

Made in the USA

U.S. Eyewear Makers, Old and New, Embrace Making It Here



(L to R) Among today's U.S. framemakers, metal production at Rochester's ArtCraft Optical, an inventory of frame fronts at Brooklyn's Lowercase, metal frame fronts at Randolph, plastic production at MODO's M Factory in Brooklyn, and detail work on acetates at STATE Optical Co., outside of Chicago.

MARGE AXELRAD / EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

NEW YORK—Eyewear made in the U.S. has been experiencing a resurgence in the past few years, as newer firms and startups as well as older, long-time family companies with deep, historical roots in the sector are committed to furthering their presence in the business. Old and new, each is looking to develop or expand connections to a new generation of customers—and eyecare professionals and optical retailers—who appreciate brand stories and authentic history about how products are made and where they come from.

From larger players to newer startups, there are a range of looks, options, materials and de-

sign styles now coming on stream, even despite the absence (or limit) of many of the support specialty services, materials, tools and experienced labor which is so essential to the art and science of frame making.

It should be noted that the re-emergence of interest in American eyewear manufacturing really pre-dates this year's expanding trade battles and pending tariffs with China. The trade import issue adds a new dimension to the story. But while there are those who are indeed interested in looking for alternate sources of supply, the complexities of moving production to the degree needed complicate the matter. Having eyeglasses and sunglasses made closer to home is of growing interest to some suppliers and retailers

who are exploring options. While U.S. companies used to dominate the eyewear market for many years, today frame and sunwear imports from around the world comprise more than 95 percent of the eyewear sold here, most industry observers agree.

But the bigger priorities of the U.S.-based eyewear companies that *VM* spoke to for this feature, are to expand their existing base of business further into the optical retail channel, to cultivate an appreciation among ECPs for the work they're doing, to build exposure and awareness among consumers about what's possible.

The companies here are by no means the only firms out there. *VM* will shine a light on the others; watch for updates online and in *VM* soon. ■

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ArtCraft Optical: The Next Generation Continues and Modernizes a 101-year Eyewear Originator

ROCHESTER, N.Y.—The third generation is hard at work at ArtCraft Optical, continuing their grandfather's legacy, one they see defining the company as synonymous with American-made legendary looks, world-class quality and a craftsmanship embedded in its DNA. Family-owned and continuously operated since 1918, ArtCraft is a global leader in the design and manufacture of dress frames, safety and military optical frames.

Charlie Eagle told *VM*, “Our grandfather, Charles J. Eagle, was originally a Swiss tool maker. He was a mechanical engineer, working in Washington D.C. designing different military gear and then moved up to Rochester N.Y., driving a motorcycle around and repairing optical equipment and tooling for companies like Bausch & Lomb, Shuron and others in the area. The U.S. Army asked him to provide eyewear for soldiers in WWI, asking him to produce cable eyewire frames for them to wear in the trenches and under gas masks and that's how the company got its start.”

The company ultimately established more than 35 offices across the country and around the world. It started with gold-filled classic metals, pince-nez and full frame construction, on through the eras of metal and zyl combination frames. Then production grew into all aluminum frames, acetate and metal trim acetate, to then developing fashionable Rx safety frames in the 90s. Charles Eagle passed away in 1988, continuing to come to the office into his 90s. His son, Tom Eagle, had been overseeing the business. “My father, along with ArtCraft's Marty Gullen, saw the industrial safety business as offering longevity to the company at a time when distributors and lab consolidation was growing.”

Throughout, ArtCraft's work with the military, for the U.S. and international allies, continues today. ArtCraft supported the armed forces from WWI through WWII, the Korean



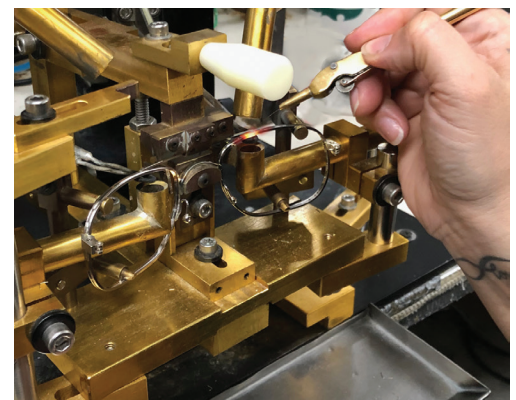
Charlie Eagle (l) president and Christopher Eagle VP in ArtCraft's factory in Rochester, N.Y.



A vintage ad showcases the Clubman Art-Rim, an original ArtCraft design which ultimately inspired scores of others...and a modern image of today's still-going-strong ArtCraft Clubman.

War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War and current conflicts, still partnering with the Department of Defense, and NATO Aligned Military and the stringent military needs of countries around the world.

ArtCraft's dress frame or fashion frame business continues, primarily via major distributors and a small team of field reps. Stated Charlie, “We are proud of our singular history but we are also telling a new story to both consumers and eyecare professionals. We will be launching several new initiatives soon, as we enter our 102nd year of frame making.



Expertise in metal frame production for dress, safety and military frames continues at ArtCraft's facility.

Added Christopher Eagle, “We all know with tremendous consolidation in our industry, it's a changed landscape. But we sense a new attitude and curiosity about made in U.S. frames.” Added Charlie Eagle, “We think it's a great thing that there are now others committing to making frames here. We've been the lone optical frame maker in the U.S. for many years and the soldering, tool and equipment companies didn't support the market, we invested in our own proprietary tools and expansion and traveled to work with partners. But we do see changes ahead.” ■

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STATE Optical Co.: Expanding Its Story, Its Factory and Its Approach to American-Made

VERNON HILLS, ILL.—STATE Optical Co. describes itself as a “first-of-its-kind brand of luxury American eyewear proudly being manufactured in Chicago, USA.” After much investment since the company started as they partnered with then California Frieze Frame founders Mark Franchi and Jason Stanley, to relocate, build and create the new endeavor here, Scott Shapiro, STATE’s CEO recalls, “From a manufacturing standpoint, we have learned so much in five years, including the real obstacles of making eyeglasses in the U.S. without the infrastructure that supports such an endeavor. The machinery, servicing it, the raw materials to bring in, the tools, the training of a workforce is just the beginning.”

This month, STATE boosted its commitment by acquiring AO Eyewear, the former division of American Optical (see sidebar below), which will complement the acetate eyewear focus of STATE by bringing metal frame making into the company, including historical and iconic eyewear to its roster.

Said Shapiro, “We’ve learned, too, the importance of the storytelling component to our initiative and bringing excitement about the story of manufacturing and craftsmanship through our reps



(L to R) STATE Optical Co.’s Scott Shapiro with Marc Franchi, co-founder and president of manufacturing, and Nico Roseillier, creative director for STATE and Europa Eyewear.

to our ECP supporters and to consumers. Our footprint has expanded three times since our start. And we want to be transparent about what we do.” To date, 2,000 ECPs have toured the inside of STATE and the company encourages visitors.

Added Nico Roseillier, creative director of Europa and STATE, “We are close to 50 active styles today, in three to four colors each. And we’ll continue to add new styles as an evolution of shapes and colors, including a new water-inspired group, this fall.” ■



STATE has expanded its production of acetate frames. State’s craftsmen finish each temple tip. The signature echoes the STATE logo, a pyramid comprised of 21 individual “dots” (representing America’s 21st state, Illinois).

STATE Acquires AO Eyewear

CHICAGO—This month, STATE Optical Co. announced the acquisition of AO Eyewear, Inc., a prominent former division of American Optical Corporation, bringing together two American-made eyewear brands and businesses. The transaction for AO Eyewear took place earlier this summer, executives said, and the details were not disclosed. STATE acquired the business from Alan McKinley, who will be general manager of AO Eyewear going forward. Scott Shapiro, CEO of STATE, told VM that STATE has transferred the frame-making equipment from AO and added 10,000 square feet to its manufacturing facility here, virtually doubling its size.

STATE will be producing AO Eyewear, carrying through many of the company’s sunwear styles and, in 2020, bringing out a new collection of sunwear, and, longer-term, optical frames.

STATE said, “As an eyewear brand dedicated to reinvigorating American eyewear craftsmanship and manufacturing, STATE has been creating luxury acetate eyewear since 2014 and has long looked up to American Optical, the oldest optical company in America.”



AO Eyewear’s heritage, dates back to 1833. Their sunglasses were also the first on the moon; the iconic style, now known as the Original Pilot, was worn by the entire Apollo 11 crew and is now on exhibit at the Smithsonian. JFK’s favorite pair of sunglasses was the AO Saratoga.

Said Shapiro, “This opportunity creates the perfect marriage between a luxury acetate collection in STATE and a classic metal collection in AO Eyewear.” ■

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Modo Brooklyn Made: Crafting Classics in a Community of Makers

NEW YORK—Modo's M Factory in Brooklyn is part of the growing "maker" and creative community within the legendary borough in a center known as Industry City. The company cites its origins in New York City in 1990, its new factory initiative was several years in the planning and concept stages before beginning its production. M Factory focuses on classic shapes and constructions.

Explained Rebecca Giefer, CEO, Modo Americas, "Our factory has grown from about 20 people when we opened our doors to about 50 people today. Most of the learnings have been about refining craftsmanship by leveraging technology. Without being part of an eye-wear manufacturing community overseas, we've leaned on our pool of resources in the maker community of Industry City. The culture of creativity that we are part of in Industry City is critical to us."

Giefer added, "We launched Modo Brooklyn Made under the Modo brand because it shares the brand ethos and design DNA, not only in aesthetic because our Modo Brooklyn Made collection offers classic and retro looks that have always been part of the Modo brand, but also due to the minimalist design approach where less is more."

Giefer noted that the products are priced slightly higher than most Modo branded goods because they cost more to make. The response has been positive from many accounts and the FW19 collection includes three new shapes that will expand the depth of the offering.

Overall, Geifer pointed out, the perspective of "Made in USA" among consumers has changed with time. "In the past, it was patriotic, but now it's different. Consumers are buying because they are interested in the maker's story. 'Locally made' is a common phrase across all industries (food and fashion especially) so the story is relevant to the buyer, origin stories 'are' becoming



Rebecca Giefer, Modo Americas CEO.



Modo's factory investment in equipment, technology and people is growing.



Modo's M Factory is a part of the community of creatives inside Brooklyn's Industry City.



The M Factory frames are classic and the range is expanding.

more common among consumers' discussions. Today we talk about knowledge is power and information as the true currency. However, regardless of the narrative that gets customers' attention, only the quality and feel of the goods will get the products up on their frame boards. The maker's story or origin story, alone, won't do it."

Giefer acknowledged that the dialog about trade and imports is more prevalent now. "But knowing that there's a value in locally-made ideas, and Brooklyn on its own, creates a new feel to the discussion. And where we are, Industry City, is about restoring industries, converting spaces and our whole team and company is excited to be a part of that." ■

Randolph USA: Extends its Manufacturing Expertise from the Military to Contemporary Eye Style

RANDOLPH, Mass.—From start to finish, Randolph USA has been building frames in America, at its facility outside of Boston, since 1973. Today, the company's consistent investment, its strong relationships with all branches of the U.S. armed forces, and embarking on new innovations in specialties like precision sports and expansion into lifestyle sun and ophthalmics, is transforming the family-run firm. Randolph has added to its in-house manufacturing experts by augmenting its management team with new product development, marketing and sales expertise to reach new customers and a new generation of wearers.

Stated, Peter Waszkiewicz, Randolph's president and CEO, "I grew up in this business. We have many general manufacturing experts among us but we have brought in a team of specialists—in product development, global



Peter Waszkiewicz, Randolph's president and CEO, (l) with Robert Zadeski; they are sons of Randolph Engineering founders, Jan Waszkiewicz and Stanley Zaleski.



Randolph's tooling and metal making experience includes special projects for all branches of the U.S. military forces and a growing range of classic and premium fashion styles. Randolph is expanding its lifestyle and fashion messages, including new optical styles this fall.

marketing, and sales, to really launch our business forward. We are staying true to our DNA but are intent on growing our brand."

This year, Randolph's 23k white gold aviator sunglasses with AGX polarized SkyTec glass lens was a finalist in this year's first-ever Accessories Council Design Excellence Awards.

Said Waszkiewicz, "Expanding our place in the optical channel is a priority for us. We recognize and appreciate the independent eyecare professional and feel that we can offer them an alternative U.S. made product that is unique and an option to the mainstream eyewear companies. Randolph has great things planned for 2020." ■

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Thema's Virtual Eyewear Assistant Uses Modern Digital Tools to Build a Custom Frame

MIAMI—The Valmassoi family of Thema are using their history of Italian frame making to bring new capabilities to the company's U.S. factory in Miami, and, most recently, are applying new digital technology to the company's work on 3D acetate production. For some time, Thema has been offering customization options for its iGreen and O-Six lines as well as for the new Black Label collections debuting this fall. The latest initiative, as explained by Guilia Valmassoi, CEO of Thema USA, was the debut at Mido 2019 of the concept of the VEA (Virtual Eyewear Assistant), advanced new ideas of what could be possible in a retail setting and used a mix of tools to redefine customization and show the art of manufacturing. The VEA system uses Thema's software and hardware, and takes a very precise measurement of a wearer's face (biometric measurements for each individual), interprets that data, offers choices to the patient and customizes the frame within a few days. Valmassoi emphasized, "We do not do 3D printing. We work only with acetate, and we view our factory here as an extension of our Italian factory."

Edward Beiner's Eyes Forward was the first retailer in the U.S. to showcase the VEA virtual facial recognition technology in his Mary Brickell Village location in Miami. Beiner recently told the Miami's WSVN TV station, "Here's an opportunity to take a product that's been done



A customer checks out the VEA display, first in the U.S., at Edward Beiner's Eyes Forward Brickell location.

traditionally the same way for hundreds of years, and now we're using 21st century technology to make a pair of glasses." The proprietary scan, via an iPad, captures 500,000 points on your face to create an image that is then processed to "choose" some 20 or 30 styles to fit the user's face. With additional customization choices, and a process that takes two or three days, the glasses are finished.

Valmassoi told VM that she is just now announcing two new partners for VEA in New York who will start up soon. Frank De Paolo owner of Successful Vision, Pelham, N.Y. said, "What really excites me about VEA is it is an extension tool for me to be able to further immerse my customer into our experience. The partnership that we have with Thema is special in that we share similar philosophies and the software further illustrates (literally) our shared end result and passion." Also starting will be Vladimir Mordukhayev, owner, Modern Day Optx, on Manhattan's Upper West Side, who talked about his excitement of setting himself apart. "Shopping for eyeglasses should be fun, memorable and educational. An educated client is a client for life. Questions are meant to be asked."

There will be a select group of additional partners using the system in the Chicago area and in Washington D.C. soon, Valmassoi added. ■

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Lowercase: Embracing Locally-Made Frame Design and Know-How

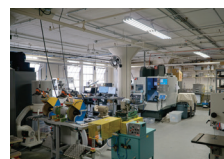
NEW YORK—Lowercase NYC launched in Brooklyn's Army Terminal in January 2017. But founder Gerard Masci's path to eyewear actually started in 2015. He'd been working in the financial sector, as an investment analyst. But he was intrigued by the makers who were already working in the field, like Randolph and California's Kala eyewear, and he started to research more. He literally also started to Google "how to" videos about framemaking, but then learning about materials, found Mazzuchelli and met with their representatives in downtown NYC not far from where he'd grown up.

"They were very supportive, introducing me to hinge makers, core wire suppliers and helped me find my first equipment supplier. I travelled to Varese, then Belluno and started to meet others. And, then, through a friend, was introduced to Brian Vallario, who was an architect and fabricator for architectural projects and he eventually became my partner and is our head designer."

The two met at NY's Marlon Hotel and 18 months later they launched their first collection, naming the first frame the Marlon in honor of that key meeting. Masci recalled, "We searched for locations but learned more about the Brooklyn Army Terminal. We had found other spaces, but we needed many amenities to where we'd set up, like concrete floors, freight elevators to manage the heavy power equipment, and other readily available industry resources that would enable us to start and we settled there.



Founder, Gerard Masci, (c), is flanked by Brian Vallario, head of design, and Ryan Langer, who oversees production and more.



In the beginning it was just the two of us, initially at my dining room table, drawing and working on samples, then we started manufacturing our prototypes." The pair also added another member to their team, Ryan Langer joined Lowercase soon after launch and oversees the more delicate parts of the

production process. His background as a craftsman and experience in fabrication has taken the quality of the frames to another level, Masci related, and he also helps out a lot in terms of the firm's web and social media presence.

Masci noted, "We were reimagining this process in the U.S. I was seeing a growing interest from the consumer about 'story.' Shinola was inspiring, how it was made in Detroit, what it was doing to bring back the craft of watchmaking. Micro breweries were burgeoning, there was just more engagement in localized products, there were many examples."

Today, sales are managed by the partners. The team got some early coverage from the likes of the *Wall Street Journal* and also, interestingly, in the Japanese market where a small Tokyo retailer, Unsonian Goods Store, which curated unique clothing and accessories, discovered Lowercase. World spread in the independent optical channel, and Masci cited many early independent optical owners and supporters including Eyes on Fremont's Nate Ogura "who have been with us from day one."

Today Lowercase has expanded into new colors and shapes, and has built an inventory.

Masci welcomes the renewed interest in American eyewear makers. "I'm a big believer that at this stage, the more people pushing the idea of made local, quality manufacturing helps create a permanent niche in the market." ■

Hilco Vision Debuts First Made in the USA Rx Safety

PLAINVILLE, Mass.—Hilco Vision this year introduced a 100 percent made in the USA Rx safety frame, from its OnGuard Industrial Safety Eyewear division.

The company explained that it's been involved in the safety frame category for a long time, but now the new U.S.-based Rx safety frames from OnGuard are available in four non-conductive metal free

styles. The frames also include comfort fit temples made out of soft touch materials, and are available in a full seal option.

The Made in USA frames meet ANSI Z87.1 and CSA Z94.3 industry standards for Rx Safety Impact.

Hilco Vision's made in the USA Rx Safety frames are made from U.S. materials and molded and assembled by U.S. employees in Massachusetts. ■

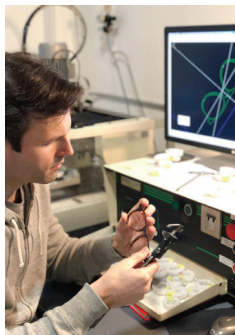


The new Made in the USA Rx Safety frame US110S was part of a new grouping launched this spring.

Dom Vetro: A Luxury Eyewear Label Brings Italian Expertise to L.A.

LOS ANGELES, Calif.—After spending nearly half a decade training with master eyewear makers in the Italian Alps, Ashley Bezamat, founder of the luxury eyewear label Dom Vetro, returned to his native Los Angeles and in 2017 opened the city's first vertically-integrated eyewear workshop adjacent to Culver City. There, he and his team of artisans use the same machinery, materials, and fabrication techniques as the Italian experts who taught him, to create unique and timeless eyewear that can be enjoyed for generations.

Dom Vetro makes both sun and optical glasses using natural, plant-based Italian acetate and mineral glass lenses. Every style in the collection can be personalized either in-person at the Dom Vetro workshop, or online through the company's custom program. Explained Bezamat, "Because everything is designed and produced under our own roof, we're not only able to offer a level of transparency, we can



Left, Ashley Bezamat in his L.A. workshop. Celebs have discovered Dom Vetro. On a national Today Show segment, Bezamat visits with NBC-TV's Al Roker, whose choice of the electric blue Arthur style generated major media exposure for the brand.

also invite customers to participate in the creative process in a way that eyewear brands cannot do."

He added, "Ultimately, we want our glasses to be more than just a functional object. We want them to be a vehicle for self-expression. And a preservation of the culture and craft of Alpine eyewear. Clients can customize their glasses or shop from the new collection. The company is also starting to

work with a select number of boutiques and retailers, Bezamat told VM. "We've expanded the facility to include space for our growing team and provide further support to the optical channel. Max Radach, who was the national sales manager at Raen Optics for four years, is our new director of sales," he said. Dom Vetro will show for the first time at Vision Expo West this month. ■