

The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release
October 1989

KAYSERZINN PEWTER

October 12, 1989 - January 9, 1990

The first American exhibition devoted to "Kayserzinn"--the trademark for art pewter ware manufactured at the turn of the century by J.P. Kayser Sohn of Krefeld, Germany--opens at The Museum of Modern Art on October 12, 1989. Organized by Cara McCarty, associate curator in the Department of Architecture and Design, the exhibition comprises thirty-five pieces, including candlesticks, tea sets, and vases, drawn from the Museum's design holdings and several private collections.

The use of pewter as a material in the applied arts was revived during the Art Nouveau period when designers throughout Europe were searching for new forms of expression. In 1894, Engelbert Kayser, the son of the company's founder, set up in Cologne the Kayserzinn workshop and hired artists to stimulate the design of pewter. This exhibition focuses on the strikingly original series of objects created between 1900 and 1904 primarily by the sculptor Hugo Leven.

Leven excelled in his use of pewter, modelling the clay from which it was cast into supple and sometimes bizarre forms. Like other Jugendstil artists, the Kayserzinn designers were preoccupied with the invention of new shapes. Abandoning traditional styles to pursue a more sculptural approach, Leven

- more -

exploited pewter's unique expressive qualities to create molten forms with an intense organic vitality. Kayserzinn's abstract imagery lends it an enduring interest and may be seen as anticipatory of German Expressionism.

Ms. McCarty writes, "In [Leven's] emphatically three-dimensional pieces, sculptural forms replaced applied decoration, the malleable metal evoking quivering muscles, perhaps, or creatures from the bottom of the sea....Gothic in spirit, their novel and fantastic shapes appear to be melting under their own weight, and provoke a mood of uneasiness in contrast with the exuberance of French work of this period."

Although these objects appear to be unique, Kayserzinn ware was produced industrially and distributed through mail-order catalogues and by such retailers as Liberty of London. Despite its relatively short period of existence, the firm was highly successful, receiving gold medals at international expositions in Paris (1900), Turin (1902), and St. Louis (1904).

Kayserzinn's demise shortly before World War I was purportedly due to the increased cost of tin. Ultimately, however, pewter's popularity had given way to a preference for glass and ceramic ware and, in particular, the advent of silver plate.

* * *