



By Kaitlin Johnstone Photos by Stephen Lippay

History is often thought of as stuffy, static, uninteresting. It is something of the past that has little relevance in our lives other than studying for exams or playing on our tv's when nothing else is on. It is, in a word, boring. Or, at least it was.

At the Toy Soldier Museum in Paradise Valley, owner Jim Hillestad makes history come alive. It jumps off the page and parades past you, displaying itself in the exuberance in which it should always be witnessed. History is full of animation, be it war or celebration, but few of us ever see the true awe that this subject holds. "When I was in college, my subject focus was History," states Hillestad. "But it was so poorly taught. It was taught with dates and kings and queens, and everything had to be memorized. You never got a feeling for what was going on at the time, what was happening behind the scenes." Hillestad puts an end to that and presents history in a way that will live in your memory forever.

Built in 1991, Hillestad has 3,000 square feet to display his passion. Every foot is dedicated to countless dioramas depicting a variety of historical scenes, as well as 70 life-sized mannequins harboring authentic uniforms, and drums, medals, sculptures and other accoutrements. His museum not only represents the past, but, with these collectibles, houses it as well.

Stroll down the aisles and you will see countless historical events. Included among these are dioramas depicting the era of King Tut, a scene from the battle of Ticonderoga, the streets of London, a parade through New Dehli, the Battle of Monongahela, and visualizations of the northwest frontier. But where Hillestad loves to focus his energy on is scenes from the time of Victorian and Edwardian England. "It's very colorful and very historical," he explains. "The 19th century was a time when Britain had its zenith in the world. They had all their colonies and along with the colonies came the colonial wars." It was an active and interesting period and one that Hillestad excels at capturing.

The amount of time that this historical collector and artist devotes to each diorama is literally impossible to calculate. "The only thing that's consistent," Hillestad divulges, "is that the time spent on the display is 90% planning, and 10%

execution." One has to have an unbelievable level of commitment to accomplish such a task. "Some of the displays have taken five years to complete," he reveals, "but that five years has been spent accumulating the right figures, getting the right accents for the display, and working with historians and curators of other museums to make sure everything is historically accurate."

With so many events already displayed, you would think it would be hard for him to continue to think of ideas and find inspiration for more scenes. But, Hillestad eagerly refutes that idea. "Historic events inspire me and then I find ways to recreate them. This involves both the appropriate figures and creating the physical features of an area, be it a fort, castle, or mountain. If something is architecturally interesting, that architecture is inspiring and I work to make the scenes and architecture play off each other."

Each diorama offers a level of interest and detail that hasn't gone unnoticed. Hillestad has had scenes displayed in the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia, the National Civil War Museum in Harrisburg, the Cresco Station Museum, Barrett Paradise Friendly Library, and he even designed a display for Bloomingdale's in New York.

But which one is his favorite? "That's a hard one," admits Hillestad. "Many times it's the one I'm currently focused on. I just finished one on the Ringling Brothers Circus, complete with sound effects, flashing lights, and clowns. That was great. And now I've just started building a diorama of the Battle of Fort Ticonderoga, so I'm really excited about that one right now.

Hillestad's museum is a way to share his passion with the public. Free of charge, it offers an opportunity of learning and enjoyment for everyone interested. "I hope people go away with a better appreciation of history. I hope they come away with the inspiration to go home and do things of a similar nature. History can be interesting, and I hope they see that here." ✱

For more information on the museum and upcoming events, visit www.the-toy-soldier.com.