

Shawn Newton

# *An Artist First*

BY MICHELLE LEUNG



Shawn Newton in his shop

Shawn Newton considers himself an artist first and a pen maker second. In art school, he focused on printmaking and sculpture classes and has always loved drawing, building, and sculpting—working with his hands. He was also, like many of us, a pen nut.

“I had always had an affinity for pens and pencils. I was the weird kid in school who actually wore a fanny pack and carried all of my best pens and pencils around with

me,” he says. Newton’s wife, Elizabeth, bought him his very first fountain pen, a Sheaffer Viewpoint with a fine italic nib, for Valentine’s day in 2010 and he quickly got hooked.

He was a high school art teacher when he got that Sheaffer Viewpoint and “went nuts” (as many of us do) buying pens on eBay. He admits that most of them weren’t great, but over the years he gave hundreds of inexpensive pens to his students: coming from humble



Majestic in cast sterling silver with Tibaldi celluloid accents; Moody in black ebonite with more than 2 carats of diamonds and 18 karat white gold clip

circumstances himself (he received financial assistance to attend college from a friend's mother), he has made it his mission to give back. Many students lost the pens or spilled ink in other teachers' classrooms, but there were always some who appreciated the pens as much as Newton did, and he still looks forward to hearing from former students when they bug him for more ink.

He began making pens in early 2012 as a way to save some money and also be able to give better quality pens to his students. He launched a Kickstarter campaign to help pay for tooling and associated costs of getting his business up and running. The premise was simple— buy a pen from him and one of his students would also get a pen. He has given students at least 100 pens that he has made, and continues to do that as much as he can even though he stopped teaching last year in order to devote himself to pen

making full time. Teachers choose the recipients—kids who work hard, who stick with it—those who really deserve a pat on the back. Newton now has a successful registered charity to help fund scholarships for graduating seniors; people who contribute receive a pack of postcards featuring student art.

As an artist, Newton is always interested in the process, the techniques, involved in making something. As a print maker, he studied the work of several modern and historical print makers, looking at their cuts and lines, trying to see how they started with the drawing, and how that became a cut block of wood or linoleum. "I wanted to know how they made the cuts, what direction they moved their tools, why they cut from a certain area a certain way. With pen making, once I discovered these guys making pens on wood lathes, I wanted to know how, and wanted to do it myself."



Newton reached out online to fellow pen makers Ken Cavers and John Brady about technique and the steps to creating these functional works of art. He never watched anyone make a pen in the flesh, but instead harnessed the power of YouTube and watched endless hours of videos on wood turning and the basics of operating a wood lathe, including how to hold the tools so you don't break a piece...or lose a finger! He eventually bought a metal lathe, kept talking to his mentors, watched more videos, and learned the basics on his own. "Practice, practice, practice," is how he got better, he says. "Do that thing so many times until you don't have to think about it anymore. The motions become almost automatic." At first he mimicked others' techniques, but now it's evident that Newton Pens is building bespoke pens completely differently from anyone else on the market.

When asked about his first few pens, Newton admits, "They were pretty terrible looking. But to run you first have to crawl. The pens themselves were functional and worked, but they weren't made very well." This is certainly not the case anymore.

To say Newton's body of work is eclectic would be an understatement. Most of his designs have evolved from client requests but he has also designed some truly original sculpted models, which he calls the Breaker and the Prospector. "When I was in college at Henderson State I took some sculpture classes under Mac Hornecker and absolutely loved it. I had never really done any sculpting before then and he introduced me to so much. He was one of the greatest teachers I've ever had. Sculpting a pen in my shop sort of brings me back to his sculpture studio, busting my knuckles, burning my arms welding, and hammering and cutting

Two different interpretations of the Orville—a bulb-filler in antique gold acrylic and a version in black ebonite with dalmatian acrylic accents



Breaker in black ebonite with flat ends; below, the Prospector in Lava ebonite. Newton uses JoWo nibs in steel or gold.



and grinding. There's a real peace of mind when sculpting with your hands like that."

One of Newton's most popular models is the Shinobi, which received much positive attention at the beginning of 2015 from several reviewers. The Shinobi is a straight, cylindrical pen with a flat cut on one side to keep it from rolling around. It appears to be a simple pen but it is completely customizable so that each pen is unique—and that's what makes the Shinobi so popular. The Shinobi needs to be seen and held in order to appreciate its simple beauty.

Newton is also one of the only custom pen makers who can build a piston filler from scratch, making all the parts except the o-rings. He can also hand-carve ebonite feeds and he works with sterling silver and copper to make clips and other parts. He works with a jeweler to create custom overlays and his own gold nibs. He can build new parts for

vintage pens, do custom nib grinding and also make a new *binde*—the decorative sleeve that fits on the barrel—for your Pelikan pen. Basically, if you can think it up, Newton can work with you to make your dream pen a reality.

"I love to bring a smile to somebody's face and pleasure to their writing experience. There's nothing better," Newton sums up.

*Prices start at \$225 for most models.*

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