

FREDERICK MILLER, 1913-2000

by Alan Rosenberg



Fig. 1. Frederick A. Miller demonstrates annealing, circa 1960s. Photo courtesy of John Paul Miller.

Frederick Miller was among the foremost American mid-twentieth-century silversmiths. In that pantheon, he was unusual because he produced works in his own studio and, simultaneously, was employed full-time as a designer and executive at Potter and Mellen, a distinguished Cleveland luxury goods manufacturer and retailer. Miller was associated with Potter and Mellen from 1946 until his retirement in 1976 and throughout that time he also taught at the Cleveland Institute of Art. A 1949 article in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* newspaper, titled "Silversmith Has Busy Work Week" declared that "the five-day week is unknown to him; his Sunday-to-Sunday is six and one half days long."¹ With such dedication, Miller devoted himself equally to his students, to his employer, and to his own studio throughout his working life.

Miller was born in Akron, Ohio in 1913. He moved to Cleveland to study at the Cleveland Institute of Art, from which he graduated in 1940. Miller benefited from a creative climate in Cleve-

land that was unusually conducive to craftsmanship and in which silver played a central role. Cleveland had an extraordinarily active crafts scene which was nurtured by the excellent instructors at the Institute and by the annual "May Show" of crafts at the Cleveland Museum of Art, an eminent exhibition that was first presented in 1918. In 1956, writing in *Craft Horizons*, William M. Milliken, director of the Cleveland Museum of Art, pointed out that "silver is coming increasingly into its own in the United States, and Cleveland is playing an important part in this success."²

Army service followed graduation and, after completion of his military duties, Miller was quickly hired by Potter and Mellen in 1946. His relationship with the firm afforded him opportunities which were not available to most silversmiths, who either worked independently in their own studios or labored virtually anonymously for one of the big silver manufacturers such as Gorham Mfg. Company or Tiffany & Co. Those who worked independently often strug-

gled to find patrons and supplemented their studio work by teaching the craft, many becoming more well-known as instructors than as silversmiths. The silversmiths employed in manufacturing mostly executed the designs of a company's art director who often had no direct experiencing with smithing. At Potter and Mellen, Miller was able to exercise a great deal of creative freedom in designing and directing the execution of his creations. He also interacted with customers and guided the store's other areas as a buyer of crystal, porcelain and flatware for which he traveled frequently to Europe.³

In his own studio Miller created one-of-a-kind pieces and at Potter and Mellen he accepted commissions for hollowware and designed jewelry for limited production. The arrangement carried on the tradition established by founder Horace Potter himself, who, following the British Arts and Crafts model, integrated the pure inspiration of the artisan's studio with the creative commerce of the retail showroom. On a



Fig. 2. Sterling coffee set with ebony handles and finials, 1969. The pot measures 4 1/2 inches and the creamer and sugar measure 7 3/4 inches in height. Photo courtesy of John Paul Miller.

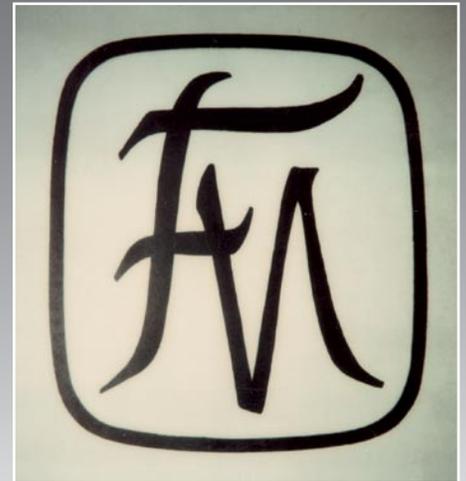


Fig. 3. Frederick Anson Miller hallmark. Photo courtesy of John Paul Miller.

tour of Europe in 1907, Potter had visited C. R. Ashbee's Guild of Handicraft which inspired him to establish Potter Studios (the precursor to Potter and Mellen) in which a group of craftsmen came together to create individually under one roof.⁴

Miller began working in silver immediately upon his employment at Potter and Mellen, however his technical ability and aesthetic sensibility were greatly enhanced through his participation in the 1948 National Silversmithing Workshop Conference, organized by Margret Craver, sponsored by Handy & Harman, and led by Swedish silversmith Baron Erik Fleming.⁵ Fleming favored a type of raising technique called "stretching" which was "peculiarly suited to the development of free-form design."⁶

In a 1949 article in *Craft Horizons*, Craver explained that "since the conferences are planned to offer each individual an opportunity for research in design, based on an understanding of the medium, only one basic technique can be explored each year." She explained

that stretching was chosen because it "is an excellent method for beginners," noting that "if the purpose of the conference was to be achieved it was essential for them to start work in the material immediately in order to discover its chief characteristics . . . as the metal moved and took shape and their understanding of it grew, their own individual design automatically appeared."⁷

Craver's article was illustrated with a series of photographs of Frederick Miller making a sugar bowl using the stretching method. The editors of *Craft Horizons* felt, presumably, that these step-by-step photographs were so important that they published them again, seven years later, adding eight not previously published and explaining the technique in greater detail. The 1956 article also explained the difference between stretching and conventional raising:

stretching is done by hammering a relatively thick disc of metal to thin it into the desired shape--striking mostly on the inside of the de-

veloping form. Raising is done by hammering a relatively thin sheet of metal so as to contract and thicken it into shape--striking mostly on the outside of the form. . . . In the stretching method the metal actually flows under the blows of the hammer. It is ideal for irregular shapes, since it permits the smith to vary his form easily as he goes along, combining in a free form a freely flowing design idea.⁸

A 1953 *American Artist* magazine article by fellow Cleveland craftsman Edward Winter explained that, through his mastery of the stretching technique, Miller "learned to free design from the conventional round and rectangular shapes and to develop free forms that seemed to him better suited to the contemporary mode."⁹ Miller himself stated that "silver, when you work it, seems almost human, as if it understood you and tried to help."¹⁰ Miller's analogy of sapience was reflected in the anthropomorphism of his asymmetrical bowls, raised on pointed ebony or ivory legs,



Fig. 5. Sterling tazza, circa 1950. Photo courtesy of Potter and Mellen.



Fig. 4. Potter and Mellen hallmark. Photo courtesy of Potter and Mellen.

suggestive of crouching beings stalking their prey.

Miller's association with Potter and Mellen put his work in front of potential customers every day. Museum and crafts exhibitions displayed his pieces to design enthusiasts throughout the country. In 1957 he observed that, "there will always be a market for the one-of-a-kind or the few-of-the-kind . . . the industrial age, the production line, infatuated us with precision, duplication, a trance from which we are just emerging, . . . the idea is just dawning that a superlatively fine thing's final merit is that it can't be like anything else."¹¹ Custom work commissioned through Potter and Mellen as well as studio work made for private patrons carried out this ethos. Perhaps with Miller's private clients in mind, Winter noted that "within the great market of mass-produced articles there is a persistent if comparatively small demand for fine hand-wrought work. There are still many discriminating persons who insist upon fine art products."¹² The unique studio-showroom interaction at Potter

and Mellen was also remarked upon by Winter, who observed that "dealing directly with the customer in commissioned work, as Miller is able to do at the Potter and Mellen shop, gives the craftsman the greatest satisfaction; the customer too, because he and the craftsman come to a mutual understanding and the customer feels that he has had a part in the creation of the piece."¹³

Such commissions in the 1950s and 1960s included ecclesiastical appointments for Saint Paul's Episcopal Church and Fairmont Presbyterian Church, both in Cleveland Heights, and the 1957 Firestone Chapel of Saint Paul's Church in Akron. Secular commissions included presentation silver such as cigarette boxes and trays made for the great industrial concerns of the Midwest like M.A. Hanna Company and Pickands Mather & Company.¹⁴

Critics and curators concurred that Miller's studio creations were exceptional. William Milliken, who purchased a number of Miller's pieces for the Cleveland Museum of Art, described his work

in 1956 as "superlative in its workmanship . . . emphasizing perfection of form for their quality and effect," adding that his pieces were "completely contemporary in approach."¹⁵ Francis Taft, reviewing the 1958 May Show, reported the "consistently outstanding performance of Frederick A. Miller, whose five pieces represented the best kind of contemporary design executed with the flawless skill of an accomplished and creative silversmith."¹⁶ In 1961, Miller exhibited twenty pieces of hollowware in a one-person show at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts. A reviewer in *Craft Horizons* stated that the pieces on display "ranged from the most finely executed free-form bowls . . . to strongly personal sculptured pitchers and servers possessing simplicity and power" singling out one of Miller's "gently belled" bowls, poised on three ebony legs which was said to achieve "an authentic sculptural simplicity."¹⁷

Beginning in 1966, Miller began to create a series of sterling bottle-form vases, decorated with integral ornament



Fig. 6. Sterling and ebony bowl, circa 1950. Photo courtesy of John Paul Miller.



Fig. 7. Sterling and ebony servers, circa 1950. Photo courtesy of Potter and Mellen.

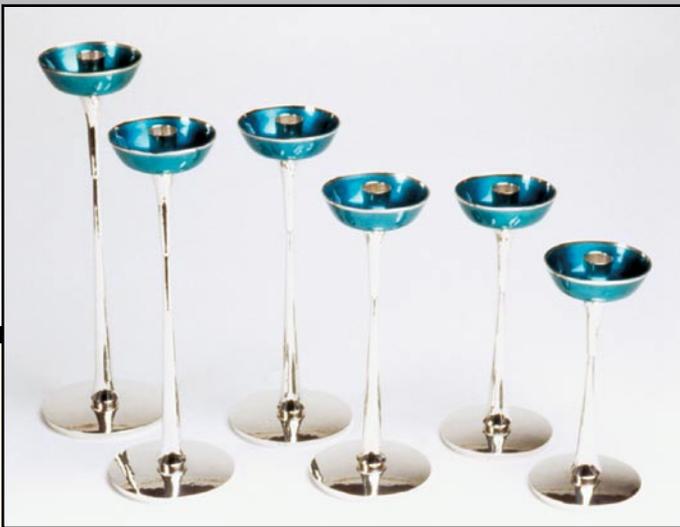


Fig. 8. Sterling and enamel candlesticks, 1964. Photo courtesy of Potter and Mellen.

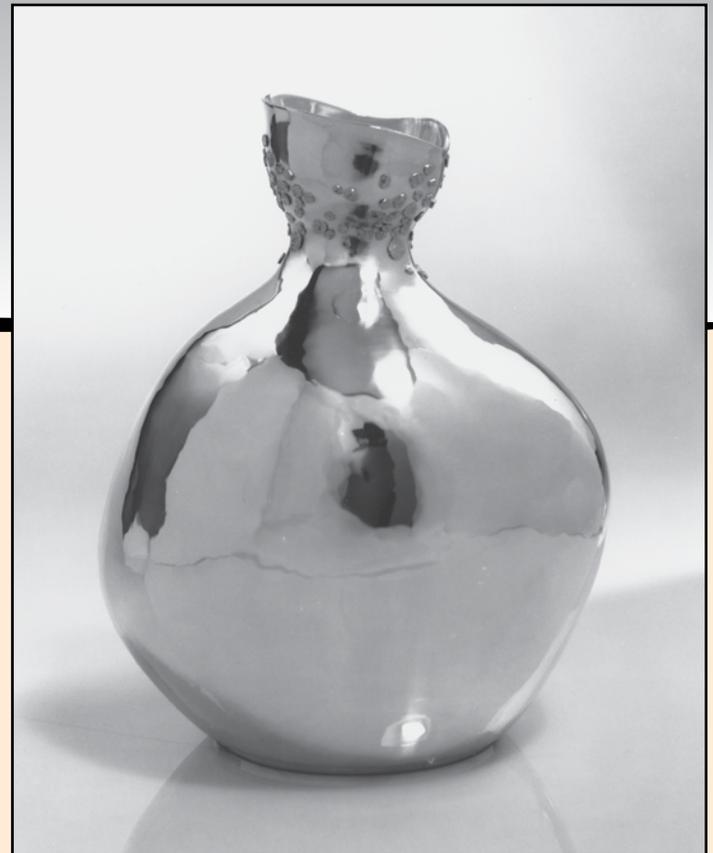


Fig. 9. Sterling bottle-vase, circa 1969. Photo courtesy of John Paul Miller.

in 23 karat gold, several of which were included in his one-person show at the Henry Art Gallery on the University of Washington campus in Seattle in 1968. In tune with the design of the time, these bottles evolved beyond the free forms and asymmetry of the 1950s toward the looseness and eccentricity that would soon be a hallmark of the new crafts movement of the late 1960s. Their irregular bodies and undulating necks belied the technical precision required for their creation.¹⁸

In 1967, after 30 years of employment at Potter and Mellen, Frederick Miller, along with fellow silversmith Jack Schlundt (a former student of Miller's), bought the firm. Miller oversaw the studio and design direction and Schlundt

handled business operations. In 1976, Miller retired from teaching and from Potter and Mellen. Prior to his death in 2000, he continued to work in the studio attached to his home.

Frederick Miller's place as one of the most outstanding artisans of the twentieth century was the result of a genius for form and ornament, techni-

cal prowess, and hard-work, combined with customers and patrons with an enlightened consciousness for craftsmanship and design.



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NOTES

1. "Silversmith Has Busy Work Week," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, May 20, 1949, 15.
2. William M. Milliken, "The May Show," *Craft Horizons*, July / August 1956, 44.
3. William Baran-Mickle, "Frederick A. Miller: A Precarious Balance," *Metal-smith*, Spring 1993, 36.
4. Leslie G. Marting, "When Artist and Craftsman Were One: Horace E. Potter and Arts & Crafts Silver in Cleveland," *Silver Magazine* 37, May / June 2005, 34.
5. For more on the Handy & Harman conferences see Alan Rosenberg, "Rufus Jacoby, Master Craftsman," *Silver Magazine* 39, March / April 2007.
6. "Fred Miller Makes a Silver Bowl," *Craft Horizons*, December 1956, 37.
7. Margret Craver, "An Ancient Method Goes Modern," *Craft Horizons*, Winter 1949, 15.
8. "Fred Miller Makes a Silver Bowl," 37.
9. Edward Winter, "3 American Silversmiths," *American Artist*, May 1953, 34.
10. "Silversmith Has Busy Work Week," 15.
11. Miller quoted in Marie Kirkwood, "In the Superlative There's Only One-of-a-Kind," *The Clevelander*, October 1957, 37.
12. Winter, "3 American Silversmiths," 30.
13. *Ibid.*, 34.
14. Jack Schlundt, interview by author, April 30, 2007.
15. Milliken, "The May Show," 44.
16. Francis Taft, "Cleveland May Show," *Craft Horizons*, July / August 1958, 42.
17. H. H., "Frederick Miller," *Craft Horizons*, May / June 1961, 43.
18. Baran-Mickle, "Frederick A. Miller," 38.

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