

~Mettlach Beer Steins: An Introduction~

by Walt Vogdes



This article provides an introduction to beer steins which were produced by Mettlach in their "golden age" of stein production between 1885 and 1910. Mettlach is easily the best known name among manufacturers of old beer steins, and to collectors the name is synonymous with quality and value. To be accurate, Mettlach is but one of the multiple factories of the company of Villeroy & Boch (V&B), its name being taken from the village where it is located. But the name is a very useful one, since the great majority of steins produced by Villeroy & Boch and sought by today's collectors were produced in this factory. Moreover, the trademarks employed on the base of their wares prominently feature the name Mettlach.

Located on the Saar River in western Germany, close to borders with Luxembourg and France, the Mettlach factory is housed on the grounds of a former Benedictine Abbey dating to the 10th century. The factory was founded on this site in 1809 by Johann Franz Boch-Buschmann, and the company of Villeroy & Boch resulted from a merger with Nicolas Villeroy in 1836.

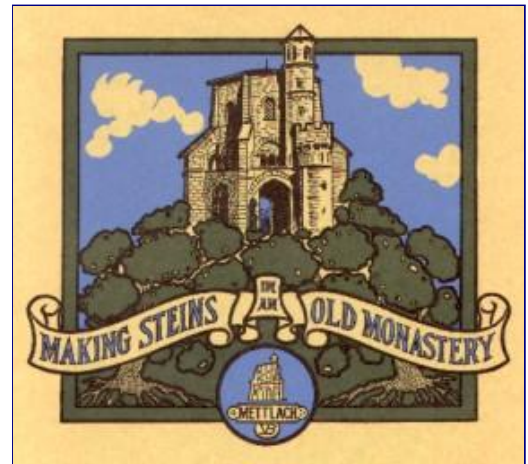
Each of several V&B factories designed (and trademarked) their own wares, and while other factories admittedly produced some high quality and appealing steins, this article will deal exclusively with those manufactured at Mettlach. Further, while Mettlach produced plaques, pokals, beakers, punch bowls, pitchers, tobacco jars, vases, dinnerware, ash trays, beer taps, candlesticks, bottles — the variety seems endless — this article will stick with beer steins.

The Attraction for Collectors

Mettlach steins have a number of characteristics which make them an enduring collectible:

- they are well-marked and easily identified
- good reference books are available
- there are many related pairs and sets
- designs are original and creative
- broad variety allows for every taste
- excellent quality control was maintained
- there is a ready market

No one knows how many steins were produced by Mettlach, but we do know that at the height of production Mettlach's factory workers alone numbered over 1250. Allowing for different sizes and design variations, Kirsner (*The Mettlach Book*) lists over 1500 different steins! He speculates that *average* production could have exceeded 2000 examples, noting that the most common items certainly had far more, while some had far less.



This is the cover of a booklet authored by E. R. Thieler in 1909, on the occasion of Mettlach's centenary as a pottery. It was reprinted in 1971 by Stein Collectors International, Inc.

While we might be tempted to speculate that the majority of this production remains in Germany, this is a very shaky conclusion. In addition to normal breakage over time, huge quantities of these examples of German culture were intentionally destroyed by conquering forces after each of the two World Wars. Mettlach wares became well known in the US following exhibitions in Philadelphia (1876) and Chicago (1893), and US collections provided a safe haven during the war years. As a result, a significant portion of the existing Mettlach pieces are in the US.

More important to today's collector than the original production quantities is the quantity which remains intact. Although in a few cases only one or two examples are known, the majority of items are more common, with somewhere between 100 and 500 examples being seen on the American market.

Types of Steins

The primary "lines" of steins produced by Mettlach are briefly described in the following sections. While reference is made to production techniques, it must be pointed out that Mettlach used many different techniques which were refined over time, and likely altered these techniques in producing specific items. Much research has been done to try to understand how Mettlach produced these items, and each of the theories is able to produce evidence to support it.

While the various categories of Mettlach steins and their markings are discussed below, it should be noted that the *stein type* is the primary characteristic by which all steins are known. Thus collectors refer to early wares, tree-trunk, relief, etched, cameo, mosaic, PUG, etched and PUG, etched and relief, character, faience, Rookwood, Delft, etc. Note that these terms refer to the primary area of *decoration* on the stein, including the side decorations, but ignoring any framework surrounding the decoration as well as the rim and base ornamentation. While most of these terms retain their normal meaning, it must be

understood that "cameo," "mosaic," "faience," "Rookwood," "Delft" and similar terms refer to visual style, and not to manufacturing process or material.

"Tree-Trunk" Relief

The early (pre-1880) stein production by Mettlach was generally limited to a relief "tree trunk" style, where the body was molded with the appearance of a tree trunk, and leaves and vines were added in relief. These steins, also called "early wares", were frequently highlighted with shiny platinum. Comprising a very small fraction of the total stein production of Mettlach, these early pieces are largely ignored by today's collectors. The construction of a railroad along the Saar River, together with new production techniques and an emphasis on the best artistic standards of the past, allowed Mettlach to introduce several new lines in the years following 1880. These wares, featuring extensive use of color, were termed "frankly unrivaled" at the 1885 World's Fair in Antwerp, bringing Mettlach worldwide renown and stimulating vigorous production.



Roy D Selms provided a [Featured Stein article for March 2013](#) which featured the stein shown at right, and discussed this stein and the early Mettlach marks.

"Etched" or Chromolith (colored stone)

Each of these terms refers to a specific manufacturing process. Because the items produced by each process are largely similar, the terms are sometimes used interchangeably—and incorrectly. Both involve creating a molded design which establishes areas of different color. Areas within the design are separated by outlines in a contrasting color. Additional definition is added the same way. See the gnome's cap in the adjacent photo for a clear example. Although there are no surviving records of how either of these processes was performed, forensic analysis of broken pieces has provided some insights. In the chromolith process, which was used prior to 1880, the color of these lines is created by filling them with colored clay slip, resulting in a completely smooth surface. The chromolith process was no longer used post 1880, as it required special equipment and proved too labor intensive and costly for mass production. Chromolith form numbers are restricted to the 800s, and *there are no chromolith steins*. The successor to the chromolith wares is the "etched" line.

The "etched" wares are very similar in appearance to chromolith items, but employ a significantly different technique, principally with regard to the outlines—on the etched ware these lines were made by rubbing a black glaze into the "incised" lines. As a result, the lines are easily felt with a finger nail.

The large background areas of many "etched" pieces show shading which could not be achieved with a uniform area of clay slip. This was created by using some form of atomizer to add color shading within the mold before adding the clay slip. This artistic embellishment makes the backgrounds more natural. At the same time, it also introduced some level of variation from piece to piece which should be accepted as intentional. Gary Kirsner discusses these topics in greater detail in *The Mettlach Book*.

This is a good place to point out that while the terms "incised" and "etched" reflect the *appearance* of these wares, they are incorrect as regards their *manufacture*.

The stein shown to the right (form 2134) is a favorite among fans of artist/ designer Heinrich Schlitt. It is commonly referred to as the "gnome in a nest". The inlaid lid shows a rooster at sunrise.

The most common and most popular themes for etched steins include scenic illustration -- tavern scenes, castles, the Munich Child, medieval scenes, etc. However, a number of steins were made with abstract designs, and these are generally known by another name. "Art Nouveau" steins feature the flowing lines and geometric patterns of that style, although they are still executed with in the etched technique. "Mosaic" steins involve a repeating pattern comprised of many small sections of colored clay. While bearing many similarities to etched steins, they evidence some of the characteristics of relief, and are generally more complex in their style.



Relief

At about this same time Mettlach began to introduce relief steins using either applied or molded relief decoration. The decoration was typically light in color against a darker color on the body, frequently blue or terra cotta (shown to the right with a greenish-gray background). The relief coloration was set by the color of the clay. Applied relief designs were formed using a flat mold, then applied on top of the undecorated body before firing. Molded relief pieces were formed by pressing the white

clay into recesses in the form before the colored clay was added for the body. These steins are similar in appearance to Wedgwood Jasperware, although of higher quality and finer detail. A later innovation involved the use of full color relief decoration, but the production of relief steins never approached the volume of etched steins.



Cameo and Phanolith



Cameo and phanolith items have a similar initial appearance to relief items, but use higher quality materials for the relief design to create a translucent effect similar to shell cameos, and to provide a finer degree of detail. Whereas relief steins are commonly glazed, the cameo and phanolith decorations are unglazed, or bisque. Cameo items most often used a sea-green background, and less commonly a dark blue color. The backgrounds were unglazed as well. Cameo steins were given form numbers in the 2000's and 3000's. The cameo stein at left is form 2949.

It's important to realize that cameo and phanolith processes were distinctly different. The term "phanolith" denotes plaques, vases and jardinières which were made from soft-paste porcelain and exhibited translucency in both the bodies and decorations. There were no phanolith steins made and all phanolith items were numbered in the 7,000's. The figure shown here is a very finely done phanolith plaque of modern manufacture.



Because the detail of these items is essential to understanding how they differ from standard relief pieces, you may click anywhere on the image to see a larger version.

Print Under Glaze (PUG) Steins

In 1886 Mettlach initiated use of a transfer technique for decorating a less-costly line of products based upon a process employed by the English. This involved the use of lithographed designs on metal plates, which then transferred the full-color design to a paper "transfer". The stein body was glazed and fired, then the transfer applied, followed by another clear glaze and final firing. There are also a number of Mettlach PUG steins on which the transfer consisted of only an outline of the design, and the colors were handpainted. Unlike other Mettlach lines, PUG decorations are flat on the body and smooth to the touch, and the steins have a glossy glaze finish. Because they required significantly less handwork, the simple half-liter PUG bodies originally cost about one third as much as the half-liter etched bodies, although with the addition of a pewter lid they were about half as costly. Interestingly, the pewter lid for a simple half-liter PUG cost more than the body alone!

The use of transfer decoration meant that a unique mold was no longer required. A large variety of decorations were applied to the same body form number. Forms 1526 and 1909, in both $\frac{1}{2}$ -liter and one liter sizes, were the most commonly used, although there were many others. In some cases the same design was used on more than one body. Whereas etched and other types of steins are generally known by the form number, PUG steins are known by the combination of decoration number followed by form. As an example, the $\frac{1}{2}$ -liter PUG stein illustrated here, decoration number 591 on body form 1526, is commonly referred to as "591(1526)".



Specialty types

At various times Mettlach produced steins which had the same decorative style as other manufacturers or periods, including Delft designs, faience and Rookwood. The Mettlach "Rookwood" steins were similar in general appearance to standard-glaze portrait items produced at the Rookwood factory in Cincinnati, OH. The outline of the decoration for these items was put on the body using a printed transfer, and the decoration was finished by hand. The Mettlach Rookwood steins, all of which are portraits, were made with a fancy "carved" pewter lid, many with a large ball thumblift, reminiscent of lids from an earlier period. Many of the faience and Delft steins also came with these lids, and some of the faience steins included a pewter footing.

The BAVARIA Line

This line of transfer-decorated steins, bearing the incised word BAVARIA as part of the trademark, appeared in the catalogue of 1906. These steins were simpler in their body shapes and overall decorative techniques, making them compliant with emerging trends of the *Jugendstil* period, while simultaneously making them less expensive.

Special Orders

Mettlach produced many steins to special order, for both domestic purposes and for export. In fact, many steins bearing German phrases or verses can also be found in an English-language version. While we might suppose that it would be prohibitively costly, the existence of a sizable number of such pieces indicates that it was not. Well-known examples of special orders include an etched stein for St. Augustine, Florida, which includes a figural alligator handle, three steins produced for Cornell University, and the Quilmes Brewery (Argentina) stein.

Handpainted Steins

True handpainted designs were used for many custom decorated steins, and they frequently carry silver presentation lids. While some of these may have been decorated in the factory, more commonly they were commissioned to local artists who worked on either flat or relief matte-finish bodies especially purchased for this purpose. Although there are a wide variety of hand-painted themes, the most common examples are probably steins decorated with student crests or *wappen*. These steins are frequently marked on the base or on the rear of the body to identify the decorative firm.



Sizes

While the vast majority were 1/2 or 1 liter in capacity, Mettlach produced steins ranging in size from 0.05 liter (very few, PUG decorated) to 7.0 liters (only one, etched #1161). This etched giant (left), standing 21" tall and weighing about 11 pounds -- empty -- is signed "C. Warth". The design features two ladies in Victorian costume holding foaming steins of beer, with an Imperial German Eagle above a very typical incised German verse:

*Gerstensaft mit Hopfen
credenzt von schöner Hand
sind jedem Wundertropfen
im weiten deutschen Land.*

*Juice with hops,
Served by a beautiful hand,
Are everyone's wonder drops,
In all of Germany's land.*

With figural stoneware inlaid lid this stein cost 40 DM in 1885, making it the most expensive stein offered by Mettlach. The body without lid cost 30 DM, for which sum one could purchase 7 or 8 etched steins with inlaid lids.

Lids

Most collectors today feel that without a lid, a stein is incomplete. This is especially true for Mettlach, since a very large number of the steins had stoneware inserts (inlays) in a pewter ring designed to match or complement the body. While Mettlach steins could originally be ordered without lids, those steins were in the clear minority.

The various types of lids originally accompanying Mettlach steins include figural (three-dimensional), etched inlay, PUG inlay, fancy pewter, simple domed or low-relief pewter (the most common lids on PUG steins) and presentation lids (usually silver or silver-plated and probably added to a specially ordered lidless piece). Etched steins bore either etched inlaid lids, figural lids or pewter lids. The "Occupational series" provides an excellent example of etched lids which complement the themes on the

bodies of the steins. PUG steins were made with either PUG inlays or pewter lids. While pewter lids were more expensive and more prized than many of the stoneware inlays during the height of Mettlach production, that appeal has been reversed for modern collectors.

Mettlach Artists

Mettlach employed a large number of artist/designers, among them some of the most prominent of their time. Most prolific among them were Heinrich Schlitt, Otto Hupp, Fritz Quidenus, Christian Warth, Johann Baptist Stahl, and M. Hein. Other notable artists who designed steins for Mettlach include Ludwig Hohlwein, Franz Ringer and Richard Riemerschmid. A large number of steins, although still the minority, carry the name or initials of these artists as "signature". Many unsigned steins can still be attributed to the artist who conceived of their design. The works of Heinrich Schlitt, a very famous Munich artist who designed murals in many public facilities, is a favorite of Mettlach collectors. Many of his works feature fun-loving gnomes or animals engaged in human pastimes. The steins designed by Ringer, Hohlwein, Hupp and Riemerschmid are also highly coveted by collectors for their artistic execution.

Recognizing Mettlach Steins

While many Mettlach collectors can spot a Mettlach stein across a room without having to examine it, the easiest way to identify Mettlach wares is by the trademarks which appear on the bottom of the vast majority of the steins. (For illustrations of Mettlach marks, see the article in the Library entitled "**Mettlach Marks: The Basics**".) Most Mettlach steins produced between 1885 and 1910 bear one or both of two trademarks: the incised abbey tower (sometimes incorrectly called "the castle mark") and/or some variant of the stamped Mercury mark. The tower mark is actually two separate marks -- an incised representation of the old abbey tower above a banner carrying the name Mettlach and the monogram V&B. The Mercury mark, usually stamped in green but known in blue, brown and black as well, shows Mercury, god of commerce, over a straight center panel with the words "Villeroy & Boch" and a semi-circular band identifying the Mettlach factory. (The variations of this mark serve as a dating system, but that goes beyond the scope and purpose of this article.)

In addition to a trademark, several other markings typically appear on the base of Mettlach steins, the most important being a three- or four-digit incised form number, and in the case of the PUG, Delft and Rookwood steins, a stamped decoration number. Other marks include a Roman numeral indicating the size, a two-digit number indicating the year, and various quality-control marks. Steins manufactured for export may also be marked "Made in Germany", or even Reg. U.S. Pat. Off.

Some Mettlach steins are found without trademarks, but in many cases the maker can still be confidently identified as Mettlach. If the incised mold number or the stamped or painted decoration number is present it may be used to look up the piece in a Mettlach reference book. If the mold number cannot be found, or if it is partially obliterated, the digits should be compared with the distinctive appearance of known examples. Other typical marks -- the size number, the year, the quality control number -- are useful to imply Mettlach. The inside should show a characteristic bright white glaze, similar in appearance to porcelain. Above all, the decoration appearing on the stein should be exceptionally clear and clean, and the stein should show overall excellence in design and quality of production.

Summary

Mettlach, one of several factories of the Villeroy & Boch ceramics company, was the most prodigious of all stein manufacturers between 1885 and 1910, sometimes called "the golden age of beer steins". Their wares are readily identifiable by quality, style and artistry, as well as by very thorough base marking. Steins were produced in a variety of different lines, including the following:

"early wares" - applied *relief*, frequently tree-trunk motif, used platinum highlights

etched - full color, normally matte finish, detailed designs where the *design is flat* but detail and color separation is provided by *incised black lines which can be felt by fingertip*

relief - the primary design is presented in *relief* in one color against a contrasting body color, or later, a full color relief design

cameo - similar to relief, but the decoration is an unglazed, translucent porcelain- like material against a sea-green or dark blue background (form numbers in the 2000's)

PUG - the design, made from a printed transfer under the glaze, is smooth to the touch and has a shiny finish, the design number should be stamped on the bottom of the stein along with the incised mold number (the most common mold numbers are 1526 and 1909)

The name Mettlach would not be nearly so well known were it not for the artistic merit and the consistently high quality of their ware. It is not a coincidence that the manufacturer with the best designs and the best production techniques was also the most prolific producer of beer steins. The large volumes produced by Mettlach, the variety of decorative themes and techniques, the number and quality of the artists they employed, the willingness to experiment and their continual innovation -- both artistic and technical -- give ample warning: while we can analyze and theorize to great lengths, Mettlach broke more rules than they followed, and new examples continue to surface.

References

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