

The last Charleville

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Extraordinary French double barrel percussion exhibition sporting shotgun marked Charleville circa 1834

Introduction

This is a very beautiful and possibly unique French exhibition sporting gun from the Charleville armoury built between 1830 and 1836. It is also probably one of the last exhibition pieces produced by this factory, as it was permanently closed in 1836. The twisted steel barrels are unmarked and have neither proof nor inspection marks, which is expected for such exhibition pieces and was most likely not intended for use, rather to promote the skills of the makers. It also appears that it could be the work of more than one person, and the Charleville factory was a large operation at that time; but desperate to enter the civilian side of the trade, which of course was short lived. It is important to understand that the political turbulence around the time this gun was being planned would have had a significant influence on the design, which probably coincides with the second French revolution of 1830.

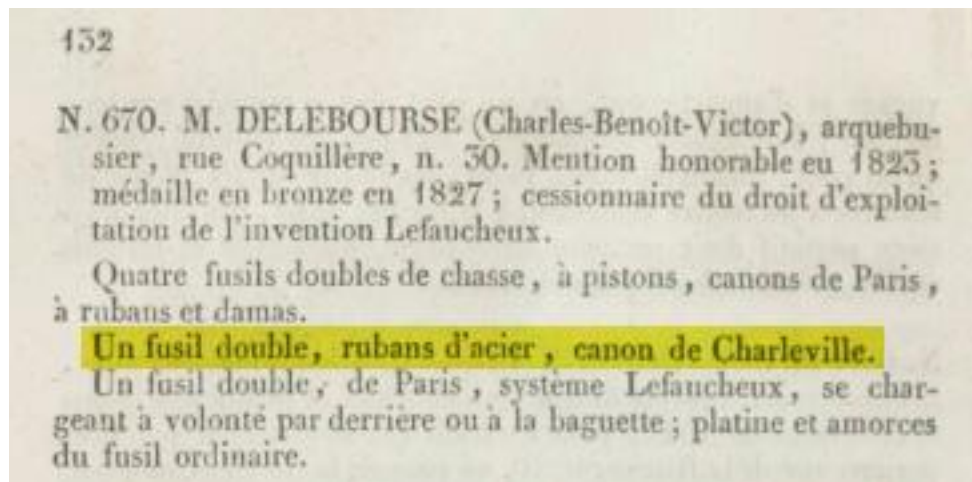
As mentioned, the gun was probably built around 1830 to no later than 1836. The main exhibition in France between these dates where shotguns and other firearms were presented was the Paris Exposition of 1834 (Exposition des produits de l'industrie Française en 1834). It was originally intended for it to be held in 1832, but was postponed due to rioting and civil unrest in the capital that year. It was decided

by the organising body when they agreed to hold the exposition two years later in 1834, that exhibits should mainly be products for the masses and ideally would combine high quality with low prices. This would certainly discourage the use of gold in the construction/decoration of entries, and promote the neoclassical style which was considered to be a stabilising influence on the population.

Of the 2,447 exhibitors at the 1834 exposition, 6 were presenting firearms. The principle exhibitor in this section was Casimir Lefauchaux, who presented his invention for hinged breech-loading shotguns and fusils (with or without cartridges). Next was Baucheron and Pirmet, but they had no description of any firearms presented at the exhibition so they may have aided the Lefauchaux stand (it is unclear). Following was Charles Delebourse, who was also an assignee to the rights of the Lefauchaux invention. He presented four double shotguns, with damascus barrels from Paris, a double shotgun with twisted steel barrels from Charleville and a double barrelled shotgun fitted with the Lefauchaux system. On the next table was Louis Lefure who presented a shotgun with damascus barrel, by Leopold Bernard in the English taste; a shotgun riche à la Française, damascus barrels with engravings and carvings relating to French culture; a rich fusil, English mounting and a French system along with a shotgun again fitted with the Lefauchaux system. The next table was Louis Francois Devisme who exhibited a double barrelled shotgun (which in this case was richly inlaid in gold), with carved wood and damascus barrels from Paris and a hinged butt plate with store. Two double barrelled shotguns (again fitted with the Lefauchaux system) with twisted steel barrels from Paris, two with Damascus barrels from Paris and another from twisted steel. All were stocked in American maple wood. Also he presented double barrelled pistols firing successively and at will by a single trigger.

The following figure is an extract from the 1834 Paris Exposition with an entry that could be this gun; exhibition number: N.670. Double-barrel shotgun with twisted steel from Charleville, presented by Charles DeLebourse, Gunsmith in rue

Coquillière, Paris and assignee of the exploitation right for the Lefauchaux invention. He was awarded the bronze medal and an honourable mention. It is tempting to imagine that as the first name of DeLebourse was Charles, he may have had an affinity with the Charleville factory and presented their work at the exposition for them.



Extract from the 1834 Paris Exposition

The carvings and engravings on the stock and metalwork all conform to the Neoclassical style of art in vogue around the time of the guns manufacture; with idealised forms from Greek mythology and ancient France. In addition, the image of Aries on the forward tang of the trigger guard bears a resemblance to a character in the Edward Hicks painting *The Peaceable Kingdom* (c. 1834). The figures of Adam, the shepherd/farmer and biologist/naturalist that can be found around the gun also follow the anatomical style of contemporary artworks from early 19th century France.



**Aries on the forward tang of the trigger and the lion in Edward Hicks painting
The Peaceable Kingdom circa 1834 (Source: National Gallery of Art,
Washington, D. C., online collection)**



View of the shotgun from all main perspectives

The tang supports a u-shaped rear sight which is formed out of the tang metal; both it and the breech section of the barrel are intricately engraved.



The mid-section of the gun viewed from above

The gun is richly decorated and it is estimated that over 5000 individually crafted pieces of silver are used to create a number of intricate floral scenes and figures of people and animals that express much life and character in a typical neoclassical style. The stock around the tang is decorated with over 20 silver discs and small silver leaves arranged along an embedded strand of twisted silver. The barrel tang is decorated with intricately engraved flowers, a rabbit or hare and what appear to be 3 flowers of reducing size.



The barrel tang and breech



The hare on the tang

Just below the tang are two silver doves in a nest that are (like the rest of the gun) extremely well engraved, even to the point of including the fine feathers around the breast area. A small pin is evident on the upper left side, which appears to hold the doves in position and is almost certainly a later repair.



Doves in a nest below the tang

The locks and mechanisms are both in excellent condition, though the right hammer is a replacement. The design is unusual as it has nipple protector arms which could be an adaptation of a flintlock firing mechanism. This would not be unlikely as the percussion ignition system was very much in its infancy, being invented some 5 years earlier in 1825.



Internal and external views of the left and right locks

The silver braiding around the left lock is almost complete, with a small missing piece in the lower left. The lock is decorated with what appears to be a pigeon (the patches in the silver work are just oxidation). The right lock is also signed Charleville and a woodcock is posed similarly to the pigeon on the left side and the silver braid is complete.



Percussion locks with nipple protectors and signed Charleville



The Charleville motif on the left lock

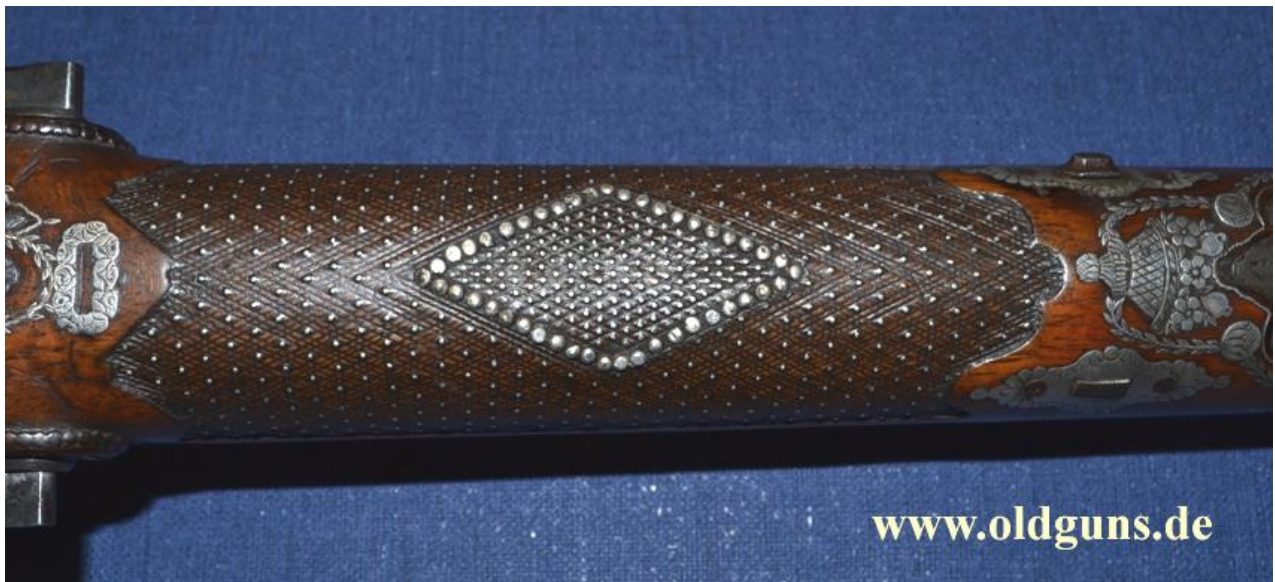


Pigeon and woodcock engraved on the locks

The wrist and hand grip area of the fore-end, are decorated with many small silver pins and stars. The pins are located with great precision and uniformity. The outside of the unsigned escutcheon plate is ornately engraved and also of silver. As can be seen, the stock is in near perfect original condition, and has not been touched since manufacture; other than perhaps a light polishing.



Top of the wrist decorated with silver studs and an unsigned escutcheon plate



Underside of the wrist decorated with silver pins

At the top of the stock by the butt-plate final is an image of Adam engraved in silver holding a chalice/cup and what appears to be a pineapple beside him. In the 18th and 19th century, the pineapple was established as a symbol of high social status, divine

benevolence, fertility, abundance and the bounty of Eden. The close up shows Adam is perhaps looking a bit woeful at his cup. Below, engraved into the iron work on the butt-plate tang is a howling wolf caught in a trap.



Butt-plate tang with wolf and Adam

The image of Adam is around 32 mm in height and engraved on silver; he is looking somewhat woefully at his cup. Here the engraver may be trying to imply some of the discontent felt at the Charleville factory around the time the gun was made. It was probably well known among the skilled craftsmen that the factory would soon close if it could not rapidly enter the sporting gun market. As mentioned, military arms were no longer to be produced in Charleville. Aries also appears to have a somewhat awkward and less than happy expression. These are almost certainly the artists attempt to convey a message.



Adam looking at his cup



Adam perhaps taking a pessimistic view and thinking his cup is half empty

The foot of the stock is decorated with a jardinière of fruit (Peaches and lemons) and flowers, leaves and roses engraved either side. The rear sling swivel is absent.



Flowers and jardinière

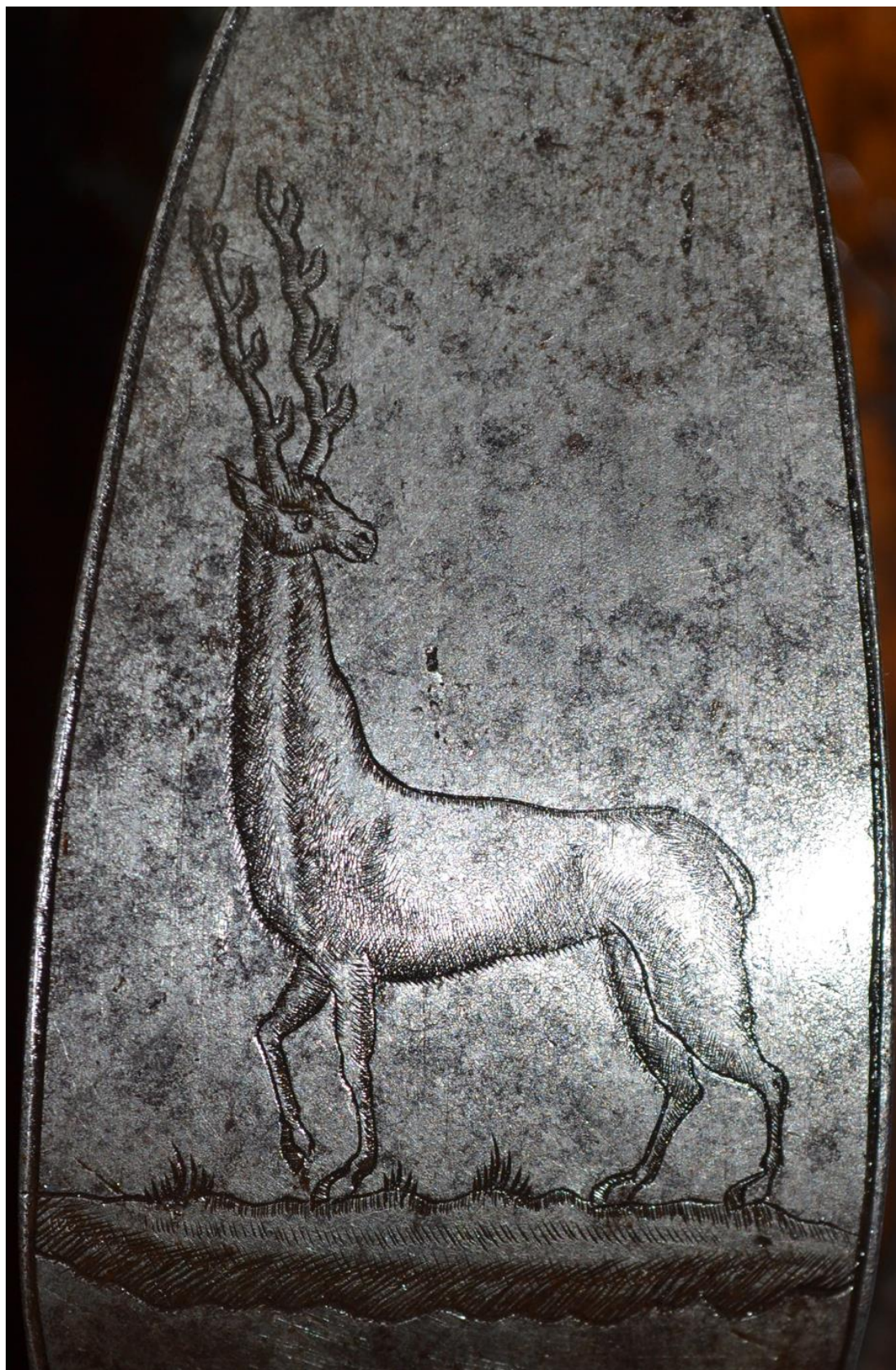
The forward tang of the trigger guard shows a Greek figure with helmet, spear and shield (very likely Aries) standing on a cloud with a rose garland above him. The trigger guard is decorated with a stag or similar large European game animal.



Aries and game animal on the trigger guard



Aries





The stock is intricately carved, with the figure of a king (possibly Charlemagne); again the character is extremely well carved and expresses much life. The crown appears to have once been covered in gold leaf. The walnut stock is in very good condition and the main parts are relatively clear of decoration; with the exception of a large carved rosette on the left side, which could represent the Greek Vergina Sun symbol.



Charlemagne



Charlemagne (note the traces of gold leaf on the crown).



Greek Vergina Sun symbol

The steel final from the ram-rod entry thimble is decorated with exquisitely carved characters including a lion, followed by a running hare, two hounds looking at each other with somewhat serious expressions and a slightly cross eyed ram or goat (one can wonder if the engraver was thinking of real people he knew when creating some of these figures).



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The Lion



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The Hare



The Hounds



The cross eyed goat

The left and right sides of the butt-end are decorated with flowers and roses, branches and leaves. In the centre of the left side is the figure of what could be a biologist/naturalist sitting on a rock and studying a bird in a nest. A broken or cut tree is also in the engraving and may be in keeping with the bird perches on each of the locks.



Biologist/naturalist sitting on a rock and studying a bird in a nest

The right side is also similarly decorated with flowers and leaves, though on this side the figure is of perhaps a farmer or similar person and faithful looking dog. He is holding a stick or crook in one hand and is wearing what appears to be a hawking glove on the other. There appears to be a wing behind the figure which could represent an earlier discontinued idea by the engraver.



Farmer or similar person with faithful looking dog



Left side of the stock



Right side of the stock

The barrels are of twisted steel (as described in the Paris Exposition entry) and are untouched, with the original finish and in an overall good condition; other than a

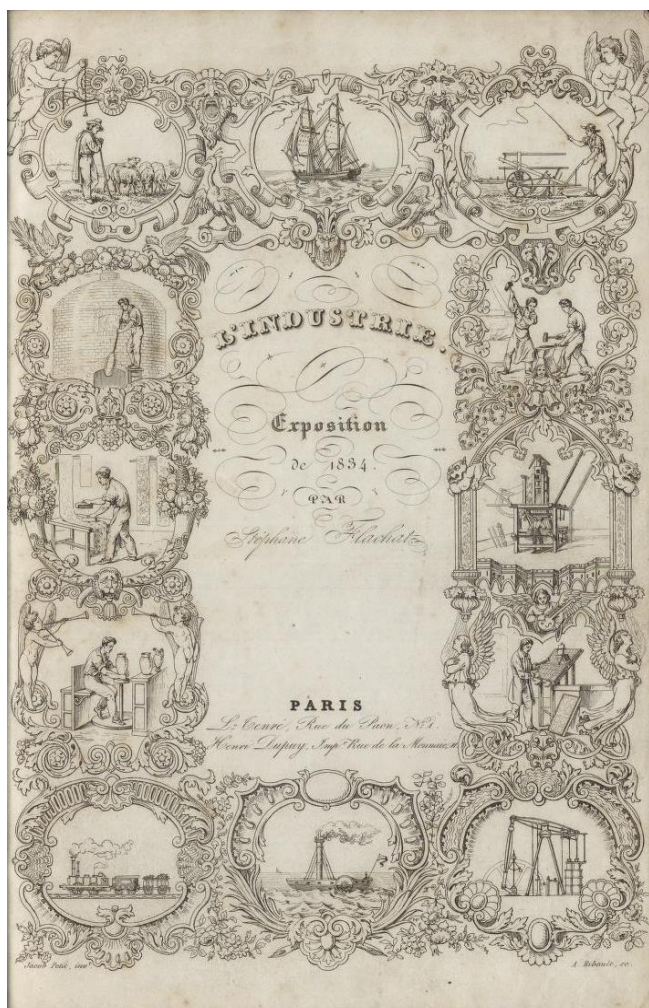
small amount of pitting/corrosion in a non-visible location which has been stabilised with oil.



As mentioned, the barrel is unmarked in-line with other exhibition pieces.



The ramrod also appears to be original.



N. 670. M. DELEBOURSE (Charles-Benoît-Victor), arquebusier, rue Coquillière, n. 30. Mention honorable en 1825; médaille en bronze en 1827; cessionnaire du droit d'exploitation de l'invention Lefauchaux.

Quatre fusils doubles de chasse, à pistons, canons de Paris, à rubans et damas.

Un fusil double, rubans d'acier, canon de Charleville.

Un fusil double, de Paris, système Lefauchaux, se chargeant à volonté par derrière ou à la baguette; platine et amorces du fusil ordinaire.

N. 671. M. LEFAURE (Louis), arquebusier, l'un des cessionnaires du droit d'exploitation du brevet Lefauchaux, boulevard Poissonnière, n. 9.

1^o Fusil avec canon à damas, de Bernard; système entièrement dans le goût anglais, des derniers modèles de Londres.

2^o Fusil riche à la française, canon damas, gravure et sculpture françaises.

3^o Fusil riche, monture à l'anglaise, système français.

4^o Fusil à charger par derrière, système Lefauchaux, se chargeant avec ou sans cartouches; platines et amorces ordinaires.

N. 672. — M. DEVISME, breveté, élève et successeur de Deboubert, arquebusier, rue du Helder, n^o 12.

Cet arquebusier, qui est aussi un des cessionnaires du droit à l'exploitation du brevet Lefauchaux, a exposé :

1^o Fusil à deux coups, richement incrusté en or, bois sculpté, canon à damas, de Paris, plaque de couche à charnière et à magasin;

2^o Fusil à deux coups à charnière, système Lefauchaux, canon à rubans de Paris, bois d'érable d'Amérique;

3^o Fusil à deux coups, canon damas de Paris, bois d'érable d'Amérique;

4^o Fusil à deux coups, canon à rubans de Paris, bois d'érable d'Amérique;

5^o Pistolets à deux coups, partant successivement et à volonté par une seule détente.