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An ANTIQUES survey:

eighteenth-century Continental pewter

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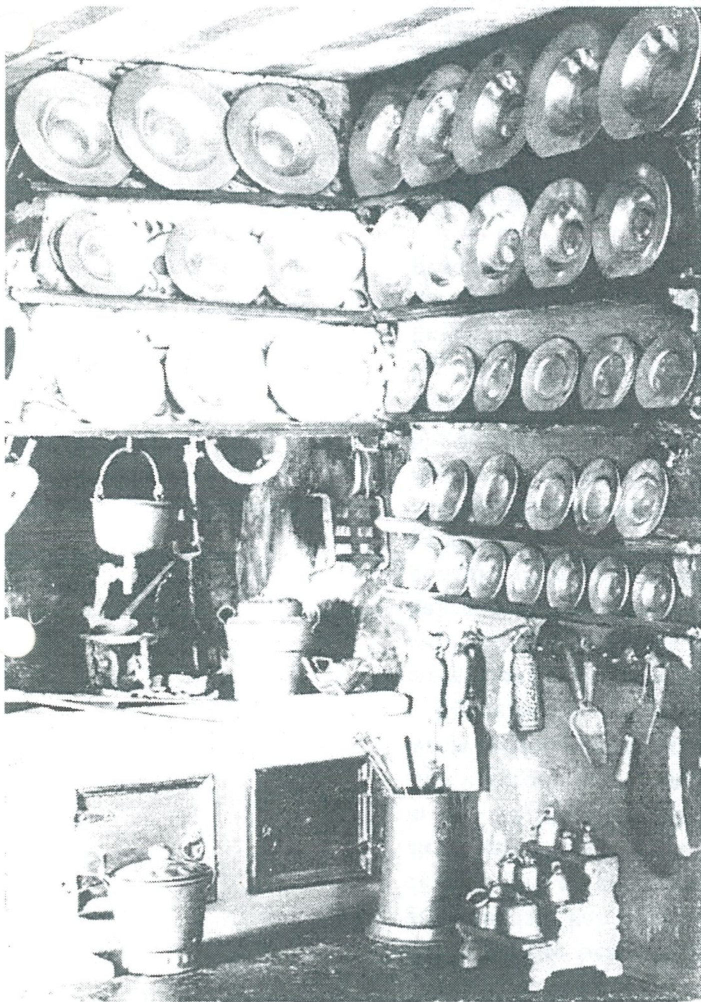

Fig. 1. Miniature kitchen interior from a sixteenth-century German doll house. *Germanisches National-Museum, Nuremburg, photograph by Eva Jaenisch.*

All photographs, except Figure 1, are of pieces in the Cooper Union Museum for the Arts of Decoration.

THE ROLE OF PEWTER in everyday life throughout the Middle Ages and the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries can hardly be overestimated. Engravings with contemporary or Biblical subjects, interior or still-life paintings, and—most enlightening of all—the seventeenth-century German doll houses (Fig. 1) with their complete furnishings, show the many forms in which pewter served the household: as measuring, pouring, and drinking vessels, as dishes, basins, fountains, and canisters, and as individual plates, replacing treen on the table of the burgher.

Measuring and drinking vessels of pewter—from the Scottish tappit hens to German *Stitzen* and French *cymaises*—were standard equipment in the taverns, as were tankards and flagons of monumental capacity in the guildhalls. Even in the church, at least in the poorer parishes, pewter was used, be it for candlesticks, incense boats, and holy-water stoups, or for chalices and alms dishes. The pewterers of Europe created an astonishing variety of shapes adapted to all these different purposes, universal in themselves, but often modified by regional customs.

Besides being useful as kitchen and table ware (a set or "garnish" of which was a sign of considerable opulence), pewter in many cases assumed a more pretentious role as a substitute for silver, both in the church and in the homes of the well-to-do but not quite wealthy. Richly decorated late Renaissance silver or silver-gilt ewers, basins, and tankards, available only to relatively few, were paralleled by pewter ornamented with fine relief work (*Edelzinn* or *orfèvrerie d'étain*) by such masters as Caspar Enderlein and François Briot.

However, the great majority of vessels up to the end of the seventeenth century were of traditional form, sturdy rather than elegant. Changes in social life and customs, spreading from the increasingly refined eighteenth-century courts down to the growing middle class, first brought a decisive modification in the shaping of pewter vessels. Gentler forms of conviviality, dictated by the introduction and spreading vogue of coffee, tea, and chocolate, as well as the increasingly civilized table manners of the century, offered a wholly new field for the pewterer. In competition with silver, faïence, and porcelain, he now fashioned coffeepots and teapots, tureens and trays, sugar bowls and sauceboats for the table of a new society

that had learned, or strove to learn, the refined manners of the rococo courts. Many traditional, sturdy vessels of earlier times were traded in and recast to suit the new taste—thus paralleling the fate of many an early silver piece that had to yield to the changes of style.

But changes, no matter how thorough they seem at a backward glance across the centuries, never occur abruptly. The more complicated the production, the more tradition-bound the craft. By the eighteenth century casting was the method most widely used in the production of pewter, although some dishes were still hammered ("raised") from sheet metal. Depending upon the type of vessel the molds could be of different materials: simple dishes and spouts, handles, and knobs could be cast in clay or sand molds; a more elaborate piece—a porringer with shaped handles, for example—would require a sandstone mold, while brass or bronze had to be used for the casting of complicated forms. The freeman, before becoming master, had to submit three or more pieces to the guild to prove his abilities, and he had to make the molds himself. Thus traditional working methods, transmitted from master to apprentice, were perpetuated by guild regulations and constituted an inherent conservative element in the craft, favoring accepted and tried forms that were modified only gradually by changes in style.

A certain baroque quality of form is apparent in the little Dutch cooler on lion's feet in the collection of the Cooper Union Museum (Fig. 2), showing the firm, full contours of pre-rococo pieces. This same restraint characterizes the triangular inkstand and the mustard pot (Fig. 3). In an engaging way, the small Dutch chocolate pot decorated with "wriggled work" (Fig. 4, left) retains some of this simplicity, although through its function it is more closely allied to forms typical of the mid-eighteenth century.

The elegantly shaped edge of the salver on three fee (Fig. 5) by Benoit Taudin shows that a close relationshi between silver and pewter was fully established in thi early part of the century. Although Meissonnier an Oppenord did not conceive their fluid rococo designs wit pewter in mind, but rather applied the infinite plasticit of ceramic materials to their ideas for silver, by the mid dle of the century pewter too was caught up in the swirl of the full-blown rococo. Like silver, it strove to catc

Fig. 2. Early eighteenth-century cooler with Dutch marks.

Fig. 3. Two inkstands and a mustard pot. The triangular inkstan is French, first half of the eighteenth century; the bombé inkstan with removable sand caster and inkwell is Dutch, c. 1770. Th mustard pot from northern Germany is from the middle of the cen tury, but its shape goes back to earlier prototypes.

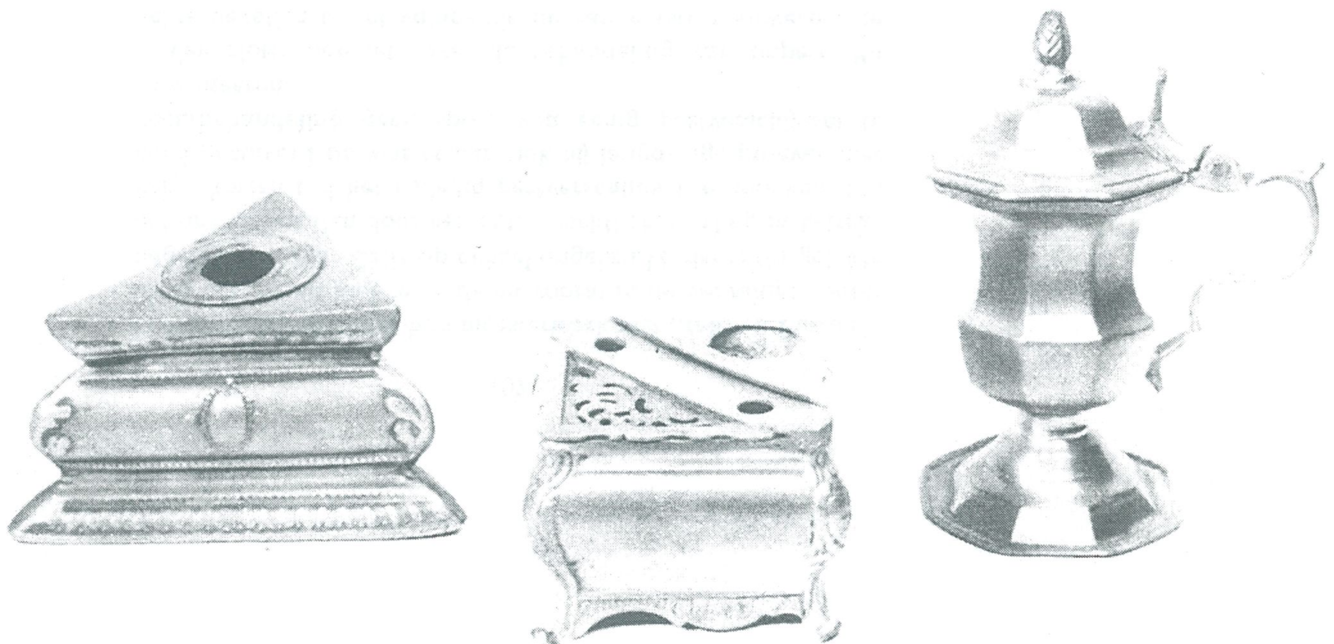

Fig. 4. Dutch chocolate pot with "wriggled-work" decoration of the first half of the eighteenth century, and two coffeepots: the larger attributed to Johann Georg Klingling, about 1765, the smaller, by Johann Christian Ibert of Silesia, about 1760.

and reflect the light on its twisting gadrooned surfaces, to provide undulating movement and never-ceasing variety. For a while, the more traditional masters contented themselves with breaking up the surface in vertical folds and ripples (Fig. 4, right). By far the greater number of pewterers followed the trend manifested in other materials, and shaped their vessels with oblique, swirling gadrooning (Fig. 6), scrolled handles, spouts, and rims.

As the shapes grew more and more complicated with bulging gadrooning and applied ornamentation in response to demand and competition, the molds often became too expensive for the individual pewterer to make. In many cases the guild owned the molds for the more expensive pieces and lent them to the different masters as need arose. A Frankfort tureen, typical of the 1760's, and bearing the mark of Conrad Philip Schroeder (Fig. 5), appears in the Cooper Union Museum collection a second time in the same shape but with the touch of Melchior Fries, who became master in Frankfort in 1782.

The discrepancy in the marks on two identically shaped pieces is only one indication of the pitfalls in the path of the student. The official quality mark varied from country to country, even from region to region. Most frequently encountered is the angel mark (St. Michael with sword and scales), often accompanied by an inscription with the word *English* in one or another garbled spelling. English pewter, famous for its purity, became on the Continent synonymous with pewter of highest quality, and large parts of Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and eastern and northern France marked their best pewter in this fashion, although much of the tin used did not come from the Cornish mines but was imported from the Straits Settlements.

The central provinces of France retained for a long time the crowned-hammer mark for first-quality pewter, although it had originally been used only for hammered ware; later a crowned F (for *étain fin*) was used. Bohemia proudly marked its finest pewter with S W for the local mines at Schlaggenwald. The crowned Tudor rose, imposed first on English imports to Flanders, became also a mark of good quality, used mainly in the northern countries and often amplified by a crowned X to denote the proportions (one to ten) in which lead was alloyed to tin for this particular standard.

The concern of the pewterers' guilds with quality was based only partly on their interest in preventing such fraudulent practices as substituting the baser, cheaper lead in undue quantities for the finer tin. True, lead would make a piece heavier and darker in color, but it could also cause deadly lead poisoning, something the guilds as well as city fathers had been well aware of from the time of the Middle Ages.

Pewter of a quality inferior to the best standard (which was by no means constant, but varied from place to place and from time to time) had to be so marked: with a flagon in Germany, a crowned C or CC (for *étain commun*) in France. Still poorer metal, with a lead content of up to one third, was called *étain mort*, *Faulzinn*, or, in Holland, *klein keur* (small-test). An oblique way of avoiding the stigma of an inferior mark was to use the town's arms—thus indicating that the alloy conformed to the standards of the local guild, neither more nor less.

Fig. 5. Covered dish, probably Bohemian, and German candlestick, both from the second ha[illegible] the eighteenth century. In center, French salver on three feet by Benoit Taudin, from the earlier half of the century.

Fig. 6. German teapot of about 1770.

From the time when the master pewterer, instead of the guild, struck the quality mark, the master's own touch had to be added as a personal guarantee that the quality of the metal was indeed the one indicated. At first only symbols were permitted, and these were struck on a control plate and deposited at the guild together with the names of the pewterers. Later, initials were accepted in the touch; and still later, when the guilds had lost their power and could not enforce the regulations against this type of personal advertisement, the full name of the pewterer was struck.

By this time—the end of the eighteenth century—pewter had become more and more the loser in the battle for the favor of the public. The miraculous rise of the porcelain and faïence industries, and the passionate interest prominent personalities showed in them, led to the rapid decline of the pewterer's craft. When in France in 1759 an edict of Louis XV ordered all silver to the melting pot to pay for the war with England, it was not pewter but porcelain and faïence which replaced silver vessels on the tables of the aristocracy and the rich bourgeoisie. In Strasbourg, one of the traditional centers of pewter making, the establishment of Hannong's faïence factory reduced in a few decades the number of pewter workshops by two thirds.

A few shops on the Continent carried on their trade into the nineteenth century, trying to keep up with changing styles from neoclassic to neo-rococo, occasionally using old molds for the latter, but the interest in pewter declined rapidly. Having lost their appeal, many old pieces were sold as scrap metal to trash collectors and ended up in the anonymous melting pots of the new industrial era, leaving comparatively few examples of the last exuberant flowering of an old craft for us to enjoy.

Fig. 7. Tureen by Conrad Philip Schroeder of Frankfort, about 1765. A tureen of identical shape, except that the knob is turned by 90 degrees, is marked with the touch of Melchior Fries, who became master in Frankfort in 1782; also in [illegible] Cooper Union Museum.