

FROM THE IVORY TOWER

Interview with Machiko Kusahara

Lydia Jakobs

At a recent symposium in Antwerp, I met media scholar, curator and collector Machiko Kusahara, who kindly agreed to answer some questions on her own research and the study of the magic lantern in Japan. Until recently, she was a professor at Waseda University in Tokyo specialising in media art, digital media culture and media history.

What is the focus and scope of your collection?

I am interested in understanding what the magic lantern meant to people and society, especially in Japan. I'm also interested in understanding the relationship between the magic lantern and other media, which is a part of my current research. So I collect lanterns, slides, prints, books and other optical toys that seem to relate to this topic.

How did you get started researching Japanese lantern culture?

I was a science student and studied the history of science at university. My senior thesis was on the cultural impact of Newton's Optics. Then I started curating and writing on computer graphics in the early 1980s and taught computer graphics theory at a college from the mid-1980s. It was natural for me to include the history of images and imagination in my lectures, to explain why we are so excited to have digital images painted with light. So I became familiar with the magic lantern, phantasmagoria, Pepper's ghost, panoramas, etc, because teaching means researching. Because of my knowledge in both the latest imaging technologies and history, I was asked to plan the 'Imaginarium' section for the Metropolitan Museum of Photography in 1988, when the planning process for the new museum started. This task gave me a chance to study Japanese lantern culture further.

How would you judge the state of lantern research in Japan at the moment?

It is now becoming a hot research topic and we have young and active researchers, each of them having their own theme to study. Together their knowledge and discoveries ensures lantern research in Japan will make progress. But the problem is the lack of support to archive existing material. Young researchers who do not have access to enough original material tend to rely for their research on recent books and papers written by others, without much studying slides and other

materials from the time lanterns were popular. Another problem is that most papers are in Japanese, so unable to connect to the international community of researchers. Yet another problem is the lack of support for magic lantern performers.

Do you think digitisation has changed the study of the magic lantern? How has it influenced your own research?

Digitising magic lantern slides and other materials such as catalogues is important. So far it has not gone far enough, but the increasing amount of digitised material is certainly changing research methods. In my case, digital archives of Japanese woodblock prints helped me greatly in my research. Because of the 'value' people find in those prints, and the dealers who have dealt in the field for many years, such digital archives are more advanced compared to those related to magic lanterns.

Is there any advice you would like to give young researchers?

Please try to see the real things as much as possible instead of relying only on already written texts. Seeing them – slides, lanterns, etc. – and examining them by yourself makes a great difference. Having good contact with performers, collectors, antique dealers and antiquarian booksellers is also important and useful. They have seen many lantern-related artefacts and can tell which were most commonly used. This point means that museums are not always the best place to visit for research. Museums collect rare items, not the most common, unappreciated things. Auction sites also help a great deal. Only after eBay started I could see the 'general trends' – what kinds of lanterns sold massively, or what kinds of slides were used everywhere. In order to understand and delve into magic lantern culture of a certain time and place, what was 'common' is important.



Could you tell our readers something about Japan and the magic lantern that will surprise them?

When the magic lantern arrived in Japan from Holland in the late 18th century, it turned into a very Japanese audiovisual medium for storytelling. The lanterns were made of light (paulownia) wood, to be used as a handheld projector. Several operators projected from behind the screen, each operator animating a character. It is almost similar to how animation is made today, one animator taking care of one character. Such small projectors can be made easily with cardboard and a magnifying glass you find from 1 Euro (pound/dollar) stores. How about playing a real-time character animation with your friends using traditional Japanese methods?

WOMEN IN WWI

2018 brings to an end the series of events marking centenaries associated with World War I (1914-18). Certainly in the UK this conflict brought about a major cultural shift in the role and perception of women, both during the War and afterwards. These two Newton & Co. slides show (left) women working in a factory on condenser tubes and (right) the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC – written at the top of the noticeboard they are looking at). This was set up in March 1917 to perform non-combat duties. Over 6,000 women were serving in France by early 2018. It was renamed the Queen Mary Army Auxiliary Corps in April 2018, with 57,000 members by the end of the conflict, and finally disbanded in 1921.

Mary Ann Auckland

