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## The Colours of Pewter

By Eugene de Forest

A DULL day it is that shows pewter at its best—a day when the sun is hidden, when light gray clouds like smoke are scurrying across the sky, and the foliage is a-drip with a heavy mist; when the robins are jubilant because the wet has drawn to the lawn's green surface so many luscious worms. On such a day pewter sends forth to the eye the truth of its soft beauty. It is not an apostle of light. Under the brightness of the sun it stands abashed, and too often appears crude, uncovered, naked, with every dent and every blemish in bold relief.

Unlike silver, it was born to live away from the limelight, where the glare cannot drown its beauty, or emphasise its defects. Silver revels in light, and never looks so well as when, like a dame of high degree dressed for the dance, it sparkles and twinkles in the brilliance of electricity.

But give to pewter its corner on a gray afternoon,

with the sun on a journey, with the clouds, now thickening, now thinning, ever changing the light, and pewter then appears in a charming, modest dress

of gray and white, like a quaker maiden on her way to meeting.

Silver is a chatterer—a very delightful one to be sure, but still a chatterer, with a ripple of words and laughter ever falling from its lips. But pewter in contrast is slow of speech, and a bit sleepy, perhaps, with a presence that is quiet and restful. And because of these attributes this gentle modesty of its nature, the music of its soft voice and the message it has to give can be heard only through an ear attuned to its moods by long years of sensitive companionship.

On one of these gray reception days of pewter you are seated, we will say, where your cumulation is disposed, primarily for the joy of your own soul, but also for the pleasure of the



NO. I.—A TALL JAPANESE TEA JAR, WITH COVER  
 OVIFORM  
 COLOURING OF SHIBUICHI GRAY, WITH SHAKUDO  
 MARKINGS AS OF BROKEN CLOUDS HEIGHT, 12 IN.  
 DIAMETER, 6 IN. DIAMETER AT BASE, 3 $\frac{1}{4}$  IN.

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few—the very few, possibly one out of a thousand of your friends who may feel in some degree as you do anent your treasures.

Without there is the patter of a gentle rain. The sun is lost. Through the open window sifts the smell of early spring growth. Within is the pewter dimpling demurely from a hundred faces. You murmur—

“If there's peace to be found in the world,  
A heart that was humble might hope for it here.”

Quiet reigns, except for a gentle imaginative stir on the shelves, like the soft rustle of June field grasses moved by a sudden breeze. It is nearly always so when, alone, you step within the doorway. An instant's faint impression of greeting—then it is gone. Yet as your glance rests now here, now there, you are quick enough to catch a lingering half-smile, or a furtive wink, and you chuckle with enjoyment over the message of content that comes to you from your simple but friendly specimens.

You forget that little else than shiny tin and dull lead form the basic make-up of these penates, because you recognise that the fine, curving lines of many of them have been moulded by the hand of a master artisan, while the climatic influences of past centuries have transformed their surfaces with a beauty that is soft and delicate. You pick up a small French jug, and revel in the soft “feel” of its texture. You remember when it first caught your eye in the window of that little shop in Amboise, right at the entrance to the chateau. *Enchantment!* At once you entered and asked the price. It was very reasonable, and you were ready to buy, but being under the influence of an hallucination developed by well-meaning friends that you must never accept a shopkeeper's first price to an American, you promptly offered in return one-half. What surprise and dismay at the result! The slim, rapid-fired Frenchman tossed his hands upwards, contorted his face with a horrible grimace, and dashed madly upstairs to the second floor where he lived. Of course you rushed after him to the foot of the stairs, called him back, and paid his price. It was ignominious, to be sure, but there was nothing else to be done, for to leave behind you that jug, with its Clodion figures in alto-relievo, was not to be thought of, not for double the price.

As you muse and muse, there comes to mind a question somebody recently asked you: “What is the colour of pewter?” Just as if pewter was possessed of only one colour, like a black coat, for instance, or a white cat. “Why,” you answered, “pewter has colours many and varied—black, gray, green, brown, gold, silver, red, bronze, and, no doubt, others.”

A surprising statement, maybe, but a true one. Listen and be convinced. Its ordinary colour, as everybody knows, is a sort of subdued tin colour, or rather it ranges from this to a pearl gray, or what the French happily phrase *gris de perle*.

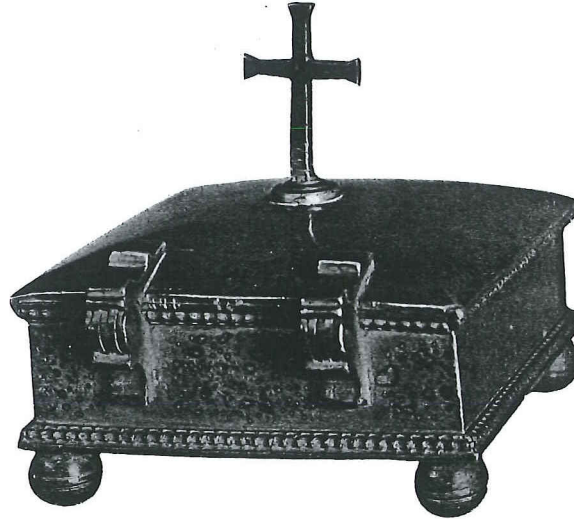
In extreme youth the complexion of pewter is almost brilliant, with something of the hardness of tin. From this it may shade off into a softer tint, or deepen into a still duller but perhaps richer colour, and yet be known as good pewter. Its pristine brilliancy was the state in which our ancestors preferred it, and they did yeoman labour to retain it in that condition. No housewife, with the pride of the Puritans in her soul, would have consented to her shelves of table and kitchen pewter showing aught but the most radiant polish. It was customary, therefore, not only to wash it and rub it vigorously after each meal, but also to submit it once a month, at least, to a hard scrubbing and polishing with oil, rottenstone or sand, and rushes. Then the afternoon sun as it slanted in through the kitchen windows would set those tinny rows to glimmering and shimmering with such good effect that the glow would near blind the guidman as he tramped through the kitchen to the woodshed, and thence to the barn to night-feed his live stock. There is therefore some excuse for those who contend that all antique pewter which exists to-day should be brought back to the condition in which its original owners loved to see it, and dutifully believed it must be kept. But while it is true that many specimens are the better for being so treated, it is also true that many others should never be more than carefully washed and rubbed, while still other pieces should be let entirely alone, except for an occasional gentle rubbing with a dry, soft cloth. Other treatment than this would destroy their remarkable patina, which, once removed, could not be reproduced in a lifetime.

*Gris de perle*, for instance, is a beautiful soft pearl

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shading, charming to the eye, which comes only through the tranquil touch of time. No combination of metals, however cunningly devised, will of itself

example of *gris de perle*, albeit the illustration can give no conception of its colour charm. When this jar left its maker's hands, its colour was whitish and



NO. II.—A PYX OF GERMAN MANUFACTURE      REAR VIEW TO SHOW HINGES  
DATED 1708      COLOUR GRAY WITH BLACK MARKINGS      SIZE, 4½ IN.

produce it. Decades must pass, and the forces of nature have leisurely opportunity to work their mysterious influence until the pewter is—

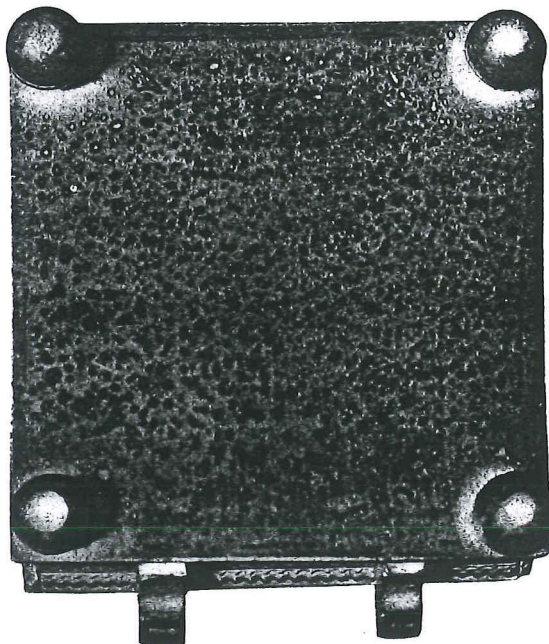
“Thus mellowed to that tender light  
Which Heaven to gaudy day denies.”

To ruin this would be sacrilege.

Look now at the Japanese tea jar of such unusual form pictured in No. i.\* Its surface is a beautiful

crude. The inside of the jar will, even now, attest this fact. But during its two centuries of existence, it has with great good taste entirely altered both the hue and pattern of its outer garment until to-day it would scarce be recognised by its original owner. During all this time it has probably had that extreme

\* The illustrations are from specimens in the author's collection.



NO. III.—VIEW OF THE SAME PYX UNDERNEATH, SHOWING THE SHAKUDO MOTTLING

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care which the Orientals alone are willing to bestow upon their personal possessions. On its rounded surface, aside from a few minute scratches, there is not a blemish. As a specimen of ancient pewter it is perfect.

But the *gris de perle* colouring of this piece is slowly disappearing under a deeper shade of gray—darker and richer—sure evidence of advancing years. At present this over-colouring is in the form of delicate spots, producing an effect which, with some poetic fancy, yet with much significance, has been termed rain-stain.

Will these tiny spots in the centuries to come gradually expand and eventually merge in a mantle which will completely cover the present base colour of light gray? This is an interesting question. If they do change in this way, the resultant colour will probably be very dark, as the rain-stain is even now almost black. This dark shade is sometimes called shakudo, and the *gris de perle*, or light undercolour, shibuichi gray. The combination of the light gray body colour in this piece with the dark rain-stain, glossed over with a bright polish, has produced a beautiful tone effect, which a lover of pewter views with appreciative delight.

Now all this remarkable beauty, these tender colourings evolved through the slow ages, may be quickly and surely disposed of, and the surface of the jar reduced to nearly its original shade by the application of sand, water, and a brush. But the hand to do the deed would be the hand of a vandal.

Casual observation leads to the belief that, generally speaking, English and continental pewter has not aged as richly as the Chinese and Japanese metal ware. Its changes have not been so uniformly beautiful. Often its surface has become covered with an oxide almost as hard as iron, and disagreeably ugly. This disparity is due probably to a difference both in the alloys and in the methods used in caring for the ware; but while it might be considered a rule, there are yet some charming exceptions, of which the pyx in Nos. ii. and iii. is an excellent example. This pyx was made in Germany. It is heavily marked on the bottom with the shakudo spots. These spots appear also on the sides, but are lighter in colour, and fewer in number. On the top only scattered traces of them are to be

found. These gradations may be accounted for by the supposition that the pyx, being an altar-piece, had excellent care, but was rubbed harder and oftener on the top, which was exposed to view, than on the bottom, which was less easily seen—a practice which seems to have come down in unbroken descent to the housemaids of the present day.

Another beautiful example of colour shading in continental pewter may be seen in No. iv. The body of this well-shaped jug has developed a uniform, rich dark gray colour suffused with brown, while its surface has a fine polish with a satiny finish, and is remarkably smooth to the touch.

Specimens of pewter with such perfection of colouring as these are rare in any country, but especially so in Europe.

All these colourings of pewter surfaces, with their variety of delicate shadings, are due to the influence of the atmosphere during a long period of years on the metals in the alloys from which the articles are made. Tin is the fundamental metal in strictly pewter alloys. Without tin the alloy would not be pewter.\* Combined with the tin there may be lead in varying quantities, or in place of the lead there may be copper, or all three metals may be used. Sometimes a little antimony or zinc is added. The Chinese and Japanese are thought by some to have used more or less gold and silver in their pewter alloys, but there is little authority for such a statement at present, as no full and careful analyses of their alloys have as yet been made, or, if made, not published. Perhaps enough has been said, however, to indicate that from such a variety of metals many shadings and colourings must in time emerge.

Golden sub-tones sometimes appear due to the presence of copper or brass. These golden sub-tones are remarkable in that they seem to lie underneath the shibuichi gray and the shakudo, and to pulse their way through these duller colourings solely by reason of their greater luminosity. "A suggestion of intercepted, but not remote sunshine."

A rugged old Chinese tea jar is shown in No. v. made by Suzuya Niyemon, that is, Niyemon the

\* Reference is made here to European and English pewter, and not to the Chinese and Japanese metal ware.

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pewter-maker. It has probably seen about three hundred years of a service that was sometimes far from gentle, as its battered sides give good evidence.

golden sub-tones. Rare colourings these, high-wrought, and not to be found elsewhere in all the world than in the ancient pewter of Chinese or Japanese make,



NO. IV.—A WELL-FORMED JUG OF GOOD TYPE, EUROPEAN MANUFACTURE  
THE GENERAL COLOURING IS A DELICATE BROWNISH GRAY      HEIGHT, 12 IN.

Nevertheless, in general it has had just the kind of care needful for bringing to the surface its innate beauty. It has probably never been washed, much less scrubbed, but has been handled a thousand times, and wiped almost daily with soft cloths. The general tone of its body colour is a rich, soft gray, such as may be found in the plumage of certain doves. Lighter in some places, but deepening strongly in others, a charming effect is produced of small dark clouds swimming in a gray sky. Scattered over the surface are raised age blisters, dark in colour, almost black, like beauty spots on the olive-coloured cheek of a Spanish dancer.

Seemingly under the surface, yet shining through it, like the sun on a murky day making its presence felt through the gray, cloudy sky, are the beautiful

unless, perchance, there be unknown specimens hidden away in the homes of India and Persia.

In studying these specimens of Oriental metal ware, one impression made upon the mind is that when dealing with alloys like those in Nos. i. and v., Nature in arranging her decorations pursued a well-defined policy. The original colour of both specimens when handed to her by man was, perhaps, a few shades away from the crude brilliance of pure tin. After working over it for a hundred years or so, the great artist succeeded in subduing this garish effect to the soft and alluring pearl gray. But not content with this, she now begun to add here and there little polka dots, later deepening these into a colour almost black. Another century was thus consumed, at the end of which she presented to our admiring view her

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wonderful rain-stain effect. But she had at her command resources even greater than these, and calling them to her aid, she now proceeded to glorify her

belief in the latter, because of the rich plumpness of the stomach, which gives evidence that its owner has been well supplied from the granary of Circe; and



No. V.—LARGE CHINESE TEA JAR      COLOURINGS OF GRAY AND BRONZE GOLD  
HEIGHT, 12 IN.; DIAMETER, 9 IN.; DIAMETER OF BASE, 4 IN.

work—to suffuse the surface with light by flowing under it those remarkable golden sub-tones.

The tea jar in No. i. shows the rain-stain effect splendidly, while the golden tones are very, very faint; but on the jar in No. v., which is perhaps a hundred years older, the conditions are just reversed—the rain-stain design is merged into the cloud effect, while the golden sunset tones are notably strong. The difference in the alloy of the two specimens predetermined the diversity in their colourings.

Picking up the thread of these facts, it will be seen that there was a regular progression, first from early tin colour to pearl gray; that then came the addition of little spots, which later deepened and multiplied into the rain-stain, and that finally the surface began to take on the golden tinge. Whether the work is now complete, or there are other changes to come, is a query to be answered only by later generations than ours.

On the top of a wonderful pewter vase (No. vi.) there sits the contemplative figure of a Chinese wise-man or a Chinese god. Inclination is rather toward

every one knows that the surest way to the favour of a god is through his stomach. Was ever seen a thin Chinese god? Although he has sat there cross-legged for two hundred years or more—and Heaven grant such gods freedom from rheumatism—it is likely that he was never aware of the rare charm of his throne in the grace of its lines and the excellence of its form. But may we not admit his ability to appreciate the remarkably beautiful and interesting change which has taken place in the colouring of his surroundings, since to some extent this change has occurred right under his very eyes—dreamy and god-like. This colouring is certainly interesting, if only in its difference from that of the objects already described. Here there is no shibuichi gray, no rain-stain, no shakudo, nor cloud effects, and not a trace of the golden sub-tones. Instead, the general tone of the vase is olive, with a slight diffusion of green. That is the first stage in its development from the virgin pewter colour. The second stage is now well advanced, and shows an olive yellow darkening into a rich olive brown. It is possible that this dark

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brown will eventually cover the entire vase. If so, the little god on his throne will sometime know.

The curious-looking vase (Nos. vii. and viii.) which,

to the skin of an alligator. Later this skin peeled off in places, leaving the smooth surface of the pewter, which in turn has become coloured to a rich shiny



NO. VI.—CHINESE FLUTED VASE  
GENERAL COLOURING OLIVE BROWN

TEMPLE FORM AND OVERHANGING COVER  
HEIGHT, 19½ IN.; DIAMETER, 12¾ IN.

during its battle for life, has lost its side arms, and on the top of which alertly perches a strange-looking creature known as a sacred animal, a being which floats leisurely down on to this sphere once in a thousand years or so, bringing happiness and good luck to all who follow its teachings, is an example of still another scheme of colour. The entire surface has been, and still is, largely covered with a heavy corrosion in very dark brown, merging into shakudo black. During the working out of this process, the vase was evidently for a long period buried in the earth. After a time this corrosion began to crack, making an effect similar

bronze on the older portions, and to a tarnished silver on those parts that did not peel until a later period. It is quite possible to successfully trace these changes in the surface. The bronze colouring and the powdering of light green noticeable here and there over the surface are directly due to the action of the elements on the copper in the alloy. In like manner an article made of bronze alloy, which is largely copper, when buried in the earth, produces finally those rich green colourings which add so largely to the beauty and æsthetic value of ancient bronzes.



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NO. VII.—LARGE CHINESE GLOBULAR VASE WITH COVER  
COLOURINGS OF BROWN, BLACK AND GREEN  
HEIGHT, 12 IN. ; DIAMETER, 10½ IN.



NO. VIII.—ANOTHER VIEW, SHOWING WHERE AT DIFFERENT  
PERIODS THE CRUST HAS SCALED OFF  
ONE SCAR HAS BRONZED, THE OTHER HAS SILVERED

It is here, at this very point, when your mind is made up to write for a thousand years that some subtle but compelling influence reminds you that the limit is reached.

The mist has deepened. Twilight shadows are moving in. The pewter is fast losing its form, and only its high lights are visible in the dusk. Through the doors that open out into the near garden come

the good-night twitterings of a flock of goldfinches fitting among the leafy branches of a linden tree. There is no ripple on the limpid surface of the lily pool. On its edge is a grosbeak with throat of rose hue daintily sipping his nightcap. The goldfish have sunk to the bottom to stay until morning. All nature speaks of a day's work done. It is time to doze and to dream.

