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Pewter Triumphant

by John Ferlay



1. Two pewter tankards sold at Sotheby's. The one on the left, circa 1695, fetched £1,750; on the right, circa 1720, £420

2. Stuart embroidery. Judith, with the head of Holofernes, sold for £480 at Sotheby, King and Chasemore, Pulborough

IF one is in the mood, it is possible to despise the humble alloy we call pewter on the grounds that it was, in this day, a rather poor substitute for silver. Although the point was probably lost on our ancestors it was also not especially hygienic, with all that lead, but it was produced in enormous quantities for household purposes until well into the 19th century. Today, the finer pewter vessels are rare and by no means cheap, as witness to the two noble tankards of Fig. 1 here, one of the late 17th, the other from the early years of the 18th century.

The earlier of the two is on the left 1A, the maker E.G., the lip of the drum inscribed *God Bless King William* above a crown over the W.R. cypher. The other, 1B is about 25 years later; with a double domed cover it is engraved all over with a crowned rosehead flanked by tulips. In this case there is a scroll thumbpiece, in the former the thumbpiece is the pattern known (for no obvious reason) as 'ram's-horn'. The decoration on each is the simple type called 'wriggled-work', a term which has always been used in this connection and which fits the bill well enough. A quarter of a century makes a great deal of difference to the market price. When they turned up at Sotheby's the William and Mary tankard went for £1,750; the later one for £420.

Seventeenth century embroidery is invariably engaging, with its naive depic-



tion of stories from the Bible as in Fig. 2 and a splendid array of creepy crawlies, birds and beasts and flowers around the central theme. The birds and beasts decoration was inherited from the previous century—rabbit, dog, thistle. And you will notice, above and below the central oval, a winged head—just those winged heads people thought suitable for the

spandrels of clock faces in the late 17th century. But, of course, the centre of interest in this embroidery is the central figure, the bare-breasted Judith with a whacking great oriental sword in her right hand, the head of Holofernes in the other. Seated in a golden landscape, she is clearly very proud of herself—as well she might be. Even in this permissive