

OLGA BICĀNE

The Museum of the History of Riga and Navigation
Riga, Latvia
olgabicaane@gmail.com

The earliest known paper lampshades — or more precisely, lamp covers that can be regarded as precursors to the modern lampshade — appeared in ancient China around 2,000 years ago, shortly after the invention of paper. From the outset, these coverings fulfilled both decorative and practical purposes.

My focus begins with the invention of the incandescent light bulb by Thomas Edison in 1885, after which the French term *abat-jour* — referring to a shade that softens and diffuses light — came into use.

In my conservation work, I have primarily dealt with table and floor lamp shades from the 20th century. The Museum of the History of Riga and Navigation holds two such floor lamps, produced in Latvia during the 1960s. These lampshades are cylindrical, made of processed paper mounted on metal wire frames and secured with fabric tape.

Over time, they developed similar types of damage: deformation, tears, and material loss. Lampshades were restored without dismantling. The surface-cleaning process was carried out using a low-power vacuum cleaner. Material analyses were carried out to identify the original paper treatment. By examining the available literature and gathering information was concluded, in the period from 1950 to 1980, nitrocellulose varnish, casein glue, shellac, phenol or carbamide resin adhesives (early plasticizers) were used; sometimes paraffin or wax impregnation was also applied. The two most used varnishes were nitrocellulose and shellac. Visual examination led to the conclusion that the varnish is nitrocellulose, as it has an amber brown tone and, when dry, becomes shiny and hard. An ethanol test was carried out, and the varnish did not react. However, when a small area was gently warmed, a characteristic varnish odour appeared. This allows us to argue that the lampshades are coated with nitrocellulose varnish, which was one of the typical methods used; therefore, no additional testing is required. Tears were repaired, missing areas filled and retouched using reversible materials and methods, with close attention to visual harmony. Paraloid B-72 varnish was used to achieve a glossy finish. The restored shades were then returned to their original settings.

Another lampshade, dating from the early 20th century and intended for a table lamp, demonstrated a distinct construction. It is cylindrical, decorated on both the interior and exterior, made from pleated paper and reinforced at the top with fabric tape. It had long been stored in fragments, with tears and losses concentrated at the fold lines.



Research revealed that the red pigment used in the decoration was light-sensitive and unstable. The lampshade was mechanically cleaned using a soft brush on the inside and cleaned on the outside as well. Additionally, gentle tapping with rubber was carried out, and surface dirt was removed using scalpels. After mechanical cleaning, the fragments were reassembled, which helped identify the missing sections. The shade was then repaired: tears were mended with high-quality restoration paper, losses were filled with maculature paper, and starch glue was used.

20th century lampshade before restoration.



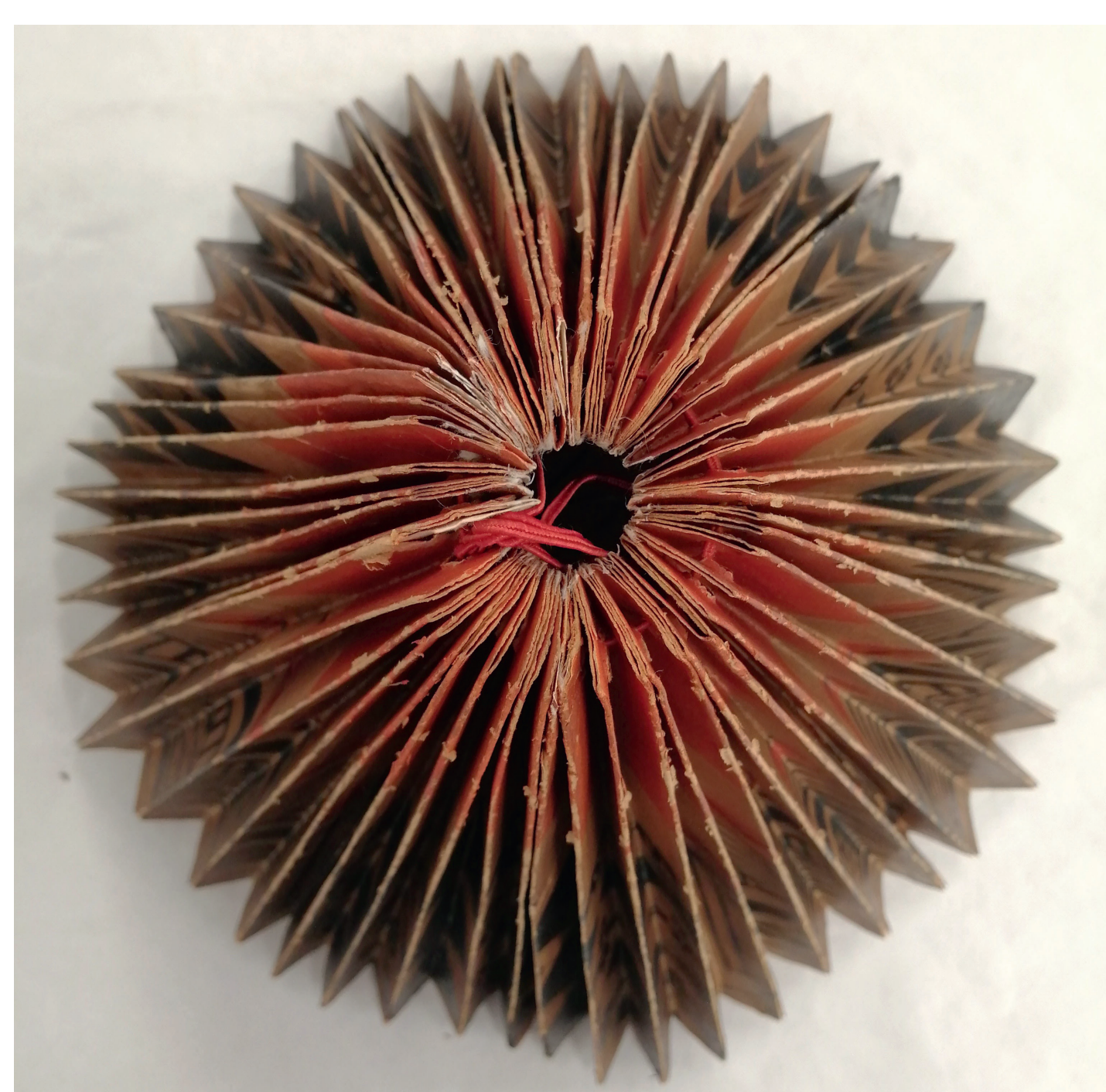
Floor lamps before restoration.

Foto Mārtiņš Lablaiks.



Lampshade restoration process

The repairs were toned with watercolour, and the folds were reinforced. Finally, the object was restructured to restore its original form and function.



Lampshade after restoration.



Another piece, a four-branched table lamp acquired by the museum in 1965 from Jeršov, head of the General Department of the Executive Committee. According to the acceptance-transfer deed, the lampshade was in poor condition, lampshade with material loss. It has now been conserved (Ramona Tālberga): the loss was filled, the entire interior was duplicated and reinforced, and the missing exterior areas were visually integrated through careful toning.

Each of these objects carries unique cultural, historical, and emotional value. In some cases, an item's significance lies not in its age or craftsmanship, but in personal sentiment — such as a cherished gift or family heirloom — which becomes the main motivation for its preservation. The conservator's role in these instances is not to judge the object's subjective value but to carry out ethical and respectful work guided by professional standards.