



Paperweight Collectors Association, Inc.

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Marshall Deitsch Pinchbeck Paperweights

Here is a question for you!

What do the metals copper and zinc have to do with glass paperweights?

The answer is that these two metals are the principal ingredients in an alloy that was invented back in the early 1700s by Mr. Christopher Pinchbeck, a London watch and musical clock-maker, whose portrait is shown here.

His alloy was the sensation of the jewelry world in its time because it looked exactly like pure gold, but it cost far less. He named his alloy “Pinchbeck Metal”, after himself. Others referred to it as “Poor Man’s Gold”.

Although Mr. Pinchbeck clearly labeled his alloy for what it was and never intended to trick or fool anyone with his look-alike alternative to gold, others did. Many jewelers used it for inferior goods, passing off Pinchbeck alloy as real gold. And soon after his death in 1732, Pinchbeck’s name became synonymous with something other than his imitation alloy. The word “Pinchbeck” began to mean anything that was a cheap imitation or a counterfeit copy of a more grand or expensive item, and the alloy was used extensively for cheap jewelry, small trinket boxes, buckles, locket and watch cases.

The composition of the Pinchbeck alloy was approximately 83% copper, 17% zinc, with a few other minor additions thrown in to enhance the mixture. The exact composition was a secret passed on to his son Edward, who continued making the alloy, then later died without telling anyone else the exact formula. But others were able to figure it out approximately and the alloy was widely imitated. It continued its popularity long after Edward’s death.

But, you might ask, what does all this have to do with paperweights?

Mr. Pinchbeck never made a paperweight in his life. But now let’s “fast –forward” about a hundred years later to the early 1840s. At that time, skilled craftsmen were able to create an intaglio mold of some popular subject or painting scene, and then they pressed and burnished a thin metal foil, made of the Pinchbeck alloy, down onto the mold. Next, the foil was lifted out of the mold and hand-tooled to bring out the delicate detail. The figures of people and animals in the foil became exact replicas of the painting scene or subject desired.. These hand-tooled foils were then installed under a protective, magnifying, round glass dome and supported by a base made of pewter or marble or alabaster that was screwed or cemented to the dome, to form a paperweight. Some of the metal bases were covered with leather or velvet. These were all called “Pinchbeck Paperweights” and were very popular in France and England in the 1840s and 1850s. Shown in Figure 1 is cross-section showing the construction of such a paperweight:



Christopher Pinchbeck
(1670—1732)

Figure 2 shows a side view of what they really look like:

And in Figure 3 we can see what they look like from the top.

Cross-section of Pinchbeck Paperweight

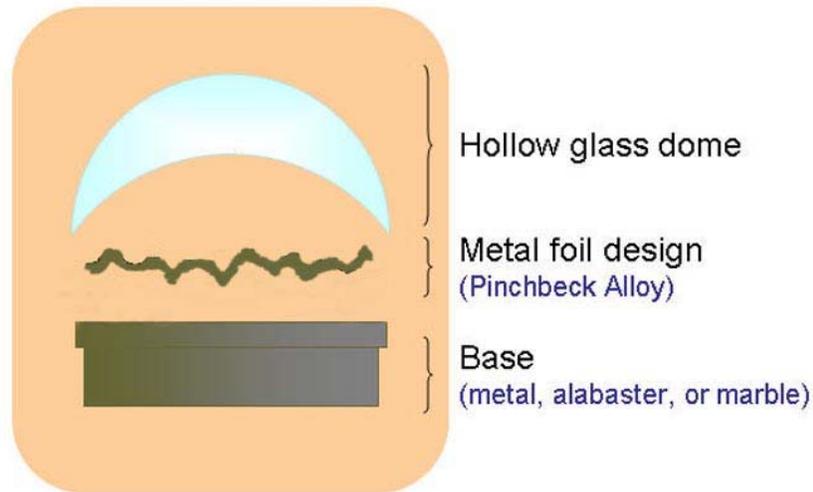


Figure 1. Pinchbeck Cross-Section

Although the Pinchbeck alloy was typically used to create the paperweights showing scenes with a gold-like appearance, other metal foils such as silver and pewter were used to create scenes with a more silvery

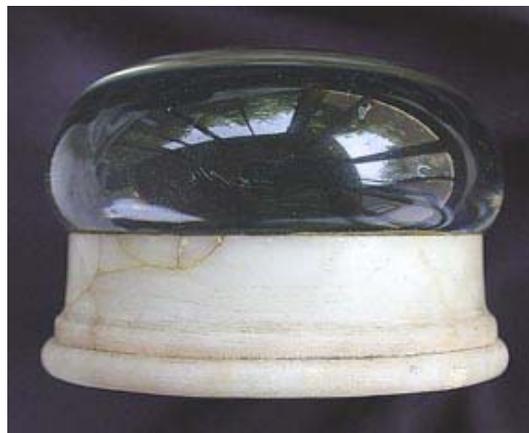


Figure 2. Pinchbeck Side View

color, as shown in Figure 4:

Some Pinchbeck paperweights even used a combination of gold-like and silver-like foils to create a very



Figure 3. Pinchbeck Top View—Gold Color

striking appearance, shown here in Figure 5:

Some of the foils were even hand-painted before installation under their glass domes, to add color to their appearance, but these painted paperweights were not very common and are considered even more rare than their



Figure 4. Pinchbeck Top View—Silver Color

unpainted counterparts.

Because the skills of mold-making, metal-working, and glass-making were all involved in the construction of these paperweights, it is extremely doubtful that they were created by only one artist or even by one factory. It is also a difficult task to determine in which country the paperweights were made, although those with marble or



Figure 5. Pinchbeck Top View— Gold and Silver

alabaster bases are thought to have been constructed in France, while those with metal bases are generally attributed to England.

In his book entitled “Paperweights” (1968, page 18), John Bedford writes: “It is difficult to place pinchbeck weights to a factory. Those with marble bases are thought to be French, but there are others where the base is of pewter screwed on and covered with velvet. These may possibly be English.”

Subject matter might be another clue to the country of origin. Not that I am meaning to offend anyone, but for the sake of comparisons, allow me to conjecture that scenes of rowdy persons drinking in pubs might possibly hint of English construction, while country scenes of beautifully dressed ladies on horseback, lovers embracing, or nymphs bathing, could hint of French manufacture. Biblical and mythological scenes would be even more difficult to determine.

In order to test these assumptions as a means of determining the country of origin, I have attempted to correlate the nature of the scene shown on the front (top) of the paperweight with the material used for its base (bottom). In other words, do all the rowdy English drinking pubs have metal bases while all the nymphs and country scenes have marble or alabaster bases? And what about the painted Pinchbecks? What scenes or bases do these have?

We can begin to examine the answers to these questions by looking at some photos of the Pinchbecks and comparing their scenes with their bases. Please keep in mind that in order to photograph a Pinchbeck paperweight, one must try to take a photo of the scene through its magnifying lens. So, the Pinchbecks are probably the most difficult type of paperweights to get decent photographs of. Therefore, I make no apologies for the quality of the photos that you are about to see.

Although one could photograph the weight under water to eliminate the magnifying effect, this should never be attempted because if the base is not watertight, the possibility of corrosion to the metal foil is not worth the risk. In fact, if you ever do see a green color on the foil, it shows that corrosion has already occurred. First, let’s take a look at Pinchbecks with metal bases to see if the scenes depicted look “English”.

In Figure 6, we can see a scene of five men sitting around a table in a pub drinking and carrying on. Its



Figure 6. Pub With Five Men

pewter metal base is covered with a leather-like paper. This weight fits the idea of a Pinchbeck made in England.

In Figure 7 we see a faceted Pinchbeck weight that contains a scene of a well dressed woman attending to a young girl, while two gentlemen look on. The base is metal, covered by a brown ribbed fabric (corduroy?). Based upon the clothing of the people depicted and the nature of the scene, I would estimate French manufacture for this weight.

Figure 8 and 9 show an outdoor scene with two dancers being watched by seven people and a small baby (although the baby may not be watching). The base is metal, covered with a worn piece of brown leather. In my opinion, this scene looks French.



Figure 7. Facetted Pinchbeck With Woman and Girl



Figure 8. Pinchbeck with Outdoor Scene and Dancers

Figure 10 shows a painted Pinchbeck. It shows a group of revelers dancing at an outdoor party in the countryside. Based on the scene and figures depicted, this weight seem French and has a metal base.

Based on the examination of all these Pinchbecks, and comparing the construction of their bases with their “Frenchness” or “Englishness” of subject matter (if such terms do exist), we may conclude that neither the scene depicted, nor the construction of its base provides a reliable method of determining the country of origin of the Pinchbeck paperweights.



Figure 9. Close-up of Dancers

However, regardless of their country of origin, we can conclude that because of their beauty and rarity, their detailed workmanship, their accurate portrayal of the subject matter and their clever technique of magnifying miniature works of art, the type of paperweights known as Pinchbecks are both interesting and desirable from a collector's standpoint. They certainly are to me, since I now have 19 of them in my personal collection. They were first manufactured in France and England in the early 1840s, before the Clichy, Baccarat and St. Louis factories ever made their first paperweights. Yet, at prices ranging from about \$800 to \$2500, they are priced within the reach of many of the collectors of antique paperweights.



Figure 10. Polychrome Pinchbeck



Figure 11. Modern Pinchbeck of Churchill