

THE BLENDE LAMP

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The Blende type of miner's lamp has been known in Germany since the mid-1700's, and is considered a prime collectible by European mining artifact collectors. It was commonly used in the Saxon Erzgebirge, a great silver mining region, up until the advent of carbide lighting.

The German word *Blende* can mean a false window or door, but in this context refers more precisely to a blind niche in a wall, rather like the recessed, arch-topped niches used for statuary in Catholic churches. The shape of the lamp closely resembles these niches, thus the name "Blende." Germans capitalize all their nouns, so *Blende* is correctly capitalized in all cases even though it is not a proper noun in English usage. The plural of *Blende* is *Blenden*.

The term "Blende" refers only to the box, and not to the actual lighting device inside. Some contained candles, but most used a spherical-bodied oil-wick lamp called a *Kuckuck* ("Coo-coo") lamp. The inside surfaces of the *Blende* were generally lined with sheet brass or tin, which served primarily as a reflector, and perhaps also to protect the wood from the heat of the flame. The body of most *Blenden* is lime wood, although other woods have also been used.

The lamp was described in Johann Caspar Zeisig's *Mineralund Bergwerks-Lexicon* ("Mineral and Mining Dictionary") of 1743. He states that it is a wooden lantern box closed on all sides so as to prevent wind or dripping water from extinguishing the flame. The front face is a sliding door with a glass window, allowing light to be cast in only one direction. The sliding door can be removed (where underground winds are not a problem) and stowed in a slot on the back.

Attached to the back is a large hook, usually very well made by a blacksmith and comparable in quality to good American miners' candlesticks. This hook is typically made of

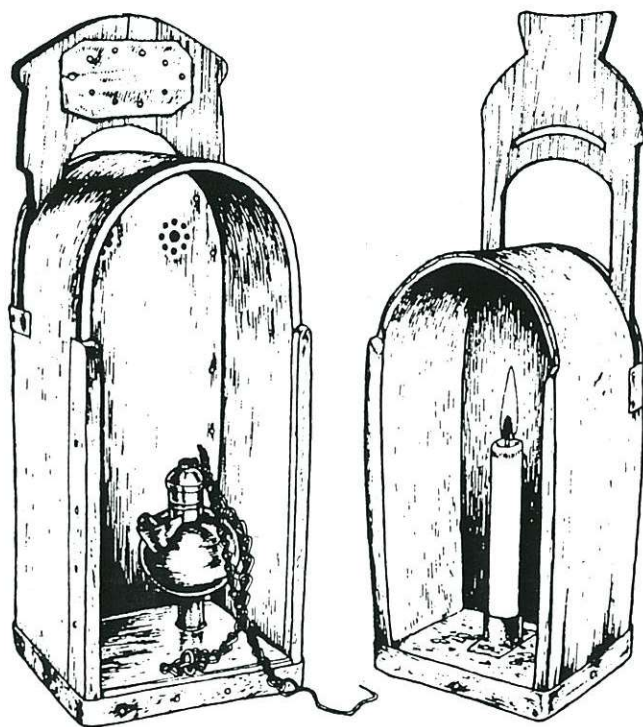


Figure 1. The example at left, with its brass "coo-coo" lamp and full sheet-brass lining, is from Schneeberg, Saxony, and the example at right is from Hallein; hence they are called a *Schneeberger Blende* and a *Halleiner Blende* in Germany. The wooden-framed glass window, shown here stowed in the back slot, can be inserted over the front to protect the flame from drafts.

iron, but copper and brass hooks are also known. Using this hook, the Blende could be hung on an ore car like a headlamp, held in the hand like a carbide superintendent's lamp, or hung from a chain around the miner's neck. Suspended over the miner's chest in this way it provided good light while leaving his hands free. All underground workers in the Saxon mines, from the miners and muckers to the mine superintendents and mine officers, used Blenden, except for those who used Frog lamps.

Carl Robert Hoffmann, in his book *Der belehrende Bergmann* ("The Well-informed Miner") (1830) states that the sheet-metal linings for the Blenden of supervisory personnel were always brass as a sign of high rank, and that the common miners' lamps were to be lined only with tin-plated steel. This may have been true in the earlier years of the lamps use, but in later years virtually all the miners carried brass-lined lamps. This brass lining, incidentally, had to be carefully cleaned each day.



Figure 2. A trammer with his Blende hung on the front of the ore car (illustration from Eduard Heuchler's *Des Bergmanns Lebenslauf*, 1867).

Vent holes, usually punched or drilled in a decorative pattern, are often found in Blenden. A tight-fitting sliding door could cut off all air and extinguish the flame through lack of oxygen; in such cases the vent holes were a necessity.

The typical brass coo-coo lamp mounted inside the Blende consists of a spherical chamber for oil or lard (*Unschlitt*), with a cylindrical female connector on the base for attaching to a plug or post on the bottom of the Blende. A wick spout projects forward near the top, and there is also a filler opening stoppered with a cork or chain-mounted metal cap, and sometimes a chain-mounted wick pick. Miners would sometimes remove the coo-coo lamp from the Blende and affix it to a lump of clay on a rock near the working area.

The Blende is best known from the Saxon Erzgebirge ("Ore Mountains") region, especially the Freiberg district, and is often generically referred to as a "Freiberger Blende." It was also used in Saxon coal mines near Lugar, Zwickau and Plauen. In the salt mines of the Hallein district, and also in the salt mines of Berchtesgaden in Austria, Blenden were used as well, but only with candles and not with oil lamps.

The Blende was a rather fragile device and many were broken or destroyed through heavy use. Consequently relatively few have survived, and nice examples in good condition are rare. However, Blenden are highly sought-after German mining collectibles, and a good one can be the highlight of a collection.

They are, however, quite expensive on today's collectibles market. An average lamp with an iron hook and no decorative pattern on the inside will sell for about \$1,700. Prices can easily go up to \$3,000 for a small officer's lamp with a copper hook and a nice pattern, especially if the owner's name and date of manufacture are marked, and the lamp is in excellent condition.

Open Blenden, made without provision for a sliding door, are older and therefore may fetch a slight premium. Small officers' lamps are naturally rare, having been produced in smaller numbers than lamps for the common miners. The most important factor determining value is condition. But mint-condition Blenden are extremely difficult to find; I've never had one myself.

Because Blenden are so rare and expensive, it is not surprising that some fakes have appeared on the market. Most which I have seen so far are poorly made and easily recognized once you've seen a few authentic examples for comparison. Clues to look for in spotting fake Blenden include wood that appears fresh and unaged, lack of wear on the high spots, and a hook held onto the back with screws. Check the vertical slots for the sliding door; after so many years they should have accumulated a significant amount of dust and dirt. Old sheet brass commonly develops cracks which, if present, are a good sign of authenticity.

Surely there are other points that one might look for as well. And surely there are fakes around. Any collector without a great deal of experience evaluating Blenden should buy only from a trusted friend or a dealer with a good reputation. "Bargains" usually turn out to be fakes.



Figure 3. Miners driving a tunnel with only *Schlagel* and *Eisen* (hammer and pick). Three are wearing their Blenden on their chest, while a fourth has removed his coo-coo lamp and mounted it on the working face (illustration from Eduard Heuchler's *Die Bergknappen in Ihren Berufs- und Familienleben*, 1857).



Figure 4. Miners at the Marcus Semmler tunnel, Schneeberg, ca. 1880.