

The Magic Lantern

PART 1

Original Japanese slides appear to be very rare survivors, certainly in Europe, so Martin's collection is something very special. From the content they would appear to date from the Meiji period (1868-1912), a theory also confirmed by Erkki Huhtamo. There are six slides in total – three slipping slides and three panoramas.

The slipping slides are similar in construction to those used by Mitsue Ikeda-Tanaka and other modern-day lanternists in Japan (see *TML* 16). Wooden pegs keep the slider moving smoothly, and these are positioned to determine the outer limits of movement for the sliding glass. The slides appear well-used, with some wear to the wooden frames and finger marks which

SOME JAPANESE RARITIES

Jeremy Brooker

A few months ago I was fortunate enough to acquire at auction some unique magic lantern slides by the English slide artist Henry Underhill, including a set illustrating a traditional Japanese folk tale, *The Tongue Cut Sparrow*. These were formerly owned by MLS member Ian Mackley who died in 2007. Ian took a particular interest in Underhill's work, and some MLS members might remember his presentation of Hans Christian Anderson's *Snow Queen* at our Convention in 2001 with his wife Daphne. At the same auction Martin Gilbert purchased some wonderful Japanese slides and we presented our finds together at the MLS Spring Meeting in Birmingham (see *TML* 39). Taken together, these slides seem to illustrate the cross-currents between East and West in the last decades of the nineteenth century.



1. Japanese slipping slide – single slipper (Martin Gilbert collection)



2. Japanese slipping slide combining a single slipper with a phantasmagorical panorama (Martin Gilbert collection)



suggest frequent handling. Though we know nothing about the artists involved, they are exceptionally well painted. They comprise one single slipper (Fig. 1), another single slipper combined with a panoramic scene representing a phantasmagorical procession of demonic creatures (Fig. 2) and one double slipper (Fig. 3).

The panoramic slides are of two distinct types. One has a black background and seems to represent a Chinese New Year lantern procession (Fig. 4). Although the lunar New Year is widely celebrated in much of East Asia, it is not generally observed in Japan. A notable exception originated in Shintchi Chinatown in Nagasaki, and the Nagasaki Lantern Festival remains a popular attraction to the present day (Fig. 5). The Festival dates back to the Edo period (1603-1868) when Japan pursued an isolationist policy and was largely cut off from the outside world. At that time foreigners were only allowed access to Japan by sea to an artificially-created island called Dejima, originally attached to the mainland of Nagasaki. The slide may represent the arrival of ships entering Nagasaki port.

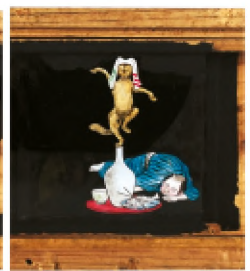
My personal favourites amongst Martin's Japanese slides are two panoramas with clear backgrounds. These are packed with charming detail. In one (Fig. 6), we see everyday scenes in the bustling streets of a Japanese city

(continued on page 3)

CONTENTS

Number 40 – September 2024

1. Some Japanese Rarities *Jeremy Brooker*
2. MLS Notice Board
6. Who's Who in Circus Magic Lantern Slides: Part 2. Andrew Ducrow, et al. *Dick Moore*
9. MLS Awards 2024
- The Magic Lantern and the Peepshow *Mike Smith*
10. Pulman Lantern by S.J. Levi – Full Restoration *Mike Jones*
11. Aurora slides
12. From the Chair *Richard Feltham*
- Special MLS Meeting in the Netherlands *Sandra Lawrence*
15. Summer Meeting of the MLS *Mary Ann Auckland*



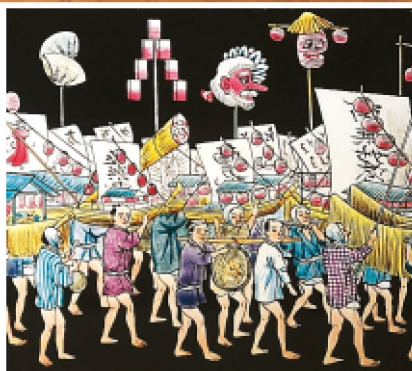
3. Japanese double slipping slide (Martin Gilbert collection)



4. Chinese lantern procession (above) and detail (right) (Martin Gilbert collection)

including a harassed mother with her unruly children, a grand lady with an attendant holding a parasol to protect her from the sun, a fish seller and a bowler-hatted gent hurrying to the office. The individual figures seem exceptionally well observed and are likely taken from some pre-existing source.

The companion slide (Fig. 7) represents another street scene, this time depicting a very grand funeral cortège. The procession is headed by Buddhist acolytes carrying banners, gongs and containers of leafy plants. These are followed by a Buddhist monk and his attendants, four men carrying the palanquin and a large crowd of mourners. Again,



5. Nagasaki Lantern Festival (above) (Simone Armer, www.simonearmer.com)

these figures seem exceptionally well observed. A banner blows over the face of one of the bearers, while another turns his head as if to address his companion in a naturalistic way. Each of the mourners is skilfully individualised. The print in Fig. 8 is another example.



6. Panoramic slide of Japanese street scene (above). Detail (below) of: (a) woman with children; (b) woman with parasol; (c) fish seller; (d) bowler-hatted gentleman (Martin Gilbert collection)



7. Japanese funeral cortège (below). Detail of Buddhist acolytes with banners at front (right) (Martin Gilbert collection)





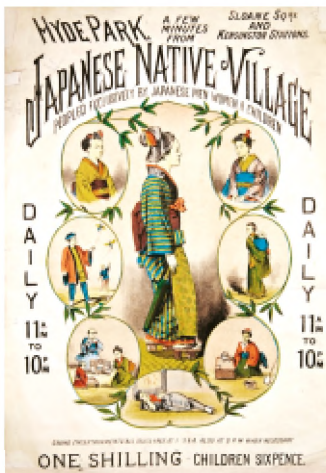
8. 'Japanese funeral customs – the procession leaves the house' (Wikimedia Commons)

PART 2

Following the Treaty of Kanagawa in 1854 Japan was forced to open up to Western trade and diplomacy, ushering in the Meiji period. This exposed Japan to outside influences, but the exchange of ideas flowed both ways. Edgar Degas, Claude Monet and Vincent van Gogh all collected *ukiyo-e* prints and Impressionism was greatly influenced by Japanese art. At the same time Japanese artists such as Koide Narashige, Hazama Inosuke and Hayashi Shizue spent time in Paris exploring Western artistic practices. There was also a mania amongst the general public throughout Europe for all things Japanese, which reached a peak in the 1880s.

To capitalise on this popular craze, a Dutch entrepreneur known as Tannaker Buhicosan opened a 'Japanese village' in Knightsbridge, London, in 1885. Visitors could observe around 100 Japanese men and women carrying out a variety of tasks in an 'authentic' setting (Fig. 9). The exhibition ran until 1887 and was famously visited by W.S. Gilbert, who engaged people from the village to instruct the cast of the latest Gilbert and Sullivan opera, *The Mikado* (1885) (Fig.10).

Naturally, this Japanophilia was not confined to the major conurbations of Paris and London, and in the English university city of Oxford Henry Underhill was to make his own small contributions to this phenomenon (Fig. 11). Underhill ran a successful grocery business in the city, but although his brother George was a Classics tutor at Magdalen College Henry was not part of the famous university.¹ Nevertheless, he was strongly enmeshed in the cultural life of the city. He was a founding member of the Oxfordshire Natural History Society (now the Ashmolean Natural History Society of Oxfordshire) and in the 1880s and 1890s gave eleven lectures to the Society on a variety of topics illustrated with his own hand-painted and photographic lantern slides. These included



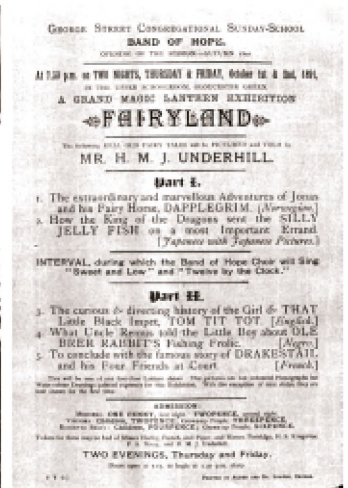
9. Poster advertising the Japanese Village in Knightsbridge, London (Wikimedia Commons)



10. Poster for Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* (Wikimedia Commons)



11. Henry Underhill (Underhill Collection, Folklore Society)³



12. 'Fairyland' poster, designed by Underhill (Bodleian Library)⁴

Spiders (1887); *Insect Eyes* (1888); *Microscopic Organisms from Ponds* (1889) and, in 1890, *Artistic Japan*.²

In addition to his academic interests Underhill was a highly-skilled artist and keen supporter of the Oxford branch of the Band of Hope, organising outings and entertainments for children. Here, Underhill could explore another of his great passions – folk tales from around the world. A poster (Fig. 12) in the Bodleian Library advertises 'A Grand Magic Lantern Exhibition' entitled 'Fairyland' given for the George Street Congregational Sunday-School Band of Hope on 1 and 2 October 1891. The programme comprised five tales illustrated by Underhill from Norway, Japan, England, America and France. As the poster explained, these slides were not photographed illustrations from published books but: "Water-colour Drawings, painted expressly for this Exhibition. With the exception of nine slides, they are now shown for the first time." This seems an extraordinary investment of time and effort for a one-off exhibition aimed at a juvenile audience but Underhill was nothing if not a perfectionist. He contributed occasional articles to the *Optical Magic Lantern Journal* (OMLJ) setting out his forthright views on imperfectly-hung projection screens and the effect of dissolving between dissimilar images, creating "the effect of one picture being, as it were, 'seen through' another" which he regarded as "particularly unpleasant".⁵

What really set Underhill apart, though, was his meticulous method for producing lantern slides, which he set out in two articles for the *OMLJ* and in a lecture *Painting Lantern Slides* (1891) for the Oxfordshire Natural History Society.⁶ He would first produce an original drawing on paper, which was then traced onto very finely-ground glass using a soft pencil. This rough outline was then overlaid with a hard pencil and the first outlines carefully removed before building up the colour in many layers of watercolour. Each slide was an individually-produced work of art and could take days to complete. Unusually, Underhill dated his slides as they were completed (for example, see Fig. 14) so we can tell exactly when each was created.



13. The Tongue-Cut Sparrow, with illustrations by Eitaku Kobayashi and translated by David Thompson. Published by Hasegawa (Kobunsha) in Tokyo, 1885 (World Digital Library)



14. Henry Underhill, The Tongue-Cut Sparrow, Slide 1. Note the date 'July 30 1889' on the reverse (right-hand image, bottom corner) (Jeremy Brooker collection)



15 Henry Underhill, The Tongue-Cut Sparrow, Slide 8 (Jeremy Brooker collection)

The Japanese tale recounted in Underhill's 'Fairyland' exhibition was *The Silly Goldfish* and the original illustrations were taken from a series of books created in Japan by the publisher Takejiro Hasegawa. These were illustrated by Japanese artists and were produced by traditional Japanese techniques using folded sheets of crêpe paper bound with silk cords tied through four holes near the spine.⁷ Though 'authentically' Japanese, these books were intended for the European market with texts translated into English. *The Silly Goldfish* was published in Tokyo in 1887 (Meiji year 20).

The Tongue-Cut Sparrow was first published by Hasegawa in 1885 (Meiji 18), with illustrations by Eitaku Kobayashi and English translation by David Thompson (Fig. 13). It was this publication which provided the source for the Underhill slides in my own collection (Figs 14 and 15). If we compare the published illustrations with Underhill's finished slides we can see how he re-worked the source material to suit the new medium of magic lantern slides.

PART 3 – CONCLUSION

Taken together, the slides discussed here perhaps tell us something about the cross-currents between East and West, at least in the limited context of magic lantern slide production. The *Nishiki Kage-e* tradition of magic lantern performance using back projection, multiple operators and hand-held lanterns would appear to be a uniquely Japanese response to the import of magic lanterns by Dutch traders during the Edo period. However, it is clear that once communications were normalised in the later nineteenth century there was a more open flow of ideas. The slides collected by Martin are clearly Japanese in subject matter and would appear to have been well-used, suggesting an indigenous Japanese magic lantern culture. But were they used in the

Nishiki Kage-e manner, with hand-held lanterns and large back projection screens? The panoramic slides with clear background, at least, would surely have been shown in the Western style using fixed lanterns.

It is also striking that, despite their unfamiliar subject matter, these six slides suggest direct contact with the West. Though distinctly Japanese, and very probably created for a Japanese audience, the three slipping slides have obvious counterparts in European slides of a similar period. Compare the last image in Fig. 3 with the 'Harlequin and the Bottle' in Fig. 16, for example. If the *Nishiki Kage-e* was developed independently without much reference to Western practices, these slides suggest the direct influence of European lanternism.

In the case of the Underhill slides, we see this influence in reverse – Japanese culture in the form of traditional tales, repackaged by a Japanese publisher specifically for the export market, then reinterpreted for the magic lantern by an amateur scholar in far-away Oxford (as in Fig. 17).

The fascinating history of *Nishiki Kage-e* has been widely researched and skilfully revived by Japanese performers in recent years. However, this should not be seen as the complete story of the magic lantern in Japan. It is hoped that these small case-studies will encourage further exploration of Japanese magic lantern performance during the later part of the nineteenth century and the evolving cross-current of ideas between East and West in the Meiji period.

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4. Reproduced in Megan Price, *Oxonesia*, OAHS, 2008, p.105
5. *OMLJ*, Vol. 2, No. 30, November 1891, pp.170–171; *OMLJ*, Vol. 3, No.35, April 1892, pp. 46–47
6. 'Artistic Lantern Slides', *OMLJ*, Vol. 3, No. 37, June 1892, pp. 67–68; *OMLJ*, Vol. 3, No. 38, July 1892, pp. 78–81
7. For an excellent account of these publications see: www.baxleystamps.com/litho/hasegawa/ft_2_sparrow_c1911.shtml



16. Slipping slide 'Harlequin and the Bottle'. Compare with Fig. 3. (Jeremy Brooker collection)



17. Henry Underhill, The Tongue-Cut Sparrow, Slide 10 (Jeremy Brooker collection)

You can view the presentation on these rare Japanese slides given by Jeremy Brooker and Martin Gilbert at the MLS Spring Meeting 2024 (see TML 39) at: <https://bit.ly/4cLvDWlh>