YANKEE SILVERSMITHING

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In 1607 the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths in London reminded its members for the second time within a generation that no workman might set up shop until he had proved his skill by completing a masterpiece, “to be begun and finished by himself without the help and instruction of any other.” But the progressive specialization within the craft at which the order was directed was a trend of the times beyond reach of injunction. During those early years of the seventeenth century the professional architect, as distinct from the mediaeval carpenter-builder, was making his first appearance in England. On the inside of that same trade, so to speak, the joiner was emerging to take over from the carpenter special details of domestic woodwork. Life was becoming more deliberately organized along the line, in domestic arrangements and social intercourse as well as in the professions and trades. It was, in effect, one aspect of a gradual transformation of a mediaeval economy into an essentially modern one.

The Worshipful Company objected to the tendency particularly because goldsmiths, to complete their work, were often dealing with "sundry inferior handy crafts" and with "pewterers, founders, and turners to the great scandal and disgrace of this Mystery" of goldsmithy. Before the end of the century, however, some goldsmiths had forsaken bench work altogether and had moved into a class a cut above the highest craftsmanship as values came to be measured. By devoting themselves entirely to money dealing, a traditional concern of their craft, they joined the ranks of England’s earliest true bankers.

In America during most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and years later along the frontier, those conditions were in some respects reversed. To meet the many exigent factors of life in the new world, as well as to profit by its diverse opportunities, the craftsman had to multiply and vary his skills rather than narrow any one of them. Such a conversion of the Old World specialist into a Yankee Jack-of-all-trades became a typically American phenomenon, one which in all its implications contributed importantly to the pattern of American life. What the craftsman lost in virtuosity he gained in versatility. As often as not the silversmith, while remaining master of his art in all its essentials, became a man of affairs as well, in the tradition of John Hull, the merchant, mintmaster, militia officer, public official, banker, and craftsman—or of the hardly less versatile Paul Revere.

During the last year or so the Museum has acquired by gift, bequest, and purchase a number of pieces that typify colonial silverwork. As the illustrations show, they are all relatively plain, as was a matter of course under the conditions described. Such work was occasionally decorated, and very handsomely as a peacetime tour of the American Wing will quickly reveal, though, in general, with manpower at a premium there was little incentive to squander it in unduly elaborating essential forms, no less in concocting nonessential ones. Then, too, America was free, by one long remove, from those institutions—the Crown, the Established Church, and the privileged aristocracy—which richly inspired European art but which often enough also undermined the sobrieties of good craftsmanship.

As elsewhere before the day of savings banks and a unified currency, household plate in colonial America constituted a serviceable and convenient form of cash reserves. But simply to state that the forms illustrated are plain, unpretentious, and variously useful might be to overlook the fact that individually—and each is by a different maker—they are handsome, well-made pieces. Indeed, it is almost impossible to find colonial silver that is not. So much has been said of the naïve sim-
plicity of our colonial craftsmanship that its character might be easily confused with mere unobtrusiveness. But that pleasant spareness is probably something more than the simple result of economics and expediency. Though the fact is not recorded, quite possibly our forebears took the same positive, sensuous delight in trim design that we do today, if for different reasons. Colonial art was largely a matter of traditional practice rather than applied theory needing justification in print.

Apart from all such implications one could particularize about the pieces we have acquired at greater length than space permits. In a broad view the group provides an interesting commentary on the amenities of colonial life during the century before the Revolution. The seventeenth-century tankard by Thomas Savage brings a very early example to our collections, by a smith not otherwise represented here. Such hollow ware for the consumption of strong drink in remarkable quantity was the characteristic output of silversmiths' shops before 1700. Aside from spoons and an occasional other form, the tableware that makes up the bulk of modern household silver did not exist. The revolution in dining manners that was to bring it into being in all its many parts from forks to centerpieces had not yet affected colonial society.

A particularly agreeable token of that change is the small trencher salt in the present group by Jacob Hurd of Boston, one of the most competent of colonial smiths. The new conventions of the dining room led to a preference for such small, individual forms over the standing salts of the pre-dining-room era, with their lingering associations with the communal feasting of the great hall. Judging from the engraved crest on the side and the initials on the base, our salt was made, about 1725, for the Belcher family, whose social prominence would have kept them well abreast of the times in matters of such appointments.

Another form new to colonial silverwork early in the eighteenth century was the caster, often used in sets of three for pepper, mustard, and sugar. Here again our acquisitions include a charming example, unique in its design, by another silversmith hitherto unrepresented in

Two silver tankards of the colonial period. By Jonathan Clarke, about 1750, and Thomas Savage, late XVII century
the American Wing. William Jones of Marblehead, a little-known craftsman, fashioned the piece for Humphrey Devereux and one of his several wives about the same time that Hurd was making the salt.

Probably the greatest change ever to affect diet came with the introduction of tea and coffee into the Western World. For the service of those beverages other new forms were demanded which only gradually evolved as the ceremonies of tea and coffee drinking developed in their Westernized versions. Although creamers are now used generally at meals they seem to have originated as part of the tea service. The one in the illustration was made by Samuel Casey of Little Rest, Rhode Island—he who was last known to recorded history by “his coat tails as he road westward” in 1770. His friends had just broken open the jail where he had been held under sentence of death for counterfeiting Spanish milled dollars and Portuguese “half Jo’s.” He must have made the present piece shortly before he fell from grace for Daniel and Mary Wanton Coggeshall, whose descendant, Edward Pearce Casey, has bequeathed it to the Museum. From the same source comes the tall tankard in the illustration, made also for the Coggeshalls by Jonathan Clarke of Newport and Providence.

As good glassware became more readily available during the middle years of the eighteenth century silver tankards gradually became obsolescent. Silver was being more commonly converted into forms for the dining and tea tables, forms that were so agreeably and thoughtfully designed that they are still familiar to us in daily use. Such a one is the footed tray in the illustration, bearing the mark of John Burt Lyng of New York, which was given to the Museum by the late Julia Stuyvesant Winterhoff.