

Detailing and painting the GMM Ocean Liner Figures

By Art Braunschweiger

(This article covers detailing procedures for the 1:350 scale photoetched brass figures from Gold Medal Models, available from GMM at www.goldmm.com)



GMM's Ocean Liner Figures are a nice option for the modeler who wants to add another level of detail. Your choice may depend in part on what type of a model you're building, and there are a number of arguments both for and against their use.

If you're intending your ship to be more of a builder's model, then adding figures may give it a diorama element that you don't want. On the other hand, they can add an element of depth to many models, versus having an empty ship. The author's ship is a waterline model, with *Titanic* appearing as she did at anchor at Cherbourg. Without any figures on deck, the model might appear lifeless and lacking realism. And the human element is important to some modelers since *Titanic's* story was one of human drama.

On the other hand, as model builder Ron Dominguez observed on the Titanic Research and Modeling Association's discussion forum in February, 2005¹, *"human life is an obvious part of anything in reality, but on a model it can detract from the important thing at hand- the quality of an exceptionally well built model. You begin to focus on the little people - what they are doing, are they realistic, the quantity of them present, the quality of how they are made and they begin to distract from the detail of the model itself . . . In seeing many different models in [many different] museums, the purity of a model without any people present always [seems] to be a better representation than with them present. In some of the instances where people were present, they almost gave a somewhat haunted impression that did not look too good overall"*.

In some cases, models with a large number of figures can appear cluttered. Many figures are often finished poorly, and can detract from an otherwise well-made model. Plus, *"getting colors 'right' in clothing can be very difficult too. Finally, there is always a problem with 'posing' people to look natural and human. That is sometimes very hard to do. Look at old photographs where there are a lot of people standing around on a busy street. Their frozen movements are very low key and somewhat difficult to recreate."*

If you decide that the presence of scale figures would enhance your model, then the key is to have them well-modeled, which means that they have to look natural - in how they're painted and how they're posed. Also, note that the GMM figures are manufactured flat, and need to be "fleshed out" for a more 3-D look. They also require bending - they don't come posed, except for a few standard positions. It should also be noted that the detailing and painting requires a fair amount of skill with very fine detail work under magnification. On a skill level of 1-to-5, it's about a 4. But figures that are well-detailed and realistically posed can be very lifelike and add a unique element of realism to your model.

Still not sure? Read on and see if it's for you.

One option is use the GMM figures as they are, except for bending and posing, leaving them as unfinished brass. The idea is to purposely have the figures appear abstract and ghost-like. With every figure having the same uniform brass appearance, it might be a worthwhile alternative to consider if the use of figures appeals to you but the idea of painting and detailing does not.

As recommended by GMM, detailing and painting is best done with the figures attached to the frame.

¹ All italics throughout the remainder of this article are also from Ron's post.

Bending and posing the figures

The arms are the easiest parts to bend. Most arms are attached only at the shoulder, and etched inside the elbow to facilitate bending. But be careful; the figures will also bend very easily where they're attached to the frame, so an arm can't be bent without holding the torso. The easiest way is to work with the sheet lying flat on the work surface, and then hold the torso down with the tip of a tweezers or knife point. Then using another tweezers or knife point, bend the arm or forearm to its desired position.

The figures' heads can be turned by carefully holding the torso in one set of tweezers (careful not to bend it off the sheet) and twisting the head with another. The figures can also be twisted at the waist, but this requires more force.

Now a few words about giving your figures realistic poses and gestures. As they appear on the sheet, the figures look too stiff. That's understandable; in order to be mass-produced, they have to have some uniformity, and they're basically two-dimensional to start with. But remember that people in social situations don't stand around woodenly. They're animated, they're laughing, gesturing, turning their heads, and everything else that demands that the discriminating modeler try to capture these in realistic poses. Even the restrained and genteel Edwardians didn't stand around like statues in social situations.



Too much activity can also look artificial. To exaggerate a bit, if you have 8 deckhands coiling lines, 6 stepping through doorways, 5 starting to climb a ladder, and 7 saluting, it's a bit much. Same for the passengers. All figures are etched in one of half a dozen basic poses, and these should be modified depending on the setting you have in mind. If you're modeling *Titanic* at sea, no need to have 40 passengers waving with one hand. (Who would they all be waving to, anyway?) Similarly, a large number of GMM passengers are etched with hands on their hips -- a good basic pose, but one that shouldn't be overused. In some cases, this may mean not using all the figures provided, and compensating by purchasing a second set.

So consider the poses. This may depend on your scene. As Ron noted: *"You really have to concentrate on the "setting" in order to get the poses right. For example, if you showed people lining a deck as a ship is pulling away from the pier then you would have a lot of people waving, pointing, little groups of people turned towards each other, heads close so the other can hear amidst the turmoil and noise of the moment."* If intended to be on the open ocean, the majority of your passengers on deck should probably be simply strolling on deck, reading on deck chairs, sitting on benches, gazing out to sea, or engaging each other in conversation.

"Thought should be given to the 'identity and role' of the person at that precise moment. It is all part of the psychology of body language and it needs to be included when you make people. If one lets their imagination run away with them a little, consider all of the circumstances you might have before you in your particular model. Here are a few to consider:

-Two or three people, huddled close together by a [railing]. . . heads close together as one speaks about something and perhaps points to something . . . Two others look in the direction of what the speaker is pointing to.

-Two passengers, women who are close together also by a rail but their attention and heads are turned towards somebody strolling the deck nearby . . .

-The "lost in thought" loner, who stands by the railing looking down at the sea all by himself.

-The frazzled deck steward who is stopped dead in his tracks by a couple asking stupid questions. One hand is on his hip as he considers the question at hand, the other hand points to an entranceway not far down the deck. The couple, completely confused and lost, lean close together as they face him, trying to understand . . .

-A young lady stands by the railing, lost in thought, gazing out at sea. A short distance away a young man stands by the railing too, gripping the railing with both hands, looking at her alone while he desperately attempts to get the courage to walk up to her . . .

In every one of the situations I have outlined above, you have a precise situation where people are acting out very natural actions. Stop and consider a situation, put yourself into that action and consider how you would stand if you

were in it. If you do this, the poses will naturally come to mind. I have created some of my best people by doing this. Make the situation 'real' and the rest will flow naturally."



How many human dramas you build in, of course, is up to you. The point, of course, is not to overdo it by creating scenes bordering on the whimsical, but to give a realistic appearance to the people on deck based on what they're supposed to be doing. Any figures used should be an enhancement, and not an attraction that diverts attention away from the model itself. Keeping them realistic but low-key is important.

Heads on the figures, as noted above, are easy to turn. Even in a group of three people talking, rarely will everyone be looking straight ahead. Turn one or two heads slightly to impart more realism.

Groupings are important. Make sure you have groups of two, three and four. And be careful of their positions

relative to each other. When there's a lot to see – like on the deck of a ship – people rarely stand squared off and facing each other. They should be at an angle to each other, facing the view but partly turned toward each other in conversation. One or two groups can have all figures turned inward toward the center, but don't make every group this way.

Where you position your figures, how many you use and how you group them will depend on what scene you're intending to portray. Is your ship steaming in mid-Atlantic? Then you'll want several hundred figures all over the outer decks, like the daytime scenes in James Cameron's TITANIC. Conversely, on the author's model at anchor in Cherbourg, there are only about 60 people on deck between the three classes since dinner was being served at that time. And those who are on deck are all on the starboard side, looking across the waters of the harbor toward Cherbourg.

Next, gestures. People gesture as they talk, and when walking or even standing, don't hold their arms woodenly at their sides. The arms are the easiest things to bend – so take advantage of this. Some should be pointing, but others should have one hand gesturing as they're talking. Some should be gesturing with both hands. Some should have their hands clasped behind their backs. Others should have their elbows bent with their arms straight out, so they can stand in front of a railing or bulwark with their hands on the upper teak section. (The GMM figures who are waving with one hand can easily have that arm bent down to have a hand on the rail cap instead.) Some can be made to shake hands, and others holding hands. Be creative and as you adjust each figure, think "what is this person doing?"

Lastly, don't forget about your benches. A few figures should be posed sitting down. To do this, you'll have to remove them from the photoetched sheet. It will also require a small pair of jeweler's pliers and a suitable tool to apply the force necessary to make the bends. A little experimentation is required, as the exact technique can't easily be explained here without benefit of demonstration. The biggest challenge is getting the bends at the waist and the knees in exactly the right places (the figures will want to bend at the weakest points, which are not the right points). And be careful; bending some figures requires considerable force – use caution not to gouge one into your finger!

For the sitting figures, a touch of CA cement (Superglue) applied to their backsides will allow you to temporarily fasten them to a bar of plastic so you can easily paint and detail them without handling them further.

Making the figures three-dimensional

Elmer's Glue or similar water-based glues work very well. GMM recommends Krystal Klear as a detailing medium. It works the same as Elmer's Glue, and has the same drying characteristics, but Elmer's Glue comes in a convenient squeeze bottle. One note of caution; Elmer's Glue dries very quickly. You will probably not be able to detail more than 2 figures before the Elmer's on your glue pad congeals to a point where it's too thick to apply. It also dries very quickly on the figures. Also, about every 10 figures, squeeze out all the glue in the bottle tip to ensure that what's coming out of the nozzle is always fresh.

To flesh out your figures, squeeze a small droplet of glue onto a glue pad or piece of scrap plastic sheet. Using the pointed tip of an X-Acto or other hobby knife, pick up a tiny droplet of glue on the bottom of the very tip of the knife blade. The droplet should not be much bigger than the figures' upper torso. Hold the photoetched sheet so that the figures' heads are to the right if you're right-handed, and to the left if you're left-handed. Then touch the glue droplet gently to the bottom edge of the torso (bottom of the dress for the female figures) and draw it gently out to the sides and up toward the head. You will probably need a second tiny droplet to finish out the torso, and just a light touch for the head. Keep the glue within the outlines of the figures, being careful not to fill in areas between the arms and torso, or between the head and shoulders. Surface tension will work to your advantage here. For best effect on the First-Class adult female figures, don't bridge the gap across the waist. Remember that well-to-do women in the early 1900s wore corsets, and they constricted the waist severely.

Don't be afraid to apply the glue very thickly to the figures – Elmer's Glue flattens and shrinks down significantly after drying, with the original relief detail in the figures still apparent. You may even want to do a second application if you're not satisfied with the relief achieved from the first application. More experienced detailers may want to attempt filling out the arms and legs too. Be careful though, on estimating the thickness of the coating by looking straight at them – Elmer's Glue dries completely clear. View the figure from the side, or better yet apply a coat of paint to check.

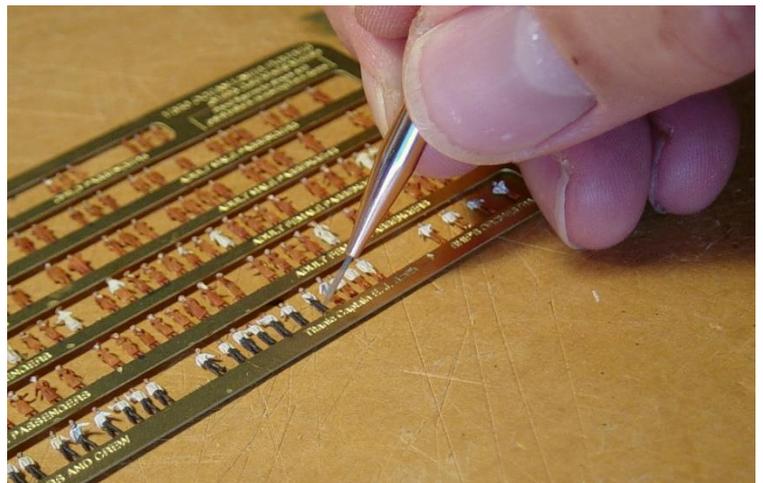


Remember to detail the backs of the figures as well as the front, although one coat on the torsos will probably be sufficient. Women's dresses below the waist can be filled out very thickly on both sides. (As a side benefit, as it dries, it gives natural looking vertical creases to the dresses.)

Note that except for the lower legs, which can't be bent until detached from the sheet, all bending has to be done before three-dimensional detailing or the glue will detach from the brass.

Painting

For the most realism, figures shouldn't be painted in bright colors because of scale effect, which causes colors to be muted and less intense over great distances. And remember that it was April in the north Atlantic, so nearly all figures would have had overcoats on. In Second and Third Class, and even for First class, the outerwear was basically all variations of the same dark color - dark brown, dark grey, and black. The passengers inside, if you have any visible, well, there you can be a bit more colorful (at least for First Class). But since you won't see them easily – in fact not unless you're actually looking for them – brighter colors won't be a problem. (They'll still have to be muted for scale effect). Some first-class passengers might have appeared on deck without benefit of outerwear, so some of these women can and should be painted in muted shades of dark red, dark green, pastel yellow and so on. Search the internet for period clothing (Edwardian era) to guide your choice of colors.



But don't go too bright or have too many colors to catch the eye. Aside from the above considerations, a darker color scheme also allows the people to "be there" without dominating the scene – a definite plus for the modeler. Unlike colors for the ship, which were very specific, the list of acceptable clothing colors is almost limitless, or can be easily made by adding black to existing colors. But remember, nothing bright! No "pure" colors

should be used without toning them down a bit by adding a few drops of white (for darker colors) – or grey (for light colors). That includes even black – make sure you're using a shade of black that isn't "pure" black, but black with a small amount of grey added.

Mixing paints for clothing colors need not be complicated or costly. A few basic colors - which you probably already have for other areas of your model - can be used as a base, and tinted darker or lighter as required. All that's needed are a few bottle caps and toothpicks - put a few drops of the base color in the cap, add a drop or two of the tinting color, and you have enough for a half-dozen figures. Exact measurements aren't required, since you won't ever need to replicate the exact shade, and it's better if the figures all look a little different anyway.

For those modeling figures for the interior, James Cameron's movie is an excellent guideline as he went to great lengths to ensure absolute accuracy with clothing of the period, even with extras in the background. The softcover book James Cameron's Titanic is a very worthwhile guide, as it has a fair amount of still photos, and can be purchased for less than a dollar (used) through Amazon.com. (And remember that if it's evening aboard your ship, all the first class male passengers need tuxedos - not jacket-and-tie.)



Last note – the color for skin (face and hands) is an important choice. Too light, and each figure will appear to have a bright spot where the face should be. Testors "Wood" color is recommended for the skin. This may seem too dark up close, but anything lighter on the figures looks artificial from a distance.

A good-quality artist's brush with a very fine tip is essential. Your local model railroad shop or arts and crafts store carries these. Note that with very small brushes, the paint congeals rapidly. Every few minutes, you'll need to dip your brush into solvent or water (depending on whether you're using oil- or water-based paint) and gently wipe it across a paper napkin to keep the tip fresh. Oil-based paints are preferred over water-based paints since they dry much more slowly, and solvent will dissolve semi-dry oil-based paint whereas water-based paint won't dissolve nearly as readily when it starts to dry.

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For those who intend to detail any of the interior areas of the ship, the ship's crew and officers on the bottom row of the GMM sheet can readily be turned into stewards and waiters by painting them in the appropriate colors. (But even on deck, consider having a few stewards attending to the First Class Passengers in their deck chairs.)

Detaching the figures and applying to the model

After each figure is detached from the sheet, it's recommended that you gently file the bottom of the feet with a very fine file to make them flat – they're somewhat pointed after being broken off from the sheet, and won't cement to the deck very well if they're left that way. When you're ready to apply them, place a drop of yellow (gap-filling) CA cement on your glue block, and let it sit for a few minutes so it becomes slightly more viscous. Holding it gently between a pair of fine tweezers, lightly touch the figure to the cement. Using your magnifier, check that you haven't picked up too much cement - if you have, wick most of it away with a tip of paper, then gently lower the figure down where you want to place it and *slightly* open your tweezer tips to allow it to drop down the last millimeter or so onto the deck. (If you press it down onto the deck you'll scrape the "clothing" off that you so carefully painted on.) For the next minute or so, keep your tweezer tips on either side of – but not touching - the figure. If you don't, it will fall over. Once the cement starts to dry and the figure will stand up on its own, gently nudge it as necessary until it's perfectly upright. Once you've added the figures to an entire deck section, you may need take a fine-tipped paintbrush and apply a tiny amount of Dulcote (flat lacquer) to the deck around the base of each one if there's any excess cement reflecting the light.

It's recommended that you place all your figures out on deck before actually cementing them down. This will allow you to distribute them properly and make sure each is in the right location or in the right group before committing them to a spot on deck. Because they are easily knocked over in their upright positions, they should be the final additions to your model after everything else is done.