



DHAKA, MONDAY, DECEMBER 27, 2010, E-MAIL: DELUXE@thedailystar.net

Beyond ballpoints

Elite fountain pens are mighty dear

MEHDI MUSHARRAF BHUIYAN

AMERICAN comedian Mitch Hedberg once joked, "I bought a \$7 pen -- because I always lose pens and I got sick of not caring."

Spending Tk 500 on a single pen may sound funny, but Hedberg's statement underlines people's typical attitude to writing implements.

Most pens are so cheap that we tend to forget the inherent worth of a pen -- which cannot be measured by mere market price. It has often been said that paper is the medium of civilisation, but paper would be worthless without something to write on it.

Because they are often cheap, mass-produced and readily available, common ballpoint pens -- somewhat tragically -- are among the most frequently misplaced tools of our day-to-day lives. But a writing instrument can be thought of as a valued possession, rather than a simple stationary supply.

If this is your choice, there are elite pens that are icons of how much man can value these knowledge-recording devices. These are not mere ink-dribbling sticks that you buy, use and throw away. You own them; you possess them proudly -- and even save them for the next generation.

The elite pens are a symbol of your taste, dignity and stature. And connoisseurs know the brands. Parker, Waterman, Cross, Sheaffer, Pierre

Cardin, Mont Blanc and Guy-Laroche are names which for decades have accompanied people who most value their writing instruments.

Waterman, a century-old manufacturer of fountain pens, is one of the few remaining from the first-generation fountain pen companies. Established in 1884 in New York City by Lewis Edson Waterman, the company is now owned by Sanford, a division of Newell Rubbermaid. The company also acquired pen-maker Parker.

Top varieties of Waterman include Expert, Exception, Carene and Harmine. These are among the high-end range of fountain pens available in the nation, retailing for up to Tk 79,000.

Parker, another vintage pen-maker, is famous for inking many historical moments, including the World War II armistice. Parker created the most widely used model of fountain pen in the world -- the Parker 51.

Today, major Parker designs available locally include Duo Fold, Sonnet, Vector, Jettor and Frontier. These retail for between Tk 1,000 and Tk 50,000.

In Bangladesh, the most notable chain to offer the big names in the industry is the Timezone. Found across the capital, Timezone stores are most famous for their wristwatch collections.

"Although the market for luxury pens is relatively small compared to what it could be, our observation is



that this market is growing significantly in recent years," said Sheikh Shahid Ali, general manager of Kollol Group, the country's top importer of branded watches.

Demand has always been strong among businesspeople and corporate

executives, but the taste for elite pens has begun to spread, he said. "There is a growing demand among the educated middle and upper-middle class -- for whom it is a classy gift item," he added.

Among the leading affordable

brands are Cross and Sheaffer, the latter owned by BIC Corp of France and characterised by its classic inlaid nib. These -- along with Pierre Cardin, the French fashion brand -- are the top-selling vintage pens available in Dhaka.

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Marking time

Quality wristwatches increasingly telegraph the success of executives and wives

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ANCIENT Egyptians erected tall, slender obelisks to measure shadows cast by the sun; these tekhenus still stand as history's earliest time indicators. Later, the Greeks devised the clepsydra, which measured time by the regulated flow of water or mercury through a small hole. And ever since, man has incessantly experimented with burning candles, pendulums, sand and glasses to measure daily life in more accurate ways.

In the 17th century, timepieces became pocketable status symbols, with the fob tucked into the vest pocket. Men of means soon considered them a necessity -- as well as a luxury status item. Busy folk began to prefer the wristwatch; by 2005, more than 1.2 billion were produced globally, worth approximately \$16 billion.

Today, youths may get by with a cell phone's time display, but Swiss and other watchmakers continue to appeal to lovers of carefully crafted timepieces who delight in their value and excellence. Watches that transcend boundaries of race and culture around the world -- Rado, Credence, Longines, Tissot and Patek -- are now making their way into the booming middle-class households of Dhaka.

"With the high-end watches, each brand is best suited for a particular age, purpose or occasion," said Sheikh Shahid Ali, General Manager of Kollol Group, the top importer of branded wristwatches in the country.

"Some specific watch brands, like Credence, Titan, Wester and Colber, are more suitable for formal occasions -- and they target professionals and businesspeople," said Ali. "Brand names like Titan, Montreux and Timex, on the other hand, are more coveted among younger people because of the sporty look of the models."

"Some particular varieties of Titan, such as Celoxe and Titan



Raga, are tailor-made for females, while ones from Pierre Cardin, Espirit and Romanson are more of designer watches," he said.

Kollol Group operates 32 Time Zone outlets across Bangladesh, and is planning three more by the end of this year to meet increasing local demand. The conglomerate is the sole Bangladeshi distributor of a number of world-famous brands, including Titan, Credence, Tissot, Longines, Espirit, Romanson and Wester.

"These boutique outlets are aimed at bringing the authentic product ranges to the doorstep of the local customers, as the genuine items are often undistinguishable [to untrained consumers] in the local market from the imitations."

As the market grew, so did the range of models, price points, functions and designs. Rado, from Switzerland, claims the world's first scratch-proof watch, offered in varieties that include Diastar, Cerix, Ceramica, Sintra and Crysuma.

Brands that target the upper-class customers come with sky-high price tags: for example, a Rado costs between Tk 40,000 and Tk 525,000.

Its Swiss rival Tissot was the world's first manufacturer of pocket watches. It did not rest on those laurels, however. Current models include T-Sport, T-Technic, T-Trend, T-Classic and T-Gold dress -- all between Tk 14,000 and Tk 1.1 lakh.

Longines, another Swiss name, is known for its Aviator watches. Its collection now features such names as Elegance, Presences, Dolcevita and Conquest at prices between Tk 55,000 and Tk 3 lakh.

Relatively affordable brands, such as Credence and Titan, are more popular among the middle-income earners. Their designs seem to match local taste and culture. "For instance, their style often goes well with local dress and jewellery," Ali said.



Credence comes in two varieties: Miyake (Tk 1,800-Tk 40,000), and Momentus (Tk 4,000-Tk 28,500).

"These watches are becoming popular these days because they are not only a practicality, they are also a big fashion statement, as they directly reflect a person's taste," he said.

Wester and Kolber, owned by Al-Futtaim group of United Arab Emirates, are respectively priced between Tk 3,000-Tk 15,000, and Tk 10,000-Tk 30,000.

Designer watches such as Esprit, Pierre Cardin and Romanson, valued for their exclusive accents and designs, are priced between Tk 5,000 to Tk 37,000.

Imported watches have come to drive the local market -- a market now worth Tk 3 billion.

"People here are becoming more fashion conscious when it comes to watches," said Ali. "Not only the high-income people, but also the middle- and upper-middle-class professionals and socialites tend to wear a high-end brand watch that speaks to their rising social status and income."

Buyers are becoming choosy about features and designs, not just brand name, he said. For example -- nowadays, many prefer gold accents in their wristwatches. Chronographs, which provide stopwatch functions, are also popular. "They also look for watches decorated with precious stones and exclusive designs, as these act as a fashion statement."

"At the end of the day, the watch you wear on your wrist is more than something you look at to check out the time; it's an expression of your fashion sense, taste and status."

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