

Golden Guns

PETER HOFER'S NEWEST MASTERPIECES

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IT IS DAUNTING TO WRITE ABOUT PETER HOFER. NOT ONLY MUST THE WRITER OVERCOME THE LIMITATIONS OF CAPTURING IN A CAGE OF WORDS THE TRANSCENDENT BEAUTY OF HIS CREATIONS BUT ALSO THE MOUNTAIN OF WORDS ALREADY WRITTEN ABOUT HIM CHALLENGES A WRITER TO ADD SOMETHING NEW TO THE LITERATURE. ILLUSTRATING HIS NEWEST FIREARMS AND THE PROCESS THAT COMPELS PETER TO CREATE THEM WILL, I TRUST, BEST THIS CHALLENGE.



Peter Hofer – gunmaker extraordinaire with one of his creations.

People who've spent time with him know that his laugh is like a lion's roar, that his shock of hair is reminiscent of the great Ludwig Van Beethoven and they chuckle at his tendency to say "supah!" when things are going well.

Connoisseurs know Peter as the maker of the most extravagant, most ingenious and most expensive sporting firearms. Offered in three hundred different calibers, from .17 HRM to .700 NE, and in all shotgun gauges, in twenty-five different barrel arrangements and ten different weapons systems configured with an array of trigger and safety systems, it is undisputable that Peter represents the zenith of Ferlach's five hundred years of gunmaking craft and artistry.

Evolution

The creative process that generates Peter's new concepts incorporates the dynamic interplay he has with his clients, many of whom possess vast collections of highest quality pieces. Astutely, and with contagious enthusiasm that radiates like heat from a furnace, Peter presents the client with the opportunity to possess a piece that is uniquely extraordinary rather than proposing merely to craft a refinement of what they already possess, such as a new Holland or Boss.

Such offers blossom through personal contacts and unrelenting worldwide travel and lead to stunning original configurations that pose mind-numbing fantastical artistic and mechanical challenges that no other gunmaker would accept.

Concepts flow into new formulations as a large river may branch into smaller but perfect trout streams. The evolutionary process that led to the Hummingbird rifle and its successors illustrates this creative sequence. As is often the case, it started with a personal friendship.

As the story goes, at least for public consumption – Peter is quite secretive about his contacts – Peter met a baron of singular financial prominence who possessed an immense firearms collection, including a miniaturized





double rifle, which, with great fanfare, he showed to Peter. With the seductive allure of unlimited funds, he challenged Peter to construct a full-size double rifle that was as light as possible. Peter said, in essence, "No problem!"

The result of the meeting was a matched pair of round body sidelock ejector double rifles in .22 Hornet with full length stocks and barrels. Each rifle had exchangeable .410 shotgun barrels. The pair established a new record for light double guns.

Daunting challenges are inherent in reducing an operable hunting gun to that size. The heart of the gun, the mechanics, had to be minimized but yet retain the strength to reliably fire tens of thousands of rounds. As each part was reduced, the action had to be balanced and timed to achieve flawless performance. For example, the dimensions of special sidelocks had to be calculated to miniaturize each part of the action.

The striker cannot, of course, be continuously reduced because it will lose its force. At some point, the miniaturized parts cannot withstand the stress of firing. Yet, attempting to compensate for the lighter striker by making a stronger spring would require strengthening and enlarging the other parts, increasing weight and causing an imbalance that would jeopardize the action's timing.

The round body configuration had intrinsic challenges. An action that is rectangular and flat on all sides will have other parts like the sidelocks and the trigger unit that are also flat. These can be inserted easily into the action. With a round body action, the lines along which the other parts are placed in the action are changed completely, with contours and curves that are more difficult to shape and which have dramatically different stress and friction points. The design challenge is magnified by orders of magnitude.

Peter developed an original CAD program to simulate the change of every edge and every measurement to execute the round body form. Perfection requires hard work.

Hundreds of hours must be invested to create a balanced action that has no tolerance for undesired movement. Small firearms present the greatest challenges and I sense that his achievements with them are the source of Peter's greatest pride as an artist.

Peter had already crafted the world's smallest drilling in Hornet/Hornet/.410 gauge that weighed only 1.7 kg! Now his .22 Hornady/.410 gauge creation inspired him to create a double rifle of even smaller and more delicate proportions. He shared his thoughts with another client, one of the world's greatest collectors.

This customer was privy to protected information then unknown to Peter. Hornady was developing the .17 HMR cartridge, to be launched within two years. Drawn to Peter's creative enthusiasm as iron filings to a magnet, the client asked Peter to build a double rifle in that caliber that was not a miniature but that was even smaller than the .22 Hornet made for the baron.

Coincidentally and conveniently, Steve Hornady, a friend of Peter's, shared proprietary information about the cartridge. At the client's request, Peter began working on the smallest double rifle in the world chambered for the .17 HMR.



I saw the rifle in the white when I visited Peter's studio several years ago. Its construction required four times the hours to build on this scale than previous small doubles.

The result was the lightest and smallest double rifle in the world, weighing 0.9 kg or 1.98 pounds! Boasting a complicated engraving scheme of multiple colored engraving of multiple colored precious metal inlays and engraving of hummingbirds, it became known by that name and was introduced the same time as the .17 HMR was launched on the market.

Something Special – Super!

Motivated by requests from several customers for a new model, the Hummingbird Rifle and the high performance .17 HMR inspired the creation of the Peter Hofer Special, a new lightweight drilling. The Special features side-by-side shotgun barrels in 12, 20 or 28 gauges and a third barrel in .17 HMR caliber hidden between the shotgun barrels.

The philosophy of the Special is premised upon the European notion that one goes out to 'hunt' generally rather than to limit hunting to a specific type of game. The Special's versatility allows for a greater variety of hunting opportunities. The bird shooter now has an effective small game cartridge available instantly. The Special, Peter told me, was designed for the USA market but its application impresses me as universal.

The three-barrel Special presents production challenges of the highest order. Some parts are very difficult to manufacture, particularly those for the .17 HMR components. For example, never before had anyone attempted to make a barrel with the outer dimensions of 6.5 mm. The 760 mm length posed the greatest engineering challenge.

Imagine a barrel with the diameter similar to a straw. It must, obviously, be absolutely straight. Yet, such a barrel cannot be machined normally on the turning lathe because the centrifugal force of the rotation tends to bend the barrel



and ruin it. Many of the initial prototypes were hurled into the trash can.

Moreover, the barrel must have lands and grooves. Working on the inside of a barrel this size is technically daunting because the difference between the grooves and the lands is only 0.1 mm (groove 4.37; land 4.27 mm). As with the Hummingbird rifle and the other smaller guns, the timing and harmony of the parts must be precisely machined and aligned to ensure long wear and reliability. The most demanding tolerances had to be attained, requiring exceptional skill of the craftsman and the highest performance of the machinery.

One has to have knowledge of the process to fully grasp the magnitude of Peter's achievement. The Special has two sidelocks for each shotgun barrel and each shotgun barrel has an ejector. A third lock inside the action has been crafted for the rifle barrel, which has an extractor. The shotgun barrels are fired with a single front trigger. The rear trigger fires the rifle barrel. A creative refinement, the rifle system has a set trigger for superior accuracy performance.

The Special offers what can only be described as pure handling elegance and is perfectly balanced at a weight of 2.9 kg. Those few who will acquire these rare masterpieces will enjoy the quintessential pleasure of ownership.

The Butterfly Rifle and the Future

The acclaim in the world of collectors generated by the Hummingbird prompted Peter to produce another model named the Butterfly Rifle. The weight and caliber are the same but the engraving motif is new and the result of fascinating techniques. As a special engraving creation, layers of different real butterfly wings were laid one upon the other and their patterns then engraved in finest Buttini (point technique).

Gold in multiple colors as well as other noble metals were inlaid into the steel. As an additional refinement, enamel



painting was applied, a technique created and perfected, I believe, by Mauro Dassa and Mario Terzi in northern Italy. Once again, extraordinary technical challenges reared, for these metal inlays and ceramic painting had to endure the hardening process which heats the steel to about 800 degrees Celsius. Technical diversity has almost no limits, but we can see that the artistic composition has no boundaries at all.

Study the photographs of this gun to experience its transcendent beauty and to appreciate how dozens of detail grace notes are orchestrated into a thematic unity. The carved front bead is of a butterfly as if emerging from its chrysalis. The fully engraved and gold-filled serpentine sidelever is absolutely resplendent. The trigger guard is fully covered with engraving and gold inlay. Even the butt of the stock is carved and inlaid profusely with multicolored gold. Hold on to this gun or it is likely to take flight! The Butterfly is as delicate as its subject but hardly fragile for it is constructed to shoot hundreds of thousands of rounds with flawless precision.

The Technikrat

By force of will, Peter transforms passion into perfection. He started his own business in 1986. His meteoric ascension to worldwide prominence was fueled by imaginative and complex mechanical solutions wedded to perfect wood and metal finishes. Peter doesn't build other company's guns. His are done for the first time. These qualities are abundantly present in his newest creation, the 'future is now' Technikrat, a masterpiece that smashes tradition like a jackhammer.

At the 2009 SCI Convention, Peter will introduce the most technologically advanced hunting rifle in the world. The Technikrat is a side-by-side .375 H & H Magnum with unique aesthetics and a truck-load of technology. Plates of solid red gold are affixed to the sideplates but sections of the sideplates are cut out and filled with non reflecting sapphire glass so that the action can be seen. All parts of the action are engraved except springs.

As for cutting edge technology, the Technikrat has a built in altimeter, thermometer, watch, shot counter, a digital compass and a GPS tracking system powered by lithium batteries. A transmitter plus antenna are incorporated into the stock and can be activated and deactivated by a mobile phone. As soon as the weapon is touched or moved, a message is sent to the owner's mobile phone with exact longitude and latitude data and then downloaded to a pre arranged location such that the gun can be located by satellite anywhere in the world within one meter.

A Peter Hofer firearm makes the impossible possible. There are no compromises or shortcuts. It is a matter of function and a matter of honor. Pushing the limits of design, metal strength and aesthetics, Peter says, "You may be assured that no wish, whether of a technical or artistic nature, will remain unfulfilled."

Peter Hofer has solidified his eminent place in the pantheon of the greatest makers, forever linking the past to future generations. Owning a Peter Hofer firearm is, to be sure, an expression of prosperity, and as a prudent investment, probably so. But as for earning a place in the constellation of the best the human spirit can produce, absolutely. 🐾

