

PATIENCE REWARDED

Mike Smith

The peepshow has a major part to play in the history of the moving image and for many years was a familiar sight on the highways and byways of Europe and beyond. However before the peepshow there were the itinerant showmen who entertained with their 'cabinets of curiosities'. These emerged in the 16th and 17th centuries and contained an eclectic collection of objects that reflected the interests and curiosities of their collectors. This might have included specimens from the natural world, scientific items, exotic plants, small skeletons and a variety of other antiquities. Larger collections would have been displayed in a room with smaller collections being housed in a specially designed cabinet. These collections were the precursors to the museums we know today – the creators of the collections would occasionally open their collections to their friends and they also became another type of street entertainment. By the early decades of the 18th century curiosities and wondrous specimens had begun to lose their appeal and the peepshowman lost one of his business competitors.

There are a few engravings to give us some sort of insight into the activities of these showmen. The most well-known of these is *La Curiosité* by Noël Le Mire (1724-1801) which was produced circa 1770 from a painting by the Dutch Old Master Richard Brackenburgh (1650-1702). A copy of this engraving is shown in Fig. 1. This engraving is also reproduced in Dick Balzer's book *Peepshows: A Visual History*¹ together with three other prints of cabinet itinerants.



2. *Itinerant Showman*. German 18th century. Oil on canvas 33 x 26.5cm

However, the story does not end there. Early in 2025 I received a communication from the gallery in Amsterdam offering me the Brackenburgh painting again. This time the price was affordable and the painting now hangs next to the German painting as one of the most important pieces in my collection. The painting has provenance back to 1864 when it formed part of the Northwick collection – one of the greatest art collections formed in Great Britain in the 19th century. It included some 500 'old master' paintings, Greek, Roman and Egyptian antiquities, books, manuscripts and miniatures. The Northwick collection was inherited and added to by Capt. George Spencer-Churchill, a cousin of Sir Winston Churchill. The importance of the painting was recognised early on by one of the most important old master collectors of the time. Furthermore, the *La Curiosité* engraving of the work shows the admiration other artists had for this work.

1. Richard Balzer, *Peepshows: A Visual History*, Harry N. Abrams Inc, New York, 1998



1. *La Curiosité* (circa 1770). Engraved by Noël Le Mire from the painting by Richard Brackenburgh

In February 2022 I was fortunate to locate the original Brackenburgh painting which was for sale in a gallery in Amsterdam, although the price being asked was beyond my pocket. I thought no more about this discovery until in March 2023 I saw that the painting was being offered for sale by auction in Switzerland. I watched the auction but the painting did not sell. I offered to buy the painting after the auction but my offer was turned down. In May 2023 I was advised by the gallery in Amsterdam (who had put the painting up for auction) that the owner of the painting had died, and I was offered it again at a substantially reduced price. Again this was beyond my pocket.

In November 2024 I bought at auction in Vienna an oil painting of a cabinet itinerant (Fig. 2). The auction house described the painting as German 18th century but they could not attribute this painting to a known artist. The painting was clearly inspired by the Brackenburgh painting – note the showman's stance and the positioning of the cabinet of curiosities. There is even a jug in the same spot in both paintings. However, there are several differences – many of the Brackenburgh characters are missing, the background is totally different and the artistic quality of the original is lost. How this copy was made no one will ever know – did the artist see the original Brackenburgh painting? It could not have been copied from the subsequent engraving as the entire picture was reversed in the engraving/printing process. Nevertheless I was delighted to add this painting to my collection.

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3. *Travelling Showman*. Richard Brackenburgh (1650–1702, Haarlem). Signed and dated 1692. Oil on panel 25 x 32.5cm