

Fabulous Lithophanes and Their New Home

by Don Maust

Photos: Courtesy of the Blair Museum of
Lithophanes, Toledo, Ohio

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Few people have ever heard about, let alone seen, a Lithophane. The word is not found in dictionaries or encyclopedias, but once in a while in advertisements in antique magazines, someone offers a Lithophane for sale. However, this is very rare. Generally the ones advertised are the plaques or porcelain plates.



Betrothal of Victoria to Albert.

Lithophanes are porcelain transparencies which when viewed with normal reflected light has relatively nothing to be seen except

that the porcelain is carved and is of various thicknesses, but when there is a light behind the porcelain, the picture impressed into it comes to life and the full details are revealed vividly and in three dimensions. This is caused by the various thicknesses of the porcelain and the thinner the part the more light comes through, while tile thicker portions hold back the light and appear to be darker.

The Blair Museum of Lithophanes has been opened with over 800 individually lighted Lithophanes in every known usage. You will see the plaques from those of doll house size of one inch squares to very large plaques up to 12 x 14 inches. Some plaques, which are in stained glass frames, were to be hung in windows.

There are many different sizes for use in table screens (to protect the eyes from the glare of an open lamp) or candle shields, which can be adjusted up and down with the height of the candle.

Matchboxes were made with a Lithophane in the bottom, and so were steins, cups, and mugs. These had to be lifted to the light to see the picture.

When visiting, some ladies carried a Lithophane fan. These were to protect their eyes from an open flame of a candle or lamp. Fans were made of papiermach and others of bronze with turned wood handles.

The stunning items of the collection are the gorgeous lampshades of four, five, and six sides in metal frames or the single castings of porcelain as globes and half shades. These latter

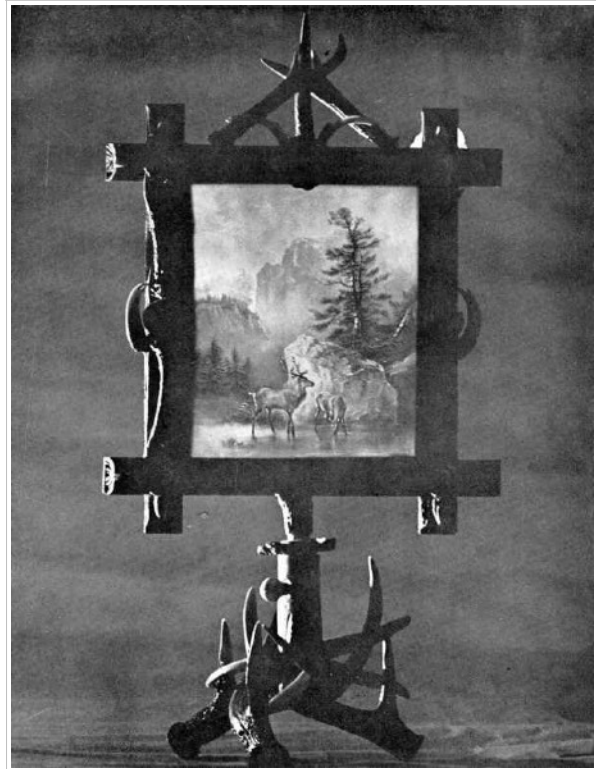
range from the small cone shaped lamp for a child's playhouse with 3 separate scenes, to the largest shade in the collection which is 17 1/2 inches in diameter at the base of the bell and over one foot high. This remarkable casting with one continuous scene does not have a single flaw, which is unusual for a piece of porcelain of this dimension. Some of the globes and half shades are colored.



Laurel G. Blair viewing one of the lighted walls of various size Lithophanes. The lower tier of Lithophanes are framed in stained glass and metal and some of the glass are etched.

Some Lithophanes are colored on the face, and others on the reverse side, and are refired.

Other special usages shown in the museum are fairy lights, veilleuse (night-lights) veilleuse-therier (night light teapots), vigil lights for home altars or for side chapels in churches or cathedrals, dessert plates and souvenirs for special occasions.



As avid hunter made this special frame of antlers for this Lithophane in color of the buck and doe at the water hole. The mist and snow in the mountains are wonderful to study.

Portraits of presidents, kings, queens, Martin Luther, John Calvin and other notables are in the collection and the genre pictures give you an idea of the clothing, furnishings and activities and thoughts of the people of the 19th Century. The interest in children, the sentimentality and also the humor, the religious pictures the outdoor and hunting scenes reveal the life of the times.

But until you see a Lithophane, it is impossible to understand them because of their three dimensional quality and their ability to spring to life when the light is turned on behind them. No experience of viewing art

works previously prepares you for the first time you see a Lithophane.

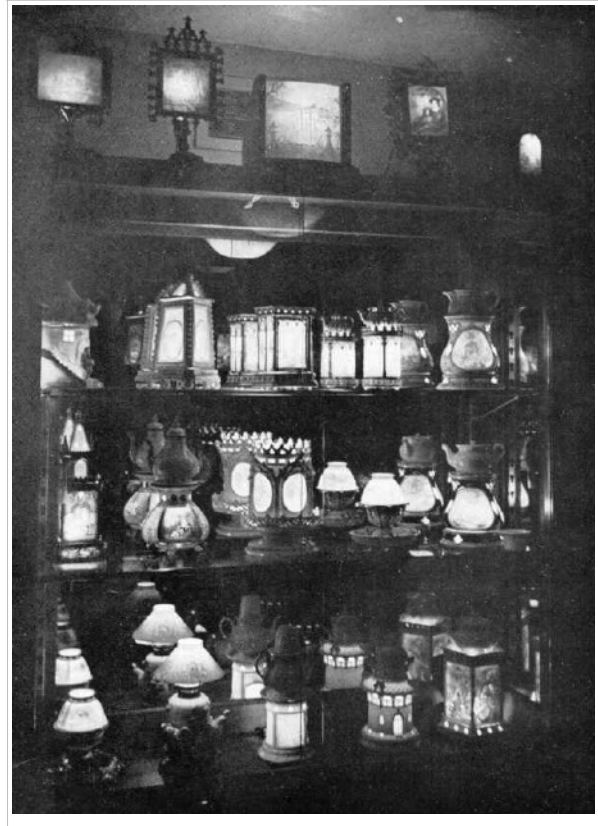
What then are Lithophanes are porcelain transparencies which when viewed with a light behind them tile full details of the scene impressed into the porcelain are revealed. They are pictures but in three dimensions instead of the two dimension forms as found in paintings, etchings and prints.



A hall lamp that can be lowered to change the candle or wick, and then returned above the heads of people, has brass and iron dividers, and red stained glass which has been etched, and five Lithophanes in color.



A hall light with blue glass and blue bulls eyes surrounding very fine colored Lithophanes of Roman subjects.



On top of the case are five candle shields, some of wood, others of cast iron or brass mountings. Inside the case, top shelf, left to right, a porcelain veilleuse-therier of Romeo and Juliet, with the top of Juliet's head the spout of the teapot; A three sided veilleuse or night light made with a base, and a top; The base of a veilleuse-therier but the pot is missing. It is six sided with the four end panels in color; A veilleuse-therier in gold and very delicate with three Lithophane pictures, and a veilleuse-therier with two Lithophanes. Middle row shows a night light of painted porcelain of four sides in a steeple; A three-Lithophane night light with arabesque Lithophane dividers rests on orange feet and supports a teapot with an orange handle and pineapple finial on the lid. The next is the base of a very tall cathedral chapel light with four Lithophanes and Gothic arches. The top is missing, and the only other one known is broken. A gold and enameled Fairy light with three scenes, and another night light teapot with two Lithophanes of farmyard scenes. The bottom shelf has a metal base and a blue enameled Fairy light with three scenes; a very delicate half shade atop a Meissen lamp base; a night light teapot with three scenes and a cap as a lid for the pot; a light house porcelain night-light teapot, not lithophanic; and the only five-sided Lithophane night-light teapot in the world.

On viewing Lithophanes you should see them without a light turned on and

then with the light to appreciate the difference. Viewing the unlighted Lithophane makes the plaque seem to be a peculiar plastic form with indentations and it is impossible to determine what the picture really is, but when tile light is on from behind it is amazing the amount of details that can be seen. In fact, the details are so minute that even a magnifying glass will show details your naked eye cannot see.



Cast brass gas light of gauntleted hand holding the "Four Seasons." Winter and Spring are shown in the picture. Notice the arabesques dividing the pictures.



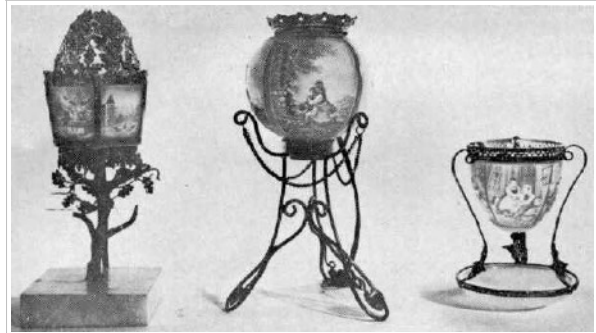
Wrought iron table screen made in Berlin with one of the Sistine Madonna putt in as the Lithophane subject.

History and nature Lithophanes were made during a relatively short period from 1828 until 1902. Because so few Lithophanes are now in existence there are few people who have actually seen them, and until you see

them it is impossible to fully understand this art form. Even when looking at Lithophanes many people cannot believe that there is not a picture imbedded in the plate of porcelain. In most of the porcelains there is no color but the whole optical phenomena is produced by the relative density and thickness of the porcelain. The thicker the porcelain the more difficult it is for the light to go through and therefore the darker that particular area, and conversely, the easier it is for the light to penetrate so that the thinnest areas are almost a pure white light.

The Beginning

A patent taken out in 1827 by Baron de Bourgoing of Rubelles, France Potteries is considered by some to be the beginning of this art form, and other factories were licensed to produce them in other countries. In this collection there are examples of Lithophanes made by the Rubelles plant, and also a French company with the mark ADT, which probably means the factory owned by A. DeTrombley, and some lampshades were made in Paris. There were some fine examples made in Mons, Belgium and the English porcelain manufacturers also made some although their manufacturing mark is not found on any pieces except those made by Wedgwood. Of course, Wedgwood is not as well known for its production of porcelain as it is for basalt and "Queens ware," but some fine and important Wedgwood "intaglios in porcelain" are in the Blair Museum collection.



A five-sided night light with metal leaves on top and held up by a brass tree; a brass holder displays a colored ball with 4 pictures; and a milk glass dish at the base of a brass device to hold a hanging Lithophane with three pictures.

German Producers

The outstanding producers of Lithophanes were the German porcelain companies including tile Royal Porcelain Company and the Meissen and Plau porcelain companies. Every porcelain company in Germany seemed to make some examples and their marks reveal that their products were superior in quality to those of other producers. Yet, each company and the artist of each company seemed to have its own technique for obtaining tile final result. It is very interesting to observe the differences between each of the techniques. In other words, the modeling of the original mould is as varied as the brush strokes and laying on of paint in oil painting.

No Lithophane has ever been signed by an artist. The manufacturer's mark is often found on the reverse side of the plaque. It would be difficult for each of the artists to have signed the work, as there were so many involved

in the making of the porcelain art object.



A view of a corner of the museum showing Laurel G. Blair holding a Berlin cast iron candle shield with a picture of Zachary Taylor as a General before he became President, the "Chapel" with many religious pictures on the left above a case filled with steins, dessert plates, fans, miniature plaques and match boxes. On the right of the picture are other subjects in plaques and the lower row all have Lithophanes framed in stained glass. The cabinet below has metal tea warmers framing Lithophanes, and small half shades and a pair of Wedgwood shades in the foreground.

Picture Subjects

Artists of the highest rank were needed to make the master dies from which the Lithophanes could be molded from fine porcelain biscuit and then fired in the kilns. First the company officials would have to decide on what pictures were to be reproduced into a Lithophane and in what size. The pictures are copies of the old masters, many religious pictures, and genre scenes, and range

in size from the miniature 1 1/4 inches by 1 inch to plaques as large as 12 inches by 15 inches, and lamp shades as large as 1 foot high and 17 1/2 inches in diameter at the base of the bell.

Wax Carving First

When it was decided what picture was to be reproduced and in what size, the artist had before him a sheet of wax which was on a piece of plate glass. This sheet of wax had the same light transmission as the Lithophane would have at completion. The artist became a sculptor taking away enough wax to cause the variations of shades and lights and darks to make the picture. Of course, the artist was copying a painting, or an etching, or a lithograph, or print, or a photograph made by a camera (photography was invented in 1826) but these are two dimensional pictures, and the artist not only had to reproduce the details that were in the picture, but because of this new medium he had to carve it in relief for depth as well as for shading. This carving would have been extremely difficult and also it becomes a completely new work of art even though it is a copy of a well-known painting.

At the beginning of the sculpturing, the wax would have been completely a flat surface and the transmission of light through the wax would have been uniform and quite dark, then the knives and ivory spatulas would have been used to cut away each graduation. Each marking of the tool would change the light transmission in the wax and as the tool cut deeper

and deeper the whiter the light transmission would be. In studying the finished pieces, you can determine the exquisite workmanship and artistry in making the original moulds.



French examples of the Lithophane art and bases made in France. The Lithophanes are single castings, and the one on the left has six scenes divided by solid porcelain strips. The base is brass with the bowl enameled in blue. The ones on the right are continuous scenes of the sconces and the candleholders have springs to raise the candles. The cases all have mirrors so that the reverse sides of the Lithophanes may be studied.

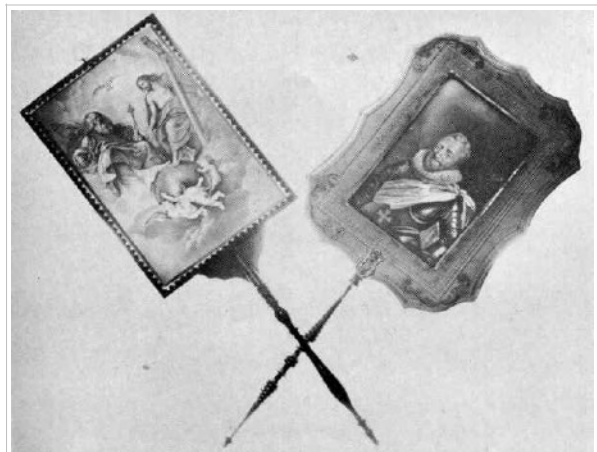
Plaster of Paris

When the artist had finished his work on the wax and the model was approved, then a plaster of Paris cast was made from that mould and this then became the master die which was used and into which was poured the porcelain dough. When the water had been sufficiently evaporated from the dough so that it could be removed from the mould, it was placed into a porcelain oven for firing. This was in

an unglazed state, but some Lithophanes are glazed, which takes an additional firing and some also have color applied which necessitates a further firing.

White and Colored Porcelain

The majority of Lithophanes are of a white porcelain, although some are of a sepia shade, others have a slight greenish tinge and a very few have an almost mauve shading. This is due to the characteristic of the clays used. Where color is wanted then transparent enamel for porcelain is applied on the porcelain and then fired for proper fusing. When you find colors in Lithophanes, the colors are often garish and not at all pleasing when viewed with reflected light, but with the transmitted light then the colors become soft, diffused, and extremely pleasing.



The one on the left is in bronze framing and the one on the right is papier-mache'. The portrait is of King Henry IV.

Hazards of Making

Each of these firings took their toll of the Lithophanes placed therein as the

furnaces were not as carefully controlled as ours are today, and the porcelain dough might have impurities so that there were many cracked or ruined during firing. It is very difficult to find any without some warping, and the English plants had great difficulty because of iron which caused the porcelain to have rust develop within it. In making lampshades they had great difficulties because of the variations of density of the Lithophanes and some of them would sag during firing. So there were many artists needed to make one Lithophane.

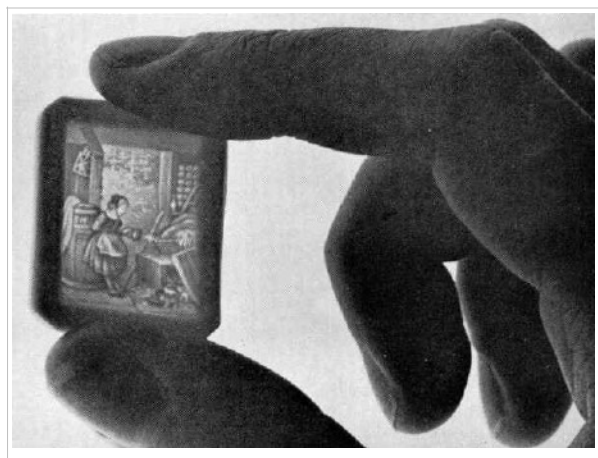


A bronze church with a removable roof and open chimney so that the light can be changed and the smoke come out the chimney, has four ADT Lithophanes and colored glass in the side windows.

Variety of Uses

In the Blair Museum of Lithophanes there are not only the very minute plaques but also some of the largest

ones. But the most important part of the collection is the display of the many items in which Lithophanes were used. Of course, the most common usage was in the bottom of steins and mugs where the drinker could see a picture when he was holding his stein aloft and quenching his thirst. They are also found in the bottoms of teacups, milk mugs, and souvenir cups. It is surprising to find pictures in the bottoms of porcelain boxes made for the wood match. A lady sometimes would carry a fan with a Lithophanes when she went to visit so as to protect her eyes from an open flame lamp. Night lights of various types were made and also lamps for use in home chapels, and the many variations of tea warmers showed the extent to which Europeans were addicted to drinking tea. These warmers are both square and round metal frames holding Lithophane plaques, some of which are curved to fit, and some are bowl shaped Lithophanes with the bottom out so that the alcohol lamp could sit inside.



A miniature Lithophane about 1 1/2 x 1 inch with exquisite detail to be used in a dollhouse hanging light or candle shield is being held to show the comparative size.

The most elaborate items for the tea service are those known as Veilleuse-Theriers (night light tea warmers) where the tea pot is an integral part of the whole set-up. They are quite interesting.

There are also a very large display of candle shields of various sizes and these mostly are adjustable with the height of the candle, so that the eye will not see the flickering of the candle but will see only a very lovely picture.

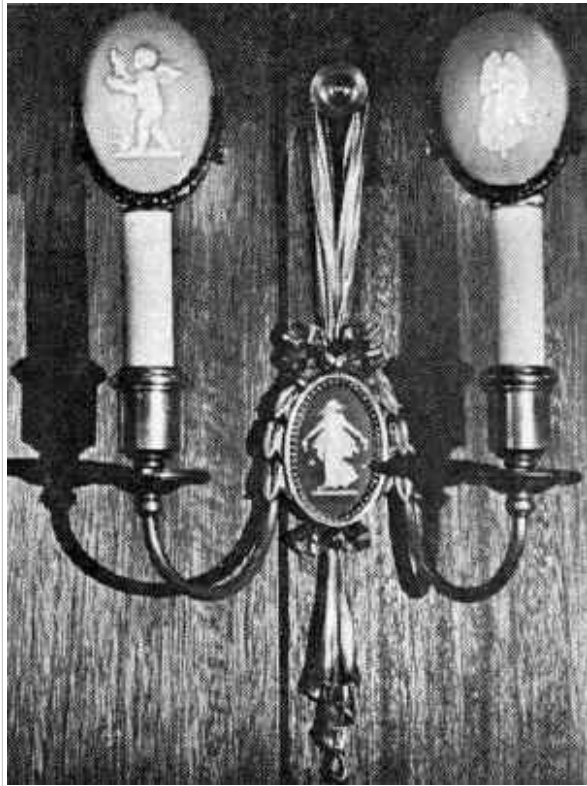
Of course, Lithophanes were very often used in the home just hung in the lower windowpane with chains. Some of the Lithophanes had holes drilled on the tops so that they could be hung that way, others were enclosed in very fine stained glass frames with brass or pewter edges, and sometimes the glass was beautifully etched. These make stunning displays.

One of the sought after collector's items is the Fairy Light, and when found with Lithophanes is extremely rare and a choice piece.

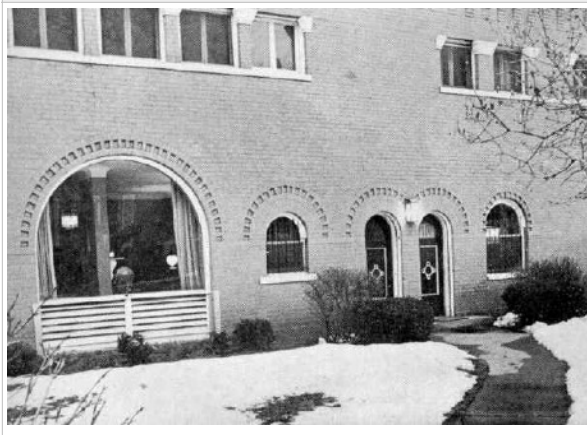
Then there are the four, five and six-sided lampshades made of metal (tin or brass) into which rectangular or trapezoid plaques are inserted to make colorful lights in the home. The globes and half shades of single castings having three or four scenes divided by arabesques in Lithophane

technique, or as a continuous scene surrounding the shade are the absolute tops of the Lithophane art and usage. Most of these are displayed in the Blair Museum on very fine lamp bases used during the Victorian era, including single and double student lamps, banquet lamps, organ lamps, and millefiori, and French cameo glass as well as some fine porcelain lamp bases.

Modern Reproductions of Lithophanes
There are being imported into this country some very fine reproductions of Lithophanes made in Plauze, East Germany at the Von Schierholz Porcelain Manufacturing Company, which Mr. Blair was fortunate in visiting. However, the items being imported are not antique as represented by various antique dealers. There are various size shades and some plaques of the trapezoid type but with the shape being different than the antiques. There is a difference in the quality of the porcelain as used in the lamp shades as it is much heavier, and the moulds cannot be corrected in their minute sections and therefore they sometimes have flaws showing, when compared with the antique castings.



Wedgwood sconce in brass with the center medallion in the green opaque background with a white figure. The shields for the candles are porcelain and the figures are uncolored porcelain where the light comes through and the face of the porcelain is enameled in yellow on the left and blue on the right.



A stable built about 1880 and now occupied on the first floor by Mr. Blair's apartment on the left and the Museum on the right. There are private apartments on the second floor.

The Blair museum of Lithophanes brings to Toledo the largest and most complete collection of these rare porcelains in the world.

The Blair Museum of Lithophanes has a collection of approximately 2800 examples of this rare and lost art.

The Museum, being a private one, is open only upon appointment and after having made arrangements at the offices at 2248 Ashland Avenue, Toledo, Ohio. The telephone number is 248-4115. The Museum is located at 220 Columbia Street, a very interesting 80-year old Italian Villa type carriage house, one and one-half blocks from the office. (1966 information)