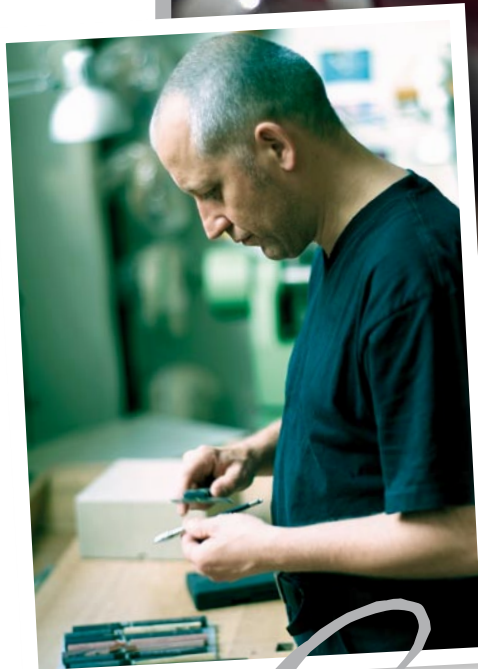


Albatross fountain pen in African blackwood with yellow sap markings, luscious purplewood, ivory-coloured boxwood, brindled Brazilian rosewood and orange-hued pernambuco



# IN FULL FEATHER

*Despite his exceptional skill, he's only known to a small circle of insiders. Michèle Mussler finds it's high time to pay a little more attention to Stefan Fink and his extraordinary writing instruments*

Stefan Fink does everything himself, except blow his own trumpet; that just isn't his style. What he does master perfectly, however, is the glorious art of writing implements – the construction and production of fountain pens and propelling pencils, each one unique, a masterpiece in purplewood, bubinga or 4,000-year-old moor oak. Even the perfection of form that unites body and lid comes from the hand of the only professional fountain pen maker in Germany.



It was chance, more than anything, that brought Hamburg-based Fink to writing implements. A woodturner and joiner by trade, Fink then studied industrial design, where he was tormented by sketching pencils 'that suffered from haptic anorexia'. The obvious solution? 'I decided just to make my own.' The result is plump, fits snugly in the hand and bears the name Tawny Owl 1. Nowadays, his first creation is also something of a cult object. Other models and

A trilogy in bubinga: propelling pencil and sketching pencil with fountain pen



The air smells of green tea, huge pieces of tree trunk are piled up on the floor and jazz music can be heard softly in the background. Above a leather sofa, a sign declares 'Hip dancing forbidden'. 'It's from the thirties,' laughs the 49-year-old Fink. 'I love dance, but I found the sign so absurd.' He has an irrepressible sense of humour, but an equally strong will. 'It doesn't matter how long I've worked on a piece, if I don't like it in the end, I destroy it.'

In figures, that amounts to a massive 80% rate of wastage. Indeed, Fink only produces 150 pieces a year. He sometimes makes furniture too, just for variation, but to buy that the waiting list is even longer: five years to be precise.

Because of his perfectionism, Fink

is regarded worldwide as a luminary in the field. The big names regularly line up at his door – usually in vain. 'Uh uh,' he says, 'I'm a one man show and always will be.' Fink has advised Montblanc ('they were very nice – that's the only way I work') and has great respect for Faber-Castell, but another renowned manufacturer that wanted to work with him 'annoyed me for months with their arrogant affectations,' so that in the end he cheekily demanded an utterly outrageous salary. 'I was just trying to get rid of them, so when they seriously considered it, I was really worried.'

Fink is not in it for the money. What he values most is strength of character. Anyone can visit him in his workshop, which incorporates a little showroom. 'It's fun advising potential customers, although some do prefer to think about it for three hours in solitude.' Dedication and patience are qualities he too possesses in abundance. To produce his models, Fink normally takes a whole tree trunk, cuts it into the right sized blocks and leaves them to dry for a year. After this, the pieces are turned, pre-drilled into tubes and then left again for another two to four years. Finally, the blanks are lathed again into their final, perfect form, bathed in hard oil, left to harden and polished thoroughly. Only then does Fink breathe inner life into them in the form of an ink feed guaranteed to work even on aeroplanes. The addition of the stainless steel grip and the mounting of the golden nib included, it takes over 300 steps before a Fink is ready to leave the nest.

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## 'MY WORK IS FOR PEOPLE WITH NOTHING TO PROVE TO THEMSELVES OR OTHERS'

collections followed, which Fink, whose name translates as 'finch', christened Albatross, Nightingale and Starling.

The world over, connoisseurs of the culture of fine writing wait for up to three years to get their fingers round one of Fink's fledglings. Even royal Asian dynasties have no choice but to be patient. However, Fink is adamant that his pens should not be regarded as status symbols. 'My work is for people with nothing to prove to themselves or to others,' the artist insists. They are for style-conscious anachronists, for the guardians – in this epoch of email overload – of the culture of writing by hand. 'Each piece is carefully balanced. The pencils are not top-heavy, but the fountain pens are, by necessity,' Fink explains. 'You shouldn't have to press down to write – writing should flow as easily as one's thoughts.'

The grain of the wood from which these items are carved runs continuously through the lid and the body, giving them an individual fingerprint. The gold nibs which Fink uses are made exclusively by Otto Bock. 'He's the best in the world, and the only craftsman still making precision nibs by hand, despite being 83 years old. That's another craft that is dying out,' says Fink, his grey-blue eyes clouding for a moment.

Fink's workshop in the centre of Hamburg has the feel of an artist's studio. Five metre high windows are fronted by rows and rows of immaculately clean lathes.



African blackwood fountain pen with engraved songbird