



THE NEW 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY LIMITED

# New life for a Lionel no. 221

USING THIS LIONEL POSTWAR STEAMER TO RE-CREATE A FAMOUS RAILROAD POSTER

by L. Ralph Grabowski

**T**he New *21st Century Limited* is my artistic reinterpretation of Leslie Ragan's famous poster from the 1930s. Post-war Lionel collectors and operators should notice immediately that I've used a no. 221 steam locomotive and tender as the main subject.

My father, Ed Grabowski, gave this classic Lionel engine and tender to me for Christmas 1946 when I was just five years old. Several years passed before I received a set of Lionel's no. 2400-series

This magnificent tribute to the author's childhood train, a Lionel no. 221 streamlined steam locomotive and tender given to him in 1946, was inspired by a famous poster commissioned by the New York Central railroad to publicize its famous *20th Century Limited* passenger train. A reproduction of that poster appears on the next page.

O-27 streamlined passenger cars with gray roofs. All of those great models inspired me, especially after I became familiar with Ragan's artwork.

### An age of streamlining

In the mid-1930s, streamlined railroad trains injected excitement and

glamour into rail travel. They gave us our first taste of streamlined design and art deco styling, helped reinvent and modernize the passenger train in the popular imagination of Depression-era America, and revived the fortunes of railroads.

In 1938, the New York Central commissioned celebrity industrial designer



Leslie Ragan's poster, titled "The New 20th Century Limited," expressed the beauty evoked by art deco styling and the power conveyed by the streamlining of machines.

Henry Dreyfuss to fashion streamlined train sets in an art deco style. His redesign of its *20th Century Limited* was probably the most famous American passenger train of all time.

The New York Central asked the premier railroad artist, Leslie Ragan, to paint "The New 20th Century Limited" to publicize the streamlined train. His poster is widely viewed as a defining image of the American machine age, as powerful today as 75 years ago.

Ragan's painting focuses on the locomotive's hallmark aluminum fin (meant to recall the helmet of a Roman centurion) and protruding headlight, while deliberately masking mechanical details in shadow.

### A great Lionel model

In 1946, Lionel first cataloged the 221, a streamlined 2-6-4 steam locomotive and tender. The handsome engine featured a die-cast metal body with a silver rubber-stamped number on the cab, an ornamental sand dome and safety valve, wire handrails, and a sheet-metal pilot and trailing trucks. Lionel clearly patterned the 221 after the New York Central's Dreyfuss Hudson.

The model offered in 1946 is the only miniature electric train ever made with aluminum wheels. Full-sized trains and other models may have silver-painted steel wheels but they weren't made out of aluminum. Of course, the magic of miniature steam locomotives has been the action of their driving wheels, rods, and exposed mechanism.

Lionel's engineers had faithfully



The author received his first toy train in 1943. Lionel models followed after World War II and inspired him to learn more about electricity and magnetism, culminating with a career in engineering. Joshua Lionel Cowen would have been proud to have heard this.

modeled the protruding headlight of the Dreyfuss Hudson. The bright headlight bulb, in the relatively open shell of the 221, wonderfully leaks light onto the driving mechanism. I loved this look when I was young and have continued to do so ever since.

### Creating an updated poster

Influenced by Ragan's poster and still infatuated with my boyhood 221, I decided to combine the two so I could pay homage to the beauty of this early postwar steamer.

To start, I reversed both Ragan's lighting and masking to emphasize Lionel's details as the premier element in a little boy's mind. Preeminent to me were the aluminum driving wheels and exposed mechanism, the beaming headlight, the vertical fin, and the marking. I also wanted to be sure to capture how the bulb highlighted the driving wheels and mechanism. Getting it right required five different exposures manipulated in 60 Photoshop layers.

What you see in "The New 21st Century Limited" is nearly all photography. The only drawn portions are the smoke shooting up from the stack and the

rocks on the riverbank. The clouds were photographed outdoors and merged. The water is a picture of the East River flowing under the Hell Gate Bridge in New York City.

### Lifelong influence of Lionel

The Lionel trains I received from my father for Christmas in 1946 and later have done more than inspire me to reinterpret Ragan's famous poster. You could say they have shaped my life. From them, I learned how to wire the layouts I built while in elementary school. That course led me to earn a degree in electrical engineering and then launch a fruitful career as an engineer, a manager, and a consultant before retiring not long ago.

I hope "The New 21st Century Limited" will strike a chord with readers of *Classic Toy Trains*, even if they never owned a Lionel 221. It reflects the fascination all of us felt about our electric trains and the power and romance of American railroading. **CTT**

To obtain copies of "The New 21st Century Limited," please go to the author's website, [LionellEngineer.com](http://LionellEngineer.com)