

The art of the tinner, tinker, whitesmith, or tinsmith (since he was known by all of these terms) is covered in this lesson that introduces students to the processes, tools, materials, and products made by this trade.

Lesson: TINSMITHING

PRE-VISIT SUGGESTIONS

Read the introductory units on Folk Art and Pricketts Fort History.

Review basic vocabulary with students.

Examine the maps to understand the geographic boundaries of the frontier and the colonies in the late 1700s and the states in the late 1800s.

Have students bring in items from home that are made from tin.



KEYWORDS & VOCABULARY

anvil - a heavy iron tool used by tinsmiths on which tinplate is hammered and shaped

apprentice - a young person being trained to work professionally in a particular trade, such as tinsmithing or blacksmithing

shears - a heavy pair of “scissors” used to cut and trim pieces of tinplate

solder - (noun) a soft lead-based metal alloy with a low melting point used by tinsmiths to join pieces of tin together. (verb) The act of using solder to join pieces of metal

tin - a rust-resistant metallic element used to plate sheets of iron to inhibit rust

tinker - a tinker is an itinerant metal worker of questionable skill who typically made simple repairs to pots, pans, and buckets

Guiding Questions

What items were made from tin in the 18th century that are not made of tin today?

Why would something have been made from tin rather than iron (blacksmithing)?

What other types of metal did people work with?

Where does metal come from?

What are some types of metal that are more expensive than others?

Materials Needed

Fort provided **RESOURCE BOX** will contain **the following:** Period examples and all materials and tools needed for hands-on activity.

Teacher will provide the following: table and a soft work surface such as a stack of newspaper or a sheet of cardboard.

Grade Ranges

K-2 students make embossed tin project

3-6 students make a punched tin panel

7-12 students make a punched tin ornament

Literature Relevant to the Art and Historical Period

Tinsmith's Song

What though our bench labor rob us
of the favor
Enjoyed by the farmer, 'midst fair
Country scenes;
What though 'tis confining to make up
tins shining,
There's naught in the trade which our
conduct demeans,
Then ply the shears, since it appears
That our calling is honest and fair;
Yet take good heed, lest, in our speed,
We should send from our hands leaky ware!
In using the folder we then may grow bolder,
And form and groove pans with our
consciences clear;
Drive each of the turners with skill
beyond learners,
And put in stout wire with our hearts
full of cheer.
Then take a burr and make it whirr,
As the bottoms spin round like a "top,"
And fit these tight, which is but right
If we wish a good name for the shop.
In this case the setter will do the work better,
And strong double seams will repay
all our pains;
But slight not the soldering, or
customers ordering
Their work at our hands will begrudge
us our gains.
This we can do and yet push through
Quite a good share of labor each day,
And in our sales of pans or pails
Boldly ask those who buy for our pay.
We thus may be working, no selfishness lurking
Within, though the weather be cloudy or cold;
And lawfully striving our trade still be driving
From far better motives than mere thirst
for gold.
Then we may serve and never swerve
From strict duty's plain, straightforward path,



Tin Smith, (Kasher)

Our country's weal with fervid zeal
By skill which each artisan hath.
O! then our bench labor may bring us the favor
Of a jaunt now and then midst the forests
and fields,
Which pleasure so joyous can never annoy us,
If health and contentment it constantly yields.
Then ply the shears, since it appears
That our calling is honest and fair;
Yet take good heed lest in our speed.
We should send from our hands leaky ware.

— *Thomas Cowherd*



18th Century line art drawing

Background

A tinsmith is a skilled metal worker who manufactures objects out of tinplate. A major advantage of using sheets of tin-plated iron, as opposed to bare iron, is that tin does not rust. Over the centuries, many different names have been used to describe tin workers. In colonial America, artisans who worked in tin were called either whitesmiths or tinner. By the 1860s, the title tinsmith had come into common usage. Ordinarily, no self-respecting tinsmith would refer to himself as a tinker. Traditionally, tinkers have been thought of as traveling metal workers who repaired tin rather than created tinware.

The trade of tinsmithing could be learned in one of two ways. First, a young boy could become an apprentice in an established tinsmith shop. Apprenticeships typically lasted for anywhere from four to six years. A second way to learn the trade was for it to be handed down from a father to his son. In some cases, tinsmithing was a family affair with the father and boys doing the manufacturing while the mother and daughters polished the completed projects. Commonly produced items included tin funnels, plates, cups, candle holders, lanterns, coffee pots, pails, whistles, bowls, canteens, chandeliers, and even tin "speaking trumpets," a colonial style of megaphone.

Unlike a blacksmith who required a large shop containing a heavy anvil, great bellows, fiery forge, and a diverse array of hand tools, the needs of a tinsmith were rather modest. Shears and snips for cutting sheets of tinplate, nippers, a light curved anvil, soldering iron, some punches, and a few hammers were all that he needed. While some of his hammers were iron, others were made out of soft rawhide that would not damage the delicate tin plating. After all, if a tin cup or bowl became scratched, the exposed wrought iron would become subject to rust. To avoid rust on a piece of wrought iron, a tinsmith would tin the inside of a container to keep it from rusting.

Tinsmiths served an important function in colonial times; however, by the end of the 19th century, many items originally made, one at a time, by the tinsmith were mass-produced, and over the course of the 20th century, the skilled artisans had largely been replaced by factories and machines. Sheets of expensive tinplate would similarly be replaced by galvanized steel, stainless steel, aluminum, or even plastic.





Artist Profile



Kimberly Pollis

Punched tinsmithing has been a favorite art form of craftsmen since the early 1800s. Today, traditional and contemporary tin crafting is a flourishing art form and a desirable design element for contemporary homes. Kimberly Pollis, of Native American descent, was born in the Great Lakes region. A longtime resident of Taos, New Mexico, she shares her life with her husband and children, working from her home studio.

She attended Suffolk University in Boston, Massachusetts, and graduated from The New England School of Art and Design in 1983. While in Boston, she enjoyed a successful career as a

Graphic Designer and Art Director for thirteen years. In 1993, she began a new journey west to pursue her enduring passion for the art, culture, and love of the Southwest.

She writes, “ART has been a lifelong passion, the sweetest blend of life-affirming action. My greatest teacher, my driving force, my guiding force to the next horizon and beyond - beyond. ART is the song of my soul.”

American Indian and Multicultural Connection



Tin frame for a Santos or Saint, circa 1840,
Millicent Rogers Museum, New Mexico

Tin art was created in other countries, such as Mexico, in addition to the southwest and colonial America. Research these historic traditions and how they are carried on today by contemporary artists. How do these traditions compare to our own? Can you identify influences from other cultures on American tin work?

American Indians worked extensively in silver and other metals. Jewelry such as armbands, nose rings, and earrings were made from metal. Clothing and other accoutrements were sometimes adorned with cones of copper or tin. Trade silver was another trade item that was widely seen on the frontier. Students may examine the examples provided in the **RESOURCE BOX**.

TINSMITH VOCABULARY WORD SEARCH



ANVIL
SOLDER

APPRENTICE
TIN

SHEARS
TINKER

ASSESSMENT TINSMITHING TEST

1. Tinsmithing is also known as _____.
2. Apprenticeships usually lasted about _____ years.
3. Commonly produced items produced by tinsmiths were _____.
4. Some tools that the tinsmith used were _____.
5. The men and boys often did the tinsmithing and the women and young girls would _____ the finished products.
6. Because the art of tinsmithing has declined due to factories and industry, sheets of tin have been replaced with _____.
7. One advantage of using tin over iron is that it does not _____.
8. No self-respecting tinsmith would refer to himself as a _____ who were repairers of tin, not artisans.
9. Some of the tinsmith's hammers were made of _____ so that they would not dent the delicate tin.

Answer Key

1. whitesmithing
2. 4-6 years
3. tin funnels, plates, cups, candle holders, lanterns, coffee pots, pails, whistles, bowls, canteens, chandeliers, and even tin "speaking trumpets," a colonial style of megaphone
4. shears and snips for cutting sheets of tinplate, nippers, a light curved anvil, soldering iron, some punches, and a few hammers
5. polish
6. galvanized steel, stainless steel, aluminum, or even plastic
7. rust
8. tinker
9. soft rawhide

ASSESSMENT RUBRIC

Name of student _____

Title/topic of art lesson _____

Date _____

Analytic Performance Rubric:

Ratings:

1. Takes ownership of the skill or art learned with mastery.
2. Takes ownership of the skill or art learned with proficiency.
3. Takes limited ownership of the skill or art learned.
4. Takes little ownership of the skill or art learned.
5. Takes no ownership of the skill or art learned.

_____ A. Knowledge of the art/skill.

_____ B. Knowledge of the historical connection.

_____ C. Knowledge of the guiding and evaluation questions.

_____ D. Skill of the art presented.

_____ E. Total points.

Feedback to student:

Constructive direction to student for further learning:

Conversion of analysis to grade: _____

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- Neumann, George C. and Frank J. Kravic. *Collector's Illustrated Encyclopedia of the American Revolution*. Texarkana, Tex.: Rebel Publishing, 1975.
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POST-VISIT

Suggestions for Extended Learning

Visit Pricketts Fort and watch the tinsmith at work in his period environment.

Research American Indian body art, such as paint, tattoos, and ornamentation (such as piercing and jewelry) and compare to present day fashion and traditions.

Related Lesson in Curriculum: Blacksmithing

In what ways were the processes for blacksmiths and whitesmiths the same and different?