

Cross-fertilization

A recent survey for model manufacturers, primarily of kits but also including ready-assembled radio-controlled and static models, to determine customers' areas of interest produced some very intriguing results. The largest groups of customers were involved in model railroading (20 percent), radio-controlled model aircraft (19 percent), and radio-controlled model cars (16 percent). Together, these groups account for 55 percent of the manufacturers' base. Scale ship and boat modelers (of static wooden or plastic kits and scale radio-controlled vessels) combined together made up 4 percent of their customers, only beating out customers interested in Lego or Meccano/Erector sets.

We are indeed engaged in a niche pursuit. There is a tendency for those with niche interests to look inward to their group members for inspiration, new ideas, and, artisanally, methods and techniques. Materials, tools, practices, all can tend to depend on the group's consensus for acceptance. This is not necessarily something to deplore but it also can limit adoption of practices from outside.

In general, ship modelers are open to new ideas from outside their own community. Nevertheless, the inertia of a niche group can make this a slow process at times. Photo-etching, for example, became an important feature of model railroading in the early 1960s, first with the arrival of stunning HO (1:87) scale brass locomotives and rolling stock produced in Japan using the technology and soon afterwards with the availability of details for scratch builders and those wishing to enhance their kits. Plastic kit ship modelers did not see similar products until 1985, when Loren Perry, after his superb demonstration of the possibilities of photo-etching at the Model

Engineer Exhibition in London that year, started to produce sets commercially for them. It probably was another ten years before manufacturers started to make photo-etched details available for modelers working with traditional wooden materials or scratch builders began to explore using the technology.

Along with most other aspects of our modern society, the pace of technologically change in the modeling world has been accelerating very rapidly, and many of the costs have fallen almost equally quickly. In particular, scanning technologies allied with computer aided design (CAD) is changing the process of manufacturing models; one major manufacturer essentially only produces new kits if there is a full-size prototype accessible that its technicians can scan and scale down for production. On a more mundane level, the availability of cheap sophisticated scanning systems and powerful CAD programs combined with inexpensive and quite efficient computer-controlled milling machines, photo-etching equipment, and three-dimensional printers is making high-level options available to model makers in general on an individual basis.

The spread of the fruits of these technologies is uneven. Use of some is more prevalent among builders of static scale aircraft models or railroaders than among ship modelers. Not everyone may be interested in these applications, or have much use for them, but, photogrammetrically scanning a particular capstan and using the data to create CAD drawings, for example, does not preclude making its model by traditional methods. It behooves us to look outside our own niche pursuit and explore these possibilities.

— Paul E. Fontenoy