



Dynamic Doodlers

A History of Ballpoint Art

The humble ballpoint pen. Since its introduction to the masses at Gimbel's New York Department store in 1945, it has become a staple of any office, classroom or study. But whilst John Loud's original 1888 patent, and the Biro brothers' later updates in the 1930's, undoubtedly arrived with the intention of revolutionizing the stationery world, it is unlikely that these innovators could have fathomed the works of art that would eventually spring from their bold balled inventions.

For threescore years now, artists have been utilizing the ballpoint for a variety of demiurgic creations, and continue to reinvent its application to this day – unsurprising considering the ubiquity of the modest writing instrument. They offer low cost, accessibility and portability, making them an obvious choice for any artist's toolbox – particularly those with a small budget.

Indeed, many of today's most renowned illustrators, painters, animators and graffiti artists found their creative feet, or more accurately, hands, by doodling away as children. In the classroom, the bedroom, on walls, paper or even flesh. At a time when creative thought flows freely and the obstacle of adult responsibility is but a speck in the distance, ballpoint pens are almost always on hand.

Of course, you don't have to have artistic tendencies to be a doodler – even as an adult. It might happen whilst you are on the phone or on a train, in a lecture or a conference maybe; the likeliness is you will, at some point, find yourself engaged in absent-minded scribbling, or perhaps just adding moustaches and horns to magazine photos (I often end up drawing structures made entirely of arrows – I'm told it means I'm looking for a way out). But the next time you do, try to keep in mind the possibilities that are bound to this unsuspecting piece of stationery...

1950's – Ballpoint Us in the Right Direction

Although Lucio Fontana is cited as being the first artist to use the ballpoint in 1946, it is a much more familiar figure who can be accredited with bringing its potential to the attention of the public: Mr Andy Warhol.



Whilst predominantly known for his prints of film stars and mass-produced goods, the pop-art prince was undoubtedly one of the foremost exponents of ballpoint art. Before Warhol achieved his first '15 minutes of fame', he, like so many others, developed his craft at school and college, at a time when the Bic Cristal ballpoint went into mass production and had begun to appear in classrooms.

“I was doing my [drawing] technique and then they told me I had to go to summer school, and if I didn’t go to summer school I couldn’t come back, so then I went to summer school and learned how to draw like they did.”

(Andy Warhol: 1989, found in XVII)

His playful and delicate style married to the simplicity of the ballpoint pen beautifully, and the doodles began to turn into works of art, many of which are still admired today.

In addition, the immediacy and, quite interestingly so as it is often considered a drawback of the medium, the permanency of the ballpoint pen seemed to pair perfectly with Warhol’s process – as this quote from an interview with friend and fellow artist, Charles Lisanby reveals:

“One Sunday . . . we went down to the flower market and bought some irises and came back and spent the afternoon drawing . . . He would just draw one line and then leave it, and when I would draw things, I was always erasing, changing, and improving. And he never improved on anything. Rather than do that, he would draw a new one, which is something I never thought of doing in those days.”

(Charles Lisanby on Warhol: 1978, found in XVII)

Another important contributor to the foundation of ballpoint art was one Alberto Giacometti. This Swiss painter and sculptor not only produced sketches in ballpoint, such as this black and blue bust of his brother Diego, but also explored a multitude of techniques that combined the pens with other tools to create some of his more famous abstract pieces.

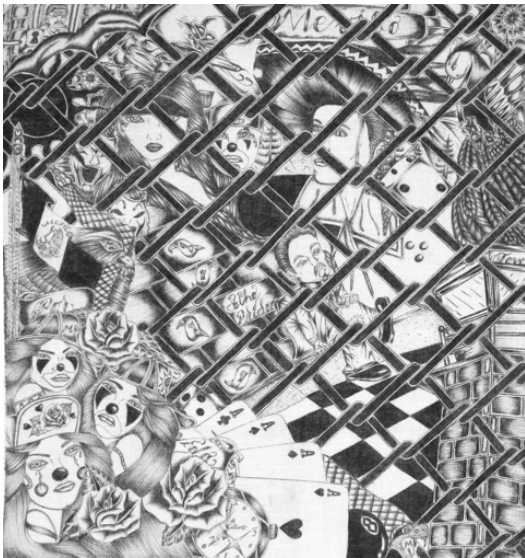


1960's – Spirals and Bars

‘Your eyes won’t believe what your hands have done’, is what was promised by American toy manufacturer Kenner when they launched the Spirograph in 1965. A biro-based, geometric art kit which appeared in conjunction with the spreading psychedelic culture of the 60’s. Users were aided in the creation of elegant spiral designs, by placing ballpoint nibs through small holes in the toothed plastic rings of the gear-like system, and applying the guided motion to a markable surface. The result was a new wave of enthusiasm for ballpoint art.

View a Spirograph television advert here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EhMom-wAzE>

Another noteworthy event of the decade was the rise of correctional rehabilitation. Art programs were incorporated as a means of therapeutic recreation in prisons, and due to limited funding, cheap art supplies were essential, meaning pencils and pens were the go-to apparatus made available to inmates. Whilst ballpoint art from correctional programs doesn't get the same exposure as other work, it has certainly produced some interesting pieces over the years.



1970s – New Inklusions

Cy Twombly is widely considered to be one of the greatest painters of the 20th century. His work is collected by some of the most prestigious galleries around the world and by the 1970's even *he* had begun to incorporate ballpoint into his unique scrawl.



However, Twombly was very much a mixed media guru, one who would utilise many tools to produce his artistic visions – the world was yet to see someone dedicated primarily to the use of the ballpoint pen.

Enter Alighiero Boetti, an Italian conceptual artist who created his first ballpoint ink works in 1972 and continued to work with the medium until the late 80's. His *Lavori Biro* (Ball Pen Paintings) was a collaborative project whereby Boetti laid down labyrinthine foundations of puzzles and linguistic codes in a grid type format, and then invited friends and acquaintances to flesh out the piece, typically commanding that they alternate between genders from one section to another.

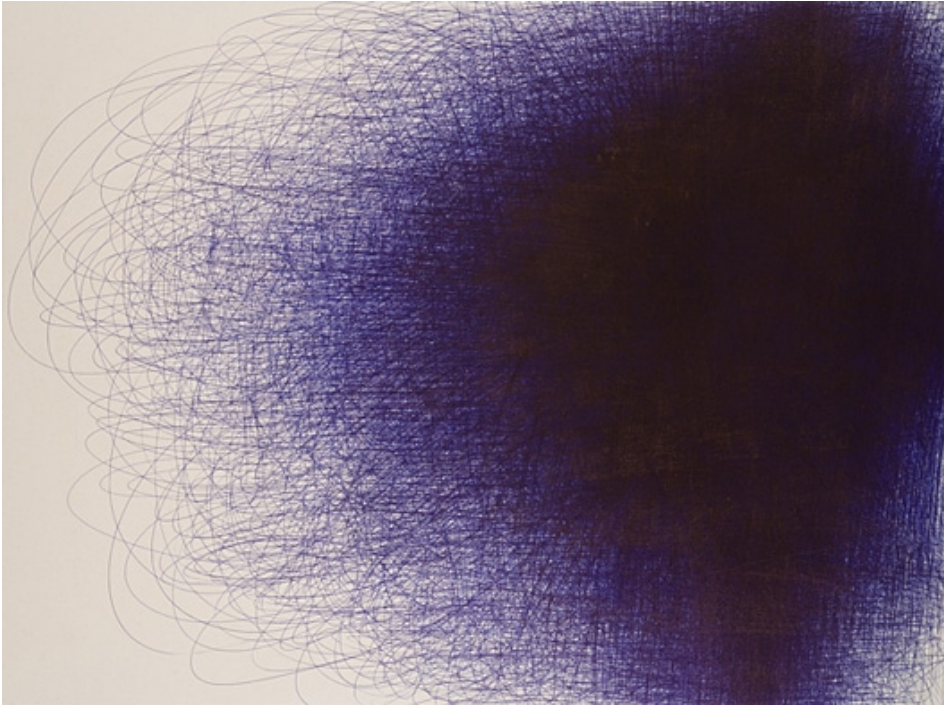


The most notable of these works is perhaps the gargantuan *I Sei Sensi* (The Six Senses) pictured above. An intricate piece, conceived almost as a canvas-based production line, with all the parts eventually coming together to form an image of the five senses - vedere (to see), dire (to hear), toccare (to touch), odorare (to smell), gustare (to taste) – and a sixth added by the artist: pensare (to think).

1980's – The Ballpoint of No Return

The 1980's brought with them two artists that were to take the medium to new levels of complexity and detail, changing the opinion of ballpoint art forever: Korean born abstract artist Il Lee, and the now legendary Lennie Mace.

The perplexing pen work of Il Lee often resembles dark clouds or wispy wool; he masterfully masses thousands of pen strokes together to form each scribbled abyss. Predominantly working out of New York these days, Lee has stated that he uses 'anywhere from 100 to 120 or more ballpoint pens on large canvas works' (IX), and once emptied 600 blue ballpoints to create a 50-ft wide drawing which snaked along a wall for an exhibition at the Queens Museum of Art.



Lennie Mace, regularly referred to as the “da Vinci of doodlers” or “the ballpoint Picasso”, emerged in the late 1980’s. This blistering ballpoint behemoth etched out an untouchable reputation for himself, coining the phrases ‘PENTings’ and ‘Media Graffiti’. His appearance and consequent work had such a profound impact on the scene that it wouldn’t be unreasonable to crown him the godfather of ballpoint art.

The New York-born virtuoso with a self-proclaimed immunity to boredom, was largely self-taught and learned the basics of anatomy and perspective in his youth by tracing over newspaper photos in ballpoint. These skills eventually evolved into his trademark style, which utilises a technique called crosshatching, creating an illusion of continuous tone – something he regularly refers to as the “wow factor”.



Mace has amassed a simply stunning array of work over the past three decades, ranging from the surreal to the life-like. He has replicated the Mona Lisa, illustrated for DC Comics, had his work shown all over the world, and through his 365DAZE project - whereby he drew a ballpoint picture every day for a year - created a truly unique artistic time capsule, a landmark in the history of ballpoint art.



1990s – One in a Mylne-ion

Whilst there were probably many other artists working with ballpoint throughout the 1990's, one very special Brit was intent on taking the medium in a new direction, one with an increased focus on aesthetic complexity: ballpoint photorealism.

Photorealism is a genre of art concerned with creating the most realistic imagery possible, encompassing various tools to replicate photographs with painstaking precision. Hailing from south-west London, James Mylne attempts such feats using nothing but biros, having had an affinity with them from a young age.

"I began drawing realistic artwork from an early age. Around the age of 14 I realised the benefits of using ballpoint pens over pencil. From the age of 19 I was selling my ballpoint drawings. Back when I was one of the only people working in this medium worldwide. At university my tutors were not too keen on my drawings, viewing them just as *pretty pictures*. Since then I'm the only professional artist from my course and ballpoint drawing has grown in popularity, becoming an accepted medium within the art world."

(Mylne, found in I)

Each piece will take Mylne anywhere between 25 and 100 hours, and like Warhol before him, his most famous works feature the likeness of celebrities, such as Audrey Hepburn and Kate Moss. He has now become the first artist to create work using spray paint and ballpoint together, been featured on the BBC, and worked with pen company BIC to create promotional videos which can be seen on YouTube.



There was, of course, a significant event toward the end of the 20th century that would serve to further publicise ballpoint art and provoke a huge spike in the medium's popularity: the arrival of the internet.

The 21st Century – Out of the Ball Park

The new Millennium, riding upon the digital wave of the internet, ushered in an era of increased interest in ballpoint art and unleashed, or perhaps just uncovered, a plethora of new artists. A collection of incredibly talented individuals who subscribe these ink funnels alone as catalysts for their creative imaginations.

Juan Francisco Casas

The mind-blowing drawings of this 34-year-old Spaniard have taken the internet by storm. What began as a joke, eventually turned into his most lucrative artistic endeavour. Casas was originally a traditional style painter but began experimenting after nights out with friends by trying to replicate their photos with a biro to such a precise degree that people would believe they were the real thing. These complex counterfeits proved extremely popular, and his works, sometimes measuring up to 10 feet high, are now shown in galleries around the world and selling for thousands of euros each.



Serhiy Kolyada

This ingenious Ukrainian original uses ballpoint on construction paper to create his politically-infused drawings. Whilst he is ignored, and even outlawed, by his hometown of Kiev, his work has caught the eye of many critics throughout the world. The complex images serve as a social commentary on life in the Ukraine – artful depictions of his courageous reflections on gender, power and money.



Toyin Odutola

Odutola was born in Nigeria and raised in the conservative American state of Alabama. Her work manifests itself as an exploration of her assimilation into American culture, awash with the echoes of her homeland. Most frequently she uses a black ballpoint, applied to the uncommon surface of black board, which achieves a unique copper-like tone.



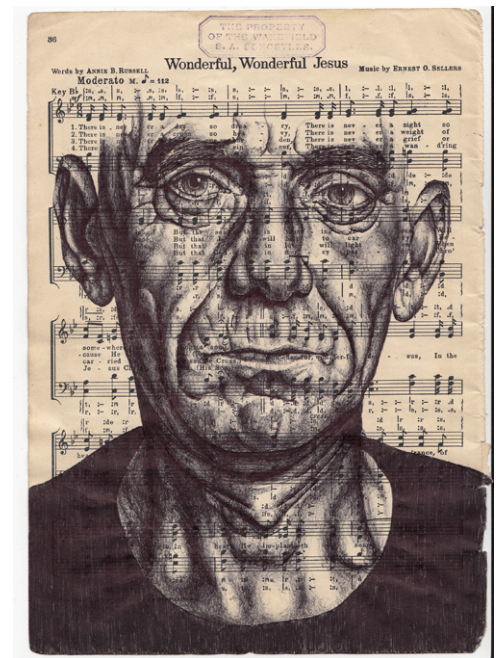
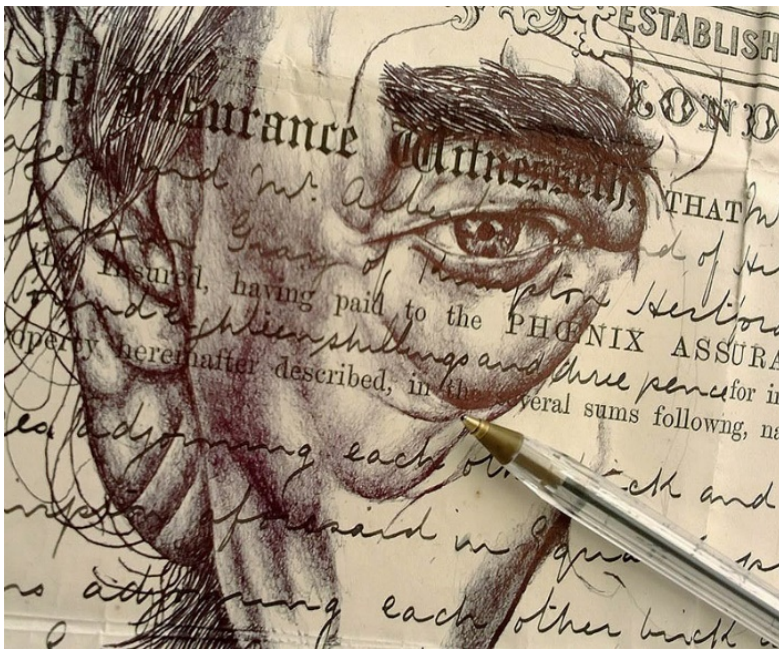
Her intention is to question people's perception of race. When asked in an interview with *Village Voice* why the majority of her figures are black, she replied:

"Of course they're black figures because they're drawn in black pen, but not all of the figures are of African American descent, or at least the reference isn't. One of the things I like to play with is, "What is black?" Is it because I drew it? Is it because it looks black? Is it because you think the figure is black? Because a lot of it is just a filter, and the filters get more and more obstructed by whatever people think the image is about and not really what it is."

(Odutola, found in XVII)

Mark Powell

Huddersfield-drifter-come-ballpoint-extraordinaire Powell fell into being an artist quite by accident. He wandered into the art studios of Huddersfield University one day after losing one of many jobs, got talking to the head tutor, and ended up enrolling on the fine art course there. His enchanting creations combine near photorealistic imagery with quite unconventional back drops. From old maps and newspapers to sheet music and used envelopes, Powell's quirky canvas choices have given him a signature aesthetic which has proved particularly popular, as he now sells his work on both sides of the Atlantic.



Challenging the Limitations

Whilst these remarkable people make it clear that the ballpoint pen can be used to create marvellous works of art, for some artists the medium is just too restrictive. A perspective which is understandable when one examines its limitations.

Most often the only readily available colours are black, blue, green and red, but for a few exceptions. I'm sure many of you have come across the somewhat unusual, cigar shaped multi-ballpoints which can come with up to ten colours and regularly include pink, purple and yellow. A good idea, certainly, and whilst perfect for sprucing up an otherwise boring birthday card, the ink composition and mechanical complications of these pens often means ballpoint artists avoid them.

Other complaints include the blobbing and skipping of ink flow, ink fading and degrading over time and, in the case of most ballpoints, a reliance on gravity. That is, the pens must be held upright to function.

But, as one would expect, the biggest grievance to be had with using ballpoints to create works of art is the unforgiving margin of error. Mistakes must be minimal, if not absent entirely, which some just find too intimidating a prospect. Others, though, welcome the danger and see it as a challenge of skill – James Mylne, for example, who refers to the medium as requiring a ‘meditative’ level of focus. (1)

Keeping the Ball Rolling

Proponents refer to ballpoint art as a movement, but it is often dismissed by established art circles and critics as a novelty. Despite this, it is gaining momentum and being taken seriously in some places, and its creative application has already taken on many forms: photorealism, surrealism and minimalist abstractions are but a few of the directions that have been explored.

Some may consider it a fad, but realistically, as long as the ballpoint pen is so readily available, the art form and its adherents will continue to grow. As far as its evolution and trajectory are concerned, only time will tell, but there are developments happening continuously. In recent years, for example, Phillippe Malouine has invented the ballpoint stool for work on huge surfaces, and a new generation of ballpointers have started creating ambitiously ambidextrous two-handed drawings.

As I mentioned before, ballpoint art so often begins with doodling – that is, the outpouring of one’s uncontrived imaginings – and I personally envisage a time when artists are able to combine the stunning detail of photorealism with an imaginative freedom similar to that of the classroom doodle.

After scouring the internet, the closest I can currently find to this ideal is the work of Shohei Otomo, son of director and animator Katsuhiro Otomo (the man responsible for the manga cult classic *Akira*). His drawings exhibit an *almost* photo-like quality, whilst at the same time being born from his own imagination and not copied from anything.



Now that photorealism has set the bar for detail, it is perhaps only a matter of time before imitation is no longer impressive, and artists of this persuasion strive to set themselves apart by the sui generis nature of their ballpoint creations.

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