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THE FRANCE GIFT OF PEWTER

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Among the good things in life coming within reach of the English commoner of late Tudor days, and apparently not least in his estimation, was "a faire garnish of pewter" for his cupboard. Whereas

in old times "a man should hardlie find four peeces of pewter . . . in a good farmer's house," by 1577 that well-garnished cupboard, with perhaps some plate "to furnish up the sute," was already a fairly common expectation. For centuries past pewter had been more or less restricted to the establishments of the gentry, the nobility, and the Church. But the fortunes of the enterprising "middle people" were improving rapidly — and portentously — and they were eager to show pewter in their own households as a token of their rising pretensions.

But pewter was not only impressive. It was far more adaptable and efficient than the miscellaneous materials such as wood, leather, and horn which it tended to replace; and it was soon serving myriad human wants from the nursery to the banquet hall, from the tavern to the Communion table. By the time the American colonies were fairly settled it was, typically, the metal of the day. Fed by the tin mines of Cornwall, the English pewterers drove a prosperous trade, and, for a while at least, the Worshipful Company of Pewterers ranked high among the London liverly companies.

To protect their trade London pewterers even as early as 1532 were insisting that no Englishman should "at any time hereafter resort to any strange Regions or Countries,



there to use, teach or exercise the said Craft of Pewterers," as some craftsmen had done "for their singular Lucre." That was long before the colonial idea had won any sort of popularity in England. But quite possibly it was a "lobby" in the interest of home manufacture that, less than a century later, induced the Virginia Company to omit any mention of the pewterer's trade in appealing to practically very other type of artisan to emigrate to America. The early records of the Massachusetts Bay Company do not list pewterers either, although they mention a wide variety of other crafts. To the investors in England, pewterers among them, Jamestown and Plymouth were first and foremost supposed to pay dividends. That point of view certainly regarded neither colony as an experiment in political or religious freedom.

There was irony in the fact that the Worshipful Company should have invested in the Virginia Company that was struggling so hard to establish Jamestown. It was just such promotion companies representing the merchant capitalism of the new economy that were so rapidly outmoding the ancient guild system. However, the London pewterers were out to supply the New World with their ware and to a considerable degree their efforts were successful. English-made pewter enjoyed a high reputation for quality, and during the colonial period vast quantities, far exceeding in value the plate and furniture exported, were sent to America. For while pewter never did entirely supersede more primitive materials (even Harvard boys for many years ate from wooden trench-





ABOVE: "A faire garnish of pewter" selected from the collection given to the Museum by Joseph France. American, XVIII and XIX centuries. INSETS ON OPPOSITE PAGE: Makers' touches on a dish, a basin, and a plate in the France gift



Chalice made by Johann Christopher Heyne (1715-1781), fifteen-inch hammered dish by Simon Edgell (working 1713-1742), and two-quart flagon by Thomas Danforth Boardman and Sherman Boardman (working 1810-1854). Gifts of Joseph France

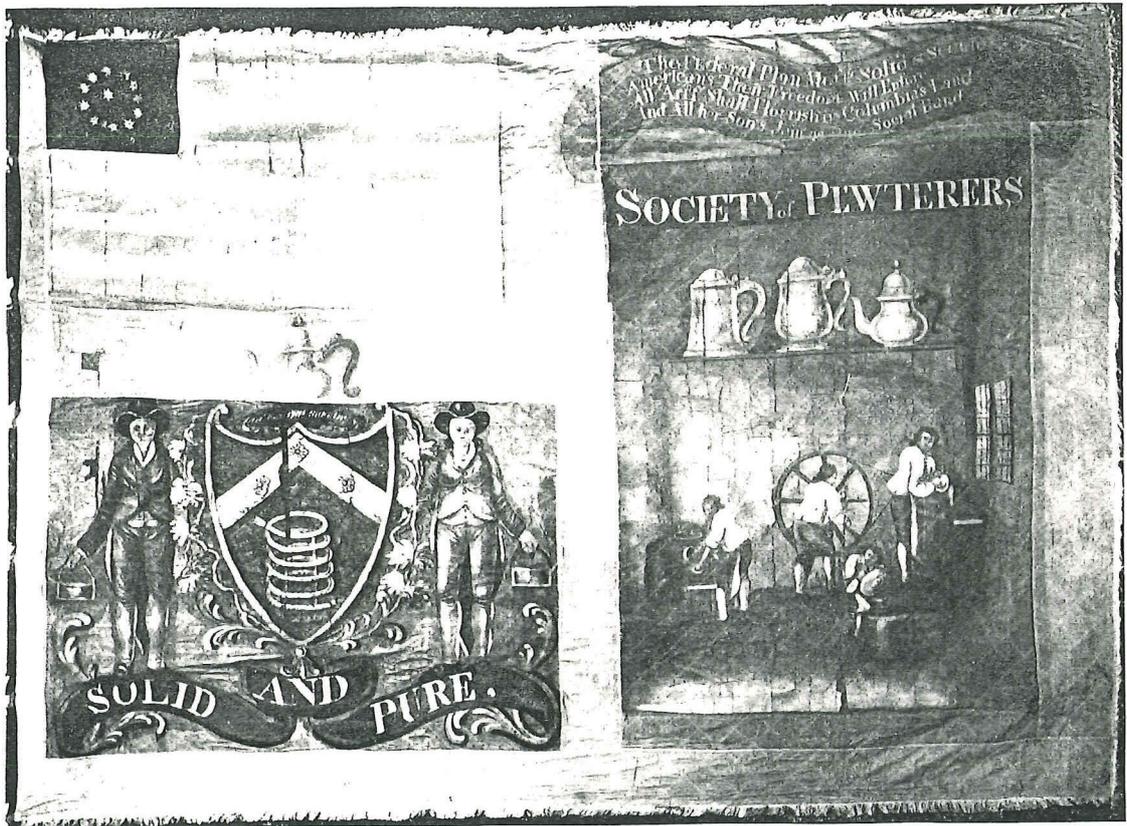
ers), it was in fairly common use in this country from the earliest days of colonization.

The nature of the metal itself, however, subverted that monopolistic imperial policy. Pewter is relatively soft and destructible but by way of compensation it may be melted and remolded easily and at little expense. Within a generation following the first settlements local artisans were at work repairing and recasting the "damned" ware of their neighbors. Undaunted by the five percent *ad valorem* tax on tin, which denied them for all practical purposes the main ingredient of new-made pewter, native pewterers in ever increasing numbers searched out all the old metal they could buy from the public and shaped it afresh.

It would be untrue to claim that the American product was as consistently good as the

English. Yet often enough it was excellent, as the American Wing collections testify. The forms were usually less varied and less elaborate than European analogues. But in contour and proportion, as well as in quality of metal, they for the most part reveal sound workmanship and a nice eye. In fact it is remarkable that a craft so beset by circumstances should have left the rich legacy it did in this country.

During the last five years the Museum has endeavored to build up a representative group of the best American work in pewter. Following a special loan exhibition in 1939 two very generous gifts from Mrs. J. Insley Blair immediately raised our collection from a negligible one to one of the first importance. Subsequently several purchases were made to augment that substantial nucleus,



*Banner of the New York Society of Pewterers showing the arms of the society, the Federal flag, and pewterers at work, with characteristic examples of their work. About 1788.
Owned by The New-York Historical Society*

and, just recently, the gift of Joseph France lifted the collection to real eminence as the finest on public exhibition. Mr. France allowed the Museum to select from his extensive collection those pieces that would best supplement what we had already acquired. That very thoughtful sort of generosity brings us forty-five more pieces, many by craftsmen previously inadequately represented or not represented at all. As a consequence, what with the important loans of Mrs. Stephen S. Fitz Gerald and Yale University shown in the American Wing, the work of the great majority of competent American pewterers may be seen in our galleries.

The France gift includes the products of men whose activity ranged from North Carolina to New Hampshire, some of them the most able craftsmen who worked in this coun-

try. Such men as Simon Edgell, Frederick Bassett, Henry and William Will, Timothy Bridgen, and Johann Christopher Heyne, to name but an even half dozen masters. A magnificent fifteen-inch dish by Simon Edgell of Philadelphia, shown on page 62, typifies all that is best and most significant in our early pewter. Made of excellent metal, it is strengthened by scrupulous all-over hammering. In England such accomplished hammer-work might have been a specialist's job. Edgell was not only a versatile pewterer, able in all phases of his craft, but a large-scale merchant and a man of affairs in the manner of so many colonial craftsmen. However, since all available information concerning those men and their work has only recently been published in Ledlie I. Laughlin's comprehensive *Pewter in America* little more need be said here.

But it might be noted in passing how particularly American antiquarian scholarship emphasizes the individual craftsman, the personal character of his work, and even the incidental developments of his career. Such manner of treatment has few real parallels in the studies of other countries. True, the history of the crafts in America is relatively brief and there was little of that official organization under guild or state that has absorbed so much research abroad. The colonization of America was in itself an expression of a new spirit of individual enterprise that acquired fresh meaning when transplanted to the New World. Conditions here lent the artisan a special importance and a special prestige. The respect paid to craftsmanship even tinged the conception of divinity. For in America, as Benjamin Franklin once said, "God Almighty . . . is respected and admired more for the variety, ingenuity, and utility of his handiworks than for the antiquity of his family."

Perhaps it is a recognition of such traditional values, an eagerness to credit each man, surely and justly, with the products of his handicraft, that leads American pewter collectors to attach such great importance to the makers' marks, or touches, on their pieces. Often, indeed, the marks have their own interest as the work of very accomplished die-

cutters. But the latter, unfortunately, remain unidentified and their work has principally a token value.

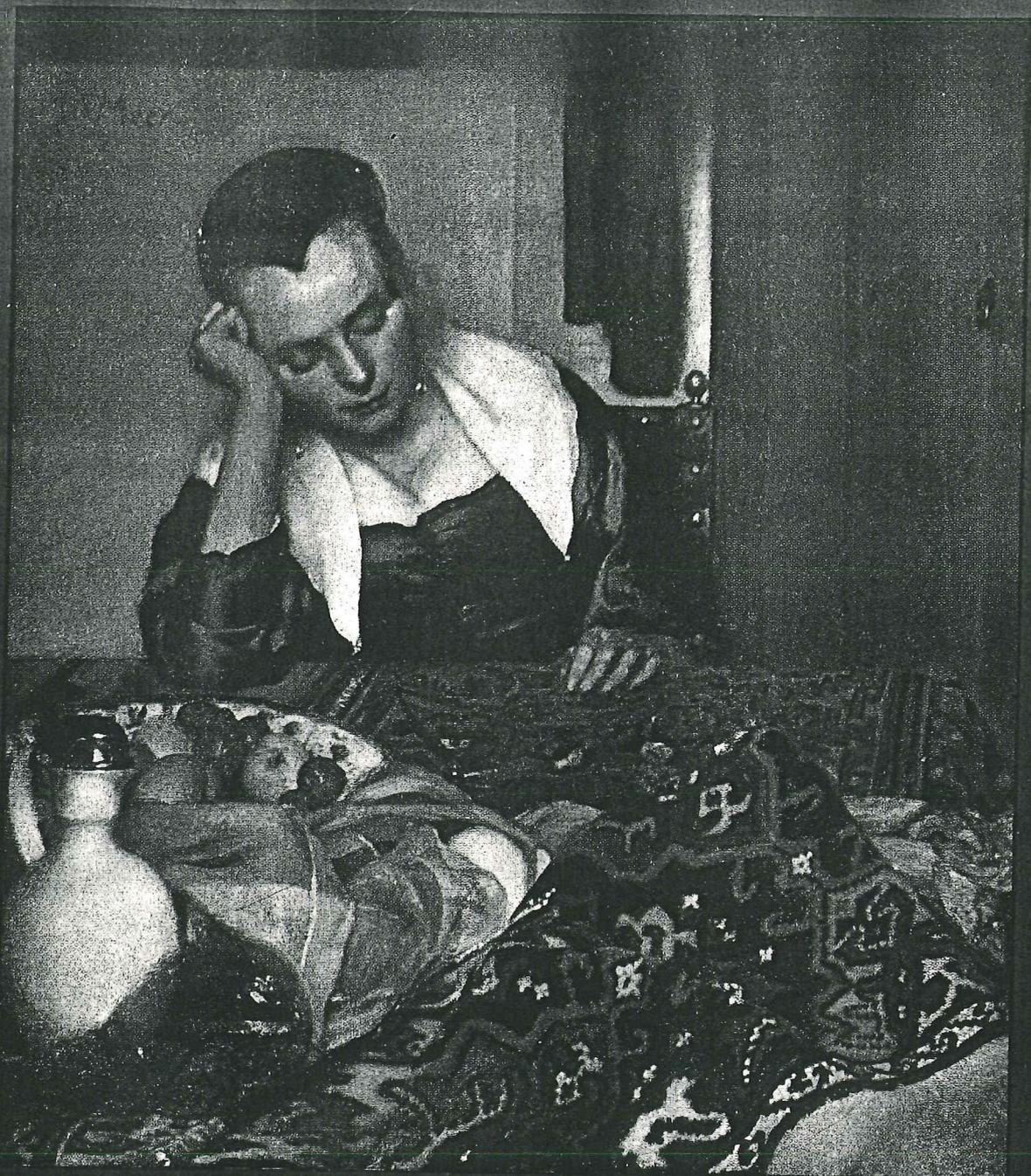
What proportion of American pewter left the shop unmarked, and why, it is impossible to say. All the pieces in the France collection are marked, some with rare and interesting touches, and by those references we can credit to American pewterers such attractive and purely native forms as the chalice by Timothy Brigden illustrated here, such interesting foreign "blends" as the chalice by Johann Christopher Heyne (see page 62), as well as more traditionally English designs in plates, dishes, basins, and porringers. The bronze molds used for casting pewter were very expensive equipment and were reluctantly discarded. As a result some styles in American pewter were perpetuated for as much as a century after they were first used. But they remain none the less interesting for it.

By the time pewtering reached a peak activity in America the metal was already being superseded by crockery, glassware, and other metals as those materials were brought within the same price range. For a while machine-spun pewter made of thinly rolled metal held out against such rivals. But by the middle of the last century pewter and the bench artisan who made it had had their day.



Chalice made by Timothy Brigden (1774-1819). Given to the Museum by Joseph France

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