HOME ECONOMICS GUIDE

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Care of Valuable Possessions

Brass-Bronze-Copper-Pewter-Silver-Tin

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Brass

Brass looks best if it is kept shining. A simple substitute for commercial brass polish is salt and vinegar. First wash the brass in hot soap suds or weak ammonia and water solution to remove any dust and dirt, then rub with salt and vinegar mixture. Dampen a soft cloth in vinegar, then dip in salt. Wash at once in clear water, dry carefully and polish with a cloth moistened with lemon oil. Follow directions given with commercial polishes. If a soft finish is desired, substitute for the polish a thin paste made by mixing rottenstone and linseed oil. Wipe off excess oil and polish with a clean cloth. Rub with lemon oil and polish lightly.

Stains and corrosion on brass can often be removed by rubbing with a wedge of lemon and some salt, followed by careful washing. Glass wax helps prevent tarnish on brass.

Brass andirons and fire sets that have been neglected require special treatment. Fine steel wool can be used but requires much time and work. Very fine emery cloth gives quicker results, but care must be taken to rub the metal in only one direction, not round and round. When the fire tools are clean, they can be polished with brass polish. Some commercial products do not require after-rinsing—so read directions.

Brasses sometimes are lacquered to prevent tarnishing. These need only dusting and occasionally washing with lukewarm suds. When the lacquer cracks, it can be removed with acetone or banana oil. If the article is not glued or does not have a part that might be damaged by hot water, it can be covered with boiling water which soaks off lacquer. Removing lacquer requires skill to prevent an uneven look. It is probably better to have it done by a professional, especially if the article is a valuable antique.

Bronze

Bronze is a molten alloy of tin, copper, zinc and aluminum or phosphorus combined in varying proportions. The surface must be colored after casting. The patina is the work of either the artist or the founder and is achieved by the application of chemicals, with colors ranging from black, brown or various hues of green to a light golden color. This patina is carefully thought out by the artist. It should not be removed.

Bronze should be dusted with a soft cloth regularly. This will keep the surface clean. Care should be taken not to rub too vigorously, especially on any protruding parts.

When bronze has been neglected for a long time and is covered with dust and grime, it is wise to give it an over-all cleaning with a soft brush. Make sure all dust is removed from crevices and notches and then rub the entire surface lightly with a soft flannel cloth. For a more thorough cleaning, wash in a solution of three tablespoons of salt in ten quarts of water, then rinse. Polish with copper polish and follow with glass wax. If a high polish is desired, a cloth may be dipped in liquid wax, applied to the piece, and when dry lightly buffed to a high polish. This wax treatment may also be given to bronzes that are kept out doors. Weathered bronze usually darkens, but this is natural and does not harm the piece. However, bronze sculpture that is constantly exposed to the elements needs special care. After a few months of exposure, it should be brush-washed with soap and a small amount of ammonia. When completely dry the surface should be rubbed with liquid wax and lightly buffed. After this treatment the elements themselves will gradually add a natural patina. The cleaning process should be repeated when the surface collects grime.

If bronze has been neglected and has a heavy crust of grime an expert should be consulted about the use of acids to restore the surface. The restoration of bronze is a delicate operation and is best done by a professional.

One of the most serious hazards to bronze is "bronze disease." The name is somewhat misleading since the same disease can attack brass and pewter as well. It shows up in small patches of corrosion, characterized by rough, light-green spots. "Bronze disease" can usually be checked by washing the piece in repeated changes of boiling distilled water. It may be necessary to soak the object for a week or more in distilled water.

Bronze should be kept as clean as possible. Accumulation of dust and dirt can eat into the metal surface.

Copper

Copper is tarnished by the same substances that tarnish silver and also is sensitive to oxygen. As silver, it oxidizes more readily when exposed to moist air. Copper should be washed with soap and water and polished with one of the several fine commercial polishes now available. A good home-made polish can be produced by mixing equal parts of salt, vinegar and flour. After rubbing with this mixture, it is important to wash the object carefully, to rinse well and dry. A careful washing should follow any polishing of copper.

The same disease which attacks bronze also attacks copper. Several preventive measures can be used. The spots can be rubbed with a mixture of hot vinegar and salt, lemon juice and salt, copper cleaner, or buttermilk. The object should be carefully washed with soap and water immediately.

If a copper piece that has been lacquered needs cleaning, remove the lacquer in the same way that was suggested for brass.

Pewter

Very old pewter is usually an alloy of lead and tin. Antique pewter should never be over cleaned—it is not meant to look like silver. There are special pewter polishes on the market, and it can also be polished by a brisk rubbing with a paste made of pumice and olive oil. Never use steel wool, not even the finest.

There is a difference between good pewter and plate metal which contains a large portion of lead. Good pewter is mostly tin. The color should be a lustrous, soft, silver grey.

Britannia alloy and white metal are sometimes confused with pewter. They are of the same general family and should receive the same care.

Silver

Silver is one metal that improves with age. The build up of small scratches as a result of daily use will give silver flatware the deep mellow tone of fine antiques.

Silver tarnishes on exposure to the atmosphere. It is impossible to keep silver bright where there are rubber floor coverings. Similarly, cabinets with rubber seals should be avoided. Rubber bands, too, should be kept away from silver. If silver pieces are held together with rubber bands, or even lay on them, the silver can become so deeply etched that only a silversmith can repair the damage. Silver can also be harmed by paint on walls. Casein, which is present in most water base paints, releases sulphur compounds that will tarnish silver. There are many foods that affect silver. Table salt, olives, salad dressing, eggs, vinegar, and fruit juices are the kinds of things that should be placed in glass or china containers. Flowers and fruit are lovely in silver containers but the acid generated as they decay can etch the containers and cause serious damage. If silver bowls are used for this purpose, a liner of plastic or glass should be used.

If silver articles are used as accessories in a room they should not be covered with plastic. It detracts from the beauty of the silver and it may discolor the silver.

Tarnish is easily removed with special polishes. Two precautions are necessary: The type of polish chosen and the manner in which it is applied. Silver should never be polished with a compound containing abrasives. Antique silver should not be frequently polished, nor rubbed vigorously.

For washing silver, use warm soapy water. After washing, dry gently.

The electrolytic method of cleaning silver is quick and easy but jewelers do not approve of it. It is referred to as the "dip" method since the silver is boiled for two or three minutes in water which contains a piece of aluminum or aluminum foil and 1 tsp. salt and 1 tsp. baking soda to 1 qt. water. The tarnish is removed from the silver and deposited on the aluminum. Every trace of oxidation is removed, leaving the pattern dead and the silver dull, white and lusterless.

Several fine commercial silver polishes are available. If there is doubt about the correct polish to use, a jeweler should be consulted.

Silver need not be polished every time it is used. When polishing, the rubbing should be brisk but not heavy, and always in the same direction. After polishing, the silver should be carefully washed. A residue of remaining polish will cause the piece to tarnish faster.

If silver is to be stored, it should be placed in a bag of tarnish-resistant cloth, or placed in drawers or chests lined with this material. Another method, especially good if silver is to be stored for a long period, is to wrap the cleaned silver in several layers of clean, new white tissue paper and then cover it with anti-tarnish paper.

Camphor fumes keep silver from tarnishing. Camphor cakes may be purchased at the drug store and are easy to use. Cutting down the number of times silver must be polished will help preserve the piece.

Tin

Under normal conditions tin is not a stable metal, but rusts quickly when exposed to the atmosphere. Much primitive work and folk art use tin as a medium. More sophisticated is the painted tinware known as tole.

With age the surface of painted tin may craze and colors begin to fade. In some cases the tin coating flakes off. Nothing can be done with these pieces. Where rust has started, a careful cleaning and rubbing of the rust spots with steel wool followed by a thin coat of wax will help to check the condition. If the rust is so extensive that the whole design may be lost an expert should be consulted. The design can be copied, the entire surface removed and the metal repaired and completely repainted. However, if this is done the piece will have lost its value as an antique.

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