



John Sipple

Sipple on Trains

A Classic 1930s Loco

The MTH Twentieth Century Hudson in HO recalls the age of the famous NYC steamer

By 1938 the business of streamlining steam locomotives had been around for a few years. The railroads, having lost a lot of business during the Depression, were looking for ways to recover lost revenue. Upon bringing popular aircraft and automobile styling to the functional steam locomotive, they put a modern face on the front of their trains and increased ticket sales.

New York Central hired up-and-coming industrial designer Henry Dreyfuss. His first locomotive design was an inverted bathtub conversion for the Detroit-to-Cleveland Mercury in 1936. His first design of an NYC loco was the 1934 Commodore Vanderbilt, an extravagant bit of artistry. When it came time to trust this master of Art Deco-meets-functionality loose, Dreyfuss pulled out all the stops.

Unlike some of his contemporaries, and even in his earlier work—all having shrouded the steam locomotive and hiding it from sight—with the Twentieth Century Hudson Dreyfuss celebrated the locomotive. Other than the side skirt, from the front of the second drive axle back to the cab and the skyline casing atop the boiler, Dreyfuss didn't disturb the function at all. A bullet dome covered the front of the smoke box, but then came the masterstroke. Dreyfuss came up with a lightweight "scimitar" or "cutlass" that extended from the nose dome, vertically, like a blade in salute.



The Dreyfuss Hudson was once the most collectible of steam locomotive models, but they've been off the market for a long time. MTH has brought this elegant lady back in this HO model, endowing it with excellent details and fine-running machinery.

This instantly became the face of the Art Deco world. Toy makers like Lionel produced small copies with various degrees of accuracy until all of the "streamstyling" was removed in the late forties. These locomotives reverted to being just what they had always been, the topnotch New York Central 4-6-4 Hudson J3a. These were remarkable machines that were found all over the system, pulling passengers, usually without being double-headed. When the streamlining went away, so did the toy makers.

Mike's Train House has reproduced the Twentieth Century Hudson in O gauge and now is making it available in HO scale, featuring all of the design elegance of the original dozen locos to wear the streamstyling. Then, under the outer shell, there is both a superlative operating J3a and a technological wonder.

I checked over the design with caliper and ruler, examining the locomotive with magnifiers and drawings at hand. Not only is the basic model very close to scale, but the details are also very much right on. NYC ordered the J3a-class Hudson with an equal mix of Sculling disc and Boxpok drivers, this detail easily telling them apart

from the earlier J1 and J2 class machines. Our sample, #5448, wore Boxpok drivers in real life, and this follows on the model. MTH also offers a version of this locomotive



This is the face of the Art Deco movement, complete with the cutlass down the nose, splitting the wind, and stirring excitement in watchers. Under the pilot panel is the swing-out dummy coupler. You can also install a magnetic knuckle coupler there, if you wish.

tive with a different number and Scullins disc drivers. The 4-6-4 wheel arrangement is very fortunate, because it provides a big loco feel without being such a big loco. The scale 79-inch drivers all have flanges and great flexibility, so they hug the track and work smoothly around 18-inch radius curves. For your customers with small layouts, this is a deluxe machine they can take home and enjoy.

New in this series of locomotives is a two-hole tender drawbar. The one farthest from the cab will work the tightest curves and will be the most used. The close hole puts the tender at a scale distance from the cab, but that restricts the operating radius to something more like a 36-inch radius or display. Customers have been clamoring for this feature, and I salute MTH for providing it.

This is a very well-engineered locomotive that runs quite well. I have found that a model supporting DC, DCC and DCS is oftentimes forced to live within the restrictions of analog DC operation. When using analog DC, this loco will start to roll around 10.5 volts, with a scale speed of one mile per hour. It produces sounds that start before the loco rolls, one reason why the start voltage is so high. It chuffs, makes steam engine sounds, lights up and produces copious smoke from the stack.

While this HO model draws around a half an amp with the smoke system on, you can flip a switch under the tender water hatch and shut off the smoke, reducing the amperage draw substantially. The smoke is an engaging effect that might sell a few locos, since it is synchronized to the driver quartering. When the loco chuffs, out comes a puff of oil vapor. The vapor is pungent, and you might want to offer your customers some of the custom-scented oils from MTH.

The locomotive comes with an electronic sound board and system controller with "Protosound 3" at its core. DCS is MTH's proprietary Digital Control System, which isn't even remotely compatible with DCC. However, the loco automatically switches to whatever power source it is facing and works accordingly. To activate DCS, you'll need to provide a DCS system from MTH. I use the DCS Commander, its least expensive alternative yet a very intuitive product. Everything the loco does is reflected in a button on the Commander. The learning curve is fast, and if you want sales, set up the Hudson on test rollers and put the DCS Commander where your customers can experience it personally.

The DCS board also supports DCC operation using most common DCC command station systems. If a customer already owns a layout with DCC, this loco is prepared to run quite well. If the buyer is not very experienced with DCC, you might provide a small service by programming the loco's cab number into the decoder's address. I used a Digitrax Zephyr with a DT400 throttle and had no trouble at all. There are some programming limitations, but this would only affect the user who wants to change the speed operations for double-heading. Since the NYC Hudsons almost never double-headed, this should not be a problem. Just program the address and enjoy it, that's my recommendation.

The train elves at MTH have cooked up a classic here, one that's certain to please a lot of model railroad operators. New York Central never placed any of the 4-6-4 Hudsons on display, with or without streamlining, so all we have left are the photos and the models. This model by MTH is a wonderful tribute to a remarkable time. **HM**

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