

A Model Success Story

Japan's scale-model manufacturers are as famously attentive to quality and detail as their customers are devoted to their products. **Tony McNicol** talks to kit maker Tamiya Inc. and to model aficionados.

There are perhaps few men in their thirties or forties who have not made a plastic model tank, motorbike, plane, or car as a child. And there is a good chance they assembled one from a kit made in Japan. Today, Japanese manufacturers still lead the scale-model business, but a lot has changed over the decades—not least the profile of customers. Poly glue and enamel paint have been dropped in favor of games consoles, computers, and mobile phones. Boys and girls are now more likely to be wielding GameBoys than craft knives. Even manufacturers admit that few of their kits are bought by children. Instead, customers are more likely to be men in their thirties or forties—the very same men, in fact, who bought kits when they were at school.

One thing that hasn't changed over the years is Tamiya Inc.'s status as the undisputed giant of Japan's scale-model world. Tamiya was first a lumber mill providing wood to rebuild war-flattened Shizuoka city. In the early 1950s styrene plastic models had appeared in the United States but were yet to make it to Japan. Fatefully, after the family's factory was destroyed by fire in 1951, Tamiya became a specialized wooden model maker. But as president Tamiya Shunsaku reminisces in his best-selling autobiography, *Master Modeler*, his own experiences with other makers' crude

and difficult wooden models had been mixed: "the [assembly instructions] would always end with some vague, careless exhortation like, 'Let's do our very best to assemble this model successfully.'"

In 1959, the company decided to switch to plastic. At the time, imported American models were so expensive that only adults could afford to buy them. When Tamiya ordered the molds made for their first model—the WWII warship *Musashi*—they ended up costing 2.5 million yen (23,000 dollars) and took seven months to make. Two carbon-steel half molds—male and female—were carved by hand based on a wooden model. To make the kit, the two molds were tightly pressed together and hot plastic injected into the gap. When the molds were separated, the kit was left.

For all Tamiya's efforts, the model failed to sell, losing the company 5 million yen. Undeterred, Tamiya rolled out other cars and tanks. In 1963, the company made its first plane, a Model 52 Zero Fighter (at the time, not a single real Zero Fighter had been restored in Japan). By the mid-sixties the company had established itself as a serious competitor to American manufacturers. But Tamiya still had one serious obstacle: its reliance on Japan's notoriously mercurial mold makers.

Tamiya writes that the mold making process was: "seen with the eyes of a lay-



Mandarake in Tokyo stocks an impressive array of model kits and painted figures; some of the latter sell for outrageous prices.



These completed models demonstrate the attention to detail that Tamiya Inc. brings to all its model kits.

man... like a task that requires the hand of God." The profession was said to take ten years to master. Knowing well enough the hold they had on their customers, the artisans behaved and charged accordingly. Molds routinely arrived late and cost well over the initial estimate.

Perhaps in exasperation, in 1964 the company decided to set up its own mold-making division. Since then Tamiya has seen the mold-making process evolve from hand carving to computer-aided design and the use of automated milling machines and most recently to carving by electrostatic discharge machines that zap the metal away. But even now the final touches to a model are done by hand. "There is a kind of expressiveness that can't be produced by machine," says Tamiya spokesman Yamamoto Akira.

Forty years on, Tamiya has earned an unrivalled reputation for accuracy and quality, and a dedicated community of fans. In 1990, a donation from the company resulted in a "Tamiya Hall" being built at the Tank Museum in Bovington, England. Tamiya has produced more than a thousand models in total, including 300 tanks and 300 cars.

Unfortunately for the company,



Also popular are resin models of cartoon and animation characters, which customers buy to take home and paint. Gorillas, Godzillas, samurai, schoolgirl heroines, and science-fiction robots all jostle for space on shelves in the character model section. Mandarake buys back the most skillfully painted creations to resell. Pieces by well-known painters can go for as much as 200,000 yen (1,800 dollars). Most statuettes are

that thirty- and forty-somethings couldn't convince their parents to buy them as children. Also on sale are a few painted and mounted plastic models. One exquisitely prepared tank diorama is priced at 160,000 yen (1,500 dollars).

The shop also sells radio-controlled cars. "Old Tamiya radio-controlled cars are attracting huge prices," Tsukamoto says. "A car from the late 1980s could cost 300,000 yen." Apparently, in the heady days of the bubble economy makers could lavish money on expensively made details and parts that aficionados can only dream of now.

About half of Tamiya's sales today come from radio-controlled cars. Like plastic models, many are bought by men around their thirties. The company's biggest ever sellers have been "Mini 4WD" toy cars, which appeared in the early eighties when Tamiya's president decided that the company had become "a little obsessive" in its quest for scale-accuracy. The new battery operated cars had a snap-together assembly, which made them easy enough for younger children to make and placated parents worried about glue sniffing. Some 170 million such cars have been sold in twenty-three years. At the height of one craze in 1997, it was estimated that 15% of all the AA size batteries in Japan were bought for the cars.

To speak to modelers and kit-makers, one begins to understand their disappointment that characters from fantasy and science fiction are replacing real cars and planes. "We don't make Gundam models or character models," says Tamiya's Yamamoto emphatically. It is the scale model maker's policy only to recreate "real things." Many of their customers are fascinated by the mechanics of actual cars, tanks, or planes. Some are very knowledgeable, too: "If a model is incomplete, there are certainly times when customers will say that 'this is wrong,'" notes Yamamoto.

But what then of the occasional accusation that models of tanks and warplanes make toys of machines with an awful purpose and history? "I do not believe that military models serve to glorify war," writes Tamiya Shunsaku. He points out that studying the machines of war can teach much about the reality of combat. One example he gives is that while American tanks in WWII had escape hatches, Japanese and Russian tanks did not. He talks about the military scale-modelers he knows. "There's nothing war-loving in their attitudes. Rather the opposite: since they know a great deal about military history, they actually have a deeper understanding of the realities of war." ■

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though, it seems that both children's toys and pop culture have moved on from military nostalgia and car modeling. These are the days of the international "otaku" (hardcore-hobbyist). Japanese manga, animation and "character" merchandising is even rapidly achieving mainstream popularity in Europe and the United States.

From Guns to Gundam

If you want to see how the pop-culture times have changed there is no more vivid demonstration than the Mandarake store in Nakano, Tokyo. Twenty individual shops in a gloomy labyrinthine three-floor shopping arcade sell everything from comics, animation cells, posters and trading cards to antique toys and fancy-dress costumes. The shop also has a booming mail order business, mostly to the United States and Europe. Nicholas Pujol, Mandarake's International Business Department Manager, says one of the biggest sellers for American customers is toy maker Bandai's Gundam science fiction series. Thousands of Gundam products have been produced, including plastic kit models.

snapped up by fans of the cartoons or animations, but "I have friends who buy them just because they are beautiful," says Pujol. Many of the artists and customers are youngish to middle-aged men.

Tucked away in another corner of the hobbyist's Mecca is "Daisharin"—a shop that specializes in toy cars and scale-models. The shelves are piled high with Tamiya plastic model kits—but they are all second-hand. "Most of our customers are just collecting," says Mandarake employee Tsukamoto Yasu. "I always ask, 'why don't you make them?' They are too busy."

In recent years, a bustling trade in second-hand model kits has grown up on Internet auction sites. Some of the most popular kits are from the sixties and seventies; perhaps, Tsukamoto speculates, toys