

## Do You Know This ... About Silver and Pewter?

by Chuck Thompson

- One gram of silver can be drawn into a wire more than a mile long.
- Until the 15th century it was church custom to bury a pewter chalice with the priest.

The recorded history of **silver** and **pewter** offers much little-known and interesting information.

### Silver

Our fascination for silver has never waned. It is not only a precious metal, but it can be and has been fashioned into elegant and beautiful objects. Silversmithing is one of the world's most ancient occupations: Silver ornaments and decorations recovered from royal tombs date back as far as 4,000 B.C. Very early Roman records show that the word "Luna" and a crescent moon symbol were used for silver.

In Colonial America, silversmithing was one of the finest crafts practiced, also one of the earliest. The *Register of the Virginia Company* records a silversmith in Jamestown in 1620.

Other important dates in the history of silver in America include 1838: This was the year the first silver mine, the *Silver Hill Mine*, was discovered near Lexington, North Carolina. The first successful silver plating factory in America was *Rogers Brothers*, Hartford, Conn. This factory was established in 1847.

Early American history reveals that having one's silver in the form of silverware was, in the eyes of the Colonists, tantamount to having it in the bank. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in the absence of banks where they might deposit surplus funds, the conversion of coin into household silverware was a convenient way to keep it intact, and also enjoy the use of it.

Today, the use of silver for silverware, ornaments, jewelry and other products consumes about 35% of all silver mined in the world. An average teaspoon, made of and marked "Sterling", will contain about one ounce of silver.

Pure silver is too soft for practical purposes and is combined with other harder metals. This process is known as alloying and is closely regulated. The proportion of silver in

the alloy is stated in terms of fineness, or parts of silver per 1,000 of the alloy. Sterling silver is 92.5% silver: Sterling contains 925 parts silver and 75 parts of another metal, usually copper. Therefore, Sterling is said to have a fineness of 925.

English silver of sterling standard is hallmarked with the lion passant. *Passant* is defined as a heraldic animal walking with the farther forepaw raised (see illustration). Originally, silver was hallmarked at Goldsmith's Hall, London, England, where gold and silver articles were assayed and stamped.



English silver of Sterling standard is hallmarked with the lion passant. Here (left to right) is an early form of lion passant and two more modern forms used in British hallmarks for silver wares

The outstanding qualities of silver include its brightness and power of reflection. Silver, when polished, reflects 95% of the light falling on it. It is considered one of the most malleable and ductile of all metals: One gram of silver can be drawn into a wire more than a mile long. Silver is also a very enduring metal. This durability has contributed to its preservation through the years.

Probably the only slight inconvenience of silver is the tarnishing which occurs, caused by the metal combining with sulphur or chlorides in the air. At times this can be an advantage because repairs, patches and the removal of engraving and other decorations are more easily detected on tarnished pieces.



Use of silver for silverware, jewelry, steins, mugs and other collectible products consumes about 35% of all silver mined in the world. This handsome tankard, crafted by silversmith Edward Davis about 1775, is from the Towle Silver Collection. (Photo courtesy of Towle Silver Co.)

The first recorded reference to value placed on silver is dated about 3600 B.C. At that time, Egyptian King Menes set the value of silver at two-fifths that of gold.

Silver is now regarded as money by two-thirds of the world's population. The distribution of silver reserves, measured in percentages of the world total: USSR (18%), Canada (15%), Mexico (14%), U.S. (12%).

From the record books: The highest price ever paid for silver is \$1,163,750 for the pair of Duke of Kingston Tureens made in 1735 by *Meissonnier* and sold by Christie's, Geneva, on November 8, 1977 (Guinness Book of World Records).

### Pewter

Pewter was first used by ancient Orientals and Romans nearly 2,000 years ago. It contained sufficient lead to cause the surface to darken with age. The best (and most) grades of modern pewter contain no lead.

Specimens of Roman pewter excavated in England show that pewter ware was made in England by the Roman Legions. Early pewterers and silversmiths gave great attention to the design of their wares to be used in Church. Finest examples of their work can be seen in Church cups and chalices. After the Restoration in England, pewter came into daily household use, replacing the clumsy wooden utensils of that time.

When the first English settlers came to the "New World", they brought their precious pewter with them. Few Colonials used either pottery or porcelain china before 1780; pewter plates and dishes were in general use. Even by 1857, china on the dinner table was rare.

The period marking the greatest production of pewter ware in Colonial America was the 150 years between 1700 and 1850. The hundred years between 1750 and 1850 were called the "Pewter Century". Boston, New York and Philadelphia were the main centers of manufacture.

In Colonial America, it was common practice for tinkers (itinerant menders of household utensils) who owned pewter molds to make yearly visits to farmsteads and cast, on the spot, what was needed by their customers. The most durable pewter molds were made of gun-metal. Some of these molds, still in use after more than a century of service, are in good condition. Because the craft was laborious and molds were expensive, the design was simple, yet this simplicity itself was both beautiful and popular.

Objects we refer to as "flat ware" were classified in Colonial times as "sad ware". The word "sad" probably refers to fine pewter of that time, an alloy of tin "saturated" with as much copper as "of its own nature it will take"; it may hence also derive from the alternate meaning of "sad", i.e., "dull", comparing the more subdued pewter to the brightness and high reflectivity of silver. The resultant pewter lent itself well to the process of shaping with the hammer. In early American pewter, the lowest grade was called *trifle*. It was much used for common tankards and mugs, and was "sometimes made with nearly forty percentum of lead". Antimony, a metallic silvery-white crystalline and brittle element used in most pewter alloys, is also used in medicine.

Even the best grade of pewter is softer than brass or bronze. Still, it is classified as one of the most durable metals. It will resist oxidation almost indefinitely and is safe for eating and drinking utensils. Modern pewter is an alloy of approximately 91% tin, 7.5% antimony and 1.5% copper. It retains its brightness indefinitely and may have a crisp bright finish or a soft satin sheen. Since 1953, the world production of modern pewter ware has exceeded the amount of pewter produced in any similar period in the history of the industry.

There are good reasons for the revival of interest in pewter. The public has become educated to the charm and beauty of non-tarnishing pewter and today's craftsmen are using pewter in new ways and in noticeable designs.



Modern Scandinavian pewter stein. The "Munich Child" finial is also cast of pewter, but was mounted on the lid separately

Today, many pewter objects command prices as high as, or even higher than, their silver counterparts.

Incidentally, display experts tell us pewter looks best when displayed against a blue background. Silver is most attractive against a red background.

[The interested reader may wish to refer to *Prosit* issue number 60, June 1980, which was largely devoted to the subject of pewter. A bibliography on pewter references may be obtained by sending us (P.O. Box 463, Kingston, New Jersey 08528) a large stamped, self-addressed envelope, with the word "pewter" marked in the lower left.]

#### About The Writer

Chuck Thompson is Executive Director of The Silver & Pewter Collectors Society (International). He is also a certified personal property appraiser and a collector. He specializes in the appraisal of Antique and Classic Silver, Pewter, and other Collectors Items. He has recently been named a Member of the Advisory Board of the prestigious Schroeder's Antiques Price Guide (6th Edition). Information in this article is from the research files of Chuck Thompson & Associates.



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