

BOOK REVIEW

SHOW PEOPLE PORTRAYED

A Catalogue of 18th and 19th Century Artefacts
Depicting Magic Lantern and Peepshow Performers

Mike Smith

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Hardback, 96 pages (£30.00 inc. postage & packing)

Available from the author – contact email: kime1944@gmail.com

This is the third, and sadly the last, volume in Mike Smith's series on how showpeople with peepshows and magic lanterns have been portrayed in the arts (see *TML* 11 and 18 for reviews of the previous volumes). The final volume covers a dazzling array of different media, including textiles, fans, ceramics and clocks – and, of course, magic lantern slides, most of which have already featured in the *TML* 'Magic Lantern Within' series. Mike's foreword provides an interesting explanation for the large number of monkeys that appear in the images (known as



'singerie') – either because they were a common sight with travelling showpeople and used to attract audiences (especially children), or that they were a satirical device, imitating human behaviour.

David Robinson's introduction also picks up this theme and mentions Florian's fable of Jacquau 'The Monkey with the Magic Lantern' (see *TML* 25, p. 14) who even appears on a thimble in the book. David provides some fascinating insight into both the content of the images and the historical development of the objects on which they are seen, as well as making two thought-provoking points. First, we never know what image the viewers are seeing in the early peepshows (ignoring the erotic fantasies on the snuff boxes at the end of the book) and, second, smartphones and computers hardly compare as subjects to be portrayed on similar artefacts today.

For each section of the 'catalogue' Mike provides a brief history of the medium concerned, a summary of the important makers and locations, and often the social and artistic influences for the main pieces shown. The sections cover tapestries and textiles, tiles, fans, porcelain, mantel clocks, *vues d'optique* and lantern slides, snuff and tobacco boxes, and *bonbonnières*. One section covers a miscellany of other objects including a biscuit tin, gingerbread mould, games, knife rests and a concertina paper peepshow – showing a peepshow.

Among the oldest objects are 18th-century French tapestries from Beauvais and ceramic tableware (plates, cups and saucers) from France, Austria and the Netherlands, including Delft. However, I found the section about fans one of the most fascinating in the book. While the concept is ancient, here it is something that can be functional, ceremonial and decorative as well as giving movement to the often complex show image depicted on it. The earliest example shown is

French, 1760, but some of the later examples are extraordinary for the intricate painting on all the parts.

It is hard to pick a favourite from the riches in Mike's book. Reluctantly ignoring the solid gold peepshow on the pocket watch, one stood out for me – the French 19th-century porcelain teapot warmer with a magic lantern show and scene, and the covered chocolate cup and saucer with a very similar design. Both belong to Jacques Prenez.

The examples illustrated in the book come from the collections of many names familiar to MLS members, including Jacques Prenez, Martin Gilbert, Gwen Sebus, Georg Füsslin and Mike Smith himself, as well as those of museums and other private collectors. Throughout the book the colour images – around 200 photos in total – are beautifully reproduced in a generous size so you can appreciate the detail. If helpful, the detail is also shown separately. Where needed, different sides are photographed to give the complete picture. The original source of the image (e.g. a print or engraving) is included where known and all the images are clearly captioned.

Congratulations to Mike and his team, including Dennis Crompton, for another excellent volume to savour, enjoy and treasure.

Mary Ann Auckland



Porcelain teapot warmer, French c. 1830 (Jacques Prenez's collection)