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## Small pen, big impact

***30th of March is National Pencil Day. As these five facts reveal, this day will honour an all-rounder – in fashion, in Hollywood and in the record books.***



At a length of 174 millimetres and a diameter of 7 millimetres, its standard dimensions are seemingly negligible and rather unremarkable. But what does standard mean anyway? After all, over its centuries-long career the pencil has not only evolved into one of the most important objects on desks around the world, but it has repeatedly caused a sensation in other areas as well – be it as a fashion inspiration, the object of a legal dispute or a record holder. In honour of its international anniversary on 30 March, here are five surprising pencil anecdotes from around the globe.

### **1. The pencil skirt: when fashion “learned to walk”**

A trend that emphasises the beauty of the feminine silhouette while also allowing wearers to make a dynamic entrance: it made French designer Christian Dior famous after World War II and turned him into a pioneering legend. The creator of the New Look is also responsible for the modern version of the pencil skirt: a form-fitting skirt that ends at knee length, enabling the wearer to move relatively freely. The original model, which was designed by Dior’s compatriot Paul Poiret around the turn of the 20th century, was an ankle-length skirt whose hem ideally had the same measurement as the waist. It was very difficult to walk in these creations, which allowed for little more than tiptoeing. The attractive yet impractical design was known as a “hobble skirt” – until Christian Dior drastically shortened it and added a pleat to provide even more range of motion, thus inventing the “pencil skirt”. Learn more at: [http://www.speak-fashion.de/fashion\\_history/classics/fashion-history-classics-who-invented-the-pencil-skirt](http://www.speak-fashion.de/fashion_history/classics/fashion-history-classics-who-invented-the-pencil-skirt)

### **2. A pair of pencils: the greatest art heist in British history?**

What began as a small act of revenge was to culminate in a major legal battle. Angry over a lost copyright dispute, London graffiti artist Cartrain stole a pack of pencils from Damien Hirst’s room-sized “Pharmacy” installation at the Tate Modern gallery in 2009. The 17-year-old graffiti artist then proposed a swap on a wanted poster: the mini-exhibit in exchange for his collages, which had been seized by Hirst. Unfortunately, the stolen goods just happened to be a true curiosity: a rare treasure from the “Faber-Castell dated 1990 Mongol 482” series. The sometime grandmaster of controversial conceptual art was not amused. Hirst accused the teenager of art theft valued at GBP 500,000 (which would amount to around EUR 560,000 today) – the highest sum that had ever been disputed in the UK at that time. The youngster was indeed arrested and subsequently released on bail. Six months later the Metropolitan Police dropped all charges against Cartrain.



### 3. The super talent: everything except writing

German Reich Chancellor Otto von Bismarck used a pencil as a pipe tamper; legendary Tonight Show host Johnny Carson sat at his studio desk and gesticulated with a pencil that had an eraser at both ends for safety reasons. While gardeners use the graphite-filled wooden stick as an effective insect deterrent, car makers know it as a valuable test instrument. The eloquently named “Wolff-Wilborn surface scratch test” is used to check the hardness of paint by applying pencils with different degrees of hardness to a surface at a 45° angle.



### 4. The “loftiest” pencil

Not many writing utensils are used 400 kilometres above the Earth – and still work. Italian astronaut Paolo Nespoli launched the first of his three space missions accompanied by a special “Twice” model from Faber-Castell. He flew the space shuttle to the ISS for the first time in 2007 in order to coordinate exterior work on the internationally manned space station. Because “work in space requires constant note-taking”, Nespoli, who was 50 years old at the time, used a version of the multifunctional device that had been specially adapted for astronauts and which had to be at hand at all times and able to write even in zero gravity and in any position.



### 5. An incisive business model

Who has ever taken the time to carefully consider “the artisanal craft of pencil sharpening”? Cartoonist David Rees, who lives in the picturesque Hudson River Valley north of New York City, has done just that, his reference book with the above title becoming a cult phenomenon. Over more than 200 pages, the 45-year-old Rees relays the pertinent aspects of sharpening a pencil by hand (never electrically!). Readers absorb his explanations with equal amounts of disbelief and fascination: Is it nonsense, or a fervent plea to slow down and practice mindfulness in these hectic times? Rees skilfully walks the line between the two, as do his subsequent offerings: For the equivalent of EUR 30 (USD 35), he sharpens his customers’ pencils and sends them back along with the shavings and a certificate exclaiming “Caution, dangerously sharp!” His latest coup: He will provide the pencil for a price starting at USD 500. The pencil business, honed to the extreme. Learn more at: [www.artisanalpencilsharpening.com](http://www.artisanalpencilsharpening.com)

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## Images:



Lothar von Faber is seen as the inventor of the hexagonal pencil – made this way so it wouldn't roll off lecterns any longer. By contrast, the pine-green classic **Castell 9000** was introduced by Count Alexander von Faber-Castell in 1905. It is still available today in 16 different grades of hardness. Over the course of its 113-year history it has inspired many artists, including Joseph Beuys and Günter Grass.

*Product: Castell 9000 pencil from Faber-Castell. Photo credits: Faber-Castell*



A true rarity today: The unsharpened pencils from the “Faber-Castell dated 1990 **Mongol 482**” series with a red rubber at the end were produced in the US in 1990.

*Product: Faber-Castell dated 1990 Mongol 482. Photo credits: Faber-Castell*



German Reich Chancellor Otto Prince of Bismarck not only used his extra-long **easel pencil** for marginal notes on draft legislation, but also as a pipe tamper.

*Product: Easel pencil A.W. Faber No.1. Photo credits: Faber-Castell*



Zero gravity mission: The **Twice** combines pencil lead and ball pen refills in a single pen. Paolo Nespoli took a special version of the multifunctional device that had been adapted for astronauts into space for the first time in 2007.

*Product: Twice from Faber-Castell. Photo credits: Faber-Castell*

## Press contact:

Press Office  
Nuernberger Strasse 2  
D-90546 Stein  
Phone: +49 (0)911 9965 5538  
E-mail: [press-office@faber-castell.de](mailto:press-office@faber-castell.de)