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***SMALL BUT MIGHTY!: MODELS, TOYS, AND MINIATURE SHIPS,*  
A NEW PERMANENT EXHIBITION AT INDEPENDENCE SEAPORT MUSEUM,  
TO OPEN IN SPRING 2025**

Philadelphia, PA (February 3, 2025)—For centuries, people of all ages have been intrigued by model ships. Made for myriad reasons ranging from pure enjoyment to promotional tools, most are unique objects made by hand. Opening on March 20, 2025, the Independence Seaport Museum (ISM) will display nearly 50 rarely seen models from its collection dating from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to the later 20<sup>th</sup> century along with related paintings and prints in *Small but Mighty!: Models, Toys, and Miniature Ships*. Primarily made of wood, the models were also fashioned out of paper, bone and metal. Among the examples to be displayed are extraordinarily detailed and realistic models, such as the Heavy Cruiser USS *Indianapolis*, as well as highly stylized toy models intended for adults and children.

“Guests to the ISM over the years have remarked at the amazing range of ship models, toys and pond models in our permanent collection,” said Peter S. Seibert, president and CEO. “This new exhibition has given us the opportunity to not only exhibit some of the public’s favorite examples along with many that have rarely ever been shown before. Young and old alike will love exploring these masterpieces of miniature craftsmanship.”

Over the centuries, ships models were used for various purposes. Some were design sources, known as half hulls, used in building larger vessels, while others were used for sport, such as pond models that were raced. Model ships were made as toys for children, and highly crafted, expensive models were intended as toys for adults. Other models were made to commemorate new vessels and were presented to shipbuilders or owners; some that were made by prisoners were used to exchange for food. Model ships were also used as tokens of remembrance either made by those who were on particular boats or those who were simply avid towards certain boats.

Most of the models in the Independence Seaport Museum’s collection are “scratch built,” meaning that the craftsmen had to shape each piece from raw or lightly prepared materials rather than using premade

parts. This method can be complex: metal casting is often used to produce the funnels, propellers, and other elements of a highly detailed model.



Among the most noteworthy ship models to be on view in *Small but Mighty!* is the Heavy Cruiser USS *Indianapolis*. The legendary ship, launched on November 7, 1931, at

the New York Shipbuilding Company in Camden, New Jersey, to deliver the bomb to end World War II, was sunk by Japanese submarine I-58 on July 30, 1945, after being hit by two torpedoes. Within just twelve minutes, the ship sank and the majority of the crew was launched into the water; the remaining 300 or so crew members were still onboard. Three days later, a pilot had a random sighting of the ship, which saved some of the sailors who were floating in the ocean. (Today, the USS *Indianapolis* is most famous because its story was recounted in a scene in the movie *Jaws*.) This model of the *Indianapolis*, built in 1934-38 by Walter H. Gerber, a German mechanical engineer who originally worked at Cramp's Shipyard in New York and then later transferred to Cramp's Shipyard in Philadelphia, is massive in size: it measures 12 feet long by 17 inches wide. It was originally constructed as a radio-controlled, in-water model that had the capability to power its inside mechanics as well. The maker also has an interesting story: Gerber came under scrutiny from the United States government during World War II because he was fixated on the accuracy of the model and came from an enemy country. Afraid that information about the United States Navy would fall into the wrong hands, his actions were monitored and his home was raided, looking for cameras and other equipment supposedly to have been reported and/or voluntarily turned over to the government. Nothing of significance was found.



Another exquisite model that will be on view in the exhibition and exemplifies early shipbuilding is the Napoleonic War Model, a very early model made entirely by hand out of bone by French prisoners in the British Dartmoor Prison and would have been used to trade for food. The prisoners were held on British prison ships during the Napoleonic wars; some may have also been made by American prisoners during the war of

1812. This model is of an unidentified British frigate with 50 guns and has a decorative paper-covered wooden stand, circa 1790-1820. It has no provenance, so it is assumed to have been French and made for the British. The model, considered a folk-art masterpiece, was presented to David Bruce, Sr. by Commodore Charles Stewart, United States Navy, at Bordentown, New Jersey, in about 1820. Stewart was a Philadelphian who served in the navy for 63 years, playing key roles in the Quasi-War, Barbary Wars and the War of 1812.



On August 10, 1893, the Steamer *Priscilla*, made by the Delaware River Iron Shipbuilding and Engine Works Company (John Roach & Sons) in Chester, Pennsylvania, for the Old Colony Steamboat Company, launched. Three years later, she was recreated as a child's toy by R. Bliss Manufacturing Company in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, known for making inexpensive but realistic toys. One of these large toy ships made of

chromolithographed paper attached to a wooden frame is equipped with wheels for motion, is a highlight of *Small but Mighty!* Measuring 37 inches long by x 20 inches high and 5 inches wide, it is in pristine condition and illustrates the color and beauty of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century ships. This faithfully executed toy offered children a duplicate of the type of vessels actively used on America's waterways. Toys such as these were sailed on the floors of large Victorian homes and enjoyed by children and, likely, adults as well.



The racing of small model yachts began in England in the 1870s, spread across the European continent and eventually came to the United States. (New York's Central Park Lake was built expressly for people to use in sailing pond models.) Organizations such as the Model Yacht Association determined rules and umpired regattas of two types: open water sailing and pond sailing. By 1950, five classes of model yachts were used, including the Marblehead or "M" Class (also known as the 50/800 Class). Their small, manageable

size made this sport appealing to those who could not handle a full-scale boat or those with limited financial resources. One such example of an "M" Class model made in 1949, the Pond Yacht *Almary II*, is featured in the exhibition. It was made by Albert Link (born in Fishtown, Pennsylvania, 1909-1993) and is considered to be one of the biggest and best of its kind. Link worked as a machinist for Smith, Kline, and Beecham in Philadelphia. Link built approximately 15 model sailboats in his lifetime (the *Almary II* was his eighth) and raced them at Gustine Lake in Fairmont Park, Concourse Hunting Park, League Island Swimming Pool in Philadelphia as well as on Cooper River in Camden, New Jersey, and Long Island, New York. In 1950, he was a national prize winner at the New York Yacht Club and again in 1954 at Cooper River. He stopped racing that same year.

For children of all ages who are fascinated with model ships, *Small but Mighty!: Models, Toys, and Miniature Ships* will delight and inform. It becomes one of the museum's signature exhibitions and one not to be missed.

### **About Independence Seaport Museum**

The Independence Seaport Museum (ISM), founded in 1960 as the Philadelphia Maritime Museum, encourages visitors to discover Philadelphia's river of history and world of connections. Stewards of the *Olympia*, a nineteenth-century cruiser, and the *Becuna*, a World War II-era submarine, ISM is home to interactive and award-winning exhibitions, one of the largest collections of historic maritime artifacts in the world and a boatbuilding workshop. Accredited by the American Association of Museums since the 1970s, it is a premier,

year-round destination adjacent to Spruce Street Harbor Park on Penn's Landing. Visit daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and see our full schedule of programs and events at [phillyseaport.org](https://www.phillyseaport.org). Visit <https://www.phillyseaport.org/admissions-hours-of-operation/> to learn about ticket packages and guided tour options.

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Images: Heavy Cruiser *U.S.S. Indianapolis*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1934-38, Walter H. Gerber (1900-1986), wood, brass, mechanicals, wiring, acquired through exchange courtesy of friends of the museum, 1984.089; Napoleonic War Model (Unidentified British Frigate), likely Dartmoor Prison, England, c. 1790-1820, attributed to an unknown prisoner in Dartmoor Prison, bone, stand made of paper-overed wood, Gift of Elizabeth C. Blaisdell, 1969.091; Steamer *Priscilla*, Pawtucket, Rhode Island, c.1896, R. Bliss Manufacturing Company (1832-1935), lithographed paper on board and wood, Gift of Theodore T. Newbold, 1985.092.003; Pond Yacht *Almary II*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1949, Albert H. Link (1909-1993), white pine, redwood, lead, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John Ruth, 1990.001.001.