

A MAGIC LANTERN FOLDING SCREEN

Sergi Arnalot (Sergi Buka)

There is a beautiful museum in the Spanish city of Madrid, sometimes overshadowed by great institutions like the Prado, the Reina Sofia Museum of Contemporary Art or the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum. I am referring to the Museum of Romanticism (Museo del Romanticismo), which is located in a neoclassical palace built between 1776 and 1779 at Calle San Mateo, 13. The museum houses an important collection of historical and artistic material from the 19th century, with a special emphasis on the Spanish Romantic movement. The museum's collection includes paintings, drawings, prints, sculpture, furniture, photography and the decorative arts. Through these exhibits we can learn about aspects of a society, an historical era and an artistic movement - Romanticism - that took place in Spain between 1833 and 1868.

Among the objects in the collection are optical toys, stereoscopic photographs, lithophanes, dioramas and a curious object which stands in room XXIV of the museum, the so-called 'Serre' room – a magic lantern folding screen. This piece of furniture is of French origin and inspired by oriental design, a decorative style which reached great popularity in Europe during the 19th century. It was highly unusual and extremely rare to insert magic lantern slides as decoration on a folding screen, and it is most likely that this piece was made to order.

The screen consists of three rectangular wooden panels joined together with hinges, each of which contains four French-style magic lantern slides typical of the



The folding screen (photograph courtesy of the Museum of Romanticism, Madrid)

period. The slides are larger than normal and were probably made expressly for the screen. There are 12 slides in total, arranged vertically, with levers on the back to give movement to the scenes. Some of them slide laterally and some pivot.

The maker and date of manufacture are unknown but in common with other French slides of this type, several are inscribed with a date – in this case 1867. This offers us an approximate date for the construction of the screen itself.

Most of the scenes are humorous, part of the typical iconography of French magic lantern slides. We can see classic scenes such as a 'welcome' slide, the chef who changes his head with the piglet he carries on a tray, Cupid appearing from a rose, Pierrot falling into a devilish cauldron, the violinist with his dancing dog, a lady pulling the head off a stubborn ass, a juggler, a man bitten by a fish, Pierrot and a devilish cake, Pierrot in a bottle, a boy chasing a rabbit, and an acrobat balancing on a ball.

This piece reminds us once again of the importance and influence that the magic lantern had in the everyday life of people in those times.



Some of the images in the screen (photographs courtesy of the Museum of Romanticism, Madrid)