

Proselytizing for Pens

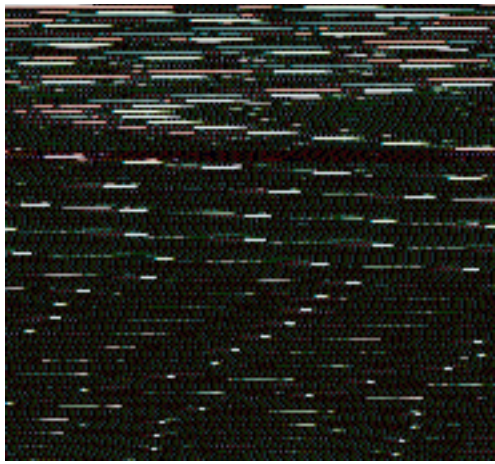
Marie A. Picon speaks to two young entrepreneurs
who are reaching a new generation of pen enthusiasts.

Log on to pentiques.com, an online pen seller and repair service, and you'll find links to the company's Facebook and Twitter accounts, YouTube and Flickr content, live high-def streaming video, a webcast archive and a blog—all focused on pens.

If this litany of e-features leaves you cold, then you're probably not living the "digital" or "social media" lifestyle. If, however, you find the above empowering, exciting even—perhaps you've already launched a web page to check out the Pentiques YouTube archive—then you're exactly the type of person Pentiques caters to, you're part of the grow-

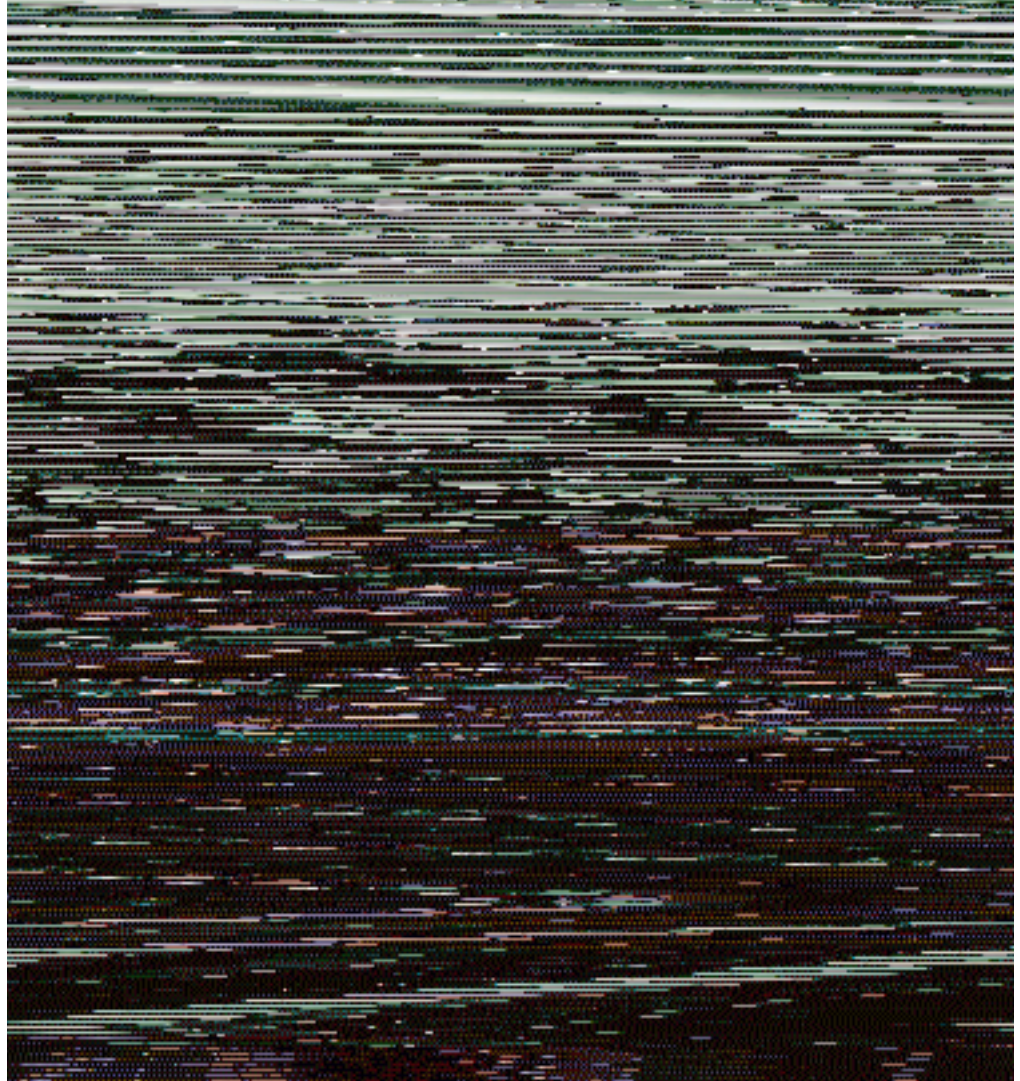
ing subset of pen enthusiasts who have integrated the virtual world into their everyday lives and who rely on the Internet for all things business and personal.

Native Ohioan Aaron Svabik is the thirty-eight-year-old proprietor of Pentiques. He explains, "We attract a younger pen enthusiast who is tech-savvy and understands the ever-changing social media outlets. Our customers communicate and procure their information within an environment created by the latest technologies. And we have embraced those media to better communicate with this generation."



Views from the webcam:
Visitors to edisonpen.mom can see
Brian Gray's entire shop area and a
close-up view of the lathe.

Opposite—Aaron Svabik's pen
repair clients can "look over his
shoulder" as he performs the work.



What interest do the tech-savvy have in fountain pens? More than the average person might expect, actually. But more about that later.

Svabik was a pen enthusiast and self-taught pen restoration specialist when he launched Pentiques in January 2000. Since 1996, he had been buying and selling old pens on eBay as a hobby while working for a local law enforcement agency, but becoming a father for the second time made him reconsider his career. "At the urging of my wife, Kim, I decided to make a run at doing what I loved," he says, referring to his full-time pen business. "I didn't want to be the kind of father who *tells* his kids they can be or do anything they dream of. I wanted to live it and allow them to see it demonstrated." Nearly ten years later, Svabik is indeed following his passion

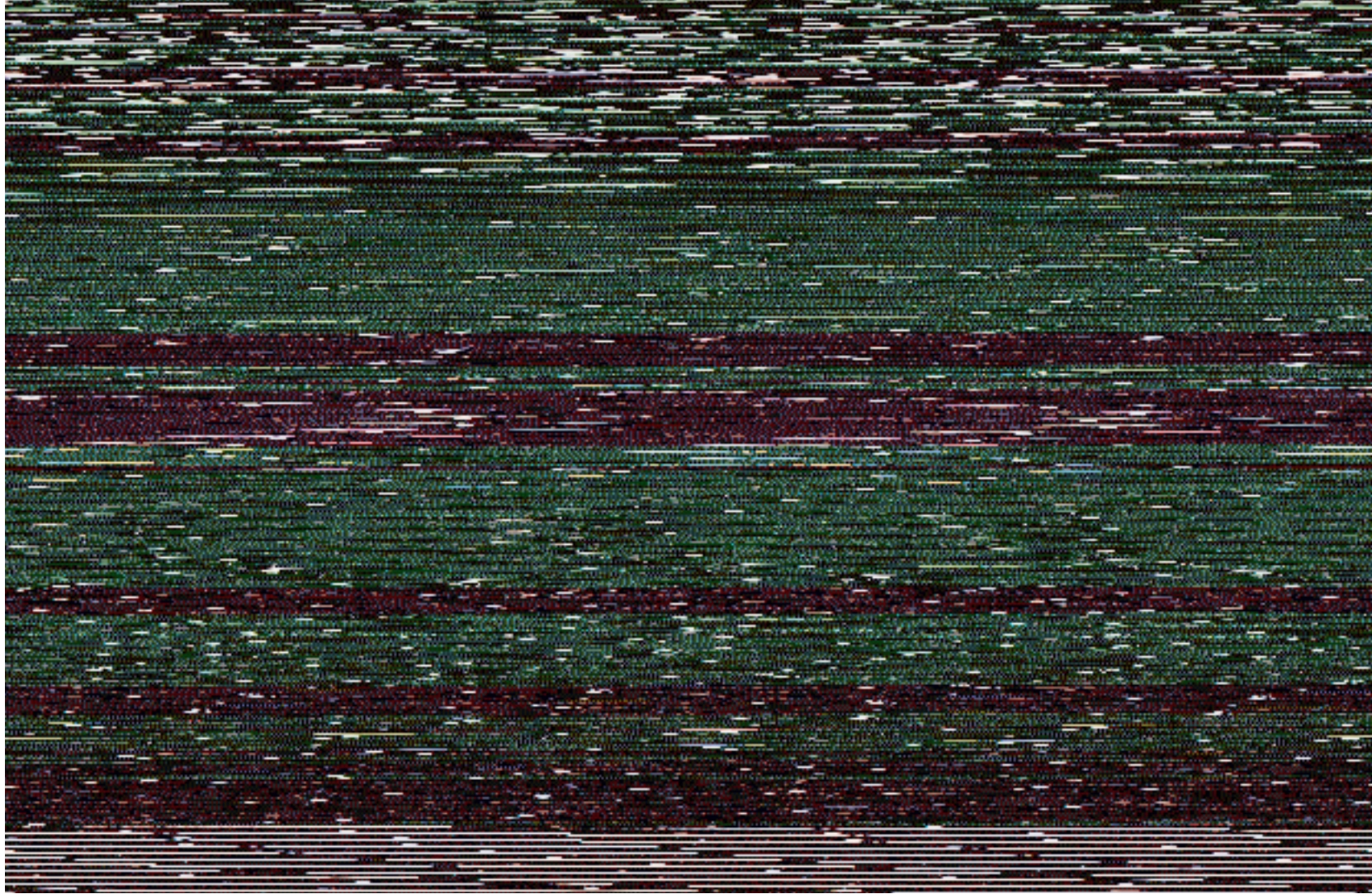
and supporting his young family with a business focused on pen repair, brokering and an ever-expanding retail storefront. And the young entrepreneur is not alone.

Thirty-six-year-old Brian Gray was working as a pharmaceutical rep when he began making pens for himself more than ten years ago, but it wasn't until 2007 that he decided to work at making pens full time, establishing the Edison Pen Company and setting up shop online at edisonpen.mom. It was a leap he might not have taken were it not for a couple of important catalysts: an impending layoff and the encouragement of Svabik.

Gray and Svabik have known each other for about two years now, having met at an early gathering of the Northeast Ohio Pen Club, of which they are both charter members. And

for most of that time, the two have been engaged in a form of friendly competition, spurring each other on to adopt new technology and grow their respective businesses.

Gray says, "When it comes to technology, we keep raising the bar for each other." He recalls, "I started the whole thing by placing a webcam above my lathe, so that clients could watch as I made their pens. Aaron saw this and put a webcam on his repair bench." Both were amazed at the traffic that these simple enhancements attracted from around the world. A month or so later, realizing the potential of video as a medium in proselytizing for pens, Svabik took his gear on the road, producing a live webcast from the Washington D.C. Fountain Pen Supershow in August 2008. He looks back on it now as an important



early project that brought significant attention (more than 3,500 viewers participated) to his website as well as to the D.C. show and numerous exhibitors at that event.

Numbers like this make the investment in technological enhancements a good one. Gray explains, “I think our success is attributable to our using the Internet to reach people. Without it, the only way to be aware of my business is through word of mouth, the rare print advertisement I might place or by meeting me at a pen show. I’m still amazed at how many people subscribe to my blog, follow me on Twitter, are fans on my Facebook page or tune in to my webcam to watch and chat daily. Whenever there is a new development in my business, I can make 1,000 or more people aware of it in a matter of keystrokes.”

In addition to reaching large numbers of people efficiently, Svabik and Gray believe they are tapping a new audience. Svabik describes it as a “new generation of young pen enthusiasts who are tech-savvy and understand the ever-changing social media outlets.” Much like Svabik and Gray themselves, they are smart-phone carrying individuals who stay “connected,” relying on instant communication in their professional lives but also finding it valuable in their personal lives.

So what do the tech-savvy like about fountain pens? The same things the rest of us find so appealing. Gray cites aesthetics, utility and grace, adding that “a pen can be a beautiful tool that serves a very basic human instinct—communication. And the pleasure is one that is shared: letters

written with a wonderful pen appeal not only to the writer but also to the recipient. According to Svabik, “The fountain pen is an escape from instant communication. One has to actually disconnect, sit, contemplate and write.” Many of his clients keep journals. Gray adds that, for the tech-savvy person, a good pen can provide an interesting dichotomy.

Technology is often identified as a culprit in the modern decline of attention paid to handwritten communication and, by extension, the pen. Ironically, the digital world may ultimately encourage interest in the fountain pen, a much older technology but one whose inimitable charms are now touted webwide—via blog, via stream, via tweet.

See Edison and Svabik pens on page 38.

Base prices for Edison pens are \$299 for a steel-nibbed pen and \$329 for a gold-nibbed model. Extra features such as ink windows, custom carving or engraving add to the cost. 567.461.2643, edisonpen.com

Edison Pen

Cool Things To Do Online

At edisonpen.com, customers can log on to watch the production of their own orders and make real-time requests for modifications. A regular group congregates there each morning.

At pentiques.com, live private demonstrations of the writing qualities of any pen currently on offer are provided upon request. It's the next best thing to an in-person test drive.

Svabik Pen Co.

Pentiques principal Aaron Svabik recently released his first pen under the name Svabik Pen Co. The Confluence is made of mottled ebonite with a contemporary touch. A variety of 18 karat gold nibs available. Limited to eighty-two pieces. MSRP: \$495 330.507.PENS; svabikpen.com