

When Dr. Robert Ballard was gearing up to make one of his expeditions in search of the wreck of the *Titanic*, he ended up backing away from an investor when he learned that they'd planned to salvage pieces of the wreck in order to break them up and sell them as paperweights.

Survivors sold autographs and personal artifacts, both in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, and decades later in order to pay their mounting bills.

The *Titanic* disaster has inspired the creation of countless commemorative trinkets from recreations of First Class china sets to model ships to replicas of that tacky-ass Heart of the Ocean pendant from the 1997 movie. I personally own a White Star Line beanie and an ice tray that makes both tiny ice *Titanics* and little icebergs to float in your drinks.

There are *Titanic* museums in Belfast, Southampton, Las Vegas, Orlando, Branson, Missouri, and Pigeon Forge, Tennessee that attract thousands of visitors each year. There is a traveling exhibition. There's a *Titanic* VR experience in Los Angeles, California.

And, of course, there is the wreck of the *Titanic*, which has been attracting commercial tourists to her depths since 1998 – for a price. Sometimes the ultimate price.

The public has a multi-million dollar fascination with *Titanic*. Maybe even multi-billion dollar! It's hard to quantify... only some of the *Titanic* museums disclose their annual earnings and I haven't personally asked LEGO how many \$680 *Titanic* playsets they sell per annum.

And this feels... weird right? This commodification of a tragedy. My name is Amanda Hootman and in this episode I want to spend a little time unpacking my feelings about the commercialization of *Titanic*. Has enough time passed that any of this is okay? Is it tasteless and tacky? Is it in the interest of preserving our shared history and heritage? Is visiting her wreck site a pilgrimage to pay respects to the 1500 lives lost, or a dangerous and irreverent display of wealth? And how the hell did so many people end up with so much "coal from the *Titanic*", "after *Titanic*"?

Why are we... like this?

When it comes to the limitless *Titanic* tchotchkes sold by brick-and-mortar and online retailers the world over, my first impulse is to hand wave the plushies and the keychains and the *coal* with "well, the sinking is distant enough in time now that people don't really feel the weight of the tragedy anymore." Much like selling American flag merch for Independence Day, the symbols are no longer inextricable from the great loss of life of the events that they're tied to, they're just... symbols. But I also know that isn't true. Before a corpse is even cold, someone somewhere will have the bright idea to capitalize on a tragedy by selling traumobilia. In 1997, immediately after Princess Diana's death Ty Inc. started selling a Princess Diana themed Beanie Baby with a tag that read: "Like an angel, she came from heaven above,/ She shared

her compassion, her pain, her love./ She only stayed with us long enough to teach/ The world to share, to give, to reach.”

Tacky. Shameless. But people clamored for those purple bears. They thought those Princess Di bears were the perfect way to commemorate a life cut needlessly short... and what's more, they thought they were going to be collectibles that would pay their kids' tuition one day. Limited edition trauma merch. A “Princess” Beanie Baby sells for around \$3 a pop nowadays.

In 2014 the 9/11 Memorial Museum gift shop, built upon the ruins of the World Trade Center, came under fire for selling a cheese board shaped like a map of the United States that featured three hearts marking the three spots where each of the planes went down on September 11, 2001. They removed that particular item from the gift shop but still sell the usual “I heart New York” junk alongside NYPD and NYFD merch and, like, World Trade Center cross pendants...

So clearly time is not the x factor here. There is a market for tack commemorating disasters and atrocities whether or not they have occurred within living memory. Time may be why *I'm* okay with having a *Titanic* ice cube tray... Not that I haven't spent some mental energy worrying over whether that's really appropriate over the course of making this podcast. And, to be sure, maybe some of the more... *darkly humorous* curios have become more prevalent and more socially acceptable with time. Regardless, people love to commemorate tragic world events with *junk*.

I think part of it is a desire to place ourselves within a historical moment. We're like little crows, collecting our shiny objects. We're trying to possess, to take physical ownership of history. And perhaps by seeing, touching, placing these little physical manifestations of history up on a shelf, we can come to understand a tragedy better. It is an event made corporeal and therefore easier to manage, conceptualize, and come to terms with.

With *Titanic* in particular there's another element: a slow process of iconification. *Titanic* is a celebrity akin to Marilyn Monroe or Elvis in that she has become a recognizable (and commodifiable) symbol almost decontextualized from the tragedy that made her famous in the first place. On my other podcast, Respect the Dead, I did a bit of a deep dive into some of the companies that hold the copyrights on dead celebrities' images and use them to sell products... mostly posters and memorabilia related to the celebrity but also things like chocolate bars and bottles of wine and other products they were never associated with in life. Celebrities like Marilyn Monroe and Audrey Hepburn are slowly reduced to the clothes they wore - a white halter dress and a black sheath dress - and commodified to the point that their images are almost irrelevant to their actual work. I react much more strongly about this erosion into symbols when it comes to singular people than when it comes to *Titanic*, but maybe I shouldn't. After all, the loss of *Titanic* represents the loss of 1500 people, and also some Survivors Who Didn't, and everyone who would have come after that. But I just don't feel the same revulsion when I see a *Titanic* ship plushie, as I do when I see a Marilyn Monroe Funko Pop. Perhaps that's tragedy plus time, but perhaps it's also scale. If the death of one man is a tragedy and the deaths of 1500 is a statistic, what does that mean for Etsy stores selling kawaii vinyl stickers of a little chibi *Titanic* smiling at a little chibi iceberg?

Let's just do a little Google search for *Titanic* themed gifts... we've got a miniature wreck site for aquariums. The stern is in remarkable condition in this one. I guess it's less recognizable to most people if the stern is as pancaked as it is in real life. We've got a two piece, front and stern pin set. Love. Would wear. We have dozens of AI generated prints, mugs and magnets of the ship and of a man and a woman that are not quite Jack and Rose... The Pigeon Forge museum gift shop is the worst offender for these. We have a hideous Heart of the Ocean themed resin lamp on Etsy with the necklace suspended in what looks like lava lamp fluid between two pieces of wood. The only images for this item are AI generated. We have novelty t-shirts screen printed with quips like "one star, would not recommend this cruise" and images of Captain Smith accompanying the purported quote "no one remembers the icebergs you didn't hit." Charming.

And then there's the f*cking coal. Beyond the mass produced plushies and recreations of china, you can buy *Titanic's* coal. There is so much of it. Everyone has a damn piece of *Titanic's* coal. You wouldn't know that they left port during a coal shortage! RMS Titanic Inc. possesses the exclusive salvage rights to *Titanic*, awarded to them by the US government after a protracted legal battle in the 1990s. RMS Titanic Inc. are a subsidiary of Premier Exhibitions, Inc. who manage the touring *Titanic* exhibition, the permanent exhibit at the Luxor Casino in Las Vegas, and the controversial Bodies traveling exhibit. Due to an agreement made under US law, RMS Titanic Inc., are not allowed to sell the salvaged items of their collection piecemeal in order to preserve the totality of artifacts as a single collection... But apparently coal doesn't count because you can buy pieces of "genuine *Titanic* coal" in little boxes in their gift shops with little certificates promising you that it's the real coal from the real *Titanic* and not bricks of charcoal from some guy's grill. You can buy coal pressed into coins. You can buy an hourglass where the sand is ground up pieces of *Titanic* coal. I - guys, I just think the coal thing is very stupid. If you bought the coal and you like the coal that's fine. Whatever. Just like... what are you doing with it? Displaying it on your desk? Sticking it to the wall? It's a rock.

But what about the money being made outside of the tchotchkes? What about the *educational* material? The museums. The experiences. The artifacts.

Ignore the fact that two of the *Titanic* museums are shaped like cheesy replicas of *Titanic's* bow. Ignore the fact that they do that goofy gimmick where you get a "ticket" with a passenger's name on them and you find out at the end if "you" lived or died... These attractions at least have some educational and historical merit. In Las Vegas, you can see The Big Piece - a gigantic section of *Titanic's* hull that was salvaged in 1998. The violin that was played by Wallace Hartley, the band's leader, and was recovered with his body two weeks after the sinking, was purchased at auction by an anonymous collector who has generously loaned the piece to both the Belfast museum and the museum in Pigeon Forge - the one owned by Dolly Parton. The display of artifacts such as these brings the events of April 14th and April 15th, 1912 into clearer focus and educates each new generation about the tragedy.

Hell, even the “Titanic VR Experience” tries to walk the “edutainment” line. They “resurrect” historical figures like Thomas Andrews and J. Bruce Ismay with the power of Playstation 1 quality graphics and have them tell you facts about the ship. It’s great. It’s fine.

I just think it’s a shame that the museums are mostly commercial ventures. It’s a shame that the 5000+ artifacts salvaged by RMS Titanic Inc., are housed in virtual roadside attractions that charge an admittance fee. It’s a shame that most of the pieces on display in the other museums are either pre-discovery artifacts picked from the floating corpses of *Titanic*’s victims or auctioned off by survivors after the fact. Survivors like Millivina Dean, who was only two months old when she survived the disaster, and ended up needing to sell autographs and “memorabilia” like a suitcase her family were given after they reached New York in order to cover her nursing home expenses in old age. It’s a shame that *Titanic* artifacts are mostly the luxury possessions of private collectors that are sometimes on loan to exhibitions, and not housed in public museums under the protection and care of public institutions. Because these artifacts are culturally and historically significant and shouldn’t be loaned out, hidden away, displayed, or destroyed at the discretion of wealthy buyers. They are part of our shared history.

And - I’ll be honest - I’m also just put off by the chintziness of it all. That’s completely a taste thing. But there it is. I don’t like Las Vegas getting its stink all over *Titanic*. Which is just, like, my opinion, man.

But there’s a much more controversial form of *Titanic* commercialism that’s attracted much more criticism, especially in recent years... commercial tourism to the wreck site.

In July of 2001, New Yorkers David Leibowitz and Kimberley Miller made history (and pissed a lot of people off) by getting married in a submersible hovering on the deck of the *Titanic*, two miles under the Atlantic Ocean. The wedding was essentially a publicity stunt organized by a commercial diving company, Subsea Explorer, and David and Kimberley won their passage to the wreck in a contest, beating out 28,000 other entries. When accused of trivializing the deaths of more than 1500 people, David replied that he didn’t think of *Titanic* as a gravesite and that you’d have the same reverence getting married in a church because there’s graveyards there too. Gottem.

Commercial tourism to the wreck of *Titanic* began in the late 1990s with companies like Deep Ocean Expeditions selling passage for around \$32,500... around \$65k in 2026 prices.

Titanic’s wreck site occupies the center of a venn diagram of three kinds of tourism: *Titanic* tourism, obviously, the pilgrimage to places and things related to the *Titanic*; thanatourism, tourism to places associated with death, tragedy, and calamity; and extreme tourism, a form of tourism that is almost exclusively the domain of the ultrarich, for those that are seeking an exclusive and risky adrenaline rush – think paid trips to near space, summiting Everest, and, yes, dives on deep sea submersibles. Not everyone who has gone down to *Titanic* falls into all three categories of tourist - some of Oceangate’s passengers went into debt buying passage on the doomed submersible, David Leibowitz and Kimberley Miller won their passage in a contest,

and Stockton Rush fell firmly into the wealthy adrenaline junkie category and never seemed to indicate any morbid or historical curiosity about the vessel - but *Titanic*'s broad appeal and limited access has made it a hot ticket basically since its discovery.

However, those hot tickets have been sitting on ice for the past three years because five people died in a very public way and brought a whole bunch of bad publicity to the industry. So, let's talk about Oceangate.

It's weird to plug my other podcast twice in an episode of this one, but we actually covered this one pretty in depth on Respect the Dead, as well...

On Fathers Day 2023, a submersible named *Titan* operated by the expeditions and tourism company Oceangate imploded while on its descent to see the *Titanic*. Aboard were five passengers: Oceangate CEO Stockton Rush, *Titanic* expert Paul-Henri Nargeolet, businessman and adventurer Hamish Harding, businessman Shazadah Dawood, and his 19 year old son, Suleman.

Titan was an experimental submersible made out of carbon fiber - a material often used in the aerospace industry but when it comes to deep sea submersibles, titanium tends to be the preferred material. Titanium and quartz. But carbon fiber is significantly *cheaper* than titanium and that was ultimately what appealed most to Stockton Rush. Not "innovation", certainly not safety, but cost-effectiveness.

The *Titan* was not classed, which is to say it wasn't certified by an official agency and deemed seaworthy. Like every company that has offered deep sea tours to paying tourists, Oceangate styled their paid customers "mission specialists" and gave them little jobs aboard the vessel in order to skirt the legal and financial responsibilities that come with offering a commercial venture to paying tourists in the legal sense. Just as "experimental" was used as a euphemism to mean *Titan* was really "unstable", "mission specialist" was a euphemism to mean "someone who paid us \$250,000 to put their life at unnecessary risk." Stockton Rush wanted to maximize his profits, which ultimately meant cutting whatever corners he felt he could get away with cutting. And as a result, four other people lost their lives, including someone whose life had only just begun.

In the center of Christine Dawood's kitchen sits a model of the *Titanic*. It's the \$680 LEGO set I mentioned earlier, made up of over 9000 individual bricks. Before he took his ill-fated trip aboard the doomed *Titan*, Christine's son, Suleman, spent hours putting it together piece by piece. Suleman had been in love with the *Titanic* ever since his parents had taken him to the touring exhibition in Singapore. Shazadah, Suleman's father, stumbled upon an ad for Oceangate while scrolling the internet during the 2020 COVID lockdowns, and the Dawoods began making moves toward a journey to see *Titanic* in person. They contacted a luxury travel agency they subscribed to and asked them about the Oceangate expeditions. The agency responded that they could make it happen, and in 2022, the agency reached back out to see if the Dawoods were still interested in visiting the *Titanic* with Oceangate. Shazadah and Suleman had never even been snorkeling before, but they wanted to go. In February of 2023, Stockton Rush and

his wife, Wendy, flew to the UK to meet with the Dawoods and pitch the \$250,000 per head journey on the sub. Stockton spun a rich yarn about the incredible marine life they'd see on the way down, glittering with bioluminescence, and then that moment when you reach the wreck and her bow emerges from the darkness. Shazadah was sold.

The two tickets Shazadah purchased were originally intended for him and Christine, but Suleman was so fascinated by *Titanic*. And it was Fathers' Day weekend. Christine offered her seat to Suleman, who brought a Rubik's cube with him so that he might try to set a world record for fastest deep sea Rubik's cube completion once they reached the wreck site.

They were 500 meters above *Titanic* when the *Titan* imploded.

Suleman's room and Shazadah's study remain the way they were when they left them. Shrines to the men they were and reminders of two lives cut needlessly short. Earlier this year, Christine completed a five week hike from Hampton Court to Suleman's former university in Glasgow – a feat he'd wanted to do himself before he passed. She plans on establishing a trauma and grief center for others like her.

In a sickening sort of echo of the *Titanic* inquiries, Oceangate and its employees never faced criminal charges for the reckless business practices that contributed to the implosion. The American and Canadian investigations into the disaster, like the American and British inquiries a century before, merely recommended tighter regulations for passenger submersibles.

But due to Oceangate, all commercial expeditions down to the *Titanic* have been on indefinite hold. It's not an attractive package for most paying customers these days. And the public scandal of the disaster has people once again questioning the ethics of even traveling down to the wreck for scientific purposes. Given the danger, should we be sending people down there at all? Given the advanced decay of the wreck, and her status as a gravesite, many think even unmanned vessels should be prohibited from dives. Still others argue that *Titanic's* rate of deterioration is a sign that RMS Titanic Inc. should be salvaging *more* artifacts, saving what they can before the wreck becomes completely inaccessible and collapses into a rust stain on the bottom of the Atlantic. It's a debate that involves marine archeologists, treasure seekers, Twitter warriors, and even the US government, and it's next time on "After *Titanic*"...

"After *Titanic*" is a podcast by Bash Back Productions. Written, recorded, and edited by Amanda Hootman. Music by Neilly Farrell. Artwork by Paul Scott Canavan. Full cast list, transcripts and sources are available on aftertitanic.com. "After *Titanic*" is supported by our generous Indiegogo backers and patrons. Help support the podcast by heading to Patreon.com/AfterTitanic where you'll get exclusive access to our Discord server, and join an entire community of fellow Titanophiles to hang out with between episodes. I've been your host, Amanda Hootman. Thanks for listening.

[The Life and Death of the Princess Diana Beanie Baby Market | Vanity Fair](#)

[How Museum Gift Shops Sell Tragedy - Fast Company](#)

[Dead Celebrities, Inc. - Respect the Dead](#)

[BBC News | AMERICAS | Titanic couple take the plunge](#)

[Inside the Titanic wreck's lucrative tourism industry - National Geographic](#)

[OceanGate Expeditions' Titanic tourism is a thing, and it's dangerous | CNN Business](#)

[Oceangate 2 Atlantic Drift - Respect the Dead](#)

[My husband and son dived to see the wreck of the Titanic, and never came back – this is what happened at sea | Titanic sub incident | The Guardian](#)