



Armed With Art

Detail-oriented gunmaker adept at exquisite designs

By Debby Schoeningh

Every artist has to discover his or her special talents and then find the appropriate canvas on which to share that artistic gift.

For Jerry Huddleston of Baker City, his muse is steel and wood, the two canvases used to create flintlock guns.

But even Daniel Boone would have some reservations about tamping a steel ball down the barrel of one of Jerry's muzzleloaders, which are more art than weapon.

Most of Jerry's guns are sold to collectors who will never fire them, but Jerry says his guns will shoot about as good as any gun can shoot.

Jerry started building guns when he was 16.

"The first gun I made was a little pistol," he says. "I shot it two or three times and thought it was too dangerous, so I threw it away."

In those early years, Jerry heated the steel with a forge he built himself and formed the components, including the flintlock mechanism, with a hacksaw and hammer, using techniques he learned from blacksmithing books.

When he made his first European shotgun, he filed the barrel out with hand files. He has come a long way since then, and has updated his equipment considerably.

"I always tell beginning gunmakers who look at my recent work that my first one didn't look like that—neither did the fourth or fifth," he says. "I also keep one of my early rifles that I won't ever show, just to remind me of where I was 35 years ago."

That is the only gun Jerry has



Jerry Huddleston

kept. Everything he makes is sold, sometimes before it is completed.

He prefers making gunstocks from English walnut but occasionally uses other woods.

"I made one from black walnut once, which about killed me," says Jerry, who was allergic to the wood and ended up at the hospital.

Jerry says he made one percussion gun in 1959 and that cured him of straying away from flintlocks.

"They are not as pretty," he says. "Nothing compares to the beautiful lines of a flintlock."

Jerry later added engraving to his repertoire.

About 10 years ago at a gun show, Jerry met Robert Evans of Oregon City, one of the most renowned engravers in the United States.

"I asked him what he would charge me to engrave my name on a pistol," Jerry says. "When I told him I could never do that, he invited me to visit his shop."

Jerry started taking his finished engraving to Robert for evaluation.

"I needed someone to tell me what I was doing wrong," he says.

The tutorship went on for several years until Jerry showed Robert his latest pistol, which won the 2007 Smith & Wesson Best Engraved Handgun of the year award at the annual Firearms Engravers Guild of America exhibition in Reno, Nevada.

"Robert said, 'There is nothing else I can teach you about engraving,'" Jerry says. "When you reach a certain level, the rest of it comes with experience. But I don't think I'm at that level because I still ask questions. I think everybody—even a little kid—can teach you something you don't know."

Jerry's engraved designs feature everything from delicate flowers interwoven with classic swirls of scroll to animals, detailed down to the finest stem on a floral spray or the individual hairs on a fox.

He works with an air compressor-powered engraver and a high power microscope to create his designs, which he first draws on paper.

He uses three colors of gold and what he calls "Damascus gold," which is composed of two colors of gold twisted and fused, and sterling silver wire. He also inlays designs on the wooden gunstock and barrels.

Jerry makes embellishments that are attached to his guns, rather than inlaid or engraved, by first carving the design into wood and then silver casting in a silicone mold.

"Too much is not good. More is worse," he says of embellishments. "It gets to looking like wallpaper."

One rifle that has drawn a lot of attention is his .54-caliber



Above, Jerry uses a high power, lighted microscope to engrave, which allows him to do fine detail. Inset, the exquisite detail comes through on an eagle he designed on the gunstock of a flintlock rifle. Opposite page, an ornate English pistol (and its mirror image) from a private collection recently on display at the Owensboro Museum of Fine Arts in Owensboro, Kentucky.

“Vigilance.” The stock is handmade from a rare piece of Oregon flame maple and adorned with a patch box that is hand cut from brass. The box is engraved with an eagle that has inlaid silver tail and head feathers. Every line of each feather is engraved, totaling thousands of engraved cuts. The beak and feet are 24 karat gold.

He made the rifle “in remembrance of the courageous men and women in our military who have so willingly stood vigilant over our freedom and risked their all in the war against terrorism.”

Jerry is working on a gun pat-

terned after an 1810 French shotgun, similar to the one made by Nicholas Boutet for Napoleon Bonaparte.

Jerry’s engraved muzzleloaders start at about \$25,000.

He says his name recognition is worth about \$10,000 on other guns he engraves.

Even though his work is highly sought after, Jerry is still not at what he considers his peak.

“I’m not out to compete with others,” he says. “It’s an art form. I’m having a contest with myself to see how good I can get.”

Jerry made guns as a hobby while employed as an auto mechanic for 40 years. When he decided to go

into gunmaking and engraving full time, his wife, Liz, says she was a little concerned.

“He was buying books on engraving,” Liz says. “As a retired schoolteacher, I don’t feel that you can go wrong with books, but one of them cost \$400. When he came back from a show, though, where he had sold \$28,000 worth of guns, I said, ‘You can buy anything you want!’ A wife has to be supportive to make something like this work.”

Jerry offers some advice for anyone looking to turn a hobby into a steady income.

“Spend whatever it takes, and don’t cut corners to make it the very best,” he says, adding the most important thing is: “Do what you love, today.” ■

See more Jerry Huddleston designs and firearms at www.jwb-flintlocks.net.

