

Art In Pens

Anuj Poddar's journey from Calcutta street to California boulevard

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Three things stand out behind the success of AP Pens. Founder Anuj Poddar's love for fountain pens, art and the Maki-e technique. It was his passion for writing, and doing so only with fountain pens, that led Poddar to start collecting writing instruments at a tender age and later designing them.

Poddar's first fountain pen was a Sheaffer, gifted by his mother on his eighth birthday. Attraction for such a fine writing instrument was one thing, but Poddar's love for fountain pens grew manifold when he found his handwriting improving using the Sheaffer.

"I enjoy writing, and after I discovered how enjoyable it is to use a fountain pen, a quest began that never seems to end," says Poddar.

This quest stayed with him through his childhood in what was then Calcutta, when he roamed around Lindsay Street looking for his next acquisition, to his days in England where he went for higher studies, and to the US where he emigrated and finally started his eponymous pen brand.

THE BEGINNING

Poddar decided to launch AP Pens in 2004. He had finalized the themes and names of the first pens and the design that he wanted on them. But that was the easy part. With hopes of creating his own brand of pen, he travelled to Japan to meet the right Maki-e artists who would design the pen. The next two years, however, turned out to be a real struggle.

"Given the differences in culture and my own inability to speak the language, I struggled for over 15 months before I was able to identify the right artist," says Poddar. "There was the usual trial and error, rejections and reworking the entire process," Poddar recalls.

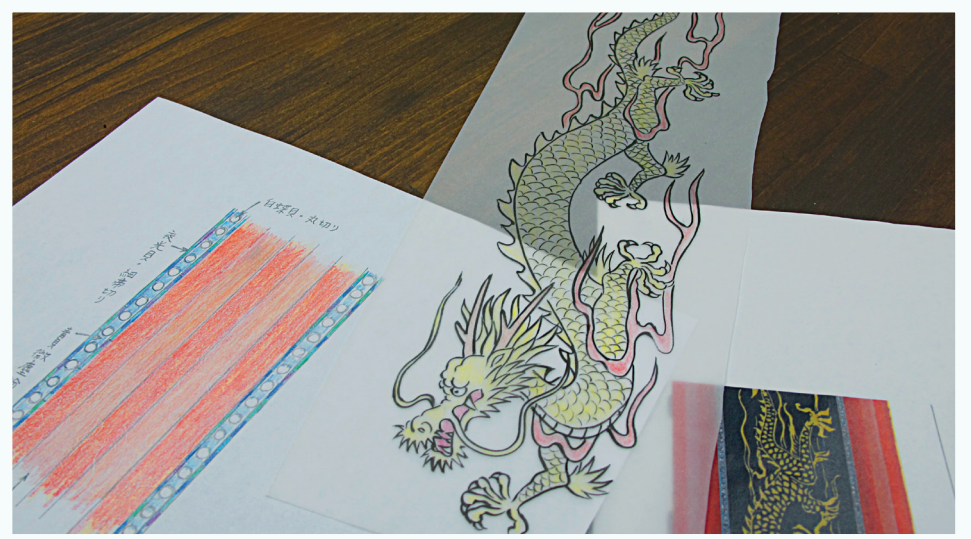
Finally, after several failed trials, rejections and false starts, AP Limited Edition Pens were launched on 15 February 2006 at the Los Angeles International Pen Show.

The first two pens that were launched under the AP Pens brand were the Ganesha and the Hanuman. They were two different pens but were launched together. "The Ganesha and the Hanuman were our greatest challenge," says Poddar. The religious themes came from childhood memories, says Poddar.

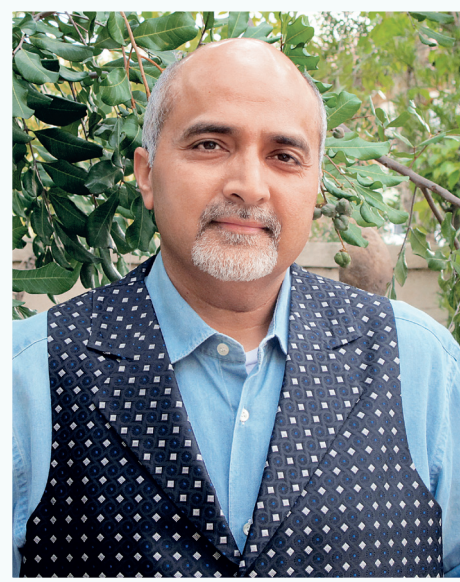
Finding the right Maki-e artist was the biggest problem, but "we finally found just the perfect blend and the best person to work with us," says Poddar. Only one artist from Japan was finally involved in the making of the Ganesha and the Hanuman. The limited editions of 18 pens each were priced at \$18,000 apiece.

THE PROCESS

The inspiration for a new writing instrument can come from anywhere. AP Limited Edition has pens with themes as varied as Hindu mythology, the circus and wildlife. After the theme is decided, a story line is drawn and sent to the artists in either Japan or Russia. The artist, in turn, after understanding the theme and the storyline, sends across the sketches for review. Changes, if any, are accommodated and the design is finalized. Poddar then gives the artist blank pens and, depending on the intricacies of the design, a pen can take between three months to one year to complete. After inspections and approval, the nib



ONE OF A KIND: A pattern being designed on paper (above) and Anuj Poddar.



and other parts are assembled, packed and shipped.

In this entire process, the selection of the art form and the artist are the most important things. As of now, two art forms—Maki-e, which is an ancient form of craft in Japan since the 16th century, and Russian lacquer art, which has prevailed in Russia since the 1700s—are used to make the pens.

"I am constantly looking for new forms of art and new artists I could work with," says Poddar. "I travel extensively, visit the artists in their studios, and research them and their prior works. I try to talk to people who know the artist or have knowledge of their work. Once I feel the artists are passionate about working with us, I first give them a pen or two to work on with an idea of their own. Once satisfied with the end product, we may begin what we call our own journey together as associates of AP Limited Editions."

Right now, there are 14 artists who work with AP Limited Edition Pens on a regular basis.

AP Pens come out in limited editions of 9 or 18 pens in any given series and cost between ₹2.5 lakh and ₹24 lakh and are sold through William Penn in India. The pens' bodies are made in Japan using ebonite, which makes the instruments light and durable. Poddar insists that no chemicals are used at any time of production. The nibs are made in Germany using 18-karat gold.

AP Limited Editions offers two kinds of writing instruments—the Connoisseur Series and the Writers Series. "The Connoisseur Series is a larger desk pen and we use the traditional eye dropper to fill ink in these pens; they do not have clips," says Poddar. "The Writers Series is designed to be used on a daily basis and, therefore, is smaller in length and in diameter, and the ink is filled with the use of a converter."

FUTURE PLANS

The clients of AP Pens are pen collectors or art lovers. "It is generally professionals, businessmen and women and people who

WHAT IS MAKI-E

Maki-e art developed in Japan 1,400 years ago and is a highly respected and rare form of art practised by just a handful of Maki-e artists. A skilled Maki-e artist has to begin his learning at an early age and work as an apprentice to his master artist for many years before he can set out on his own. Maki-e art features Urushi lacquer (sap from the Urushi tree that is native to Japan) along with gold powder and other precious and semi-precious materials painted and inlaid into intricate designs. The Urushi lacquer is refined in four-seven steps before it can actually be used for Maki-e. There are four main types of Maki-e that may be used in any given product—Hira Maki-e, Togidashi Maki-e, Taka Maki-e and Shishai Maki-e. The processes can vary depending on the amount of detail in the design and level of expertise desired.

WHAT IS RUSSIAN LACQUER MINIATURE ART

This is an age-old form of painting that was used in Imperial Russia to paint icons at churches and decorate the homes of the royals. The artists specialize in different forms of miniature painting in four distinct styles depending on the region they represent. There are four main regions—the Palekh School, the Kholui School, the Fedoskino School and the Mstera School.

Each school has its own distinct style of painting. The work is always very detailed and elaborate and in miniature form. The level of details and clarity depends on the artist authoring the object.

have done well for themselves," says Poddar. "We find that our collectors find us." The buyers of AP Pens worldwide are Indian, Americans, Asians and Europeans.

The pen maker has recently started offering its buyers the opportunity to create a one-of-a-kind pen just for them. "The pen could have a theme that is personal to them, have a short message on the pen and/or depict something personal to them," says Poddar, adding that the move is a result of extensive market feedback and request of several customers worldwide.

But despite reasonable success in the past years, Poddar is looking to grow in a slow-paced and phased-out manner. "Exclusivity, rare beauty and excellence is what we provide and that we must continue to do." ■

CONNOISSEUR'S CHOICE:
The Ganesha 108 (above)
and the Wish Granting Cow.

