

SPECIAL MEETING OF THE MAGIC LANTERN SOCIETY

TOVERLANTAARNMUSEUM, SCHEVENINGEN, NETHERLANDS

15-16 June 2024

Perhaps it is the very fact that we have not been able to meet easily for some time that made the Special Meeting *Turbulent Times* in the Netherlands so intoxicating. Old friends finally got to meet again; new friends connected for the first time. Long before the lights went down in the Toverlantaarmuseum's tiny auditorium there was an air of excitement and creative possibility, like a particularly well-preserved lightning slipping slide.

The Toverlantaarmuseum, in the seaside area of Den Haag, is not just home to **Henk Boelmans Kranenburg** and **Robert Conrad te Pas** but filled to the brim with every kind of magic lantern and optical device imaginable, along with a few items beyond imagination. Members lingered and wondered at their leisure in between events, though the generously packed programme meant that any such lingering and wondering needed to be carefully managed.

Thanks to a small army of volunteer helpers, introductory coffee and two exceptional lunches meant that no one had to leave the museum during the day to find sustenance. Members could mingle and even spill out into the garden, filled with greenery, flowers and a few curiosities, terrible weather permitting.

After a welcome by MLS Vice-Chair **John Townsend**, **Henk Boelmans Kranenburg** opened with a few comments and questions – proving that no one person can know everything, and everyone, especially people from a wide geographical area and diverse knowledge base, has something to contribute to the conversation.

In the first presentation of the weekend, *The Many Disappearances of the Magic Lantern Showmen*, **Roger Gonin** (France) related the curious demise of the itinerant magic lantern pedlar, a profession often considered so lowly that some preferred to call themselves 'organists'



Henk and Monique (above) and a lunch break (right)



Teyler's Museum is a cabinet of curiosities containing many wonders. Dying childless, the science-obsessed banker Pieter Teyler stipulated in his will that his house and contents should be available to all, for ever. Crucially, he also left a large part of his fortune to facilitate this, and over the centuries his home has transformed from a comfortable merchant's house to a jaw-dropping museum. Exhibits range from the

on official documents. Of course, there were not many such documents, except those used by ex-lanternists emigrating to Mexico hoping to find gainful employment in almost anything except lanternry. Particularly interesting was the moment of 'crossover' between the pedlars and the scientists.

The images in *Turning Heads: 350-year-old engravings from the Martin Gilbert Collection* are, when you first look at them, quaintly amusing: engravings of interesting-looking individuals, who when literally turned on their heads become strange creatures or curious humans. When interpreted by **Monique Wezenberg** (Netherlands), however, they became political commentaries on the great (mainly Dutch) personalities of the day. Extra information, gleaned when Martin and Monique bumped into a local man while walking around the town the day before, only further proves the importance of leaving our collective front doors to enhance our knowledge.

Knowledge does not come more local than **Sjaak Boone's** family, which has strong Scheveningen connections. Sjaak's presentation, *The Privateer Captain*, told the story of his ancestors, introducing an intriguing magic lantern possibility from a print of the day. Sjaak's presentation also included a painting displayed in the museum of the extraordinary Panorama Mesdag (1881), a short distance from the Toverlantaarnmuseum, which many members managed to visit. Most agreed it was the best panorama they had seen.

Just before breaking for the morning, **Bernd Scholze** (Germany) followed Henk's lead, making some intriguing comments and asking questions about 18th-century slides, the perfect ice breaker (if one was needed) for a lunchtime conversation. A little watery sunshine tempted some into the garden. By afternoon when we boarded the coach for our

visit to Haarlem, the clouds were again threatening.



Turbulent Times with Piet van der Pas narrating (left) (photo: Ditmar Bollaert) and (below) a slide of Stadhouder Willem V from the presentation



traditional glass domes and cases of stuffed things, through curious displays of bones and minerals, all the way to contemporary media via the obligatory galleries of Dutch paintings. The core collection is well worth a look, but we were there to see *De Grote Illusie* ('The Great Illusion') – an exploration of virtual reality across 200 years, reinterpreted through modern multimedia.

The result is a dazzling (if at first a little disorienting) kaleidoscope of early optical illusions, projected onto walls, through peep holes and



Teyler's Museum: (above) optical projections (photo: Ditmar Bollaert); (right) Dominique 'on a platter'



across banks of mirrors. Parades of slipping slides jostled with strips of very early film, swirls of zoetrope images jumbled against a carnival of whatever the collective noun for chromatropes might be. Elsewhere, a small phantom joined a spooky party in a Pepper's Ghost display, and members queued up to have their heads cut off and displayed on a plate, all literally done with mirrors in the 'Talking Head' demonstration. A Kaiserpanorama (communal stereoscope viewer) allowed around twenty people to view 3D images at the same time; also available were modern virtual reality headsets for rather more private experiences.

Saturday night is movie night. Back at the Toverlantaarnmuseum, this meant the constantly changing images of *Turbulent Times*, curated by the late **Annet Duller** (Netherlands). Narrated by **Piet van der Pas** in Dutch (with a written translation) this told the life story of Stadhouder Willem V and his successor King Willem I between 1770-1820, using only lantern slides contemporary to the period from Annet's collection. Henk and Monique rose spectacularly to this technically ambitious occasion, the aural challenge equally well met by musicians **Dominique Santens** and **Philippe Khazzaka** (Belgium), proving that multi-media extravaganzas are far from the sole preserve of the TikTok generation.

Later, as people mingled in the bar, a delightful video presentation of *Romeo and Juliet* took many of us by surprise. A screening in the fairytale garden had been planned, but the weather gods frowned and this gorgeous, dreamlike fantasy, drawn from many sets and individual slides, was shown indoors.

Saturday's fare was a hard act to follow yet, if anything, on Sunday the atmosphere was ramped even higher. **Jeremy Brooker** (England)

kicked off the morning with unique, often homemade slides. From one-offs asking patrons to refrain from bringing 'strange children' into screenings to hastily scrawled 'lost property' requests, it is a miracle these slides, the work of moments, have survived. Others, including some stunning examples from the hand of Oxonian grocer and amateur lantern-slide maker Henry Underhill, were the work



The audience at the Toverlantaanmuseum (left) (photo: Ditmar Bollaert); and observing slides there (right)

of weeks – the exquisite *The Tongue-Cut Sparrow* (see p. 1) elicited audible gasps at the sheer beauty of Underhill's brushwork.

Dominique and Philippe presented several sets including *Little Red Riding Hood* and *The Jester of Flanders* (Tyl Uilenspiegel) which are not unique but still vanishingly rare. They also showed two different versions of *The Mouse* – one in silhouette form, the other a coloured commercial set from the UK – pointing out that, at the end, while visually different, the snook-cocking mouse is virtually identical in both.



Slides from *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Tyl Uilenspiegel*

It's easy to forget that some concepts of the magic lantern must look frankly arcane to beginners. In the short film *A Glimpse of Magic*, **Edgar and Linda Gibbs** (Wales) clearly explained the concept of the chromatrope using 21st-century techniques.

Nobody understands the strange box discovered in the Netherlands a few years ago. In *A Mysterious Dutch Feux Pyriques*, Monique gave a 'what we know so far' presentation about the current investigation into this intriguing, early nineteenth-century optical device, which appears to have used sunlight as a light source.

In *All Roads Lead to ... Brussels*, Belgian presenter **Eleonora Paklons's** investigation into the travels and magic lantern work of Charles Buls revealed a man who always seemed to have one foot in his homeland and the other ... somewhere else. His casual use of homoerotic slides must have added an intriguing piquancy to the traditional travelogues given by most explorers to audiences back home. A special delight about this meeting saw equal attention paid to lantern content and technicality. In *No Turbulence for the Lightning!* **Patrice Guérin** (France) provided a fascinating overview of the history of illuminants, using examples from his own collection.

No magic lantern meeting is complete without phantasmagoria. On *Graveyards*, *Wizards and Funny Monsters*, presented by newlyweds **Ditmar Bollaert** and **Els Prevenier** (Belgium), included some of the finest examples of eighteenth-century gentlemen astonished by

Ditmar and Els (photo: **Else Flim** and **Adrian Kok**) (left) and a slide from their show (right)



monsters, skeletons juggling with their heads, phantoms escaping from crypts and wizards conjuring bugaboos.

Original and funny, *Divine Beauty: The Slides of Maison de la Bonne Presse*, presented by 'M. Bartolomé and his Apprentice' seemed at first to be a perfectly pleasant presentation by the said M. Bartolomé (**Bart Moens**, Belgium) and his young apprentice (**Margo Buelens-Terry**, Belgium). We suspected nothing when the eager, flat-capped apprentice admitted it was their first outing with the magic lantern, and happily listened to Monsieur B, nattily dressed in his showman's gear, as he tried to sell us slides from his latest catalogue of somewhat obscure religious subjects. Then came the crash. A collective gasp was followed by silence, as a room full of collectors watching a series of rare slides reacted to the bone-chilling sound of broken glass. The show must go on, so 'the apprentice' started projecting "anything still left in the box" which happened to be from Monsieur B's 'other' collection: saucy erotica. Fresh, fun and still absolutely on point, this is surely representative of how modern practitioners can use old slides in new and creative ways.

There was one last marvel. On our return from lunch, the room was blacked-out and a hush fell as **Bernd Scholze** slowly moved the earliest known example of a phantasmagoria lantern still mounted on its original stand across a specially-made track, projecting a clear, focussed, image that genuinely zoomed in and out, to exclamations of wonder from the audience. There was a concluding vote of thanks from Acting Secretary/Treasurer **Richard Crangle**.

Thanks to transport issues, a presentation like Bernd's would have been difficult in the UK – yet another reason why it is so important for MLS meetings to be held in more than one country. We extend special thanks to our hosts, **Henk and Robert**; we say 'thank you' to organiser and administrator **Monique**, who managed to herd cats (well, MLS members from seven countries); we thank volunteers and assistants **Josephine**, **Hanneke**, **Sabine**, **Else**, **Adrian**, **Bart**, **Dominique** and **Phillippe** who worked like furies behind the scenes. It seems to me that international cooperation is vital to keep the MLS vibrant and relevant.

Sandra Lawrence

Photographs from the meeting by the author unless credited.