

NEPENTHES

The Japanese distribution company has quietly built a fashion dynasty through improving American menswear staples. Labels like Engineered Garments and Needles have redefined classic American style through the discerning lens of a true enthusiast, crafting garments rooted in the past but with bells and whistles that keep them grounded in the present.

Needles founder Keizo Shimizu was born on July 1, 1958, in Kōfu, the capital city of Yamanashi Prefecture on the Japanese island of Honshu. Known more for its great hiking paths and breathtaking views of Mount Fuji, it's hardly the place where one would expect to fall in love with fashion. Yet, it was during biannual trips to Shinjuku that Shimizu and his older brother developed an appreciation for menswear. One of their favorite brands was VAN, a Japanese brand credited with bringing preppy "Ivy Style" to the East.

In fact, it inspired one of Japan's earliest postwar style tribes, the "miyuki-zoku," which consisted of youths dressed head to toe in items like madras blazers, loafers, oxford shirts, and repp ties, which they saw as more modern and stylish than their usual school uniforms. So they wore them as a form of rebellion, famously keeping their standard-issue school gear folded up in paper bags that they carried around.

"One day, I found a copy of *Men's Club* magazine on my brother's desk. The issue was about the Ivy Style," recalls Shimizu in an interview on the Nepenthes website. "After that, *Men's Club* became my bible and I read every issue all over. Especially the ones featuring the Ivy Style, I perfectly remembered what's on which page."

Shimizu discovered *Men's Club* at 13, and by 19 he moved to Tokyo, developing a love for film along the way. He especially liked films like

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It was here that he met Daiki Suzuki, the future founder of Engineered Garments, and the two bonded over a shared passion for American menswear. During their time at Redwood, Shimizu noticed a shift in the Japanese style scene—the demand for casual sneakers by Reebok and Nike was rising fast, and ever-prescient, he became the first importer of Nike's Air Jordan sneakers to Japan.

"Redwood was the first ever clothing shop which handled Nike products. Because of the company's regulation, only sporting stores could sell the items until then," Shimizu recalls. "It was when Michael Jordan started to be active. So I asked him to distribute at least the Air Jordan series. Then I finally got approved after some ups and downs. Before that they had rejected my offer consistently. As expected, the products went like hot cakes soon after I started to carry those. But it didn't sell well at sporting stores. So I bought all the excess Jordans in stock from Japanese shops and sold it out."

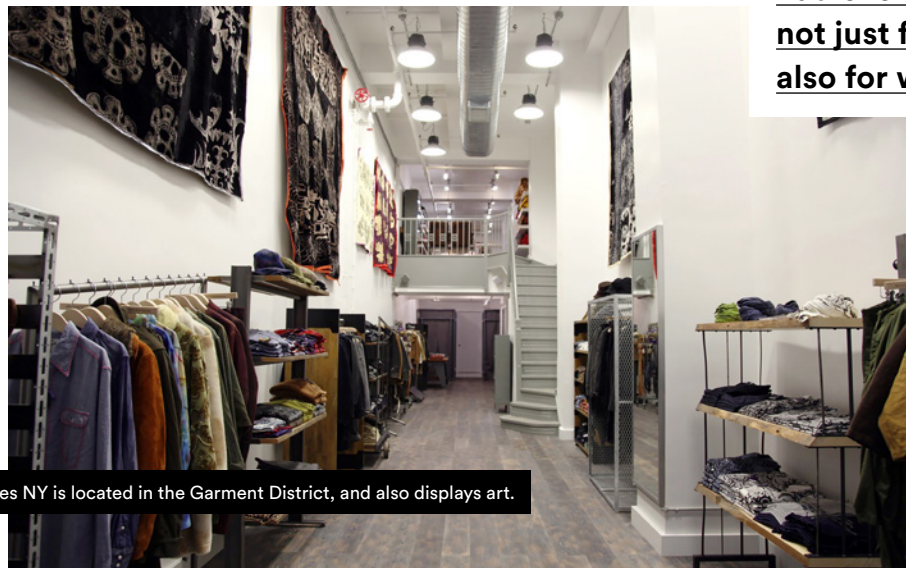
Shimizu's desire to be the first to break a trend became a running theme. At 29, he opened his own store, Nepenthes, in 1988. The company shares a name with a carnivorous tropical plant. At the same time, Daiki Suzuki, just four years younger than Shimizu, had gotten a taste of the West from a three-week trip he took to San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York—where he developed a particular fondness for the seedy Hell's Kitchen neighborhood. So he

joined Nepenthes as a buyer, taking trips to America to find unique brands and items to sell in Japan. Suzuki's taste complemented Shimizu's aspiration to be an early adopter of the next big thing.

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In 1994, Suzuki moved to San Francisco to be closer to some of Nepenthes' business partners. Four years after that, he moved to New York to open the first Nepenthes NY store on Sullivan Street, in 1998. By this time, Shimizu and Suzuki found it increasingly difficult to find quality U.S.-made clothing, as there was a decline in American manufacturing and more production had moved overseas. So they took it upon themselves to start making the type of goods they wanted to see in the market. Needles debuted in 1997 with a casual suit jacket styled after one Miles Davis wore in the '60s. Engineered Garments started in 1999 as a brand making high-quality American-made trousers. It's said the name for the latter comes from a patternmaker who commented that the clothing specifications were so severe it was as if the clothing wasn't designed—but engineered.

"Since it became really hard to find American-made products and I couldn't find any clothes I wanted, I thought I should make those



Nepenthes NY is located in the Garment District, and also displays art.

American Graffiti, not just appreciating the cinematography, but the on-screen costumes as well. It gave him context for the American sportswear he held in such high regard. That birthed a passion for vintage American heritage clothes, from Levi's 501s to Brooks Brothers shirts. He eventually found himself working for VAN, the brand he loved as a child, and after six months working at a branch located in the basement of storied Japanese retailer Isetan, Shimizu enrolled at the Bunka Fashion College. After graduating, he joined the retail world, first starting at a company called Union Square, then moving onto a store called Redwood in 1982, which specialized in American workwear.

