

Flats for Everyman

by Valentine Bean

Part 1 of a brief series by a U.S. contributor on this intriguing aspect of the collecting hobby.

When Frederick the Great was shown, sometime after the close of the Seven Years' War, a set of "tin soldiers" made by the Hilpert family of Nuremberg he is reported to have said: "These should go far."

What Frederick was looking at in the seventeen sixties was the ancestor of what English speaking collectors today call "flats." It is doubtful if Frederick's eye was prophetic enough to see down the corridor of two centuries to what flats have become. No doubt he fully understood the immediate military propaganda value of the figures for his subjects and their commercial value — especially as toys. His observation, however, was correct: flats have gone far.

It must be left to the historians to trace the history of the flat figure to the present day. An excellent resumé, *The Tin Soldier — a brief history* by George Cameron, was published in the September 1974 issue of *Military Modelling*. The purpose of the following remarks is to

Heading, the unusual and dramatic "Christ before Pilate", issued by Alfred Retter and engraved by Ludwig Frank comprising 25 figures in 30mm. It is a good example of the use of a staging board with levels; note the use of cut-out scenery with columns built up from cardboard giving an "engraved" appearance.

The Mignot flats in the "Emperor's Bivouac" at right were designed by Lucien Rousselot and engraved by R. Pepin; painted and staged by the author, the photos are by Donald C. Withee.

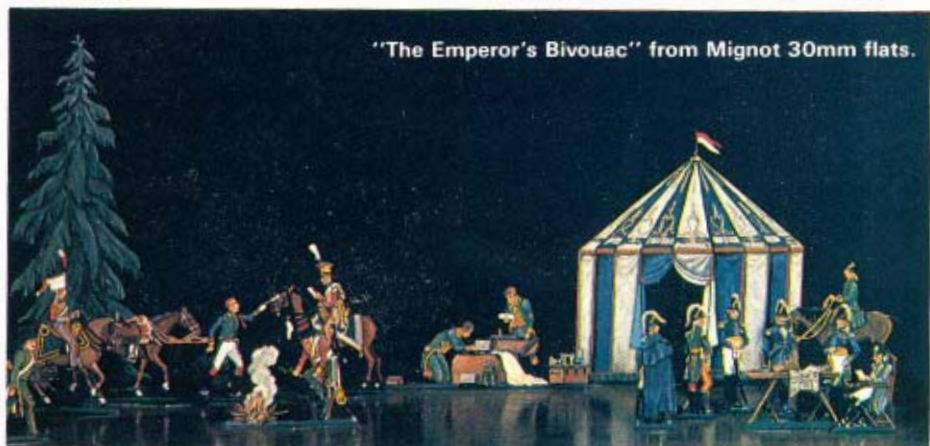
bring to the attention of British and American collectors some of the reasons why collecting modern flats is worth the time and effort it takes to collect them.

First, we must establish just what we are talking about. For British and American collectors flats received their name after-the-event. That is, we call them flats to make a distinction between them and the round figure: what John G. Garratt calls "solids" and the French call "ronde-bosse." The exact date when this distinction was made is not easy to establish. Goethe, in 1811, published some remarks about having seen some round figures in France. Not a very reliable way to establish a date; but it does give us a point of departure. It must have been after — and probably well after — 1811 that the word "flat" became the English nomenclature for the imported product of the German makers. In the simple slang of the modern collecting world the two types of figures are "flats" and "rounds". Any other division is a sophisticated refinement of the obvious — an exercise in hair-splitting.

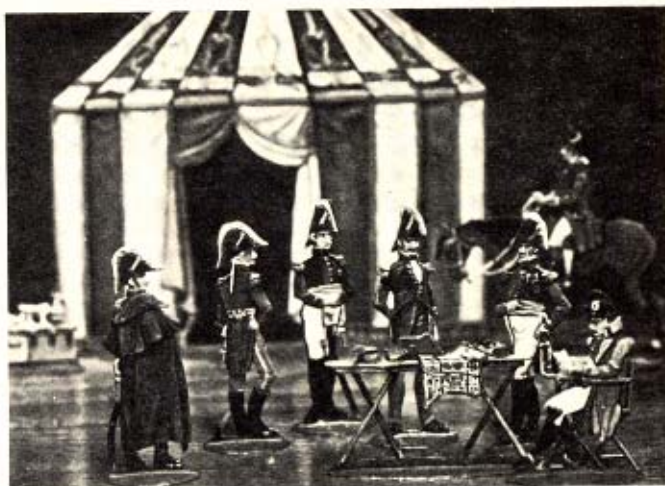
To bring us to the flat figures available today and a brief study of their attractions for collectors we must skip the area of figure collecting known as the "antique figure". The prices collectors have to pay for these figures justifies the rather impressive name. What they are, of course, are what the original buyer thought of as "toy figures". The flats we are talking about date from 1930 to the present and are, for the most part, available today and can be bought, unpainted, from the German makers and dealers.

It is interesting to note that the modern flat figure and their meticulous authenticity to historic detail is entirely due to the demands of the collector. The collector called the tune and the makers danced to it. The result was a figure for collectors. The industry went from making toys to making figures of an artistic quality they did not previously possess. What was made for the collector in the nineteen-thirties still has validity for the collector today: that is, if he has the eye to see it.

In appearance the modern figures are just what the word means: flat. They are engraved



"The Emperor's Bivouac" from Mignot 30mm flats.



on both sides, but they have no third dimension. "As thin as a dime!" is the way most U.S. writers put it. Ernst Heinrichsen established the scale for the flat figure at 30mm. for foot and 40mm. for mounted in circa 1850, which has become known as the "Nuremberg Scale". It would be interesting to know just how this scale was arrived at. Whatever the procedure, the 30mm. scale is just right. One has only to glance at a 70mm. flat figure to know why: the larger the figure the flatter they seem to become. Put another way — the larger the flat figure the more painting talent is demanded to make them convincing to the viewer.

The figure must first be designed on paper. This design is then transferred to slate plates by an engraver. It is at this point that one of the major differences between flats and rounds is to be noticed. It is here that the flat collector first makes a judgement. Indeed, it may be the only judgement he has to make. For the flat figure to be of interest for the collector the designer and the engraver have to be artisans of the first rank. There are many instances when this collaboration has produced figures which the collector has every right to call an "art object". The designer and the engraver have, in a word, become artists.

An example of this type of collaboration would be when Ludwig Madlener, a designer, is working with Ludwig Frank, an engraver. This partnership is a happy circumstance for the collector: for the figures produced by these artists embody, in a flash of recognition, the exact action they represent. Madlener/Frank seem to have the power mentioned by Leonardo da Vinci "— of seizing those fleeting gestures in which men reveal their emotions". The work they design and engrave has the right amount of exaggeration which highlights the figure and gives it a sense of life. This is not to say that the single round figure can't have

these qualities: indeed they do. However, the figure we are talking about is one of a set of many figures that is dramatizing a single action. The key to the collaboration is not the single figure — or the figure at all — but the action the figure (or figures) is engaged in. In other words, the emotions human beings, in a historical point in time, were engaged in acting out. That the figures are designed for a "set" at the outset is one of the main attractions for a flat collector today. Such sets do for the collector (and of course the viewer) what a good play does for an audience. By artistic exaggeration the action is bigger than life and yet not so big as to turn what is drama into melodrama.

For the flat collector, getting to know and to recognize the work of designers and engravers is a very attractive aspect of the hobby. It divides itself into so many areas of interest that the collector is always absorbed in the process. One of these areas is the fascinating way the designer and the engraver work with just the three types of flats: foot figure, mounted figure and groups — that is, more than one figure sharing one stand. The variety of how each type relates to the other is very great.

Another area of interest is the variety of body positions modern flats can assume. The antique flat figure is always in the profile right or left body position. Today the engraved body positions are more varied: from full front — ("frontal" as they say in the German catalogues) — one quarter right and left, back to the classical profile positions. The positions are, of course, repeated on the reverse side of the flat as seen from the back. This makes five main body positions and three subsidiary body positions that a flat figure can be designed to take. Once the designer and engraver have established the body positions they cannot be changed. To off-set this rigidity the designers

Left, "The Trophies of Austerlitz" in 30mm. by F.C. Neckel, designed by Lucien Rousselet and said by some to be one of the most beautiful sets in existence. Above, a detail from "The Emperor's Bivouac".

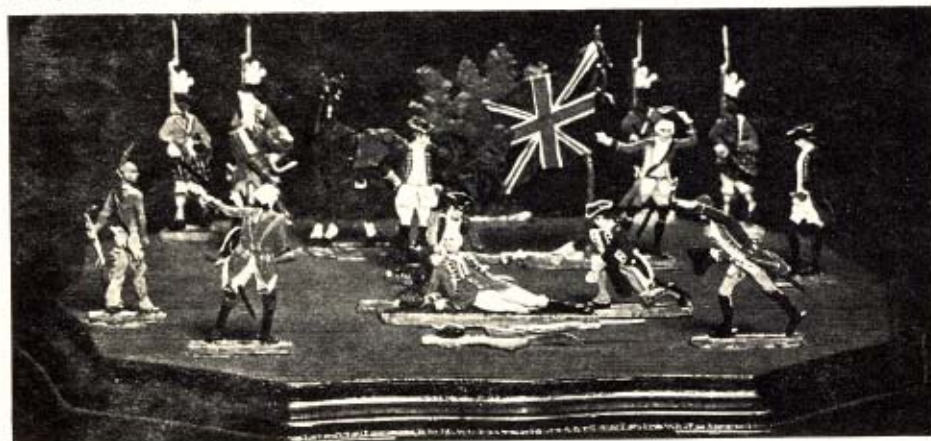
have created what is called a "combination" figure. That is, a figure is designed to have as many as four arms, or three legs. In this way the collector, at his worktable, can decide whether the figure will be running or standing, with arms raised or lowered, simply by cutting off the unnecessary limbs. A great variety of body actions is thus achieved.

The final observation to be made in regard to the designers and engravers is in the area of the aesthetic qualities of the figures rather than their practical qualities. This has to do with the "effects" the designers and engravers have been able to employ to represent everything — from human emotion to the details of military equipment and uniforms — by pure outline and silhouette. An outline that implies a far more substantial *idea* than a 30mm. flat figure would seem to warrant. It is this very quality of "expanding meanings" that gives collecting model soldiers in any size or make its strongest motivation: the reason most collectors insist on saying they collect military miniatures and *not* toy soldiers. This is true of rounds as well as flats. The round figure is more impersonal, for it stands alone. With flats this is done in outline, achieved through excellent draftsmanship and the very fine art of engraving. The special quality of the flat figure is its relation to other figures in a set and their astonishing way of humanizing history.

An attraction of flats mentioned by most English writers on the subject is that they can be used in making dioramas. There isn't any question that this is true; but it receives a negative response from most British and American collectors. Modern life-style precludes the collecting of dioramas in large numbers. There is simply not space enough in modern homes and apartments to display them properly. Or to find space to store them when not on display.

What these writers are reflecting, of course, is the German attitude to flat collecting and dioramas. Most German collectors are builders of dioramas. Large—even vast—dioramas, with figures counted in the many hundreds.

The English speaking collector need not dismiss flats because they have no space to "The Death of General Wolfe", first issued by Eugen Blum, now listed in the F.C. Neckel catalogue; it comprises 18 figures in 30mm and note how figures on different planes give depth to the staging. All painting by the author.



display dioramas. Once the German preoccupation with dioramas is accepted as fact the "flats-for-dioramas" can be seen for the myth it is and other areas of flat collecting are found to be open to the collector. We must leave a discussion of these other areas of flat collecting for the time when we visit a flat collector in his workshop and see how he solves this problem. It must be emphasized here that flats-for-dioramas is not the only goal.

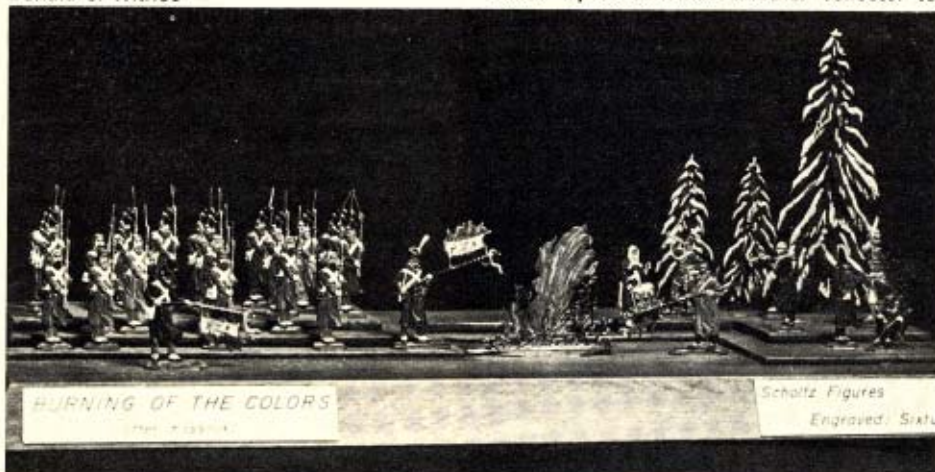
Flats present their own type of conditions that impose certain restraints and rules which must be accepted by the collector. More often than not they are exposed in a negative way by writers on flats. What is not stated by these writers is that everything in the creative arts — the visual arts; the plastic arts and the performing arts — also have their conditions which must be accepted before they can be appreciated. Conditioning implies discipline and discipline in the arts has always developed its own type of creative excitement. Flats are no exception.

The first condition, of course, is that they are flat. It is this condition that is the hardest one to accept by non-flat collectors. Michael V. Hitrovo, a learned and wise American collector of flats, has said that there's not much use trying to convince collectors about flats because they either like them — or they don't. This is true and it is this first of the flat conditions that makes it true. If a way around this first stumbling block could be found, appreciation of the flat figure would come more easily. It is, perhaps, a good example of the classic "love at first sight" — that if a collector does not have this flash of love on first seeing a flat figure, then he will never be a flat collector. They say love is blind; well, bias is blind, too! If this first condition cannot be met — then that would seem to be that.

However, we are talking about the attractions of the flat figure and not trying to turn figure collectors into flat collectors only. Collectors should be able to collect all types of figures — flats included.

The second condition is that flats can only be seen from the front — or back. This is a condition flats share with every other art form — from live theatre performances to listening to music in a music hall. The variety of body positions for modern flats has already been pointed out. Although flats can only be seen from the front they are no longer in just the profile position. Flats now have a multiplicity of expressive human attitudes that are not possible with the round figure. If this were not

"Burning the Colours", a 38 figure set in 30mm by Werner (and Anna?) Scholtz. Painted and staged by the author. Photo: Donald C. Withee



BURNING OF THE COLORS

Scholtz Figures

Engraved: Sixtu

true there would be little reason for converting and/or remodelling the round figure.

The next condition is centered in the staging (displaying) of the flat figure. This condition stems from the first two: because they are flat and can be seen only from the front. The condition dictates that the figures be staged on parallel planes with their stands parallel to the front edge of the staging board or display shelf. Variety can be achieved through various staging techniques — such as levels and different planes — always remembering that the figure must be seen "square-on". To place the stands on the bias distorts the outline so carefully thought out by the designer and engraver and the figure loses credibility in the eye of the viewer. To lose viewer credibility is to put all in hazard.

If any type of scenery or props are used in the staging they, too, should be flat. They can be done in built-up relief the way the figures are in the engraving, and painted with highlights and shading but the "flat style" must be kept. Staging flat figures gives an exciting and rewarding challenge to the collector; his creative energy and ingenuity is brought into strong focus.

In the past, flats have been attractive figures for the war-gamer: the reason is financial rather than aesthetic. Today the 30mm. round wargame figures have swept all before them — but the flat figure should not be overlooked by the wargamer. This is well expressed by Douglas H. Johnson, an American wargamer and editor of the journal *Savage and Soldier* when he writes: "It would be exciting if more wargamers took a serious interest in flats. They lend an entirely different atmosphere to a game — much more of a feeling of transfixed movement."

All writers on flats are agreed on one thing: their low price. This may very well be the most compelling and immediate reason for turning to flats. Once the financial corner is turned the aesthetic quality of the flat figure begins to assert itself.

There is an area where the collecting of rounds and flats touch: research and study. All the supporting elements of collecting — such as the study and reading of history, uniform books and prints, military history and, yes, painting styles — are applicable to flats. Flats have a very strong advantage here because of the very wide range of historical epochs for which there are flat sets available. From pre-history to World War II there are many figures and sets to choose from. Research has always been one of the attractions of collecting; to collect flats enlarges this exciting aspect of the hobby.

It would be a very foolish collector who would try to convince another collector to

change his collecting habits. It cannot be done! Collectors are a happy band of brothers with an extreme tolerance for the bias of other collecting interests. What can be suggested is that British and American collectors have not given the flat figure the attention their many attractions deserve. One need not be a flat collector to have flats in one's collection. To have examples of the best designed and engraved flats in a collection is to enlarge the value of that collection greatly — and not just as a financial investment.

Flats are highly charged with the stuff of history. To appreciate and understand their many attractions is to extend and heighten the joy of collecting military miniatures.

Partial List of Makers and Dealers

(NOTE: Following is a partial list of German makers and dealers of flats. It is by no means complete. They all have catalogues of one sort or another, although they are rather expensive. Most are illustrated. German makers of flats fall into two categories: (1.) Commercial makers; (2.) Private makers. It should be mentioned that the language differences present a barrier to easy ordering and business dealings; it, therefore, takes time for an English order to be translated and complied with. When seeking information and/or ordering Mignot flats it is necessary to write in French. Collectors writing for information regarding catalogues and figures should always enclose International Reply Coupons if an answer is expected.)

Commercial Makers

F. C. Neckel, 7421 Hatlenhofen, Ledergasse 46, West Germany. Excellent illustrated catalogue. Very expensive.

Aloys Ochel, 23 Kiel, Feldstrasse 24 b, West Germany. Good catalogue. Partially illustrated.

Karl Romund, 3 Hannover, Lavestrasse 19, West Germany. Inexpensive figures. Partially illustrated catalogue. Special emphasis on U.S. Indians and the U.S. West. Some 60mm.; 70mm.; and 90mm. figures.

Werner Scholtz, 1 Berlin 12, Knesebeckstrasse 86-87, West Germany. Excellent partially illustrated catalogue.

Private Makers

Franz Beck, 35 Kassel, Reginstrasse 7, West Germany. Small, partially illustrated catalogue. Early German history and mythology.

Ruthard Bunzel, 2104 Hamburg 92, Neuwiedenthaler Strasse 56, West Germany. Printed list catalogue.

Wolfgang Hafer, D - 3511 Lanolwehrhagen b. Kassel, Berlinerstrasse 1, West Germany. Excellent illustrated catalogue.

Alfred Retter, 7000 Stuttgart 75, Kleinhohenheimer Strasse 32, West Germany. Small typed list catalogue.

Dealers

G. Tobinnus, 3 Hannover, Gretchenstrasse 25, West Germany. Typed list.

Au Plat D'Etain, 1, Rue de Vieux-Colombier, Paris, VIe. Excellent illustrated catalogue. Mignot flats only. Correspondence must be in French.

Under Two Flags, 4 St. Christopher's Place, Wigmore Street, London, W.1: Phone: 01-935 6934.

Historex Agents, 3 Castle Street, Dover, Kent.

