

## ~ Porcelain Steins with Lithophanes ~

by Walt Vogdes



The illustration to the right shows a nice 1-liter porcelain stein which was produced around 1900. The creamy, glass-like body is decorated with a transfer scene in the Historismus style - a page stands upon a foliate support while blowing his trumpet to command attention. The pewter lid is nicely engraved, and sports a thumbblift evocative of earlier tastes. Like many porcelain steins, this one contains a lithophane, or "picture", in its base. So while we look at the stein, we will also discuss lithophanes and how they are made.

How do you spell it, really? Based upon the definition and derivation given in Mirriam-Webster, the correct spelling is *lithophane*.

### **lithophane**

[deriv.: probably from German *Lithophan*, from Greek *lithos* + German *diaphan* diaphanous] porcelain impressed with figures that are made distinct by transmitted light; *also* : an object of this material

Because lithophanes are dependent upon the translucent nature of porcelain, they are found exclusively in porcelain steins. When collectors first discover one of these Victorian-era treasures hiding in the bottom of a stein, they are understandably puzzled about it. How are such subtly beautiful images formed, with no apparent use of paint or ink? Mr. Laurel Blair, founder and curator of the [Blair Museum of Lithophanes](#), describes lithophanes as "basically a porcelain transparency which when held before a light creates a three-dimensional image. The image is obtained from the relative thickness of the porcelain. The tones of the thinner area are lighter, while the thicker the porcelain, the darker the picture.. The lighting brings out the soft variations of shadings and coloring of the clay."

Both of the lithophanes shown in this article are larger than most (and in my opinion, nicer than average, as well). The first, which is from the featured stein, portrays a young farmgirl napping, while her goat gives her a nuzzle, or perhaps is getting ready to eat her cap! The second is from the Nürnberg Trichter (funnel) character stein. In this scene we see the statue of the Gooseman of Nürnberg, which still greets tourists in a small square in Nürnberg today.

The process of making a lithophane began with the carving of the image in beeswax. Using a light source behind the wax to highlight the details, the artists used fine steel and ivory tools to create the desired image. Thicker areas remained dark, while deeply carved areas were lighter, allowing the artist to create images of surprising detail. A plaster mold was made from the beeswax image, and this mold was then used for forming the porcelain lithophane disks to be inserted into the base of a porcelain stein. The same wax could be used to make many molds, with details being sharpened if they became worn or distorted.

The stein bodies to receive these lithophanes were made as open cylinders. It was a simple task for the finisher to join the lithophane to the body while both pieces were still "green", and they fused together when fired.

Many lithophanes are specifically designed to complement the design or theme of the stein. Among the most well known examples are two lithophanes found in the bottom of the L.A.W. (League of American Wheelmen) character stein. Fittingly, these scenes are of bicycle riders. Lithophanes commonly depict soldiers and their girlfriends, monks, the Hofbrauhaus in Munich, the statue of Bavaria, or tavern scenes. However, the "nude woman" lithophanes which we see frequently were made following World War II.



One word of caution to collectors. Lithophanes, because they must be made thin enough for the light to pass through, are inherently vulnerable to damage. Many have been cracked or broken by their owner unthinkingly dropping a few coins or a set of keys into the stein for safe-keeping. Ouch!

As is usually the case, thanks are due to the researchers and authors whose efforts have greatly enhanced our understanding of our hobby. Much of this article is based on information found in *Character Steins, A Collector's Guide*, by SCI Master Steinologists Eugene V. Manusov and Mike Wald.

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