

The Journey from *Penturning to Penmaking*

by Kurt Hertzog

Where to Next?

In previous columns, we've had discussions on targeting markets, perfecting skills, finding your own niche, and growing a product line upscale if needed or desired. As your skills progress, your market might go more elite, but total size almost certainly gets smaller. When you have arrived at perfection, uniqueness, and customization, and outgrown the local markets, where can you go next? Have you ever been to a pen collector's convention? That may be where you need to set your next target.

Almost every large city, and many small cities as well, has a pen collector's group. These groups function much like any other collector's group. Collectors of baseball cards, stamps, coins, or other items have their own special interest groups with their own magazines, networks, and conventions. Pen collectors are no different. This collector's market, long reserved for the buyers, sellers, and collectors of production pens, is starting to yield a bit to the higher-end custom makers. Here and abroad, there are specialty magazines that cater to the collectors of writing instruments. There is a network of dealers, repair facilities, and "hop up" material producers of which only those in the collectible pens' field are aware. Though it has taken a concerted effort over a number of years, the custom penmakers are making inroads into the pen collector's market with their work.

One of the uphill battles the custom maker faces when dealing with a collector is the concept of value, and particularly resale value. If a pen is being (or has been) produced by a major manufacturer, there is considerable information known and published about it. The year(s) of manufacture, various configurations and colors, and the quantities produced are usually well documented. There are "book values" with the collectibility and price largely driven by the availability (read rarity) and the past track record of the price of an item. This known rarity factor, along with relative ease of proving authenticity, has a larger impact on the buy-and-sell price than the buyer's emotional desire to own the pen or pencil.

What happens in the case of a one-of-a-kind pen from an independent maker? Often, a one-of-a-kind or even a few in a series doesn't have a researchable lineage that will help date and authenticate a pen. Even the defunct production pen producers were in business for years and produced, by comparison, many more pens than most custom makers can usually expect to make. Sadly, many custom producers are relatively obscure and

may not be in the marketplace for an extended period of time. An investment in one of their products, while it may be a pleasing and enjoyable possession, might not turn out to have any resale market or appreciate in collector's value. In spite of these concerns, many collectors are beginning to turn favorably to the custom maker's work, particularly after they see them at a convention for a few consecutive years or on the convention circuit.

So you are ready to crack into the collector's market, right? Where do you find them? What do they want? Do you have the right stuff? How do you build a following? The first recommendation that I'd make is to research the situation. There are a number of these shows around the country in large metropolitan areas, as well as some of the smaller cities. If you attend a few of these shows to get the lay of the land, you'll know how your work stacks up against those who are already attending, as well as learn the various ways of displaying your wares. Get a copy of *Pen World Magazine* for a listing of all the upcoming shows and do some research on the Internet as well. Though exhibiting at the shows is a modest investment, it is an investment none the less. If you don't already have a "product" or "product line," business cards, booth display, and lighting equipment, a visit to a show or two will let you see everything from the dump-it-on-the-table type displays to the custom built and well-lit sales venues.

Another advantage of attending a show as a spectator before you commit to exhibiting is to really ask yourself the hard questions. Is your work in the league with the other custom makers showing there? Are you willing (or able) to put in the time and money building sufficient inventory to carry you through a show or two. Remember, you're likely to spend a few shows with no or minimal sales. That doesn't mean you can put out two pens and expect that collectors will begin to accept you as a serious contender. Staying power is part of the dues-paying process. Going to a show, selling little or nothing, and never returning certainly isn't going to get you into that group of custom makers with any credibility. If your work is not on par with those already showing, can you return home to work on new designs, improving skills, or creating your own niche?

The two most important things to accomplish at your first shows are being brutally honest with yourself regarding your skills and product compared to the competition and beginning a network. If you are ready from a skills and quality aspect, great! If not, put a plan in place to get to

where you need to be. Don't spend money and time setting up a booth only to be crushed by the competition and go home having spent time and money competing with people out of your league. And believe it or not, contacts will probably be the most valuable take-away from the show. Even though the exhibitors are in competition with each other, they also share the camaraderie of being pen lovers. Your genuine interest in the show, the show process, learning the ropes, and being part of the event over the long haul will find like-minded people who will most likely share what they know. They were in your shoes once as well.

Make sure you don't overlook meeting the show organizer, as well as his or her support people. These are going to be valuable contacts when you decide to come back as an exhibitor. Don't forget to get a complete listing of any special vendor or sales tax permits (or both) that might be required. Often that paperwork takes planning and application ahead of time. Knowing if you need it will make your first foray proceed much smoother. Go, have fun, but make sure you make all the contacts possible and learn everything that you can. Do your homework ahead of time. Nothing will put a bigger damper on your first show as an exhibitor than not having the necessary materials and infrastructure to make it a successful outing.



Fig. 1 The Ohio Pen Collectors Show was started in 1995 by Terry Mawhorter and his wife. This show in Columbus (actually Dublin) is typical of pen shows usually held at a hotel conference center.



Fig. 2 Having started with 48 tables, the show has grown to 160, and requires both ballrooms and the foyer on the perimeter of the conference center.



Fig. 3 This show is for the family. There is no age limit to those appreciating fine writing instruments, and there is plenty for the younger attendees to do while they are at the show.



Fig. 4 The show is open to the public, so the draw can be collectors and families wanting an enjoyable and interesting weekend afternoon.



Fig. 5 There is an assortment of vendors ranging from buyers to sellers to service providers. Some are commercial with storefronts back in their hometown, while others just have an interest in collecting.



Fig. 6 Sometimes, finding just the right part requires some digging.



Fig. 9 In addition to buying and selling, repairs and adjustments were available for a favorite writing instrument. Here, Richard Binder does some fine adjustment on a nib while the customer waits.



Fig. 7 Over the years, most of the manufacturers have produced special promotional products that are rare today. Sometimes, the vendors put these items on display for interest and information only.



Fig. 10 One of the custom makers, Dan Symonds of DS Pens, tends to his display.



Fig. 8 If you are willing to look around a bit, just about anything can be found somewhere at the show.



Fig. 11 A newcomer to the collector's scene can learn a lot by examining the various methods of display that vendors use at the show.



Fig. 12 Brian Gray and his wife, Andrea, of *Edison Pen Company*, another custom maker, show a customer the new ink-fill mechanism being offered in the line.



Fig. 15 Look and learn what goes on behind the scenes of the booth. Electricity, credit card machines or cash box, packaging materials, replenishment stock, and more are all part of the game.



Fig. 13 Rich Kleinhenz is another of the custom makers breaking into the collector's market. Rich, of *Beautiful Handmade Pens*, has his booth in the foyer.



Fig. 16 You are never too young to get started. This young man had his own turned pens for sale at the end of Grandma's booth and was doing a brisk business.



Fig. 14 In addition to the other custom makers, Barry Gross of *BG Artforms* has been attending these shows for years to build up the recognition of custom makers among the collectors.



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Kurt is a regular feature columnist for *Woodturning Design* magazine and one of the five Council Members of the Pen Makers Guild. He was recently elected to the Board of Directors of the American Association of Woodturners. His woodworking interests also include flatwork, and he is a past chairman of the Rochester Woodworkers Society.

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