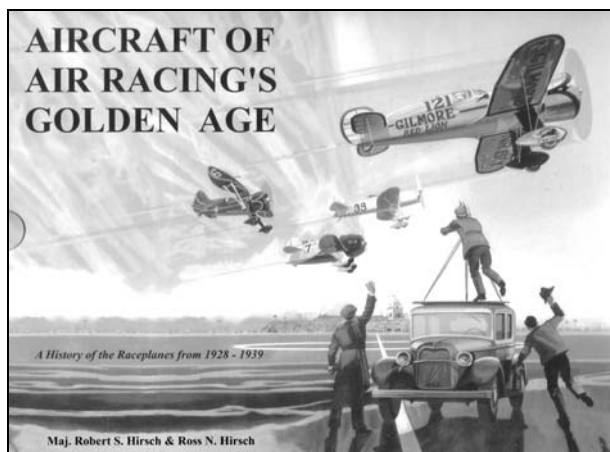


"Aircraft of Air Racing's Golden Age" - Book review

Anders Bruun

Robert S. Hirsch and Ross N. Hirsch: "Aircraft of Air Racing's Golden Age" (Published by the authors 2005, ISBN 0-9761960-1-8, 0-9761960-2-6). Two-book boxed set, hardbacks, 29.5 x 21.5 cm (11.5 x 8.5 inches) landscape format, 1071 pages. Price US \$ 75.00, regularly available on eBay (seller "aarga21"). Address to the publishers: Hirsch Publishing, 8439 Dale Street, Buena Park, CA 90620, USA, phone +1 714 8287369, e-mail rossnblanca@yahoo.com.



Making airplane drawings is (as most activities...) a balance between quality and quantity. Some draughtsmen only produce a few drawings, each of top quality. Others, such as William Wylam, Charles Mendenhall or Björn Karlström, have an enormous production, but of more inconsistent quality. Hirsch, whose work must be familiar to anybody who is interested in racing airplanes, definitely belongs to the second category. It is easy to condemn that kind of draughtsmen, but they have two advantages: Since they don't need to know the diameter of every rivet they will make drawings also of badly documented airplanes and since they produce so much they can assemble encyclopaedias like this set of books.

This absolutely massive work tries to cover all US racing planes from the 1928 - 1939 era. I have not been able to spot any significant planes missing; on the contrary I found some that I hadn't heard of before. It is split into two books, the first covering the years 1928 - 1934 and the second 1935 - 1939. The set weighs around 6 kg (13 lb) so it's nothing you should read lying on your back in bed - the consequences of falling asleep might be painful!

Each year has a chapter of its own, describing the different races, and there are chapters covering the different planes, more or less in chronological order. There are lots of colour photos of old race programs and posters to liven the book up. The book ends with a section about the pilots and designers involved.

According to the publishers the book contains 158 scale drawings. Hirsch has an inimitable style and it would be impossible to mistake his drawings for anybody else's. It

must be said that some of his drawings are rather bad and from experience I can tell that you that many of them are very difficult to make models from. You will find drawings that are asymmetric, top views that don't match bottom views, measurements that are not in scale and sometimes, of course, pure simple inaccuracies. The drawings sometimes cover different versions of a plane in different views on the same sheet, and often don't tell which version is which.

Unfortunately the books contain several other inaccuracies and mix-ups - here are some examples that I quickly found when leafing through the books:

- Three of the photos of the Cessna CR-2 in fact show the CR-3
- It is stated that the Thompson Trophy-winning Caudron C.460 is preserved - it is not, it was destroyed in a crash in December 1936, during an attempt to break the women's speed record.
- It is stated that F-ANAK is a Caudron C.460 - it is not, it is a four-cylinder C.660.
- It is stated that the Travel Air R bought by Italy "disappeared" in Europe and was copied in the Soviet Union - an old myth and well, its design was perhaps not all that unique...

The list could be made much longer. Another shortcoming of the books is that very few of the photos are dated and the photographers are never identified.

I realise that so far I have sounded pretty negative. This is not fair, since I don't regret it for a moment that I paid the price for the books. There are two reasons. One is that it is great to have all these drawings of different planes in one place. Regardless of their inconsistent quality you are able to compare their size and layout and marvel at the multitude of designers and constructors. There are also many coloured side-views, which will whet your modelling appetite.

However, the biggest reason to buy the books is the photos. The books contain a huge lot of photos, more than 1200 of them according to the publishers, and the coverage is simply mind-blowing. There are more different photos of some obscure planes in this book than I have seen in total in my whole life. For example, there are six photos of the "Bushey-McGrew Special", eight photos of the Haines H-1 and nine photos of the retractable-gear version of "Miss Los Angeles". Most of the photos are big and well reproduced. There are also a couple of rare pre-war colour photos. This amount of photos makes the books an invaluable modelling reference.

75 dollars might appear to be a high price, but given the volume of the book, the number of photos and the high quality of binding and paper I think it is very good value for money.

It is stated that this is Hirsch's last book. If it is, it is a monument of a lifetime of collection of photos and drawing of planes. I think everybody with an interest in the Golden Age air racers simply must buy it!