

# POLYTECHNIC REDIVIVUS

It may well be that more lantern slides from the Royal Polytechnic Institution have been seen in 1996 – on screen and off – than at any time since that Victorian temple of optical projection closed its doors, 115 years ago. To celebrate the centenary of the first commercial showing in London of the Lumière Cinématographe (which took place in February 1896, at a very different, revived Polytechnic) a week of shows and events were held at the University of Westminster, which now occupies the site and buildings at 309 Regent Street.

The present buildings bear very little resemblance to the Polytechnic either as it was in the days when Dr Henry Pepper oversaw the lantern activities, or, already much altered, when the Cinématographe was seen there. However the basic structure and even some of the details of the Great Hall seem to have survived the various rebuildings, and proved a suitably evocative venue for the week's events.

For a fascinating foyer exhibition on the birth of cinema, the Science Museum loaned some of its virtually unknown collection of Polytechnic slides.

The opening show on 19 February 1996 was a thrilling celebration of the history of the magic lantern, devised and compered by Mervyn Heard. The climax of the show came with projections with an original Polytechnic-format lantern on a 20-foot screen. Both lantern and slides came from the collection of Lester Smith. The slides represented two of the Polytechnic's major productions, *The Lady of the Lake* and the pantomime *Aladdin*. The beauty of their colours and the exquisite detail of the painting gave at least a hint of how spectacular the Victorian shows must have been, with the addition of music, sound effects and voices.

Original Polytechnic slides were to be seen in still more august circumstances in Paris in June, when Laurent Mannoni presented a selection of the slides belonging to the Cinémathèque française, in the Louvre. One feels that Dr Pepper, Henry Langdon Childe, W.R. Hill and the rest of the Polytechnic's painters and showman would have been justly proud to have their work exhibited in the world's most celebrated museum of art.

M. Mannoni told his audience:

'The hand-painted glass slides of the Royal Polytechnic represent a technical and artistic revolution in the very long history of luminous projections. Never, since the magic lantern of the astronomer Christaan Huygens escaped from the old laboratory of the Hague to travel the world, had there been luminous pictures so precise and perfect. The art of projections, in Abbé Moigno's phrase, reached its apotheosis in London between 1840 and 1880. Never again, after the Royal Polytechnic closed in 1882, would one find on the screen such a quality of painting on glass, of chromatic variation, of optical tricks. The already ancient fusion of painting, optics, magic and light here engendered a spectacle such as no museum could ever offer us – frescoes of great size, even gigantic, sometimes traversed by apparitions and unexpected substitutions, provided by the juxtaposition of images; the almost miraculous journey of the shapes and the colours from the machine

to the screen; the transparent figures sublimated by the incandescent light. 'We cannot hope, in the conditions of this lecture, to bring you the whole beauty of these English projections. The screens of the Royal Polytechnic were much larger than ours. The first screen of the Royal Polytechnic measured around 25 feet high; musicians accompanied the show, while a sound effects team hidden behind the screen gave the pictures a special richness of sound. Moreover the projections were provided by four, sometimes five or six huge lanterns, linked for 'dissolving views', pictures that succeed one another in a perfect cadence and symbiosis. The large format images were projected by powerful lanterns, lit by lime cylinders made incandescent by the flames of oxy-hydrogen gas, and later by electric arcs...'

For the Louvre show, a Polytechnic Lantern from the Will Day Collection, now owned by the Cinémathèque française, was used. Laurent Mannoni explained:

'The Cinémathèque française is the only French institution which conserves slides from the Royal Polytechnic.

It possesses around 80 examples, of several different formats and dates, but all coming from the same source, the English collector Will Day (1873–1936). Day was very early interested in the history of this institution, where his grandfather had exhibited a number of models in 1841. When the contents of the Royal Polytechnic, including notably a collection of 4000 glass slides, were auctioned in 1882, Will Day was only a child. When the slides were dispersed, English lanternists acquired the most prestigious, often at very high prices. In 1894 one of these lanternist-painters, Edmund Wilkie, proudly exhibited his collection...

'From the years 1900 to 1910, Will Day threw himself with passion into research into all the techniques engendered since antiquity by 'the art of deception', to project, animate and transfigure images. He was able to acquire some slides from the Wilkie collection. The entire Will Day collection was acquired by the Cinémathèque française in 1960. So it is that in this rich collection of more than 2000 items and more than 6000 magic lantern slides, we find these large format images, painted with infinite detail by the best English artists specialising in painting on glass. In the reserves of the Cinémathèque, packed in two huge wooden cases, the most beautiful slides of the Royal Polytechnic are still preserved.'

The show was given in the context of a season of early exotic cinema, and M. Mannoni selected in particular slides of natural phenomena and exotic scenery. However he also showed two slides from the Polytechnic's *Don Quixote*, and the superimposition effect of 'The Soldier's Dream', painted by W.R. Hill after Goodall's painting, in turn inspired by Thomas Campbell's poem. The climax of the Louvre show however was one of the most famous of all Polytechnique slides, the panorama from Gabriel Grubb, measuring more than three feet in length.



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