

Fairy Lamp Club Newsletter

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THE BLAIR LITHOPHANE MUSEUM

by Connie

Last September on a Sunday afternoon John and I visited a wonderful Lithophane museum, which is located in the Toledo Botanical Gardens¹. It opened in July 2002 and houses the largest Lithophane collection in the world. On display are about 450 of the 2300 Lithophanes in the collection.



*Laurel Gotshall Blair, 1909-1993
Founder of the Blair Museum of Lithophanes.
Portrait by Peggy Grant, artist and Blair
Museum Advisory Board member.*

Mr. Blair, a Toledo resident, started collecting about 1958 and traveled around the United States and Europe buying Lithophanes. When flying, he often purchased a separate ticket for his purchases. He had about 450 Lithophanes when he purchased a 1500 piece collection from a Florida couple in the early 1960s.



He left his collection to the City of Toledo which donated the current building to house the collection.

Each Lithophane in the museum is lit with its own light that allows you to view each picture, as it should be seen. With all the preparation necessary, it took several years to prepare the collection for viewing.



The subjects of the Lithophanes include: landscapes; natural phenomena such as volcanoes, mountains and waterfalls; ships and battles on land and sea; portraits of famous people; copies of paintings; village scenes; family scenes, many of which include children; and religious art. Originally Lithophanes were lit by candle or oil.

¹ www.toledogarden.org



The image on the left shows the various thicknesses in the porcelain to create the Lithophane. The image on the right is backlit revealing the detail in the resulting image.

Lithophanes are a 19th-century art form. They must be backlit to make the picture visible. To make a Lithophane, wax is placed on a piece of glass that is backlit. The picture is sketched on the wax, and then the picture is developed in the wax with a modeling knife. The depth of the cut determines how light or dark different parts of the picture will be. The wax design is covered with Plaster of Paris that hardens into a mold. The soft porcelain is pressed into the mold, fired in a kiln and the translucent porcelain Lithophane emerges. Because they are so delicate, many were broken in the process of being made. Some Lithophanes are left white while others are hand-colored.



The colors appear harsh in reflected light but becomes soft and diffuse when backlit adding greatly to the beauty of the scene.

Many are flat plaques of varying sizes from a miniature 1" x 1 1/2" to about 12" x 14" which are displayed in showcases around the museum.



King Edward VII – Reign 1901-1910

Famous people are sometimes depicted in Lithophanes. Among some we saw are Zachary Scott and Abraham Lincoln. Some plaques are in metal frames and placed on lamps or hung in front of a light source.



Some round shades are just porcelain and are very fragile. Other plaques were in frames

with candleholders in the back that would hold fairy lamp candles, others had no candle holders and would be placed in front of candles.



There were a few steins with Lithophanes in the bottom and tea warmers or Vielleuses with Lithophane bases.



There also was a Lithophane ladies' fan used to protect her eyes from an open flame. Fairy lamp shades, both white and colored, were displayed in a variety of holders. Two fairy size lamps on a stand had metal finials attached to the bottom on the candle holders. I had never seen this before. John took pictures of the Lithophanes, but not of any of the fairy lamps, because he says he lives with

them. The illustrations of fairy lamps and tea warmers are from my personal collection.

The museum is open May to October on Sunday afternoons between 1 and 4 pm. To make an appointment for a group tour on a special day or to get directions call 419-745-1356.

The Toledo Botanical Garden
5403 Elmer Drive
Toledo, OH 43615

They are open by appointment for groups of 10 or more upon request. Admission is \$5.

Editor's Note:

If you love Lithophanes, as I do, this museum is certainly worth a trip to Ohio. The Antique Journal described this collection in its November 1966 issue. The article is filled with additional photos and contains a wealth of information including a detailed description of the process to make Lithophanes. I have put the article on-line for your convenience. It can be found in the "On-line Articles" category.

In addition, the Blair Museum of Lithophanes website has additional information about this wonderful collection and its founder, Laurel Blair. The address for the website is: www.Lithophanemuseum.org