

BY ROBERT M. VETTER

The "Jan Steen flagon"



"Jan Steen" flagon, about 8 inches high; no visible touch; late sixteenth or early seventeenth century. Although acquired at Bergen, Norway, this flagon has all the characteristics of Dutch work. *Victoria and Albert Museum, London.*

and related Continental pewter

DURING THE SIXTEENTH and seventeenth centuries the spouted decanting vessel known to collectors and dealers as the "Jan Steen flagon" was, to judge from its frequent appearance as a picturesque accessory in the paintings of Dutch and Flemish masters of the period, an indispensable utensil in every Dutch and Flemish household. Jan Steen was neither the first nor the last to be aware of the artistic possibilities of this simple object and to give it a prominent place in his pictures. Perhaps it is because he seems to have seen something particularly humorous in its quaint and expressive shape that we call the type after him today. The detail from one of his paintings illustrated, showing a boy filling the flagon unceremoniously from a wine jar, is typical of Steen's use of it in funny or vulgar scenes.

From these records it appears that this decanter was in fashion in fairly standardized form for about a hundred and fifty years; pictures dated as far back as 1550 show the type already fully developed. Certain features and technical peculiarities distinguish it from contemporary Dutch pewter types. It is very heavy, intended for rough use; and the metal is always of excellent quality. The absence of engraving confirms the flagon's utilitarian purpose; fillets or incised lines are sparingly applied.

The flagon is found in four heights: about twelve, ten, eight, and five and a half inches. The body is pear shaped with a bell-mouthed lip, and the profiled rim of the domed lid matches the lip. Spool shaped or cylindrical (both types occur in early pictures), the foot is hollow; a flat bottom is suspect. A heavy, jutting handle, semi-circular in section and visibly thickened under the hinge, balances the hexagonal spout. Its terminal either points downward, turns up, or projects horizontally—in which case it is slightly lobed. Two types of the "Dutch erect" thumbpiece are distinguishable. The spout has projections at the top to prevent drops from running down, and its lip, which may be square or pointed, is sometimes grooved to give the jet direction. The base of the spout is either squared off or chamfered, and it is strengthened at the point of attachment by a fillet. The thumbpiece of the double-hinged small flap slants forward and is similar to the one on the lid.

The touch is found on the outer surface of the handle, inside the lid, or, rarely, on top of it. The small rose in use in the Netherlands well before 1600 frequently appears, flanked by the maker's initials and sometimes in juxtaposition to the town arms. There may also be gauging and house marks.

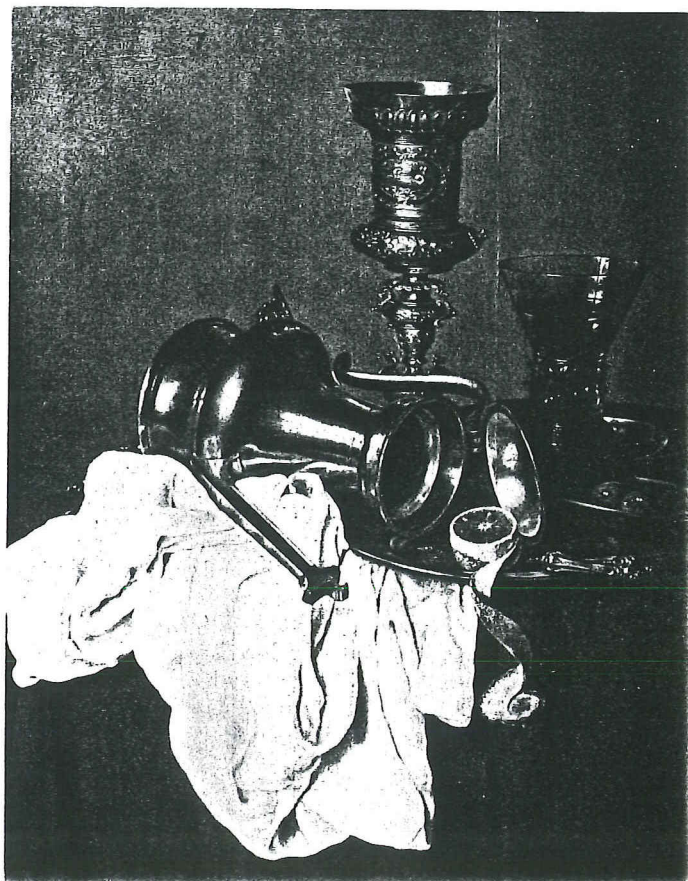
A masterly representation of the Jan Steen flagon in a still life dated 1642, probably by G. W. Heda (active 1642-1702). *Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.*

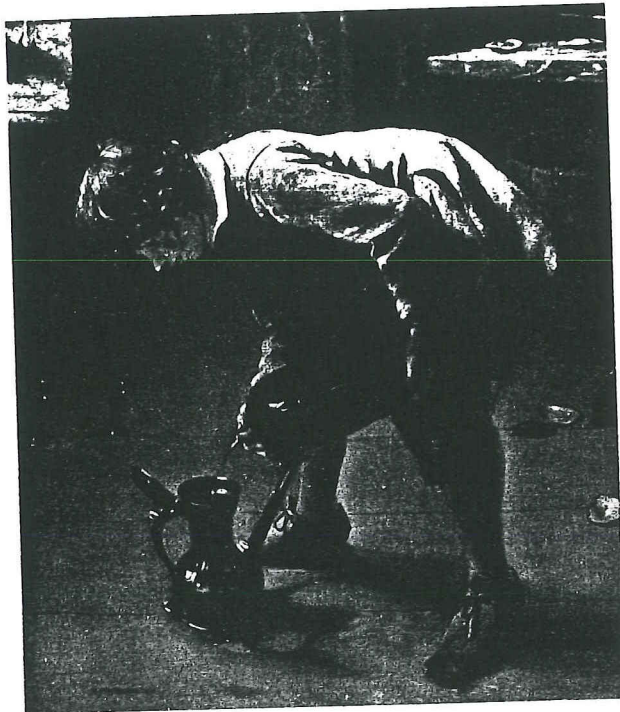
Considering that in the seventeenth century there was probably no Dutch household without its Jan Steen decanter, surprisingly few specimens have survived. This type is today one of the rarest and most coveted in pewter; during my long stay in Holland I came across only about a dozen genuine specimens.

There are, however, several related types of spouted pewter flagon in other Continental countries. Most of those which still exist have been found in Switzerland, where they were popular during several centuries, but the form is typical of wine-growing and wine-consuming regions, and there are very early specimens which originated in the countries bordering the Rhine.

Outside the Netherlands we miss the painted records which the great Dutch masters have left us, but marks and touches of pewter in the other Continental countries have been much more carefully tabulated—which makes it easier to determine places of origin. On the rest of the Continent the bridged type is most common. The structural necessity for this bridge or strut, tying the spout to the body, is not obvious in pewter; it is reminiscent of ceramic work, from which it may have been derived.

In Switzerland spouted flagons were often given as prizes at shooting competitions, in which case we find





The flagon in a detail from a painting by Jan Steen (1626-1679). Van Beuningen collection.



Detail from a painting by Frans van Mieris (1635-1681). Mauritshuis, The Hague.

them stamped or engraved with a device of crossed guns. Some are beautifully engraved—mostly wriggled work—with initials of owners, donors, or guild members, dates and symbols referring to guild use, or floral ornamentation. Two touches are as a rule impressed on the handle or on the lid. One represents the town arms, the other contains the pewterer's name or initials and often a hieroglyphic allusion to his name. The closing seal on the bottom shows, on the inside, a rosette or some other device. This is a survival of the medieval practice of applying religious subjects at this spot—a pious custom almost completely abandoned during the Renaissance. These particulars apply not only to spouted flagons but to Continental pewter in general, from which Dutch pewter differs in so many respects as to form a class by itself.

The Bubenberg flagon at the Landesmuseum in Zurich, a piece of exceptional vigor with an interesting carrying strap, may have been the prototype of the Bernese flagon shown. Similar flagons were made in different parts of Switzerland well into the seventeenth century. They were called *Stubenkannen* and their use, like that of the German *Ratskanne* and the French *cimaise*, was chiefly ceremonial. More akin to the Dutch type is the Cologne flagon. Its round, corrugated spout, twin-acorn thumb-piece, attachment of the handle, and openwork design of the bridge, are medieval; however, this piece cannot be dated earlier than the first half of the sixteenth century. The hexagonal spout attached to the conical body of the Tyrolese decanter is usual on pewter flagons of all sizes in Austria, but this is a rare and interesting item; the arm-shape bridge resembles Swiss examples. Stylistically, the

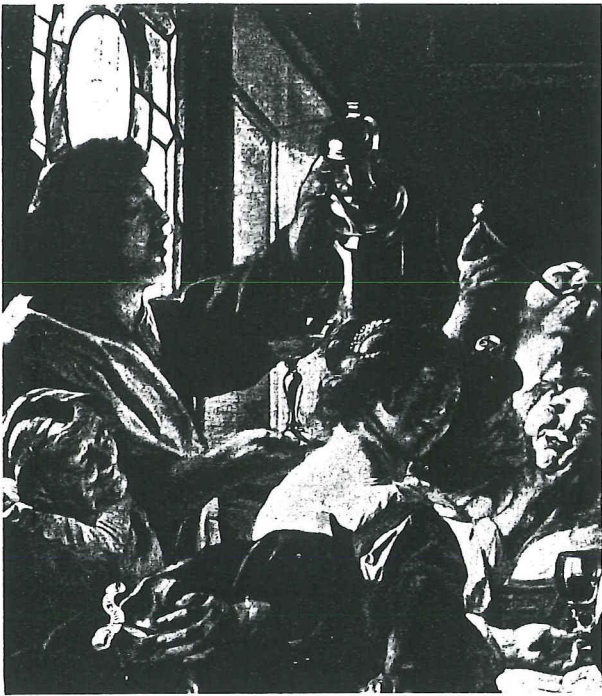
spouted flagons widely used in Provence and in the Lyons district of France belong to the Mediterranean area.

Decanters with short spouts and detachable lids hail from southern Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. Most of the round, bell-shape flagons called *Glockenkanne* were made at Zurich. The spout of this type is closed by a screw cap, and the lid is also screwed on. The prototype of the *Glockenkanne* dates from the sixteenth century and appears in contemporary Nuremberg woodcuts. I myself remember having seen such flagons in use for carrying cider to peasants working in the fields.

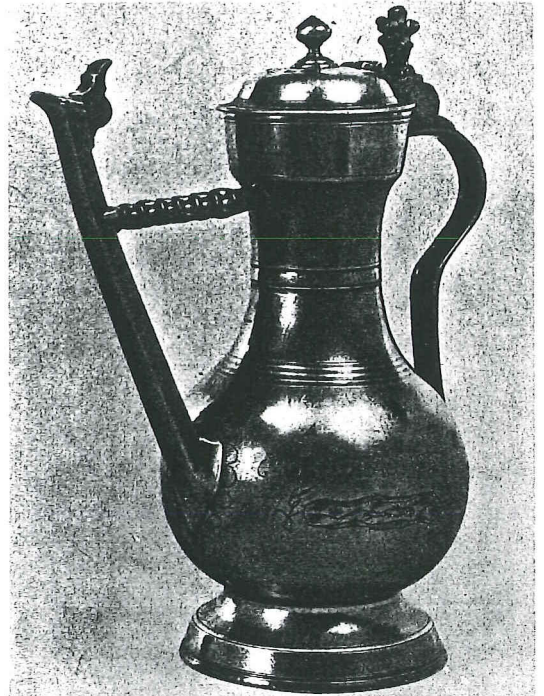
The only spouted flagon which I have so far been able to ascribe to Great Britain is in the Rijksmuseum at Amsterdam. Its similarity in general shape and in most details to an Elizabethan plain flagon in the Cyril C. Minchin collection is so pronounced that a common origin seems beyond doubt. The sweep and attachment of the handle, and the placing of the hinge above and beyond the lip, are characteristic and quite un-Continental.

As far as the outline of the body is concerned there is a curious similarity between the Dutch Jan Steen flagon and the Scottish "pot-bellied" measure. This unspouted type dates from about 1680, so there can be little doubt as to which came first—showing, as does the "tappit hen," that the Scottish pewterer was not so impervious to Continental influence as his English confrere.

With all their regional differences, there is a kinship between the various Continental spouted decanters and the Jan Steen flagon. And what attracted the painters of this type attracts us still: a feeling that form and function are blended here successfully and harmoniously.



Detail from *The Bean King's Feast*, by Jacob Jordaens (1593-1678). This and the Van Mieris both show the customary way of holding the flagon by the neck while pouring. *Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna*.



Swiss (Bernese) flagon with angel mark and F crowned, height 11 inches; probably by Abraham Ganting of Bern; dated 1777. The bridge is shaped like an outstretched arm. *Victoria and Albert Museum*.



Swiss flagon bearing the arms of the Bubenberg family; height without the iron strap, about 13 inches; from Spietz (Thun), c. 1500. *Landesmuseum, Zurich*.

Sixteenth-century flagon with gothic detail; Cologne touch (three crowns and master's initials, G L; initials repeated in relief inside lid); height 8 1/4 inches. *Author's collection*.





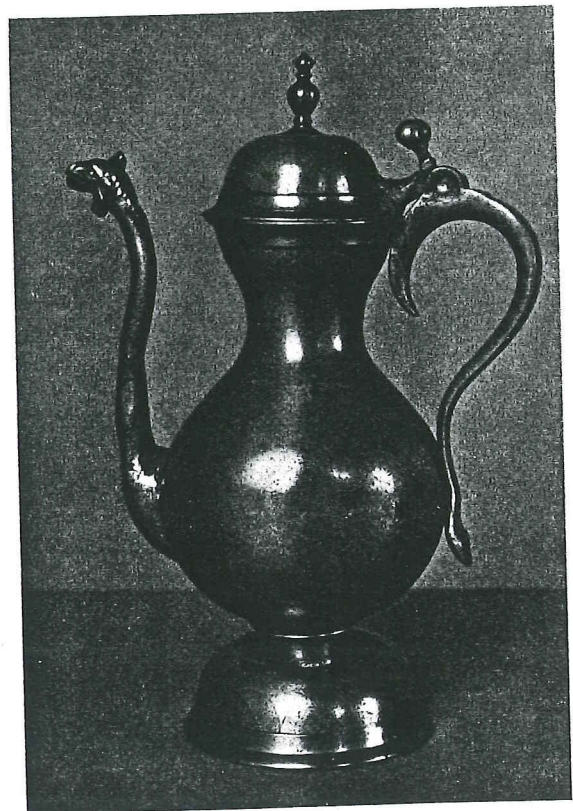
Tyrolese flagon with touch of Franz Sick of Innsbruck, c. 1716; bridge in the shape of an arm. *Museum für Volkskunde, Vienna.*



Spouted drinking flagon from the South of France, dated 1670; height 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches. *Collection of H. P. Titsingh; photograph by the Rijksmuseum voor Volkskunde, Arnhem.*



German *Glockenkanne* with marriage dedication, dated July 21, 1684; height 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches. *Victoria and Albert Museum.*



The only British spouted decanter known, about 8 inches high, Elizabethan; foot, lip, and cover are strengthened by brass rings. *Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.*