Marc Etienne Janety (c. 1750 – c. 1823) is known to readers of this journal for his mastery of the arsenic process by which he made platinum malleable, and thus useful to the artist-metalworker as well as to the instrument maker (1). Received into the Paris Guild in 1777, Janety practised as a silversmith for several years. But in 1788 he was described as having “busied himself for more than two years” with platinum which—except in pre-Columbian South America—had never been used in such a context. His contemporaries mention snuff boxes, watch chains and similar trinkets among his productions, and a coffeepot was shown by Lavoisier to the Academy in 1790 (2). So far, however, familiarity with Janety’s work in platinum has been based entirely on written evidence. The sugar bowl illustrated here is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and is, to our knowledge, the only example by him to have survived. One other, a coffeepot, was in existence as recently as 1933 (3), but disappeared during World War II.

The sugar bowl is 7 inches long and is fitted with a dark blue glass liner against which the white brilliance of the metal is particularly effective. It is signed and dated, along the base rim, PLATINA JANETY FECIT 1786, and thus establishes Janety’s control
of the new material by that year. In addition, it bears the French import mark for platinum introduced in 1926.

It has not been possible to trace the history of the bowl beyond the 1890s when it was in the collection of Baron Jérôme Pichon, the first of the modern connoisseurs and collectors of French silver. In 1900 it was lent by an unidentified owner to the International Exhibition in Paris, and lately it was owned by the late David David-Weill from whose collection it was sold in 1971.

Janety appears to have been the only French silversmith to substitute platinum for silver in the manufacture of objects for domestic use. The difficulty of working the material, and the ease and inexpense of producing the same articles in cast or stamped silver combined to prevent its general use in the decorative arts. The sugar bowl is thus of interest both as a document and as an example of the extraordinary quality of design and skill that could be achieved in platinum.

References
3. “Exhibition of Old French Gold and Silver Plate”, New York, Arnold Seligman Rey and Co, December 1933, No. 45. This is the same piece as shown in a line drawing in H. Nocq, Le poignón de Paris, II (1927), 353. It is conceivably the same shown by Lavoisier

The Melting of Iridium

A HISTORICAL NOTE

Recent developments in the application of iridium as an electrode in high-duty sparking plugs lend interest to a little-known paper published over ninety years ago entitled “The Fusion, Casting, Dephosphorising, and Plat-...