

THE TRAVELLING LANTERN OF AUVERGNE

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1. Two views of the Auvergne lantern and its carrying box (all photos by the author)

IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, the magic lantern led a double life. It could be found in the cabinets of curiosities of the nobility and the great scholars and scientists, but it was also used by itinerant showpeople at the extreme opposite end of the social scale.

A remarkable discovery of a traveller's lantern (Fig. 1), in the French region of Auvergne, has revealed to us the apparatus used by these itinerants, who roamed throughout Europe from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries until they disappeared around the middle of the nineteenth century. The Auvergne lantern is a very rare survivor. In the context of travelling around towns and villages it would have been subject to much wear and tear (and indeed this lantern shows some damage), and there must have been many such lanterns that eventually just fell apart or were regarded as good for nothing but scrap.

The lantern was found in the roof space of a house that was being renovated on the outskirts of the village of Lanobre, in a rural area of central France, south-west of Clermont Ferrand and very close to the western border of the Auvergne region. It was resting on the top of an outside wall, between two beams of the roof. The house itself dates from before the 1820s – the current owners believe it to have been a postal coaching inn, though I have not been able to confirm that – and was situated on a royal post road constructed in the sixteenth century.

This discovery reminds us that, although the name 'Savoyard' has typically been given to travelling lanternists, there were also many 'Auvergnats' (natives of the Auvergne) involved in this difficult travelling trade. Although in Auvergne there are still folk memories of travelling coal merchants and sellers of household linen, the same

cannot be said of these lost workers in the imaginary.

These shadowy people, just like the images they showed, have almost completely disappeared. Only a few drawings and engravings show the travelling showpeople in their miserable living conditions. They are often portrayed with a barrel organ or hurdy-gurdy and an animal (typically a monkey), and with a whole family travelling and performing together.

THE LANTERN

The simple tinplate lantern is 41cm high, including its decorative chimney, with a square body 14.5cm wide and deep. It was secured to a box, 55cm high and 43cm wide, by two wire loops passing through holes in the lantern body and the backplate of the box. The backplate itself has holes through which carrying straps could be passed for attaching it to a lanternist's back.

Unfortunately the lens is missing, but it presumably consisted of a rectangular slide carrier which fitted into two vertical channels on the front of the lantern body, with a cylindrical lens tube attached to it. The upper part of the box, next to the lantern, includes a compartment which presumably would have been used to store the lens and other fragile parts (Fig. 2).

The lower part of the box has a double compartment 24cm deep (Fig. 3) in which the slides were stored. For transport the slides would have been arranged vertically, probably padded by textile material, while during a show they could have been laid flat in the compartments, perhaps using one compartment for slides to be shown and the other for those already used.



2. Compartment for storing the lens etc. in the upper part of the carrying box



3. Slides stored in the compartments at the bottom of the carrying box



4. The lantern set up as though for projection, with the lens and slide carrier from another lantern temporarily held in place by a clamp



5. Carle Vernet, 'Le joueur d'orgue' (1820), with the Auvergne lantern and carrying box superimposed for comparison

When set up for projection (Fig. 4), the carrying box forms a stand for the lantern, with the lens attached so that the long slides pass across the front of the box. There is a small hole in the front of the compartment that may have stored the lens, which from its position might indicate the attachment of some kind of support or carrier for the slide.

One interesting feature is that the lantern appears to be of almost the same pattern as that shown in the lithograph 'Le joueur d'orgue' (The organ player) by Carle Vernet, from his series of 100 small pictures 'Les cris de Paris', created around 1820 (Fig. 5). It is also similar to the lantern shown mounted on a box in the engraving 'La lanterne magique' by Dubois, dated 1822 (Fig. 6).



6. Dubois, 'La lanterne magique / Vous allez voir ce que vous allez voir' (1822), with detail (below) showing lanternist and lantern



7. Front and rear views of one of the slides ('Noah's Ark'), showing details of the construction of the wooden frames. This slide also has a second movable glass, with a small blob of wax(?) at one end to make it easier to manipulate.

THE SLIDES

Ten wood-framed slides were found with the lantern, all about 40cm long and 8.5–10cm high (Fig. 7). Some of them include a small amount of movement, such as moving eyes in the animals and birds of Noah's Ark, or movement of a ship and the angel in the 'Liberty of the seas' slide, and most were painted with some delicacy and skill. It is quite surprising to find such fine work associated with what is quite a rough lantern which typically – we might have assumed – would have been used to show subjects that were sketched without great care or were rather more saucy in nature.

One of the slides is too badly damaged to be recognisable; as for the other nine, their subjects are all different, although some could be gathered under general descriptions such as 'biblical subjects', 'political subjects' or 'royal subjects'. The surviving slides (the titles are just for reference, and do not appear on the slides themselves) are:

'Noah's Ark' (Fig. 8), a mechanical slide with a movable second glass allowing movement of the eyes of some of the animals and birds. Several similar slides

8. 'Noah's Ark' slide, with details of some of the figures and animals



are known from other collections, including one in the Cinémathèque française, which show the animals processing in more or less the same order. This would suggest that there was a common source image for these slides, but I have not yet been able to identify that illustration.



9. 'The carriage' slide (the glass is broken with a section missing), with details of the soldiers and the passengers in the carriage

'The carriage' (Fig. 9) shows a grand carriage drawn by eight horses (this detail in itself suggests that the carriage was that of a monarch). On the side of the carriage is a double-headed eagle crest, which is that of the Holy Roman Empire but also the Russian Imperial family. Since the entourage have fur hats, the building resembles the Winter Palace in St Petersburg, and the carriage is similar to one now in the Hermitage museum in that city, a reasonable assumption is that the lady in the carriage is Catherine II of Russia ('Catherine the Great', 1762–96). However, we might also notice, hanging around the neck of the man riding in the carriage, the prominent insignia of the Order of the Golden Fleece, which would suggest that he is a member of the nobility or royalty, particularly associated with the Habsburg family. One possible candidate might be Prince Charles-Joseph de Ligne (1735–1814), a Belgian diplomat and man of letters who became a Chevalier of the Golden Fleece in 1772 and visited the court of Catherine on at least one occasion.



10. 'The battle' slide, with details of the figures and the siege scene. The soldiers' uniforms are quite precisely painted and give clues as to the identity of the battle.

'The battle' (Fig. 10). Judging from the military uniforms this shows an eighteenth-century battle, with a city under siege in the left-hand view. The uniforms of the cavalry approaching from the right (especially the 'death's head' insignia on their scabbards and saddlecloths) show them to be Prussian, and the rider at their head firing a pistol is probably Frederick II of Prussia ('Frederick the Great', 1712–86). The battle probably represents the famous Battle of Rossbach of 1757, during the Seven Years' War (1756–63), in which the army of Frederick II defeated a much larger Imperial French Army. The central part of the slide shows a classic face-to-face confrontation between infantry, which was a typical tactic of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, though Frederick adopted other strategies. On the left of the slide, the mortar firing at the besieged city carries the French royal coat of arms, with three *fleurs-de-lys* surmounted by a crown, but apart from that there are few reliable clues. The red, white and blue flag appears to be that of the Netherlands, but this is not necessarily a reliable indicator; other similar slides exist with the flags of different colours, and at this period national flags might not have been widely recognised by popular audiences in any case.



11. 'Caricatures' slide (the paint is quite badly damaged), with detail of the grotesque female figure

'Caricatures' (Fig. 11). If these are caricatures of specific individuals, they would achieve their comic effect by making some features recognisable, and at such a distance from their original historical context it is now hard to identify who is shown. It is possible that the second figure from the right is Marie Antoinette – her hair is decorated with ribbons and what may be ostrich feathers – and the man pouring wine for her could be her husband, Louis XVI, who was the subject of jokes about his love of fine wine. There is a slide in the Cinémathèque française showing very similar figures to the two right-hand ones here.



'The hunt' (Fig. 12) appears to show a royal hunting expedition, with some very fine detail on the lady's dress and attendant's uniform.



12. 'The hunt' slide (missing a portion at one end), with details of the stag and the figures. The detail on the lady's dress and attendant's uniform is done by scratching away the paint after laying on the colour, and shows as white lines on a blue background.



'Liberty of the seas' (Fig. 13) is a moving slide showing an allegorical political cartoon of the 'Quadruple alliance' of Russia, Denmark, Sweden and Prussia against Great Britain, represented by King George III (sitting) and his minister William Pitt (in black). The image corresponds closely to a cartoon engraving by François Bonneville of Paris, entitled 'La Quadruple Alliance' and including the date 1800, though the figures are arranged slightly differently. The 'liberating angel' announcing the 'freedom of the seas' also appears in Bonneville's cartoon, as do the four figures on the far shore, who represent the four parts of the world (Europe, Asia, Africa and America) applauding the Alliance's opposition to the British navy's blockade of neutral shipping. The episode is sometimes called the 'Second League of Armed Neutrality' or the 'League of the North', and took place in 1800-1.

'The libertine' (Fig. 14) is a badly damaged slide, but it is still possible to distinguish the story (right to left) which is the Bible parable of the Prodigal Son. The first image shows a young gentleman setting out on horseback, bidding farewell to his parents. He is then shown revelling in the countryside with two bare-breasted women; however, in the third scene he is being chased with a broom by one of the ladies, followed by her companion who appears to be carrying the young gentleman's trousers. In the fourth scene he is minding a flock of animals sitting under a tree, and appears to be praying. Finally in the left-hand image he returns home and begs forgiveness from his father; a rather nervous-looking fatted calf can be seen on the left of this image.

'The duel' (Fig. 15) shows two pairs of two rather puzzling images, starting with a duel at the right-hand end. The aftermath of the duel is shown by a lady (presumably her favours were the subject of the duel) showing apparent dismay over a fallen duellist while a wealthy old miser waits to console her. The two images at the left are typical of comical 'diablerie' images featuring the devil, but the slide is quite damaged and it is hard to work out its meaning. The first image shows a gleeful devil with a sack of silver and a basket on his back, containing a child or young woman, while a man tries to hold the devil back by its tail. In the final image the consequence of this action is that the devil's tail breaks off and the man is rewarded with a shower of devil-droppings. A slide in the collection of the Cinémathèque française shows the same sequence of images.

'The Egyptian campaign' (Fig. 16). This slide shows a sequence of images relating to Napoléon Bonaparte's campaign in Egypt in 1798-1801, and has a second movable glass allowing some of the figures to move towards others. The broken portion of this second glass carried a winged Victory figure placing a laurel wreath (a flattened circle just visible at the broken edge) on the head of Bonaparte (the figure with sword standing in front of the Pyramids). Other identifiable images include Bonaparte offering a red, white and blue sash to the Bey of Egypt, and possibly four of the five Directors who held power in France in 1795-9 (one offering a peace treaty, others admiring the imagined riches offered by the Egyptian campaign). Many of these images relate directly to contemporary engravings, some of which I have been able to trace.



17. Unidentified (and probably unidentifiable) slide – there are some fragments of trees and what appears to be a lady's dress, but not enough detail to give many clues.

Unidentified subject (Fig. 17). This slide is too badly damaged for its images to be understood, though it seems to show male and female figures in a landscape, not dissimilar to the 'Libertine' slide.

13. 'Liberty of the seas' slide, with details of the two groups of figures. The vertical line at the right-hand end of the slide is the edge of the second movable glass, carrying the figure of the angel.



14. 'The libertine' slide – the paint is very badly damaged and the colours are severely faded to almost grey and brown, but it is possible to make out the rough sequence of events.



15. 'The duel' slide with details of some of the figures. Again the paint is badly damaged, though in this case most of the colour has survived.



16. 'The Egyptian campaign' slide, with portion missing at left-hand end. Note the pyramids shown at bottom right and the remains of the 'winged Victory' at top right. Some of the figures are is movable on a second glass whose broken edge can be seen at the right-hand end.

