

Continental pewter epergnes, cruet stands, and sugar bowls

BY ROBERT M. VETTER

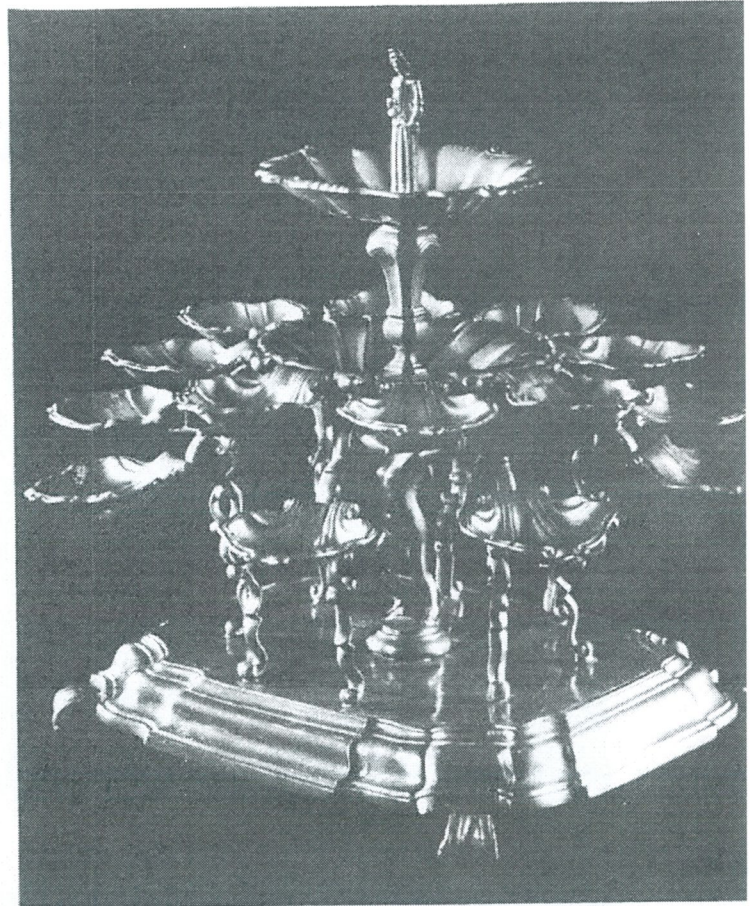


IF WE STUDY pictures or prints of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and even seventeenth centuries, showing guests assembled round a dinner table to partake of a festive banquet or a less elaborate repast, we are struck by the utilitarian nature and the simplicity of the equipment and its arrangement. There is no evident intent to please the eye as well as the palate. A precious glass or goblet may have been placed before a distinguished guest, but the general impression is one of frugality. Decorative plate is placed on a sideboard or buffet, while the table remains implemented only for action. Such primitive settings continue well into the fifteenth century, when candlesticks are sometimes placed in a line along the center of the table; but the guests' attention is still directed to the food rather than to its presentation. In the second half of the century the imagination of cooks and confectioners comes into play, and their skill in dressing meat, fowl, or fish in lifelike shapes and in preparing elaborate pies and cakes becomes notable. A radical change of taste, probably emanating from France, is apparent by the eighteenth century; now tables are laid with uniform *couverts*, and the French gift for organizing the pleasures of life and for civilizing those of the table leads to the invention of the decorative centerpieces called epergnes (the word derives from *épargner*, in the sense of to dispense good things sparingly and—in this case—elegantly).

The epergne is a decorative stand consisting of a base and a central superstructure, bearing and supporting large and small, often conchiform, trays, cruets, casters, and the like. To be attractive to the eye is the primary function of these complicated embellishments of the table; usefulness is a secondary consideration. Although the numerous appendages were intended to be filled with all sorts of enticing condiments and candied fruit, the epergnes I have seen show no signs of use.

Fig. 1. Pewter epergne by Simon Kröber II (w. Augsburg 1707-1757). Height 17 inches. *Städtische Kunstsammlungen, Augsburg.*

Fig. 2. Pewter epergne by Josef Heilingötter (w. Karlsbad first half eighteenth century). Height 14 inches. *Collection of Ludwig Mory.*



Epergnes were made of gold, silver, vermeil (fire-gilt silver), porcelain, and pewter. The epergnes of the imperial court of Austria were made of gold in the purest rococo style by famous Viennese goldsmiths and combined with rare Chinese porcelain. As far as Augsburg is concerned, it may be assumed that the clever silversmiths of that town produced exemplary epergnes. The pewterers followed suit with more modest creations, which were by no means slavish copies of silverwork (the silversmiths would have resented copying of their models).

The pewter epergne was for the table of the prosperous burgher, or for that of the impoverished aristocrat who had had to pawn his silver. However, these substitutes were by no means insipid constructions. The use of leadless alloys brought out marvelously the intimate beauty of tin, and this subdued brilliance doubtless contributed in no small measure to the enjoyment of the diners. Silver epergnes were flanked by silver candelabra. The lack of surviving pewter candelabra suggests that pewter candlesticks served for the middle-class table.

With the advent of the pseudoclassical Empire style and its bourgeois modification, Biedermeier, the rococo epergne disappears and bunches of flowers adorn the citizen's table, in line with the "return to nature." Few pewter epergnes have, therefore, survived in complete and undamaged condition. They are eagerly sought by the collector.

Owing to the relative weakness of pewter the supporting members of epergnes in this material had to be somewhat bulky, which gives the pewter epergne a portliness in harmony with the character of the cheaper material. Very elaborate and costly brass molds were required for casting the delicate parts of these structures. The pewterers made their own molds, which could be used only as long as the fashion for such purely ornamental objects lasted. The casting re-



Fig. 3. Pewter epergne by Johann Wilhelm Stücker (w. Schlackenwald second half eighteenth century). Height 11¼ inches. *Museum für angewandte Kunst, Vienna.*

Fig. 4. Cruet stand (Augsburg, c. 1760) by Johann Christof Schneider. Glass bottles are pewter mounted; scallop-form bowls for salt and pepper. Height c. 6 inches. *Städtische Kunstsammlungen*.



Fig. 5. Cruet stand similar to that of Fig. 4 but made by Simon Kröber II, and surmounted by a bowl made by Kröber's associate Sebald Ruprecht I, who became master at Augsburg in 1712. Height c. 9 inches. *Collection of Dr. Karl Ruhmann*.



quired the employment of a complicated technique (*Heissguss*) of pouring and cooling the metal, to prevent cracking. The rough castings were carefully smoothed and burnished by hand, which gave a very pleasing surface texture; occasional toolmarks enhance the effect. The care taken in finishing is one of the criteria of authenticity. No wonder such attractive wares found ready buyers in spite of their limited utility.

The pewterers of Augsburg, a town famous for its silver, and those of other pewtering centers, notably Karlsbad and Schlackenwald in Bohemia, led in the designing of tasteful epergnes. Apparently there was co-operation and exchange of ideas among these centers, since identical pieces bear authentic touches from pewterers working in each of the districts named—a fact which puzzles the investigator.

Simon Kröber II (w. 1707-1757), a member of a famous Augsburg family of pewterers, made the splendid epergne in Figure 1. The base with its sharply articulated contours and profiles is raised on scroll feet and supports four boldly curved members to which six small scallop-form dishes are fastened, two of which hold candle sconces. The center structure has two platforms for small, portable accessories, in this case a sugar or pepper caster below, and a sugar bowl with spoon holder on top. On the base itself stand two detached dishes and a cream jug. The total height of this impressive structure is nearly seventeen inches. It seems remarkable that such a comparatively early piece should have been designed in the fully developed rococo style which German pewterers followed right up to the end of the century.

The epergne shown in Figure 2 is fitted with twelve scallop-form dishes and two shallow bowls. The central bowls are supported by a rather athletic female, and the finial is a girl in eighteenth-century servant's dress holding a goose in her apron. The piece is extremely rare, about fourteen inches

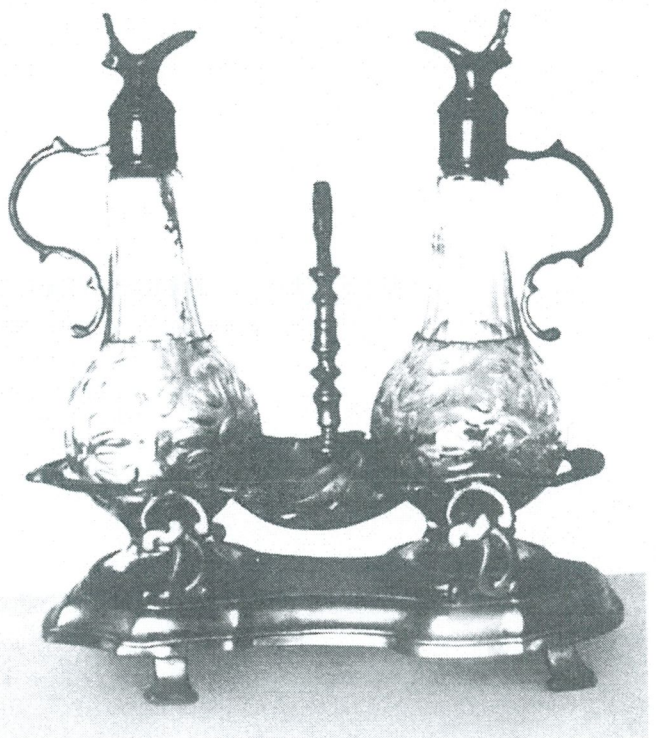
Fig. 6. Elaborate cruet stand, mid-eighteenth century, made by an unidentified pewterer, probably from Karlsbad; glass cruets and scallop-form bowls for pepper and salt. Height c. 15 inches. *Mory collection.*



high, and was made by the pewterer Josef Heilingötter, who worked at Karlsbad during the first half of the eighteenth century.

Figure 3 is another example of Bohemian work. It is smaller than the first two, only eleven and one quarter inches high; and it is more soberly conceived. Its accessories are four detachable scallop-form dishes, four footed bowls of various sizes, a sugar caster, and a cream jug. This model enjoyed great popularity and quite a number of specimens still exist, some of which are fitted with pewter-mounted glass cruets. This one bears the touch of Johann Wilhelm Stücker of Schlackenwald, who worked during the second half of the eighteenth century. The molds were used for recasts during the nineteenth century, but these were made of poor metal, show slovenly finish, and are artificially blackened; the originals are notable for their brightness and meticulous finish.

A form earlier than the epergne, and less of a luxury, is the cruet stand: a combination of little carafes, or cruets, on a common base, used for holding vinegar and oil for the dressing of salad. Figures 4 and 5 show cruet stands with pewter-mounted glass bottles. The former bears the touch of Johann Christian Schneider, an Augsburg master working during the last half of the eighteenth century, whereas the similar piece (Fig. 5) is marked by Simon Kröber II and Sebald Ruprecht I, who became master in 1712. The similarity of detail in all except the central member demonstrates the use of the same molds by contemporary and successive masters, showing a laudable spirit of co-operation and explaining the appearance of different marks on exactly similar pieces. Both cruet stands are provided with two small scallop-form dishes for salt and pepper. The large bowl on top of Figure 5 may be a later addition.



Cruets were not always pewter-mounted; some were of plain glass or even porcelain (pewter is not suitable for containing vinegar and oil). Figure 6 shows a very elaborate specimen with bottles and stoppers both of glass. The touch on this exceptional piece has so far defied identification, but a South German or Bohemian—perhaps Karlsbad—origin is likely. A Swiss cruet stand (Fig. 7) is executed in lively rococo style. The maker is Johann Caspar Manz, who worked at Zürich about the middle of the eighteenth century. Cruet stands with various stylistic features, and some with no style at all, persist to this day as a useful adjunct to the dinner table.

Many collectors may have been puzzled by small footed bowls fitted with a central column, crowned by a sort of umbrella perforated by six curved slits. Sometimes this "umbrella" is upheld by a twisted column or a figure in crude pewterer's style, or surmounted by such a figure. These bowls were intended to be filled with crystallized sugar, and the

Fig. 7. Cruet stand with pewter-mounted bottles, by Johann Caspar Manz (Zurich, 1741-1779). Height c. 9 inches. Formerly in the author's collection.

Fig. 8. Sugar bowl with spoon holder, with six pewter spoons inserted into the slits of the umbrella-like upper bowl. Karlsbad, c. 1760. Height without spoons, 6 inches. Formerly in the author's collection.

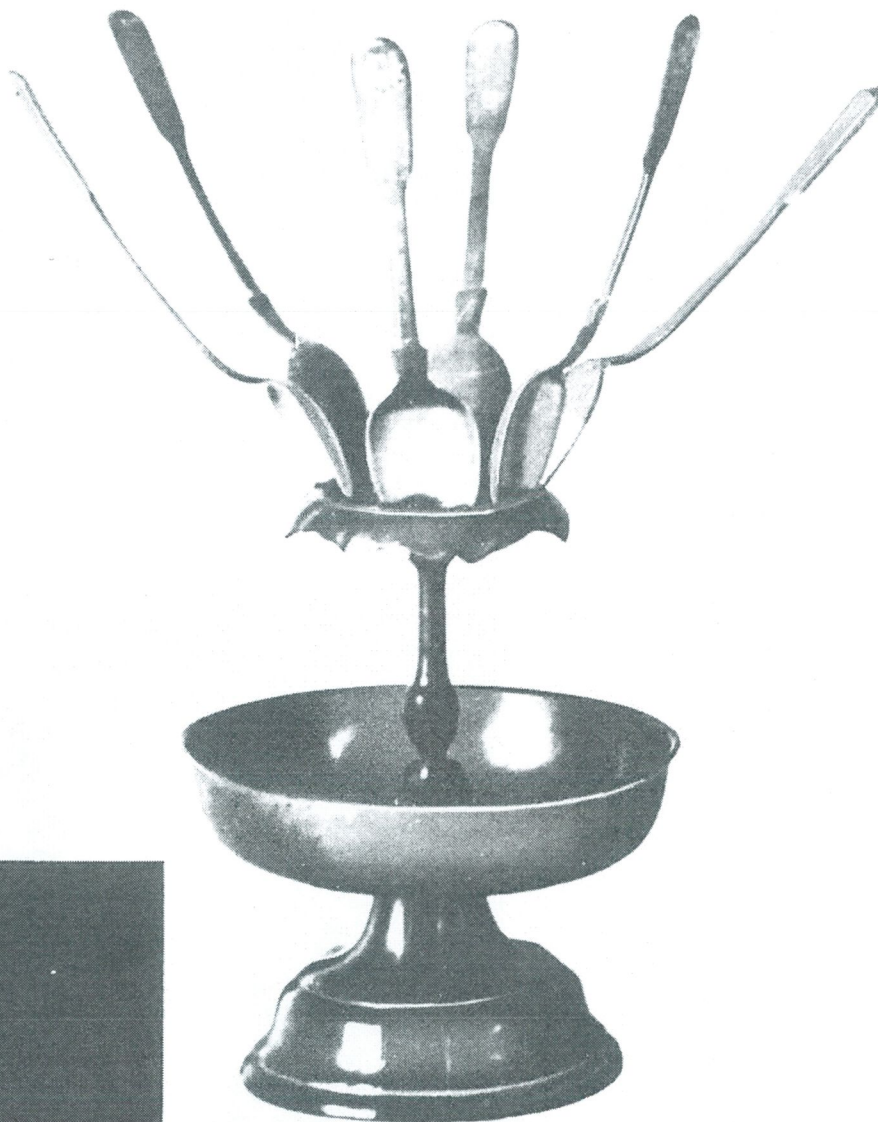
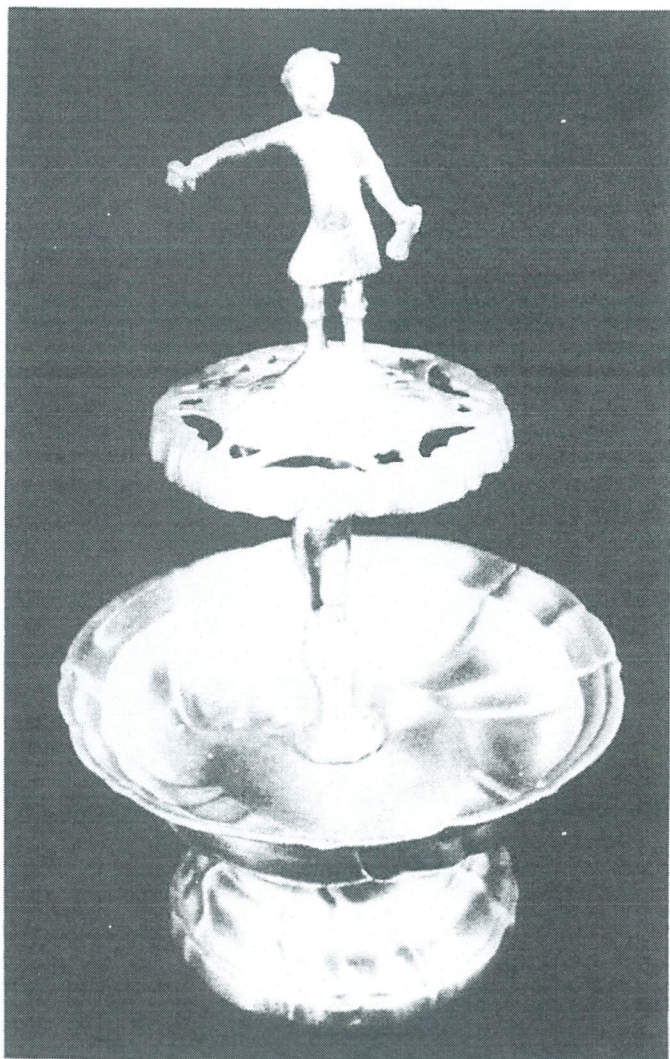


Fig. 9. Pewter sugar bowl with spoon holder. The "umbrella" is supported by the figure of a boy and surmounted by that of an Indian. Unidentified angel marks. Height 8 inches. Ruhmann collection.



tea- or coffee spoons were inserted into the slits of the "umbrella" (Fig. 8) in readiness for the guests. The sugar bowl in Figure 9 is marked with an unidentified angel touch. An oval specimen in the possession of the Museum für angewandte Kunst in Vienna is lacking the figure of Fortuna which once surmounted its plain slotted disk (Fig. 10; see also Fig. 12). Switzerland produced a model in which the "umbrella" is topped by a small shallow bowl (Fig. 11). This may have served to hold a large lump of sugar to be immersed briefly in the guest's coffee or tea. Bowls of this type have come down to us bearing the touches of various Zürich pewterers (Manz, Wirz, Bossart). Sometimes the spoon holder is fixed to the lid of a sugar box; Figure 12 shows such a combination, to which the figure of Fortuna adds special grace. This handsome item is the work of a Frankfurt master (Lahr?).

Generally speaking, current pewter literature either ignores the category of baroque table pewter or does not give it the attention it certainly deserves. Even the important museums located in former centers of the pewtering industry have failed to establish representative collections. It may be argued that this particular line developed only in the shadow of the silversmith's craft, and that it was merely a final and rather feverish effort in a doomed medium. However, even the most conservative of collectors cannot deny that these pieces have a certain grandeur.

Fig. 10. Sugar bowl with plain spoon holder, oval shape; it once had the figure of Fortuna above the spoon holder (see Fig. 12). No touch. Height 4½ inches. *Museum für angewandte Kunst.*



Fig. 11. Round sugar bowl with spoon holder. The "umbrella" is topped by a small tray, perhaps for a lump of sugar. A type made by different masters at Zürich (Manz, Wirz, Bossard). Height 5 inches. *Collection of H. Blumenthal.*

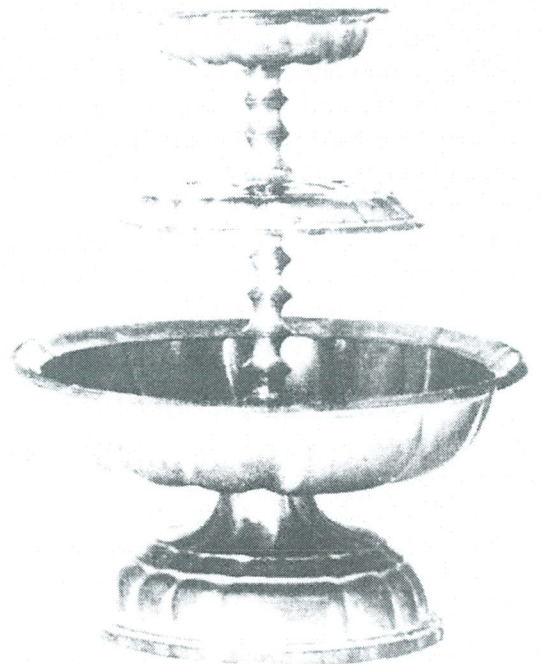


Fig. 12. Spoon holder combined with sugar box, made at Frankfurt am Main; surmounted by a figure of Fortuna on winged globe. Height 8 inches. *Museum für angewandte Kunst.*