

## A COVID FIND

Mike Smith

What does a collector do when normality is no more? Antique fairs are cancelled and auction houses struggle to come to terms with social distancing and government regulations. There is no source of new pre-cinema material and even the Magic Lantern Society has to cancel its regular quarterly meetings. You are starved of normality and turn to the internet for solace!

One day during the summer whilst browsing on the internet I came across the website of a well-known London rare book dealer. Somehow or other I found myself looking through a catalogue from December 2016 and the second entry was a painting of a peepshow! It was an image I had not previously seen and excitement kicked in. Was the painting sold or perhaps it was still available? I thought long and hard about the situation and convinced myself that it was still for sale on the basis that, had it been sold, there was a strong possibility that it would have been bought by either a member of the Magic Lantern Society or one of the international film museums – and in either case news of such a purchase would have filtered down to me somehow or other. I got in touch with the book dealers.

They told me that the painting did not sell and they were selling it on behalf of a client – they would enquire if it was still available. A few days passed and I heard it was still for sale!

The price of the painting in the December 2016 catalogue was such that I felt I needed some expert guidance as to the way forward. Fortunately I know a local picture dealer who was prepared to examine the painting on my behalf and advise me on the best way to approach this potential purchase. A week or so went by before he was able to see the painting and a few more days before I got his feedback. He was complimentary about the painting itself – well executed and in good condition – however he felt the subject matter restricted its commercial appeal and therefore the price being asked was on the high side for such a specialist subject. He gave me his view as to a realistic price to offer and negotiations began.

Some two weeks later a deal was agreed and the painting now forms part of the Mike Smith Collection.

Here is a little information about the painting and the artist. The painting is an oil on canvas in a wooden frame and measures 87.5 x 106 cm (including the frame). It is not signed or dated but on the back of the canvas in black paint are the words 'Warranted. Barker. Bath'. The well-regarded artist Thomas Barker (1769–1847) was often referred to as 'Barker of Bath'. The painting has now been attributed to him and was probably painted in the early 19th century. Both Thomas Barker's father, Benjamin, and his younger brother, also called Benjamin, were artists of note.



Barker was an occasional exhibitor at the Royal Academy and the British Institution. There are six paintings by Barker in the Tate Gallery and the British Museum hold a number of his drawings and prints. The painting formerly hung in the boardroom of the London-based photographic retailers Wallace Heaton, who were England's largest photographic retailers for most of the 20th century. They retained the Royal Warrant for supplying the British Royal Family with their cameras. The company was bought by Dixons in 1972 and their archive is held by the Sheffield City Archives. There are the remnants of two Wallace Heaton paper labels on the back of the frame of my picture.

Accompanying the painting was a small card with a photograph of the painting. The back of the card states 'Ex. Wallace Heaton'. The description beneath the photograph (see extract, left) is full of inaccuracies:

- This is a peepshow, not "an early attempt at cinematography".
- The man is not "turning a handle" but is manipulating a cord to enable the views inside the peep box to be changed.
- The boy does not "see a run of pictures" but a series of views which will transform from day to night.
- "Nearly as possible continuous like present day 'cine'" it was not. The flick book was the first form of animation to employ a linear sequence of images and this did not appear until 1868 – some 60 or 70 years after this picture was painted.

It seems quite unbelievable that a world leading photographic business could get its facts so wrong! Nevertheless I am thrilled to be the new owner of this fine painting which I will always associate with the 'Covid era'. It was some six weeks from first finding the painting to it being installed in my home and this was a period where the problems of Covid-19 were temporarily forgotten.

