

JOHN MOTTISHAW'S CLASSIC FOUNTAIN PENS:

A MASTER'S LEGACY FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF PEN LOVERS

BY GREGORY PETERSON

Nibmeister John Mottishaw long has held a top spot among the elite artisans who bring out the best performance in a fountain pen. Modesty prevents this accomplished Canadian-American artist from using the term “mastery” to describe his prodigious skill with gold fountain pen nibs. But how else to describe his singular expertise?

Mottishaw's career began in fine arts—drawing, sculpting, designing, and studying Japanese art and culture. As a young man he built a metalworking foundry, learned to cast molten bronze, hammered copper onto sculptures and boat hulls, and began a lifelong love affair with gold.

“Then somewhere along the line I got seduced by fountain pens,” Mottishaw says—and for nearly a quarter-century now, serious pen lovers have been grateful he did. Today, his Classic Fountain Pens

(nibs.com) enjoys a global reputation as one of the premier places for the purchase, adjustment, and customization of the world's finest gold nibs.

THE PATHWAY TO EXPERTISE

Asked to estimate just how many nibs he has worked on, Mottishaw pauses, then he sets about doing the math aloud: “Well, let’s see...ten nibs per day, times five days per week, times 52 weeks per year, for 20 years. I’d say at least 50,000 nibs.” And how much time is required to complete a nib’s shaping, welding, grinding, slitting, polishing, and testing? For a complex nib job, Mottishaw estimates at least an hour—meaning he has spent roughly 50,000 hours practicing his exacting craft.

How to put this experience in context? Fans of author Malcolm Gladwell may remember “The 10,000 Hour Rule,” popularized in his best-selling book, *Outliers*. This rule-of-thumb metric is the point where concerted practice brings one to the threshold of mastery in most human endeavors. But at his 10,000 nib-hour “mastery milestone” (reached before the-turn-of-the-century) Mottishaw was only getting started.



When Mottishaw opened Classic Fountain Pens in 1994, his uncommon talents found a ready market—one that rapidly grew as the internet brought increased visibility and a wide geographic reach. On this foundation, Mottishaw took his highly specialized talent and built it into a successful business—one that soon will celebrate 25 years.

Unlike large stationery retailers, Classic Fountain Pens curates a relatively small number of fountain pen brands and models. It began with Germany's Pelikan pens—whose reliable, interchangeable nibs were well-suited to the customizations that differentiate Mottishaw's shop. Over time, CFP's selections grew to include many other European brands such as Aurora, Kaweco, Lamy, and Montegrappa, and others. Most prominent here, however, are the fountain pens of Japan.

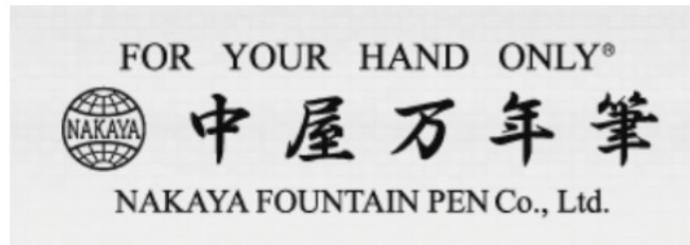
THE SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP WITH JAPANESE PENS

Mottishaw is unabashed in expressing his admiration for the pens of Japan, which he considers the epicenter for today's finest pens and nibs. Nakaya, Platinum, Sailor, Eboya, Namiki, Pilot, and Danitrio all

are held in high esteem at Classic Fountain Pens; and by all accounts, that admiration is mutual.



In 2005, a Japanese friend set up an email correspondence between Mottishaw and Nakata Toshia—whose father’s pen-manufacturing enterprise (founded in 1919) became the Platinum Pen Company. Nakata-san is president of Nakaya Fountain Pen Co., the 1997 spinoff created by Platinum retirees. As the relationship with Mottishaw grew, Nakata invited him to Tokyo for specialized training—and Classic Fountain Pens became Nakaya Pen’s exclusive representative in English-speaking markets.



Nakaya’s slogan, “For Your Hand Only,” is not just marketing fluff. One-by-one, these pens are custom-made for the specific buyer—and the customization continues when Classic Fountain Pens tunes each Nakaya nib. This pen-by-pen attention is a practice that Mottishaw has instituted for every pen—whatever the manufacturer—sold by his shop. Mottishaw’s pens all are setup, tested, and adjusted to meet each buyer’s specifications.

“THE MIDDLE WAY”

In 2010, Mottishaw and Nakaya deepened their relationship further still. Mottishaw reviewed the Nakaya offerings—and envisioned a design to fit between the company’s long, sleek desk pens and its pocket (piccolo) models. He sketched a sculpted pen body and submitted it to Nakaya master pen designer Shinichi Yoshida, who adapted this design into a prototype. With that, the Naka-ai model was born. Nakai-ai translates as “The Middle Way”—a reference not only to this pen’s

place in the Nakaya product line, but also to Buddhist ideals of balance, integrity, and centeredness that have touched Mottishaw’s life and work.



“My goal was to eliminate everything unnecessary and keep the design simple,” Mottishaw says, adding that he is “pleased with the result.” Mottishaw is not the only one pleased with the Naka-ai; his elegant, sculptured pen earned the “Best Fine Art Pen” award in Pen World’s 2018 Readers’ Choice competition.

Effusive praise also is commonplace among those who have added the Naka-ai as a crown jewel in their pen collections, like this breathless excerpt from a Fountain Pen Network member who—after a six-month wait—at last took possession of a customized Naka-ai:

Bravo, Mr. Mottishaw. It is utterly smooth...perfect flow...fantastic line variation, firm, but still with some give and some “softness” to the feel...

For a company bearing the moniker “Classic Fountain Pens,” the Naka-ai is an altogether fitting flagship. This elegant pen truly is a classic—in design, execution, and performance.

GROOMING THE NEXT GENERATION

As Mottishaw approached his 70th birthday, he became increasingly mindful of the passage of time—and of the legacy he wanted to leave behind. (“It began dawning on me,” Mottishaw says, “that physically I couldn’t do everything...and that I wanted to see Classic Fountain Pens’ services perpetuated.” With these goals in mind, Mottishaw initiated a program to train next-generation nibworkers in advanced nib-mastering techniques.

To state the obvious: nib grinding is an esoteric skill. So when Mottishaw-the-master sought talent for an “apprenticeship” position, where did he look? In the “Help Wanted” section of CraigsList—and it was there that Classic Fountain Pens found Gena Salorino. Like Mottishaw, Salorino was a talented artist, a reader, a writer, and a good

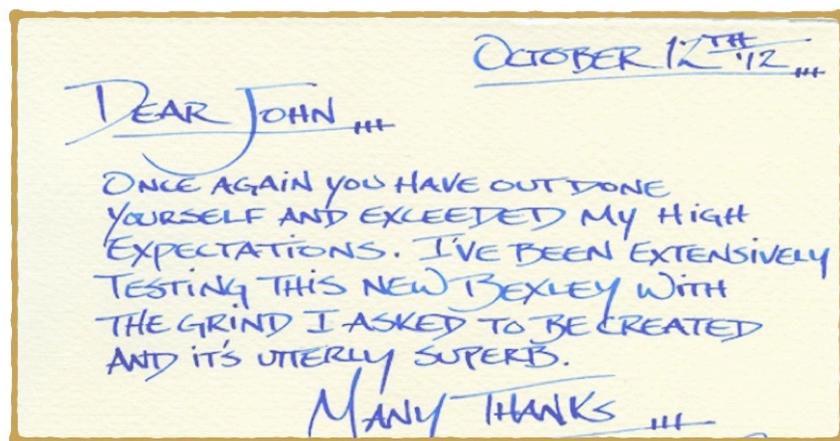
communicator. Unlike her new boss, however, Salorino had never before put her hands on a fountain pen.

Four intensive years later, Salorino now is an accomplished nib artisan in her own right. About a year ago, she was joined by Jessica Hlavac—who now does much of the testing and preparation of the shop’s new pens. Together, these dedicated apprentices are steeped in what they call “the Mottishaw Method.”



“I wanted to be very specific about what techniques would consistently yield optimal results—and quickly,” Mottishaw says. “It got down to identifying and numbering each of the nib cuts—creating a replicable, operational system of addressing nibs to meet this shop’s high standards.”

Asked how his apprentices have performed, Mottishaw clearly is pleased with the results—and he is “doubling down” on his investment in their professional development. This summer, Salorino and Hlavac are heading to Japan—where they will tour pen manufacturing operations and undergo special training from Nakaya. Mottishaw himself is still very-much-involved in day-to-day operations, but now his company’s capacity grows with each passing day. This legacy plan works.



OCTOBER 12TH '12

DEAR JOHN

ONCE AGAIN YOU HAVE OUTDONE YOURSELF AND EXCEEDED MY HIGH EXPECTATIONS. I'VE BEEN EXTENSIVELY TESTING THIS NEW BEXLEY WITH THE GRIND I ASKED TO BE CREATED AND IT'S UTTERLY SUPERB.

MANY THANKS

WRITING JUST DOESN'T GET ANY BETTER

Wisdom texts long have counseled that one should pay attention to people's accomplishments, not just their words. "By their fruits you shall know them," we've been taught. For the fountain pen community, John Mottishaw's "fruits" are manifest in so many forms—his experiments and innovations, his education and art, his sculptured Nakai, his renowned Spencerian nib customization, his leadership and his legion of friends. And now he has given a legacy gift—passing along his expertise for generations of pen lovers yet to come.

Oh yes, and one can't forget those 50,000 impeccably tuned nibs—or the long list of devoted Classic Fountain Pen customers who experience the Mottishaw magic whenever one of his nibs meets a page. Writing just doesn't get any better than this...

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