



love at first write in LA

# Flax Pen to Paper

BY NICKY PESSAROFF

The friendly faces at Flax: Joan, Phil and their daughter, Alanna Flax-Clark.

One of the ways pen stores stay relevant in an increasingly electronic world is by going electronic; the majority of successful pen stores do a robust online business. Flax Pen to Paper is, most definitely, a successful and profoundly relevant pen oasis. The funny thing is, the only place you'll find Flax's offerings is at their real-world location.

The 2,400-square-foot pen shop calls Westwood Village, a Los Angeles neighborhood, home. Flax's neighbors include the UCLA Medical Center and various high-end retail establishments. The Gayley Avenue location was built

with one thing in mind—pen selling—and to this day, built-in cases display the various wares. Flax is perhaps the only pen shop to completely eschew pen brand display cases.

Flax wasn't always this way. The company was founded in 1931 by Meyer Flax as an art supply store located in downtown Los Angeles. In 1950, Flax's son, Harvey, moved FLAX Art Supplies to a new location in Westwood Village, and for fifty years, the store was a landmark for Hollywood's many artistically inclined. The surprising thing is that pens came so much later.

"There had always been a pen presence there, but it was primarily an art supply store," says Phil Clark, Flax Pen to Paper co-owner with wife Joan Flax, granddaughter of patriarch Meyer Flax. Clark explains that, in the early '90s, Joan wanted a sister store that focused exclusively on pens and writing accessories. "We both had an interest in writing instruments, so we built up a pen business within the art supply business."

The 12,000-square-foot location easily accommodated this store-within-a-store. In 2002, Flax and Clark took the pen business to its current location,





Flax Pen to Paper's elegant interior—note the sink for teaching customers how to clean their pens.

1078 Gayley Avenue, while FLAX Art Supplies remained at the old location. It ceased operations when Harvey Flax retired, meaning that the kid sister, Flax Pen To Paper, is the final legacy of the Flax family.

And it's quite a legacy. The single store originally housed two businesses and was gutted and completely renovated. The cabinetry is made of ash, and the storefront features large windows to maximize natural light. The store even has a sink near the check-out counter, where Clark and Flax teach customers how to clean their writing instruments.

"We wanted an upscale environment that would also be welcoming

and not intimidating. So it's a very upscale-looking store, but it's very relaxed," Clark says. "We don't pressure people. We want them to feel at home."

The light, beautifully appointed store maintains a relaxed attitude, right down to the store soundtrack, which features an eclectic array of artists, from Billie Holliday to Yo-Yo Ma. The pen collection is no less robust, and every major brand one would expect is covered: Caran d'Ache and Fisher Space Pen, Pelikan and Namiki, Cross and Omas, Tombow and Conklin, Porsche Design and ACME. Prices for pens range anywhere from \$8.95 to tens of thousands of dollars.

Flax Pen To Paper also carries a wide variety of paper products—of course—along with briefcases, desk accessories, computer bags, personal organizers and a large selection of greeting cards.

Flax Pen to Paper is a labor of love for Clark and Flax, and it's also a testament to their partnership, in-store and out. Clark, who was born in Scotland, met Flax while she was in the United Kingdom studying Harris Tweed weaving techniques. The two soon married and moved to Los Angeles, and the Flax family categorically supported both the union and the couple's desire for a pen shop. The family thrived, and so did the store,



Customers at Flax may try any pen.

each a testament to the effortless way Clark and Flax work together. Perhaps the most singular aspect of their vision is their decision to completely forgo online pen sales, although they do maintain a presence on the web and in social media.

“We have made a conscious decision not to venture into e-commerce,” Clark says. “E-commerce is, ultimately, a numbers game and you end up selling commodities. We deal with individuals. We don’t sell commodities. Pens are very personal items.”

Flax Pen To Paper’s notion of customer service is also decidedly old-school. Clark says, “We have an idea of how pens should be sold. Somebody

walks into the front door and says, ‘I want to buy a fountain pen, and I want to spend \$150.’ In the course of a conversation, we spend a lot of time with that customer, helping them pick out a pen. We try to match a person’s needs to a writing instrument. I spend half an hour looking at their writing, looking at how they hold a pen, and I help them figure out what it is they actually need. Ultimately, my goal is that somebody walks out of our store feeling like they got what they wanted, even if they didn’t exactly know what they wanted when they came in. I want people to feel like they’ve been taken care of. We build relationships, and people come back because we know them.”

The feeling is reciprocal, and Clark and Flax’s customers continue to return because they feel a personal connection to just about everything that makes Flax unique—the family history, the dynamic between the owners, the understated beauty of the store itself and the thing that every true pen aficionado looks for in a pen-seller—a genuine love for writing instruments.

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