

QUICK CHANGE: MUYBRIDGE'S PATENTED SLIDE-CHANGER

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IN LATE JULY 1881 the chronophotographer Eadweard James Muybridge applied for a patent – United States Patent No. 251,127, granted in December 1881 – for a 'Picture-Feeding Device for Magic Lanterns'; in other words, a slide-changer.¹ He assigned the rights of this patent to the Scovill Manufacturing Company of Waterbury, Connecticut, whose cameras he had used in his earlier chronophotographic work at Palo Alto, California.

It is not known whether the Scovill company ever manufactured the slide-changer for sale, but Muybridge's own example still exists. It has remained, unrecognised until now, on the front of the lamphouse of Muybridge's Zoopraxiscope lantern in the Kingston-upon-Thames Museum, indicating that this lamphouse was used to project conventional slides as well as the glass Zoopraxiscope discs showing images of animals in motion. I photographed the lamphouse ten years ago (see illustration) but, being concerned at that time only with the Zoopraxiscope disc mechanism, gave little thought to the attachment, believing it to be a fitting supplied with the commercially-available lamphouse. It was only when Charl Lucassen reproduced the patent drawing of Muybridge's slide-changer on his 'Chronophotographical Projections' website that I immediately recognised it.²

The arrangement allows for feeding the slides vertically from above ('by hand or by means of a hopper', according to the patent specification). Three slides can be held in the device at one time: one above the aperture ready to move into position, one in the aperture actually being projected, and one below the aperture ready to be removed. The slides 'may be delivered into any suitable receptacle'. The slide-changer holds the slides in place by an arrangement of clamps and springs. It makes sense to use gravity to drop lantern slides into position in this way, rather than push them across horizontally as was the case with the usual range of slide carriers. The use of a 'hopper' would allow very fast changing.

It is just possible that Muybridge intended to use this device to project slides of his chronophotographic sequences at a sufficient rate to reproduce movement on the screen, thereby avoiding the limitations of the Zoopraxiscope, whose rotating glass discs were not suitable for projecting true photographs. There is no evidence that this was ever attempted. However, if used in a conventional manner and even without the hopper, the slide-changer would no doubt have made the presentations much slicker. We can imagine Muybridge's projectionist Ernest Webster struggling to manage the fast changing



The slide-changer in situ on the front of Muybridge's Zoopraxiscope lantern at the Kingston-upon-Thames Museum, close-up detail below

required to keep pace with Muybridge's lectures. In a letter written in 1931 he recalled that

between the moving photos Muybridge introduced a very large number of still photos and these I had to put through at a very rapid rate. Muybridge during the show walked about the stage with a little steel 'clicker' in his hand and this he used as a signal when he wanted a slide changed. Sometimes for some of the slides he had no 'patter' and ... he 'clicked' faster and faster ...³

The slide-changer is just a tiny part of the story of Muybridge's screen presentations, which I have researched and written, and hope to publish in 2003/4 as part of a proposed publication cataloguing Muybridge's bequest of his screen projection materials and equipment to the Kingston Museum. In the meantime a major Muybridge exhibition from the USA is due to open at the Hayward Gallery, London, in the summer of 2003.

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NOTES

1. The patent specification and diagrams can be viewed, along with all other US patent and trademark documents, at the United States Patent and Trademark Office website <http://www.uspto.gov> (address correct at time of going to press).
2. See <http://web.inter.nl.net/users/anima/chronoph/muybridge/index.htm> (address correct at time of going to press).
3. Ernest Webster, letter to Mrs J.P. Leigh, 18 November 1931. From a typescript copy in the Muybridge Collection, Kingston Museum.

Muybridge's patent specification (US Patent and Trademark Office)

