

Power of the Pen, Danish-style

Denmark's Eskesen A/S has brought authentic Danish design to the traveling masses for more than 50 years. You might not know their name, but you surely know their work.

By Leslie Gilbert Elman

FROM THE GRAND CANYON TO THE GREAT Barrier Reef, there's a little bit of Denmark in almost every souvenir shop on earth. Brightly colored floating-action pens produced by Denmark's Eskesen A/S are among the world's most ubiquitous souvenirs. Other Danish design products are more highly regarded in artistic circles, but no other Danish item has the universal appeal of the "floaty" pen.

For generations of adults in the United States and abroad, the floaty pen is a universal symbol of the old-style family vacation. It resonates with anyone who ever piled into the back seat for a summertime car trip—whether to Cape Cod or Skagen. It's the treat your grandma bought you on the boardwalk or your dad picked up at the airport on his way home from a business trip. Each design is unique—the Viking ship on the pen from Iceland is distinct from the one on the pen from Denmark. About 100 new pen designs are produced each week.

What surprises many aficionados, including Danish collector Finn Sørensen who was interviewed recently by Danish Public Radio about his collection, is how few people recognize the floaty pen as a distinctly Danish product. Eskesen created the

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floaty pen and holds an estimated 90 percent of the floaty pen market. (The remaining 10 percent can be attributed to knock-offs from Asia and Europe.)

A close look at most floaty pens reveals the words "Made in Denmark" stamped on the metal pocket clip or on the flat top of the clear plastic barrel. Other pens simply bear the Eskesen logo—a combination of the letter "E" and a ballpoint pen tip.

Perhaps you've never studied Eskesen's floaty pens, such as the one from Copenhagen's Nyhavn district in which canal boats float past the 18th-century buildings or the one from Oslo that features a uniformed palace guard marching back and forth. Yet plenty of people have. In its 56-year history Eskesen has sold more than half a billion floaty pens. Its sales amount to about \$10 million a year.

"Everyone likes the pens at first sight," says Ole Trojaborg, Eskesen's sales manager. "The world has changed a lot in the past 50 years, but the product is the same as in 1951 (when it was introduced). It sort of lies in everyone's memory, intrigues people and inspires their imagination."

Writing history

Company founder Peder Eskesen was a baker by profession and a tinker by inclination. Born in Odense, Denmark, in 1908, he lived through World War II as most Danes did, holding on to a hope for a brighter future. After the war, he wanted to try something new—a fresh start perhaps.

According to company history, he became fascinated by the technology of ballpoint pens. Introduced in 1938 by Hungarian

