

Collecting Antique Pewter

With its warmth and its weight, pewter, especially antique pewter, is an attractive area for collectors. And because it was once fairly less expensive to produce than even silver-plated pieces, and is almost indestructible, it is easy enough to find interesting pieces. This is generally true of course, even though the pieces by important makers will always be highly desirable and will carry a price to match.



Just like pottery was to china, pewter is often overlooked by new collectors who will rather flock to silver. But pewter, like pottery, has its own aficionados who will go to great lengths to find rare and old pieces.

A fairly malleable metal, pewter can be shaped quite easily and can lend itself to myriad uses both in the kitchen and in the dining room.

Pewter is especially interesting to collect because it is plentiful and the range of articles is so extensive. Up to the 1850s silver was the metal of the nobility while pewter was used by the rest of the population. It had long been considered the poor man's silver. After that date, when a method had been discovered for silver-plating (applying a thin layer of silver on items made of other metals - copper, nickel or brass), pewter somewhat fell out of favour. After being used for years mainly as another base metal for silver-plating, it resurfaced at the turn of this century when the Arts and Crafts artisans started using it extensively.

You can collect porringers, tea and coffee sets, beakers, utensils, barber bowls (with an indentation to insert the neck), candlesticks, plates and bowls of all types, and even chandeliers, church implements, and tools. Some will collect by maker, others by country. One area which is becoming more and more popular is the old ice cream molds used by restaurant at the turn of the century and made in various shapes and sizes from small egg and heart-shaped ones to large rabbits, sleighs, and others.



As usual be wary of fakes and reproductions – you will never read enough books and manipulate enough objects – that is true not only for pewter but for every field of collecting. You must talk to knowledgeable antique dealers, museum curators and specialists; these people live among those artefacts daily and can usually give you some valuable information.

Some pewter items were reproduced and are marked as such – they will still be very serviceable in the kitchen and look great but will never acquire the value of truly old pieces. Other items were faithfully copied down to the touch marks (the artisan’s signature) in order to fool the unsuspecting buyer.

Marking on pewter is quite difficult to recognize. Indeed, because pewter is a malleable metal, the outside markings often become worn to the point of being illegible. At first, a marking showing a crown and a rose on British pieces was a guarantee of quality but this was quickly used in other countries and came to be almost meaningless. A depiction of an angel is often seen on European pieces and is another way of identifying good quality items. You will sometimes notice many marks on some pewter items – on sterling silver; the item was stamped once, by the assay office, and never touched again. On pewter, a piece could be assayed many times. Case in point, I remember an old tankard of mine where I could see two or three Victoria stamps as well as a few Georgian ones. Add to that the maker’s mark or name, the date stamp (not always though) etc. Plus, on tankards, especially, you can often find the name of the person to whom it belonged (some taverns kept their patrons’ tankards and handed it to them when they arrived); the date at which the person had received it, and various other markings (mine had a few lines of a poem).



You will have to cast an unforgiving eye to any piece of pewter you buy to be able to identify replaced parts (lids, handles, hinges) and be wary of pieces that seem to have had too hard a life – dubious pieces are often thrown to the floor, buried, attacked with chains and hammers to give them an older look and patina. A lot of pewter salt containers (either individual or what is known as “master salts” where salt, which was a valuable commodity, was kept – sometimes under lock and key) will show small black indentations on their interior surface – this is called “pitting” and is a type of corrosion caused by leaving the salt in for long periods at a time – it is a sign of a truly old piece. It is also why most silver-plated or sterling salts have small blue glass liners to contain the salt.

In closing, here are a few books on the topic, for those of you who wish to delve deeper in the area of pewter collecting:

- American and British Pewter: An Historical Survey – John C. Thomas (out of print)
- Old Household Pewterware: Its Appearance and Function in the Course of 6 Centuries – Dieter Nadolski (Holmes & Meier Publishing)
- Pewter of the Western World – R. G. Hornsby (Schiffer Publishing)
- Pewter – Anthony North (Antique Collectors Books)

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Are you interested in collecting pewter? Send us an e-mail and let us know. We'll try and keep an eye out for you. In the meantime, you can [search for pewter](#) in all of our current auction items.

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