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The Art of Pewter

Many technological innovations, as well as the centuries-old tradition of serious craftsmanship, are responsible for these high-quality collectibles

BY CARLA E. WESTERMAN

THE artists and craftsmen who practice the art of fine pewter making today belong to a tradition that began at least 2,000 years ago. Pewter has always been prized for its lustrous beauty, which enhances the simplest spoon or the most intricate sculpture. When finished to a soft sheen, pewter is an ideal artistic medium for portraying sharp detail, contrasting textures and complex three-dimensional concepts.

Other characteristics, such as pewter's ease of working, are of prime importance to the craftsman who must shape and mold the metal. And the durability of pewter is attested to by the many surviving plates, tankards and other domestic utensils from past centuries that have weathered rugged daily use as well as the test of time.

The Franklin Mint began to explore the artistic possibilities of pewter more than eight years ago and, in 1974, issued its first series of sculptured figures, *The People of Colonial America*. In the years that followed, the artists and craftsmen at the mint focused their talents and ingenuity on this versatile metal, producing some 50 series of miniature figures, animals, spoons, tankards, sculptured scenes and plates with themes ranging from the historical to the purely artistic.

As with most Franklin Mint creations, a pewter sculpture begins with an artist and an idea. Before preparing sketches, the artist delves into research materials related to the subject matter: If it is a historical event, pictures and documentation help recall details of a bygone era. If it is an animal, real-life observation helps fuel the imagination.

However, the artist also must know the properties of the medium, or the finest idea may not be realized. To understand how the initial clay model will be transformed into pewter, the artist presents sketches and ideas for the three-dimensional piece to the technical experts responsible for handling the mint's pewter sculptures.

The craftsmen who make the pewter molds study the sketch to see how the piece might be cast, proposing solutions to satisfy both technical and artistic requirements. Since only the simplest pewter sculptures can be cast in a single mold, they also decide how the piece will be taken apart for production. Sometimes the artist will modify his sketch as a result of these discussions, but just as often the research and development group takes up the challenge of finding a new way to produce the piece.

Back at the drawing table, the sculptor shapes an armature, a wire skeleton around which the concept will be fleshed out in clay or a synthetic sculpting material. Turning the piece continually, scanning the proportions with a critical eye, the sculptor works a rough shape and then begins to concentrate on the fine detail. Tools are a personal choice and can range from the conventional to, perhaps, a dental instrument. Whereas one artist may achieve the texture of hair strand by strand, another might prefer delicate strokes with a wire brush.

The completed clay sculpture is then scrutinized for authenticity of detail and fidelity to the original design. Once approved, it is the criterion against which the success of all subsequent steps is judged.

The next priority is to make a more durable version of the fragile model. A rubber mold is prepared for making a replica in epoxy, a quick-setting resin that can be worked with sculpting tools. Following guidelines established in the original meeting with the technicians, the artist cuts the sculpture into a number of parts and "keys" the joints so they will fit back together again in only one way. The separations are strategically chosen: Concealed in the seam of a jacket or the wheel of a car, they are invisible in the finished piece. The sculptor compares the epoxy model against the original to assure that no detail or contour has been lost or distorted.

At this point the artist entrusts his model to the pewter-making experts. A complex sculpture goes first to research and development, where trial molds are prepared and obstacles that might interfere with production are identified. Large tableaux may be broken down into more than 30 elements, which in turn require the preparation of more than 30 separate molds. The pieces must fit back together again with absolute precision. Engineers and technicians huddled over large work tables strewn with rubber molds, epoxy patterns and boxes of assorted pewter pieces tackle the problem: An animal

claw tears the mold, a miniature rifle breaks when released from the mold, an automobile fender does not align properly.

Once these difficulties have been resolved, the sculpture is brought to the master-mold makers. To prepare the master mold, the craftsman carves a shallow impression of the piece into a large, soft, black rubber disc. The epoxy model is fitted into the cavity, covered with a second rubber disc, then placed in the vulcanizer, where heat and intense pressure squeeze the rubber around it. The rubber mold emerges hard as an automobile tire with a perfect impression of the epoxy inside.

The pewter offspring of the master mold are touched up by engravers who carefully compare them to the artist's original work. Using a powerful magnifying glass, the engraver pinpoints any flaws or details lost in the molding process. Once the pewter piece meets the engraver's standards, it is returned to the mold maker for preparation of the production mold.

In the pewter production area, the many interrelated tasks necessary to produce the sculpture are performed in an atmosphere of busy concentration. Shiny pewter ingots are stacked in neat rows. Crucibles of shimmering hot liquid pewter are made ready. An operator gracefully ladles a silvery stream of pewter into a mold. Another gently twists a mold to release a small spoon, using great care to avoid damage to the pewter as well as the rubber mold, which is used over and over again. Skillful hands trim and polish the finished pieces, removing mold parting lines, seams and any other rough areas. The sculpture is then reassembled with solder, a painstaking procedure done by hand.

Though the sculpture is essentially complete at this stage, it must still undergo a multistage hand-finishing process. The pewter is cleaned, polished and dipped in a special bath to accelerate the natural darkening of the metal. Next, trained polishers ply a buffing wheel in the hard-to-reach spaces of an intricate tableau or over the tiny features of a miniature figure. Deftly turning the sculpture as they work, they highlight faces, smooth surfaces and selected detail. The finished sculptures are passed to inspectors who examine each one, making sure that the piece is a faithful reproduction of the artist's original model. And finally, a clear protective coating is sprayed over the sculpture to preserve the soft glow and subtle shadings of the finish.

Although methods of working with pewter have been refined and improved with the help of present-day technology, these artists and craftsmen still measure the results of their work against the centuries-old standards of scale and proportion, color and finish that give fine pewter its distinctive appearance and appeal.

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Nearly complete, these figurines undergo a multistage hand-finishing process during which they are trimmed of excess metal, cleaned, polished and buffed to pewter's distinct patina.