



HISTORY IN THE WRITING

Shaw Pens

BY SUSAN BOWEN

Alan Shaw has combined his love of writing instruments and American history to carve a unique niche for his handcrafted pens. Each pen reveals an aspect of Americana, from American presidents to famous landmarks.

Shaw got hooked on pens when he received his first Sheaffer fountain pen in third grade. He acquired pens until 2001, when a job loss forced him to sell his collection. Like so many American jobs, his position was outsourced overseas.

The former programmer and systems analyst decided to reinvent himself as a penmaker, tapping into his latent artistic talent and the American history he had learned at Drexel University years earlier. He set up his workshop in an old tool shed in his backyard in Cheltenham, Penn., near Philadelphia, and practiced making

pens on a lathe. By 2006 penmaking was his full-time business.

Shaw sold his first pens to the Tinder Box in Haverford, Penn., followed in 2007 by Bertram's Inkwell in Baltimore, Md. Other current retailers include Total Fine Writing, A Pen Lover's Paradise, Pentiques, Precious Memories by Pens, Langman Galleries and Fahrney's.

Shaw's signature style consists of artwork engraved on a pen base made of True Stone or Italian resins. His pens are trimmed in either rhodium-coated sterling silver or gold-colored titanium nitrate, the latter of which is identified by the letters *TN* engraved on the clip. Michael Masuyama of Mike-It-Work grinds Shaw's nibs to meet special customer needs.

The intricate engravings on Shaw's pens reveal both his artistic talent and computer skills. "I scan a photo or line



The John Adams pen from the Founding Fathers series and the pen in honor of the Marine Corps.



drawing into my computer and use a combination of Photoshop and a painting program to compose the final artwork," explains Shaw. "I usually add details not included in the original photo. Finally, the artwork must be sized to the small, rounded canvas of the pen." Shaw sends the artwork and pens to Ken Nelson of Kallenshaan Woods in Las Vegas for engraving.

After the engraved pens are returned, Shaw begins the painstaking task of painting the engraved artwork. Some engravings use up to four colors. The pens are then returned to the lathe for a light sanding and are coated with clear acrylic sealer to protect the artwork.

Shaw draws from history, American landmarks and institutions for his various thematic series. He works with historical societies and organizations in developing his themes



The Chaddsford Winery pen and the pen in honor of President Obama's pet Portuguese water dog, Bo. Pricing for Shaw Pens ranges from \$360 to \$750. Visit shawpens.com.

and secures authorizations and distribution rights. He began with the Founding Fathers—George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and Benjamin Franklin. He is creating a pen for each branch of the military, beginning with the Marine Corps. His Firefighters' Medal of Valor pen was commissioned by a police officer in Atlanta.

Shaw recently launched a series of pens celebrating famous American lighthouses, beginning with the Tybee Island Lighthouse in Savannah, Ga. (see *PW*, October 2009, p. 22). Two projects now underway in collaboration with the United States Lighthouse Society are the Thomas Point in Chesapeake Bay, Md., and the Cape May in New Jersey.

Vineyards are another favorite theme, beginning with the Pennsylvania winery Chaddsford, the subject of a pen introduced at the 2010 Philadelphia Pen Show. A pen commemorating the Wolf Mountain Winery in Georgia will be unveiled at the Atlanta Pen Show, April 9–11.

Pen collector shows are important venues for selling Shaw Pens. Shaw selects a theme pen for each show, including the sand-inspired South Beach pen introduced at the 2009 Miami Pen Show. The new Presidential Pet series came about as a result of a chance meeting at the 2009 Washington D.C. Fountain Pen Super Show. S&P Publishing, licensee for the

official seal of the Pet of the President of the United States, commissioned Shaw to create a series of pens depicting pets of U.S. presidents. To date, he has created Bo, President Barack Obama's Portuguese water dog, and Fala, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's beloved Scottish terrier. Next on the drawing board: George W. Bush's Barney, requested by the Bush Presidential Library. Shaw has additional projects underway with other presidential libraries and the U.S. Parks and Wildlife Service.

Shaw pens come in engraved wood or leather boxes with official certificates and a history about the pen's theme. Prices range from \$540 to \$750 for pens with 18 karat gold nibs and \$360–550 for pens with steel nibs and rollerballs. Shaw completes about thirty-five pens per week.

With the loyal support of his wife and business partner, Nancy, Shaw has big plans for Shaw Pens, including its new corporate sales program. Within two years, he plans to hire a young apprentice from an art or technical school. "We need to get young people interested in pens," emphasizes Shaw. "In the same way I preserve history through my pens, I want to preserve fine writing instruments and handwriting by getting a new generation excited about this vital art of communication."

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