

Peabody...

Tuesday

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Oversized in every way, “Ocean Liners: Glamour, Speed, and Style” has steamed into port at the Peabody Essex Museum for the summer.

Visitors will navigate through five exhibition halls, turning this way and that for a glimpse at ship models, publicity posters, decorative arts, photographs and video displays, aimed at capturing the fantasy and extravagance that goes along with the aesthetic of ocean liner travel.

By Keith Powers / Correspondent

If you go...

WHAT: Ocean Liners: Glamour, Speed, and Style

WHERE: Peabody Essex Museum, East Indian Square, Salem

WHEN: through Oct. 9

TICKETS: Free with museum admission. Visit www.pem.org or call 866-745-1876

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It's a beautiful exhibition, with magnificent detail, insightfully curated. Much closer to the Peabody Essex Museum's historical roots than shoes or clothes — the subject of other recent, quasi-artistic exhibitions — “Ocean Liners” captures the spirit of an industry built on mercantile successes, but very much rooted in luxury, lifestyle and design.

The very title hints at the success of the industry, which came of age because of the development of powerful engines that allowed ships to travel in days, not months, across the Atlantic (and further). And before, of course, the advent of airplane travel that rendered those achievements moot.

We call them “ocean liners,” or “cruise ships,” underscoring the fact that it was the voyage itself that was truly important, not the destination. As distant as that notion may seem now, in the earliest days of ocean travel, the industry had to work hard to overcome the notion that the voyage was treacherous, uncomfortable and life-threatening (it was: the Titanic sinking didn't help with the marketing plan).

Enormous models, schematics of various engine enhancements, and the hyper-designed details of various ships capture the high life. Aspects of many famous liners, traversing the history of the industry from the mid-1800s to the present, are on display: the SS Bremen, the Normandie, Kronprinzessin Cecilie, Queen Mary, the SS United States.

One insightful corner of the exhibition shows the sumptuous Luisitania, whose sinking led directly to American involvement in the first world war. The fact that the Luisitania was carrying tons of munitions to England was glossed over by the horror of more than a thousand civilians deaths at sea.

There are some photographs of the era, mostly notably by Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen, and some deeply influential examples of graphic design and decorative arts. But this is mainly an exhibition for fantasy, not for art, and like the very industry depicted in the show, it succeeds.

It's impossible to wander through the galleries without imagining a sojourn on board, free in every way from the cares of life on land, where cocktails, dinner and dancing were the focal points of the day.

The extravagant nature of the decorative arts, the poster designs and persuasive, high-end marketing materials — all of it eases any notion that ocean liner travel was anything but a glorious escape from trouble. (A deck chair from the Titanic — unremarked with any ironic or blackly comical label — sits mutely as part of one arrangement. Just sayin'.)

“Ocean Liners” was co-curated by Daniel Finamore, PEM’s curator of maritime art and history, and Ghislaine Wood, guest curator for the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. On view through Oct. 9, the exhibition is also accompanied by a number of lectures and a film series. Visit pem.org or call 866-745-1876 for complete details.

Keith Powers covers music and the arts for GateHouse Media and WBUR’s ARTery. Follow [@PowersKeith](https://twitter.com/PowersKeith); email to keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com.

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