A MODEL BUSINESS

"Why [do] model fans, including myself, love them so much?" asks Shunsuke Tamiya in his autobiography. As president of the world's most famous plastic kit model manufacturer, Japan's Tamiya Corp., he is well placed to know. "One reason must be the sheer pleasure of craftsmanship," he writes. "To build something with your own hands, to see it gradually take shape: this is a nonintellectual, purely intuitive pleasure."

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Like several of Japan's other model manufacturers, Tamiya Corp. is based in Shizuoka city, about an hour's bullet train ride away from Tokyo. The provincial city is famous for its green tea plantations and within sight of Mount Fuji. But climbing the steps to enter Tamiya's HQ, it's immediately obvious you are entering a machine world. At the door is a car engine on a pedestal; inside, the reception area doubles as a car and motorbike display room. There are three full-sized original F1 cars, motorbikes and a Porsche 911—even a sky-blue, solar-powered car shaped like a popular Japanese cartoon character.

Tamiya was founded in 1946 by Shoji Tamiya, the current president's father. Having started off as a lumber company, the company began making wooden toys

in 1948. In 1960 they made their first plastic model, a 1/800-scale *Yamato* (the old Imperial Navy's flagship). Now they have a catalogue of hundreds of tanks, planes, ships, cars and motorbikes, and they bring out 30 new plastic model kits every year as well as battery-powered and radio-controlled toys.

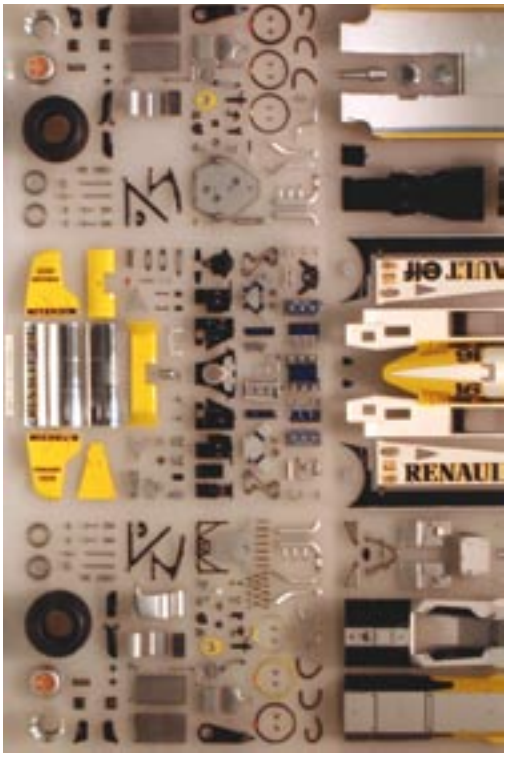
The key to making a good plastic scale-model kit has always been quality of the metal molds, says Tamiya employee Akira Yamamoto as he shows us around a mold-making demonstration room at the Shizuoka HQ. Tamiya was one of the first companies to make its own steel molds. Once hand-carved by master mold craftsmen, more recently molds are formed by computer-controlled milling machines or electrical-discharge machines for to make the most intricately detailed pieces (the mold metal is vaporized bit by bit). A single mold can cost millions of yen to make, but produces an almost unlimited number of kits.

Tamiya's molds were once hand carved, but now they are made by computer-controlled milling machines, or etched out by electrostatic discharge (previous page). Tamiya produces hundreds of scale model cars and motorbikes, as well as battery-powered toy cars.

Sounds Real

But, despite employing the latest technology to make ever more accurate and detailed models, kit makers are having an increasingly tough time selling their wares. "It's a shame, but the number of people actually making the kits has dropped," says Yamamoto. The sad fact is that fewer and fewer customers have time for model making. Some customers are even choosing "ready-made" models over traditional kits. The models are made from slightly higher-quality materials than the standard kits, but are pressed with the same molds and look almost exactly the same—an identical end product, just minus hours spent wielding craft-knife and poly cement. Most are made on assembly lines in China and the Philippines and can cost about twice as much as the self-assembly models.

One thing that all their standard kits and the ready-made kits have in common, though, is that the models must be based on real things. Tamiya only makes and sells models of actual objects—a policy the company is almost obsessive about at times. Yamamoto shows us a radio-controlled tank model that replays the sound of the real-life tank firing its canon (an employee was dispatched to Germany to make the recording). There's also a neat story in company president Shunsuke Tamiya's bi-



ography of how he once bought a Porsche 911 to take apart and measure for a scale model. He and his staff managed to do that but then unfortunately found they couldn't put it back together. They ended up asking a distinctly unimpressed Porsche dealer for help.

It's a Snap

Yet these days, Tamiya's lines of tanks, planes and ships are fighting a losing battle against an army of fantasy figures, robots and spaceships. Scale models made by Tokyo-based toy company Bandai are a universe away from Tamiya's historic recreations. The company sells a huge range of plastic models based on the Gundam series of sci-fi TV shows and films featuring skyscraper-tall, human-operated robots. At Bandai's Tokyo HQ, a Bandai staff member places a large completed model on the table in front of me, called "Strike Freedom Gundam." It is illuminated from the inside by a bulb in its chest and a battery in the base. Since 1980, Bandai has produced over a thousand Gundam kit models. "There are so many models that it is hard to think of new names," says Hobby Products Department Manager Katsumi Kawaguchi.

Although at first the Gundam models were put together much like other scale models—customers assembled them with poly cement and painted them—in recent years Bandai has made the kits so that the hundreds of parts can be snapped together in a few hours straight out of the box. The models are made from colored plastic that doesn't need to be painted. These days, only a fraction of customers even paint their models. "Families complain about the smell," says Kawaguchi.

Online One-Offs

And, while Bandai's customers may want to make their models as quickly as possible, there is even another group of scale model enthusiasts who never pick up craft knife at all. Customers to Daisharin, a small shop in the Nakano area of Tokyo, have a quite different interest in plastic models. "About half the people who buy the new models are collectors. They don't make them," says Masahiro Nitta, a friendly 24-year-old Japanese man with dyed blond hair. Daisharin specializes in model vehicles, mostly "matchbox" cars and plastic kit models. One wall of the pokey shop is stacked floor to ceiling with aged kits in plastic sleeves. The most valuable models are the ones that have never been opened, plastic bags inside still sealed. In the window of the shop is a submarine model made by Ikko. The manufacturer went out of business years ago, but the model is all the more valuable for that.

Nitta says that scale-model kit collecting has become popular partly thanks to the Internet; the vast majority of kit-model buying and selling happens online. Take one Japanese auction site that carries 7,438 Tamiya items for sale. Alongside a variety of collectable kit models, the cheapest item is a ¥100 set of transfers for a

One of Bandai's 1,000 plus Gundam fantasy robot scale models. Unlike traditional scale models, Gundams can be snapped together and are rarely painted.

Daisharin ("big wheel") model shop in Tokyo sells collectable scale models and toy cars. Most of their customers are adults.

hobby knives. While some collectors might be shocked, Nitta is pretty phlegmatic about it: "There are different ways of enjoying models."

And, of course, for all the popularity of yesterday's models, plenty of new models still get made—some very carefully indeed. The shop also sells "professionally made" models. Tucked into one corner are several shelves stocked with dioramas of tanks and planes and ships. Each is marked with the name of the modeler, priced in the 10,000s of yen, and represents hours, if not days, of painstaking work. One scene of a tank falling off a bridge has been recreated down to the rust on the flanks of the vehicle and moss in between the stones of the bridge.

racing car model; the most expensive is a shocking-pink, apparently lovingly hand-painted, King Hauler radio-controlled truck and trailer, priced at ¥380,000.

Not everyone buying old scale models, however, collects or trades them. "There are some people who want to make exactly the same model they made when they were a child," says Nitta. Middle-aged customers—usually men—come to the shop looking for the model car or tank they remember from their school days. If they find it, they take the carefully preserved old kit home, rip open the box and set about the valuable item with their

Old Boys' Toys

At a scale model shop in Tokyo's Asakusa district, Chiharu Ohsumi says that he makes about five models to order a year, "Boats, planes, tanks—anything is OK." An average job takes about 20 hours. Dressed in jeans and sweatshirt, he has bags under his eyes, maybe from long nights bent over model kits. Some of his customers are collectors and model enthusiasts; others are just elderly modelers who don't have the eyesight and steady fingers for modeling any more. He can charge up to ¥200,000

for a large, detailed model. He says that it is not so unusual for a customer to come in for their completed model and order another one on the spot.

Bigfoot is one of the biggest model shops in Tokyo. The Asakusa district has long been famous for its toy shops, and there used to be toy factories, too, till they moved to China. Bigfoot is still going strong, though. Ohsumi and two other staff members watch over three floors with 45,000 kits, about half of them Japanese made. The shop specializes in scale models—everything from a model of Belgium's famous Manneken Piss to *Yamato* battleship kits.

Ninety percent of customers who come to the shop are adults, many of them members of modeling clubs. Ohsumi admits that he can't really call it a toy shop any more; it has become more of a hobby shop. As well as model kits, Bigfoot also sells special parts hobbyists can use to customize kits. "They are more expensive than the actual kit," says Ohsumi as he picks up a Czech Republic-made metal dashboard for a plane model. The shop also has two shelves with folders full of special decal transfers—about 1,000 sheets, and a section with professional-looking modeling knives, files and other tools for modelers.

Adult hobbyists are nothing if not serious about their hobby. The shop even gets visits from "buyers" working for individual customers in Shanghai and Hong Kong. They come to pick up specific models only available in Japan. On the other hand, the relatively few children they see in Bigfoot tend to be brought in by fathers nostalgic for toys from their childhood, says Ohsumi. Not many Japanese children are interested in model making or even know how to use the tools. "They don't know how to use knives," says Ohsumi. Teachers discourage children from using knives for safety. "My generation used knives to sharpen pencils. They use electric sharpeners today."

Global Cool

Times have changed for Tamiya, too. In the lobby of their HQ is a real-life Tamiya F1 car decorated with the company's logo. Tamiya sponsored the Lotus team in the early 1990s and ended up producing models of cars marked with their own logo. The company hasn't made any F1 models recently, though; they can't get access to the cars to measure them any more. Nor can Tamiya recreate the advertisements for tobacco on some of the F1 cars, even though—ironically enough—most modelers are adults now. "They are probably smoking as they make the models," notes Tamiya's Yamamoto with a smile.

But Tamiya's HQ also contains a museum with elaborate and quite beautiful model dioramas from Tamiya-organized competitions around the world. Most, if not all, of the contestants are adults. "The way of making the models has become more creative," says Yamamoto. "That's a good thing."

Daisharin model shop is part of the Mandarake hobby superstore in Tokyo (above); A Lotus Formula 1 scale model, and the car it was based on, greet visitors at Tamiya's Shizuoka HQ (below).