

German Miners' Beer Steins

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Over the centuries, the Germans have probably developed the most elaborate mining culture of any country. Almost every aspect of mining generated its own category of collectibles, especially in Saxony. In 2015 I published an article in the *Mineralogical Record* discussing just three of those categories: the Saxon miner's parade axes, the Saxon frog lamps, and the Freiburger Blenden lamps. Here I'd like to discuss the German miner's beer stein.



Figure 1. Miner's tankard from the Lower Harz region in gold and silver, dated 1732. Notice the gryphon on top with a rock hammer in his hand, and the pieces of ore (probably acanthite, silver sulfide) around him. The large engraved scene shows a mining area. Made by goldsmith H. A. Schumacher in Wolfenbüttel, for Vice- Berghauptmann Karl Albert Ludwig von Immenhoff.

In centuries past, as today, beer-drinking was an important social activity in Germany, especially among the various professions, and at all levels of society. Members of the royalty and aristocracy, proud of the mining history in their region and the wealth it generated, would sometimes commission their own special steins or metal tankards. These could be quite impressive.

And because Germans workers have always taken great pride in their trades and occupations, each profession had its own steins decorated appropriately. These are referred to today as “occupational steins,” and you can find them designed for a wide range of jobs including miner, carpenter, baker, brewer, farmer, coach-driver, electrician, barrel-maker, butcher, cheese dealer, night watchman, plasterer, rope-maker, tapestry weaver, landlord and many more. The first trade-related steins date back to the 1700s, but they were most common during the period from 1895 to the outbreak of World War I in 1914. (The German military community had their own equivalent in the “regimental steins.”)



Figure 2. (left) Beer stein from Freiberg showing the city emblem (center) surrounded by miners and crossed hammer symbols, dated 1720. The words on the banner, “Floreat Semper Freiberg,” are Latin for “Ever-blooming Freiberg.”

Figure 3 (right). Miner’s tankard from the Oberharz region, dated 1652. The miners on the lid are carrying ore baskets and pushing wheelbarrows full of ore.

Occupational steins vary in rarity and value, based in part on the population frequency of the occupation, with jobs like farmer, butcher, brewer and baker being the most common and least expensive. Mining steins are considerably rarer and more expensive. Also, the better-paid trades tended to yield more steins, but lesser-paid trades like miner and fisherman produced fewer. Value is also affected by the scenes depicted and whether they are individually hand-painted or applied by transfer techniques.

Occupational steins were often acquired during a person's school years while in training for a particular trade. A hundred years ago and more, the Freiberg Mining Academy in Saxony was such a highly respected institution that mining students from many other countries including the United States would not consider their education complete unless they spent at least a year studying in Freiberg. After classes they would join their fellow German students at the beer hall and have fun consuming enormous amounts of beer together. (Some American students wrote home that the toughest part of the curriculum was keeping up with the German students' unbridled consumption of beer and the resulting hangovers.) Each student had his own beer stein, many of them personalized with their name, and all generally equipped with a pewter or tin thumb-levered lid. The lid was important because it allowed you to swing your stein around boisterously while singing together without sloshing beer all over the guy next to you.

German mining-theme beer steins came in several categories, the most historically interesting being those personalized with the name of the owner, sometimes dated with a year, and occasionally with the name of a mining area. Steins from the Freiberg District often depict miners in the black mining uniforms typical of the area, and may show scenes typical of mining in the Erzgebirge region. Other steins, such as those produced by the Mettlach (Villeroy & Bach) company, represent more generic, decorative tributes to the mining profession and are not designed to be personalized. Even today, ceramics companies in Germany sometimes produce steins with a mining theme, just for the decorator and tourist market.

Following are some of the steins in my own collection. These are generally very rare, and do not show up in google searches, except perhaps for those shown in Figures 14 and 16.



Figure 4. This stein has the traditional miner's emblem of crossed hammers (*Schlegel und Eisen*) and below it a ribbon with the traditional miner's greeting "*Glück Auf*" (loosely translated as "Good luck coming up out of the mine"). German fliers used the equivalent greeting "*Glück ab*" (loosely translated as "Good luck coming back down" or "Happy landings"). There is room above and below the crossed hammers for the miner to personalize the stein with his name, but in this case the buyer chose not to.

On the left side is the image (applied by a transfer process, not hand-painted) of an old and distinguished Freiberg miner or mine captain, perhaps representing the father of the young Freiberg miner pictured on the opposite side. The writing around the top edge translates as “It would be better for the earth to perish than for a miner to die of thirst” (thirst for beer, that is!). The same expression can be found on occupational steins for other professions, substituting a different occupational name for “miner.”



Figure 5. This stein is personalized with the name “Simon Rauch, Fuhrmann, Peissenberg 1899.” A *Fuhrmann*, as the hand-painted illustration shows, was a mule driver, bring cars full of ore out of the mine to the surface—a very rare career as occupational steins go. Peißenberg is a municipality in the Weilheim-Schongau district, in Bavaria. It is situated 7 km southwest of Weilheim in Oberbayern.

The usual “Glück auf!” is written on the banner, and the expression written around the base translates as: “With good luck we climb to salute the sunlight every day, whereas he who gets to enjoy the sun all day takes its rays for granted.” This is a common sentiment among miners, in one form or another. As anyone knows who has spent a day working in the dark underground, coming back up to the surface into the bright sunlight once again brings a uniquely intense feeling of joy and relief. For at least a moment you no longer take daylight for granted.



Figure 6. A miner’s wedding was sometimes commemorated with a special beer stein like this rare and beautiful example, abundantly inscribed with good wishes. The central hand-painted illustration shows the miner joining hands with his new wife in front of a bouquet of flowers, with a “Glück auf” over the crossed hammers and a miner’s safety lamp hanging from the crux. The text above the flowers translates as “Wake up happy every morning, drink from your stein without worries.”

Around the top rim it says: “Hops and malt, may God preserve us.” On the left side of the stein: “May you drink from this stein for many happy and bright years to come.” And on the right side is the presentation to the groom, Anton Mittelbach, “to commemorate this year of 1908 for [our] dear son-in-law and daughter, greetings from Westphalia.” The stein was therefore a wedding gift from the bride’s family in Westphalia.

The maker of the stein, not having a lid design related to mining, could have used a generic lid but chose instead to use a military design featuring a soldier raising his drink, and emblazoned with “Consecrated to those who have served faithfully in their time, be blessed.” Perhaps the groom had served his time in the military before becoming a miner.



Figure 7. The upper inscription on this hand-painted stein translates as: “For the Name Day 1906, of D. Joh[ann] Asshauer, [from his] beloved mother and sister.” In Catholic and Lutheran regions of Germany a person’s “name day” (*Namenstag*) was the feast day on the church calendar devoted to the saint after whom he was named, in this case St. John (December 27). Name days were often celebrated even more than birthdays, including with the giving of gifts such as this stein, presented by the mother and sister of the recipient, who was clearly a miner by profession.

The front illustration shows two elegant, mustached miners in traditional black uniforms, crossed hammers, “Glück auf,” and the German words for “God be with us,” and “Long live the miner.” On the left side is a scene in front of a church, depicting the miner and his wife, with the words for “Thus is life most beautiful” (presumably meaning the churchgoing life). And on the right is a domestic scene with the miner and his wife seated at a table while she pours him a drink.



Figure 8. This stein has a classic occupational design applied by a transfer technique (i.e. not hand-painted). It is personalized for someone named Georg Peter. The central scene depicts a Saxon miner in full uniform, wearing his *Schachthut* (“shaft hat”) with the words “Glück auf” around it, and a background depicting mining facilities including a smelter stack. On the left side is an underground scene with a miner working by the light of a frog lamp.

The wording on the banner translates as: “Happiness on you, lovely sunshine; I greet you every day [coming out of the mine].” On the right side is another miner tramming an ore car by the light of a frog lamp. The banner continues the poetic sentiment, translating as: “[but] he who gets to enjoy your rays all day takes you for granted.” (It rhymes in German.)

I have another stein with exactly this same transfer design but with a different lid and without a personalized name. Instead, around the top are words translating as: “It would be better for the earth to perish than for a miner to die of thirst” (thirst for beer).



Figure 9 (left). This stein, personalized with the name of Heinrich Bachtod, carries an inscription around the top which translates as “While the silver is fresh, and the ore grows, God grant us all a happy heart.” Clearly he was a silver miner. The hand-painted front image shows two miners in full, black uniforms shaking hands under “Glück auf!,” a royal crown, crossed hammers, a ladder (very unusual) and an oil lantern. Below their hands is a second crossed hammers and what appears to be a burner. The vignette on the left side shows a miner underground wielding a pick, and on the right side another miner trampling ore out from the mine.

Figure 10 (right). A very tall stein personalized with the name of Hans Müller, above which are the crossed hammers and “Glück auf!” The scene above (applied by transfer) shows two hunters displaying to the womenfolk a fox they have just killed. There are no side scenes. The expression around the top reads *Frohe Zecher Roßlach* (“The *Roßlach* happy revelers”). *Roßlach* is a part of the municipality of Wilhelmsthal in the Upper Franconian district of Kronach in Bavaria.



Figure 11. This occupational stein is clearly mining-related because of the crossed hammers emblem and the words “Glück auf!” on the banner beneath. Above the crest is a metal wheel symbolizing the smelting or foundry arts and the words *Zum Andenken* (“In remembrance of”). Below the crest it is personalized with the name of “Wilhelm Weis” and the words for “Unity is strength.”

Around the top is the saying about how it would be better for the whole world to perish than for this guy to die of thirst for beer, but instead of “miner” the profession given is “Former.” A “Former” was a foundry molds mechanic or engineer in the smelter associated with a mine. In the vignette on the left side, the fellow is saying goodbye to his weeping girlfriend, offering words of slim consolation that translate loosely as “Oh girl, it doesn’t matter; Formers are as common as grains of sand on the beach.” (Sounds like he’s dumping her, the scoundrel; but why would he have such a scene hand-painted on his personalized stein?)

On the other side the man is having a beer with his friend, and the poem beneath translates as: “As long as the iron continues to flow, long live the lifeblood of the Former.” (It rhymes in German.) This reference to “flowing” iron (either iron ore “flowing” out of the mine, or molten, smelted iron flowing into a mold) is consistent with Wilhelm Weis being a smelter molds engineer at an iron mine, apparently a managerial-level job considering how well he is dressed.



Figure 12. This beautiful example, probably dating to 1900-1915, represents a different category of mining-related steins: those made purely as decorative items rather than as personal expressions of pride in being a member of the mining profession. The front vignette (there are no side scenes) shows a happy Kobold, one of the mythical German mining gnomes, holding his frog lamp and miner's pick. He is backed by a large "Glück auf!" banner and is kneeling on a crossed hammers shield.



Figure 13. This is another attractive and very detailed decorative mining stein, depicting (in the front vignette) two miners working underground by the light of frog lamps. On the right side are two more miners, one pushing an ore car and the other apparently supervising. On the left side is a single miner in full dress uniform with a high-ranking feather in his hat, a brass-tipped walking stick (*Berghäckel*), and a brass belt buckle with crossed hammers. Of course there is the obligatory “Glück auf!” at the top and a two-part poem which translates as “Happiness to you, lovely sunshine, be heartily greeted. He takes your rays for granted, who can enjoy you all day.”

Interestingly, the vignettes (applied by transfer) are decorated with pink flower blossoms of unknown significance, or perhaps just for beauty, and are highlighted by brush.

The uniforms of the miners are all gray instead of the typical Erzgebirge black that was common in Saxony for underground miners. This is merely a bit of artistic license on the part of the stein painter. Up until 1668, in the Erzgebirge (“Ore Mountains”), miners and smeltersmen all wore the same black uniform. After that date, differences were gradually introduced. Between 1719 and 1913, the black uniform was still standard only for silver miners throughout Saxony. For parade dress, white trousers were required for almost everyone. The black jacket was worn by miners whereas the gray jacket was worn by smeltersmen and foundry workers (a white jacket was worn by other kinds of workers). After 1842, all mining officials wore black jackets, and only the elders of the smelter's union continued to wear gray.



Figure 14. Among the better known commercial makers of beer steins and other ceramics was the Mettlach factory, a subsidiary of Villeroy & Boch. Their "golden age" of stein production was between 1885 and 1910. Situated on the Saar River in western Germany, the Mettlach factory was built in 1809, on the grounds of a former Benedictine Abbey dating to the 10th century. Founded by Johann Franz Boch-Buschmann, it became the company of Villeroy & Boch following a merger with Nicolas Villeroy in 1836.

The above example is design no. 980, made in 1909. On the front is a miner working underground, beneath a "Glück auf!" and crossed hammers on the overhead beam. On the left side is the King of the legendary Kobolds, Saxon miner gnomes, and on the right side are a couple of more gnomes looking out of a hole and listening to the hammering sounds of the miner.

The expression written on the banner above translates as "Proclaim it with a loud banging, good luck to all miners."

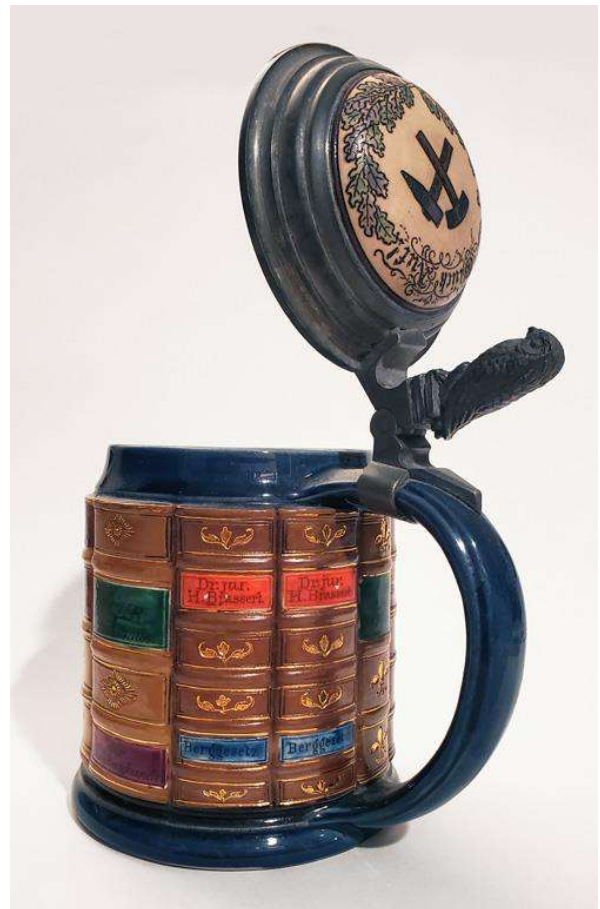


Figure 15 (left). We would call this a mug instead of a stein, but in Germany it's all the same: *Bierkrug*. I love this one because of the elegant crest with bands of mirror-bright gold, black, and mirror-bright silver representing the gold, coal and silver sought by the miners.

Figure 16 (right). Here is another unique, decorative beer stein from a Mettlach occupational series depicting a shelf of books pertinent to each profession. This one is for the mining profession, made in 1891. The crossed hammers and "Glück auf!" appear on a ceramic insert in the lid. Each book spine is carefully lettered with the title of a book that could be in a mine manager's library. The books depicted are: *Berggesetz* ("Mining Law") by Dr. Jur H. Brassert (2 volumes); *Katechismus der Bergbaukunde* ("Mining Arts Catechism") by Stöhr; *Bergpostille oder Sarepta* ("Mountain Prayers or Sarepta") by M. J. Mathesius dated 1578; *Der Bergmanns freund* ("The Miner's Friend"); *Zeitschrift für das Berg* ("The Mountain Journal") by Hütten und Salinenwesen; *Archiv für Bergbau* ("Archive for Mining") by Karsten, dated 1818; *Bergreihenbuch* ("Mountain Range Book") by C. Ch. W. Kolbe, dated 1802; *Die Nutzbaren Mineralien im deutschen Reiche* ("The Useful Minerals in the Kingdom of Germany") by Dr. H. v. Dechen; *Bergbaukunde* ("Mining Arts") by Köhler; and *Bergbaukunde* ("Mining Arts") by Lottnerserlo.



Figure 17. Most miners' beer steins, at least from the 1895-1914 period, were made of porcelain, but some interesting decorative steins were also made in stoneware in later years. This one is unique in showing depictions of vertical sections through a mine, with miners working on various levels tramming ore, shoveling ore or chopping out ore. Two cars of ore are being raised in the shaft elevator.

The inscriptions on the left and right side translates as “Long live the honorable profession of miner.” Around the bottom the inscription translates as “Work is the citizen’s beer; blessings are the payment of effort.”

So where is the obligatory “Glück auf!”? At the top of the central scene is a mine building, with “Glück auf” in the tiniest letters across the top.

Figure 18. This stoneware stein, surely dating to much more recently than the 1920s, is actually a copy of the earlier porcelain occupational stein shown in Figure 5, right down to the inscriptions.



MODERN STEINS

A fair number of decorative mining-themed steins have been produced during the 20th century. Some reproduce images of miners taken from early publication; others feature artwork by modern artists. They are generally quite inexpensive, and can occasionally be found for sale on websites like Etsy. For those who want to learn more about beer stein collecting in general there are, as you might expect, a range of books, magazines, auction houses, and national collector organizations that can be of help. A collection of beer steins looks great on a shelf, and the variety available seems almost endless, with collectors specializing in a wide range of sub-categories. But if you have the “collector gene” beware. You may find yourself spending money in a whole new field of collecting!

SOURCES

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