

An Interview with *Bruno Corsini*

I first meet Bruno Corsini many years ago at the Columbus Ohio Pen Show and was immediately taken by a pen he had made. It was precise in every detail— uniquely designed and beautifully turned and polished. A silver snake of his design coiled around the cap to form a pocket clip. I had seen few pens where the phrase ‘meticulous attention to detail’ counted as much as this one. I later learned that Bruno is likely to spend hours designing and manufacturing a specific tool for a few individual pens. He strives to make custom pens that are unique in character and with qualities and a level of precision that is not commonly encountered. His fittings and components, like a cap clip or filling mechanism, often showcase his originality and may take as much time to think out and execute as the custom pen itself. Bruno is old school in his approach to pen making. But rather than explaining what I mean by that term, it is better for you to read what Bruno says instead.

FPJ: What got you interested in making pens?

BC: I'd been using fountain pens for about 30 years and collecting vintage pens for about 10 years. As a collector, I had an interest in newer pens that were made in vintage style (e.g. Parker Duofold Centennial, Bexley Original). I commissioned Chris Thompson to do a few replica pens and I also had Paul Rossi make me a nice solid orange pen to hold a spare Parker

nib. I'd hit a point in my previous field (software development) where it was no longer fun, so I decided to change direction and pen making seemed a natural choice. I did some chatting with three top pen makers – Paul Rossi, Chris Thompson and David Broadwell – all of whom were very helpful and supportive.



■ Droplet Pattern Overlay pen is the result of a collaboration with Henry Simpole of London, England. Pen is a button-filler in red hard rubber with Simpole sterling silver overlay.

FPJ: What are a fountain pen's most important features?

BC: All its attributes are important...but what's most important depends entirely on the user. It all boils down to how you feel with the pen. There's the visuals... does the pen look cool? There's the feel in the hand... shape, size and weight. Is it comfortable to use? The nib, of course, is always very high on

the list for those who write with their pens, but the details of the nib are very individual. And the filling system...how easy is it to use and maintain? Does it perform well? Again, it's all how you feel with the pen.



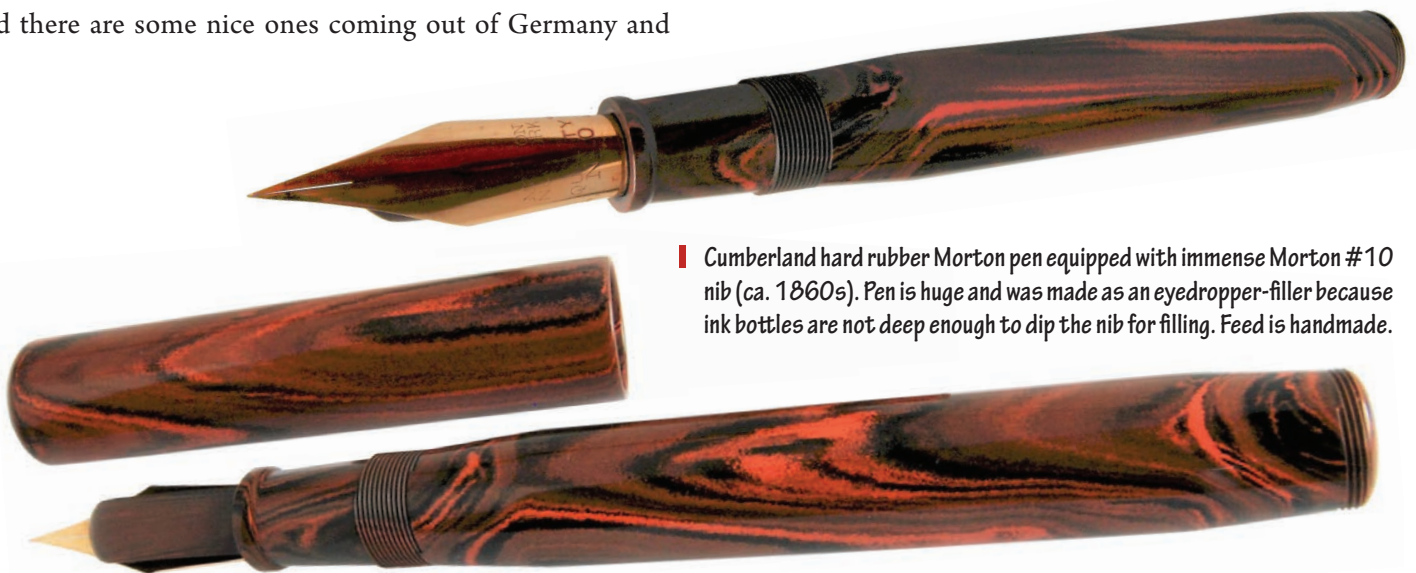
█ Piston-fill limited edition PENguin pen (in collaboration with Rick Propas) is made from a mix of materials. Barrel is a modern “alternative ivory” and amber acrylic is used to reflect the coloring of the Emperor Penguin.



FPJ: How do acrylics and other modern materials compare to celluloid, hard rubber and other materials found in vintage pens?

BC: I think many of the modern acrylics look too flashy, lacking the subtle elegance of the vintage hard rubbers and celluloids. In some cases, modern materials look like they are trying to emulate something vintage but to my eye they just can't pull it off. Many of the newer hard rubber materials are getting better and there are some nice ones coming out of Germany and

Japan. What I would really like is something to look like the early mottled red and black but I've seen nothing yet that can reproduce that. As one who harkens back to the early 20th century with my designs, I find it difficult to find the right materials that evoke that era.



█ Cumberland hard rubber Morton pen equipped with immense Morton #10 nib (ca. 1860s). Pen is huge and was made as an eyedropper-filler because ink bottles are not deep enough to dip the nib for filling. Feed is handmade.

FPJ: Speaking of materials, are there any that you especially like working with?

BC: My favorite is hard rubber. It's not that I like “working with it” as hard rubber is rough on the tools and can take a lot of time. But the end result is worth it. I've been using some old stock hard rubber that has produced some beautiful pens and

some newer materials out of Germany and Japan are also nice. I've also been working lately with pearl inlays in the pen bodies and that's producing some nice results.

FPJ: What's your take on today's use of the cartridge/converter filling system? Do you favor a particular type(s) of filling mechanisms? If so, why?

BC: I don't use cartridge/converter systems in my pens. It's a modern convenience that I'm just not interested in. I think they have their place and I certainly have a number of pens in my collection that use them. I favor sac-filling pens, mainly because they are the most reliable for the long term. And sac-fillers provide for various mechanisms to squeeze the sac, leading to many interesting and fun designs. I've developed a number of

different sac-filling pens, using some of the interesting early designs, but always trying to improve upon them. Since I don't think about fast manufacturing issues, I take whatever time it takes to do them. My crescent fillers and sleeve fillers are a couple of the most interesting. That said, I'm not averse to the various kinds of barrel filling designs. I've done quite a few eyedroppers and piston fillers.

FPJ: Is there a time and place where you prefer to work?

BC: Well, as for a place... I need to work where the lathe is. That means in that tiny space in the back of the garage. The time is when I feel like it.

FPJ: What is it you wish to convey through your pens? Are there themes you like to repeat?

BC: My pens are meant to look, feel and behave like the pens of the early 20th century. I reflect that in the overall design, materials, clips, filling systems and nibs. I also want them to perform very well of course.

FPJ: What pitfalls are novice pen makers likely to encounter? Any advice for them?

BC: The main thing is to understand how a pen works. Then, think about how to differentiate your pens from the others out there. Be unique.

FPJ: What basic skills are needed to make a decent pen? What aspects of pen making are most difficult?

BC: Machining skills are most important to me. And one of the most important machining skills is decent mathematical ability. I like my pens to be very precise. Everything should fit extremely well and operate smoothly, without a feel of cheapness or cut corners. I use geometry and trigonometry in my processes. When I started making pens, I spent a lot of time studying things like the geometry of threads, in order to learn how to calculate best fits. As time went on, I developed some

software to assist in the repetitive calculations. For example, I can easily and accurately create any desired radius end on a pen through a series of calculated cuts, rather than using specialized tooling that's expensive and hard to set up. I can also calculate how to cut non-standard threads when I need to use thin material, or how to generalize multi-start threads for any possibility. This comes in handy when I do repairs of old pens and need to match threads.

I Corsini Black Crescent with Pearl fountain pen. Pearl ring around barrel involved making a faceted groove around the pen and cutting 10 separate trapezoidal pieces of pearl, each about 1/6" in length.



FPJ: In your opinion, are custom pens different from factory-produced pens? What special touches set apart a Corsini-made pen?

BC: Since I started making pens, I've observed factory produced pens in a different light. I look at the designs and see features that may be incorporated for the purposes of keeping costs down and allowing pens to be made with less effort to "fit and finish". For example, a piece of metal trim between two parts, while it may be a visual accoutrement, may also be there

because it means the parts don't need to fit flush or have finished edges. I pay no attention to such things in my pens. I don't mass produce, so I do whatever it takes to get the pen to be what I envision. Subtle curves and tapers, smooth joints, clean fitting threads... all are hallmarks of my pens.



I Corsini Black Pen Society fountain pen with its elegant curves and tapers contains an actual 2016 Black Pen Society pin in end cap. White strips are made using the same Ivory Alternative material that went into the PENguin pen

FPJ: What tools make your work more enjoyable and easier? What is the one tool you would be lost without?

BC: Well of course, the one fundamental tool is the lathe. I suspect it would be rather difficult to make a pen without one. Besides that, I use mills, drills, grinders and sanders. But in addition to the tools used to form the pen, there a number of metrology tools... those used to accurately measure. My pens are made to close tolerances and I measure to sizes under 1/1000th of an inch ("a thou"). I use quite a few tools for measurement and find most to be invaluable.

In this same vein, something I do not use is Computer Numerical Control (CNC), a type of computerized machining. In other words, all the machining is completely hand controlled. In making pens of the early style, I also prefer to incorporate the early methods as well. CNC is great for mass production, but not for my work. Being that I spent a career working with software technology, I wanted to make a break from that in my pen making. And besides, I have rather limited space here so I need to be very selective about the tools I can fit into a small shop. My lathe is old and small, but sturdy and serves me well.



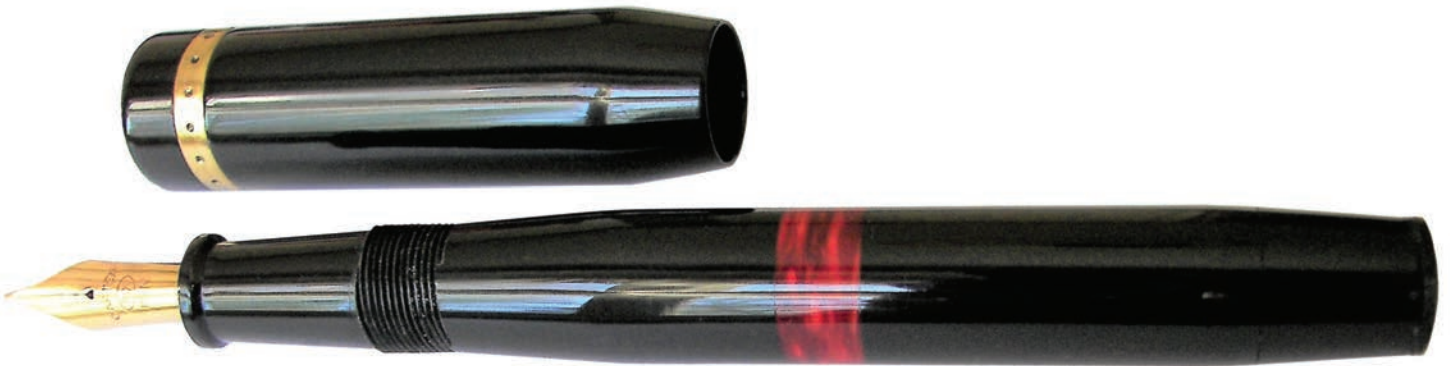
I Corsini pens are made to very close tolerances. For the Blue Helix pen pictured, Bruno cuts 16 grooves using a careful lathe setup. Then, 1/16" wide pieces of Paua Abalone are cut to nearly 1/2" in length and shaped to a precise fit before being set into the pen. Note vintage Waterman #7 Blue nib.

FPJ: Can you give us an idea of the work and time it takes to make a Corsini pen? What aspects are most difficult to execute?

BC: I don't think any pen takes me less than 10 or 12 hours in the actual construction of the pen, although many take much more than that. I don't use CNC machines so every cut is done manually. And on top of that is the time spent in design, tool making, testing, and even in the communications with the customer. It's a good thing I'm not trying to support myself with this. What's difficult is anything I'm doing for the first time. But then it usually gets easier as I learn more about the process.

FPJ: The Johnny Cash pen has a history that brought you and me together. Please tell the story.

BC: Well, Johnny Cash died shortly after I started my pen-making endeavors. We had not yet met, but one day you proposed a question on one of the pen forums (I think it was PenLovers.com). You asked if someone might make a pen as an homage to Johnny Cash. My immediate response on the forum was that if it was done, it most certainly should be made from black hard rubber. A few ideas were bantered about. In 2006, I attended the Columbus show for the first time and that's where we met. We talked about the Johnny Cash pen and did some hasty drawings. It sat on the back burner until a couple years ago when I decided to just make one. It was not quite what we'd drawn up, but by that time the Black Pen Society had formed and I wanted to keep it primarily black. It has a red "Ring of Fire" around the barrel. The cap top is shaped to conform to Johnny Cash's early hair style. And of course, it has a Carter nib.



■ Johnny Cash pen contains at least three Cash elements: Black (hard rubber), Ring of Fire and Carter nib.



For more information about Corsini pens, visit brunocorsinipens.com