

Fairy Lamp Club Newsletter

Issue XVII February 2007

ALEXANDRITE FAIRY LAMP by Jim

As we all know, there are many rare and unusual fairy lamps. With so many it is difficult to identify one as the rarest of the rare. Alexandrite, however, surely must be near the top of the list.

My first introduction to an Alexandrite fairy lamp was illustrated in R-633. At first, I did not appreciate the significance of this "rather plain" fairy lamp.



As time passed and my knowledge grew, it took on a much greater importance. That importance grew significantly again when I was able to add an Alexandrite fairy lamp to my collection.



This Alexandrite fairy lamp, shown on a cut crystal stand, came from the fairy and miniature lamp collection of the late Gloria Shulman. Ms. Shulman's family wished to have the collection go to fellow lamp collectors and sold the collection to Bob Culver, founder of Night Light Club. Bob, respecting the wishes of the Shulman family, offered the lamps to members of the Fairy Lamp Club, the Night Light Club and the Rushlight Club. Ms. Shulman was a member of each of these clubs and, I suspect, she would be very pleased to know that so many of her lamps have found loving homes among fellow collectors.¹

So, what is Alexandrite? First, it is a rare mineral (chrysoberyl) found in Ural

¹ Bob Culver still has several choice lamps for sale from the Shulman collection at mylamplist.com.

Mountains in Russia. It is light citron green by daylight and red by incandescent light. Other varieties of Alexandrite may be yellowish or pink in daylight and a columbine or raspberry red by incandescent light. Because of their rarity and the color change capability, Alexandrite gemstones are some of the most expensive in the world.²

Of course, we are not here to talk about gemstones. As you can see, however, the coloration and name of this unusual fairy lamp is based upon naturally occurring colors found in the gemstone by the same name.



The colors of this lamp are exceedingly difficult to photograph and much harder to

reproduce on an inkjet printer. The base color is pale citron yellow, (straw yellow) shading to a rose red or lavender, shading to a deep violet or blue. Hmm...not only is it hard to photograph, it is equally hard to describe.³

Alexandrite is a homogenous heat reactive glass⁴ much like Burmese. The range of colors is created by reheating the shade twice after the shape is first formed. The first reheating creates the rose red or lavender color changing from the light citron yellow base color. The final reheating produces the deep violet blue color.⁵ Exactly what glass formula produces the colors is unknown; however, some suggest an addition of gold to the formula could cause the color shift.

Needless to say, it was a complex process and variations in color density are common among the limited examples found. Alexandrite ware is found in both free blown and expanded blown mold shapes. I have not seen any early examples of pressed Alexandrite.

While researching Alexandrite, I consulted with members of the "Glass Message Board"⁶ in hopes of finding additional and more specific information.⁷ It was during these discussions that I learned of another characteristic of the Alexandrite color — chocolate brown.

² Wikipedia Encyclopedia, www.en.wikipedia.org

³ If you would like to see better photos of Alexandrite's distinctive colors, including the chocolate brown edge, they are on-line at tinyurl.com/27f2ht

⁴ A mixture, glass in this instance, which is completely uniform in composition and changes color when it is reheated.

⁵ *British Glass – 1800-1914*, Charles R. Hajdamach, pg. 318)

⁶ www.glassmessages.com

⁷ This discussion forum is sponsored by Angela Bowey from the Glass Museum and Glass Encyclopedia. www.glass.co.nz



Apparently, a rich chocolate brown color is evident on the edge of Alexandrite ware. I had not noticed the brown edge on this fairy lamp shade until I inspected it closely. It is a distinctive chocolate brown color that you really can not miss once you know what to look for. What causes the brown edge effect is unknown.

Alexandrite was first introduced and patented by Thomas Webb & Sons in 1901 or 1902. Without patent documents or company records, the exact date is unknown. Some researchers indicate the production was very limited and short lived. Others even go further and speculate that all known examples of Thomas Webb's Alexandrite came from a single batch of glass.⁸ Regardless of where the exact truth lies, it is clear that examples of Thomas Webb's Alexandrite are rare... especially in fairy lamps.

Thomas Webb's Alexandrite is not to be confused with glass by the same name produced by Stevens and Williams. The Stevens and Williams ware had a base glass of transparent yellow, cased with blue and rose-red, which was cut to various depths by the decorator.⁹

⁸ www.antiquecolouredglass.com, Andrew Lineham Fine Glass, London

⁹ *Art, Feat & Mystery – The Story of Thomas Webb & Sons, Glassmakers* – H.W. Woodward, P. 32

¹⁰ The dichroic, (having or showing two colors), characteristic of neodymium glass is attributable to the use of neodymium oxide in the glass batch.

¹¹ *Fairy Lamps – Elegance in Candle Lighting*, Ruf and Ruf, pg. 14.

The trade name "Alexandrite" or "Alexandrit" was also used by many other glass companies, including: Heisey, Moser, Morgantown Glass Works, Boyd's Crystal Art Glass, and Halama (Czech) to name a few. Still others use Alexandrite to mean Neodymium glass¹⁰... it gets very confusing!

Just why Webb's Alexandrite fairy lamps are so rare is unknown. Obviously, the production was very short lived and the surviving examples are exceedingly difficult to find. In terms of fairy lamps, perhaps the process was simply too complex to warrant production. Or, perhaps Clarke, realizing that his business was on the "down slope," was not interested in developing a new line of fairy lamps.

By 1900 gas light was available in towns but the elegance of the wide array of fairy lamp domes lent a mystique provided only by candle light. The popularity of the fairy lamp was clearly coming to an end and the flow of new designs and types of glass was ebbing. The clear dome Cricklite on fancy cut glass standards as used for dining lighting was *de rigueur*.¹¹

I know there must be other examples of Alexandrite fairy lamps. If you have one, or have additional information to share, I would love to hear about it.