

# THE MAGIC LANTERN

## The magic lantern — a children's toy

In many ways the toy magic lantern is the most perfect example of the basic lantern as it must have been in the early seventeen hundreds. A simple light, inevitably of only single candle or single oil wick power, optically primitive and projecting a slide strip only one or two inches wide, these delightful little lanterns were used by children in the nursery. This was in contrast to father's mahogany or large metal lantern, which would be kept in his study and only brought out for entertainment or instruction on suitable occasions. The toy lanterns have a charm to them which was often lost in the adult's version, and in their unchanging form are more exact reflections of the lantern's early beginnings.

The following article is based on a text by Honore Bostel recently published in France, the source of all the most delightful children's lanterns.



## The fantastic world of magic lanterns

Lanterns — light them up! In order to light up yours, let me go back to the time when Chaldean or Roman magic lanterns were found near Vesuvius. In the 'pre-concrete' age, torches projected images onto cave walls. A box, some drawings in colour, a torch: the formula was discovered. On another coast, in Africa, we know that the Egyptians also used to project images, but onto clouds so that the pictures moved. Bravo to the high priest and all those who could make carpets fly and raise up weird phantoms! What a most advanced regime — an autocracy moderated by magic already centuries before the 'petites lucarnes'.

Appollonius of Tyane, who lived in the first century, appears to have used a magic lantern; but it was an English monk, philosopher and physicist, Roger Bacon (1214-1294), who devised the first 'dark chamber'. Four centuries later, a German monk — also a philosopher and a physicist — Father Athanasie Kircher (1601-1680), set up the first known magic lantern. It consisted of a 'light box' (an oil lamp), a sliding lens, a parabolic mirror, and a design painted onto a sheet of glass.

## The Scottish genius

1789: it was the low point. Having amused kings and peasants in courtyards and faubourgs, the magic lantern seemed condemned. Florian wrote a fable ridiculing the lanternists: 'The Monkey who Shows Magic Lanterns'.

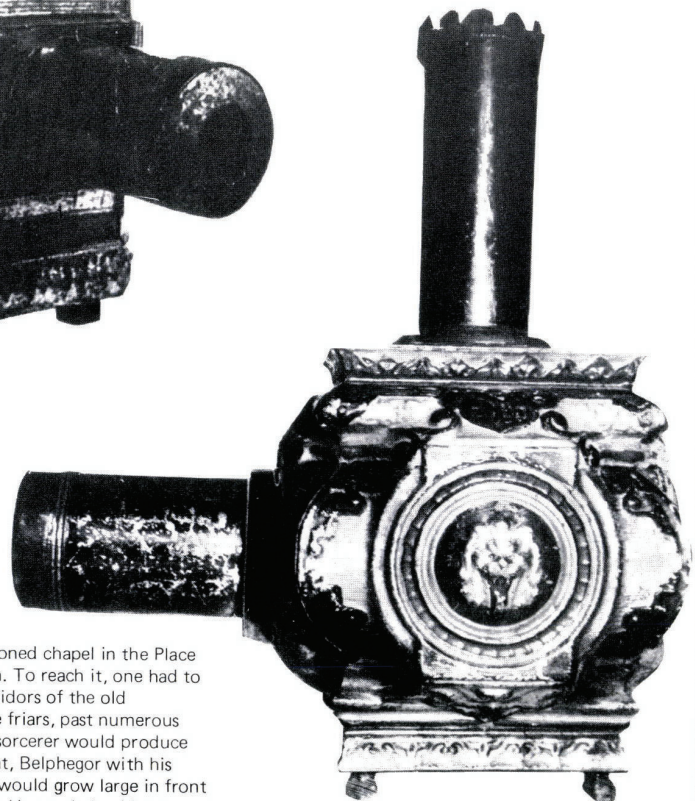
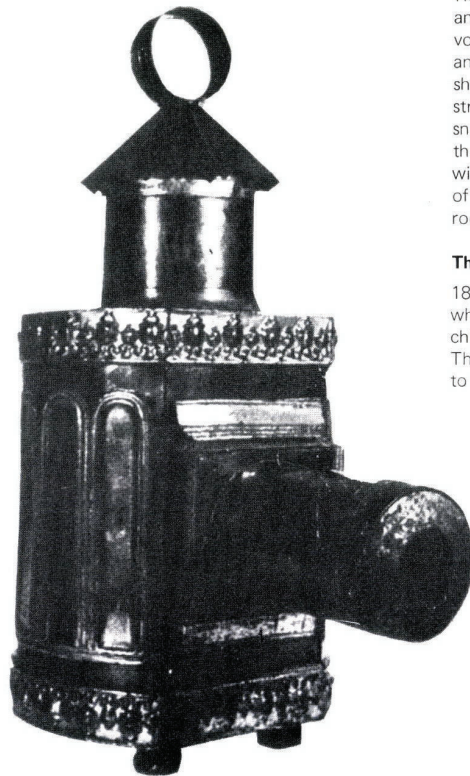
1795: at last Robertson arrived. The humorous, clever, disciplined, roguish British people once again gave us a new genius. Notice what an anglophile I am. Robertson, a physicist and an aeronaut (Montgolfier balloon) took out a patent in 1795 for the 'Fantscope'. This was the old lantern — as sung about by Lily Marlene in 1942 — but fitted with wheels to move forward or back in front of the screen in order to enlarge or reduce the projected image. He was the



Robertson was the true precursor of horror films and, as such, had a very important following. The vogue for this phantasmagoria increased the success and numbers of the magic lanternists and their 'home shows'; they could be heard at night throughout the streets of Paris at the time candles were being snuffed out, shouting 'Magic lantern, strange thing to see!' It was enough for someone to open his window and call out to have the equivalent of 'Night of the Living Dead' shown on the wall of the dining room or bedroom.

## The first French factory

1843: Augustin Lapiere, a French tinsmith who was who was too poor to pay for a performance for his children, made them a magic lantern out of cans. Then he decided to commercialise his model. Thanks to him, France was the first country to produce



pioneer. He used an abandoned chapel in the Place Vendome as an auditorium. To reach it, one had to walk through the long corridors of the old monastery of the Capucine friars, past numerous tombstones. The Scottish sorcerer would produce at will the spectres of Marat, Belphegor with his horns, or the Devil, which would grow large in front of the astonished audience. He was helped by two assistants who would move forward or back, each with a lantern fixed to their stomachs. They projected images of bats, grotesque birds, and the skull and cross-bones.



# A CHILDREN'S TOY

'family' magic lanterns. Lapierre was the 'Pathe' of yesterday or the 'Paramount' of today — as Bonnot and his band were later to become the inventors in France of the hold up. God is really a little French. Auguste Lapierre's workshop was in rue Saint-Paxent in Paris. His son Edouard succeeded him in 1875, first at 25 rue Pasturelle then later at 38 quai Jemmapes as the business expanded. In 1900 his business was so flourishing that he built a factory at Lagny — the biggest magic lantern factory in Europe. His two sons Rene and Maurice later took over the business. In order to compete with German rivals, the Lapierre brothers changed over from the costly process of hand-painting glass slides to using transfers, allowing them to reach a wider clientele.

## Some vestiges

Nowadays we still remember the dynasty of the magic lanternists, including Aubert, who envisaged magic lanterns in the shape of the Eiffel Tower, or Sacre-Coeur, or Buddha. But most of the artists who illustrated the thousands of glass slides have been forgotten, and only a few of their fragile works have come down to us. Desch, for instance, never became wealthy. By happy chance, a catalogue of his works was found in a garage, and also many painted slides intact. The methods of movement in the slides were novel, and different from those used by Lapierre or Carette. Desch used three processes: the chromatropes type, consisting of a geometrical rose window which revolved when turned by a crank-handle; the sliding type, where people or objects could pass in front of a static background; the animated type, using a rapid superimposition of two plates in order to create the illusion of movement.

Desch was a skilful colourist. To obtain a transparent view he would dilute his colours with petrol or copal varnish. His favourite tints were Prussian blue, Anvers blue and Berlin blue (which he used to obtain remarkable night effects), and the pinks from the cochineal beetle and madder-root. He worked at the end of the nineteenth century, at 8 rue Saint-Paul, and used to sell his hand-painted slides from 2.50F to 50F. Today some cost 5,000F. What would the figure be if his name had been Rish?

The magic lantern disappeared at the end of the nineteenth century with the dawn of the cinematograph — the inventors were two brothers, called Lumiere.

