Two Beautiful Italian Sisters

# The Final Glory Of The Italian Line

The Italian Line was responsible for commissioning two of the last purpose built ocean liners. SS Michelangelo and SS Raffaello were designed with the modern flair of the Nineteen Sixties to sail between the Mediterranean and North America. But the era also saw the growth of jet air travel, with which no ship could compete. That these two sisters even had the short careers that they did was due to subsidy by the Italian government.

They are worth remembering because of their beauty and style. They were the swan song actors in the age of steam powered ocean liners; their hulls appropriately painted white. They had very distinctive profiles, sleek and sharp. They had an unusual arrangement of two funnels, aft of center and like the elaborate cooling towers of science fiction nuclear reactors. This feature was ahead of its time and has been refined into the design of the funnels on modern ships.

# History

Rex and Conte di Savoia dictated by Il Duce were intended to make Italy competitive on the sea, in line with his many grand ambitions. Rex designed as the faster of the two, won the Blue Riband in 1932 but soon lost it to the super-ship of the age, Normandie. Conte di Savoia was styled as the more luxurious of the two.

First ships commissioned with a post war subsidy: the Andrea Doria first sailed the Atlantic in the winter of 1953. Her sister Cristoforo Colombo launched a year later. The two were nearly identical at more than 29,000 tons. The Andrea Doria has the most lingering fame of all the Italian liners, famously sinking after being struck by the Swedish American Line’s *Stockholm* in fog, July 25, 1956. She lies off the coast of Nantucket, having attracted intrepid divers for decades, collapsing slowly into the seabed due to corrosion and snagged fishing nets.

The replacement for Andrea Doria was the 33,000-ton Leonardo Da Vinci, featuring lifeboat mounts that allowed them to be lowered with up to 25 degrees of list. A lesson learned from the slowly capsizing Andrea Doria. Leonardo Da Vinci bridged the technology gap between the older ships and Michelangelo and Raffaello.

In 1958 the Italian Line started to plan for a pair of super-ships. They would have a three-class layout specifically for regularly scheduled passage between Genoa and New York. The capacity, including the crew, was 2500 souls, built almost concurrently by two separate shipyards. They spanned 900 feet in length and 45,000 tons with thirty lounges and a theater with almost 500 seats each 760 cabins and 18 elevators.

The funnel design became a trademark. Some thought they were horrible but they were effective in dispersing smoke and engine fumes. The lattice structure allowed airflow to pass through, a feature that has become a standard on modern cruise liners.

## Michelangelo

Built at Genoa Sestri shipyards, from start to finish she took five years to complete and entered service from Genoa in April 1965. In the spring of 1966, during a stormy crossing to New York, a rogue wave hit her headlong, caving in the front of the upper structure below the bridge. Two passengers were lost, swept out to sea and a crewmember died later of their injuries. As a result of the incident he aluminum plating that had given way was replaced with steel, not just on Michelangelo but also on her sister ship and many of the other competing liners such as the SS United States.

She continued in service without further incident but passenger numbers declined along with all of the other liners. There was just no competing with jet airliners, particularly after the introduction of the Boeing 747. There was a half-hearted attempt to operate cruises but many of her features worked against her. Her cabins were small and lacked windows and the three-class layout.

Michelangelo was finally withdrawn from service in 1975 and sold to the Shah of Iran, whose shipping plans were thwarted by the Iranian revolution. She spent fifteen years at Bandar Abbas and was finally scrapped in Pakistan in 1995.

## Raffaello: Futuristic Style, Dated Transportation Mode

At twenty-two tons heavier than her sister and slightly longer, Raffaello was built by Cantieri Riuniti dell'Adriatico in Trieste. She had a relatively uneventful life compared to Michelangelo, with minor mechanical problems that caused delays on several trips.

Raffaello had a unique and modernistic interior design that was a vision of the future that would not be out of place in a modern boutique hotel. She represented the finest that Italian design had to offer in the nineteen sixties. Lines were minimalist, evocative of art deco style of many of the great liners.

A chic but sleek and sterile “space age” looks, with polished metal, cool blues and hardwood paneling. To travel on this ship would have been a marvelous experience that is lost to the hassled modern traveller. Sadly, she shared the same fate of being sold to Iran in 1975 and was sunk by a torpedo, just offshore of Bushehr in the Persian Gulf in 1983.

# Epilogue

Michelangelo is long gone and the wreck of Raffaello still lies just below the surface where she sank. Like too many other ships of the mid twentieth century they made statements of romance, taste, national pride and subsidies, yet the much more economically efficient airliners rapidly superseded them.

There are few institutions that could oversee such beautiful ships as museums. That is the only long-term way to save the remaining few ocean liners: they must be preserved as examples of the history of the era, whether by grant (unlikely to provide more than partial funding) or by paying their ways as fixed hotels.

The super liners, from the Cunard Queens and Normandie to SS United States and The Sisters of the Italian Line had interior spaces in the hundreds of thousands of square feet, the size of a large skyscraper. Not many places have a need for such things on their waterfronts. Conversion to cruise ship operation has had limited success but cannot be competitive in cost or service with the huge modern cruise ships.

So, all of these ships are a story, a romantic story from a past age now. Easily forgotten because such vessels are no longer used as a dedicated mode of passenger travel. It is because they were once a significant transportation mode, highly valued and central to the pride of their nations that all these liners of the ocean, and specifically these two beautiful Italian Sisters, should remembered.

# Bibliography

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