

## What Is Fine Pewter?

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Pewter, in general, is a silver-white alloy consisting principally of tin. The properties of pewter vary with the percentage of tin and the nature of the added materials. Antimony adds whiteness and hardness.

Modern pewter, better known as fine pewter, is a lead-free alloy of tin mixed with a small proportion of another metal, (generally copper, antimony, bismuth or silver). It is ranked as the fourth most precious metal in the world after platinum, gold, and silver. It is a comparatively soft metal, silver gray in color and does not tarnish, rust, or deteriorate.

Old Pewter has lead which imparts a bluish tinge and increased malleability; HOWEVER, lead tends to escape from the alloy in poisonous quantities if the percentage used is too large and may cause the item to rust, tarnish, or deteriorate.

Pewter is worked by casting, hammering, or lathe spinning on a mould and is usually simply ornamented with rims, molding, or engraving, although some continental display ware, especially of the Renaissance period in France and Germany, show intricate ornamentation. Because modern pewter, often classified as Fine Pewter, contains no lead, the clocks or other items such as figurines have a finer appearance.

A little bit of history . . .

Around the 12th century, pewter was within the reach of only the wealthy and was on the table of only castle halls and in the houses of only rich merchants and churchmen. Later, its use spread into taverns and cottages. With the introduction of pottery and glass, its use declined during the 18th and 19th centuries.

In a sense, replacing pewter with glass and pottery was the best thing that could have happened for the health of society at the time. The 17th and 18th century pewter was made from a composite of lead and tin -- not a healthy option since these pewter items were needed for drinking or cooking. Because today's society realized to what degree the lead leaching out of the pewter could be dangerous to one's health, people shied away from using pewter items . . .

. . . UNTIL the early 1970's . . . when the ancient craft of pewter making was revived -- with a major difference.

How is today's pewter different from the pewter used from the 12th to the 19th century?

Modern pewter makers

- got rid of the lead component all together
- use a mixture of at least 90 tin with the balance made up of copper, antimony, bismuth or silver.

Comstock Creations in Durango, Colorado, USA, who makes beautiful clocks, uses a composition of 97 tin with the balance made up of copper, bismuth, and silver. Comstock's products are guaranteed lead-free and quite safe to be used for all kinds of food and drink.

Why is fine pewter so prized?

- Artists can do so much with fine pewter because it is a very easy medium to work with, and it allows the craftsmen to produce items with exceptional detail (such as our clocks' 3D appearance -- exquisite sculptured appearance).
- The consumer prizes the products made of Fine Pewter because it has lasting value. Under normal conditions, it will not tarnish, rust, or deteriorate in any manner.
- Fine pewter is very collectible, affordable, and cherished for its longevity and lasting value.
- It is now fashionable to use pewter instead of silver for everyday use. Pewter is easy to store, never wears out, and can provide the enlightened consumer with the ability to put on a splendid display on those special occasions.

- It can also be readily engraved with an inscription by any competent jeweller.

Taking care of a pewter item is very easy -- no work

Unlike silver, Fine Pewter does not require polishing. Pewter can be polished but others prefer to let the pewter age and acquire an antique look. All it really needs is an occasional dusting with a soft cloth. If you feel you want to do more, handwash with only mild soap and warm water and dry thoroughly. (Abrasive cloths, cleanser, or cleaning sprays can damage your clocks or figurines).

Stamped, Numbered, dated -- What does it all mean?

On the back of certain items such as clocks, the company has stamped its name, the item number, the year it was designed, and a signature. Like a signature in a book, this does not necessarily add to the clock's value.

When you buy, do be careful, however. To make people believe that a certain pewter clock or figurine is somehow more special and valuable, some people may list a pewter item on a website or in an auction as "stamped and numbered", "signed and numbered" or "stamped and dated". Don't be fooled by this.

There can be certain exceptions, however, as when a pewter figurine is part of a limited edition collection, but in that case there would be a special number such as 250/4000 (meaning it is number 250 out of 4000 made). Some limited editions also come with a certificate of authenticity. When in doubt, ask questions.

Normally, the number stamped on the back of the item is likely nothing more than the item number given by the manufacturer for identification purposes.

Is pewter expensive? Not really!

- 1) Consider the fact that pewter is identified as the fourth most precious metal in common use.
- 2) Even though modern technology is much advanced and there have been many manufacturing breakthroughs, there is still a lot of hand craftsmanship involved. What is so amazing is that a good craftsman can so constantly produce many pieces with minor variations. These minor variations is what makes the charm of pewter items!
- 3) Some companies use an acid bath procedure to give the item its antique or a black & highlighted look. One can therefore conclude that price depends on variables involved in the making of the item.

Why do some pewter items look shinier, have a "mirror-type" look?

The finished look depends not on the pewter's composition but on the way it is finished. The item gets a bright or shiny finish if the craftsman decides to buff it with special jewellers' rougns to produce the shiny finish. Otherwise, the item will end up with a softer, satiny look.

You can rest assured that the fine pewter made in the USA is 100 lead free, so items made with fine pewter is quite safe to handle and will keep its natural silvery appearance with very little effort.

### **Short note about the author**

Marcelle Snyder

Born in New Brunswick in 1942, Marcelle Snyder started her teaching career at the age of 19. In 1976, she and her two daughters moved to Ontario where she continued her teaching career at Durham College. Recently retired, Marcelle picked up her second interest, decorating, and decided to sell her favourite clocks on the internet. Always interested in learning, she researched the origin and evolution of clocks, especially the grandfather clock and pewter clocks, and wrote articles summarizing some of her findings. You can read some of these articles at <http://www.AwesomeClocks.com>.

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