

COLLECTORS' FOCUS



ANTIQUÉ FIREARMS

Judged as works of decorative art, the best quality historic guns offer outstanding value for collectors outside this specialist market, writes **Roger Field**.

Antique firearms, a designation that covers both pistols and long arms, has been something of a niche market in recent years. With the constant tightening of gun laws in the UK and much of Europe, it is as if firearms are seen as 'difficult' by many who might otherwise value them – the better items at least – as works of art, rather than view them as mere weapons. The result is that firearms tend to be worth significantly less than items of comparable rarity, condition and age in the mainstream art market.

The converse of this is that there is a strong collectors' market for firearms, one that is not speculative and given to wild swings in fashion and that is passionate about the subject. As a result, prices have continued to rise steadily in recent years and the consistent message from the trade is that the higher the quality the better the investment.

However, when truly superb items come onto the market the formula changes. As David Williams, head of Arms and Armour at Bonham's, is keen to emphasise, a top quality firearm will incorporate more than one of the applied arts that are so highly valued and sought after in the more mainstream markets: engraved and worked gold, silver, ivory, wood and steel. 'This is why most of the major museums have an arms and armour gallery', he explains.

'A fine weapon is a showcase for the applied arts.' The highest quality items are viewed by discerning collectors as being much more than weapons and are sought beyond the specialist market and, occasionally, by museums. These objects can then fetch prices more commensurate with works of similar importance in other areas of the decorative arts.

One such example is the pair of snaphaunce pistols made by Matteo Acquafresca in about 1690 and recently acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Influenced by contemporary



1 A cased pair of percussion rifled target pistols by J. Purdey, 1839, **medium, measurement**. Christie's, London, **name of sale** (20 September 2007), £66,500

2 A pair of small wheellock puffers, Saxony, 1586. Blued steel with gilded borders, gilded copper-alloy wheel covers and fruitwood stocks inlaid with engraved staghorn. Length 31 cm. Peter Finer, London, £145,000. Enquiries: +44 (0) 20 7839 5666

Parisian styling, these Italian pistols are stocked in ebony, the steel chiselled and engraved, and the stocks extravagantly worked in silver wire inlay with depictions of humans, birds and fantastic beasts. The likelihood is that they were created for one of Acquafresca's known clients, such as the Duke of Tuscany or the Medici court in Florence. Not least, they are in perfect condition.

It is condition, explains Nick McCullough, head of Arms and Armour at Christie's, that makes a good firearm great. With the possible exception of pieces made either as gifts or for presentation, firearms were built to be used. Just as a modern Purdey or Holland and Holland shotgun is designed to look as good as the gun maker can make it, it is also designed to shoot as well as possible. Top-quality weapons not only need to look superb, they also need to work beautifully – that is what makes them truly desirable. And, just as a modern sporting firearm needs regular servicing and occasional replacements of working parts, a weapon that regularly fired corrosive black powder needed even more servicing to keep it fully functional. So, while McCullough does not feel that contemporary repairs – minor of course – necessarily devalue a firearm, he is emphatic that inexpert modern repairs and cleaning can make a top-quality item ordinary.

Provenance is also critical. Take an object in superb condition by a top maker and then add great provenance and the price will rocket. Christie's, London, sold a cased pair of Purdey percussion target pistols in their 20 September 2007 auction (Fig. 1). Made in 1839, with browned twist barrels, inlaid with gold and in perfect – probably unfired – condition they were estimated at £25,000-£35,000. However, they had been bought from Purdeys in 1840 (for £81 'cash') by Jérôme Bonaparte, nephew of Napoleon. They sold for £66,500.

Not an over-the-top price says Peter Finer, the only British dealer still to have a gallery that deals in top-end firearms and produces a biannual catalogue. He has made several recent sales of fine cased pistols by top English makers for comparable prices, an area that he believes has potential for continued good growth. He echoes Williams's advice about the gulf between 'good' firearms and the 'exceptional' examples that can be viewed by the wider market as works of art and not just as weapons. By way of illustration, he recently sold an exceptional pair of John Knubley cased flintlock pistols, hallmarked 1786-87, for a substantial six-figure sum. Not only were these exceptional items, in superb condition, they were also reputed to have been a gift from the Duke of Wellington to the Prince Regent.

In his 2008 catalogue, Finer has a matched pair of South German wheel-lock pistols dated 1586 (Fig. 2). Their stocks are extravagantly decorated with inlaid and engraved staghorn, the barrels are blued steel and the working parts engraved, and the pommels are



3 A pair of 32-bore flintlock rifled pistols by Fatou a Paris, 1818. Ebony and walnut mounted in two colours of gold. Overall length 38.5 cm. Auction by Thomas Del Mar Ltd, London, 12 December 2007, £30,000

emblazoned with the arms of Saxony. What makes these pistols even rarer is that, given their small size, they must have been made for a boy.

After a flat period from the late 1990s that very saw few top-quality items come onto the market, Finer has seen a renaissance in the past couple of years with more pieces coming up for sale and ever better prices being achieved. He believes that the middle market – fine, well-decorated items in good condition – is still significantly undervalued, again because of the wider collectors' failure to value them as works of art.

Thomas Del Mar, who runs auctions under his own name and in association with Sotheby's, makes the same point, adding that when these weapons were made they were highly valued both by their owners and their makers. After all, in a world of violence and death, a top-quality weapon was one of the most valuable things a gentleman could own. In his sale of 12 December 2007, lot 508 was a pair of presentation quality, gold-mounted flintlock pistols by Fatou of Paris, dated 1818 (Fig. 3). It was the combination of light wear and restoration that kept them in the middle market and resulted in them reaching only their lower estimate of £30,000, an otherwise low price for such a superb and ornate pair of pistols.

Del Mar's tip, as is McCullough's, is that early German wheel-locks have the potential to outperform the general firearms market. Good examples regularly fetched substantial prices in the 1980s. When the German economy went into decline after unification, prices stagnated. These highly desirable and ornate pieces have only now returned to price levels seen 15 to 20 years ago. With keen north European collectors back in contention, and not forgetting new Russian and eastern European money, the experts I spoke to see this as an area awaiting rediscovery.

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