



MITSUE IKEDA-TANAKA AND THE ART OF THE JAPANESE MAGIC LANTERN

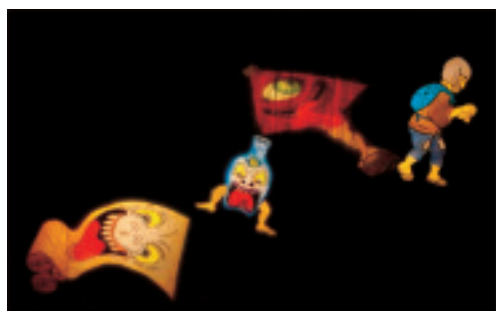
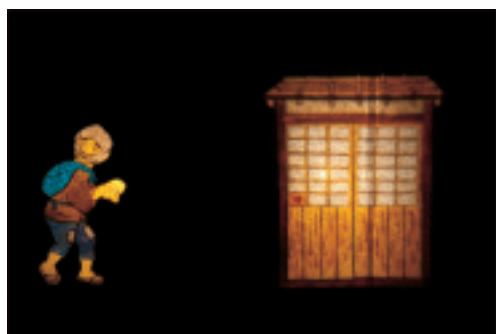
Mary Ann Auckland

During the last ten or so years many of us have had the great fortune to experience the captivating magic lantern shows of Mitsue Ikeda-Tanaka and her well-rehearsed students. Recently some of us have even taken part (see *TML* 15, p.13). Until earlier this year Mitsue was a professor at the Osaka University of Arts (OUA) specialising in visual art and theatre production, as well as the director of her Japanese magic lantern performance group, Nishiki Kage-e Ikeda-Gumi. Mitsue has been researching, reconstructing and performing 'Nishiki Kage-e' – a form of Japanese magic lantern show using portable wooden projectors – since 2004, not only helping to revive the art but applying it as a new form of theatrical expression for modern visual media.

The scholar Genpaku Sugita asserts that the magic lantern made its way to Japan from Europe in the Meiwa Era (1764-1772). In 1779 the publication *Tengu-tsu* reported on a wooden slide projector known as the 'Kage-e Megane', modelled on the European version and available from opticians. This was very well received when demonstrated in Osaka and soon afterwards wooden slide projectors were being used in Joruri and Kabuki performances in Kamigata (the cultural areas of Kyoto and Osaka) and the surrounding area. The images, accompanied by music and narration, were back-projected on a Japanese paper screen. Recent research suggests that 'Zashiki Kage-e' projectors ('Zashiki' means a private room) using a 'Taneita' (slide carrier) for domestic use also became well established relatively quickly in this area. News spread to Edo (now Tokyo) and by 1801 shows there were being presented in show tents and then teahouses. In the Kaei Era (1848-1854) Toshio Fujikawa organised performances in Osaka called 'Nishiki Utsushi-e' – 'Nishiki' means 'brocade' and the term 'Utsushi-e'



Mitsue with Nishiki Kage-e Ikeda-Gumi in New Orleans at the US and Canada MLS Convention, 2016



Slides from Tsuitenaihi (The Sneak Thief)

(derived from the colourful and fresh images shown) was used in Edo to describe performances using a magic lantern projector. Images of the magic lantern can be found on fans and other popular art of the time. Performances in the Kamigata area eventually became known as 'Nishiki no Kage-e', then shortened to 'Nishiki Kage-e'.

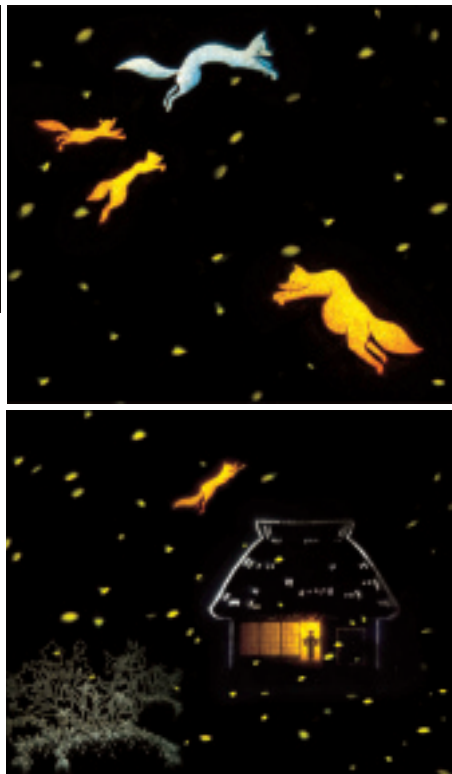
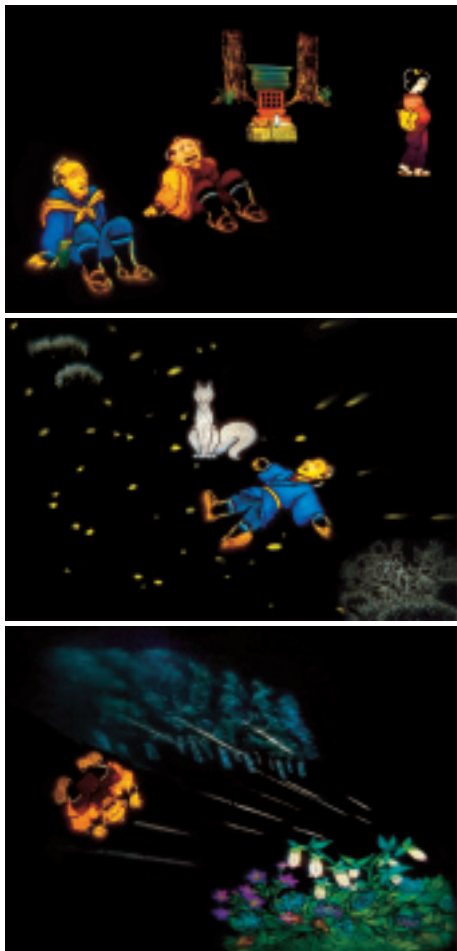
The Japanese art of the magic lantern diverged significantly from the European tradition in the use of several wooden lanterns ('Furo'). These were made out of paulownia wood which is not only lightweight but easy to work and both heat and warp resistant. The lanterns could be carried by the operators, giving a far more dynamic feel to the show. Figures could move freely around the screen, zoom in and out, and interact with each other. With sophisticated slipping mechanisms individual characters could change while in motion. Stories were often taken from Kabuki and other traditional performing arts traditions with ghosts and goblins especially popular. The glass slides ('Video') were made using vibrant transparent fabric dyes with the characters and objects outlined in black 'Sumi' ink. The light source was a lamp using rape seed oil.

'Nishiki Kage-e' became so popular that many small dedicated theatres were built and the shows remained popular until the early 20th century. By the late 1920s they were out of fashion and then became largely forgotten. From the late 1970s interest in traditional arts and the Japanese magic lantern revived.

Mitsue recognised the earlier magic lantern shows as the origin of Japanese animation and began the 'Nishiki Kage-e Art Project' as a result. In 2004 she began reproducing the 'Furo' and 'Taneita' of yesteryear but could find very little information about the dimensions, structure and fabrication methods of the originals. Procuring paulownia wood was also another problem. Through a long process of trial and error – and a great deal of imagination – she finally developed a working lantern. While she strived to remain faithful to the originals, some aspects were adapted using up-to-date resources – she used modern illuminants, clear plastic for the slides and she introduced a few new tricks



The Toy Film Museum in Kyoto



Slides from *Kokon Tensho no Kotowari*
(*The Law of Reincarnation of an Old Fox*)

with the slide carriers to improve the movement and drama of the images. One of the many charms of this dynamic art form is that with one operator associated with each main character they can bring the image to life for the audience in a unique way.

Two of the most memorable stories I have seen Mitsue's group perform are *Tsutenaihi* (*The Sneak Thief*) and *Kokon Tensho no Kotowari* (*The Law of Reincarnation of an Old Fox*). In the first an unlucky burglar tries to rob a house where various objects – including an umbrella and a pot – start to come to life, at first behind his back. When he sees them the thief flees in alarm. In the second a travelling master, against the advice of his servant, eats the sushi and rice wine left as an offering at a shrine dedicated to Inari (one of the principal spirits of Shinto). The dish hits the head of a fox taking a nap, leading to the fox and man entering the mysterious process of reincarnation and the cycle of all creation. The dancing foxes was one of the most beautiful scenes I have ever seen performed by magic lantern.

Mitsue has also taken a close interest in the Toy Film Museum of her old friend Professor Yoneo Ota. Housed in an old artisan dwelling, this opened in Kyoto in 2015 – a real gem for all

magic lantern and early cinema aficionados. In limited space Professor Ota has an extensive collection of magic lanterns and optical toys on display. Last year Mitsue both performed a Nishiki Kage-e show and ran a very successful workshop – that is still being talked about – in the museum.

So what next for this extraordinary creative individual? Mitsue says: "I am continuing to research the Japanese wooden magic lantern 'Nishiki Kage-e' and all the possibilities it offers for artistic expression. Recently I have found some interesting facts about the very early Nishiki Kage-e, a subject in which many important points are unclear or unknown. I will certainly continue to hold workshops on Nishiki Kage-e where adults and children can enjoy this magical art for themselves." You can rest assured that Mitsue will not 'retire' and her interest in magic lanterns is profound. She will certainly continue to be involved in the research and activities of the Museum and run workshops, encouraging others to create lanterns (her sake box lanterns are simple and stylish), slides and shows – although most of us fall far short of her standards. But I suggest we watch this space and wish her every good fortune for the future.

BOOK NEWS

SHINING STONE

A History of Lithophanes from the 18th to the 20th Century

KH. W. Steckelings

In 2013, a beautiful book was published in Germany. *Leuchtender Stein*, the definitive history of the lithophane, was written by MLS member Karl-Heinz Steckelings. Gwen Sebus wrote an excellent review of the book in *The New Magic Lantern Journal*, Volume 11, Number 10. However, the text, of course, was in German. Now a PDF e-book version with English text is available. The English title is *Shining Stone* and the layout is practically identical to the original bound book with some slight slippage. All the superb illustrations are there in their original positions and you view with two pages side-by-side as in the open book. If you are using a laptop, the disadvantage is that, to read it, you have to enlarge the text, so losing the advantage of the full page on the screen.

Andy Cook, who members will remember gave us a splendid illustrated talk on lithophanes in 2013, is credited for editing the English language edition. The publishers also now offer the original book with an English language CD.

All versions can be purchased online from www.sandstein-verlag.de. The hardback German edition costs 78 euros, the e-book in English is 48 euros and the German hardback edition with English CD is 98 euros. If they mistakenly charge you for post and packing the e-book (as they did me) they will refund on request!



Jeremy Fisher