Pewter

Pewter, a tin-based alloy, has been used for at least 2,000 years, back to the Roman Empire and ancient China. In the Middle Ages, pewter became one of the most common metals used for daily items in Europe. Over the centuries, many utilitarian objects have been made of pewter, including dishes, tableware, tankards, teapots, oval trays, gravy boats, saucers, lamps, candlesticks, mustard pots, and also handles, knobs, and hinges. Ecclesiastical objects like flagons and chalices for communion services, alms dishes, and collection plates were also frequently fashioned out of pewter. Because pewter was so widely used, it was considered an "everyday" metal, appropriate for the more mundane, utilitarian items rather than decorative or artistic ones.

Pewter exceeds most other common alloys in ductility. The ease of working with pewter established it as one of the most important metals in the development of civilization. Pewter can be stretched, compressed, or bent into desired shapes, and even with cold working it does not harden enough to require annealing.

The Romans used pewter in quantity for tableware and vessels. In order to meet this demand, they needed access to the large tin deposits in the British Isles—one of the driving factors for the Roman invasion of Britain. Many ancient Roman pewter items, brought by conquering legionnaires, have been excavated in England.

The untarnished surface of pewter is generally bluish-white with either a satiny sheen or a bright finish. A shinier, harder, and lighter alloy called "Brittania metal" became popular in the 19th century. The earliest pewter samples were made from about 70% tin and 30% lead. This type of pewter became known as "black metal" because it darkened greatly with age; the lead content also readily leached out in contact with acidic foods. This soft, heavy black metal, also called "German pewter" or "lay pewter," was commonly cast and hammered into tankards and dishes.

Finer quality pewter was made with little or no lead; antimony, copper, and bismuth were substituted instead to improve the durability and sheen.

Modern pewter is typically 91% tin, 7.5% antimony, and 1.5% copper. The copper adds ductility while the antimony adds whiteness and hardness. Modern pewter is somewhat softer than bronze or brass, but it can still be classed as one of the most durable metals, able to resist oxidation and exposure to weak acids almost indefinitely.

Around the 11th century, pewter flagons and chalices began to replace wooden drinking vessels in many households. Starting about the 14th century, pewter manufacture developed rapidly and became widespread in Europe, especially in England because of the ready

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availability of tin deposits in the British Isles.

English trade guilds enforced rigid standards on pewter production, with the result that English pewter became famous for its quality and was exported widely. Just as silversmiths identified their creations with signature marks, "pewter smiths" also used unique designs or stylized initials to mark their wares. Other European pewterers began to imitate English signature marks on fine items to suggest higher quality.

The earliest known pewter smith in Holland began to sell his wares in 1331. By the end of the 14th century, pewter was also being manufactured in Sweden. As early as 1485, Swedish guild rules required pewter smiths to stamp their wares with a signature mark. Also in the 14th century, the German pewter industry began to grow around the cities of Nürnberg and Augsburg. Pewter craftsmen also set up businesses in Belgium and France at this time.

In the 18th century, Britain taxed the export of unworked pewter and prohibited the export of pure tin. In the United States, pewter smiths—many of whom had been trained as apprentices in England—found themselves suddenly without raw material for their trade, and so were forced to melt down old English pewter items to make their wares.

Pewter smiths cast rough items by pouring molten pewter into brass molds. After the pewter had hardened, they finished the items by hammering, burnishing, engraving, turning on a lathe, or soldering smaller pieces together (as for snuff boxes). Some modern items are also formed on stamping presses.

Pewter smiths often copied the artistic designs of far more expensive silver items. Some pewterers even tried to pass off brightly polished pewter as silver! Display objects could be enameled, painted, gilded, or inlaid, but most utilitarian items were not ornamented.

By the 18th century, pewter was used daily in virtually every European household. Porcelain was still rare and expensive, and only the very poor used wooden plates. However, a century later the cost of ceramic and porcelain tableware dropped dramatically due to technological improvements. Many people found themselves able to afford the porcelain dishes previously reserved for the rich, and they abandoned the "everyday" pewter. Though pewter smiths responded to the changing situation by developing brighter and lighter alloys, such as the Brittania metal described previously, ceramics increasingly replaced pewter. Pewter smiths began to concentrate on making coffee pots and tea services, which remained a mainstay for their business.

Beginning in the mid-1800s, the electroplating process allowed the deposition of a thin layer of silver onto an inferior vase metal. Silver plate appeared more desirable than bright Brittania pewter, and many pewter manufacturers turned to electroplating instead.

During World Wars I and II, many antique pewter items were melted down for scrap and lost forever. In World War II, the manufacture of pewter was not permitted in the United States because tin was reserved for essential purposes.

Some new pewter is still produced today, primarily for novelty and decorative items rather than the ubiquitous utilitarian uses pewter once served.

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For further reading, consider Ronald F. Michaelis's *Antique Pewter of the British Isles* (1955, G. Bell) or Charles F. Montgomery's *A History of American Pewter* (1973, Praeger).

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