

# Opportunities & Dangers for Advancing Ship Modelers

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*The following excerpt which appeared in the Nautical Research Journal and Ship Modeler's Shop Notes is reprinted here to give guidance to builders who desire to construct accurate and representative ship models. This material is as applicable now as when it was first written. The opinions expressed here are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the Nautical Research Guild.*

Model Builders careers often reach the stage where another kit-built ship model or another scratch-built model from well-worn plans is no longer fully satisfying. That leads to the search for a fresh prototype - perhaps from outside the overworked American frigate and clipper ship eras. Such searches can offer both invigorating challenges and serious problems.

Building a model based on inadequate information is a waste of effort for the serious craftsman and will leave a false impression in the minds of those who view his or her handiwork. The field is already cluttered with such long-lived anachronisms as the Lexington plans in Charles Gerard Davis's otherwise excellent - and still not superseded - book *The Built-up Ship Model* (Salem, Massachusetts: Marine Research Society, 1933, and reprints). New books lavishly promote "replica" ships, some of which, on close examination, prove to be of the most dubious authenticity. Shoddy and inaccurate foreign kits flood the hobby shops. Must we remain trapped between overdone old favorites and fantasy?

Certainly not! The new science of nautical archaeology, coupled with new finds in archives and their more thorough analysis, have been introducing spectacular new subjects for modelers and making some previously known ships more accessible, while a re-evaluation of our generally accepted model building parameters opens even more authentic subjects for modelers' consideration.

## Parameters

Let's look first at the parameters. The goal of many of us has been the creation of virtually complete reconstructions of named historic ships in 1:48-scale, fully-rigged models, a goal enshrined in the models of American ships Howard I. Chapelle commissioned for the Smithsonian Institution's collection and in the "best" models admired at any model exhibition anywhere in the world. As we go back in time from the well-developed eighteenth-century American and western European ship model traditions,

and expand our geographic range farther beyond the Atlantic and across the Pacific, such a goal becomes less and less realistic. From about 1650 to 1750, only a limited number of named European and American warships, Indiamen, naval auxiliaries, and a few other ships, have substantial bodies of information available about them. Before 1650, very few ships anywhere are documented well enough to meet this standard. Are modelers limited to such ships? Only if large, partially planked, and fully framed models of specific ships are the goal.

Much larger numbers of ship types are well-enough known from reasonably good illustrations and written evidence to provide the basis for 1:96-scale, solid-hull or fully-planked models. A mid-sixteenth-century Portuguese carrack, for example, could be handled in this way, working from Peter Breughel the Elder's engravings, which are frequently reproduced, as in *The Great Age of Sail*, edited by Joseph Jobe (Switzerland: Edita Lausanne, 1967, p. 38) and *Sailing Ships: Prints by the Dutch Masters from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century* edited by Irene de Groot and Robert Vorstman [New York: The Viking Press, 1980, illus. 2-4]. Bjorn Landstrom provides a reconstruction in *The Ship* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1961, p. 110-111).

Still more ships can be modeled in yet smaller scales to show only very general characteristics for history-of-the-ship model groups. The endlessly contentious Santa Maria is a prime example in the latter category: even though numerous researchers, including Bjorn Landstrom (*The Ship*, pp. 102-103) and Jose Maria Martinez-Hidalgo in his *Columbus' Ships* (Barre, Massachusetts: Barre Publishers, 1966), have worked on this ship, the evidence is still too limited for a serious reconstruction. The fullest set of drawings is in Xavier Pastor's *The Ships of Christopher Columbus* in the *Anatomy of the Ship* series (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1992), but this book is little more than an amplification of Martinez-Hidalgo's work and apparently does not use the information provided in the last quarter century by nautical archaeology, limited as that is for this type of ship. Annoyingly, it

refers to each of the very different and speculative reconstructions as "replicas," which could be very misleading to non-specialists, especially with the Anatomy of the Ship imprimatur.

Once those caveats have been taken into account, the accumulated research does make many additional ships available for accurate model work. As certain modeling techniques are generally applied to building classic models of larger, decked vessels, while other techniques are applied to modeling smaller, open vessels, the following suggestions are divided into these two groups.

*The author continues for four pages describing the many subjects available for modeling dating as far back as 2583 B.C.*

*Due to the excessive length, the text has not been included here. If copies are desired, they can be purchased. You may order a photocopy of the article or the entire back issue (subject to availability). Please e-mail [info@thenrg.org](mailto:info@thenrg.org) for confirmation and pricing.*

## About the Nautical Research Guild

Founded in 1948, the Nautical Research Guild (NRG) is an IRS 501(c)(3) approved nonprofit educational organization with an international membership of historians, ship model makers, artists and laypersons with a common interest in the history, beauty and technical sophistication of ships and their models.

The NRG publishes the quarterly Nautical Research Journal, a quarterly magazine whose articles span the broad spectrum of topics in the linked disciplines of nautical research and ship model building. The NRG also holds an annual conference and operates the Model Ship World online community.

For more information about the Nautical Research Guild, including membership options, visit <http://www.thenrg.org>.

## About Model Ship World

Model Ship World is the world's largest ship modeler's forum with over 32,000 members. The forum hosts over 900 scratch build logs and over 2,400 kit build logs.

Free to join, the forum has an active community of modelers across all skill levels. With over half a million posts in more than 15,000 topics, Model Ship World is an incredible resource for any modeler.

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