

Recently seen on eBay Extraordinary American Arts and Crafts Stein Brings an Extraordinary \$66,000 Price

by David Kornacki

David Kornacki is the owner/operator of the Roycroft Copper Online Price Guide (<http://www.roycroftcopper.com/>). While the site offers considerable information about Roycroft Copper items, David has offered this article about a recent auction which stein collectors should find to be very interesting. In the words of one of us, "Holy Mother of God! [Did you see this auction result?]"

Although most of us have a general feel for what "modern" design looks like, many have probably never considered when and where the first modern-looking objects appeared — sometime in the 20th century for sure, before World War II probably, but the 30s?, the 20s?, the teens?, earlier? In fact, the transition from design based on historical precedents, for example Classical, Gothic or Renaissance, to a sleek, clean and altogether new look, happened right around 1900 and it began in Europe. Designers in Great Britain (the Arts and Crafts Movement), Austria (the Vienna Secession movement) and Germany (the Jugendstil or literally "youth style"), were the first to cast aside a heavy, cluttered, and historically-infused Victorian aesthetic and create objects that we would call "modern".

As surprising as it may seem, one of the first instances of that new modern look migrating across the Atlantic to the USA was the metalwork done by a few artist-craftsman at the Roycroft Community in East Aurora, NY, just outside of Buffalo. The Roycroft was founded in the late 1890s by charismatic former soap salesman Elbert Hubbard, who channeled the modest fortune he had amassed at the Larkin Company into a career as a writer, printer, lecturer and social commentator. Hubbard's Roycroft enterprise was designed to create an environment where talented individuals could produce quality items of lasting beauty and utility, and it included not only the famous Roycroft Inn and Chapel, but also a printing shop, bindery, leather shop, furniture shop and after 1908, a small copper shop staffed with at most 30 or so craftsman (figure 1). (For more information

about The Roycrofters and Elbert Hubbard, who tragically perished on the Lusitania in 1915, visit the Webpage Of The Roycrofters - <http://www.roycrofter.com/>.)



The small Roycroft Copper Shop is shown in this January 1911 advertisement. The caption below the photo reads: "This building is made from field-stones - the stones the builders rejected. We planted the ivy, but God made it grow. Here some of our skilled boys and girls pound out unique objects of art, showing the loving marks of the hammer. Indestructible, beautiful, peculiar, individual - the true expression of man's joy in his work."

One of Roycroft's leading artist-craftsmen, Dard Hunter, had traveled to Europe prior to 1910 where he was inspired by the Vienna Secessionist aesthetic; returning with an enthusiasm for the new style. Shortly thereafter another talented "Roycrofter" named Karl Kipp (a young former bank clerk from Saratoga who had actually served some prison time for embezzlement!) set to work producing metalwork for sale in the fledgling Roycroft Copper Shop that emulated these *avant garde* European designs.

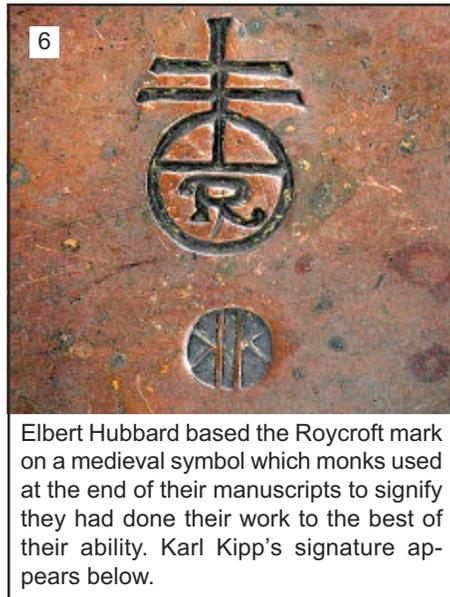
One of the first pieces produced by Kipp, probably in 1910 or 1911, was the copper, silver and jade stein recently sold at David Rago Auctions seen in figures 2 - 6. Estimated in the catalog at \$30,000 to \$40,000, the piece was hammered down for a new owner at a price of \$55,000 (\$66,000 including buyer's premium).

This stein has all the hallmarks of the emerging Arts and Crafts aesthetic that was entirely new to America in 1910: a simple



Handle inscription to "H. C. Meacham."

clean shape, with symmetry and decoration based on basic repeating geometric forms, yet finely hand-crafted in hammered copper and finished in a soft natural color palette. Rago's catalog describes the stein as an "exceptional hammered copper presentation stein with pierced nickel silver bands and four jade cabochons", and today's collectors would probably agree that this stein rises to the level of an iconic example of American Arts and Crafts metalwork.



Elbert Hubbard based the Roycroft mark on a medieval symbol which monks used at the end of their manuscripts to signify they had done their work to the best of their ability. Karl Kipp's signature appears below.

Roycroft collectors suspect that this is probably only the fourth, but certainly the best, example of this stein to appear on the market since interest in collecting objects from the American Arts and Crafts Movement first began in the 1970s. Although the stein, and a few related copper objects done by Kipp at Roycroft with a similar aesthetic (including candlesticks, jardinières, vases, and a smoking set), were advertised for sale in widely distributed Roycroft catalogs during 1910 and 1911, they were apparently produced in very small numbers. The stein was priced at an extraordinary \$25 in the 1910 Roycroft metalwork catalog (fig. 7), a time in which the average annual wage was around \$500! That \$25 price equates to around \$600 in 2008 dollars.

Clearly these objects appealed to a limited market. And in fact we see by the inscribed handle that this stein was actually a presentation piece for Henry Clay Meacham [1869-1929] (fig. 5) who owned the largest department store in Fort Worth, Texas, in the early years of the last century, and who served as that city's mayor from 1925-27.

In Roycroft copper collecting terms, this sale represents one of the highest prices ever paid for a piece of Roycroft metalwork and is one of the few examples to break the \$50,000 mark at auction.

7 A Stein Song

For it's always fair weather,
When good fellows get together,
With a stein on the table and a good song ringing clear.

Richard Hovey and Elias Carmen were prince-covers and Kings of Vagabondia. ¶ Together these true comrades found the joys of the open road, and all the wholesome, friendly, natural things that belong to a natural way of living. They were merry souls, these two, and their verses are filled with the lure, lilt and laughter that was in their hearts. The Stein Song is a joyous echo of some happy day when Richard Hovey sang out:

For we're all frank-and-easy,
When Spring is in the air,
And we've faith and hope aplenty,
And we've life and love to spare.

The Roycroft Stein is made from hand-hammered copper, with sterling-silver trimmings and handle. The cover and top band are set with jade. The lining is silver-plated. ¶ Height, six inches; diameter, four and one-half inches. Price, \$25.00. ¶ The Roycroft Steins are specially made. Get in your Christmas Order now.

The Roycrofters, East Aurora, Erie County, New York

This advertisement from October 1911 offers the stein seen in this article for \$25. Under the title "A Stein Song" is this verse:

For it's always fair weather,
When good fellows get together,
With a stein on the table and a
good song ringing clear.

So what lies behind the price of this stein? First we have to recognize that it has all the qualities that serious Arts and Crafts Movement collectors hope for: exceptional form, beautiful workmanship and outstanding condition, including original patina. Also, Karl Kipp is generally acknowledged as one of the very best craftsmen at Roycroft, and this piece bears not only the familiar Roycroft mark but also Karl Kipp's artist signature that rarely appears on Roycroft items. Further, the stein has provenance: originally owned by a well known businessman and former mayor of Fort Worth, TX, and the piece came out of an important Roycroft collection and was featured in the book "More Roycroft Art Metal" in 1995.

After 1912, the metalwork produced at the Roycroft Copper Shop evolved beyond the modernist Vienna Secession influence to incorporate Art Nouveau, Classical, Medieval and even American colonial forms, and the result was a distinctly American Arts and Crafts aesthetic. So not only can today's collectors easily spot a piece of Roycroft copper from across a crowded flea market, historians and museums recognize Roycroft metalwork as an important part of the history of 20th century American design.

From a collector's perspective, the stein is one of the holy grails of Roycroft metalwork,

scoring a perfect 10 on my informal Roycroft evaluation checklist:

- **Rarity** - This stein is one of the all-time rarest Roycroft items; only four examples are currently known.
- **Form** - Steins are unusual for Roycroft and it would certainly display well in a collection.
- **Beauty** - Aesthetics are often overlooked in the mad rush to acquire every object that bears a Roycroft and/or Karl Kipp mark, but this one is truly stunning, even to the uninitiated!
- **Importance** - the heavily Vienna Secession-influenced pieces designed by Karl Kipp are actually "important" enough for the Metropolitan and other major museums to own.
- **Workmanship** - this piece expertly combines beautifully hammered copper with silver accents and jade cabochons in a way that reveals the hand of the artist-craftsman.
- **Condition** - Condition is extremely important to value, with mint condition examples often selling for two or three times the price of the same item with a cleaned finish or other damage.
- **Date** - When it come to Roycroft copper, earlier is generally better, and all the German silver accented items were made before the late teens.
- **Size** - I suppose you can say that when it comes to Roycroft copper, bigger is better, however this factor is not significant in judging this stein.
- **Color** - Roycroft used different color finishes, this dark nutty brown is most desirable, and this stein also has the gorgeous complex patina of age.
- **Availability** - Not to be confused with rarity, but how often a form hits the market - I wouldn't hold my breath waiting for another one of these steins to show up!

But at the end of the day, just looking at this piece should impart a sense that it is something quite special. While I suppose Roycroft works rarely make an appearance in a stein collection, I would hope that few stein collectors would fail to recognize the inherent peaceful, balanced quality and unique stylish appearance of this stein.

Credits:

Many thanks to Roycroft enthusiast and collector David Kornacki who contributed this article.

Photos of the stein are provided by Rago Arts and Auction Center.

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