



From Canada with Love

BY MICHELLE LEUNG

Canadian pen maker Chris Manning has been using fountain pens since his high school days to avoid hand cramps when writing for long periods of time. They became his primary writing instrument, but he didn't like the pens he saw offered for sale: they were too small or light for his large hands and he thought the heavier pens he found were poorly designed and uncomfortable to write with. That's when he decided to make his own and founded Silver Hand Studios.

He turned his first pen during Christmastime in 2006 and hasn't stopped since. He was doing well enough by 2009 to quit his job in IT and devote himself full-time to

pen making. He now works with international clients and exhibits at some of the world's biggest pen shows.

His work combines the best of modern tooling, ancient jewelry techniques, and precious materials like sterling silver, gold, enamel, and Argentium (a trademarked tarnish-resistant sterling silver alloy) to create one-of-a-kind pieces of functional art. The base of his fountain pens is usually black acrylic, although sometimes he uses celluloid. He doesn't use ebonite with silver, as the sulfur it gives off tarnishes the silver. Manning uses JoWo nibs sourced through the American company Franklin-Christoph.

Manning is possibly best known for his beautiful, attention-grabbing sterling silver overlays. While most overlays on pens are traditionally quite flat, Manning intentionally makes his three dimensional. He encourages potential customers who see his pens in person to explore the texture with their fingers. “Designers often forget that both visual and physical texture are important to a great design,” he says.

On occasion, Manning’s work involves engine turning (also known as guilloché), done with an old-fashioned, hand-powered machine. Guilloché—an engraved pattern of fine, repetitive lines, requires a high degree of skill to do well because the process is so hand-intensive.

One of Manning’s better-known techniques is lost wax casting, which he says has been used by jewelers for over 4,000 years. Records indicate the ancient Egyptians used this technique! This first step involves making a wax model of the piece. Once the wax model is made, a mold is made using a high temperature investment plaster. The wax model is then melted out, exposing a cavity into which the molten metal can be poured. Because the wax model is melted and destroyed, an original wax model is required for each piece cast. This is a highly time-consuming process and therefore only a small number of pens can be made using this method. Manning uses modern machines and computer-controlled mills to save time, but it still



Limited edition Gothic Overlay, made using the ancient technique of lost wax casting. The clipless design is based on architectural detail from a 16th-century house in Dresden. Note the pen rest at the top of the cap. Only 10 pieces available in Argentium silver; one in gold (\$1,250–7,500).

Opposite—Chris Manning with his antique Straight Line engine, used for guilloché engraving



The Jaipur limited edition was inspired by original marble work from the Amer Fort in Jaipur (right). The body of the pen is cast in Argentium silver, and the contrasting inlay with niello, a black alloy of copper, silver, lead, and sulfur. The rhodium plated, 18 karat gold nib is available in extra-fine, fine, medium, and broad. Available in a choice of Argentium silver (shown, \$2,500) and 18 karat gold (\$30,000).



takes 14–16 hours to machine an overlay out of wax. The casting process can take several days of labor as well.

Manning draws much of his inspiration from jewelry design, classic art, and architecture. Travel to various countries and exploring new cultures have opened up new design possibilities. He recalls a trip to India in 2012 that led to two pens based upon marble work he saw there.

Sometimes he finds a technique or a material he wishes to use, begins exploring the limitations and strengths of it, and it eventually results in a new pen. Manning photographs everything he finds interesting and keeps the photos in a huge design album to use as inspiration. Once he chooses a few design elements to experiment with, the next phase is to sketch ideas on how to use them. Every pen starts as a model in a 3D CAD tool, allowing him to accurately tune the proportions of the pen before he attempts a physical prototype.

From start to finish, Manning says, a pen can take years to design and make. Sometimes he must learn a new technique to make the pen he envisions—he does all the work himself on every pen in order to control the entire process. He has scrapped designs at the prototype stage because he knew a particular pen would have been impractical to make. At other times, a new design can come together in as quickly as a week. The biggest difficulty with making something as small as a pen is to keep the design simple. Manning explains, “The trick is to take a Gothic cathedral, or the Taj Mahal”—both of which have inspired pieces he has made—“and distill a single design element from it. As tempting as it might be to use every great idea, too much can easily overwhelm.”

In the end, Manning says, every pen he makes must be beautiful, functional, and, to him, technically challenging and interesting. Quoting William Morris, he says, “Have

nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful.” And then he adds: “I want my clients to believe my pens fulfill both of those requirements. If I have succeeded, then I expect my pens to remain in use for generations.”

Manning will exhibit at the Los Angeles International Pen Show this February, where he will give his first public showing of a pen set commemorating the Battle of Agincourt of the Hundred Years War (the basis for Shakespeare’s *Henry V*). Track down his table to marvel at his set of two pens, one in blue for France, and one in red for England. The technique used for these particular pens is hot enamel over guilloché, with multiple layers of colored enamel applied over the engraving and then each layer fired in a kiln. Once you hold a pen from Silver Hand Studios, it’s abundantly clear the amount of love, care, and attention to detail Manning puts into every writing instrument he produces.

It will soon be ten years since Manning produced that first pen. Looking back, he says he is most proud of the technical hurdles he has overcome and techniques he has taught himself, some of which are rarely used today. “It has been a challenge, and a delight, to shine new light on these techniques in a modern piece,” he says.

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The Taj Mahal limited edition, inspired by a decorative detail of the famed 17th-century mausoleum (\$2,500; gold version \$30,000); the Model 8—Silver Hand Studio’s first non-limited pen—made of acrylic and Argentium (\$750). Along with the Battle of Agincourt pen set, it will be seen for the first time at the Los Angeles International Pen Show in February. See our calendar for details.

