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"The Millennium—Celtic Rifle, Over and Under Rifle," 2002, engraved by Alain Lovenberg, Tohogne, Belgium, and manufactured by Hartmann & Weiss, Hamburg, Germany.
COURTESY/THE NEVADA MUSEUM OF ART

A hello to arms

Decorative Arms

First, to clear up any confusion for folks who have seen, but not read very closely, any ads or other promotions about the current exhibition at the Nevada Museum of Art, *Decorative Arms: Treasures from the Robert M. Lee Collection*. The firearms on display are from the private collection of Robert M. Lee, a conservationist and the founder of Hunting World, a fine leather goods company. He's not the same person as, nor is he likely closely related to, Robert E. Lee, who commanded the Army of Northern Virginia during the Civil War.

The objects in the exhibition include firearms from the early 1500s through to the contemporary period. There's a firearm that was owned by a member of the French royal family, and another that was looted during the Napoleonic Wars. There are firearms made by recognizable names like Beretta, Colt and Winchester, as well as swords, knives and suits of armor. Supposedly, all the firearms are functional, but many were designed as art pieces, often commissioned by Lee himself, and many have never been fired.

Many of the objects are simply beautiful, featuring ornate engraving. Arguably the most stunning object in the exhibition is an 1839 display knife by the English company Joseph Rodgers & Sons. It's a multi-use tool, like a Swiss Army knife, but this one is too large to fit into anyone's pocket. Dozens of blades fan out from the knife's ornate base, like the world's sharpest peacock.

And although many of these objects are beautiful, the subject of the work has been drawing new faces to the NMA.

"It's probably fair to say that there are people who follow this particular subject matter, who are firearms collectors themselves ... who would not come to see a contemporary art show," said Amanda Horn, the NMA's Senior Vice President of Communications. "So, it's certainly bringing in a different audience for us than other exhibitions"

Many of the engravings feature wildlife or mythological scenes created on what Horn calls the "miniature canvases" of rifles, pistols and other

firearms. The exhibition forges a connection from the 16th century to contemporary artwork through, as Horn describes it, the "ancient tradition of engraving, of metalwork, of collaboration between makers and engravers and metalworkers that arrives at a finished object. It's something that dates back to the medieval period, and when you look at the contemporary pieces, you don't see a ton of difference. You do in the mechanisms, in the technology, but not so much in the artistry."

There's also something very Nevadan about the show. Lee himself lived in Northern Nevada for 30 years. There's work by a local engraver, Guy Leutzinger, in the exhibition, and with featured names like Colt and Winchester, the exhibition inevitably conjures images of the mythic American West.

"There are a lot of people in our region who love this subject matter, who are outdoor enthusiasts, who are sportsmen who appreciate hunting, and appreciate the objects and the artistry there," Horn said. "That's what we do as an art museum. We bring objects together that tell different stories. Those objects appeal to different people. They connect to our region in different ways. And appeal to various aspects of our community. ... We bring divergent voices together. We understand that everybody comes to firearms with inherent beliefs. Some people see objects of sporting. Some people see objects of death. And people come into it with a particular bias. We know that. We understand that. So, as an art museum, how can we bring people together to have conversation around the art?"

The NMA is hosting a broad range of programming affiliated with the exhibition, including a talk by Dr. Pierre Terjanian, curator of Arms and Armor at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and personalized tours of the exhibition led by Burning Man co-founder Michael Mikel.

But Horn says one of the museum's main goals with the exhibition is to foster appreciation of the craftsmanship of the contemporary engravers and other artisans involved.

"They're putting in their own contemporary spin, but they're really paying a lot of homage to an ancient practice," she said. □