

# Which **scale** is right for your next model?



## Maybe not the one you think ... *By Terry Thompson*

What scale is right for your next project? That depends on the subject of your model, and what characteristics you find most important. Some of us are “constant scale” builders – we build all our models to a single scale, sometimes regardless of the subject. This allows easy size comparisons and lets us combine several models in a diorama. (It also reduces the time you spend browsing at the hobby shop, but you’ll have to decide for yourself if that’s an advantage.)

Others of us, though, skip around a bit scale-wise, and that’s also a rational approach. Unlike our cousins in model railroading or radio control, we don’t usually operate our models, so they don’t

need to be of the same scale to make operation possible. Likewise, though many of us may build a small diorama or two, few of us build large multi-subject scenes. Mostly, we enjoy the occasional change of scale, which provides variety and adds to our options – we have more kits from which to choose and can take advantage of each scale’s strengths, and so maximize our modeling pleasure.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the various scales, though? We at FSM can offer a few opinions based on experiences and conversations with modelers around the world. We didn’t consider cost because it is too subjective. In fact, larger-scale models often cost less per modeling hour than their

Does size matter? You bet. Bigger isn’t always better and small can be more than charming – it can be downright practical. These P-51 Mustang models, built by Larry Schramm, show the changes that come with using different scales. From front to back the scales of the planes are: 1/144, 1/72, 1/48, 1/32, and 1/24. Jim Forbes photo

smaller counterparts because larger-scale models tend to be more complex and offer greater detailing opportunities. So the final cost is probably not as big a factor as kit prices make it appear. What is important is how much enjoyment you get from building, modifying, and painting each of your models. FSM

## AIRCRAFT

### 1/24 SCALE

**Pros:** Big, real big. Plenty of room for details. Parts are easier to handle than in smaller scales. Impressive when complete. Can be combined with auto models and model railroad figures in dioramas – if you have the space.

**Cons:** Big, real big. Can look bare without details. Relatively few subjects available. Few aftermarket parts or decals.

**Overall:** Great if you have the space and your subject is available.

### 1/32 AND 1/35 SCALE

**Pros:** Impressive size. Parts somewhat easier to handle than in 1/48 scale. Interest increasing. Some possibilities for combining with 1/35 scale armor in dioramas, if you’re a bit flexible on scale and choose carefully. (The 1/35 scale helicopter kits work perfectly, of course.)

**Cons:** Completed models are a bit large for many bookshelves. Relatively few detail parts and aftermarket decals. Subject choices somewhat limited.

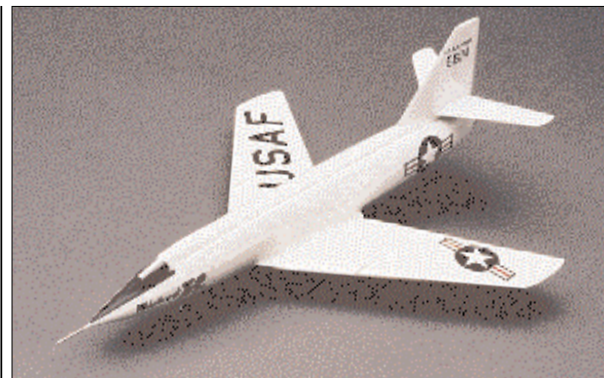
**Overall:** Same as for 1/24 scale.

### 1/48 SCALE

**Pros:** Often somewhat easier to build than 1/72 scale, and details can be more to scale. Many diorama accessories and figures available. The hottest scale for aircraft right now in the U.S. Most major single-engine types available, plus some multi-engine. Large and growing supply of aftermarket parts and decals. Great diorama possibilities.

**Cons:** Subject choices are limited compared to 1/72 scale.

**Overall:** If you can’t decide on a scale for your next airplane project, 1/48 scale is probably your safest choice unless your subject is very large. Because the kits are



This Alliance Bell X-2 is doubly rare. Only two of the full-scale experimental aircraft were built, and the injection-molded kit is currently available only in 1/72 scale – the scale which offers modelers the greatest choice of aircraft subjects. Jim Forbes photo

often newer than their 1/72 scale counterparts, the parts often fit together more easily.

### 1/72 SCALE

**Pros:** Largest variety of kits available, and by a wide margin. Relatively easy to store and display. Especially with newer kits, less need to add details than on larger-scale kits. Many, many aftermarket parts and decals. Can combine with 1/72 scale armor and figures in dioramas. Good selection of beginner kits.

**Cons:** Some smaller parts often molded too large for scale. Detail work can be somewhat finicky. Many older (and some newer) 1/72 scale kits have fit problems.

**Overall:** For the builder who wants to build everything, loves obscure sub-

jects, or is short on space, 1/72 scale is a great choice. It’s also the largest practical scale for models of very large aircraft.

### 1/144 AND SMALLER SCALES

**Pros:** Good variety of kits of airliners and multi-engine military types. Easy to store and display. Many aftermarket airliner decals.

**Cons:** Detail and paint work can be tricky. Few details available. Limited diorama possibilities. Relatively low level of detail, unless you have surgeon-quality skills.

**Overall:** Small scales are great for airliner buffs and fans of really large military aircraft, but demand excellent building and painting skills.

## ARMOR

### 1/16 AND 1/25 SCALE

**Pros:** Whopping big models that are impressive. Great detailing possibilities. Diorama possibilities with both autos and aircraft, but you’ll need some space. Some models operate.

**Cons:** You’ll be making your own details in many cases. Fewer choices of models.

**Overall:** As with big-scale planes, these models have a high “wow” factor. Be sure you have the space, though. You may need to fabricate a few parts.

### 1/35 SCALE

**Pros:** Widest variety of armor subjects available. Plethora of aftermarket parts, decals, and dry transfer-letters. Big

enough to detail, but small enough to display on a shelf.

**Cons:** Largely an armor-only scale, so while many diorama parts are available, there’s little overlap with other subjects save for some limited compatibility with 1/32 and 1/35 scale aircraft.

**Overall:** The simplest choice for building most military subjects, and a

nice compromise between "big enough to see" and "small enough to display." Watch out for older kits, however – some are terrific, but many are clunky.

#### 1/48 SCALE

**Pros:** Excellent diorama possibilities, especially because of the wide variety of parts created for 1/48 scale (O scale) railroad modelers. Decent potential for detailing.

**Cons:** Relatively few kits and few aftermarket details available.

**Overall:** Could have been a contender in armor but for Tamiya and Italeri deciding to specialize in 1/35 scale. These days 1/48 scale armor is more often used to complement aircraft in dioramas.

#### 1/72, 1/76, AND 1/87 SCALE

**Pros:** Good variety of subjects. A popular scale in Europe. Excellent poten-

tial for larger dioramas, especially for 1/87 scale, where you can use HO scale structures and vehicles.

**Cons:** Detail parts somewhat finicky to work with, and many parts are heavy for scale. Fewer aftermarket parts than in 1/35 scale. Also, there is very little interest in the United States.

**Overall:** Good for modelers with limited space. Why don't more armor modelers build large dioramas in these scales?

#### 1/285 SCALE

**Pros:** Do not take up much space. Often relatively simple to build.

**Cons:** Limited detail. Small size often forces compromises on scale and prototype fidelity.

**Overall:** Mostly used by gamers.



This 1/72 scale Hasegawa M24 Chaffee built by Harmon Kaplan of New Jersey puts a twist on the term "quarter scale." Though not as popular as 1/35 scale armor, the smaller armor scales offer more possibilities for dioramas. Chris Appoldt photo

## AUTOS

#### 1/20, 1/18, AND LARGER SCALES

**Pros:** Impressive size. Potential for jaw-dropping detailing.

**Cons:** Limited selection of kits and aftermarket parts. Size of model demands exceptional painting skills. Need for relatively high level of detail to look right.

**Overall:** If your subject is available and you have the skill to paint well, you can do amazing work in these scales.

#### 1/24 AND 1/25 SCALE

**Pros:** Widest variety of kits and aftermarket parts. Completed models large enough to detail and small enough to dis-

play. Can combine with 1/24 scale aircraft in dioramas. Good selection of beginner kits.

**Cons:** Possible confusion between 1/24 and 1/25 scales. (There's a 4-percent size difference, so be careful when swapping parts between kits.) Otherwise, not many cons.

**Overall:** The default choice for car modelers, and with good reason. Is it a coincidence that 1/48 scale aircraft, 1/35 scale tanks, and cars in these scales are all about the same size when built? Probably not.

#### 1/43 SCALE

**Pros:** Good selection of foreign and racing subjects, as well as die-cast models to kitbash. Convenient size for display.

**Cons:** Very few injection-molded plastic kits. Fewer U.S. subjects than in 1/25 scale.

**Overall:** A good choice if you're short on space or are really into race cars, but be prepared to work harder than in 1/24 or 1/25 scale.

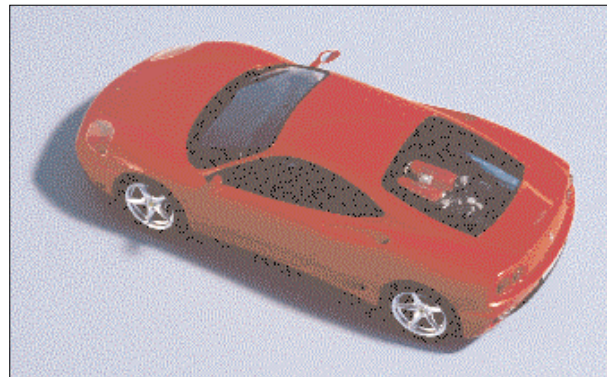
#### SMALLER THAN 1/43 SCALE

**Pros:** Easy to display, and good diorama possibilities. Some terrific truck and commercial vehicle kits.

**Cons:** Some tiny parts. Limited (and often odd) prototypes. Almost impossible to achieve scale fidelity because of technical concerns (thickness of material, etc.).

**Overall:** A good choice for building large trucks and construction equipment, and excellent for dioramas. Passenger autos are difficult to detail in the small scales.

1/25 and 1/24 are the scales of choice for most auto kit manufacturers. Ironically, 1/24 scale auto kits – like this Tamiya Ferrari 360 built by John Grabinger of Laguna Hills, California – are based on inches, yet the scale is very popular with manufacturers outside the United States. Terry Thompson photo



## SHIPS

#### LARGER THAN 1/350 SCALE

**Pros:** "Wow" factor – can be a life-long project, but there's the possibility of building models so good they truly can't be told from the prototype in a photo.

**Cons:** Few kits are available. Plenty of space required for display. Few aftermarket parts. Projects can get involved.

**Overall:** If you have the space, time, and talent, you should try at least one. Well-built large ships are worthy of museum displays, and that's where many end up.

#### 1/350 SCALE

**Pros:** Possibility of fantastic detail. Impressive when complete.

**Cons:** Relatively few kits available in plastic. Completed models are large.

**Overall:** Still impressive, and more manageable than larger scales. The mantelpiece-scale for the rest of us.

#### 1/700 AND 1/720 SCALE

**Pros:** Good variety of kits, especially for World War II Pacific Theater modelers. Nice size for displays and dioramas.

**Cons:** Just big enough to make you



The "wow" factor for this 1/72 scale USS *Enterprise* extends along all 11.5 feet of the model. The scratchbuilt ship (with its mostly kit-based accessories) took over 7,000 hours and 28 volunteers to build, and the carrier – like many well-built, large-scale model ships – now resides in a museum. Chris Becker photo

want to detail them. Just small enough that it's tough to do.

**Overall:** If you're not sure you want to build a ship, or if you're sure you want to build a lot of ships, try 1/700.

#### SMALLER THAN 1/720 SCALE

**Pros:** Excellent for dioramas, wargames, and large collections.

**Cons:** Some models are pretty rough.

**Overall:** Mostly for the gamers.

## FIGURES

#### LARGER THAN 1/14 SCALE

**Pros:** Possibility of magnificent likenesses.

**Cons:** Dioramas get pretty large. Equipment somewhat limited.



**Overall:** These models can be absolutely terrific, but be prepared to modify or scratchbuild some parts.

#### 1/14 (120MM) TO 1/22.5 (G) SCALE

**Pros:** Excellent selection. Truly stunning models possible.

**Cons:** Few diorama parts available, though some model railroad accessories can be used.

**Overall:** Possibly the best all-around figure scale – big enough to paint, small enough to display.

#### 1/32 (54MM) AND 1/35 SCALE

**Pros:** Excellent selection of military

figures. Great diorama possibilities.

**Cons:** Big enough that you have to paint eyes and skin tones. Small enough that doing so is not easy.

**Overall:** Great for dioramas, but a little small for single-figure displays.

#### 1/48 (36MM) TO 1/87 (20MM) SCALE

**Pros:** Wide selection. Great for building large dioramas.

**Cons:** Painting realistic faces is difficult. Many details are too large for the scale.

**Overall:** A dioramist's dream scale – plenty of accessories available. Anyone up for a model of Waterloo?

#### FURTHER READING

For details on understanding and converting scale ratios, see Chris Appoldt's "Tips for the scales" in the December 2000 issue of FSM.