

Message in a model

Stories from the Navy Room of the Rijksmuseum

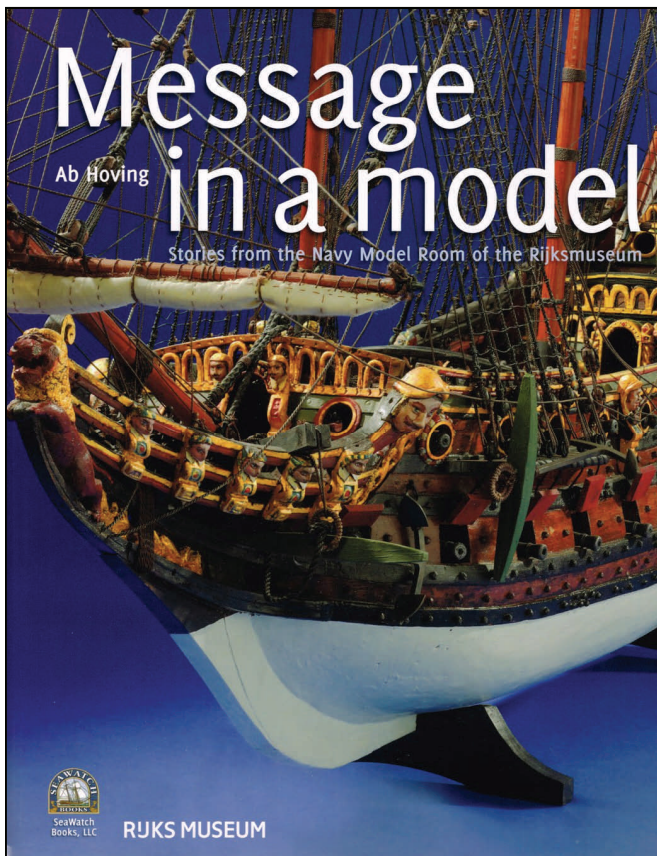
by Ab Hoving

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This book grabs your attention with a catchy title and a beautifully illustrated dust jacket, and never lets go! When you first open "Message in a Model", your first impulse will be to thumb from page to page, studying the nearly 400 remarkable photos, stopping briefly to read a caption before going on. Only after completing your photographic tour through this book, will you start to read Ab Hoving's many stories, which are truly intriguing.

It starts in 1889 when the Dutch Department of Defense donated some 1400 models and maritime heirlooms to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. A substantial number



of the artifacts would remain in storage, unseen and unappreciated by the public. Not designed to last hundreds of years, many pieces would suffer from the ravages of time.

Realizing that time was not on their side, the Rijksmuseum brought Ab Hoving onboard in 1989, as head of the Dutch History restoration workshop. For the next 23 years, Mr. Hoving would work with a small team of colleagues and volunteers, painstakingly bringing the collection back to its former glory. These efforts would culminate in the reopening of the Rijksmuseum in 2013. This would be the first time since 1927 that the public could visit the Navy Model Room.

Along the way, Ab Hoving added to his knowledge of these artifacts, which he shared with visitors to the museum. It was during these tours that he noticed how the demeanor of the attendees changed from one of interested surprise to one of enthusiasm. It was this observation that would be the inspiration for this book.

"Message in a Model" deals with 54 subjects that represent a wide range of artifacts, or artifact groups. With such a magnificent collection at his disposal, you would think that the majority of them are magnificent sailing ships, such as the example featured on the book jacket, and in the photo to the right. This is not the case.

One particular model selected by the author is anything but magnificent. In fact, it is referred to as an enigma. This vessel actually existed, but what was its purpose? Hoving offers some compelling theories as to what its possible use may have been.

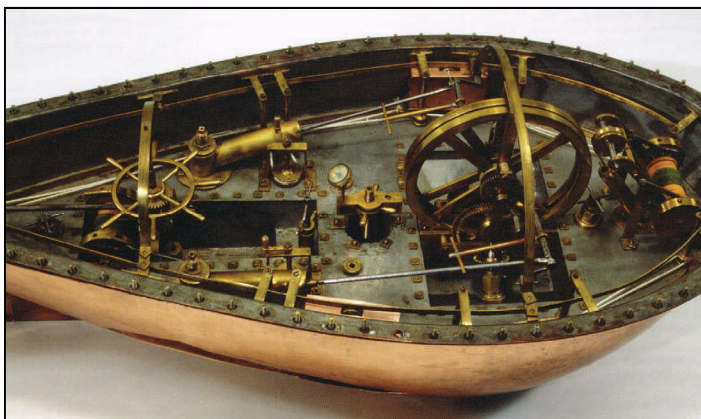


He also gives reasons why this strange craft could have contributed to a war being declared!

Many of the subjects chosen by Hoving involve technological innovation and inventions that were submitted to the Navy Board in the form of models. For numerous reasons provided by the author, many of these ideas never went any further. The motives may have included political jealousy, ambition, economics, a lack of understanding, or merely that some were ahead of their time.

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One such device was a submarine designed by Anton Lipkens in 1837. Hoving describes the model as “one of the most remarkable objects in the Navy Room.” The



model contains many innovative concepts, and Hoving describes many of them, including a propulsion system that does not include a propeller! The model’s hull could be separated, so one could view the submarine’s interior. The above photo shows the lower half.

The Rijksmuseum has a number of church models, also known as votive models, in their collection. The author discusses these unusual models, and offers some interesting facts concerning these religious/maritime artifacts. Hoving sheds some light on how, and why, these models differed from contemporary decorative model ships.



One of the final chapters deals with a subject that may seem out of place in such a remarkable book. The segment is titled “Ugly Models.” Hoving admits that the col-



lection has a certain number of models that belong in the fireplace. They are of primitive workmanship, have poor proportions, and are of no historical value. Their only redeeming quality is the fact that they either belonged to some distinguished individual, or were built by someone of royal personage. The model above belonged to an artist. You can see the rolling sea sketched on the side of the hull, no doubt, the basis for a painting.

This brief review touches on only a few of the diverse subjects this remarkable book contains. They were chosen as a brief sampling of what awaits you inside “Message in a Model.” The lavish illustrations, coupled with Ab Hoving’s stories will entertain and intrigue you, while stimulating your imagination. This book is highly recommended.

Reviewed by
Bob Filipowski

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