The Rise and Fall of MOTOR CITY DRAGWAY

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The Art of Writing

The Goose Feather Quill

By Robert Myers

The art of writing—of literally setting pen to paper—is disappearing. Typewriters and now computers and smartphones have removed people from the tangible connection of expressing thoughts. Some schools no longer teach cursive writing—why learn such an obsolete art in the modern world of keyboards?

The quill pen, however, imparts a certain elegance to writing. As an art form, the use of quill and calligraphy has not vanished entirely. In fact, many people still enjoy mastering its beauty.

The use of bird feathers as pens dates to at least the seventh century. Fashioning a quill pen required a degree of craftsmanship. Writers started with the wing feather from a large bird—typically a goose, swan, or turkey. Using a sharp knife, they shaved off most of the vane, or plume, to make the shaft easier to hold and then stuck the quill, specifically the point of the feather, into hot sand and let it cool. The heat hardened the quill and made it last longer. Using a penknife, they made a nib, or point, by cutting the quill at about a 45-degree angle, trimming away the sides, and cutting a lengthwise slit to the point. The slit helped the ink flow to the end of the nib.

Iron sulfate, tannic acid, water or wine, and gum arabic produced the rich black ink of the past. The tannic acid came from oak galls—bulbous growths on leaves and twigs that oak trees form in response to attacks from parasitic insects. Gum arabic kept the pigment suspended in the liquid and helped the ink flow from the pen.

Writers dipped the quill pen into the ink, dabbed off the excess on the inside of the inkwell, and put their thoughts to paper. Writing in such a way allowed for three or four words to be scratched at a time, before dipping the quill back into the ink. When finished, they sprinkled pounce—powder made from cuttlefish bone or sand—from a pounce pot onto the paper to help dry the ink. Leftover pounce went back into the pounce pot for reuse.

In the days before a postal service, correspondents entrusted their letters to third parties for delivery. To ensure the contents’ privacy, they folded the letter and pressed molten wax onto the seam with an engraved seal. The seal authenticated the sender’s identity. Sealing wax ensured that no one could open the letter without breaking the brittle seal.

The invention of the steel nib in the early nineteenth century made the quill obsolete. The steel nib gave way to the fountain pen and then the ballpoint pen, and the quill pen almost—but not quite—vanished. A few writers still enjoy writing with a goose quill, and they appear at every session of the U.S. Supreme Court. Twenty white quills are placed on the counsel tables to become treasured souvenirs for the lawyers who argue a case before the nation’s highest court.

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