

History's Greatest inventions

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History's Greatest Inventions: Ink

As the wise man never said, "The ink is mightier than the pen."

It turns out that the old cliché of the pen being the greatest invention of humanity has some truth to it; after all, it has no doubt been used by history's top innovators to draw designs for other great inventions such as the modern-day telescope; the internal combustion engine; the light bulb; the electric telegraph; the silicon semiconductor and hundreds more. There should, therefore, be no rejection of the fact that the pen is one of the greatest inventions of man of all time. But what is the engine without its fuel? What is the pen without its ink?

Granted, for hundreds of years, civilisations such as the Ancient Egyptians employed styluses for carving letters into wax tablets before the invention of ink and coped quite well without the pigmented paste (Dutta, 2013). But even they came to the realisation that a more durable technique of inscribing important documents (such as business accounts) was required — the pen was born (although in a very primitive form).

Simultaneously, the Egyptians created ink composed of carbon and gum in which these "Reed" pens would be dipped in and used by the middle and higher ranking Egyptian populace every day as well as used to write the religious "Book of the Dead", which "was written in both black and red ink" ("Book Of The Dead - Crystalinks", 2012). Rather interestingly, the other six original civilisations such as the Ancient Chinese and the Indus Valley Civilisation also independently developed their own versions of the pen and ink ("Who Invented Ink? – Who Invented?", 2010), thereby cementing them as the dynamic duo that would survive the crucible of history. It seemed as though then that as the pen was nothing without its ink, the ink too, was nothing without its pen.

This has been well evidenced over the past 2 millennia over the course of which the pen and ink have been utilized to sign hundreds of treaties like the Treaty of Paris and the US Constitution in addition to (around the same amount of) declarations of war such as the United States' declaration of war against Nazi Germany (Pigott, 2007). More recently, the couplet has become "a symbol of freedom of speech" (Zimmer, 2014) in the collective eyes of playwrights, poets, authors and artists. Let's also not forget their significance in our everyday lives; when was the last time you got away with forgetting your pen in class?

So for most of history, ink has had its fate written in concomitance with a glorified stick (albeit a damn important one). There would be no problem with this; there hasn't been a problem with this for thousands of years. If only the pen wasn't dying...

The exponential increase in popularity of the computer since its availability to the general public since the 1970s has been closely followed by the gradual decline in pen usage as typing is a much faster and cheaper (in the long run) approach to taking notes rather than writing them. In addition to this, various environmental groups like the Green Council of Hong Kong have informed against the usage of disposable pens - the most widely used type of pens – due to their negative impact on the environment when disposed of (Fong 1, 2010). So, is this where the line ends for ink too?

Not quite — great inventions last an age; the greatest inventions last several. Ink is no exception. The rise of the computer has been accompanied by the emergence of the printer - a device which

allows the computer to create physical copies of typed documents thus rendering the pen without any significant advantages. But this wouldn't be possible without ink for printers to inject onto paper. Furthermore, ink is used to create tattoos and forms the basis of colorants for markers and some high-quality paints (Sàng, 2007). Again, the appliance is dependent on the ink just as much as it is dependent on the appliance.

To summarise this dangerously in-depth essay on ink, it must be understood why ink – in all its underappreciated glory – is history's greatest invention. It's not just because it was crucial in the drafting of the modern world. It's not just because it has the potential to make and break anyone and anything. It's also because it's flexible. It doesn't have just one application and performs well in all of them. Because of this, it has managed to survive the test of time for so long and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

Maybe we can learn a thing or two from ink...

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