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CONCERNING PEWTER

The old dispute as to the difference between pewter and britannia still causes confusion. According to Kerfoot, the name *britannia* was applied by English makers to a superfine grade of pewter, and no clear line of differentiation between the two wares is discernible. A similar view is expressed by the pewterer Max Rieg of Williamsburg, Virginia, who says that britannia is really a finer, harder alloy than pewter. The reason for scorning britannia items, as most collectors do, is their inferiority not of metal but of shape, for britannia achieved its greatest popularity and superseded pewter at the time when refinement of form had given way to decadence. Pewter and britannia have the same components, varying only in relative quantity, and half the time cannot be told apart.

Max Rieg is a true craftsman. In his little shop in Colonial Williamsburg he fashions beakers, bowls, porringers, candlesticks, and other objects in reproduction of early forms, faithfully following old-time methods — with the substitution of electricity for man-power in driving his lathes. His alloy he makes according to an eighteenth-century receipt for pewter which was discovered by the research workers of the Restoration. Except in articles of tableware and objects that are to come in contact with food, it calls for 1.67 per cent of lead — a small amount in proportion to the quantity of tin (the principal ingredient) — antimony, and copper. Rieg believes, however, that most old pewter contained a fairly high percentage of lead, in spite of the fact that all the old pewter he has analyzed showed the presence of very little. His explanation is that pewter with high lead content is not durable and has not survived: hence the old pewter that we have today is the best of the old pewter, at least in quality of metal. And since it is reasonable that a pewterer would expend his greatest effort on his finest material, the old pewter that remains to us is probably the best of the early production in workmanship as well.

Regarding the cleaning of pewter, Rieg advises utmost caution. For the inexperienced person he advocates the use of nothing stronger than metal polish, since irreparable damage can be wrought by improper handling of caustics. His own method, which he declares is dangerous, is to submerge a piece for about five minutes, longer when necessary, in a bath composed of five ounces of caustic soda to a gallon of water. It is extremely important to wash the piece absolutely clean in soap and water on removing it from the bath. For a final polish it may be rubbed with a *brass* (not steel) brush. For a piece afflicted with pewter disease, Rieg's remedy is to cut out the spot so that the corrosion cannot spread, and replace it with new alloy.

A visit to Max Rieg's workshop, at the Sign of the Golden Ball, is a pleasant and illuminating experience. Set up as part of the Williamsburg crafts program, which also includes operation of small shops for cabinetmaking and blacksmithing, the shop is intended to present the appearance of an eighteenth-century pewterer's establishment, true to type in architecture, methods, products, even in the costumes of the workers. The total effect is undeniably "quaint," while realistic and revealing.

POTTERS AT THE WORLD'S FAIR

In the Home Furnishings Building at New York's World's Fair a crew of potters disposes of 3,750 pounds of clay weekly. Veteran craftsmen from Ohio, West Virginia, and elsewhere demonstrate each step in the process of producing pottery to a daily audience hardly less fascinated than that which witnesses the miracle of glassblowing at the Glass Center. The pottery plant has all the very latest machinery, yet 90 per cent of the work is done by hand. Collectors who realize the value of a first-hand knowledge of the technique of the potter will find a visit worth while; and everyone finds vicarious satisfaction in watching a master craftsman at a job he loves. These potters, like their brethren at the Glass Center, and elsewhere in various pavilions, evidently take tremendous pride in exhibiting their not inconsiderable skill.

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