

Lithophanes - Shadow Pictures

Hidden images that can fetch astonishing prices

By Rev. R. C. Toogood A.K.C.

I was first introduced to lithophanes when busily engaged in collecting commemorative mugs. The dealer showed me a cup and saucer with Edward VII's monogram on the cup. I said it was not what I wanted, as I only collected cups, mugs and beakers with the monarch's head. She then lifted the cup to the light and there, in the bottom of the cup, I saw a 'shadow picture' of the king, whereupon I paid what would normally have been an exorbitant price without quibbling. I was hooked!

Lithophane pictures are visible only when light passes through the various depths of an intaglio picture mould pressed into porcelain. Where the porcelain is thin the picture is lighter and where it is thick it is darker. The manufacturing process is reasonably simple, with a wax original set in a plaster cast. When the plaster is dry, the wax is removed and the mould is pressed into porcelain clay. This process was patented by Baron de Bourgoing in 1827 at Paris. The idea was enthusiastically taken up in Germany, where the Meissen Factory acquired the rights to make them from 1828, but the technique is chiefly associated with the Koniglich Porzellan Manufactur at Berlin, where a great deal of lithophanes were produced until 1858. This factory gave to lithophanes the alternative name of 'Berlin transparencies'.

In England, manufacturing rights were obtained by Robert Griffith Jones in 1828. He licensed the Worcester firm of Grainger Lee & Company to manufacture them. Some other English companies, including Minton, Coalport, Wedgwood, W.H. Goss and W.H. Copeland produced them by a slightly different method, as did the Irish Beleck factory. In Wales they were produced at Llanelly by the South Wales Pottery. On the Continent they were manufactured at Sevres in France, the Royal Copenhagen factory in Denmark, and factories in Czechoslovakia, Belgium and Portugal. However the majority of lithophanes were produced in Germany. Attempting to rival the Berlin's output was the Von Schierholz factory at Plau. At the latter end of the nineteenth century American firms entered the market, the principal one being the Phoenix Pottery Company in Pennsylvania. There is even a lithophane museum at Toledo, Ohio. Lithophanes are still being manufactured in some factories in Hungary and Germany, sometimes from old moulds, but modern examples tend to be heavier and thicker than their predecessors.

Lithophanes can be either glazed or unglazed and designs include Old Master paintings, religious scenes and the heads of monarchs in commemorative ware - in England it is Edward VII and George V who appear in these. Queen Mary is most rare. (These seem to be the only monarchs to which this technique was applied, as it went out of fashion around the time of the First World War, probably due to its German connection. Lithophanes were also made as window plaques, or used in the manufacture of items through which light passes in order to enhance them. Thus they were incorporated into night-lights, or glass shades for oil lamps. The price of these interesting articles varies with rarity, quality and place of manufacture. Interesting pieces can usually be purchased within a price bracket of £70-£200 - so happy hunting. One word of warning, though: do not get your friends interested in collecting lithophanes too, or you will start a trend and the price of pieces will go up in leaps and bounds. Of course, if you have quite a large collection that you want to sell, that is precisely the thing to do!



Crucifixion scene. £75-90. Left. Crucifixion scene showing the impression of the mould. Right. Crucifixion scene lit from behind.



Edward VII Coronation cup £80-100 according to condition. (Some do not give a crisp impression). It was produced in large numbers. Left. Edward VII Coronation cup, exterior. Right. Edward VII Coronation cup, interior, lit from behind.



George V Coronation mug £120-150 according to condition. A smaller number were made. Left. George V Coronation mug, exterior. Right. George V Coronation mug, interior, lit from behind. The Queen Mary mug is much rarer and would probably cost £200-250.