

A German stoneware bottle – 300 years old



It seems we can't help giving our pots human features. We talk about the foot of a pot – the belly, waist, shoulder, neck and mouth. For millennia potters have been putting human faces on pots. The Ancient Egyptians and the Romans did it. Medieval potters across Europe did it. In the 16th century in Germany, potters started putting the images of a bearded face on the necks of their stoneware containers, used for serving, decanting or storing drinks such as wine and beer. These normally have narrow mouths without a lip for pouring, but they are now commonly called jugs, and I will follow that convention. These jugs were produced in huge numbers in a range of sizes until the 18th century, and were shipped around the world.

The jugs were made in various towns in the German Rhineland and in nearby Belgium. By far the largest number imported into England were made in Frechen, on the outskirts of Cologne. I can say with some confidence that the jug (40 cm tall) in the picture above was made in Frechen, based on its shape and also the marks on the base made by the cutoff wire, which are characteristic of Frechen jugs (see photo on next page).

Not all of this type of jug had a bearded face on the neck, but a large proportion did. In continental Europe they are called Bartmann jugs (German for bearded man), but since the middle of the 17th century in England they have been referred to as Bellarmines. This is thought to be a reference to Cardinal Roberto Bellarmino, a Catholic inquisitor who died in 1621. Bellarmino was instrumental in

the burning of Giordano Bruno, the progressive Italian philosopher, and a suitable target for the mockery and ridicule of the Protestant world.



Cut-off marks on base

Various theories have been put forward to explain the bearded face on these jugs. The faces on the early jugs made in the 16th century typically had serene expressions and it has been suggested that they represented God, possibly as a pious attempt to seek divine protection for the owner and the contents. However, by the middle of the 17th century the faces looked more like satyrs, with fierce grimaces. It is possible that, in line with the gradual secularisation of life at the time, these faces now represented the so-called Wild Man – a common theme in medieval literature and art. It may be that by this time the faces had no particular meaning, and were just a form of branding, but it is possible that their wildness represented a defiant rejection of puritan criticism of the alcoholic contents.



The face on my jug is so stylized that it is difficult to tell whether it has a serene or wild expression. It makes me think of Picasso! The image has been formed by pressing a carved stamp into a strip of clay that had been smeared onto the neck of the jug. Unusually, the outline of the face is a well-

defined rectangle. I have not seen, in books or museums, another jug with precisely the same face image. It is likely that the same stamp would have been used repeatedly by the potter, but this type of jug was made in such large numbers by so many different workshops, that the odds of coming across two made by the same potter must be low. One of the UK's foremost collectors of Bellarmine's has told me that he has hardly ever seen two jugs with the same face.

There were other changes in these jugs between the 16th and 17th centuries. The early jugs were quite spherical in shape, often with elaborate moulded decoration as well as the bearded face. By the middle of the 17th century they had become more pear-shaped, like my jug. The later jugs also tended to be much simpler, often with only the bearded face, probably because the increased demand prompted the potters to work more quickly. The 16th century jugs were attractive items for the wealthy, the 17th century jugs were functional pots for the masses. There was also a shift in use from decanting and serving drink to using them for storage and shipping, which tended to favour the larger jugs like mine. All this suggests that my jug dates from the second half of the 17th century or the first half of the 18th century.

All Bartmann jugs were made of stoneware and salt glazed – both inventions (in the context of the Western world) of the potters of the Rhineland. This made them robust and easy to make, without needing to apply any glaze material prior to firing. However, my jug did have a high-iron wash swabbed over the upper half before firing – in the picture at the head of this note you can see where the wash has run down the jug in places. Presumably this was done to improve the appearance, as it has no other function that I can see. Certainly, the salt-glazed surface where there is no covering wash is a rather dull and uniform pale grey/brown.

I had expected to see the marks of supporting pads on the base of the jug, on which it would have stood in the kiln, but there is no evidence of these. However, there are two glaze-free scars on opposite positions at the widest point of the jug, suggesting that the jug was fired on its side and stacked between other jugs, making contact at these two points. Contact at just these two opposing points seems rather unstable and there are a few smaller scars elsewhere on the surface, which may indicate other contact points. Direct contact in this way is a risky business in salt glazing, as the glaze can weld the two pots together and break them on separation. In fact one of these scars has a chunk of the pot missing at the edge, presumably from this cause. The Frechen potters clearly knew just what they could get away with in their firings.

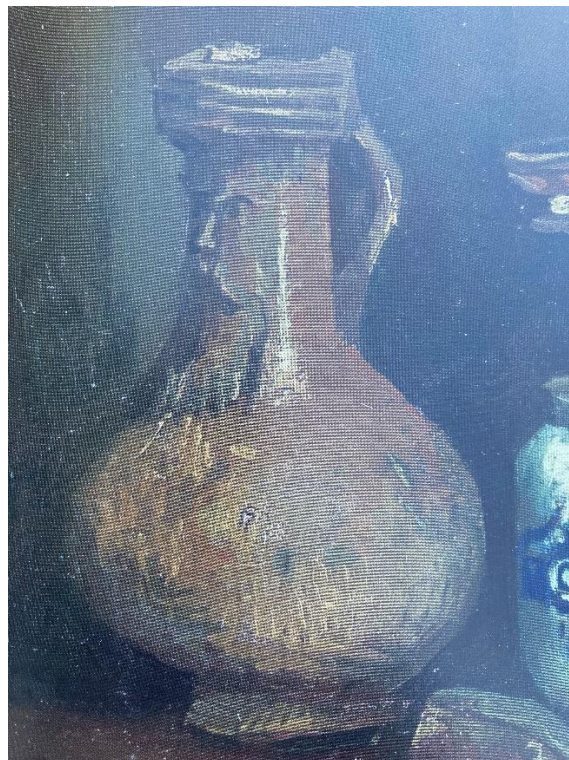


Stacking scar and separation damage (scar is 3 cm across)

You can also see in the photo at the head of this note that there is a small hole near the base which has been plugged with cork. Although it is near the bottom of the jug I think this hole is too small to have been made intentionally for a spigot (a difficult thing to do in any case in stoneware) and it is more likely to be a defect. Maybe it was caused by a lime particle in the clay, which can cause a hole to appear some time after firing, when it is too late for the customer to reject the pot.

As well as their routine uses, this type of jug was also used for so-called witch bottles, particularly in England. These were charms used since the 16th century either to counteract a spell which a victim was suffering from or as general protection against evil spirits. The idea was to put special items in the bottle, put a stopper in the mouth and hide it or bury it in the home (typically under the hearth). Commonly these items would include nails and pins for the spirits to impale themselves on, wine or urine to drown the evil spirits, as well as special herbs such as rosemary. Of all the witch bottles found in England, more than half are Bellarmines. When I got my jug it had an ancient-looking cork in the neck and I did wonder what might be inside. However, it was empty.

The success of these jugs resulted in them being shipped all over the world, and examples have been found in Indonesia, India, Japan and colonial America. They weren't just used for shipping drink – the Dutch East India Company used them for transporting mercury, and one used for that purpose turned up in Western Australia. Inevitably, some other countries tried to make their own versions of these jugs. In England several pottery workshops experimented in their production, but only in the late 17th century, by which time demand was falling as competing materials such as glass were taking market share. Copies were even made in Japan. Interestingly, Van Gogh included a Bartmann jug in one of his paintings and from its appearance it looks like a Japanese copy. It is not clear whether Van Gogh was aware of this but he did greatly admire Japanese arts and crafts.



Detail from Van Gogh painting

Kevin Akhurst
June 2023