

# Marshall and the Mint

**Mike Knepper compares the minis and maxis of miniatures.**

The Franklin Mint has 3000 employees worldwide, offices in 20 countries, a corporate headquarters and shipping center covering nearly 500,000 square feet and even its own zip code. It's a name known to practically every adult in America.

Creative Miniatures Associates sometimes has as many as eight employees working in their offices—a cluster of rooms on the second floor of a rundown building in Stamford, Connecticut. Theirs is a name known only to the most serious collectors in the world.

Of course, things aren't *that* different. Both companies make model cars.

I'm not a model-car collector, though over the years I've come to have a few dozen models of varying quality. In fact I was never even particularly curious about building model cars as a kid. But the Story Idea light went on recently when I read a Franklin Mint ad in Parade Magazine last week and a couple of minutes later found a feature on CMA and its owner, Marshall Buck, in the business section. Does the term *compare and contrast* come to mind?

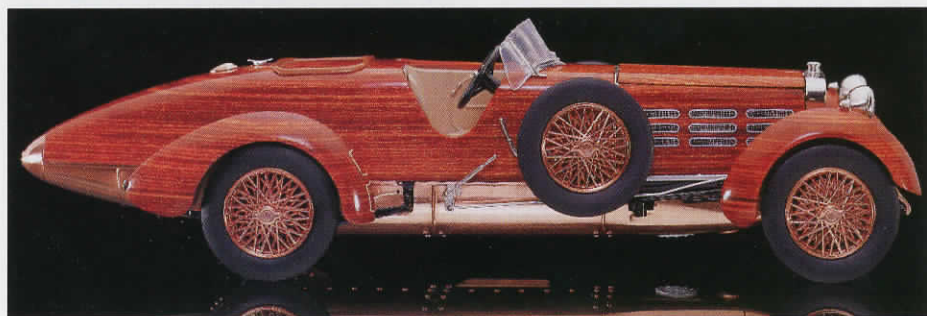
By its own reckoning, the Franklin Mint is the world's "leading creator of fine-quality collectibles." These run the gamut from porcelain dolls to the Official Star Trek Insignia Collection, but perhaps the best known of their products are a long line of die-cast model cars. The Franklin Mint is a privately owned company, so getting a handle on the actual dollars and cents involved is well-nigh impossible; in fact its PR department operates under a gag order even when it comes to revealing the most popular seller out of its 66 individual models and six collections. "The 1911 Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost is popular," a Mint spokesperson tentatively offered. "And Corvettes. Corvettes are good."

If you want the actual *number* forget it, but I figure about a gazillion is probably not far off the mark.

**And at a gazillion** times \$90 to \$135, you begin to see how the Mint can afford its own zip code. The Franklin Mint's car models are mostly 1/24th-scale replicas

that are made in various Asian factories and shipped back to the Mint for resale. (The only collectibles actually manufactured at the Mint proper are the coins and medallions that served as its original products.)

According to Roger Hardnock, the Mint's director for diecast design, the process of creating a model takes a year and a half on average, and despite the critical importance of selecting the right vehicles to replicate there's no formal process involved; no nominating committee, no review board, *nada*. An idea can come from any source, Hardnock says: The idea is then discussed among people involved in the model end of the business as well as those in the non-model lines, and out comes a consensus.



**The next step** is to find an as-near-perfect example of the car as possible. "Literally hundreds" of photographs are taken, Hardnock continues, adding that engineers even visit the car to hand-sketch each bit and piece. A prototype model is then done in one of the Far East facilities, which is shown to the model's "sponsor" for approval. A sponsor is someone involved with the vehicle in some way—a car company, perhaps, or in the case of an antique or classic even the current owner. After a go-ahead, rough tooling is made next and a prototype car assembled from those parts.

"Then we nitpick the details," Hardnock says, "and review it a couple of times before

production." The Mint's models are die-cast in zinc with additional parts made from ABS plastic. The detail is remarkable when you consider the cost; engines are detailed to a certain extent but of course lack ignition wires, coolant hoses, sparkplug tips and so forth. Hardnock took me to a display of models running from the earliest to the present; it's easy to see how quality and detailing have improved over time, thanks, Hardnock said, to improved technology. It's simply easier to mass-produce detailed bits and pieces now than it used to be.

I actually have an example of one of the most recent models, a 1932 Ford Coupe. The steering wheel turns the front wheels, the undercarriage is detailed with tie-rods,

**Clockwise from right:**

**CMA's 1/14th-scale Ferrari 166 MM Barchetta, in kit and professionally built form; the Ferrari SWB is also available both ways.**

**Custom-ordered and -built CMA McLaren M8A awaits pickup by the customer, while the Mint's 1924 Hispano-Suiza Tulipwood Speedster model can be home-delivered on a payment plan. And who says you can tell a shop's quality by the neatness of its space?**

exhaust system, leaf springs and so forth. The doors open, there are window cranks, door handles and door pulls. The hood opens and there is a rumble seat. The molded wire wheels have realistic-looking plastic spokes. The single windshield wiper, which previously would have been part of the molded windshield frame, is a free-standing individual piece. All in all, my Ford is a satisfactory model.

**Or it would have** been, if I hadn't visited Marshall Buck next.

That not fair, of course—it's rather like saying "My Hyundai Scoupe felt quick before I drove an F40." But Lordy-day, as

my sainted grandmother used to sigh, what Marshall Buck's sometimes-as-many-as-eight modeling maniacs can do.

They beaver away in a cluttered suite (this is a *suite*?) of offices, the main workroom holding positions for a half-dozen modelers. There's a separate room for painting and molding, a grinding/polishing/photography room, a shipping area and Buck's office. The whole operation would fit into the Mint's gift shop.

Buck got into the business exactly as

build models for himself, then for friends, then for a small circle of customers.

Seven years ago, one of those customers urged Buck to go into business and provided some financial backing. Buck sold most of his 600+ piece collection for additional seed money, and Creative Model Associates—CMA—was born.

"Ten or 12 years ago I couldn't have a business like this," Buck explains. "But today the interest is there. We're selling memories and nostalgia."

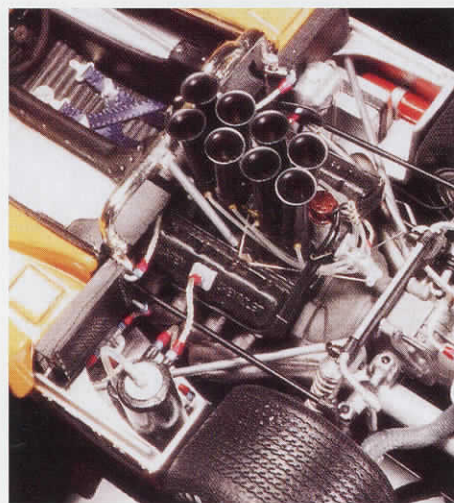
threaded through a loom just as on the original. The wire wheels on vintage racers are actually *wire wheels*. If it was on the original car, CMA puts it on the model: screw heads, bolts, hangers, brackets, heim joints, grease fittings, they're all there.

**Most of Buck's** business is centered in these limited-production runs, but he also builds model kits for (very) advanced builders or will take another manufacturer's kit and give it the CMA treatment for a customer. And then there are those one-offs—frequently replicas of an owner's vintage racecar. Although the concept has since been duplicated by many competitors, Buck was also probably the first modeler to get famous drivers' autographs on the models with which they are associated. Stirling Moss' autograph graces a plaque Buck fixes to the display stand of the Rob Walker Ferrari 250 SWB in which Moss won the 1961 Goodwood Tourist Trophy, for example. The model costs \$750.

Shortly after you read this a very elaborate 1/12th-scale Ford GT40 should be available in kit form or fully assembled. Buck wasn't certain of the price, but figured the kit would be under \$1000 and the assembled model \$4500 to \$6500. "It will rival a \$30,000 scratch-built model," Buck promised. A 1/12th Birdcage Maserati is coming. Late 1994 releases are a 1/24 Ford GT40 Mk. II roadster Transkit, \$95; a Ferrari 330P4 signed by Chris Amon, assembled for \$600; and an Aston Martin DB3S, assembled at \$500-\$600 or about \$140 in Transkit form. (A Transkit supplies the additional parts needed to transform another manufacturer's kit into a CMA-spec model.)

**What's the conclusion?** Nothing shocking. Just as cars are priced from not-so-much to OhMiGod, so are models, and with both you get what you pay for. The Mint's models, however many gazillion they put out each year, are marvels of mass-production detail. As Marshall Buck says about Franklin Mint models, they make collecting possible for anybody with the desire.

*His* models, on the other hand, exist on another plane. It's cubic zirconium vs. diamond, Hyundai vs. Ferrari. Again, you get what you pay for. The Franklin Mint answers to *The Mint, Franklin Center PA 19091*. Creative Miniature Associates can be found at *CMA, 29 Parker Ave., Stamford CT 06906* ○



**Memories and nostalgia** that can cost as little as \$600 and as much as several thousand bucks (for a one-off scratch-built). CMA specializes in racecars from the 1930s through the early 1970s, and production runs are small—typically 50 to 250 units, mostly 1/24th-scale but also 1/43rd. There's no offshore sourcing here. Buck's models begin with a wooden form; the actual bodies are eventually cast in resin on-site, and then the meticulous detailing begins.

The CMA modelers simply breathe life into their models. Looking idly at a random selection of products during my visit I notice not only are there individual ignition wires on a McLaren Can-Am car, they're

you'd assume—by building a hotrod model when he was seven—but unlike those of us who turned into teenagers and found significantly less productive ways to waste time, Buck kept at it. When he was 16 he was doing freelance design work for the then-powerhouse Aurora company. After high school, he dabbled in a variety of professions from photography to the garment business, but through it all he continued to