

The Robertson-style Fantoscope which is now in the possession of Thomas Weynants of Lede, Belgium, is possibly the most important magic lantern in captivity. Mr Weynants accompanied the instrument to London for the Magic Lantern Society Convention in April 1993; and throughout the weekend it was an object of awe and astonishment to the assembled magic lantern enthusiasts. Two shows were performed on the lantern, and the images – a trifle misted by weak illumination and wear on the lenses – seemed almost mystically to carry the spectators back a century and a half, to the time when the lantern probably originated. Mr Weynants has given his own account of the discovery of this marvellous and majestic instrument:

THE MOISSE-WEYNANTS FANTASCOPE

THOMAS WEYNANTS

In 1990 two friends told me about the holiday they had spent in a castle in the middle of France, the Château de Moisse. They had gone there to help the Belgian proprietors in their restoration project.

“Knowing my interest in early photography and optical devices, they told me about three magic lanterns they had seen in the attic of the castle. For years I had dreamed of finding a beautiful magic lantern and slides, and so I wrote to the owners of the castle. They replied that if I was interested, I should come to stay for a few days; and so it was that in the summer of 1991 I arrived for the first time at the Château de Moisse. Throughout the 800km journey there I had reflected with curiosity upon the nice little sketch which one of my friends had made of a very strange machine on wheels, such as I had never seen before, and which was unlike any pictures of magic lanterns in my books.

At the castle, I went up to the attic, to be confronted by a huge lantern, almost completely made of wood, and looking just as it did in my friend's sketch. Along with it were two little toy lanterns, with many beautiful panoramic slides, and also a box containing some exceptionally fine slides mounted in wooden frames and evidently intended for the big lantern.

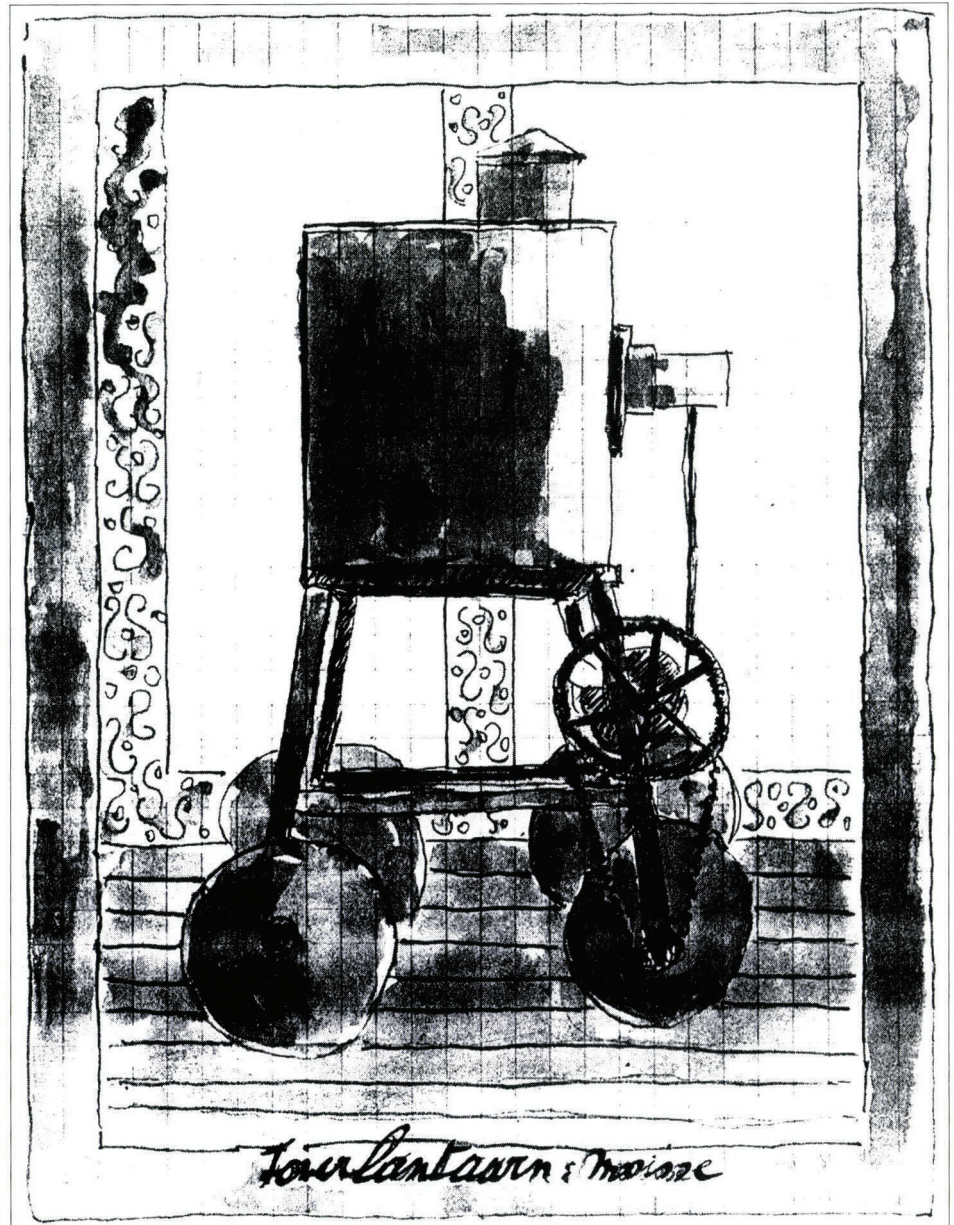
While I was looking at this, the owner asked me if I was still interested now that I had seen the *ugly* machine. Although they knew it had something to do with projection, they had no real interest in keeping this machine which they mockingly called a *battering ram*.

I replied that I was very interested to buy it or to make an exchange, but that I was sure that this *battering ram* was far too rare and expensive for me to afford.

I returned to Belgium after my short holiday, without the war machine. A few months later I again made contact, with the result that, after several weeks, the owner proposed that he would swap his complete lantern collection for a clock which I possessed and two little bronze vases. I told him that this seemed a very unfavourable exchange for him and very auspicious for me. He answered that if I agreed to his proposal, the complete lantern collection became mine. I had no hesitation in agreeing. Three months later they brought the lanterns and slides to Belgium.

Until then I had no knowledge of fantascopes and fantasmagoria. But from the moment I began to research, I discovered a real passion. My first discoveries I owed to David Henry, who sent me Françoise Levie's book *Lanterne Magique et Fantasmagorie*. On pages 28 and 35 I found illustrations of an opaque skeleton made for projection. It was similar to something I had seen some months earlier at the castle, without realising that this curious object had anything to do with the magic lantern.

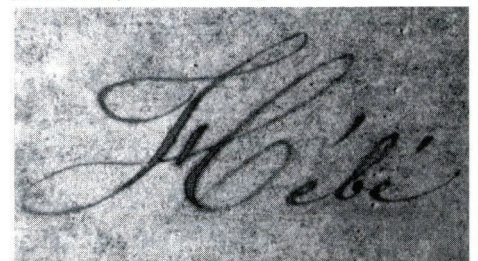
So I resumed contact with the owners and a few months later managed to buy this skeleton for a modest price, even though I told them that it would be very easy for them to get much more money for

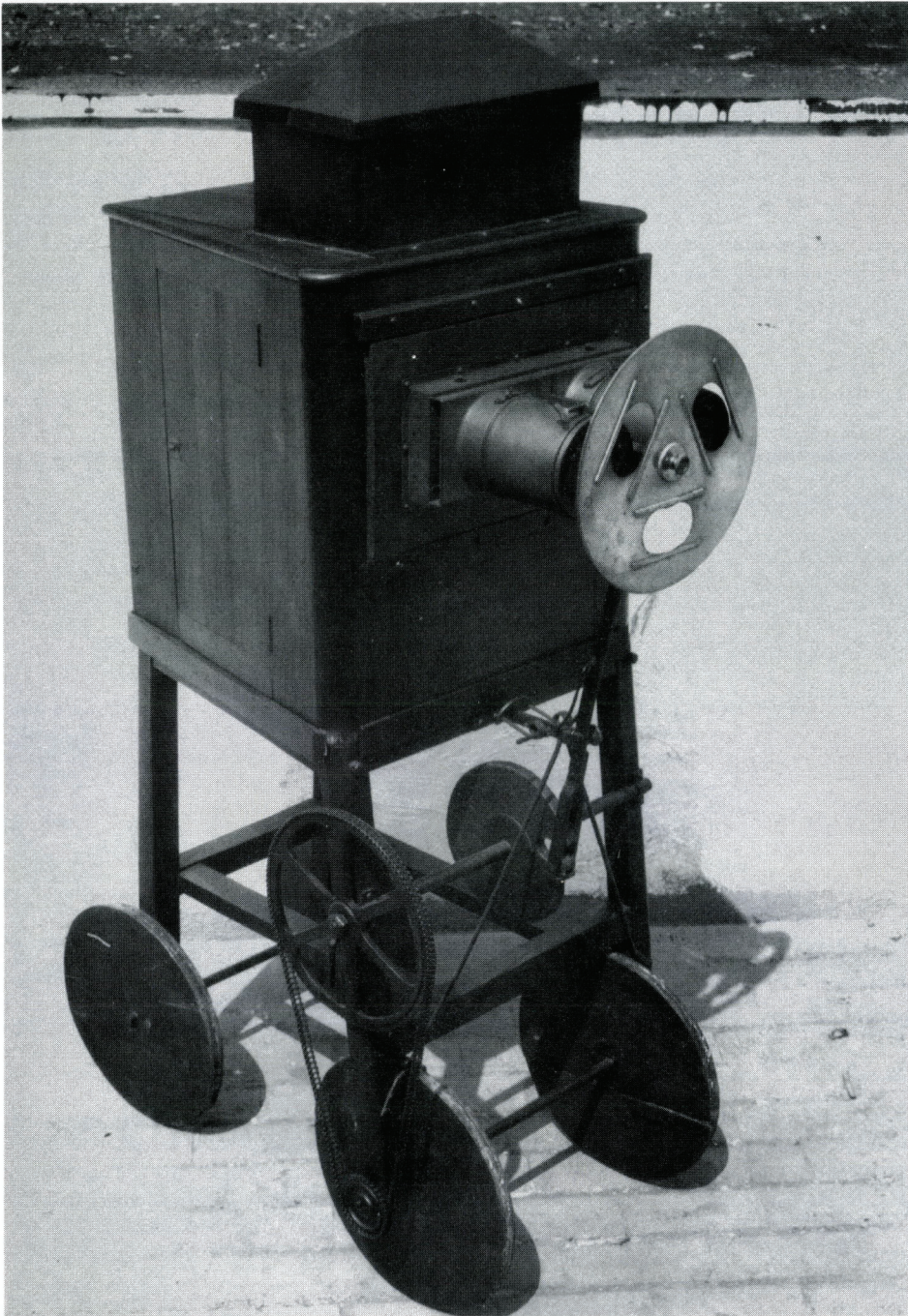


Sketch by Rik Soenen

it than I could afford. I was astonished by their generosity and their acceptance of my proposal that the whole collection should remain together. They had come upon the collection more than eight years ago, when they bought the castle; and in the intervening years had kept the lantern and slides until the moment they found someone interested in it. Thanks to my observant friends, I was the lucky guest-player in this fascinating drama; and I want in this article to offer heartfelt thanks to all the other actors in the play.

A clue to origin on the binding of one of the slides





above. Three of the slides discovered with the lantern

