
COLLECTING BEER STEINS



An introduction to the hobby

*Published by
Stein Collectors International, Inc.
revised 2016*

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WHAT IS A BEER STEIN?

When American stein collectors travel to Germany, they often make the mistake of asking about “beer steins.” Unfortunately, although the word “stein” is taken from the German language, by itself it translates as **stone** in German and does *not* refer to a drinking vessel!

While produced in a number of different materials, steins have been made in Germany for more than 600 years in a hard, vitrified ceramic material called stoneware (German: *Steinzeug*). Beer steins made of this material have been referred to as *Bierkrug* or *Steinkrug* (beer or stone jug). The term we Americans know as “stein” stems from this definition.



Today, collectors have settled on a definition for a stein that includes a handle and either a hinged or a set-on lid. Some insist that the vessel be intended for drinking, which would eliminate what others have accepted as “serving steins” or “master steins.” Without the lid, the vessel is called a mug. With set-on lid but no handle, it is termed a Pokal. With neither lid nor handle, it is considered a beaker.

The stein seen here is a very typical Bavarian shape with decoration featuring the Munich Child, the ancient symbol of the city of Munich. The lid is a low relief of the cityscape, while the figural thumblift depicts the twin towers of the *Frauenkirche*, the Church of Our Lady in Munich.

Beer steins come in all sizes, shapes and materials, such as glass, pottery (earthenware), pewter, porcelain, stoneware, faience, etc. There are even rarer examples carved from wood, made from leather, ivory, ostrich eggs, and horns. Royalty occasionally had steins of pure gold or silver. An extraordinary variety of age, materials, geographic origin, manufacturers, style, shape and decoration make steins a particularly rich field for collectors.

LIDS, THUMBLIFTS AND LITHOPHANES

The lid at top right was cast in pewter with a relief scene of the city of Munich, and it includes a Bavarian lion as thumblift. The second lid has a stoneware insert within a ring of pewter.

The majority of stein lids are cast in pewter, and they come in a wide variety of shapes, including simple domes, relief scenes and conical shapes. In other instances steins were comprised of a pewter ring with a ceramic insert, often matching the design on the body. Sometimes this ceramic insert will show a complete three-dimensional figure.



Lithophanes may often be found in porcelain steins, especially regimentals, occupational, student steins and some characters. They are quite a surprise when you first see one. They rely on porcelain's property of translucence, and a detailed scene is formed by varying the thickness of the material. They are formed in a porcelain disk which has been molded with a relief scene. A craftsman then uses special tools to sharpen the details before the disk is added as the base of a stein.



The image at right is a lithophane in the base of a porcelain stein. This is the view the drinker will get after emptying the stein!

WHY DO STEINS HAVE LIDS?

Perhaps not the first question about steins but certainly a common and persistent one is, “Why do beer steins have lids?” For years we have been told that the lids were intended to counter the spread of the Bubonic Plague by flies, and that in the early 1500’s lids were required by “covered container laws,” widely adopted and enforced in German principalities. Sometimes the pewter guilds are held up as the driving force, since they would certainly have an interest in providing lids for all manner of drinking vessels.

Unfortunately, this theory is both illogical and unsupportable: fleas spread the plague, not flies; the plague had run its course in Germany well over 100 years prior to the supposed enactment of such laws; drinking vessels are often illustrated in 16th and 17th century paintings without lids in apparent violation of these “laws”; many other vessels used for eating and drinking apparently escaped these laws; and no documentation has been found of a single covered container law or guild law requiring lids – despite repeated efforts to find them. We might be tempted to shrug our shoulders and simply conclude that in the past 500 years the records have simply been lost, but then, much documentation is available relative to guild rules, and the *Rheinheitsgebot* (commonly known as the German Beer Purity Law), enacted in Bavaria in 1516, is quite well documented. Further, pewter was expensive, and although it was used for hinged lids in the 15th and 16th centuries, its use would have been limited to the upper classes for many years. (The English “Book of Rates” for 1545 established a customs value for pewter-covered stoneware vessels imported from Europe at exactly twice the value of those without covers.)

So why *do* steins have lids? At the time pewter lids began to appear, homes and beer gardens were dusty, dirty places, and flies and other insects were very bothersome. Farm animals often shared shelter with their owners, and straw-thatched roofs contributed to a general lack of cleanliness. There were no waste management systems, and water sources were often unfit for drinking. No wonder people got sick, and of course, illness was spread by coughing, sneezing or other unsanitary contact. Covering your drink simply made common sense. Lids

were also probably seen as a way to keep a drink at its original serving temperature while it was being enjoyed. And, as stoneware drinking vessels came into wider use, they evolved from strictly utilitarian forms to more artistic shapes and adornments, enhanced by pewter mounts. By the 16th century pewter lids had gained favor for utilitarian as well as aesthetic purposes, and had become a cultural tradition in Germany.

This revisionist thinking is credited to the critical analysis and research performed by Stephen Smith and Ginger Gehres.

Now let us explore some major stein categories.

EARLY STONEWARE STEINS

An 18th century Westerwald blue and gray saltglazed stein with applied relief.

Stoneware steins date from the late 15th century in Germany, and for the first three hundred years their production centers were primarily east-west across the center of Germany. Factories were of necessity located near suitable clay deposits and plentiful fuel (timber) supplies. The clay was thrown on a potter's wheel and kiln-fired at 1200 degrees Celsius using a saltglaze process. Salt combined with elements in the clay causing the clay to partially vitrify into a dense non-porous material similar to stone. In later years a colored glaze was also applied to the stein prior to firing to add artistic interest. Applied or incised animal or floral arrangements around the body of the stein were common. The pewter lids had a small shell-shaped or other thin thumbflift on the earliest steins, or a hollow-soldered-ball thumbflift on 18th century examples.



Large deposits of clay were found near the confluence of the Mosel and the Rhine rivers in the Westerwald region, along with a good supply of timber. Because of these factors, the greatest quantities of steins with the longest time-span of pro-

duction come from this region of Germany. These steins are generally found with blue, gray, and purple decoration under a clear saltglaze. The decoration is generally repeating. Touch-marks are often found on the lids of these steins and can be helpful in dating them. Many of the more ornate Westerwald steins also had a pewter foot ring to protect the base from chipping, thus adding to the complexity of the piece.



FAIENCE STEINS

An Austrian faience stein dated 1852 in the decoration. Very nice!

Faience, a tin-glazed earthenware with a bright white ground, originated in Faenza, Italy in the 15th century, spreading slowly into other European countries. Faience was Europe's answer to the extremely expensive Chinese porcelain wares imported to the continent as early as 800 A.D. Again, the factories were located near large

clay deposits. The clay was mixed with other minerals to produce a lighter and more porous material than stoneware. The body of the stein was formed on the potter's wheel and fired in a kiln. Next it was dipped into a milk-white liquid tin glaze to produce a smooth white surface similar to the porcelain it attempted to emulate. After drying, the stein body was painted with various colored glazes and fired a second time. The process was time consuming but the steins that survive speak to the worthiness of the effort. In Germany today, these steins are considered historic works of decorative art and are on display in many museums throughout that country. The painted designs include animals, architectural scenes, birds, coats of arms, figural scenes, floral decor, occupational themes, religious scenes, verses, etc. Because faience is a relatively soft and fragile material, these steins were typically encircled by a pewter foot ring and lip ring to protect against chipping. Such old steins are rarely seen without some imperfections or hair-line cracks. Collectors take this into consideration, given the material used in production.

GLASS STEINS

A green glass stein enameled with the scene of a knight. The matching glass inlay of the lid greatly enhances this stein.

Glass has been produced for thousands of years with examples dating back to the Egyptians, primarily in the form of beads for ornamentation. The Phoenicians expanded production to include drinking vessels. Glass steins in Europe, and particularly in Germany, date from the 15th century though larger production occurred in the 18th century. The plastic property of molten glass enabled a wide variety of shapes and decorative techniques. Glass steins from the 1700's and 1800's are generally mouthblown and wheelcut, and are often decorated by copperwheel engraving, and fit with pewter lids. Milk glass was introduced later and painted much in the style of faience steins. Enameled glass steins followed in the 1800's. Different mineral oxides were used to infuse the glass with colors of ruby red (gold was initially used to produce the color), cobalt blue, etc. By the mid-1800's wheel-cut overlay steins were laboriously produced. Different colors of glass were laid one over the other, with the engraver producing intricate geometric and floral designs when cutting through the different layers. Toward the end of the 1800's molten glass was blown into molds, which made glass steins more affordable.

Pressed glass, in which glass is pressed into a mold by a plunger or piston, was invented in the early 1800's. Pressed glass steins began to appear in mid-century.



PEWTER STEINS

An 18th century pewter occupational stein bears the tools of the carpenter's trade.



Pewter is an alloy containing primarily tin, and when combined with other metals (bismuth, antimony, copper, brass, and lead) can easily be worked and formed. Pewter steins generally date from the early 16th century although other types of pewter drinking vessels go back to the Bronze Age. Historically pewter has been expensive and with the arrival of earthenware in the 18th century, its popularity declined. A resurgence of pewter occurred during the period 1850 to 1900

when designs from bygone epochs were in demand. Most of the imitations of this period were of fine quality and workmanship and were quite expensive. Pewter is lauded for its simplicity. The form is all important. Pewter pieces are formed by casting and sheet spinning. Finishing is done by turning and various other hand works. Steins were decorated by engraving, etching, punching, stamping and "wriggle" work. Some designs are distinctive to the country of origin with the main identity being in handles, lids, bases and thumbflifts. Some pewter steins have touchmarks which refer to the maker, the alloy quality and the town or city of the manufacturer.

METTLACH STEINS

This half-liter Mettlach stein, model #1979, is part of that factory's "Mosaic" line.



Mettlach is a small town in Germany's Saarland. It is the home of one of Villeroy & Boch's factories, where stein production began circa 1840. V&B used coal-burning kilns which produced a more uniform

product than the wood-fired process. The Golden Era of V&B stein production began around 1880 and lasted until about 1910. The world expositions during that time catapulted the new V&B production technique of chromolith or “inlaid stoneware” to the heights of world awareness. When the factory was partially burned in 1921, documentation of the production techniques was destroyed and little is known except through theories about how chromolith (today commonly referred to as etched) was produced. Mettlach also produced hand-painted, mosaic, tapestry, print-under-glaze (PUG) and relief items, sometimes incorporating more than one technique. V&B used an extensive marking system which included the old tower (abbey) trademark, the year of production, form number, size number, etc. Following the overwhelming acceptance of the V&B chromolith steins, other German factories attempted to recreate similar etched steins, some using almost identical scenes to those used by V&B. However to the trained eye, the difference is clear. Since 1976 V&B has produced some contemporary steins. They are well marked and not intended to confuse the collector of antique steins. These production techniques are significantly different from the methods used during the Golden Era.

PORCELAIN STEINS

Porcelain steins were often decorated to celebrate birthdays, weddings or sports. In this case, the stein notes membership in a 4F gymnastic association, forerunner of the American Physical Education curricula.

Porcelain steins in Germany date from the early 1700's. Porcelain is a very hard, vitreous and translucent white material, fired at high temperatures of 1300-1500 degrees Celsius. The main ingredient is china clay (kaolin), mixed with suitable purified extender clays and fluxes. The early pieces from the Meissen factory are quite intricately painted and



usually finished with porcelain inlaid lids. In the late 19th century some manufacturers began using transfer decorations which, after firing, could be augmented with minimal hand painting. Many of these steins include lithophanes. The lithophane involves a difference in the porcelain thickness so that when held up to the light (looking through the inside of the stein), a scene is revealed. Lithophanes can be quite intricate and interesting to the collector.

GLAZE PAINTED RELIEF STEINS



A painted relief souvenir stein, showing the US Capitol Building. In addition to fitting into an Americana collection, at 1/8-liter this also qualifies as a miniature.

From circa 1880 to the present, vast quantities of relief pottery (earthenware) and painted stoneware steins were produced in Germany for use in that country and for export. Earthenware is pottery that has not been fired to the point of vitrification and is thus slightly porous and coarser than either stoneware or porcelain. The body has to be covered with a heavy glaze to make it impermeable to liquids and more amenable to decoration. The bodies of these steins are cast with relief scenes and then either painted or color-glazed. These are the steins commonly found today in antique shops or flea markets.

Certain categories of relief steins have become quite popular with collectors, such as those with scenes of sporting events. Painted or transfer-fired brewery steins, depending upon the particular brewery, are also currently popular. Some notable manufacturers include Diesinger (D.R.G.M.), Gerz, Hauber & Reuther (HR), Thewalt, and Marzi & Remy. A few collectors also search out examples designed by specific artists such as Heinrich Schlitt or Karl Beuler.

REGIMENTAL STEINS

This porcelain regimental stein displays a characteristic pewter finial. These steins are detailed recordings of history.

Germany became a major world power in the late 19th century. The German Constitution of 1871 reaffirmed that all able-bodied men were liable for military service. Due to financial constraints, however, less than half of those qualified actually served in the standing army. At that time some servicemen, just prior to the completion of their time in training, purchased a souvenir “in remembrance of my service time.” Often this was a stein made from porcelain, pottery, stoneware or glass decorated in a motif symbolizing the soldier’s branch of service and personalized with his

name, garrison town, military unit designation and his years of service. Each regimental stein tells a complete story and every facet of the stein is symbolic. The finial relates to the type of unit, with cannon depicting the artillery; a seated soldier, the infantry; and a horse and rider with a lance, the cavalry. The thumblift is also part of the story: A rampant lion depicts Bavaria or Hesse; an eagle, Prussia; and the griffin, Baden. The body of a regimental stein usually has a central scene and two or more smaller side scenes. Many steins have a roster, usually near the handle, listing the names of the reservists in the original owner’s unit. Most porcelain regimentals have lithophanes with domestic, farewell or royalty scenes. If a regimental stein has either a lithophane with a nude scene or a small bulge inside the curve of the handle, the stein is most probably a reproduction. If the pewter lid has the same patina inside and out and the body shows no indication of any enamel highlighting, the stein is possibly a reproduction.



OCCUPATIONAL STEINS

Even priests drink beer! This nice porcelain stein was originally owned by a parish priest in Auerbach, Germany.



Occupational steins date from the 1880's to about 1930. Generally these steins are porcelain and feature a wrap-around transfer scene depicting an individual working in his trade, or simply the tools of his trade. However, occupational steins can also be found made of stoneware (Villeroy & Boch produced two series), glass, pewter, etc. The lithophane in porcelain occupational steins generally reflect the original owner's trade, a drinking scene or royalty. The availability

of steins relating to a particular occupation is relative to the number of individuals employed in that occupation. For instance, farmer and baker steins are more common while shepherd and goldsmith steins are less available.

CHARACTER STEINS

A ¼-liter character stein of King Gambrinus manufactured by the firm of Adolf Diesinger. This stein fits nicely in a Diesinger collection or a character collection, and could easily be squeezed into a collection of miniatures.



The most commonly accepted definition of a character stein is one which is in the shape of the thing it represents. In other words, the lid and the body combine to form a shape of a person or thing, either historic or symbolic. Some animals, vegetables and even everyday objects may be given human charac-

teristics. Although character steins can be dated much earlier, full-scale production by various factories began circa 1870. Most of these steins were made of porcelain, pottery, stoneware or pewter. They are both decorative and utilitarian and often represent the political mood, humor or interests of the times. Character steins are currently being manufactured and in some instances the original molds are being utilized. Some of these steins are marked with country of origin. If they are not marked, determining age is difficult to say the least. Education as well as assistance from experienced character stein collectors is recommended.

CONTEMPORARY STEINS (Post World War II)

The 1997 Oktoberfest stein shows a happy king whose beer may have gone to his head! It has a nice relief pewter lid displaying the Munich Child.



After the devastation of World War II, the German beer stein industry was forced to regroup. There was little demand for steins except on the home market and the pieces produced were functional and inexpensive. By the 1970's the stein market evolved as collectors recognized and appreciated steins for their artistic qualities. The German stein industry responded by producing high-quality steins in the tradition of earlier generations. Several of the older German factories produced limited editions and successfully experimented with materials, decorating techniques and lids. Limited edition steins soon became the fastest growing part of a revitalized industry. In the 1990's stein production began to follow the same global trends as other industries. In some cases German firms outsourced manufacturing to Asia; in other cases entirely new firms entered the market (e.g., Ceramarte in Brazil). These steins will be the antiques of the next century!

STEIN COLLECTORS INTERNATIONAL, INC.

Stein Collectors International, Inc. (SCI) was founded in 1965 as a member-owned and operated non-profit organization dedicated to the study and understanding of the art, culture and manufacture of beer steins, drinking vessels and related items from antiquity to modern times. Worldwide membership is over 1,000, with the majority of the members living in the United States. Membership in regional chapters is available throughout the U.S.A. and Germany.

Our quarterly publication, *Prosit*, includes well-illustrated articles in full color which have been researched and authored by our collector/members. The cover of the 48-page issue from June 2011 is seen here. Major articles in this issue addressed the steins produced by Dümmler & Breiden, porcelain steins produced by the firm of August Saeltzer, and the 20th installment of “Steins From the Road”, a pictorial series notable for its variety and scope and featuring steins from members’ collections.



What does *Prosit* mean, anyway, and why was this title chosen for a publication about beer steins? The German word *Prosit!* (or *Prost!*) is the equivalent of the English *Cheers!*, the French *A votre santé*, the Gaelic *Sláinte*, the Polish *Na zdrowie*, the Hebrew *L'chaim*, the Span-

ish *Salud*, or the Scandinavian *Skoal*. Whether used as a drinking toast or a salutation, it expresses friendship and good cheer, and in that regard, it hearkens back to the origins of SCI, formed by collectors who enjoyed good times and friendship in each other's company.

Actually, the German language does have another term which expresses the same sentiment: *der Gemütlichkeit*, the original name of our publication. But after having to pronounce that term and explain it, let alone spell it, it was decided that the term *Prosit* offered some advantages, and the name was changed in 1969.

Local chapters are the backbone of SCI, providing a means for collectors to get together several times a year to enjoy our favorite hobby. Meetings are planned and organized by the chapter and its members, and held either in a restaurant or in a member's home. While catering to the interests and passions common to all collectors, the meetings are also social occasions to gather with friends, enjoy good food and drink, and to buy, sell, trade or simply examine fine steins, and spouses are an essential element. Often there will be a speaker on a stein-related topic. Members are invited to bring steins to sell, or simply to discuss with other members. Each chapter establishes its own dues structure, publishes a chapter newsletter, and has a set meeting fee to cover the cost of food and drink.

Each year since 1967, SCI has hosted an annual three-day convention. Held throughout the USA as well as in Germany, conventions consist of four to six lectures, workshops, stein sales room, members' stein auction, and usually a large commercial stein auction. Conventions also provide the once-a-year opportunity to convene the Board of Trustees, report to the membership, conduct elections of officers, and recognize members' contributions. Chapters volunteer as hosts and are responsible for planning the convention events and program.

SCI has also established its own Research Library and Archives. The library has an excellent selection of books, articles and stein lecture video tapes and DVD's available for research by members.

This booklet has been published to raise awareness of and to promote the hobby of stein collecting. You can read informative articles, learn about convention plans or a local chapter in your area, or participate in SteinTalk, an active forum for the stein collecting community, by visiting our web site:

<http://www.stein-collectors.org>.



Visit our web site to read articles about steins, research marks, manufacturers or artists and designers, or ask questions in SteinTalk, our online forum about steins. And, of course, if you want to join the world's largest community of stein collectors, you can do that at our web site also. Take a look today...

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We thank SCI Master Steinologist Ron Heiligenstein whose initial idea launched this "introduction to the hobby". Our sincere appreciation is extended to the following SCI members whose assistance made the idea into a reality:

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