

EXQUISITE ARTISTRY

HE IS A MAN OF EXCESSES, THE GUNSMITH FOR WHOM THE IMPOSSIBLE, THE INCONCEIVABLE IS THE BEST SOURCE OF MOTIVATION. CONCEIVING AND BUILDING INCREDIBLY FINE HUNTING WEAPONS WITHOUT GIVING MUCH THOUGHT TO THE COST OF FEASIBILITY IS PETER HOFER'S OBJECTIVE, A GUNSMITH WHO LOVES TO TEST THE LIMIT AND WHO CONSIDERS HIMSELF FIRST AND FOREMOST AN ARTIST. PETER'S SPECTRUM OF WORK IS AS VAST AS THE BOUNDARIES OF THE HUMAN MIND. IF THE CONCEPT CAN BE THOUGHT, PETER HAS THE SKILL AND THE WILL TO METAMORPHOSE IT INTO WOOD AND STEEL. EVERY PIECE, HE TELLS ME, IS "UNIQUE AND WILL NEVER BE DUPLICATED".

Images courtesy of Peter Hofer

Hofer rifles are the most beautiful works of art in steel and wood.



Peter Hofer



Exquisite artistry is apparent in the meticulous attention Peter gives each one of his hand-made rifles.

With the earnestness of explaining scriptures, Peter extolled the art of gun-making. "It is not an industry" he said. "The guns are all hand-made and at a minimum, the gunsmith must be a perfect craftsman", but he emphasised by punching the air, "my computer and my CAD are in my head and designing is from the heart".

Peter Hofer graduated from the Ferlach Gunsmiths' College with flying colours at the early age of twenty. Very soon, he acquired a reputation as the workshop's genius with difficult combination, the most famous of which is the legendary five-barrelled gun (triple jacked up 20/70, flanked by a double barrelled 9.3x74R and finished off with two single triggers). Perhaps his talents would have remained undiscovered had it not been for the difficult decision he was forced to make in 1986, to start up on his own. As a fledgling entrepreneur, all he had to bolster him were his craftsmanship and his determination to turn out the best rifles in the world, plus a friend who could do little more than encourage him. He spent his free time – of which there was plenty at first – investing everything he had learned and dreamed of in one rifle. It was no coincidence that this rifle caught the eye of an influential client and things started to take off. There are only a few manufacturers left in the world today who still handcraft exclusive hunting weapons the traditional way. Today, the most highly regarded manufacturer of guns in Ferlach is probably Peter Hofer. Not only because he is very skilled in his trade, but also because he dares to break the rules of tradition, experimenting with engraving techniques which is quite unusual for Austria. Peter Hofer exploits his imagination to the full and his best ideas are converted into the most beautiful works of art in steel and wood. A romantic? Maybe, but he is also a realist and a highly qualified expert to boot, never forgetting that a rifle is first and foremost a weapon for shooting. Function and precision are number one

priorities. And even a very precious rifle with the most beautiful engravings should be used for its proper purpose, otherwise it would lose most of its meaning. Peter Hofer's highly appreciated hunting rifles are beautiful enough to be kept behind glass for posterity, as a work of art, but this is surely not what he would have in mind. In the hands of enthusiastic hunters, those three barrel rifles, hammer rifles and high-power rifles are meant to prove their worth. Mass production is left to others. His guns are built step by step and with greatest care for a select group of discerning huntsmen. He would also like to establish a good "mental rapport" with his customers - he has to put himself into their situation and thoughts in order to do justice to their wishes. This inevitably means that only a small number of select guns can be made - five at the most leave Peter Hofer's workshop every year and each one requires thousands of man-hours to be completed. In any event, Hofer has entered the gunsmiths' Hall of Fame as one of the world's best gun-makers. But he is definitely more than a perfect craftsman; he is also a designer, an innovator and an artist who works with the skill of a precision engineer. Moreover, he sees gun-making as an Austrian cultural heritage which cannot afford to rest on its laurels. Indeed, Hofer's success is not due to mere chance or family reputation. It is the result of constant research and development.

True to his philosophy, Peter Hofer's work starts where others leave off, for he invests so much time and effort in his rifles that it verges on the infeasible. This may sound exaggerated, but it isn't. He devotes all his energy to details. There's not a single screw that isn't polished, not a hidden part of the bolt that doesn't receive the same care and attention as the visible surfaces. And that all takes time. Meticulous care is devoted to each part of every weapon. Don't even bother to enquire why a screw which will forever remain hidden inside the action, receives the same attention as the more visible parts such as the side >>

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plates. That is just the way Hofer works, no matter how much time it involves. After all, nobody would have thought of asking Leonardo Da Vinci how long he took to paint his Mona Lisa. A masterpiece is timeless in every sense of the word. Hofer does not aspire to emulate. He doesn't look to other Austrian gunsmiths for inspiration, not to makers in England, Belgium or Italy. He keeps his impressions to himself when visiting other well-known workshops, only mentioning positive aspects and talking of his mentors in glowing terms. Criticising colleagues is not his style. Rather he strives to achieve a rapport with his clientele, at trade fairs, exhibitions and with his wonderful brochures. Hofer is dedicated to perfecting his creations so that they will become family heirlooms as works of art that will live on after him. The touchstone of his philosophy is the total identification of his ten-strong team with these high ideals. Each member of the team made up entirely of local craftsman, had a free rein to develop his own sphere. One thing is certain, for Peter Hofer, routine is anathema and routine would set in as soon as he tried to build something identical to something he has already once built. Peter found and expresses his "reason for living" with his incessant creation and construction of weapon prototypes. From the smallest express rifle in the world to the most complicated combined weapons, like his five-barrelled rifle in different calibres with side-locks or his bolt action rifles and double barrel rifles equipped with a battery of interchangeable barrels, everything is a gamble, an adventure and always excessive too. Since Peter Hofer builds only one of a kind weapons, one must understand that everything he builds is done for the first time. So he is permanently confronted with new difficulties, new technical obstacles never encountered before, these must be solved or overcome only to find that even more complex or unpleasant problems wait further down the line. But at the end of the effort there is the weapon, always unique, inevitably beautiful.

Inspired by and true to his hunting tradition, Peter builds a stunning array of firearms in more than 100 calibres and more than two dozen barrel configurations that are appropriate for any hunting requirements in the world. On all his firearms, the stocks are ornately carved and sculpted and require a minimum of three hundred hours of labour. The rugged angular lines of the action's reinforcing bands of steel and cross-bolting system communicate strength and the exquisitely fitted and polished steel transmits the soul of the gun and perhaps reflects the soul of the owner. It is in smaller jewel-like guns, however, that Peter's unparalleled skills as a designer and craftsman are illuminated most brightly and it is in this realm that he creates what no other gun-maker is willing to attempt to execute. The mechanics are the heart of the gun, he says, and it is where he is the master heart surgeon. One customer has been looking for years for someone to build a small double barrel rifle in calibre .22/22 Hornet with side-locks, round body and side lever. Accepting the challenge to build this delicate piece, Peter developed a diminutive pin-less side-lock that could be fitted without screws, enhancing the engraving surface. Having achieved his goal, he set out for an additional challenge. Telling a faithful client about the .22/22 Hornet, Peter said he'd like to make something even smaller but still not a miniature. This customer, one of the world's greatest collectors, was aware of Hornady's new .17 cartridge and asked Peter to build an even smaller double rifle in that calibre. The gun, now completed "in the white" required four times the hours to build on this scale. Named the "Hummingbird Rifle" by the client, it boasts a complicated engraving scheme of multiple coloured precious metal inlays. The sketches are so life-like I felt the pressure of the beating wings.

Peter concedes that the creative process is wearing and "hurts my brain" yet he never stops until he finds a solution. Austrian gun tradition feeds his soul but Peter is flexible enough to incorporate new styles and theories. His extraordinary set of five shotguns, and his .375H&H double-rifle with two scenes from paintings by Rubens (The Hippopotamus Hunt on the left side-lock and the Lion Hunt on the right), illustrate his willingness to make guns based on the classic English systems and depart from traditional engraving styles by calling upon the finest engravers from London and Italy. "I must be the best", he said. "And if that means breaking with the Austrian tradition, then so be it". Peter knows that when you are at the top, there is only one direction to go and that is down. "Maybe I am one of the finest today. But I must be the finest tomorrow. That is the challenge".

The greater the client's knowledge, the greater the respect for Peter's remarkable mechanics and artistry. It takes years to create this precision handwork so Peter aspires that it will be cherished. "I am a technician but I send to the customer a small piece of my life. It is important where the rifle stays and who is the owner and how the gun will be treated". As impressive as his guns is Peter's humility towards his clients. They are the ones who allow him to keep the culture and art alive. In a soft voice he told me, "I say many 'thank you' to my clients". A man of profound depth, Peter speaks of his art in spiritual terms. "I put my soul into every piece and it is transmitted to the owner. It sounds crazy but there is such a contact with the piece". Peter's ->





Above: The fine embellishments and engravings explain why Peter Hofer only manufactures unique weapons and would never consider copying any of his creations for all the money in the world.

Left: This extraordinary set of five shotguns illustrates Hofer's willingness to make guns based on the classic English systems and depart from traditional engraving styles by calling upon the finest engravers from London and Italy.

spectrum of work is as vast as the boundaries of the human mind. If the concept can be thought, Peter has the skill and the will to metamorphose it into wood and steel. Nearly all of the weapons crafted by Peter Hofer are made with special requests from experienced hunters. More than anything else, his customers are literally king and this proverb is a rule of conduct for Peter Hofer. Peter shares in his hunting clients' joys as well as in their troubles and he tries to find a solution in the form of a new weapon. The ideas for many of his weapons are born of these exchanges with hunters and are in particular responsible for his notoriety. Peter is a lover of African calibres and the builder of powerful rifles with two, three, four and even five barrels, but he owes a part of his success to a miniature, the smallest double barrel rifle in the world: a rifle chambered in the startling .17 Hornady. "One of my clients wanted a very small weapon, light almost useless and certainly superfluous", Peter recalls. "That was when the idea was born for this double barrel rifle which represents the limits of miniaturisation. We started by drawing the weapon as we dreamed it should be, without knowing whether it was realisable. Then we spent several months studying the project and trying to find a technically feasible way to get to the desired result. Two years later, the double barrel rifle is practically completed. Don't ask if it could be made even smaller, I believe we have achieved the maximum of miniaturisation". But this 'gadget' of a weapon cannot eclipse the others, the weapon crafted for hunting that fulfilled the wishes and requirements if experienced hunters, we know exactly what they want. "One day a client asked for a multi-purpose weapon, to be used with equal pleasure for hunting stag, wild boars, bear or chamois, not to forget duck, with side-plates and as light as possible". The weapon made to fulfil this catalogue of demands possesses three barrels. The first is in calibre 8x75RS, sufficient for bear. The second barrel, 6.5x65R is neat and light, perfect for chamois, deer and even wild boar. Finally, the last is a

smooth .410 Magnum. "A conventionally built weapon would weigh 4.5 kg", explains Peter, "this one doesn't weigh more than 2.9 kg". To make this feat of prowess possible, the drilling has only two side-locks and two triggers. The safety lever permits the barrel selection. The front trigger shoots one or the other of the rifle barrels, the rear trigger shoots the .410 Mag barrel. The finish is particularly original, the engraving, done in Bulino, depicts all the big birds of the Northern Hemisphere as well as some ducks and it is literally dazzling which accounts for his incredible talent.

The night before he sends the completed piece to the client, he stays up late and polishes the wood for the last time. He cleans the case and checks the metal to make certain it is perfect. Before closing the case, Peter touches the gun and says good-bye. With candor I did not expect from such a superstar, he told me, "I know it is only wood and steel, but I think back to when I started; how long it has taken and the problems encountered in solutions to the mechanics and getting the engraving right. I had jumped from an idea to a higher level where I see that the idea can be fulfilled". By thus creating unique weapons, original works of art, Peter has recreated or resuscitated one of the major roles of the master craftsman gunsmith: to give body to the hunter's dream. And to all those who will never be able to own one of his weapons, Peter offers a share of the dream that is not to be neglected, the capability of marvelling at beauty like a child would. That's something you can't buy at any price. Hence in spite of all the changes, Perkonig's lines are still true of Ferlach rifles today: "and know that this is not an object, but has life. It has a soul, that dreams and sings. Pervaded by thousand gentle hunting winds, the experience of time". {J/B}

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