

Head of the class

Decorative leaderheads have their place

By Mark Ward Sr.

Leaderheads. Conductor heads. Distributor heads. Hopper heads. No matter what you call them — and we'll call them leaderheads (one word, though some spell it with two) — the products provide installers of high-end gutter systems another opportunity to up-sell their customers. (By the way, according to the website Conductorheads.com, the products are also known as scupper boxes, rain collectors, collector heads, rainwater heads, and gutter boxes!)

“If somebody’s going to spend \$10,000 or \$20,000 on copper gutters, then for a just a little more they should get the complete ‘look’ of a classic gutter system by installing leaderheads too,” believes Sock Woodruff, owner of RainTrade Corporation, a gutter supply company based in Lake Bluff, Ill. In addition to their ornamental appeal, he points out that leaderheads “function as an overflow for water and ice build up, and in long runs they also allow air into the conductor to prevent vacuum and keep the water flowing effectively.”

RainTrade offers 25 styles of leaderheads whose names — from Abbey to Yorkshire — suggest the product’s historic European origins, though Woodruff says a few manufacturers may offer a streamlined modernist look. “They’re usually made of 16-ounce copper,” he continues, “and used for upscale custom homes, churches, and public buildings.”

His company has patterns and jigs from which its in-house craftsmen can then make the leaderheads by hand, soldering the various components together. Woodruff puts the cost of the products at \$300 and up, “though the price could



OrnaMetals photo

double or triple if the homeowner wants a custom-made style.” One strategy to keep down costs, he adds, is to install leaderheads only on the front of the house. “But really,” he points out, “they don’t cost all that much when compared to the total price of the house, or even gutter system.”

Leaderheads are easily mounted on brick or stone using mortar plugs, Woodruff explains, or on wood using stainless steel screws. “With the growth of copper gutter sales over the past five years, sales of leaderheads have

increased along with that,” he adds. “And though they’re often specified by architects, I’ve also seen gutter installers use them as an up-sell item.”

In its catalogue RainTrade refers to the products as conductor heads, while Park City Rain Gutter prefers to call them collector boxes. The Utah-based company is the United States distributor for copper gutter products from Minoletti, an Italian manufacturer. As such, its leaderheads have a Mediterranean flair.

“You wouldn’t see leaderheads on a tract home,” admits owner Gene Stucky.

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“They’re more of an upscale item. Functionally, leaderheads can improve the flow of water. Some have overflow spouts that can indicate an obstruction. But people really buy leaderheads for their decorative value.” Park City sells a dozen styles—from round to square, as well as several ornate *bacinella* configurations.

Products can be made from zinc, aluminum, or steel, but Stucky agrees copper is the most common choice. Across the industry, he reports prices can range from \$100 up to several hundred dollars or even more. Those distributed by Park City, however, sell for less than \$300.

“If you’re going to have an upscale gutter system,” Stucky says, “then you don’t want it to be unaccessorized. Leaderheads are accent pieces. Though they’re popular with European-style homes, leaderheads also fit well with Southwestern adobe style — which is somewhat Mediterranean — and with mountain rustic styles and log homes.”

Even if copper prices have seen big increases in recent years, Stucky reports these hikes have yet to make a dent in sales of copper gutter systems. “Homeowners who install leaderheads are an upscale clientele who are less affected by price increases or by a slowdown in the housing market,” he observes. “Architects will often specify leaderheads, but many gutter installers also sell them as well.”

At Metal Tech-USA of Peachtree City, Ga., the products are called hopper heads. Marketing manager Shane Norris explains the company distributes products both from Revere Copper and from RHEINZINK. He pegs the price of zinc leaderheads at around \$100, “which is more than aluminum but less than



Chris Industries photo



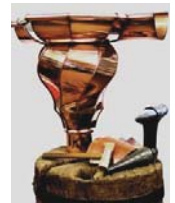
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copper, so that you can get an affordable alternative to copper that still provides you a great European look.”

Other customers for zinc gutter products can include museums, libraries, college dorms, and other institutional buildings where a clean but aesthetically appealing look is preferred. And for homeowners who invest in an upscale gutter system, Norris advises, “Leaderheads are like the cherry on top of the sundae, or the icing on top of the cake. That makes them great up-sell items for contractors. Homeowners don’t usually get excited about gutters. But when we show them some leaderheads, people brighten up and say, ‘That’ll look great on my house!’”

Chris Industries of Northbrook, Ill., offers several standard leaderhead designs but specializes in historical reproductions. The favored terminology at the company is to call the products conductor heads. But by whatever name, its craftsmen can custom-fabricate the items in copper, lead coat, Kynar-painted aluminum, and Kynar-painted, galvanized, or stainless steel.

Standard-design copper leaderheads from Chris Industries start at about



\$180, while large custom-made units can top \$1,000 each. “The market is high-end, churches, public buildings, and universities,” relates marketing director Ryan Hill. “And our sales are probably split about 50/50 between residential and nonresidential applications.”

Hill estimates 90 percent of Chris Industries’ leaderheads are made from copper. For that reason, as copper gutter sales have risen so have sales of leaderheads. “But not as much as the gutter themselves,” he notes. “With the skyrocketing price of copper the last couple of years, sometimes ‘extra’ items such as leaderheads are taken out of the budget.”

As Hill sees it, people who view leaderheads as “extras” are homeowners who are stuck with copper gutters, no matter what. “If you’ve got a cedar roof,” he explains, “then you’ve got to use copper gutters, since copper doesn’t cor-

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Park City Rain Gutters photos

rode from tannic acid. So if you have no choice, maybe your goal is just to keep your costs down.” But when homeowners make a conscious choice for copper gutters, leaderheads are more likely to be part of the package.

One company that does prefer to use the term leaderheads (one word, not two) is OrnaMetals LLC of Decatur, Ala. The firm’s managing partner, Guenther Huber, is an immigrant craftsman whose

family has been making leaderheads and fabricating decorative architectural metal products in Germany for two centuries.

“About 80 to 90 percent of the leaderheads installed in the United States are just decorative and functionally useless,” Huber states. Nevertheless, though OrnaMetals’ leaderheads typically sell for between \$150 and \$600, he has crafted custom-made leaderheads for as much as \$2,500 each. “And in that case,”

he smiles, “the homeowner ordered 20 of them!” In another case, he once made leaderheads that also incorporated gaslights in the design.

Not surprisingly, the primary markets for Huber’s leaderheads are multimillion-dollar homes, historic renovations, churches, and institutions. Yet even though architects often specify the items, he has also seen many cases where installers are able to sell their customers on adding leaderheads to a gutter project.

OrnaMetals works in both copper and zinc, creating a wide array of finials, weathervanes, radius gutters, water-spouts, panels, moldings, medallions, mansards, half-spheres, ridge caps, and roof ornaments. All told, Huber observes, “The copper market is growing, so that sales of related products such as leaderheads is growing. Copper prices have gone up. But in the market we’re talking about, material cost is secondary to the desire for aesthetics and longevity.” **GO**



Chris Industries photos

