

Magic Lantern

The magic lantern was an early form of slide projector invented in the 17th century by a Dutch scientist called Christiaan Huygens. Images were hand-painted onto glass slides, inserted into a wooden carrier and projected onto a white wall. The first magic lanterns were lit by candles and oil lamps but the images were not very bright. The development of carbon arc lamps and limelight allowed much stronger images to be produced. The magic lantern shown here is adapted for electricity but lit originally



Helioscopic Magic Lantern, c1880

Manufactured by Walter Tyler of Waterloo Road, London.
Eden Valley Museum Archives

by a kerozene lamp. Smoke was diffused through the chimney at the top.

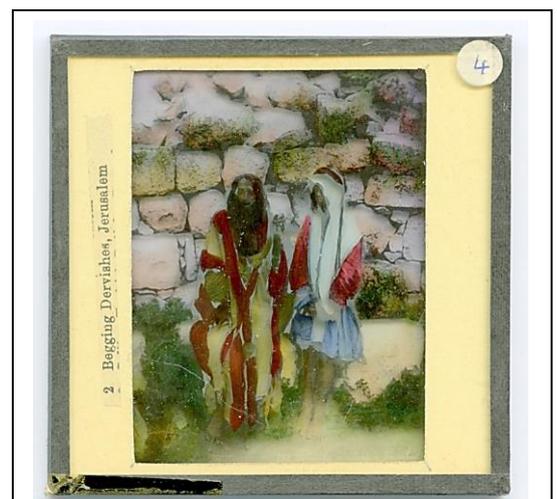
Magic lantern shows were a popular form of entertainment in the 17th century and performed by travelling showmen who narrated stories to go with them. Horror shows called phantasmagorias featured all kinds of grisly effects which both thrilled and terrified the audiences that watched them. Ghosts, demons and other macabre and creepy characters were projected onto smoke ... and vanished when the projectionist tugged at the slide carrier!

Lantern slide carriers were either 'standard', as shown here, or moveable. Moveable carriers had a device that allowed different slides to pass over one another to create different effects, such as falling snow or ships rolling at sea. Brass eye screws at either end of the carrier allowed it to be pulled back and forth. Better quality carriers were made by Beard or Ensign and some were made in mahogany.

Painted slides were difficult to execute because flaws always appeared more obvious once slides were lit. Colours such as Prussian blue, Naples yellow and carmine admitted light better than others but only if applied thinly. Each layer of paint had to be fixed with varnish so the process was quite a lengthy. In 1820, a copper-plate printing process developed by the optical instrument maker, Philip Carpenter enabled lantern slides to be mass-produced.

Magic lanterns were used for educational purposes too. The magic lantern at Eden Valley Museum was used for religious instruction at Sunday School by the Crouch House Baptist Chapel in Edenbridge. Their lantern slide collection includes

photographic slides produced by Bonfils. Félix Bonfils was a French photographer born in 1831 who



Bonfils Lantern Slide, c1876

Eden Valley Museum Archives

established the first professional photographic studio in Beirut. He produced thousands of photographs of the Middle East over the course of his career and in 1880, a new colour photography technique called Photochrom. His lantern slides included landscapes, Bible stories and posed scenes with models in Middle Eastern dress. His wife Lydia was a portrait photographer and managed the family business. She took up photography having become fed up of mixing egg whites, which in those days were used as a fixative.