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THE COLLECTORS' GALLERY

Slightly more than gazing into the crystal ball

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During the ten-year life of the Magic Lantern Society of Great Britain, I have seen the membership grow from twenty to two hundred and fifty. During the same period, there has been a phenomenal growth of collecting in other minority interest areas such as ephemera, optical toys, scientific instruments and so forth. The list could be almost endless. Several of these interest groups have formed small Societies similar in nature to the MLSSGB, meeting quarterly, publishing broadsheets or quarterly journals. Such activity seems to increase almost daily. The Pack Age exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum has led to Robert Opie establishing his Packaging Museum in Gloucester, the Children's Toy Museum in Notting Hill Gate has opened, and others are continually mooted. The major auction houses now hold regular sales specialising in items which only a few years ago were included in general auctions. At the time of writing, the Panorama and Diorama group is about to be formally established and Teddy Bears have become the latest subject of special auctions!

Many of these interest groups share similar aims and problems, and in almost all of them there is a realised or potential area of overlap with the activities of other collectors. The Magic Circle, established long ago, whose principal activity is the promotion of conjuring, is of considerable potential interest to the lantern collector in that many Victorian illusions depended on optical trickery. The scientific instrument collector will find much of interest in the scientific magic lantern with its attachments and slides. Links between the photographic collector and the magic lantern slide enthusiast are obvious (although little researched at present) simply because the majority of slides were photographic. The Ephemera Society's events are regularly attended by lantern collectors whilst nineteenth and eighteenth century books on popular science or natural philosophy contain chapters of interest to almost all the previously mentioned groups.

Thus the overlap is considerable. Yet all these groups operate independently with overworked and

unpaid treasurers chasing subscriptions every January, magazine editors working into the night chasing reluctant contributors and meeting mailing deadlines, and poor programme secretaries desperately seeking new events and appropriate free or inexpensive cheerful venues.

My goal for the next ten years of the MLSSGB is to see these barriers eroded, to see more Societies working together, sharing manpower, skills and limited financial resources for their mutual benefit. This co-operation could most usefully take the form of a consortium dedicated to the establishment of a Collectors' Gallery for like-minded Societies with a desire for permanent home in London. The Gallery would have a permanent secretariat, an ever-open exhibition facility capable of holding regular showings of members' collections both privately and publicly, meeting spaces and catering back up. If ten Societies formed such a consortium and each met quarterly, there could be formal activities for forty out of the fifty-two weekends of the year. The Gallery could be used for both formal and informal meetings during the evenings. The initial membership would be in the order of 3,750 if each individual group had a membership of between 250 and 500. At an annual membership of £15, this would mean an opening income, at today's rates, in excess of £50,000 per annum. It would surely not be inconceivable for such a body to then be in a position to raise a capital sum of between a quarter and a half-million from within its own ranks, not to mention its potential for increasing this sum by investigating various financial avenues.

Of course the idea would be subject to many pitfalls, including the vagaries of vested self-interest and personality clashes. And yet, the benefit to the subscribing Societies would be immense, whilst becoming a major public attraction through the constant programme of exhibitions and presentations which would be on offer.

My time-scale for the realisation of this Collectors' Gallery is ten years. The MLSSGB's coming of age party could be celebrated there, with a vast interdisciplinary gala happening taking place in 1997.

Imagine what the quarterly or even monthly magazine of the Gallery could be like. The Gallery's permanent graphics team could perhaps even operate commercially, selling its expertise to the world at large and thus adding to the financial viability of the Gallery. As a small convention centre, the Gallery would surely fill the gap in the market identified by our investigations for this tenth birthday celebration. There are *no* inexpensive, fully equipped Centres for 250 delegates available in London that we have been able to discover. The London Conference booklet led us to check out 50 or so alternatives but all are geared to the commercial market where the high costs can be offset by companies against tax, or the catering facilities are non-existent, or the exhibition aspect unsatisfactory, or the administration unco-operative. This tenth anniversary is only able to take place due to the goodwill of the Architectural Association. Our next Convention will not be held there simply because the extra numbers will not fit in. I would anticipate similar events that like-minded groups would want to hold cannot take place.

The Clubroom and related spaces at the new Museum of the Moving Image due to open in 1987, will be a contribution to the needs of small Societies but will still be controlled by a quasi-governmental body, and subject to their political and financial whims. The Collectors' Gallery, on the other hand, would be run by collectors, for collectors.

This proposition for the next ten years is not put forward as simply a fanciful gaze into the chairman's crystal ball, but as an idea for serious debate by potentially interested parties. It has not been discussed by the Committee and is in no way yet part of the official policy of the MLSSGB. Informal discussions, however, suggest that mine is not simply a lone voice.

The alternative is more autonomous Societies, more care-worn treasures, more under-financed magazines, more Societies grubbing around for space and handouts, albeit with enormous enthusiasm and energy...

See you at the Collectors' Gallery in 1997...