



DAN SYMONDS

HOUSTONIAN DAN SYMONDS began making pens almost as a fluke. He had taken his son to an aquarium store, and not having any interest in tropical fish, he checked out the woodcraft shop next door. It carried pen kits, and Symonds said to himself, “I can do that.”

He made a few pens from the kits and was quickly bored. “I have a computerized mill as one of my play-toys around the garage, and decided to try that on a pen.” Now, five years later, Symonds is a member of the Pen-Maker’s Guild and is among those independent penmakers whose pieces command hundreds of dollars.

His work is all done by hand until the carving begins. His computerized mills, or CNCs—machines he built himself, thanks

to his background as a design engineer in that field—allow him to develop programs that will machine three-dimensional images in just about any kind of material. “I use five software packages, depending upon what I’m trying to do. You have to be able to create computer code that tells the machine what to do, how to make multiple passes over the material and take away everything you don’t want.”

The use of CNCs in the penmaking process is controversial in some circles—undeservedly so, Symonds thinks. “People will sometimes say, ‘All you have to do is throw a chunk of material in there and hit a button and walk away, and then you have a complete pen.’ His response? “It’s simply a tool. Some of the finest craftspeople do phenomenal work with nothing but basic shop tools. They can produce things I

could never dream of. I have a different skill set. The machine does nothing unless you can tell it what to do.” He points out that the most difficult part of the process is conceptualizing the pen and figuring out how to translate the idea into a physical form. “I just happen to use a different kind of tool for part of the process.”

Although computerized mills make mass production easy, Symonds has no interest in producing pens as a commodity. He wants each of his pens to be different—and despite some similarities among pens, no two are exactly alike.

Independent penmakers often have trouble finding high quality components, primarily clips and nibs. Symonds meets those challenges by learning new skills: “You have to learn how to cast silver, how to beat junk parts into fancy clips. A lot of



facing page—Celtic Garden, Dan Symonds's successful submission pen to the Pen-Makers' Guild, made of bloodwood, ebony and holly. Not for sale.
 this page—purple-dyed box elder burl with holly overlay; bloodwood, holly and green- and red-dyed holly sawdust; black and green Cumberland ebonite

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black dyed box elder burl and TruStone turquoise; mystic white and blue swirl acrylic

us have started to cast our own nibs. I'm working on that but I haven't introduced it into my pens yet." Until Symonds perfects his own nib-making abilities, he purchases gold nibs from Howard Levy of Bexley Pen—"one of the few penmakers who will sell nibs to selected independent makers whose work he is comfortable with."

A member of the Pen-Makers' Guild, Symonds is in touch with fellow penmakers every day through online discussion groups. "We want to get to the nuts and bolts of sophisticated techniques. The group I am working with now is focused heavily on casting acrylics and metals, machining techniques, and computer techniques."

To become a member of the Pen-Makers' Guild, each prospect must submit a pen that exhibits the maker's unique artistry, something he or she regards as a masterpiece. A five-member council votes on admission. "In the things I get involved with, I'm always over the top," says Symonds, "and also very self-conscious about my own work. When I decided to try for membership in the Pen-Makers' Guild, I knew I wouldn't be able to stand rejection, so I created something so over the top that I would be sure to be accepted."

Symonds freely admits that his initial interest in pens had nothing to do with their writing qualities. "I didn't worry about that at first," he says with a chuckle. "I was making art! Lo and behold, people like the art to write. It came back to bite me a little bit, and I had to go back and examine how to develop the pen as a piece of usable art instead of shelf art. I had always been intrigued by pens but never really had opportunities to use good pens. Now I'm a pen person and I do like the feel of a good nib."

He exhibited at his first pen show this past August—the Washington D.C. Fountain Pen Supershow. There, he made his first sale and received his first commission, which he eventually turned down for several reasons, including time and the expectations of the customer. He has made it a general rule not to take commissions, because "it takes the wanderlust out of the process." He exhibited at the Ohio show in November and will be in L.A. in February. The shows have been instructive, he says. Through the immediate feedback they provide, he is learning what customers want. For example, he created a design with a cap that posted, even though he doesn't care for that feature himself.

Symonds, who is an engineering manager for an oilfield products company by day, reflects on his choice to pursue penmaking: "If I could do this fulltime, I'd do it in a heartbeat. I'm kind of ADD. My mind never stops. Penmaking is the byproduct of an over-active imagination and the need to do something with my hands."

Pentiques.com is Symonds's exclusive online distributor.

Independent penmakers who wish to be featured in PW may request a nomination form by emailing editor@penworld.com. Please do not send pens for photography unless requested.