

End Note

Everything Begins with a Pencil

Sketches, notes, plans, lists—so many ideas and images first appear in the world as graphite lines on paper. Maybe it's the impermanence that allows the free play and the experimentation, but little credit is ever given to the pencil for its contributions. Around since the 1500s, the amazing invention today remains generally unnoticed.

Hardly anyone collects pencils—they're just sharpened down and eventually discarded or buried in a drawer. Fountain pens arrive in jewelry cases, while pencils are packed in cardboard. Even history usually neglects to mention that Lincoln probably wrote the Gettysburg Address with a German-manufactured pencil and that Henry David Thoreau was also a pencil manufacturer who significantly elevated the quality of American pencils.

Henry Petroski, a professor of civil engineering, describes the modern pencil in his book, *The Pencil*: "The lead in a single American-made pencil in the late 20th Century might be a proprietary mixture of two kinds of graphite, from Sri Lanka and Mexico, clay from Mississippi, gums from the orient, and water from Pennsylvania. The wooden case most likely would be made of western incense cedar from California, the eraser perhaps a mixture of South American rubber and Italian pumice stone." The aromatic cedar, the eraser, and sometimes the lacquer produce that great fragrance that gathers around a cup of sharpened pencils.

If there are four pencils in your desk drawer, the odds are that three will be yellow. That's because L&C Hardmuth Co. of Vienna in 1890 produced a premium pencil called the Koh-I-Nor. It was finished in the colors of the current Austro-Hungarian flag—black

(the graphite) and yellow (the wooden case). The colors came to connote quality, and, consequently, many other manufacturers flattered Hardmuth with their imitations.

Over the years, an amazing variety of pencils has been manufactured. The Joseph Dixon Company of Jersey City, N.J., (est. 1827) was at one point making more than 700 different pencil styles. Today, new designs still appear. In 2000, Faber-Castell was awarded five design awards and a place on *Business Week's* Best Products 2000

list for its new Grip 2001 pencil. Made of a very lightweight wood from Indonesia called Jelutong, the metallic gray barrel is triangular in shape and is covered with small raised dots to improve your grip.

And when might this slighted elegant piece of engineering finally become obsolete? Well, as the new century debuted, the *International Herald Tribune* reported, "Production of black-lead pencils across Europe rose 12 percent in 2001 from 2000. In developing countries, demand has grown even faster." Faber-Castell, the paper reports, has its name stamped on 1.8 billion pencils a year.

As psychologists and engineers struggle to make the interfaces between us and our computers disappear, so as to humanize the experience, we will still grab for the ignominious pencil whenever we need to make a note or sketch a solution. The writing will be uniquely in our own hand, and the medium will be what truly elegant technology is supposed to be—invisible. ■

