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Made in America

A new shine on an old US shoe polish brand has buffed it up into an all-American winner

A lot has been said about bringing manufacturing back to the US, but Shinola (yes, as in ‘you don’t know shit from’) has put its money where its mouth is. Founded in 1907 as a small shoeshine manufacturer which then boomed during the Second World War before fading away in the 1970s, Shinola was resuscitated in 2011 by Bedrock Manufacturing.

Owned by Tom Kartsotis, founder of Fossil watches, Bedrock is quickly assembling a portfolio of US brands. Last year it bought Seattle-based outdoor

clothing company Filson. But Filson is a fully-formed outfit. Shinola is Bedrock’s vehicle for doing something completely new, in the old-fashioned way. Today’s reinvented Shinola brand is looking to turn traditional American manufacturing and making skills to the production of a contemporary lifestyle range, including luxury handmade bicycles, timepieces, stationery and leather goods.

This month the company opens its first retail store – designed by Rockwell Group and comprising a boutique, café and

newsstand – in the heart of TriBeCa. But the real setting of the Shinola story is not downtown Manhattan, but Detroit.

‘The original goal was a made-in-America watch brand,’ says Shinola’s creative director, Daniel Caudill. ‘It was about proving we could make a beautiful, well-crafted product in this country and make it affordable and do it at a profit.’

The first part of Shinola’s expansion push was to open a 30,000 sq ft watch factory last year in the College for Creative Studies in Midtown, Detroit. Housed in »

STORE TROOPERS

Shinola creative director Daniel Caudill (left) in the company’s new flagship store in TriBeCa designed by architect David Rockwell (right). The shop, still under construction in this photo, will sell Shinola’s handmade bicycles, as well as watches, leather goods and stationery



the historic Argonaut building, built by General Motors and now the A Alfred Taubman Center for Design Education, the Shinola team visited the college looking for young local talent. What they also found was a vacant fifth floor, the perfect place for their factory.

Set up in collaboration with Swiss watch movement maker Ronda, the Detroit factory trains locals, many ex-auto workers, through Shinola-sponsored classes at the college. 'We were looking at a few different places [for the watch factory]. Detroit obviously has a history of manufacturing, but the people there also just really wanted to help,' says Caudill. 'Everything about the city made it perfect.'

Shinola has become so convinced of Detroit's potential that it has since located its corporate headquarters in the same building. A second store, set to open this summer in a vacant tyre warehouse in the city, will house another retail outlet, a juice bar and some production.

For the flagship Manhattan space, the Rockwell Group envisioned a sophisticated amalgam of old and new accents, dividing the 1,400 sq ft space into multiple sections to capture the Shinola ethos. When it opens on 1 July, visitors will be greeted by a newsstand operated by NoHo café The Smile, dispensing magazines and coffee from a walnut-lined alcove. Beyond, the main boutique will be filled with a mix of custom-made furniture and beautifully

TIME TRIALS

The rise and fall and rise of Shinola

1907 Shinola is founded as a shoeshine manufacturing company.

1940s During the Second World War Shinola's business boomed. The famous adage 'You don't know shit from Shinola' was likely to have been coined by a wise-cracking serviceman.

1970s Shinola failed to move with the times and its cheap and cheerful old-fashioned-looking product gradually fell out of favour. It was also no use on sneakers.

2011 The Shinola name was acquired by Dallas-based Bedrock Manufacturing and reimagined as an all-American luxury brand. It set up a watch-making factory (and its HQ) in Detroit's historic Argonaut building.

2013 The revamped Shinola brand makes its debut with two flagship stores: one in TriBeCa, New York, another in Midtown, Detroit. Both shops will showcase Shinola's bicycles, leather goods, watches and stationery, all manufactured in the US.

BRAND NEW

The resurrected Shinola sells a commemorative shoe polish in homage to its past, as well as a smaller tin containing leather balm, which comes with its watches. It also sells stationery, leather accessories and handmade bicycles, which come with their own set of tools

refurbished pieces. 'Aesthetically, it is at the intersection of clean minimalism and 1930s industrialism,' says David Rockwell.

Rockwell Group has made the most of the store's typical TriBeCa angularity. A custom-made steel spiral staircase, which leads up to a mezzanine catwalk, dominates one corner, while another wall features a row of stadium-style bleacher seating, on which products will be displayed. A huge, cast bronze world map retrieved from an office in the Rockefeller Center hangs overhead. 'The design was guided by Shinola's attention to detail,' Rockwell says. 'The brand combines the mythology of American production with the romance of the hand that made it, so we created an environment to reflect that.'

As well as having its headquarters and watch factory in Detroit, Shinola has reached out to other Midwest states, partnering up with Waterford Precision Cycles in Wisconsin; leather goods manufacturer Eric Scott in Missouri; and the Horween Leather Company in Chicago, Illinois. Edwards Brothers Malloy makes its notebooks in Ann Arbor, Michigan. With the brand looking to add footwear, home goods and clothing to the mix, it may not halt the US industrial decline all by itself, but as a poster boy for domestic craft and small-scale manufacturing, Shinola looks like it will punch well above its weight. ★

www.shinola.com