

The soft, silvery glow of pewter has graced homes since the Bronze Age. Everyone from the Pharaohs to the Romans mixed tin with metals such as lead, copper and bismuth to create everyday objects for the table. But it was only from the end of the 19th century, when the Swedish Grace, art nouveau and arts and crafts movements illuminated the value of historic practice, that pewter was appreciated as a material worthy of artists. And, as tastes have shifted, “the interest in pewter has grown over the past 20 years, moving beyond Sweden to international buyers”, says Eva Seeman, chief specialist for modern and contemporary decorative art and design at Bukowskis auctioneers.

This year’s centenary for Stockholm homewares institution Svenskt Tenn has further renewed interest. “It’s a timeless material,” says Per Ahldén, the brand’s curator, pointing to recent collaborations with designers including India Mahdavi.

Though some of the 1920s Svenskt Tenn designs are produced using the same moulds to this day, the originals are sought after for their timeworn patina. Early pieces designed by the brand’s founder Estrid Ericson are particularly desirable. Her eclectic creations were inspired by museum antiquities and frequent trips to England, where she scoured antique shops and market stalls for 18th- and 19th-century pewter plates and chargers. “There were other Swedish pewter companies around at the time,” says Ahldén. “But they were still making

baroque and rococo candlesticks and coffee pots – Estrid’s pewter workshop brought a new style.” Placing an emphasis on the handmade, her designs were distinguished by their heavier weight and their powdery, almost painterly, matte-grey hue as well as her distinctive symbol, two winged figures with their heads bowed together. According to Seeman, rare examples of Ericson’s designs sell for many times the price of an ordinary example at auction.

Prices for the more experimental Svenskt Tenn pieces, many by other notable 20th-century designers, are rocketing. Ericson recruited Josef Frank in the 1930s to design nesting tables and pewter candlesticks, and his pieces fetch big sums: a 1959 cylindrical jar is currently available on 1stdibs for €1,725. A 1920s pewter mirror conceived for the brand



1938 PEWTER AND BRASS BOX, SOLD FOR £1,360



VINTAGE

Pewter ware

The silvery alloy has taken on a new shine

WORDS BY AIMEE FARRELL

by influential Swedish sculptor, designer and dancer Anna Petrus, adorned with the now-signature lion emblem, reached £31,400 at Bukowskis in 2017, and at the auction house’s upcoming modern art and design sale in May, a very rare pewter bowl featuring an engraving by sculptor Tyra Lundgren, a classmate of Ericson’s, will be one of the highlights (estimate £3,000-£4,500). The furnishings from Ericson’s personal collection are another rich seam: a 1920s table engraved with female figures by Lundgren sold at Bukowskis for £44,300 in 2019.

BEYOND SWEDEN, serious investors should look out for the maker’s touch, which is a useful indicator of calibre. “It will be registered with the Pewterers’ Company and any maker found to be selling substandard wares risked losing their mark and being unable to trade,” notes Angus Patterson, senior curator of metalwork at the V&A. When Christie’s offered the David Little private collection in 2007, considered the finest collection of early British pewter ever to come to auction, one of the prize lots was an unusually large wide-rimmed charger from the mid-17th century, engraved with an elaborate hunting scene and the maker’s touch, “W.B.”, that sold for £72,000. More affordable is Britannia Metal – a pewter alloy that’s manufactured rather than traditionally cast, which became prevalent during the mid-1800s.

A decorative motif known as wrigglework, which is drawn freehand using a zigzag tool, is also a covetable style. “Anything from the 17th century with wrigglework has become very

valuable,” explains Patterson. “It has a folksy look but still caters to aristocratic tastes.” Patterson points to a pewter beaker from the 1690s engraved with wrigglework portraits of William III and Mary II that sold at Christie’s for £14,400.

Such folkiness draws in young collectors and sellers. For Charlie Porter of the online vintage and antique shop TAT, pewter is the perfect starter metal. “With its dark, murky tones, just one big pewter plate on a table or dresser looks like a

“SILVER GETS THE GLORY BUT PEWTER HAS A BEAUTIFUL SOFTNESS”

Dutch master still life,” she says. “It’s instant chic.” She recently sold a set of five initialled pieces dating from the early 20th century, including bowls, a vase

and a chalice, its cup cradled by a small figure, that would elevate any table.

Though The Pewterers’ Company is one of the oldest guilds in England, and this year marks the 550 years since it was awarded the royal charter, the metal has lost none of its allure for contemporary creatives. “It irritates me that pewter is often overshadowed,” says silversmith David Clarke, whose pieces include candelabras made from pewter mixed with exploded slip-cast ceramics and large-scale centrepieces such as *Stash*, which was shortlisted for the Loewe Craft Prize. “Silver gets all the glory but pewter has a beautiful softness that is still misunderstood.” It is democratic, accessible and, when warm, so malleable it can be fashioned with few tools other than the maker’s hands; for Clarke the joy of pewter is in its butteriness – and lack of pretension. “If it gets dented it becomes part of a piece’s history,” he says. “It retains its scars.” ■HTSI



SVENSKT TENN PEWTER

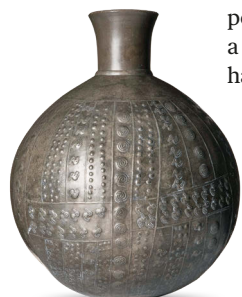


Above: 1929 vase by Nils Fougstedt, sold for £1,400. Left: Josef Frank tea set sold for £300 at Bukowskis



Pieces in pewter by David Clarke. Top far left: 1929 floor lamp by Nils Fougstedt and Anna Petrus, sold for £22,600 at Bukowskis. Top left: 1929 Svenskt Tenn pewter mirror by Anna Petrus, sold for £31,400 at Bukowskis

Below: 1930 Svenskt Tenn pewter vase, on sale at Bukowskis. Below centre: 1972 vase by Anna Petrus & Estrid Ericson, sold for £5,180



WHERE TO BUY

1stdibs 1stdibs.com
Bo Knutsson Antik & Konsthandel boknutsson.com
Bukowskis bukowskis.com
Christie's christies.com
Svenskt Tenn svenskttenn.com
TAT tat-london.co.uk
Uppsala Auctioneers uppsalaauktion.se

WHERE TO SEE

Arlington Court Devon, nationaltrust.org.uk
Bewdley Museum Bewdley, bewdleymuseum.co.uk
Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge, fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk
Victoria and Albert Museum London, vam.ac.uk
Worshipful Company of Pewterers pewterers.org.uk



Above: engraved bowl by Tyra Lundgren, to be sold at Bukowskis. Below: 1930 pewter-topped Uno Åhrén Table by Björn Trägårdh, sold for £24,000

