

[O'Pecko on Schwartz, 'Collecting the Globe: The Salem East India Marine Society Museum'](#)

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George H. Schwartz. *Collecting the Globe: The Salem East India Marine Society Museum*. Public History in Historical Perspective Series. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2020. 240 pp. \$28.95 (paper), [ISBN 978-1-62534-472-4](#); \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-62534-471-7.



Reviewed by Paul J. O'Pecko (Mystic Seaport Museum) **Published on** H-Sci-Med-Tech (December, 2022) **Commissioned by** Penelope K. Hardy (University of Wisconsin-La Crosse)

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The opening pages of *Collecting the Globe: The Salem East India Marine Society Museum* immediately place the subject of the book, the Salem East India Marine Society Museum (now the Peabody Essex Museum), into the broader context of American maritime museums. It is by far the oldest such museum in the country, and indeed it lays claim to being the longest continually running museum of any kind in the United States. For the most part, US maritime museums collect to tell the story of the past, whereas the East India Marine Society Museum was also developed to tell the story of the world as it unfolded. In describing the immense hall that was the society's exhibition space, the author notes, "Together, the vast ensemble was an organized display of the natural, cultural, and spiritual world bound by the sea and open to visual inspection through the efforts of the American maritime trade" (p. 7). The exotic collections brought from around the globe by local mariners drew crowds to its doors.

There are many maritime museums in the US supported by influential donors, but how many can claim someone like Jacob Crowninshield, captain of the ship *America*, who brought the first elephant to the country in 1797? And while there are also many histories of maritime museums, including James Lindgren's recent *Preserving Maritime America: A Cultural History of the Nation's Great Maritime Museums* (2019), few authors share the intimacy with the collections in question as does Peabody Essex Museum's George H. Schwartz. His command of maritime history and the collections at the museum where he is an associate curator puts this institutional history firmly on solid ground. The fact that he also teaches in the museum studies program at Tufts University gives him additional credibility within the museum community, and his writing reflects his knowledge.

Throughout the book, Schwartz includes many examples of the East India Society and its members either playing a direct role in or acting to influence the development of American science, literature, discovery, and diplomacy. Nathaniel Bowditch, for example, is probably the best-known mathematician to emerge from the early republic. He was a long-term member of the society, and his publication of the *New American Practical Navigator* in 1802 corrected over eight thousand errors in an earlier publication on navigation, British mathematician John Hamilton Moore's *The Practical Navigator and Seaman's New Daily Assistant* (1772). Bowditch's influence on American navigation and commerce continues today through the continued publication of his work, the latest update

published in 2021.

On the literary side, Nathaniel Hawthorne's father, who died in Suriname in 1808, was a member of the society. Hawthorne's connection to the society is evident in his short story "A Virtuoso's Collection," published in *Mosses from an Old Manse* in 1842, which "was inspired by his visits to the East India Marine Society Museum" (p. 148). Other works mentioned by the author that were also inspired by the society include Rudyard Kipling's *Captains Courageous* (1897) and Joseph Hergesheimer's *Java Head* (1919). Other authors and artists pepper the book with appearances as visitors intrigued by the society's eclectic global collections.

Schwartz also details the Salem society's influence on global relations, noting the role society members played in the 1838 to 1842 US Exploring Expedition under Captain Charles Wilkes as pilots and interpreters in the South Pacific. Early visits to Japan, over fifty years before Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry "opened" the closed ports of Japan to commerce, saw Salem ships being employed by Dutch merchants to trade on their behalf, while their own ships, normally allowed to enter Japan, were being assaulted by British privateers. Along with trade with Japan, the author discusses the importance of Salem's extensive trading ventures with China and India, the important collections that came to the museum from those commercial connections, and the influence those collections played on the American vision for other national societies.

Being a mariner who sailed around either Cape Horn or the Cape of Good Hope was a requirement to become a member of the society. Schwartz notes the advantages of this to the society early on in its existence as objects and logbooks from such members formed the foundation of the museum's collections. However, as the importance of maritime commerce in Salem faded in the second half of the nineteenth century, membership and support of the society greatly declined. By 1865, the society was in dire financial straits and considered selling its collections. The author notes that "the *Salem Register* published a scathing editorial concerning the rumor that P. T. Barnum was going to purchase the Society's collection" (p. 163). The rumor was just that, and in 1867 the philanthropist George Peabody formed the Peabody Academy and took over stewardship of the collection, thereby saving it from dispersal.

Such ups and downs of the society and its members are a critical part of the book and underscore the changing nature of Salem's maritime business, especially in the nineteenth century. While the focus is rightly on the antebellum heyday of the institution, a bit more attention could have been given to the eventual makeup of what became the Peabody Essex Museum, one of the country's premiere museums. Overall though, *Collecting the Globe* fulfills its mission as part of University of Massachusetts Press's Public History in Historical Perspective series. It is a fascinating view into the creation of the country's first museum that collected on an international basis nearly fifty years before the formation of the Smithsonian Institution.

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