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ART

Peter Hofer

The hunting gun as art.

by Brooke Chilvers

PHOTO COURTESY PETER HOFER

IN 1984, A HANDSOME FRENCH PROFESSIONAL hunter invited me to a remote town on the slopes of the Karawanken Mountains in Carinthia, the Austrian province that borders Slovenia. "It's called Ferlach," he said, omitting that Ferlach was home to such prestigious gunmakers as Ludwig Borovnik, Johann Fanzoj, Franz Sodja, Herbert Scheiring, and Josef Hambrusch.

During my crash course in single-shot Kiplaufs, two-caliber Bergstutzens, and three-barreled Bockdrillings, I developed a real affection for the exuberant, neo-Gothic high-relief engravings of roe deer and oak leaves or edelweiss and chamois in alpine landscapes that adorn these handcrafted guns. "They're real works of art!" I declared to the PH, who said he'd marry me for that remark. And did.

Twenty-three years later we were back. So much, from Sodja to the butcher, had disappeared. Yet "the city of gunmakers," where specialized crafts-

men have lived together since 1558 (Steyr has been home to Mannlicher-Schoenauer only since 1853), still counted 14 master gunmakers producing some 500 sporting guns each year.

Possibly the boldest is Peter Hofer. After graduating in 1979 at age 21 as a master gunmaker from Ferlach's five-year Gunsmith College, he started his own business in 1986 making only very expensive customized guns personalized with first-rate engraving, the same year that the semi-industrialized Franz Sodja, with guns that cost one-tenth to produce, closed shop.

Hofer's wild hair has grayed since I first saw his expert engraving displayed under magnifying glasses at international sporting shows. Now, in his old-world, wood-paneled showroom, his white-gloved hands held the perfected incarnations of his multifaceted imagination, derived from 300 different calibers, 42 distinct barrel configurations,



and an almost endless variety of gun systems. One express Drilling was chambered to 8 x 75 and 6.5 x 65 rifles and a .410 shotgun. A quad-barreled Vierling had a 12-gauge side-by-side shotgun with an 8 x 75 rifle barrel beneath and a .22 Hornet above the tubes. A double with a set of three exchangeable double barrels provided a 9.3 x 74R, a combination barrel in 8 x 75RS and .222 Remington, and another in 6.5 x 57R and .22 Hornet, or five calibers on three barrels!

With such combinations, not only can one magnificent, technically ingenious gun take down everything from bear, wild boar, and red stag to fox, hare, and partridge, but each Hofer gun is also a one-off creation, a work of art that might take from 18 months to eight years to produce. Many are far more than congratulatory tributes to an individual hunter; they are museum-worthy "instant classics" that probably increase in value at least at the same rate (8 to 10 percent) as labor costs in Austria, where the cost of producing fine guns has tripled in 15 years.

Abstract expressionists might question whether art can be made by a committee consisting of an eccentric, outspoken gunmaker; a demanding Russian hunter with nearly impossible requirements; a stockmaker reverently working 300 hours on an 800-year-old piece of walnut burl; an engraver who inlays 99.99 percent pure, 1.5 mm thick "Feingold" wire into the design or background; and Hofer's *bulino* (also called "banknote" or *putini* [Italian for "point"] engraving) specialist, a rare female engraver who lives far away, high in a fairy's mountain forest.

Along with the challenge of overcoming technical obstacles, such as tuning a combination of barrels in a single gun to hit the same target at 100 metres, there is Hofer's quest for unique imagery to enhance his guns. Despite the use of computers and 3-D technology, guns like Hofer's are born from the individual skills of human hands, not the built-in dexterity of a machine, and thus, for me, are art.

Just look at Hofer's Lilliputian gold-inletted .17-caliber Hornady rimfire varmint gun (see photo above), engraved with flowers, feathers, and iridescent green-headed, blue-bellied hummingbirds whose myriad reds and blues cost his atelier hundreds of hours of secretive experimentation with rare electrolytic metals such as titanium and zirconium.

Truly significant engraving has an overall theme or pattern: for example, the African "Big Five." Animals cannot stand alone in an engraving and need to be supported by ornamental framing, such as conventional or stylized flora or scrolling whose motif might date back to ancient Egypt or Greece. The overall composition must be suitably wed to the shape and surface of the gun, each element connecting with the part of the gun it is embellishing, as in engraving the texture of elephant skin or feathers into the safety lever.

Engraving of flawless quality will double or triple a Hofer gun's \$100,000 to \$300,000 price tag. High-priced engraving is in stark contrast to the influential Belgian tradition that the cost of engraving should not exceed one-quarter of the gun's value. Unfortunately, lavish engraving has

served in the past to mask faulty gunmaking, precipitating a decline in the prestige of this art. Then, in the 1960s, just as gunmakers were turning to machines to stamp out ready-made parts that required only hand retouching, Italian gunmakers pioneered "high art" guns. Their popularity took off with Mario Abbiatico's 1978 book, *Modern Firearms Engraving*, which whetted the appetite of collectors, keeping the taste for artistic hunting weapons alive. It also made extravagant bulino engraving a "must."

The engraver's simple hand tools haven't changed for centuries. The *burin* is a chisel to be tapped by a hammer. It makes relatively deep and sharp incisions in the unhardened steel, which are given subtlety and nuance through hand retouching. The *graver* is pushed along the steel like a plowshare. This more delicate and laborious gesture creates continuous, finer grooves or tiny dots.

The Austrian gun industry dates back to 1558 when Ferdinand I, who fought the Ottoman Turks for control of Hungary, became Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and invited craftsmen from Holland and Belgium to establish gun works. Gunmaking here was always a conservative industry, producing wheel-lock guns long after flintlocks became widespread. Guns were fired from the cheek, not the shoulder, which created a strong desire to decorate the buttstock with horn inlay and later with iron and brass, which is quite malleable and withstands gilding.

Gun writer Tom Turpin says engraving is part of the Germanic makeup, and is naturally high-spirited. Rifles, especially, were engraved in deeply cut high relief and sculptured backgrounds, with filigree trigger guards or safety levers and lots of gold inlay between medium-sized scrolls. Themes generally related to hunting or wars with the Turks.

Hofer, as usual, goes one step further, using great works of art such as Albrecht Dürer's complex etching *The Knight, Death and the Devil* for bulino engravings. He also reduced two very large, 7½-by-12-foot

This .17 caliber took three years to complete. The process of extracting blues and purples from zirconium is reserved for Hofer's established patrons.

paintings by Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), *The Hippopotamus and Crocodile Hunt* and *The Lion Hunt*, to sidelock-size. (The originals were plundered from Munich by Napoléon's troops around 1800; the former was eventually returned, but the latter was destroyed by fire in 1870 at Versailles.) At 85,000 dots per three square millimeters, such works represent close to 10,000 hours of craftsmanship. One .470 Nitro Express required 21,400 hours of labor spread over 12 years.

To clear the stage for Hofer's elaborate game panoramas, bare-breasted gold Dianas embracing big-game cats, and realistic family portraits, the perpetually innovative Hofer "suspended" his sidelock vises and screws to make them disappear. His motifs are brilliantly executed high dramas of horses, knights, and castles. Bears bring down stags beneath swirling cloudy skies that make you smell the weather. A lion chases zebra across the sidelocks, warthogs scatter as a leopard pulls down an oryx, while Thomson's gazelles move off the scene and jackals wait their turn. Bulino engraving can capture the detail of a Cape buffalo's torn ear and its distinct expression of disdain.

This photographic quality of bulino engraving is increasingly popular, and a surprising number of hunters want their images engraved for posterity on their guns. This effect is achieved on unhardened steel by making 8,000 dots per square millimeter with a handheld needle-like chaser under a 40-power binocular microscope; the best work leaves no trace. Compared to other techniques like etching, bulino produces a remarkable and subtle range of color, from shiny steel to almost black, with many shades of gray in between. Perspective is achieved by controlling the depth and density of the points, creating a play of light and shadow between the subject and the setting.

With no more kings to bear such guns, the great collections of sportsmen, such as Bob

Continued on page 119



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Art

Continued from page 111

Petersen's, hopefully will find their way into museums, assuring the future of fine guns as art. The good news for tomorrow's collectors is that Peter Hofer's genetics are mixed now with Daniela Fanzoj's 300-year-old family tradition through the birth of their son, Luca. ■

Brooke spent a day with future gun-makers, engravers, and weapons engineers at Ferlach's Höhere Technische Bundeslehranstalt (www.btl-ferlach.at), and was impressed by the level of manual training and creative stimulation. "If you can say 'Fischer Fritz fischt frische Fische' three times and want to learn from the best, contact them."

