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THE COLOURFUL WORLD OF CARAN D'ACHE.

Caran d'Ache is the name of a Geneva company. It is also that of one of Switzerland's most illustrious brands. Little is published about the privately-owned firm with a payroll of 340. But for decades, it has been a name to conjure with on the world market for quality pencils, crayons, pens and artists' materials.

Established in 1924, the company took its name from the turn-of-the-century French caricaturist Emmanuel Poiré, who was highly admired by founder Arnold Schweizer. Poiré had been born in Russia and spent most of his youth there before returning to France. He adopted as his nom-de-plume the Russian word for pencil: KARANDASCH, which he gallicised as CARAN D'ACHE. It is a safe bet that the name is now more widely known than it was in Poiré's day, thanks to the marketing skills of Schweizer's successors. From the beginning, the company concentrated on research and quality in the manufacture of pencils, refining the process by which graphite is combined with clay baked and finally impregnated with a wax mixture. Just five years after its founding, Caran d'Ache patented its "Fixpencil", the first totally metal mechanical pencil in the world, which has been a best-seller ever since.

From lead pencils, it was just a short step to colour. Here again, innovation has been the key. Besides normal coloured crayons, there are today water-solvent crayons which can be used to obtain a watercolour effect, as well as colour-fast and non-flaking pastels, bright and water-resistant wax crayons, the Pablo collection of permanent colours and water-soluble fibre-tipped pens.

Other specialities from the Caran d'Ache programme include a range of acrylic and gouache paints in small selections for individuals or large pots for schools, modelling clay, spray protectors, fixatives, glue, pencil sharpeners and erasers.

It is hardly surprising that the list of satisfied customers includes some of the age's leading artists. Pablo Picasso used "Neocolor" wax crayons, as does his daughter Paloma, the Lucerne artist Hans Erni works with the pastel collection and designer Karl Lagerfeld finds the fine "Prisalmo" crayons ideal for this work.

The company does its part in encouraging the arts. Since 1979 it has awarded an annual prize of SFR 40,000 to the Swiss artist who has done most for the arts in Switzerland.

Caran d'Ache also began with a collection of pens in solid gold and silver and hand-lacquered ballpoint and fountain pens with matching lighter. In 1970 came the "Madison" collection of fountain pens, lead holders, fibre and ballpoint pens in solid gold or silver, black satin finish or bimetal stainless steel and gold.



A picture of an old Vampire taken from the military archives.

In 1990 the Guinness Book of Records noted: "The most expensive writing pen in the world is the Caran d'Ache 18-carat solid gold "Madison" slimline ballpoint pen incorporating white diamonds of 6.35 carats". Its recommended retail price from a London distributor was around NZ\$65,000.

Lighters have become another Caran d'Ache speciality, with their patented independent twin gas reserves and most of the gift pen collections feature matching lighters.

One of Caran d'Ache's earlier most successful advertisements showed a white Volkswagen Beetle being decorated in colourful swirls by a group of children. And the company's mechanical scenes depicting ballerinas, penguins or dancing bears which delight all those with their noses pressed against shop windows at Christmastime are now also crated up and shipped off to foreign markets.

The company is represented by 75 agents in as many countries. The Far East is a particularly important market, with Singapore, Japan and to a lesser extent Hong Kong among leading customers. For all that, the company has come a long way from the eponymous Russian cartoonist....

VAMPIRES 50 YEARS OLD

In September 1943, the first prototype of this jetfighter was tested in Great Britain. Designed by Sir Geoffrey de Havilland and built in Hatfield, England, the Vampire had a double tail made out of plywood. The Vampire reached a maximum speed of 820 km per hour and could carry canons, bombs and rockets.

In 1947 Switzerland bought 75 machines which were delivered in Emmen in 1949. For the next 100 machines, the fuselage and wings were built in Switzerland under licence whilst the rest was still being purchased from England. When they were replaced by the more modern Venoms, the Vampires were used as training aircraft for new pilots. Now only one machine remains at the museum of transport in Lucerne.

FOREIGN POPULATION

Apart from Luxembourg which holds the record in foreign population (29%), Switzerland is by far the country in Europe with the largest percentage of foreigners: 18%. Next in line would be Belgium (9.2%), Germany (8%), Austria (6.6%) France (6.1%), Sweden (5.7%), Greece (5%), The Netherlands (4.8%) and Great Britain, Norway and Denmark (3.5%).

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