

Share the Hobby!

James H. Hillestad outlines how he mounts library displays to bring the titanic toy soldier hobby to the public's attention

Text and Photos: James H. Hillestad

As someone who is knee-deep in the hobby of using toy soldiers to create miniature worlds, I derive great satisfaction from sharing it with others.

One way I do that is to create displays and put them on show at our local library. The audience ranges from enthusiastic children with popping eyes to deeply absorbed adults.

To keep the displays fresh, I change them periodically.

FOR YOUNG & OLD

Displays that are designed to appeal to the young are placed at about 3 feet above the floor -- eye-level for a 6-year-old. Figures are protected from enthusiastic handling by glass.

Descriptive narratives accompany all of the displays to explain their subject, meaning and relevance.

Good lighting will enhance the visual experience. So will a back panel that allows for posting signage, photos, book dust jackets and other explanatory materials.

It is great fun to watch people's reactions. So often, you see faces light up as the child or grownup enters another world -- especially in a library, where the three-dimensional displays enrich what library users see on the bookshelves and computer screens.

ABOVE RIGHT: Jim Hillestad's Titanic exhibit demonstrates the use of a back panel for photos, book dust jackets and explanatory background information.

RIGHT: W. Britain's Titanic Lifeboat No. 6 set and Capt. Smith figure.

BELOW: Shelves depict historical events from the Battle of Britain (center) to Washington Crossing the Delaware (below).



FINDING INSPIRATION

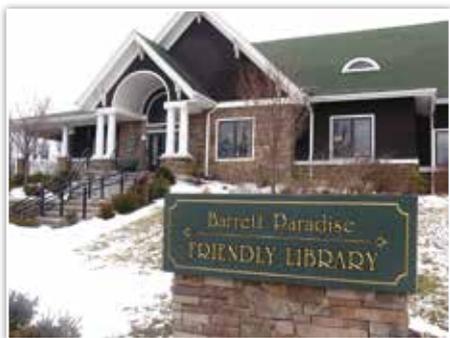
Anniversaries of important historical events and the publication of noteworthy new books often provide my inspiration for a new display.

For example, a recent new publication of "The Travels of Marco Polo" set the stage for a colorful array of Silk Road

figures. They were produced by Frank and Jan Scroby, and marketed under the Star Collectables label.

Attracting a lot of oohs and aahs was a collage of photos of 2012's Diamond Jubilee of British Queen Elizabeth II, set off by a Gold State Coach produced by Trophy Miniatures of Wales Ltd.





ABOVE: Dioramas created by Jim Hillestad can viewed on a regular basis at the Barrett Paradise Friendly Library, in Cresco, Pa.



RIGHT: A display commemorating Queen Elizabeth II's Diamond Jubilee incorporates toy soldiers, commemorative porcelain and other artifacts.

BELOW RIGHT: The Titanic's Grand Staircase was a meeting place for first-class passengers on their way in to dinner.

And my wife, Carol, and I just installed an exhibit remembering the RMS Titanic, the ill-fated passenger liner that sank during its maiden voyage April 15, 1912. This display was inspired by a visit to the Titanic Artifact Exhibition at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia.

The centerpiece of the library display is W. Britain's eye-catching Titanic Lifeboat No. 6 commemorative set containing 10 figures. W. Britain also produced a figure of John Edward Smith, the captain of the



BELOW: Character sets, such as Laurel and Hardy, the Beatles, Peter Pan, and Elvis, are used to make mini-displays.

BELOW RIGHT: The library's display cabinets stand just outside the Periodical Room.



Putting toy soldiers in the public eye

ship, that is included in the exhibit.

Elements of the display include a photo showing Carol and I standing on a replica of the Titanic's Grand Staircase from the exhibit at the Franklin Institute.

Hood, and Peter Pan.

Provision has also been made for a tabletop diorama (24 inches by 45 inches). Subjects have varied from the Battles of Bunker Hill and Antietam

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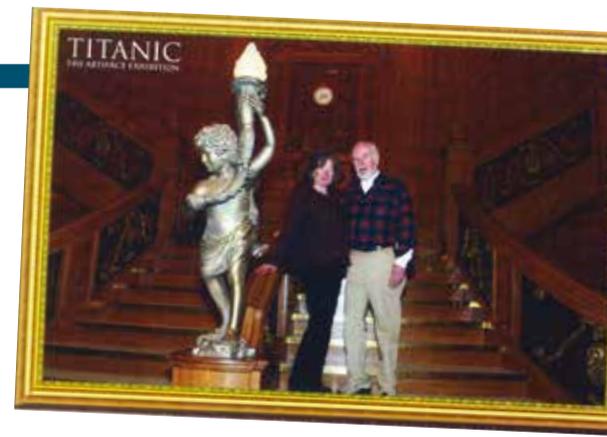
ECLECTIC MIX

In two other cabinets are an eclectic mix of figures designed to attract young patrons. Subjects include Washington Crossing the Delaware, World War II's Battle of Britain, Sherlock Holmes, Laurel and Hardy, the iconic Beatles, Robin

to the “Dog Show on the Green” and a “Pennsylvania Buggy Factory.”

Shelves below the diorama space hold books and DVDs related to the display on hand.

“Cool,” “awesome,” and just plain “wow!” are some of the reactions we have overheard.



RE-CREATING HISTORY

For me, the displays reinforce the idea that “toy soldiers” are not sandbox toys -- but are three-dimensional re-creations of human history.

What better place to share your historical interests and collection than your local library. Not every library will have space for multiple displays. But most have a cabinet or two that could showcase changing displays.

To give readers some ideas, this article offers examples of displays that have been a success at the Pocono Mountains' Barrett Paradise Friendly Library, in Cresco, Pa., USA.

We relish the fact that under the creative management of the library director, Cindy DeLuca, our library is a welcome place for miniature figures that reflect and amplify the written word ■

ABOVE: Carol and Jim Hillestad stand on a replica of the Titanic's Grand Staircase at the Franklin Institute exhibit.

LEFT: A display featuring Marco Polo and the Silk Road was inspired by a new publication of “The Travels of Marco Polo.”

BELOW LEFT: Annie Messina, who is responsible for the library's 70 volunteers and who owns three Labrador retrievers, enjoys viewing the “Dog Show on the Green” diorama.

BELOW: The Battle of Waterloo history behind this large diorama of Hougoumont is explained by narratives on top of the plexiglas dome.



about the writer

James H. Hillestad is the proprietor of The Toy Soldier Museum and shop in Cresco, Pa., USA.