

## BOOK REVIEW

# THE MAGIC LANTERN: A SHORT HISTORY OF LIGHT AND SHADOW

Michio Yano (ed.)

Tokyo: Tokyo Photographic Art Museum, 2018

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Paperback, 180 pages (including 84 pages of illustration and three essays)

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Anyone lucky enough to have witnessed a Japanese lantern show – perhaps at one of our own Conventions, or those of the Magic Lantern Society of the US and Canada – will know that the Japanese style of projected performance is very different from the ‘western’ traditions. However, as this new book (the catalogue of a recent exhibition at Tokyo Photographic Art Museum) makes clear, along with the differences there are

quite a lot of similarities and connections. Perhaps the ‘eastern’ and ‘western’ lantern worlds aren’t complete strangers to each other after all...

It’s sometimes missed that there were really two lantern traditions in Japan, both imported from Europe but then developed in different ways. The *Utsushi-e*, with spectacular shows

involving a troupe of lanternists, each following one character in a narrated story around a large back-projection screen, originated from lanterns brought to Japan by 18th-century Dutch traders, but evolved by interaction of that new technology with existing traditions like the various types of shadow show. But the later *Gentō*, which arrived in the late 19th century after the relaxation of Japan’s exclusive attitude to outside cultures, was closer to European and American lecturing and storytelling practices, with typical content including travel and temperance lectures.

This is a beautifully produced book, with 84 pages of colour photos of items from the exhibition giving a survey of slides, lanterns and ephemera

from the western traditions as well as a good overview of the same subjects in Japan. Just as important are the three essays, which complement both the illustrations and each other very nicely. Miyuki Endō, curator of the exhibition, writes an outline of the history of the lantern in

general and in Japan in particular, including some useful suggestions for other sources to consult (if one could read Japanese). Erkki Huhtamo gives a fine concise summary of the lantern’s western history, including some subtle pointing out of techniques – back-projection, hand-held lanterns, commentators or lecturers – that feature as common strands with the Japanese tradition. Finally Machiko Kusahara contributes a fascinating account of some of the ways the Japanese lantern traditions have interwoven with other popular media like paper theatre and kabuki plays.

All the image captions, essays and notes are presented in Japanese and English, and all in all it’s a very useful and accessible introduction to a fascinating history which we need to learn more about.



1. Japanese Furo (lantern) and Utsushi-e slides, date unknown



3. Tane-ita (slides) for Utsushi-e, 19th century



2. Wood-bodied Furo for Utsushi-e, 19th century

Richard Crangle