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## TOY STORY

# MAKING HISTORY

*A small shop selling unique, tiny collectible figurines acts as a time machine for history buffs – and boys who never outgrew their toys*

Stepping inside King & Country at Pacific Place, you're plunged into the past – everywhere are tiny figurines, be they human or animal, aircraft or automotive. Detailed displays of battle scenes from World War II, the American Revolutionary War and the Napoleonic era feature uniformed soldiers, mounted horses and even bagpipers. There are dioramas portraying Custer's Last Stand in 1876 and Rommel's Afrika Korps, complete with captured Allied vehicles. Paratroopers dangle from the store's ceiling, amid replicas of old Fokker planes and a dramatic depiction of the Australian Light Horse charge at Beersheba in 1917 (ordered by an Australian businessman for his office in Dubai).

"These are all hand painted, all metal," says Andy C Neilson, an affable Glaswegian who is the brand's co-founder. "We call them 'toy soldiers' but you can also call them 'military miniatures.'"

A Hong Kong resident for 36 years, Neilson began his previous career in graphic design at Saatchi & Green (a joint venture with Saatchi & Saatchi in Glasgow) after spending five years as a Royal Marines corporal in Scotland. And he collected toy soldiers.

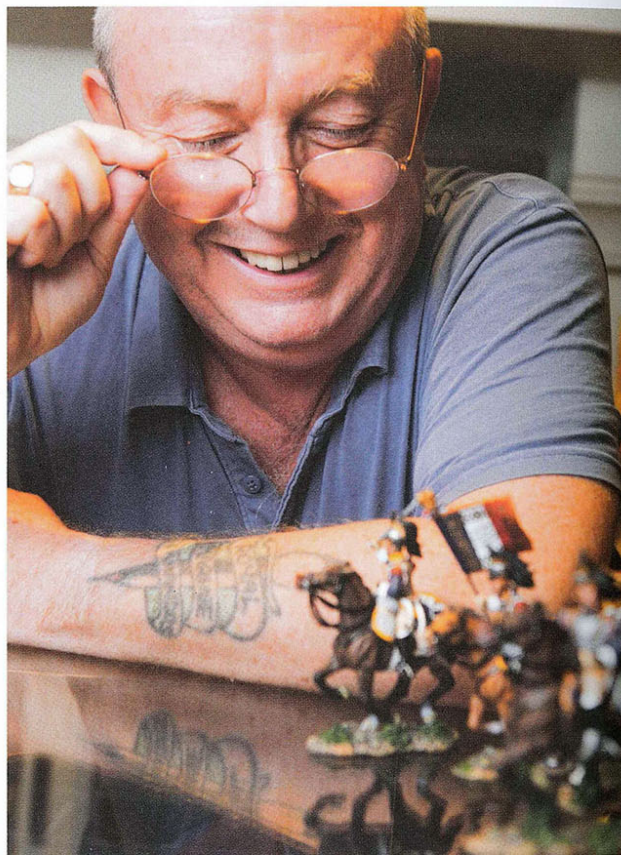
"In those days, you could only find them in the UK," recalls Neilson. But he had to wait months for the figurines to arrive in the mail. "One day, my first wife Laura said to me, 'This is crazy! Hong Kong was the toy capital of the world, so she suggested, 'Why don't you make them here?' That planted the seed for King & Country. The couple opened a

tiny shop on Wyndham Street in 1983 and, just eight years later, they became one of the first occupants of Pacific Place.

Today, Laura McAllister remains Neilson's business partner and his brother Gordon builds the dioramas that the two design together.

As word of King & Country has spread, what was once a private obsession for Neilson has transformed into a fully fledged business that's one of the world's major creators of collectible miniatures.

"Now you can come in here and spend HK\$200 or \$200,000," he says, proudly divulging the names of some famous international clients. "Phil Collins is one of our big collectors. He lives in



Right: Andy C Neilson

Opposite: Winston Churchill

Below: The Australian Light Horse charge at Beersheba



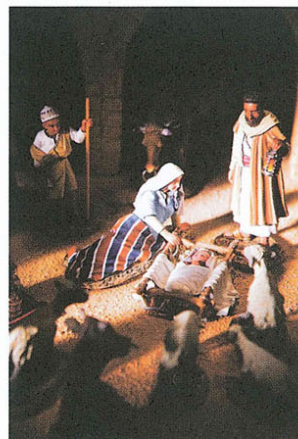






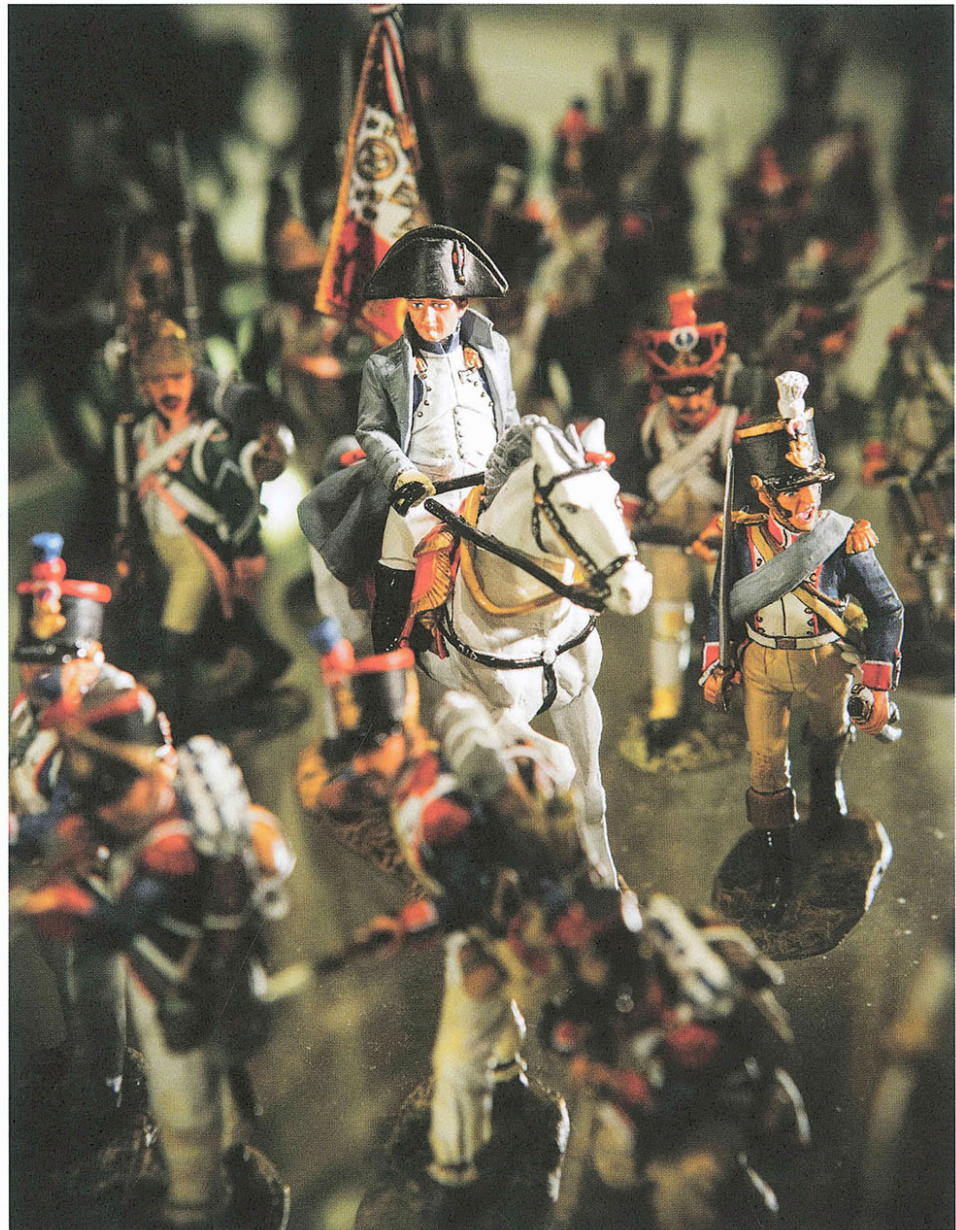
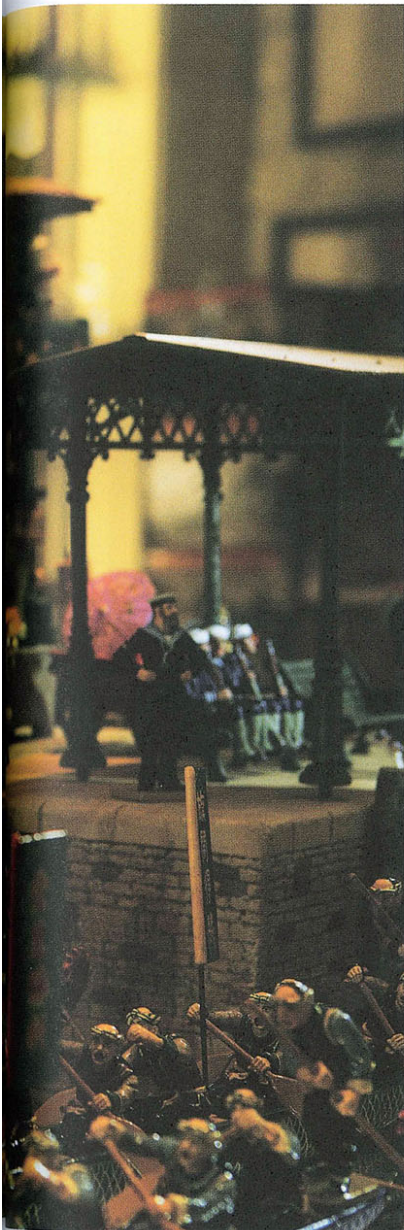


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Switzerland but he's a major buff of Davy Crockett and the Battle of the Alamo in 1836.” (King & Country also has a shop near the Alamo in Texas.) Singer Rod Stewart, actor Mike Myers of the Austin Powers films and director John Landis are other celebrity collectors. “And Chris Patten, the former governor, used to come into the shop regularly.” Toy soldiers have long been associated with society's





upper crust. As early as the 16th century, European aristocrats bought them from craftsmen who made them from scrap kitchenware metal. Miniature figures were also used by military strategists to plan battles and soon developed into a popular pastime for adults.

Asked about King & Country's target demographic, Neilson notes that it's resoundingly male. They include doctors, lawyers, architects, engineers and other highly educated, affluent professionals who love history. "Many of these guys, when they were younger, would paint up whole armies and fight war games," he says.

"They had Airfix and Revell model kits. They now realise they don't have the time or the skills any more, but they still love the history, so now they can buy the history."

Along with military miniatures, Neilson says, "we also do civilian stuff like Ancient Egypt, The Life of Jesus and Streets of Old Hong Kong. This helps bring in the wives and girlfriends. We have scenes of Hong Kong from 100 years ago, when the ladies wore beautiful cheongsams. The men still wore traditional Chinese costumes and some still had pigtails." Adding to the shop's ambience are wooden signs hand painted by Neilson and movie posters

from his personal collection: the shop window displays *Beau Geste*, a 1939 adventure film starring Gary Cooper as a Foreign Legionnaire.

What about displays like the Nuremberg diorama in the shop? Does he get any flak for the Third Reich regalia, with a diminutive Hitler figurine seated in a Mercedes-Benz? "Very rarely," he says. "We're in the history business, and this is part of history – the good, the bad and the ugly. How can we tell the story of World War II if we show only the good guys?"

King & Country's success, Neilson believes, can be partly attributed to a mindset described

**Clockwise from above left: Streets of Old Hong Kong; Napoleon Bonaparte; the nativity scene; interior of the King & Country store**

by a leading American psychologist who is a major collector. "He told me, 'In your adult life, no matter how successful or rich you are, your life is still controlled. There's still the government or whatever, telling you what to do. But when you collect miniatures, you are in control. You can move your armies, your platoons, even finish a war. You can refight the Civil War, and this time the Confederacy wins!'"