

Spanish Gold

The Art of Damascening

From the Collection of Leonardo M. Antaris, M.D.



2019 NRA Annual Meetings & Exhibits - Indianapolis, Indiana

GOLD DAMASCENED GUNS



Astra M4004-E #813004, cal. 9mmC. (.380 ACP), with red-gold accents, formerly part of the Astra factory museum, exported to the United States in 1958. The gold damascened jewelry with similar motifs was made in Eibar. On the letter opener are Basque symbols for life and death.



Model AS #1,187,225, cal .38 (9mm Largo), damascened by Miguel F. Zubimendi, whose magnificent artwork is expressed in a multi-panel layout. Pearlite grips with Canadian crest escutcheons and a cowhair-covered presentation case! Shown against the factory invoice and export paperwork. Proofed 1971 and exported to Spencer Arms and Security Systems, Ontario, Canada.

Regardless of manufacturer, model, or manner of presentation, damascened guns are truly “show-stoppers,” whose beauty transcends the usual collecting criteria. The visual impact of these masterpieces totally eclipses that of traditional engraving or inlay work and is created using the painstaking process of roughening up the surface and hammering super thin gold foil and thread using an assortment of hand tools (page 3, *The Damascening Process*). The vast majority were special ordered for political presentations, military awards or at the request of wealthy customers. These guns needed to be spectacular, and a few gold inlays weren’t good enough. They were customarily fitted with special grips, often personalized, and in presentation cases.

nearly 6x the price of a standard gun, more so if ordered with damascened grips.

To say that only “a few” damascened guns were completed would be an understatement! As a very rough guide, looking at Astra’s and Star’s production, one damascened firearm was completed per 10,000 standard guns. Smaller pistols, that cost less, were sold more frequently; larger guns, more rarely.



Astra M902 #26735, cal. 7.63mm, formerly the centerpiece of Astra’s factory museum, with its matching stock. Eibar-style artwork replete with dragons and song birds. The second of only two semiautomatic, gold damascened M902s, the other on the cover and page 4.

As so few were completed, it made no sense for a gun making firm to keep a dedicated damascene artist on its payroll. Given the limited selection of nearby artisans and the cross-talk between companies, it should come as no surprise that several artists worked with equanimity for Astra, Star, and Llama. Some of the

better known artists include: U.S. President Eisenhower, Mexican President Calles, Francisco Franco (Dictator) of Spain, Manuel Noriega (Dictator) of Panama, Hermann Goering of Nazi Germany, Egypt’s King Farouk, Juan Peron (Dictator) of Argentina, and Prince Amir Mansour of Saudi Arabia, are just a few of the recorded recipients. In fact, several of their guns are in this display!

better known artists include:

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.

Miguel F. Zubimendi, one of the best artists from the Basque Provinces, most active from the 1950s–1970s, preferred elevated figurines, extensive scroll work, and borders made of three fences: one of foil, two of gold wire.

There can be no argument that the visual impact of these masterpieces totally eclipses that of traditional engraving or inlaying. An extraordinary artform by any metric, damascening is all-too-often overlooked by the American market, an oversight that compels further exploration.

Lucas Alberdi worked on quite a few Astra, Llama, and Star pistols from the late 1940s–1960s. Although his “signature” was a dragon within a heavily bordered shield, he also favored unusual borders, particularly paving stone (meandros) highlighting.

The process was introduced in the 13th century, with most of the early decoration applied to armor and firearms. It proved popular in France during the 1600s and then in Holland and Belgium in the early 1800s. By the early 1900s, damascened jewelry had become fashionable and affordable, particularly in Spain, yet the decoration of firearms remained costly. Their large, complicated surfaces required a lot of time to lay out the pattern, then execute the work. In the 1930s, most damascened guns were priced about 4x more than a blued gun. Over time, as wages increased, the gap widened. By the 1950s, damascened guns were

Jesús Pardo, renowned for his work in Toledo, used finely detailed Arabic patterns with shielded inscriptions, silver highlighting and extraordinarily precise geometry to great effect.

Maria Jesus Berasaluce Rodriguez, of Ermua, did virtually all the work for all three firms from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s.

While most damascening was completed with-

out 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. Just as telling is a comparison of their “signature” motifs and styles.

Who bought these guns? Although most companies had a few damascened firearms for display in their front office or trade shows, the guns were too expensive and infrequently sold to speculative inventory.

As one might expect, there was a wide variety of presentation cases, sometimes by a single manufacturer. Astra’s most elegant was leather bound with gold-gilt trim, lined in silk and velvet, with paired, spring loaded locks. For a brief period, Star offered a similar case but with the cow hair attached to the

exterior! A far more luxurious case was made of hand-tooled leather with a suede interior. On the other side of the spectrum were the paper covered cases, sold by a variety of lesser manufacturers, secured with flimsy hinged clasps.

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 internet search for “Forgotten Weapons, Gold Damascene, YouTube” for a 38 minute presentation that has now been viewed over 350K times. A six page article can also be found at www.ogca/golddamascening. Specific questions may be addressed to: antar-is_leonardo@msn.com.

The Damascening Process

Though popularly described as “the art of inlaying different metals into one another,” the process is really quite different. Traditionally, the bare metal is scored/scratched in several directions to create a field of microscopic barbs. Super-thin gold, either foil or thread, is laid out in a pre-ordained pattern, then pressed onto the surface. The barbs pierce the gold, then bend during hammered appli-

cation, securing the gold in place. The work is then blued to darken the background. The final step is to detail the gold forms with a variety of punches. A thicker application of gold might require some inlaid undercutting but, that would be the exception, not the rule. Pure yellow gold is the classic material. Red and green gold is used less frequently; silver and even platinum may be used for highlighting.



Black Powder Flask made in 1861 and signed by Placido Zuloaga of Eibar, gifted artisan and “Father” to Spain’s damascening renaissance. Very, very few works were signed and dated by Placido, an attestation reserved for his best efforts. A high condition masterpiece and a “Holy Grail” for anyone interested in this genre!



Astra M804-E # 821321, cal. 9mmP, with ultrafine damascening. Breathtaking artwork by Jesús Pardo, whose signature is on the frame under the left grip. The doubled gold thread for the stars on the slide, the pearled accents on the front and backstrap, and the tastefully inserted Nasrid motto make for an unparalleled presentation. Impossible to improve upon the quality of this work!



Star Super A #336,499, cal .38 (9mm Largo), damascened by Miguel F. Zubimendi, with later pearlite grips. Isabelina chest and two lockets, the larger constructed to hold a mirror. The small brooch bears the Nasrid motto translating, “The only victor is God.” Early instruction booklets had brown vinyl covers, gold embossments, and were bound with string.

Encased Display



Gold damascened Astra M902, #22486, cal. 7.63mm. Prepared by Adolfo Santos of Eibar, purportedly for Egypt's King Farouk. Resplendent with motifs of Arabic influence and scenes from the Alhambra palace of Granada, Spain. Well known in collector circles; previously pictured on the cover of *Blue Book of Gun Values* (1991), and featured in *Les Pistolets Astra* (2002) and *Astra Firearms and Selective Competitors* (2009). Complete with original shipping box, instruction booklet, and cleaning rod. Super Rare: Very few M902s were made as strict semiautomatics and only two were gold damascened. Rarity, condition, and documentation -- this gun has it all!



Damascened Libia, #28255, cal. 7.65mm, in factory presentation case. Beíste-gui Hermanos registered the trademark "Libia" in 1919. Arabesque pattern with generous application of gold thread and mother-of-pearl grips.

Spectacular Star MMS, #1197623, cal 7.63mm, damascened by Jesús Pardo, with metallic grips and matching stock. Phenomenal Arabesque design with breathtaking detail and geometric perfection. One of only two MMSs damascened by Pardo, the other shown in this display!



Star SI #970653, cal .32ACP. Richly embellished pistol with pearlite grips, made 1968, and damascened by Lucas Alberdi. Though originally intended for a U.S. recipient, as reflected by the caliber designation ".32" (rather than 7.65mm), the gun was exported to Fritz Hopfner, Germany, in October 1971. The well-detailed figurines, Alberdi's signature "Dragon in Shield," and the gold-toned grips are beautiful to behold!

S&W M&P, #296310, cal .38 Spl. This spectacular S&W is an example of a U.S.-made firearm damascened in Spain. The gun was shipped from Springfield in May 1919 and subsequently fitted with metallic grips and gold damascened for presentation to Mexican President Plutarco Elías Calles (serving 1924-1928) at his inauguration. Exquisitely detailed Mexican seal on the left frame and intertwined PEC initials on each grip. Later given to Calles' secretary who kept the gun until 1950, then various collections. Profiled in *Guns* magazine May 1975. A magnificent and historic revolver with US, Spanish, and Mexican attribution!



Destroyer M1922 revolver, #009530, cal .38 Spl. Isidro Gaztañaga of Eibar registered the "Destroyer" trademark in 1914; "LEFT" in 1922. Elegant floral scroll with intermingled dragons. Tasteful border around the "Destroyer" trademark and the large dragon on the side-plate. Mother-of pearl grips with logo medallions. Elegant by any metric!

Main Display



Star Model A #586555, cal. .38 (9mmLargo), damascened by Lucas Alberdi in 1958. Retained by Star for many years before export to Fritz Hopfner, Germany in October 1971. Shrinkage was a problem for many plastic grips of this period.



Star SI #580,833, cal. 7.65mm, damascened by Lucas Alberdi, shown over a special-order, hand-tooled leather presentation case. Shipped in 1964 to George Clinton Duke, well-known gangster of Ontario, Canada, whose gun collection included a submachine gun mounted to his golf cart!



Astra M3004-E #717108, cal. 9mmC. (.380 ACP). This spectacular pistol with Nicaraguan crest on the grips was retained in Astra's museum until exported to the US in May 1960. It was in a group of 10 damascened M3000s made in 1954, #717101-717110, only five with metallic grips. The others were shipped to Latin American countries.



Superbly damascened Star MMS, #1197623, cal 7.63mm. A phenomenal gun whose metallic grips and matching stock are embellished in a complementary pattern. Damascening by Jesús Pardo, one of the premiere artisans in Toledo, whose extraordinary work is featured in many tourist brochures showcasing Toledo's "finest."



Star Model P #332922, cal .45ACP, damascened by Lucas Alberdi in 1949, featuring his signature "Dragon in Shield" and meandros bordering. Another of his favorite scenes, an angel poling a gondola, is under the forward frame.

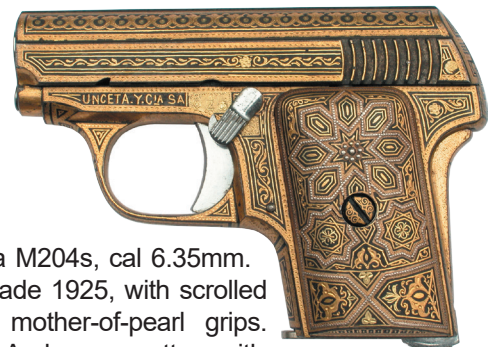
Gold damascened Llama Omni, #PA4857, cal. 9mmP, prepared for Prince Amir Mansour bin Nasser bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, grandson to the founding king of Saudi Arabia. The Prince's name is on the slide; the left escutcheon is marked with the Saudi Crest; the word on the right escutcheon translates "Highness." A cover gun featured by Spain's prestigious ARMAS magazine, No. 36, ano IV. Retained by the Llama factory; later purchased by Militaria Cantabrico before export to the U.S. in 2016.



Astra A-60 #L6055, cal. 380 ACP. This beautiful gun was displayed by Interarms in the 1988 Shot Show and later featured on the cover of the September 1988 American Rifleman magazine. The unsigned work was performed by Maria Jesús Berasaluce Rodriguez of Ermua who favored foliate scroll with perpendicular highlighting and small flowers. Super Rare: Astra made 8,191 Model A-60s between 1984-1994. This was the only gold damascened A-60 in Astra's production log!



Special order set of consecutive Llama pistols in different calibers, two sizes, and two engraving patterns: IIIA #616430 (.22LR); IIIA# 616431 (9mmC); IX-A #616432 (.45 ACP). All made in 1974, damascened by Miguel F. Zubimendi, and imported by Stoeger Industries.



A beautiful pair of Astra M204s, cal 6.35mm. M204 #312022 (left), made 1925, with scrolled foliage, dragons, and mother-of-pearl grips. M204-E #754725 (right), Arabesque pattern with lavishly embellished grips. Ordered by John C. West, whose name is on the grip safety. Exported to Samuel Shapiro of FI in Baltimore on 21 June 1957.



Damascened Lefauchaux M1854 pinfire revolver #9434, cal. 11mm, made by Orbea Hermanos, circa 1860. Sold in a burl wood case, French fitted for revolver and accessories, labeled by Barcenas y Posada, a retailer in Havana, Cuba. In the background is a plate dated 1873, cloak buttons, and a metallic match case.



Orbea y Cía. M1884, NSN, cal. 11mm. While most of these large, top break revolvers were used by the Spanish Military and WWI belligerents, a few were sold commercially. This example was likely used for presentation in the Argentine Military, a scenario suggested by the scene on the left frame and the Argentine crest carved into the mother-of-pearl grips.



E. Tettoni M1914, made in Brescia, Italy, copied from the Smith & Wesson, NSN, cal 11mm. Spanish-made guns were not the only firearms to have been damascened in Spain. The decorative work on this E. Tettoni was performed by Orbea Hermanos of Eibar, who also mounted the mother-of-pearl grips with "OH" escutcheons. Subsequently presented to Prince Tommaso of Savoy whose crest is on the backstrap.



Lefauchaux M1854 pinfire revolver, NSN, 11mm, damascened by Eusebio Zuloaga for Manuel Gutiérrez de la Concha (1808-1874). The inscription on top of the barrel "Arcabucero de SS. MM." translates as "Armorer of the King." Gutiérrez's title "Marquis de Duero, con Grandeza de España de primera clase," is on the backstrap.

After rising to Capitán General de Cataluña, Gutiérrez became a member of the Spanish Parliament, eventually presiding over the War Cabinet. As for the artwork, Eusebio Zuloaga was not only a firearms expert, he was also an accomplished artist and father to the renowned Placido. In contrast to some of Eusebio's earlier work that was relief-engraved, this revolver was decorated with a munificence of gold and silver thread, in breathtaking detail, and 100% coverage. An epic work of a renowned artisan, in impeccable, original condition, complete with a full set of accouterments in its presentation case.

Astra Cadix #R342100, cal .38 Spl., damascened in 1981 and retained by Astra for display in its trade shows. Notice that each wall of the cylinder was decorated with a different display of birds, dragons, and flowers. Ultimately sold as part of the factory's bankruptcy in 2002. Super Rare: Astra made 191,074 Cadix revolvers between 1958-1982. Of those, only 11 were gold damascened! This was the very last one.



Astra 357 #R187400, cal .357 Magnum. Visitors to Astra may have seen this magnificent gun, for it was displayed in the factory's conference room for several decades. One of Astra's finest revolvers, it was later sold as part of the factory's bankruptcy in 2002. Super Rare: Astra made 64,957 M357 revolvers between 1971-1991. Of those, only five were gold damascened, this example made in 1976.

Copy of Russian Nagant, NSN, cal. 7.91mm, made by Orbea Hermanos and presented to General Vasile Rudeano, then working in the Romanian Ministry of War, upon his visit to Eibar in 1915. Rudeano's task was to assess weapons for purchase by his country. Rudeano's initials are in an oval plaque on the leather bound case; presentation specifics are on the left side of the frame. Extraordinary work, with an incredibly detailed Romanian seal, performed by the Fabrica de Grabados de F.A. Larrañaga.



HISTORY OF GOLD DAMASCENING IN SPAIN

Placido Zuloaga (1834-1910), Father of Modern Damascening and a native of Eibar, Spain is generally credited with popularizing the damascening renaissance in Spain. After he and his father, Eusebio, won a Parisian art exhibition in 1855, Placido went on to transform his family's gun-making factory into a firm creating objects d'art, eventually winning 36 gold medals in international art competitions.

By 1890, Zuloaga had trained over 200 artisans. Most left his firm to set up independently and, in the process, broadly commercialized the industry by decorating broaches, bracelets, belt buckles, tie pins, cane heads, and related objects. Eventually, there came to be two centers for damascening: one in Eibar, the other further south, in Toledo. For the most part, artwork originating in Eibar tended to feature

living forms or their representations, such as dragons, cherubs, song birds, scrolling vines, and flowers. Artisans from Toledo, heavily influenced by the Moorish culture, favored exacting geometric forms, architectural perspectives, and the Arabic inscription/Nasrid motto that translates "There is no victor but God."

LEONARDO M. ANTARIS, M.D.



Leonardo M. Antaris grew up in Princeton Jct., N.J., then a rural community strongly influenced by Princeton University. At the time, hunting and shooting sports were considered standard, after-school activities that everyone enjoyed. In fact, quite a few teachers were involved in the shooting clubs, a circumstance that proved very influential during Antaris' formative years.

The Broomhandle Pistol 1896-1936; Central Powers Pistols; FN Browning Pistols; Imperial Lugers and their Accessories; Italian Small Arms; J.P. Sauer & Sohn, Suhl; Les Pistolets Astra; Luger: The Multinational Pistol; U.S. Military Automatic Pistols 1894-1920; U.S. Military Automatic Pistols 1920-1945; The World's Assault Rifles; VIS Radom; Vom Ursprung der Selbstladepestole (Bande I); and Paul Mauser: His Life, Company and Handgun Development 1838-1914.

In 1971, Antaris entered Northwestern University's six-year Honors Program in Medical Education, followed by an internship at the University of Wisconsin and an Ophthalmology residency at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center. As Antaris began to practice general Ophthalmology, his interest in firearms prompted him to publish *Astra Automatic Pistols* in 1988. Over time, he became a regular contributor to the *Blue Book of Gun Values*. Later acknowledgments appeared in *Axis Pistols; Baskishe Pistolen & Revolver; The Belgian Browning Pistols;*

In 1988, Antaris set aside general Ophthalmology to pursue a vitreoretinal fellowship at West Virginia University. He relocated to Iowa and set up Quad Cities Retina Consultants. In addition to his practice, his continued interest in Spanish firearms prompted him to publish *Star Firearms* in 2001 and expand upon his earlier work with *Astra Firearms and Selected Competitors*. More recent activities have included cataloging for the James D. Julia auction company, Morphy Auctions, and starting Historic Investments, an importing/resale company focused on highest quality, collectible firearms. Antaris has been an OGCA member for over 30 years and an NRA Life member since 1978.

Strength in Numbers; The Ohio Gun Collectors Association Reaches out to NRA Members

If you're an NRA member who enjoys safely and responsibly collecting, shooting and owning firearms, The Ohio Gun Collectors Association (OGCA) wants you as a member of its nation-wide collectors' association. According to the National Rifle Association, OGCA is the "Granddaddy" of all collector associations, and just so happens to meet six times per year in Wilmington, Ohio at The Roberts Centre located directly along I-71 between Cincinnati, Columbus and Dayton, just a few hours from Indianapolis, Indiana.

Though closed to the public, OGCA meetings are huge events drawing thousands of people from across the country, and regularly feature 700-800 tables of strictly gun-related material. Now in its 82nd year, almost every meeting offers educational and social opportunities such as exhibits, speakers, collector club invitationals, firearm book signings and an annual banquet. For example, "Spanish Gold" started out as a Featured Display that got so much attention that Leonardo Antaris built an exhibit for the 2017 Annual Display Show, winning both the Member's Choice Award and First Place (Modern). An invitation was swiftly made to Dr. Antaris to represent the association at the 2019 NRA Annual Meeting!

OGCA shares many similar objectives with the NRA. They regularly donate to youth shooting clubs and are known for promoting safety and education. Also like the NRA, they take a united stand against onerous legislation and support pro firearm candidates through its political action committee. Gun owners, target shooters, hunters and collectors face

increasing threats to our firearm rights, and all must stick together.

If you have never heard of OGCA it's because they don't advertise. Their private gun show meetings are limited to members and invited guests. However, the association is specifically reaching out to pro-gun enthusiasts and select organizations to expand awareness of OGCA and the fun of collecting. OGCA has members in 49 states and 13 foreign countries...and yet is unknown to some of the best, safety-oriented NRA members right here in the Midwest. The organization hopes that visitors to the NRA Annual Meeting & Exhibits in Indianapolis takes the time to find out more about the association.

OGCA has participated in every Collectors Exhibit held at the NRA Annual Meeting since its inception in 1954. OGCA so believes in the importance of this annual event that it chartered a bus for members and their friends and family to visit the 2019 NRA Annual Meeting.

OGCA's 18,000 members joined solely by word of mouth. In other words, you must first come as a guest of a current member. Guest passes are \$10 for the weekend and individuals are limited to two visits due to security protocols. To join, you need two sponsors who have been a member at least one year. OGCA already has thousands of members who belong to the NRA who would consider sponsoring their fellow target shooting friends and Second Amendment enthusiasts. For information, ask a member, visit www.ogca.com, call (330) 467-5733, or email ogca@ogca.com.



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