



A Pen for Your Thoughts

It's possible to find an elegant writing instrument to fit your wardrobe, the season, or your mood as pen makers rethink writing **BY VIRGINIA POSTREL**

While Christmas shopping at the Dallas Galleria, two women of a certain age pause to look in the window of Paradise Pens. The shop's merchandise is lit like fine jewelry and priced in the hundreds of dollars.

"This is not your normal ballpoint," one says with satirical disapproval. "It's a *writing instrument*."

Most Americans treat pens as neces-

sary but boring commodities — basic office supplies like paper clips or plain white copy paper — and assume they'll be priced accordingly. A four-pack of one of my standbys, the Uniball Vision Elite, costs just \$8.99 at Staples and comes with a free sample of cherry chewing gum. For most of us, pens are cheap, disposable, and abundant. As long as they don't leak, we don't think much about them.

From top to bottom: Cross, Retro 51 (3), Porsche, Cross (3), and, at right, Montblanc

That wasn't always the case. "Today, I am a fountain pen" is the punch line to a hoary joke about bar mitzvahs, and as recently as the 1970s, getting a nice pen was a common rite of passage. Back in 1976, Jonathan Margolies, now a Milwaukee lawyer, got several Cross ballpoints as bar mitzvah gifts, plus "an old fountain pen for tradition's sake." When his son Joe had his bar mitzvah in November, he didn't receive a single pen. Judging from Joe's experience, the 21st-century version of the joke would have to end "Today, I am a Best Buy gift card" or "Today, I am an iPod."

But premium pen makers haven't lost hope. In the era of the iPod and Starbucks, all sorts of businesses, from washing-machine makers to midpriced hotels, are discovering that functional goods don't have to be boring, generic, or as cheap as

have a wonderful pen that accessorizes with your outfit or maybe goes with your purple boots, and that shows a little spark to people that you're interviewing, you might buy that. But I haven't convinced you of that. Because pens are too functional."

Cross has the blessing and curse of a classic design. Introduced in 1946 to celebrate the company's centennial, its slim Century model was so successful over the next three decades that Cross assumed it would always be a winner. But as catalog discounters replaced jewelry and stationery stores, only to be shoved aside by even cheaper big-box retailers, Cross pens became less special. Like many symbols of middlebrow aspiration, the Century started to seem stodgy.

The company's new marketing and design team is out to change that image.

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possible. People will pay more for the sensory pleasures and intangible meanings that aesthetics adds to workaday function.

If a dash of style can attract customers to products as mundane as wastebaskets and mouthwash bottles, surely there's a way to get more than a few fountain-pen geeks to care about the look and feel of the pens they use. The trick is to convince the people who gladly spend hundreds of dollars for handbags, or thousands for snazzy tire rims, that they should treat pens more like fashion accessories and less like Kleenex.

That pitch got personal when I met with Charles Mellen, the vice president of global marketing at A.T. Cross. He came to Cross from Tumi, the luggage maker that successfully reinvented itself as a luxury fashion brand. He hopes to do the same for Cross by adding "aesthetic innovation" to the company's traditional emphasis on function.

"You're using a Pilot pen," he observed. "Why? Because you don't perceive the value and the need to have a premium pen. If I can convince you that you can spend another \$20 or \$30 on a pen, and you can

The Century itself has gotten a fashion makeover, with versions added in sophisticated colors like "oxygen blue" and "tender rose." The colored models give the delicate pen a feminine appeal.

Cross marketers plan to celebrate the Century's 60th birthday by reminding young design aficionados of its status as a classic of midcentury modernism. "This is like the Seagram's Building of pens," says Tom Peterson, the company's global marketing director. "People should perceive it that way rather than 'Oh, yeah, it's my dad's pen.'"

Sure. The Century deserves a place in the Museum of Modern Art's design collection. But I still don't want one. It's too thin for my giant hands. And that raises an important point. Today's aesthetic imperative requires more than good looks. People expect variety.

So Cross doesn't just mean Century anymore. The company's menu of pens provides not just different flavors but entirely different dishes, catering to a range of tastes and moods. At the high end (roughly \$100 to \$200), the smooth curves of the Verve recall contemporary sports cars or aircraft bod-

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ies, while the Townsend’s precisely grooved shaft echoes business pinstripes.

For fashionistas, the company gives its ATX model (\$60–\$80) colors that change with each fashion season. It’s a radical shift for a company that once rarely ventured beyond precious metals. Last fall, the ATX came in claret red, champagne white, and jade green, with a rose-gold clip. For spring, the lineup is brighter: oceano blue, chili red, and papaya gold, plus a Moroccan-style print.

The goal is to make buyers “more interested in having a wardrobe of pens,” says Peterson, who joined the company in August. After all, he says, you don’t have one pair of nice shoes. You have several.

An upstart company in Richardson, Texas, has successfully pushed that message for 15 years. “Life is too short to carry an ugly pen!” is the slogan of Retro 1951.

Known for its colorful retractable rollerballs, most of which sell for around \$25, Retro 51 defines itself not as a writing-instrument company but as “an obligatory gift company,” says founder George Kartsotis. “It’s Uncle Joe’s birthday, and you have to get him something. Get him something that’s cool.” Retro 51 sells its wares not only in pen stores but also in all sorts of gift shops.

Its mainstay Tornado model comes in 50 different finishes, from rich metallic reds, greens, and purples to croc-printed leather. The most expensive version, at \$75, is embedded with tiny iridescent seashell fragments.

The options vary not just by color but by feel: Do you want a shaft coated in rubberized lacquer, brushed metal, or smooth acrylic? Would you prefer the fat Big Shot or the miniature Elite? Do you like the flow of a fountain pen, the precision of a ballpoint, or the hard point and liquid ink of a rollerball?

This variety accommodates different tastes, personalities, hand sizes, and writ-

ing styles. And, of course, it encourages customers to match their pens to their outfits or their moods — the old wardrobe trick.

“You don’t *need* more than one pen,” says sales manager Dan Arnold. But “when you offer the different flavors like we do, they will buy multiples.” Once my husband bought his first red Tornado, he almost immediately added versions in black rubberized lacquer, bright blue, and a silver and black checkerboard pattern.

The digital age is actually fueling demand for nice instruments.

The less important handwriting is in our workaday lives, the more a handwritten note seems like a small, thoughtful luxury. But with the right pen, a handwritten note requires no more composition than a quick e-mail. A fountain pen’s bold strokes are personal and dramatic, and, notes Arnold, their generous lettering means you don’t have to write as much. To succinctly fill a note card, he uses the widest nib he can find.

By redefining durable pens as fun fashion, Retro 51 proves pens can get people excited if they look cool and don’t cost too much. At the other end of the market, Montblanc has defined its premium pens as meaningful luxuries.

Montblanc is a century-old company, and its best-known pen, the gold-banded Meisterstück, debuted in 1924. Yet in many ways, it seems like a new business.

In the late 1980s, Montblanc’s executives realized that the traditional identity of a fine pen “as a tool to write, to take notes, as an instrument, had lost its relevance,” says Jan-Patrick Schmitz, president and chief executive officer of Montblanc North America. Computer keyboards were the primary tools of business communication, while pens were something to “buy for a few cents in bulk.”

Montblanc developed a new strategy, Schmitz explains, by asking fundamental questions: “What does handwriting mean? What does a pen mean? As a product, it is a status symbol, a sign of intelligence and education. It’s a symbol of power.”

The company eliminated its cheaper “functional” pens and redefined itself as a luxury goods maker. Over time, it expanded into new businesses, from leather accessories to jewelry, and opened its own boutiques.

At the same time, it developed many variations on the classic Meisterstück and created limited-edition pens. To promote its writing instruments as enduring symbols of achievement, Montblanc named its limited editions for famous writers and

artists, including Marcel Proust, Johann Sebastian Bach, Charles Dickens, and, most recently, Greta Garbo.

Unlike Cross or Retro 51, whose relatively inexpensive offerings are meant to be easily replaced, Montblanc doesn’t want its pens to ever look dated. “We have stayed away completely from fashion,” Schmitz says.

Its pens’ value, the company believes, lies largely in the meanings they carry, meanings that often include marking a

particular achievement in the owner’s life. When you pull out the pen you bought when you made partner, Schmitz says, you don’t want colleagues to think, “Wasn’t that the spring season of ’92? That’s out of date.”

Montblanc’s strategy is taking pens back to the future. Before mass-produced ballpoints took over in the 1950s, a pen was a valued possession — a costly business investment and often an emotionally laden memento. “I’ve got a fountain pen that my

mother gave to my dad before they got married, and he owned this pen his entire life,” says Philip Clark, who owns Flax Pen to Paper, a shop near UCLA.

He and his wife, Joan Flax, opened their store three years ago, after developing the pen business in her family’s now-closed art supply store. They deliberately designed Pen to Paper to encourage browsers to abandon their disposable pens for something more enduring and expressive. Customers who come in for wedding invitations or Moleskine journals have to walk past the pens, whose cases are built around the cash register. There’s always an employee nearby to open the cases and let people try out the pens.

Clark is an enthusiastic and knowledgeable guide. The Namiki fountain pen, he says, has the world’s only retractable nib. At \$135, it’s one of the company’s cheaper versions but something every collector has to have. In another case are the store’s most exquisite and expensive offerings, costing thousands of dollars each. They are fountain pens decorated with the traditional Japanese art of *maki-e*. Artists take four to six months to meticulously hand-lacquer each pen, creating designs in gold dust and colored powder.

Over here are the Montegrappa pens, made of celluloid that has to be cured for a year and hand-tended to get the process just right. One model comes in vibrant red and canary yellow that scream, “That’s Italian.” Italians, Clark says, tend to value lightweight materials. For heft, you turn to Germans like Montblanc.

For high-performance, there’s Porsche. Made by Faber-Castell, the world’s oldest pencil company, Porsche pens have shafts that pivot on steel rods or compress and retract like high-pressure hoses.

In dollars, the store’s biggest brand is Montblanc, whose pens generally run \$250 or more. Depending on the season, the Retro 51s displayed up front usually sell the most units. “I need six Tornados,” says a customer shortly before Christmas. “No, seven.”

Clark firmly believes “there is a really cool pen for everybody out there.” On a return visit, I succumb. A cheapskate and a sucker for jewel tones, I buy three brushed-aluminum Tombows — silver, purple, and turquoise — for \$22 apiece. My husband gets a Porsche. ♡

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