

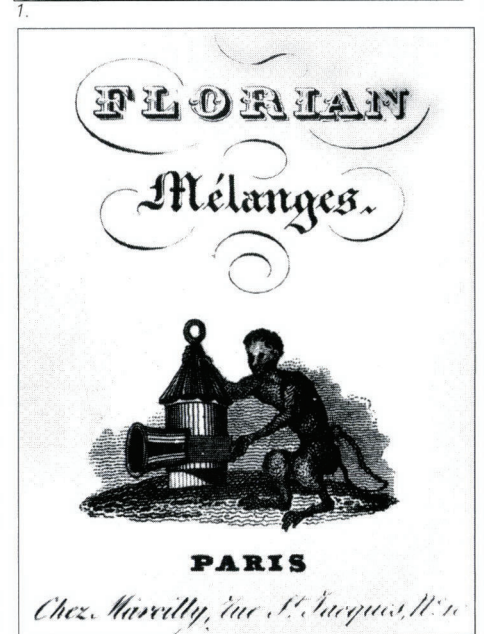
THE FABULIST DISPLAYING THE MAGIC LANTERN

A tribute to Florian 1755-1794

JEAN-PHILIPPE SALIER



LE SINGE QUI MONTRE LA
LANTERNE MAGIQUE.



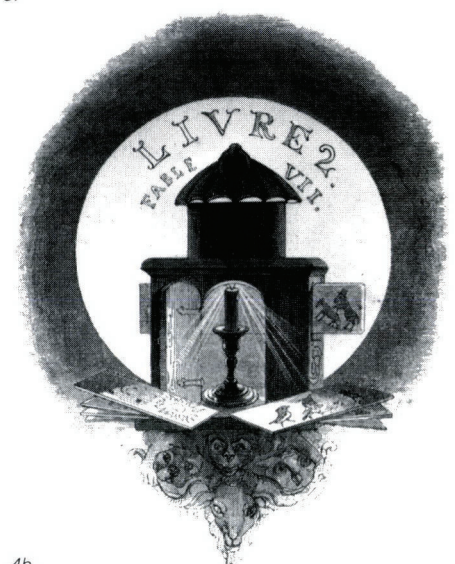
In France, Jean-Pierre Clarisse de Florian is presently considered a minor writer and poet from the late 18th century. Most likely his major contribution to literature is the first translation of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Not many people remember that Florian also wrote a series of Fables. Although the quality of the latter do not compare with the famous Fables from La Fontaine, we magic lantern collectors should not ignore Florian. He is one of the few artists who devoted a piece of their art to the magic lantern world. Indeed, his most famous fable tells of *The monkey displaying the magic lantern*.

Imagine how a frustrated monkey takes advantage of the temporary absence of his human mentor, a galantee showman. Here is a unique opportunity for him to proudly present to other animals the lantern show he has watched so many times. No

doubt he is fully knowledgeable about the process, and his sharp views of our world are about to change the life of generations to come. At last, a time for deep, philosophical considerations and valuable scientific comment comes of age. Precious sentences are filling the showroom while a series of views slide superbly past the lantern. Alas! what should have been an unforgettable one-monkey show quickly becomes an after-dinner talk of the most boring type. The audience, however willing to watch, sees hardly anything at all. In fact, although the galantee showmonkey provides endless comments about the slides, he has forgotten just one thing – lighting up the lantern.

Why such a fable, and why a monkey? As a child, Florian was lucky enough to grow up in Voltaire's house, and years later Voltaire's influence was still there when Florian was elected a Member of the famous Academie Française. Florian devoted his life to literature and poetry, even though his fame did not last. Not only was he close to most acknowledged authors of his time, but also we may assume that he reluctantly met many of those hazy-minded wits whose uncertain knowledge relies on a by-the-book approach to facts and a good memory, instead of an in-depth appraisal of the science they claim to teach. Hence the fable. As for a monkey as the pretentious showman, such a choice was most likely dictated by the ability of this animal to mimic our acts. Almost certainly, this choice also relies on the usual presence of a monkey as a pet for itinerant showmen. In fact, pictures of lanternist monkeys existed in the early 18th century, prior to Florian's fable. Nice illustrations of them can be found in the last chapter of the Magic Lantern Society's *Ten Year Book*. Also, I have in my collection a lithophane with a monkey next to an itinerant showman; the man is resting on a wooden box with a strap, very likely containing a street-organ or a magic lantern (1).

Even though Florian turned our favourite show into a ridiculous example of what should not be done,





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I still think he deserves our acknowledgement as he gave us an opportunity to find a few unusual collectors' items. Editions of Florian's fables are pretty scarce, even in France. Still, they can be found in antiquarian book stores and flea markets, often at an affordable price as few people pay attention to them, including many magic lantern collectors who are not fully aware of all the unexpected spin-offs from the French poetry. In fact, after spending a few years with the feeling that sooner or later I would find an edition of these fables, my first actual encounter with one was totally disappointing: I acquired a rare, old, miniature book entitled *Florian's Fables*. Quite a limited number of fables were printed in it ... but no monkey or lantern ever popped out. I wish to reassure the reader, though, that most of the editions of Florian's book I have seen since, whether abridged or not, do contain *The monkey displaying the magic lantern*. And about three quarters of all the (French) editions of the fables I have found so far contain at least one magic lantern-related picture, whether within the book or on the cover. Of course, the text remains the same from one book to another, but the design and the details of the illustrations vary considerably. And this tells us

a lot about how people in the good old days saw the magic lantern and the showman, through the years and from one country to another. I present here a selection pictures taken from these editions. They are classified in chronological order as much as possible. From such an order and what can be seen in the pictures, several comments come to mind.

The fact that the lanternist monkey is included and illustrated in most editions confirms the importance of this particular fable, usually considered one of Florian's best. This still held true in the early 20th century, even though the magic lantern was by then out of fashion. Indeed, this fable is among the few selected in several Florian "digests" published this century (7, 8, 9, 10, 11), although one can only wonder whether such a relatively unexpected choice originated from a genuine interest in magic lantern shows or merely from a quick glance at previous selections from earlier printers. At least in one case we may assume that a real interest in the magic lantern guided the artist in charge of depicting this fable: the document (14) is an original painting whose topic obviously is Florian's fable. Although I cannot date it precisely (is any MLS Member aware of the



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signature?). It seems to be a late 19th- or early 20th-century work, as suggested by the overall drawing style and the nicely detailed Lapiere "Lanterne riche". Also worth of note is an early 1900s book which exclusively contains songs (13): one of which is devoted to a galante showman who obviously forgot to light up his lantern yet nevertheless tries to project slides containing pictures of ... monkeys. It is more than likely that the author of the song had read Florian's work.

Technically speaking, the pictures as found in various editions provide a perfect demonstration of a terrible truth: in front of a magic lantern, not all human beings are equal. On the one hand, most drawings reflect a fairly good knowledge of the art of projection. Indeed, from one book to another the lantern designs approximately reflect the printing period, starting with a classical 17th-century lantern (3,4), next replaced by Lapiere's "Lanterne Carrée" (6), and eventually turning into a typical, rather ugly, black and brass item of the mid-1920s (7,11). Notably, people in the Far East seem to have an outstanding knowledge of the lantern set-up: a French/Japanese edition (12) depicts a showroom where the lantern is unusually located behind the screen, very much in the way that



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Robertson's fantasmagorias were projected. On the other hand, even a monkey would not make the mistakes found in some of the illustrations. In two editions at least, the poor lantern would hardly have been able to work at all: its candle is out of the lens axis and is located ... between the slide and the lenses (4), or its objective is completely missing (5) ! In one instance (2), a barn wall is supposed to provide the screen, with little chance of reflecting anything whatsoever: how could brown beams and a beige cob-wall do so? But after all, why pay attention to these minor details? They will not seriously affect the final result as the slide is nothing but a piece of wood (3) ...

Looking for further editions of Florian's fables will provide you, fellow collectors, with a pleasant and endless hunt. To conclude, portraying an absent-minded monkey as a lanternist was a bright idea which continues to enlighten the magic lantern world. This unambiguously registers both Florian and his magic lantern as Life Members of the aptly named "Century of Light", the details of the fable not withstanding.



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BIBLIOGRAPHY AND DOCUMENTS:

The numbers in the text and on the pictures refer to the items listed below, which in no way provide an exhaustive list of books. For further illustrations, the reader may also refer to pictures nos. 158, 213 and 286 in reference (15).

1. Lithophane: an itinerant showman and his monkey.
2. *FABLES DE FLORIAN EN ESTAMPES*. Early 19th century(?). Caillon Ed., Paris. Illustrator unknown.
3. *FLORIAN, MELANGES*. Mid-19th century(?). Marcilly Ed., Paris. Illustrator unknown.
4. *ALBUM DE FLORIAN*. c.1850(?). "L'illustration" Ed., Paris. Drawings by Granville.
5. *FABLES DE FLORIAN*. 1852. Lecou Ed., Paris. Drawings by Battaille.
6. *LES FABLES* par Jean-Pierre-Clarisse de Florian. c.1900. H. Laurens Ed., Paris. Drawings by A. Vimard. (Children's book.)
7. *FABLES DE FLORIAN*. 1936. Garnier Frères Ed., Paris. Drawings by Benjamin Rabier. (Children's book.)
8. *QUELQUES FABLES DE FLORIAN*. 1938. Dacosta

Ed., Paris. Drawings by Jean-Jacques Roussau (!). (Children's book.)

9. *TRAIN DE FABLES*. 1947. Imprimerie Artistique en Couleurs Ed., Lyon. Drawings by Samivel. (Children's book with fables from various authors.)
10. *FABLES DE FLORIAN*. 1949. Albin Michel Ed., Paris. Drawings by A. Rapeno. (Children's book.)
11. *LES FABLES DE FLORIAN*. c.1950(?). Artima Ed., Tourcoing. Drawings by J. A. Dupuich. (Children's book.)
12. *FABLES CHOISIES DE FLORIAN*. (Date unknown). Flammarion Ed. Printed in Tokyo. Drawings by Ka-no Tomo-nobou and Kadji-ta Han-ko.
13. *LE REPERTOIRE D'UNE CIGALE: CHANSONS SENTIMENTALES ET PATRIOTIQUES* by Pierre Tisné. Haton Ed., Paris 1906. Contains a song "La lanterne magique" (probably suggested by Florian's work).
14. Painting (gouache and pencil). Signature unknown (to me). Early 1900s (?).
15. *THE LANTERN IMAGE. ICONOGRAPHY OF THE MAGIC LANTERN*. 1993. Compiled by David Robinson. The Magic Lantern Society Ed., London.