

david oscarson pens

I can remember back to my early school days sitting at a desk made with a small square cutout for a long missing inkbottle. My son tells me this puts me on a first name basis with most dinosaurs and makes me somewhat older than dirt. Nevertheless, I also remember when school reports had to be written (written, not typed, saints forbid, and computers only existed at very large accounting firms) in black, or blue-black ink. Thankfully by living to this very advanced age I have been able to see in the past few years the re-emergence of the pen as not only a collectable but as a valuable tool for today's business professional. After being dominated by a disposable product for years the pen industry has, in recent years, returned to craftsmanship and design in the manufacture of pens.

One of the leaders in the new wave of artisan pen manufacturers is the well-known designer David Oscarson. Working with materials such as 18-karat gold, sterling silver, English lead crystal and enamel, he creates fine writing instruments that are also works of art. By perfectly marrying engineering with artistry, he fashions pens that have both pen makers and collectors talking. The *Robb Report* pronounced his pens as the finest in their "Best of the Best 2004" edition, passing over several better-known and longer established pen makers. The editors said, "Collectors reap what this artisan pen maker has sown," adding, "With designs that address function and aesthetics in equal measure, David Oscarson's eponymous company stands out among the new wave of artisan pen manufacturers."

The young designer is justly proud of his pens and is an articulate and enthusiastic spokesman for his designs. A St. Louis native, David, who spent part of his childhood in Sweden, has a degree from Brigham Young University and a background in design, marketing and retail. However, don't think for a moment that these pens are all about clever advertising slogans and media hype, they are not. To see and touch one, you immediately realize the countless hours of work and skill that has gone into the making of each one. Lee Davis at Seng Jewelers, (the exclusive Kentucky representative for the David Oscarson Collections) has pointed out that these pens have a dedicated following around the world. In fact, many are reserved before a collection is even presented. The pens have been called the best-engineered pens in the world. They are also, arguably, the most beautiful.

by Rex Lyons





Oscarson originates the designs from his office in St. Louis. Generally, one or two new collections are presented each year. The actual work of making the limited edition pens takes place in England, under his direct supervision. This is the only place where the extremely high level of craftsmanship necessary to do the fine enamel and crystal work is available today.

Oscarson's first collection was a tribute to Henrik Wigström, who shared Oscarson's Swedish heritage. As Head Workmaster for the Russian court jeweler Peter Carl Fabergé, Wigström was responsible for the execution of many of the jeweled and enameled confections and Imperial Easter Eggs presented as gifts by the Russian Imperial and British Royal families. Examples of these are in museums worldwide including: The Forbes Collection in New York City; the Hillwood Museum & Gardens, the former home of Marjorie Merriweather Post in Washington DC; The Hermitage State Museum, in St. Petersburg, Russia; and, the Royal Collection of Great Britain.

Each pen begins as a block of solid .925 sterling silver or 18-karat gold, which English craftsmen turn and bore to become the barrel. The pen then passes through multiple stages of precision engraving creating the intricate pattern known as guilloché. This is a painstaking and delicate process of creating several layers of engraving that provide the design behind the enamel and bring light and

life to the surface of the precious metals.

Most enamel work created today is "cold" enamel, which is actually a sort of colored epoxy. It is much easier to do, but completely lacks the depth and beauty of the much more difficult hard enamel process. The production of translucent hard enamel is a demanding process requiring the highest levels of patience, experience and skill. A five-year apprenticeship is required of the craftsmen who do this painstaking work. For hard enamel, a mixture of glass, water and metal oxides is ground for hours by hand using a mortar and pestle. Recipes are closely guarded secrets and can command many months of work on a given formula to get the exact shade needed for a design. When this mixture has settled, the water is removed and the resulting fine paste is the basis for hard enamel. A quill is used to delicately apply each coat of the paste to the surface, ensuring that the entire guilloché area is covered. The pen is then fired in a furnace at temperatures reaching 1400 degrees; this fuses the enamel to the metal and forms a thin layer of glass. After it cools, the piece is manually ground with a diamond file, restoring the proper shape and surface. The entire tedious process is repeated at length until the level of enamel reaches the depth required to cover the peaks and fill the valleys of each intricate guilloché pattern. When the final stages of firing are completed, the pieces do not need grinding or filing but are buffed and polished to reveal



the velvet finish and translucent beauty of hard enamel.

The third in Oscarson's series of limited-edition writing instruments is perhaps one of his most intriguing. This is the crystal collection and it incorporates a barrel of full English lead crystal. The crystal is made in England's only remaining, working brick cone. Established in 1788, this circular structure houses multiple furnaces where some of the world's finest crystal has been created. Each pen barrel was blown, cut, ground, and polished entirely by hand. These were then combined with hard enamel and offered in four different colors that are limited to 128 of each color. Three crystal pens in solid 18-karat white gold pavé set with diamonds were also made. When filled, the ink shows through the intricately cut and polished crystal, offsetting the colors of the enamel decoration.

The nibs for the pens are manufactured in Heidelberg, Germany from 18-karat gold. They are plated with rhodium and tipped with iridium to ensure durability. Next, they are coupled with an ebonite feed to assure a good fit with the nib

for best flow and performance. The result is a nib with an excellent response, not flexible but soft and comfortable. These are beautiful nibs in perfect proportions to the pens. The nibs are available in fine, medium or broad sizes. Some pens are also made with a rollerball filler. In fact, Oscarson says that some collectors and users buy one of each: a fountain pen for the desk and a rollerball to use every day and carry with them.

Because of the workmanship and time it takes to produce each pen, they are created in extremely limited editions. Most of the pens in his collections begin around \$4,200. Prices range upwards to \$40,000 - \$50,000 or more for the 18-karat solid gold and diamond models. Custom designs are also undertaken by special request. David Oscarson was understandably quite pleased to hear his work called by a collector, "the Patek Philippe of pens." To be compared to what many consider the world's finest watch is a great complement. However, Oscarson also sees this as an ongoing challenge to improve his creations while continuing to present the best designed and engineered pens in the world.

Seng Jewelers in Louisville is the exclusive Kentucky representative for both the David Oscarson Collections and Patek Philippe watches. 