



Why I Hate Ship Model Contests

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I hate ship model competitions. Just to be candid, I only entered one, and I was humiliated. There were seven entries, with five prizes plus honorable mention to be given to those seven models. I got nothing, nada, niente, zilch, zip. Even worse, my model was the biggest and most ornate, so anyone who looked at it must have thought that the fool-builder wasted his time and effort on a piece of junk. Yes, I was plenty sore, and it still hasn't worn off years later. Which is one of many reasons why I hate ship model competitions.

Aside from the sore loser syndrome, a ship model competition is like a beauty contest for men, women, and children, with a few canine and feline competitors thrown into the mix. I never saw a child or a cat that wasn't better looking than me. Who could judge a contest like that? Anybody, I guess. Who judges ship model competitions? Other ship modelers who are looking for duplicates of their own models? Museum curators who are looking for something instructional, or worse, something interactive?

I once saw a contest for models of the Constitution. Far from all being the same, these models took different approaches and emphasized different elements from open structural detail to full sail under way. I'd have hated to judge them. What criteria are used to judge models? Every model is an individual expression of a burning interest, or else it's a virtuoso display of great craftsmanship. Every good model required a depth of research which is probably not available to the judge, unless he or she built a model of the same ship at some point in time, preferably the recent past. If the subject of the model is unfamiliar to the judge, how can that judge make a reasoned judgment? What expertise does a judge need to judge models from every era, in every scale? Tough, or downright impossible?

Well, we all know neatness when we see it. In a pie-eating contest, neatness doesn't count, but in a ship model contest, it does. I think a ship model should convey, as Bruce Hoff has said, "a compelling impression of a real ship". The real ships I have visited aren't exactly neat, but have an air of orderly clutter, often baffling to a layman. But in a ship model, we look for neatness. A wealth of crisp detail is always a winner. Then of course, being post-industrial people, we like to see cookiecutter uniformity, all gun ports neatly aligned and sized, endless rows of treenails, precisely caulked decks, guns and blocks replicated like they came off an assembly line. Are all the deadeyes exactly alike, and all lined up in a straight row? Uneven elements are a no-no. Tool marks and pencil marks and irregularities in the finish are verboten. A white stripe that bleeds or hesitates is death. Neatness and uniformity count very high.

But what about originality? A model of a ship never before modeled. No points. In fact, the judge, having never seen the like, can't know if it is "accurate" or dreamworks. So originality is out. Anyway, some people think every model is a copy of a ship, so it can't have any originality. Does a judge consider how well the character of the vessel is portrayed or how well it is conveyed to the viewer? What about the complexity of the project? A garbage scow is easier to model than HMS Victory. And HMS Victory is easier to model than HMS Loyal London, or some other obscure galleon of yore. Well, for a contest, we should stick to the garbage scow, and make it as perfect as possible so the judges can examine it with magnifiers and find no flaw.

But what if we (God forbid!) load the scow up with commercial garbage that we bought in a model RR store,

instead of making all the miniature garbage lovingly with our own hands? Many contests divide the models into categories according to who made what. Scratch built, mostly scratch, really scratch, not so scratch. Did you make your own deadeyes, or (horrors!) did you buy them? Maybe they ought to have deadeye contests, if that's so important. Ship model competitions demean our art. We should remember the great French salon competitions of the late nineteenth century, where Bougereaux and Rosa Bonheur and other forgotten artists won grand prizes for their precisely painted sentimental crap, while losers like Monet and Van Gogh often weren't even allowed to exhibit.

I feel privileged to belong to the Ship Modelers Association, which does not believe in contests, and has never sponsored one (and hopefully never will). That doesn't mean that ship models don't deserve awards and recognition. They are rare works that come from love and devotion and ingenuity and skill and expertise. In my book, every good ship model deserves its own blue ribbon.

Editor's Note: The item above is another in the "Philosophy of Ship Modeling" series. I hope, as time passes, I will receive more articles of this type. I know from personal observations that various people have different ideas about the whys and wherefores of ship modeling. With regard to modeling contests, I have been a member of the SMA for many years, and when I joined, it was already a firmly established principle that there are no contests sponsored by the club, and we have not held any. Even though there are no SMA contests, individual members have always been free to participate in contests elsewhere. For instance, Rolly Kalayjian won the "grand prize" at the Mariners Museum a few years ago.

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