

## Painting Icebergs: A Titanic Obsession

“Uncles and Aunts, little children lost their pants  
It was sad when the great ship went down.”

—Children’s nursery rhyme

In the mid 1990s, Fred, my therapist, suggested that I do a self-portrait as a naked child. The assignment was designed to liberate an innocent, joyful, spontaneous spirit from that of the anxious, striving, and self-conscious man I had, by age thirty-eight, unfortunately, become. Like eating vegetables, meditating, and all things meant to do me good, I resisted the assignment at first. I didn’t want to paint myself at all, never mind as a child. I pictured those cloying, doe-eyed paintings of children that pediatricians used to decorate their waiting room walls. Session after session Fred kept asking me, “So, Peter, have you done the painting yet?” And session after session I would say no, but that I would. Finally, Fred stopped asking.

During that same period, while in Philadelphia for a pharmaceutical products convention at which I’d been hired to draw caricatures, I wandered into an antique shop in the historic district, a dusty, cramped little shop where, leaning against a ratty piece of furniture, a pair of paintings caught my eye.

The paintings, executed in an unusual technique, were shiny, with absolutely no texture, their surfaces as smooth as glass. In fact their surfaces *were* glass. They were reverse paintings—oils executed on sheets of glass. The technique, which the French call *verré églomisé*, has been around since the Middle Ages, at least, when the Byzantines used it for their icons and to depict other sacral subjects. With the Renaissance it spread to all of Europe, where it was soon adopted by nineteenth-century horologists for decorating the faces of their clocks. It wasn’t long before folk artists and artisans embraced the method, which gave rise to a cottage industry, with one factory in Bavaria producing over four thousand glass paintings in a single year.<sup>1</sup> They’re sometimes called reverse paintings, since the side of the glass that gets painted on isn’t the side that’s displayed.<sup>2</sup>

The style of the paintings was no less remarkable. Though the subjects they depicted were as gloomy and grim as could be, the style in which they were painted was anything but grim. Indeed it was refreshingly innocent and naive, like a child’s dream. For all I knew they might have been painted by

children, only they were a little too tidy, too fastidious, their colors, however fanciful, too measured, too restrained.

But the most unusual thing by far about the two paintings was the subject matter. In one a ship in silhouette bore down on a mammoth silver iceberg. In the other the same ship was shown sinking, plumes of bluish-gray smoke rising from its four funnels against the now silhouetted black iceberg.

The ship, it goes without saying, was the *Titanic*. The paintings were done the same year she sank, in 1912, from do-it-yourself kits slapped together by entrepreneurs eager to exploit the sensational tragedy, which, for a brief time, created its own little industry.

For a long time I stood there, gazing at the two paintings, mesmerized. What I felt was beyond covetousness, beyond the feeling that I *had to* own them. It was more like a premonition, an inevitable quality, a sense that the paintings were mine and mine alone, that they always had been, and always would be.

As a child I'd always been fascinated by ships, and especially by ocean liners, a fascination ignited by my first visit to New York City with my papa when I was five years old, when I saw a group of them, the RMS *Queen Mary*, the SS *France*, the SS *United States*, lined up in their berths, looking, with their vanilla white superstructures, their yellow masts and cherry red funnels, like colossal floating banana splits. That things so enormous could move, let alone float, astounded me. No more than a year or two later, I first saw, on the boxy wooden Magnavox in our living room, the film version of *A Night to Remember*, Walter Lord's minute-by-minute account of the sinking of the *Titanic*. The image of the doomed liner's counter stern rising out of the water, looming with its lights still ablaze against a starry sky, made an indelible impression on me; very possibly it was my first experience of awe. The first long paper I ever wrote for a school project was about the *Titanic*, a book report on *A Night to Remember*, complete with a cutaway illustration of the ship, its details thoroughly improvised.<sup>3</sup> On the brown shopping-bag covers of my grade school textbooks, and on the wide-lined pages of my composition notebooks, I sketched the sinking *Titanic* over and over again, as if somehow by sketching it I could bring the events of that cold April night closer, and own them somehow, or at least make them that much more my own.

And though in my sketches I always made sure to include minuscule bodies plunging into the sea, I never really gave any thought to those people

on that ship; I never stopped to consider the horror; I never concerned myself with the human side of the tragedy. I thought only of the ship itself, about its four tall majestic funnels, its gleaming propellers, its countless arrayed portholes, and that curved, looming, massive hull.

The paintings in that Philadelphia antique shop were about four-feet long by a foot-and-a-half wide, with cheap gold-painted sculpted plaster frames. My then wife and I had just bought our first apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side, in the nineties. It featured a sunken living room with a dining alcove in the area above it. We'd painted one wall of the alcove Chinese red, and docked our most extravagant and expensive furniture item there: a 1920's maple English bar unit, with a hinged top that opened to a Busby-Berkley display of blinding light and mirrors etched with droll cocktail shakers and floating martini glasses. One of those two paintings, I thought, would look magnificent over it.

The antiques dealer wanted \$900 for both paintings. I asked if he would consider splitting the pair, and sell me just the one of the sinking ship, but he wouldn't, so I let it go. Even at half the price it would have been way too rich for my freelance artist's blood.

But the painting wouldn't let *me* go. It haunted me, so much that, one night after a day spent working on an oversized corporate caricature commemorating the principle actors in a bond merger,<sup>4</sup> I sat down in my studio with some acrylic paints and brushes and tried to recreate the forsaken *Titanic* painting from memory. The result fell far short of my aim. So I tried again, and again. Rather than attempt any kind of realism, I aimed for what I'd seen in those paintings: a child's interpretation of the *Titanic* disaster, with everything charmingly, disarmingly skewed. I stayed up working all night. By sunrise, like Monet with his lily pads, Degas with his ballerinas, and Morandi with his dusty brown bottles, I'd found not only my perfect subject, but the perfect style to go with it. And thus, that night, the naive artist in me was born.

Over the next twenty-eight months there followed a hundred and four paintings of the *Titanic*. They lined every wall and storage shelf and filled every closet of our apartment with its obligingly sunken living room. I worked in all different sizes, in all different colors, proceeding according to whim and fancy, my only consistent directive to myself being to *do it wrong*. To hell with perspective, to hell with proper lighting effects and proportions, to hell with all the rules and principles my professors taught me back in art

school. Create purely from joy and inspiration, spontaneously, and damn (so to speak) the icebergs.

And though my subject remained consistent, there seemed to be no end to the possible variations. This I learned: that while there may be a limited number of ways to do something right, when it comes to doing something wrong apparently there is no such limit. Anything was permissible, therefore everything was possible. Indeed, everything was not only possible, but *inevitable*. While painting I'd say to myself, "Yeah, sure, why *not* do it that way? Why not choose this or that color? Why not make the funnels green? Or paint a dozen instead of four? After all, assuming that you keep painting the *Titanic* for the rest of your life, sooner or later you were bound to paint one with a doz-en green funnels." It was like that old chestnut about the infinite number of monkeys banging away infinitely on an infinite supply of typewriters, eventually producing *King Lear* or some other masterpiece.

But my goal wasn't to produce a singular masterpiece; mine was a quest for variety and abundance, a gluttony for plentitude. How many ways could I paint this picture? For years I had drawn and painted, but never in my life had I done so with such joy and ease. It was as if a burden had been lifted—a heavy burden about the size of the *Ti-tanic's* hull, the burden of great ambition met with grim determination, of youthful dreams evolved into adult anxieties, of high hopes turned into insomnia and stomach ulcers. The more I painted, the happier I felt. Except for when I was a kid, I'd never felt happier. All thanks to a sinking ship. I had found my obsession.

But in obsessing over the *Titanic*, I could hardly claim originality. The sinking has obsessed generations. It is the Belle Epoque's answer to Noah's Ark. As legends go, it looms as large. It has all the necessary elements: a drama of disaster unfolding upon a world stage. As with Noah and his ark, it is a tragedy where a select few prevail, while the rest are doomed. And while the story of the *Titanic* may not take in the entire globe, it takes in quite a big chunk of society: rich, poor; educated, ignorant; heroic, cowardly. The *Titanic's* manifest represented almost as many specimens of humanity as the beasts aboard Noah's vessel stood for all species on Earth. Indeed, had the *Titanic* story never happened someone would have had to invent it.

As a matter of fact someone did. In 1898, fourteen years before the *Titanic* went down, a struggling author of seafaring tales named Morgan Robertson wrote a novel about a magnificent liner's fateful encounter with a rogue iceberg in the north Atlantic on a freezing cold April night. As Walter

Lord describes it in his spine-tingling forward to what remains by far the best book about the *Titanic* disaster:<sup>5</sup>

The real ship was 882.5 feet long; [Robertson's] fictional one was 800 feet. Both vessels were triple screw and could make 24-25 knots. Both could carry 3,000 people, and both had enough lifeboats for only a fraction of this number. But then this didn't seem to matter, because both were labeled "unsinkable."

On April 10, 1912, the real ship left Southampton on her maiden voyage to New York. Her cargo included a priceless copy of the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* and a list of passengers collectively worth \$250 million dollars. On her way she too struck an iceberg and went down on a cold April night.

Robertson called his ship the *Titan*; the White Star Line called its ship the *Titanic*. This is the story of her last night.

The title of Robertson's novel was *Futility*, and, as Lord points out, it was meant to underscore the folly of all human attempts to rise above their limits and rival their gods, the hubris and vanity inherent in all human ambition and enterprise.

Hubris and futility: those are the two main themes that emerge from the *Titanic* legend, and that cling to her even in death. I remember, in the fall of 1985—years before I wandered into that Philadelphia antique shop—reading about Bob Ballard's discovery of the *Titanic* wreck two and a half miles under the Atlantic. It made the front page of the *Times*. The news sickened me. This was a disaster in its own right, I thought. Where the article continued in the science section there was a photograph of the grinning oceanographer wearing his signature baseball cap. I took an instant dislike to Mr. Ballard, who seemed to me the sort of scientist whose empirical enthusiasms date back to frying toads on the barbecue grill. With the rest of the world I'd happily pictured the great ship still down there, still more or less intact under a leagues of seawater, her slender graceful buff funnels—three of four, anyway—reaching up toward the sun-wrinkled surface like the pipes of Nemo's organ, calling to mind the lines of Hardy's famous poem: "In a solitude of the sea / Deep from human vanity, / And the Pride of Life that planned her, stilly couches she." Coal bunkers groaning, engine cylinders gleaming in their casings, brass

propellers miraculously void of barnacles turning golden figure eights down there in the frozen blue depths—a *Titanic* no less unsinkable than her myth, growing more so year by year. And now this oceanographer with a pubescent boy's wanton gleam in his eyes had gotten his empirical hands on her and would torture every last remaining secret out of her, rusty rivet by rivet. Those fabulous mysteries would no more survive the glare of Ballard's bathysphere searchlights than its water-logged hulk would survive a sudden influx of oxygen. In the name of scientific research ship and myth alike would soon be reduced to several heaps of rust-oozing junk mired in sea-bottom muck. "It's incredible how good she still looks," Ballard and others claimed, or some such idiocy. But she didn't look good. She looked awful, as bad as any rotting corpse exhumed after three-quarters of a century. Save for the macabre thrill of watching some extremely high-tech seagoing grave robbers at work, there was nothing to celebrate here, I thought, and everything to regret. Despite all the high-minded talk of preserving the wreck and respecting her dead, it was just a matter of time, I knew, before entrepreneurs had at the wreck with their own, private submarines.<sup>6</sup>

Still, for better or worse, Ballard's discovery rekindled the public's fascination with the *Titanic*. Soon there was a Broadway musical (in which, during previews, the model ship on stage refused to sink), followed by Cameron's \$200 million epic for which, with the wide-eyed zeal of a child building a model ship in his basement so as to sink it in his bathtub, he practically re-built and re-sank the *Titanic*, painstakingly synthesizing her vertiginous final plunge into the sea, with bodies screaming and falling, funnel cables snapping, deck timbers and hull plates snapping and tearing, the ship wailing in agony as it splits in two like a torture victim on the rack—all in service of a cheesy comic-book melodrama.<sup>7</sup>

Thanks to the tidal swell of interest in the *Titanic* generated by Ballard's discovery and Cameron's film, my paintings had their moment in the lime-light, with spots on TV and radio shows, and an editorial in *The Wall Street Journal*. My paintings got their fifteen minutes of fame. Unwittingly, I contributed to and took part in the feeding frenzy. I became one of the myth's perpetuators, one of its exploiters.

Having finished my first seventy-five *Titanic* paintings, I decided to hold a salon. We did it in our Upper West Side apartment. My wife prepared period hors d'oeuvres to go with the champagne. I nailed a trumped-up *Titanic* life preserver (the real ones didn't say the ship's name) like a Christmas

wreath on the apartment door, and hired a solo cellist to play ragtime and “Nearer My God to Thee.” The event took place on a Saturday afternoon. Over two hundred people stopped by throughout the day, some coming from as far as Vermont, Washington DC, and Georgia.

Of all the people we had invited, only one disappointed us by not showing up, a man who lived just across town on East 68th Street, but who, due to an infirmity, had responded with regrets to my faxed invitation; however, (his typed letter went on to say) if I offered him a rain check he would do his very best to come by some other time.

Two Sundays later, in a wheelchair pushed by his attendant, Walter Lord arrived, trembling with Parkinson’s disease, but alert and eager for my offerings. Tea and crumpets were served. One by one as he sat at the dining room table, I took the paintings down from the walls and displayed them for him. With each painting he nodded, though it was hard to say for sure whether his nodding signified approval or was a symptom of his palsy. When asked by me to explain his own obsession with the *Titanic*, Mr. Lord gave this disarming answer, “Well,” he said with a snort as though it were perfectly obvious, “if there’s anything better than a great ship, it’s a great ship that sinks!”<sup>8</sup>

Few are not drawn to the story of the *Titanic* and of the concatenation of coincidences and misfortunes that, in retrospect, seemed to have been orchestrated with a watchmaker’s precision by fate with no other intent but to doom her. If only this, if only that. But that night the if onlys were all as fast asleep as the Marconi man aboard the SS *Californian*, drifting with her engines off a mere dozen miles from the doomed liner’s last stand. The *if onlys* and *what ifs* were aroused only in and by retrospect. Such is fortune. For the salient feature of all legends and myths is that they *need* to have happened. Something in our collective unconscious yearns for, insists upon, them. And what myths reality does not provide, we concoct (The Abominable Snowman. Elvis lives!). Even when, as with the story of the *Titanic*, reality is generous to a fault, providing us with as much irony, awe and horror as we could ever wish for, still, we feel the need to enlarge, embellish, augment, improve, perfect. To turn tragedy into a masterpiece.

People need disasters; we need tragedy; we need horror. But we need to enshrine—to protect and preserve and hold—it in legend or myth, like the bones of a tyrannosaurus in a museum, where it can instruct and fascinate while posing no danger. We all yearn to get up close to horror, where we can see and touch and begin to experience it as something other than a vague

abstraction, if only to begin to grasp it, to *know* exactly what we fear. Life is one long freeway pileup and we're all of us rubberneckers, with doom our own ultimate destination and no chance of escape. We're *all* passengers on the *Titanic*.

But for the people of 1912 who lived through that disaster, the sinking of the *Titanic* was no metaphor. It was a living nightmare, a shockingly gruesome reminder of the potential for suffering within a matter of hours and on a massive scale. Yet given sufficient time and distance even the most gruesome tragedies take on the patina of myth by way of nostalgia. Compared with our own contemporary disasters and tragedies, they seem quaint, innocent. So we take a kind of cold perverse comfort in them. They belong, after all, to the myth of better days. The *Titanic* is a *chaste* tragedy; it is tragically subsumed by sublimity.

Which is why, despite all attempts by oceanographers, scientists, and historians (including Walter Lord) to put to rest any doubts as to what exactly took place on that cold April night, thereby sinking all *Titanic* myths once and for all, still, the ship, along with her cargo of legend and lore, keeps bobbing up to the surface again and again, refusing to stay sunken. The supply of facts may be limited; however many rivets were driven into the *Titanic's* hull, there were only so many. But the imagination knows no limits, nor does the human need for legends and myths, for those primal yearnings and urges that give us back to ourselves, that nourish and nurture our childlike view of reality, that replenish the supply of awe and wonder from which artistic and creative impulses spring.

One day as I was walking through Grand Central Station with one of my *Titanic* paintings under my arm, transporting it to a gallery downtown, a toddler, walking hand in hand with her father, caught what must have been a very brief glimpse of what lay on the canvas.

"Daddy, daddy!" she cried out, pointing, "It's the *Titanic*!"

In that girl's unmitigated joy I recognized my own childhood fascination with the ship, my own wonder at the sheer magnitude of that colossal vessel, its scale matched only by that of the disaster that sent it and fifteen hundred souls to the bottom of the ocean. But the child saw nothing tragic in my painting. She saw only something wonderful. Where others might have seen disaster, she saw a miracle. Under that cavernous turquoise ceiling spattered with electrical stars her jaw hung, her cheeks glowed, and her eyes blossomed,



lit up by a child's categorical delight. Yes, life can be tragic. But in spite of being so, or maybe part and parcel to it, it's also fabulous. That little girl in Grand Central Station knew this. She couldn't have been more than four years old, yet she knew, as all children seem to know, that horror and beauty are not mutually exclusive.

It isn't horror that deprives us of innocence. Nor is experience itself diametrically opposed to the sense of awe and wonder. If we've lost our childhood innocence, if we've surrendered it to something grim and obligatory, it's because we assume that this is what we're *supposed* to do, just as we assume that, in public, we're supposed to wear clothes, and, when life turns grim or tragic, our emotions, like our clothes, should be black. But children don't mourn. Not just because they don't have to, but because they know better. They mostly see the wonder in things. That, above all, makes them children.

As I neared the end of my painting series, instead of painting the *Titanic* sinking, I started painting it in other poses: at dockside on a bright sunny day, breezing past the iceberg, and even one of her steaming safe and sound into a sleepy New York harbor at night. The last painting was of the *Titanic* and Noah's Arc meeting at sea, with the former vessel transferring her passengers to the latter. Then I was done.

One day, a few months before I stopped painting the *Titanic*, I brought one of the earlier paintings, a small one I'd done using a scratchboard technique and bright earth colors,<sup>9</sup> to Fred, my therapist, at one of our sessions.

"Congratulations," he said, smiling as he peered at it over his bifocals.

I'd done the assignment.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> 1814

<sup>2</sup> The paint is likewise applied in reverse. Unlike a typical painting, where the first strokes are normally covered up by subsequent colors and strokes, with a reverse painting the first strokes are also the first to meet the eye, with the background (or the under-painting) painted last. For the artist to see his creation while creating it, he had to mount a mirror on the wall behind it.

<sup>3</sup> Down to the wallpaper on cabin walls.

<sup>4</sup> Such works of art, for those who may be interested, are called tombstones.

<sup>5</sup> One that treats the simultaneous events of that night almost cubistically, like a still life by Georges Braque or Juan Gris.

<sup>6</sup> The most notorious of these being George Tulloch, whose company, RMS Titanic Inc., among other things, sold golf-ball sized bits of bunker coal to suckers for \$25 a pop. Get yours while supplies last! Only 250,000 chunks left!

<sup>7</sup> I enjoyed and hated Cameron's film, mentally retrofitting *A Night to Remember*, the 1958 classic based on Walter Lord's book—a sober docudrama—with his far superior special effects.

<sup>8</sup> Weeks later, on a visit to Lord's East Side apartment—itsself a film set of the *Titanic's* first class dining salon, with its coffered ceilings and paneled walls—while looking over his collection of ephemera, high on a closet shelf I noticed a thick wad of paper. “Take that down,” he said. I did. It was the handwritten manuscript of *A Night to Remember*, on yellow legal paper bound with two red rubber bands. “How many drafts did you end up doing?” I asked. Lord looked at me, perplexed. “Drafts?” He'd given the holograph to a secretary to type up, and that was that.

<sup>9</sup> “Clay Titanic,” I called it.