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SO SCANDINAVIAN;

Inks For The Memories;
Even Wondered Where All Those Tourist Pens Are Made? Wrong. Look To Denmark For Those Celebrations Of Venice / Hollywood / Disneyland / Big Apple, Etc., Etc., Etc.;

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There is a cup above my desk filled with enough masterworks to rival MOCA. One particularly stunning landscape, an offshore study of Long Beach, captures the city's skyline, from its seedy motels to glass office towers; its blue skies and bluer waters; an aquatic park crowded with small craft. The artist has caught that elusive California light that at once softens and defines all that it envelops. In the foreground sails the Queen Mary. With a 45-degree tip of the canvas, the Queen embarks on a cruise she hasn't attempted since 1967.

The scene is a fiction, a tiny fiction, that takes place in the confines of a 16x80 millimeter, oil-filled translucent tube at the top of an Eskesen floating-action souvenir pen. Known as "floating pens" or, affectionately, "floaties," they are invariably found crammed in dusty bins on tourist shop counters. They would be easy to overlook if not for one striking trait: Sold for \$3, they possess a craftsmanship that flies in the face of the souvenir trade.

These are not off-register shot glasses or key chains, 3-for-\$10 T-shirts or refrigerator magnets. An inch longer than ordinary ballpoint pens, sleekly contoured, floaties bespeak weight and balance and durability. The plastic casings are brightly colored but never garish. The illustrations reveal microscopic attention to detail. Eskesen floating pens may not carry the price tag of a Mont Blanc, but they are just as carefully, and beautifully, made.

A good souvenir, like a good children's book, transports you to a beloved place, real or imaginary. We hold onto a hand-tinted '40s postcard of a

dreamy MacArthur Park or a '70s snow dome of a towering Big Ben because they evoke memories--even if they are memories we don't have. Floaties conjure similar Lilliputian scenes. Try to scribble a note with one and not become distracted by the miniature universe: There's the downscaled Hollywood Bowl, where a cloud of floating musical notes waltzes between a gray-haired conductor in a Tom Thumb tuxedo and his tiny orchestra of bald trumpeters and ponytailed violinists. An LAPD squad car rolls through a stop sign in front of the Police Academy. A pair of dice swims across a Vegas craps table. A brown bear and her cub waddle through a grove of towering Sequoias.

I once stood outside the Brandenburg Gate haggling over a collectible floaty--made when the Berlin Wall still stood--of a tour bus cruising into the British sector. And, truth be told, I've purchased X-rated pens. In one, a '50s giveaway for the Texas Coal & Oil Co., a brunet's negligee falls to reveal a discrete bikini; in a version from the '70s, the trunks of two blokes in leather wristbands and Michael Caine hairdos slowly sink for total exposure.

Perhaps the most curious aspect about floaties is their birthplace, Denmark, a fact proudly stamped on every steel clip. More precisely, they are made in Store Merlose, a medieval village of 1,200 an hour south of Copenhagen.

In 1946, a local baker named Peder Eskesen invented what history now agrees is the first floaty. The idea of such a pen had been floating around for some time, but he mastered the sealing process. Leaking mineral oil--oil is what allows the images to hover in the tube--had long plagued inventors, but Eskesen arrived at a method to prevent such mishaps. His first pen order was for Esso (the forebear to Exxon); it depicted a bobbing oil drum.

Soon Eskesen was marketing the pens worldwide. The shah of Iran ordered wafting family portraits; thousands of Yellow Submarines were launched at the height of Beatlemania. In its 50 years, the company has produced more than half a billion pens. The United States is its biggest customer. Where else can you buy a post-rehab token of the Betty Ford Center? Because the company's name is not on the pen, collectors beseech Danish embassies for its identity. Some, like a Monsieur Zanat from France, the holder of the Guinness World Record with more than 4,000 pens, have even made a pilgrimage to Store Merlose.

Eskesen's corporate campus is a network of flat beige warehouses surrounded by acres of pasture. Think TRW with haystacks. My guide is marketing manager Lars Sorensen. A mustachioed blond in a long white cardigan, Sorensen has that particular Danish flair of being at once warm and efficient. He shifts easily from gossip about the Danish royal family to a scientific rhapsody on plastic moldings. Sorensen leads us to a sun-drenched studio as hushed as a preschool at nap time to observe artist Michael Julin. His round belly

cinched with the cord of a lab coat, Julin is applying the finishing brush strokes to an oil painting of a Saipan Airlines jet. When we're introduced, he jumps from his seat; he rarely meets the ultimate consumers of his work.

He explains that each pen actually contains a set of illustrations--in this case, the floating plane, a backdrop of Saipan and the passengers in the foreground. Every illustration begins as a painting, then is shot down to size. "You see," he says in a soft Danish accent, "when we photograph the painting down, the oil distorts the picture." With his index finger, he traces the length of a foot-long plane from nose to tail. "I must paint everything elongated."

Julin's expertise is cars, planes and ships. "I love Volvos," he says, nodding toward a window and his vintage 122 wagon parked outside. Others among the 12 full-time artists specialize in cartoon characters, farm animals, historic figures. "Yes," Sorensen interjects, "they produce up to 50 new designs each week." Clients customarily send photographs or rough sketches; Disney issues reference binders thicker than phone books for each character.

In the cramped film room, where the paintings are shrunk into tiny strips of 35mm celluloid, Sorensen holds up a reel of Lion Kings for a pen-in-progress. He opens a door to a blaze of noise from the factory floor, where men and women monitor rows of clanking apparatus that cut and shunt the film strips into the pens' plastic tops. He points to the injection room, where technicians pour mineral oil into the pens and seal them in a secret process. Admission is barred, Sorensen apologizes. Eskesen is wary of its competition, an upstart Chinese company whose pens are beset by oil leaks and bubbles.

What about the nudes--the floaties known as tip 'n' strips? "We sell 4 to 5 million a year," Sorensen says. Unlike the souvenir pens, the tip 'n' strips start as photographs. The original models are grandmothers by now, and when I suggest a reunion, Sorensen looks intrigued. The pens haven't been updated since the '70s, but this year will herald "an international revival in the tip 'n' strip," Sorensen says. "New models will be spread all over the world."

Boxes and boxes of pen components await assembly in a shipping depot. Eskesen is the largest employer in Store Merlose, and about 100 families a day come by to take home pen parts, hand-fastening 14 million pens a year. I head for the train station, unable to dismiss the figure from my thoughts. That translates, roughly, into 560 floaties per family per day. I imagine the assembly line on a cold winter's eve: The grandmother hands the ink cartridge to her middle-aged son, who places it in the empty chamber and passes it to his daughter, who attaches the clip and tightens the parts. With each pen, a new world takes shape. . . a minuscule grove of Oregon

redwoods, a diminutive Pieta sliding through the Vatican, or a bantam Malibu surfer who, sealed in a translucent tube, rides the crest of an eternal wave.

PHOTO: Bear Family in Kings Canyon National Park PHOTO: Disney's Mickey Mouse in Tomorrowland PHOTO: "Seismic Activity Scale" - Sold in San Francisco PHOTO: The Queen Mary Against The Long Beach Skyline PHOTO: An LAPD Cruiser Outside The Police Academy PHOTO: Leonardo Da Vinci's "The Last Supper" PHOTO: For Adults Only: An Early "Tip 'N' Strip" Pen