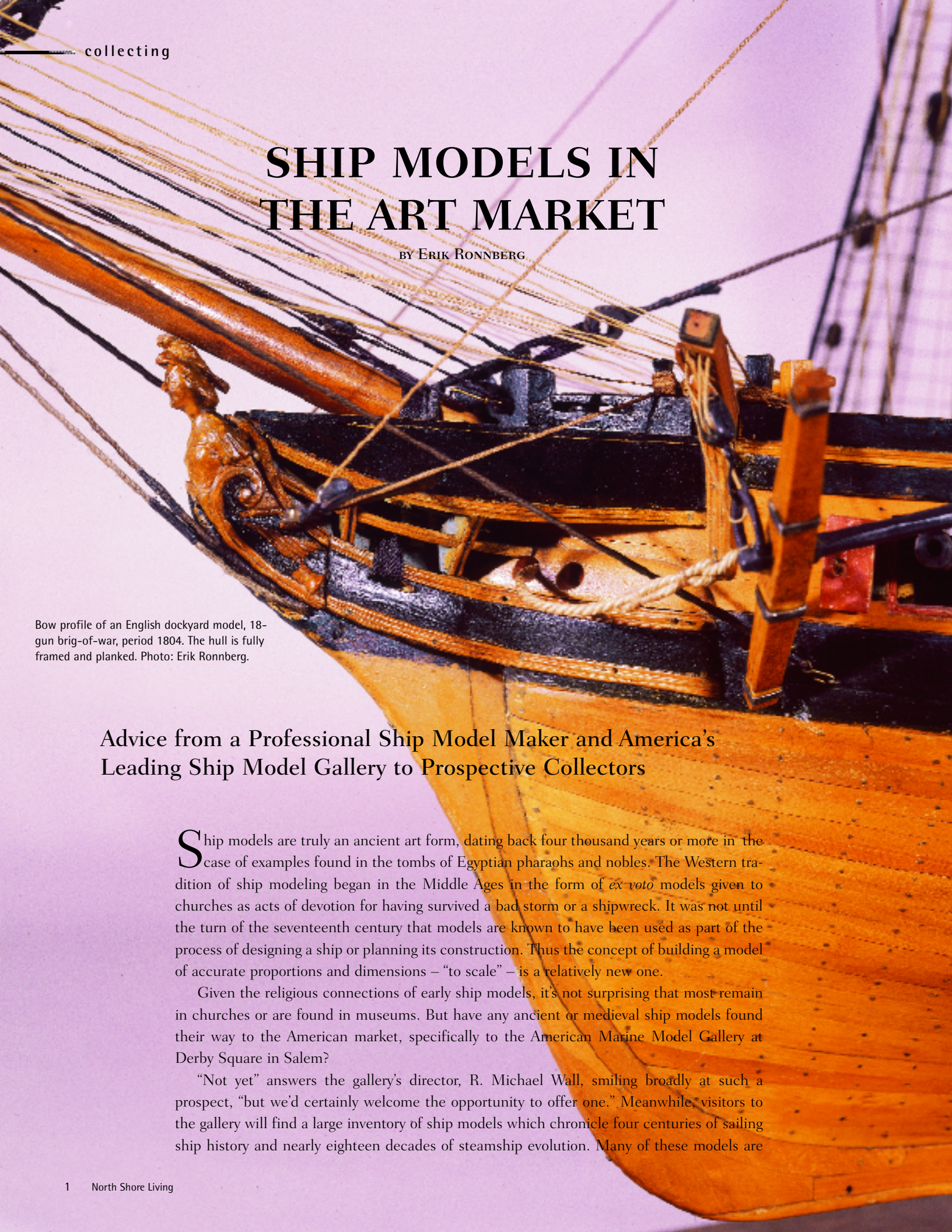
SHIP MODELS IN THE ART MARKET

BY ERIK RONNBERG



Bow profile of an English dockyard model, 18-gun brig-of-war, period 1804. The hull is fully framed and planked. Photo: Erik Ronnberg.

Advice from a Professional Ship Model Maker and America's Leading Ship Model Gallery to Prospective Collectors

Ship models are truly an ancient art form, dating back four thousand years or more in the case of examples found in the tombs of Egyptian pharaohs and nobles. The Western tradition of ship modeling began in the Middle Ages in the form of *ex voto* models given to churches as acts of devotion for having survived a bad storm or a shipwreck. It was not until the turn of the seventeenth century that models are known to have been used as part of the process of designing a ship or planning its construction. Thus the concept of building a model of accurate proportions and dimensions – "to scale" – is a relatively new one.

Given the religious connections of early ship models, it's not surprising that most remain in churches or are found in museums. But have any ancient or medieval ship models found their way to the American market, specifically to the American Marine Model Gallery at Derby Square in Salem?

"Not yet" answers the gallery's director, R. Michael Wall, smiling broadly at such a prospect, "but we'd certainly welcome the opportunity to offer one." Meanwhile, visitors to the gallery will find a large inventory of ship models which chronicle four centuries of sailing ship history and nearly eighteen decades of steamship evolution. Many of these models are

An English dockyard model of an 18-gun brig-of-war, period 1804, scale: 1/4" = 1'. Modelmaker(s) unknown. Dockyard models were most often used by navies to study a new design or method of construction. This example has a fully-fitted interior, indicating that it was also used to study crew accommodations and hold arrangement. Photo: Erik Ronnberg.

contemporaneous to the vessels they represent, although most are by living modelmakers who view their work as an artistic calling as much as any painter or sculptor would.

Long dismissed as a "craft" or "folk art," the best ship models deserve better recognition, Wall feels, and belong in the same ranks as the best cabinetmakers, jewelers, ceramics- and glassware makers, and textile artisans whose works are found in the finest art museums. "Indeed, a case can be made that ship modeling transcends those decorative arts which are based on a narrow range of skills applied to one type of material or medium. Ship models, by contrast, rely on many skills, uniformly refined to the highest level, and on many dissimilar materials. Ship modeling is thus a multiple medium art form whose best examples are so uniformly excellent in workmanship, and whose various materials are so skillfully blended, that the complexity is subsumed by the overall visual impact."

"Models of the highest quality and recognition of their makers go hand-in-hand," Wall emphasizes. "This has been a major stumbling block in the past for connoisseurs who were promoting the field. A great marine painting by a recognized artist has unquestioned value – cultural and monetary. But if it has no signature, its value is much less. A great ship model by a known modelmaker should have similar cachet, and should rise in value in response to similar appreciation and demand by collectors."

But if we can agree that the best models and modelmakers should be better appreciated and patronized, are there categories of models which fit this superlative, and can the best ship modelers have their own distinctive styles? Wall replies with a strong "yes" to both and adds that the rich variety of model types and modelmakers' styles offer something for collectors of every taste and range of interests.

The *marine model artist*, as Wall prefers to call this profession, has an area of interest and a recognizable style which are developed and refined through years of work. The specialized knowledge and well-honed skills are critical to the completion of a model within a time frame that affords a living wage. This is the difference between amateur and professional modelmakers, both of whom can produce models of comparable quality, but the less practiced amateur takes longer to complete his model and thus makes a lower hourly wage, even if he is paid as much as the professional.

"If you have to re-invent your work methods and the construction process with every model, and if your research methods and access to sources of information aren't good, you're not going to be successful in this field," Wall asserts. To illustrate his point, he cites an old favorite which has been modeled many times: the USS *Constitution*. "It's not just 'I have a

A panoramic shadow box depicting Friendship sloops lobstering off Monhegan Island, Maine. The steamer is a "carry-away boat" which bought lobsters directly from the fishermen, then rushed them alive to market in Portland or Boston. Made by Erik Ronnberg, scale: 1/8" = 1'. 12"h. x 42"l. Photo: Erik Ronnberg.

Constitution model,' but 'I have a McNarry *Constitution* model.' Without the authorship, it's just another model, not the work of an important artist, and the difference in value will be very considerable."

But knowledge, skill, and experience aren't enough to make a good model a good investment. Longevity of materials is a crucial factor – the model must have a long life to make it inheritable (or resalable) over several generations. This factor has become more problematic in recent years as the manufacturers of glue, paint, and synthetic construction materials "improve" or discontinue older products of known longevity. What replaces them is of unknown longevity, and whose properties can even create problems when they become parts of a model which also incorporates traditional materials.

Wall observes, "Dockyard models of warships, built for the navies of several European nations, have long been the benchmark for high standards of workmanship, artistry, and longevity. Well-cared-for examples have lasted two centuries without needing major repairs, while even seriously damaged ones respond well to careful reconstruction and conservation. The secret lies in the careful selection and preparation of materials. Woods in particular are well-seasoned, and only one or two varieties are used so they have similar aging properties. Hide glue and varnish were the only adhesives used, while metals were limited to silver, copper, and brass.

"Today, a newly-made model can be assembled from dozens of dissimilar materials, including four or five different types of glue, and with no guarantee that the construction will hold together for twenty years, let alone 200. Experienced professionals, having learned from their early mistakes (and the mistakes of other modelmakers), avoid novel materials for their own sake, and prefer conservative choices of materials and time-honored methods. Are these people stodgy 'shellbacks?' Ask an experienced collector who wants his ship models to appreciate in value and be as desirable to future collectors as when he bought them."

Another tricky aspect for beginning collectors is understanding the relationship between scale and detail. Scale is an absolute, being a precise ratio of the size of a model to the size of the vessel which it represents. One commonly used scale is 1/8" = 1', which is another way of saying that the model is 1/96 the size of the original; it is used in the form of a special measuring rule to gauge the precision of the smaller vessels so studying their details won't be so hard on the eyes. Smaller scales are preferred for large ships so the resulting models won't take up so much space. Large scales and small scales make very different demands on the rendering of detail, the common goal being realism. In larger scales, *nuance* of detail – detail within detail – makes increasing demands. The wear and tear of use, textures and imperfections of finish one would find in the full-size object, and the styling of hardware become important. Are the bolt heads round, square, or hexagonal? What patterns of rowlocks, cleats, and chocks are correct?

In small-scale models, fine detail can be hinted at in artful ways, and the methods and materials for doing so are usually very different. The collector who becomes a good critic of ship model detail becomes a historian in the process – just like the modelmaker who treats detail in a serious way.

Beginning collectors of ship models soon find their own levels of appreciation and purchasing power, and will seek out the best quality work within their budgets. In a market now flooded with imported "decorative models," it is wise to visit museums and read books on ship models to get a better idea of quality and learn how to spot a good model in a gallery, an antiques shop, or an auction. Antiques shops and auctions can certainly yield up treasures, but they are likely to be in need of cleaning and repair which, if done well, will add to the cost. The expense of skilled repair work can be offset by the appreciated value of the model, but poor repair work can destroy its value, both monetarily and historically. This is why a reputable gallery is the best source in the long run. A carefully restored and cased old model, or a new model by a reputable maker, will be a source of pleasure for many years without having to worry about quality or longevity.

Assuming a collector has decided to purchase a model, what is the best way to display it at home? Here the size of the model must be considered in the relation to the size of the home setting. If the house is small, or the model is to be in a small room (such as a den), then plan on acquiring a small model that will fit neatly on a shelf, in a niche, or on a desk or

small table. Always allow space for the model's glass case, as this is the first line of defense against tobacco smoke, children, the cat, and an accidental collision with the feather duster. Large models get even larger in their glass cases, and the need for custom display furniture becomes an issue. Remember this rule: very good small models accrue value; very good large models accrue dust.

When table space is scarce and walls are bare, consider half models and shadowboxes as alternatives. These can be mounted individually or in a thematic grouping, such as a series of half models representing merchant ships which sailed under one merchant's house flag, or racing yachts which challenged or defended for a particular trophy (the *America's* Cup, for instance). Shadow boxes (dioramas in low relief) can also be hung on – or built into – walls, either singly, or grouped thematically. A true sailor's art, the shadow box has gained popularity because it combines models within a painted scene that has a lively narrative quality.

Proper display of ship models calls for lighting which draws attention to the model and facilitates close study of its details. There is a wide variety of fixtures and controls to choose from, and in most cases, effective solutions can be very affordable.

When asked for his most important advice to begin a collection, Michael Wall made these two points:

"If you buy for quality, rest assured that your models will continue to have value, value which will appreciate with time. When you decide to collect, start with a vessel or type you can relate to (aesthetics, family ties, etc.); then use that as the theme for buying. Within that theme, plan for a group of five models as the core of your collection."

Collecting ship models is an adventure in learning – learning about ships and their roles in maritime history, learning about making intricate objects from a great diversity of material and methods, learning about a very special aspect of the art world. Initially the challenges can be daunting, but the rewards are commensurate with your efforts. The experience and expertise offered by a gallery specializing in ship models is a boon to beginners and the surest way to avoid expensive mistakes. With an inventory of fine models, long experience in working with museums, interior designers, and displays for homeowners, and a long list of satisfied clients, the American Marine Model Gallery is the ship model gallery to visit.

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Erik Ronnberg is a widely recognized modelmaker whose work is found in many maritime museums and important private collections. He has published extensively in the fields of ship modeling, maritime history, and 19th century American marine art. His models are represented exclusively through the American Marine Model Gallery.

A miniature waterline model of the English clipper ship *Cutty Sark* under shortened sail in heavy weather. Scale: 3/64" = 1', 8 1/2 w. x 11 1/2 h. x 20 1/2"1. This model was made by English modelmaker Philip Reed, one of the world's foremost builders of miniature ship models. Photo: Erik Ronnberg.

A full-hull model in a waterline setting: fishing schooner *Columbia* anchored on the Banks, awaiting the return of her dories, 1923. Model by Erik Ronnberg, scale: 1/8" = 1', 10"w. x 18"h. x 26"l. Photo: Erik Ronnberg.

A large full-hull model of the schooner yacht *America* as rebuilt in 1886. This model is now in the collection of the Cape Ann Historical Museum. Model by Erik Ronnberg, scale: 3/8 = 1', 44"h. x 56"l. Photo: Erik Ronnberg