

SILHOUETTE SLIDES

Philip Banham



Fig. 1 Panoramic slide from the 1850s

ANY COUNTRY PLANNING TO GO TO WAR with another nation must raise extra revenue, generally through an increase in public taxation. This was exactly the problem faced by Etienne Silhouette, the French Minister of Finance, in 1759, when he was forced to raise taxes to meet the high costs of the Seven Years' War. As a result of Silhouette's financial demands and his austere policies, his name became synonymous with anything done or made at low cost.

Prior to the mid-eighteenth century, anyone who wanted to capture the likeness of a person had no alternative but to employ the services of an artist to create a portrait painting or drawing. This was an expensive process that was only available to the rich and famous. However, by the 1750s, it had been found that a much cheaper likeness could be produced by cutting a black piece of card to the shape of the sitter's profile. These 'profiles' or 'shades' become known as 'silhouettes', after Etienne Silhouette. Over time, three methods were devised to produce the silhouette. Some were painted on a variety of materials including ivory, plaster, paper and card, or in reverse on curved glass. Another technique was known as 'hollow-cut', in which the negative image was traced and cut away from light-coloured paper, which was then laid over a dark background. In the third, main, method, known as 'cut and paste', the figure was cut freehand out of black paper and then pasted onto a light background. Various ingenious methods were devised to produce a more accurate likeness. For example, a bright light was placed behind the sitter to produce an exact shadow on a screen, which the artist could then draw directly onto tracing paper. Another technique involved the use of Lavater's special silhouette chair¹.

In the nineteenth century, the concept of the silhouette image was adapted to a number of other uses, including story books illustrated with silhouette prints² and political caricatures printed in magazines. Originating in the orient with traditions such as the shadow theatres of Indonesia, the shadow play became popular entertainment in Paris during the latter part of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Given the success of shadow theatre shows, it was hardly surprising that magic lantern showmen incorporated silhouettes painted on glass into their lantern shows. For effective projection through a magic lantern, silhouette slides require a bold image with clear definition at the edges, unlike framed silhouette paintings in which a fuzzy outline could be used to illustrate clothing or hair.

Magic lantern showmen realised that relatively simply produced black images could create powerful, projected images on the screen. The images could be produced using similar techniques to those of paper silhouettes. It is likely that the earliest silhouette magic lantern slides were long panoramic

slides painted on thin handmade glass. The illustration (Fig. 1) probably dates from the 1850s, when a combination of wet collodion and hand painting was used to produce the finished effect. Collodion was a mixture of pyroxylin in a mixture of equal quantities of alcohol and ether, and was used by Scott Archer to produce the Ambrotype photograph³. When exposed to air, the edges of the image tend to deteriorate, which causes an attractive colour change or halo effect.

Whereas the finest hand-painted magic lantern slides were created by English slide painters, it appears that the best silhouette slides were produced by French and German artists. In France, the most notable caricature artists specialising in visual storytelling through the silhouette were Henri Callol and Emmanuel Poiré, who assumed the pseudonym Caran D'Ache towards the end of the nineteenth century. Both produced similar *ombres* (*ombres chinoises*). These fine images could be transferred onto glass for projection through a magic lantern.

Henri Callol had a considerable sense of humour, as illustrated in his sequence 'Général et Cerf-Volant' where, in a halt during a formal march past and parade in Paris, some urchins tied a kite-string to the tail of the general's horse. As the parade gathered pace, the general's horse started to trot and the kite was raised and floated gaily behind him. The troops could not contain their amazement, as the general, totally unaware of the situation, passed by the rostrum in dignified triumph, followed by his troops⁴.

Twenty years ago when we were in Paris, we spent a day hunting round the antiques markets. Having found nothing to purchase, we were about to return to the hotel when Rosemary discovered a stack of long glass magic lantern slides, many of which were glued to the exterior brick wall of the shop with Blu-Tack. Sadly a number of them had fallen off and smashed on the ground. We salvaged as many as possible, but some of these wonderful panoramic slides were in small fragments and beyond restoration. In the sequence of five slides illustrated opposite, believed to be from 'La marche à l'étoile' or 'L'Épopée' by Caran D'Ache, the story develops gradually. It starts with the formal formation of advancing soldiers and their mounted officers and standard bearers, with ensigns flying in the breeze and columns of soldiers in neat marching rows (Figs 2 and 3). This image of tough men all marching or riding into battle is made more human in the following slide (Fig. 4), as women and children can be seen walking on the outside of the column, followed by a supply wagon pulled by a donkey, and children running alongside the soldiers as if it were some great spectacle and not the serious matter of people being killed in warfare. We are not shown the actual battle scenes, but next we see the return of



Fig. 2 Soldiers marching to battle



Fig. 3 Soldiers marching to battle



Fig. 4 Soldier with women and children



Fig. 5 Soldiers limping home wounded



Fig. 6 Anti-war propaganda

the soldiers, who have clearly been beaten; they are now sad and broken as they limp home wounded. Even the dog is thin and hangs his head. The horses, formerly fit and proud, are now shown with wooden artificial legs and the soldiers are on crutches or even creeping along, bent double (Fig. 5). However, worse is to come as Caran d'Ache paints gun carriages crammed with the wounded, limping soldiers, some with no legs, and,

finally, hard-hitting, semi-comic figures with clockwork keys jutting out of their backs. But in reality the slides are far from humorous. The powerful visual image condemns all wars and requires no accompanying script. The skill of the artist is supreme and I consider this short series one of the most notable ever produced (Fig. 6). David Robinson suggests that these panoramic slides may have been used in complex magic lantern shows in

which back projection was used, with one lantern showing the scene and a second lantern showing the figures on long panoramic slides to provide movement⁹ (Fig. 8). However, in the main, these silhouette designs were used in several shadow theatres in Paris and other major European cities. As can be seen, there is a close link between the use of these images in both professional magic lantern shows and shadow theatre companies, including La Loupiote, Le Théâtre du Petit Miroir and le Théâtre de la Lanterne in France and Clair de Lune Théâtre and La Compagnie de l'Ombre in Belgium⁶.

Transformation slides have long been a feature of magic lantern performances. The early hand-painted wooden



Fig. 8 Long panoramic slides showing movement

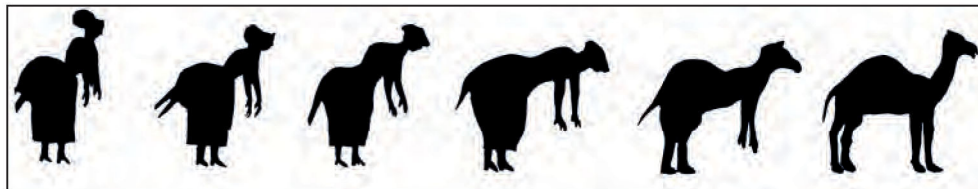


Fig. 9 Fearful fate of a fashionable female

mounted silhouette 'The Grecian Bend' or 'Fearful Fate of a Fashionable Female' was illustrated in the *Society Newsletter*, but because it is a dynamic image it is worth illustrating again. The accompanying poem by Lydia Vare, written in 1869, is a humorous cry for young women not to be too modern in their fashion choices and reject the wearing of the bustle. It starts: 'Let's have the old bend, and not have the new:/ Let's have the bend that our grandmothers knew, /Over the wash-tub and over the churn;/ That is the bend that our daughters should learn.' Then in the third verse: 'Let's have the bend that at church they did wear, / Bowing them lowly in meek, humble prayer;/ Not sitting erect, with the modern miss air...' Modest women were advised not to be overcome by vanity in the way they dressed, the love of the new bonnet, or the latest fashion such as the bustle: 'Leave the camel his hump; he wears it for use;/ leave the donkey his pannier, and cut yourself loose/ From fashions that lower, deform, and degrade...' (Fig. 9). A much shorter version is printed on a label attached to the slide and reads: 'The Grecian Bend, the Grecian Bend, Oh wither will the fashions tend; If ladies will themselves debase, They'll have the camel's form and face.'

The traditional story of 'Lucky Hans' or 'Hans im Gluck' appears in different versions and in different countries, but the underlying thrust of the tale is similar. A young man leaves his poor, widowed mother and sets out to make his fortune. He works hard for a number of years and, wishing to return to his mother, his employer pays with a bag of gold. Alas he is rather naive, and falls victim to the first smooth-talking confidence trickster along the way. He exchanges his bag of gold for a lame horse, who throws him from a bridge into a stream. A shepherd convinces Hans to exchange the horse for a cow who fails to

Fig. 10 The Lucky Hans slides



produce any milk. As the slides show, the situation rapidly deteriorates and finally there is nothing left except small change to purchase a last glass of beer. Penniless, the young man washes in a brook and returns home to his poor old mother. This

set was produced by *Sddeutsche Lichtbild-G m.b. H, München*. The use of bold silhouettes rather than hand-painted scenic slides conveys the essence of the tale clearly. (Fig. 10)

Another excellent story sequence in silhouette slides is Albert Smith's 'Little Kasper' or 'Der Kleine Kasper'; the text in English and German together with the images were reproduced in the *Magic Lantern Society Newsletters* Nos 45 and 46.

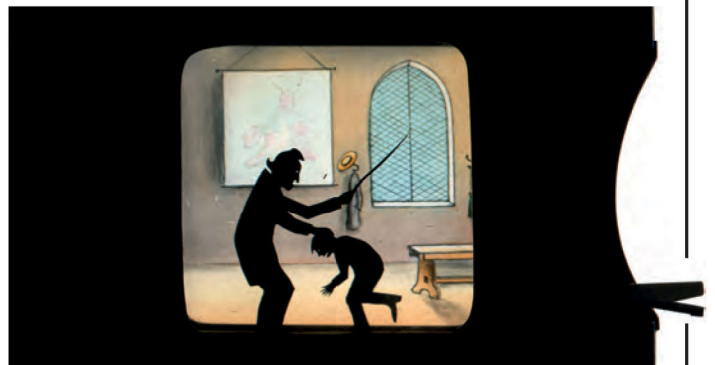


Fig. 11 A boy being caned

Some of the most striking silhouette slides are the brass mechanicals in which a disc of thin brass is cut to form a figure, and limbs are articulated and attached to a complex series of brass levers and joints cased in a mahogany frame. Magical effects are produced when the slide is projected. In Fig. 11 a boy is being caned and the pain causes the boy to kick his leg up as each stroke hits his bottom; it is quite realistic and amusing at the same time. A static hand-painted scene is sometimes added, as shown in this example.



Fig. 12 A silhouette slide with landscape

By combining traditional landscape painting with a silhouette scene, an interesting three-dimensional effect is produced (Fig. 12). Usually, the darker part of a woodland glade would be in the distance, but in this instance the dark areas are at the front and the impact is enhanced. In 'Woodland Glade' the effect is both unusual and magical due to the juxtaposition of the dark silhouette trees in the foreground and the lighter-coloured copse and yellow sky in the distance. Another technique that was sometimes used by the artist producing silhouette slides was *verre églomisé*, in which one side of the glass was covered with black soot paint or thick black pigment and the fine detail, such as the rigging on a sailing ship, was outlined by needle point. The surrounding surface was then scraped away and finally a thin translucent blue or light brown tissue was placed over the slide to produce an interesting effect when it was projected. Some of the early hand-painted panoramic slides incorporated this technique, and it was a way of playing with the idea of black and white on a slide.

Silhouette magic lantern slides appear to be a relatively neglected subject. Only rarely have illustrated articles appeared in the Magic Lantern Society *Journals* and *Newsletters*. Small silhouettes, many the size of a standard magic lantern slide, can be found in many of the major art galleries, including London's Victoria and Albert Museum and The National Portrait Gallery, and the Royal Collection at Windsor, but to my knowledge no magic lantern slides are exhibited.

Given the ease with which snapshots can now be taken, particularly with mobile phones, it is perhaps surprising that silhouette artists are still active in tourist resorts in city centres

across Europe. Crowds still gather to watch tourists having their profiles skilfully cut out of a sheet of black card and mounted on a white background in a matter of minutes.

Philip BANHAM started collecting slides 40 years ago, gave his first show 35 years ago and joined the Magic Lantern Society in 1977. In the 1990s Philip developed a new course at Warwick University using photographic images, including slides, as primary source material in the study of Victorian Social History. In recent years, together with his wife Rosemary, he has lectured for the National Association of Decorative and Fine Arts Societies where topics have included '350 Years of Transparent Painting on Glass Through the Magic Lantern' and 'Victorian Fairy Painting'. <philip.banham@virgin.net>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Grateful thanks for the assistance and advice of Willem Hackmann and Annet Duller

REFERENCES

1. *Essays on Physiognomy*, Lavater, G.G.J and J. Robinson, 1859
2. *Silhouettes*, Peggy Hickman, Cassell, 1968
3. *Cassell's Cyclopaedia of Photography*, 1911
4. *La Nature*, Edition 1893, page 365
5. *The Lantern Image: Iconography of the Magic Lantern 1420-1880*, David Robinson, The Magic Lantern Society, 1993
6. *A Treatise on Silhouette Likeness*, Edouart, Longmans 1834
7. *Newsletter*, No 35, Magic Lantern Society, Dec 1993, page 5

SEE ALSO

- Escapade*, John Goodall, Macmillan, 1980
The Studio, Gabriel Mourey, 1895
Grimm's Fairy Tales, 1812
La Prise de Peking, Adolphe Philippe Dennerly, Hachett, 1861

