



# DREAM VESSELS MADE TO ORDER

A COMPELLING ACCURATE BOAT MODEL IS A SELF-TAUGHT SKILL FOR THIS CRAFTSMAN

STORY BY HEATHER CONN

From top: Model of a 112-foot yacht destined for a Miami boat show; Model of 40-metre LNG escort tug for use in Norway; Model of the new cable ferry to Denman Island.

**H**OW DO YOU impress a multi-millionaire who's having a \$50-million mega-yacht custom-built? All those finicky design and spec details. And an owner's plans that can change on a whim.

A man-who-has-everything in Mexico was about to view, for the first time, a custom-made exact replica, built to scale, of his dream vessel, a 50-metre motor yacht. After months of meticulous work, Brian Klassen, owner of Brian Klassen Models in Halfmoon Bay, shipped his completed model last December to the New Zealand company building this boat. He had no idea what to expect.

"The owner was overcome with emotion," Brian says. "It meant the world to him."

The ability to create a compelling, accurate boat model from scratch that evokes life and character — to make it "sing," in Brian's words — is a self-taught skill for this Sunshine Coast craftsman. Besides patience and a honed eye for detail and perspective, he draws on numerous capabilities: operation of multiple woodworking machines and a 3-D laser cutter and engraver, fluency in CAD (computer-aided design) drawings, automotive painting and finishing, careful sanding that produces crisp, sharp edges and "a true understanding of what high quality is and means."

Brian's specialty is making two- to nine-foot models to varying scales of mega-yachts of 110 feet or longer. He fabricates almost every part by hand, including tiny deck chairs, bar sinks, wood railings and helicopters (for a yachter's quick getaway from the top deck, of course). He'll cast many small custom-detailing parts using silicone rubber molds or photo-etched brass. Two teeny paper images laser-copied and glued back-to-back become a boat's flag. Since every model, either half-hull or full hull, is one of a kind and is built to a different scale, ▶



PHOTOS: BRIAN KLASSEN & HEATHER CONN



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PHOTO: BRIAN KLASSEN



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Top: Brian with his latest model of a 112-foot yacht (background) and the model of a 65-foot Concorde yacht made for Coastal Craft in Gibsons. Left: Brian's replica model of a troller, based on the Seamaster fishboat hull, built in Sooke by Park Isle Marine for a U.S. client. Right: Brian with a 3-D chart clock.

none of the parts are interchangeable.

Although he has made models with working parts such as navigation lights, radar antennae, anchor winches and propellers, Brian says there is little demand for these features. Most clients are commercial shipyards or owners' reps who use his models to help visualize a boat while it's under construction.

"I do see it [model-making] as art," he says. "I'm not creating something of my own design, but it's 3-D marine art. It's something an owner can put on the wall or on a mantel and display as art." He adds: "According to the purists, it's not art — but art is in the eye of the beholder."

Since 1999, when he started Brian Klassen Models in Maple Ridge, this solo entrepreneur has custom-built almost 100 commissioned boat models. He says

he particularly enjoys the "salty, shippy" designs of working boats. He remembers fondly making a model of a 40-metre escort tug, a liquid-natural-gas-powered one from Norway, for Vancouver-based Robert Allan Ltd., a world leader in tugboat design. Another favourite was a 14-inch model of a 28-foot troller for a U.S. client.

"Every project is special," says the boat lover who spent his childhood fishing in a 12-foot runabout from his family's former summer cabin in lower Gibsons. "Boats have so much character. They are alive almost."

After moving from Maple Ridge to the Sunshine Coast in 2002, Brian created a 25-inch model of a 65-foot Concorde yacht for Coastal Craft, custom boat builders in Gibsons. (For scale, 3/8 of an inch equalled one foot on the working boat.)

Over the years, he's built a dozen models for a commercial shipyard in Egypt and one for a sailboat owner in Israel. He has shipped models to clients across the U.S., in Europe, Russia, the Caribbean and Australia.

"There are rich people all over," he quips. His models, which can come with a five-figure price tag, range from sailboats with miniscule rigging to pilot boats and even a 78-centimetre-long model of BC Ferries' new cable ferry to Denman Island: the 78-metre Baynes Sound Connector.

Currently, Brian is making a remote-controlled model of a tugboat and boxing up his latest model of a 112-foot motor yacht with three deck levels, destined for display at the Miami International Boat Show in February.

Brian started out in Vancouver's architectural model industry in 1986. He credits skillful masters from Germany, Switzerland and Austria with teaching him how to sand with finesse and learn to know what looks right.

After serving as an apprentice in model shops, he spent another 13 years learning different methods and techniques before starting his own business.

When he's not working on boat models, Brian makes 3-D charts of local waters and elsewhere, using maple or birch plywood that's 1/8-inch thick. He sells 3-D chart clocks as well. **CL**