

Zeitschrift:	Mitteilungsblatt / Keramik-Freunde der Schweiz = Revue des Amis Suisses de la Céramique = Rivista degli Amici Svizzeri della Ceramica
Herausgeber:	Keramik-Freunde der Schweiz
Band:	- (1957)
Heft:	37
Artikel:	Lithophanic art
Autor:	Elder, Robert A.
DOI:	https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-394940

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 12.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Lithophanic Art

by Robert A. Elder, Jr., Assistant Curator of Ethnology Smithsonian Institution Washington, D. C.

(Fig. 1 — 7)

Das Sammeln von Lithophanien ist heute eine neue Modeströmung. Bereits werden im Maison Drouot beachtenswerte Preise bezahlt. Da wir über dieses typische Kunstgewerbe aus der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts keine zuverlässigen Informationen besitzen, baten wir Mr. Elder, der an einer umfassenden Monographie arbeitet, uns eine Orientierung zu schreiben. Die Redaktion dankt dem Verfasser für seine Freundlichkeit bestens.

The fragile delicate beauty of a lithophane! — has it been your good fortune to see, even one? — Raphael's Madonna of the Chair or Esmerelda from Victor Hugo. If so, you will have thrilled to the exquisite intricacy characterizing these porcelain pictures of famous and popular art — these masterpieces of illusion. From Victorian and Biedermeier time there remain to us selected examples of decorative art well worth consideration. Among the nineteenth century expressions of man's multi-faceted search for esthetic enjoyment are the thin translucent china plaques known as lithophanes. So accurately calculated was the carving of the original wax mold that the three-dimensional effect of perspective was often similar to a fine painting or engraving and frequently superior to illustrative material in these other media.

Having not seen an porcelain transparency, you can anticipate a memorable experience in the fine detail of old-time craftsmanship used with pride of results, on interesting homely subjects and the richness of a full range of shading in many well-known paintings.

Definition and Origin

Though lithophane (lithophanie in French and German) is the simplest and most correct name for these porcelain pictures they have also been designated as the following: photophanic pictures, diaphanes, bisque or parian pictures, translucent embossments and transparencies. The ceramic literature of the last century, in discussing the light transmitting qualities of porcelain or fine china, frequently uses the inaccurate term transparent. Though translucent was known, the close distinction between it and transparent had not become firmly established — the latter reserved for the

free transmission and the former for the partial transmission of light.

Essentially they are a thin sheet of translucent hardpaste porcelain 4—6 mm. thick on the edge with the picture in varying thicknesses less than this, dependent on what degree of shade each feature requires to give it perspective when the light comes through from behind. Without the transmitted illumination to bring out their illusive beauty they show only as irregular-surfaced white plaques.

As the French have so often been responsible for the origin or elaboration of new decorative art ideas, so was a Frenchman of *Paris* the inventor of the process of achieving the unusual results obtained in the transparencies. The comprehensive patent was taken out in 1827 by *Paul de Bourgoing*, who apparently never was connected with the manufacture of any actual examples of lithophanes, though he must have done testing in developing the details of the process. Later, in 1842, he joined *Tramley* in modifying it to make *email ombrant*, which began the same way but achieved its result through reflected rather than transmitted light.

The inception of Bourgoing's idea for the specialized application of translucent porcelain to lithophanic pictures is not known because biographical sources on his life have not come to light. However, the rather rare Chinese porcelains with floral patterns cut entirely through the unfired (greenware) body so the designs were only covered with two layers of clear glaze were known in Europe. These were usually in globe form for suspension with a candle light like a lantern and the outline naturalistic patterns lighted from the back might have inspired Bourgoing to apply the highly translucent native porcelain to traditional European scenes.

In the year following the French patent the famous Royal Porcelain factory at *Berlin* began to make lithophanes. Whether independently or from the French origin they carried the development of the craft to a high degree of skill — some of the finest ones coming from their shops. By 1844-5 their production was in the hundred thousands and for the 1851 Crystal Palace Exposition in London they had a major display with the first colored ones to be shown.

Also in 1828 the *English* patent rights were acquired by

Robert Griffith Jones of London who gave Grainger, Lee and Co. of Worcester an exclusive license for 15 years during which time they made and marked examples of lamp shades, night lamps, and straight panels.

In spite of the fact that lithophanes came to be produced in large quantities, as shown by certain factories production figures, considerable skill was required in several of the steps in the process. A working table was prepared with plate glass on top and source of light beneath. On this an area of the desired size for the picture was dammed up on the sides with any substance similar to putty and liquid wax was poured in to form a smooth sheet about 5 cm. thick. Taking a printed copy of the picture which was to be copied, the skilled craftsman, such as a portraitist in wax or an engraver, proceeded with hand tools to carve the details of the picture in the wax. Though the wax was lighted from below to show how the porcelain would look, it was the accuracy with which the artist judged the depth of the carving that would determine the sharpness of detail and correctness of perspective in the finished product. From this the negative plaster mold was taken and retouched if necessary. No doubt in a factory in full production of these items a positive was also made from this, so other working negatives could be made as they wore out easily as in all cast porcelains. Then liquid porcelain known as slip was poured into this negative plaster mold so the picture was face down and could be smoothed on the back. After part of the moisture had been absorbed by the mold the plaque was removed for further drying before being fired in the kiln. Handling during these last two steps must be very careful to prevent warping and the firing control so exact the larger factories probably had a special kiln.

The suggestion made by one writer that the third step was retouching the plaster positive, from which a final negative mold in pewter or type metal was made, may have had limited use. However it is not practical as a normal ceramic casting process because the porcelain plaque would have to get its initial drying in a non-absorptive mold and with only one surface exposed, which would take an unworkable amount of time if it is not impossible.

Some plaques are found in the dull biscuit state, but a larger proportion have a very thin glaze which was applied before the single firing. Glazing does not effect the lithophanic effect. The infinite gradations of light and shadow resultant from the differential light transmission due to the porcelain thickness give a picture of great beauty in detail, in depth, and in mellowness of tonal values. Even with these superb advantages, some lithophanes after 1850 had color applied — either to the front surface in strong colors on detailed parts or in the back in broad generalized areas of light colors. The latter, usually applied to the in-

side of hemi-globular shades, occassionally increases the beauty, but of the more than 1800 lithophanes examined and recorded fortunately very few have been colored — because the coloration seldom has enhanced them as pictures and makes them look very unfinished on the front when not lighted.

Skilful art work in the apportionment of tonal gradations, detailed craftsmanship of the carver's tools, careful chemical choice of fine porcelain ingredients, infinite care in placement of the plaques in the kiln, and strict attention to control of the kiln fire — all these complicated procedures did not prevent lithophanes from becoming an important item of popular art. The pictures used were paintings and illustrations which had already gained public appeal and so were familiar to people. Not being creative works of original art, their value lies in the skilful application to another medium. As a porcelain transparency, their use in lampshades, night lights, candleshades, and cups was more versatile and beautiful than just a two-dimensional copy of it. Once the craftsman's work in making the wax mold was done and the plaster mold ready, the turning out of a large number of copies of a particular subject was a routine matter. During the middle of the nineteenth century the effects of the Industrial Revolution were relieving the common man of a portion of the drudgery of existence. In these circumstances he was experiencing need for some satisfaction of latent artistic desires. Among the expressions which came to fulfil these feelings for more than the prosaic, lithophanes contributed significantly in bringing to man delicate lovely accessories for his light sources. At the height of their popularity, between 1840—1875, great numbers were produced, at reasonable prices, and widely distributed, even to the United States. That few are seen today is due to their fragile nature and their popularity, the latter of which usually means they slip away easily as fancy fades.

Not to let these fine examples of such an interesting art be forgotten, Dr. and Mrs. Edmond Beroud of Upper Darby, Pennsylvania have given much time and effort to gathering the outstanding collection of over 1800 specimens of lithophanes in every possible use. The magnificent display in their home is a never to be forgotten experience and their giving me freedom to study the collection has been most generous. From their collection he has made the photographs accompanying this article.

Varieties and Makers

Having seen, perhaps, a single lithophane panel or a much rarer lamp shade, one will be surprised to know of the interesting variety of ways in which porcelain transparencies brought glamour to Victorian lighting (at best,

often rather dim) and delight in other spheres. In the Biedermeier era the centuries old apprehension of the dark was a long way from being dissipated, so the wish to have a small light at night was very real. Most commonly this was furnished by a candle which was mounted behind an ornamental cast-iron or ormolu frame holding a fragile lithophane picture whose details of nostalgic realism served to soften the harshness of direct light. A few of the varied forms of these candleshades are seen in fig. 1 and 2. Some of the most distinctive and rarest of these shapes are the all porcelain night lamps in fig. 7. These hollow porcelain forms with a removable top for placing the candle have three or four different lithophane pictures and present a delightful effect, the result of a complicated casting process. Our forefathers were anything but averse to their nightcap of hot toddy and fig. 6 will show the lithophane makers did not fail to capitalize on it. These rechauds of iron, tin, nickel or brass with their inserted transparencies for popular appeal served as night lamps as well as warmers for toddy, hot milk, and the numerous vaporous effusions then so dear to people's hearts for sickness. In these worked equally well candles, alcohol burners, or occasionally float lamps.

At its fullest do we see the art of the lithophane craftsman in the one piece hemi-globular shades in fig. 5 or the very rare full globular ones of which only a few are known. Great precision was required to complete these and they were used on a wide variety of lamp bases as fig. 3 shows, along with the more usual shades of 4 to 6 panels set in a scalloped tin frame. Fig. 4 is typical of the style of hanging lamps in perforated brass with cut floral designs in red or blue overlay glass surrounding the lithophane panel. They were suspended by double chains on pulleys so the base could be pulled down to light the candle or burner. The most remarkable example of this type of use is the shallow fifteen inch, chain-suspended, all white bowl with a complete frieze of the Dancing Hours made by the famous Wedgwood Co. of England in the 1880s. Interesting curved wall brackets holding two rows of small 5 by 8 cm. panels are also found.

Not to leave untouched further excursions in porcelain products, the makers put many a homely scene in bottoms of small cylindrical cups, match boxes, and rarely in plates. The ever popular steins, especially regimentals, frequently were enhanced by lithophane bottoms.

In general most lithophanes were impressed on the back with the maker's mark and a number, the latter to identify the scene for reorder purposes. Since these marks were applied with individual dies while the porcelain was still soft, it would have been easy to miss using them all, which no doubt explains many of those with numbers but not the

factory mark. As will be detailed later, one firm stamped their mark on the front border of the plaque. A few had numbers scratched or incised in the back and some had the mark printed on the back. Besides the main production centers to be mentioned, there were numerous others, several of whose marks have not been identified, who experimented in this kind of porcelain work.

In the making of lithophanes Germany was foremost, not only from the viewpoint of quantity but more important that of quality. Of the many examples of this art studied, those with the finest detail in the most significant pictures come from the *Royal Berlin factory* with the KPM surmounted by the scepter mark. Beginning in 1828 this was the earliest factory in the field and they continued into the latter half of the nineteenth century. In point of variety of scenes the *Plane factory* in *Thuringia* using the PPM mark was first. A large part of their pictures are very good in definition, quality of porcelain and finish showing a highly developed organization of production. Also in Thuringia, at *Gotha*, the Henneberg factory was producing some marked HPM. Incidental allusions indicate that Meissen did some work of this kind but no definite record has been found nor any authenticated specimens seen.

Though the French invention of lithophanes did not have an immediate local effect, two factories, as yet unidentified, did become serious makers of these transparencies. The one stamped with a PR surmounted with a clearcut sickle made the traditional French and German scenes in good porcelain and fair quantity. This mark does not stand for Porcelain Rubelles, as has been alleged, because Rubelles made only faience. From the other, whose AdT mark, stamped on the front of the plaque resembles that of the Rubelles faience factory but isn't this maker, come a very distinctive type of lithophanes. With a coarse granular texture, cast thicker than those of other factories, without glaze, and the design standing in higher relief and less detail, their products are in sharp contrast to other work in this field. Though much of their work does not compare favorably with the fine detail products, some pictures achieve a remarkable effect through broad lines and massive shadows. Examples of their porcelain are relatively rare and give the impression of being done by a less experienced factory. There is no information that the Sevres factory made any lithophanes.

As previously noted, *England* began to make these transparencies at an early time after the original patent but examples from here are scarce. Besides Grainger, Lee at Worcester, Minton, Copeland, Kennedy Porcelain, and Adderley and Lawson also did a little of this work. In the latter part of the century the famous Wedgwood factory made some outstanding lamp shades and small oval pic-

tures in their 1878 bone china formula. Most of these had the typical classical figures intaglio with the surrounding background in colored glaze. A few lithophanes are known with the mark of the South Wales Pottery at Llanelli; and Fermagh Pottery, the famous belleek company of Fermanagh, Ireland.

Copenhagen is known to have made some lithophanes in the mid-nineteenth century. In the *United States* the Phoenix Pottery of Pennsylvania, well known for its majolica wares, came out with a few lithophanes between 1872 and 1877, but they were not of good quality no doubt due to insufficient experience.

On some French lithophanes will be found either of two other marks which need explanation — «*marque déposé*» stands for *marque déposé* which means trade mark or brand name, and «*procédés brevete sans garantie du government*» is the abbreviation for: *procédés brevete sans garantie du government* which means: process patented without guarantee (liability) of the government.

Lithophane artists selected from a very wide field of art illustrations to convert into porcelain panels. The record files I have developed indicate there may have been as many as two thousand different pictures used. These fall into four main classes: first are works of famous painters such as Raphael's Sistine and Alba Madonnas, and Madonna of the Chair, Correggio's Holy Night, Ruben's Descent from the Cross, Batoni's Magdalen, Boucher's Diana at the Bath, and Steuben's Esmerelda; second are famous people such as scenes of Napoleon, of Faust and Gretchen from Goethe, numerous of Shakespeare's heroines, Holbein's Luther and the Americans: Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and Zachary Taylor; third is the most numerous class, that of genre painting from many origins such as the famous masters: Dou, Teniers, von Meiris, and Murillo but also such popular sources as almanacs, magazines, and especially children's books from which many charming lively scenes were copied; and fourth well known scenes from Europe and America like the castles of Heidleburg, Rheinstein, and Lichtenstein, the cathedrals of Cologne and Strassburg, the cities of Ems, Germany; Vevey and Lucerne, Switzerland, the palace of Sans Souci, and the spectacular Walter Scott monument in Edinburgh, and the American places such as Niagara, Catskill, and Bastian Falls and West's famous painting of Wm. Penn's Treaty with the Indians.

In Victorian time, when some expressions were not a fortunate selection of elements, the art of the lithophane contributed significantly in many ways to the betterment of life. The continued and increased appreciation of fine paintings, both traditional religious masterpieces invoking mystical sentiment and familiar secular scenes recalling historical events, was fostered by their application to a

widely distributed medium of art. Not only were persons given a chance to see these stimulating sources but the opportunity for intensified interest was enhanced by the fine details of light and shadow achieved in these porcelain panels. Through the ample use of genre painting by the masters and other competent craftsmen, the charming personalized scenes brought a broader understanding of the elements of earthly life which had been developing slowly for several hundred years in contrast to the concentration upon the supernatural. These were factors in the modern inception of tolerance of «thee as well as me».

Lithophanes came into the height of their development at a time when the problem of artificial light was important. In spite of some strident voices raised against too much light, man's realization of the desirability for better facilities had become dominant. Therefore he was concerned with the following features — increasing the intensity but also diffusing it better, distributing in more equitably in a given area, spreading its use among more people while making it safer to use. Thus he was really in the struggling time of light when much was being sought.

To several of these needs lithophanic porcelain made a distinct contribution. In furnishing diffusion by shades which had attractive pictures in them, the stark glare of many a plain shade was softened and character was given to the shadows. With meaningful illustrations in translucent porcelain shades the stimulus was provided to relieve the lurking gloom of frequent dark corners by a candle or a small lamp that spoke to one with familiarity. As a great variety of light sources could be made more appealing to the eye and the emotions and at a reasonable cost people in more varied walks of life discovered it was attractive to use more lights in different places, on an increased number of occasions.

A connoisseur will appreciate not only the expert craftsmanship that went into this porcelain work but also the pleasing result which sheds such charm. That these translucent plaques became easily available because multiplication was simple, in no way detracts from their quality. A wide distribution may reduce the esoteric nature of an object's possession for those to whom this factor is of prime importance and therefore, for them, obscure the truth of its worth, but this does not alter its inherent character. These essences remain its own and only human nature's perception varies ceaselessly. Standing out in the sphere of cultivation of beauty cannot help but be the Lithophane!

Selected Bibliography

Barber, Edwin A., Historical Sketch of the Phoenixville Pottery, *The Clay Worker* magazine, vol. 28, August 1897, 96-9.

Beroud, Edmond, What They Are and Why They Are a Delightful Item for Collectors, *The Spinning Wheel* (mag.), June 1951, 22, 24, 27.

Brongniart, Alexandre and Riocreux, D., *Description Méthodique du Musée Céramique*, Paris, 1845, 289, 298.

Buckley, Francis, A Forgotten Victorian Craze, *Antique Collector*, London, July 1937, 184.

Fletcher, John, Llanelly Porcelain, *The Connoisseur* (mag.), vol. 84, August 1929, 87-8.

Hommel, Rudolph, Lithophanes, *Hobbies* (mag.), August 1949, 80-82, January 1950, 57; using pseudonym: G. A. R. Goyle, *Antiques* (mag.), vol 29, April 1936, 146.

Hughes, George B. and Therle, After the Regency, London, 1952, 124-5.

McClinton, Katharine, *A Handbook of Popular Antiques*, New York, 1946, 225-8.

Meyer, Hans, *Böhmisches Porzellan und Steingut*, Leipzig, 1927, 24, 69-70.

Schock, Thomas, Lithophanes Are Worth Collecting, *American Antiques Journal*, May 1949, 16-7, 27.

Der Verfasser arbeitet an einer umfassenden Monographie über Lithophanien und bittet unsere Mitglieder, die Lithophanien besitzen, um gefl. Mitteilung.

Neues über Adam Friedrich von Löwenfinck

Meine Stellungnahme zu den Einwänden zu meinem Aufsatz «Adam Friedrich von Löwenfinck, einer der bedeutendsten deutschen Porzellan- und Fayencemaler des 18. Jahrhunderts» im Mitteilungsblatt Nr. 34 der «Keramik-Freunde der Schweiz».

Von R. Wark, Hendersonville

(Abb. 8 — 13)

Kurz nach der Drucklegung des genannten Aufsatzes kam mir ein graphisches Blatt zu Gesicht, das für den Kamelreiter auf dem von Löwenfinck gemalten Krug in der Sammlung Dr. Zschokke in Köln als Vorlage gedient hat. Diese Vorlage war auch Dr. Schönberger bekannt. Robert Schmidt hat sie erstmals im Katalog der Sammlung Otto Blohm publiziert (Abb. 8). Es ist ein Stich von Johann Christof Weigel in Nürnberg aus der Serie Nr. 125 «figures et habilemens Chinois», der 1719 im eigenen Verlag herauskam. Damit ergibt sich die neue Tatsache, dass Löwenfinck auch Malereien nach Stichvorlagen ausgeführt hat, was manches ändert. Man darf wohl annehmen, dass auch der Pferdereiter des gleichen Kruges (Abb. Titelblatt Mblt. Nr. 34) auf einen Weigel-Stich oder auf einen anderen zurückgeht. Dieser reitende Chinese trägt auf dem Rücken eine Kiepe mit drei blühenden indianischen Stauden, in der rechten Hand hält er eine Fahne. Genau dieselbe Figur, nur als schreitender Chinese, findet sich auf dem Bayreuther Krug und auf der AR-Vase der Slg. Sheaffer (Abb. 31 und 35 Mblt. 34).

In der Zwischenzeit sind mir zwei weitere Vasen bekanntgeworden, die beide denselben Dekor des Sheaffer-Fayencekruges tragen (Abb. 9). Löwenfinck hat sie also nicht nach eigenen Entwürfen, sondern nach fremden, mitgebrachten Vorlagen gemalt. Es sind uns somit zwei

Fayencekrüge und drei AR-Vasen bekannt, die nach Weigels Vorlage bemalt sind, sofern wir den Pferdereiter des Zschokke-Kruges als von Weigel stammend betrachten. Der Dekor des Chinesen mit der Kiepe und Fahne erscheint in Spiegelbildmalerei bei den Meissner Vasen sowie auch bei den Fayencekrügen.

Damit möchte ich auf die Einwände von Herrn A. Zell in Köln eingehen. Die Bewegung auf der Vase der Abb. 35 und 36 richtet sich, wie Herr Zell ganz richtig schreibt, nach links, auf den beiden neuen Vasen im historischen Museum Bern mit genau denselben Bildern geht die Bewegung nach rechts. Wir kennen somit verschiedene Kopien, die im Spiegelbild gemalt sind, was sich aus der Technik der Übertragung eines solchen Stiches ohne weiteres erklären lässt. Diese Spiegelbildmalerei ist gewiss nichts Abnormes, «widerstrebend und unausgeglichen». Wir kennen hochwertige Chinamalereien auf Vasen und Cloisonés der Kang-Hszeit, bei denen die eine Vase die «echte» Malerei trägt, die zweite aber, als kompletterendes Pendant, das Spiegelbild zeigt. Wenn wir die verschiedenen Abbildungen in meiner Arbeit überblicken, so treffen wir die «Linksbewegung» beinahe regelmässig an, auch Wanderstab und Fahne werden in der linken Hand gehalten, was anatomisch durchaus vertretbar ist, ohne dass der Maler als Linkshänder angesehen werden muss. Sogar die Fabeltiere

Tafel I



Figure 1 Candlestand with cut glass bowl

(Swiss National Museum, Zurich)



Figure 2 *Lithophane candleshades in cast iron and brass frames*



Figure 3 Various lamp bases with multi-panelled lithophane shades

Tafel IV

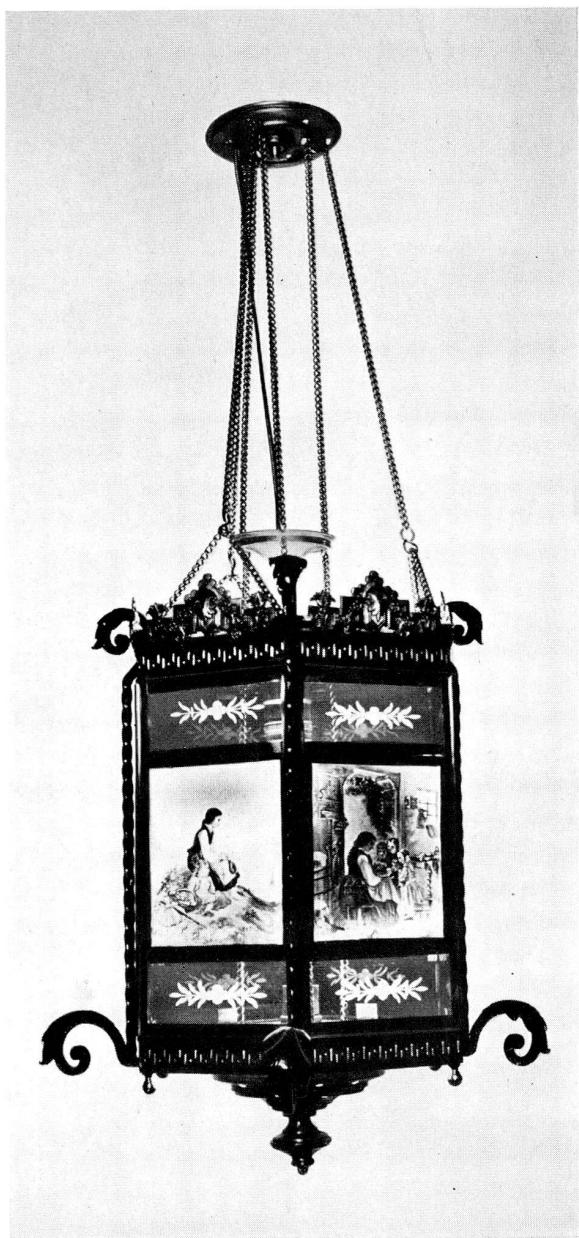


Figure 4 Hanging lamp of pierced brass with lithophane panels



Figure 5 Ormolu lamp with lithophane shade of wildlife scenes



Figure 6 *Lithophane rubands in brass, nickel and iron*



Figure 7 Hollow-cast all porcelain night lamps