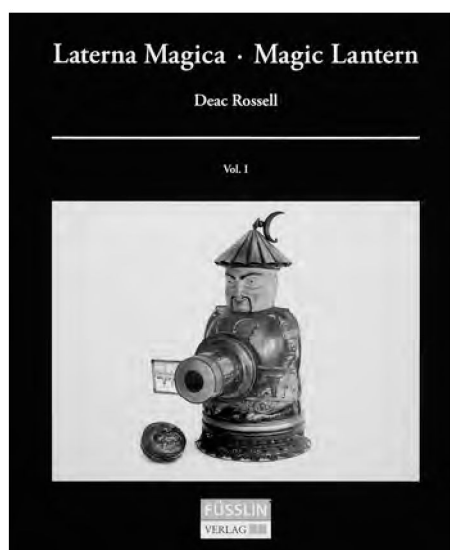


REVIEW: NEW LIGHT

Richard Crangle



Deac Rossell
Laterna Magica / Magic Lantern, Band 1 / Volume 1
 Stuttgart: Füsslin Verlag, 2008
 160pp, ill. Hardback, ISBN 978-3-940769-00-8
 44.00, available from the publisher at www.fuesslin.de

SOME OF US HAVE BEEN WAITING for this book for a while – in recent years, it seems that most of my dealings with Deac Rossell have included a gentle enquiry as to how ‘the book’ was going, and a reassurance in return that it would be appearing ‘soon’ or ‘later this year’. It’s a great pleasure to see it finally become a reality, and it doesn’t disappoint.

Billed as the first volume of an intended three, this history of the lantern takes us in reasonably chronological sequence from the mid-seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries, with the exception of the Phantasmagoria which is to be covered later. In some respects this is a fairly familiar story, at least for those of us who have potted around the subject for a while and read Mannoni, Hecht and Liesegang, among others. Huygens (very carefully described as ‘the man with connections to many of the earliest known magic lantern activities’, neatly avoiding any distracting ‘inventor’ debates) and other familiar names from the early years are treated in a chapter; the next chapter outlines numerous mainly technical developments in the eighteenth century; and Savoyard and other popular exhibition practices are covered in a third.

What sets this apart from any previous work is its refusal to ‘take things as read’ or accept the usual gaps in our knowledge as inevitable. Sometimes this means re-interpreting familiar sources; sometimes new discoveries are presented, many of them (necessarily, given Rossell’s research interests) relating to Germany and the German pioneers, a very welcome development in itself. Prominent among the *dramatis personae* is the (until now) slightly shadowy character Johann Franz Grienel (1631–87) of Nuremberg, whom Rossell describes as ‘one of the most important figures of the earliest period’. He makes his case well, linking Grienel to many of the other early lantern practitioners, demonstrating his influence on the early lantern designs whose illustrations we know from more familiar sources (with a rare surviving example, Fig. 1), reproducing a list of his wares from the 1670s(!) and even managing to conjure up a portrait.



Fig. 1 Early magic lantern of the ‘Grienel’ design

But even the relatively well-known references and illustrations, such as the 1765 engraving by Johann Eleazar Schenau (MLS members may know this from *The Lantern Image*, item 52), are discussed and given a historical explanation that I can’t remember reading in the other places they have appeared, including the Society’s own books. This Schenau image is a good example of Rossell’s approach: he examines every detail and then considers it *in context*, pointing out that the screen image shown (‘an old witch being led off by devils with a bat hovering above’) is actually quite unusual for its time, since ‘engravings of the travelling lantern shows in the second half of the eighteenth century only occasionally show ghostly, devilish, or superstitious objects’. That’s an interesting point, and one that only a broad knowledge and a questioning researcher would bring to light: more conventionally such an image could be blindly accepted as evidence of a ‘typical’ lantern show.

The illustrations, certainly, are a striking feature of the book, and not simply because there are so many and they’re so well reproduced (though if I might quibble slightly, numbering of the pictures and numbered references in the text would be helpful). What really strikes the eye, especially an eye that has seen a few magic lantern books in its time, is how downright *unusual* these illustrations are. My favourite is perhaps one of the more prosaic objects: a rough-and-ready Savoyard lantern of c.1820 (Fig. 2), complete with its battered travelling box, a worker’s lantern that says more to me about its maker, owner and audience than any ten of the pretty lacquered drawing-room ornaments we’re more used to.



Fig. 2 Savoyard lantern, carrying box and slides, early 19th century

Where have all these wonderful discoveries – rare lanterns, astonishing early slides, unfamiliar engravings and so on – *been* all this time?

One answer lies in Rossell’s acknowledgement to his publisher Georg Füsslin, noting ‘Füsslin’s enthusiasm as a collector and his involvement in a wide circle of other collectors on the Continent’. A browse through the picture credits – a high proportion are to the wonderful Binetruy Collection – is instructive in itself. There are plenty of good small and specialist publishers around, but I can’t think of any whose output consistently demonstrates higher standards of content and production than those of Füsslin Verlag. That this book is superbly produced, heavily illustrated, well translated and

edited and nicely laid out, says a lot for the love that has gone into its creation.

This doesn’t, it has to be said, come cheaply. At just 160 pages – in fact, about half that in terms of text, since it is presented in parallel German and English – the book seems to come and go quite quickly, and the cover price of 44 Euros would buy a slide or two or several hot meals. But given the going rate for specialist illustrated hardbacks these days, I can’t complain about value for money in any mean words-per-Euro fashion. There’s a lot more that could be said about many of the subjects covered – though to be fair not enough is generally known (yet) about a good few of them – but Rossell’s writing is comprehensive enough to avoid the sense of missing something. It’s consciously no more than a summary, but it also manages to expose a remarkable degree of detail – as a summary, it manages to convince the reader that the author does actually know the detail and depth of the subject but is concentrating on what’s important to the story at hand. There’s no sense of ‘fast-forward’ jumping over gaps, which most historians will be aware is all too tempting and easy. Instead Rossell gives us the important outline developments and, to some extent, issues a kind of challenge to the rest of us would-be lantern historians: if we really feel there’s a need for a more detailed account, why not *do* something about it?

Laterna Magica is a great read – informative, clear and elegantly written, fast-moving and engaging. It’s intended as a compliment that my one abiding regret is that, perhaps a little greedily, I wanted to read more of it. Reaching the end of Volume 1, I started again at the beginning and enjoyed it just as much the second time around.