



## Literary Movement

FROM BURBANK, THE LATEST WAVE IN FLOATY PENS

For a mid-century icon that's pure kitsch, the floaty pen has been surprisingly unadventurous for much of its history. The miniature dioramas stuck for decades to promotional or tourist themes, such as an airplane floating across a given city's skyline with a tilt of the pen.

But all that changed in 1996, when floaty pen collector Sandy Medof launched [www.floaty.com](http://www.floaty.com) on a whim. Working with 10 artists from her Burbank studio, the former documentary filmmaker now heads Floaty Industries, offering 240 \$4 Medof-created pen designs that radically tweak the floaty concept. A mermaid who swims into toxic waste and exits as a skeleton. Homer Simpson in an over-the-shoulder Betty Grable pose, peeling down to a Euro-thong (the Bart model peels down all the way). O.J. Simpson's white Bronco wafting down the 405 Freeway, and Monica Lewinsky floating on her knees into the Oval Office. New parents favor the floaty showing an infant who drifts from behind a reclining pregnant woman into the arms of a waiting father.

Medof also accepts commissions (her most famous: the Village People's official "Macho Man" pen, in which six gray-suited men float into a closet and exit the other side as the disco group). "This started as a simple floaty pen page, to show my 200-pen collection, but it's become an obsession," says Medof, 45, who got hooked on novelty pens in 1990 after buying her first tip 'n' strip pen (a "conceal and reveal" floaty variant) in a Paris airport.

There are thousands of floaty collectors worldwide, says Diana Andra. She publishes a floaty newsletter from her Mansfield, Ohio, home, which is crammed with 13,000 pens. There seems



to be no floaty association or convention. "Just as well," says Medof, whose annual sales top \$500,000. "Word of mouth is purer for such a fun, simple object."

Medof is one of more than 200 distributors licensed by Denmark-based Eskesen, the premier floaty manufacturer since Peder Eskesen opened his factory in 1946. As with other licensees, Medof sends her designs to the company for manufacturing. Serious collectors are Eskesen purists.

"Some knockoffs are filled with water," sniffs Andra, who has been paid as much as \$70 for a floaty. Eskesen zealously guards its mineral oil formula and sealing process to stymie imitators. To create a floaty, workers photograph a design, adjusting for distortion, and assemble the floating pieces along guides in the inside tube. The result: 500 million units sold, mostly to North American.

"They don't get how special they are," says Medof of Eskesen. "But we do."

—R. DANIEL FOSTER