The Magic Lantern

king of France, inscribed 'Vive Charles X'. Charles (1757–1836), the former Comte d'Artois, succeeded his brother Louis XVIII in 1824 and was crowned in Reims on 29 May 1825. We can assume that the painting, showing him in his coronation robes, was done very soon after this event, since Charles's unpopularity as upholder of the *ancien régime* grew rapidly, with his three successive reactionary governments, until in 1830 he was forced to abdicate. Long before that there were few to cry 'Vive!' or represent the 67-year-old monarch in as flattering a light as does this picture. So the painting presumably dates from 1825–6, a time when translucent pictures were very much in vogue: Daguerre's Diorama – the apogee of the form – had opened in July 1822 and was still Paris's top attraction.

But the fascination with transforming an image by variation of illumination from the front and the rear of the partially translucent

DOMESTIC TRANSPARENCIES

David Robinson

A charming French oil painting recently discovered and acquired by Mike Smith is a rare – so far perhaps even unique – visual record of rear-illuminated translucent pictures as a home entertainment. The scene is a well-furnished bourgeois drawing room. The young father-showman has set up his apparatus on a plain table, between the curtains in the window recess. The curtains part slightly to show that it is dark outside. The transparency picture is mounted on the front of a box or small chamber, of which the side door is open to permit the showman to use the rod or cord he holds in his right hand to regulate the illumination which streams from within the box. The escaping light illuminates him, though the painter has slightly falsified the direction of the rays to provide a nicely composed shadow on the curtain. The young man's appreciative audience – wife and small daughter, both with frilly pantaloons showing below their skirts – sit rapt on the sofa.

We can date the painting fairly precisely from the subject of the transparency, cleverly lit to be the focal point of the composition. It is a portrait of the

Painting, oil on canvas, probably French, c.1825–6. (Mike Smith collection)

picture dates from long before the Diorama and the nineteenth century. In eighteenth-century stage practice, both the technique and the term 'transparency' might be applied either to paintings partially illuminated from behind, or for the effect (still much used today) of the 'gauze' – a scene painted on a thin translucent material, which is visible and apparently opaque only when lit from the front. If the front illumination is reduced, while the illumination of a second scene or action on the stage behind the gauze is increased, the front painting becomes more or less transparent and invisible, being apparently supplanted by the rear scene. A production of *The Siege of Troy* at Bartholomew Fair in 1724, designed for the show-booth proprietor Mrs Mynn by William Oram and the young William Hogarth, used a 'transparency' to represent the burning of the city. At Covent Garden in 1771, the Italian designer Giovanni
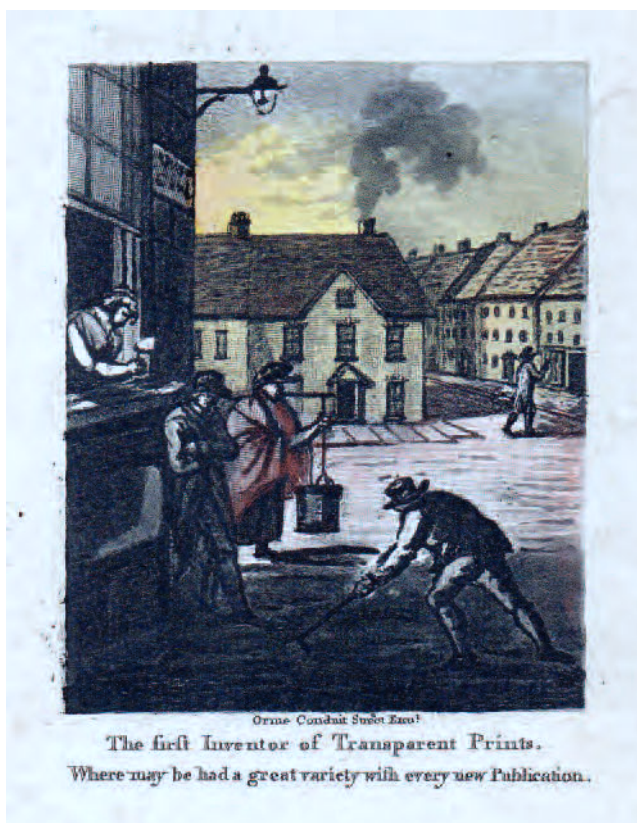
'The First Inventor of Transparent Prints', Edward Orme, London, n.d;
(left: recto, right: verso)

DOMESTIC TRANSPARENCIES *(continued from page 1)*

Battista Cipriani (1727–85) created allegorical transparency paintings of St George and the Dragon and The Genius of England for the spectacle *Installation of the Knights of the Round Table*; and these were subsequently re-used for other productions and patriotic displays. For a revival of David Garrick's 1759 pantomime *Harlequin's Invasion* the Drury Lane scene-painter John French devised 'Shades and Transparencies, Representing the amusements of Harlequin and the Destruction of the Pantomimical Fleet'.

We have ample evidence too that as early as the 1750s Garrick used a gauze to give a suitably mysterious and misty effect to the witches' cavern in *Macbeth* – a tradition which was continued by John Philip Kemble. Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg, who arrived at Drury Lane to work for Garrick in 1771, employed elaborate lighting effects, some certainly 'dioramic', both in his stage designs and in the miniature decors for the Eidophusikon. Besides such ambitous, large-scale theatrical 'transparencies', there were of course the day-and-night effects produced by piercing, oiling and back-colouring vues d'optique that were the *sine qua non* of the peep-showman, and are still treasured by collectors today.

These however were all public shows; but in 1799, almost ovenight, dioramic images entered the home (if it was rich enough), thanks to a sudden vogue among London's fashion-conscious for 'transparency prints', with the leading print-sellers Edward Orme (1775–1848) of Bond Street and Rudolph Ackermann (1764–1834) of the Strand competing to dominate the market. Orme claimed to have been the inventor:

In trying experiments to improve the varnish generally used for oil paintings, some of it dropped unnoticed upon the dark part of an engraving; which being afterwards exposed against the light, this spot where the varnish had been spilt formed light in the midst of shadow. This, being daily before my eyes, suggested the idea of producing by the same means a strong transparent light in prints previously prepared for effect. Accordingly the first attempt was made upon a print of Sir Bertrand in the Haunted Castle ...

Sir Bertrand was an instant success and remained in Orme's catalogue

for the next decade, priced at half a guinea. In time more than fifty prints were on offer, ranging in price from four shillings for small prints to three guineas for a pair of views of Mount Vesuvius. Scenes of gothick horror (*The Castle Spectre*) were mingled with tableaux from popular plays and documentary images of a blacksmith's shop, a glass-house, a shipwreck and a frightened horse. Orme rarely bettered his spectacular one-guinea transparency of 'The witches in Macbeth'.

The technique of producing these prints involved preparing a copperplate engraving in the conventional manner. This was then printed on good-quality paper, selected to be fairly translucent when held against a strong light, and free from watermarks or the grid-lines of 'laid' papers. The front of the print was hand-coloured in the normal way, using transparent watercolours. The back was then also painted – the colourist presumably having to work with a strong light behind the print to ensure accuracy. In this verso painting, some areas of the image were treated with varnish, which made them readily translucent, while others were rendered opaque with black paint, or coloured so as to alter the recto effects when the print was viewed against the light.

How fast the fashion for the prints took effect is reflected in a cartoon by James Gillray, published by Hannah Humphrey on 15 April 1799, deriding a government committee set up to investigate the United Irishmen and other suspected revolutionaries. Titled 'Exhibition of a Democratic Transparency' it showed the committee part hidden by a frame exhibiting four transparent prints, with different alarming scenes of revolution.

Orme complained,

The moment they became fashionable, most persons concerned in the publication of prints began to imitate them; and they are now as common as any other kind of engravings. This, however, is not much to the credit of some of these persons, who, not contented with pirating the idea, have attempted to palliate the appearance of any overreaching or unfair competition, by detracting from whatever merit there may have been in the original design; roundly asserting
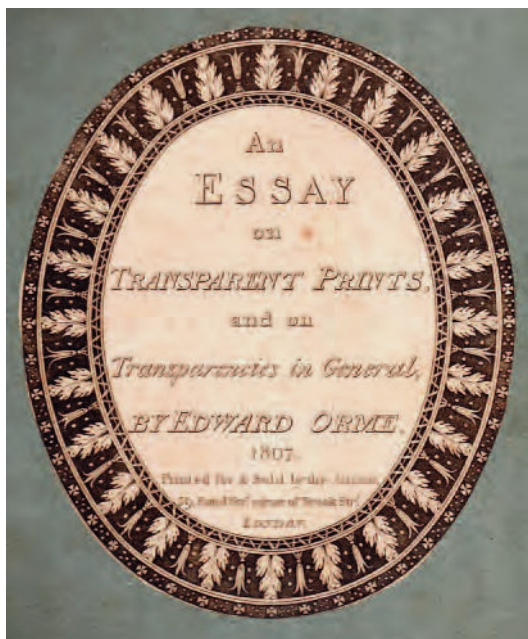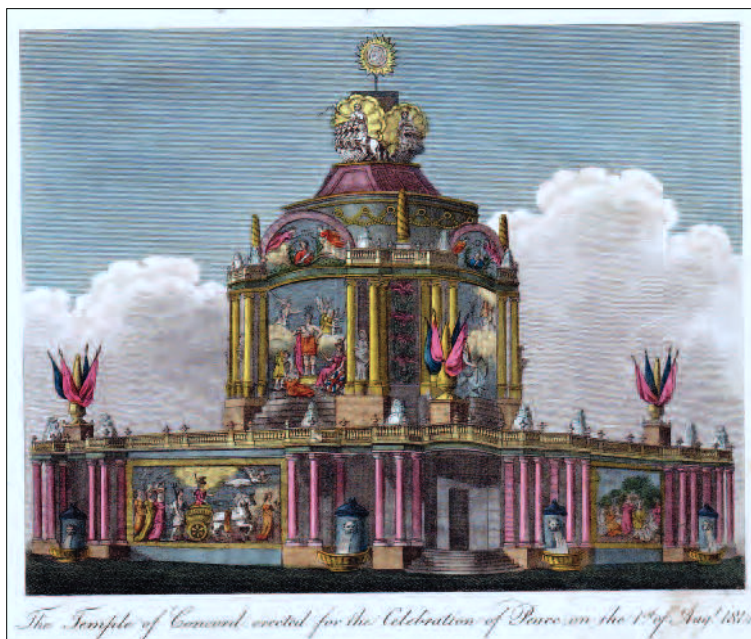
'The Temple of Concord erected for the Celebration of Peace on 1 August 1814', G. Jones, London, 1814

to the public, that it was no modern invention, but imported from either China, Spain, or Germany. . . That transparencies on silk, linen, and even paper, have been done for centuries is allowed: no one ever disputed it. But this, which is a thing altogether different, has been artfully brought forward to confuse the minds of the public in appreciating the author's claim of first introducing to notice transparent prints. . .

The principal use of these transparencies is, to supply the place of painted glass; the effect of which is beautiful, but the execution of it is too laborious, too expensive, and attended with too much risk of failure, to encourage anyone to paint in this way for their amusement. Few persons attempt it, and fewer arrive at any degree of perfection in the art.

The transparencies here recommended, on the contrary, may be executed by any person, who understands the least of the art of drawing or colouring; and the amateur may either colour prints, or drawings of his own making, by the same process.

Within weeks Rudolph Ackermann attempted to upstage Orme with a twelve-page booklet, *Instructions for Painting Transparencies* (1799), followed by subsequent enlarged editions, incorporating a catalogue of Ackermann's transparencies, whose repertory closely resembled Orme's. Among other artists commissioned by Ackermann, Thomas Rowlandson (1756–1827), then at the peak of his career, designed a series of six views specifically for adaptation and marketing as transparencies. Other print publishers quickly entered the field. On 19 April 1799 the prolific S.W. Fores, always keen for a racy subject, issued the unsigned 'Transparent Pieces', which shows three elegant ladies of varying shapes. When held to the light we can admire the inadequacy – or absence – of their underclothes.

Orme however maintained his dignity, and only in 1807 published his superb folio (actually described as a 'large quarto'), *An Essay on Transparent prints and on Transparencies in General*, from which the preceding quotations are taken. Printed on the finest hand-made paper, seven of its twenty engravings were transparencies, and at the end was a page of samples of suitable coloured backing paper, each with a varnished corner to show how the translucent effect was acheived. The book was published by subscription, with fifteen members of the Royal Family and a considerable representation of lesser blue blood chipping in, and was advertised by an enchanting little flyer with the portrait of a cat with eyes that glowed when held to the light.

The book was essentially intended to teach the reader to make his (or much more likely, it is suggested) her own transparencies. The requisites were formidable: for a start you needed to have at hand mastic, Canada balsam, finest spirits of turpentine, pumice stone, lip glue, gum water, spirit of wine, gin or hartshorn, isinglass, size made for the cutting of white leather, nut oil, litharge of silver, white
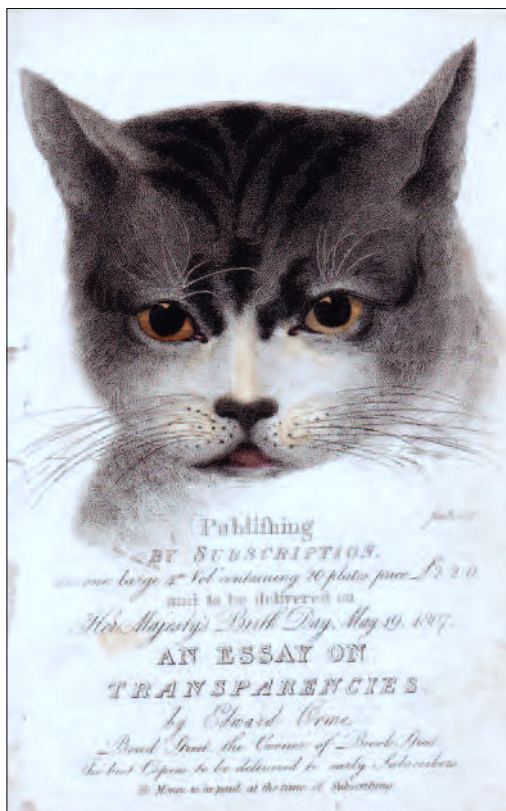
resin. Only then did you get round to inks, colours and the quills, brushes and pencils to apply them. Generally the intention of the book was less to encourage the user to produce transparency prints than to use the process to ornament windows (in the style of stained glass) or household objects like fans, fire-screens, window-blinds and candle-shades.

The success of the new style of transparency was such that it went on to a new public career.

At the height of the craze, large-scale transparencies were produced for spectacular public display in shop windows or specially designed structures. In 1810, for example, the London goldsmiths Rundle and Bridge commissioned the painter Thomas Stodhard to create a transparency for their shop window to commemorate the Jubilee of George III. On 5 and 6 November 1813, when all London was illuminated to celebrate the allied victory over the French at Leipzig, the window of Ackermann's Repository of Arts at 96 Strand displayed a transparency of aspect so awesome that it would have done for Robertson's Phantasmagoria. In the background the French troops are seen put to rout or slaughtered by armies bearing the Russian and Prussian flags, while in the foreground Bonaparte, seated on a drum, gazes into the eye sockets of a skeleton that confronts him, defiantly perched on a cannon. This transparency was most likely designed by Rowlandson, who engraved a published reproduction of the design.

For the national peace celebrations of 1814, a revolving 'Temple of Concord' was erected in Green Park, designed by the Drury Lane scenic designers Greenwood and Latilla, and decorated with a series of large 'Allegorical Transparencies' brilliantly illuminated from within by night. They were designed by Henry Howard R.A. (1767–1847), assisted by the painters Thomas Stodard, Smirke, Woodforde, Dawe, Hilton and Genta.

In the *Essay on Transparent Prints*, Edward Orme offered a bold prediction for an even more ambitious new development of transparencies: 'Panoramas being so much in fashion, I would wish to recommend a transparent panorama, which would produce a striking effect, and could not fail to attract by its novelty'. It was fifteen years before his idea was to be realised by Daguerre, in the Diorama.

Orme's book was bilingual, with the English text on the left-hand pages and French on the right. His aim, he said was 'to disseminate a knowledge of this pleasing art on the Continent'. There is little evidence of production of transparency prints anywhere on the Continent on a comparable scale to London, but transparencies as a show had apparently taken a hold in other countries. Franz Niklaus König's 'Diaphanorama' toured Germany in the late teens of the nineteenth century. A print from a picture by Johann Heinrich Lips, reproduced in Birgit Verviebe's *Lichtspiele vom Mondscheintransparent zum Diorama* (1997), shows a group of connoisseurs admiring a large transparency apparently depicting God manifesting himself to (judging from his scant apparel) Adam. And we can speculate that the young father in the painting that

'Ackermann's Transparency, exhibited to commemorate the Peace, June 1814', R. Ackermann's Repository of Art, London, 1814

has stimulated this article might have been one of Orme's French readers. The only slight surprise about his picture of the King (a print or a drawing?) is that, as we see it, it is quite without colour or lighting effect. What transformations might his manipulations behind the screen have produced? Perhaps he is about to light up the monarch's coronation jewels (the first transparency plate in Orme's essay is the crown of England). Or we might speculate fantastically that he is about to startle his little audience by imposing devil's horns on the unloved king. But he doesn't really look that type.

In the 1830s and 1840s, of course, there was to be a major revival of dioramic prints, with the long series published variously by Browne, 'G.W.', W. Morgan and, best and most prolific, William Spooner. They are charming, often funny, eminently collectible, but somehow lack the glamour, the artistry and the grand ambition of the great days of the Orme–Ackermann rivalry.

David ROBINSON is an eminent British film critic and author of many books on the history of film, including the official biography of Charlie Chaplin and *The History of World Cinema* first published in 1973. He is director of the Silent Film Festival held each year in Pordenone, northern Italy, and is closely associated with similar initiatives in the UK.