

Spanish Gold

The Art of Damascening

By Leonardo M. Antaris, M.D.

Representing OGCA at

The NRA Annual Meeting & Exhibits

Indianapolis, April 26-28, 2019 (page 7)

ANTARIS' GOLD DAMASCENING DISPLAY CHOSEN FOR 2019 NRA ANNUAL MEETING

Come to Indianapolis for the April 26-28, 2019 NRA Annual Meetings & Exhibits!

OGCA's exhibit, "Spanish Gold: the Art of Gold Damascening" by Leonardo M. Antaris, MD should stop participants in their tracks! While the display may be a little non-traditional, its unparalleled eye-appeal and educational focus should not come as a surprise for those who know Antaris. Active in OGCA for over 33 years, he is a regular tableholder who travels from Iowa for virtually every meeting. An Ophthalmologist by profession, Antaris is a passionate historian with an

eye for detail and an enthusiasm for artistry. To date, he has written two books on Astras, a text on Stars, and is currently working on a Mauser C96 book.

"Spanish Gold" started out as an OGCA "Featured Display" that got so much attention that Antaris built an exhibit for our 2017 Annual Display Show, winning both the Member's Choice Award and First Place (Modern). That same display has been a big hit on the Youtube channel "Forgotten Weapons", hosted by Ian McCollum, where it has been viewed nearly 350,000 times! See for yourself; go to Youtube and search for

"Gold Damascening Special Presentation".

Of course, embellishment is something everyone can appreciate. All of us are familiar with inlays and plating. But gold damascening? What is that? And when applied to a firearm...wow! To get an insider's perspective, we are pleased to present the following article that includes the history of damascening, the technical process, artistic styles and how to assess the quality of a damascened gun. Enjoy the article, and don't worry....you won't be quizzed!

Spanish Gold, The Art of Damascening – By Leonardo M. Antaris, M.D.

THE HISTORY:

Gold damascening was introduced in the 13th century. Laborious to apply and always expensive, the embellishment was largely an affectation for nobility whose decorated shields, swords, suits of armor and firearms can be viewed in virtually every major arms museum. The art form thrived in France during the mid-1600s, later spreading to Holland and Belgium.

Placido Zuloaga, a native of Eibar, is credited with popularizing its renaissance in Spain. After he and his father Eusebio won a Parisian art exhibition in 1855, Placido transformed his family's gun making factory into a firm that created a variety of objets d'art. Examples were purchased by Spain's King Alfonso XII for presentation to the King of Portugal and the King of Bavaria and a number of works, bought by English textile magnate Alfred Morrison, received international recognition.

Over time, Zuloaga's successes attracted a number of apprentices. Some made small items to pay the overhead. Others collaborated in effecting major commissions. By 1890, Zuloaga had trained over 200 artisans. As they left to set up independently, the industry was broadly commercialized as the artisans turned to decorating broaches, bracelets, plates, belt buckles, cane heads, and related items. Eventually, there came to be two centers for damascening: one in Eibar, the other further south, in Toledo.

By the early 1900s, largely due to increased competition, damascened jewelry had become popular and plentiful. Yet, the decoration of firearms remained costly. Surfaces were large, there were multiple angles to navigate (particularly for revolvers), and every pattern needed to be unique. The "rule of thumb" in the 1930s was to price damascened guns about 4x the

cost of a blued gun.

Over time, wage increases widened that gap. By the 1950s, damascened guns were priced nearly 6x the price of a standard gun. That was for just the gun. If the customer wanted damascened grips, it was even more expensive! As one might expect, only a few were completed.

Under the circumstance, it made no sense for a gunmaking firm to keep a dedicated artist on its payroll. Instead, the work was subcontracted to a limited selection of nearby artisans. Accordingly, it should come as no surprise that several artists worked with equanimity for Astra, Star, and Llama. In fact, from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s, the majority of the damascening was effected by Maria Jesús Berasaluce Rodriguez of Ermua.

FOR REGAL PRESENTATION:

Although most companies kept a few damascened firearms for front office display or trade shows, they were too expensive and infrequently sold to speculatively inventory. The vast majority were special ordered for political presentations, military awards, or at the request of wealthy customers. As flagship firearms, they were customarily

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Rufino Unceta and officers of the Guardia Civil display a damascened Model F with wood grips. Shown with presentation case and spare magazines.



Garate, Anitua y Cia, sold a small number of .455 caliber revolvers to the British government during WWI. This example, an OP No. 1 Mark I prepared by F.A. Larrañaga, featured the "Order of the Thistle" on the left barrel, a symbol also used by the Scots Guards. Above the revolver is a burnishing tool. A selection of damascening punches and a mallet is grouped to the left.



Astra M804-E #821321 with ultrafine damascening performed by Jesús Pardo who signed the frame under the left grip. The Nasrid motto, frequently found in designs of Arabic influence, appears on the frame in several locations. In the background is a small amphora and pieces of jewelry, all damascened to the same high standard.

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fitted with special grips, often personalized, and in a presentation case.

Most early handguns were fitted with mother-of-pearl (MOP) panels. But by the late 1920s, the MOP was largely replaced with celluloid, later with pearlite. In many cases, the panels were made to include special order escutcheons, usually with intertwined initials or a national crest.



Gold damascened Astra M902, serial #22483, was purchased in 1932 by Othon León, whose signature appears on the right magazine well, then the military attaché to the Mexican Embassy in Spain. The seal of Mexico was placed in the left side of the magazine well, while views of the Alhambra Palace in Granada, Spain adorned each side of the magazine extension.



Initials of George Clinton Duke, Canadian gangster.



Damascened escutcheon for Llama's handguns.



Canadian Coat of Arms, early form.



Canadian Coat of Arms, late form.



Spanish Coat of Arms.

DAMASCENING PROCESS

Step 1: Roughening the Surface.

Traditionally done by scoring the base metal in three directions with a series of closely spaced serrations, usually performed with a sharp knife

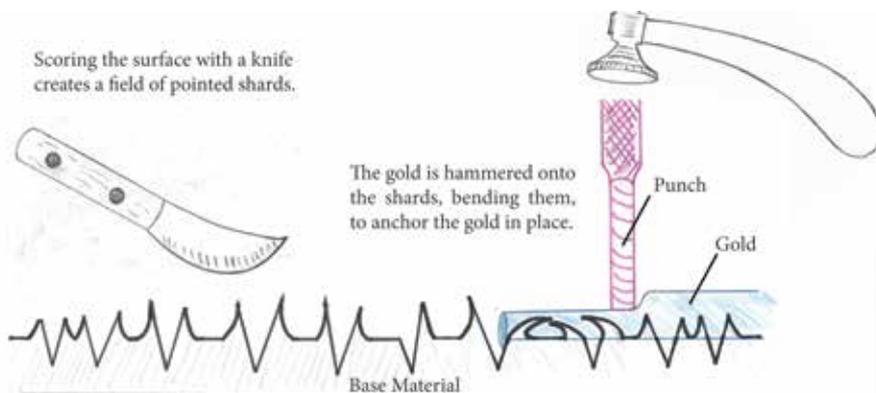
technique used for inlays.

Step 2: Positioning the Work.

The items to be damascened, often irregular in shape, may be attached to rectangular blocks of wood with a red, resin-based adhesive known



Scoring the surface of a plate in preparation for later work.



or the end of a file. Though the incisions are shallow, the surrounding metal is pushed into irregular points, creating a field of thin shreds. Attaching thicker material requires longer shreds from deeper scoring. The most elevated figures are anchored via a field of parallel serrations, undercut with dovetails, similar to the

as "pikia." The blocks are then tightened into a cast-iron ball vise, that usually weighs about 30 lb., seated on a triangular wooden base. The vise can be positioned in any orientation, as its mass and confinement minimize movement while the artist is working.



Artisan working on pieces of jewelry. Work is fixed in resin, attached to a wood block, and positioned in a heavy ball vise.

MATERIAL: The standard working material is 24 carat gold. To securely attach to the barbed iron surface, the pieces have to be very thin: the gold wire has a thickness of 6-8 microns, the gold foil a thickness of 5 microns (1 micron=1/1000 mm). Green gold (gold mixed with silver), red gold (gold mixed with copper), silver, and platinum are occasionally used for highlighting.



Star MMS with scored surfaces, incompletely applied gold damascene.

Step 3: Applying the Gold. After outlining the design, the gold wire is attached by exerting a little pressure, first on one end, then the other, using a punch with a flattened point. Once the ends are secured, the length of the wire is flattened by lightly and repeatedly striking the same punch with a hammer. This sends the barbs of iron into the soft gold, bending them over to anchor the gold in a permanent fashion. To create elevated figures, “damasquinado en relieve,” the gold is beaten into dovetailed serrations as the material above the surface is coalesced and sculpted into the final design. As this process takes more time, the guns with elevated inlays tend to be of higher quality and more costly.

EIBAR (Renaissance) and TOLEDO (Arabesque) DESIGNS:

Artwork originating in Eibar tends to feature living forms or their representations, such as dragons, gargoyles, dogs, songbirds, egrets, cherubs, scroll-



Eibar (Renaissance) motif with birds, dragons, and vines.

ing vines, and flowers. Artisans from Toledo, heavily influenced by the Moorish culture, favor exacting geometric forms, architectural perspectives (especially scenes from the Alhambra Palace in Granada), and the Arabic inscription/ Nasrid motto that translates “There is no victor but God.”

Step 4: Bluing the Background. Once the gold is in place, the parts are released from the resin by heating, and then blued via a series of chemical immersions for an effect similar to today’s salt blue. The bluing principally affects the iron, conferring only a slight dulling to the gold.

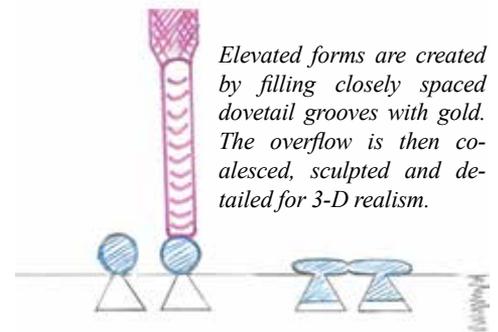
Step 5: Applying the Final Details. The “sombreado” (shading) or “repassado” (revisiting) is the operation that brings the artistry to life! After reattaching the parts to the wood blocks and replacing the blocks in the ball-vice, the parts are textured with a variety of punches. Some are used for matting, others for fine stippling.



The artistry begins: anchoring gold thread to a small plate fixed in place by the red “pikia.”



Impeccably applied gold borders and wire scroll.



Elevated forms are created by filling closely spaced dovetail grooves with gold. The overflow is then coalesced, sculpted and detailed for 3-D realism.

There are hollow, circular points for beading, smooth faces for burnishing, and rounded ends for dotting. This is when the eyes are put into the dragons, the feathers on the songbirds, and the veins in the leaves. It is not unusual for an artist to have over 50 of these punches in his tool kit. Once completed, the parts are removed from the resin, lightly oiled, and assembled to their final form.

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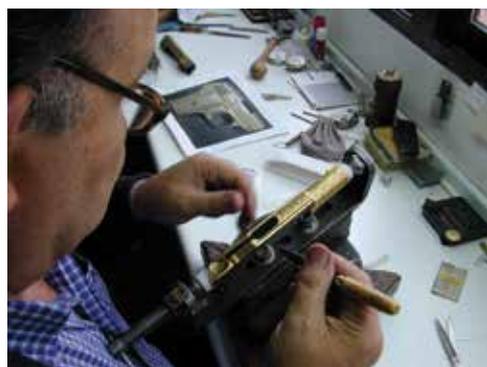
Toledo (Arabesque) motif with Arabic inscription, view from the Alhambra Palace and geometric forms.



Julio Peña of Toledo, Spain, finishing one of his signature plates.



Jesús Pardo of Toledo, Spain applying the final touches to an Astra M804-E frame.



Detailing the matching Astra M804-E slide, an Astra M204-E pictured in the background. At right, an impressive collection of damascening tools.



WHO DAMASCENED MY GUN?

Although most damascening was completed without a signature, a comparison of factory records against the known work of some of the more prolific artisans allows many of the embellished guns to be properly credited.

Adolfo Santos of Eibar, who decorated many of Astra’s M900 series pistols from the early 1930s, favored scenes from the Alhambra Palace in Granada, Spain.



Lucas Alberdi worked on quite a few Astra, Llama and Star pistols from the late 1940s–1960s. Although his “signature” was a rearing dragon within

a heavily bordered shield, he also favored paving stone (meandros) high-



lighting.

Miguel F. Zubimendi, one of the best artists from the Basque Provinces, most active from the 1950s–1970s, preferred elevated figurines, extensive scrollwork, and borders



made of three fences: one of foil (1), two of gold wire (2, 3).

Jesús Pardo, widely renowned for his work in Toledo, used finely detailed Arabic patterns with shielded

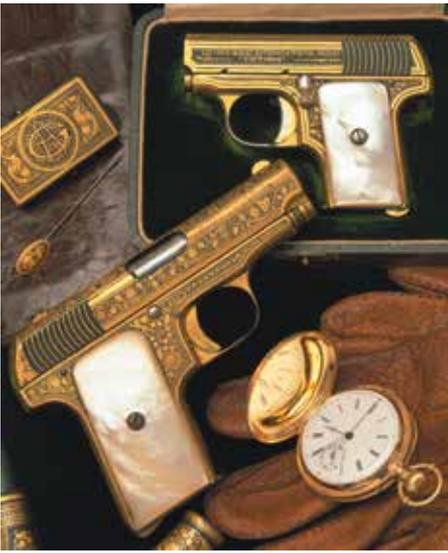


inscriptions, silver highlighting and extraordinarily precise geometry to great effect.

Maria Jesús Berasaluce Rodriguez, arguably the most prolific artist as concerns firearms decoration, especially in the 1980s-



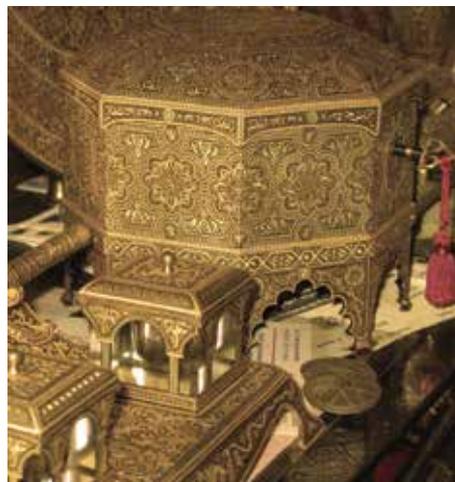
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Astra damascened very few Victoria marked pistols as they were largely inexpensive utilitarian arms. The cased 6.35mm pistol #58337 and the larger 7.65mm pistol #52850 are covered with a scrolled floral pattern whose details suggest the same artistic hand. The winged dragons on the tie tack and belt buckle frequently figure on objets d'art made in Eibar or its environs.



Star Model E #272,284 over Franco era coins. The geometric damascening of the pistol contrasts with the dragon and songbird motifs found on the tie tack and partially exposed cigarette case.



1990s, seemed more concerned with output than quality. Coarse borders, overruns, and minimal detailing typified her work.

HOW TO ASSESS QUALITY:

Although beauty is said to be in the eye of the beholder, a few guidelines can be used to reliably assess artistic talent.

Poor: The least demanding work uses large repetitive patterns of foil with



minimal detailing. Borders are non-existent or



Astra A-60 with coarse borders and non-realistic detailing of figures and foliage.

coarse and fraught with overruns and irregularity. In some cases, the gold is so poorly applied that it peels with the slightest provocation.

Intermediate: As the quality improves, more attention



is paid to the bordering, the detailing of the figures, and



Astra M4000-E with a pleasing, well-executed but not highly detailed pattern. The sphinx with red-gold wings provides an elegant touch.

like.

Excellent: The best quality work involves a unique pattern with linear complexity, geometric symmetry, and very fine detailing with realism as appropriate to the imaging. Lines are straight and corners sharp. Classical Arabic inscriptions may be woven into the design that may even extend to metallic grips, an elegant option that can add 30-40% to the surface area. One of the most complicated designs, seen on a few Star pistols, included an Aztec calendar on each grip. Thicker gold and/or multicolor gold accents may also be present. Regardless of manufacturer, model or presentation,

damascened guns were invariably "show-stoppers." That was the expectation—they were meant to be visually arresting, to confer an aura of wealth, luxury, and lavish ostentation be-



Rarely seen to-

day, these guns and other objets d'art retain an allure that transcends simple collecting, harkening to the artistry of decades ago while begging preservation for future generations.

Cover: S&W, M&P, #296320, presented to Mexican President Plutarco Elias Calles (1924-1928) whose intertwined initials are on the grips. In the background is an Astra M1911, #52850, damascened for commercial sale.

the surrounding scroll. The design should be symmetric and aligned to the major components. Linear accents become more refined and the animals and foliage become more life-



*We hope you enjoyed this “Collector’s Corner”
article by Leonardo M. Antaris, M.D.*

*For those interested in learning more about the damascening process, its evolution, applicability to firearms, and manner of evaluation, an excellent audio-visual reference is provided by Ian McCollum of
Forgotten Weapons.*

*Just search the internet for “**Forgotten Weapons,
Gold Damascene, YouTube**” or
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4KM7ySNWuqU>
for a 38 minute presentation that has been viewed
over 350K times as of March 2019.*

Specific questions may be addressed to: antaris_leonardo@msn.com.