

# Anuj Poddar and the art of designer pens

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3

**AP Limited Editions' exquisite writing instruments are expensive works of art inspired by various regions and much sought after by collectors**

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Special to Weekend Review

In the times of computers, iPads and QWERTY keypads Anuj Poddar has managed to create a niche of his own. He is the founder and CEO of the Los Angeles-based AP Limited Editions (APLE) that manufactures exquisite designer pens.

Poddar's story began at the age of 8, when he was studying at La Martiniere for Boys in Kolkata, India. "I was gifted my first fountain pen, a Parker 51, by my mother. A pen with a turquoise blue barrel and a silver cap, it had gold accents on it," Poddar recalls.

Enchanted by the fine-writing instrument, it led to an improved handwriting over time. With it began Poddar's quest to collect pens and his passion for unique pens has only grown each year. Today, at 52, he still uses fountain pens to note down his thoughts and feelings and has a collection of 368 outstanding fountain pens, outside his APLE brand of pens.

"While I acquired some through auctions at Bonhams and Christie's, others were bought from antique dealers from all over the world and from pen stores in Australia, London, New Zealand and Canada," he says.

His family has been art collectors for decades and Poddar grew up with art around him. "I was especially mesmerised by miniature art, which I still appreciate and believe that it is out-of-the-world," he says. It was this passion for art and the love for pens that led him to toy with the idea of manufacturing pens and starting his own venture. "This meant founding my own pen brand bearing my own initials."

While in England he would visit hubs in London, including Harrods, Covent Garden and Burlington Arcade and buy the most intriguing pieces. His visits to the United States gave Poddar the opportunity to interact with the collector fraternity and also helped him gain more knowledge about pens. No wonder, when APLE was launched, it attained a distinctive status amongst the connoisseurs of designer pens.

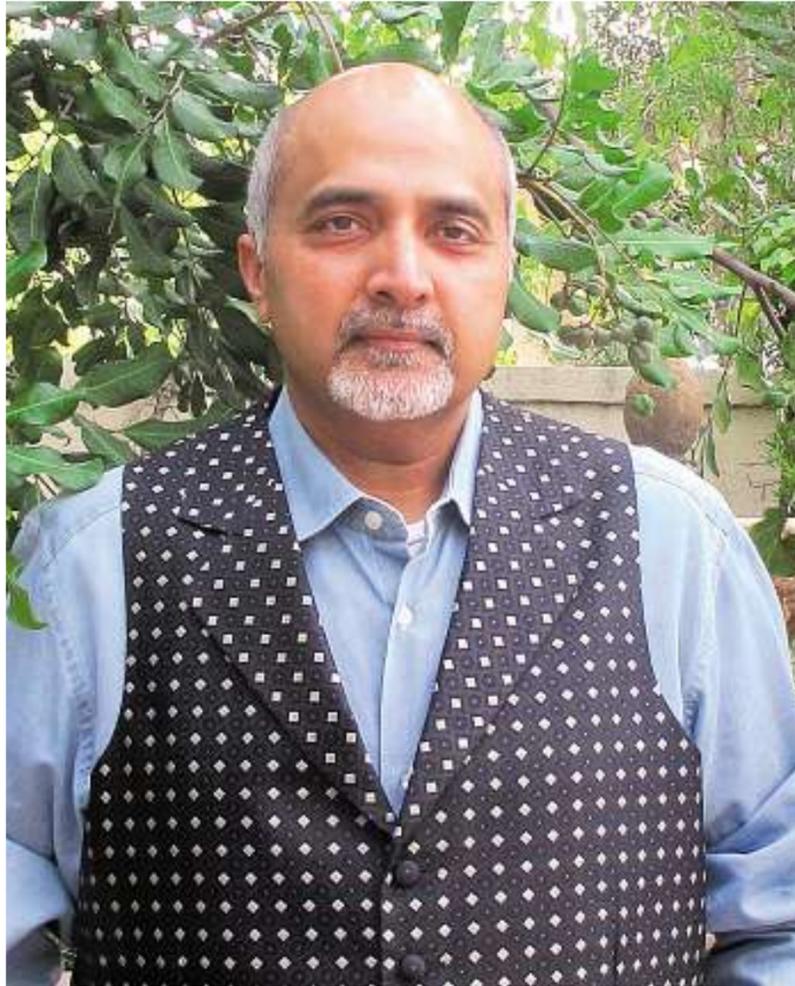
For inspiration, Poddar travels across the globe to find Asian techniques of art that can be rendered on a pen. "This is an experimental process since the story and the art form may come from two completely diverse cultures. For instance, the circus theme on a pen was inspired from my childhood memories of Russian circus groups. Then there was an antique Jamawar shawl in the family for over 100 years. Woven in Kashmir, it had an exquisite design and I spoke to an artist to do a rendition of the shawl in different colours. One has to see it to believe the end result," he gushes.

Poddar has a team of creative people headed by his wife, Smita. He says, "When I first launched the company, Smita thought I was crazy, though she still supported me. It was only later that she became equally involved."

Since every pen has a story to tell, Smita and her team prepare a narrative that tells the collector about the inspiration behind the pen. And when the pen is sold, it goes with a certificate and the story of its growth.

The aesthetic intricacy and craftsmanship that characterise the APLE pens shows the painstaking work that goes into each piece. Many pens have religion as a theme. But Poddar insists, "Religion is not the brand's focus. It just happens that some pens have been inspired by religions of the East. We find that miniature art renders itself beautifully in the depiction of religious themes. But we have many ideas from nature and wildlife as well."

Each pen features a German-made 18-karat gold nib and Poddar pays as much attention to the packaging. He uses the world's best materials and opts for the top manufacturers. Each wooden case is beautifully inlaid and finished, since he desires that his clients must love the box as much as the pen they invest in.



Anuj Poddar, founder and CEO, AP Limited Editions pens

Interestingly, while pens are supposed to be written with, Poddar claims, "Most of our buyers do not use the pens to write. They are kept as showpieces." He stands as a strong advocate of use rather than display. "My pens are designed for collectors who appreciate art. But since I use pens that are in my collection, I do advise others to do the same."

The collector and manufacturer of designer pens spoke to *Weekend Review*:

■ **How were you able to afford the intriguing pens at a young age when you visited England?**

It was in 1974, when I was 11-years-old that I went to England for a summer vacation with the family. I collected all my savings and instead of buying toys or games, I would go looking for pens. My siblings would laugh and suggest I rather buy a camera or a racing car set to play with, but that was not of interest to me and pens were my only passion.

■ **Do you have all those pens from the early collection?**

No, unfortunately, I gave most of them to my friends or relatives when I was in my teens.

## What is Japanese Maki-e art?

It developed in Japan 1,400 years ago and is a highly respected and rare form of art practiced 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.

■ **How did the transition from India to UK to US happen?**

I began my studies in India followed by London and was back in India in the early 1990s. In 1994, I went to the US to do my Masters in Business Administration and three years later, took up a job in Los Angeles as marketing consulting manager for one of the largest recruiting firms, Korn Ferry International. A year later, in 1998, I joined Identicator, a company that manufactured equipment for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). In 2001, I quit the job to start my own business of manufacturing fingerprinting equipment, which I continue with a partner.

■ **For how long did you toy with the idea of founding your own pen brand?**

It was at the back of my mind even when I took up the first job in 1997, but due to financial constraints nothing could transpire. And even though I began working on it in 2004, it was not until 2006 that I was able to launch my brand. That is because we had to find the right artist to design the pen and the right supplier to market it. The three times that I rejected the design; we had to start all over again.

## Russian lacquer miniature art

It developed when highly skilled painters sought other expressions of their talent. The four villages of Fedoskino, Mstera, Kholuj and Palekh, once the traditional centres of iconic art, developed into thriving art centres where miniature art was developed and expressed in distinct styles that blended the traditional European and Oriental traditions of lacquer miniatures. The age-old art form of painting was used in Imperial Russia to paint icons at churches and decorate the homes of the royals.



**Blade Of Magnificence**, an APLE pen with a Maki-e rendition of a sword

■ **Which were the first designs that you manufactured?**

We started with designs of Ganesha and Hanuman, two Hindu deities. And the first APLE pens were launched in 2006 in Los Angeles. Since the retail price of each pen at that time was \$18,000 (Dh66,113), I was a bit apprehensive of finding buyers. But amazingly, it met with stupendous success and we received orders for the months to come!

■ **What is the price and who are the buyers of your pens?**

Presently, we are manufacturing Japanese Maki-e art pens and the Russian Lacquer miniature art pens. These range from \$2,400 to \$42,000. We sell through specialised retail pen shops all over the world. The buyers include doctors, lawyers, businessmen, engineers and architects.

■ **Isn't it ironic for doctors to buy pens, considering it's difficult to decipher their writing?**

I agree, doctors all over the world write only what they alone can read! But yes, they are very big collectors of pens, especially in the US. In fact, when we launched our brand, the buyers were mostly doctors and stockbrokers.

■ **Do you have any personal favourites from your own collection or from the ones that you manufacture?**

I treasure the Namiki White Tiger and Kirara. I acquired the latter from Andy Lambrou, author of many books on pens, including *The Fountain Pens of the World*. From my own brand, it is the Maki-e art pen Trees of Life. I also enjoy writing with a Russian lacquer art pen The Nine Nights, depicting Durga. Another favourite is the Wisdom and Power.

■ **How often do you write with these pens?**

I prefer handwritten notes and write every time I wish to thank someone, or when sending a message on a wedding or anniversary, instead of a printed card. The bond that I shared with Donald Almey, the principal of my high school in Kolkata, was because of the handwritten note I sent to him. Before going to London for higher studies I wrote to him thanking him for the education I received at the school. He was very impressed and phoned me, asking me to have dinner with him when I visited my parents next. So, at the age of 17, I had become friends with a 45-year-old man!

■ **Any particular pen you missed buying at any point of time?**

Yes, there was a very early and scarcely available limited edition Namiki Double Dragon pen. I actually did own it at one time, but when I wasn't doing too well, much before I launched my company, I sold it at an auction for about \$8,000. And if I were to buy it now, it would cost me over \$30,000, so I have never considered purchasing it.

■ Nilima Pathak is a journalist based in New Delhi.

interview