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BY NANCY OLSON



From the William Henry Collection



Dan Heins in the pen shop

William Henry introduces a fountain pen

A William Henry pocket knife appears to be birthed whole, so perfect is the assemblage of materials. Metals, wood, stone and fossil ivories, among other ingredients, coagulate seamlessly to create something that is as much intuitive as it is utilitarian, as much a piece of art as it is an award-winning product known to be among the best. And after my visit to the company's headquarters, this comes as no surprise. The stark exterior of the studio belies what goes on inside: a constant whirl of creative thought, concentrated attention and manufacturing machinery. It is here where the folding knives, money clips and, as of last year, rollerball pens are designed and produced. Last fall, a fountain pen was added to the list, and it is informed by the same qualities as its forebears.

Matt Conable, president and co-founder of William Henry, has been making knives since he was a teen, so he modeled his McMinnville, Oregon, studio after a custom knife shop, which is where he first crafted his art. Thus, while the 6,400-square-foot manufactory is well appointed and well staffed, it feels more like an artisan's workshop rather than a state-of-the-art facility that produces about 800 knives per month for over 300 retail stores. No modern manufacturing stone is left unturned. CNC machines, laser cutters, blanking presses, vacuum chamber ovens and other specialized tools each crank out their best, creating many of the more-than 35 parts for each knife. But the recurring theme is the craftsmen and



Matt Conable

women who literally feel their way along each piece, as if blindfolded, making sure it fits the company's motto of, "Superlative function deserves to be elevated to superlative art." The smallest imperfection can detain any piece from its final destiny.

Since the company's introduction of products other than knives, Conable has expanded the definition of William Henry, which was founded in 1997, to include, "functional art for men. I like stuff that works," he says. As the brand's sole designer (and, incidentally, sole knife sharpener—a singular art), he is intrigued by the sensuous intersection of form and function, warm and cold, hard and soft. This is evident in the subtle juxtaposition of patterns and materials in a range of products that not only work well and look spectacular, but also feel as if they grew right out of your own hand. As examples, the earthy warmth of Central American cocobolo is the perfect counterpoint to cool Wave Damascus steel. The

totemic DNA of fossil ivory beautifully opposes state-of-the-art heat-colored mokume gane. Pearl set in titanium offers a confluence in texture.

William Henry uses about 20 studios and 30 artisans from three countries to get exactly what it is looking for in metalworkers, engravers, pearl experts and other craftsmen at the top of their game who help actualize Conable's sketches. As a result, many of the knives are the conclusion of hundreds of miles on an approximately eight-month-long, 800-step journey from design to fruition. Add to this the fact that the pearl hails from Asia, the wood from such reaches as Morocco and Mexico, the woolly mammoth bone from Russia or Alaska—every piece is truly a long-distance affair that eventually converges in the Northwest U.S.A. Some parts production and all assembly, stone setting and multiple polishings are conducted at the studio, which accounts for the organic quality of the work.

The pen shop, adjacent to the knife manufactory, has a buzz all its own. At the helm is Dan Heins, whose years of experience in woodworking and manufacturing make him a perfect fit. Each pen is turned, meticulously assembled and polished as a whole to a glass-like finish, rendering every piece unique. And here, too, it seems that human touch accounts for more than the most technologically advanced machinery. After each polishing the pens are examined by eye and felt by hand for any imperfections. All metal parts are pressure fit or threaded (there are five separate thread joints), which means that dimensional tolerances are of utmost importance. The exceptional balance of the new fountain pen collection impressed me, particularly when taking the diversity of materials from which they are crafted into account.



Conable sharpening a knife



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and polished as a whole to a glass-like finish,
rendering every piece unique.*



Fountain pen and presentation box



When the decision was made to venture into pens, Conable studied watches for insights. “Pens are as much about mechanics as anything else we do,” he says. He concedes that a pen represents about 20 percent of the complexity of a knife, “But it was harder than I thought it would be.” The writing instruments, like the knives, are all about mechanical and tactile excellence. And excellence never comes easily—especially when there are moving parts involved. The rollerball pen collections (Pinot and Merlot, named in honor of Oregon’s wine country, where the company resides) were—and continue to be—well received. So it seemed natural to take on a fountain pen and name it Cabernet. The result is four designs, each with an 18-karat gold German-made nib available in fine, medium and broad sizes; an ebonite section and feed; and an amazing spring-loaded cap with a

The writing instruments, like the knives, are all about mechanical and tactile excellence.

The cap crown medallion is fashioned from rose gold.



stepped metal cap crown. The cap features a new patent-pending closure system that uses chromium steel balls embedded in a titanium ring that are captured in wave-shaped grooves for closed and posting positions. Each pen is embellished with a Damascus steel clip studded with a gemstone. The body materials are familiar: wood, decorative metals, ebonite and titanium, combined in a well-conceived array of distinctive designs.

One design is fashioned, cap and barrel, from aerospace-grade titanium (\$950). The accent pieces are made from hand-forged tapestries of mokume gane woven from multiple layers of copper, brass and nickel silver, as well as Damascus steel crafted from layers of different steel alloys. The clip is studded with a ruby. Another features an ebonite cap and a curly koa barrel (\$950), with accents of mokume gane and ebonite. The pocket clip features a citrine. The third design is made from etched “vine” Damascus steel (\$1,400), cap and barrel, also with mokume gane and ebonite accents; a sapphire is on the clip. The final design (pictured) is crafted from a stunning twist-pattern mokume gane (\$1,500). The pocket clip is embellished with a diamond, and the accents on the cap and barrel are made from titanium and ebonite. The cap crown medallion is rose gold. Just 25 pieces of this “first run” of fountain pens are available in each design, and each piece is numbered inside the cap crown—a subtle and luxurious accent that is visible only upon close inspection.

Conable, who shares time at both the McMinnville location and his home office in California, is about as unassuming as they come—particularly for someone whose company has gained such acclaim in such a short period of time. He enjoys every aspect of his work, he says, and he’s always on the lookout for new materials and new challenges. When I bid my farewell, he was sitting at the blade-polishing machine trying to meet his own quota. “My work,” he said, “is an experience, not a chore. I believe it’s worth doing.”

