JANUARY 2015

Ferns for the Parlor

Unknown Maker | *Wardian Case (Terrarium)*

VISIT THE BMA
and see this *Wardian Case (Terrarium)* in the American Wing.

Unknown maker, perhaps English. *Wardian Case (Terrarium)*. 1860–1880. Cast iron, painted and gilded, glass. 55½ x 26½ x 17 inches. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Charlotte B. Filbert Bequest Fund, BMA 2007.186.

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A plain glass container and a bit of soil are all you really need to build a terrarium. But perhaps you'd like something more elegant? This gilded terrarium, perched atop four lively cast-iron legs, would have been a showpiece in a 19th-century English or American parlor.

For years before this terrarium was made, nature enthusiasts in England delighted in bringing tender ferns from the woodlands into their homes to protect them from the sooty air and noxious fumes emitted by coal-burning factories. Collecting and displaying ferns became a national pastime, thanks to a simple glass box invented by a fern-loving doctor named Nathaniel Ward.

Dr. Ward's invention came about quite by accident. While observing the development of a moth chrysalis buried in soil in a sealed glass jar, the doctor noticed that a bit of fern had sprouted in the soil. Dr. Ward forgot about the moth and set the sealed jar on his window ledge. For four years, he watched the fern thrive undisturbed in the humid conditions of the sealed jar while ferns in his own backyard withered and died from exposure to the polluted London air.

Building on his observations, Dr. Ward devised a simple "Wardian Case" that allowed Londoners to enjoy a year-round display of greenery indoors. Then, suspecting that his tightly-sealed case could be used to transport live plants safely over long distances in harsh weather, Dr. Ward conducted an experiment. He filled two cases with moist soil and native English plants and lashed them to the open deck of a ship bound for Australia. Sealed off from the punishing salt air, the plants arrived in perfect condition after months at sea. Soon English botanists were collecting humidity-loving plants from countries around the world and shipping them to England for study, cultivation, and display in ornamental cases such as this elaborate terrarium.

CHALLENGE FOR STUDENTS

Compare various designs for Wardian Cases at http://bit.ly/1u6Hfb2

Learn how terrariums work and build one of your own. Refer to http://bit.ly/1hWtBRC

Read Dr. Ward's ideas in his publication *On the Growth of Plants in Closely Glazed Cases*, Chapters 3 and 4 at http://bit.ly/1Clgrse

Discuss how air pollution affects plants in today's world.

PRINT THE IMAGE ON PAGE 2 FOR YOUR STUDENTS.

BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART 100

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