To build or not to build

Pre-built scale models have taken the modeling community by storm. But has collectibility replaced building?

BY AARON SKINNER

A trend that started with a few high-qualitydie-cast metal replicas has exploded in recent years. Customers who visit a well-stocked hobby store are likely to be greeted by a dizzying array of built-up, pre-finished plastic and metal models — aircraft, tanks, ships, and even figures are represented. Traditional model kit manufacturers like Tamiya and Dragon have gotten in on the action, introducing lines of pre-built, pre-finished replicas that compliment their model kit lines. Replicas (even those you can get at general merchandise stores like Wal-Mart) feature realistic detail and weathering. What’s more, they’re selling well.

Who are pre-built models for?

The manufacturers and distributors see the market for pre-built models as different from the consumer base for traditional kit models. To Alain Yuen of Dragon Models USA, there is very little crossover between the two products. Dragon Models USA is the American distributor for several major model manufacturers including Dragon, Hasegawa, Miniart, and Zvezda. Four or five years ago, Dragon began marketing a series of pre-finished models under its Dragon Wings and Dragon Armor brands. Both now feature several hundred items.

Yuen said that pre-built models offer instant gratification for the people who may not have the time or the skills to build model kits. For history buffs who have read about a particular vehicle or seen it on television, these models offer them a way to have one without having to build it.

Bob Lewen of Model Rectifier Corporation echoed Yuen’s take on the appeal of these products to people who want the models but don’t want to build. MRC is the U.S. distributor for Easy Model, a large series of pre-built, pre-finished replicas manufactured in Macao.

Lewen described Easy Model’s target consumer as “a person who just loves the idea of having the airplane, and doesn’t like the idea of being a modeler.” Collectors are also interested. “I’m getting a lot of calls from consumers who are collecting as many as they can get,” Lewen said. The finished models are also popular with the wargaming crowd, as well as diorama builders, he said, explaining that some people want to build an airfield scene but don’t want to build all of the aircraft to populate it.

Or they can’t finish a model as well as the Easy Model planes are painted. “There is only a small percentage of hobbyists that are going to paint a model as good as these,” Lewen said.

They can even be impulse buys, according to Lewen, who said that MRC worked closely with Easy Model on the product packaging, which includes trading cards and pictures of the other items in the range.

Lewen believes there is some crossover appeal to traditional model-kit builders. Some modelers may want an entire series of a particular type of model, but only have the time to build some of them, he said. Also, detail modelers may want to use these finished models as a guide for painting and finishing their kits.

Painting, fine-line detail and overall quality set Easy Model apart from the other pre-finished models available, particularly for the price, Lewen concluded.

Tamiya, well-respected for the quality of its plastic kits, took a different tack on pre-built models when it introduced the Masterwork Collection in 2003. Instead of all-purpose display replicas, the Masterwork models are build-ups of Tamiya plastic kits. Fred Medel of Tamiya America equates buying a Masterwork model to hiring someone to build a model.

Medel’s assessment of the typical pre-built consumer parallels Yuen and Lewen’s: the person who wants a model of something but doesn’t have the time or skill to build a kit themselves. He said the majority of the buyers are collectors.

A wide range of products

The Dragon Armor range has mostly been in 1:72 scale, mirroring the parent company’s small-scale plastic model line. Recently, it introduced 1:35 scale armor,
again mirroring the company’s strong presence in the plastic kit business. The CAN.DO range includes more than 100 military vehicles in 1:144 scale.

Under the Dragon Wings banner, there are about 200 releases, mostly in 1:72 scale, and several larger aircraft have been issued recently in 1:144 scale. Overall, Dragon releases six to eight new titles each month, according to Yuen.

And, although the range of models available is similar to the company’s plastic kits, they are not the same, Yuen cautioned. Whereas Dragon’s kits are primarily plastic, the pre-builts are a combination of metal and plastic. Plastic kits have finer detail than the pre-finished models, which means there is a sacrifice in detail to facilitate packaging and shipping.

Easy Model has produced more than 300 models including planes, armor and helicopters in 1:72 scale, 1:144 scale ships, 1:700 scale submarines, and 1:35 scale figures. Most of the models concentrate on World War II subjects, but Easy Model is preparing to launch a line of jet fighters starting with the German Me 262 through to current service aircraft. Unlike Dragon, Easy Model’s pre-builts are all plastic.

Tamiya’s Masterworks line includes aircraft, military vehicles, cars and motorcycles. Fred Medel said that the best sellers right now are 1:48 scale armor, reflecting the ever-increasing range of kits in 1:48 scale. He said that the fine detail available with pre-builts just isn’t there in a combination plastic-metal replica.

Medel admits that when the range was introduced, there were questions about the idea’s salability and whether the models’ expense and stock finish would prove off-putting for consumers. Instead, they have proven popular.

Tamiya's near-museum-quality models receive minimal weathering, but are advertised as “touch-up friendly,” inviting collectors to, as Medel put it, “go to town” with pastels or oils, taking it to the next level and personalizing the model.

A view from the frontline
These models from traditional kit manufacturers, joined by collections from companies like Forces of Valor and 21st Century Toys, have become an established category. But their growing popularity worries Gary Gordon of Greenfield News and Hobby in Greenfield, Wisconsin.

Starting with pre-finished, unbuilt kits and die-casts, Gordon has seen the completed model segment of the market explode in recent years. But the growth is at the expense of the traditional kit sales, he said.

There is crossover between buyers of kits and completed models, absolutely, Gordon said. In the past, a consumer may have wanted a particular model because grand-dad flew one in the war, or he saw it on the History Channel. His option, if he wanted anything more than a glorified toy, was to buy a kit and build it.

Now, thanks to the pre-built collections, all they have to do is walk in and buy one off the shelf. It fits the bill for a lot of people, particularly if they don't have time, Gordon said. And some people are putting together displays or dioramas using the pre-built models. But, in his opinion, for scale modeling, a hobby already hurting because of other distractions, this new trend is an added hurdle.

Gordon sees some potential for a reverse trend; someone who is collecting the pre-builts might decide they need a certain airplane or vehicle to finish their collection, but no one makes a pre-finished model. So they might go out, find a kit and build it.

In the short-term, Gordon said Greenfield News and Hobby is riding the wave of the trend, but the future impact of pre-built models is unclear.

Love it or hate it, pre-finished models, once little more than toys, have become a force unto themselves. And with big players like Tamiya and Dragon moving into the market, it’s safe to say the strength of the trend and the popularity of the products are likely to grow for the foreseeable future.