

POST-CHRISTMAS SEASON / NACHWEIHNACHTZEIT

New Year's Eve: Silvesterabend (der 31. Dezember)

New Year Eve belief: Silvesterabendglaube

lead-pouring: das Bleigießen

Is it heart-shaped – signifying a love to come? Could it be seen as a horseshoe – luck awaiting you in the New Year? Is it a mountain, meaning difficulties to overcome? Wild speculations as to what kind of shape fate has formed, are just as much part of the fun as the guessing of its meaning for the person in question.

Naturally, mankind's eternal wish to get a glimpse of the future culminates at this focal point of the last night of the year. As a nation, Germans, in general, are not said to be superstitious. Most would never visit a fortuneteller and would be embarrassed if someone called them superstitious. Those small semi-automatic gestures like knocking on wood (= not wanting to challenge bad luck) or symbolically spitting into one's hands before throwing dice, have turned into meaningless rituals, mere remnants of former traditions, whose origins are often completely forgotten.

However, summing up one's past experiences and wondering about what the next year has in store, is nothing to be ashamed of. Therefore, this playful way of talking about one's expectations in the sheltered, relaxed ambience of a group of friends or family, has lost little of its attraction.

Once all have agreed on what the object shows, the difficult task of deciphering the meaning begins. In one house, a brainstorming crowd will shout their interpretations like participants in a television quiz show, where speed and wealth of associative thinking will win the prize. In others, "serious" interpreters, after turning the object around and around, will set to work. A few hints may be found in the booklet of the Bleigiessen box itself as examples, but for the innumerable shapes that do not fit any of these, more help is needed. Luckily, the December issues of popular magazines may have published a list of symbols and their alleged meaning, several can be found in the Internet, or families just draw up their own or revert to a dictionary of symbols.

It is believed that Bleigiessen has already been practiced by the ancient Romans, who, research shows, knew how to melt lead. Others place its origins even earlier, in Mesopotamic times, where Babylonians supposedly created the tradition, which then spread to the east as far as China and the west as far as Greece. It may also have originated in Greece and then was taken up by the Romans. However, there are no hard facts to corroborate these theories.

Christian tradition, of course, has always been skeptical towards and critical of any supersti-

ONE OF THE BLEIGIESSEN LEAD SHAPES IS MELTED OVER AN OPEN CANDLE FLAME USING A SPOON.



THE BLEIGIESSEN SET
TYPICALLY CONSISTS OF A SERIES OF HOLLOW LEAD SHAPES TO BE MELTED AND A SPOON FOR HOLDING THE LEAD OVER A CANDLE FLAME.