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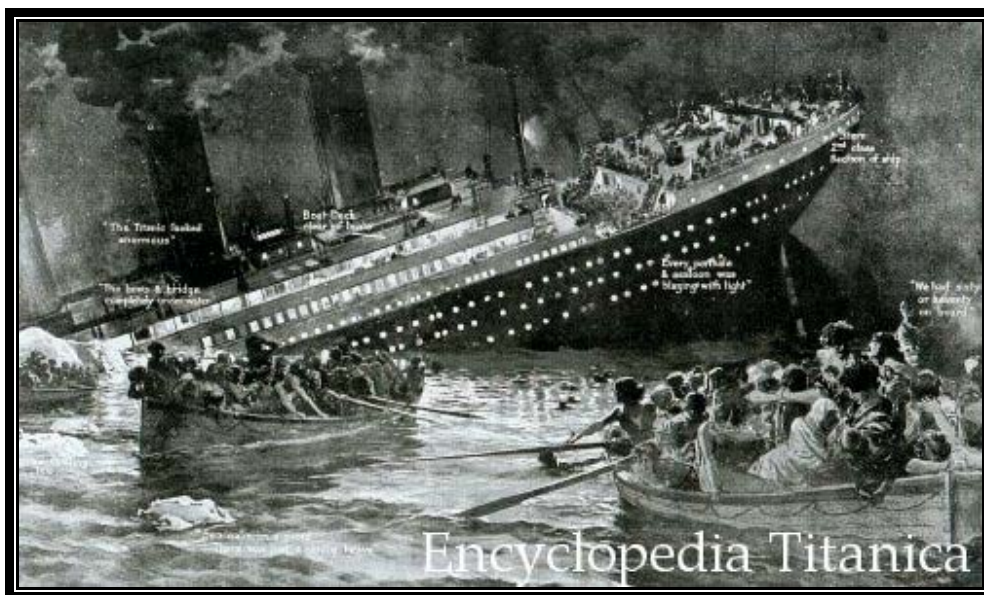
Anatomy Of A Boat Deck Portrait

By Senan Molony

Who was the real Leonardo of the *Titanic*? Not the sun-blessed Di Caprio: a man with a far more convincing claim to be the Da Vinci of disaster is a 31-year-old Neapolitan who captured the crisis on canvas. His name was Fortunino Matania. He never beheld the *Titanic* himself, but saw it through the eyes of those who were there – and in turn communicated that vision for all time.

Matania was the leading artist of *The Sphere* magazine in London. He has bequeathed two particularly outstanding images of the sinking, one of which conveys far more than initially meets the eye.

The technical accomplishment of both works has ensured their widespread reproduction in illustrated histories of the maiden voyage shipwreck. One depicts lifeboats pulling away from the suspiring ship, the whole overlaid with quotes from those who survived – “The starlight night was beautiful,” “The *Titanic* looked enormous,” “Every porthole & saloon was blazing with light.” The other shows a patient throng, waiting on the boat deck.





This second image, more stately and still, is deserving of special attention. At first glance it might appear to be a typical piece of mawkish sentimentality, celebrating the fortitude of those who stood back while the weak went away. At its centre is a man in dickie-bow dinner suit, blowing a farewell kiss to his wife. A lifebelt dangles forgotten in his other hand.



A case of the strong surrendering only to good manners? How the Edwardians might quiver with suffused pride at such a depiction of sacrifice! As such, it does little more than meet the mores of the age, satisfying audience expectation.

But look a little further. See the man standing immediately behind, the one with his head in his hands. Here the notion of noble immersion in the freezing Atlantic is subtly sabotaged. It is at once a glimpse more real - as is the sicklied face of the lifejacketed chef, looking from centre of the picture down the deck to the kiss-blowing man. This cook, who carries a practical coil of rope, is uncomprehending of the attitude of his social better.

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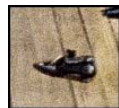
How can this man throw kisses, as if seeing someone off from a restaurant in Belgravia? The chef's stomach is churning and he cannot begin to empathise. This is his own time of dying, and he has no-one to whom he might toss heedless enamourings. There is no admiration in the look he shoots the aristocrat, for he is sick at heart.



There are frowns elsewhere – frowns that show not every countenance is unclouded at the prospect of highly civilized extinction. A woman in the foreground will not go in the lifeboat, thank you very much. Her whole expression says the pleading man in

pyjamas should unhand her at once. Look there at the overcoat, momentarily flung onto the rail so that the man can indicate the waiting boat. If she would but get in, he can drape it over her shoulders.

Then there is the thoughtful man, the one with arms folded around a clutched valise. He is beside the dinner-jacketed dignitary, but he is staring at the deck. Frowning at a forgotten shoe.



Here the modern viewer, jaded by cliché in every treatment of disaster ever since, might understandably revolt. What a cloying piece of nonsense!

Except for the nature of Fortunino Matania's art.



Matania put the shoe there precisely because he was told about it by an eyewitness. And this is the hallmark of Matania's many masterpieces – scrupulous attention to detail, married to a majestic capacity to capture a panoply of human emotions with a few darts of pen or brush.

The *Sphere* told in a later edition how its artist had worked out his *Titanic* boat deck reconstruction – they called it a reconstruction - at Southampton. "No, the man stood here - a foot more to the right," the magazine quoted his eyewitness informant in setting the scene.



Fortunino Matania at work in Southampton on his famous illustration with an unnamed *Titanic* steward in May 1912

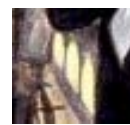
Take the night sky in the picture – speckled with stars, and indeed “the starlight night was beautiful.” But these are not just any stars. Matania has not flicked paint from individual bristles to create an effect. He has instead represented the **actual** constellations that were present in the sky that night as *Titanic* sank. Chief among them was Orion – and Orion’s belt is unmistakable as the narrow band of three stars just below the top margin of the picture, midway along the left hand side.

This demonstrable accuracy is uplifting. It gives confidence in our consideration of the scene below. And now we can see the same painstaking work, such that the *Titanic* boat deck is recognisably realised as it actually was.

The boat deck rail joined at right angles *exactly* where the unwilling woman has set her steadying left hand. The Welin davits arched overside just so. And the lights blazed here at foot-level through the continuation of the high windows of the first class smoking room on A Deck below.

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All of which tells us that this is precisely the aft side of the boat deck, on the port side, and that we are looking at lifeboat 16.

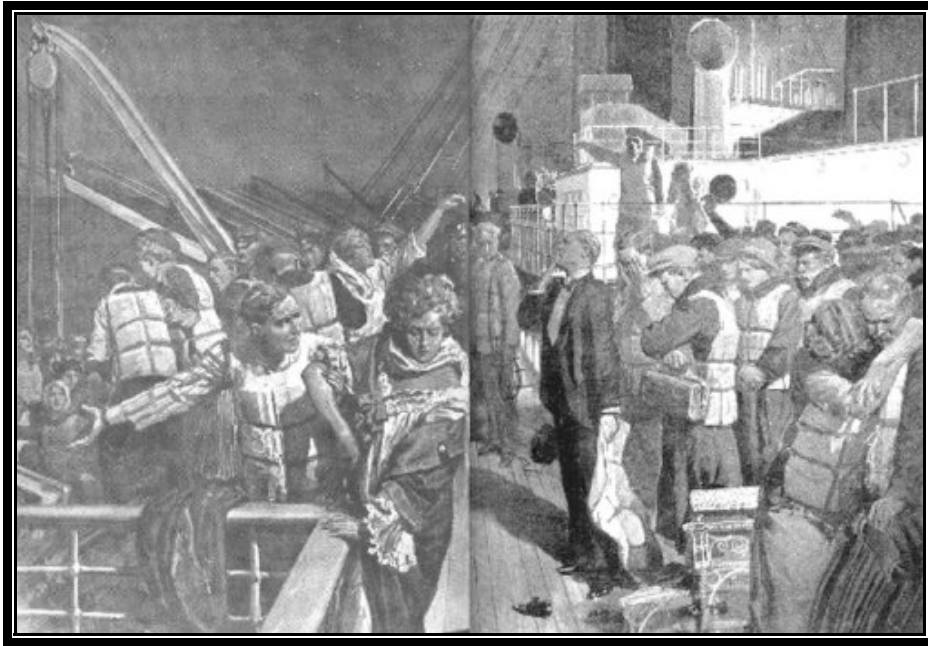


Boat 16 is the “silent lifeboat,” about which little was testified. This state of affairs has led to much conjecture about what happened in this location, and why Sixth Officer Moody did not depart in 16 as he was supposed to do by reason of his compact with Fifth Officer Lowe. It has even led one researcher to float the theory that this is where an officer committed suicide, and that Moody was that man. But it is more likely that Moody was simply ordered away.

Speculation flourishes in a dearth of known facts. The presence of Master-at-Arms Bailey in 16 when it eventually left the ship, and the earlier unruly scenes and gunplay at No. 14, have led to speculation that this lifeboat saw more than the usual chaos. There are claims, from the likes of Ethel Beane and Nellie O’Dwyer, of passengers being killed in this immediate area.

It is little realised that Master-at-Arms Bailey, like Canadian Major Arthur Peuchen at lifeboat 6, actually climbed down a rope to enter the boat. According to the evidence of seaman Ernest Archer, already in No. 16, Bailey “came down the fall,” and he presumed he had been ordered into it by a senior officer to take charge. So much for Moody’s chances.

Now we have an eyewitness detailing the scene around boat 16 before it left, and doing so through an artist. The picture appeared as a double-spread on pages 118 and 119 of the May 4, 1912, issue of *The Sphere*. The magazine said the reconstruction, entitled “Women and Children First” was made by “artistic cross-examination” of a crewman who was present.



“Women and Children First”
the Sphere 4th May 1912

The man was a steward, whom the magazine coyly failed to identify, but whose photograph it carried. The *Sphere* said its special artist was “seen here discussing the details of his drawing with one of the stewards of the *Titanic* at Southampton last week. Every point, from the positions and attitude of the people to the angle of the davits and position of the boats, was fought out,” it added.

“The scene was vividly impressed on the steward's mind and he was able to correct costume and grouping as the reconstruction proceeded, down to the smallest detail... The shoe lying on the deck is no artist's invention. The passenger in his dinner jacket stood here as shown, not wearing his lifebelt, but holding it as he kissed what was to be a last farewell to his wife.”

If the steward is thus to be believed, then the chef and the man in the dinner jackets are real persons, as are the others gathered around this lifeboat, whether or not they include the owner of the abandoned shoe.

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It may be that Master-at-Arms Bailey is the moustachioed man at the davit. Tall, lean Sixth Officer Moody could be the man helping a bonneted lady into the



boat. But who is the commanding figure, standing elevated, his right arm extended as if giving orders?



And who is the steward who gave the artist his insights? Charles Andrews is a candidate. He gave a deposition at Southampton in the week in question, and gave evidence in America about going to his station at boat 16 immediately

following the accident. He later left in the lifeboat, around 12.50am by his account.

[Andrews had put his watch back at least 20mins to allow for a time change due that night, and thus felt the impact of the iceberg at 11.20am by his time. He said he left in the lifeboat “about half past 12.” The British Inquiry decided the boat left at 1.35am.] Clearly Andrews should know most about lifeboat 16’s brief service history.

The only extant picture of Andrews, a picture from early in manhood, shows him without the moustache worn by the steward who briefed Matania. In the latter respect, the *Sphere* photographs seem to bear a closer resemblance to steward Harry Prior, whose survival circumstances are unclear. Prior did not testify at either Inquiry.

Andrews mentioned in his US evidence that he walked up on deck and stood by the boat. “There were lots of people around, and I saw stores brought to the boat,

and bread.” In volunteering the detail about the bread and stores brought to the boat, Andrews seems to rule himself out of being Matania’s informant, as there are no loaves in the picture – even though many witnesses would talk about bread lying about the deck. Nor did Andrews mention the abandoned shoe in testimony.



Charles Andrews

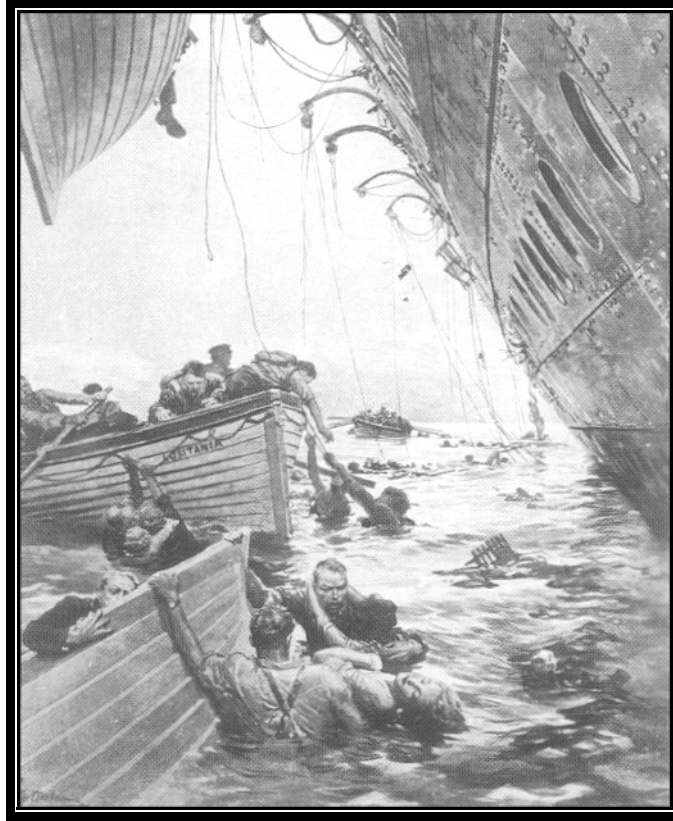


Harold Prior

Whoever the steward may be, there is a chiming story that focuses on footwear in the aft port quadrant on the *Titanic*. A woman who attempted to enter boat 10 had a boot that caught in the rail as she fell between lifeboat and ship – only to be hauled in at the deck below.

Whether she had anything to do with it or not, the shoe is said to be “no artist’s invention.” Certainly Fortunino Matania would not need to resort to any cheap motif – he was already the shining star of the *Sphere*, having been headhunted from his work as an illustrator with the *Graphic*.

Matania found further fame, and his work in World War One is emblematic of that conflict. His drawing of lifeboats lowering from the sinking *Lusitania* is justly famous – it seems to place the viewer in the water, with a boat dangerously descending from overhead, complete with a suit-leg hanging down from an occupant inside.



Matania's portrayal of the sinking of the Lusitania

King George V, for one, was so impressed with Matania's work that he invited him to cover the Royal Tour of India. During the Great War Matania worked as a war artist, spending nearly the whole of the conflict at the front, producing hundreds of striking images.

His work is said to have been admired by military experts for his trademark technical exactitude. One assessment forms its own enduring tribute: "His war art features in virtually every history or encyclopaedia of WW1 ever produced."

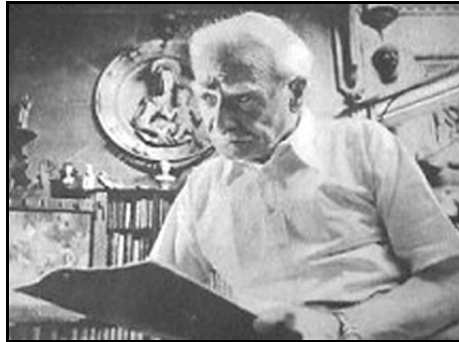
Regularly exhibited in later years at the august Royal Academy and The Royal Institute of Art, Fortunino Matania continued to chronicle history as it happened. He was recognised in his native land and made a Chevalier of the court of King Umberto II.

In 1940 Matania lost many of his works when his London studio was bombed during the Blitz. The whereabouts today of the original artwork "Women and

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Children First” is not known, but Matania drawings and illustrations are becoming increasingly collectible, having always been so among the cognoscenti.

Matania remained loyal to *The Sphere* for nearly sixty years. His last illustration appeared in the magazine shortly before his death in 1963, more than half a century after his *Titanic* portrayals had first captured the public imagination.



He was 82 and still a colossus of his craft when he died. And if the empty shoe or discarded doll are by now hackneyed images from every site of calamity, then let us remember where the trend may have begun - on the boat deck of the *Titanic*. Kick-started by a shoe in a “photographic” re-creation by a man who was a modern Master.

Illustrations: Fortunino Matania, Charles Andrews, Harold Prior courtesy of Senan Molony.

Women and Children First by Fortunino Matania courtesy of the Mariners' Museum, Newport News Virginia, used under licence.

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