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# PEWTER

## A Most Misunderstood Metal

By Ana Lopez

### Pewter has a public-relations problem.

Many people mistakenly think it still contains lead, and some metalsmiths fear it will ruin their silver.

But for hundreds of years pewter was everywhere—from middle-class housewares to pilgrimage souvenirs to Art Nouveau decorative arts.<sup>1</sup>



Left:  
**T. Madden**  
*Garden Shadows* (torq  
 necklace), 2019  
 Pewter, bronze  
 2½ x 11 x 11 in.  
 Photo by the artist

Opposite:  
**Matthew Hollern**  
*Persistence II*, 2018,  
 Pewter, SLS nylon, acrylic  
 16 x 14 x 6 in.  
 Photo by the artist

Now that pewter alloys are lead-free, a surprising number of artists are revisiting pewter's unique qualities and complex history. Pewter is a tin-based alloy. Since tin is brittle, it is combined with other metals to improve its durability and working properties. And because it alloys easily and has a very low melting temperature, it can form a eutectic mixture with other metals, reducing the melting temperatures of each component. For metalsmiths, the nightmare scenario is heating silver that unbeknownst to them has been in contact with pewter, which leads to a meltdown in every sense.

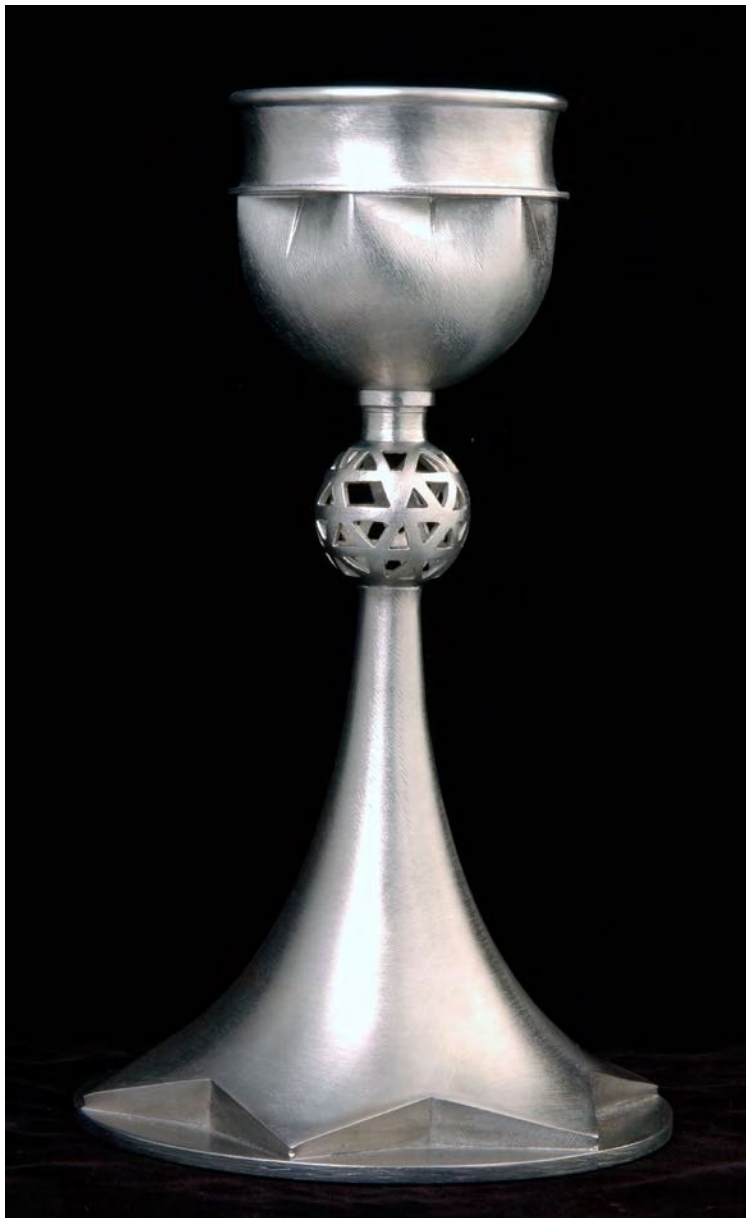
Conversely, fans of pewter rave about its accessibility and forgiving nature. For example, welded pewter joints provide a seamless construction without being brittle. Pewter can be formed with wood tools, and can be melted with just a small butane torch. Since no amount of hammering, rolling, or forming will cause it to stiffen, there is no need to stop and anneal the metal. And since it's a poor conductor, pewtersmiths can hold elements in place with masking tape while soldering with a torch. It can be liquefied in a saucepan on a hotplate and cast into a silicone mold. Scrap metal can be endlessly melted down for reuse, so nothing goes to waste. Finally, it is food safe—and considerably less expensive than silver.

Before the method for rolling pewter into sheets was developed in 1775, pewter was usually cast, scraped, and polished. The oldest extant pewter holloware is an Egyptian bottle from circa 1450 BCE. We also have Roman-era plates and medicine containers. During the pilgrimages of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, churches sold pewter badges depicting relics or saints.

In the 1500s, pewter objects intended for display began to develop, with relief decoration engraved into molds. By 1600, pewter was in all but the poorest homes as plates, spoons, drinking vessels, and candlesticks. It was preferred over wood or clay in large part because it could be remade if damaged.







Above:  
**Fred Fenster**  
*Kiddush Cup*, 1995  
 Originally designed 1988  
 Pewter  
 9 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 5 $\frac{1}{2}$  in.  
 Smithsonian American Art  
 Museum, Gift of Ruth  
 Neubauer, 1996.32.3  
 Photo courtesy of Smithsonian  
 American Art Museum

Right:  
**Lynn Whitford**  
*Three Boscs*, 2007  
 Pewter  
 7 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 3 in.  
 Photo: Eric Tadsen



## Pewter as a Niche Metal

Domestic pewter's prominence declined in the late eighteenth century due to industrialization and the advent of porcelain, glass, and silver-plated wares. Yet, pewter found a role in the progressive decorative arts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Manufacturers used cast pewter to create clocks, boxes, and vases in Art Nouveau and related movements. Archibald Knox designed for Liberty's department store in London, creating the Tudric line as part of the British Arts and Crafts movement.

In 1970, Randy Stromsoe was apprenticed to the American Arts and Crafts silversmith Porter Blanchard. They used pewter to try out the proportions for new designs to generate orders for silver. Eventually, the pewter itself became popular. When Stromsoe needed to make an ice bucket large enough to hold three bottles of wine for Elton John, pewter was the solution. But the choice is not always motivated by cost. "Pewter is fun," says Stromsoe.<sup>2</sup>

Frances Felten was an early postwar advocate of pewter in a Modernist style. Her highly polished and unadorned tableware was included in the Museum of Modern Art's *100 Useful Objects of Fine Design (Available Under \$100)* in 1947. Several of her pieces incorporated enamels by Margaret Seeler. One such box was included in the seminal *Objects USA* exhibition in 1969. Devoted student Shirley Charron outlined Felten's techniques in her pewtersmithing instructional book *Modern Pewter: Design and Techniques* (1973).

In the postwar studio movement, Fred Fenster was the premier US ambassador for pewtersmithing. While at Cranbrook Academy of Art, he observed the pewter work of Gudmund Jon Elvestad, a goldsmith from Norway.<sup>3</sup> Fenster took to working with it and ended up writing his master's thesis on pewtersmithing in 1960. In it, he lamented, "Unfortunately, most of the work produced still tries to emulate silver and does not take full advantage of the inherent properties of pewter."<sup>4</sup> Fenster particularly valued the tactile

nature and responsiveness of pewter. "You get this feedback as you're working with it... you can respond right away. [With] silver there's a gap."<sup>5</sup> In over sixty years at the bench,

Fenster made innumerable vessels, Judaica, and functional objects for the home in pewter. But his most far-reaching influence was as an educator. Pewter was part of the curriculum at the University of Wisconsin–Madison (UW), where Fenster taught for over forty years. Most metalsmiths currently working with pewter in the United States can be traced back to him.

## Pewter Processes

One of the methods Fenster used to create hollowware was by piecing together sheet as a dressmaker would piece together cloth—then welding it and hammering out the seams. Lynn Whitford, a former student at UW, builds bananas that way; many of her pewter sculptures resemble bowls of fruit.<sup>6</sup> Matthew Hollern, another student of Fred's, took this process into the digital realm—first sketching objects with computer-aided design (CAD), then generating a flat pattern that he transfers to sheet metal. Hollern has created pieces ranging from intimate objects for the table to sculptures six feet high.

A Fred Fenster pewter workshop was an “evangelical experience” for Thomas Madden. Smitten ever since, he continues to teach pewtersmithing to his students at the College for Creative Studies in Detroit, Michigan.<sup>7</sup> Michael Gayk, one of Madden's former students, uses software to simulate vector math to describe things like noise, then 3D-prints the results. These are then molded and cast in pewter. The resulting objects are physical representations of ephemeral, sensory experiences. Gayk says, “I think I need pewter to stay low tech so I can work high tech in different ways.”<sup>8</sup>



Above:  
**Michael Gayk**  
*Turbulence (Be Like Water)*, 2023  
 Cast pewter  
 4 x 4 x 4½ in.  
 Photo by the artist

Left:  
**Randy Stromsoe**  
*Play Ball*, 1994  
 Pewter  
 6 x 10¼ x 5½ in.  
 Photo: Ron Bez





From top:  
**Tamara Johnson**  
*Cracker N#2*, 2023  
 Pewter, oiled-based  
 paint, pigmented  
 resin, matte varnish  
 2 x 2 x .5 in.  
 Photos: Trey Burns  
 Sweet Pass

**Lisa Slovis Mandel**  
*Piece of Me*  
*Menorah*, 2006  
 Pewter  
 5 x 5 x 2 in. (each)  
 Photo: J. Wallen

**Venetia Dale**  
*The Gathering*  
*of Something*  
 (installation view),  
 2022–2023  
 Pewter  
 18 x 60 x 60 in.  
 Photo: Mel Taing



The low-tech nature of pewtersmithing also made it a viable studio material for many during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Venetia Dale's current work is about the labor of caretaking: "My work plays with this invisibility of tending by creating sculptures that invite a reconsideration of the small,

repeated acts one makes to care for home and family."<sup>9</sup>

Parenting three children during the pandemic meant that Dale had only crumbs of time, but fortunately twenty minutes is enough to cast five small things in pewter. She collected orange peels, made simple molds, and cast when she could. Over time, the results came together to replicate the inflated hopper balls children love to bounce on—though Dale's simulations seem to deflate under their own weight.

Sculptor Tamara Johnson previously recreated common household objects in bronze. When she lost access to foundries during the pandemic, she turned to the one metal she could melt on a hotplate. She has cast replicas of saltine crackers, okra, and a can of tomatoes—which she finishes with oil paint. Johnson says, "In my work the object has to be remade because there is something about the simulation of a thing that turns it into a body, and then that body is able to have other reverberations and echoes in the space. Metal allows it to endure."<sup>10</sup>

Myra Mimlitsch-Gray was supposed to be traveling on sabbatical in 2020 but instead found herself at home with few resources. Myra's studio practice is grounded in craft's agency to explore shifting identities of materials and objects. Imagining landscapes and horizons, she poured plaster into slabs—but when she tried to bend them they cracked. So she made molds of the cracked plaster and cast pewter into them. These physical inquiries led to a series of forms suggestive of pitchers, though lacking functional bottoms. In these "souvenirs of unrequited travels and imagined sublime,"<sup>11</sup> pewter became a record of actions and adjacencies.

Clockwise from right:

**Myra Mimlitsch-Gray**  
*Fractured Creamers*, pair,  
 2020 and 2022  
 Cast and fabricated pewter  
 3¼ x 3 x 2½ in.  
 3¾ x 3 x 2 in.  
 Photo by the artist

**Thomas Bosse**  
*Gorilla FIASSk*, 2016  
 Pewter  
 5 x 4½ x 1 in.  
 Photo by the artist

**Jack Mauch**  
*Weighted Shot Glass*, n.d.  
 Cast pewter, patina  
 Photo by the artist

**Jeffrey Clancy**  
*Fake Antique /*  
*Borrowed Nostalgia*, 2018  
 Pewter  
 5 x 5 x 8 in.  
 Photo: Jim Escalante



## Pewter's Appeal

Some makers like pewter as a break from the exacting demands of other media. In her book

*Pewter Studio: Contemporary Projects and Techniques*, Lisa Slovis Mandel (a UW alumna) shares that working with sterling appeals to the left side of her brain, which prefers logical sequences—whereas pewter appeals to the more intuitive right side of her brain. The Judaica she creates also comes together faster in pewter, making it more affordable. This means more of Mandell's work makes it into people's homes. "Only so many people can afford silver," she notes.<sup>12</sup>

Jack Mauch, a woodworker, makes pewter cups. He uses the same equipment for both materials: he cuts sheet pewter with his bandsaw and grinds it on a disc sander. The quick turnaround on the cups is a pleasant counterpoint to the months it may take him to finish a door.

Jeffrey Clancy (who attended a Fred Fenster workshop) is drawn to the intuitiveness of pewter, which is contrary to the "imperialistic nature of perfection that Western craft teaches us." Clancy has shaken molds with molten pewter in them just to get waves in the final product. "You can get really stupid with it," he effuses. "With pewter the worst thing that is going to happen with it is that I'm going to recast it in five minutes. With a failed silver project, you are going to sit there and sulk over it for five days."<sup>13</sup>

The malleability of pewter makes it practicable for makers with physical limitations—or, those "with the muscular control of even fifth-grade pupils," according to a 1926 educational treatise.<sup>14</sup> When Thomas Bosse was in graduate school he suffered from arthritis, which made hammer-forming difficult, but "Pewter put the hammer back in my hands at a time when I could hardly manipulate a pencil.... I encourage anyone with a disability or joint issues to consider pewtersmithing if they've found that forming with traditional metals creates a physical barrier between themselves and the craft."<sup>15</sup>







Funlola Coker loves that pewter “is a little bit strange.”<sup>16</sup> To Coker, the way it melts is dreamlike, soft, and playful, making it ideal for representing different realms. Coker is interested in the surreal within object-making, and explores Afrofuturism in relation to Yoruba culture and history. Coker sees pewter relating directly to the otherworldly qualities of these relationships. Its ability to endlessly shape-shift is captured in Coker’s molten-looking forms that seem to have paused midtransformation.

David Harper Clemons (another Fenster workshop attendee) says pewter “reminds me a lot of the immediacy and the forgiving qualities I find working with steel.” He uses an alloy with more bismuth, which expands as it cools. So, when he casts pewter into wood, the pewter expands into cavities in the wood and locks itself in place. Clemons also makes pewter drinkware because it helps to keep things cold and “makes cheap beer taste good.”<sup>17</sup>

Brian Ferrell also makes functional drinkware. It meant that he could let people touch and handle the work without it tarnishing. His double-walled vessels sometimes combine pewter with wood, playing off the warm, tactile surfaces of each material. It’s “like sculpting with clay but with a torch.”<sup>18</sup>





**“It has reinfused my studio practice with a joy and playfulness that had waned somewhat over the years.”**

**— JAMES THURMAN**

## Pewter's Associations

Some dismiss pewter because they associate it with inexpensive toys. As a child, James Thurman melted his pewter Dungeons & Dragons figures after seeing a demonstrator cast musket balls at a fair. Now he forms pewter by spinning it—shaping sheet metal around an interior chuck while rotating on a lathe—noting, “it feels like the metal loves to be spun.” Painted pewter figurines are also appearing in some of his pieces. “It has reinfused my studio practice with a joy and playfulness that had waned somewhat over the years.”<sup>19</sup>

Logan Woodle's metalwork explores the relationship between truth, history, and meaning in storytelling around the agrarian South. He loves working with silver, but the subject of his work is “the opposite of the historical context of silver.” Woodle embraces the eutectic joining of pewter and silver—the singular eventuality that keeps pewter out of many silversmith's workshops. For Woodle, “Being able to combine silver and pewter in the same object allows me to play with historical class dynamics in a more visually intentional way.”<sup>20</sup>

The class associations of pewter and silver imply a darker aspect of the US/UK colonial relationship. Since the colonists weren't permitted to import raw tin—only finished pewter goods—it's likely that some substandard goods were exported, since there were no guilds in the colonies to test the alloys.<sup>21</sup> When these were damaged and remade, lead was frequently added to stretch the supply of metal or to improve its casting properties, increasing the density of lead exposure. The lead content in what was shipped to the United States probably increased after the Revolutionary War.<sup>22</sup> Woodle notes that the “devastation wrought across society” from lead-tainted pewter “is unfathomable.” Pewter sold in the United States has not contained lead since the 1970s.

As an educator, Woodle is concerned about how pewter's reputation combined with silver's rising prices can mean that “many of our students never get to make a functional piece of hollowware.”<sup>23</sup> He continues to interrogate the assumptions and classist attitudes he finds about pewter, seeing parallels regarding the perceived value of agrarian labor.



**James Thurman**  
*Bringer of Doubt*  
(candle snuffer), 2023  
Thurmanite® in cast resin,  
spun pewter, brass, brass  
microhardware, painted  
miniatures (Reaper 2634  
sculpted by Clint Staples,  
2911 sculpted by Jason Wiebe,  
4054 sculpted by Julie  
Guthrie, 3334 by various  
sculptors and Reaper Celtic  
Skull by unknown sculptor),  
also includes a booklet  
3 x 13 x 6 in.  
Photo by the artist



Left:  
**Logan Woodle**  
*The House Built on  
Chicken Legs*, 2019  
Pewter  
15 x 6 x 9 in.  
Photo: TJ Roth

Opposite, from top left:  
**David Harper Clemons**  
*Mixed Spoons*, 2023  
Cast pewter, red brass  
8 x 1½ x ½ in.  
(largest in series)  
Photo: Loam Marketing

**Funlola Coker**  
*Oculus*, 2023  
Pewter, copper  
12 x 9 x 7 in.  
Photo by the artist

**Brian Ferrell**  
*Scotch Tumblers*, 2014  
Pewter, mahogany, walnut,  
rubber  
17 x 11 x 5 in.  
Photo by the artist



This page, clockwise from above:

**Trish Woods**

*Symbols of Alchemy*, 2016

Patinated pewter, amethyst, peridot,  
zircon, colored silver gilding  
15 in. (length)

Photo by the artist

**Fleur Grenier**

*Hidden Oak Leaves and Ferns*, 2024

From the *Hidden Botanical* series

Pewter preserved in glycerine

ferns and oak leaves

27 x 19 x 13 cm

Photo: Roy Newnham

**David Clarke**

*Baroque Beauties* (candlesticks), 2016

Pewter

10 x 10 x 10 cm

Photo by the artist

Opposite:

**Ella McIntosh**

*Castscape trio*, 2024

30 x 45 cm

Sheet, cast, and oxidized pewter

Photo by the artist





David Clarke is a British silversmith who also uses pewter to address hierarchies in metals and society. Clarke is inspired by traditions as a starting point for disrupting expectations and material norms. He also injects humor as a way of broaching touchy subjects. Clarke has made replacement pewter lids in the shapes of anatomical posteriors (*Arse*) for silver-plated hollowware, resulting in vessels intended for the concealment of drugs—a far cry from how, traditionally, elaborate pewter centerpieces might inspire mealtime conversation. Clarke is learning from discussions with his detractors, saying, “I am most interested in people who are appalled by my work.”<sup>24</sup>

## Pewter's Advocates

In the United Kingdom, the Worshipful Company of Pewterers hosts the annual Pewter Live Design Competition. Many schools teach working with pewter just so their students may enter the student competition. Artist Fleur Grenier is a freeman at the Worshipful Company of Pewterers. She authored the 2010 book *Pewter: Designs and Techniques* in the hope of passing along her knowledge to others. Her most recent work takes supreme advantage of pewter's lower melting temperature by encapsulating real leaves and lichen within objects. Similarly, educator Trish Woods selected this event to help her students focus their design ideas—for which she had to learn enough pewtersmithing to teach it to her students. She fell in love with pewter and has been using it ever since. She completed a PhD specializing in the chemical coloration of pewter. “I have always been involved in metal patination and color and I wanted to do the same with pewter.”<sup>25</sup>

Ella McIntosh's original business name was This Is Pewter because everyone thought her work was made of silver. She is concerned that pewter is getting left out of a lot of important conversations. At precious-metal conferences in the UK participants discuss sustainability and the passing on of skills—issues that also affect pewtersmiths—but the latter have no seat at the table. In creating large-scale, brutalist pieces void of embellishment, Ella uses her work to “bang on that closed door and say ‘hi.’”<sup>26</sup>

Wider acceptance of pewter will require more education of consumers and makers. For many patrons the specter of lead remains. In colleges and universities, pewter requires both isolating materials and expanding curriculum. As Michael Gayk notes, “There hasn't been an emotional commitment to say that pewter, if it's handled correctly, can be in the studio.”<sup>27</sup> But what about what we miss out on when pewter is not included? To quote Fred Fenster, “Pewter deserves to play a more important role in the fields of design and craftwork.”<sup>28</sup> Since, according to its enthusiasts, pewtersmithing itself is play—who couldn't use more of that?

**“Pewter deserves to play  
a more important role in the  
fields of design and craftwork.”**

**—FRED FENSTER**



<sup>1</sup> Pewtersmithing traditions exist across Europe and Asia, and in more places than may be addressed in this article. <sup>2</sup> Randy Stromsoe, conversation with author, April 17, 2024. <sup>3</sup> Fred Fenster, interview by Jan Yager, August 9–10, 2004, Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, transcript p. 12, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-fred-fenster-12243>. <sup>4</sup> Fred Fenster, “Pewterwork: An Investigation of Pewter as a Contemporary Working Medium” (master's thesis, Cranbrook Academy of Art, 1960), 14. <sup>5</sup> Fenster, interview by Jan Yager. <sup>6</sup> Lynn Whitford, conversation with author, May 23, 2024. <sup>7</sup> Thomas Madden, conversation with author, April 22, 2024. <sup>8</sup> Michael Gayk, conversation with author, April 25, 2024. <sup>9</sup> Venetia Dale, conversation with author, April 29, 2024. <sup>10</sup> Tamara Johnson, conversation with author, April 15, 2024. <sup>11</sup> Myra Mimplitsch-Gray, conversation with author, April 29, 2024. <sup>12</sup> Lisa Slovis Mandel, conversation with author, April 17, 2024. <sup>13</sup> Jeffrey Clancy, conversation with author, May 10, 2024. <sup>14</sup> William Varnum, *Pewter Design and Construction* (Bruce Publishing, 1926), 24. <sup>15</sup> Thomas Bosse, email message to author, April 19, 2024. <sup>16</sup> Funlola Coker, conversation with author, April 24, 2024. <sup>17</sup> David Harper Clemons, conversation with author, April 29, 2024. <sup>18</sup> Brian Ferrell, conversation with author, May 1, 2024. <sup>19</sup> James Thurman, conversation with author, April 15, 2024; email message to author, April 25, 2024. <sup>20</sup> Logan Woodle, conversation with author, April 22, 2024. <sup>21</sup> Henry J. Kauffman, *The American Pewterer: His Techniques & His Products* (T. Nelson, 1970), 15. <sup>22</sup> Charles F. Montgomery, *A History of American Pewter* (Praeger, 1973), 12. <sup>23</sup> Woodle, conversation with author. <sup>24</sup> David Clarke, conversation with author, May 3, 2024. <sup>25</sup> Trish Woods, conversation with author, May 3, 2024. <sup>26</sup> Ella McIntosh, conversation with author, May 3, 2024. <sup>27</sup> Gayk, conversation with author. <sup>28</sup> Fenster, “Pewterwork,” 34.