

THE ART OF SHADOWS

Mike Smith

This wonderful painting of a young woman creating hand shadows on the wall of the court of the Pharaohs is a reminder that the history of the moving image goes back many centuries. In fact the origin of hand shadows is lost in the passage of time – suffice to say that shadows have been around since the beginning.

The art of creating and animating shadow images using only the performer's hands is known as shadowgraphy or *ombromanie* – performers are often called shadowgraphists or shadowgraphers. The performer uses his or her hands to cast shadows of animals, people and objects on to a flat surface. By further manipulation of hands and fingers a moving image is created. This art is often described as 'cinema in silhouette'.

Hand shadows gained popularity in Europe in the 19th century mainly through the talents of the French magician and entertainer Félicien Trewéy (1848-1920). Trewéy performed elephant, bird and cat hand shadows and developed many of his own creations. Although the art of hand shadows is popular across many fields of entertainment it is particularly favoured by magicians as it



was popularised by one and he inspired many others. Society member, magician and shadowgraphist Sergi Buka continues this tradition today.

This oil on canvas painting is by the Italian artist Giulio Viotti (1845-1877). It measures 64 x 96cm. Viotti specialised in painting orientalist and historic subjects.

The painting is from the Mike Smith Collection.