



FABER-CASTELL

since 1761



A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PENCIL

OVER 400 YEARS OLD

The pencil, that most universal, economical, versatile, environment-friendly yet unprepossessing of writing and drawing implements for the common man, is produced and consumed by the thousand million every year – even in this age of the internet. Children in every country learn to write with it; in later life it is indispensable for all kinds of notes and sketches and drafts – for everything, in fact, that is written or drawn by hand and may have to be corrected. The pencil is long-lasting, undemanding, unaffected by climatic changes, and even writes under water or in space. What other writing implement can claim to be such an all-rounder?



*Graphite and clay
for pencil leads*

TANGLED TALE

The history of the pencil is long and somewhat complicated. But one important point to start with: the ‘lead’ pencil never had anything to do with lead. Admittedly, Pliny the elder mentions small leaden discs – but he says they were used for ruling lines, not for writing or drawing. When an early document records a “lead-coloured substance, greasy to the touch, which stains the fingers, is more convenient for drawing than pen and ink, and whose marks can easily be rubbed out”, it can only be referring to graphite. For that is what pencil leads are made of – at least since 1565. That was when a recognizable ancestor of the present-day pencil was first documented in England. It owed its existence to the discovery of extensive graphite deposits in the Cumbrian hills. People thought they had stumbled on lead glance or plumbago, which they sawed into thin rods and sandwiched between pieces of wood to make the first crude ‘lead’ pencils. It was not until the late 18th century that the chemist Karl Wilhelm Scheele showed that the supposed lead ore was in fact quite a different substance. He named it graphite, derived from the Greek word for writing. Though very much softer than diamond, it is also a form of carbon and is completely non-toxic. The expression ‘graphite pencil’ never really caught on, and to this day we speak of pencil leads.

*Lead cutter,
circa 1700*



BLACK GOLD

As later became clear, the graphite from the mine in Cumberland was exploited in a reckless way, being used in its pure form for making simple pencils. When the reserves threatened to run out, its export was banned – on pain of death, according to one source. The scarcity of this ‘black gold’ pushed up the price until finally it was worth 200 francs a pound on the international market.

At the same time, the quality of both the graphite and the pencils made from it grew worse. Only thanks to its monopoly was Britain able to maintain such high prices for such poor products. Binding agents such as glue, latex, or gum tragacanth were used to ‘stretch’ the graphite.



Graphite pencil from the 17th century

THE EARLY PENCIL-MAKERS IN NUREMBERG

The pencil was first mentioned in Germany in 1644, in an artillery officer’s notebook. And Hanns Baumann of Nuremberg, who died on 7 February 1659, was named in his son’s marriage contract as a pencil maker – the first time this trade is documented. The names of other citizens of Nuremberg, such as Jäger, Jänicke, or Friedrich Staedler (who was forbidden by a council decree of 1662 to manufacture pencils) have been recorded for posterity in this connection.



*Lothar von Faber,
1817-1896*

THE FIRST QUALITY GERMAN PENCIL

A century later, in 1761, the cabinet-maker Caspar Faber set up his own pencil business a couple of miles outside the city gates at Stein. He thus laid the foundation stone for the present FABER-CASTELL group. But it was his great-grandson Lothar who brought about the rise of the German pencil industry in the 19th century. Lothar Faber took over the small A.W. Faber company in 1839; it was thanks to him that within a few decades the Nuremberg region blossomed into the centre of European pencil production.

He was responsible for the world-wide availability and reputation of the pencil in its present form and quality.

Lothar's efforts were revolutionary for the time; his technical and marketing skills made him a major industrialist. This development could not have been predicted; in fact German pencil manufacturers had a poor reputation. There was a shortage of local raw materials; the pencils were marketed anonymously; prices were dictated by the traders, so there was little incentive for the manufacturers to provide quality goods. Around 1800 some Nuremberg workshops produced what looked like pencils but in fact were simply wooden sticks with a small piece of graphite let into each end. The name Nuremberg came to be associated with shoddy goods. Lothar took the opposite step, becoming the first German pencil manufacturer to make quality his watchword. His travels abroad in his youth had taught him that this was the only way to success. In 1862 he was ennobled for his outstanding services as an employer and social benefactor. Later, as Baron Lothar von Faber, he was even appointed hereditary counsellor to the King of Bavaria.



*The first brand-name pencils,
A. W. Faber Polygrades*



A.W. Faber factory, circa 1860

SUCCESS WITH NEW PRODUCTION METHODS

Lothar started in 1839 by improving the graphite/clay method, which had been invented almost simultaneously by Conté in France and Hartmuth in Austria at the end of the 18th century. Powdered graphite was mixed with clay, formed into thin rods, and fired in kilns. By varying the proportions it was possible to produce pencils in different grades of hardness. Lothar made some technical improvements and increased the efficiency of his factory. Water power was harnessed, the sawing and planing of the wood were mechanized, and later a steam engine provided even more power.

The way was now open to rationalized industrial production.

Lothar applied his business acumen to all aspects of both his products and the marketing of them. He was not only the inventor of the hexagonal pencil; he also laid down standards for length, thickness, and hardness, which were adopted by most of the other manufacturers. Within a few years “A.W. Faber” became synonymous with quality pencils. Lothar also laid great store by quality for all his catalogues and price lists, packaging, etc. As he noted in his journal, “I had my labels produced by the best lithographers; until this day they remain the most attractive of any used for pencils. I took similar care with my invoices, letterheads, display charts and price lists.”

*Page from a catalogue,
circa 1860*



*Entrance to the graphite mine
in Siberia*



AN INDUSTRIALIST FINDS HIS FORTUNE IN SIBERIA

A lucky chance contributed in no small way to Lothar's success. In 1856 he acquired a mine in distant Siberia – not far from Irkutsk near the Mongolian border – which produced the best graphite of the time. The valuable material had to be transported to the nearest port by reindeer, over enormous distances without the slightest hint of a road; its journey was not over when the ship later docked in Germany. The cost was high, of course, but as English graphite was by now practically non-existent, Lothar held all the trump cards. He sealed his success with another unusual step for those days. From 1847 he marked his quality pencils with the name of the company. “A.W. Faber” pencils thus became not just the first brand-name writing implements anywhere in the world. He later wrote in his memoirs “From the beginning I strove to rise to the highest position by producing the best that could be made in the whole world.”



Pencils made of Siberian graphite

Lothar was the first pencil manufacturer to travel in Germany and abroad with samples of his products. And he demanded prices which until then only English pencils could command. That led Nuremberg merchants, who were accustomed to neither quality nor the corresponding prices, to wonder “whether Faber is putting silver in his pencils”. But the young industrialist with the unconventional ideas was not to be put off.

By the 1850s his pencils had become sought-after, at first abroad and later also at home in Germany. Other Nuremberg manufacturers followed his example; in the course of the 19th century companies such as Staedtler, Schwan, and Lyra were founded. By the end of the century there were some 25 pencil factories in Nuremberg, producing up to 250 million pencils a year with a value of 8.5 million marks – a great deal of money in those days. A.W. Faber, the largest of them, employed around 1000 people. Germany now led the world in pencil production, with most of the factories concentrated in and around Nuremberg.



London



Paris



New York

Maisons A. W. Faber • A. W. Faber's Geschäftshäuser • A. W. Faber's Premises

INTERNATIONALISM AT AN EARLY DATE

Lothar's thoughts went beyond the frontiers of Germany at an early stage, so that his business soon took on international dimensions. In 1849 he opened a branch office in New York, to provide the booming American market with pencils. Subsidiaries in London, Paris, Vienna, and St Petersburg followed. His trading links extended as far as the Near East, later even to China. Lothar thus successfully realized his early dreams: "Even during my studies in Paris, I considered what steps I would have to take so that one day my products would conquer the world". His pencils regularly gained medals and certificates at international exhibitions.

PIONEER OF REGISTERED TRADE MARKS

Being so successful, the name A.W. Faber was frequently misused for cheap imitations. To protect himself and his reputation, Lothar submitted a petition to the German Imperial Parliament in 1874, requesting legal protection for branded articles. The law took effect the following year, and was later extended and unified, thanks to Lothar von Faber's pioneering efforts in this field.



A GREAT NAME COMES ABOUT

After Lothar von Faber's death in 1896, his widow took over the company, followed by their eldest granddaughter Otilie. In 1898 Otilie von Faber married into one of Germany's oldest aristocratic families, becoming the wife of Count Alexander zu Castell-Rüdenhausen. However, her grandfather's will had stipulated that the company should retain the name Faber for all time. And so the family name Faber-Castell came about, a name that was also applied to the business when Count Alexander took over the management. He was a very different character from Lothar von Faber. He was a cavalry officer by background, not a manufacturer, yet amongst his very successful moves was the introduction of the green Castell 9000 in 1905. This pencil set new standards of quality and value. It rapidly developed into the best-selling product in the range, and is still the 'classic' among black-lead pencils.



Castell 9000, a classic among pencils for nearly a century

1800 MILLION PENCILS A YEAR

Both the quality and design of pencils have steadily improved to the present day, while the production methods have been optimized. The measures have included creating new generations of pencils with a clear and aesthetic design, and also setting up completely new product lines such as cosmetic pencils for well-known international companies. In the past few years FABER-CASTELL has paid particular attention to the finish: a colourful coat of paint turns a plain wooden pencil into something that is a pleasure to use. FABER-CASTELL Germany uses a particularly environment-friendly water-based paint – incidentally the only company selling on the world market to do so. With a total of over 1800 million black-lead and colour pencils a year, FABER-CASTELL is the world's major manufacturer of wood-cased pencils.

MEETING THE HIGHEST DEMANDS

Products for artists had already occupied an important position in Lothar von Faber's day – with good reason: the fineness of artists' materials has always presented a challenge, and particularly high standards of quality apply to their manufacture. FABER-CASTELL now has the reputation of being not only the world's largest but also the best manufacturer of colour pencils. The Art & Graphic range includes, amongst others, the well known Polychromos artists' colour pencils and Albrecht Dürer watercolour pencils, as well as Art Grip colour pencils for the growing hobby market. They are unequalled in variety, with up to 120 different colours in the form of pencils and crayons.

*"Alexander Velthers Collection":
wooden case in a limited edition*



GRIP 2001 – THE PENCIL MOVES WITH THE TIMES

Nearly 100 years after the introduction of the "Castell 9000", the company has shown that even the black-lead pencil is capable of improvement. An ergonomic triangular cross-section, a non-slip grip zone made of raised dots of water-based paint – what counts are ideas that combine good design with tangible benefits for the user. Not surprisingly, the new silvery "Grip 2001" was a success from the start: since making its appearance this pencil has won several international design prizes.



"Grip 2001", the millennium pencil with its innovative bumps'

So the pencil continues to make history in the 21st century. It develops its unmistakable character and complements the modern communication tools. Uncomplicated, robust, long-lasting and environment-friendly as it is, people can identify with its natural materials better than with the cold technology of the keyboard. Like no other writing implement, the pencil is tolerant of mistakes and a change of mind.

HOW IDEAS TAKE SHAPE

With the Graf von Faber-Castell Collection, the company again succeeded in providing the culture of handwriting with some unusual nuances. A unique world of black-lead and ink writing has grown up around the “perfect pencil”. The function is based on historic products, while the visual design possesses a timeless elegance. Only natural materials are used, for example selected woods combined with attractive metal parts.



Pocket pencil from 1885 and the “perfect pencil” in the Graf von Faber-Castell Collection, 1993

What is so perfect about the “perfect pencil”? Well, it combines all the essentials: writing, correcting, and sharpening. The sharpener is built into the extender that also protects the point and allows the pencil to be clipped to a pocket. The end cap conceals a replaceable eraser. Very compact and always to hand – there is nothing to compare with it, anywhere.



Desk set with silver-plated pencil extender

So as to provide this luxury pencil with an appropriate setting, we developed a wooden desk set with silver-plated lid. It is a valuable item in its own right, and graces any desk.



Smallest pencil



Oldest pencil



Solid white gold cap with three diamonds

A further credit to the FABER-CASTELL company: some superlatives that cannot be seen anywhere else in the world. Not only does the company archive include the oldest pencil in the world (from the 17th century). The world's smallest (17.5 mm) and largest (19.75 m) pencil – each of them fitted with a genuine lead – and the world's most expensive pencil with three diamonds set in a white gold extender cap (€ 9000) are among the unusual items that have been produced by FABER-CASTELL. The history of the pencil, so rich in highlights, shows no sign of coming to an end – not even in this age of the mobile phone and laptop computer.



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