

Arms and Exhibitions

Anthony North

Whereas most students of the 19th century are only too aware of the exhibitions that were so much a feature of that period, arms and armour specialists have usually tended to neglect the catalogues and their somewhat exotic military wares. It has to be admitted that the swords, shields and firearms illustrated in such periodicals as the *Art Journal* would give the likes of Messrs Mortimer, Manton and Wogdon a fit of apoplexy.¹ Most of the arms illustrated provide a violent contrast to the plain, austere but workmanlike firearms and swords made by English gunmakers and swordmakers. The best quality English firearms were most restrained in their decoration, limiting the ornament to simple elegant scroll-work on the lock plate and chequering on the stock. The skills of the damascener, chiseller and carver were very much kept at arms length.

The arms most frequently represented are firearms, as they combine technical innovations with very ornate decoration. It is worth remembering that the primary function of exhibitions in the 19th century was to show off skill and it is this that makes these exhibitions worth studying. The best craftsmen were employed, working to the highest standards to produce arms which could hold their own against the grand inlaid furniture, highly decorated ceramics and silver which were so much a feature of these exhibitions. The plain simple products of gunmakers such as Purdey and Hollands must have looked absurd to continental eyes used to the lavish productions of French gunmakers like Renette and Gauvain.² It is doubtful if any of the firearms shown in the exhibitions were ever intended to be used. An examination of the cased sets of pistols reveals barrels in pristine condition and locks that have clearly never been fired. The centres of bullet moulds from these sets have often not even been cut out to allow a ball to be cast. They were intended purely for decoration, provided with finely made cases of exotic woods mounted in engraved brass and lined with silk. They were intended solely as an ornament for the gun-room made as a decorative tour-de-force.

As one would expect the arms makers of continental Europe dominate the scene. French gunmakers especially inherited a tradition of fine craftsmanship going back to the 17th and 18th century. It is ironic that the qualities for which British gunmaking was – and still is admired – derive in fact from France. It was the influence of Huguenot gunmakers in the late 17th century coming to England and settling in London that produced the plain style of gunmaking which is always thought of as characteristically English.

It is not the intention to discuss the high quality art skills of Vechte and Morel Ladeuil which are in many ways the gems of the 19th century armourer's craft.³ They have been discussed elsewhere and are well-known. It is perhaps worth pointing out that the large flat areas of a shield provide ample scope for embossing and chasing whereas the artist working on guns and swords has not only to deal with an intractable material like steel but also is very much constrained by the form of a firearm or sword.

The gothic revival style of the 1840s and 50s was successfully adapted for furniture, silver and interior decoration but as far as firearms are concerned it produced some real nightmares. By the mid 19th century pistols were invariably produced in expensive cases complete with accoutrements to service them. These comprised a variety of different tools such as screwdrivers, ram-rods, oil-bottles, small hammers and a bullet-mould – all decorated en suite with the pistols, which they were designed to serve. One extraordinary cased pair of target pistols made in the 1850s by a Liège gunsmith, Charles Honoré, a celebrated designer and engraver of firearms, looks like something out of a Gothic horror film rather than a pair of working pistols (**fig. 1**). The stocks are of ebony carved with gothic arches and quatrefoils, the rifled barrels and lock plate are chiselled with gothic panels, the hammers are chiselled

with figures based on gargoyles. However it is the rest of the mounts that are truly remarkable. These are of carved and pierced ivory, and consist of knights in armour set on gothic plinths and pillars, pierced gothic spires, and various animal heads. The accessories are comparatively tame by contrast with the handles of the various tools carved with gothic motifs, except for the oil bottle which is carved in the form of a gothic font. The pistols have never been fired as the resultant explosion would almost certainly cause most of the knights to fall from their plinths and the spires to crack and fall off. The pistols are signed by Honoré and were reputedly made for the Great Exhibition of 1851. The maker still remembered the main purpose of his profession, in spite of the elaborate decoration, for the barrels are rifled and the locks are made on the most up to date percussion system. Pistols of this general form, but without this elaboration were designed for indoor target shooting and were very fashionable on the continent in the 19th century. This pair would additionally have been an ornament to any gunroom.

The swords and firearms that featured in the international exhibitions were not always viewed as working weapons in the 19th century. A good account of how they were judged is provided by the commentator on the Armoury of the collector and designer William Bullock writing in 1808. This is somewhat earlier than our period but bears repetition.

Again should the warlike weapons arrest attention which have been the instruments of carnage and bloodshed...he muses in silence, as he blames the ambition that stirred up the fires of contention, and regrets the enmity that subsists between man and man. But turning from such painful remembrance, his thoughts will placidly dwell on the progressive improvement of fire-arms from the first invention in remote times to those of a later date.

These sentiments although expressed in Regency times in England catch exactly the impression the makers of firearms shown in the exhibitions wished to leave with their admirers.

That the Gothic style for firearms was still fashionable in the mid 1860s is demonstrated by a fine pair of Viennese pistols made for the Paris Exhibition of 1867 (**fig. 2**). The ebony stocks are carved in relief with Gothic tracery and foliage. The rifled barrels are chiselled with long Gothic panels in the perpendicular style and the steel mounts contain gargoyles and various architectural motifs. These pistols clearly owe a debt to the Gothic pistols of earlier date described above, and like them, the system of ignition is of the most modern kind. They are fitted with back-action locks and break-down barrels with extractors operated by pushing forward a lever in front of the trigger guard. Although at first glance they appear to operate on the percussion system they work in fact on the modern centre-fire system with the hammer operating a firing-pin, protruding through the centre of the breech, which strikes the centre of the cartridge base. They also have adjustable rear sights. They are fitted into a velvet lined case with all the usual accessories and the lid is stamped in gold with an Imperial eagle and the title 'Joh. Springer Gewehr Fabrikant + K.K. Kammer Lieferant Wien'. Johann Springer (1819-75) was a well-established Viennese gunsmith who exhibited at most of the international exhibitions. The accessories include a bullet mould with jaws that have been filled with copper plugs and have never been cut out for a bullet so they were clearly intended for show rather than use.

Although swords were used to a limited extent in the latter part of the 19th century – there was a cavalry action using swords during the American Civil War – the sword had by this time become a weapon of ceremony. In continental Europe one which was very fashionable type was the hunting-sword. Throughout the 19th century hunting was very much in vogue and had its own distinctive costume and accoutrements. Part of this ceremonial regalia was a short, usually single-edged curved sword. Initially used to give the coup de grace to a wounded animal it was, in earlier times, widely carried when travelling because of its convenient short length. By the 19th century however, it had also become solely an ornamental weapon. It is

interesting to note that far more hunting swords were made as exhibition pieces than military and naval dress swords. Like the presentation firearms that feature in the international exhibitions the hilts and scabbard mounts are worked in the strangest and most curious designs. Although there are examples based on the classical swords of Greece and Rome, 19th century continental craftsmen turned much more to the Gothic and Renaissance for their inspiration. The hilts and scabbards closely follow Gothic revival architecture. This style with its pinnacles, crockets and niches was ideal for a decorative sword hilt. Naturally, the patron saint of hunting, St Hubert, figures extensively in the canon as do medieval knights and their ladies. These figural hilts seem to have been especially popular and included some extraordinary creations. One of the most bizarre has a hilt in the form of a poacher in early 19th century costume with his right leg caught in a man-trap holding his head in anguish, with a dead game-bird at his feet (**fig. 3**). This was interesting enough to merit an illustration in the *Official Catalogue* of the Great Exhibition of 1851. It was made by the French silversmith Jules Wiése to the designs of the French jeweller François Désiré Froment-Meurice.⁴

It should be said that gold and silver are frequently used for the hilts and scabbard mounts of these swords. Most hilts are loosely based on the cruciform swords of the middle ages but there the likeness ends. The blades are often very plain, usually cut with two fullers. Unlike the blades of the 18th century they are very rarely blued and gilt but are very highly polished. It is as if the artist visualised these swords as being shown only in their scabbards which are also highly decorated en suite with the hilt.

A very remarkable exhibition hunting-sword (**fig. 4**) was on the international art market recently. It is a tour-de-force in highly polished cut-steel, with mounts of cast gilt bronze and silver. The hilt is formed of fluted and beaded fillets of highly polished steel, the pommel formed as an open-work crown, the silver grip is engraved with scrolling foliage and is applied with stags' heads in silver. Mounted on the hilt are finely cast figures representing Virtue and Avarice, fox-masks, boars heads and lion masks of gilt-bronze, the guard is in open-work and consists of winged-dragons with gaping jaws, the bodies finely engraved with feathers. The steel scabbard is engraved with leaf-work and is decorated 'en suite' with the hilt, with mounts of gilt bronze. The blade is of flattened oval section, cut with ridges and flutes and engraved adjacent to the hilt with geometric panels and formalised leaves. The various elements of the hilt are held together by screws and studs of engraved steel.

The maker of this extraordinary sword is something of a mystery. The hilt is signed on one side of the grip 'P. Jouhaud'. The sword comes with what appears to be its original case of veneered maple with a silk lining.

Cut and polished steel was very popular for jewellery and for sword-hilts from the 1770s onwards. To produce cut-steel wares demanded great skill as most of the work had to be done by hand and polishing the different elements was laborious and difficult. It reached its apogee in the late 18th century especially in Woodstock⁵ and Paris but remained fashionable until the middle of the 19th century especially for exhibition pieces such as chatelaines and swords. The 'Jouhaud' sword as far is known, is unique. The maker is not recorded either as a sword-smith, gunsmith or jeweller in either France or Belgium. The form of the figures is similar to 19th century French bronziers work and the likelihood is that the sword was made by a French maker. A maker named Joyau is described as a *sculpteur modeleur* working for the celebrated French jeweller Jean Valentin Morel (1794-1860) but it is by no means certain that he is the manufacturer of this extraordinary sword. Whoever he is, he is most unlikely to have been a sword-maker. The open-work and chiselling are clearly the work of a craftsman more at home with chatelaines and keys than swords. It does not appear in any of the exhibition catalogues and the lack of a name within the case may indicate that for some reason it was never exhibited. The steelwork is of exceptional quality – as are the animal masks of gilt bronze, the two allegorical figures of gilt bronze are of lesser quality and may be by a different hand. It dates from the 1860s and the probability is that it was made either for the exhibitions of 1862 or 1864 and never shown.

After the exhibitions closed most of the luxury arms were disposed of either to museums or to private clients. It is in this latter group that discoveries still remain to be made. Many of the hunting-swords, sporting guns and luxurious mounted pistols illustrated in the various exhibition catalogues are still extant, widely scattered certainly but still awaiting identification.

The comments of the International Juries on these less than warlike wares are worth repeating. They speak of 'beauty and variety of design, excellence of workmanship, combined with moderation of price, in swords' – presumably the price of luxury firearms made even the most impressed juror, draw back from too lavish a compliment. The jurors were not unaware of the practical possibilities of the various products they were reviewing. Devisme was praised 'for the beauty of his workmanship in guns, and for his explosive projectiles for large guns'.⁶

The jurors saw no incongruity of firearms being produced in earlier styles. A comment on a percussion-target pistol shown at the Great Exhibition of 1851 describes it as being 'as fine a specimen of elaborate engraved work as we remember...the design of the decoration is in the Romanesque style and is displayed with considerable taste. What makes all these *armes de luxe* so fascinating and worth studying is that the ornament is so divorced from their grim function.

Perhaps it was just as well that A. W. N. Pugin took up sailing as a hobby and not shooting.

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NOTES

¹ These three are generally acknowledged to be the leading London gunmakers of the late 18th century. They all worked in the characteristic plain English style.

² Waring, J.B. *Masterpieces of Industrial Art and Sculpture at the International Exhibition of 1862*. London, 1863: plate 6; French ornamental firearms.

³ Wilson, G.M. *Antoine Vechte- the 19th century Cellini*. The First Park Lane Arms Fair, Feb. 17/18th 1984

⁴ F.D. Froment-Meurice (1802-55) was the leading French jeweller and goldsmith of the 19th century. Several of his designs were produced by the goldsmith Jules Wiése. See Vever, H. *French Jewellery of the 19th century*. Thames & Hudson, 2001.

⁵ Woodstock in Oxfordshire was the centre of a small but very expensive luxury trade in cut-steel wares, which flourished in the second half of the 18th century.

⁶ Devisme is recorded in Paris from 1854 to 1859. He exhibited *armes de luxe* at all the exhibitions of his day. See Waring op.cit.; Plate 6.