

Messing about with boats

Some model ships are a far cry from toys for small boys, finds Alan Harper

FOR more than three years, model-shipwright Malcolm Darch has been labouring in his Salcombe studio over a project that could come to be regarded as his masterpiece. A Nelson-era frigate in 64th-scale, his rendition of the Royal Navy's HMS *Minerva* is a fully rigged replica of an 18th-century Navy Board model in the US Naval Academy Museum in Annapolis, Maryland. And now, finally, it's finished. 'It took 38 months,' says Mr Darch. 'That's well over 6,000 hours—I haven't added them up yet.'

'Peer through the windows and you glimpse the gundeck, cleared for action'

By some margin his most ambitious endeavour in 35 years of professional model-making, the commission came from an American collector—an avowed 'Hornblower' enthusiast, with a house in Minerva, New York. Like its 18th-century inspiration, Mr Darch's *Minerva* is crafted from dense and fine-grained English boxwood. 'It's the world's best carving timber,' he explains. 'But it was a tremendous surprise to find that it's also one of the best timbers for steaming—which needs to be done to achieve the extreme curves encountered in this hull. No wonder the 18th-century modelmakers used it. The perfect colour is a bonus.'

Mr Darch's miniature warship is a work of extraordinary complexity and depth. Like an intricate piece of jewellery, it appears to get more perfect the closer you look. Fittings are made from brass and copper, with a scale-thickness acetate used for the glazing of the

HMS *Minerva* in the making. Even specialist tools had to be created for the detailing



stern gallery—glass would have been too vulnerable for shipment to New York, the craftsman explains. Peer through those windows, and you glimpse the gundeck, cleared for action and perfect in every detail. The copper hull sheathing, with each copper nail head carefully impressed as they would have been, below flush, is 1,000th of an inch thick.

‘I’ve known Malcolm’s work for years,’ says Simon Stephens, curator of ship models at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich. ‘The quality and the detail he goes into, and the amount of research, are of the first order. The amazing thing for me is how close he has got to the original model.’

Mr Darch often spends months on research before lifting a chisel. Clients who commission a model receive not only a marvellous miniature of their chosen subject, but a comprehensive dossier detailing the original vessel’s history, which can be more than 200 pages long—because although one half of the Darch studio resembles a miniature shipyard, the other half houses a 4,000-volume maritime library.

And there is much on record concerning the Royal Navy’s original *Minerva* of 1780. A 38-gun fifth-rate, she was in service for barely 20 years, but, in that time, served in the Channel, Mediterranean and Indian Ocean and saw action against French, Spanish and American ships. She was Rear Admiral Cornwallis’s flagship in 1793 at the siege of Pondicherry. And, of particular interest to the model’s owner, she also has a sail-on part in one of the ‘Hornblower’ novels.

Unlike its unrigged, 18th-century model counterpart, the hull of the modern *Minerva* had to be strongly framed before planking,



Perfect in every detail, from stem to stern: the 64th-scale 38-gun fifth-rate HMS *Minerva*

as on a real ship, to withstand the tension of the rigging—which with almost unbelievable thoroughness, was spun from scratch on a miniature ropewalk, to ensure the absolute accuracy of its dimensions and lay.

Such obsessive attention to detail is typical of Mr Darch’s approach, perhaps because he trained originally as a yacht designer, and worked as a professional boatbuilder on the Hamble and in Salcombe before turning to

full-time modelmaking. He has built model yachts, steamers, schooners, lifeboats and square-rigged clipper ships, but nothing as complex and involved as *Minerva*.

He even had to make special tools. ‘A major task was to create the mass of delicate box-wood mouldings throughout the ship. The secret is to make a scraper of tool steel, ground to the exact shape of the mouldings. The carving fore and aft and the frieze painting—laboriously colour-matched to the Admiralty model—were the trickiest and most time-consuming jobs.’

‘His modelling is top-quality—very clean, very tight. I wish I could have models like this offered to me all the time,’ says specialist London auctioneer Charles Miller, who, when working at Christie’s in 2003, knocked down an 18th-century Navy Board model for more than £660,000. That’s still a record price. ‘Some modelmakers’ strengths are hull forms, some are very good at rigging, some are great at carving. Mr Darch is good in all categories, which is why it’s worth paying the money—you won’t get better than this.’

The client is keeping the price he paid for this modeller’s masterpiece close to his chest. It will be a fraction of that auction record, of course, but he can be confident that his beautiful ship model holds its own special record—one that’s likely to stand for some time. It took a full year longer to build than it took Woolwich Dockyard to construct HMS *Minerva* herself, back in 1780.

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For each of Malcolm Darch’s models, he compiles a full history of the original vessel