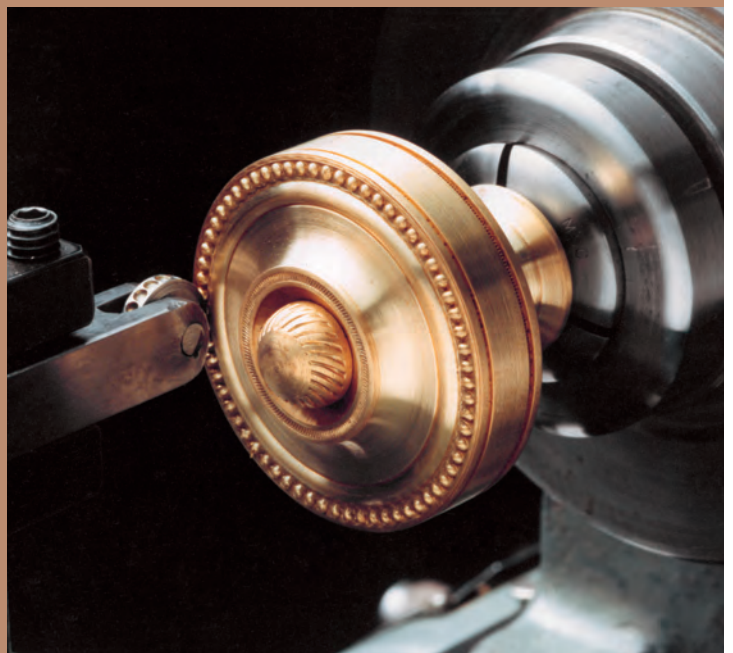


Recasting the Past

TEXT BY APRIL PAFFRATH

Art isn't always touchable. Thanks to architectural hardware by E. R. Butler, this art is.



This page, clockwise from above: An oxidized bronze knob gets a hand-hammered finish. Molten brass is poured into sand molds. Beading is put on the face of a knob.

The hand-carving of a wooden prototype lever.

Opposite Architect Gil Schafer specified E. R. Butler's reproduction mercury glass knobs for his new old house in Dutchess County, New York.

Obsessions are underrated, especially when they relate to the art that surrounds us. A healthy fixation can open up a world of information and delight, revealing histories and textures that might have remained undiscovered had some curious person not delved into the past with unwavering attention.

When your fixation is architectural hardware, the world is more fun to touch and enjoy. Rhett Butler of E. R. Butler & Co. has such a passion. Actually, his interest goes well beyond hardware to include the finest quality of crystal, art, architecture, and more. That's what makes his shops so much fun. Sitting right next to brushed metal knobs that will help recapture the interior detailing





JON WALLEN

of an Adams-era house are bits of jewelry, crystal, and porcelain that reflect the same quality as Butler's hardware. His shops are part high-end home décor shop, part sculpture gallery.

Even when a house has been the owners' central focus, hardware is unfortunately often a throwaway thought, taken care of at the last moment just to finish off the project. Like hollow paneled doors or vinyl windows on an otherwise detail-driven home, out-of-the-bin knobs, back plates, and hinges break up the texture and feel of the house into which owners have painstakingly invested time and funds. E.R. Butler provides homeowners with another option—the best materials and designs using the lat-

est technology. His customers are looking for quality and longevity rather than something that will merely make a door function. "These pieces will outlast the house," says Butler.

Part of knowing how to create the perfect hinge or knob means completely understanding the industry history and what that means for today's creations. Butler has done extensive research in the field and, in the process, extracted the essence of American hardware. Like many crafts and fine arts in the United States, hardware and its styles were influenced by the diverse makeup of the country. Modern hardware is the product of French, German, and English designs, styles, and techniques. The

English tradition has the strongest influence on E.R. Butler's hardware.

The machinery needed to create hardware in quantity was not in place until the 1830s. "It's the same machinery that made bullets," says Butler. The Industrial Revolution brought about a wider use of metals and materials and at the same time increased production output through new technologies and new workforces that were gaining ground in that period. Weaponry, like mass-produced bullets, led to the technology needed to produce hardware in number.

In late 2000, Butler acquired W. C. Vaughan, a hardware manufacturing company dating from the early 1900s. It appealed to Butler because it was less

about marketing and more about craftsmanship. He began by reconstructing the company, continuing his research into old catalogs and forms, and adapting it to modern possibilities. “I have the luxury of technical innovation,” says Butler. The bulk of his research focuses on discovering the original intent in the designs he uncovers. It isn’t enough to replicate an old piece of hardware—it may not function as needed in the modern world. The size may be wrong for modern doors and plates, or functionality may be just short of what it needs to be. Some may not meet modern safety codes. Butler looks at the history of hardware and architectural design to consider what the original makers were trying to achieve, and that essential element goes into his plans.

Butler trained as an architect at Rice University and was fascinated by the theoretical and philosophical aspects of the study of architecture. When he was younger, he worked with his carpenter-father on antiques and restorations. Now he works with many architects, outfitting the interiors of their finest projects, and his architectural knowledge allows him to communicate with them on all levels. “Architecture is a painful and giving process,” says Butler. “We have a lot of mutual respect.” For his part, Butler works to make the best product he possibly can with his philosophy of permanence, and customers relish Butler’s commitment to artistry and history. They know that the doorknobs, hinges, and plates that accent their homes do more than capture a superficial look, whether they are opting for a historic re-creation or one of Butler’s more modern designs. The hardware from E.R. Butler creates artwork that weaves

through an entire space—almost hidden—yet transforming that space into a truly finished environment. Butler’s relentless search for history and quality is echoed by his clients’ desires. “Hardware has to be functional,” says Butler. When he brings old designs up to modern standards, he maintains the designs’ dignity. “You have to be allowed to play with modern elements and give yourself license to not repeat history.”

It is the balance between function and form that frees him from merely re-creating the past—he rethinks it instead. “I like things to be correct,” says Butler, “historically and/or proportionally.” He takes advantage of modern technology to create what could not have been made in earlier years. “I try to get at the designer’s



A craftsman files the parting line of a lever.

original intent and adapt that to modern possibilities,” he adds. Just as craftsmen used the latest in manufacturing to create the new wave of decorative hardware in the 1800s, Butler takes advantage of the technology available now. “We look for technology that can really help us do it best,” says Butler. Using state-of-the-art software, Butler and his team can look at the designs in a virtual three dimensional environment. The images for some E. R. Butler products are sent to a YAG laser, which machines them exactly to specifications. That doesn’t mean it’s all done by machine. There are plenty of hours spent handcrafting designs and hand-tooling details onto the hardware. Two knobs for one door might take six hours of highly skilled handwork to finish.

Even though the designs may recall an earlier day, some methods are radically changed. “Materials science is light-

years ahead of what it was,” says Butler. “We’re not cranking out production; we’re creating fine art. We’re reproducing handcrafted work.”

The people who outfit their home with E. R. Butler hardware are thinking beyond the norm. “They’re adding something that’s a little more personal,” says Butler. It’s as if his clients share a bit of his obsession with hardware, and with good reason, according to Butler.

“Hardware is one of the only tactile interfaces in one’s home. It does something; it separates the different areas of our lives.” Touching well-made objects connects people to art every day. Ted Meuhling, an artist whose work Butler sells, has designed a series of butterfly-shaped drawer pulls for Butler. “You can put them on doors and drawers, but not necessarily evenly spaced,” says Butler. The result is an entire wall of cabinetry that looks like a bunch of butterflies in flight. The function is impeccable, and the artistry pushes the envelope of expectations. The artistry and the function have merged together.

Customers and architects can order from items that are already designed or in stock. E. R. Butler stores carry polished brass and nickel with no lacquer. For other finishes or lacquers, customers can special order for their needs. For projects that truly reflect personal style and detail, customers look to Butler and his team for custom design work. “The most innovative work is done on a custom basis,” says Butler. Customers pay the costs of time and materials—the extra cost they pay is in patience while designs are finessed and production completed. His attention to detail is the

talent that sets his firm apart. “I want them to look at what they have from me and know that it is the best it can be,” says Butler. “I don’t compromise.”

“If it pushes the envelope, it’s worth it. You rediscover something and make it more interesting,” says Butler. At its base, making the world a more beautiful and functional space is part of Butler’s philosophical direction. “I like to take time to appreciate the intangible

elements—why we exist—and extrapolate those into a door-knob,” says Butler with a little smile that shows he knows the unanswerable questions of life might not connect with hardware in everyone’s brain, a smile that belies his knowledge that life is for appreciating. “There’s a lot to be gained by looking at different things,” says Butler. It increases appreciation for the passion involved in work and for the skills that people such as Butler are able to share with the world through their



Hardware lowered into ultrasonic cleaner to remove any residual compounds left from the buffing and polishing process.

work. “If it was just about making donuts,” he adds, “I don’t think I could do it.” **NOH**

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