

(collecting)

Henry Simpole's bespoke pens

BY PAUL ERANO

DREAM MAKER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NEAL LAVER





captures the essence of what he finds most fascinating about fountain pens—even if such a pen does not exist. And that's where Henry Simpole comes in.

Simpole is a highly regarded pen restorer and pen maker who is perhaps best known for his recent collaboration with Conway Stewart to produce the Centenary pen and the oversized Exhibition pen. What may be less known about Simpole is that he also builds custom-made—or bespoke—pens on a very limited basis. “Bespoke” is an English term usually used to describe custom-made clothing. Simpole applies this context to pen making, creating highly personalized pens for his customers—one of whom is rumored to be a certain member of the British aristocracy. →

Choosing the right fountain pen is a very personal thing, and when it comes to building a collection, there is no single best way to go about it. We may lean toward either modern or vintage pens, for example, or concentrate on pens of historical note or those with unusual features. Some people are drawn to pens made from

precious or exotic materials or those that reflect a particular decorative style, like Art Deco. There are those who collect pens to match their wardrobe, while others couldn't care less about a pen's looks as long as its nib meets their criteria for perfection. Whatever the inclination, a true collector is always on the lookout for that one pen that

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Erano: What exactly are bespoke pens and how did you become interested in making them?

Simpole: A bespoke pen is unique in design—or made to order—with specific details in the design that are carried out by hand. “Bespoke” also implies that the service is fashioned “by hand” wherever possible. I have always been interested in following through with an idea about a new design for the overlays for my pens, so my interest in bespoke pens initiated when I was



asked by a client if I could make an overlay with a lady in the design. At first I was hesitant about doing it because I had never incorporated the human form in any of my designs. The “magic” happened when I presented my first finished design to the client and saw his reaction to the pen I had crafted for him.

Erano: Since bespoke pens are so personal, must a client provide you with a great deal of information in order for you to meet his or her expectations?

Simpole: Actually, it’s the other way around. They ask me if I can do this or that, but the most important thing to me is that the client is delighted with the design. In that respect, it is important that the client only provide

the “seed” of an idea. My work begins in how I interpret that seed in my own way. It would be difficult, if not impossible, if I was given too much information to work with, and ultimately it might lead me to abandon the commission if the client doesn’t allow a fairly free hand in my artistic endeavors.

Erano: I’ve seen the terms “handmade” and “made by hand” used to describe the method by which various items are made. Does this term carry any special meaning for you?

Simpole: Handmade is a term that implies that the artist or artisan, where possible, uses his hands rather than mechanical aids. My bespoke series of pens are handmade—in the *extreme*



use of the word. Whether I am making a series of pens or one bespoke pen, it can take days to work out the pattern alone. The cap of the Conway Stewart giant Exhibition pen, with the initial letters "CS" embedded subliminally in the pattern, took three days to design on paper. A bespoke pen I made recently for a client took almost as long. Part of the art is knowing when to stop drawing and transfer the design to the sheet of gold or silver. It takes me a whole day to pierce out the cap and barrel of the Myrtle pen. There are seventy holes to be cut in the barrel of that pen. Once the overlay is curled into a cylinder and soldered, I clean up the metal edges with miniature files. Then I start my favorite part, the engraving, which alone takes many hours. But to me it is pure enjoyment—the home run, as you might call it.

Erano: You mentioned that details are important. To what kind of details are you referring?

Simpole: First and foremost it should be a theme with which I can work, allowing for my artistic interpretation of the theme. For example, with the Lady with Lilies the client wanted it done in silver, but I insisted that it be gold plated when finished. My reason was that the lady's face detail was so small, and so lightly engraved, that with the tarnishing of the silver and constant cleaning, the face would disappear or become indistinct over time.

Erano: So, do you have a particular style?

Simpole: In my opinion, the Art Nouveau period was an era of exquisite beauty. Its organic curves, flowers, plants, and even insects and birds, as well as the female form, are all beautiful subjects executed in flowing lines which are easy on the eye. One does not need to be an expert to find Art Nouveau pleasing to look at. I enjoy other decorative styles and





themes as well, such as Art Deco. I especially like working with appreciative clients and presenting them with a beautiful, unique pen that exceeds their expectations.

Erano: What is your feeling toward the bespoke pens you create?

Simpole: I have always said—and I hope this to be true—that

my pens will be used. Perhaps it would be unwise to carry them around in one's jacket pocket on a daily basis, but they may be kept on the desk and used for important letters or writing for one's own pleasure.

Erano: Do you have any hopes as to how future generations of collectors will view and care for the bespoke pens you make?

Simpole: In view of the craftsmanship—not to mention the expense—involved, I think that my pens will be looked after and not be subjected to the wear and tear of most daily-used pens. Yet, I hope that people are not reluctant to write with them. I'd like to think that my pens will be treasured as unique and personal works of art. The Assay Office Hallmarks emphasize the stan-

ers to
in my bed all day.
easily troubled by fairies
Carnale this morn
and post



little
perfect
by Lord and Lao
And then there
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however, l

dard and quality of the materi-
als used (.925 silver and 18-karat
gold). As for their artistic quality
and worth, I hope that they are
enjoyed and used often—now
and by future generations. S

More information about Henry
Simpole and the bespoke pens he
makes can be found at www.henrysimpole.com.