

Pewter from New Mexico, USA

I am hopeful that visitors to this website can help cast some light on an artifact we discovered in New Mexico, USA.

The pewter piece featured in the images is 78.3% tin and 21.7% lead with no copper, iron, or nickel or other "impurities." The isotope ratios of the lead demonstrate that its origin is the Bellmunt region of northeastern Spain, located southwest of Barcelona. The piece was found in a remote location, in a very dry climate, on soil never wet except in scant rain. Other metal artifacts, considered likely 16th century Spanish, were found nearby. There is historical evidence of 16th century Spaniards at the site. We are seeking to identify the piece.





We have shown the images included on this website to a number of colleagues. No one has yet identified the piece. Below are samples of comments by colleagues.

One American museum curator wrote, "Pewter for objects, by most definitions for European craftsmen, has some copper in it. The tin and lead components are both soft metals and not particularly desirable to a consumer for any intrinsic value. The tin does, however, provide plenty of silvery white shine when new and highly polished. Sometimes secondary, inexpensive, white metal badges or medallions were struck from the same dies made first for silver or bronze objects. This allowed the maker to sell multiples of cheaper impressions and obtain a better financial return for the investment of making the initial design."

The pewter piece is adorned on one side only, producing a raised relief decoration. There are two opinions about the method employed to produce the design. One British colleague wrote, "The plain back shows the decoration was cast, not stamped." Another American colleague wrote, "I think this piece might be stamped/screw pressed in the manner of coins and medallions from the renaissance and later (thus the one flat side)."

The piece is 41 mm diameter and less than a mm thick. It is malleable, but firm and could be carried in a pocket without bending it. I can see no holes for attachment, and I can see no evidence of a missing pin or clasp or ring, and no maker's mark. One British colleague suggested that the piece is an appliqué, that is, a smaller ornament or device applied to another surface. Another American colleague wrote, "I might also speculate that the piece was inset as ornament into something else -- a leather or wooden trunk or chest."

Per the observation of a British colleague, we have considered that because the center of the decorated side is "vacant," and that there appears to be a shadowy "ring" at that location, that the piece might be missing an attachment, such as a lid missing the "handle," or a goblet absent the stem and vessel. An American colleague wrote, "I would speculate whether it once had an additional ornament of another material mounted onto the center." Such a circumstance would explain why the center is vacant and the periphery is decorated.

A Dutch colleague wrote: "It is quite possible that it is indeed the base of a small goblet. Not only because of the traces of a broken stem, but also because of the concentric decoration and the plain (undecorated) backside (or bottom side in case of a small base). It could concern a small goblet, a miniature version. Such miniature goblets are known from the late medieval times, possibly serving as toys. Even in much later times such miniature objects (even sets) are known, which were used for children to re-enact the church mass. In view of the decoration it concern objects of high quality. The stem with blooming roses and rose buds and the landing bird are beautifully designed."

Identifications that have been considered include tokens, badges, medals, and souvenirs. Colleagues have suggested the flowers are roses, lilies, tulips, and pomegranate. One colleague sent us a 1519 drawing by Renaissance artist Christoph Weiditz displaying a hatpin remarkably similar to the New Mexico piece.



Several colleagues suggested that the artwork might be the clue that provides the age of the piece. For example, one colleague in England wrote: " I might even have said the bird and the surrounding garland were stylistically too late to be mid-16thC, but then I know nothing really about mid-16thC Spanish (?) ornament! I'd recommend showing the picture to some museum curator/historian of applied art familiar with Spanish Renaissance art." A collector in England reported, "I have seen this floral design quite frequently & is attributable to the Tudor period (1485 to 1603)." A curator in America wrote, "By style, I would say nineteenth-century European, but it's really well outside my area of expertise." A decorative art curator wrote, "The symmetrical bird and flower motif is vaguely evocative of Chinese/India/Persia (17th-early 18th century) to my American eye, and the border of parallel lines seems to resemble the coining or ridges that were placed on the edges of milled coins, or perhaps gadrooning, which is a motif for centuries." These estimates offer a wide range of dates, and some are, admittedly, offered by colleagues lacking an art history background. Perhaps a specific art style will be obvious to a visitor to this website.

We would be grateful for any interpretation that visitors might thoughtfully suggest as to what the piece represents; any observations, opinions, or whatever offered will be greatly appreciated and highly respected. Please communicate your comments and suggestions to the Pewterbank website.