

~ Your Stein: Old or New? ~



This is a composite of two earlier articles authored by SCI Master Steinologists Liselotte Lopez and Les Paul, corrections regarding import laws by John McGregor, with editing, photos and photo captions by Walt Vogdes

People who have acquired a stein or two through inheritance or as a gift often assume that it is easy to determine the value and age of a stein by simply inspecting it. If a stein is well made and attractive, they figure, it is automatically old and, therefore, valuable. Those with less craftsmanship are presumed to be of recent vintage and worth far less. Others suspect the stein's age can be determined by signs of wear (which can easily be faked), not realizing that many old steins were never used for drinking, and may consequently appear almost new.

Contrary to these common assumptions, steins can be real puzzles, and numerous pitfalls await those who take anything for granted in the beer stein hobby.

Beer steins are a favored gift in Germany, frequently being inscribed with the owner's name and the date of a special occasion on the pewter lid or rim. Reliance on these dates, however, is very uncertain. Old lids are easily - and frequently - attached to steins which lack a lid, and anyone who wants to misrepresent the age of a stein can easily have a date inscribed in the pewter. These dates should only be used to corroborate the age of a stein, if the other traits are consistent.

A second very common error is to conclude that a four-digit number on the base or the side of the stein beginning with "17", "18" or "19" is a date. On certain very early steins and on some which were custom decorated for a specific event like a wedding or birthday the date may appear as an integral part of the design. But a number behind the handle or impressed in the base is almost certainly a form or mold number assigned by the manufacturer, and it has nothing to do with the date the piece was produced.

We are often faced with conflicting generalizations regarding the approximate age of a stein. Antique and collectible dealers (and sellers on eBay!) confuse the issue when they refer to steins made 30 or 40 years ago as "old". The problem created is in deciding what to call a stein which is 100 years old. Or 200 or 300 years old. In this article we will use terminology which not only acknowledges the full period of stein production, but which has come into common use by the large body of stein collectors.

early	from the 16th through mid-19th century
old	from mid-19th to early 20th century
contemporary	post-World War II

These basics can be supplemented by the terms **antique** (covering both early and old), **Jugendstil** (referring to the "Art Nouveau" period from 1900 to about 1920), **Third Reich** or sometimes simply **military** (used for steins with patriotic military themes of World War II) and **modern** (imprecise, but clearly implying very recent vintage).

Producing fine steins was not the exclusive domain of old stein makers. Today's firms, with modern technology and improved tools and materials, can and do produce beautiful steins. And some of the old stein makers who routinely turned out fine specimens and occasional masterpieces were simultaneously producing junk for the tourist trade. Even Villeroy & Boch, makers of the famous Mettlachs, made steins of

varying quality and workmanship, from superior to quite ordinary.

Questions about age, value, type and maker have puzzled collectors ever since steins became collectibles. Much factual information, especially factory records, was lost in the devastation of two world wars. The American collector has been further hampered by a lack of reference works in English. This situation has improved markedly in recent years. In addition to the many articles which have appeared in *Prosit*, new books have been published on character steins, Regimental steins, the steins of the Diesinger and Hauber & Reuther factories and other areas of interest. Interested collectors should see *A Stein Collector's Bibliography* in the Library of this site. Even so, knowledge of Mettlach wares is still far advanced over other factories. Libraries do, of course, offer many books which can make the collector better informed about the basics of ceramics and glass.

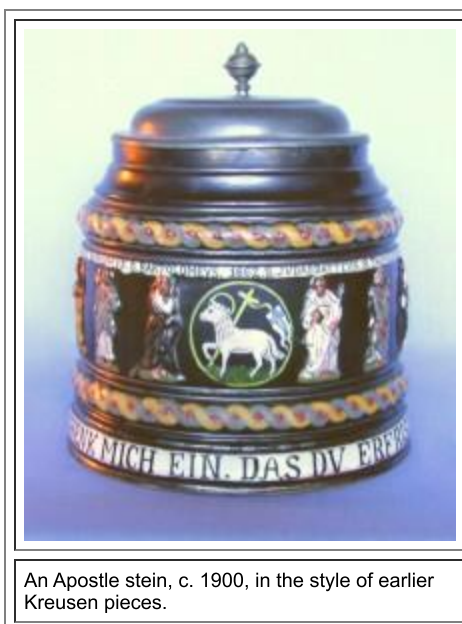
For the serious collector, one of the best ways to get information is to join Stein Collectors International. There are also local stein collector clubs which offer members a chance to see and hold antique steins, by far the best way to learn about them.

Most beer steins come from Germany, where they were made at least as early as the 15th century. Outstanding pottery centers were Cologne, Siegburg and Frechen in the Rhineland, and Kreussen in Bavaria. Many small, unimportant peasant potteries came and went, their wares, names and locations long ago forgotten. Today's collector is not likely to come across a stein that is 300 years old. But he can expect to find steins made in imitation of those early products, in accordance with the decorative tastes of the *Historismus* period in the late 19th century.

Around 1850 stein production experienced a tremendous upswing, and untold thousands of beer steins of every imaginable kind were produced in an area of the Westerwald called *Kannenbäckerland* (or jug baker's land), which has a history of pottery making that stretches back hundreds of years. World War I forced many stein makers to limit their output - the shortage of raw materials and labor eventually stopped production. When stein making resumed after 1918, it never regained the former level. Fine steins were no longer items of daily use.

During the 60 year "heyday" numerous workshops and factories were founded or expanded. Some were successful and are still in business; other lasted but a few years. Marking their products with a firm name was not important to 19th-century manufacturers, and many steins are found without any identification of who made them. Some manufacturers marked only their top quality steins with their name. Ordinary steins, made in large quantities for daily use, frequently did not warrant the extra time and effort it took to impress or stamp the name. Even more frustrating to collectors is the fact that even some well-marked steins remain a mystery. It was not until recent years that Schierholz was identified as the maker of the beautiful "Musterschutz" character steins, and Diesinger as the manufacturer of the steins previously known as "DRGM", but other mysteries remain.

After the German "Merchandise Marks Act of 1887," German products that were to be exported, including beer steins, had to be marked either "Germany," or "Made in Germany." Those destined for the domestic German market, however, were not required to be marked, and many were not. The "McKinley Tariff Act of 1891" (US) had no effect on German products, because they were already being marked due to



An Apostle stein, c. 1900, in the style of earlier Kreusen pieces.

the earlier German law. During the existence of East and West Germany (1949-1990) steins produced for export could be marked either "Western Germany" or simply "Germany". The first of these two marks conclusively dates the stein to this period; the appearance of the second mark only indicates manufacture post-1887. And the absence of any mark indicating the country of origin is inconclusive as to date.

Trademarks, when they are present, are frequently a good determinant of age, and a look through the article "The Basic Marks - A Beginning" in the Library may allow you to identify your steins. Most companies which produced steins over a long period of time changed their trademarks periodically, allowing collectors to date their pieces within a specific timeframe. Some firms, such as King, Goebel, Ceramarte, Rastal, Franklin Mint and Avon, among others, only came into existence and began to produce steins in the post-WWII period. Gerz has changed their trademark to "Gerzit", indicating contemporary manufacture. Other terms which are indicative of this period are "West Germany" or "W. Germany", "Japan", "Original", "Hand-Malerei" or "Hand-painted", "Limited Edition" and "Alt Grenzau".

Most firms, some of them only tiny workshops with less than 10 employees, kept haphazard records or none at all. Two world wars took their toll on German factories, destroying what records there were along with the buildings. Twice the country's currency was devalued, and many pottery firms went bankrupt, especially after the monetary crisis of the early 1930s. All files, designs, catalogs and firm histories went down with them. Some of the steins, often unmarked, fared better and outlived their originators to find themselves on a shelf in some American collector's stein room. Many of the owners are still asking the eternal question: Who made them, and when?

We can only attempt to list some of the most common stein materials and the better known marks here. Exceptions exist in every stein category, and all statements are therefore general.

Since **earthenware** steins are among the most common, we'll start with them. Old and new earthenware steins range in body color from pale ivory to dark brown. Their decoration is mostly **relief**, showing domestic life, the hunt, courting couples or drinking scenes. Predominant background colors are either dark green, cobalt blue or brown, with maroon, pink or black highlights. On some old steins, the relief figures are hand painted with various colors, a process repeated on new steins.



Das Gnomenfest (c. 1900) - An earthenware stein with relief decoration showing dwarfs (*Zwerg*) in procession through the forest, carrying a barrel of beer, a horn player leading the way. The dark background color is typical. The twisted-branch handle is a signature of the Girmscheid factory. The lid and thumblift are lightweight pewter.

Earthenware and stoneware steins with **etched outline decoration** are among the most desirable and expensive specimens. Music boxes were often mounted in hollow bottomed steins made around 1900, and music-making steins are still produced.

Multicolored relief steins are made in large numbers today and sold in gift and department stores and tourist areas. Their clay composition, due to improved mining and purifying techniques plus modern production methods, may make them superior to yesterday's steins which were still partially made by hand. Their execution, however, is sometimes not as careful as it might be. One finds faces and figures painted in a rough, imprecise manner, with gaudy colors than run. Other flaws are also found - even stray chunks of clay fired onto the bottom by accident. Their cone-shaped metal lids pretend to be pewter but seldom look it.

Despite primitive working conditions and the absence of automatic machinery, steins produced before 1900 are generally better made since there was stricter quality control. It seems that the older the steins, the more attention to detail the work received (mold lines ground off, clear features and outlines, background color only where it should be).

But not every stein buyer of the 19th century could afford the best, so there was a wide range of prices and quality. Fortunately, few of the inferior ones are still around today.

A second category is **porcelain** steins. These are decorated with hand painting, transfer or decal printing, and sometimes a combination of both. Old regimental and occupational steins only seem hand painted. As a rule they are **transfer printed** with some areas filled in by hand painting and enameling. Only the very earliest or specially made regimentals are entirely hand painted. Gold and silver decoration are sometimes found on porcelain steins, and many have translucent pictures, or **lithophanes**, in the bottom. Lithophanes in old steins are generally of fine detail and may be extremely thin; in new steins they are cruder and thicker. One new lithophane depicts a nude, a motif which would have been frowned upon by rural people in Germany, which did not escape the influence of the Victorian age. Many new lithophane pictures are patterned after the originals, showing identical scenes with only slight variations - one must look at old lithophanes to learn the difference. Old porcelain steins can be pedestaled and flared; others are straight sided. Some reproduction porcelain steins are recognized by flared bodies and bottoms with a large diameter. Old porcelain steins are seldom marked, but **beware**. New, imported steins which must list the



This half-liter stein is marked HR, dating it c. 1900. It combines a tapestry style with pebbled background and an etched design of the popular *Münchner Kindl*.



A miniature porcelain stein, transfer decorated with a butterfly and flower design, then highlighted by hand. Porcelain is a very hard type of ceramic, entirely vitrified during the firing process, with a glass-like appearance and surface.

country of origin may have the country's name obliterated. Rough, scratched areas of dull spots in the porcelain glaze (usually on the bottom) can indicate sandpapering and should be considered with caution.

Reproduction regimentals have been made for years. There never was any intent by their makers to pass them off as the original reservist's steins so popular around the turn of the century. It is the uninformed or unscrupulous person who is responsible if "old" prices are asked for reproductions. Usually, the novice collector, lacking sufficient know-how, gets burned. But even old pros at stein collecting have been duped. [Editor's note: See the article on this subject in the Library.]

Creamware pottery steins look like porcelain, but they are a class by themselves. The German term for this type of stein is *Steingut*. They resemble porcelain but are lighter and have no lithophane. Cheaper than china, they were decorated in the same way as porcelain steins and are easier to chip and break.

Steins of earthenware, stoneware and creamware may all be painted, some with enamel highlights. Others are transfer printed, with hand painting over the glaze or printed under the glaze. Hand painting is usually a sign of older steins. Today's labor costs are too high to allow it.

A century or so ago, most large stein firms manufactured both earthenware and stoneware and did their own decorating-painting, as well as pewter work. Today they may specialize in one or the other. Some stoneware steins are saltglazed - in the old days these were the least expensive.

Saltglazed stoneware may be decorated with cobalt blue or manganese-violet slip before firing. This process became known in the Westerwald area around the middle of the 17th century. Stoneware steins carry the same motifs as earthenware but are vitrified and consequently more resistant to breakage.

Brewery steins (straight-sided, plain grey stoneware with beer or brewery names on the front) are in wide use throughout Germany and Bavaria in particular, their shape little changed in the last 130 years. Most are saltglazed, which makes them ideal for use in beer gardens and inns, as they can take a lot of heavy use. Others appear saltglazed (you can tell the real McCoy by its grainy, pebbly surface, similar to that of an orange), but are in fact covered with a shiny glaze not achieved in a salt kiln.



A saltglazed pouring stein, decorated in typical cobalt and manganese colors. This stein, bearing the trademark of Merkelbach & Wick, was made around 1900 in the style of earlier Westerwald pieces.

Figural steins in the shape of a head, animal or human figure, either partial or complete, are generally called **character steins**. They may be made of porcelain, stoneware or earthenware. Occasionally one finds a date on the pewter lid rim. Old and well-made character steins, especially in porcelain, are as prized as Mettlachs and just as expensive. Some have the German word *Musterschutz* on the bottom. This merely means "design protection" or "patented design" and is not the name of a manufacturer.

German character steins of more recent make (from around the late 1940s to the present) are showing up in increasing numbers due to their great popularity in this country. These often hilarious, gaudy, well-made or kitschy characters can be found in gift shops as well as antiques shops for anywhere from a little to a lot of money. [Editor's note: In addition to entirely new character steins, such as the Schulz and

Dooley series, or the Corona animals, some of the finest porcelain character steins are being made today using molds which are 100 years old. These latter steins, unless scrupulously marked by today's manufacturer, are easily confused with the originals.]

Some imports from Japan have recently been made available to collectors who, after ordering what looked like fairly decent character steins, were shocked to receive cheap "monsters". Most deserve to be hidden rather than displayed!

Old **glass steins** are especially difficult to assess - almost none were marked with a name and very few with a date. They may be cut, engraved, etched, painted or pressed. Except for the pressed ones, most were mouth blown and had handles attached in a separate process.



A half-liter clear glass stein, hand-blown with applied handle, c. 1865. The body has been faceted around the base, thumbprint cut above the waistline, and fitted with a porcelain inlaid lid in pewter mounts. The position of the thumblift (over the lid) and the closed pewter hinge indicate the earlier date. The traditional pastoral scene on the inlay is typical.

Early glass steins lack the brilliance of modern glass, and old mold-blown steins have imperfections such as lime or sand spots, swirls, discolorations and streaks. Their designs lack sharpness, and pontil marks are visible. Glass steins which are plain, cut or etched and have a painted porcelain insert in the pewter lid can generally be considered old. But it is not difficult for an enterprising quick-buck artist to switch lids or salvage them from broken steins and mount them on recently produced glass steins. At least one German glasshouse is rumored to be making mold-blown steins using old forms.

Pewter lids and their shapes play a significant role in determining stein age. Most old pewter lids are of medium to heavy weight pewter, not inexpensive for their time, in shapes more elaborate than today's (although even 100 years ago one could order the cheaper steins with thin, flimsy pewter covers). Prior to World War II steeped pewter lids were made using a three or four part mold which produced undercuts and finials, mirror smooth interiors, and much heavier, more durable pewter lids. Modern **spun pewter lids** are made in a single cone-shaped mold, have knurling ridges inside and are very thin. They tear easily at the tang or point of attachment. Cone-shaped spun pewter lids were produced in the pre-war era, but they were in the minority. Today these less expensive pewter lids have almost completely replaced their heavier molded predecessors. Finally, not all steins were adorned with lids; some drinkers thought it a troublesome items and an unnecessary expense.



Left, a heavy, steeple-shaped lid with relief decoration, made in a three-part mold. Note the finial and the shape of the lid, which cannot be achieved in a mold-spun lid. In the middle, a heavy pewter relief lid. At the right is an example of a spun pewter lid. The lighter weight makes it susceptible to tearing.

Pewter darkens with age and exposure to the air. The inside of the lid, which is not exposed, will remain shiny and bright. This external patina is coveted by most stein collectors today who think it a crime to clean and polish a pewter lid. The absence of this patina suggests a newly-made lid, but this is not necessarily the case. High grade pewter on steins which were kept locked in cabinets and seldom used can look like soft silver and still be more than 100 years old. On the other hand, steins which stood in dank cellars or spent decades in unheated attics may have pitted, darkish pewter lids, and blemishes and pitting on pewter is undesirable. Some new lids on reproductions have been dipped in a darkening chemical to make them look old, but the interior of the lid will be darkened as well, giving away their true age.

Germany's contemporary stein industry does put some fine pewter lids atop the better souvenir steins - many are almost indistinguishable from the old. Some are artificially darkened to resemble antique pewter. On cheap, mass-produced souvenir steins, imitation pewter lids are common. These cone-shaped covers, with fewer moldings and far less detail than the originals, have a harsh, shiny metal look. The letters DRGM plus a number may be visible on the inside.

Today's stein makers turn out everything from superb artistic specimens to kitsch. Many are made in the traditional manner - closely imitating motifs of yesteryear. There is no magic date after which steins suddenly looked different from those made earlier; it is a subtle variation in the manner of decoration, form, coloring and lid, most noticeable in cheap steins. Separating new unmarked steins of fine workmanship and quality from the old can be a difficult task. Regrettably, some manufacturers still neglect to permanently mark their steins; some use only an easily removed paper label. [Editor's note: It's possible, but rare, to find an original paper label on a stein which is 100 years old. It's impossible to find an old stein "with the original box".]

There is a trend among ceramics firms to market more steins of artistic merit and higher quality. A few have taken their old molds out of storage and are making new copies of old steins. This is so-noted on the bottoms, sometimes by using the term "Original". The healthy worldwide market for



A high quality relief pewter lid appearing on an Oktoberfest stein manufactured in 1985. The detail is exceptional.



The excellent pewter shown above is contrasted with this example of heavy glaze which obscures all detail.

good steins has also led to production of limited edition steins.



The quality of contemporary steins varies just as did those produced 100 years ago. At right and left we see two typical souvenir or giftware steins featuring traditional German themes. Second from the left is a limited edition stein. Note the variations in pewter quality, as well.

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