

Hartmann & Weiss

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Making 'best' game guns better

Among the knowledgeable—those who scrutinize the minute details of a shotgun inside and out—Hartmann & Weiss is ranked with only a handful of other gunmakers among the world's best. Some people find this surprising. Many associate H&W with the company's superb rifles and are not familiar with its shotguns, which is unfortunate. For more than 40 years, the firm has been consistently producing "best" game guns in Hamburg, Germany. Its formula for success is simple: Try to make them even better.

At first glance, Hamburg seems an unlikely place for a high-end gunmaker. It's not close to any of Europe's traditional "gun towns," and there is no tradition of small-arms production in the area. Historically, the city's existence has been based on shipping, predating even a 1266 agreement in which Henry III granted Hamburg special trading rights with London via the Hanseatic League. The same topography endowing wealth upon Hamburg prior to the Second

World War—an ice-free, deepwater port on the Baltic—was responsible for the city's phoenix-like rebirth and prosperity after it saw some of the worst conflagration of the war.

To understand how best gunmaking came to Hamburg, one must go back to 1900 and the German city of Suhl, a "gun town" extraordinaire. The little valley cradling Suhl was chock-full of shops and factories churning out thousands of arms of every size, shape and quality. Then, as now, the gun trade was global. Suhl actively competed with Europe—mainly France and

Belgium—for raw materials, markets and even skilled workers. The onset of industrialization was allowing households in the Old and New Worlds increased leisure time and income, and shooting was becoming a major form of recreation. Gun companies the world over scrambled for a share of the market. With shotguns, Great Britain had a corner on the form taken to its highest level: the game gun. The Germans strived to produce a contender—down to the advertised *englischer Arabeskengravur* (English scroll engraving)—and largely succeeded, but

cachet was lacking. In rifles it was an ongoing small-arms race, with new cartridges being introduced one after the other. Of course the Mauser bolt-action was and is the standard by which all others are judged.

On an international level it was much the same, with stakes being much higher. Britain, mother of the industrial revolution, ruled the waves, and though her superpower star was starting to set on her possessions, it still shone brightly on

a preeminent navy protecting the transoceanic trade. Germany, on the other hand, was just emerging as an industrial giant, and charged with nationalistic hormones, it was itching for turf and validation on the world stage. Perhaps it was inevitable that the two would clash before long.

Today many of us appreciate the old Suhl craftsmanship for just what it is: fine work. Then as now, no country has a corner on quality. Two pieces of metal can fit together only so well, and the best gunmaker sets himself to the task of perfecting that



The shop's skylight-brightened second floor is where Otto Weiss oversees the making of the firm's shotguns.

joinery (and everything else). It certainly helps, however, if an ardent young 'smith with the grail of perfection in his sights has an experienced master to demonstrate what quality work should look like and expedient techniques to achieve it.

One of those keen for the crusade was young Otto Weiss, a third-generation gunmaker from the village of Gardelegen, near Suhl. Weiss started his gunmaking studies in 1952, at age 13, when he began apprenticing at the state-run Ernst

Weiss spent three years "just filing" while he absorbed knowledge distilled from the talented workers of Suhl's glory days.

Upon completion, Weiss moved on to Merkel, where he was listed as "Otto Weiss number #3" on the payroll, because two other workers shared his name. Then, like scores of talented journeymen before and since, Weiss made for greener pastures. His exit was not without difficulty, however. Besides provincialism in gunmaking, he had to escape the totalitar-



Otto Weiss (above) and Gerhard Hartmann (left) have been working together since 1963, and today they produce some of the best "best" guns in the world. This Boss-action over/under was engraved by Florian Güllert.



Thälmann Werke, in Suhl. Thälmann made large numbers of modest guns for Western markets and the lucky few who could afford them in the communist East. After the war, the company had incorporated under one roof all that remained of the old Suhler names and equipment after Russian occupiers had high-graded or destroyed tons of machinery. As most of the military-age craftsmen in Suhl had been lost during the war, Weiss remembers that the men training him were "in their 80s"—a sad commentary on war but probably fortuitous; most of the best Suhl-made guns had been produced prior to the First World War and possibly fashioned by the elder craftsmen's hands. It was an arduous apprenticeship, and

ian state. Thankfully he made it out and settled in Zürich, Switzerland, to work for W. Glaser.

After a year there, Weiss applied for a position with the Gunmakers Association in England and was offered several. (The English had lost much in the war, too.) Those knowing Weiss aren't surprised at his choice: James Purdey and Sons. His internship at Audley House fulfilled his high aspirations and resulted in associations and influences that would shape the rest of his career.

Weiss settled at Purdey's in February 1960 and fell under the tutelage of stocker Ben Delay. In Weiss, the aging gaffer found fertile ground to plant the seeds of "best" wood manipulation—to complement Weiss's already considerable skill with metal. At the Purdey bench Weiss found kindred spirits in young David Trevallion, Peter Nelson and Ken Hunt. One can only imagine the hijinks as the craftsmen-cohorts terrorized London on weekends, transported in an old Rolls that Trevallion's father had restored.

Similar to Weiss in age and inclination, an athletic youth with a passion for rifles and hunting was following a similar path in northern Germany. Gerhard Hartmann, born in Hamburg, was 15 when he found

Cieplik, a small hometown gunmaker, to take him on. After four years' apprenticeship, Hartmann also went down the road: south to Ulm for a year at Krieghoff. In 1960, like Weiss, Hartmann traveled abroad for further study—to the government-sponsored Gunmaking School in Ferlach, Austria. During his Ferlach off-hours, Hartmann worked as a stocker for Josef Winkler and hiked the Karawanken Mountains with fellow student and life-long friend Martin Hagn. During their days in Ferlach, the young men dreamed of heroic hunts for the great bears and mountain rams that neither could afford. Later the dream became reality, as Hartmann pursued big game from Kazakhstan to Kamchatka, even living and hunting for a time with Hagn from an Alaskan wilderness teepee.

In 1961 Hartmann finished in Austria and returned to Hamburg, where he secured employment at the prominent local gunshop Vandrey. In 1963 Otto Weiss left Purdey's and also relocated to Vandrey, where he was introduced to Hartmann. The pair worked together for two years before joining forces as Hartmann & Weiss in 1965. In 1971 they invited Peter V. Nelson, Weiss's workmate at Purdey's, to join them in Hamburg, which he did.

Three years later Nelson returned to England and opened a shop and showroom, giving Hartmann & Weiss a London address. This arrangement lasted 16 years, until 1990, when Nelson left the firm to build his own world-renowned shotguns.

Today Hartmann & Weiss builds shotguns in the classic British style, because, as Weiss puts it, "We both like the English guns so much." The Boss action is the side-by-side mainstay, although the firm has made Hollands and Beesleys. The 12s and 16s come round-bodied with ejectors, whereas the 20s can be had with either square or round frames. All are true self-openers. For an over/under, H&W offers the much-emulated Robertson/Boss as its flagship. It comes with scaled frames in 12, 16, 20 and 28 gauge as well as .410. All rifles have German actions, starting with Mausers in three sizes. The company also produces Hagn



A pair of 20-bore Beesley-action single-trigger guns (above) and a museum-quality takedown Mauser rifle engraved by Alain Lovenberg.

and Heeren falling-block single-shots and recently added a sidelock Kipplauf single-shot based on a Merkel action. The rifles can be ordered with Hartmann & Weiss's signature takedown-barrel system. Double rifles are built on Beesley actions in calibers ranging from H&W's proprietary .577/.500 to .375 H&H. The firm does not make Drillings or other combination guns.

It's hard to generalize about the synergy created when talented individuals such as Hartmann and Weiss work together. Both gunmakers are skilled with wood and metal and show a passion for sound mechanics and tasteful lines. Hartmann tends to concentrate on the rifle side of the business, whereas Weiss focuses on shotguns. In their three-story "factory," a converted residence 10 miles from the city center, the main floor houses a fine showroom and a machine-tool room surrounded by workbenches. Here Hartmann guides two assistants and a

machinist in between filing at his own bench. (Hartmann regulates the double rifles in the basement's 100-meter range.) Upstairs, in the skylight-brightened shotgun atelier, Weiss oversees two more workers: an actioner and a barrel/action maker. Weiss has his own stocking room here and a bench where he finishes all of the doubles.

The partners typically take tried-and-true mechanisms—such as the Beesley, Boss and Mauser actions; the Boss single trigger; Southgate ejectors—and fine-tune them with small yet significant changes in materials and design. For example, many of their self-openers have springs built into the cocking rods and safety sears, eliminating parts and screws. At the juncture where their O/U ejectors cam on the action, a hardened steel insert prevents wear. They also have modified the Boss single-trigger turret to make it easier to disassemble—something only a gunsmith would notice. Whenever pos-

sible, they use roller tips on mainsprings, eliminating the weak, breakage-prone tumbler "link." And they are not afraid to mix metaphors, so to speak, building Beesley-action guns with Boss single triggers and Holland/Southgate ejectors. The goal is to offer the best in style and mechanical design.

For a small company, H&W has offered a great variety of action types through the years. This is possible in large part because of its pioneering role—along with that of Fabbri and Westley Richards—in introducing CNC production to the high-end trade. Hartmann and Weiss saw the need to change from guns made mostly by hand with gauges after conventional machining and forging, to guns initiated on CNC equipment and then extensively hand-finished. The Herculean effort to modernize at H&W began in 1980, when Hartmann spent literally hundreds of hours "at the drawing board" committing

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all of H&W's designs to measured drawings for CAD programming and milling on the firm's new machinery.

Those decrying the change, claiming the guns are somehow diminished, have not seen the extensive handwork still involved or had the pleasure of handling an H&W gun. Far beyond the precise fit and modern metallurgy, Hartmann & Weiss shotguns have the intangible look and feel of a "best" and perform to the same standard in the field. One long-time customer, a retired business executive from a Southeastern state, has a small collection of bespoke, upper-tier shotguns and hunts with them all. He observes: "With the unpredictable angles offered by wild birds, I need a gun with good trigger pulls and proper weight distribution. Gerhard and Otto make the gun to my exact specifications, perfectly balanced and slightly barrel-heavy to retain momentum on crossers and instinctive shots. Many guns have good triggers, which sometimes fade. Hartmann and Weiss's are magnificent initially and stay crisp after extended use. Their O/U incorporates subtle improvements in the superb Robertson-

Boss design, making it even better. They use only the best materials and sophisticated metallurgy in their barrels and actions; the guns almost work better inside than out. Customer service is above par. A gun sent in after a hunting trip comes back looking like new.

"Beyond the joy of using a fully functioning field gun with classic beauty and impeccable fit and finish, Hartmann & Weiss shotguns hold their value. For me, it doesn't get much better."

It's almost a shame that the perfect metal fit and flawless lines of a Hartmann & Weiss gun are covered with engraving. Like an unclothed man, a gun "in the white" hides nothing. Nevertheless, proper engraving can transform the superb to the sublime, and in that light most H&W clients opt for traditional scroll to complement their treasures. Because the human eye easily can detect a "dogleg" lurking amongst the radii, good scroll is not at all easy to cut. Over the years H&W has used some great engravers, including Ken Hunt, Keith Thomas, the Brown brothers, Phil Coggan and Heinz Funk. More recently, Florian Güllert has

gotten the nod for his amazing talents. Among guns of this stature, an exhibition piece is not inappropriate, and H&W's Alain Lovenberg-engraved takedown Mauser sets are some of the finest ever made. Those wishing to own this type of quality should be prepared to wait up to four years and spend, depending on options, around six figures.

It's interesting that what started more than 100 years ago in Suhl as an effort to build fine shotguns has come full circle back to Germany, incarnated in a modern company committed to "best." By many accounts, the current offerings at Hartmann & Weiss are on equal footing with the game guns of old and certainly with those being produced by the top gunmakers in the world. Cachet definitely can be found in Hamburg. ✈

Author's Note: For more information on Hartmann & Weiss, call 01149-406-775-585. Thanks to Cornell Publications for research assistance with catalog reprints.

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