

# REVIEW: *MAGICHE VISIONI PRIMA DEL CINEMA*

Richard Crangle

Carlo Alberto Zotti Minici (ed.),  
*Magiche Visioni prima del Cinema: La Collezione Minici Zotti.*  
Padova: Il Poligrafo, 2001.  
314pp, ill. Paperback €36.15, ISBN 88-7115-299-9.

**LIKE LAURA MINICI ZOTTI'S MUSEUM** of Magic Visions in Padova itself, this catalogue of the Minici Zotti Collection is a very welcome arrival on the scene. Beautifully produced, and generously illustrated, it should grace the bookshelves of any serious collector of all things optical, if only to serve as a humbling example of all the wonderful things which aren't (yet) in one's own collection.

In many ways the book is a conventional catalogue, with most of its 314 pages devoted to a categorised listing of the optical instruments, iconography, accessories and slides of the magic lantern and many other optical media. This perhaps makes it more of a reference work than a book for leisure reading, but there are enough glorious images (a high proportion in colour) punctuating the pages of lists to reward a random browse. The equipment parts of the collection have a much higher percentage of items illustrated – simply because there are so many slides listed – but the slide images are well chosen and beautifully reproduced. In particular, a tantalising selection of slides from Laura's remarkable discovery of a collection of over 100 eighteenth-century slides (some of which entranced the audience at last year's Convention in Birmingham) are reproduced in full colour. Perhaps the work that *Magiche Visioni* could most closely be compared to is Laurent Mannoni's superb *Le Mouvement Continué*, the catalogue of the apparatus collection of the Cinémathèque Française.<sup>1</sup> The fact that any comparison at all can be made to a book of that standard (especially as *Magiche Visioni* was produced with – one suspects – a fraction of the resources) is a testimony to the quality of the Zotti Collection and the efforts of Laura, Carlo Alberto and everyone else involved in creating this catalogue.

If there is one criticism to make of the catalogue sections of *Magiche Visioni*, it is that their text is entirely in Italian – of course that is not a problem in itself, but it can prove potentially frustrating to the researcher trying to identify a slide set by its original title in another language. Page 278, for instance, presents the slightly odd juxtaposition of an illustration of the title slide of the wonderfully named set *Ants and their Ways*, alongside its catalogue reference *La vita delle Formiche*. Without the illustration, it might not be immediately obvious that the catalogued item relates to a set which can be identified separately from British manufacturers' catalogues. But perhaps that's only a problem for an obsessive slide cataloguer such as myself, and the same can be said of most catalogues, in any language.

In any case, the book opens with a series of essays and introductions in both in Italian and English. Here and there, translation



problems make themselves felt (the civic introduction by Gian Franco Martinoni is particularly poorly served by its English version). There is a general history of 'pre-cinema' by Carlo Alberto Zotti Minici, and an interesting and thoughtful essay by Gian Piero Brunetta which places the Zotti Collection in context – encouragingly, he talks of a 'history of vision' rather than the narrower 'history of cinema' which (for this reviewer at least) always seems to restrict the way we look at all the wonderful media we deal with. Short contributions by Stephen Herbert, Laurent Mannoni and Thomas Ganz complete the picture, celebrating the Zotti Collection, the museum in Padova and Laura Zotti herself. Mannoni nicely describes the Museum of Magic Visions as 'the Louvre of the Magic Lantern', and I don't see what's wrong with that.

It has to be said that there are certain limitations in the approach of some of these various introductions. It is unusual now, for instance, to find Father Kircher featured quite so prominently; rare indeed to find a history of things optical which seems to ignore Christian Huygens completely. And an assertion like 'the first to apply the idea of photographic plates to magic lanterns, in the late 1860s, was Joseph Bamforth, owner of a publishing house in Yorkshire', which is wrong on three counts (although, to be fair, this is partly due to a shift of emphasis in the English translation of a more accurate Italian original), is all too likely to find itself repeated in some other less careful work.<sup>2</sup> But these are minor scholastic points, and cannot truly be said to detract from the main purpose of the book, which is to celebrate a wonderful collection.

Thinking more generally, there is perhaps a question of how much longer this type of book will be viable as a record of a collection; or perhaps, to put it another way, there is a question of what this type of book (wonderful though it is) is actually for. This is not to disparage *Magiche Visioni* or

Padova: La Specola. Hand-painted slide, c.1850. Minici Zotti Collection, cat. no. 1341



the achievement of producing it in any way. In any case, one of its main functions – to act as a souvenir for the person who has visited the collection, or as a substitute or appetiser for the one who hasn't – is obvious, and in this it succeeds admirably. But still there are a couple of questions which stick in my mind, not so much in relation to this book as in relation to any similar ambitious works in future.

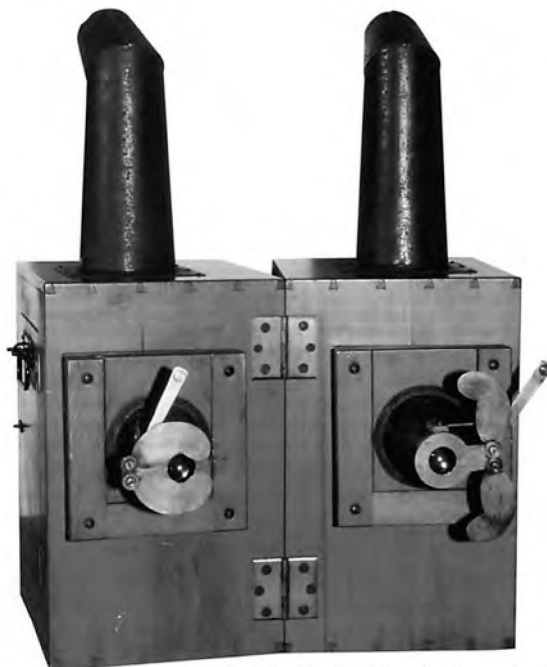
Firstly, a collection catalogue certainly makes a contribution to the general history of entertainment-with-images (and this example makes a very worthwhile contribution, notwithstanding my minor gripes about its introductory materials), but there remains the problem of exactly which history it contributes to. *Magiche Visioni* places itself firmly in a history of cinema, which is fair enough, but has its limitations. For one thing, as I have argued elsewhere, the media illustrated so well in this book had their own lives and purposes quite independent of the twentieth-century cinema, and to keep seeing them only in terms of the (undeniable) part they played in its evolution is to see only part of the picture. For another, in today's rapidly-changing digital age, it is becoming clear that cinematography, as based on the marriage of the photograph and the projection lantern, is itself just one more stage in a much larger and longer story of visual entertainment. In other words, 'historical' media like the lantern can and should be seen on equal terms with later developments. The tag '*prima del Cinema*' (translated as 'before the advent of the cinema') certainly helps to identify a book like this with an existing market, and hopefully broadens its appeal and educational potential – but I begin to wonder how much longer it will seem necessary to make this specific connection.

Secondly, there is also the question of access to the information



*Choreutoscope moving slide by W.C. Hughes of London, 1880s. Minici Zotti Collection, cat. no. 1213*

contained in a catalogue book. Now that computer-based information is so widespread – particularly through internet resources like library and museum public-access catalogues which can be browsed quickly, efficiently and powerfully – the days of the paper-based printed listing must be numbered. This, of course, makes *Magiche*



*Double dissolving-view lantern by Eckenrath of Berlin, c.1870. Minici Zotti Collection, cat. no. 4*

*Visioni* (to say nothing of other projects – the *Encyclopaedia of the Magic Lantern* is a case in point!) all the more remarkable as an achievement, but also begs the question of how much longer a printed list of slides and pieces of apparatus can be the best way of allowing interested parties to analyse the contents of a collection and bring the information that collection represents into use for an understanding of the wider subject it covers.

But having said all that, *Magiche Visioni* remains a significant contribution, like the collection and museum it celebrates, and all concerned in its production are to be congratulated. If nothing else, it works as a (300-page) calling card for a magnificent collection, and if it conveys one important message it is 'get thee to Padua'!

#### NOTES

1. Laurent Mannoni, *Le Mouvement Continué: Catalogue illustré de la collection des appareils de la Cinémathèque Française* (Milan: Mazzotta, 1996).
2. A pedant writes: for the record, photographic slides are generally credited to the Langenheim brothers of Philadelphia; they first made them in 1849; and Joseph Bamforth was a photographer not a publisher.



*Two hand-painted long slides, possibly Dutch, c.1790. Minici Zotti Collection, cat. nos. 1543 and 1548*