

DEVISME ENGRAVED PERCUSSION REVOLVER; A Rare Historical French Beauty

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Fig. 1 – Devisme “Model 1854” engraved percussion revolver with case and accoutrements.

The firearms produced by Louis-François Devisme (pronounced div-eem) of Paris, France are among the most highly sought after and desirable arms manufactured during the 19th century. Devisme was an incredibly talented French gunsmith, sword maker and inventor whose talent and fine aesthetic sense allowed him to produce firearms and swords that were truly works of art. Devisme was born in Paris in either 1804 or 1806 and before the age of 30 he had received his first award for firearms design and manufacture at the 1834 Paris Exhibition of Industry. Over the next three decades, Devisme would receive numerous awards and medals for the firearms that he displayed at the various French Exhibitions. These included silver medals in 1839 & 1841 and additional awards in 1855, 1862 and 1867. He also received a medal at the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London (also known as the Crystal Palace Exhibition) for firearms that he displayed there. It is likely that Samuel Colt first became aware of Devisme’s work at The Crystal Palace Exhibition and Colt was apparently impressed enough that he acquired one of Devisme’s percussion revolvers (in unfinished form) for the Colt firearms collection. The pocket sized percussion revolver of about .28 caliber is well documented in Colt company records, and the gun (serial #1485) no doubt served as a study piece for Colt and his other designers as well.

Devisme was on the cutting edge of firearm design and manufactured a wide array of firearms from sporting rifles and shotguns to innovative revolvers, single shot pistols and even a “Flobert” type parlor pistol. He introduced a very advanced centerfire revolver in 1858-59, based upon an earlier percussion design and in doing so manufactured one of the first (if not the first) “striker fired” handguns, a concept which is the mainstay of many modern gun designs like those offered

by Glock, Heckler & Koch & Springfield Armory. This design allowed for a very low bore axis in the hand, which meant that the revolver pointed very naturally, was inherently quite accurate and had less felt recoil than other period designs.

In many ways, however, Devisme's innovative firearms designs were really only the canvas upon which he executed his artistry. Exquisitely engraved examples of Devisme firearms are known, often mounted with silver, with chased patterns and engraved high relief embellishments. Devisme's aesthetic talent rivaled that of the leading French firearms maker of the previous century, Nicholas Noel Boutet, and another leading French firearms designer and manufacturer of the 19th century, Joseph-Célestin Dumonthier. In many ways Devisme became the "Boutet" of the 19th century. Ironically, Boutet died in 1833, only one year before Devisme burst onto the firearms scene with his honorable mention medal at the 1834 Paris Exhibition of Industry.

Devisme's first firearms innovation was a self-cocking revolver patented during the 1830s. By 1854 he had patented the rather unique percussion revolver described here. He also received several additional French firearms patents between 1855 and 1869, culminating with his very futuristic cartridge revolvers. These included two innovative break-open (or top-break) center fire cartridge revolvers that were displayed at the 1867 Paris Exhibition. Devisme's reputation for excellent skill and artistry made his arms highly sought after by the wealthy luminaries of his time, and have made them equally sought after by the most discriminating modern collectors. His quality and artistry resulted in Devisme arms being acquired by the leading monarchs of era, including Queen Victoria, and her consort Prince Albert of England, King Louis-Philippe of France as well as numerous members of the Russian royal household. Some of Devisme's most famous American clients of the era included Confederate leaders Generals John Bell Hood, J.E.B. Stuart and Robert E. Lee, not to mention Confederate President Jefferson Davis. Hood, Stuart and Lee all owned Devisme swords, while Davis owned one of Devisme's high-grade .74 caliber percussion big game stalking rifles. In modern times Devisme's arms have graced some of the most renowned firearms collections in the world, from the Metropolitan Museum of Art to the finest collection of high grade arms ever assembled, that of the late King Farouk of Egypt.



Fig. 2 – Devisme “Model 1854” revolver – right side. Note the side mounted cocking lever.

The Devisme percussion revolver described and illustrated in this article is a Cased Exhibition Grade Engraved Model 1854 Percussion Revolver. This pattern of revolver is designated by

collectors as both a Model 1854 and a Model 1855. These are clearly collector terms of convenience since it is highly unlikely that Devisme ever referred to these guns by that nomenclature. As the revolver is based upon his 1854 patent, we have opted to use that designation for the pistol. It is an extremely rare revolver, not only because of the superb engraving but also because of the Thouvenin tige in the cylinder chambers (described below). Devisme manufactured this model between 1854 and 1858. By about 1858 Devisme was using an improved lock mechanism with the cocking lever in the center of the frame, rather than on the outside of the frame. The new pattern of revolver was the one that he then offered in a centerfire cartridge variant as well, even prior to the outbreak of the American Civil War.



Fig. 3 – Devisme “Model 1854” revolver – left side. Note the superb quality of the engraving.

The gun is a single action, six-shot percussion revolver with a 6 5/8” octagon barrel that is rifled with five rounded grooves. The revolver is nominally .40 caliber (or 10mm) with the bore measuring about .399” or 10.15mm and the chamber mouths measuring a slightly larger .40” or 10.18mm. It has a unique, frame-mounted, “cocking lever” that actuates a centrally mounted striker that is concealed within the frame. As with any standard single action revolver, cocking the gun rotates and locks the cylinder, indexing a chamber to align with the barrel and sets the mainspring to allow a forceful blow to be delivered to the primer when the sear is tripped. In this case, the blow is delivered by a spring-loaded “striker” in the frame of the gun rather than by the nose of the hammer. It is obvious that Devisme’s design could be easily adapted to the use of metallic cartridges. It would be a good candidate for use in a dual ignition revolver that could utilize either a cartridge or percussion cylinder, depending upon available ammunition. Because of the concealed striker (or hammer is you prefer), the gun has a distinctive frame profile, similar to that found on the American produced Pettengill revolvers which also had concealed hammers. As mentioned above, the design allows the bore of the revolver to sit lower in the hand than other period designs and this translates to improved “pointability”, accuracy, and recoil control.

Of special interest is the cylinder, which incorporates a Thouvenin tige in each chamber, a feature that is almost never encountered on revolvers. This alone, makes this model Devisme revolver extremely rare. The “tuge” or “pillar breech” system was developed by French Army General Louis-Étienne de Thouvenin and was a direct predecessor to the expanding base bullet concept of Claude-Etienne Minié. The Thouvenin system used a pillar (tuge) in the base of the chamber around which the powder charge was deposited. When the bullet was loaded into the chamber, a strong strike with the ramrod or loading tool upon the [soft](#) lead projectile was

supposed to seat it upon the pillar and cause the base of the bullet to expand slightly so that it would grip the rifling of the bore effectively. The downside of the design was that the bullet was often deformed to some degree when struck, reducing its aerodynamic qualities and resulting in inconsistent accuracy. Another problem was that failing to strike the bullet hard enough meant that the base did not obdurate sufficiently to grip the rifling, resulting in reduced velocity and more inconsistent accuracy.



Fig. 4 – Front and rear views of the revolver.

Fig. 5 – Front of the cylinder clearly showing the Thouvenin tiges or pillars in the chambers. Note Devisme's trademark and a proof mark on the cylinder's front face.

This model Devisme revolver is loaded by removing the cylinder, placing it upright on a flat surface and pouring the required amount of powder into the each chamber. A conical lead bullet was then inserted in the chamber mount (point up) and a heavy metal rammer was removed from the butt of the gun and placed in the chamber mount on top of the bullet. The face of the rammer was concave to accept the ogive of the bullet, and the top was large, thick and weighted. The rammer was then struck with the ebony loading hammer included in the cased set, theoretically seating the bullet and upsetting the base sufficiently to seal the chamber mouth and grip the rifling when fired.

The revolver had to be taken apart in order to remove the cylinder. This was easily accomplished by rotating a lever mounted along the lower left side of the frame downward. This rotated a half-round lug in the bottom of the barrel wedge and disengaged it from a half-round cut in the bottom of the cylinder arbor pin. Once this cam was disengaged, the revolver could easily be separated into its three primary component parts: 1) the barrel, lug and topstrap; 2) the grip frame; and 3) the cylinder. The gun was then reassembled by reversing the process. A single guide pin in the bottom of the grip frame and in the top of the top strap assured correct alignment of these two components.



Fig. 6 – The disassembled revolver.

This revolver is serial numbered **6801** on the bottom edge of the right grip, above the butt cap. The assembly number **247** is present on all of the major components of the gun, including the interior bottom of the frame, the tip of the cylinder arbor pin, on the rear face of the cylinder, on the right flat of the barrel, on the interior of the barrel to frame locking lever, and in pencil inside both grips. The right barrel flat is additionally marked with Devisme's trademark, a **(CROWN) / DV** within a half-oval. This same trademark appears on the bottom of the frame and on the front face of the cylinder. The right barrel flat is also marked: **DEVISME BTE A PARIS**. The front face of the cylinder has a second mark as well, a **(CROWN)** over a script **M** proof mark. The top flat of the barrel is clearly engraved **DEVISME A PARIS**, leaving no doubt as to who was the maker of this revolver.



Fig. 7 – Close-up of the Devisme revolver showing the beautiful engraving and high-grade wood of the grips. Note the serial number on the right grip, and the maker's name, trademark and assembly number stamped on the right barrel flat.



Fig. 8 – Close-up of the left side of the Devisme revolver showing the beautiful engraving and high-grade wood of the grips. Note that the edge of the butt cap, two grip screws and their escutcheons are engraved with the same patterns.

This particular cased and engraved Devisme Model 1854 percussion revolver is in very fine+ condition. Were it not for some scattered light pinpricking and minor wear to some of the engraved panels it would rate excellent condition. This gun is a masterpiece of the engraver's art. It is "exhibition quality engraved" with deeply chiseled and etched flowing vine and floral motifs that cover about 80%-90% of the exterior metal. Only the middle portion of the bottom three flats of the barrel, the trigger and the bottom of the butt cap are left unadorned, with the balance of the gun (including the screws) engraved *en suite*, including both the cocking lever (hammer) and barrel release lever, as well as the spanner nuts that retain both of these parts are similarly engraved. The two grips screws, and their accompanying escutcheons, are also engraved with the same patterns.

The gun appears to have been finished "in the white", which was not uncommon for exhibition quality engraved arms. There is no indication that the gun was ever blued and the only blue present is found on the front sight and on the face of the barrel web where it appears to have been finished in order to help resist the erosion from escaping gas when the revolver was fired. The meal of the engraving has a medium dull silver color over most of its surfaces, with the recesses of the deeply engraved patterns having a darker gray color that contrasts well with the balance of the metal and helps make the scrolling patterns stand out. The gun remains extremely crisp and sharp with mostly smooth metal and no real pitting present to speak of.

This Devisme revolver is mechanically excellent, and times, indexes and locks up exactly as it should. The bore of the revolver is in very fine to excellent condition and remains about mirror bright with deeply cut rifling with a relatively high rate of twist. The revolver has a pair of finely checkered and highly figured walnut grips that are truly striking and add considerably to the

overall visual effect of this highly embellished revolver. The condition of the grips match the rest of the revolver. They are in very fine to near excellent condition and are free of any breaks, cracks or repairs. They retain a large majority of their original varnished finish. Both grips are pencil numbered to the revolver with the assembly number **247**.

The original rear sight is present on the top rear of the frame and the original front sight is dovetailed into the top of the barrel near the muzzle. The front sight retains about 50% of its original pale fire blued finish with strong hints of purple in the coloring. The pistol retains its original and very unique “rammer,” which is screwed into the flat butt cap of the revolver. The face of the rammer shows some wear and use as well as some lead residue, indicating that it was used during the service life of the revolver.



Fig. 9 – Devisme revolver. Close-up of the barrel, muzzle and front sight. The beautiful floral engraving that covers 80-90% of the gun is crisp and sharp, as is the rifling in the bore.

The rare beauty is contained in a lovely French fitted case and is complete with all of its original accessories. Rarely can we say with any certainty that the accessories contained in a cased set are original to the gun and casing, but in this case we feel confident that every piece here is original to the set. The case is made of what appears to be English oak and retains much of its original varnish. The top of the case has a round brass escutcheon plate, engraved with a marquis' coronet above the monogram “**GP.**” This is probably the initials of the person the gun was sold to. The brass hinges appear to be original to the case and the lock appears to be intact. The top, sides and bottom of the case shows the expected wear, dings, mars and surface one would expect from a 150+ year old wooden box that was intended to protect and preserve its contents. The interior of the form fitting “French” casing is lined in dark green velour with a matching dark green pillow in the lid. The interior shows light wear and some minor areas

where the velour has worn through, mostly in the recess that contained the revolver. The casing is cut for the revolver, as well as six specific accessories and has a single compartment with a lid.



Fig. 10 – Closed case with all the original accessories.

The original accessories that are in the case are all of the same high quality and design that one would expect to accompany such a well designed and manufactured revolver. They are all in very fine to excellent condition and include:

- 1) An Ebony Loading Hammer, measuring 9" in overall length with a 1 3/4" long, double sided head. The hammer was used to strike the metal rammer (concealed in the butt of the revolver) when loading the bullets into the Thouvenin cylinder.
- 2) A Combination Bullet Mold & Cone Wrench, measuring 6" in overall length, including the sprue cutting handle extension. The single cavity mold has a maximum diameter of .403", creating a bullet exactly the right size for the chamber mouths once the lead cooled and shrank slightly. The mold cavity casts a pointed tip, round nosed bullet with a flat base and no grease grooves. The mold block is solid and does not open. A pivoting iron sprue cutter is mounted on the top of the mold block and is clearly marked: **DEVISME BTE**. The mold handles give the impression that this is a scissor type mold, but this is only for aesthetic purposes, and the two handles terminate in a cone (nipple) wrench for the removal and insertion of cones in the cylinder.
- 3) An Ebony Percussion Cap Container measuring about 1 13/16" in exterior diameter, about 1 7/16" in interior diameter and about 1 13/16" in height. The container retains a highly polished exterior and a matte interior. The interior lip of the container and inside lip of the lid have a crescent key way that allows the lid to be securely fastened to prevent the container from opening accidentally. This very simple container is so well made that even in its simplicity it is almost a work of art in itself.
- 4) An Ebony Handled Turn Screw (screwdriver), 5 1/4" inches long, with the blade perfectly sized for the grip screws of the revolver.
- 5) A Copper Powder Flask, which is embossed **AB / A PARIS** on both sides, below the spout. The flask measures approximately 4 1/4" in length by 1 1/2" at the widest point of the body and retains much of its original dark lacquer finish. The spout is adjustable to throw different

weight charges and is marked 11 12 13 14. The original spring is in place and the flask operates correctly.

- 6) A Devisme Cleaning Rod with folding handles. The rod is superbly made and is 8 5/8" in overall length with folding "T" handles that measure 2 15/16" long when extended. The rod is finished in the white and includes only a simply slotted jag for use with cleaning patches.
- 7) A large number of original flat based conical lead bullets, apparently cast from the mold, are present in the lidded compartment of the case.



Fig. 11 - Combination bullet mold and cone wrench found in the case. Note the manufacturer's mark "DEVISME BTE."

Overall this is a really stunning example of a very high grade Exhibition Engraved Devisme Percussion Revolver that is in wonderful condition and is 100% complete and correct in very way, including the accouterments in the case. This gun almost certainly dates to between 1854 and 1858 and has survived in really outstanding condition. It is a historically important revolver and is also a wonderful example of Devisme's artistic capabilities.