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Beauty to be held

It is Rhett Butler's ambition to raise the status of the humble doorknob to that of a decorative art. His showroom in New York City has a range of handles more akin to jewelry than mundane household hardware



Above: rare antique enameled doorknob and escutcheon plate. Right: E. R. Butler & Co. has an eclectic array of antique and modern enameled porcelain and brass doorknobs and bells

To **Rhett Butler**, the founder of E.R. Butler & Co., Fine Architectural Hardware, a doorknob is a thing of beauty to behold – and, of course, to be held. He often compares his creations to more personal accessories. “A single screw goes through as much hand-finishing as a piece of jewelry,” says Butler (who was named for a relative, not for the rakish character in *Gone with the Wind*). He recounts the process as if reciting a poem, “grinding, sanding, polishing, patinating, antiquing, highlighting, waxing...” When he finishes, you stand in awe of the humble screw. “The workers draw straws every day to see who’ll get stuck making them,” Butler says. “It’s incredibly tedious.”

At the opposite end of the manufacturing spectrum is a new 3D laser-sintering machine. The EOSINT M “prints” in metal, similar to the way in which a bubble jet prints in ink. The US\$800,000 apparatus traces a computer-aided design in layers of bronze powder 0.0001-inch thick, fuses the bronze with a laser, and then continues to layer and laser. The 44-year-old New Yorker proudly proffers the product of his high-tech baby, a bronze door handle that has been sliced down the middle revealing faint horizontal lines, like the growth rings of a tree. He claims that the only other owner of an EOSINT M in the U.S. is Boeing, the aerospace giant. “It’s super-cutting-edge technology.”

It is this combination of old-world handwork and brave new world innovation that makes Butler seem able to straddle the centuries. With a boyish enthusiasm and an attention to detail that borders on obsession, he remains faithful to the past by creating hardware for today using futuristic technology.

Given its range, calling the company a “hardware” manufacturer is an understatement bordering on insult. The word “hardware” conjures images of old coffee cans overflowing with greasy nuts and bolts. The British phrase “door furniture” is pretty, yet still cumbersome. More architectural afterthought than art form, hardware is often something a contractor sticks on a door after the serious design work has been done. At E.R. Butler & Co., the mission is “to elevate the stature of [hardware] within the decorative arts.”

A visit to the showroom in New York’s fashionable NoLita district proves that Butler succeeds wildly. After all, this is where medieval-looking doorknockers befitting the hand of Quasimodo keep company with sleek, stainless steel fixtures by modern industrial designers such as Philippe Starck and Jasper Morrison. It is where Venetian door pulls ripple and curl like tiny ocean waves next to faceted crystal doorknobs the size of grapefruit. It is a jewel box brimming with more than 120 drawers of the finest samples of art





nouveau, American colonial, sixteenth-century Italian, and twenty-first-century pieces (to name a few). Many of the showroom models are themselves antiques, dating back to the early 1900s.

Lately, Butler's collaborations with his peers have also yielded extraordinary results. A collection of drawer pulls by award-winning furniture designer Chris Lehrecke is a study in refined geometry. Ted Muehling, the New York-based designer known for his organic jewelry and house wares, has created drawer pulls with graceful butterfly silhouettes. Muehling first worked with Butler on a series of Biedermeier-style candlesticks made from a variety of convex and concave forms. Previously, Muehling had painstakingly pieced together the delicate neoclassical shapes from various cast and spun parts. Butler was able to manufacture them efficiently and exquisitely on a computerized lathe.

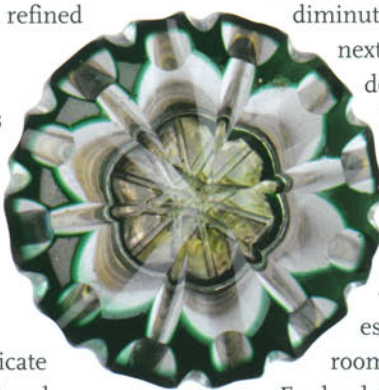
Old and new metalwork coexist with other specimens to lend Butler's display the appearance of a natural history exhibit. Faceted crystal drinking glasses by Muehling for Steuben rest next to a turtle shell, the object they were modeled after. Also by

Muehling is an assortment of porcelain flora and fauna for Porzellan-Manufaktur Nymphenburg, including a celadon platter with an extraordinary array of painted butterflies. A cast-bronze coral-branch door handle lies nearby. Crouching amid ivory ear plugs from Burma and a pearl-encrusted door pull is a fossilized crab. Meanwhile, a diminutive, white porcelain goat frolics

next to a fluffy white ermine-covered door handle (made for the musician Lenny Kravitz), and a life-size bronze rabbit keeps a look out under the window's display of lights.

To look at the curiosities in Butler's *wunderkammer* is to be transported – to a hunting lodge on an English estate, a gondola in Venice, a drawing room in France, a barn in colonial New England. These are the artifacts of a crash course

in architectural history, a topic Butler knows well. He began working in historic restoration with his father, he says, “as soon as I was old enough to hold a hammer.” He earned a degree in architecture from Rice University in Texas and became a licensed architect. In 1990, he launched E.R. Butler & Co., designing custom hardware and representing



This page, above: a production manager applies flux to a cylinder cover prior to a silver-soldering procedure. Inset: rare glass doorknob, c.1860s. Opposite page, from top left: an engraved cylindrical floor stop is assembled prior to finishing; a round crystal doorknob with a turned solid brass shank; oval thumb turn and knurled rose; a production assistant in the finishing department of the workshop performs the final assembly







Maison J. Vervloet-Faes, a century-old Belgian company specializing in art nouveau hardware. Over the years Butler has developed relationships with other venerated European companies, such as Maison Bricard of Paris, the Italian company GBT, which carries early Bauhaus, and FSB, a 120-year-old German manufacturer best known for its contemporary designs and focus on ergonomics.

In 2000, Butler bought W.C. Vaughan Co., a company with a rich heritage in early American and Georgian hardware. Thanks to this acquisition, E.R. Butler & Co. now holds the oldest hardware patents in the United States. Due to Butler's voracious appetite for research, the company also owns the world's largest library of hardware trade catalogs, as well as an extensive collection of design and metalworking books. At the moment, Butler houses these treasures in his four-story Brooklyn factory and warehouse.

Although the company also has a retail store in Boston, the New York address provides a special source of inspiration for Butler. From 1868 to 1897, 53-55 Prince Street housed the original silversmith works of Tiffany & Co. – the giant footprints of smelting tanks are still burned into the floor. The former tenant's legacy also includes an 80-foot-deep

water well in the basement, which used to supply plumbing to neighboring tenements. Still doing renovations after three years, Butler says, "I want to uncover the good bones of the space. I'm partly paying homage to the past and partly reinterpreting it."

The lower level will become the home of both a secondary private showroom and Butler's antique hardware collection, which numbers in the "tens of thousands," he says. Cloisonné, enamel, sulfide portraits in glass, mercury glass, Murano glass, cut crystal, gutta-percha (a mid-nineteenth-century natural latex that preceded plastic), Wedgwood, bronze, silver plate, wood, and wrought iron objects – these are just some of the gems in Butler's cache.

These pieces continue to inform Butler's projects. In one device, Butler saw an opportunity to improve upon the past. He revamped the interior of an "American olive knuckle" hinge, a piece of hardware used in the U.S. for 200 years, while keeping the classic exterior intact. His fusion of historic preservation and modern technology earned this invention a patent. "Just being historically accurate can be boring," Butler says. "Putting a new twist on things – now, that's fun." ♦

Opposite page: a production manager on the stock floor of the store (top); E.R. Butler & Co. has a venerable reference library (bottom). This page, clockwise, from top left: inspecting a W.C. Vaughan Co. cabinet rose before finishing; a patinated "Empire" design series lever handle prior to its final coat of wax; a clear-cased cobalt bubble crystal doorknob, about to be assembled. Below: octagonal crystal doorknob, made from pressed and ground cobalt crystal, with a turned solid brass shank

