**Museum August Kestner**

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**ÖFFNUNGSZEITEN** Di-So 11:00-18:00 Uhr

Mi 11:00-20:00 Uhr

Montags geschlossen

Freitags freier Eintritt

**PRESSEINFORMATION**

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**Exhibition | Museum August Kestner**

**Magical images through light**

**Lithophanes from the ‘S’ Collection, Wuppertal**

**16.12.2021 bis 13.11.2022**

**Opening: Thursday, 16.12.2021, 16.30 Uhr**

Until well into the 19th century, artificial light was a luxury. Wax and tallow candles as well as oil lamps provided only scant illumination in the home. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that images created using light fascinated people in the past. Lithophanes – to which this exhibition is dedicated – consequently represent very special decorative items.

The term lithophane – meaning ‘to appear in stone’ or ‘light in stone’ – has established itself for such porcelain objects, although translucent materials like paper or glass have also been used. Worked in relief, they show an image similar to that of a slide when lit from behind.

Porcelain lithophanes were first presented to the general public at the 1828 Leipzig Trade Fair. They enjoyed great popularity for several decades, both in Europe and in the United States.

Initially, only sunlight or single candles were used to illuminate lithophanes. Most of these porcelain panels were hung as plaques in windows or built into holders as shields to dim candlelight. Later used for a variety of decorative purposes, they served for example as shades for oil lamps and were integrated into small portable stoves.

The presentation of the exhibited lithophanes on loan from the ‘S’ Collection, Wuppertal, is intended to focus attention on a now almost completely forgotten translucent pictorial medium of the 19th century.

**Who invented the Lithophane?**

It is highly likely that espionage was involved in the invention of the porcelain lithophane. On 12 January 1827, the French diplomat Paul Charles Amable de Bourgoing was granted a patent for the production of porcelain lithophanes. Together with Alexis Sylvain du Tremblay, a wealthy nobleman experienced in porcelain production, he founded shortly thereafter the AdT & Cie. manufactory in Paris solely for the purpose of producing such lithophanes. However, the company’s first products demonstrate the initial difficulties it had with the quality of the porcelain mass and the firing process.

Since Bourgoing had been in Berlin a few months earlier, it may be assumed that he was drawing on the experiments conducted over a lengthy period of time by Berlin’s tradition-rich Royal Porcelain Manufactory (KPM) before it launched its own high quality lithophanes on the market in 1828. Consequently, Bourgoing probably does not deserve the credit for the inventing the porcelain lithophane, as is often assumed, but rather the KPM in Berlin. Unfortunately, due to the destruction of the Berlin manufactory's archives during the war, documentation that could provide evidence for this no longer exists.

**From wax model to porcelain lithophane**

Almost immediately after the first lithophanes produced by the French and Berlin porcelain manufactories came on the market, copyists began to appear with their own products. Numerous manufactories experimented more or less successfully with their own recipes.

The production process begins with a hand-made wax model on a light table, from which a plaster mould is taken. The more material is scraped out of the wax plate, the thicker the plaster layer will be in these areas later on when casting. As a result, these areas are thinner and more translucent in the cast porcelain panel. The less wax is removed, the less translucent these parts of the motif are in the finished lithophane.

A special biscuit mass is filled into the plaster moulds. After firing, this is on the whole transparent and has a marble-like appearance.

In order to shorten the time-consuming manufacturing process, some manufacturers tried to avoid making a wax model and recast lithophanes produced by other companies.

**The motifs: landscapes, portraits and scenes from everyday life**

The motifs depicted by lithophanes provide insights into the lives and lifestyles of the emerging bourgeoisie in the 19th century, which was characterised by educational zeal, a love of travel and concern for the family.

Everyday scenes, often reflecting Christian moral concepts, make up a large part of the lithophane production. Well-behaved children, industrious girls, faithful mothers, courtship and wedding scenes allude to the Biedermeier focus on the family, which was regarded as the guarantor of domestic bliss as well as peace and comfort. With the exception of well-known personages, portraits are rare. The worlds of labour as well as military and political motifs were largely avoided, which is symptomatic of the romanticised view of this period.

The idyllic landscape views, tranquil city scenes and representative buildings were often chosen from the vicinity of the respective manufactory. Motifs include the Rhenish castles that were among the preferred destinations of the educated middle classes, documenting that era’s idealisation of the Middle Ages.

Copies after paintings enjoyed great popularity. In addition to famous Old Masters, the manufacturers chose from a wide range of contemporary artists.

**Quality differences and variety of styles**

The production of lithophanes was widespread around the mid-19th century, and numerous manufactories, even smaller ones, endeavoured to master the technique. However, considerable differences in quality exist that are visible in direct comparisons. Alongside finely toned lithophane pictures, there are blurred or cloudy motifs and panels whose form is distorted. The colours of the porcelain body vary even if they come from the same manufactory. In addition to the standard rectangular panels, lithophanes were also produced in other shapes, especially round and trapezoidal, which in many instances were used as inserts in lamps.

Most porcelain lithophanes were offered for sale unglazed. They were seldom covered with a glossy transparent glaze, as this caused an optical blur due to the altered refraction of light. Lithophanes with polychrome painting were less in demand because they were more expensive.

Moving light – for example the flickering of a candle or varying amounts of sunlight – creates a special effect when viewing lithophanes: the atmosphere of the image changes and the motifs seem to be in motion.

**A diversity of translucencies**

Exceptional and often unique examples are the decorative lithophane lamps and the pieces that were elaborately framed in coloured cathedral glass as window decorations. The gradual fall in prices, however, made lithophanes affordable for less well-off buyers and manufacturers responded by expanding their product range to include small portable stoves, nightlights and all manner of inexpensive decorative items. The motifs of the lithophanes embedded on the bottom of cups, mugs and tankards only became visible when the drink was consumed against the light, creating a surprise effect.

Besides lithophanes, there are other types of porcelain objects that likewise play with transmitted light. The motifs on Chinese *an hua* ceramics are incised into the porcelain before glazing and firing or are placed between two layers of porcelain and are only visible when the body is illuminated. For rice grain ware, grains of rice were pressed into the body that left holes in the porcelain after firing, which were closed with a transparent glaze to allow light to pass through. Such techniques probably contributed to the invention of the lithophane.

**An era comes to an end**

Until around 1870, lithophanes enjoyed steadily increasing popularity and the number of manufacturers throughout Europe grew accordingly. Subsequently, however, the interest of the buying public gradually declined. This was due in part to the rise of photography and the increasing use of electricity, but in the end, they represented a pictorial world that no longer corresponded to contemporary tastes.

In Germany, lithophanes based on historical or new models are now produced only at the Nymphenburg Porcelain Manufactory in Munich and in Rudolstadt (Thuringia). The production of the wax models is very time-consuming and requires considerable skill. Due to the complexity of their production, such products are comparatively expensive today.

Moreover, similar effects can be achieved more easily and less expensively using 3D printing techniques in plastic. The lithophane lanterns made of porcelain frequently offered for sale today likewise go back to computer-assisted production methods, which enable a high degree of perfection and new forms of design. However, the imperfections of traditional handicrafts decisively contribute to the uniqueness of historical lithophanes.

**INFORMATION**

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