



Wielgus embellished this second model Dragoon revolver from 1989-91. The firearm is made of steel, gold and ivory. (Photo courtesy of the Wielgus Family Revocable Trust)

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[Exhibit showcases guns as art, not weapons](#)

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An object associated with function takes on a meticulously aesthetic quality in a new art exhibit opening next weekend.

The Roswell Museum and Art Center exhibit, "Raymond Wielgus: A Connoisseur's Eye," features guns that artist, modeler and carver Raymond Wielgus transformed during the last 35 years of his life. The museum will premiere the artist's final 40 weapons in an opening ceremony 5-7 p.m. June 11.

"Handguns are designed for defense or hunting, yet he views in them aesthetic beauty," said Andrew John Cecil, RMAC curator of collections and exhibitions. "This will be a good challenge for the fine-arts crowd and will generate interesting discussion."

Wielgus began reworking reproductions of 19th century firearms after purchasing a revolver in Tucson with a less-than-perfect design.

"Ray bought a Colt Diamondback six-shot revolver for target practice and found he didn't like the feel and decor of it," said RMAC director Laurie Rufe. From that point on, Wielgus modified 67 guns.

Wielgus embellished the firearms by inserting gold inlay into hand-carved grooves, creating intricate patterns identical on both sides of the firearms. His detail is precise right down to the tiny screws that hold the guns together, also inlaid with gold.

The artist transformed the base steel on some guns with blueing techniques and acid baths that dyed the material French gray or black. He also hand-carved ancient ivory grips onto the firearms.

“There are people fascinated with weapons and the decoration of guns, which is age old. But the inlaying of steel with precious metals is unusual,” said Rufe, adding that Wielgus embellished the guns without sketching a plan on paper.

The firearms in the exhibit range from 4 1/2 inch miniatures to 13 7/8 inch revolvers, all no longer functioning. The pieces complement the museum’s historic gun collection, which visitors can compare with Wielgus’ embellished firearms, Cecil said.

The museum will also show Wielgus’ hand-carved perfume bottle top and wooden statue to emphasize his breadth of interests and knowledge of materials, he said.

Before retiring to Tucson and starting his gun project, the artist spent years working as a sculptor and a modeler for major design firms. He helped develop prototypes for everything from radios to the Tucker car.

Wielgus also collected African and Oceanic art, now housed at the Indiana University Art Museum and the Art Institute of Chicago.

Larry’s Gun Shop, Wiley Moloney and the Roswell Museum and Art Center Foundation funded the exhibit, which runs through Jan. 2.

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