

Photographing your model

By Art Braunschweiger



Model of Titanic under steam by Richard Herries

You've spent weeks if not years building your model and you want to show off what you've accomplished. This article will give you some tips on how to photograph your model so it looks as impressive in pictures as it does in real life.

First, let's talk about what not to do. Too often the skill and detail that went into a model goes unseen because of poor quality photographs. A few examples:

The one at right is much too small. In this case, the file size of the photo is too small. The setting on the camera may need to be changed.



In this one, the detail is visible, but it's too dark:



Perhaps the most common mistake: blurry pictures. It doesn't matter how good your model is, no one wants to look at blurry pictures. **Your photos must be in focus.** If you post blurry pictures no one will comment on them because no one will be able to see any of the detail you've put into it. (And actually, there's really nothing to see in this shot anyway.)

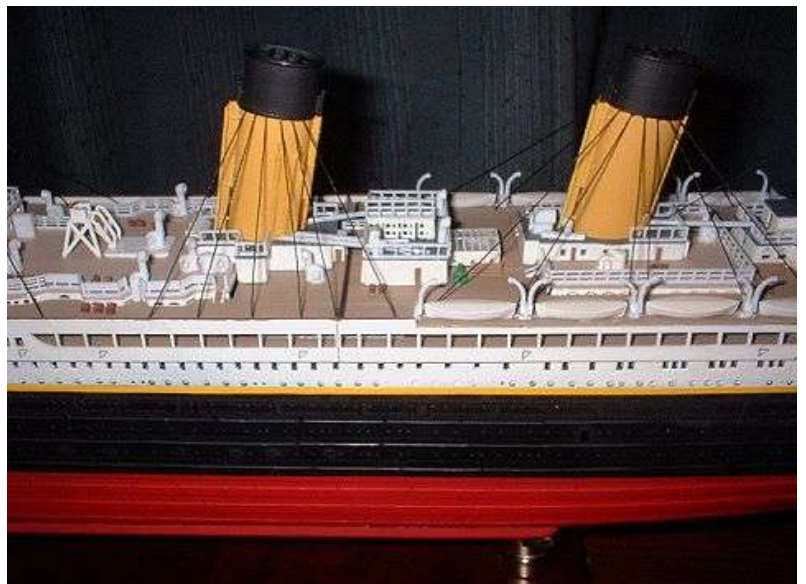
Don't take shots with your cellphone. Use a real camera in decent lighting conditions.



This photo has everything against it - it's too dark, the background is unattractive and completely distracts attention away from the model, it's out of focus, the model is too far away and has too much glare from the flash:



Here's an otherwise good photo, but the lighting is a bit harsh. It's typical of an improperly lit model photographed indoors.



Compare any of these examples to the photograph at the top of the first page, and it's readily apparent what a good photograph can do. Were it not for the background, it would be easy to imagine that you're looking at a photograph of the real ship.

Let's start with an important point, which is

Tip #1: use a decent camera. You can't take great pictures with a cheap camera - period! Your cellphone has a camera? Forget it. Newer phones and other devices have high-resolution cameras, but you can't select the focal point or control the aperture or any other settings. Almost everyone has a digital camera these days- if you don't have one, borrow one. Even better, if you know someone with an SLR camera (single-lens reflex camera, the kind that serious photographers use) have them take pictures for you.

Aside from the camera, much of your photographs' quality has to do with the light you're taking the picture in. The less light available, the slower the shutter speed has to be in order for the picture to come out properly exposed (not too dark). However, even a room brightly lit with fluorescent lights is nowhere near as bright as a cloudy day outside. That brings us to

Tip #2: photograph your model outside if possible. Mid-morning light is best if the sun is out. If possible, use a bright area out of direct sunlight. Digital cameras have a hard time compensating between very light and very dark areas. If that's not possible, take your pictures on a bright but overcast day as Richard Herries did with his *Titanic* model at the top of the first page. You can use late-in-the-day shots, but only if you're going for the sunset effect.

Tip #3: Avoid flash. When flash is used close up, it gives a harsh, glaring light as in middle photo on the preceding page. If you can't photograph your model outside, take your pictures in the brightest room you have, and brace the camera on top of something solid. (Use a stack of books, a piece of furniture, etc.) The less light available, the slower the shutter speed has to be. If your camera displays the shutter speed, as a general rule 1/60th of a second is the very slowest shutter speed you can use if you're hand-holding your camera without benefit of a tripod or bracing it, and that's only if you have very steady hands.

Light levels aside, though, outdoor light adds much more realism to your model. No matter how well a photo is taken in artificial light, it looks . . . well, artificial. There's no getting around it.

Now - before you start posing your ship, look around you. What's behind it? Consider the photo at right. Beautiful ship, nice detail, and a great image . . . if you want a visual of *Titanic* sailing through the hills of California. That brings us to . . .

Tip #4: watch your background. Either move the ship, move what's behind it, or position a loosely draped sheet behind your model. There's also another way to deal with this, discussed further on.



Now, let's talk about what shots you're taking. Too many happy modelers just snap away, taking picture after picture, and then download or post them all for viewing.

Tip #5: be selective with your pictures. Every one should be unique. Instead of having four images of the bow that are pretty much the same, pick the best one and use that. If you're photographing your model in progress, don't just show a series of meaningless pictures taken from up high - closeups are especially important here. Focus on specific areas you're working on or have just completed.

Tip #6: take closeup shots of different areas of the ship to show the detail. Next, remember that your model has a lot of detail in it, and people will want to see that detail. Focus on specific areas: the Bridge, the well decks, the Docking Bridge, the raised roof over the 1st Class Lounge with the compass tower, etc. Some of your shots can be from a medium distance, encompassing a larger area of the ship such as this photo of Terry Fike's *Titanic* --



Also try to get closer shots of specific areas. The one at right, of the author's model, is a great example. Camera won't get that close? That may not be a problem. If your camera can take a picture that's high enough in resolution, just take it from further away, crop and enlarge it.

Also notice in this photo what a difference natural light makes. It gives realistic shadows right where they should be. In this shot, the shadows of the crane boom on the top of the crane base adds that touch of realism.



Closeup shots of specific parts are also nice to see if they're particularly detailed, built from scratch or you want to show them off for another reason. At right is a photograph of the scratchbuilt skylight dome covers from the author's 1:350 *Titanic* model. They've been photographed on a piece of light-colored construction paper (copy paper works well too.) Notice how this completely eliminates all other distracting details so your attention is immediately focused on the subject of the photo.



Tip #7: Use low camera angles for more realistic photos. Although some photos need to be taken looking down from above to show detail, shots look more realistic when they're taken from the same viewing plane as you'd see the ship in real life - almost as if you were looking at a ship through binoculars. Also, with a low camera angle, you have more relief - what you're looking at stands up on deck against the background, so it looks more three-dimensional at the same time.

You can also try some creative camera angles for special effect. Creatively done and carefully thought out, you can give a "fly by" appearance to your model, as in this dramatic shot by a modeler named Hiroshi. :



Combine a low camera angle with some late-day or very early morning lighting, and you can achieve a dramatic sunrise or sunset shot as Mark Mudryi has done here:



Tip #8: Control your depth of field to achieve special effects or to focus attention on what's in the foreground.

Now we need to talk about an advanced camera subject: depth of field. Notice the difference between these two photos as to what's in focus and what's not: (The first is by a modeler named Mark from Connecticut, the second by Mark Mudryi)





In the first picture, the bow is in focus while everything further back is not. That draws all your attention a certain point. It's a particularly useful technique when the subject of your picture is in the foreground.

In the second picture, a lot more of the picture is in focus. That's appropriate here because the entire Well Deck from one side to the other needs to be seen clearly. Same for the Fo'c'sle Deck. The Bridge area in the foreground is a bit out of focus, but not too badly.

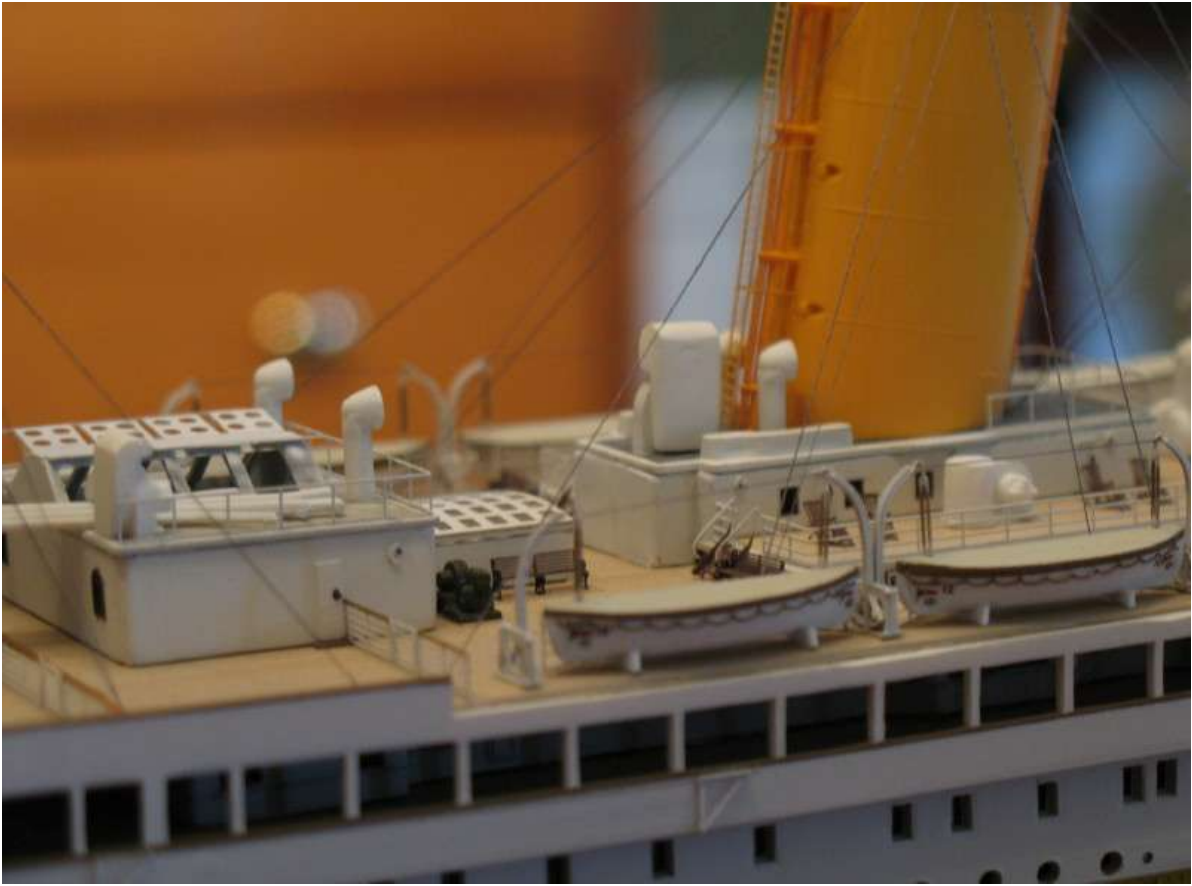
How do you achieve this effect? By controlling your depth of field. The depth of field is how much of your picture is in focus from front to back. The depth of field, in turn, depends indirectly on the amount of light. It works like this: the less light your camera has to work with, the wider the aperture has to be inside your camera (that determines how much light gets inside to the film or, in a digital camera, to the image sensor). A wide aperture means a shallow depth of field (from the camera lens into the distance, only a very small part of that is in focus.) Conversely, if your camera has a lot of light to work with (as on a bright day outside) it has to reduce the light entering the camera by closing the aperture, which gives a much greater depth of field. In your camera, the aperture setting called an "*f* number" or "*f* stop", and in a typical camera ranges from *f*4 to *f*16. This number may be visible in the digital display inside your viewfinder or on your camera's back screen. The range may vary depending on the camera.

But wait, there's no depth-of-field setting on my camera. Not to worry. You can control it by selecting your shutter speed - because the slower your shutter speed, the longer the lens is open, and the less light you need - therefore the narrower your aperture and the greater your depth of field. Getting confused? Let's make it simple. Many basic cameras, and just about all SLR cameras, let you override the automatic setting so that you can manually select the speed while it sets everything else to compensate. Figure out how to manually select the speed of your camera (with the camera setting everything else) and then:

For a shallow depth-of-field (everything out of focus beyond what you're focusing on), use the fastest shutter speed you can. The lens will have to open as wide as possible to compensate, and give you a shallow (narrow) depth of field.

For a deep depth-of-field (as much as possible in focus), use the slowest shutter speed you can in the brightest light possible. The slow shutter speed will require the camera to use a narrow aperture to reduce the light, yielding a deep depth of field. You'll also be able to get a better depth of field if you shoot from as far away as possible (if you have a high-resolution camera, back up, zoom in and plan on cropping the image later).

Now that we've gotten that technical bit out of the way, let's go back to another use for depth of field: eliminating unwanted background. Sometimes you can't be picky about location and what's behind your model. Take the background out of focus, and your problem is solved. In the photo at the top of the next page, Mark has done just that with his model



If you're going for this effect, don't shoot in overly bright light, as you can only reduce the depth of field to a certain point in really bright conditions.

Tip #9: If you have an illuminated model, combine a time exposure with a low level of ambient lighting so the interior lights show up in the picture without the outside of the ship being too dark. In the two photos below from Mark of Connecticut, he's done just that for a very realistic effect:





Tip #10: Digitally edit your pictures if possible, or have someone do it. You've finally finished your model and are excited about getting those photos online for everyone to see. That's understandable, but don't rush. This is your one opportunity to make your model shine, so take the time to do it right. Do some photos show unnecessary detail, or need to be "zoomed in" a bit? Crop them. Are some a little too dark? Lighten them up. You can even add sharpen them up a bit (but not excessively). If you're a more advanced user of digital imaging software you can enhance the color a bit and even correct the color when it's "off" because of artificial lighting. If you don't have the software or don't know how, ask around - you might know someone who would be glad to take a disc of ten or twenty photos and clean them up for you.

The bottom line: It's your model and you're proud of it - take the time to do it right!



Britannic wreck model by William Barney