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# PEWTER

## North America

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROGER BIRN

The master metalsmith Jack Prip once said that pewter is somewhere between clay and "real" metal, thus summing up its attraction for metalsmiths. Thirty-two craftsmen from the United States and Canada showed the range of their exploration of the material over the last decade in "North American Pewtersmiths," an invitational at the Brookfield Craft Center in Connecticut (January 22-March 18).

Largely an unheralded medium, pewter is a superbly responsive metal that allows the artist wide expression. Readily malleable and fusible, it is a soft white metal that is tarnish resistant. Because it does not work-harden—it anneals at room temperature—it retains its plasticity while it is being worked, thus eliminating problems with firescale and heat warping. Even when highly polished, it retains a warm depth of tone. The metal's softness invites texture; indeed, in use, pewterware rapidly acquires a patina—the myriad nicks, dents and scratches that add to its beauty. Pewter melts at about 450 degrees Fahrenheit, a relatively low temperature that enables the worker to have delicate control over soldering, fusing and casting. Many forms which might require elaborate preparation in another metal can be produced more easily in pewter.

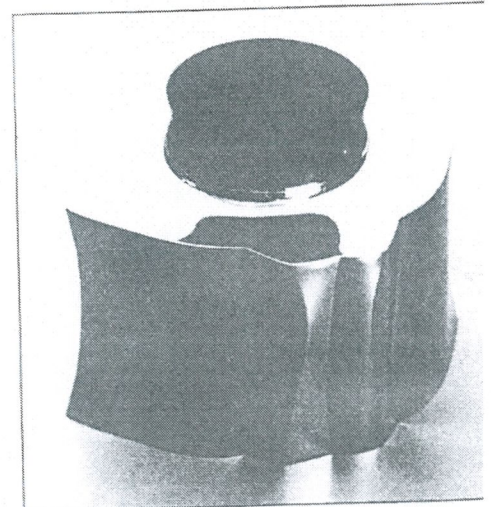
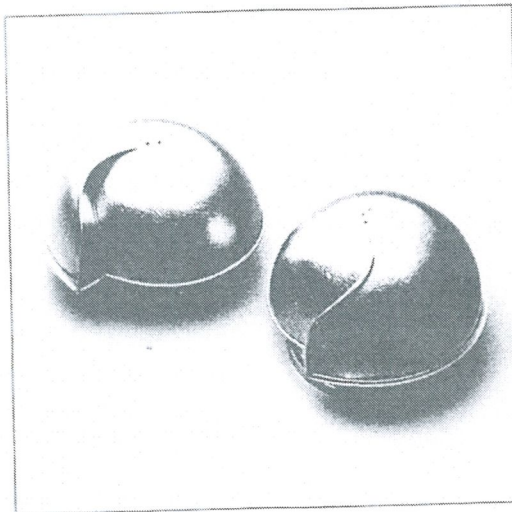
Throughout the ages, pewter alloys have been characterized by a high tin content. "Fine" or lead-free pewter is tin with some copper. Faced

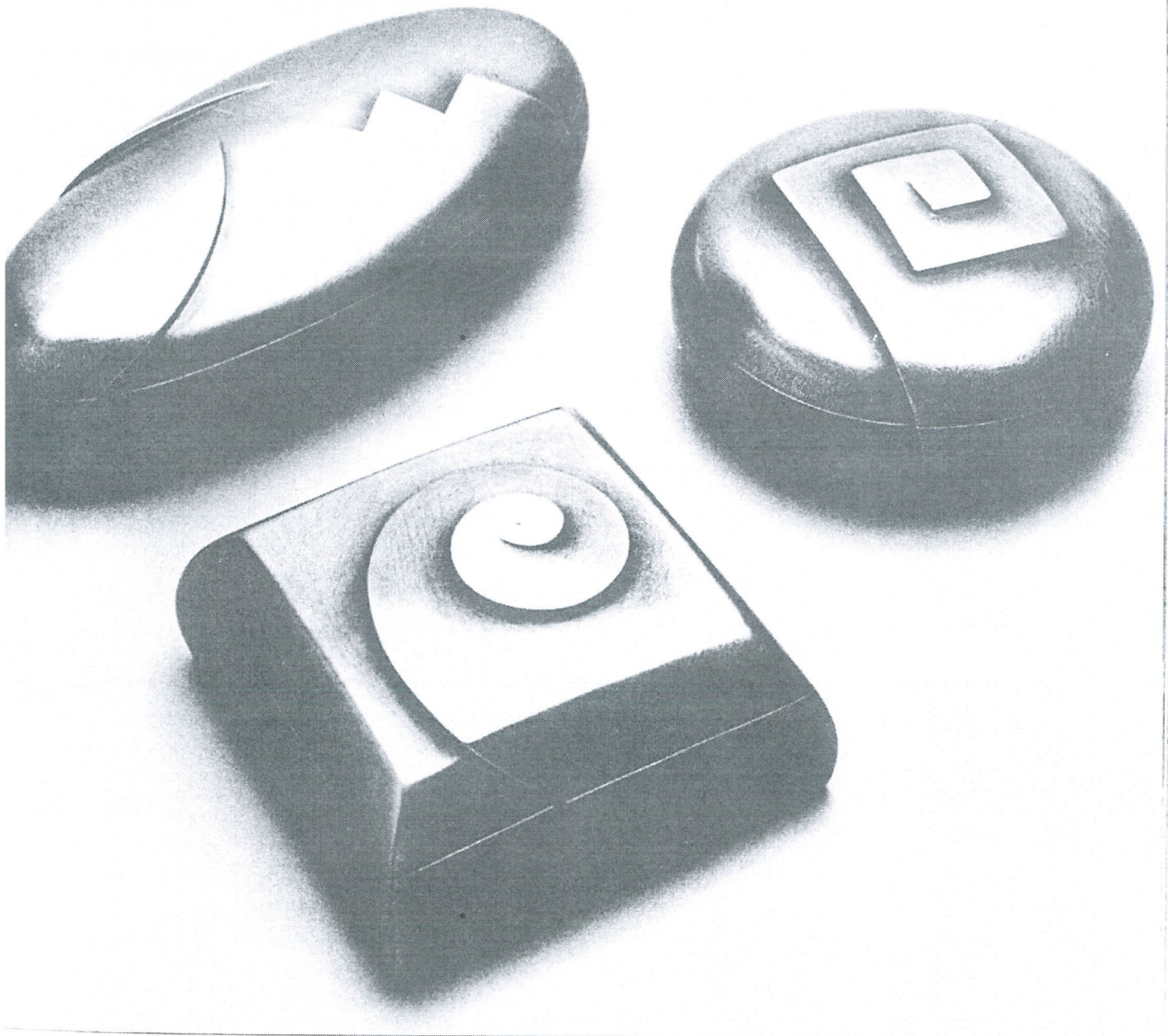
with competition from silver plate and china manufacturers during the 19th century, pewters standardized the alloy to "Britannia Metal"—92% tin, 6% antimony and 2% copper—thus eliminating the "common" pewter alloys containing lead. Pewter and Britannia Metal are synonymous. With the availability of sheet pewter, those who cast pewter to form holloware—the pewterers—gave way to those who work the sheet to its final form—the pewtersmiths. Pewterers are a minority today and limit themselves to works somewhat smaller in scale than those of the pewtersmiths.

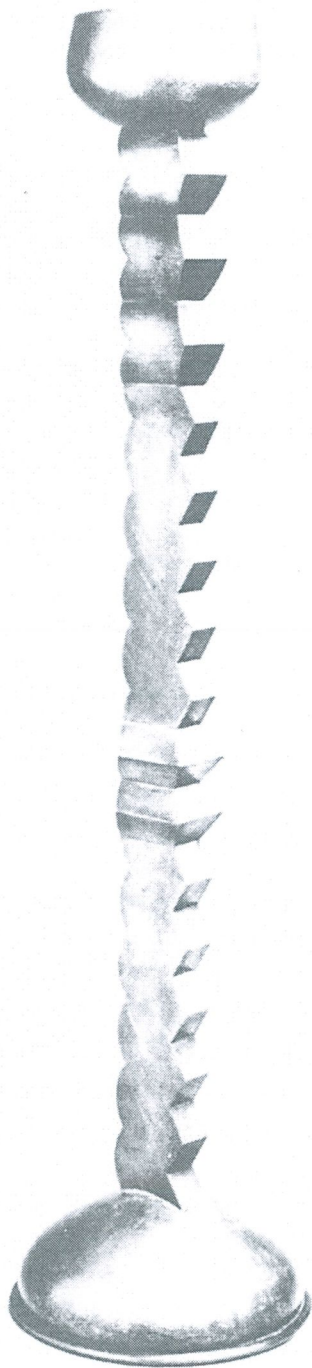
For a long time, pewtersmithing was confined to the factory and to industrial arts schools. Smiths with this background—the late Lewis Whitney, Don Miller, the late Fred Pulsifer, Don Shenstone and Sally Richards—inspired by the ideal of the colonial pewterer, or, in some cases by Scandinavian pewtersmithing, founded small businesses during the middle decades of this century. Their work reflects a direct approach and folk art aesthetic.

Among the more artistically adventurous pewtersmiths have been Ivan Crowell, a Canadian, and the late Frances Felton of Connecticut, both of whom inspired many included in this exhibition. Shirley Charron's book, *Modern Pewter: Design and Techniques* (Van Nostrand Reinhold: 1973), a tribute to Felton, documents the

RIGHT: Salt and pepper shakers, each 2½"x3"x3½", by Fred Fenster.  
FAR RIGHT: Canister, pewter and vermilion, 5½"x6¼", by James Gagnon.  
OPPOSITE PAGE TOP: Boxes, 1983, constructed and formed, oval box 4"x8"x3", by Robin Quigley.  
BOTTOM LEFT: Bowl, 1983, pewter and Plexiglas, 5½"x4¾"x¾", by Janet Prip.  
RIGHT: Vessel #125, 7"x18", by Linda Weiss Edwards.







ABOVE: Candelabrum, c. 1970, 48" high, by Jack Prip, not in exhibit. RIGHT: Boxes, c. 1968, pewter and cloisonne enamel, by Frances Felton, not in exhibit. OPPOSITE PAGE TOP: Goblets, tallest 12" high, by Jack Route. BOTTOM LEFT: *Findings #2*, 1984, brooch, 6" x 1½" x 1½", by Paulette Werger. MIDDLE: *Vessel II*, 6" x 11", by William Derrevere. RIGHT: *Show Window*, one part of a triptych, 27" x 16" x 11", by Sergey Blumin.

precepts Felton developed over a lifetime. In boxes and canisters in which she combined pewter with plique-à-four enamel, Felton capitalized on pewter's ability to hold a bright finish indefinitely, and in her bowls, she explored its malleability. Three pewtersmiths who seem to be elaborating on Felton's ideas are Charron, who exhibited multiple leaved bottles and sculptures, G. Adeline Laughlin, with a baptismal bowl and pendants, and James Gagnon, whose canister and lidded box have subtle movements of the surface and added areas of texture. Among those exhibitors inspired by Crowell are Judd Jones and Fred and Judi Danforth. The Danforths bring a refinement of form and an understated elegance to their production work. (Judi also studied with the late Hans Christensen at the Rochester Institute of Technology.)

Academic metalsmiths began to experiment with pewter in the 1950s. Prip, who taught at the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, used the metal extensively in the 60s and 70s and has encouraged students to explore its possibilities. Prip has made the most of pewter's malleability and its ease of casting and soldering in several of his large-scale holloware pieces. His original techniques, such as using a rough file for a textured finish, have been continued by his former students Robin Quigley, Janet Prip and Francis Byrne. Byrne's plates show a robust response to pewter; they remind one of slab-built pottery. Quigley brings a refined playfulness to pewter in her boxes, plates and bowls. Janet Prip explores abstract symbols in her shallow bowls by exploiting the metal's capacity to take a variety of finishes and to fuse easily.

By far the most active teacher concentrating in pewter today is Fred Fenster, at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He has also inspired many students to try their hand at the pliant metal through his workshops and lectures given across the country. About one-third of the pieces at Brookfield were made by metalsmiths who were introduced to pewter by Fenster or by his former students.

Fenster began working with pewter as a graduate student at Cranbrook Academy of Art under Richard Thomas in the early 60s, and now it is

his principal medium. Echoing Prip, he says, "I like pewter for its immediacy. I feel that the metal is much like clay in its responsiveness." He is now using roll printing, for which pewter is ideally suited.

Three goblets by Jack Route show Fenster's influence by their sensuous line and directness of fabrication. The base, stem and bowl are made from one uncut sheet of metal rolled into a flaired tube. Paulette Werger, currently a student of Fenster's, brings a background in sculpture and sensitive observations of nature to pewter. She has developed her own techniques for slumping the metal so as to introduce free, plastic elements into her creations. William Derrevere continues to explore vessel forms, using chasing and stamping to create flowing textures that complement the forms.

Linda Weiss Edwards, who was introduced to pewter at a Fenster workshop and now finds it her preferred medium for holloware, exhibited a heavy, 18-inch-diameter bowl with a spontaneous configuration. In contrast, Glenice Matthews showed a punch bowl, which, though impressive in size, lacked the refinement of her sculptural form *Birth of Athena*, seen in "A Celebration of Pewter" at The Society of Arts and Crafts in Boston last fall.

Another sign that pewtersmithing is flourishing is the effort made by the American Pewter Guild, Ltd., an organization of pewter manufacturers, suppliers and amateur craftsmen, based in Valley Stream, New York, to attract artists and professional pewtersmiths to membership. In a recent design competition sponsored by the guild, there were prizewinners in the industrial categories as expected, but there was also a refreshing influx of artists. The grand prize was awarded to Claire Pflieger and prizes in other categories went to Ken Kantro and the Danforths, all of whom were represented at Brookfield. The Smithsonian's Museum of American History will present a guild exhibition beginning May 5. □

*James Seavey, a pewtersmith and a distinguished member of the Society of North American Goldsmiths was curator of "North American Pewtersmiths."*

