



Opposite page: A Purdey over-and-under shotgun. Above: A variety of bespoke, single- and double-triggered guns crafted by Austrian gunsmith, Peter Hofer.

THE EARLIEST EXAMPLES of the modern-day firearm were first used as hunting tools in the early 16th century, and within a few decades, the rifled arm was invented. But that invention—and guns in general—were reserved only for a select few. “The first guns were all custom-made,” says Greg Martin, president of Greg Martin Auctions (www.gregmartinauctions.com), an Irvine, Calif.-based appraisal and auction house for antique firearms and other weaponry. “Going back to the 16th century, the greatest engravings and guns were all handmade for royalty.”

While guns certainly are more prevalent today, bespoke models offer the same type of exclusivity once reserved only for the aristocracy. Martin says that even though the finest guns still are made for royalty and other distinguished individuals, royal blood is no longer a prerequisite to acquiring one. The finest gunsmiths in Europe and America constantly are creating bespoke shotguns and rifles for their most discerning clientele, and while such a gun might require a significant investment of both time and money, the finished product brings the romanticism of 16th-century craftsmanship to the 21st century.

“The lure of a custom gun is the magic of having something that you’ve designed and is built for you,” Martin says. “When it comes together, it’s an expression of who you are.”

AN AMERICAN REVOLUTION

It seems only fitting that Antony Galazan established his firm, Connecticut Shotgun Manufacturing Co. (www.connecticutshotgun.com), in New Britain, Conn. After all, Galazan has built a reputation for creating bespoke guns that rival the handiwork coming out of Great Britain’s major gun-making firms. “He can do fantastic machine work and handcrafted work that replicates the best bespoke gun makers overseas,” says Martin, who has commissioned numerous pieces from Galazan in recent years. The way Martin sees it, Galazan’s work is no less desirable than that of other gunsmiths, even if he incorporates more machine work into the process than other craftsmen. “The image of the handcrafted gun is a status symbol, but it doesn’t necessarily mean a better product, not in this age of high-tech lasers and all sorts of machinery.”

A significant amount of value in a custom-made gun rests in the artistry and intricacy of its engraving, and, during its



Above: A side-by-side shotgun built by Antony Galazan at Connecticut Shotgun Manufacturing Co.
Below: Examples of intricate engraving that Connecticut Shotgun Manufacturing Co. can produce.

36 years in business, Connecticut Shotgun has established a solid partnership with many of the world's most notable independent engravers. It's done so through a commitment to provide the smoothest canvas on which an engraver can work. To accomplish that, the company's craftsmen spend hundreds of hours stone polishing all of the metal surfaces of a completed gun. "We spend more time stoning than most other companies spend making the entire gun," says Lou Frutuoso, Connecticut Shotgun's sales manager. "When the engraver sees that, he sees that it's a high-level gun. That's how we've become the best gun maker here in the United States."

The company's reputation and relationships with the industry's top engravers, like Fracassi and Pedretti in Italy, did not materialize overnight. Instead, it was a gradual process that hinged on bespoke gun connoisseurs and serious collectors adding Connecticut Shotgun pieces to their collections. As those collectors sought out the best engravers to finish their guns, those engravers were introduced to Galazan's work. From there, as Frutuoso explains, engravers began to realize that working on a piece made by Connecticut Shotgun

offered the chance to work on a pristine surface. And as Martin acknowledges, it is the company's finer details—like detachable locks with undetectable screw heads—that have attracted collectors to Galazan's work.

Connecticut Shotgun's best guns start at about \$75,000 and require between one and a half and three years to complete, but some engraving work can add years to the length of time it takes to finish a gun and can easily push the gun's final price into six figures. "The engravers work at their own pace," Frutuoso says. "And if the customer wants Fracassi or Pedretti [to do the work], he doesn't mind waiting that much time."



OLD WORLD EXCELLENCE

Austrian gunsmith Peter Hofer will be the first to tell you that the evolution of his career and his own business, Peter Hofer Jagdwaffen (www.hoferwaffen.com), was as much a reflection of his skills as a craftsman as it was predicated on two principles of good fortune: being in the right place at the right time, and meeting the people who trusted him to make a high-quality gun and helped to guide him along the way. Hofer's decision to become