



JAN DIVINCENZO

Customized for Quality

Edison is a small company that is growing for good reason.

After the first commercially available ballpoints in the mid-1940s, the pen market stratified, with cheap, disposable pens at one end and precious pens at the other. If, however, the high-end market took fine pens out of the hands of the masses, it also put them back into the hands of craftsmen. The Internet facilitated access to tools, materials, information and retailing opportunities that enabled individuals to produce and sell pens as finely crafted as those of the big luxury brands. A few of these individuals discovered a niche market for custom pens, crafted according to customer specs from a range of options. This is the market that Brian Gray, founder of the Edison Pen Company of Milan, Ohio, has successfully pioneered.

Edison pens have an affinity with classic American designs of the early and middle 20th century yet eschew unnecessary ornamentation to focus on primary material and finish. Though Edison just this year issued its first “production” models, it originated as a one-man operation that offered what the big companies could not without enormous cost and in-

convenience. “Those companies have economies of scale,” Gray explains. “Montblanc could make a custom pen, but it would cost \$15,000. Whereas I can make one for \$200 to \$500.” Making custom pens, his Signature Line models, is how he started and what he still finds most engaging.

Gray has created a unique ordering infrastructure for his Signature Line pens on his website, www.edisonpen.com. The pens are available in seven basic models: the Pearl, Morgan, Mina, Huron, Herald, #76 and Glenmont, with the Huron and Herald available in a “grande” size. Next, he offers a choice of beautifully colored resins, which include acrylic, ebonite, celluloid, celluloid acetate and Lucite. He’ll equip the pen with one of a variety of filler mechanisms: Schmidt K5 converter, eyedropper, piston (in production) or bulb filler. The bulb filler, which hasn’t been around since the 1925 Postal Reservoir Pen, is basically a sac affixed to the barrel that, when squeezed, pushes air out of a breather tube and, when released, sucks ink back through the tube into the reservoir. “It’s a really good filler,” says Gray. “That’s why I rummage through those boxes of old, broken pens at shows. I’ll find something interesting and think, ‘Could I make this?’” Additional custom options include ink windows and end caps. As for nibs, Edison offers an excellent steel nib and an 18k-gold nib of the best German manufacture, which Gray tunes and tests before shipping the pen out.

Gray arrived at pen making through his onetime hobby in marquetry furni-

ture and woodturning. Disappointed with the limitations of kit pens, he set about machining his own parts. In 2006, after more than a decade in pharmaceutical sales and a quick succession of layoffs, he started the Edison Pen Company and, working with his wife, managed to turn full-time pen making into a successful business. He’s expanded into a new shop, acquired his Production Line tools and taken on an employee. In 2011 the Edison Huron model, designed after the early-century oversize flat-tops, was nominated for *Pen World* magazine’s Reader’s Choice Award. The Collier, a Production Line model that takes its cues from cigar-shaped pens popular in the mid-century, was voted the Goldspot Luxury Gifts 2011 Pen of the Year by a 62 percent margin.

Another aspect of Gray’s work involves his collaboration with urushi lacquer artist Ernest Shin, owner of Hakumin Urushi Kobo. “I met Ernest a couple of years ago at a show,” says Gray. “He needed a pen maker and I needed someone who could dress the pens up.” So far, on the Pearl, Morgan and Herald models, Shin has applied traditional urushi lacquer techniques to striking effect, with an aesthetic rooted not in pictorial representation but in organic patterns and textures. Now in production is a beautifully designed urushi version of the Mina model, which, with its flared ends, recalls the reed pen. Though still a small company, Edison provides a level of quality not found among the giants, most of which, it’s useful to recollect, also started as one-man operations. ○

The Edison Pearl with the Tsugaru-nuri technique by Hakumin Urushi Kobo

