



A Family Tradition: The Silverwork of Franklin Porter and Helen Porter Philbrick

GRAHAM C. BOETTCHER

Father-son workshop traditions are well documented within the history of American decorative arts. Since the eighteenth century, when Paul Revere, Jr., apprenticed in his father's shop, fathers have passed down their craft to their male offspring. Rare are examples, however, of father-daughter workshops, particularly within silversmithing, a predominantly though not exclusively male trade.¹ Born in 1910, Helen Louise Porter Philbrick trained in the workshop of her father, the Danvers, Massachusetts, silversmith Franklin Porter. The two worked closely, sometimes sharing work on individual pieces.² Beginning in 1928, Helen Louise Porter began marking her work with the initials HLP, and distinguished her work with the mark PHILBRICK after marrying the Reverend John H. Philbrick, an Episcopal clergyman, in 1936.³

In 2006 the Yale University Art Gallery acquired a pendant bearing Philbrick's mark (fig. 1), dating from the 1940s. This donation led to correspondence with Philbrick, which resulted in her 2006 gift of twenty-six pieces of silver crafted by the artist and her father to

the Yale University Art Gallery. Philbrick expressed that the Gallery was the ideal home for these gifts, not only because it had already acquired works by her father but also because she recalled the pleasure of visiting the museum when she lived in New Haven for a brief time in the early 1930s. In her autobiography, Philbrick wrote, "It was stimulating to be so close to Yale University, . . . Yale had fine free concerts and excellent libraries and museums."⁴ Not only does this gift greatly expand the Gallery's collection of Arts and Crafts silver and jewelry, it also enables us to document this extraordinary father-daughter collaboration.

Franklin Porter learned his trade in the late nineteenth century in Providence, Rhode Island, center of the country's silver and jewelry industries. He studied first at the Rhode Island School of Design, followed by technical training at Brown and Sharpe, a manufacturer of precision tools and machinery, established in 1853. From 1910 to 1914, Porter operated a workshop and small salesroom at his home in Bristol Ferry, Rhode Island, where he sold to locals and wealthy Newport clients.⁵ During this time, owing to the high cost of silver, Porter sometimes worked in other metals, including brass, copper, and nickel silver.⁶ In 1914 economic necessity forced Porter to move to

Fig. 1. Helen Louise Porter Philbrick, *Bird in Flight Pendant*, ca. 1940–50. Sterling silver, DIAM. 1½ in. (3.8 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Graham C. Boettcher, B.A. 1995, PH.D. 2006, 2006.177.3

Middleton, Massachusetts, where he cultivated new clients who bought his wares from a tearoom that his wife, Ethel, operated in the front parlor of their home. That same year, in order to increase output and thereby also income, the Porters adopted an eighteen-year-old boy named Edward Sherman Dwyer to serve as an apprentice.⁷ As Philbrick remarked, after Eddie's arrival, "the volume of silverware increased, but not enough," forcing Porter to take employment as a machinist and master mechanic at General Electric in Lynn, Massachusetts, in 1919, and soon after at the Champion Electric Light Factory in Tapleyville.⁸ In 1919 the family moved to Danvers, to be closer to Porter's work at Champion. At that time, as Philbrick recalled, Porter's "silver tools were stored in someone's barn and the silversmith really believed that his career was ended."⁹

Shortly after arriving in Danvers, the family became caretakers of the historic Judge Samuel Holten House. According to Philbrick, "There was a sturdy woodshed in the backyard. Without much comment, but with a steady persistence, piece by piece the silversmithing tools began to make their appearance in the woodshed."¹⁰ In 1924 Porter was laid off from Champion, enabling him to resume silversmithing full-time, which he did until his death in 1935.¹¹ Porter christened his new workshop Saint Dunstan's, the patron saint of silversmiths, whose picture he had found on a trip to Providence. According to Philbrick, Porter had a "long procession of apprentices" at Saint Dunstan's, none of whom lasted very long. Philbrick herself was the exception. As she recalled, "Probably the only reason the silversmith kept me on was that I lived in the same house and he couldn't get rid of me! And besides I was his partner."¹² Although she had been working with her father since at least 1926, it was not until 1928 that Porter made his daughter's work official. Philbrick recalled:

In his journal under the date July 1, 1928 he wrote "Helen Louise Borden Porter

began her work with me this day, at Saint Dunstan's. Her 'signature' will be H.L.B.P. introducing the 'Borden' not hitherto part of her name." My stamp however is HLP. That was the year I entered Wheaton College in Massachusetts and could only work with him during vacations for the next four years.¹³

An anecdote suggests that father and daughter had already established an easy, even playful, rhythm to their work by this time. As Philbrick recalled, "Father was glad to have help in the shop and we quickly fell into the same old routines. When we were both sawing little bits out of filigree handles at the same time, we raced, not to finish first, but to see who would break his jeweler's saw first. They would snap broken at a slightly wrong angle."¹⁴

After graduating from Wheaton in 1932, where she majored in fine arts, Philbrick moved to New Haven and volunteered at the Religion and Labor Foundation established by Professor Jerome Davis of the Yale Divinity School.¹⁵ In the spring of 1933, Philbrick returned to Danvers and enrolled in the Boston School of Occupational Therapy, where she studied weaving. When Porter died suddenly in 1935, at the age of sixty-six, Philbrick was the heir to his practice. As his obituary noted, "His will leaves to his daughter all his tools, implements, sketches, books and good will of his business as a silversmith."¹⁶ However, Philbrick's educational pursuits prevented her from taking over Saint Dunstan's. In 1936 Philbrick graduated from the Boston School of Occupational Therapy and married John H. Philbrick. While silversmithing never became her profession, Philbrick did not abandon its practice, continuing to craft jewelry for friends, family, and personal use. As Philbrick wrote, "Whenever we moved after we were married, I kept a small collection of silver tools, especially [marking stamps with the words] STERLING, HANDWROUGHT, and PHILBRICK."¹⁷

The earliest and perhaps the most unusual piece included in Philbrick's gift to the Gallery is Franklin Porter's replica of the Old Stone Mill (fig. 2), also known as the Viking Tower, in Newport, Rhode Island, which was commissioned by the Reverend Dr. Roderick T. Terry, who served as president of the Newport Historical Society from 1918 until his death in 1933. Philbrick recalled the commission, writing:

Dr. Terry sent for the silversmith one day and asked him to make a replica of the Old Stone Mill in silver. Father, armed with tape measure and sketch-books, climbed over and around and through the old stone mill noting every detail. The assignment was to make a silver casting so perfect that if the landmark should be destroyed, it could be replaced from the silver replica. With characteristic caution Father made the casting first in lead while he was also inquiring into the client's credit references. In due time the silver model was cast, delivered and duly appreciated.¹⁸

At the time Terry commissioned the replica, the Old Stone Mill was a well-known and widely discussed landmark, as many New Englanders believed that the tower was evidence of a Viking settlement established by Leif Erikson.¹⁹

More typical of Porter's body of work are two examples of the *Brig Leander* brooch (fig. 3), undoubtedly his best-known design. The brooch depicts the *Leander*, a merchant ship launched by Captain Joseph Peabody in 1821, which was reported to have brought more than a quarter million dollars worth of revenue into the customhouse at Salem, Massachusetts. The pin was commissioned by the committee organizing Salem's tercentenary celebration. Porter and his daughter made 150 *Leander* pins to be sold for \$1.50 apiece at a street fair during the opening festivities on July 7, 1926. As Philbrick recalled:



Fig. 2. Franklin Porter, *Replica of Old Stone Mill in Newport, Rhode Island*, 1917–19. Lead, silver, copper, and brass, 3 x 2½ in. (7.6 x 6.4 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Helen Porter Philbrick, 2006.171.1

Fig. 3. Franklin Porter, assisted by Helen Porter Philbrick, *Brig Leander Brooches*, 1926–32. Sterling silver, 1½ x 1⅞ in. (3.8 x 4.8 cm) and 1⅜ x 1⅞ in. (3.5 x 4.8 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Helen Porter Philbrick, 2006.171.11–.12

Whoever sold them did so well that by the end of the week there was not one left and we had taken orders for a few more. Before the new ones were made, more orders had come in, and more and more. Other orders were set aside while we devoted the workshop to *Leander*. The shop was filled with them in all stages of manufacture. We turned them out in fleets of ten at first, then twenty at a time, then thirty. Within the next five or six years we turned out almost one thousand *Leanders*, made entirely by hand.²⁰

The number of brooches made by Porter and Philbrick is particularly remarkable considering the intricacy of the craftsmanship. Explaining the process, Philbrick wrote, "Every one had seventeen holes pierced, to silhouette the shape of the wind-filled sails. Each hole was first stamped with a prick punch, then drilled with the finest drill. The outline was sawed with a jeweler's saw, about the thickness of a hair, held taught [*sic*] in a saw frame. To saw out the holes, the jeweler's saw had to be released and threaded into each hole, tightened, sawed out, released again and rethreaded into the next hole."²¹ The *Leander* became so popular that the motif was used on stick-pins, earrings, buttons, and matchboxes. During the lean years of the Great Depression, when silver orders waned, sales of the *Leander* brooches provided Porter with a steady source of income, prompting the silversmith to call them his "potboilers."²² Despite being a staunch practitioner of handicraft, and perhaps owing to his background as a machinist, Porter eventually succumbed to the temptation to have *Leanders* made by machine. This departure from his usually high standard for craftsmanship proved to be an utter failure. Of the two thousand die-cut *Leanders* ordered, eight hundred went unsold. Philbrick noted, "This was indeed a lesson to our workshop: if you make handmade articles, keep them handmade and *don't compromise*."²³

While father and daughter sometimes shared the work on individual pieces, occasionally the elder Porter passed commissions on to his young apprentice. One example of this division of labor is the pin that Philbrick made for the Turner Hill Baseball Club (fig. 4). Baseball was a favorite pastime at Turner Hill, the Ipswich estate of Charles G. Rice and his wife, Ann Proctor Rice. In 1926 Mrs. Rice commissioned Franklin Porter to create forty pins for members and fans of the amateur team that played at Turner Hill. As Philbrick recalled, "The assignment was passed on to me at the age of sixteen, and I was deeply impressed and proud to be allowed to work on anything so unusual. First of all we had to do some research to learn the exact proportions of home plate. The pin was about one inch square with a corner lopped off in the shape of home plate. On this flat background was applied a tiny silver baseball bat and a still tinier silver ball and the initials 'T.H.'"²⁴ While trusting a commission from an important client to a teenager is certainly evidence of Porter's confidence in his daughter's ability, Philbrick has an alternate explanation: "I believe the master craftsman had an ulterior motive in urging a young lady with deft fingers to handle the small finds that had to be soldered on the pin backs. Each pin had a hinge on one side and a safety catch on the other. Father was not at his best handling such trying little bits of pieces. He laughingly complained 'that they jumped like bugs.'"²⁵

Tasks such as the Turner Hill Baseball Club pin not only honed Philbrick's skills as a silversmith but also challenged and refined her own design abilities. Evidence of Philbrick's creativity as a designer can be seen in an elegant and unique shawl fastener she made between 1928 and 1932 (fig. 5). The fastener consists of two opposing forms with knoblike ends and serpentine tails, which clip together in the middle. Three loops on the back of each half allow the shawl to be sewn to the clasp. While incorporating seemingly organic shapes, the piece forsakes none

Fig. 4. Helen Louise Porter Philbrick, workshop of Franklin Porter, *Turner Hill Baseball Club Pin*, 1926. Sterling silver, $\frac{3}{4}$ x $1\frac{1}{4}$ in. (1.91 x 3.2 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Helen Porter Philbrick, 2006.171.10

Fig. 5. Helen Louise Porter Philbrick, *Shawl Fastener*, 1928–32. Sterling silver, $4\frac{3}{4}$ x 3 in. (12.1 x 7.6 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Helen Porter Philbrick, 2006.171.16a–b



of its functionality in the name of form. Around the same time, Philbrick began to experiment with aluminum, creating a small bowl (fig. 6, left). As the daughter and apprentice of Franklin Porter, Philbrick would have been well practiced in the manufacture of bowls. As she explained, bowls were her father's "favorite project," and in one year he made more than eighty in various shapes, sizes, and styles.²⁶ Philbrick's aluminum vessel appears rough-hewn when compared with the dainty silver bowls she made around 1943 (fig. 6, right). Its uneven edge and pronounced hammered finish call attention to its handcraftedness, as if to underscore the seemingly ironic use of a material increasingly associated with machine-made articles. To be sure, other metalsmiths had begun working in aluminum during the Depression as an affordable alternative to silver.²⁷ However, when compared with the multiplicity of machine-made aluminum objects, handwrought aluminum goods were still a relative novelty at

this time. This was remarked upon in a 1936 article entitled "New Metals in the Modern Room," in which Walter Rendell Storey wrote, "The hand-hammering technique, once confined to wrought iron, is now applied to aluminum . . . delicately wrought aluminum candlesticks, torcheres, mirror decorations and grilles may be seen. These pieces are astonishing to those who have thought of aluminum as a metal which could only be cast or molded into shape. Here is work which follows closely the hammered metal art of the Renaissance."²⁸

Like the rough-hewn aluminum bowl, Philbrick's jewelry calls attention to the transformative power of the craftsman's hand. Two silver-and-copper shawl pins made by Philbrick in the 1940s (fig. 7) consist of organic forms embellished with deeply cut, expressive hatching. Such pins were a departure from the representational jewelry on which Philbrick had collaborated with her father in the mid- to late 1920s, such as the *Leander* brooches, or pins in the form of



Fig. 6. Helen Louise Porter Philbrick, *Bowl*, 1928–32. Aluminum, H. 1¼ x DIAM. 4⅝ in. (3.2 x 11 cm). *Bowl*, ca. 1943. Sterling silver, H. 1¼ x DIAM. 3⅞ in. (3.2 x 9.8 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Helen Porter Philbrick, 2006.171.18–.19

a seagull or a rabbit (fig. 8). These pieces accounted for a large portion of their joint output. As Philbrick recalled, “We collected designs and made pins out of anything that would produce a silhouette: owls, rabbits, Scottie dogs, lobsters, butterflies, and near the seacoast, of course, sea gulls and sailboats.”²⁹ In form and decoration, the shawl pins evoke both the antfigurative aesthetic and intense emotion of the contemporaneous Abstract Expressionist movement. A third silver-and-copper shawl pin dating from the 1940s (fig. 9) was fashioned by Philbrick from a broken master butter knife made by her father. The piece not only serves as a fine example of Yankee thrift and ingenuity but also functions as a tribute to her father, who himself believed in respecting the work of his predecessors. As Martha Gandy Fales explained, “Often when old silver was to be remade, he saved the pieces from the melting pot by paying for the

object’s weight himself. When St. Peter’s Church in Salem requested him to melt down their eighteenth-century alms basins, which had been made by John Touzell, so that he could make a box to hold their Communion wafers, Porter refused. Ingeniously he formed a pyx using one basin as the box and the other as its cover, carefully preserving the original engraving.”³⁰

Rings created by Philbrick in the 1940s demonstrate the same simplicity of form and truth to materials (fig. 10). One ring, made of a single open length of silver cut to resemble leaves, can be bent to size for the wearer. Philbrick made a second ring simply by threading an Egyptian scarab bead with heavy-gauge silver wire, which she knotted on both sides to prevent the bead from moving. The simple beauty of Philbrick’s own work seems to recall her father’s professed creed. With each piece of silver he made, Porter included a card reading,



Fig. 7 (top left). Helen Louise Porter Philbrick, *Shawl Pins*, 1940–50. Sterling silver and copper, $1\frac{1}{16} \times 4\frac{1}{4}$ in. (3.3 x 10.8 cm) and $\frac{7}{8} \times 3\frac{3}{4}$ in. (2.22 x 9.5 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Helen Porter Philbrick, 2006.171.23, .21

Fig. 8 (top right). Franklin Porter and Helen Louise Porter Philbrick, *Seagull Brooch*, ca. 1926. Sterling silver, $1 \times 1\frac{3}{4}$ in. (2.5 x 4.5 cm). *Rabbit Brooch*, 1928–32. Sterling silver, $1\frac{3}{8} \times \frac{1}{2}$ in. (3.5 x 1.27 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Helen Porter Philbrick, 2006.171.2, .9

Fig. 9 (bottom left). Helen Louise Porter Philbrick, *Shawl Pin*, 1940–50. Sterling silver and copper, $\frac{5}{16} \times 3\frac{5}{8}$ in. (1.43 x 9.2 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Helen Porter Philbrick, 2006.171.22

Fig. 10 (bottom right). Helen Louise Porter Philbrick, *Rings*, 1940–50. Sterling silver wire and blue-green glazed ceramic, overall DIAM. $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (1.91 cm); sterling silver, overall DIAM. $\frac{7}{8}$ in. (2.22 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Helen Porter Philbrick, 2006.171.7, .6

“Embodied in this piece of Silver . . . are the ambition and love and some of the life essence of the Craftsman and it is offered to you in the belief that by its daily use and appreciation your artistic sense will be nourished and the Gospel of its maker ‘Simplicity and Service’ be extended.”³¹

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1. Passing down the silversmithing trade to daughters seems to be much more prevalent among Native American jewelers. For example, Alice Quam, a Zuni silversmith active in the second half of the twentieth century, was taught by her parents, Wayne and Doris Ondelacy, who made clusterwork jewelry from the 1930s until the 1950s. Quam, and her husband, Duane, taught the craft to their daughters, Lorraine Waatsa and Alvina Quam. Today, Ben and Angeline Touchine, Navajo silversmiths, are passing the tradition to their daughter, Vangie. Among non-Native Americans, notable examples from the twentieth century include: the Boston silversmith Edward Everett Oakes, who trained both his son, Gilbert Oakes, and granddaughter, Susan Oakes Peabody; Peer Smed and his daughter, Lona P. Schaeffer; and John Axel Prip, a fourth-generation metalsmith who passed his craft to his daughter, Janet.

2. Rebecca A. G. Reynolds and Jeannine Falino write, “Unlike many other aspiring silversmiths from his generation, Porter worked alone. He never joined with a partner, nor did he participate in one of the shop collectives prevalent at the time.” While Reynolds and Falino acknowledge that Porter “benefited from the assistance of his daughter,” Philbrick’s role in her father’s workshop as well as her own work have been little discussed heretofore. See Reynolds and Falino, in *Silver of the Americas, 1600–2000: American Silver in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*, ed. Jeaninne Falino and Gerald W. R. Ward (Boston: MFA Publications, 2008), 359, no. 273.

3. Hereafter, to avoid confusion with her father, I will refer to Helen Porter Philbrick by her married name, even when discussing work she completed prior to her marriage.

4. Helen L. Philbrick, *Journeys with a Real Jack in the Pulpit* (n.p.: Xlibris, 2005), 59.

5. The primary source on Franklin Porter’s life and work is Helen Porter Philbrick, “Franklin Porter, Silversmith (1869–1935),” in *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 105, no. 3 (July 1969): 145–215. Porter’s papers and financial records, as well as a distinguished collection of his work, are at the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts, and are discussed in Martha Gandy Fales, *Silver at the Essex Institute* (Salem, Mass.: Essex Institute, 1983), 54–59, 61, 63n.29. See also Dorothy T. Rainwater, *Encyclopedia of American Silver Manufacturers*, 3rd ed. (West Chester, Penn.: Schiffer Publishing, Ltd., 1986), 149–50. In her autobiography, Philbrick notes that her father always called his customers “clients.” Philbrick, *Journeys*, 50.

6. According to Philbrick, during Porter’s “Newport Period,” he made “brass bowls and copper bowls and arty little bookends with copper and brass rivets. He had an extensive line of mahogany trays with metal handles and rims, also with rivets.” Philbrick, “Franklin Porter,” 149. The Yale University Art Gallery has a mahogany and copper dresser or vanity tray with alternating copper and brass rivets (inv. no. 2006.176.2).

7. Edward Sherman Dwyer took the Porter name, and flatware produced from April 1927 to May 1928 bears his mark, ESDP. Edward attended Boston University and later became an instructor at the New Haven Commercial High School in Connecticut. Because he was already an adult when he started in Porter’s workshop, he did not spend as much time there as his sister. He returned to work with his adoptive father for only one year after finishing college. For more on Edward Dwyer Porter, see Philbrick “Franklin Porter,” 152, 178–79; Philbrick, *Journeys*, 20, 57; and Rainwater, *Encyclopedia*, 150.

8. According to Reynolds and Falino, Porter’s work as a machinist influenced his silverwork. They write, “Given his proficiency as a machinist, he was preoccupied with the crafting of his wares, taking extra care with their mechanical functioning. . . . Porter typically relied on his knowledge of practical mechanics to solve design issues, sometimes favoring technical solutions over generally accepted silversmithing methods.” See Reynolds and Falino, *Silver of the Americas*, 360–61.

9. Philbrick, “Franklin Porter,” 153.

10. *Ibid.*, 154.

11. *Ibid.*, 156.

12. *Ibid.*, 157, 193.

13. *Ibid.*, 193.
14. Philbrick, *Journeys*, 50.
15. Philbrick, *Journeys*, 57–59.
16. Quoted in Philbrick, “Franklin Porter,” 174. Unfortunately, as Philbrick recalled in an interview with the author on May 1, 2006, Porter’s tools were stolen on the day of his funeral. Interview notes in the curatorial files, Department of American Decorative Arts, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn.
17. Helen Porter Philbrick, letter to the author, January 31, 2006, curatorial files, Department of American Decorative Arts, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn.
18. Philbrick, “Franklin Porter,” 150. It is uncertain whether or not the replica in silver was actually made. Philbrick stated that the project only got as far as the lead model. Philbrick, interview by the author, May 1, 2006, curatorial files, Department of American Decorative Arts, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn.
19. While Terry did believe that Vikings had once settled the shores of New England, he did not support the theory of the tower’s Norse origins. In 1917 Terry delivered a paper before the Newport Historical Society, in which he stated that the Old Stone Mill has “no connection whatever with the visit of the Norseman to our shores.” See Roderick Terry, “The First European Visitors to Narragansett Bay,” *Bulletin of the Newport Historical Society*, no. 22 (April 1917): 1–5.
20. Philbrick, “Franklin Porter,” 173–74. See also Philbrick, *Journeys*, 43–46.
21. Philbrick, “Franklin Porter,” 174.
22. *Ibid.*, 174–75; and Philbrick, *Journeys*, 46.
23. Philbrick, “Franklin Porter,” 175.
24. *Ibid.*, 171.
25. *Ibid.*, 171. For more on Charles G. and Ann Proctor Rice, see Edward Weeks, *Myopia: A Centennial Chronicle, 1875–1975* (Hamilton, Mass.: n.p., 1975).
26. Philbrick, “Franklin Porter,” 181. See also Fales, *Silver at the Essex Institute*, 59.
27. For example, the Evanston, Illinois, metalcrafters founded by Ernest Gerlach as the Cellini Shop in 1914, and succeeded by Cellini-Craft in 1934, introduced their “Argental” line of inexpensive, hand-wrought aluminum objects during the Depression, when the market for silver was diminishing; see Sharon S. Darling, *Chicago Metalsmiths: An Illustrated History* (Chicago: Chicago Historical Society, 1977). In 1933 Arthur Armour opened a workshop producing handwrought aluminum housewares in Grove City, Pennsylvania, which he operated until 1976. For more on the use of aluminum in the decorative arts, see Sarah C. Nichols, *Aluminum by Design* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Museum of Art, 2000).
28. Walter Rendell Storey, “New Metals in the Modern Room,” *New York Times Magazine* (February 2, 1936): 14.
29. Philbrick, “Franklin Porter,” 189–90.
30. Fales, *Silver at the Essex Institute*, 59.
31. Philbrick, “Franklin Porter,” 147.