

colonial furniture and firearm decorations, as well as Pennsylvania Dutch folk art (Hecksher and Bowman 1992:12-13). European “baroque” and “rococo” art is rife with volutes, and fancier European and Mediterranean guns from the 15th to 19th centuries regularly exhibit these and derivative motifs, often interacting with other forms in patterns of tendrils, leaves, flowers, and coils of serpent or dragon tongues and tails. A stunning rifle in matchlock and snaphaunce configuration dating to 17th century Germany and displayed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, features elaborate patterns of volutes, many with pearl insets in the “eye” of the curl. It is interesting that in a traditional Irish/Scottish hopscotch game, the steps curve around like a volute and end in a circle called “Heaven” (Schuster and Carpenter 1996:196). Closer to home, in Adams County, is the earthen coil in the tail of the Great Serpent Mound, attributed by early archeologists to the Adena culture c. 321 BC. The mound was first mapped in 1815, and an account included in *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley* published in 1848.

Greek Architectural Orders

A model for the volutes on the Bodenheimer guns (either direct or indirect) was present in the vocabulary of Greek architectural styles that was manifest in many public buildings, artist/trade pattern books, and school textbooks in the latter 18th and 19th century. A striking feature of many public buildings, including the national capitol in Washington DC, state capitol buildings, and county municipal buildings, was their imitation of Greek architecture, particularly the use of stone columns. The Greek “architectural orders,” based on the “capitals” (caps) of stone columns were categorized by early European historians as Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, and a couple of later “Composite” styles (see illustration). Of interest to this discussion is the Ionic style, which dates to the mid-sixth century BC and features very pronounced decorative volutes (scrolls) that are said to represent ram’s horns or shells of certain marine life, in particular the nautilus (Bustos 2021). Nautilus shells curve (at least ideally) in accord to the “golden ratio spiral” and carry meanings such as growth, perfection, and strength. The symbolism of ram horns is associated with power, strength, energy, and vitality. The later Corinthian style incorporates the volutes in various ways, along with vegetable motifs,

especially acanthus leaves, which symbolize enduring life and rebirth. It is also notable that the columns themselves are thought by some scholars to represent tree trunks. Thus, an assemblage of columns equals a grove of trees, and the trunks link this world of flesh with that of the spirit realms in the sky. The architectural orders were assumed and modified by the Romans and influenced later architecture in Europe and later other places worldwide down to today, with revivals happening during the Renaissance and Enlightenment that influenced architecture in the European colonies and emerging nations of the New World.

The Bodenheimers’ world certainly was replete with Greco-Roman imagery – several buildings in downtown Lancaster from the mid-19th century display influences of architectural orders. It is no coincidence that the site of the first major public university in Ohio was in the city of Athens in newly formed Athens County (later accessible to Lancaster via the Hocking River).

Aside from the monumental expression of the volutes on architecture, a source of patterning may have been closer to home for makers like Bodenheimer and others in the Eastern United States that preceded him. Patterns for volutes might have been found in women’s sewing baskets or tailor shops – templates of paper or other more durable material. A quick search online for “French curve” reveals numerous patterns (some even with round holes) for sale or free downloading – which could be very useful to any contemporary makers seeking for a pattern to create a rifle in the Bodenheimer style. Indeed, a comparison of the volutes on the two rifles under discussion here with the illustration of the ram’s horns/Nautilus/acanthus leaf motif on an Ionic column capital shows a clear correlation. It is easy to imagine how the Ionic pattern traced on paper could be folded in half and applied to a rifle buttstock to yield a functional, aesthetically pleasing, and symbolically rich result. The pattern symbolized protection and vital life force, the accompanying patterns of smaller volutes and flowering plants being further expressions of positive energy, good fortune, long life, fecundity, etc. – all valued traits in hunting, shooting, homestead protection, and well-being.

The Volute Cheekpiece in Ohio and Sets of Twins

The Bodenheimers were not the only Ohio gunsmiths to carve single or paired volutes on their rifle buttstocks,

as the form was utilized by several makers around the state. A cursory glance at photos in the Vol. I-V of *Ohio Gunsmiths and Allied Tradesmen* by Donald A. Hutslar, reveals several rifles with volute cheek pieces (and others may be found in other volumes devoted to gunsmithing traditions in West Virginia, Pennsylvania, etc.). These include a rifle by Jay Dupler of Fairfield County that exhibits a volute cheekpiece, with a fancy brass patch box configuring the space on the lock side (Hutslar, Vol. 1, n.d.:223). A rifle by Peter Kane (which has an interesting wrist repair) from adjacent Hocking County also features a curved volute as cheek piece (Vol. 2, 190). Farther east, a rifle from Belmont County by N. Jany has a cheekpiece styled as a volute ending in a circle (Vol. 1, 52). A half stock rifle by Thomas Sigler (1829-1905), born in Pennsylvania and later recorded in Putnam County in northwest Ohio, has a volute as a cheekpiece (Vol. IV, 139, 142). These cheekpieces with pronounced volutes suggest a category of their own but could also be a subcategory of rounded cheekpieces not uncommon on Ohio rifles and other muzzleloading firearms in the American story. More research might deliver a better sense of when and where the large volute pattern originated and became common, although it is safe to say that the stylistic feature was used by several gunsmiths working in overlapping timeframes in mid-19th century in Ohio.

Another interesting aspect of the story is the existence of non-identical “twin” rifles produced by the Bodenheimers. Page 220 of Vol. I illustrates a half-stock rifle that is of corresponding artistic quality and patterning of the fancy full stock discussed above. Although the details differ slightly, the pronounced paired voluted cheekpieces, the swirling volute with metal inlays on the anterior of the volutes, and the floral designs are very similar – though one rifle is built as a full stock and the other as a half-stock. This twinning of architectural and artistic themes is also illustrated by the unadorned full stock rifle on p. 221 of Vol. I, which like the plain half-stock discussed in this article also has pronounced cheekpieces carved as volutes on a curly maple stock – the dimensions and architecture appearing so similar as to be of the same pattern. It would be fascinating to understand if the Bodenheimers intentionally created these “twins,” as a display of skill or artistic achievement, or if it was just an incidental aspect of their production.

Final Thoughts

It is impossible to say exactly why the Bodenheimers and a few other Ohio gunsmiths incorporated the artistic element of volutes into their firearms. However, these striking features are carefully wrought aspects of their work. It is worth contemplating how ancient symbolism, manifesting in many ways in the mid-19th century could have consciously or unconsciously become represented in the work of local gunsmiths that still resonate with meaning for those who appreciate their artistry today.

Measurements of a Plain Bodenheimer Rifle with Double Cheek Pieces

Overall length: 52 ½”

Barrel: 36” by 1 1/8” octagon; turned round 1/8” at muzzle; iron rear sight 9 3/4” from rear of barrel; front sight 1 3/16” from muzzle

Stock: Walnut half-stock, poured pewter nose cap

Hardware: Brass trigger guard, butt plate, and tiny teardrop side plate

Lock: Machine engraved with designs, worn lettering; finely finished iron set triggers

Volutes: Carved of the stock wood; dimensions: distance from outer curve to comb, 7 1/8”; 2 5/8” in height; width of center circle, 1”

Select Sources:

Bustos, Mark (2021[March 30]). *Researchers Discover Natural Law that Explains Sharp Structure in Animals.*

The Science Times. <https://www.sciencetimes.com/articles/30386/20210330/researchers-discover-natural-law-explains-sharp-structures-animals.htm>

Everett, Clyde W. (1982, rpt.). *William Bodenheimer Gunsmith.* *Association of Ohio Long Rifle Collectors Newsletter* Vol. IV:4, 8).

Gale Ambassadors (2022). *How Egypt was Presented in the Popular Imagination in Nineteenth Century Newspapers.* *The Gale Review.* https://review.gale.com/2022/12/27/how-ancient-egypt-was-presented-in-nineteenth-century-newspapers/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=how-ancient-egypt-was-presented-in-nineteenth-century-newspapers

Hecksher, Morrison M. and Leslie Green Bowman (1992). *American Rococo, 1750-1775: Elegance in Ornament.* New York: Harry N. Adams.

Hutslar, Donald A. (n.d.). *Ohio Gunsmiths and Allied Tradesmen.* Vol. I-V.