

# Putting pen to paper with distinction

Karen Knapstein

The invention of the fountain pen in the late 19th century made the process of writing far easier than it had ever been. With the invention of a pen that held its own reservoir of ink, it was no longer necessary to repeatedly dip a pen nib to reload it with ink every few letters.

The first patent for a pen holding its own ink supply was issued in 1827 to Romanian Petrache Poenaru. The French government issued the patent to Poenaru, a student at the French École Polytechnique, for his “self-fueling endless portable quill, with ink,” which was made from a large swan quill. The name makes the pen sound better than it actually was. Poenaru’s invention was still messy, like its traditional dipping pen predecessors, and it still needed frequent refilling.

People kept waiting and hoping for a better alternative; they wanted a writing instrument that was reliable, that didn’t flood the paper, making a mess of things, and that didn’t need constant refilling.

The wait was long, but the answer came in the form of salesman Lewis E. Waterman’s improved fountain pen design. Waterman’s design limited airflow into the ink reservoir through the use of a small air channel: air flows into the ink chamber, allowing a specific amount of ink to flow out smaller channels onto the back of the nib. Waterman was granted a patent on February 12, 1884 for his “Fountain Pen,” and he founded the “Ideal Pen Company” in the same year. Renamed the L.E. Waterman Company in 1888, the firm led the fountain pen industry for decades and remains a world leader in luxury writing instruments.

Global competition for the fountain pen market was fierce, however. Collectors can thank that spirit of competition, which ultimately leads to design innovation and improvements, for the plentiful variety and number of pens that can now be found. The names Sheaffer, Montblanc, Cross, Parker, Wahl, Conklin, and many others also grab the attention of vintage and contemporary writing instrument collectors.

It’s somewhat ironic that the fountain pen

*Far left: Restored 1920s Waterman’s 52 Red Ripple Hard Rubber Fountain Pen with 18K Gold Filled Trim, \$325.*

*Left: Restored circa 1930s Waterman’s Ideal Globe Fountain pen, made in Canada, 32 1/2 blue-green quartz celluloid with nickel trim, sold for \$135.*

Photo courtesy Greg Schiek, [www.AntiqueDigger.com](http://www.AntiqueDigger.com)



was invented to make writing quicker and more convenient, but, today, fountain pens are used largely for calm, leisurely writing.

Collectors like David Nishimura appreciate fully the experience of writing with these old-fashioned instruments. Nishimura, of Providence, Rhode Island, first dipped into pen collecting in the mid-1980s, when he was an art history grad student. He says at that time he searched through flea markets and antiques stores and found a lot of material “in the wild.” He explains the allure: “Pens are beautiful and functional objects, interesting both in terms of design and technology. Plus they are eminently usable, and as an object of collecting, highly affordable.”

In the ensuing decades, Nishimura has attended countless pen shows and accumulated a wealth of knowledge and insights, both through his own collecting experience and as a full-time dealer. “Most real collectors do use fountain pens, but it varies how many of the ones in their collection they choose to use. Many advanced collectors are like me: I have my collection, and I have pens that I use – there’s a clear line in between,” Nishimura says.

## Fast Fact

When the president signs a bill into law, the pen he is using becomes a historical artifact. When Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act in 1964, he reportedly used more than 75 pens. President Barack Obama used 22 Cross rollerball pens signing the Affordable Care Act into law.

As far as which pens are most popular among collectors, Nishimura says, “Well-known marques are always the most sought after.” Names of still-operating companies include Parker, Waterman, Montblanc, Pelikan, and Namiki, while “among defunct companies (noting that some entrepreneurs have started new and unconnected companies in recent years using the old names), Wahl-Eversharp, Conklin, Chilton, etc.”

General auctions provide occasional opportunities to catch a pen or lot of pens here and there. However, specialty writing instrument auctions by Bonham’s, Martini Auctions, and Dreweatts & Bloomsbury, and direct sales from pen specialists provide the most concentrated offerings for buyers who aren’t much for sifting through the bric-a-brac to find what they’re looking for.

Nishimura says there are a handful of people who make a living as vintage pen dealers (although there are a lot of amateurs), but he made writing instruments his full-time profession in 1995. While he attends shows to feed his collector interest in vintage pens, he does much of his commerce online through his website, VintagePens.com. He launched the site in January 1997 – more than 20 years ago – making it one of the first websites dedicated to pens. Now, at any given time, VintagePens.com offers more than 600 vintage fountain pens and pencils, along with other antique and collectable writing instruments and old writing equipment.

One outstanding example in the current catalog includes a circa 1908 Parker 47, excellent condition, in the original box, with

gold filled trim and pearl slabs (item #9095, \$6,500).

One needn't drop four or five figures to pick up a visually striking fountain pen, however. The Parker Diamond Medal "Vac-Fil" Vacumatic in burgundy pearl with black marbled pump-filler and gold-filled trim is listed at \$225 on VintagePens.com. The site reports this model dates to circa 1935 and was made by Parker for retail by Sears, Roebuck & Co.

As much as VintagePens.com is a feast for the eyes and options for prospective buyers, it offers much, much more.

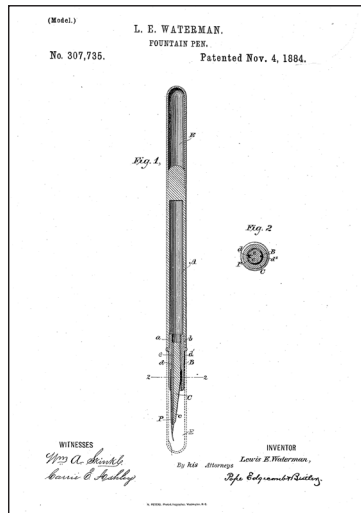
Nishimura explains, "From the beginning [in 1997, VintagePens.com] was intended as much as an information resource as a commercial site. At that time most pen trading wasn't online – it was predominantly face-to-face at shows." Therefore, Nishimura's site is populated with an encyclopedia's worth of knowledge distilled for collectors.

To name a few of the topics that can be found on VintagePens.com: Pen and pencil history; individual pen profiles, including patent drawings; pens to avoid, and why; how to evaluate a vintage pen; discussions of pen show basics and pen show etiquette.

Nishimura also recounts the dynamic shifts of the vintage fountain pen market in a series of articles published on his blog, vintagepensblog.blogspot.com. "The pens that once could be found at flea markets, general antiques shows, shops, and auction houses, were now sent to eBay instead," he says.

While pens "in the wild" are not as abundant as when pen collecting was a "young" category of interest, there are still gems – vintage and contemporary – to be found. When searching for collectible writing instruments, don't overlook or dismiss estate sales. In April 2017, Fine Estates in San Francisco held a two-day consignment sale that offered approximately 2,200 writing instruments, including fine contemporary collectible pens, boxed writing sets, and many limited editions.

According to Martin Codina, CEO of Fine Estates, the writing instruments came from the collection of Morton Blatt, who sold



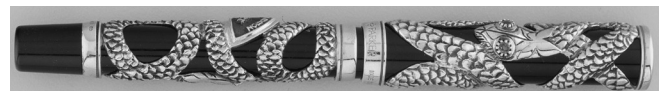
*The patent by L.E. Waterman for an improved design that started a fountain pen revolution.*



*Parker 47, circa 1908, with gold filled trim, pearl slabs (item #9095), \$6,500. Photo courtesy David Nishimura, www.VintagePens.com*

*Montblanc Qing Dynasty fountain pen, #1 in edition of 8, 20th century, honoring the artistic achievements of China's Qing Dynasty, black lacquer and jade, cap accented with dragon in 18K gold, set with brilliant-cut*

*yellow diamonds, 18K gold nib also engraved with a dragon, \$22,500. Photo courtesy Heritage Auctions*



*Limited edition Parker Gold Snake 18K gold, resin and emerald fountain pen, circa 1997, number 207 of 250, black resin pen with twisted 18K gold snake overlay with inlaid emerald eyes, 18K gold medium nib, design based on the Parker Lucky Curve filigree Snake #37 design of 1906, in a black leather case, \$3,750. Photo courtesy Heritage Auctions*

Like the mechanical watch, the fountain pen has survived by pulling a neat trick: transforming its obsolescence into an aura of indulgent luxury.

— Troy Patterson, Bloomberg (<https://bloom.bg/2kZshpq>)

much of his fountain pen collection through Bonham's about five years ago for approximately \$1 million. Blatt, apparently, was one of those collectors who viewed fountain pens as artifacts and not to be used. Many of the instruments were still in their original boxes with literature, and none of them had been put to paper.

Covina's Fine Estates was hired by the estate executor to sell what was left of Blatt's collection. When queried about how his firm established the prices, Covina says he employed a research team who, when possible, used manufacturers' websites to identify the writing instruments, and then used Worthpoint, Terapeak, and LiveAuctioneers to establish past sale prices.

Covina reveals that about 200 people attended the initial two-day sale in April, with buyers coming from all over northern California. Sales were brisk with about a 50 percent sell-through (by volume) at all price points. Simple Pilot fountain pens moved for \$5 and a limited edition Montblanc Hemingway – the most expensive pen in the sale – sold for \$1,400. Covina reports the sales in the initial offering added up to about \$50,000.

The sale of the balance of the Blatt collection continues June 16-18 at the Fine Estate Sales showroom (502 Irwin Street, San Rafael, California). Pickings are still plentiful for contemporary pen users and collectors. Covina says there are approximately 1,000 pens remaining: More than 100 of them are priced over \$500, 200 are priced over \$200, and the rest are priced at \$5 to \$100. (No pen dip testing allowed.)

Collector Greg Schiek of Naples, Florida, is a relatively recent devotee of fountain pens. His interest was initially piqued in the winter of 2011, as he was working towards his Master's Degree. While writing a research paper focused on the globalization of the Parker Pen Company, he attended a local antique fair with the intention of finding vintage Parker fountain pens. While strolling through the fair, he met an individual with a coffee cup full of 12 fountain pens, one of which was a Parker 51. There was



Restored double jewel Parker 51 fountain pen, 1945 (second quarter), buckskin beige, sold for \$495. Photo courtesy Greg Schiek/AntiqueDigger.com



Fine Estate Sales in San Francisco, California, is offering this Italian three-pen set in box by Aurora for \$600 during the firm's June 17-19 estate sale. Photo courtesy Fine Estate Sales, [www.finesf.com](http://www.finesf.com).

no pricing on the pens, so he inquired, "How much for this Parker?" The seller responded, "I want \$3 for all the pens, but you can't have the stoneware coffee cup. That coffee cup is antique and very expensive and I would have to get \$75 for it."

Schiek says he couldn't pull out his wallet fast enough to give them the \$3 for all the fountain pens. He says, "Due to my recent research paper and information I was armed with, I knew about the one Parker fountain pen and the model that I could make out." It was a Parker 51 in Dove Gray with a 1/10th 16K gold-filled cap.

After doing his research, he found the other 11 pens consisted of: four Montblanc Meisterstück 149s, one Lamy 2000, two Lamy Personas, two Pelikan M800s, and three Parker 75s.

Of that inaugural experience, Schiek says, "That \$3 investment turned into a few more zeros before that decimal point because all the fountain pens were very desirable and in excellent condition

## 2017 Pen Show Calendar

### Miami Pen Show

July 14-16  
Doubletree by Hilton Miami Airport  
and Convention Center  
711 NW 72nd Avenue, Miami, FL  
33126  
[miamipenshow.com](http://miamipenshow.com)

### Washington D.C. Collectible Fountain Pen Supershow

August 3-6  
Falls Church Marriott Fairview Park  
3111 Fairview Park Drive  
Falls Church, VA 22042  
[pencentral.com](http://pencentral.com)

### San Francisco International Pen Show

August 25-27  
Sofitel San Francisco Bay Hotel  
223 Twin Dolphin Drive  
Redwood City, CA 94065  
[sfpenshow.com](http://sfpenshow.com)

### Dallas Pen Show

September 8-9  
Double Tree Hotel Dallas Near the  
Galleria  
4099 Valley View Ln, Dallas, TX 75244  
[dallaspenshow.com](http://dallaspenshow.com)

### Colorado Pen Show

October 6-8  
DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel Denver-  
Stapleton North  
4040 Quebec St, Denver, CO 80216  
[coloradopenshow.com](http://coloradopenshow.com)

### The Ohio Pen Show

November 2-5  
Crowne Plaza Dublin Hotel  
600 Metro PI N, Dublin, OH 43017  
[theohiopenshow.com](http://theohiopenshow.com)

– worth way more than that ol’ stoneware coffee mug the vendor told me he wanted \$75 for. This particular purchase hooked and fueled my passion for collecting vintage fountain pens.”

According to Schiek’s research and experience, “The Parker Pen Co. has an enormous following of collectors, it’s arguably the most popular fountain pen due to the sheer amount of fountain pens produced and innovative nature of the company by using technology like the ‘lucky curve’ feed and the vacuumatic filling systems that revolutionized the way people used fountain pens and the fountain pen industry.”

Recognized as one of the most popular pens ever produced, the first Parker “51” was created in 1941; since more than 300 million Parker “51”s were made, they are readily available and most can be found for under \$100, making them appealing to beginning and veteran collectors alike.

Alternatively, Montblanc is the epitome of luxury goods. One of the ultra-limited Qing Dynasty fountain pens, crafted from black lacquer and fine jade, produced by Montblanc in 2002 in an edition of just eight pens, sold at auction in February 2013 for \$22,500.

There is more than a century’s worth of fountain pens available for collectors and users/consumers. Vintage American, European, and Asian fountain pens from a plethora of makers are available. And with modern manufacturers creating user-friendly fountain pens, collector and luxury editions, there are a lot of options from which to choose.

Unless potential loss or damage is of no concern, it’s unwise to get into using or collecting fountain pens without a little guidance from the veterans. Nishimura advises against buying “lots of common junk instead of a few good pieces. Many ‘collectors’ nowadays really aren’t, though – they are consumers. Owning a dozen nice pairs of shoes doesn’t make one a shoe collector. Ditto for pens.”

Schiek shares similar sentiment: “When I first started in this

hobby, I would buy everything I could get my hands on; if it were a fountain pen I was buying it. I learned real fast that 99% of the fountain pens have some type of condition issue that needs to be addressed.”

He continues, “If a person were interested in the hobby, I would strongly encourage individuals to attend a fountain pen show in their region to experience the vastness of the hobby. Fountain pen shows provide a great wealth of education, the ability to see and compare enormous amounts of fountain pens at one time, get fountain pens serviced, make new connections and, in my case, located hard to find parts to fix fountain pens that broke or are missing parts during my restoration process.”

Fountain pens became obsolete with the invention of the more sensible and reliable inexpensive ballpoint pens in the 1940s. However, today’s enthusiasts recognize them as being beneficial for more than just their writing capability.

“Any doodad can be a status symbol, and any old objet d’art can be eyeballed, but from a beautiful pen flows great self-expression. Or, anyway, that’s the message of the marketing and the beauty of the idea: holding craft and ritual in your hand,” says writer Troy Patterson (Bloomberg, February 2, 2017). Consumers are buying in to what the marketers are selling, too: Global sales of fountain pens have increased year over year for the past decade (except 2009). Whether vintage or new, if you ever get the chance, use a fountain pen to draw a line or two. But beware: You may find yourself joining the millions of user-collectors around the world who are already enjoying the experience of writing with these satisfying instruments. ■



*This contemporary World War II commemorative Douglas MacArthur fountain pen by Parker is offered for \$700 during an estate sale in San Francisco June 17-19.*

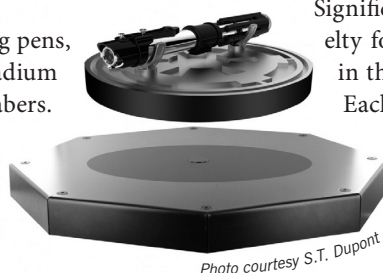
*Photo courtesy Fine Estate Sales, www.finesf.com.*

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## Fountain pens honor a galaxy far, far away

In December 2015, Parisian luxury goods maker S.T. Dupont [[www.st-dupont.com](http://www.st-dupont.com)] introduced a line of pens as a nod to the release of “The Force Awakens.”

At the top of the line is a duo of levitating pens, created in bronze with black lacquer, palladium and rhodium, designed in the form of light sabers. One variation is modeled after Darth Vader’s light saber with Empire details and a red topaz crystal (shown at right), while the other is fashioned after Jedi Master Yoda’s light saber, which has Rebel Alliance details and a green topaz crystal. The levitation is achieved through the use of electro-magnets in the plinth and the levitating platform; when the base is plugged in the



*Photo courtesy S.T. Dupont*

platform holding the pen levitates. Only eight of each pen were made; each retails for about \$24,614.

Significantly less exclusive – yet still pricey for a novelty fountain pen – S.T. Dupont also created pens in the form of X-Wing fighters and a TIE Fighter. Each of these pens, which were produced in a limited edition of 1977 (the year the first Star Wars movie was released) carries a retail price of approximately \$1,969. One can speculate and argue whether or not the value of these and other contemporary novelties will rise or fall, but only time will tell.

Visit [www.st-dupont.com](http://www.st-dupont.com) to see more luxury and unique pens by S.T. Dupont. ■

## Fountain pen restoration requires patience, delicate touch

Greg Schiek, proprietor of AntiqueDigger.com, restores American made fountain pens from the early 1920s to the late 1950s.

He says most of his restoration work is on Parker, Sheaffer and Waterman fountain pens. Restoring a fountain pen, in many cases, is meticulous work. “The celluloid and hard rubber pens can be brittle to work with and one requires extreme patience and the ability to be delicate with the parts they are working with,” Schiek explains. “One wrong move could damage a part that could be very difficult to repair or find to replace.”

The process takes time and a gentle touch. According to Schiek, “If I were to restore a Waterman 52 black chased hard rubber fountain pen from the 1920s, I would start by removing the cap from the barrel. Next, I would remove the section from the barrel. Then I would use a knockout block to remove the feed and nib from the section. I would also remove the lever assembly and pressure bar from the inside of the barrel.

“Once I have everything removed,” Schiek continues, “it is a process of cleaning and polishing the parts.”

Schiek explains one of his processes:

With the Waterman fountain pens from the 1920s, they are made from hard rubber. Using water to clean hard rubber fountain pens is not ideal because the hard rubber can swell if it meets water for an extended period of time, which can cause the components to not fit properly when putting back together. Using mineral oil on hard rubber fountain pens is a better alternative.

I clean the inside of the cap and barrel with mineral oil and cotton swabs until all of the ink, dirt and grime are no longer evident on the cotton swabs. On the trim, which typically is the



*The same Waterman Ideal pen, before (top) and after (bottom) restoration.* Photo courtesy Greg Schiek, [www.AntiqueDigger.com](http://www.AntiqueDigger.com).



*Waterman 52 black chased hard rubber fountain pen, 1920s, disassembled and ready for cleaning and polishing.* Photo courtesy Greg Schiek, [www.AntiqueDigger.com](http://www.AntiqueDigger.com).

clip and banding on the cap, lever box assembly and the nib, I will use Simichrome or Navaljelly and cork to polish these areas/parts bright again.

The section nipple will receive a new ink sac and will be secured with shellac.

The pressure bar receives a thorough cleaning in an ultrasonic bath and micromesh sanding as they are typically covered with tough to remove dirt and grime. I will reattach the lever box assembly back to the barrel and secure the lever to the pressure bar. I will use a brass shim to clean in between the tines of the nib and secure the nib and feed back into the section.

After the cleaning is complete, I will secure the section with new ink sac, feed and nib back to the barrel. Once the fountain pen is fully put back together, I will test the lever and new ink sac to make sure the fountain pen “sucks” up ink and test the flow of ink from the feed to the nib on paper.

If all goes well, we have a fully restored, working fountain pen in ready-to-write condition for a new owner.

Greg Schiek invites individuals with questions pertaining to fountain pens or the hobby to contact him at [info@antiquedigger.com](mailto:info@antiquedigger.com). ■

### Resources for fountain pen research within easy reach

Parker Pens Penography - <https://parkerpens.net/apls.html>

Pen Collectors of America - [www.pencollectorsofamerica.com](http://www.pencollectorsofamerica.com)

The Fountain Pen Network - [www.fountainpennetwork.com](http://www.fountainpennetwork.com)

Facebook fountain pen groups (search for “Fountain Pens”)

David Nishimura Vintage Pens & Writing Equipment - [www.vintagepens.com](http://www.vintagepens.com)

*The Book of Fountain Pens and Pencils*, by Stuart Schneider & George Fischler, Schiffer Books, \$79.95

*The Chronicle of the Fountain Pen: Stories within a Story*, by João P. Martins, Luiz Leite, & António Gagean, Schiffer Books, \$95

*Pens & Pencils*, Revised 3rd ed., by Regina Martini (photography by Harald Grotowsky), Schiffer Books, \$24.95

*Fountain Pens and Pencils: The Golden Age of Writing Instruments*, by George Fischler & Stuart Schneider, Schiffer Books, \$89.95

*Parker Pen Repair Manual No. 5115*, 8th ed., Schiffer Books, \$9.95