

Who would have thought that in a world oversaturated with smart phones, old-fashioned notebooks would once again become a hot trend?

Pocket Notebook Redux

BY REINHARD KARGL



Two notebook companies with a long history: Leuchtturm celebrates its centennial with Leuchtturm1917 notebooks in gold, silver, and copper. At right—Rhodia's Webnotebook and the Habana by Rhodia's sister brand Quo Vadis.

By the 1980s, high-quality, stitched pocket notebooks were a rare specialty item. Instead, mass-market retailers were stocked with soulless notebooks of inferior quality and little consistency. Most were cheaply stapled, glued, or spiral bound. The paper? Thin, highly acidic scratch paper lacking durability. Little of it was suitable for writing or drawing in ink—and didn't need to be, since by then, equally soulless, disposable plastic sticks had become the most popular writing instruments. For fountain pen users, the situation was rather frustrating. Many gave up and never adopted consistent notebooking habits.

Luckily, things began to change dramatically in the 1990s after former Italian teacher, Maria Sebregondi, convinced the small Milanese publishing company Modo & Modo to market a notebook with similar specifications to those used by writers like Bruce Chatwin and Ernest Hemingway, under the now famous trademark Moleskine.

Moleskine notebooks first went into production in 1997 and were made in China but, as the *New Yorker* Magazine puts it: "The company cultivated the perception that its product had been around forever." Whether you call it imaginative branding or deceptive marketing, the company was soon unable to keep up with demand. By 2015, annual revenue reached an astonishing \$138 million; not bad for a company that doesn't do any traditional advertising and even keeps the correct pronunciation of its name a mystery. Instead, the brand gets an abundance of free publicity on blogs, social media, and video channels.

Moleskine got lots of things right, but fountain pen users are utterly failed by the brand's paper. Results vary by nib and ink, but due to ghosting, bleed-through, and feathering, the writing experience ranges from barely acceptable to dreadful.



Leuchtturm1917 hardback notebooks are available in 17 different colors and are joined by new softcover notebooks (right). Below—Semikolon notebooks have a sturdy linen cover, perfect for personalization.



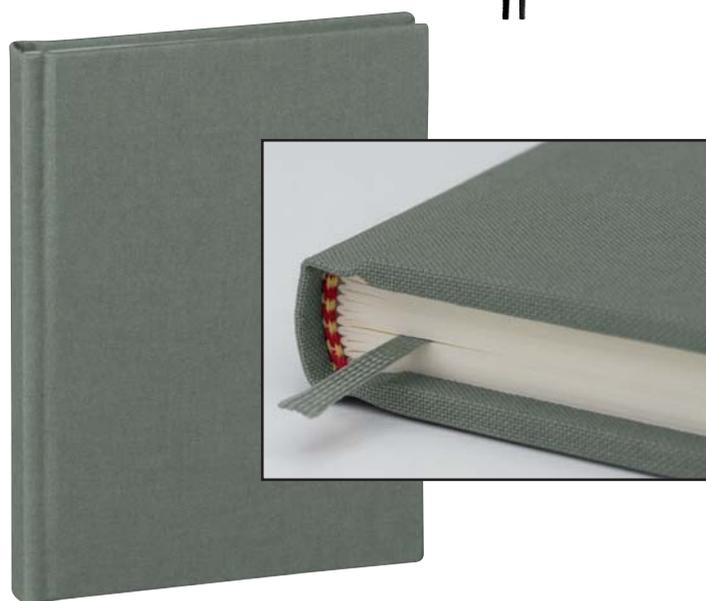
Luckily, Moleskine's phenomenal success has encouraged other companies to make competing products with all the winning design elements (and more), and with fountain pen friendly paper.

Only one brand offers each of Moleskine's features (and adds many more): Leuchtturm1917, a German company founded in 1917. It adds front index pages and page numbering, and the last pages are perforated for easy removal. There is twice as much (and better) stitching than in Moleskine's offering, but best of all, Leuchtturm takes great care to use fountain pen friendly paper.

Ink-proof notebooks are not as easy and straightforward to make as it might seem. Paper is always a compromise. The biggest problem is consistency, explains Leuchtturm1917's Brand Manager Philipp von Ludowig, but he affirms that Leuchtturm is acutely aware of the difficulties and makes every effort to cater to the complex requirements of fountain pen users.

The Leuchtturm notebook line has expanded continuously and now comes in 17 colors. (To celebrate the company's centennial, Leuchtturm currently also offers gold, silver, and copper tone covers). The pages may be dotted, lined, blank, or squared, and the company even includes stickers for labeling both fronts and spines.

New in the lineup is the thinner softcover option featuring flexible covers, which ride in back pockets much more comfortably. (Caution: the softcover line is only three quarters as thick as the original, but it has only 121 pages; the



original has 185). All in all, there is no question that for the fountain pen user, Leuchtturm1917 is outperforming Moleskine in every way. It's not even a close contest, considering that retail prices are roughly the same.

But there are more contenders.

The other heavyweights in the room are Rhodia's 3.5 x 5.5 inch Webnotebook, and the 4 x 6 inch Habana series of its sister brand, Quo Vadis. Both feature highly fountain pen friendly Clairefontaine paper with over 80 grams of weight. Some people dislike Rhodia's thick and slippery cover, but the Habana's flexible and tactile covers make a fine alternative.



Rhodia's Rhodiarama Webbie notebooks feature Clairfontaine paper and come in variety of colors. Below—Rhodia Webnotebooks in black, silver, and orange.

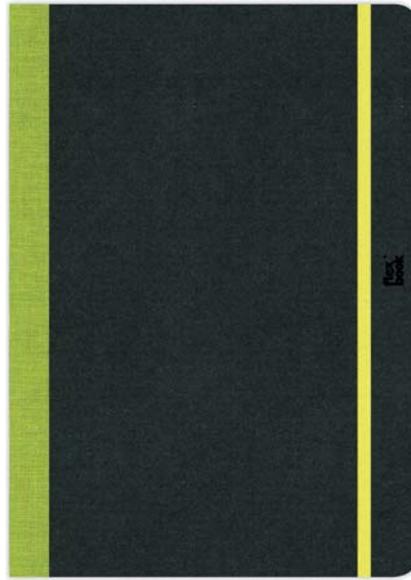
Of course, not every fountain pen user loves the smooth Clairfontaine paper used in Rhodia and Quo Vadis products. Those who prefer premium paper with more surface texture should strongly consider the notebooks made by Semikolon. This German brand also belongs to the Leuchtturm group and was originally renowned for high-quality photo albums and artist sketchbooks. The bindings on Semikolon's A5 (4.5 x 6 inch) sized notebooks are better than all those mentioned above. The covers are made from natural linen and can be painted and drawn on for personalization, and there are currently 15 assorted colors. The downside here is that the increased dimensions and thickness are pushing the limits of what can still fit into most pockets.

The current trend of carrying smartphones in the back pockets of pants has also carried over to pocket notebooks, but this carry method bends covers and stresses bindings. A trendy response to this is the 3.5 x 5.5 inch Flexbook, made in Greece. Its soft and flexible cover feels comfortable in the back pocket, but there is another, interesting feature. A novel binding (both sewn and glued) makes it possible to bend the book at the spine by 360 degrees without deforming the pages. This makes it possible to hold the notebook in one hand and use a cell-phone in the other hand to photograph or scan a single page. The 85 gram acid-free paper is excellent and ink proof while still offering 192 pages. An elastic band is provided, but bookmark cords and pockets are lacking.

Suitability for back pocket carry is perhaps best implemented by a company from Thailand: Zequenz. The 3.5 x 5.5 inch size is perfect. The slim cover is smooth but not too slippery. But the real innovations lie in a newly developed glue binding system that allows extreme flexibility, up to 360 degrees. Introducing the notebooks at PaperWorld 2017 in Frankfurt, Managing Director Nalin Damrongkitkarn was very proud of this binding. She said its combination of high flexibility and durability has only recently become possible. Another innovation: not only are all corners rounded, so is the spine! The middle pages are wider than the top and back pages, which requires special manufacturing techniques. The paper is smooth and on the thin side, which allows more pages, but it is still suitable for fine nibs with moderate ink flow. Zequenz notebooks are minimalist in aesthetics and devoid of added features.

There is yet another innovation, and this one might revolutionize the way we perceive and use notebooks. Leuchtturm and others have started to integrate paper notebooks into the digital world. For instance, Quo Vadis is offering its ME (Multimedia Enhanced) journal in two sizes so far. Each page is identified by a unique imprinted QR code box, which can be scanned via a free mobile phone app and which allows videos, photos, or audio recordings to be associated with the respective page in the paper notebook.





Today's notebooks offer great flexibility, literally. Left—Flexbook notebooks can be bent 360 degrees, and easily scannable Flexbook Smartbooks are designed in bright pastel colors. Below—Leuchtturm1917's Whitelines notebooks easily turn your analog writing digital. Zequenz notebooks also bend 360 degrees.



Another notebook for the analog–digital continuum is Leuchtturm1917's brilliantly executed Whitelines Link line of notebooks. Write or draw in the notebook using your pen of choice, the usual way. Open the free Whitelines Link app on your mobile device and hold it over the notebook page. The app recognizes the paper's corner markings, scans the page, removes the lines or dot grid, corrects distortions, and crops the image—all automatically and without the need for user intervention. The digital version of the notebook page can then be saved, filed, printed, or shared via e-mail and social media, or uploaded to popular cloud-based services such as Dropbox or Evernote. The process is as simple as it gets and takes only a few seconds. For example, to e-mail your notes: mark the "mail" icon on the paper, hold the phone above the page, and you'll get an image of the page in an e-mail document ready for sending.

As paper notebooks are rediscovered and adopted by new generations, the future of high quality notebooks is not in doubt. In fact, we are just at the beginning of a whole new era of enhanced functionality and renewed popularity, in which technologies of the 19th and 21st centuries are merging to produce brand new possibilities.

Read more of Reinhard Kargl's work at <http://reinhardkargl.com>.

Find your perfect notebook at a pen retailer or at these websites: leuchtturm1917.us
leuchtturm1917.us/notebooks-whitelines-link.html
semikolon.com/notizbuecher-hefte/notizbuecher/
quovadisplanners.com • rhodiapads.com
prat-usa.com/flexbook.html • zequenz.com

