Riverside Drive, New York, 1905

The Toy Soldier Museum's James H. Hillestad shares creative ideas for diorama backdrops using architectural drawings

TEXT AND PHOTOS: JAMES H. HILLESTAD

The inspiration for my "Riverside Drive, New York, 1905," diorama came from childhood memories of playing on a huge cannon in the park at Fort Hamilton in Brooklyn, N.Y.

The cannon, a 20-inch Rodman, was emplaced during the American Civil War to guard the harbor of New York City. In 1864, it was the largest gun in the world. Ironically, Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson had been stationed at Fort Hamilton in the 1840s before becoming top Confederate generals.

Fast forward to 1995 and the Chicago Toy Soldier Show, where I saw such a cannon in miniature on the sales table of Bill Speer. Nostalgia took over and I purchased two of them.

Bill, an architect from Atlanta, then introduced me to a new world: two-dimensional buildings.

I was blown away. The buildings, more accurately described as backdrops, offered the perfect setting for displaying the cannons in a park scene.

Above: A treasure trove of detailed architectural drawings can be found in "A Monograph of the Works of McKim, Mead & White 1879-1915." Top of page: The "Riverside Drive, New York, 1905," diorama measures 5 feet by 30 inches. A hidden tape recorder plays "The Sidewalks of New York." The pond is a picture frame from a crafts store with a blue paper insert.

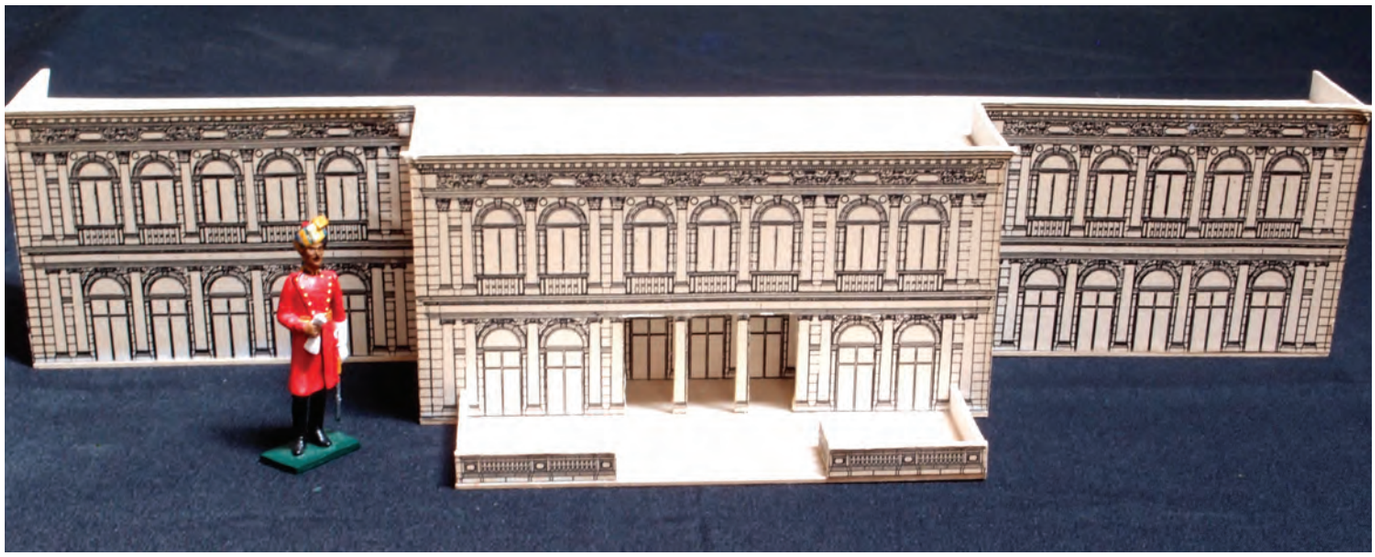
A NEW DIMENSION

Speer's novel art form uses copies of architectural drawings of libraries, palaces, mansions and park monuments, for example. The drawings are found in architectural books.

They can be reproduced at a copy center on plain or colored paper to the desired scale. Using a paper spray-glue, they are then mounted on poster board or Foam-Cor paper-faced foam board.

I first tested the concept by re-creating a palace in British India from a drawing. Then I took the original size and scaled it up to 54-mm to complement traditional-style toy figures painted in gloss.

This led to my creating a diorama titled "Riverside Drive, New York, 1905." Riverside Drive is a scenic boulevard along the Hudson River that



The 2-D building concept is tested by a reduced-scale model of an Indian palace shown with a 54-mm figure for comparison.

The park railings are paper, as are the sidewalks and roadway. The monument at right is a bronzed 54-mm Napoleonic figure atop a wooden candlestick base.

The 2-D architectural drawings form effective backdrops that lead a viewer's eyes to focus on the 3-D toy figures, horse-drawn wagons and scenic accessories.

passes by Grant's Tomb and through tony neighborhoods as it runs north-south along the west side of Manhattan. I made turn of the 20th-century building backdrops and a park for placement of my pair of miniature Rodman cannons.

As readers can see from photos of the diorama accompanying this article, it is not just the buildings that are made of paper. The railings, sidewalks and other hardscape elements are all made of paper. This is important, as introducing hardscape in three-dimensions would undercut the "magic" of the two-dimensional simulation.

A NEW FOCUS

Notice when looking at the final result, a viewer's eyes focus on the figures and gardens, not the 2-D buildings. The backdrop serves as a foil (and a very inexpensive one at that). Contrast that with a display using costly 3-D structures where the eye is first drawn to the buildings and only later to the figures.

For sources of architectural inspiration, Dover Publications has a number of low-cost booklets.

Also, a treasure trove of detailed architectural drawings is contained in "A Monograph of the Works of McKim, Mead & White 1879-1915," pub-

lished in 1985. It is available online or perhaps at one's local library. One of the partners in the firm, Sanford White, was noted for his many architectural achievements, including Madison Square Garden and the Washington Square Arch in New York City, as well as residential mansions built for the Astors and the Vanderbilts, among others. ■

ABOUT THE WRITER
James H. Hillestad is the proprietor of The Toy Soldier Museum in Cresco, Pa., USA.

Figure of the legendary Oozlefinch crafted by Martin Ritchie of U.S. Military Miniatures.

OOZLEFINCH GUARDS AMERICA'S COASTS

Fort Hamilton in Brooklyn, N.Y., was the headquarters of the U.S. Army's 5th Coast Artillery. Its mascot was the Oozlefinch, a mythological bird that guards the coasts of America.

The legendary creature is said to have large, all-seeing eyes and big feet. It was known to have a tendency to fly backwards to keep the dust out of his eyes.

The legend of this lovable mascot began in 1905 at Fort Monroe, Va., then home to the Coastal Artillery Corps. A Captain H.M. Merriam, no doubt under the effects of alcohol, first reported seeing a large-eyed, flight-challenged bird outside the Officers' Club.

And with that, the legend of the Oozlefinch was born!

--James H. Hillestad

The 2-D Indian palace is shown scaled up to 54-mm to complement figures made by John Eden.

Children play on a Rodman cannon in a park at Fort Hamilton. Jim Hillestad was inspired by childhood memories of playing in the park and finding miniature Rodman cannons to create a diorama titled "Riverside Drive, New York, 1905." (Photo Courtesy of Brian Rose)

The park setting complements Rodman cannons by Bill Speer and figures by John Eden. Please note the 54-mm child climbing on a cannon just like Jim Hillestad did at Fort Hamilton when he was a little younger.