

The Magic Lantern

THE EXCELLENT ART OF WRESTLING AND THE LEIDEN ARATEA

How a chance discovery helped find the templates for an important series of early Dutch lantern slides

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It all began in April 2022. A few days before the well known Collector's Fair in Utrecht I received an email from a Dutch contact who from time to time offered me interesting items for my collection. He mailed me that he had a box of magic lantern slides and could bring it to Utrecht if I was interested – and of course I was.

We met in the early morning and went to his car. He showed me the box and I had a quick look at the lantern slides. Obviously these were early slides and I bought them, put them in my car and went to the fair. When I returned home I took a closer look at the slides.

The box contains 14 slides with the frames measuring about 41.5 cm by 9.3 cm. The visible diameter of the circular glass images is 6.5 cm (Fig. 1). Both the box and frames are made of oak and can be dated in the first quarter of the 18th century. Each frame has four glass pictures that are fixed with iron rings. There appear to be some slides missing and the original number could have been 18 in total. Some of the glass pictures in the existing frames have probably been destroyed over the centuries. The reason for this could be, among other things, the formation of rust on the iron rings. The rust created so much pressure that some glass images cracked. The images that were no longer usable were then replaced with still intact images from the frames that now are missing. This might explain why there are individual glass pictures in the frames that don't appear to match the others in the same slide.



1. The box and slides

Two particular themes among the slides stand out. The first is **wrestlers** (Figs 2–5). The letter 'A' is painted or scratched at the bottom of each wrestler painting. Slide images with other themes also show the letter 'A' as well as the letter 'L' (e.g. second picture from the left in Fig. 2). I don't yet know the meaning of this but I think there must be a reason that this marking was made so clearly visible in the projected image.

The second outstanding theme is **astronomical motifs** (Figs 6–8). From the beginning I was sure that there must exist templates for the paintings. My attempts to find them on the internet were not successful. So I contacted Annet Duller who in my view was the best expert in early Dutch magic lantern slides. She told me that she had seen similar slides in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. She had photographed the whole collection years ago and was kind enough to send me her pictures. Among them was a group of slides that obviously were made in the same workshop as mine and there was even one slide with images of wrestlers. However, these slides have



2–5. Wrestlers

five glass images each (mine have four) and the wrestler images do not have a black background although other slide images do.

Another difference is that the pictures are fixed in the frames with putty. I cannot prove it, but a reasonable assumption would be that in the early Dutch lantern slides all circular glass pictures were originally fixed into the frames with iron rings. Because of the rust problem it may later have become necessary to remove the iron rings in order to prevent damage to the pictures. The simplest

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6–8. Astronomical motifs



9–10. Slides from the Rijksmuseum

(from page 1) solution was probably to fix them with putty, as in the Rijksmuseum slides.

Back to the main story. I found the group of slides on the Rijksmuseum website but there was no further information about the slide with the wrestlers (Fig. 9).¹ Some of their images have the same letter 'L' as in Fig. 2 (for example in Fig. 10). My further attempts to find templates for the wrestling scenes failed and so I closed the case for the time being.

Things changed in November 2023 when I was looking through an online auction catalogue of a Dutch antiquarian. After I had finished my usual search for 'magic lantern', 'peepshow' and other optical toys I had the idea of using the word 'wrestling'. To my delight, one search result came up with graphics of wrestlers that looked familiar. The description of the lot mentioned that the prints came from a book about wrestling by Nicolaes Petter published in 1674.

My search on the internet for Nicolaes Petter was successful. The entire book with all 71 wrestling graphics is digitised. It took only a few minutes to find every matching graphic – the templates for the magic lantern slide pictures. The title page from the first edition of the book is shown in Fig. 11.

According to information from the internet Nicolaes Petter (1624-1672) was born in Mommenheim near Mainz in Germany and took on an apprenticeship as a young man in Amsterdam. Later he joined the wine guild in Amsterdam and became a successful wine merchant. He was known in his time as an

undefeatable wrestler. His clientele seems to have consisted mostly of upper-class gentlemen, and the techniques he taught were considered more 'civilized' than common wrestling.² Petter wrote an extensive treatise on 'grappling' as a means of urban self-defence that was published in 1674, after his death, by his widow. The book was in both Dutch and German, and illustrated by Romeyn de Hooghe (1645-1708).³ There are detailed instructions for each fight scene depicted in the book. The book was very successful, reissued several times and also translated into French and English.

Some of the magic lantern images with wrestling scenes and the matching templates from the book are shown in Figs 12–14. After my successful search for the templates of the wrestling slides, there was renewed motivation to find the templates for the astronomical motifs. But my initial attempts failed. Then I came up with the following simple idea. I photographed each slide image with my smartphone and started a picture search via Google.

After a few tries I found a swan that looked like a picture of my magic lantern slide (Fig. 15). The swan turned out to be a miniature painting from an illuminated astronomical manuscript. It is kept in the Library of Leiden University and was written and illuminated in Lorraine around 816. It is referred to as the *Leiden Aratea Manuscript of Ancient Constellations* and is available in a digitised version supplemented by detailed information about the history of its creation and further links on the Internet.⁴

The *Leiden Aratea* includes 35 full-page illustrations, at



12–14. Magic lantern images with matching images from the book



11. Title page of Nicolaes Petter's book



15–18. Illustrations from the Leiden Aratea

least four of which are missing. The illustrations include some of the earliest artistic depictions of the constellations described by the ancient Greeks. However, the artist of the Leiden manuscript made no effort to place the stars accurately according to their positions in the sky, so they cannot be considered true star charts. A comparison of the miniatures with my lantern slides showed only a near similarity (Figs 16–18).

Further searching revealed that in 1600 the Dutchman Hugo Grotius, also called Hugo de Groot (1583–1645),⁵ published a printed facsimile of this manuscript with black and white engravings by Jacques de Gheyn II (?1565–1629)⁶ (Fig. 25). It was the first ever printed facsimile of a medieval manuscript in history.

Hugo Grotius was only 17 years old when he did this. He became a major figure in the fields of philosophy, political theory and law during the 17th century. This facsimile is also available in digital form on the internet.⁷ A comparison of the corresponding graphics with the magic lantern images confirmed that the templates had been found. A selection of the slide images and the corresponding template from the printed facsimile are shown in Figs 19–24.

As I mentioned above, the series of magic lantern slides from the Rijksmuseum and my lantern slides clearly come from the same workshop. Due to the characteristics described in the Society's book *Dutch Perspectives*,⁸ especially the frame shapes (see p. 36 and p. 40), I at first ruled out the pictures as coming from the Musschenbroek



19–24. Magic lantern images with corresponding images from the Hugo Grotius facsimile



25. Box with slides from the 'De Lakenhal' Museum



26. A slide from the box in Fig. 25



27. Slide from the Rijksmuseum – the image in the middle matches the centre image in Fig. 26

workshop. However a further comparison of the motifs and painting style with the lantern slides in the 'De Lakenhal' Museum in Leiden,⁹ which are considered to have been created in the Musschenbroek workshop, has clearly shown that all of the lantern slides mentioned here do indeed come from that workshop. Fig. 25 shows a box with slides from the 'De Lakenhal' Museum.

The images and box show all the features that, according to *Dutch Perspectives*, clearly indicate that they were made in the Musschenbroek workshop. Fig. 26 shows a slide from this set of images. The image in the middle of the slide corresponds to the image in the slide from the Rijksmuseum (Fig. 27), further supporting the suggestion that those slides also come from the Musschenbroek workshop. Then the slide in the Rijksmuseum with the wrestlers proves that my lantern slides come from the same workshop. The similarity of some of the images leaves no doubt about this.

Now that we know the sources for the magic lantern slides, we can

better understand what content viewers were interested in around 300 years ago. We can imagine the evening when family members and friends got together and, after a good dinner, lit up the light in the magic lantern. The pictures appeared and during or after the show they all discussed what they had seen.

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