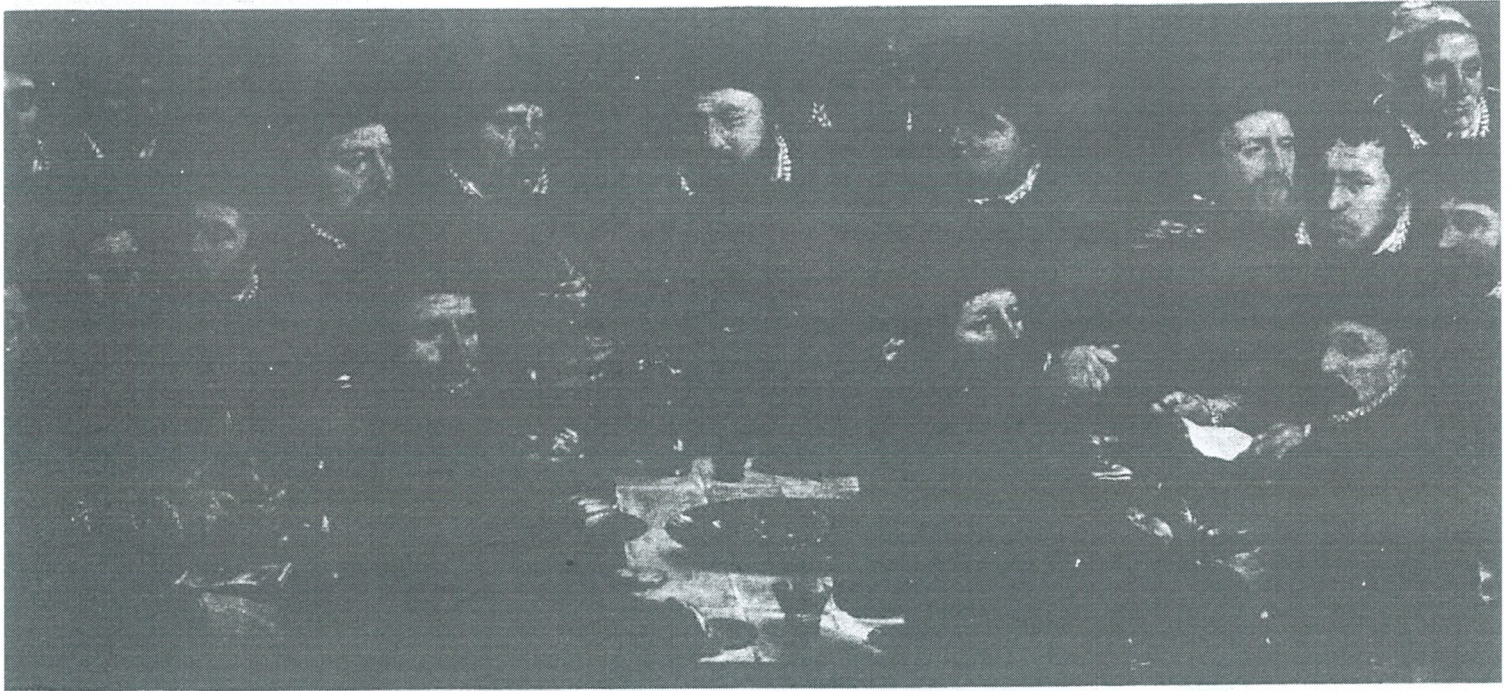


European guild pewter: forms and functions

BY ROBERT M. VETTER



This portrait of members of an unidentified Dutch guild, painted by Dirck Barendsz (1534-1592), shows the masters partaking of a meal. Among pewter tableware is a large so-called Jan Steen flagon at left which serves as a decanter. The food is on a broad-rimmed pewter dish, and each member has before him a small pewter plate. Some members hold pewter tankards. *Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.*

Our oldest contributor, in two senses of the word, is Robert M. Vetter, who was born in 1881 and first wrote for *ANTIQUES* in 1927. He was coauthor with the British expert Howard Herschel Cotterell of a series of articles on Continental pewter, and he has continued to be one of our most valued writers. From his home in his native Austria he wrote recently, "Born into what seemed a hale world, in the capital of a proud and mighty empire, I was cast into an epoch of violent and rapid change. When I was ten, a bicycle was a technical wonder. Since then the boldest fantasies of Jules Verne have been surpassed. Still more bewildering are the changes in the moral and spiritual spheres. . . I have found a passionate devotion to and occupation with antiques a release from today's materialism."



Fig. 1. Gothic flagon from Villach in the province of Carinthia, Austria, one of a small number of early guild flagons (many were lost or destroyed in World War II) which are, as a group, the rarest and costliest objects ever made in pewter. This example, richly engraved in the manner of the late fifteenth century, has a remarkably complex handle with a unique braided upper portion and a lower portion dominated by griffins facing each other over a trefoil. This latter motif, found also on flagons of later date, probably has a symbolic meaning. The lions sejant on base and lid are a favorite quasi-heraldic motif found on guild vessels of all periods. Height 12 inches. Formerly in the Figdor collection, Vienna. *Metropolitan Museum of Art, Collection of Irwin Untermyer.*

IT IS NOT easy to reconcile the spirit of the ancient guilds with that of their descendants, the modern trade unions. The guilds had developed from religious brotherhoods, possibly of monastic character, and until their disappearance in the early nineteenth century vestiges of this religious atmosphere and a love of rite and ceremony persisted.

From the time the carefully selected apprentice entered his master's establishment he was under the direction of his guild until, after many years of toil, his coffin was borne by guild brethren to the grave. His education, moral instruction, and even the choice of his bride were governed by guild laws, written and unwritten. To become a master, he had not only to produce his masterpiece but also to marry the daughter of a master in his profession. This was not the hardship it seems to us: nobody married for love in the old days.

The rules which governed guild functions and the behavior of guild members for more than six centuries have come down to us in numerous documents which, although couched in various languages and dialects, show a remarkable uniformity. Unwritten laws regulated ceremonies, hospitality, and general behavior, so only a vague, romanticized tradition informs us about the more intimate side of guild life—about the human relations among members. The entertainment of wandering journeymen and other guests was accompanied by copious consumption of alcohol, creating a definite demand for hollow ware; and here the study of accessories—especially those made of that pleasant metal, pewter—bears witness to the pride, humor, and conviviality of these craftsmen as they worked and relaxed under the auspices of their guilds.

The various vessels provided for more or less official occasions display a certain universality of function and form; only inscriptions and trade emblems reveal their relation to a particular trade and place of origin. It is thus possible to classify them in distinct categories. The guild flagon (Fig. 1), of considerable dimensions, was used to fetch drink from the cellar and to fill the goblets or tankards of the guests, often through spigots fitted to the lower parts of gigantic examples. The loving cup is a standing cup or large goblet for drinking on ceremonial occasions, when it passed from hand to hand and lip to lip (Fig. 2). The individual beaker, tankard, or mug was often inscribed with the name or initials of its owner (Fig. 3). The guild shield identified the meeting place of the guild members (Figs. 4-6); a tavern sign of forged iron in the street and a flat shield of pewter inside served this purpose. The tobacco tray, used for offering tobacco to smokers or as an ash tray, was fitted with appropriate tools and suitably inscribed (Fig. 7). By the seventeenth century tobacco had become an effective promoter of conviviality, and we may imagine our guild brothers relaxing with their long clay pipes.

Possibly the most curious of the German pewter guild vessels are the three-dimensional guild signs or trophies. Authentic specimens are the high lights of many pewter collections, for nothing else expresses guild spirit so well. As a rule they represent, realistically or in stylized fashion,

products of the guild in question. To a certain extent there were standard symbols: a shoe for the shoemaker, a bull for the butcher, a shuttle for the weaver, and so on. These could be suspended on chains above the guild members' *Stammtisch* (the table reserved for their use in the local tavern), or stand on a table or sideboard, and they were more readily recognized by many than a lettered sign would have been. They also served as mascots at feasts and processions. The interior was hollow so that it could be filled with drink and used as a decanter or loving cup.

In the wake of the French Revolution, Continental guilds vanished: they were either dissolved or divested of their privileges. Industrialization made factory hands of free-and-easy journeymen, and progressive specialization within each trade obviated traditional procedures or made them appear ridiculous. Guild inventories, including their pewter treasures, were sold and scattered. Gradually collectors became aware of their cultural and artistic value, and today genuine guild pewter finds ready buyers everywhere.

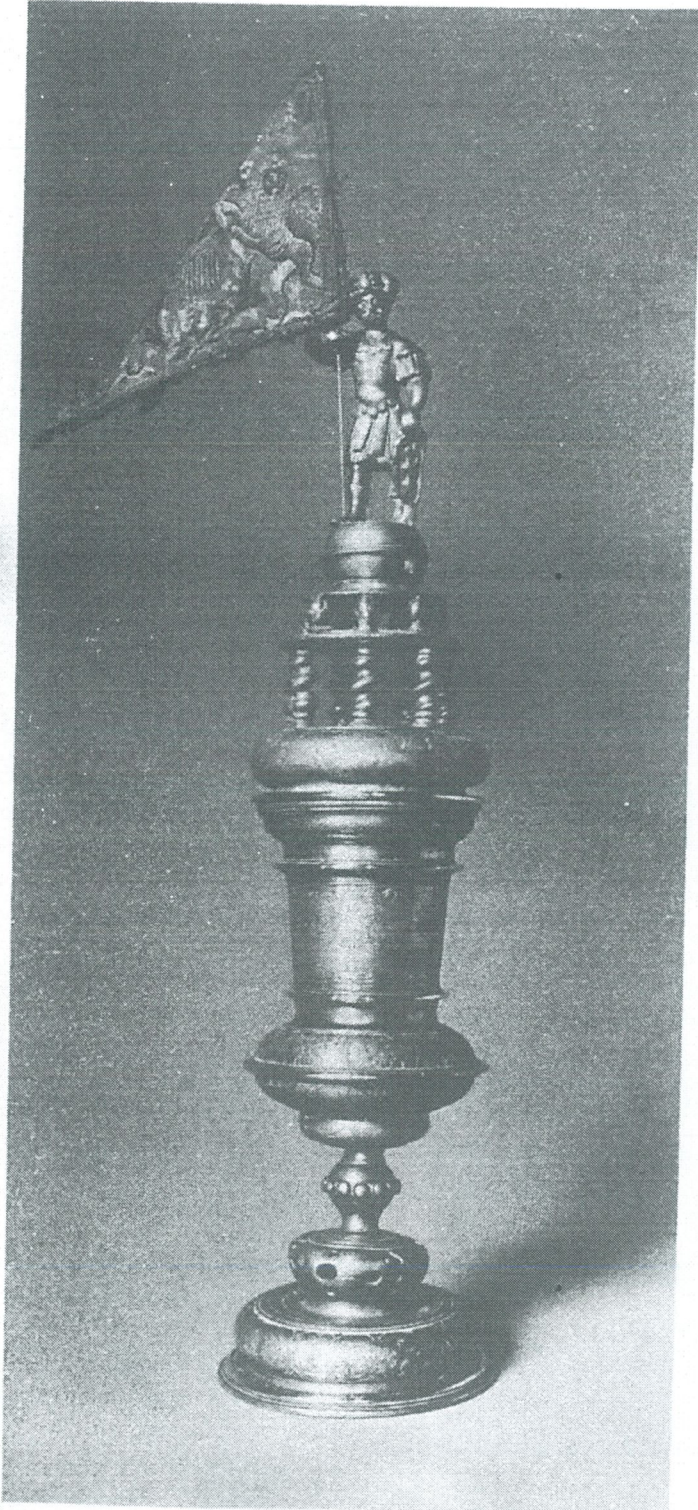


Fig. 2. Giant standing cup from pewterers' guild at Lübeck, made by Jochim Petersen and dated 1688. Encircled by brass rings, richly engraved with appropriate legends, symbols, and ornaments, and crowned by a flag-bearing figure, this cup is one of the proudest creations of the pewterer. It reflects the consequence and prosperity of the trade within the walls of one of the most important Hanseatic towns. Height 24½ inches. *Museen für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, Lübeck.*

Fig. 3. Dutch guild tankard from Nijmegen, Holland, dated 1733. This belonged to a member of the bakers' guild, whose emblems are engraved on the medallion. Height 10½ inches. *Rijksmuseum.*



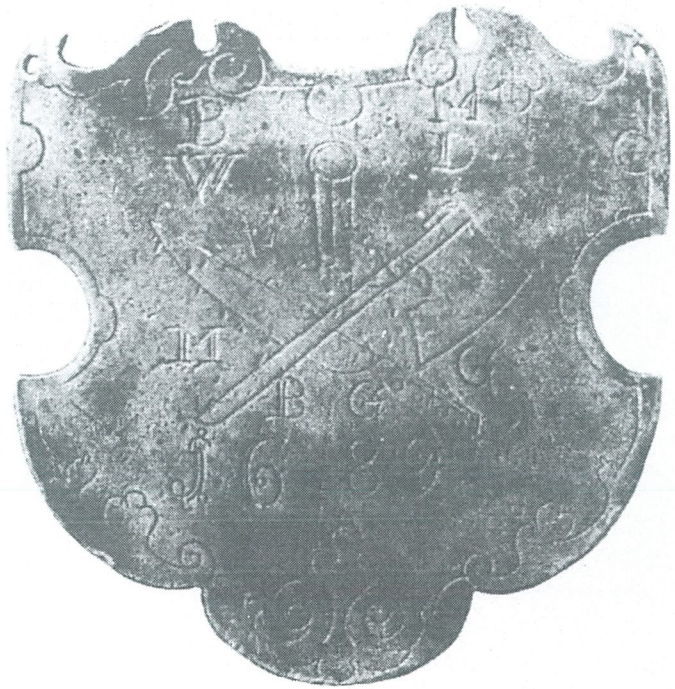


Fig. 4. Guild shield from a butchers' guild, dated 1689. This rather crude example is engraved with butcher's tools, initials, and scrollwork. 7½ by 7 inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 5. Guild shield dated 1774 and bearing the emblems of eight associated guilds. Such associations were often found in small towns or monasteries. Elaborate openwork and engraving set off the center design of a pelican feeding her offspring with her blood, symbolizing the co-operative guild spirit. Height 21½ inches. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden.

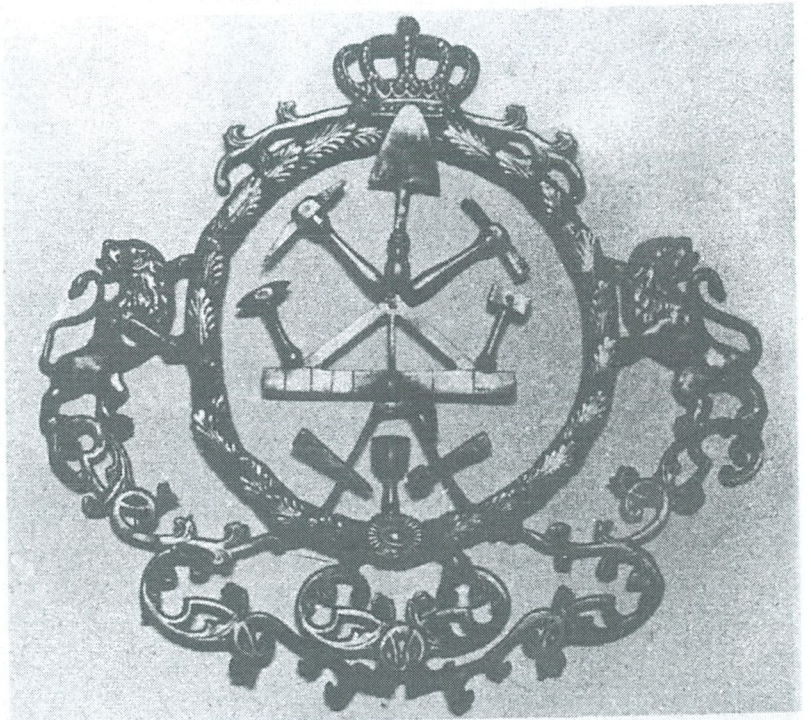


Fig. 6. Guild shield from a bricklayers' and masons' guild at Straubing, Bavaria, made and dated 1820 by J. Pruckner. Mason's tools, a wreath, lions, and a crown are combined with scrollwork. 14¾ by 16¼ inches. Ex coll. Fritz Bertram.

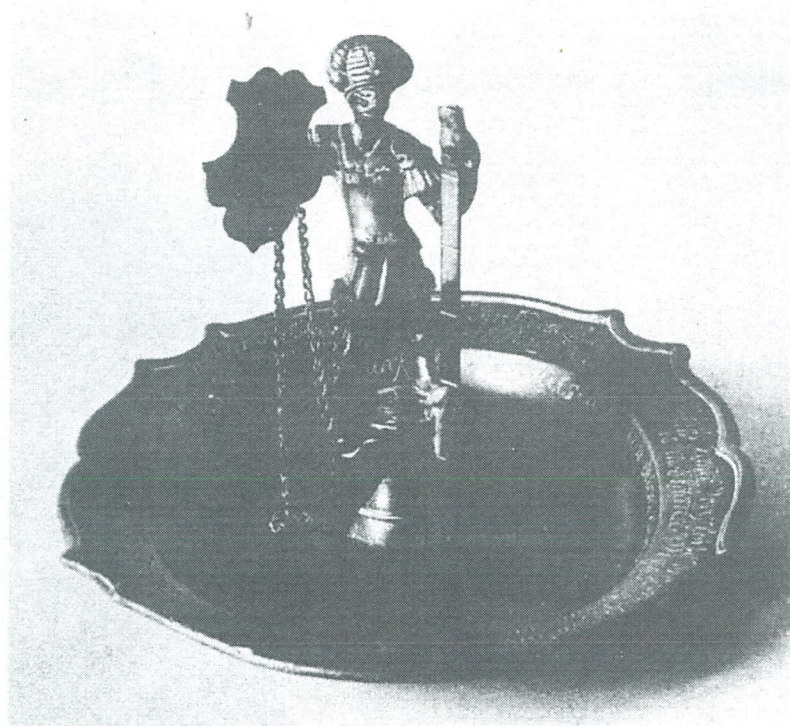


Fig. 7. Tobacco tray from ship carpenters' guild at Lübeck, dated 1760. The figure holds a yardstick and a shield engraved with guild emblems. *Museen für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte.*

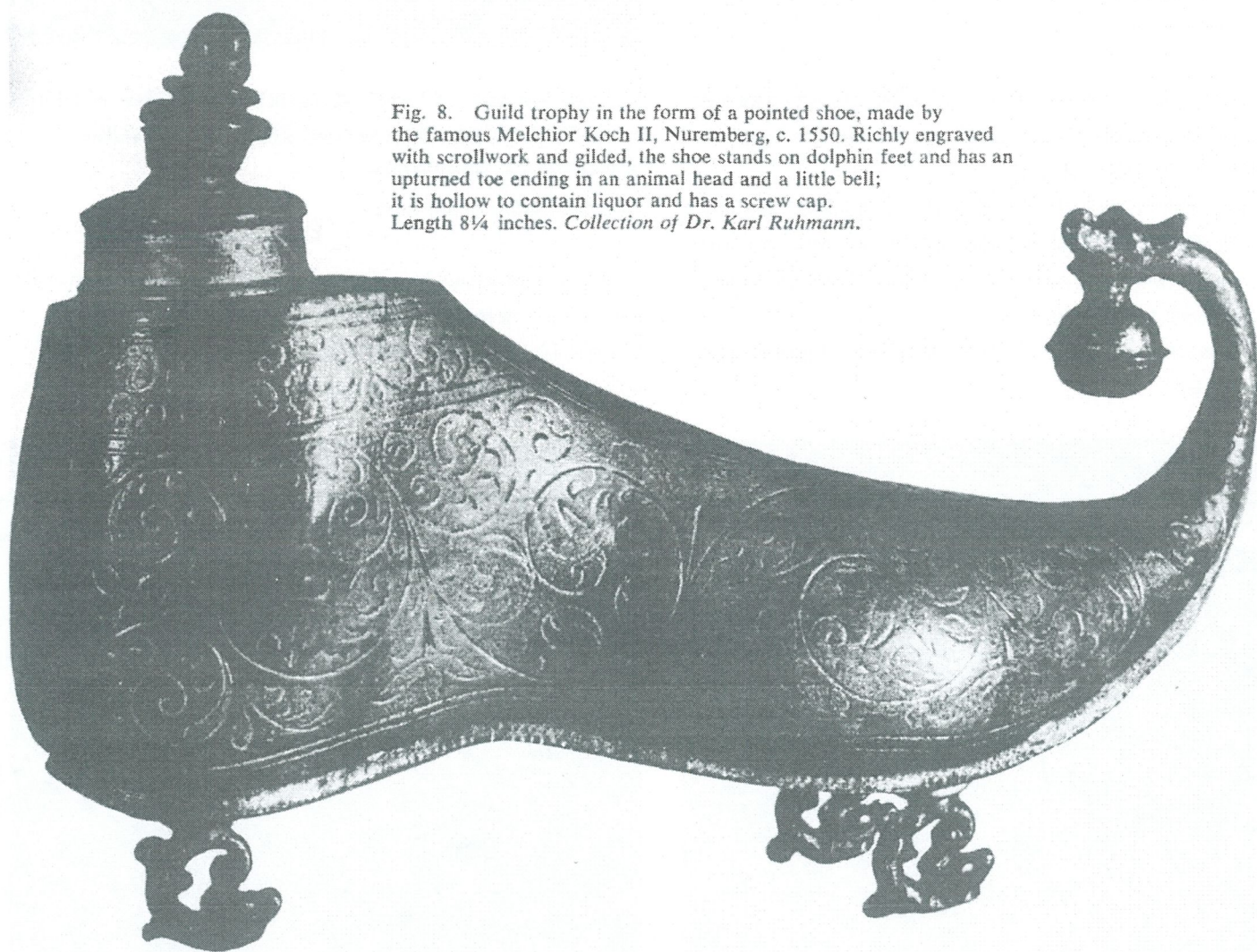
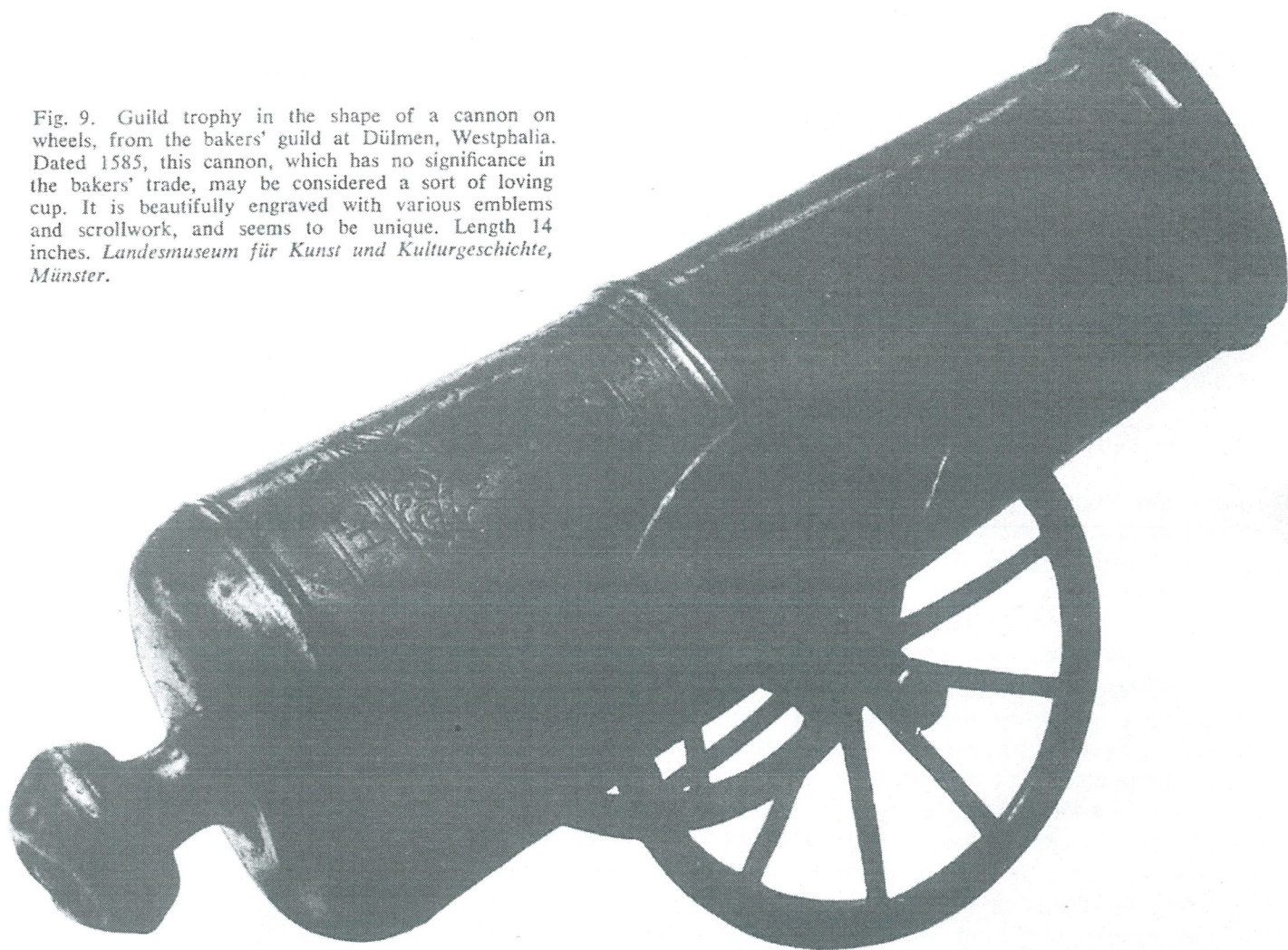


Fig. 8. Guild trophy in the form of a pointed shoe, made by the famous Melchior Koch II, Nuremberg, c. 1550. Richly engraved with scrollwork and gilded, the shoe stands on dolphin feet and has an upturned toe ending in an animal head and a little bell; it is hollow to contain liquor and has a screw cap. Length 8 1/4 inches. *Collection of Dr. Karl Ruhmann.*

Fig. 9. Guild trophy in the shape of a cannon on wheels, from the bakers' guild at Dülmen, Westphalia. Dated 1585, this cannon, which has no significance in the bakers' trade, may be considered a sort of loving cup. It is beautifully engraved with various emblems and scrollwork, and seems to be unique. Length 14 inches. *Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, Münster.*



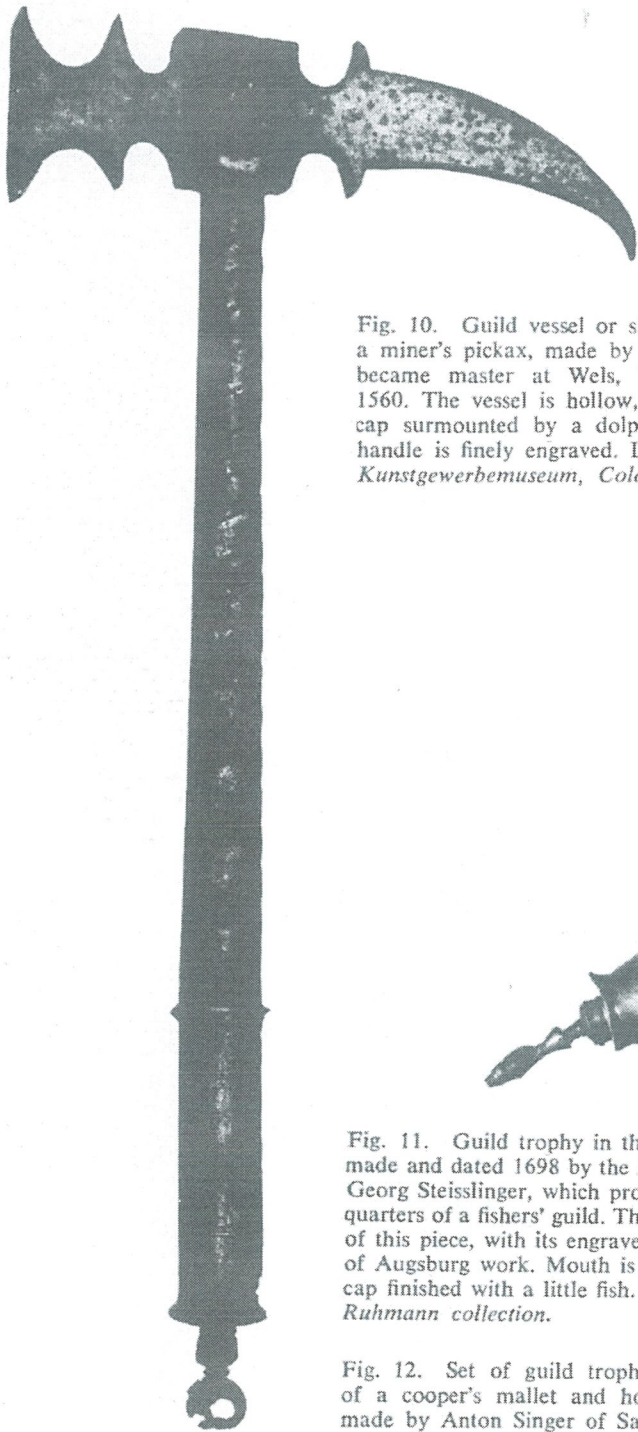


Fig. 10. Guild vessel or sign in the shape of a miner's pickax, made by Jacob Ruepp, who became master at Wels, Upper Austria, in 1560. The vessel is hollow, closed by a screw cap surmounted by a dolphin; the parcel-gilt handle is finely engraved. Length 23½ inches. *Kunstgewerbemuseum, Cologne.*

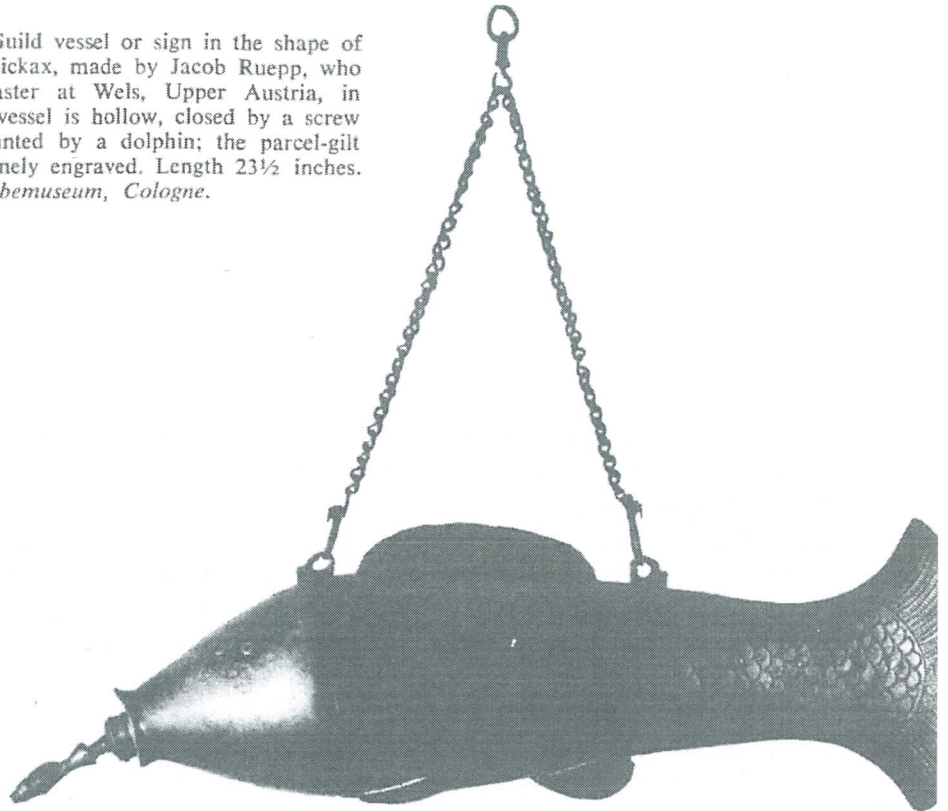
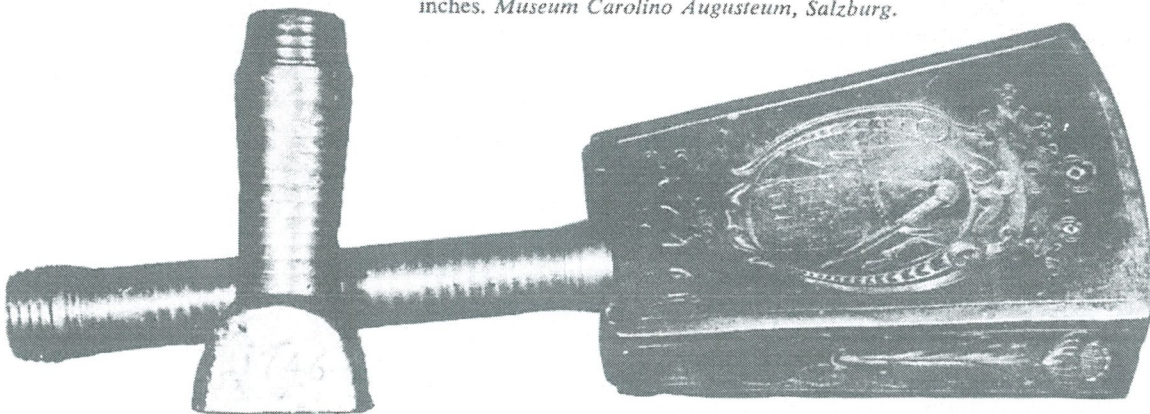


Fig. 11. Guild trophy in the shape of a carp, made and dated 1698 by the Augsburg pewterer Georg Steisslinger, which probably adorned the quarters of a fishers' guild. The meticulous finish of this piece, with its engraved scales, is typical of Augsburg work. Mouth is closed by a screw cap finished with a little fish. Length 27 inches. *Ruhmann collection.*

Fig. 12. Set of guild trophies in the shapes of a cooper's mallet and hoop-driving chisel, made by Anton Singer of Salzburg, and dated 1746; from the coopers' guild at Hallein, Salzburg. Both are fitted with screw caps. Length of mallet, 17 inches; length of driver, 5½ inches. *Museum Carolino Augusteum, Salzburg.*



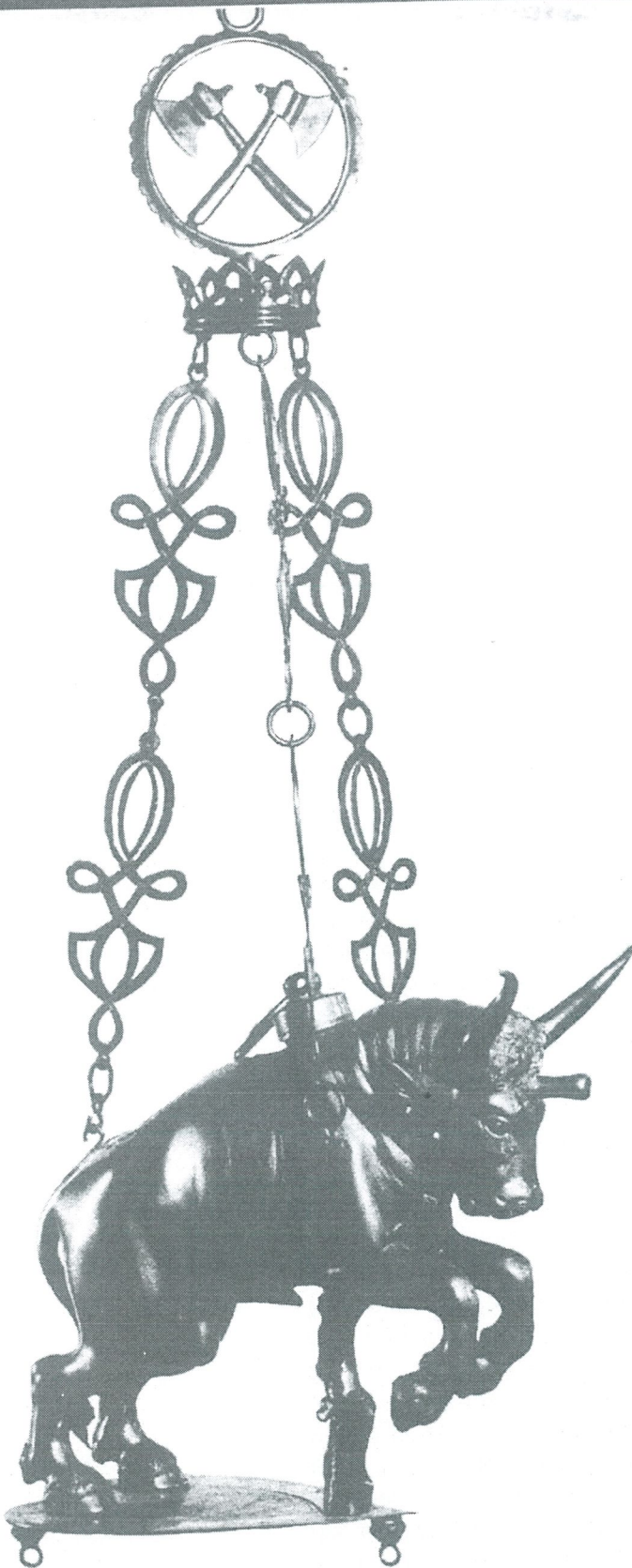


Fig. 13. Guild vessel and sign in the shape of a rearing bullock by an unknown pewterer, c. 1700; from the butchers' guild at Augsburg. Probably modeled by one of Augsburg's many competent sculptors, this splendid animal is suspended on chains which terminate in a crown surmounted by crossed butcher's hatchets. The screw cap and spout on the forelock leave no doubt about its use as a drinking vessel. Height of bullock, 15 inches; length of chains, 28½ inches. *Städtische Kunstsammlungen, Augsburg.*

Fig. 14. Guild trophy in the shape of a trotting bull by an unknown pewterer from Württemberg, dated 1660; from an unidentified butchers' guild. With glass "jewels" round its neck, glass eyes, and lion's-head medallions on its body, this bull appears somewhat stiff and clumsy in comparison with the Augsburg example. Height 14 inches. *Present owner unknown.*

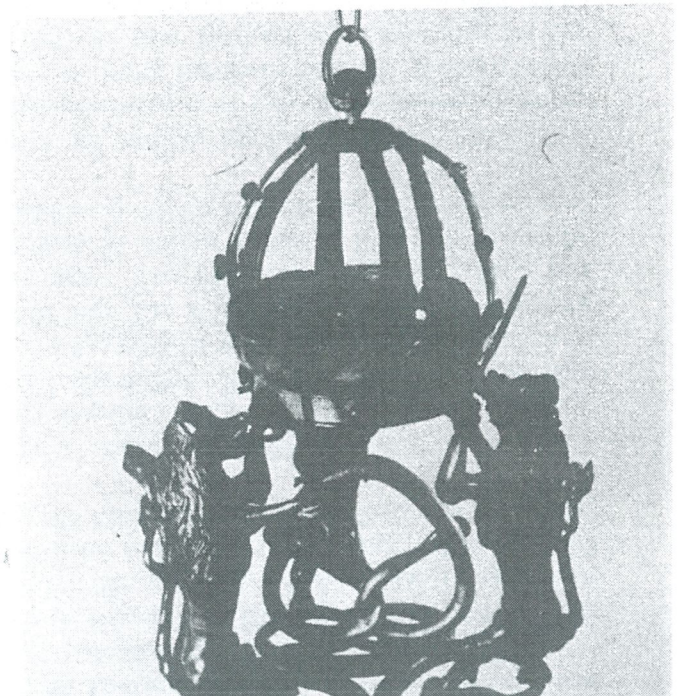


Fig. 15. Guild sign from an unidentified bakers' guild, eighteenth century. Three lions with swords stand on pretzels to support a crownlike structure adorned with glass buttons and fitted with a candle socket. Although the location of the guild is unknown, this odd piece is marked with the touch of one Johann Wolfgang Bauer, member of a Swabian family of pewterers, who became master in 1756. Height 13½ inches. *Bakery Museum of Dr. August Oetker, Bielefeld.*