



Above: Thomas and Patricia Hooper's shop, ASL Pewter Foundry, is located in a restored historic building along South Third Street in downtown Louisiana. **Right:** Patricia and Thomas show off some of the handcrafted items that they sell in their shop.



Above: On display in the shop are an inkwell set, tea set, punch bowl and other items crafted by the Hoopers. **Left:** Thomas Hooper uses a lathe in his workshop to create a bowl out of a flat, round piece of pewter. **Below:** Thomas trims a pewter bowl on another lathe.



A passion for pewter

Thomas and Patricia Hooper are the mom and pop of fine pewter crafts

by Amber Hanneken

In the Middle Ages, meals were served on it, Colonial Americans dipped their pens into inkwells made of it, and today pewter wares are making a comeback with the help of Thomas and Patricia Hooper at ASL Pewter Foundry in Louisiana.

Pewter is a white metal alloy that dates to the Bronze Age and is made mostly of tin with a small percentage of copper and antimony. Today, it is commonly used to make collectible figurines and pendants, but the Hoopers are giving traditional pewtersmithing new life by recreating Colonial-era pieces with their collection of more than 200 original molds from 1840 and earlier. They also create their own molds and design new pieces in traditional style using a lathe. Together, they make everything from ornaments to tea sets and punch bowls with prices ranging from \$3 to \$1,000.

"One of the things that makes us truly unique from the very few other pewterers out there is our collection of antique molds," Patricia says. "These are molds that nobody else has, so we're able to cre-

ate things that are the same pieces that people were making in our business 200 plus years ago."

Thomas and Patricia both love history. They met when a mutual friend introduced them at an arts and crafts show and renaissance festival in Hanford, Calif., and have been together for almost 20 years.

In 1995, the couple left California for Missouri's small-business-friendly atmosphere. The two owned a fragrance company and wanted to make bottles and incense holders for their products, so ASL Pewter Foundry (an acronym for Astral Sea, Ltd.) was formed. They eventually sold the fragrance company.

"We started making pewter because we could do that in the same environment that we were making the fragrance products," Thomas says. "And after working with the pewter, we found that we both had an affinity for it, and we took to working with the material very well."

As one of the only companies creating such a wide selection of traditional pewter products, their pieces can be found in museum gift shops and historical societies across the country. They

have made pieces for Colonial Williamsburg and ornaments for both the White House and Missouri Governor's Mansion Christmas trees.

Most pewtersmiths work with the material solely as a hobby, but Patricia and Thomas have made it their livelihood. They create all the pieces themselves in their shop with the help of a full-time apprentice, Bryce Chandler. Both work seven days a week and as much as 10 hours a day or longer.

"Generally speaking, when you're working with your hands, your level of success is directly related to the hours you put in," Patricia says. "If I'm not here, it doesn't get made."

The two work together on ideas for new projects. If they want to do something historic, they try to obtain an original or get the dimensions from one. Thomas spins pieces on the lathe. Taking a flat disk of pewter, he shapes the metal over a wooden form to create bowls, plates and cups. He also does most of the soldering work.

Both Thomas and Bryce cast in the antique molds while Patricia casts in their made-in-shop rubber and silicone molds because they are lighter than the old ones. They pour hot liquid metal into a mold and let it cool until it's hard. Patricia is in charge of the fine clean-up work that requires a



Apprentice Bryce Chandler pours molten pewter into a spoon mold. The machine spins it until the metal hardens.

delicate touch, and Thomas and Bryce clean and polish the larger pieces.

They have an antique and polished finish that can be applied to the pieces so that they look old or brand new. Patricia also does "wriggle work," a form of engraving in the pewter. She bases her work on historic pieces by creating her own interpretations of

trees, dogs, rabbits and other designs from nature.

"I have elements of design that other people have done," Patricia says of her work. "Then, every once in a while I do something that is my own, like a rooster or a really silly sheep — all of my sheep are really silly."

Besides the craftwork, Thomas keeps the books and Patricia helps customers. Both of them warmly greet visitors who enter the beautifully restored historic downtown Louisiana store and ask them what they know about pewter. The store, which is just a short walk from the Mississippi River, has a cheerful air with its large windows, bright colors and high ceilings. Any day of the week, customers can come in and see Thomas, Patricia or Bryce creating pewter pieces.

"Our workshop is set up in such a way that we have several of our workstations where people can walk in and watch us make things," Thomas says. "We're always making something every day."

The Hoopers say they enjoy teaching their craft and are eager to answer any questions. They hold classes for people interested in learning about their work. They also invite other artisans to their shop throughout the year to sell their products. For the past

eight years, they have been selected as one of *Early American Life* magazine's Top Traditional Artists in America and host a show for artists in the Midwest that are featured in the magazine's Directory of Traditional Crafts.

"I think the most important thing is that we, as American craftsmen, need to teach. We bring a lot of civic groups in; home school kids are always welcome to come into the shop and learn," Thomas says. "It's really important that some of these crafts are staying in America and are made by American craftsmen."

The Hoopers attend 15 to 20 shows a year where they sell their products and talk about their craft. Recently, they won Best in Show at the Christmas in July Art Show and Sale in Sedalia. They have won several other arts and crafts awards, too, although judges often have trouble fitting them into a category. Some shows are one day and others are longer, including one at George Washington's home at Mt. Vernon, Va., where they wear Colonial costumes. Thomas and Patricia consider their work folk art — traditional and functional art made for the people.

Two years ago, the art department for Brain Tree Productions, which was beginning production of "John

Adams," an HBO miniseries about the life of America's second president and the first 50 years of the United States, approached the Hoopers with a unique opportunity. After visiting shops around the country, the department found that the pieces they liked the most all had the ASL Pewter stamp on them, so they asked Patricia and Thomas if they could create nearly 500 pewter pieces to be used in the series. The two excitedly accepted the task and started production.

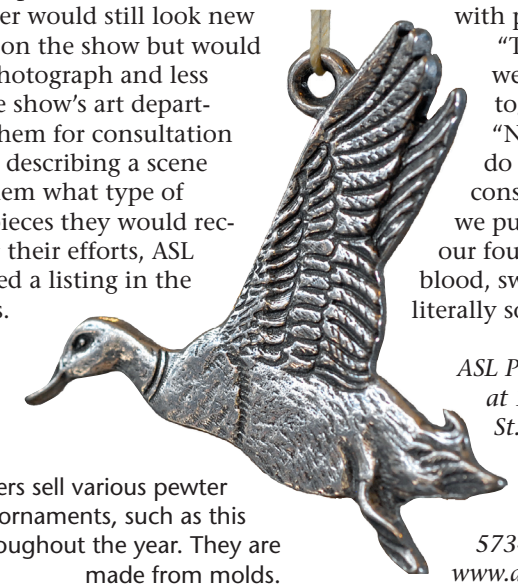
They developed a satin finish so that the pewter would still look new and polished on the show but would be easier to photograph and less reflective. The show's art department called them for consultation several times, describing a scene and asking them what type of time-period pieces they would recommend. For their efforts, ASL Pewter received a listing in the show's credits.

Pewter is unique in being both

functional and decorative. The Hoopers sell many of their pieces to people interested in history or to those who have a historic home, but also have several modern pieces like goblets and martini glasses. Customers find ASL Pewter a good place to find gifts for weddings, anniversaries, retirements, baby showers and birthdays.

"We just appreciate the opportunity to work with a material that is so versatile as this and it also is affording us to have a hobby and a business kind of in one," Thomas says with pride.

"This is something that we both love, we do it together," Patricia adds. "Nearly everything we do takes both of us, and consequently, every piece we put out on the floor has our four hands on it. Our blood, sweat and tears quite literally sometimes."



The Hoopers sell various pewter Christmas ornaments, such as this duck, throughout the year. They are made from molds.

ASL Pewter Foundry, located at 123 South Third St., Louisiana, is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. For more information, call 573-754-3435 or visit www.aslpewter.com.