

Paul Simard

Still Passionate about Pewter after 40 Years



Tureen and various objects



Jug

Val-David is an effervescent village where a great number of incredibly talented artists and artisans live and work. Val-David represents the heart and soul of an inventive nation. It is a village filled with indomitable creators ablaze with passion, where agile hands fashion matter and practice most known arts and crafts techniques using the most imaginative of materials.

It's in the heart of this Laurentian fiefdom, on a beautiful august day, that I am going to meet Paul Simard, an artisan who has been practicing one of the most remarkable crafts for 40 years: pewtersmithing. My intent is to interview this unequalled craftsman, unique in the exceptional quality of his production as in his rather uncommon occupation which is practiced by less than ten people across the whole country.

The art of metalsmithing, which is called "dinanderie" in French, was so named for the village of Dinant in Belgium. At one point in time, this village's reputation radiated throughout Europe, as it was recognized for its copper, brass and pewter wares used mostly for the fabrication of kitchen utensils.

Hence, I have the great honour of being received in Paul Simard's workshop, which appears to be of another era. As I listen to my host speaking, I am mesmerized by his vocabulary: swaging hammer, ingot, pitcher, anvil, patina, curvature, rolling mill, etc. What have I stumbled into? This craft is as different as it is fascinating to discover.

Paul starts his process by melting metal ingots in a cauldron, and then pours de molten metal in a mould that produces a 1 cm thick rectangular sheet. Once the metal has cooled, the sheet is removed from the mould and is repeatedly passed through a cold-rolling mill which, with application of 50 tons of pressure, yields very thin sheets of pewter that will serve as base material for the artist to work with. To those who would be so inclined, note that it would be impossible to find such a rolling mill as this. It was, in fact, built by a local machinist and, looking at the size of gears and chains that make up this machine, it would probably be arduous to find an identical one anywhere on the planet, except maybe in a comic book.



Lighted work in stone, wood and pewter



Paul Simard holding a vase

Once the pewter sheet is ready, the real work begins. Pewtersmithing, in its pure form, is an art that does not include welding. Only the hammer and the anvil (in the shape of a steel mushroom) are used to shape the matter. In opposition to a sheet of paper that could not be folded up to create a vase without removing some of the material, pewter molecules reform and compress themselves, thus the artisan is able, through repeated hammer blows, to create almost the same shapes a potter obtains when working with clay.

Paul Simard has created a great number of art pieces using this classic technique, but he also produces pieces that do require some degree of welding to attain desired results. He was introduced to the art of metalsmithing by the Stefanowski brothers of European origin, established in Québec, who trained him. Paul also went to France to attend further training courses, since the craft was yet unknown in Québec. He started working with copper but, due to its inherent toxicity, he soon abandoned copper and adopted pewter as his medium of choice: BM 94 (Brittania 94% pure metal) to be more precise. This alloy being devoid of any trace of lead, which is harmful for the health, is more suitable since a great number of finished pieces are used as kitchen utensils.



Various objects created by Paul Simard

Paul Simard's diverse creations include oil lamps, votives, goblets, patens, jugs, art pieces, funeral urns, crosses, tureens, trophies, etc. When I visited Mr. Simard's workshop, a retrospective exhibition of his 40 years career was being held at the Val-David Exhibition Centre. The centre being located only two blocks away, we were able to walk over and only once inside did I fully realise the extent of invaluable work this master pewtersmith has done over the years. The photographs accompanying this article speak for themselves and will no doubt allow you to appreciate the high quality of these works. I was lucky enough to benefit from a guided tour of the exhibition accompanied with the most patient and inspired creator himself.

We must mention in closing that among the most recent distinctions awarded to him, Paul Simard was, in 2012, selected among three finalists to create an art piece underlining the 50 years existence of Québec's Ministry of Culture. For this occasion, he created a magnificent fleur-de-lys, symbol of pride for Québécois. Paul Simard has happily welcomed apprentice Patrick Gauthier to his workshop, which allows him to train a successor and ensure transmission of this most extraordinary discipline.