

# FJP

PAUL'S

# FOUNTAIN PEN

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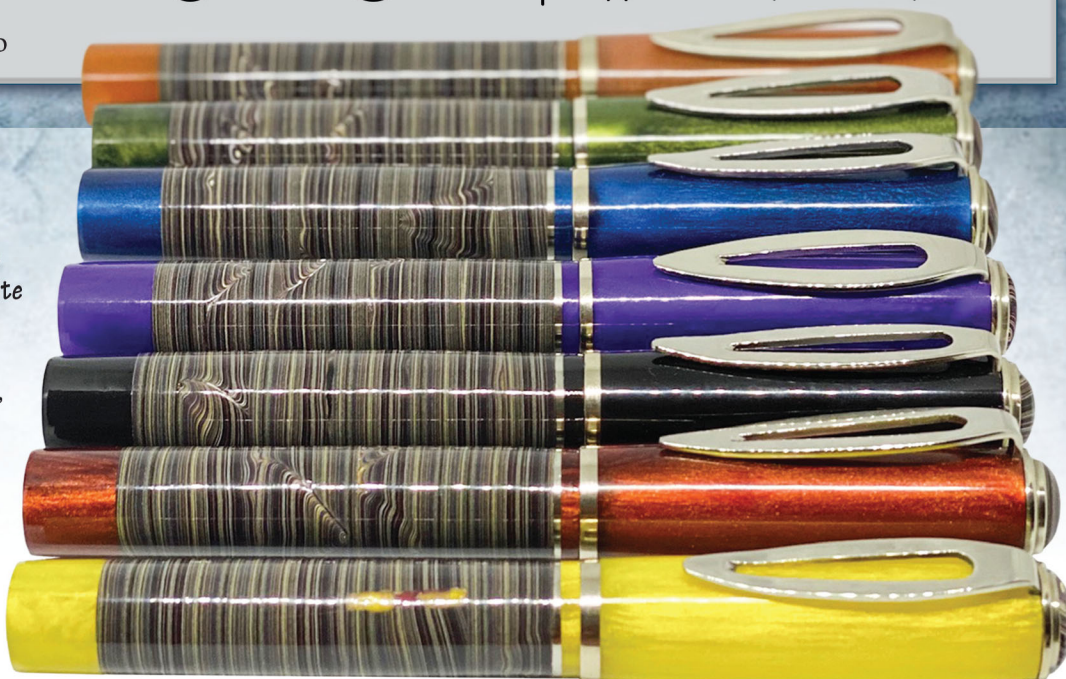
■ Sky Cowboy by Jason Olson.



# An Interview with Jason Olson of Write Turnz Pens

by Paul Erano

“Stingray” was built around the iconic coup’s split window. Fordite from the Corvette factory in Bowling Green, Kentucky was used for the pen’s body. Fordite, or Detroit Agate, is the layered accumulation of overspray from hundreds, if not thousands, of applications of paint in older paint booths. It is rapidly disappearing as plants update technology.



I have the good fortune to be part of the DC Metro Pen Crew where, on many Sunday afternoons, we participate in Zoom meetings and listen to guest speakers present on a number of topics, including ink, pen repair, and paper. The Zoom meetings also introduce us to some of the new pen artisans, and we can see their pens, virtually at least, and learn about their approaches to making pens. That’s how I first met Jason Olson. During the Zoom meeting, I could hardly believe the variety of materials he uses in his pens; some of them are almost unimaginable. Equally impressive is the effort he puts into finding the materials. These are, clearly, two significant factors in the pens he makes. Imagination and aesthetics are equally important. I fell in love with his “Doubtful Donkey” and I wondered just what kind of imagination it took to create a pen aptly named “Deconstructed V.1”. Jason has a way with naming his pens: “Classic Chittum”, “The Spruce Goose”, “Doghouse”, “The Fibonacci”, “Frankenpen 2.0”, and “Sky Cowboy” being prime examples. The pens on the following pages illustrate just how unique, imaginative, and appealing Jason’s pens are. In the interview that follows, Jason and I talk about how his insights and long-standing interests guide his approach to pen making, and how they help determine the very form and substance of every pen he makes.

Jason Olson at work in his studio, turning down a new rod.



“Doubtful Donkey” captures the spirit of everyone’s favorite down trodden donkey.



**FPJ: What got you interested in making pens?**

**JO:** I have always loved having and using good pens and pencils, something most people in the rural community I came from either didn't have access to or didn't think much about. I had no idea a pen could actually be made by hand until a good friend received an old, broken-down wood lathe, which is how I learned to make my first pens.

At first it was all kit pens, but I was hooked, and tinkering with kit pens became far too limiting. I began to explore artisan pen making, and having a strong mechanical background and an open mind, I tried my hand at making my own pens. Let's just say the first few attempts were pretty far off the mark, but I stuck with it, and ultimately my efforts led to relationships with established makers who helped me a great deal.

I soon learned that, rather than being an open play book or a "how-to" manual, mentoring is a trial-and-error process that involves guidance and nudging in the correct direction. These relationships are what make the pen-maker community special, the willingness to help and guide others in their pen-making journey.

**I** "Doghhouse" has an oak barrel that came from a tree that was toppled over during Hurricane Irma. The customer is a fellow maker of fine cutlery at The Doghouse Forge.



**FPJ: What do you feel are the most important qualities a pen should have?**

**JO:** If a pen provides a bad writing experience, then that's a huge problem. In addition to writing well, the user's overall experience with the pen is very important: first receiving and opening the box, the pen's visual appeal, and how the pen feels in the hand, to name a few examples.

My philosophy towards pen making is somewhat specific. I love a pen with a good story to tell or a reason for being. Some of my earliest pen experiences came from the stories or themes carried forward by the pen, such as many Retro 51s. I like to make pens that tell a story, capture a moment in time, or memorialize a historical or culturally significant event. That's how I meet most new people and potential customers.



**I** Think of "Deconstructed" as an attempt to turn a pen inside out.



**FPJ: What materials do you most like working with, and why?**

**JO:** This is a key question for me. The more different, odd, challenging, or rare the material is, so many times better is the final pen. I have worked with WWII wreckage from a Spitfire, a Woolly Mammoth molar, woods that stood witness to some of the greatest battles on earth, exotic burls, Apollo 11 Kapton Foil, and a great many other meaningful materials. Sometimes, because of the themes and exotic materials we use, “form versus function” issues arise that need to be ironed out so that the pen works properly. In those instances, the form aspect of the pen is massaged to the extent necessary to make this possible.



In the near future there will be projects involving space-flown shuttle components, SR-71 Black Bird material, and Revolution-era White House material. Really, I can’t name a favorite material, because it’s the story that inevitably dictates what materials can or should be used. It’s the story being told through the pen that is most important.

■ “GW-13” is all about George Washington and the 13 original colonies.

GW planted thirteen Horse Chestnut trees, and the wood from one of them was used to make the body of this pen.

The pocket clip is a Cuttose, GW’s first American-made sword, made in upstate New York.

**FPJ: Is there any specialized equipment that you use now or plan to use in the future?**

**JO:** One thing we take great pride in is crafting a truly hand-made pen. My studio is very “manual” in nature. Nothing is computer operated or automated. I feel that this approach allows me to pay close attention to the fit and finish of every pen that leaves my studio.

Also, thinking about specialized equipment, I am just in the infancy of how to engrave by hand, which has been called a lifelong pursuit. I practice regularly to develop my skills, and I am looking forward to getting some formal education, hopefully in the fall. In the meantime, online courses, mentorship, and practice allow me to utilize this skill in some projects. The key here is to understand the limits of what one can and cannot do. The art form itself is very rewarding and is essential to carrying the story forward in many cases.



■ “Mocha Mammoth” features fossilized woolly mammoth tusk and hand-forged Damascus furniture.



**FPJ: What is it about your pens that you feel sets them apart from other pens?**

**JO:** I may be slightly biased here, but it all comes back to the story. When designing a new project, the story behind the pen is extremely helpful in making decisions, and to staying on course. I love telling stories through my pens. There's no other way to put it!

If one could actually log the hours spent chasing just the chance to acquire a storied material, or the time it takes surfing the web looking for something interesting or unusual, the toll would be high. For example, last year a friend of mine asked for a Vegas-theme pen with specific details about the colors needed to match an original \$100 clay chip from The Sands casino. The search for the right materials took a long time, but it eventually paid off when I located floor boards from the Sands casino stage at the Copa Room to form the pen's barrel, and 1950s Sands casino silverware for the pocket clip. The total project time, from request to shipping, took just shy of 13 months. It may sound like a cliché, but a small piece of me goes into every pen that leaves here. Nothing pleases me more than seeing my work posted on social media or pictures of folks using my pens.



■ The “Sands” fountain pen incorporates relics from the actual resort that once stood in Las Vegas.

**FPJ: What are your primary objectives as a pen maker?**

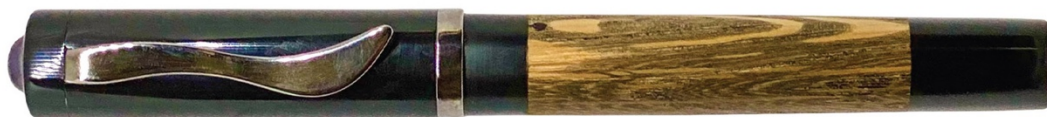
**JO:** Two big ones for me are to never stop learning and to keep pushing the envelope, whether that takes place in design or in fabrication techniques. Constant forward movement and process improvement are absolutely critical. If one does not move forward, he is moving backwards. As mentioned earlier, I have just started learning hand engraving, which is a perishable skill. It requires practice just to stay current, much less to improve and grow.



■ “Ancient Chompers” takes a fossil and makes it into a useful tool. A woolly mammoth molar makes up the body with a tusk-inspired clip.

**FPJ: Are there other specialized techniques or equipment you use in your pen-making operations?**

**JO:** We do almost everything in-house: casting, stabilizing, metal work, hand engraving, plating, and the obvious turning. Our studio is quite the collection of highly specialized machines that may or may not have been originally made to create fountain pens. I have had to make difficult decisions about letting a tool leave, simply because it does not pertain to pen making and I need the space. But that regret goes away as soon as the new machine or process is set up and working.



■ “Pearl” was inspired by everyone’s favorite pirate and his ship, the Bounty. The wood used in the pen’s body came from a purpose-built tall ship first used in the 1962 movie, “Mutiny on the Bounty”.

**FPJ: It sounds like you have a long association with tools and making things work. How did it all start?**

**JO:** Growing up we fixed and repaired everything until it was virtually useless, and this inadvertent training allowed me to buy and sell a great many things. It also led to a strong side hustle of building street rods and fixing other folks’ vehicles. One thing that became obvious early on was the value of quality tools. I remember getting my first real toolbox around age 12, but the real treasure was what I scrimped and saved for to put inside it. I still have all those tools and I use them regularly. There’s a more in-depth discussion of my family genealogy and why, perhaps, some skills came naturally to me in the “about” section on our website.



■ This second annual FrankenPen makes use of left over, mismatched materials, just like Frankenstein!







**FPJ: What do you personally like about fountain pens? What don't you like?**

**JO:** As a very minor collector and a person who appreciates a good pen, I absolutely fell in love with the feeling of laying down ink on good paper. When I try to describe this feeling to folks who are new to fountain pens, whether in person or in video chats, I get some odd looks. It may take a few weeks for them to come around, but you'd be surprised at how many of them write back to me and say, "Now I understand what you mean."

I remember the day I fell for fountain pens. It was long ago and before I changed careers and became an artisan pen maker. I took a fountain pen on a business trip to Atlanta, a Bock #5 nib inked up with Waterman Serenity Blue ink, but the pen in my hand quickly turned as dry as the topic of the meeting. For the record, the topic of the meeting was ISO (International Organization for Standardization) Certification. Dry indeed! I had used up an entire converter full of ink creating wonderful doodles! That was the beginning of a new passion and a lesson learned: never travel with only one pen.

■ The "Fibonacci" was Jason Olson's 2020 Pen Artisan Guild competition pen. The carvings and radiuses used are sequences of the Fibonacci Curve, thus repeating the same shape regardless of scale.

**FPJ: What pitfalls did you encounter when you first began making pens?**

**JO:** Perhaps the better question would be what pitfalls didn't I encounter? I have always been mechanically inclined, and I can follow through on a project to get it done. However, the things that evaded me at the time were scale—how to make the cap and barrel of the right dimensions for example—and the techniques I needed to learn in order to make pens that will last a very long time. There was lots of trial and error.

I still use my very first pen that I consider a success. It's next to me right now. It's my benchmark to measure the progress I've made and a reminder of how important it is to never stop learning. I learn something almost every day and wonder how I had failed to know that before.



■ "Spruce Goose" embodies the can do attitude of Howard Hughes, who built the largest flying wooden airplane from birch plywood. The pen's body is made using birch plywood from the airplane.

**FPJ: What do you feel are the most significant differences between custom-made and mass-produced pens?**

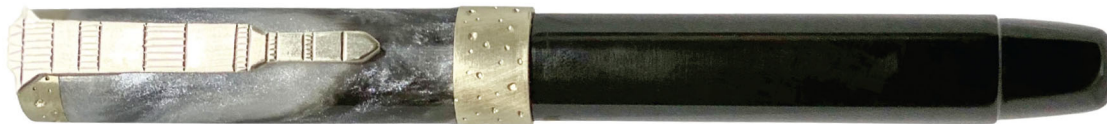
**JO:** For me, a truly artisan-made pen must have meaning and a reason to exist. Something about the pen must be unique and special. That's a big part of what drives me to search for unusual materials and alternate ways in making pens. Don't get me wrong: I like several brands of manufactured pens, and some have excellent nibs. But what really changes in a line of manufactured pens: a new color release in the same shape, silver furniture instead of gold, or updated sealing materials on a piston filler? I love the ones I have, but they will be the same next year and so on. Blow-molded plastic or injected-resin-body pens have been around a long time, and that gets a little tiring. That said, does anyone have a blue-striped Pelikan M800 they'd like to part with?

Also important to me is that a manufactured pen typically supports shareholders and a management structure that care for "the brand". An artisan pen typically supports a family, real people who are extremely passionate about what they do.



**FPJ: Do you have any ideas or insights to share as to the future of our hobby?**

**JO:** I can see fountain pen use continuing to grow, simply based on the number of new people who are interested in fountain pens. Some of them are still in high school. I remember scanning the crowd at the last live event I attended, and I was surprised at how many young people were there, talking with exhibitors and being so engrossed in the pens on their tables. Nothing spurs the imagination more than seeing a new generation of young people interested in fountain pens. It gets me excited about the new materials I'll be looking for and themes I'll be thinking of in the years ahead.



■ "Vision for Space" was created for the 50th Anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing. The pen's finial encases a small piece of Kapton foil that orbited the moon. Several layers of foil made up the outside of the Command Module.

Note: The cover photo of this issue features the "Sky Cowboy", Jason Olson's first annual Labor Day pen, which celebrates the American Worker and captures the years between the 1920's and 1950's when so many things were made using rivets. The red section is a nod to Molly the Riveter and the tens-of-thousands of women supporting the war effort during World War II.

For more information about Write Turnz visit Jason's website at [writeturnz.com](http://writeturnz.com)



■ Route 66 captures a bygone era when Americans took to the open road. Pen is crafted from Ranchite collected at the Cadillac ranch in Amarillo, Texas.