

The Magic Lantern

WHAT IS IT?

Mike Smith

The answer – a panorama. This word can have many meanings, but in the context of optical history it can best be defined as ‘a picture or a series of pictures representing a continuous scene, often exhibited a part at a time by being unrolled and passed before the observer.’

The term ‘panorama’ is attributed to Robert Barker (1739-1806) to describe his cycloramic painting ‘Edinburgh from Calton Hill’ which was first shown in London on 31 January 1788 (Fig. 1). Three years later in January 1791 another Barker panorama, this time depicting ‘London from the Roof of Albion Mills’, was presented in the capital.



1. *Edinburgh from Calton Hill, Robert Barker, 1788*



2. *Panorama of The Battle of Waterloo, Belgium*

These early panoramas were perceived not so much as works of art but rather as a novelty; a technical invention capable of transferring the spectator into a different painted reality. By combining artistic talent and technical features panoramas offered the illusion of taking the spectator to a completely different location that they had probably never seen. Popular subjects included landscapes, topographical views and historical events. The painting was arranged on the inside of a cylindrical surface in a purpose-built building (known as a rotunda), completely surrounding the spectator with everything unconnected with the painting eliminated from sight. A viewing platform was situated in the centre of the rotunda at such a distance from the canvas that the panorama’s perspective seemed a natural foreshortening. In time, this effect was made even more convincing by a three-dimensional treatment of the space stretching between the platform and the panorama. This was accomplished by using real objects purposefully arranged to obliterate the transition from their three-dimensional reality to the flat surface of the canvas (Fig. 2).

Encouraged by the success of his two panoramas, Robert Barker financed the construction of a special two-storey rotunda just off Leicester Square, London. The opening ceremony was held on 25 May 1793. The building functioned for 75 years and well over 100 panoramas were shown there during this period. In 1799 a rotunda was built in Paris by Robert Fulton and the panorama fever spread very quickly. This popularity inspired William Burton to pioneer the idea of creating a network of rotundas throughout Europe to display the large output of panorama paintings produced during the early decades of the 19th century. Thanks to Burton’s initiative, dimensions of both paintings and rotundas were soon standardised. Panoramas could now



3. *Illustration of a theatrical moving panorama*

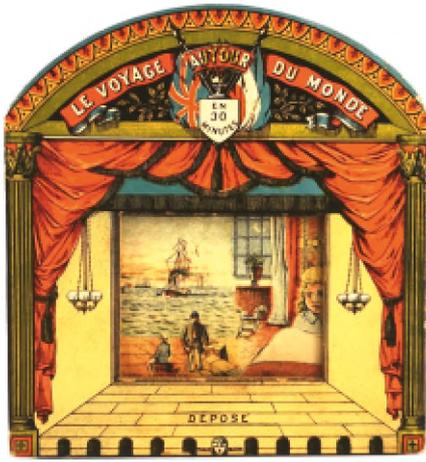
travel between cities with little difficulty, making possible frequent changes of display just like new films in modern-day cinemas. By the last decade of the 19th century several hundred panoramas were circulating in Europe. Many of them were repainted or painted on the back of an older panorama, and at the end of their life they were often cut into pieces and the fragments sold as individual paintings. The birth of the cinema at the end of the 19th century may have led to the decline of the panorama, as the viewer could see on the screen a dynamic cavalry charge instead of a frozen one. Some 30 panoramas have survived in Europe, with around half being accessible to the public.

The moving panorama was a mid-19th-century development of the static version. It was among the most popular forms of entertainment in the world, with hundreds of panoramas constantly on tour in England and many European countries.

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4, 5, 6 and 7. Toy panoramas showing printed scenery rolls

Moving panoramas (Fig. 3) were often seen in melodramatic plays, adding a new visual element to theatre in a bid to give a more realistic quality. Not only was it a special effect onstage, but it also served as an ancestor to early cinema. This type of panorama was achieved by taking the long painted canvas and rolling each end around two large spool-type mechanisms that could be turned, causing the canvas to scroll across the back of a stage, often behind a stationary scenic piece or object like a boat, horse or vehicle to create the illusion of movement and travelling through space. The immense spools were scrolled past the audience behind a cut-out drop-scene or proscenium which hid the mechanism from public view.



8 and 9. Panorama magic lantern slides of the Rhein river

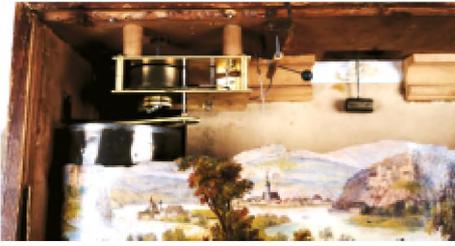
The moving panorama was the catalyst for the development of a myriad miniature optical amusements which incorporated all the elements of the theatrical panorama into a range of toys, in the form of toy theatres and other ingenious amusements. The toy theatres were produced with printed scenery rolls which moved from one spool to another by means of a simple handle (Figs 4-7). Panorama fever also spread to the magic lantern world, with panorama slides becoming the staple of many shows (Figs 8-9).

However a recent discovery by Martin Gilbert and myself takes the miniature moving panorama in a different direction (Fig. 10). Our discovery is a panorama in the form of a picture which incorporates a clock, a moving panorama and a musical movement. It is a picture of a river (quite possibly the Danube) and was made in Austria around 1865. The picture measures 62 x 63 x 13cm. It is clearly a 'one-off' made to the highest specification and destined for a fine home. The picture of a theatre is skilfully painted in oil on metal, with the theatre screen handpainted in oil on vellum and incorporating the moving panorama. A couple are seen walking by the river. The scenery changes and music plays when the clock strikes on the hour. The clock has a 'Grand Sonnerie'



10. Panorama picture clock (left)
11. Reverse of picture clock showing panorama roll (right)





12. *The panorama mechanism*

movement activates the panorama, and both run while two tunes are played; then both these features are switched off until the next hour is reached and the sequence starts again. During the restoration of the clock, panorama and musical movement, the connection between the clock and the musical movement was disabled to preserve the delicate panorama roll.

movement – a form of quarter-striking in which the hour last struck is also repeated at each hour. It works by striking the quarter-hour on one gong and the hour on a second gong with a slightly lower tone. For example, at 3.15 the clock strikes once on the higher chime to indicate the quarter hour, followed by three strikes on the lower chime to indicate the hour. At 3.30 the clock strikes twice on the higher chime (half hour), followed by three chimes on the lower gong (hour) and so on.

The musical movement is connected to the clock and starts the music when the clock strikes on the hour (Figs 11-13). In turn the musical



13. *The musical mechanism*