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The Ruhmann collection of decorative pewter

BY ROBERT M. VETTER

EVERY COLLECTION REFLECTS THE COLLECTOR'S personality, no less than the *oeuvre* of the creative artist reveals himself. Seen from this angle, Dr. Karl Ruhmann of Vienna appears as the typical Austrian art lover of the old school, versatile, well-informed, preferring quality above the spectacular, and guided by a feeling for intimate values. His passion for the beautiful and rare was shared by his brother, Franz Ruhmann (d. 1946), whose collection of medieval and Renaissance glass of museum standard is now in Dr. Karl Ruhmann's possession and has been expanded by him with select items from subsequent periods. No less important are Dr. Ruhmann's gallery of early nineteenth-century Viennese paintings by such

artists as Waldmüller, Daffinger, and Amerling, and his old Viennese furniture, porcelain, silver, and other decorative arts. His special fondness for pewter dates from his youth, and he has advanced gradually to the undisputed prominence which he now holds among Continental pewter collectors: his extensive collection ranks with the best ever assembled. Pewter of such quality has become so rare that it would probably be impossible to build up a comparable collection again.

Dr. Ruhmann's preference is for pewter of high craftsmanship and finish, embellished with relief casting or engraving. Plain household pieces of sturdy, functional type appeal to him far less. In this he differs from many collectors, who consider the so-called florid type of Continental pewter an esthetic misfit, its ornamentation incongruous with the plain character of the material, and regard British and American pewter as a model of good taste and sobriety. Much of the pewter that Dr. Ruhmann has collected is what is called *Edelzinn*. This term, which means literally noble pewter, was originated by Hans Demiani (*François Briot, Caspar Enderlein und das Edelzinn*, 1897) to designate the relief-decorated pewter, chiefly French and German, of about 1600. Gradually the name has been extended to cover all sorts of decorated pewter, though some collectors maintain that it is a contradiction in terms, and that the "noble pewter" itself was a vain attempt to emulate contemporary silver. The examples in Dr. Ruhmann's collection, however, should convince the impartial observer that decoration of pewter may be in harmony with the esthetic qualities of the material and that *Edelzinn* is not merely a substitute for the richer metal. Clearly it makes up a class by itself, of undisputed originality and subtle beauty.

Dr. Ruhmann's collection contains some remarkable items of decorated Italian pewter. Little is known about the craft in Italy which John Ruskin in his *Stones of Venice* mentions somewhat disdainfully. The examples shown here suggest the versatility of Italian pewterers, who practiced every means of surface decoration—*repoussé*, engraving of all kinds, etching, even enameling—and exerted considerable influence on the pewter of other countries. In that and other respects this collection contains many surprises, even for the initiated and advanced connoisseur.

A selection of items from Dr. Ruhmann's collection was exhibited in 1960 at the Museum Ferdinandeum at Innsbruck, under the designation *Edelzinn aus der Sammlung Dr. Karl Ruhmann*, and a catalogue with detailed descriptions and splendid illustrations was issued on that occasion. This catalogue is so informative that it should form part of every pewter library as a standard work of reference.





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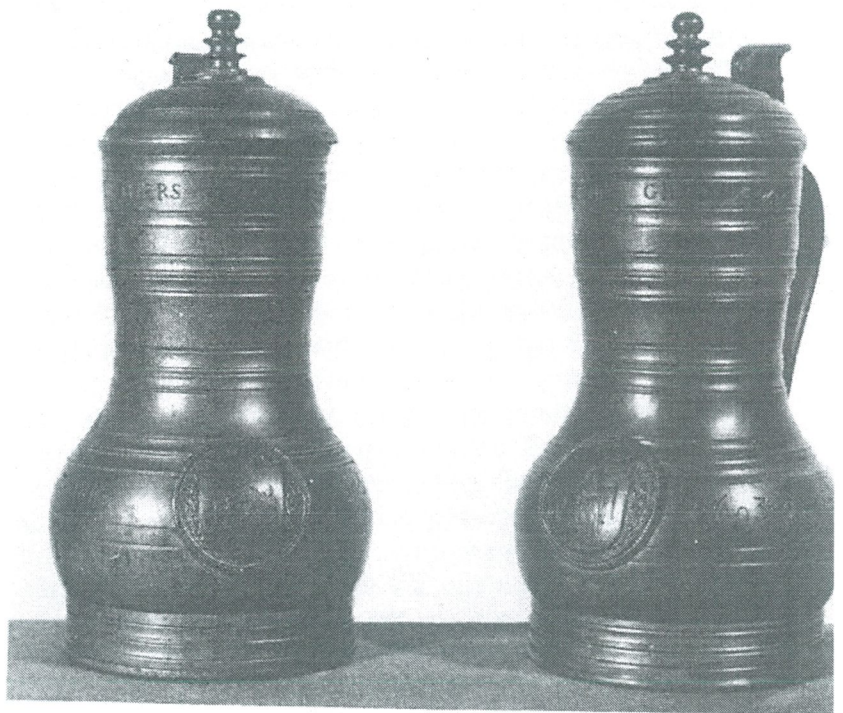
Hexagonal flask with screw cap, probably Saxon, c. 1700. Height 10 inches. The sides are relief cast in an all-over ornamental design. All illustrations are from the collection of Dr. Karl Ruhmann.

Austrian tankard, made by Isaac Widemann of Linz, c. 1600. Height 7 inches. The piece combines simplicity and noblesse.

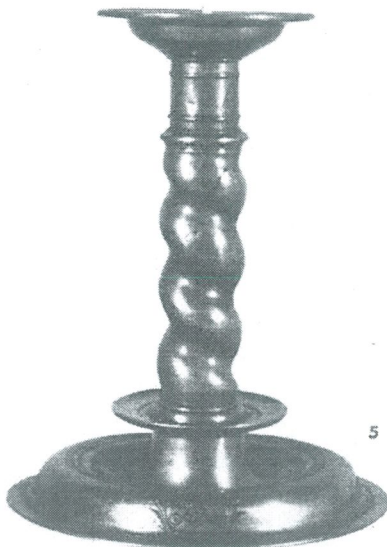
German spouted flagon made at Augsburg by Georg Teisslinger; dated 1689. Height about 6 1/2 inches. Unusual in its combination of strut-supported spout with straight-sided body and spreading base.

Dutch flagons from a grocers' guild at Nymwegen, Holland, dated 1693. Height about 10 inches. Pieces of this sort and quality have become extremely rare.

Candlestick, Swedish, c. 1650. Height 9 inches. A piece whose singular charm depends on form rather than decoration.



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6 Italian dish, early seventeenth century. Diameter 16 inches. A piece of great beauty showing the unusual technique of raised ornamentation achieved by deep cutting of the background. The addition of an enameled escutcheon in the center—a technique attempted nowhere outside Italy except in Britain—as well as the splendid workmanship indicate that this was a presentation piece. The pewterer's craft is here carried to artistic perfection.

7 German dish, early seventeenth century, an interesting variant of the well-known *Temperantia* dish by Caspar Enderlein of Nuremberg (1560-1633), so called because of the relief figure of Temperance in the umbo, or raised center. Here the elaborate cast decoration follows the original model but the central medallion is occupied by the equestrian figure of Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden, who in 1629 besieged Nuremberg in vain. Was this dish intended as a gift to the King from sympathizing partisans?

8 Italian (probably Venetian) plate, early seventeenth century. Diameter about 9 inches. Decorated with *repoussé* bosses and "wriggled" engraving. Such simple but effective *repoussé* work, with either wriggled or straight-cut engraving, was dear to the Venetian pewterers of the sixteenth century and later. It passed over the Alps and was also popular with Nuremberg pewterers toward the end of the 1500's, but the Northern engraving, though sometimes full of character, was not so graceful and refined as the Italian.

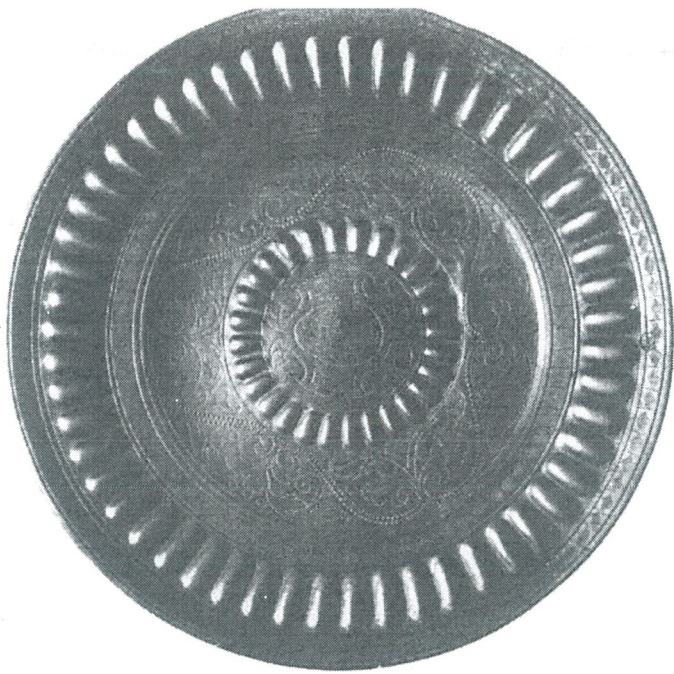
9 German plate by Nicholas Horchhaimer, who worked at Nuremberg 1561-1583. Diameter about 9 inches. Relief cast in a strapwork design.

10 German broad-rim dish with raised umbo, c. 1600; touches unidentified; probably a piece belonging to affiliated guilds. Diameter 15 inches. The engraving is a fine example of popular art.

11 German flat pierced platter or dish ring made by Johann Wolfgang Pütz, Nuremberg, c. 1730; beautifully engraved.

12 Bavarian wine cooler of monteith type made by Sebastian Lipp Jr. of Landslut, c. 1720. Diameter 12½ inches. The richness of the baroque tonal and relief decoration is enhanced by the soft color and lively surface texture of the material.





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