

Collectibles



This Eskesen pen from Walt Disney World (above) shows Tinkerbell floating up and down in front of the Magic Kingdom.



A mama bear and her cub (above) walk through the winter landscape of the Great Smoky Mountains, which border North Carolina and Tennessee.



This floaty-pen-and-ruler combination (left) shows a tourist boat sailing down the Thames in front of London's Houses of Parliament.

floaty pens

With these implements, you'll write on water!



Hmm, where do I want to go today? Rode might be nice. But I also wouldn't object to a mellow gondola ride on the Grand Canal in Venice. A nice Hawaiian beach? Now we're talking. Or maybe I'd prefer to stay right here and check out some buff guy's backside, as he slips in and out of his skimpy Speedo. Those are all great options, and I can see and do them any time I want. All it takes is a tilt of a \$3 pen.

I can go anywhere or visit famous people whenever I please, because I am one of the growing number of collectors who has discovered the magical mini world of floaty pens. Floaty pens are those retractable ballpoint pens sold in souvenir shops, theme parks and airport shops that depict tourist attractions and cartoon characters or advertise products. The upper portion of the pen consists of a clear-plastic, liquid-filled chamber in which an image floats back and forth through a minuscule stage set. The part below is a chamber of brightly colored opaque plastic that houses the ink cartridge.

The technical name of a floaty pen—which is also referred to as a float, floating, floating-view, view, motion, magic-motion, tilt or action pen—is "floating-action pen." Collectors are called "float collectors." Diana Andra of Mansfield, Ohio, who has one of the largest collections in the U.S., explains that many people who are enamored with floaty pens "like things that float. I call it 'captive water,' because it's contained."

A professional craftsman when she's not floating, Andra—who is working her way toward 2,000 floaty pens—got into pens via snow domes. "It's a natural transition," she says. "I had been collecting snow domes but got bored with the poor quality of the new ones. When I was on vacation in San Francisco in 1994, I found a floaty with Felix the Cat, which I also collect. I bought it, and then bought more." That was the beginning...and there seems to be no end.

Frenchman André Perrin made it into the 1997 *Guinness Book of World Records* for having amassed the largest number of floaties in the world. His collection—which includes pens from 52 countries and categories like famous people, movies, Disney and sports—numbers over 2,800 floaties!

Collector Nancy Nerenberg of Los Gatos, California, says, "I started collecting about 10 years ago, but I didn't realize I was until I had 16 pens. I'd buy one from every place I visited. When I had about 80, I met a man with over 100. He told me that he always bought every example from a particular

Photographs by Antonio Achilleo



King Kong floats up and down the exterior of New York City's Empire State Building on this Eskesen pen (right).

This Italian-made tip 'n' strip (right) is thicker and has a slightly longer window than an Eskesen original. The top of the pen is embossed: "Made in Italy! Patent," while the tip of the clicker is embossed: "Vepla."

A tugboat and barge sail by London's Houses of Parliament (right). Two loons (far right)—the state bird of Minnesota—swim across the placid waters of one of this state's 10,000 lakes.

This is a typical tip 'n' strip pen (right). A bathing beauty loses her slinky swimsuit when the pen is tilted one way, and gets it back when turned in the opposite direction.



This tip 'n' strip pen (above) was made in the U.S. and probably dates to the 1960s or '70s. The clip is embossed "Viki."

In the window of this key chain (left), a smiling boy and girl ride the Steel Phantom at Kennywood.



The caption on this Eskesen toothbrush (below) reads: "New design." In the window a little figure rides the stream of toothpaste that goes in and out of the tube.



place. To buy all the scenes from a city hadn't occurred to me, but at that point, I developed a fervor for getting more and more."

What is & what isn't a Floaty Pen?

It is generally agreed that a floaty pen contains an image or other object that floats in a small chamber of liquid. Although the liquid looks like water, mineral oil is actually used, because it doesn't yellow or turn rancid and ensures the moving object a smooth ride.

The most typical floaty has an image that glides from top to tip and back again. The first such pen was developed in 1946 by the Danish company Eskesen, still at the forefront of floaty-pen technology today. Eskesen's pens are made by developing designs that are translated into a painting. Photographs of the painting are taken and then shrunk onto tiny pieces of 35-mm film. Specialized machines cut the strips and insert them onto a thin track inside the transparent chambers. A stationary film strip is placed

behind and sometimes also in front of the moving image to create perspective. Eskesen calls these pens photoramics®.

But photoramics aren't the only floating pens. Who hasn't secretly ogled nudes—those pens with women (or men) who wear a bathing suit one second and lose it the next? Their official name is tip 'n' strips, and their images are taken from photos. And if most of the buxom babes in these pens look like they've just stepped out of *Charlie's Angels*, that's because, until last year, the same girlie photos had been used since the '70s.

Tip 'n' strips operate on a similar principle to non-X-rated floaties. With tip 'n' strips, however, the film depicting the woman's front is placed inside the front of the chamber, while the film of her back is fit into the concave space inside the back of the chamber. The "significant" naughty bits have been lightened further to enhance the tip 'n' strip action. In between the two body halves is the moving image—typically a thin black

strip that, when tilted in one direction removes the clothes and tilted back, restores them. "The magical appeal of tip 'n' strips," says Andra, "is how they conceal and reveal."

Some floaties are conceived more simply. For example, there are pens with no motif film. Glitter, stones, microchips or other materials in the clear plastic tube create the movement. Other pens may have a floating or stationary film strip as well as glitter or stones. Although not as popular with collectors, these are technically floaty pens.

It may come as a surprise to those who thought a floaty pen was just a couple pieces of plastic and a ballpoint cartridge. In reality, it can have up to 28 different parts. It's not necessary to know every little piece that comprises a floaty pen, but the following are terms with which you should be familiar:

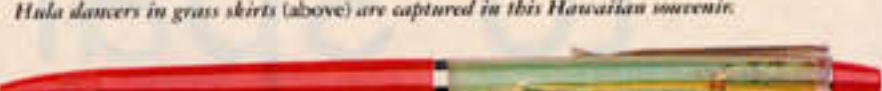
- **Barrel.** The barrel is the cylindrical body of the pen. It comes in a variety of colors.
- **Window or design barrel.** The clear-plastic area in which the floating scene occurs.



On one of Minnesota's 10,000 lakes, a sailboat (above) cruises by a moose in the brush.



Hula dancers in grass skirts (above) are captured in this Hawaiian souvenir.



This pen's caption (above) reads "Hawaii—surfer paradise"; inside, a surfer bangs ten.

- **Floater or glider.** The piece that actually moves. It's vertically on a track and, when tilted, moves vertically from end to end.
- **Background.** The stationary film strip placed behind the floater to create depth of field. It often illustrates a land- or seascape.
- **Foreground.** A stationary piece of film wrapped around the window in front of the floater, used for a greater sense of perspective.
- **Caption, back or outside panel.** The message, placed on the back of the window.
- **Clip.** The little metal piece that attaches to a pocket or notebook.
- **Clicker or click top.** A device on the pen top that, when clicked, discharges or retracts the pen tip. Typically used on tip 'n' strips.
- **Twist barrel.** Another device to eject the pen tip. When twisted, the lower part of the barrel pushes out or retracts the writing tip. Typically used on most floaties.

Eskesen: The Real McCoy

Although other companies have come and gone in the floating-action-pen business, Eskesen is still the world's leader. In fact, Eskesen manufactures over 90% of all floating pens, and the U.S. is their biggest customer. In the past 51 years, the company—located in the medieval town of Store Merløse on the island of Sjælland, about an hour south of Copenhagen—has produced more than a half-billion floaty pens.

Peder Eskesen, a local baker, is considered the inventor of the floating-action pen. The idea was not his, however, others before him had tried to figure out a way to capture a floating image inside a writing implement, but they never succeeded in finding a way to keep the oil from leaking. Eskesen solved the problem; the sealing process he developed is still a carefully guarded secret.

This fun-filled pen found immediate buyers. The oil company Esso gave Eskesen, who had started a company, his first order: Esso contracted him to design and manufacture pens with an oil drum that bobbed up and down inside the window.

Soon, Eskesen was producing pens for

world leaders, including the Shah of Iran and Charles de Gaulle; film companies; major manufacturers like Coca-Cola; and almost every tourist destination in the world. Eskesen also became a leader in tip 'n' strip pens (they sell between 4 and 5 million annually). "Tip 'n' strips are some of the earliest pens the company did," says Andra. "They're Eskesen's claim to fame."

Eskesen's daughter, who took over the company after her father's death, sold it six years ago. Today, Eskesen has 12 full-time designers, each of whom has a particular specialty: One person is the expert on cars, ships and planes, another draws only animals and another does only cartoon characters. The artists create around 50 new designs a week.

While 150 employees produce the pens at the plant, Eskesen has also developed a cottage industry among the local residents of Store Merløse. Over 100 families a day hand-assemble the pen parts into the finished products, right in their own homes.

In addition to pens, Eskesen manufactures key rings, letter and bottle openers, screwdrivers and toothbrushes, although these are difficult to find in the U.S. Whether it be a floaty pen or a toothbrush, Eskesen takes great pride in producing beautifully designed, executed and detailed items.

Other companies have tried their fate at creating floaty pens. An unknown American company seems to have specialized in tip 'n' strips in the 1960s or '70s. Their pens are wider than Eskesen's and are marked: "U.S.A." Surprisingly, the quality of these pens is rather high. Two manufacturers from Japan, New Jersey—Secretary Pen Co. and Progressive Products, Inc.—are known for their metal-bodied mechanical pencils, which had short windows and were filled with liquid that supported a floating object. "That was as close to Eskesen as you can get," says Andra.

The pens that create rough waters for seasoned floaters are those being made in China and Italy, which do not approach the quality of Eskesen's pens. Chinese pens are close in shape to Eskesen's, but some Italian floaties are longer and thicker with a shorter clip. Chinese and Italian pens are usually marked.

An Eskesen pen is easy to identify: It is 6" long—1" longer than other ballpoints—and

is slightly under 1/2" in diameter. Depending on when the pen was made, the clip is marked: "Made in Denmark," "Denmark," "E Made in Denmark" or "E" (the latter is usually found only on pens destined for foreign markets). Collectors agree that no other manufacturer has ever come close to rivaling the quality of Eskesen's pens. In fact, many floaters only collect Eskesen pens.

Determining Value

Although a few cartoon pens bear dates, most floaties do not. Andra says that one way of detecting an older pen is by its clip, older ones are shorter and more contoured than newer ones. The pen top also provides clues: Older ones are bullet-shaped, newer ones have blunt tops. "But just how old is a pen with one of these clips?" asks Andra rhetorically. "Who knows?" Faded pens are also a problem. Many think that if a pen has lost its color, it's old. In reality, it could be a new one that has faded. "Loss of color is not necessarily an indication of age," says Andra. "Fading could be due to overexposure to sunlight."

Another way to approximate the age of a pen is to know when the featured object was built. For example, Seattle's Space Needle went up in 1962; therefore a pen with its image had to have been made after that date. But when? That's the tough part.

Luckily, up till now, a pen's age does not really impact on its worth. What makes one floaty more valuable than another has more to do with its theme and rarity. Andra says the most desirable pens are those with advertising, especially ones of American icons like Heinz Ketchup. "Advertising pens are the hardest to find," says Andra, "because they either stay in-house at the company or are given to clients. They're not sold."

Second on collectors' wish lists are pens of unusual locations or events like the demise of the Berlin Wall. Foreign pens are also highly coveted. And of, course, there's Disney. "Disney's primo," says Andra. "They're desirable because anyone who collects anything thinks they have to have Disney. Also, Disney often does a pattern once and then changes it, so it becomes a limited edition—even if it's an edition of 10,000 to 50,000."

The least sought-after floaties are those of common locations. "They're easy to come by," says Andra, "so every serious collector has them. They're made over and over, you don't have to work hard to get them." After typical destinations, "animal pens are among the least requested," says Andra.

Collectors of antique pens—vintage Mont Blancs and Watermans—would rather see floaters sink than swim. Those who spend hundreds, even thousands, of dollars for a single pen turn their nose up at floaties. Maybe they haven't taken a serious enough look.

A Mont Blanc might be pretty and French, but it doesn't take you on a cruise down the Seine, on horseback through Chantilly or in a balloon through Euro Disneyland.