

# CAPTAIN STEPHEN CARD PORTRAITS OF SHIPS

By Richard H. Wagner

Stephen Card is the leading maritime painter of the day. His works are prominently displayed on the ships of Cunard, Holland America, Costa and Saga as well as in many private collections. They can also be seen in numerous books on ocean liners and cruise ships. One of the reasons for their popularity is that they are not just realistic portraits of specific ships but rather evoke the personality of these ships and the feel of being at sea.

## *Captain Card's Career*

Given the feel that Card's paintings evoke, they could only have been done by a sailor. Born on the island of Bermuda in 1952, the sea was always close at hand. "I was interested in ships from the age of about 11. It never occurred to me to do anything else. Initially, I wanted to be an engineer. But I saw the light so I went as a deck officer," he laughs.

As a Bermuda Sea Cadet, Card's first opportunity to go to sea was on Cunard Line's *Franconia* in 1967. "The trip that I was doing was the three week Montreal cruise. That was it, I was hooked after that."

While still in school, Card had several other opportunities to go to sea, which only confirmed his career choice. Accordingly, when he finished school in 1970, he joined the Glasgow firm of J & J Denholm Ship Management Ltd. as a Navigating Cadet. Over the next 11 years, he rose to the rank of Chief Officer. Then, in 1982, he returned to Bermuda to take up the post of Queen's Harbor Master.

During this period, art "was a hobby. When I was younger, I used to do portraits and landscapes. It wasn't ships - - that sort of developed over the years."

One of his relatively early ship paintings was of a Holland America cargo ship, the *Noordam*. As it happened, Holland America was hosting a cocktail party in honor of the arrival in Bermuda of a new Holland America ship also named *Noordam*. Card jokingly said to the ship's agent: "I'll tell you what, I have got this painting of the old *Noordam* and I will give it to you in exchange for an invitation."

Not only did the agent give Card an invitation but he showed the painting to the Chairman of Holland America Line Nico van der Vorm. He was so impressed that at the cocktail party he asked Card to paint portraits of the entire Holland America fleet. "And that was the whole reason I started painting full time."

"I just didn't know any better. I figured if I could make enough to live on - - comparable wages to what I had been earning at sea as a captain - - then I was okay. The first couple of years, it was maybe two-thirds, but I was working at home, I was doing my own thing - - it did not hurt. There were a couple of lean years. The hard thing with painting is that you never know when you are going to get paid. You have to wait for work to come in, you have to hope for the best. It is not easy but after awhile you learn to live with it. Forget about a monthly paycheck or a weekly paycheck, it just doesn't happen that way. If you are doing a show, you work for a whole year, pay out a massive freighting bill, put the show on and you sit there with fingers crossed hoping you are going to sell something - - risky."

Another fortuitous event involving Holland America several years later again altered the course of Card's career. Card received a copy of *Rotterdam*,



*Grand Dame*, by ship designer Stephen Payne and on the cover of the book was Card's painting of the Rotterdam that he had done for Holland America. This led Card to look up Payne who was working for Carnival Corporate Shipbuilding and invite him to lunch. Because the Rotterdam painting was an early one and his work had developed since then, Card wanted to offer to do a new painting for the next printing of Payne's book.

By that point, Carnival Corporation had purchased Holland America and Payne was working on a new ship for HAL. She was to be called the Statendam, a name that had been borne by four previous HAL ships. At the lunch, Payne asked if Card would be interested in doing a painting for the new ship and suggested that he send Carnival Corporate Shipbuilding a proposal. "I thought about it and I said: 'Here's an opportunity. Why not do a painting of each of the five Statendams?'" Carnival liked the idea as did Frans Dingemans, who designs the interiors for the HAL ships. As a result, Card has been commissioned to do a series of paintings for each of the subsequent HAL ships - - more than 90 paintings.

When Cunard announced that it was building Queen Mary 2, Card wrote to Carnival Corporate Shipbuilding and "said that I would like to do work for Queen Mary 2." This proposal was approved and Card spent three years working on paintings for Cunard. Most of these are on QM2 but some are on Queen Victoria.

These days, "most of [the paintings are] what somebody asks me to do. It is commissions. They will say: 'I want a painting of such and such a ship.' But if I am working towards a show, then it is completely my choice and I will spend days going through all sorts of material and then things start to work together."

#### *Captain Card's Approach to Painting*

Most of Card's works are oil paintings. "I used to work in acrylics but not anymore. Watercolors and oils, it is traditional."

He did not attend art school is largely self-taught. "The influence on my work is more contemporary artists - - the postcard artists from the turn of the century and more modern guys like Bill Muller. When



*Captain Card discussing his painting of the second Mauretania during a tour he conducted of the marine art on Queen Mary 2.*

I see his work, I mean bang it is there. There was a guy working in Bermuda named Derek Foster, a well-known yacht painter and sailing ships. I spent time with Derek in his studio. A lot of what I know I picked up from Derek, that is where the influence is. You don't borrow but you pick up little bits of technique from various painters."

When he has an idea for a painting or when a client suggests a subject for a painting, Card's first step is to download a photograph of that ship from the Internet. "I just need that to know what the ship looks like before I start digging for everything else because I can't remember what they all look like." He then starts sketching various rough ideas into a small book that he carries.

Before he begins to paint, however, Card looks for as many photographs of the ship as possible. "I sit there and can go through hundreds and hundreds of pictures and sooner or later something just twigs at me and it could be just anything - - a little image or detailing that would work in a different setting."

In addition to suggesting an idea for the painting, the photographs provide details about the ship that he needs for the painting. "When it comes to doing the painting, you take one little area and you have to have all the details for that area. So that is when you start searching for as many photographs as possible - - close ups, different angles. Even a window, [you know rough-



ly] what it looks like but does it have a divider, is it made up of two separate pieces? Sometimes you can have a group with a curved end piece, - - there are so many variations, yet it is just one little detail."

Card's paintings are detailed but they are not technical drawings. "When you stand several feet away from the painting you can't see the fine detail so it is not really worth doing. It doesn't improve the image at all. One of the dangers of doing extreme precise work is that that it becomes a pale grey color for a window whereas if I am doing a row of windows, I might do a green color there and the next one I'll paint pink to give a sunlight effect. It becomes more colorful than the repetitious work. You have to play with colors because at the end of the day that is what you are looking at is color."

Although Card's paintings are in full color, he prefers to work with black and white photos. "If you see a color image, you tend to be bound by what you see. If it is in black and white you can make up your own colors. Black and white is best for research. You have to research to get funnel colors correct but that is easy enough to find out. Color photographs are never right anyway but it can influence you to think that that is the way something should look. There is one marine painter I know who cannot paint Cunard red because he is looking at color photographs. In the old days, if you didn't use the correct filter [on the camera], the red appears very dark and we know it wasn't, it was a very light color."

While he uses photographs for reference, Card does not merely paint a copy of a photograph. Rather, he composes an entirely new scene that depicts the ship, often in the company of other ships, in a different location. In order to do this, Card researched the history of the ship. "With a ship, you want to know the background of the ship, the ship's career - - where she traded, when. One of the ideas I had for [a painting of the French Line's] Flandre was to have her somewhere other than New York. One of the nicest places to me is The Solent passing the Isle of Wight because you can get a good view of the ship. Then, I thought I better check on my history to find out whether Flandre went to Southampton because I have never seen pictures of



Captain Card with his painting of Caronia.

Flandre in Southampton. Until I can track down all these little bits and pieces it is a bit risky to say do this or do that. Once you have an image like that, it is a question of designing a nice sky to go with it and the direction of light, where to give it the best overall color."

Along the same lines, Card likes to be historically accurate about what other ships to include in the composition beyond the main subject. "I try to do something that will complement the ship itself. Sometimes it is just other ships that I like that I know could have been there at that period. Once in a while you could find an old newspaper, say the New York Times, and they would say: 'Queen Elizabeth sailed at noon.' And then it would say: 'Also outbound was Kungsholm and Europa and several other ships' and you say, let's put them all together."

"Some people I know are happy to make a picture but it is the background for me that is the interesting part. Without the background, I do not see how anybody could paint the picture."

The research that Card does in connection with his paintings has enabled him to write two books that are both art books and maritime history books. *Cunarder* presents a series of paintings that he has done of Cunard ships along with a history of the ships depicted in the paintings. His *Holland America Line: A Spotless Line*, follows the same pattern except focuses on the ships of Holland America. In addition, he has collaborated with Pierce Plowman on *Queen of Bermuda* about the Furness-Bermuda Line ship of that name. The same team is working on a new book *A Century of Passenger Ships to*



### Some Challenges

Painting pictures that are often displayed on ships at sea presents some challenges that landlocked artists do not face. For example, under the new Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) regulations that go into effect in 2010 strictly limit the amount of combustible material in an area on a ship such as a staircase. This affects the amount and composition of such things as the paneling, carpeting and the decoration. Since the cruise lines have been aware that their ships will have to comply with these regulations, the lines have been taking them into account in the ships they have been building recently. Because a painting on canvas can burn, some lines have directed that artists doing painting for their new ships must paint them on aluminum panels.

"I want to paint on canvas, which is the best thing. So, I took one of these panels and I cut up an old painting and glued the canvas on the surface. I turned the gas cooker fire on and had this thing sitting [on top of the flame on its] back. No heat went through at all - it was perfectly safe. Then, I turned it over and put the painting down [on top of the flame] and made notes. After 20 minutes the flame had only spread [a short distance]. Unless you can get heat behind the canvas with enough air, it is just not going to burn. If you roll the canvas and stand it up and put a fire to it, it will proba-

bly burn but covered like that the flame spread is nothing. So, I wrote all this out and I sent it down to Carnival [Corporate Shipbuilding] and I said this business of painting on aluminum panels is a joke." At first, they did not take Card seriously but after considering the issue further, "they said: 'Okay, just go ahead and paint on canvas and we will glue it down, it is okay.'"

Since the ships are air conditioned there is no problem with salt or dust affecting the painting. However, there is the problem of overzealous stewards. "I did a picture on Saga Rose ten years ago. Now, there is a strip along the bottom where the paint is almost completely gone because every morning with a wet rag, the cabin steward wipes the frame. It is everyday for the last ten years and it has wiped the paint off. When I see them I say 'Don't do that!'"

Despite such difficulties, Card still enjoys his work. "Each painting is a whole new ball game. It is not affected by what has gone before or by what is going to come after. Once it is finished, it is finished and I have no interest in whatsoever. But the painting that is up on the easel that is the project and yeah it is fun."

*Captain Card with his painting of Queen Mary.*

