



In Praise of the *Pencil*

It's been around for more than two hundred years and it's still popular today:
the pencil. Grey lead or colored, thick line or thin line – it's all equally good.
And the very best bit: a super sharp point. What makes the pencil still so irresistible?

It may be a bit hard to imagine why a wooden tube with a graphite and clay filling would have quite such an international following. But listen to its fans and it starts to become clearer. Even in the digital age, there's no shortage of pencil-lovers around, judging by the many websites and blogs talking about all sorts of pencils in great detail, with fans offering tips on which pencil writes or draws the best and – because this is an indelible aspect of the pencil – which eraser rubs out the best and which sharpener creates the best point.

Or which knife? New York artisan David Rees has been sharpening pencils professionally for years, with a knife. Send your pencil to Rees, and he'll return it hand-sharpened and enclosed in a plastic tube that also includes the souvenir shavings. In his witty book, *How to Sharpen Pencils* (Melville House, 2012), Rees explains his techniques with an endearing deadpan humor.

There are also plenty of pencil-philic videos – for example, of pointy pencils zapping past like racecars, children's hands scratching paper to a soundtrack of scratch music, and a clip by the Australian folk band Hudson, whose colored pencils dance a complex choreography.

Bart Moeyaert, a Flemish artist, poet, and children's book author, is an avid pencil enthusiast with a more or less random collection of six hundred pencils, including a beautiful one that was hand-painted by illustrator Marit Törnqvist.

Moeyart writes about his love of the pencil in his little book, *56 Kilometer*, (available in Dutch only): "It's an attractive, friendly invention. With a pencil I always have a choice. Shall I write, or

draw? Do I want a hard or soft line, with a sharp or blunt point, so that you can tell my mood? Will I do it hesitantly, eraser at the ready, or is that line meant to stay there forever? Every day I take the time to decide. Did you know the average pencil is good for drawing a line 56 kilometers (35 miles) long?"

NEVER LETS YOU DOWN

What makes a pencil so irresistible? Perhaps part of it is that nearly everyone learns to write with one. You probably remember your very first HB No. 2 pencil, and sharpening it on the electric sharpener on the teacher's desk, and then going carefully back to your desk. Dropping a pencil was (and is) not a good idea, because it can break the lead. Nothing is as frustrating as a freshly sharpened point that snaps the first time you use it.

The pencil is widely praised for its simplicity, affordability (even special vintage pencils are available at a decent price), and scent (cedar wood and graphite – does anything smell ➔)

"Ernest Hemingway claimed a writing day was only successful when he used up seven pencils"

9H 8H 7H 6H
very hard

5H 4H 3H
hard

2H HF HB B
medium

2B 3B 4B
soft

5B 6B 7B 8B 9B
very soft

"With a pencil you say, I dare to make mistakes, I dare to show it's not yet certain"

better than that?) Moreover, a pencil never lets you down. It keeps working when it freezes (unlike a ballpoint pen). You can write on vertical surfaces (like on a wall, making notes on the job), and it works even out in outer space (you can't say that about a ballpoint pen because, due to weightlessness, the ink won't run down to the tip).

Besides, pencils are fun to collect. All over the world they are easily available and affordable. What's also nice is that a pencil has a double function. You can both write and draw with it. Some world-famous writers want nothing better than to write with their wooden friend. Roald Dahl always kept a jar of no fewer than six yellow pencils on hand. Lewis Carroll used pencils to write *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Ernest Hemingway claimed a writing day was only successful when he used up seven pencils. Vladimir Nabokov wrote everything he published in pencil.



HB, 2B, 4H: WHAT DOES THAT STAND FOR AGAIN?

Most pencils are printed with a code that refers to the hardness of the lead. The code was invented in 1889 by Friedrich von Hardtmuth of the Koh-I-Noor pencil manufacturers. H stands for hard ('hart' in German), F stands for fine ('fein' in German) and B stands for soft [not black], as it contains more graphite (blei means lead, which as you know is a soft pliable material and perhaps why we call the pencil filling lead). The numbers indicate the gradations from 9B, the softest (lots of graphite, little clay

In an article in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood advised writers: "Take a pencil to write with on aeroplanes. Pens leak. But if the pencil breaks, you can't sharpen it on the plane, because you can't take knives with you. Therefore: take two pencils."

Finally, the inventor Thomas Edison liked his pencils to be only three inches long (about 12 cm), which is much shorter than the standard length. Edison managed to get a company to produce custom-made pencils just for him. He ordered them by the thousands.

FOR REAL DAREDEVILS

Moeyaert finds great symbolic beauty in the fact that a pencil allows one to accept mistakes, and to move forward. "When I was poet laureate of Antwerp, I noticed that some people felt that pencils were only for cowards," Moeyaert replies. "According to these people, a pencil is not definitive enough, not daring enough. I found that such a strange and twisted idea. It's not the tool of the coward, but rather of the daredevil! With a pencil you say, 'I dare to make mistakes, I dare to doubt, I dare to show it is not yet certain.'"

He relishes the beauty of the pencils he finds, for their utility and for their longevity.

to 9H, the hardest. HB is the most common: the standard office and school pencil, falls between hard and soft.

PRETTY COLORS

The lead core of color pencils is made from a paste of various materials including dyes, binders and kaolin (also used in pottery). The finer the dye is ground, the better the color. Major Brands include Caran d'Ache, Koh-I-Noor, Conte, Bruynzeel (now called Bruynzeel Sakura), Faber-Castell (Bart Moeyaert's favorite) and Staedtler.

"Ever since my early twenties, I've been going to the children's book fair in Bologna," he writes in his book about pencils. "There I always go to a wonderful *cartoleria* (stationer's), whose owner began recognizing me after a few years. At one point he said, 'I have something for you that you'll probably love.' And he pulled out a box of eight Faber-Castell pencils from the 1950s, still in their original packaging. I almost died. Fantastic."

A RAINBOW OF COLORS

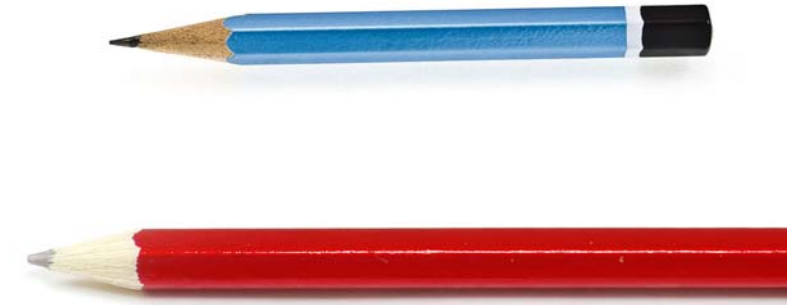
Walk into any stationer's – or better still, go to an art supplies store – and you will find a rainbow of colored pencils. Almost every brand proudly marks its pencil with "Since 1761." This simple writing implement has been around for centuries. And we have never needed Pencil 2.0 or higher, unlike with fast-developing computers, digital tools, and apps); although, there is Pencil 1.1 (the one with an eraser at the end).

Opinions differ who invented the pencil. According to one story, a heavy storm swept across the Northern English county of Cumberland in the early 1500s and uprooted a large tree that was sheltering a seam of graphite. This graphite turned out to be an excellent writing medium: shepherds marked their sheep's wool with it and also used it to write on wood.

The German cabinet maker Kaspar Faber introduced a major improvement in 1761. His mixture of graphite, sulfur, and resin drew a tighter line than had been possible with pure graphite. Ultimately, though, the French painter Nicolas-Jacques Conté, was credited as the inventor of the modern pencil. He baked a mixture of graphite and clay in a lime kiln to produce pencil lead and, in 1795, obtained the French patent for his procedure. He was followed in 1812 by William Munroe, the first American to make and sell wood-encased pencils.

Moeyaert used the pencil as a metaphor in his speech for the Frans Kellendonk Memorial Lecture in 2012, an annual literary event put on by the Dutch University of Nijmegen: "He who writes in pencil not only knows how much he knows, but also how little he knows. He dares to reformulate his words, not once, but continuously. He loves searching for the right line, and experiences the pencil as an extension of his hand. Again and again he tries to see and re-see the truth. The facts can change at any moment, something can always happen to shed new light on the matter."

That's it for now. Long live the pencil. ●



READ MORE:

"How To Sharpen Pencils" by David Rees (Melville House, 2012). Order through Amazon.com; also for iPad.

CHECK OUT THESE SITES:

- * WWW.BRANDNAMEPENCILS.COM Nicely designed American site by Bob Truby, avid pencil collector. Here you will find 155 brands from all around the world, including El Salvador, Japan, Russia, and the Netherlands (the famous yellow Bruynzeel pencil). Arranged alphabetically.
- * WWW.PENCILREVOLUTION.COM A blog made with love, including reviews of various pencil brands.
- * WWW.PENCILTALK.ORG To quote the site, this is more than a blog focused on pencil reviews and discussions, it is a "meditation on the basic tools used by writers, artists, students, and office workers, and how these tools influence us."
- * WWW.ARTISANALPENCILSHARPENING.COM The website of David Rees, who is featured in this article.
- * FREDSPENCILS.WORDPRESS.COM Fred comes from the USA and has been collecting pencils for thirty years. He put them all on his blog, causing quite a commotion in the pencils scene. He has plenty of beautiful pencils, including some from the Philippines, and has many funny stories to tell. Click on Amusing, under Categories.