

Pencils for the world:

Anniversary year will honour entrepreneur and pioneer Lothar von Faber

Whether for small notes or great art, classical literature or amateur artists: pencils are just as important in the digital age as they were in the past. That people worldwide have this access is all down to one man: Lothar von Faber, who was born exactly 200 years ago.

Schoolchildren write their first letters in pencil. Pencils are used to design houses and cars, jot down shopping lists and pen world literature. Since it was first developed in the 16th century, this utensil has inspired the great and famous, from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Vincent van Gogh to Pablo Picasso, Günter Grass and Karl Lagerfeld.

That the pencil – as a basic and predecessor model of all writing and drawing instruments used today – already conquered the world in the last century is above all owing to the pioneering spirit of one German entrepreneur: Lothar von Faber (1817–1896), who developed the family-run business in the Franconian town of Stein into a global brand. He took over the company management in 1839, making him the fourth generation of the family to run it. He made decisive improvements in terms of quality, opened up international production and distribution channels and built up a brand with an excellent reputation. The young entrepreneur, who was knowledgeable in both economics and design, desired nothing less than to “...raise myself to the first rank by making the best that can be made in the whole world.”

As a result, Lothar von Faber optimised the process for giving the pencil leads their strength, time making it possible to manufacture different hardness grades for the first. Being a global player, as it were, the Franconian visionary also modernised his factory’s production lines, seeking out and securing supply of the world’s best sources of raw materials at the time.

By combining graphite from Siberia with cedar wood from Florida, he was able to perfect the legendary Polygrades indelible pencils. Shortly thereafter, he presented his hexagonal writing instruments, whose revolutionary shape provided the prototype for the pencils that can be found on almost every desk today, adorning them with the golden imprint “A.W. Faber” and thus creating the very first branded writing instruments. Von Faber set up a distribution network with offices in New York, London, Paris, Vienna and St. Petersburg. Eventually, it even stretched as far as the Middle East and China. He was just as thorough in expanding his

product portfolio, supplementing his pencils with writing utensils, artist’s supplies and all kinds of “office” equipment.

Von Faber also shaped history with his leadership style, offering his workers social security long before this was enshrined in law. He founded a company health insurance, the Lebensversicherungs-Bank, set up educational and sports facilities and lobbied for a unified Europe. In this era of Brexit and isolation efforts from west to east, his words from 1879 are still surprisingly relevant: “Let us hope that the people of the ... great European powers can unite under one modus, which will ensure a permanent and secure legal situation for all nations. A European or international parliament ... would probably be deemed the most suitable ... A political European equilibrium would thereby be established and the economic order would soon follow of its own accord.”

It is these values that Faber-Castell, the world’s leading manufacturer of graphite and colour pencils, espouses to this very day. Just how much von Faber shaped the company’s DNA can be seen in the festivities marking the bicentenary of his birth this summer: a special exhibition will open on 12 June and lectures at the Faber-Castell Castle will honour the life and work of this pencil pioneer. In addition, a limited edition of the legendary Polygrades pencil model is being relaunched to pay testament to the timeless beauty of his designs.

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