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Clemens Friedell

While Gorham's Martelé line might have created a taste for hand-chased silver hollowware in America, very few small shops practiced chasing on a high level. The process is too labor-intensive and costly. Most Arts and Crafts silversmiths restricted the amount of ornament they applied to hollow forms. The exception was Clemens Friedell (1872-1963), a chaser of extraordinary skill.

Born Clemens Freidl in Louisiana, Friedell grew up in Vienna. He apprenticed to a silversmith there for seven years, learning the intricacies of the craft. His family moved back to the U.S. in 1892, but he was unable to find work as a smith, so he taught music for almost a decade. In 1901 he was hired by Gorham as a chaser for the Martelé line. In 1907, a financial panic caused demand for luxury goods to collapse, and Gorham laid off many workers, Friedell among them. By 1911, he had a shop in Pasadena and found a wealthy clientele open to extravagance.

Friedell tended to use traditional forms decorated with low-relief ornament, much like Martelé. His innovation was his subject matter. He looked to the local environment for imagery, and roses and orange groves offered two possibilities. There were also California poppies, pine cones, fuchsias, hibiscus, orchids and fruits galore. He had one assistant who raised and fabricated silver shapes; Friedell would then design and execute the chasing himself.

His most famous work, a 107-piece dinner service for Los Angeles beer magnate Eddie Maier (a birthday present for his mother, c. 1910), was decorated with about 10,000 chased orange blossoms. The set took Friedell and his assistant 7,500 hours to make—about a year's worth of labor—and required 150 pounds of silver. The centerpiece, nearly 2 feet tall, was festooned with oranges and the Maier monogram. In an almost surreal gesture, the edge of this stemmed bowl was shaped like rose petals.

Most of Friedell's early work was commissions, and he specialized in trophies and presentation silver. A unique line was metal portraits of horses belonging to well-heeled clients. The horse's head was chased in low relief out of silver, sometimes inside a horseshoe. The portrait was mounted on a shield form chased of copper, decorated with flowers and fruits and scrollwork, and the whole set on an oak plaque.