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In the museums

BY RUTH DAVIDSON

American silver and pewter

Three pieces of American metalwork, all recent museum acquisitions, bear the marks of outstanding craftsmen and, in addition, exemplify highly typical forms in American silver and pewter. The earliest in date is a silver porringer, made about 1730, which is now in the Brooklyn Museum collections. The work of the London-trained silversmith Simeon Soumaine, it is stamped SS on either side of the handle.

The porringer, or shallow bowl with handle, has a long history: made of various material throughout Europe in the Middle Ages, it developed characteristic forms in different countries—the *écuelle* in France, the quaich in Scotland, the bleeding bowl in England. The American porringer, except for a few early examples, is larger than its English prototype and was evidently widely used for the porridges, gruels, and other semiliquid foods that made up the light evening meal until the end of the eighteenth century or later. Louise Avery, in her invaluable *American Silver* (1920), quotes the diary of Thomas Vernon for 1776 as frequently mentioning "a porringer of pudding and milk" taken for supper, after which the writer "turned in . . . very sober." The handle of the porringer shown here is pierced in a simple design with two arched openings at the base. This early pattern, favored in New York, was to be succeeded by the more elaborate "keyhole" type of piercing around the middle of the century.

In contrast with the porringer, a silver coffeepot made in Philadelphia by Philip Syng Jr. about 1760 represents a relatively new form that had been developed, for the service of an exotic beverage, only a few generations before. Its slender body, gracefully curved, and its embossed and chased rococo ornament of C scrolls, asymmetrical floral motifs, and pierced shells reflect the new fashions of its time. Philip Syng Jr., the son of the Philip Syng who came from Cork, Ireland, in 1714, left a quantity of well-made silver, comparatively simple in design but distinguished by its excellent proportions; he is perhaps most often thought of as the maker of the silver inkstand used at the signing of the Declaration of Independence and preserved in Independence Hall, Philadelphia. The coffeepot shown here now belongs to the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

A pewter beaker recently acquired by the New-York Historical Society illustrates the persistence of another traditional form in metal. Simple, comparatively low, and adorned only by the molding of the base, this piece claims special interest as having been made by Frederick Bassett, of the famous New York family of pewterers, about 1770. It has a quality mark and FB on the inside of the bottom.

The straight-sided tapering vessel, called, from its German name, a beaker, is a remote descendant of the ancient drinking horns, actual sections of animal horn hollowed out and closed, often by a metal base, at the lower end. Such horns were elaborately mounted by European, especially German, silversmiths and other metalworkers well into the eighteenth century. The beaker and the tankard were evidently the two forms made in the greatest quantities by colonial pewterers as well as silversmiths, and, although the tankard lost popularity rapidly after the introduction of tea and coffee, the beaker continued to be made all through the 1700's and even later. Its longer life can be accounted for by the fact that in addition to serving domestic needs it had become part of the communion service in Protestant churches. It replaced the chalice as a sacramental cup in Holland during the Reformation, and subsequently in those parts of England most closely in touch with the Low Countries. The beaker was the only form of communion cup used in New Netherland churches, though tankards and other vessels evidently served the same purpose in the Nonconformist churches of New England, where several cups might be handed around at the service, according to the doctrine that "the administration . . . of the Lord's Supper did not exclusively belong to the pastor . . . but might and should be attended by a society of Christians, though deprived of that office-bearer" (quoted in Jones, *Old Silver of American Churches*).

Pewter beaker by Frederick Bassett, c. 1770. *New-York Historical Society.*

Silver porringer by Simeon Soumaine, New York, c. 1730. *Brooklyn Museum.*

Silver coffeepot by Philip Syng Jr., Philadelphia, c. 1760. *Philadelphia Museum of Art.*