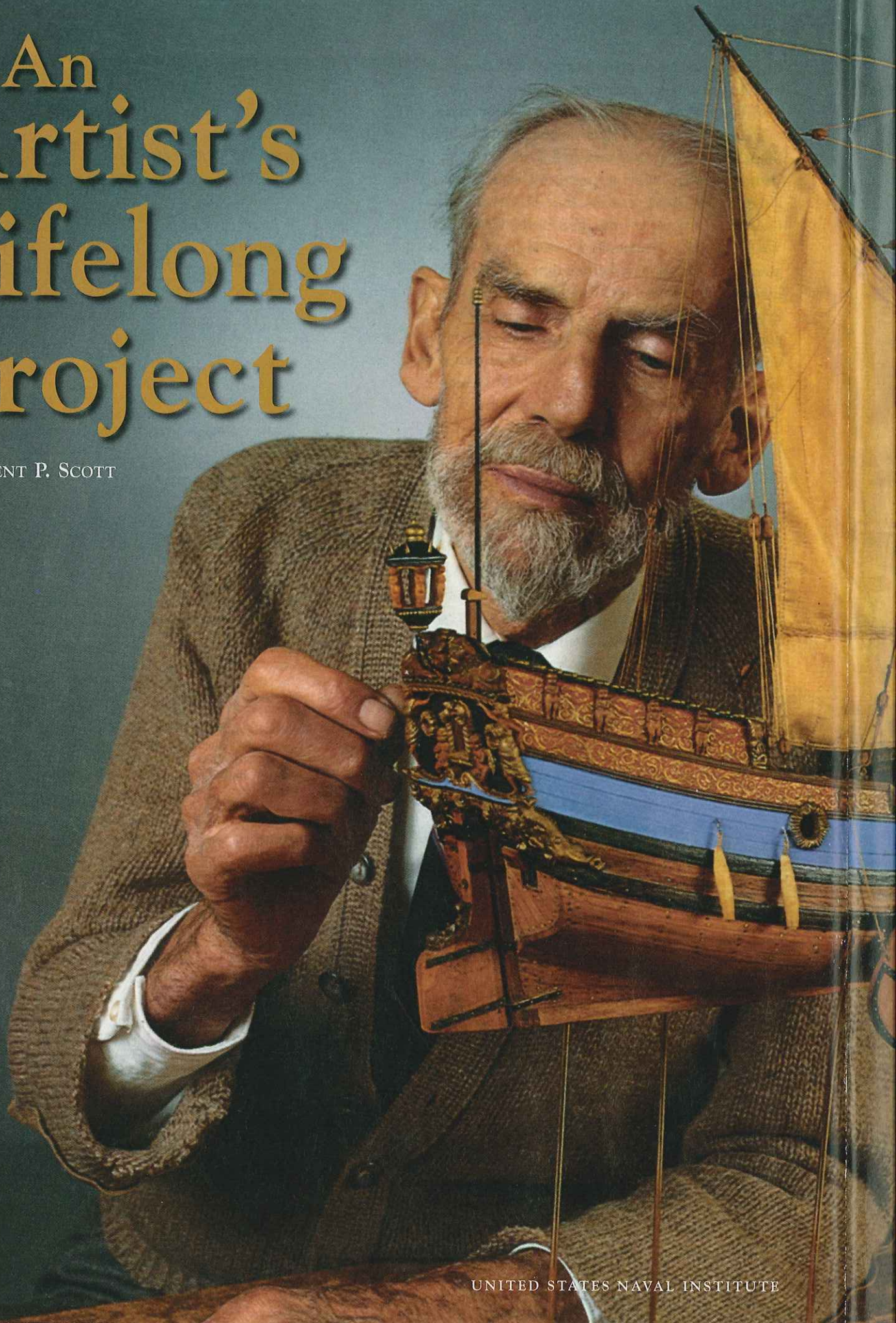


An Artist's Lifelong Project

BY VINCENT P. SCOTT





The jewel of the Mariners' Museum's vast nautical collection is a fleet of intricately carved miniature ships that August Crabtree dedicated his life to crafting and interpreting.

When the Mariners' Museum in Newport News, Virginia, is discussed these days, chances are mention of its fabulous *Monitor* Center will be part of the conversation. The center, which opened in March 2007, uses life-size re-creations and high-tech wizardry to help tell the story of the famous Union ironclad. One of the museum's most prized exhibits, however, is on the opposite ends of the size and technology range: August F. Crabtree's intricately carved miniature ship collection.

Visitors to the museum—be they landlubbers, ship modelers, or old salts—are amazed by the elegant and vivid detail of the ships. Built to a scale of 1:48 and complete with working parts and decorations, they illustrate the evolution of water transport from raft to steam power. Crabtree's small vessels are much more than mere models; they are sculptures in miniature. The late William Francis Gibbs, one of America's greatest naval architects, said of these small ships, "Certainly there is nothing that I have seen here or abroad that takes their place in historical accuracy and detail."

It is my privilege to have known August and his wife, Winnifred, personally and, as a volunteer docent at the museum, to continue to interpret his art for the public. It's a rewarding experience that offers me the chance to witness museum visitors' initial reactions to a fleet of ships that the Mariners' Museum refers to as the jewel of its collection. Some people exclaim, "What a great hobby." Carving miniature ships, however, was Crabtree's lifework, not a mere diversion. He called it "The Project." Once asked if he loved his work, August replied, "I hated it, but I love the finished product."

Other visitors have exclaimed, "Such patience!" To the contrary,

August Crabtree was the most impatient man I have ever met. "With patience," he said, "I would never have achieved my goals."

A better understanding and appreciation of the work of all artists is revealed in their personal histories, but in the case of the man whose masterpieces are supreme in the art of ship modeling, only fragments have trickled out. Moreover, August and Winnifred were very reserved about their private life. "We were born and we survived," August said. "Judge me only by my work." However, through conversations with "Augie" and "Winn" and research, I have been able to gather enough information to write a book manuscript about their lives and miniature ships from which this article is adapted.

Developing his Shipbuilding Skills

August Fletcher Crabtree was born in Portland, Oregon, on 29 August 1905. Although he never sailed the world's oceans, he seemed to have an in-born lust for ships and the sea that may have originated in his ancestry. His great-grandfather, John Jobe Crabtree, was a shipbuilder on Scotland's river Clyde. John migrated to Virginia, where August's grandparents were born. They later crossed the country by covered wagon, settling in Oregon.

MARINERS' MUSEUM, NEWPORT NEWS, VA

Master miniature-ship craftsman August Crabtree examines a detail on his rendition of an ornately carved mid-17th-century Dutch yacht.

answer. August recalled that “The title stuck with me and after some thought I knew what I would do.” The Project’s theme would be the evolution of ships.

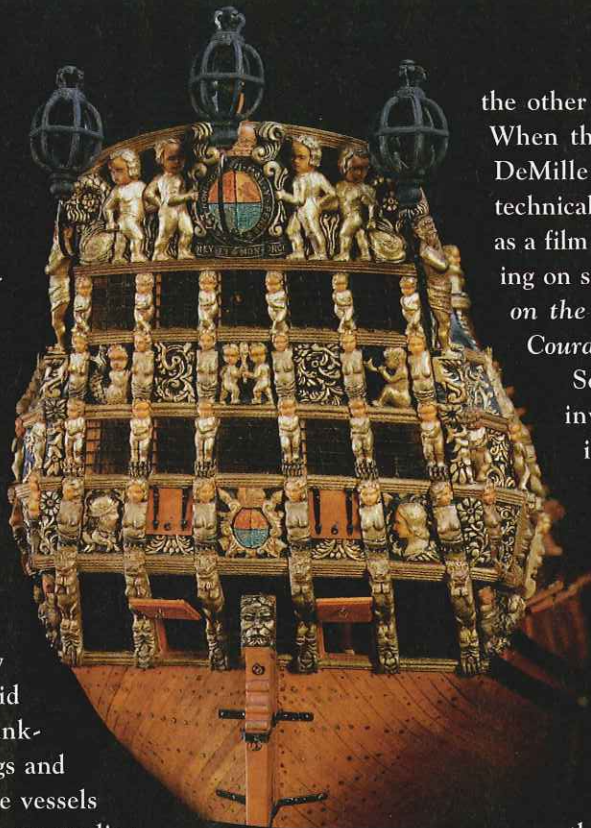
Before beginning work on a vessel, Crabtree would ask himself, “Why the hell did they build such a ship?” He found the answers in his own studies of the economic, political, and environmental conditions during the ship’s era.

Each of his miniature ships is based on and conforms to authentic plans and drawings and was assembled and fastened in shipwright order. Also each ship’s tiny working parts operate as they did in full scale. All decking and planking were fastened with to-scale pegs and nails; August did not use glue. The vessels are so perfectly built they’re museum-quality miniature ships, not models.

Supporting Himself while Pursuing his Dream

In the 1920s, there was no market for Crabtree’s miniature masterpieces or generic small-scale model ships. He recalled, “The only work I could get to survive was hard and dirty labor.” In his spare time, however, Crabtree’s passion for building the ships became an obsession. A turning point came in 1932, when August met an architect from Los Angeles at the local library. Crabtree invited the man to his studio, and after reviewing his work, the architect said, “Hollywood for you, not only artistically, but financially as well.”

August moved there, settling into a home near the 20th Century Fox Studios. He also found studio work, mainly crafting miniature figures and ship models for still shots. He did manage to find the time to work on his own miniature ships. Describing his workshop back then, August said, “On one side is The Project; on



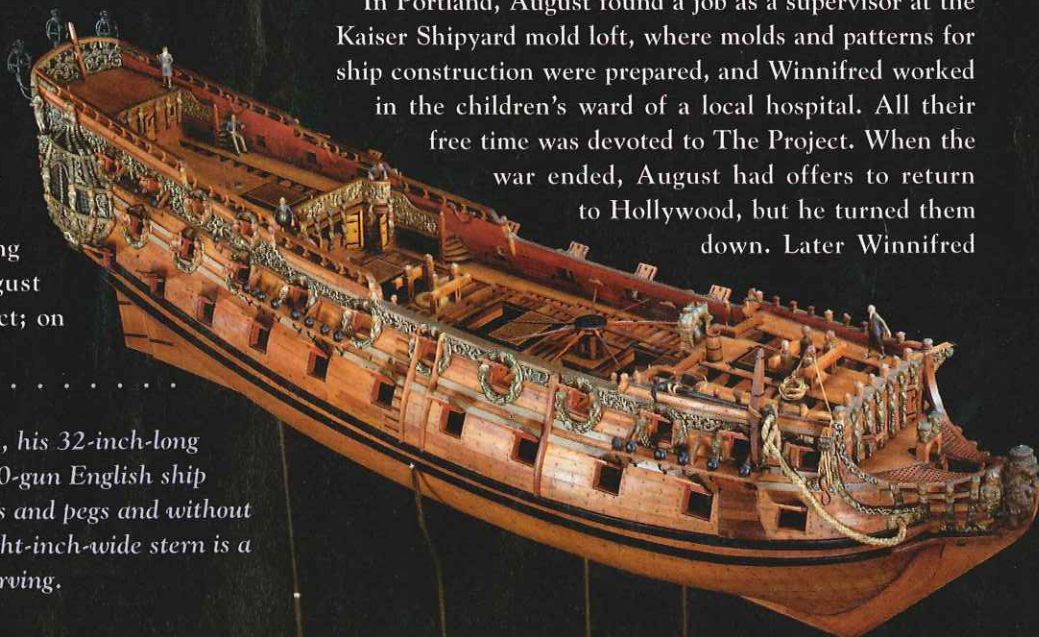
the other side is that Hollywood stuff.” When the great film director Cecil B. DeMille learned of his self-developed technical skills, the craftsman was hired as a film consultant. He ended up working on seven movies, including *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935) and *Captains Courageous* (1937).

Soon the Hollywood work was invading time for his own miniature ships. Moreover, August needed assistance with some of The Project’s details as well as with home chores. His help turned out to be his future wife, Winnifred Clark, whom he met at church. She was an aide to a wealthy widow of a Duluth, Minnesota, real estate developer. The widow had moved to the Los Angeles area to be near

her only sister and insisted that Winnifred join her. When August invited her to his studio, Winnifred was awed by his work and agreed to become his assistant. An artisan in her own right, she would help with painting and sail making and executing the final tiny file strokes to achieve perfection. Winnifred later admitted that when she began she “knew nothing about the subject. . . I was curious and wanted to learn.”

With the outbreak of World War II, August decided to return to his native Portland and contribute to the war effort, but he didn’t want to lose his assistant. The couple were married on 14 January 1942. As Winnifred put it, “I guess I passed the test.”

In Portland, August found a job as a supervisor at the Kaiser Shipyard mold loft, where molds and patterns for ship construction were prepared, and Winnifred worked in the children’s ward of a local hospital. All their free time was devoted to The Project. When the war ended, August had offers to return to Hollywood, but he turned them down. Later Winnifred



MARINERS' MUSEUM, NEWPORT NEWS, VA

Right: Like all Crabtree’s models, his 32-inch-long example of a late 17th-century 50-gun English ship was assembled with to-scale nails and pegs and without glue. Top: The English ship’s eight-inch-wide stern is a masterpiece of miniature woodcarving.



August's love of maritime history began when he learned to read at the age of three. He was tutored by his father, Fletcher, a Western Union telegraph operator. At about age six he became a fixture at the local library. Noting his interest in ships, the librarian showed him prints by prominent marine artists including the Van de Veldes, who were renowned for accurate ship proportions and decorations. The 17th-century Dutch painters—Willem and his two sons Willem and Adriaen—became his favorites.

The boy's first glimpse of the Pacific Ocean came at age five. "Where does that river [the Columbia] go," he had asked his father. The answer entailed a train ride to Astoria, on the coast. At the same age, August first began carving images in wood. "I just wanted to do it and I did," he later said. His favorite retreat for woodworking was on the bank of the Columbia, where his carving was sometimes interrupted by the passing of two-masted, square-rigged sailing barks. When the local library sponsored an adult evening class on "sculpture in wood," seven-year-old August was admitted after much pleading and with help from his librarian friend. It would be his only formal art education.

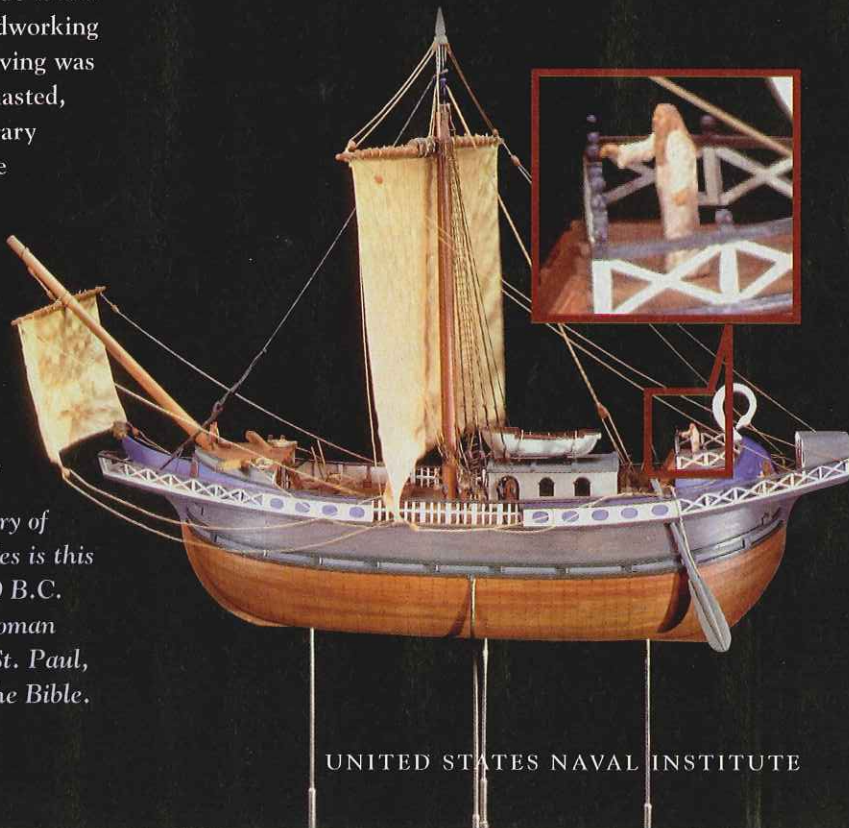
August's father died when he was 12, and to help with the family finances, the boy went to work in a meatpacking plant. August next

tried his hand at constructing ships, working as an apprentice shipwright on the wooden boat docks of a local shipyard. He inflated his age to 14 to get the job. In the meantime, he delved deeper into woodcarving by studying the many species of wood, developing a wood-seasoning process, and crafting the tools needed for carving miniature sculptures.

All artists must have a subject for their work. For August, it seemed preordained that his subjects would be ships. Nevertheless, it took a display of ship models at a local bank for him to consciously make the decision. "They attracted considerable attention," he recalled. "That started the germ for me to build ship models."

At age 16, August carved his first miniature ship, basing it on a drawing of the *Mayflower*. He was a perfectionist, however, and had concerns about the historical authenticity of some of the completed model's details. After careful study, he identified errors. "It was a valuable lesson," he said many decades later. "I never wanted to see it again." He gave away his *Mayflower* without identifying who modeled it.

After that experience, August searched carefully for another ship to model, finally settling on a 17th-century Dutch royal yacht. He laid his second model's keel in 1921, when he was still 16. Later he used a painting by one of the Van de Veldes as a guide for carving the ship's elaborate decorations. Pleased with the result of this second attempt at crafting a model ship, he decided to carve more vessels. But what kind? A local theater's billboard that read "The Evolution of Popular Music" provided the



MARINERS' MUSEUM, NEWPORT NEWS, VA

Crabtree's fleet of 16 small ships traces the history of wooden seacraft. Top: One of his earliest examples is this Egyptian seagoing vessel, which dates from 1480 B.C. Right: The artist's version of a circa-50 A.D. Roman merchant ship includes a tiny representation of St. Paul, whose journey on a similar ship is described in the Bible.



MARINERS' MUSEUM, NEWPORT NEWS, VA

The final vessel in August Crabtree's chronological history of ships is also his largest: the Cunard Company's Britannia, whose maiden voyage was in 1840. The actual liner's keel measured 207 feet; the miniature ship's is 4 feet 3³/₄ inches long.

.....

said, "He did not want to cheapen his work." August lovingly adorned his own miniature ships with meticulous details, such as various expressions on the faces of the tiny figures that crewed his vessels, but the studios did not need such precision.

Finding a Home for the Fleet

Traveling east, the Crabtrees visited Chicago, Newport News, New York, and Miami before settling in

a third-floor Garden City, New York, apartment in 1948. The next year, after crafting 16 miniature masterpieces, August declared The Project completed. Now his overriding concern became finding his small-scale fleet a permanent home where people could see and enjoy it. The couple decided that the Mariners' Museum would be the perfect location. The museum was very interested, but at that time it did not have the space to accommodate the collection. It did say it would like to accept the ships in the future.

Impatient, August decided to move to bustling, touristy Miami, Florida. With the help of only one hired worker, he built the small Crabtree Museum. In 1955, the Mariners' Museum was ready for the collection, and August and Winnifred, along with their ships, moved permanently to Virginia's tidewater. For the next 35 years the couple gave weekly historical interpretations of their miniature fleet, and he demonstrated sculpting in very small scale.

August passed away in 1994, and his wife followed him in 2005. The couple never had any children, but August used to say, "My models are like my children and I'm very proud of my children"—and well he should be. ⚓

Mr. Scott is a docent at the Mariners' Museum. He dedicates this article to his friends August and Winnifred Crabtree, a self-made genius and his dedicated spouse.

How to Sail into Ship Modeling

You don't need to have the talent of August Crabtree to craft your own beautiful miniature ships. Hundreds of model ship kits are available, and it's easy to get started in the hobby.

Wooden model kits are categorized as beginner, intermediate, or advanced. A typical beginner kit (right) includes a solid-wood hull, which is roughly cut to the ship's hull shape; various wood and brass fittings; rigging line; wood dowels and strips; and plans and instructions. A hobby knife, sandpaper, glue,



paints and brushes, and tweezers are some of the basic tools you'll need. Intermediate and advanced kits rely on plank-on-bulkhead hull construction, just like full-size ships.

One of the most important rules for builders is to take your time. Unlike with most plastic model kits, you'll need to shape and/or construct many of the parts. One thing's for certain: Building these models is a great way to learn more about sailing-ship construction and terminology.

Some of the many Web sites that include information for beginners are <http://www.modelshipbuilder.com>, <http://home.att.net/~ShipModelFAQ/>, and <http://drydockmodels.com>.

Eds.