



A Visionary Mind

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Hofer Jagdwaffen: a passion for creating guns




AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPH

Aparadox, an artisan, a visionary and a psychologist, or possibly a man brought into this world a century too late or even a century too soon. Whichever way you try to interpret Austrian gunmaker Peter Hofer, you'll never arrive at the same conclusion twice, no matter how often you're privileged to spend more than a few moments in his company.

As enigmatic as his guns are extravagant, Hofer is afflicted with a passion to create. It is an obsession that verges on torment, and at times he is unable to describe what drives him and his metallic artistry. A glance at his hands reveals years of working with metals and fine tools, whereas his general countenance is that of scholarly fortitude.

One aspect of Hofer that you soon come to appreciate is that his story and that of his guns is like no other. Hofer doesn't produce guns; he *is* the guns—and his rep-



Master gunmaker Peter Hofer (inset) and his team have done a lot of experimenting with small-caliber guns, such as this side-by-side .22 Hornet that has interchangeable .410 barrels.

utation for making the most expensive guns in the world is of seemingly little concern or consequence.

Born in Ferlach in 1958, Hofer's direction in life was determined early, as he worked alongside his father, Ludwig, selling shotguns, rifles and ammunition in the family's gunshop. At the encouragement of his father, a gunmaker, Hofer studied at Ferlach's renowned Institute for Higher Technical Studies in metalwork and weapons manufacturing, and in 1979, at the age of 20, he became the youngest master gunmaker in the world.

However, for Hofer graduation also meant leaving the family business, the challenges of creativity now burning deep within. "When I graduated," Hofer said, "I felt I was at the beginning—something that at times I still feel today—the whole process one of constant learning. The other important point I'd discovered was that in over 450 years of Ferlach gunmaking, everything was in the heads and minds of the great makers; nobody had ever committed their ideas or designs to paper and kept them. Equally, if any of the workshops were having a quiet time, none of the gunsmiths ever spoke to each other, so knowledge was never passed on or combined for the greater good of the craft."

After having been approached by some of his former college classmates who wanted to work with him, Hofer realised that a pool

of knowledge from other master gunsmiths, all helping and learning from each other, could result in guns of such quality and design that not only would the great traditions survive in a far more open atmosphere but also the reputation of Ferlach would thrive once again.

At that point Hofer had worked alone for two years, but he felt that it would be of benefit to hire these former colleagues and to dispense with the method of task-specific assignments and have everyone share their knowledge and skills equally. All would work as one for the greater good of the profession, sharing their ambitions to produce some of the most exceptional guns the world had ever seen.

This approach also would address some of Hofer's other concerns, namely that many of Ferlach's established names had ceased trading



even at the lower end of the price scale and that it appeared to be a bad time to create a new business. "One well known manufacturer was producing over/under shotgun/rifle combinations for what at the time was around \$7,000. At the same time, dur-

ing a 1986 trip to America, I sold my first gun—a shotgun—for about \$200,000. What was different was the fact that I sold my guns with a different philosophy, finding clients who shared my passion for something different. You have to remember that both then and now, many of my customers own numerous factory-produced guns. Although there is nothing whatsoever wrong with this type of gun, these people are in a position to look beyond, with a desire and vision to create something original that also sets new boundaries."

Hofer's approach led his team and him to experiment with many new calibers, from the smallest to the largest, combining them in traditional multi-barrelled, multi-caliber Drillings. Even if the gun had two smoothbore barrels, either side by side or one above the other, somewhere there would be a rifled barrel to add versatility. The trick that Hofer perfected was to ensure the gun still balanced and handled like a true shotgun.

These days, with Drillings increasingly popular among a high percentage of European and Scandinavian hunters, out-and-out shotguns figure rarely in the requests of Hofer's growing list of clients.

Finding that smaller calibers such as .22 and .17 are the ones that interest many clients, Hofer's

The "Hummingbird Rifle" (above, right & top) is a round-action side-by-side chambered in .17 HMR. Note the gold-and-enamel hummingbirds, "feathered" sidelever and ornate front bead.



COURTESY OF
HOFER-JAGDWAFFEN



team developed smaller spring technologies, actions and ejectors—ideas that since have translated to the larger calibers. By studying the existing designs and accepted ideas but combining them with modern advanced metals, Hofer and his team were able to reduce the overall size and weight of guns to the absolute minimum while ensuring that they remained comfortable to shoot.

With four gunmakers (Hofer, Andreas Smuck, Rudolf Zierler and Wolfgang Scharnagel), one stockmaker (Alfred Zeiner), two engravers (Barbara Krondorfer and Kelih Helmut) and four office administrators, Hofer Jagdwaffen's small workshop is always a hive of activity. Row upon row of craftsmen's tools line the walls and benches, the patina of time and use ingrained into each.

And it is here that the Hofer method of working sets itself apart. Previously, where a lone gunsmith would produce the entire action or a team just certain aspects, now in the Hofer workshop each gunmaker is capable of producing the ejectors for one gun, the locks for another or the barrels for a third. But although each gunmaker tends to specialize in one process if only to simplify the system, a

client could request that a particular gunmaker work on his gun, although the ideas and suggestions of the entire team would still play a significant part in the final outcome.

This ability of the gunmakers to work on virtually any aspect of the building process also means that machinery is kept to a minimum. Although the familiar lathes are there, it's only rarely that they are used—and then only to speed up the most basic and elementary processes.

"For the first two years I made all my own guns," Hofer said, "but as time passed and orders grew and my friends wanted to work alongside me, I had to reconsider how I worked. What I had to do was teach my friends how I wanted and liked things done. My stockmaker at the time produced stocks in a certain period of time, but I had to tell him that to work to the clock was not good enough; a stock had to be built to how I wanted. I always tell people that the fastest Ferlach stockmaker could make a complete and finished stock and forend in one day. But to be right in every respect and how I like them to be takes Alfred Zeiner at least six weeks."

Describing today's world as "too fast," Hofer always has appreciated that his customers are able to divorce themselves and him from modern-day pressures and delivery times. Hofer guns typically involve 2,000 to 4,000 hours of work, with each finished gun the result of however long it takes to be completed to Hofer's and his colleagues' satisfaction.

But as Hofer's reputation has grown, so have the demands on his time. Acting as an ambassador for himself, his colleagues and the guns, Hofer now spends a lot of time travelling. "My problem is I have to travel to all parts of the world, with America, the Arabian countries and Russia my current most popular destinations," he said. "But given the choice, I would always prefer to be in my workshop creating or solving many of the problems that unique commissions often in-



Hofer Jagdwaffen produces many multi-barreled guns and rifles, such as this side-by-side 12-bore (top left) with a .17 HMR barrel hidden beneath the rib.

volve. Even if I live to an old age, I will never be able to make all the guns I want to. No matter how many guns I produce, it will always be a small quantity even if we build the same gun four or five times with different engraving.

“For me, it is creativity—something that drives everybody at Hofer’s—always feeling that the next commission will allow us to develop an even more extreme design in overcoming unique problems and difficulties.”

The most common challenge that Hofer and his team face is the production of springs that are small enough to fit into the actions yet are strong enough to perform the tasks required of them. They typically overcome this by re-designing the springs or locating them in completely different parts of the action than where they are normally.

Located at 24 Kirchgasse under the shadow of a nearby church, Hofer’s premises are a refined haven for gun aficionados. Identified by a discreet sign on the side of what was once a private villa, Hofer Jagdwaffen has operated from this location for more than half of its 27-year existence—the need for more room spurring



AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPHS

Hofer’s employs a number of master engravers, and clients can select the services of the individual they prefer.

the move from Hofer’s original address on Franz-Lang Strasse.

Upon entering the premises, one is greeted by the mount of a leopard, a huge fireplace and a large banquet table flanked by specially made leather cases containing a variety of superbly crafted bolt-action and double rifles. Other guns and rifles are neatly displayed on simple racks—nothing allowed to detract

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COURTESY OF HOFER JAGDWAFEN

This set of five shotguns includes side-by-sides in (from bottom) 12, 20, 28 and .410 as well as an over/under .410. All actions are scaled to size, and the stocks were made from the same piece of burl wood.

from the guns themselves.

At the rear of the room, beside a small doorway that leads to the workshop, is a narrow spiral staircase that winds through potted plants to the office above. Venturing through to the workshop, the first thing you pass is Hofer's huge desk, surrounded by files, reference books and tomes on the great artists—the source of inspiration for many of Hofer's clients when choosing engraving. A few steps farther is the workshop itself, which contains small workbenches with actions and barrels in various stages of completion and intricate drawings laid out by their sides. With around 30 guns in progress at any time, this work represents at least six years of constant attention, although only five fully completed guns a year pass through the front door.

Quiet beyond compare, the air is almost monastic, each gunmaker working diligently, looking up only occasionally to nod politely toward the stranger who has just walked in. Come lunchtime, however, things change, as a short walk to the local inn reveals the gunmakers in deep, animated conversation over plates of blood sausage and small glasses of red wine.

Looking around the shop, I was drawn to several guns in particular. The "Hummingbird Rifle" is a double rifle of diminutive proportions chambered for the new .17 HMR. If it wasn't for the fact that I knew it was a fully functioning hunting weapon, I would have been forgiven for thinking it was a miniature. A sidelever of staggering beauty and wonderful balance, the round-action rifle boasted beautiful walnut, fences and sideplates encrusted with gold and enamel hummingbirds, and barrels that culminated at a small gold bird acting as the most ornate bead.

Another gun, what looked to all intents and purposes like a double-trigger side-by-side 12-gauge of the most exquisite proportions, held a secret within. Fully stocked and awaiting the engraver's attention, it was only upon opening the gun that the small, centrally located .17 HMR barrel became visible—the small chamber situated between the ejectors just below the concave rib. Hofer believes that he is the only Ferlach gunsmith to still accept shotgun commissions, as pure smoothbores are rarely ordered. These days nearly all 12-bores incorporate rifled barrels of some description.

The third gun I couldn't help noticing looked like something John Wayne might have carried on his hip—in a *large* holster. The handgun, based on the Single Action Army Colt, had a five-round cylinder and a huge barrel chambered for .600 Nitro Express. The owner of the gun intended to use it for hunting Cape buffalo.

One point for anyone considering commissioning Hofer to build a gun—be it a 12-, 20- or 28-gauge shotgun or a bolt-action rifle—is that the least expensive will cost around \$125,000 plus engraving (which can add another \$15,000 to \$20,000).

Of course one shouldn't expect to order a gun and have it in time for next season. Currently, the wait is around six years. And then it goes to the engraver.

Like most bespoke guns, it is the engraving that individualizes each, but Hofer's customers also can choose between more than a hundred caliber and gauge combinations and more than 20 barrel configurations.

Action-wise, clients can select from Anson & Deeley, Holland & Holland, Merkel, Blitz or Mauser types. Similarly, double-underlug systems combine with Greener, Kersten or Purdey fasteners along with various other designs unique to Hofer's.

Other popular items are interchangeable barrels, to increase a gun's versatility, along with the European preference for combinations such as the *Bockbuchsflinte* over/under shotgun/rifle or the *Bockdrilling* three-barrelled shotgun/rifle with a smaller-caliber side barrel. Naturally, triggers, scope mounts and stocks can be built to suit clients' personal preferences and measurements.

"We can provide relief engraving with 24-karat gold, silver, platinum and precious-stone inlays, more prominent on the deeper Austrian-style-background examples," Hofer said. "More popular, though, are bulino and Buttini decoration, the effect of either allowing us to produce the best reproduction of the subject, with greater depth and feel and the animals looking like they are about to jump out of the gun."

Working exclusively for Hofer for more than 25 years, engraver Kelih Helmut's commissions have included reproductions of hunting scenes by masters such as Peter Paul Rubens and Albrecht Durer.

Although Helmut remains the most popular of Hofer's engravers, other masters, including Italian Firmo Fracassi, have decorated Hofer guns through the years. A client can select the services of the engraver he or she prefers; all that's initially required is prior warning to ensure that the readiness of the gun's sideplates will coincide with the engraver's availability.

"Many clients ask how much these engravings will cost and how long it will take, since quite naturally they want to use their guns," Hofer said. "But I cannot tell them, the complexity of some of the scenes needing months not days. Many clients are happy knowing that what they will see is exactly what they want but they will have to wait. The longest was 12 years—more than 21,000 hours going into the complete gun. I describe this and any gun that needs more than 10,000 hours as a 'mega-gun,' but I try not to do many of these."

Time spent with Hofer can go a way toward explaining the man himself and why he has been called "The Rebel of Ferlach"—a title he neither approves of nor disapproves of. As the youngest and newest Ferlach gunmaker, he has had to prove himself to clients and to confirm his right to stand alongside the already established Ferlach dynasties.

"I can only tell you that I have always strived for perfection as I see it," Hofer said. "When Hofer's builds a gun, there are no such things as tolerances or acceptable spaces. An example of this is the metal-to-metal surfaces, which where they bear on each other can do so for the life of the gun without wear. Even down to the proofing, where I look for 50 percent more than the best magnum proof the Austrian proof house is looking for. I build a gun for generations to use, not just the member of the family who orders it. It is a lasting testament to the client whose vision inspired it and to Hofer's for bringing the dream to reality."

A keen hunter with a house high in the mountains, Hofer finds his greatest inspirations when he is away from guns. "My best ideas and solutions to problems come to me when I'm occupied by something completely different," he said. "Away from the workshop, I study psychology and psychotherapy; I enjoy time by the sea surfing, spending time with my two daughters and trying other avenues that slow down my pace of life.

It is during these times—when my thoughts are outside my work—that the answers to many technical difficulties come to me.”

Without question, Peter Hofer is a man as complex as the guns he builds—a gunmaker who lives in anticipation of his next customer’s request.

“I have clients who now want to shoot at their targets at more than 700 meters distance,” he said. “What I have to do is be ready for the one who wants to shoot his next trophy at 800. There has never been a question that Hofer Jagdwaffen cannot answer, and I hope there never will be.”



Author’s Note: For more information on Peter Hofer’s bespoke guns and rifles, contact Hofer Jagdwaffen, peterhofer@hoferwaffen.com; www.hoferwaffen.com.

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