

THE STRAIGHT SHOT

The Beauty of Guns – Part 2 by Jess Hardin

It seems obvious that “some guns got it, some don’t.” While the armed forces have reason to believe they upgraded their armament, when it comes to that certain something the slab-sided Colt .45 auto and even the M-14 rifle have it, whereas some could argue that the very competent Beretta 9mm and M-16 rifle may not. The addition of an optical sight usually has a slight detrimental effect on this subtle amalgam of qualities, that is, unless they’re vintage and secured with classic claw mounts, or else of the highest Teutonic precision. An otherwise fine lever action has a little less of it than before, whenever a litigation-shy company insists on adding a clumsy-looking cross-bolt safety. All but the poorest double barreled guns sport a fair amount of it, whereas effective as they are, most modern pump action models seem to me to fall short. The Colt single action has it in spades, of course! And the perfectly balanced Remington revolver Model 1875. The finest historical replicas and quality restorations often meet the measure. It’s likely found in heirlooms passed literally from hand to hand, grandfather to father to son, in an unbroken chain of responsibility and love. In quality break-top handguns a widowed mother wore,

sizing up strangers through an old screen door. In prized smoothbores, a majority of single shot rifles, most longarms with octagon barrels, and dainty derringers from another era. Then again, it’s likely evident in any gun that we take to the woods time after time, picking it out of the rack over the many other able candidates.

Whatever we choose to call this quality, it’s intrinsic to certain new and artful arms, custom or factory, right off the shelf. It seems that others have to earn this quality through service, christened with the blood of elk or grouse. One may prove that it’s a gem with a display of uncalled for accuracy, its sacrifices and heroics commemorated in cherished memories from a lifetime in the field. Another may prove itself by combining a special feel with utter dependability, an increasingly rare virtue among both people and machines in this age of expediency. For all of its potential for beauty, such an arm must be able to be loaded and put to work at its intended purpose. As with us, it is in the application, the actual firing that we are each defined.

Certainly, the overall industry trend is towards utilitarian arms, and such guns fill an important need. Man-made materials have proven

stronger and lighter than wood or steel, and there’s a certain validity to ultramodern designs as we enter an age more futuristic than any science fiction. There is, if you will, a side-current... a divergent trend allied with aesthetics and informed by tradition. As in the finest hardwoods, it is this clear, alternating grain that provides the gun world with it’s continuing shimmer, it’s depth, it’s chatoyance. Amidst all the hoopla over the latest fiber stocked rifles and polymer wonderpistols, Winchester revitalized the designs that echo her history, reconfigured their Model 70 to conform with the look and feel that had made the pre-’64 production its proud reputation. New American companies are staking their reputations on custom quality production rifles and shotguns, and thanks to gun shows and a widening mail-order network the supply of genuine antique arms is in some ways more accessible than ever before. Gunsmiths are specializing in “honest” upgrades of vintage arms, as well as their own custom models. And for those preferring the price and tensile strength of historical reproductions, there is an increasing assortment of quality copies— not only typical Colt and Winchester designs but lesser known models like the Merwin & Hulbert revolver and the Maynard Civil War carbine. For those who can afford such things, there are few arms more classy than the limited production Sharps and Ballard single shot rifles still crafted by a number of small shops today. And one can still order custom engraving as fine or finer than any done in the old days, and replace their factory revolver grips with genuine ivory, polished horn, or delicately carved wood.

Few will ever agree as to which guns embody that special feel, history, materials, design, appearance or balance. In the end what’s important isn’t which arms we do or don’t find beautiful... but rather, that beauty – like history – still matters.

(Excerpted from Jess’ book *Old Guns & Whispering Ghosts*, signed copies soon to be available again from www.oldgunsbook.com)

"You need only reflect that one of the best ways to get yourself a reputation as a dangerous citizen these days is to go about repeating the very phrases which our founding fathers used in the great struggle for independence."

Charles Austin Beard (1874-1948)

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