

The Magic Lantern

'FEUX PYRIQUES' ('CHINESE FIREWORKS')

Part 1 – The hidden optical cabinet

Herman Bollaert

On a cold November evening, some years ago, I went to Brussels to visit an antique dealer. I had met this man a few days before at a fair. On that occasion he told me that he was in possession of a strange kind of optical device for viewing large transparent paintings. He had found it in a castle, he said, in the loft of the

horse stables and guessed that it must have been concealed there for at least 200 years. It consisted of two big wooden cases – one was the display cabinet and in the other the pictures were stored. Because of lack of space he wanted to get rid of it and wondered if I could possibly be interested. I said that I would like to see it and we made an appointment to meet at his home.

He lived in a residential area of Brussels. In the dark corridor where I entered his house, I noticed the two black cases among other pieces of old furniture. Each was about 1.2m x 1.2m x 0.5m in size. They looked tatty and unattractive and my first impression was rather disappointing.



2. The wheel with spiral slots



1. The reverse side with candle holders



3. The two frames with thin glass tubes

The first case contained the mechanical part. The dealer opened it sideways and removed the front panel, turned it and put it into the back of the case. The reverse side was fitted with a large number of candle holders (Fig. 1). This panel of lights was now facing a large wheel with a spiral of slots emanating from its centre (Fig. 2). The wheel could be set in motion by means of a handle outside the case. While turning, the light falling through the slots would be continuously interrupted. In front of that wheel were two frames, positioned one behind the other, both filled with thin glass tubes for refracting the light (Fig. 3). On the inner front side of the case were two grooves for inserting the images. In this way the scenes could follow each other and be changed without interrupting the show.

(Continued on p. 3)



4. The system assembled

CONTENTS

Number 29 – December 2021

1. 'Feux Pyriques' ('Chinese Fireworks') – 1. The hidden optical cabinet *Herman Bollaert*
2. MLS Notice Board
5. *The Cricket on the Hearth* **Mary Ann Auckland**
The Magic Lantern Within
6. 'And This Year's Winners Are ...' The MLS Awards *Lydia Jakobs*
A Seasonal Medley
7. Chips with Everything – Even a Magic Lantern Show! *Jeff Barnard*
8. An Occasional Lanternist: Estelle Thomson *John Hyett*
9. A Night at the Museum *Mary Ann and George Auckland*
10. Book Review: *Pictures of Poverty: The Works of George R. Sims and Their Screen Adaptations* *Richard Crangle*
12. The Dagestad Collection *Sjur Dagestad*
13. The Origin *Ben Judd*
14. Remembering WW1 and recent finds *Lindsay Lambert*
15. MLS Autumn Meeting *Mary Ann Auckland*



Tableau 1. Moon and stars with sparkling light effects.



Tableau 2. A fisherman's home at night. From the doorway, his wife watches him fish.



Tableau 3. A sunny day on the water. Two men are picking up the fishing net.



Tableau 4. Another fisherman at work. He rinses his catch in a basket.



Tableau 5. A mother's happy moments with her children.



Tableau 6. A girl waiting for her sheep to be shorn – perhaps hoping it will not be harmed.

I was surprised to see how cleverly the whole system was assembled (Fig. 4). Now the dealer went to the other case, opened it and proudly said that the pictures were very good. He pulled them out, one by one, holding a torch at the back so that, being transparent, we could see them from the front. They were superb! The wooden frames were just over one metre square and covered with canvas and cardboard. All twelve of them were hand painted and of an outstanding quality – definitely the work of a great artist. They were still in very good condition, thanks to the strong case in which they had been stored for some considerable time. Immediately, I recognised it as 'artificial fireworks', better known by its French name 'Feux Pyriques' or 'Chinese Fireworks'. Never before had I seen an optical illusion of that size and quality. I realised that what I saw here was a unique piece of its genre.

The pictures themselves were circular and transparent, one metre in diameter and bordered with wreaths of stars, flowers, branches and other decorative motifs. Some parts, especially the borders of the robes as well as the necklaces, diadems and garlands, were pierced, allowing the flashing light to penetrate, which resulted in sparkling light effects. By analysing the style of furniture and the women's dresses, it was relatively easy to date them. I concluded it was 'Empire' (1804-1820), the French style which reached its peak during Napoleon's reign and spread throughout Europe. I could imagine that when the whole thing was in operation, the effects must have been spectacular. The pictures from the case are shown in Tableaux 1 to 12.

(Continued on p. 4)



Tableau 7. Beware! What a boy must watch for.



Tableau 8. A boy's first reading lessons.



Tableau 9. Diana, goddess of the hunt, takes Cupid's bow and arrows.



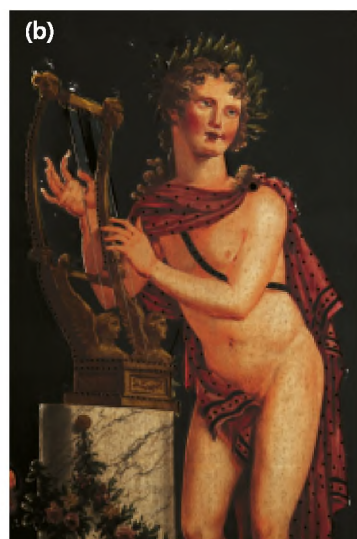
Tableau 10. The Bacchantes, also known as Maenads (the possessed), followers of Dionysus. Through dance, food and wine they brought themselves to a state of ecstasy.



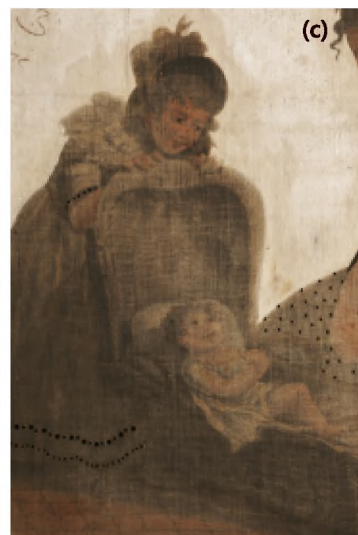
Tableau 11. Scene from the Bible: "But if she cannot afford a lamb, she is to bring two doves or two young pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering." (Leviticus 12:8)



Tableau 12. Dionysus, the Greek god of fertility, wine, joy, poetry, music, etc. He is playing the harp in company with a dancing satyr with pan pipes



Details of Tableau 12:
 (a) Front view showing the effect with back light
 (b) View with light on the front only
 (c) View from the back



Details of Tableau 5 (see page 3):
 (a) Front view showing the effect with back light
 (b) View with light on the front only
 (c) View from the back

Herman Bolleart, who died earlier this year (see TML 27), wrote this article in early 2018 – Part 2 will appear in TML 30.

After more than 200 years not being used, last month (November 2021) Herman's son Ditmar Bollaert revived this exceptional optical cabinet and once again showed the 'Feux Pyriques'. A short video of the device in action is available to MLS members via the 'Past events' section of the MLS website, www.magiclantern.org.uk/events (as part of the 'virtual meeting' of 18 December 2021).