



"Shirt tales are profit tales!"

## The Meistergram Story

BY STEVE GLUSKIN

There was a time when an embroidered corporate logo—on a golf shirt, a dress shirt, a necktie or carry-on bag—was a rare sighting. When an attractive embroidery design—be it wildlife, landscape, portrait, whatever—was the result of many hours of painstaking hand-stitching, based on many years of training and experience. Today, these things are commonplace, and represent a foundation of the multi-billion-dollar promotional-apparel industry. But it wasn't always so. The trip from then until now has been strange and remarkable, with many fits and starts, many twists and turns, a few pivotal moments, a few pivotal players. One such player, whose moment began in 1933, was Meistergram, with which I spent many years of my professional life. I'd like to tell you a bit of the Meistergram story. . . .

### Freedom from freehand

In 1933, the Meisters cooked up a promotional scheme to enhance their basic business of shirt sales. This trio of dapper Cleveland, Ohio, brothers developed a monogramming machine, placed it and an operator—known as a "Meistergram Girl"—on the sales floor of a big-city department store and proved that, with low-cost monograms available on the spot, you could sell more shirts. They proved this so well that, before long, the concept was picked up by department stores across the country. During the '30s and '40s, the company had literally hundreds of Meistergram Girls traveling the world presenting monogram promotions.

The earliest of these worked on freehand machines—the M80—pretty much just

About the author: Following his tenure at Meistergram, Steve Gluskin was senior director of sales with Brother Intl. for embroidery equipment from 1996 to 2001; from 2002 to 2005 he served as VP of sales and marketing for Omni Leasing Corp., followed by a two-year stint as director of new business development at Universal Laser, and is presently back with Omni Leasing in the position of COO.

zigzag sewing heads mounted in tables. They'd stencil a letter onto a piece of paper and pin the paper on the fabric, then move the hoop to form the letter. To make the machine run, they had to step on a treadle. There was also a knee lever they'd have to move to control the width of the stitch, if they wanted to taper letters at the end or whatever. So, they're controlling the knee lever, they're stepping on the treadle, and they're also moving their hands, very steadily. It was a highly skilled operation that required a lot of talent.

What finally made it popular and easy to do was the M100, which replaced the stencils with templates. You'd trace the template with a stylus, and the pantograph moved the hoop under the sewing head to sew the letter. You're still stepping on the treadle, and you still need the knee lever to control the width of the stitch, but at least the letter was formed for you. That machine revolutionized the industry at the time, by "de-skilling" the freehand operation. That's when business really started growing. Still, no computers, no electronics, but now a department store could train an operator in days instead of months.

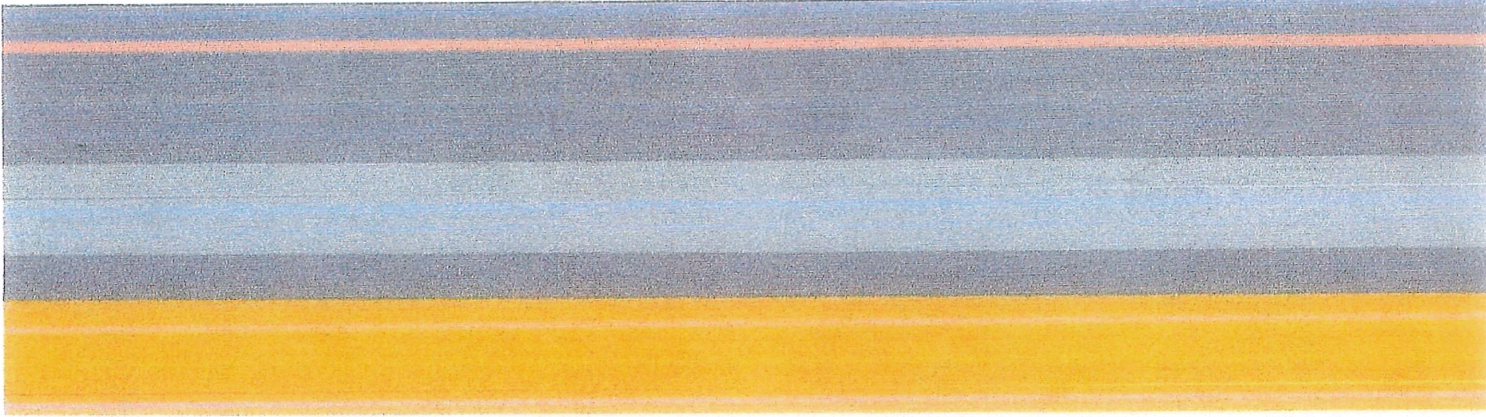
Always a step or two ahead of their time, the Meisters supported all this with a sophisticated marketing campaign involving elaborately produced sales and training literature, all with an eye toward creating a buzz that brought buyers flocking into



The Meister brothers rose to prominence by placing their machines—operated by "Meistergram Girls"—in ladies and linen departments from coast to coast in such prominent retail outlets as Macy's. . . .

...And created quite a stir, as evidenced by this crowd gathered spontaneously on the sidewalk to gawk into a store window on an occasion when the machine and operator were placed in a bit more prominent view.





retail outlets—drawn by the allure of instant personalization—and leaving with armloads of merchandise. Ironically, it was the success of this promotional venture that led the brothers into the machine-manufacturing business for which they became best known.

### **Meistergram Boy**

Fast forward to the early '70s, when my father—a linen distributor in Rochester, New York—was looking to offer monogram promotions to one of his larger department-store chain accounts. He'd heard of the Meistergram machine, so flew to their New York office where he was shown the M100. Impressed, he had one shipped to Rochester. I happened to sit down at the machine while our operator-in-training was at lunch, and made a perfect letter on a towel. Make no mistake, I don't know how to sew on a button, but I did a perfect letter on that machine. Next thing I know, I become the "official" operator and find myself sitting in the department store cranking out monograms—the company's first "Meistergram Boy."

In time, we went from one machine to five. Like the Meisters, though, we weren't really looking to make money on the monogramming, but the more we promoted it, the more towels and sheets the stores sold, the more goods they bought from my father. It was a tremendous promotional tool.

In December of 1973, my father sent me to the Meistergram plant in Cleveland to look at a new model of the M100. There was another young guy working for the Meisters at the time by the name of Larry Katz. We became friends and he later told me this story:

About a week before I went to Cleveland to look at this new machine, E.B. Meister,

one of the brothers, says to Larry, "You know what, the business is starting to grow. We need a young guy who's had a few years of college, a nice young guy who knows how to monogram." So Larry says, "Okay, I'll just put an ad in the paper: 'Needed: Nice Young Monogrammer.'"

And I walk in a week later, for my father. E.B. says to me, "We're looking to hire a young guy." I was 20 years old at the time. "We want you to help us sell, go around training, travel around the country." Well, you know what it's like at 20, to get a job, an expense account, to fly all over the place. I jumped at the job, but I was only going to stay for a year. I started in April of '74 . . . and I never went home again. Ended up staying with Meistergram for 22 years.

### **Meistergram changes hands**

In the '70s is when Talbot's and retailers like that got going—the Shetland sweater with the diamond monogram on the front, the script letters and the strawberries, all the kelly greens and pinks, all those preppie styles. That whole thing made monogramming and personalization very, very popular. The whole gamut of products was now being personalized. Meistergram started growing quickly then, very quickly. Business was good. We were doing business with nearly every major department store in the country at the time, and started putting on some international people.

Geoffrey E. Macpherson Ltd. in Nottingham, England, was Meistergram's distributor in the U.K. Prior to taking delivery of his first few machines, Geoffrey sent his son Neil over to Cleveland to get some training from us, and we became acquainted.

Then, two years later, Neil calls and says, "Hey, I'm moving to America. We're opening up an office for Macpherson here and we're going to be selling Barudan equip-

ment." So, between Neil and his father, they now pretty much own the world for distributing Barudan embroidery equipment.

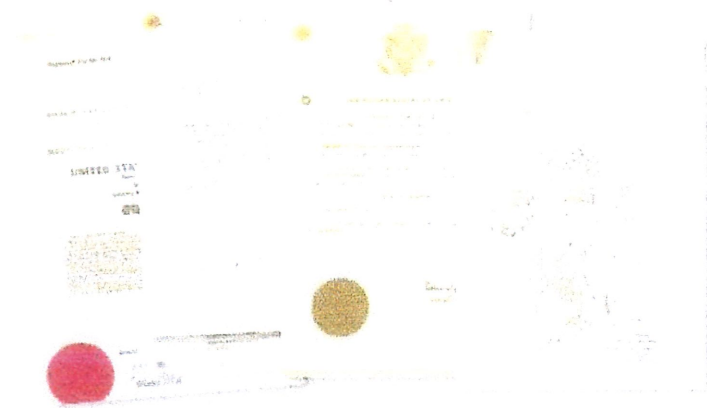
Ironically, a couple years later, Neil offered me a job to move to North Carolina and help him start his "Macpherson Monogram" division. I wasn't interested in moving, though, and turned him down. Little did anyone know this move would occur under different circumstances at a later date, as neither myself or Neil could imagine at the time what a significant role that we would play in each other's future. In any case, that's how Macpherson first became associated with Meistergram.

Thing was, though, Meistergram only made a single-head machine. It was strictly mechanical. Still, none of the Japanese machines were over here at all yet. None (or very few) of today's embroidery companies were around. There *was* a company, though, that was really our only competition at the time—Ultramatic, based in Connecticut. They started selling multi-head equipment. Still all mechanical, not electronic, but their machine was more of an embroidery machine than ours, it did more of the intricate designs, multi-color, things like that. Ultramatic and embroidered designs were gaining momentum.

About this time, getting up in the years, E.B. decides to put the company on the market. All kinds of people came in and looked at it. An investor from St. Louis finally took a look, liked what he saw, and said to Larry and myself, "Listen, I want to buy this company but I'm not going to make an offer unless you guys run it." He made it worth our while, so we agreed, and he bought the company.

The new owner gave us the green light to go ahead and further automate the equipment. We found an engineering firm near-

# Meistergram



Documentation of the U.S. patent of "Meistergrams, The Perfected Hand Type Monogram."



Promotional campaigns devised by the Meister brothers were consistently ahead of their time.

by in Cleveland, explained the machine to them and said we wanted to add a keyboard, type in a letter, and sew it out automatically. "Okay, great," they said, "send us an M100 and we'll call you when we're ready." About a year later, they have this

machine in bits and pieces all over their laboratory. There's this little wafer-cassette which they stick into a micro-reader, and push a button with the letter "A". The machine starts up and embroiders an outline of an apple with a bite out of it.

They proved they could assist us in automating the sewing process and, from that, we developed what we called

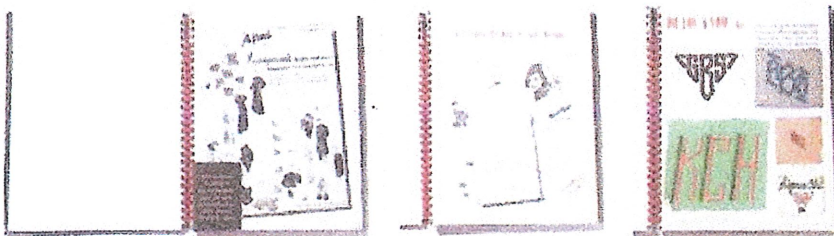
the Meistermatic 600. You see, we're hearing rumblings that Ultramatic is developing a single-head monogram/embroidery machine. They never did single-head machines, that was always what *we* did, so we were worried. Prior to an early-'80s Bobbin Show, Ultramatic announces they'll debut a single-head, automatic, electronic monogram machine called the Ultramatic 100. Well, everybody knew the model 100 was *our* bread and butter. *Theirs* bread and butter had been the Ultramatic 600. So that's how we got our name "Meistermatic 600." We'd both kind of borrowed from the other's name.

We weren't ready, though, so we built a "prop" machine, took a photograph of it. It was a box of air with a keyboard. We printed brochures for the Bobbin Show and we said "coming soon." Ultramatic basically did the same thing.

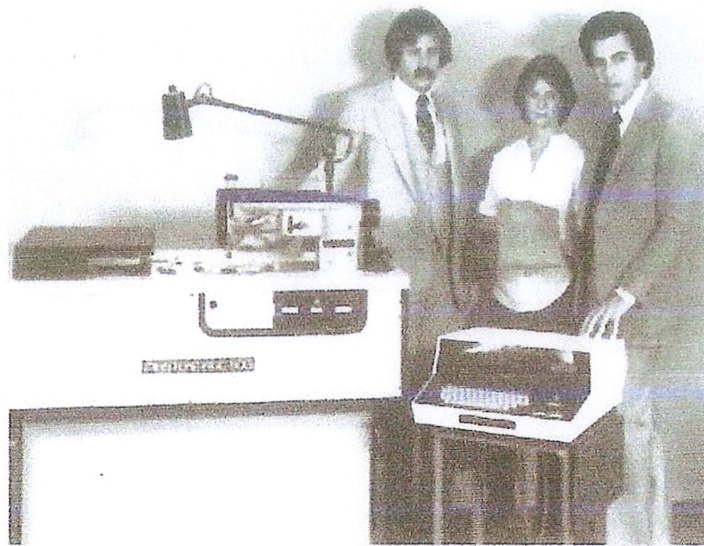
We had *all kinds* of interest and, less than a year later, when we actually introduced and began demonstrating the Meistermatic 600, customers were lining up to buy them. They were throwing money at us to get 'em early. We could only build, oh, ten machines



The Meisters borrowed *Vanity, Vanity, all is Vanity* from Allan Gilbert's famous illustration for their promotional/technical literature, various samples of which are shown here.



The author (left) and Larry Katz flank a Meistergram instructress in this photo taken in the early '70s. (All images and memorabilia courtesy the author.)



a month, but we had orders for hundreds. It was unbelievable.

About this time, other multi-head machines were just starting to appear. Slowly but surely, it was happening.

I've often said this: Meistergram did a great job putting people into business. That was also our problem. What happened is that, as our customers were growing and needed larger equipment, we didn't have it. But we were seeding the market tremendously.

Suddenly, embroidery started to get more popular, corporate identification started to catch on, people were looking for something different, caps became popular and, finally, in the late '80s, we go to the Bobbin Show and there's this company called Melco that shows up and stuns everybody. The embroidery industry is starting to cook. Now you've got Melco, you've got Ultramatic, you've got Tajima, you've got Meistergram, and you have Barudan.

Business was still very good, but more and more competition was coming into play. Again, we were putting all these other people into business, but were basically getting our lunch eaten when they needed to grow and we didn't have the next step

for them.

Enter the *next* owner of Meistergram. To raise some cash, the current owner sold it to another entrepreneur who was working under his father's company, but was now ready to set out on his own. Unfortunately, from almost the day he bought the company, things started to go south. Simultaneously, embroidery equipment competition really started to kick in.

#### **Meistergram milestones**

Meistergram scored many firsts over the years that the industry really doesn't know about.

During WWII, the company temporarily retooled its factory and redirected manufacturing to support the war effort by making parachutes and uniform insignia, chevrons and the like. We were the first to put on seminars: business seminars, marketing seminars, embroidery seminars. We developed a monogramable-merchandise catalog called *Expressions*. You couldn't find a place to buy, say, six shirts. Back in the old days, nobody wanted to do that. There was no industry. There were no apparel distributors, no supply people. There was basically

nothing there. Until *Expressions*.

The *Inc. Magazine* 500 fastest-growing companies? We were in that group the first year they had it—number 479, back in 1983. Part of that, no doubt, resulted from a *Family Circle Magazine* article in 1982. Our ad agency wanted to do a piece on a business, on one of our customers. Thing is, there was a recession going on, people were losing their jobs. Moms needed and wanted to help supplement the family income but what they were finding was that, when they put their kids in daycare, whatever money they were making in the workforce they were giving to the babysitter. It was a wash, there was no reason to work. So they were looking for something they could do from home at their own pace, while watching the kids. Meistergramming was a natural, so we developed an article about a very successful customer: To this day, I believe she was one of the first female entrepreneurs in the industry. *Family Circle* published the article with its circulation somewhere around 11 or 12 million at the time but, a few weeks before publication, I called the editor and asked what kind of response we could expect. She gave me some absolutely ridiculous number, in the hundreds of thousands. I said, "We can't handle that! We're a small company!" So we tried to *limit* the response by taking out our phone number. The article ran and we received, between cards, letters and calls from people who looked *up* the number, thousands of leads for Meistergram machines. We sold millions of dollars over the next couple of years from this one article. We'd have people call five and six years later, "Listen, I was in the dentist's office the other day, and this old magazine was there, and I saw this article. . . ."

And we thought, "Gee, what would happen if we advertised?"

## Beginning of the end

Meistergram, for all those years, did all the manufacturing, sales, marketing and distribution. We had our own engineering department, design department, a 100,000-square-foot building, over 100 employees. It really had become a thriving business.

But the multi-head equipment *we* were developing just didn't make sense. We were going to come out with a "me-too" machine, everybody else was ahead of us at this point, and we couldn't find a good sewing head to use for this multi-head we were developing. So I said to the owner, "I have this friend in the business, a friendly competitor by the name of Neil Macpherson. Maybe through his association with Barudan, they'd private-label a sewing head for us."

So we flew down to N.C. for a meeting with Neil, and we actually left there with the understanding that we were going to *buy* Macpherson. We figured, instead of trying to get him to introduce us to Barudan and strike up a relationship, why don't we just buy his company? Neil was planning to eventually move back to the U.K. anyway, so this looked like a perfect solution for both Macpherson *and* Meistergram. We could scrap the development of what we had been doing, take over Macpherson, and *we* would be selling multi-head Barudan machines along with single-head Meistergrams.

Negotiation goes on for a couple months, back and forth, we get down to the nitty-gritty of nearly everything being signed, and Neil decides at the last minute he doesn't want to sell the company. Almost as a joke, somebody at the table says to him, "Well, then, why don't you buy us?" Neil says, "Hmm, that's interesting, but I don't like manufacturing, I just like sales, marketing and distribution."

To understand what comes next, understand that Barudan of Japan had always

talked about coming over to America for manufacturing because of shipping costs, the yen-dollar exchange rate, everything else. If they could manufacture machines in the U.S., they'd be less expensive. So Neil gets an idea, flies to Japan and says to Barudan, "I have an opportunity for both of us. I can buy this company that's been around for over 50 years, that has thousands of customers all over the world, that has a manufacturing facility in Cleveland, that has a name and a product line, I can buy this company but I don't want the manufacturing. You guys have wanted to build in America for years. You don't want to start from scratch, so here's a perfect opportunity. Let me buy the company, sell you the manufacturing and engineering, and you can build Meistergram machines for me. You'll have a factory to build them in, you'll have great workers, you'll have a name and, slowly-but-surely, you can bring over the Barudan production."

Ultimately, in two signatures, Neil buys Meistergram, and Barudan buys the engineering and manufacturing from Neil. I turned off the lights on a Friday night as Meistergram, turned 'em back on the next Monday as Macpherson/Meistergram, but with no manufacturing. The people in the factory were working for Meistergram on Friday and on Monday they were working for Barudan America.

Under the ownership of Macpherson and a move to N.C., Meistergram became successful once again. I stayed with Macpherson/Meistergram for another 10 years and left in mid '90's, moved to Arizona to pursue an opportunity out of the industry. Neil sold out in the late '90s. The company that purchased Macpherson/Meistergram struggled with market changes and eroding equipment margins and, sadly, was forced into bankruptcy after a few years.

And that's the story. Would the commercial-embroidery industry have blossomed

the way it has without the Meisters? Hard to say, but they clearly had an impact and, even though the company disappeared, their influence lives on. 