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A Visionary Mind

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Hofer Jagdwaffen:
a passion for creating guns



AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPH

A paradox, 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.

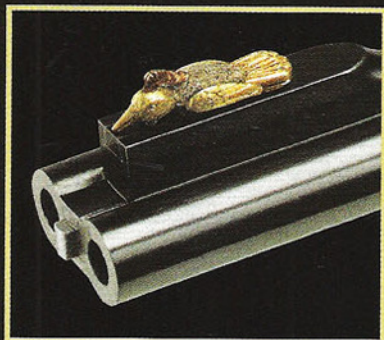
However, for Hofer graduation also meant leaving the family business, the challenges of creativity now burning deep within. "When I graduated," Hofer said, "I felt I was at the beginning—something that at times I still feel today—the whole process one of constant learning. The other important point I'd 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.

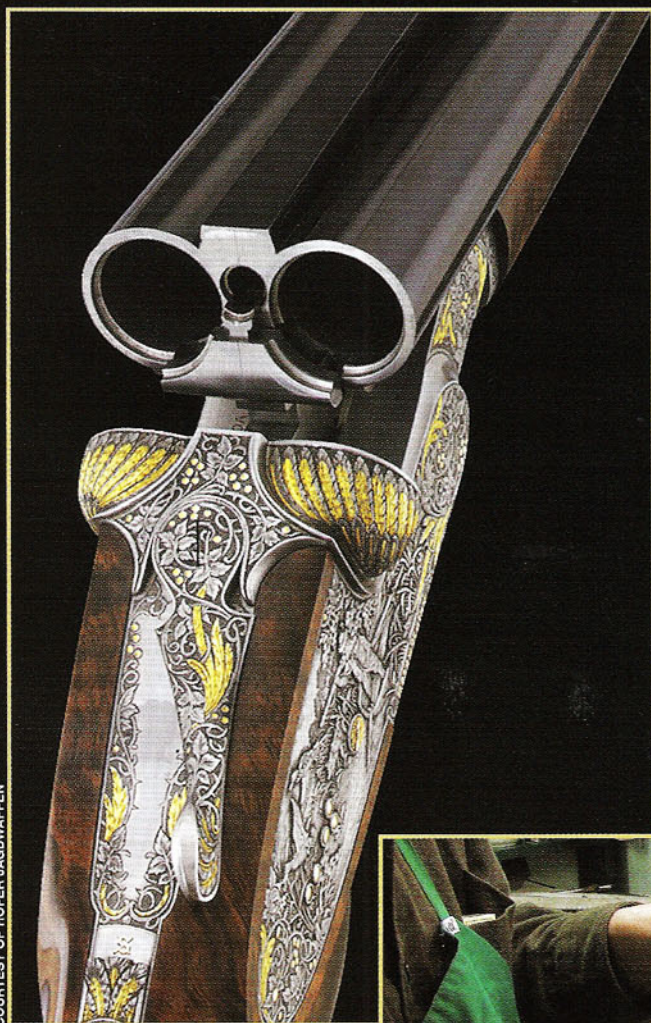
These days, with Drillings increasingly popular among a high percentage of European and Scandinavian hunters, out-and-out shotguns figure rarely in the requests of Hofer's growing list of clients.

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



COURTESY OF HOFER JAGDWAFEN

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-

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



AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPHS

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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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.