Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Raymond J. Wielgus to The Art Institute of Chicago

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Arms and armor for hunting, war, and ceremonial occasions have always been among man’s most treasured possessions. These objects, therefore, were subject to special care and lavish decoration commensurate with the owner’s wealth and social status. Since the Renaissance, firearms have seen progressive improvements in efficiency. Guns and pistols, which had come to be considered mechanical marvels, were made by the most skillful craftsmen and decorated by the most talented artisans.

When embellishing weapons, these artisans often chose the most spectacular — and most difficult — method of steel decoration, known as damascening (named for Damascus, the city where this ancient technique first flourished). In this process, a pattern is chiseled into a steel surface; next, a soft, high-grade gold wire or foil is hammered into the chiseled grooves; finally, the decoration is finished with a fine graver and polished flush with the steel surface. Larger figures and other ornamental motifs are sometimes in rusted into steel in a similar manner and left in relief. The more important damasced areas may be enhanced by engraving, which can cover the surrounding steel. The decorated object is often blued, chemically or by heat, since the resulting color contrast between the blued steel and gold makes the ornament more visible.

Although mass production of firearms became possible in the nineteenth century, the tradition of hand-crafted gun decoration did not end. New forms of firearms and new materials used in their construction influenced artistic standards and ornamental techniques. In the United States, some prominent engravers, including Gustav Young and Louis Daniel Nimschke (both active c.1850-1900), introduced and developed a specific style of firearm decoration that has been widely followed by artisans ever since. The distinctive feature of this style is an abundance of scrolls and arabesques that were finely engraved on the blued-steel parts of the weapon. These exuberant scrollwork patterns satisfied Victorian taste and enjoyed widespread popularity before 1900. Many of the most luxurious presentation weapons of the nineteenth century feature floral
patterns, animal figures, and symbolic imagery executed in gold incrustation and finished with chiseling and engraving. While generally superseded by new artistic trends toward the turn of the century, this type of decoration has remained the great favorite of American arms collectors and firearm decorators.

Pistols decorated by Raymond J. Wielgus (born 1920) show an entirely new approach both to the art of the gun decorator and to the selection of ornamental motifs. His background may provide some clue as to his unique approach to his craft. Wielgus studied art at the University of Illinois, and he was trained as a wood carver and an industrial model designer. He later worked as a restorer of museum artifacts. He also studied and collected objects of primitive art and became a recognized expert in this field. At the same time, he developed a keen interest in the decoration of firearms. Since his retirement in 1970 he has devoted considerable time and energy to the study and practice of the decorative techniques used by artist metal-workers of the past.

While Wielgus continues to use the ancient technique of damascening, his decorative designs are far removed from traditional scrollwork patterns of most gun decorators. His repertoire of ornamental motifs, mostly inspired by Art Nouveau and Art Deco, is refreshingly new in firearms decoration and, at the same time, corresponds perfectly to the technical designs and functional forms of the pistols produced in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Other patterns developed by Wielgus seem to derive from elements found in the primitive art that he has studied and admired.

Not content with simply applying decoration to a plain standard-issue weapon, Wielgus normally refines a pistol’s shape by remodeling its component parts with files. The result is a lighter and more elegant form that is subsequently emphasized by linear gold-damascened decoration along the pistol’s edges.

Firearms decoration traditionally involves several artisans, apart from the gunsmiths who make the barrel, mechanical parts, stock, and mounts: an ornament designer produces patterns of decoration, in the form of drawings or prints; a goldsmith or an iron chiseler

Captions
decorates the steel pieces; a stock decorator embellishes the grips and stocks of carved wood or ivory; a cabinet maker fashions a case with fittings to keep a deluxe firearm and its accessories. Wielgus has learned to perform all these specialized jobs himself: chiseling, engraving, and damascening steel; carving exotic woods and ivory; and inlaying hard woods and precious metals. The decoration and fitting of a presentation-quality firearm by a single craftsman is a long creative process that may require hundreds of hours of concentrated work.

The appreciation of decorated arms has often taken weapons directly from the armorer’s workshop into princely treasure rooms or collectors’ cabinets to be preserved in vitrines and proudly shown to admirers of fine arts. Like his predecessors in the field of arms decoration, Raymond J. Wielgus transforms purely utilitarian and potentially deadly objects into works of art; compare, for instance, a standard issue Parabellum pistol (checklist no. 27) with the same model decorated by Wielgus (checklist no. 24). As his craftsmanship has created an impressive array of decorated firearms, Wielgus’s artistic erudition and imagination have produced a new and original page in the history of arms decoration. Chicago’s connoisseurs of the decorative arts should feel fortunate that this master craftsman has chosen The Art Institute of Chicago as the first American museum to be the custodian of these outstanding works of art.

Leonid Tarassuk, Consulting Curator of Arms and Armor

Unless otherwise noted all objects are gifts of Mr. and Mrs. Raymond J. Wielgus.

American Firearms


Austrian Firearms


Belgian Firearms


22. Browning Model 1900 semi-automatic pistol, .32 cal. (8 mm), ser. no. 260331, c. 1920; decorated 1980. Steel, gold, and ivory; with accessories, in English oak case. 1987.218.6a-d.

German Firearms


26. Bergmann Model 1896 semi-automatic pistol, cal. 5mm, ser. no. 1265, c. 1900; decorated 1980. Steel, gold, and ivory; with accessories, in macassar ebony case, with damascened mounts. 1987.218.11a-e.


Photographs by Terry E. Schank