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W's annual Readers' Choice Awards.
Prizes and ballot begin on page 63.

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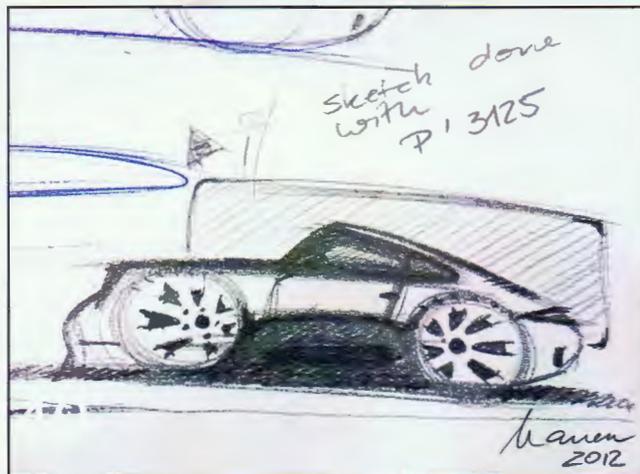
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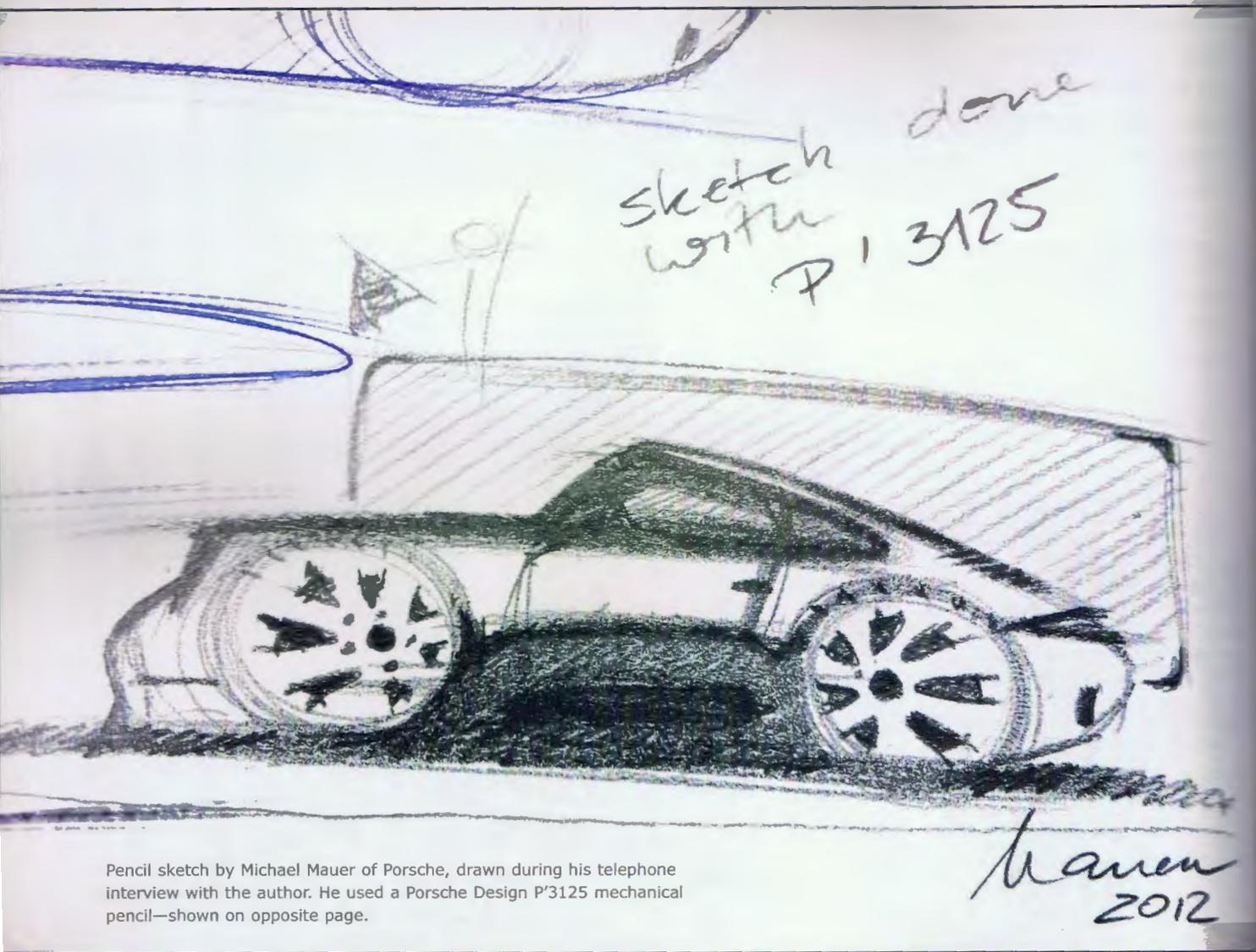
44



56

36





Pencil sketch by Michael Mauer of Porsche, drawn during his telephone interview with the author. He used a Porsche Design P'3125 mechanical pencil—shown on opposite page.

Pencil *for* your Thoughts

BY JIL MCINTOSH

Pencils occupy their own very special place in the world of writing instruments.

Michael Mauer has one of the best jobs imaginable. As the director of design at Porsche, he's responsible for the styling of some of the world's most exciting sports cars. At his office in Germany, he has access to sophisticated design software, powerful computers, and electronic tablets to create his work.

He prefers a pencil.

"Computers help us to be faster in the process, but when I try to do sketches on a tablet with an electronic pencil, there's no connection between what I am sketching and the paper," Mauer says. "Whenever I see a pencil lying on the table, I have to try it out, to feel the weight, the balance, is it

hard or soft, and do I have a good feeling with it. It helps me to visualize my thoughts."

A rudimentary pencil may have been one of our earliest writing instruments, with our early ancestors making marks with charred sticks pulled from a fire. The ancient Romans wrote with a thin metal rod, called a stylus,

Some early styluses were made of lead, which later became the popular term for the stuff inside the pencil that actually does the job.

Of course, pencils actually contain graphite. The modern pencil's roots trace back to a large graphite deposit found in England in 1565, according to the German writing instrument brand Faber-Castell. Called "black lead" because it was the same color as lead, it became popular for writing since the marks it left on paper could

be rubbed away. Swedish chemist Karl Wilhelm Scheele later discovered that it was actually a crystallized type of carbon, and he named it after *graphein*, the Greek term for writing.

It fell to the cabinetmaker Kaspar Faber—founder of the company that became Faber-Castell—to cut narrow sticks of graphite and glue them between two pieces of wood to form an early rendition of our modern pencil in 1761. But pure graphite is very brittle, and so around 1795, it gave

way to a mixture of powdered graphite and clay, shaped into rods and fired in a kiln, a process developed by French chemist Nicholas Jacques Conté.

Pencil makers could tweak the writing quality by adjusting the ingredients: more graphite for a "soft" pencil that put down a darker line, or more clay for a harder pencil that made a lighter, sharper line.

Lothar Faber, great-grandson of Kaspar, had mechanized pencil production by 1839, enabling mass pro-



Porsche Design's P'3125 Slimline mechanical pencil, \$250. The clip withdraws into the barrel when the tip is extended for writing.

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From top: Palomino pencils in progress; Palomino's Blackwing, box of twelve, \$19.95. Visit palominopencils.com.

duction of these writing instruments. He also introduced the hexagonal-shaped pencil, and came up with standards for pencil size and the hardness of the graphite inside.

The grading ranges from the softer B for black, to H for hard, with the mid-range HB and F (firm or fine). Numbers are added as the pencil gets harder or softer: a 3B is softer than a 2B. There's also a simpler scale that uses numbers alone, with a No. 1 equivalent to B, and No. 2 to HB. Even so, the scales are arbitrary. Just as one pen company's fine nib may be comparable to another's medium, pencils with the same grade but from different manufacturers may write differently.

Early writers who used leadholders—pen-like handles that held a piece of lead, precursors to mechanical pencils and modern drafting pencils—merely had to pull out more lead and abrade the graphite to get a sharp tip. Wooden pencils needed the wood shaved away to expose the lead. Square pencils were the easiest to make, but they had to be whittled with a knife, while the European-style round or hexagonal pencils could be used with sharpeners, a shape that American companies eventually copied.

Better-made than American pencils, European pencils remained popular until after the Civil War, when U.S. factories began mass-producing good-

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quality pencils, with brands such as Dixon Crucible, American Lead Pencil, and General Pencil. But as the decades passed, pencils began to slowly lose their luster. The ballpoint pen made it easier to write with ink, and cheaply made offshore pencils became an inexpensive choice to give to children. Finally, the pencil's great advantage—that its marks could be erased—was overshadowed as writers and bookkeepers turned to computers.

Still, there are many people who still love their pencils. "I think there's a connection that's made when you use a pencil, that isn't there when you do something digitally," says Alex Poirier, marketing coordinator for Palomino Brands, a division of the California Cedar Products Company. "I prefer the expressiveness, that you can go

from incredibly light to incredibly dark. I can go back to something I wrote two years ago and I can almost 'read' how I was feeling, by the pressure I put on the pencil."

In 2010, the company revived the Blackwing, often referred to as "the best pencil ever made." The Blackwing was originally made in the 1930s by Eberhard Faber, the pencil-making operation of John Eberhard Faber, a descendant of the famous family. Devotees included writer John Steinbeck, composer Stephen Sondheim, and *Looney Tunes* artist Chuck Jones. When the original Blackwing was discontinued in 1998, fans stockpiled them, with some paying \$30 or more for a single pencil in online auctions. The new ones are made in Japan from California incense

cedar wood. "It has a really nice aroma, and it's the best wood for pencil-making because it sharpens really evenly and easily," Poirier says. "There are so many really bad pencils. You can go to a big-box store and buy a package for 99 cents, and they're terrible. People forget what it's like to use a really high-quality pencil."

"Once they're introduced to that, they remember why they like to use pencils. There will always be a desire to go back to analog, and when you couple that with the connection you get with a pencil, it's a very useful tool that will be used for a very long time."

JIL MCINTOSH is a pen collector and freelance writer based in Canada. She writes frequently about pens and cars.

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