

Contemporary Collectibles: Beyond Waterman and Parker pens

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

There is a general consensus in the vintage fountain pen world that the Big Four brands are Waterman, Parker, Scheaffer and Wahl Eversharp, but there are a number of other brands that, though less well known, were equally elegant - and collectible - writing instruments.

Well worth looking out for are pens made by, for example, the Conklin Pen Co., Aiken Lambert, Crocker, later known as Chilton, the Pilot Co., the Moore Pen Co., Paul E. Wirt, and Mabie, Todd and Co., all of which were in operation during the Golden Age of fountain pens, roughly between the years 1920 and 1945.

Some of these companies are recognized for their technical advancements as well as fine design. The Eagle Pencil Co., for instance, in 1890 was the first to market a filling system involving little glass vials. Though innovative, it wasn't very practical due to the fragility of the glass.

Eight years later, the Conklin brand, founded by Roy Conklin in Toledo, Ohio, was the first to introduce a commercially successful self-filling pen. Known to collectors as the Crescent Filler, it worked by drawing ink into a reservoir hidden inside the shaft by means of a projecting metal crescent employed to initiate a pumping action. This was a great improvement over the sometimes-messy process of using a dropper to charge a pen with ink.

The majority of Crescent Fillers were made of a rather ordinary black ebonite; much rarer and more valuable is the elaborate gold-plated model made in 1901. Originally marketed as Conklin's Self-Filling Pen and heavily advertised, it was met with widespread approval, rating a 1903 endorsement from Mark Twain, who said he favored the Conklin "because it is a profanity saver: It cannot roll off the desk."

Some of Conklin's other elegant early models were the large, flat-top Durograph (now very hard to find) and the Endura. In 1931, Conklin introduced the streamlined Nozac, made in a variety of colors and sizes, which had a piston-type filling mechanism.

The Esterbrook Steel Pen Mfg. Co. of Camden, N.J., was known as the largest producer of steel pens in the world beginning in 1859, moving into fountain pen manufacture in the 1920s. As opposed to other companies that emphasized style and upscale quality, Esterbrook concentrated on affordable, everyday pens - all with their distinctive smooth-writing steel nibs.

Mabie, Todd and Co. had a convoluted history with roots in both New York and England, producing Swan pens, distinguished by the extremely high quality of their workmanship. The Moore Pen Co. of Boston also made first-rate fountain pens, in particular their Safety pen, which had a retractable nib. And, of course,

we must mention the Montblanc, then and now the prince of European pens.

There were literally hundreds of other manufacturers whose pens are worthy of notice. The short-lived Dunn Co. produced see-through, large-barrel pens in the 1920s with such names as Camel and Dreadnought. LeBoeuf of Springfield, Mass., marketed some premium-quality pens during the 1920s and '30s, including gold-filled, pearlized and wood-grained plastic examples.

Oldwin, a French company founded by Bruno Mara in 1930, used a unique celluloid-like material called rhodoid, which was composed of sheets of acetate cellulose. Crocker (which started life as the Chilton Pen Co.) produced such now-valuable examples as the rare "clown" pattern, harlequinque yellow, brown and black pen and pencil sets, the Wingflow Demonstrator, pens covered in lizard skin and gold-fill filigree overlays, and the Crocker Hatchet Filler, named for its unusual filling system.

Collectors of vintage fountain pens are particularly enamored of art deco design and detail-streamlined shapes and the interesting mottled, swirling and geometric visual effects made possible by the introduction of translucent plastics.

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