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Wriggle work decoration on British and European pewter, 1600–1800



BY KENNETH BARKIN



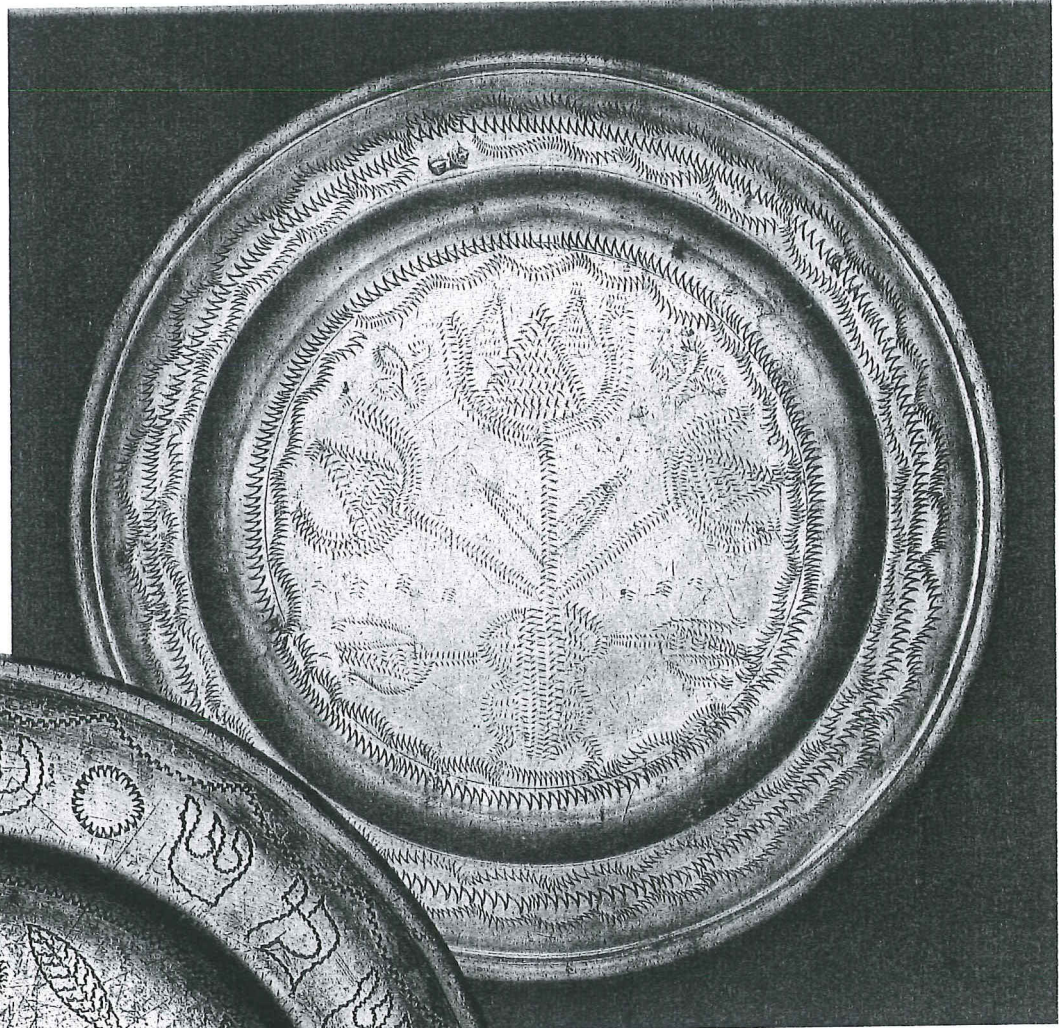
In the English-speaking world, pewter over the past three or four centuries has been considered primarily a utilitarian metal associated with the implements used to fulfill the basic needs of everyday life. Since it is overwhelmingly nineteenth-century pewter that survives in significant quantities, the spoons, plates, bowls, and tavern mugs of that century come to mind when one thinks about the role of pewter in the past. A British expert on pewter, Peter Hornsby, once estimated that eighty percent of surviving pewter objects are spoons and plates.¹ When George Orwell (1903–1950) wrote about his years in an English boarding school before World War I, he remembered the pewter bowls encrusted with the porridge of earlier students that greeted him at breakfast each morning.²

Above all, pewter is remembered as plain in form with simple lines, medium gray to black in color, and far removed from the world of aesthetics or even folk art. This is particularly true of American pewter on which decoration of any sort is exceedingly rare. Decoration is found more often on British pewter and even more frequently on continental pewter. Just as furniture and artworks in the baroque

ANTIQUES

and rococo styles were more lavishly decorative in their continental incarnations than in their more restrained British or American manifestations, so the Continent produced more decorated, what the British would call "busy," pewter.

An exhibition of British and continental pewter of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries currently on view at the Long Beach Museum of Art in California, attests to an age when there were at least five methods for decorating pewter. One method required a decorative punch, often in the shape of a



Pl. I. Wine cup made by Jonathan Ingles (w. 1668-1702), London, c. 1668. The mark "II" on the bottom incorporates the date 1668, which was probably the year Ingles became a freeman of the guild. Pewter, height 3 1/8 inches. *Except as noted, the objects illustrated are in the Lord Barkin Collection and photographs are by Greg Page.*

Pl. II. Sugar caster, Saint Omer, France, c. 1720. Pewter, height 6 inches. Casters as large as this are rare. This one is also remarkable for its combination of wriggle work and gadrooning.

Left: Pl. III. Plate made by J. C. Sarburg, German, possibly Frankfurt, c. 1760. Marked "J. C. SARBURG" on the reverse; inscribed with Psalm 113 in Hebrew around the rim. Pewter, diameter 12 inches. In the center is the rare depiction of a synagogue in bold wriggle work. Psalm 113 is usually recited during Passover. *Collection of Irwin and Sarah Wall.*

Above: Pl. IV. Dish, Belgian, c. 1720. Marked "LC" at the top. Pewter, diameter 14 inches.

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Pl. V. Bed warmer marked by Birch and Villers (w. 1772–1786), Birmingham, England, c. 1780. Pewter; length 31 inches. Since pewter melts at an average of 440 degrees Fahrenheit, and bed warmers use hot coals or hot water (as in this case), pewter bed warmers are rare but brass ones are common. The top is decorated with wriggle work tulips, attesting to their popularity more than a century after the tulip craze began. *Collection of Stan and Marion Robboy.*

Pl. VI. Beaker; Dutch, c. 1690. Marked "B.A." with rose and crown on the bottom. Pewter; height 7 inches. Large numbers of beakers were made in the Netherlands to celebrate the accession of William of Orange to the throne of England as William III (r. 1689–1702) in 1689. Usually the figure of William decorates one side of these beakers and Mary II (r. 1689–1694) the other. In this case, William is paired with an orange tree.

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Pl. VII. Plate made by John Shorey (w. 1683–1721), English, c. 1700. Marked "IS" in shield on the rim at center left; inscribed "EP" at center right and "THE GIFT IS SMALL THE LOVE IS ALL" around the rim. Pewter; diameter 9 inches. The plate was probably a modest wedding present. The inscription of homilies is extremely rare on British pewter.

Pl. VIII. Salt box, German, c. 1770. Pewter; height 13, width 7 inches. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century saltcellars are generally very small owing to the high price of salt. As the price decreased, large containers such as this were made to hang on the wall.

palm leaf, to stamp a circle or frieze of decoration around the rim of a plate or the lip of a flagon.³ Earlier, this technique was commonly used on leather and on brass alms dishes. The second method of decorating pewter; relief decoration, was common in German-speaking central Europe from about 1500 to 1650.⁴ Such pewter was cast in molds, but unlike nearly all other pewter ornamentation, the decoration was in the mold. Thus the creativity belonged to the designer of the mold. The pewterer poured the molten metal into the mold, extracted the piece when it had cooled, and carefully finished it. These molds, often of bronze or cast iron, were of great value and were often still extant in the nineteenth century. In Nuremberg, one of the major centers of metalwork in early modern Europe, the molds were often sold or passed down from generation to generation. This form of decoration was also popular in Strasbourg, France. The finished pieces were praised for their aesthetic rather than utilitarian value. Very little relief-decorated pewter was made in Britain.⁵ Hammering a pewter piece from the back side was thought to strengthen the metal, especially in England and France, but it was a technique also used occasionally to decorate the front of dishes, chargers, and tankards, for it changed the way light refracted from the surface. A fourth method of decoration was cutting the pewter into fretwork patterns. This was common in the Kulmbach area of Germany where barrel makers also made wooden stave tankards, which were then inlaid with a piece of fretted pewter.⁶

This brings us to the main subject of this essay: wriggle work, which was by far the most successful form of ornamentation on pewter at the time and is highly valued by collectors today.⁷ Wriggle work was done by the pewterer or a journeyman in his workshop rather than by a master engraver. Sending pewter to a trained engraver had been banned by the English pewterers' guild



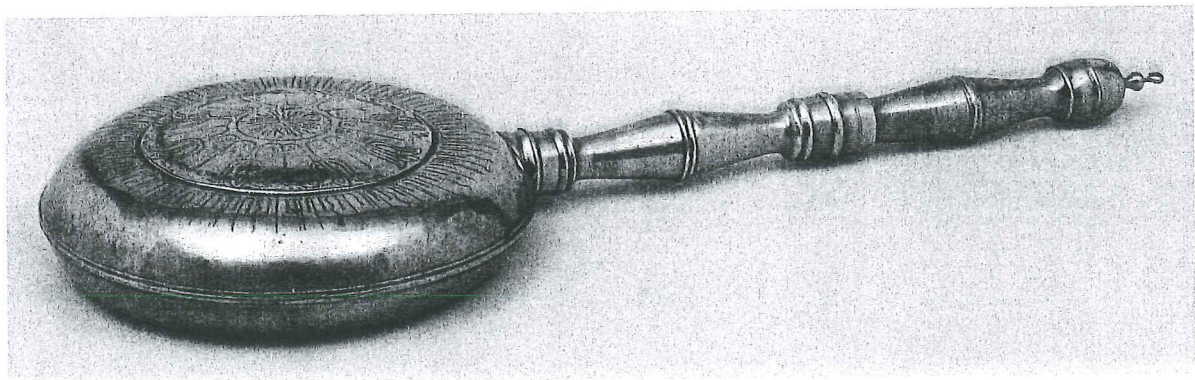
as early as 1588 but continued to be allowed by continental guilds (see Pl. IX, right).

Wriggle work entailed the use of a sharp tool to incise the decorative pattern with zigzag lines. In Germany there were several variations of wriggle work decoration. Perceptive observers have noticed that many of the animals and plants on wriggle work plates, particularly in England, bear a remarkable similarity to each other. This has led scholars to speculate that pewterers may have used stencils to outline the decoration.

This method had been used for a century by Dutch tile makers, who put the stencil over a blank tile and hit it with a bag full of colored powder.

The purpose of wriggle work decoration was decorative rather than functional, aimed at attracting prospective buyers. From surviving pieces it is clear that the wriggle work might be shallow or faint, as it is on the seventeenth-century wine cup shown in Plate I, or very bold, as it is on the eighteenth-century dish in Plate IV. Like much folk art, such decoration was characterized by a lack of perspective and little attention to accurate detail or proportions. An example is the beaker shown in Plate VI, decorated on the side not pictured with an orange tree that resembles a child's drawing. The rendering is remarkably flat and similar to decoration on Dutch and English delftware of the same period. It is not surprising that the renewed interest in wriggle work parallels the rise of interest in folk art painting in recent times.

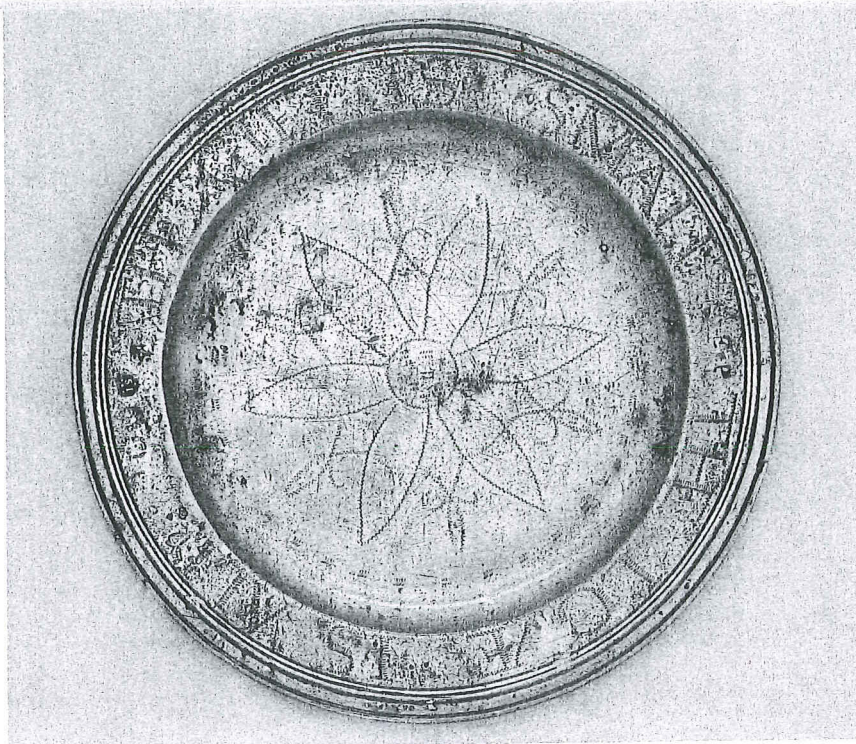
Wriggle work as a form of decoration thrived in England between 1660 and 1730, according to Hornsby, or between 1680 and 1710, if one accepts the view of Vanessa Brett.⁸ They both believe it continued much later on the Continent. However, the pewter in the current exhibition leads one to extend the terminal date proposed by either author: The wriggle work plate portraying a lion with a crown on his mane (Pl. XIII) is marked by A. Carter, a pewterer listed by



Howard Herschel Cotterell (d. 1934) as active around 1750.⁹ Another object that exceeds both proposed date spans is the pewter bed warmer shown in Plate V, which has a ring of eight wriggle work tulips on the lid. It bears the mark of George Birch and William Villers, who set up shop on Moor Street in Birmingham, England, in 1772 and remained in business until 1786.¹⁰ Thus, the dates of wriggle work decoration in England ought to be extended to more than a century and for a good two centuries on the Continent.

The exhibition offers evidence that wriggle work decoration appeared earlier in German-speaking Europe than in England. The remarkably sophisticated early seventeenth-century flagon in Plate X is from Schässburg, Transylvania (now Sighisoara, Romania), an area that had attracted German artisans in the late Middle Ages. In his authoritative book on the pewter of this region, Horst Sluka dates this flagon to the 1620s.¹¹ The flagon combines a relief-decorated handle, similar to later Norwegian handles, a punch-decorated lip and base, and a large leaping stag on the cylindrical body. The stag and surrounding plants combine wriggle work and straight-line engraving. The mixture of wriggle work and other methods of decoration on a single piece is characteristic of German work and is very rare on British pewter. Sluka's book pictures a number of pewter flagons and tankards that were decorated with wriggle work in early seventeenth-century Transylvania, which was nominally part of the Ottoman Empire at that time. Although it is clear that wriggle work appeared on the Continent considerably earlier than in England, it is too soon to establish whether there was a direct influence of one on the other; or what scientists refer to as coevolution—that is, that wriggle work appeared independently in Europe and in England.

When Hornsby's dates are lengthened to the 1770s, the period is one in which pewterers faced increased competition from delftware and glass, and later from silverplate and Britannia metal. It is clear that the use of pewter in the household began to decline in the eighteenth century. A century earlier probate lists showed that up to eighty-five percent of British households had at least one pewter object. This was not true by the mid-eighteenth century. Colorful ceramics from Chelsea, Lambeth, and Derby as well as the creations of Josiah Wedgwood (1730–1795) began to dominate the high end of the market, and stoneware and glass challenged the dominance of pewter at the lower end of the market. The eighteenth century was the cen-



tury of ceramics. Around 1770 there were five thousand workers employed in the potteries of England and Wales. This is more than the total number of pewterers known to have become masters from the fourteenth century until that date.¹²

Although competition increased in Europe (for instance, in the early nineteenth century German pewterers complained about losing part of their market to porcelain), Britain seemed to feel it the most. British pewterers then turned to the lucrative foreign markets, and exports soared by one thousand percent in the eighteenth century, a large proportion going to the American colonies.¹³ The habits of British consumers also changed in the eighteenth century. Tea and coffee grew in popularity at the expense of beer; a drink still associated with pewter. The consumption of beer declined by fifty percent per capita between 1710 and 1800. Tea consumption rose from an average of one ounce per person in 1700 to 2.3 pounds at the end of the century.¹⁴ Pewter mugs and tankards were the main vessels for dispensing beer; but the metal did not appeal to drinkers of coffee and tea. Cotterell, writing in 1929, claimed that few surviving teapots were made of pewter.¹⁵ and, one might add, even fewer teacups.

To survive the increasing competition, pewterers on the Continent and in Britain sought to offer a greater range of products. In the mid- to late seventeenth century, wriggle work cropped up all over Europe from Transylvania to Germany, Switzerland, France, and the Netherlands. One may see the greater degree of decoration on pewter as an effort to stimulate demand in the rococo age, when lively decoration was popular and

the simple lines of pewter objects seemed to lack vitality and movement as well as color:

Another reason for the rapid increase of wriggle work in England has not escaped the notice of scholars. Among the earliest pieces in the 1660s were commemorative chargers that celebrated the accession to the throne of Charles II (r. 1660–1685) in 1660 after twenty years of civil war; His marriage, shortly after the end of the civil war, led pewterers to turn out wriggle work chargers with the arms of the Stuarts.

On one wriggle work dish in a Derbyshire collection, Charles I (r. 1625–1649) is hiding from parliamentary soldiers in an oak tree.





Pl. IX. *Left to right:* Dish marked by Wood and Mitchell (w. 1742-1754), London, decorated in Germany, c. 1750. Inscribed "ADAM USQ. EVA IN PARADIS" on the rim at the bottom. Pewter diameter 13 inches. Adam and Eve, the snake, the apple, and devil are represented in straight-line and crosshatched engraving. Dish marked by Robert Baldwin (w. c. 1690-1726), Wigan, Lancashire, c. 1700. Inscribed "171 LAE 31" at the top. Pewter diameter 17 inches. Dish made by Johannes Walser (w. 1681-1730), Chur, Switzerland, 1708. Marked "J.W." with rose and crown on the rim, and inscribed "AF/1708" at the top and "S. GEORGII ROYVST. EXORVST." above the professionally engraved depiction of Saint George killing the dragon. Pewter diameter 13 inches. *Photograph by Steve Wallig.*

Pl. X. Wine flagon, Transylvania, c. 1625. Marked "MN" at the bottom. Pewter, height 10 inches. This early flagon is remarkable for its various types of decoration: punch, relief, line engraving, and wriggle work. Punch decoration in central Europe is found only in Transylvania and the Augsburg region of southern Germany. The relief decoration on the handle is similar to that on the handles of Norwegian tankards but most probably developed independently of Norwegian pewter.



This peculiar combination of politics and wriggle work reemerged thirty years later when the Catholic James II (r. 1685-1688) was driven from the throne in 1688 during the "Glorious Revolution."¹⁶ A large number of wriggle work beakers (usually seven inches high) then appeared with the faces of the new Protestant rulers, William III alone (see Pl. VI) or with Mary II. The vast majority of these were made in the Netherlands and exported to England. The number surviving is evidence that these patriotic souvenirs found a ready market in both countries. Something similar occurred at the same time in Regensburg, near Nuremberg, where the electors of the Holy Roman Empire met at regular intervals. Many wriggle work portraits of the electors and their wives appear on tankards made by local pewterers to commemorate these meetings.¹⁷

The largest section of the exhibition in Long Beach is devoted to pewter with wriggle work decoration, the chief subjects being plants, animals, religion, and marriage and the family. Many of the flowering plants are stylized and not easily identifiable even by a botanist (see Pl. XII). Among the flowers most commonly represented are roses, lilies, fleurs-de-lis, and sunflowers. Occasionally the flowers are combined with sayings, such as *The Gift Is Small, The Love Is All* (Pl. VII). The tulip was one of the most represented flowers in wriggle work, whose growing popularity as a form of decoration coincided with the spread of tulipomania in the seventeenth century. Two British and two continental objects in the exhibition attest to the European obsession with tulips. From England there is the bed warmer (Pl. V) mentioned above and a charger from Wigan in Lancashire that traces the growth of the

tulip from bulb to mature flower: A similar representation appears on a large Belgian dish, and the German salt box shown in Plate VIII.

British plates with wriggle work animals and birds were frequently given in pairs as wedding presents. Some scholars view the animals as embodying religious symbols, with the deer and the lion both being references to Christ.¹⁸ While it is true that many representations, such as a pelican in her piety, may have religious meaning, the frequent appearance of a peacock and peahen on pairs of plates are clearly symbols of a couple about to be married. This provides a clue to the frequent appearance of wriggle work lions and stags on plates that were often sold in tandem with plates decorated with birds. Careful observation of these plates shows the lions and stags in heat, leading one to the inescapable conclusion that as late as the 1750s these plates served as fertility symbols in England (see Pls. XI, XIII)—surprisingly in a century that has been called the age of reason. But primitive folk beliefs, as historians have learned, often continue under the surface in highly religious cultures as well as in so-called enlightened eras. Clearly, such gifts were meant to wish the couple luck in having a large family.

As religion played a greater role in everyday life in the past than it does today, pewterers in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries sought to expand their market with wriggle work decoration depicting well-known religious images. Most common were Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (see Pl. IX, left), the Virgin saddened by the seven sorrows she had experienced, and Jesus on the cross.

A surprising number of wriggle work

Left: Pl. XI. Plate made by William Bartlett (w. 1740–1770), English, c. 1740–1770. Pewter; diameter 8½ inches. This and the plates in Pls. XII and XIII were probably given as wedding presents in sets of two. The stag and lion (see Pl. XIII) were male symbols and were probably matched by plates depicting a flower or fawn for the bride.

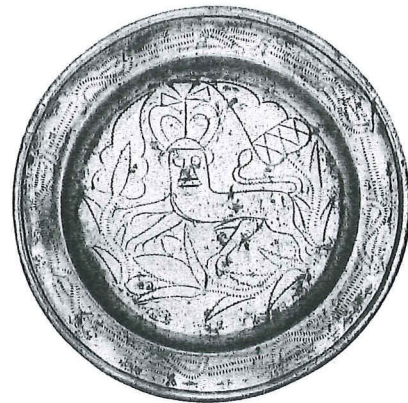
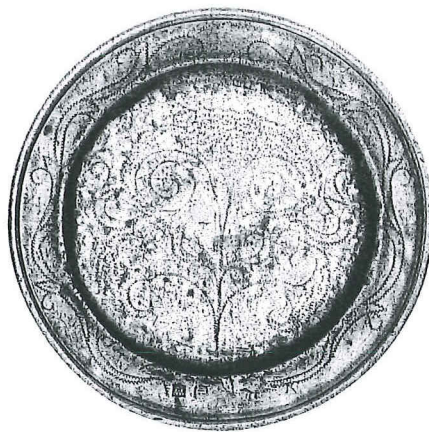
Center: Pl. XII. Plate made by James Hitchman (w. 1701–1733), English, c. 1720. Marked “JAMES HITCHMAN” on the reverse. Pewter; diameter 8½ inches. The central decoration is a stylized tansy. *Collection of John Phillips.*

Right: Pl. XIII. Plate made by A. Carter (w. c. 1750), London, c. 1750. Marked “A. CARTER” on the reverse. Pewter; diameter 8½ inches. The central decoration depicts a crowned lion.

pewter plates and large dishes made between 1670 and 1800 were clearly for the use of observant Jews.¹⁹ They were made and decorated by Christian pewterers, since Jews were never allowed to become master artisans in the guilds. The decoration around the rim



tulips but also with a couple hand in hand, who are no doubt to be married. The box would later hang in the kitchen, serving both utilitarian and aesthetic functions. Many dishes survive that are inscribed with the names of a betrothed couple and the year of their wedding, sometimes surrounded by flowers. These mementos are found in English, German, and Hebrew. In each case the man and woman getting married or their families had to order the wriggle work dish. Such commemorative dishes were relative novelties in the eighteenth century but quickly caught on, replacing the more traditional set of pewter plates and bowls as a wedding present. There is also evidence that wriggle work and straight-line engraving were used to commemorate charitable donations. One English chalice bears the inscription, “T’IS A GIFT TO THE CHURCH OF CHRIST’S MEETING, HOG LANE, WOOLWICH, 1758.” In this case the donor chose to omit his or her name.



included Hebrew words and phrases from the psalms and Passover prayers. These objects were chiefly made in southwestern Germany, Bohemia, and the Netherlands, where there were substantial Jewish populations. A few survive with poorly executed Hebrew letters, which may be the result of Jews seeking to decorate their own pewter without the guidance of the pewterer: The owner’s initials in wriggle work Hebrew script are also not rare. Jewish pewter is lavishly decorated with pomegranates and often tulips and other flowers. The plates and dishes are sectioned with wriggle work borders for the various spices that are used in Passover ceremonies. Apart from Passover and Purim themes, one occasionally finds a dish that is decorated with a wriggle work building, presumably a synagogue (see Pl. III).

Wriggle work, as well as straight-line engraving, was used to commemorate important moments in people’s lives. The salt box mentioned above is decorated not only with

Wriggle work decoration proved to be very popular for more than a century. There was a boldness about it that was lacking in straight-line engraving, and it corresponded with the growth of folk art style decoration on chests, boxes, and other utilitarian objects. Given the simultaneous rage for flamboyant decoration and dress among the nobility and fashion-conscious upper classes, it is not perhaps surprising that pewterers made a nod in this direction with wriggle work.

An exhibition entitled *From Tavern to Tabernacle: Decorated British and European Pewter, 1600–1800*, is on view at the Long Beach Museum of Art in California until September 8.

¹ Oral communication from Peter Hornsby, 1991.

² George Orwell, *Such, Such Were the Joys* (Harcourt Brace, New York, 1953), p. 34 ff.

³ The technique occurs rarely and usually on English dishes of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. It was, however, common in Transylvania and the

regions around Augsburg in southern Germany. For a general introduction to the history of pewter, see Kenneth Barkin, *European Pewter in Everyday Life (1600–1900)...* (University Art Gallery, University of California, Riverside, California, 1988).

⁴ Erwin Hintze, *Nürnberger Zinn* (Klinkhardt and Biermann, Leipzig, 1921); and Katharina Ruhmann, *Edel-Zinn: ein Begleiter durch die Ausstellung* [Karl Ruhmann Sammlung] (Katharina Ruhmann, Wildon, Austria, and Universitätsbuchdruckerei Styria, Graz, 1988), p. 104.

⁵ The Granger candlestick in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London is relief decorated, but some scholars have expressed doubt about its authenticity (see Anthony North and Andrew Spira, *Pewter at the Victoria and Albert Museum* [V and A Publications, London, 1999], p. 126).

⁶ See Klaus Heinz, *Kulmbacher Daubenkrüge*. Schriften zur Heimatpflege 41 (Landschaftsmuseum Obermeim, Kulmbach, Germany, 1990).

⁷ Surprisingly little has been written about wriggle work decoration. See Peter Hornsby, “Wriggle work Plates,” *Journal of the Pewter Society*, vol. 6, no. 4 (Fall 1988), pp. 142–149; Christopher A. Peal, *Pewter of Great Britain* (John Gifford, London, 1983), pp. 34–35; Peter Hornsby, *Pewter of the Western World, 1600–1851* (Schiffer, Exton, Pennsylvania, 1983), pp. 41–48; and Ronald F. Michaels, *British Pewter* (Ward, Lock, London, 1969), pp. 12, 65.

⁸ Hornsby, “Wriggle work Plates,” p. 142; and Vanessa Brett, *Phaidon Guide to Pewter* (Phaidon, Oxford, 1981), p. 29.

⁹ Howard Herschel Cotterell, *Old Pewter; Its Makers and*

Marks in England, Scotland, and Ireland: An Account of the Old Pewterers and His Craft (Batsford, London, 1929), p. 176.

¹⁰ Ronald F. Homer and David W. Hall, *Provincial Pewterers: A Study of the Craft in the West Midlands and Wales* (Phillimore, London, 1985), p. 68.

¹¹ Horst Sluka, *Siebenbürgisch-sächsisches Zinn* (Aschen-dorff, Münster, 1990), p. 150.

¹² John Hatcher and Theodore C. Barker, *A History of British Pewter* (Longman, London, 1974), pp. 280–281.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 290.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

¹⁵ Cotterell, *Old Pewter*, p. 143.

¹⁶ Hornsby points to the coincidence that British wriggle work began at the same time as patriotic pewter. See Hornsby, “Wriggle work Plates,” p. 143.

¹⁷ Elisa zu Freudenberg and Wolfram zu Mondfeld, *Altes Zinn aus Niederbayern* (F. Pustet, Regensburg, 1982), vol. 1, p. 212.

¹⁸ Hornsby, “Wriggle work Plates,” p. 144.

¹⁹ Very little has been written about Jewish pewter. See Alex Neish, “The Jewish religious plate,” *Journal of the Pewter Society*, vol. 7, no. 4 (Fall 1990), pp. 125–129.

KENNETH BARKIN, a professor of European history at the University of California, Riverside, is the guest curator of the exhibition that is the subject of this article.