

# A PHANTASMAGORIA OF MAGIC LANTERNS

*Martyn Jolly*

The exhibition *Martyn Jolly's Phantasmagoria of Magic Lanterns* went on display at the Canberra Museum and Gallery between 10 June and 5 September 2020, curated by Virginia Rigney, designed by Greer Versteeg and installed by Gary Smith.

We displayed 560 3¼ inch square slides arranged in groups and sequences in a large light box through grids of black acrylic. These were mounted in wooden frames and displayed vertically in four bays of a large display case. The slides were lit from the front by LED light, enabling visitors to read the labels, and from the back by reflected fluorescent light using a UV filter. Visitors were given handouts with thumbnail images to identify slides and commentaries were included within the overall grid. Wooden mechanical slides were also displayed on glass shelves with back lighting from individual electroluminescent panels. In addition there were:

- A circular digital projection on a facing wall introducing visitors to the exhibition
- Four video screens demonstrating the mechanical slides, chromatropes and panoramic slides
- Conventional displays of magic lanterns
- Enlargements of an Australian lantern slide and a Primus slide box.

The following is part of the text from the digital projection, coming after an explanation of why I collect and the apparatus we use.



## WHY WE RE-ENACT

Magic lanterns were pervasively important in Australia for a century. They were used by various operators, from sophisticated professional showmen to Sunday School teachers. In a range of venues, from theatres to home parlours, they projected multiple types of slides, from ingenious hand-painted mechanical slides to high quality hand-tinted photographic slides. These were combined with different forms of musical and theatrical accompaniment to entertain and inform a wide variety of audiences, from opening night crowds to gaggles of local kids. Any magic lantern slide found in an archive, no matter how humble, is tangible evidence that at some particular time, in some particular place, some Australians had collectively witnessed images, heard music and listened to texts. These had been orchestrated together by some individual or organisation to give them an experience, persuade them of an opinion, or connect them to others.

We undertake traditional historical research into Australia's visual and aural culture, but simultaneously we also take a complementary practice-led research approach to investigating the magic lantern experience. Through re-enactment we seek to understand a historical audience's ephemeral experience of the magic lantern, and the particular material conditions and constraints of the technologies that produced that experience. For this reason, I have assembled a working collection of over 5,000 slides and several different magic lanterns. We hope our creative re-enactments create the fleeting manifestation of an uncanny delight in our audience. We invite our audience to feel they are perhaps sharing that experience with an audience of a 150 years ago.

*For more information search online for 'Heritage in the Limelight' or go to [www.martynjolly.com](http://www.martynjolly.com).*