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The Editor's Attic

Art and Emptiness

THE art galleries of New York City have, of late, been almost literally plastered with displays exemplifying modern trends in art since the year 1912, when the *Nude Descending the Stairs* first made its clattering appearance before an astounded and incredulous American public. The same nude, still suggesting a flock of wooden furniture being cast down ten flights in an apartment house — probably to make room for clinical chromium — recently turned about and climbed up again by one story to grace the huge latter-day show at the Museum of Modern Art.

Huge this show was, for it occupied the walls of four loftily separated rooms. Managerial benevolence annotated each group of exhibits for the better enlightenment of the general public. By reading the posted explanations, and viewing the neighboring pictures, one might learn that cubism dissects and simplifies forms into associated cubes — rather static stuff, of course. Futurism is cubism that has been fed on vitamins until it begins to prance. Then there are orphism, dadaism, and some other isms, but the Attic forgets their special significance.

Just now, at the Museum and elsewhere, sundry changes are being rung on abstract art. The misguided geniuses who first began hacking objects into cubes committed, I surmise, a grave error in leaving here and there throughout their compositions a few recognizable chunks of this and that — a procedure hardly more permissible than inadvertently imbedding a collar button in a croquette. Under current rules of the game, identifiable foreign matter is being rigorously excluded, thus compelling the art lover to capture the flavor of each *chef d'œuvre*, if he can, without information as to its ingredients. This method is essentially masculine, and possibly had its origin in the concoction of Sunday evening chafing-dish menus from whatever might be discoverable in the refrigerator.

Abstract painting is to be achieved in one of two ways. The artist may start with some more or less specific form, or forms, in his mind's eye — such, perchance, as a cabbage and a setting of vari-tinted Easter eggs. Having removed these visionary objects to the seething cauldron of his soul, he allows them to simmer until they have lost all resemblance to inhabitants of the vegetable or the animal kingdom. By this time they have become sufficiently abstract to be spread on canvas. As an alternative the artist may approach his creative venture with an imagination quite unstimulated by outside interference, and gradually evolve from his inner consciousness a pattern of utterly unreal shapes. In the latter instance the operation is known as concretion. As a

matter of fact, however, whether the program opens with something and ends with nothing, or with nothing and ends with something, the results are hardly to be differentiated.

There is no novelty in all this abstraction or concretion except the studied self-consciousness of today's artist. When old Grandma Huckabuck designed a hooked rug, she not infrequently gazed out of her window upon manifold familiar things, whose aspect she thereupon so completely transformed in terms of colored rags that no one else could guess what had been her source of inspiration. Grandma Sniffenstitch, on the contrary, just made up her designs out of her own head. In some of the most delightful of domestic textiles abstraction has been thus achieved, quite without other intent than that of making a "pretty."

Modernistic pretties painstakingly executed in oils on canvas shock a good many persons, who find it difficult to reconcile such non-representative productions with the longstanding assumption that a painting hung on a wall should be the likeness of a person, of an animate or inanimate object, or of a scene of some kind. This conception is so deeply ingrained in most of us as to constitute a prejudice that renders us incapable even of looking at abstract paintings. Somehow these strange compositions seem tinged with immorality. So they are, to the extent that they are contrary to our *mores*, the customs to which we are habituated.

The Attic confesses that it does not care for such works; not, however, because it finds them *per se* disturbing, but because it considers them technically labored and emotionally insincere. Viewed as scientific experiments, modern abstractions are not infrequently interesting and fairly pleasing. That, alas, is about the best that may be said in their behalf. In general, whatsoever faint evidences of a vital spark they reveal seem to be the offspring of an inorganically chemical fertilization of the spirit; too frequently of a frustrated creative urge that has been thrown back upon itself to ferment until it forces an exit to expression through subtly pernicious channels.

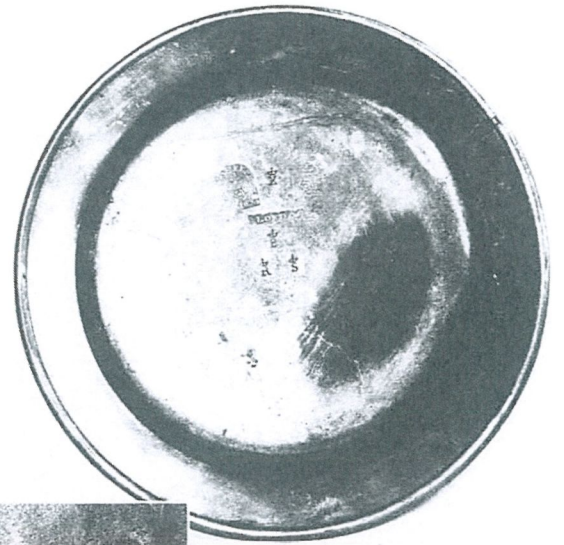
"Semper Eadem" Bobs Up

THE late J. B. Kerfoot, in his pioneer volume *American Pewter* (p. 92), expresses his belief that the SEMPER EADEM mark accompanying the legend BOSTON on sundry eighteenth-century pewter plates was employed by Thomas Badger, pewterer in the Massachusetts capital. This belief is reaffirmed in *Some Notes on American Pewterers*, published in 1926 by the late Louis Guerneau Myers. But Mr. Myers carries his investigation somewhat further than does his predecessor. He finds that Boston claimed

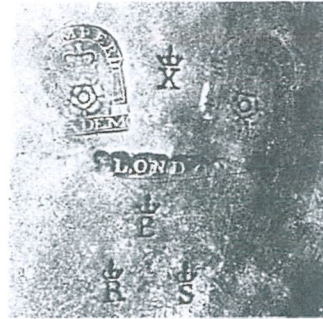
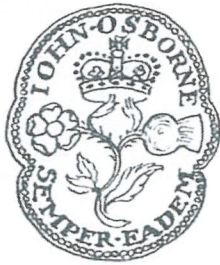


Fig. 1 — OBTVERSE AND REVERSE OF ENGLISH "SEMPER EADEM" PLATE

Diameter, 9 1/2 inches. The archway with its motto is apparently identical with that appearing on anonymous Boston plates usually ascribed to Thomas Badger. A detail of the English mark and a sketch of the yet earlier mark of John Osborne (London, 1713) shown below. Boston mark will be found in Kerfoot's *American Pewter*. Plate from the collection of R. T. Sheldon



two Thomas Badgers, father and son. The former, born in 1735 and apparently active until 1813 or even later, was evidently a full-fledged pewterer long before the outbreak of the Revolution. Following the close of that conflict, he adopted an eagle mark for identifying his products. Prior to the war, in Mr. Myers' judgment, he had used the anonymous SEMPER EADEM device, consisting of an arch supported on columns enclosing a rose and crown, and displaying the first word of the motto in the frame of the arch, the second word in the base. The argument seems logical, particularly in view of the fact that the BOSTON stamp on SEMPER EADEM items is identical in every respect with that discoverable in conjunction with Badger's later mark, in which his name is disposed above and below an eagle motive.



That the faithful motto *Semper Eadem* (always the same) did not originate as a pewter trade emblem with Badger was made clear in a note by the late Howard H. Cotterell, published in *ANTIQUES* for June 1926. As early as 1713 it was bravely displayed in the touch of John Osborne of London. The accompanying elements of the Osborne mark, however, differ so widely from those associated with the motto in the much later touch ascribed to Badger as to forbid attempts to connect the two makers. So the opinion originally advanced by Mr. Kerfoot and later substantiated by Mr. Myers has seemed to be fortified beyond danger of dispute.

This blissful situation might, no doubt, have indefinitely endured except for the intervention of Francis Mason of New York City, who, some time since, sent the *Attic* a number of pertinent photographs with accompanying comment as follows:

"In the sale of Louis M. Ream's pewter at the Anderson Galleries in February 1928, there appeared a plate with the familiar gateway touch of SEMPER EADEM, below which, in place of the expected BOSTON mark, was spread the word LONDON in a serrated rectangle. Whether this throws light, or further shadow, on the history of 'Mr. Eadem' I leave to those more intimately acquainted with him."

The *Attic*, alas! perceives only shadow. This disturbing piece from the Ream collection is without question genuine. Its English source is attested not only by the London mark, but by the shape of the rim: flat, and plain on the obverse, with a reinforcing reed on the back — a treatment common to English plates from 1750

on, but, save in the plates of the Bostonian John Skinner, seldom encountered in American ware of corresponding period. The crowned X on the bottom of the plate would be a less reliable indication of English origin were it not accompanied by the crowned

initials of the owners, R and S B. The recorded diameter of the piece, 9 1/2 inches, finds no counterpart in Mr. Kerfoot's list of American plate sizes.

Admitting the soundness of this reasoning, how may we reconcile the fact that the accompanying archway with its motto is, or in the photographs appears to be, line for line an exact duplicate of the archway on the Boston plates ascribed to Badger? The problem might be less baffling were it not complicated by two coincidences, the one affirmative, in the identity of touches; the other negative, in the pervasive absence of any identifying name or initials. Are these coincidences due to pure accident or may they be tentatively viewed as evidence of consistent purpose? Furthermore, how comes it to pass that the only SEMPER EADEM mark mentioned in Mr. Cotterell's *magnum opus* on English pewter is that of Osborne, a mark not only earlier than the one now in question but in no significant degree resembling it? The *Attic* ventures no answer. Mr. Mason has provided the hat for whose casting into the ring the *Attic* has herewith supplied the motive power and the appropriate arena. Further responsibility for its disposition must devolve upon students of pewter in America and abroad.

An Absent-Minded Terry

HERE is an interesting sidelight on Samuel Terry, clockmaker, of Bristol, Connecticut (1774-1853). Samuel, it may be remembered, was a younger brother of the renowned Eli Terry, who was first to attempt the quantity production and distribution of wooden clockworks, and, incidentally, made a fortune from his undertaking. If Samuel's career was less spectacular than that of Eli, his inventive genius was fertile and his reputation widespread and substantial.

The sidelight referred to is supplied by a letter written by Samuel in 1835 to Judge Elial Foote of Jamestown, New York, in response to the latter's enquiry regarding the cost of installing a clock in one of the Jamestown churches. Judge Foote, it should