

The Elegance and Eccentricity of Pen Enthusiasts

82

26

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Commentary

A man presented me with a copy of The Epoch Times with my article on the page and asked me to sign it, which I was happy to do. He gave me a pen and I noticed that it was unusual. A fountain pen. I don't use them so this is already a novelty. But it also happened to be beautiful so I asked about it.

If memory serves, he said it is from 1932, maybe made by Parker, an innovative model that uses a special suction for refills. It was also gold with a cross-stitch pattern and it had a name that I forget. It looked new but it was in fact nearly 100 years old. He knew everything about it and was proud to explain it to me in detail.

As he spoke my mind shot back to an event over the holidays. It was at a Christmas market and there was a boy who seemed to be of high school age and he was selling his custom-made pens. I stood in amazement as he explained them all and what they were made of and how he makes them. That feeling of being left out of a subculture swept over me.

How can one not be impressed by a 17-year-old with the mental and physical focus on such crafts? It's far better than being possessed by social media. Seems like this boy is going to make something of himself. If I had to bet, I would guess he was homeschooled.

Thus did I ask the man who wanted me to sign the newspaper about this market and culture. He excitedly shared details and invited me to a pen show in the coming weeks in Philadelphia, where vendors show their wares, both newly made recreations and antiques. He said the place would be packed and I could throw myself into this world completely.

Then I looked on eBay and sure enough there are thousands of vintage pens for sale, some posted at \$60,000. Many others are more affordable.

It's fascinating because there is hardly a use for a pen anymore, much less a fountain pen. We sign for credit cards with our fingers, making

strange scribbles on screens and no one particularly cares what it looks like.

We type everything. We've mostly stopped writing letters. The world has gone digital, almost completely. If I had such a fountain pen, I'm not even sure how I would carry it. Which pocket? I'm not sure.

What could possibly account for this vibrant interest in fountain pens?

Before I answer, indulge me as I tell another story. As I entered the train station in Philadelphia, I was overwhelmed at its grandeur and beauty. It was built in 1933 with a neoclassical style outside and Art Deco inside. It is cathedral-like but celebrates not the gods but modernity and technology. Regardless, it is stunning and awe-inspiring. It was wholly restored some years ago and perfect.

Today when you enter, there is a major distraction. Scaffolding is everywhere on the high windows on either side. What is being put there is stained glass, which sounds great until you see it. It is simply awful. Shapeless colors going this way and that, it is typical of our lost times: formless and without inspiration or messaging. It is not finished. They have been working on this for two years but the results will be completely out of character for the building and thus a major embarrassment for the city as a whole.

How does this sort of thing happen? Some committee somewhere, with art professors and various other "experts" with all the right credentials undoubtedly fed some allocated tax dollars to the friend of a friend and fobbed it off to the city managers as great art. Too intimidated to say no, they went along. Now the interior of this train station goes from mighty to lame at taxpayers' expense.

Who could stop this atrocity? Not the regular citizens. They have no power over expert advice. It's always the elites who decide these things and the elites are cowardly and corrupt. This is true throughout the whole of public life.

How to respond to such things? There is only one way. We have to find ways in our own lives to create beautiful things. We bake. We light candles on silver candlesticks. We acquire small oil paintings if we can afford them. We fuss over ties and dresses. We knit. We build libraries. We look for the best ports and scotches. We read old religious texts. We read poetry. We get good at chess. We become interested in strange sports like falconry.

We find ways to make our own lives beautiful. Why? Because, in the end, this is all we can control. No one asks our opinions about what kinds of huge windows should be in the train station or what U.S. policy should be in Ukraine. But we can control whether our shirts are properly ironed, our baked scones are delicious, the flowers on the dinner table are properly arranged, and the music that is playing on our home speakers.

This is how it comes to be that societies in decay can combine so much public ugliness with so much private beauty. One plays off and inspires the other as people try to regain some control of our lives.

And this is how these vibrant subcultures are born. The inspiration is the desire to rebuild and the motivation stems from the awareness of what we can and cannot control.

Back to the pens. Do you see how this comes to be? There is an intense desire in the culture these days to recover what we have lost. What was eaten and destroyed in the course of these many decades in an attempt to recreate the world with expert advice and the elevation of rationalism over beauty? Once we find out, we use what power we have to beautify our own lives.

It comes down, in some cases, to the pens we use. Absolutely no one has any actual use for a fountain pen from the 1930s or, for that matter, a watch made by a jeweler in Geneva. We have all sorts of things that are rising in value even though they serve no practical purpose. But they do serve a much higher purpose of restoring elegance via nostalgia to our private lives.

As for the history of pens themselves, have you ever seen a vellum manuscript from the Middle Ages in a museum? The effort they took to create is astonishing to consider: the cutting of the feathers, the shaping of the edge tools, the mixing of the inks, the artistry of the writing skill. It's no wonder that the scriptorium was considered the most valuable part of the monastery and the scribes the most exalted among all the monks.

History moved forward to make the fountain pen and the ballpoint pen and eventually dispense with the need for pens entirely. But at the same time, the world has become more brutal, more strange, and certainly less wonderful. We look at those old manuscripts with awe and inspiration at how much they truly cared for elegance and took such pride in their work.

It inspires us to do the same, even given the state of the world. This much is true: I enjoyed writing with this pen, if only briefly. And it has made me interested in the whole subculture, maybe to the point of acquiring one myself. Life is short and we write less and less. Why not make everything, even such simple tasks as writing a signature, a special experience?

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