

~ The Gooseman of Nuremberg ~

by Kurt Sommerich, SCI Master Steinologist (dec.)



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There are probably few collectors of beer steins who have not heard of the world-famous *Gänsemännchen* Fountain in Nuremberg. The *Gänsemännchen* or "Little Goose-Man", is a small, but life-like bronze sculpture of a peasant who is holding a goose under each arm. Out of the beaks of the geese spew jets of water into the basin of the fountain. Also, on the upper part and on either side of the base there is a water-spouting fish.

The "Little Goose-Man" appears on the body of several beer steins, e.g., Mettlach no. 2276, ¼- and ½-liter. In pewter he stands on many thumblifts and sometimes serves as a finial decor on the top of beer drinking vessels.

Here is a short history of this "Goose-Man":

Dramatis Personae:

1. Peter Vischer the Elder (1460-1529) and his son, Peter Vischer the Younger (1487-1528) of Nuremberg, bronze sculptors par excellence (*Erzgiesser*). They created the world-famous Tomb of Sebald, the *Sebaldusgrab*, in Nuremberg's Sebaldus Church. St. Sebald was Nuremberg's Patron Saint. One of the Vischer's students in the workshop was an artist named Pankraz Labenwolf.
2. Albrecht Dürer of Nuremberg (1471-1528), Germany's most beloved painter and incomparable master of other pictorial art media as well. This Renaissance genius drew sketches of a planned fountain, featuring the "Little Goose-Man" as early as 1500.
3. Hans Peisser of Nuremberg, a wood carver of renown of the early 16th century. The City Museum (*Fembohaus*) of Nuremberg houses the wooden figure of the "Little Goose-Man," which he carved from Dürer's sketches. It became the model for Labenwolf's bronze sculpture.



In the absence of clear documentation (alas!) art historians are nevertheless unanimous in ascribing the *Gänsemännchen* Fountain to Labenwolf. He created the fountain from about 1550 to 1560. Thus Dürer's drawings of Frankonian peasants and specifically of the "Goose-Man," demonstrated a step-by-step evolution which culminated in the creation of this fountain. The location of the fountain was on the Goosemarket (*Gänsemarkt*), which later on became the Fruit Market (*Obstmarkt*). When World War II broke out, the fountain was moved to its present location in the Court of the New City Hall, Hauptmarkt 18.

The flesh and blood "Goose-Man" came from the so-called Garlic Country (*Knoblauchland*) in the immediate vicinity of Nuremberg. It can easily be guessed what the farmers grew there.

He was reputed to be a drunkard. After he sold his geese, he spent his money on wine and returned home empty-handed, albeit full in other respects. No doubt, this droll peasant was a unique specimen, a well-known "character" of his day.

There is a bit of folklore to the effect that on one of his trips to the Goose-market this peasant was so thirsty that he had to quench his urge by drinking water from the beaks of his geese. Hence, to this day Nurembergers refer to water as Goose-Wine (*Gänsewein*). The writer of this article has a theory that this is another case of setting the sun to match the watch: It is more likely that this expression originated after the fountain was completed. When the good old Nurembergers watched the two geese spouting merrily away, they probably had an inspiration and invented the *Gänsewein* reference.

All good things are copied. This also applies to the "Little Goose-Man Fountain". One copy stands in Bad Böll in Württemberg, and another in the courtyard of Brannenberg on the Inn. Still other replicas are located in Weimar, Lucerne (Switzerland), and even more places begging to be discovered by *Gänsemännchen* detectives. One copy even stood in Castle Hohenschwangau, from whence it was stolen in 1966.

An astute reader in Russia informed us that another replica of the statue can be found in Meiningen (Thuringia, Germany).

--Editor, May 2012

Here is a footnote to the Weimar "Goose-Man": When the German poet, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe visited Nuremberg in 1797 he fell in love with the "Goose-Man", which he called *Entemännchen* ("Little Duck-Man"). He expressed a strong desire to have a replica in his own domain. When the burgers of Weimar decided in 1858 to build a beautiful fountain, they remembered Goethe's wish - 27 years after his death.

But let the whole world know that there is only one true original: The *Gänsemännchen Brunnen* in Nuremberg!

About the author:

Kurt Sommerich was an early member of SCI, co-founder of Die Lustigen Steinjäger von Wisconsin, a Master Steinologist, recipient of the *Prosit* Editor's Award for his frequent contribution, chairman of the SCI convention held in Milwaukee in 1968 and co-chairman of the Milwaukee convention in 1977. Kurt came to the United States in 1938, escaping Nazi persecution. All of his life he was especially fond of his home town of Nuremberg, even though when he left it was not under the best of circumstances. An exceptional author and speaker, his knowledge of German culture, history and folklore was enormous, and he was eager to share it with anyone who expressed an interest. Had he not been so sharing and generous of his time, it is likely that many of the terms, phrases, symbols and history which he unlocked for us would have otherwise remained a mystery. We are grateful for this article, among his many others.

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