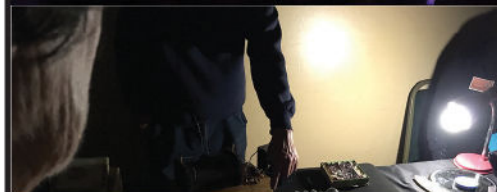


THE CURIOUS CHAMBER

Frog Morris



Our Chairman, Jeremy Brooker, wanted to try some new approaches for the 10th International Convention of the Magic Lantern Society. Nicole Mollett, Alexia Lazou and myself had been approached to create a 'sideshow' for the programme. We decided that we would create a version of the 'Cabinet of Curiosities'. We are all practising artists and aware that the once-popular 'Cabinet of Curiosities' was an important influence in the evolution of the modern-day art museum, as well as having strong associations with the era of the Magic Lantern. The aim was to draw together artists using magic lanterns as there is now a growing group of us within the Society. However, we did not want limit our show only to artists. There are plenty of lanternists and collectors who might not describe themselves as artists yet are passionately involved in some very creative projects.

We made an open call for exhibits (see *The Magic Lantern* no. 10) and we were not really sure what to expect ...

As visitors entered our Chamber of Curiosities they entered into darkness, also uncertain of what awaited them within those walls. Slowly the lights began to turn on, illuminating one by one an arcade of optical apparitions. My role was to introduce each piece with drama and intrigue.

First to appear was an artwork by London based artist Sarah Sparkes who is currently touring a new exhibition *The GHost Formula* which explores supernatural manifestations (<http://www.theghostportal.co.uk/>). This piece was a personal tribute to her grandfather who was once a magic lanternist. His slides had been left abandoned in a shed until Sarah discovered them and decided to give them new purpose in his memory. Shining through the scratched and worn-thin paint of the old slides, viewers could peek at miniature light installations created by Sarah in cases behind.

Next was a work by Alexia Lazou. This installation using children's lanterns mixed with old film stills and scripts paid tribute to early film pioneer John Williamson. Williamson made *Fire!*, an early 'action movie'. But it was not shot in the towers of New York nor the streets of LA but in Alexia's home town of Hove.

We then moved onto a display cabinet containing a number of curious collectors' item, including an episcope handmade from fretwork in 1938 found by Lester Smith for his collection and "The fastest slide changer this side of Hong Kong" from Willem Hackmann. The cabinet also held a number of rare and beautiful slides and some fortunate visitors to the Chamber were able to see these projected. Bernd Scholze had kindly shared with us some hand-painted slides from China brought back by a missionary in the 19th century. We also had a selection of exquisite hand-painted animated slides made in the present day by artist Nicole Mollett, who was on hand to project the slides herself and was able to answer questions about how they were created.

The visitors then had the opportunity to handle and interact with a number of optical toys provided by George Auckland including a mutascope animation of Eadweard Muybridge's galloping horse, a mesmerising Euler's disc, spinning rattlebacks which appeared to defy the laws of physics and reversing goggles that turned the world upside down. Lester Smith and David Burder teamed up to finish this sequence with the famous 'hollow face' illusion featuring Albert Einstein. And if these mind-bending exhibits were not enough, there was more to come ...

Robin Palmer had spent the last few weeks working frantically in his workshop to recreate a 'physioscope' – a device which was first exhibited at the Royal Polytechnic Institute in 1845 but is now rarely seen. This enormous projector filled the second half of the Chamber and had lenses bigger than dinner plates. It was large enough for a human to get inside and project their own face onto a wall – as Robin was brave enough to step inside and demonstrate for amazed onlookers. But this was not all he had brought. We were also lucky enough to see his set of Geissler tubes demonstrated – the 19th century forerunner of the neon tube. As an electric current passed through the arrangement of strangely shaped tubes filled with different gases, they lit up in a dazzling array of colours.

And finally we ended with a song and dance, but fortunately it was not performed by me. Maria and Michael Start had shared with us two beautiful and graceful automata from their collection. The first was a leopard that pawed elegantly across the table and then, finally, we opened a tiny silver box to reveal a minute feathered bird who sang our guests 'farewell'.

Frog Morris is an artist, performer and magic lanternist (www.artofthemagiclantern.co.uk)