Model engineering or sleight of hand?

It would be disingenuous to downplay the thrill that I experienced when my large-scale aircraft models began to attract the notice of the model engineering press. Who would not take pride at seeing their work arrayed in print alongside living, breathing, precision engineered masterpieces faithful not just to the form but the function of the original? Yet it was hard not to feel like an interloper, for while what I do is unquestionably model making, is it model engineering?

Major components of my models are most certainly ‘engineered’ in the sense that the techniques used are those of the builders of, say, live-steam models, albeit executed to a lesser degree of tolerance, accuracy and mechanical integrity. In my workshop metals of various kinds are turned, milled, drilled, ground, etc.; and held together either with solders and brazes or with traditional mechanical fastenings that are the stuff of the engineer. However, I also rely on the ways of the aero modeller, using ply, balsa wood, plastics and whatever adhesives are appropriate. I make significant use of two-part casting resin and modern composite materials such as foam board and high-density model board, and I have greatly benefited from the ability to produce vac-formed parts from sheet styrene. And in the final analysis, my work owes much to skills and techniques garnered from many years of making and modifying plastic model kits. In short, I choose whichever methods and materials that make the task at hand as easy and as practicable as possible, with the condition that they must be stable, durable and appropriate to achieving the result that I seek. The ultimate requirement is that my work looks ‘engineered’, that what the eye sees is a faithful replica of the original, down to the feel and even patina of the finished construction.

My models are unashamedly part engineered, part sleight of hand: an amalgam of methods and materials. Under their aluminium skins is a wooden heart. As important to their structural integrity as the numberless nuts, bolts, screws and rivets that hold them together are modern adhesives, particularly cyanoacrylate and epoxy glues. Yet so long as the outcome is robust, enduring, accurate and – above all – convincing, then I am content, for hopefully I have captured in miniature, if not the function, then certainly the form and perhaps even something of the soul of these magnificent aircraft. Should that qualify me for ‘honorary membership’ of that exclusive, yet sadly dwindling fellowship of ‘model engineers’, then I am honoured and proud to accept.