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# FINE CONTINENTAL TABLE PEWTER

## *of the Eighteenth Century*

*By* ROBERT M. VETTER

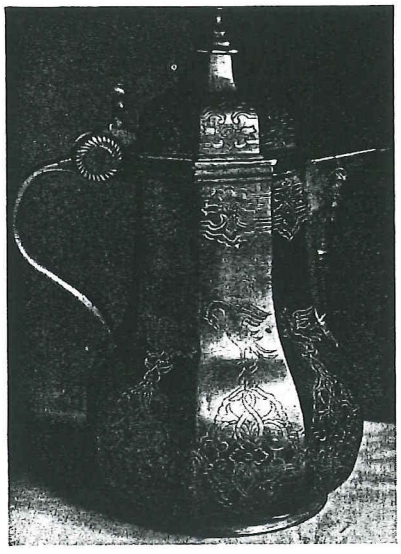
*Our veteran authority on European antiques shares with us here some reflections on his favorite subject, which deserves more consideration than it has yet received from American collectors.*

PEWTER has sometimes been considered suitable only for common utensils. The makers of fine pieces have been accused of encroaching on the domain of the silversmith, and pewter of the elegant sort has been termed "poor man's silver." This might be justified if pewterers had been simply slavish imitators of silver work, but this they certainly were not. The designs of an outstanding pewterer like Sebastian Ferber of Mainz, two of whose pieces are illustrated here, were in some cases actually copied by silversmiths. One might as well call pottery like Delft "poor man's porcelain." In both cases a less delicate and costly material permits of a bolder and more picturesque expression. Continental pewterers in the eighteenth century were very much alive to the possibilities of their material, and blended style and stuff in a manner which deserves our admiration.

There can be no doubt that English pewter, large quantities of which were imported into Continental Europe, set a standard of excellence. This applies more to the quality of the pewter, however, than to the style. English tableware was sober in outline; the conservative English masters did not venture much further than to the lobing, scalloping, or gadrooning of plates and dishes.

Leadless alloys of tin, with small amounts of copper, antimony, and bismuth to harden the metal, seem to have been first used in England. For that reason pewter of such composition was generally termed *Englisch Zinn,* and marked with the symbol of an angel—doubtless intended as a pun (Engel—Englisch). A crowned rose mark was also used, as an imitation of English touches. Such marks had reference only to the purity of the metal, not to the origin of the tin. Most of that used on the Continent came from Saxon, Bohemian, or Straits mines, though some pewterers used Cornish tin. The words *Fein, Fein,* a crowned hammer, or the letter *F* also denoted fine quality. Bohemian and Austrian pewterers struck the words *S. W. Fein Zinn* on their wares, indicating that the tin came from Schlackenwald near Karlsbad.

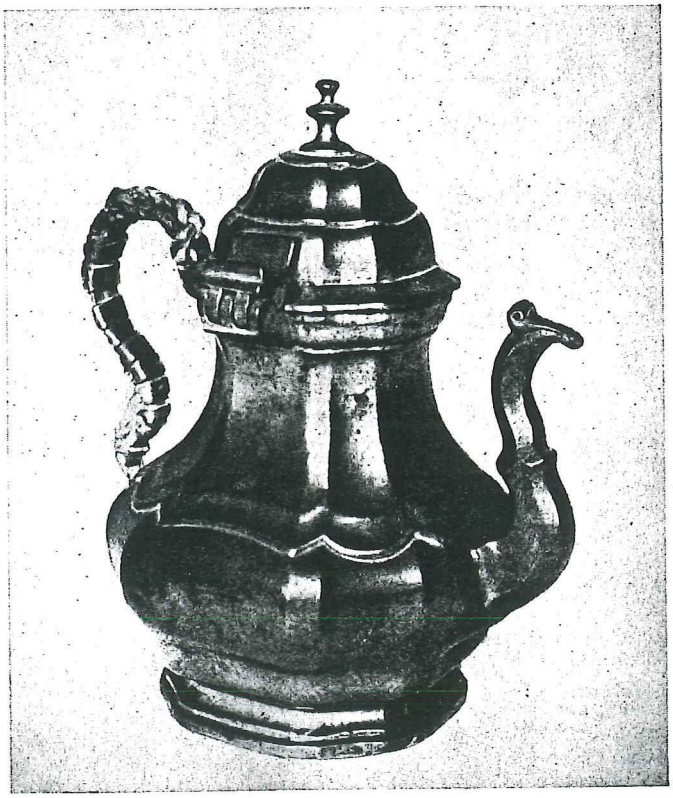
Fine pewter was made to some degree everywhere in Europe in the eighteenth century, to meet the increasing demand for elegant tablewares. In spite of the keen competition offered by porcelain, pottery, glass, and silver, the pewter trade experienced a period of unprecedented prosperity. There was a healthy exchange of ideas, so that similar designs crop up with



COFFEEPOT by Andreas Böck, Linz, Austria *(c. 1725)*. Polygonal form, with decorative engraving. Height, 3¾ inches. *Ruhmann collection.*

COFFEE URN with three taps, by Hugo Lemmen *(Cologne, c. 1700)*. The polygonal form of the neck and the ornamental reeding are typical of the early baroque style, as are also the supporting figures, caryatid handles, and engraving. Three angel touches. Height, 12½ inches.

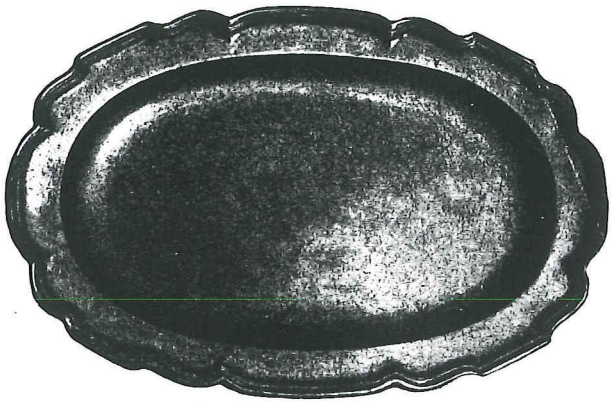
TEAPOT from Karlsbad, Bohemia, showing transition from angular flat panels to folding or fluting, in elegant early baroque style. Height, 6½ inches.



slight modification in widely separated regions. The technique became fairly standardized all over the Continent, with only the Dutch pewterers departing from the general practice. Certain regions excelled in the production of fine pewter. In Germany the outstanding centers were Frankfurt, Mainz, and Nuremberg; in Bohemia, Karlsbad; and in France, Bordeaux, Lyon, Strasburg, and Chartres.

Bohemian pewter is particularly original and inventive. It seems likely that rococo designs were first developed in pewter by the Bohemian masters. They were renowned for their skill in making complicated molds for casting thin-walled and delicate vessels. The alloy which they used consisted of practically pure tin; how they managed to cast it in such intricate molds is a secret not yet rediscovered. Unfortunately the very purity of Bohemian pewter has made it particularly susceptible to tin-pest.

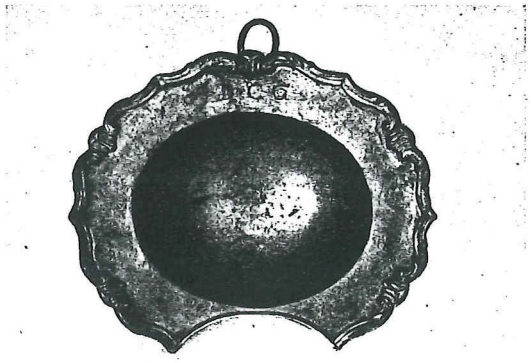
In the eighteenth century mass-production methods were introduced to some extent in the pewter industry. Permanent metal molds, or dies, were used, and castings were assembled by soldering and finished by scraping, polishing, and burnish-



**Oval Dish** by Johann Georg Klingling of Frankfurt, who became master in 1726. The Klinglings were the most prominent pewterers of that town. Identical dishes formed part of the inventory of the Goethehaus at Frankfurt.

**French Pewter.** The teapot shows the polygonal form, while the salt to the left follows the *Régence* fashion which was the forerunner of the rococo. *Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris.*

**Ewer,** ornamented with vertical folds *(c. 1760).*



**Dutch Shaving Basin,** with angel mark. The rim is flat, with ornamental strips soldered on—a typically Dutch method of decoration.

ing. The lathe was used as far as the complicated shapes permitted.

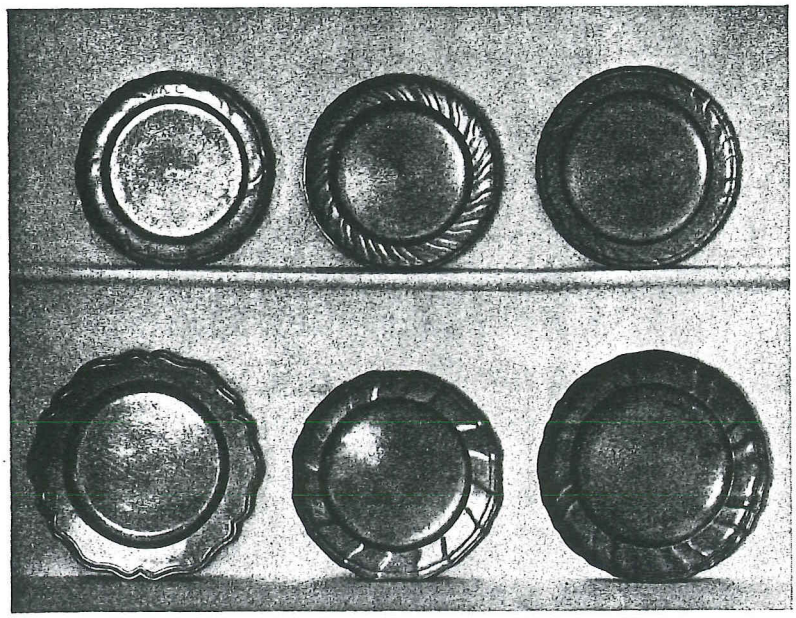
In style, eighteenth-century pewter developed from the sterner baroque to the more flippant rococo. The horizontal section of hollow ware changed from circular to angular, becoming polygonal. Contours then became more sinuous, with folds, twists, and waves suggesting motion—dynamic effects often enhanced by a rippled surface, which was produced by hand polishing. Finally, the evolution of the baroque reached its climax in the delightful irrationality of the rococo. To the undulating surfaces were added rococo ornaments of

GERMAN EWER, with deep, twisted folds and ornament in high rococo style. Height, 10 inches.

OVAL SUGAR BOX *(Frankfurt, mid-1700's)*. Deep twisted folds; rather heavy handles, feet, and finial; engraving on cover.

FLAT BOWL, with raised center and folded rim; engraved decoration; angel touch. *Collection of Karl Ruhmann.*

SWISS COFFEEPOT, with angel touch. Wavy folds, with slanting spout, producing a dynamic effect. Height, 11 inches.

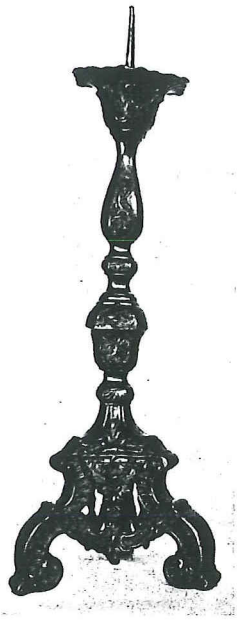


SWISS AND BOHEMIAN PLATES, showing treatment of rim in various styles of folding.

shells and other motifs, resulting in pieces which exhibit what might be called "visual counterpoint."

This brilliant episode was a sort of last flowering before the final collapse. In the end, the struggle was lost by the pewterers. Ceramics, like Wedgwood, prevailed; while Sheffield and Britannia metal—the latter a sort of sophisticated pewter—became veritable silver substitutes, the one with more, the other with less, success.

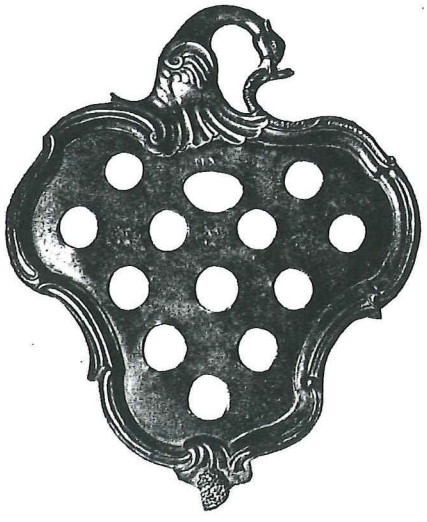
When the ultimate decline of the craft had already begun, pewter in Central Europe was fashioned into forms dictated by the Empire and Biedermeier styles. Technically, the achievements were remarkable, but the geometric exactness demanded by the classic designs is contrary to the intrinsic nature of pewter, the softness of which calls for a more sketchy treatment. The mellowness of its surface was marred by the addition of an excess of antimony in order to make the alloy more fusible and polishable. Such alloys have a hard, cold surface. The manufacture of rococo pewter was continued in more remote places up to about 1840, where the old dies were used. Gradually the dividing line between pewter and Britannia metal becomes less and less distinct.



FLEMISH CANDLESTICK, symmetrical design of early rococo style. Height, 24 inches. *Formerly in Karel Azijnman collection, Holland.*

BOHEMIAN CANDLESTICK in rococo style *(c. 1760)*, showing use of asymmetrical ornament. *Museum für angewandte Kunst, Vienna.*

FRENCH BROTH BOWL *(Bordeaux, c. 1730)*, marked with the name of the maker, *Fabreguettes*, the word *Raffiné*, and an *F*. Rococo decoration. *Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris.*



ANOTHER OF SEBASTIAN FERBER'S CREATIONS —a spoon holder, 14 by 11½ inches; angel marks.

SOUP TUREEN AND TRAY by Sebastian Ferber of Mainz, whose designs were copied in silver. A consummate example of the rococo style in pewter. Angel marks. Tray, 22 inches long; tureen, 12½ inches high.

*Except as noted, illustrations from the author's collection.*