The Magic Lantern

The mystery piece (left) and (above) with the illumination on and two of the five transparencies visible.

A MYSTERY PIECE

Mike Smith

The Italian auction house selling this piece at the end of 2021 described it as follows: "Centre piece of furniture with magic lantern, Naples, first half of the 19th century". But what is it? Clearly not a magic lantern – but without these words being included in the description, I would not have found it. The description continued:

> mahogany structure with a rotating pentagonal plan, with panels decorated above by curvilinear ribs to create motifs of neo-gothic taste: the upper part, with a partially closed top with a tin profile, is characterized by facades delimited by angular columns, surmounted by a gable; each has a panel with double glass to contain backlit views painted in ink and watercolours on paper whose vision is made better through the light arranged inside the structure.

In simple terms this is a high-quality mahogany five-sided rotating pedestal viewer containing five transparent paintings ('transparencies') which can be backlit from inside the viewer. While now there is a simple electric light to provide illumination, there is ample evidence of an elaborate system of oil lamps that was originally used to provide the back-lighting. Originally some form of metal cowl would have been placed on top of the wooden and metal chimney dome. The viewer stands 1.6m tall. It has no maker's name anywhere and the five transparencies also have no identification. The subject matter of the paintings suggests that they could be of Italian origin but there are no records of Italian transparency painters. I have no reason to doubt the Naples attribution made by the auction house for the viewer but equally it could have been made almost anywhere in Europe and I can find no record of any other transparency viewer.

According to the media historian John Plunkett, transparencies "were one of the most important forms of popular art to emerge in the late 18th century. Until at least the mid-19th century, they were ubiquitous" at public celebrations of all kinds in England, elsewhere in Europe and in the USA. The most elaborate large-scale transparencies for public exhibition were usually produced by professional artists, but:

> their prevalence stemmed from the fashionable status attached to the production of small paper and ornamental versions by amateurs. Transparencies proliferated because they could be executed in a multiplicity of formats, sizes and materials appropriate to whatever artistic or practical skill was possessed by their creator; these were then exhibited in a corresponding variety of public and domestic spaces.[1]

The American writer and researcher Shannon Selin elaborates on this domestic aspect:

> London bookseller Rudolph Ackermann published 109 transparent etchings between 1796 and 1802, along with a book entitled *Instructions for Painting Transparencies* (1799). British engraver and publisher Edward Orme encouraged the fad for transparencies in both England and France with his bilingual manual, *An Essay on Transparent Prints and on Transparencies in General* (1807). Orme provided detailed instructions on how to turn an

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The transparencies:
1. Around 1800 the depiction of Vesuvius erupting was a common subject, but the landscape here is not recognisable as that around that particular volcano.

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2. (far left) This appears to be the Bridge of Sighs in Venice but, if so, the Salute Church shown in the bottom right is not in the correct position.

3. (near left) This transparency creates the atmosphere of the romantic paintings of the early 19th century. Some views that Daguerre used for his dioramic transparencies date to this period and often show churches and ruins of the Gothic era.

4. (below left) Here is an enigma – the buildings on the left are Italian renaissance whilst those on the right would appear to be influenced by Arab/Islamic architecture.

5. (below right) This is a particularly romantic image with the Gothic ruins and the manner in which the cloudy sky is represented – typical of the sublime and picturesque imagery of the English school of the period.

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etching or engraving into a transparency. This involved painting large areas of color on the back of the print (corresponding with the outlines of the illustration) and then adding varnish to specific areas to give the paper a see-through effect when held up to the light.[2]

Scenes often included firelight, moonlight and other glowing illusions. Orme's instructions suggest that transparencies could be substituted for stained glass in lanterns, lampshades and fire screens.

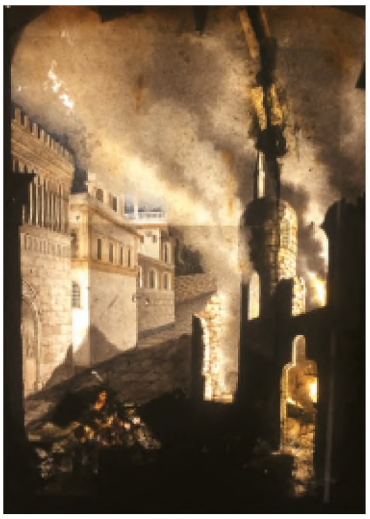
Returning to the transparencies used at public exhibitions, one such event of particular interest is the dazzling Temple of Concord. This was erected in Green Park, London, in 1814 to celebrate the end of wars with France and one hundred years of Hanoverian monarchy. It was part of a scheme of temporary structures from which elaborate displays, fireworks and mock battles were staged.

The mastermind behind the Temple was Lieutenant Colonel Sir William Congreve (1772-1828), a rocket designer, prolific inventor (e.g. the rolling ball clock) and Comptroller of the Royal Laboratory at Woolwich. He had served in many campaigns throughout the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815) and led a company known as the 'rocket brigade' at the Battle of Leipzig in 1813. Congreve designed the Temple assisted by stage designers from the Theatre Royal and master engineers. The result was a structure of such flamboyance and theatricality that the public were in awe upon its unveiling.

In the view shown below thousands of spectators encircle the glittering Temple, fully illuminated at midnight for the inaugural ceremony. It revolved so everybody could see its lavish decorations which were rendered on semi-transparent fabric lit from behind by rows of oil lamps. Congreve had commissioned some of the nation's best artists to design and paint allegorical scenes on these transparencies. He had also designed a special type of firework – one of these can be seen shooting into the sky to the left of the Temple.

Though this pageantry was impressive, the Temple was not built to last. After the celebrations had come to an end it was offered for sale and realised only a fraction of the price it had cost to make in the first place.

I believe the viewer recently discovered in Italy was quite possibly greatly influenced by the Temple of Concord erected



in London in 1814. Here are my reasons for coming to this conclusion:

- both the structure in Green Park and the domestic viewer found in Italy are decorated with transparencies, albeit of very different sizes and materials
- both were backlit using a range of oil lamps
- both structures revolved to enable all views to be seen easily
- the dates of these two viewers correspond approximately
- with the missing chimney cowl in place, the design similarities are easy to see.

There is more information about transparency paintings in an article written by David Robinson in a previous edition of The Magic Lantern *(No. 2, March 2015).*

REFERENCES

1. John Plunkett, 'Light Work: Feminine Leisure and the Making of Transparencies' in *Crafting the Woman Professional in the Long Nineteenth Century* (New York, 2016), quoted in Shannon Selin, 'Celebrating with Light'.
2. Shannon Selin, 'Celebrating with Light: Illuminations and Transparencies', *Imagining the Bounds of History* website, *shannonselin.com/2016/10/illuminations-transparencies*.

Engraving of the Temple of Concord