

A NEW AGE OF Sobriety?

RICHARD RAWLINGSON LOOKS AT RECENT TRENDS IN THE ART OF ENGRAVING

I'm very lucky to have many of the world's finest guns pass through my hands and in front of my camera lens on a regular basis. For nearly twenty years I have been photographing guns and gunmakers professionally and it has been interesting to see how engraving styles and tastes have evolved over that period.

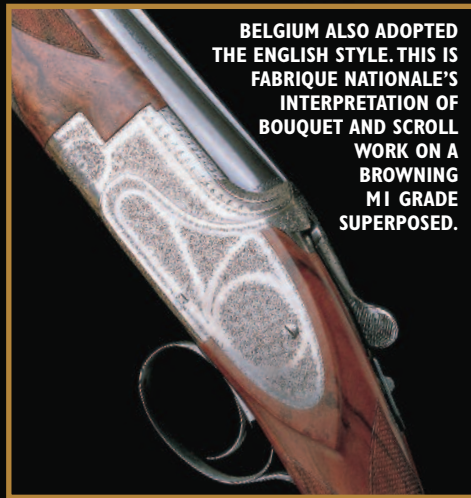
When I first started there is no doubt that the motto for those commissioning top end guns was 'if you've got it – flaunt it!' The era of the superstar engraver was in full flow and buyers fought to get their guns engraved by the big names and to commission ever more extravagant pieces. Fantasy was the buzz word. Forget traditional decoration and game scenes, the engravers were encouraged to let their imaginations run wild. Led by the likes of Manrico Torcoli and the Creative Art team in Italy, some amazing guns were produced; totally stunning or totally tasteless according to your point of view.

In England, gold inlay, carving and classical themes were revived to produce designs that harked back to the elaborate ornamentation of the 17th and 18th centuries. Tastes are cyclical of course, and there is no doubt that the circle is turning away from these excesses towards a more restrained, classical look. New guns passing through my studio over the last couple of years have

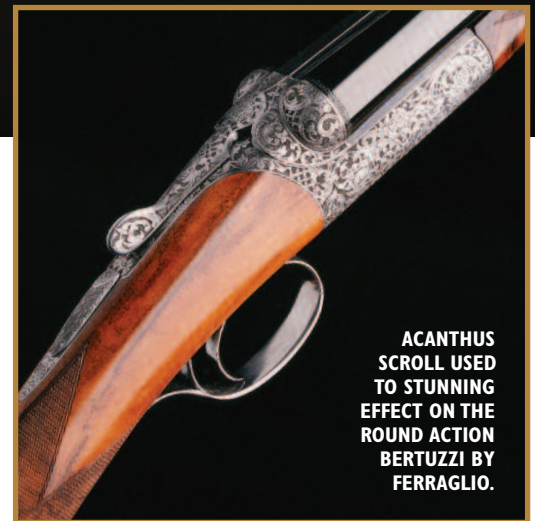
been more likely to carry traditional scroll work or game scenes than mythical figures, with not a nude figure in sight for years!

In particular I think we are seeing a revival of scroll decoration, perhaps as buyers tire of the photo-realism of the Italian bulino school. For all its showroom appeal, the finest quality bulino engraving is far from durable on a hard working gun and wears away

with use. Not an issue on a collector's gun that rarely (if ever) leaves the display cabinet, but a problem if you see value wearing away in front of your eyes.



BELGIUM ALSO ADOPTED THE ENGLISH STYLE. THIS IS FABRIQUE NATIONALE'S INTERPRETATION OF BOUQUET AND SCROLL WORK ON A BROWNING M1 GRADE SUPERPOSED.



ACANTHUS SCROLL. USED TO STUNNING EFFECT ON THE ROUND ACTION BERTUZZI BY FERRAGLIO.

THE BUYER OF THIS FABBRI – ONE OF A MATCHED PAIR – COULD HAVE AFFORDED ANY STYLE OF ENGRAVING BUT CHOSE CLASSIC ENGLISH STYLE BOUQUET AND SCROLL. THE RESULT IS TIMELESS. (ENGRAVING BY CREATIVE ART).



Interestingly, of all the prestige makers, Ivo Fabbri makes guns that are designed to be used and used hard. Anyone who can afford a Fabbri can also clearly afford any engraving they want, yet all the Fabbri guns I have photographed in recent times have had modest scroll engraving. A sign of the times perhaps with conspicuous displays of wealth considered somehow inappropriate?

Manton's Influence

For two centuries now scroll engraving has been the 'default' position for the gun trade. Fashions may come and fashions may go, but elegant scroll work is timeless. Its origins can be traced back

to the London gunmakers of the early 19th century – particularly Joseph Manton. He was a hugely influential figure who shaped the careers and thinking of many who followed him, such as James Purdey. He led a movement to a more austere style of gunmaking as a conscious revolt against the elaborate excesses of continental makers, with their heavily carved stocks and heavy use of precious metal inlays. It was a style most closely associated with the French trade, and, of course, at this period anything French or 'French taste' was considered

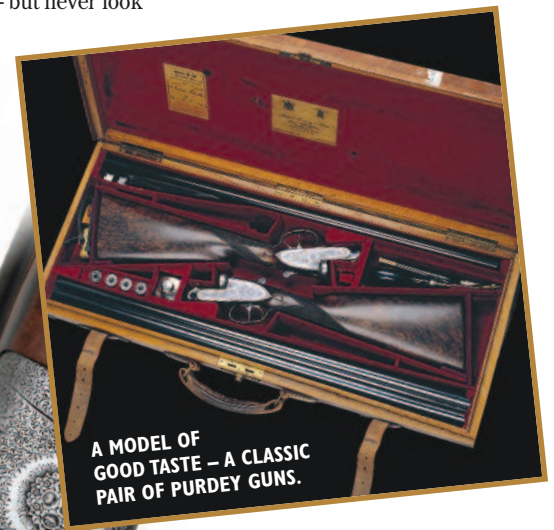
THE LATEST THING: WILLIAM POWELL HAVE INTRODUCED THE PEGASUS MODEL FOR 2009 – OR IS THAT 1909? ALTHOUGH MADE BY B. RIZZINI IN ITALY, IT STILL EMBODIES TWO CENTURIES OF ENGLISH STYLE.

beyond the pale in British society.

The striking thing about Manton's guns is how little engraving they carry. It is the quality of the gunmaking not the decoration that you see – and his guns were of the highest quality. Dense engraving can hide a multitude of gunmaking sins but Manton had nothing to hide. (Two centuries on, gunmakers still grumble about buyers who confuse decoration with quality. On a recent visit to the Piotti factory, Manuel Piotti described the typical reaction when someone first picks up one of his guns: "They say what lovely wood, what superb engraving – but never look

at the real quality of the gun." Did it hurt? You bet it did!)

That austere style was the predominant look on British guns throughout much of the 19th century. Simple scrolls, as edging and borders, gradually gave way to more extensive coverage, but illustration was confined to a minority of guns decorated with rather primitive game scenes. The stylistic revolution came towards the end of the century, with the introduction by Purdey of a style of tight scroll work surrounding floral motifs, that has become known as 'rose and scroll' or 'bouquet and scroll' engraving.



A MODEL OF GOOD TASTE – A CLASSIC PAIR OF PURDEY GUNS.

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TRADITIONAL ENGLISH ROSE AND SCROLLS BUT ON A MODERN ITALIAN CLASSIC. THIS IS A PIOTTI MONACO ENGRAVED BY CONTESSA.



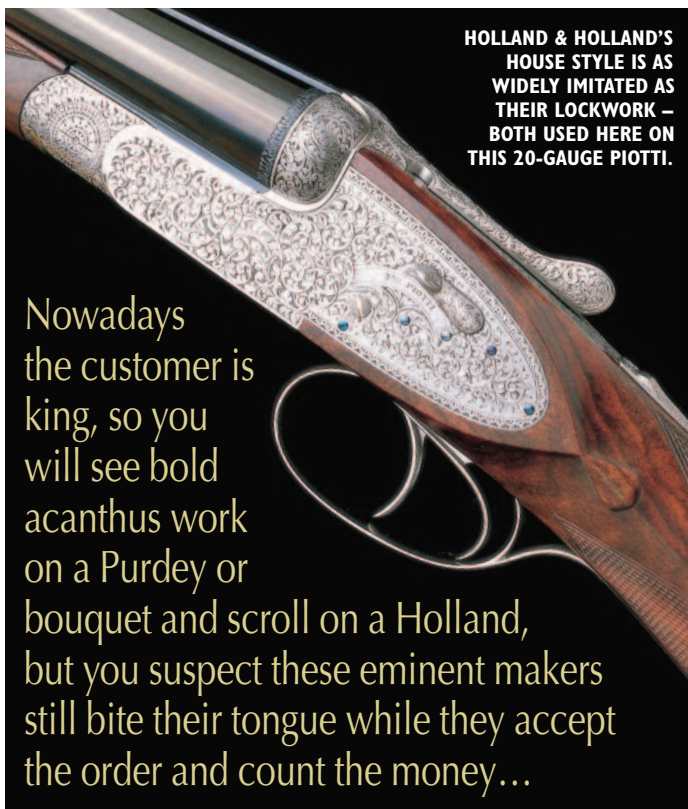
THE EVOLUTION OF THE HOLLAND & HOLLAND STYLE FROM (TOP) AN EARLY HAMMER GUN TO (LOWER) THE CLASSIC ROYAL SIDELOCK WITH BOLD FOLIATE SCROLLS.



So popular did it become that it quickly was adopted by most of Purdey's rivals in London and Birmingham and it quickly became a generic known in the trade as 'Purdey style'. Each maker tried to personalize it by creating their own distinctive patterns, which,

together with features such as the carving of the fences, allowed the knowledgeable to identify the maker at several paces.

Only Holland & Holland stood apart from the rush to copy Purdey's lead. Its house style was altogether bolder and more



HOLLAND & HOLLAND'S HOUSE STYLE IS AS WIDELY IMITATED AS THEIR LOCKWORK – BOTH USED HERE ON THIS 20-GAUGE PIOTTI.

Nowadays the customer is king, so you will see bold acanthus work on a Purdey or bouquet and scroll on a Holland, but you suspect these eminent makers still bite their tongue while they accept the order and count the money...

dramatic. Full coverage of large foliate scrolls over all the lock plates and minor furniture soon became the H&H signature and it too became shorthand for a style that continues today throughout the gun trade worldwide. Say to a gunmaker in Spain, Italy or Germany that you want a gun engraved in 'Holland & Holland style' and they will immediately understand what you mean.

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Scroll Work

English style scroll engraving has spread to all parts; indeed, the Italian trade has its own word – inglesina – to describe it. Trainee engravers at Cesare Giovanelli's school in Gardone spend hours covering a flat block of steel with intricate patterns. The master then

appraises their work, files the block smooth again and tells them to practice some more. It is painstaking, precise work and many engravers become specialists in the technique. Within co-operative studios, such as those operated by Creative Art or G. and S. Pedretti, one or more members may undertake all the scroll work, often creating frames or borders for others to fill with game scenes.

Small scroll work has been taken on by some Italian engravers to new levels, with total coverage such as on the Beretta Imperiale illustrated below. Impressive at first sight, such work is mind-boggling when viewed under a powerful lens – the intricacy and precision is quite breathtaking. To my eyes however, such work smothers the gun. Empty space, such as the gaps around the classic Purdey bouquets, gives balance and lightens the overall effect. As ever, taste is personal.

What is beyond doubt, however, is that classical decoration of shotguns will never be in bad taste. In years to come fantasy engraving on a gun will define its era as accurately as the flowers and flared jeans on a hippy at Woodstock. Elegant bouquets and scrolls on the other hand are timeless. ■



FULL COVERAGE TIGHT SCROLL WORK, SUCH AS THIS BERETTA IMPERIALE, IS AN ENGRAVING TOUR DE FORCE.