

# A Unique Luxury Experience

An Interview with Giuseppe Aquila, Chief Executive Officer, Elmo & Montegrappa S.p.A.

**EDITORS' NOTE** *In more than 20 years at the helm of Montegrappa, Giuseppe Aquila has been a driving force in legitimizing writing instruments as a global luxury category. After leaving college, Aquila spearheaded the brand's international expansion with a renewed commitment to luxury and private bespoke production. His vision of pens as objets d'art won awards and helped foster a thriving collector community. Over recent years, a focus on contemporary customer experience has seen him open more than a dozen mono-brand boutiques and break new ground with an avant-garde approach to materials, design and engineering.*



Giuseppe Aquila

**COMPANY BRIEF** *Italy's first pen manufacturer, Montegrappa (montegrappa.com), has been setting standards for prestige writing instruments for more than a century. In the early twentieth century, portable fountain pens were the technological revolution of the day, and the Venetian maker's earliest customers included the young Ernest Hemingway. Today, pens offer refuge from digital technology. For owners ranging from Quincy Jones to Sir Jonathan Ive, Montegrappa pens are a catalyst for creativity and a symbol of personal identity. Montegrappa's latest launch – Montegrappa Configurator – is the world's first full customization platform for fine pens, objects that have been undergoing a renaissance in recent times. "Create the most interesting pen in the world" is the challenge laid down by Montegrappa Configurator, a newly launched platform that gives users unprecedented opportunities to create fine writing instruments to their exact requirements. Handmade at Montegrappa's custom shop close to Venice, the custom designs take less than two weeks to go from drawing board to desk. The launch of the service represents a major milestone as the luxury marque prepares to celebrate its 110th anniversary in 2022.*

**How has Montegrappa adapted its business in order to address the challenges caused by the global pandemic?**

Retail disruptions and reduced travel during the pandemic have been a double impact for luxury brands, including Montegrappa. Fortunately,

initiatives we had already set in motion before the pandemic have meant that our reaction has been more of an acceleration than a pivot. Ecommerce has been a very important area of focus for a few years now, and we have used the last 15 months to improve discovery and performance online, while also strengthening our offering of online-only product.

In particular we have more than tripled our offering on our online Configurator platform over the last year and this has been an important driver of attention, relationships

and sales. Our custom design program now has a much wider price coverage which attracts both new and repeat shoppers, and we have been making regular updates to the materials and color options to keep things interesting.

Internally, production has generally been smooth since the shock of the initial lockdown, but disruptions further up the chain continue to complicate scheduling at times. Our "Progetto km0" initiative that we launched in 2019 has helped in this area. By migrating production of auxiliary items in-house and partnering with suppliers close to

our headquarters, we have managed to minimize disruptions and increase our agility significantly.

**How is Montegrappa positioned for growth as many of the markets around the world begin to reopen and recover from the pandemic?**

Very well, we think. Work from home has reacquainted many potential customers with their desk inventories and we are seeing more curiosity in prestige and luxury pens. Our retail partners are facing pent up demand and difficult times have inspired many of them to lift their game. Over the last year we have introduced exciting new products at all price points which passive shoppers are now discovering. Additionally, select dealers are installing upgraded brand display systems and we have just launched a new training program, also with a view to building relationships with new retail partners, particularly in the horology segment.

Then there is Montegrappa Configurator, which is a totally unique experience both in the writing segment, and perhaps even in luxury. Our launch of the ZERO silhouette last year brought a whole new contemporary aesthetic, accessibility and design versatility to



Montegrappa Fine Leather raw materials (above) and finished products (opposite page)



our repertoire and has generated a huge boost. Its wider appeal and surprise factor have really helped to validate our commitment to custom-made. Select retailers also now have access to the Configurator platform – both online and via a special touchscreen counter. We are also pushing out a similar platform for B2B clients called Business Bespoke.

Finally, the last year has seen us launch new programs in partnership with names like Formula 1, Sea Shepherd, Monopoly, David Bowie and Harry Potter. All have been tremendously effective at bringing Montegrappa to broader attention and using familiar themes to demonstrate the exuberance and uniqueness of luxury writing instruments.

**Will you preview some of the new pieces in the collection?**

At the top end, we have three releases planned before the end of the year for our Non plus ultra tier. One will be Purgatorio, the sequel to our spectacular Inferno pen made for the Dante Alighieri jubilee. The others are still secret but collectors won't be disappointed. All I can say is that one involves a collaboration with a partner in Japan, and the other is a Cult series design – easily the most mechanically complex complication pen we have ever made.

We also have exciting new limited edition releases coming to our Formula 1 and Harry Potter programs, as well as an open-edition collection for Monopoly. Meanwhile on Configurator, a new silhouette is in the pipeline that will build on the success of the ZERO, with similar timepiece-inspired heuristics and more value-added options.

**Montegrappa is launching a new leather goods collection. Will you discuss Montegrappa's focus on leather goods and what customers can expect from the collection?**

Montegrappa Fine Leather is an exciting new direction for us. We have dabbled with leather goods in the past, but never with the conviction to build specific distribution or enhance our reputation. Now that we have an established digital sales platform, we can approach this category with more vigor. The main propositions behind Montegrappa Fine Leather are top-level Italian craftsmanship backed by full customization. Now that we have optimized the engine behind Configurator and become so good at custom-production at scale, the time is right to apply this experience to new products.

We will be launching the collection with a small range of lifestyle silhouettes and writing accessories, and plan to gradually expand the offering over time. All products offer the same levels of customization and use the same high-end materials and superlative craftsmanship. We have a special partnership with an atelier in Florence and have worked closely with them to perfect quality and transfer our expertise in custom production.

Every product must be an unforgettable experience, and we place a great deal of emphasis on showing reverence to every product at every level. We don't want our product to simply feel like a superior pen, but rather as a unique luxury experience in its own right. Recently, though, our approach to customer service has become increasingly centered on personalization and creating products in collaboration with our customers. By creating Montegrappa Configurator, we have been able to revive many of the traditional tenets of luxury and offer them at greater scale and speed. Our customers can create products in a convenient, pleasurable way, and instantly understand pricing and delivery.

Acquiring customers through Configurator and full-bespoke Atelier services has been tremendously helpful at opening the communication channels with our market. I spend a good portion of my days communicating directly with our end-customers, and the trust and access engendered by these relationships is proving enormously fruitful.



**How important is it that the leather goods offerings maintain the look and feel that Montegrappa is so well known for?**

I think we are perhaps more appreciated for our craftsmanship and originality than for a specific look and feel. For this collection we have worked with Daniela Atzori who is a fabulous young designer from Sardinia on creating bold and crisp designs that resonate more with the contemporary direction of the ZERO than the more nostalgic values of the Extra 1930. The color palette is modern and confident, while shapes and hardware underscore the precision that is central to our vision of artisanal production and accentuate the flawlessness of the materials.

**Montegrappa places a major focus on customer service. What are the keys to providing great customer service?**

**What are your priorities for Montegrappa as you look to the future?**

The last decade has seen levels of investment and progress without precedent in our company's history. Every area of the company has been modernized and strengthened, and we are better placed than ever to respond to opportunities and determine our own path. Now that we have implemented most of the improvements we set out to achieve, we need to work on leveraging that skill set to grow and solidify our reputation. We are at a point where we can bring unrivalled originality and refinement to practically any project.

Whether our market is China, a specific retail partner or a single collector, we are now in a position to use our strengths and agility to pursue business with full confidence. ●