

'A QUITE RARE ENTERTAINMENT': AN OPTICAL SHOW IN PARIS IN 1656

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LIKE MOST RESEARCH STORIES, this small investigation began as a question arising from another piece of research. Simon During's excellent book *Modern Enchantments*, reviewed in this journal recently, includes among its many interesting features one most intriguing reference to the magic lantern, in what During calls 'a very early public demonstration of its powers in the Hôtel de Liancourt, at Paris, on May 9, 1656.'¹ He quotes one Jean Loret, who 'upon watching the projected images ... felt the need to seek supernatural protection' and crossed himself repeatedly. In the context of During's discussion of 'secular magic' he uses this reference to present the lantern as an instrument of necromancy, which perverts the rational scientific purposes of the lens and reaches into the occult while 'powerfully reminding us of death'. All of which seems quite reasonable to me.

But since the generally accepted date for the earliest known reference to a magic lantern (despite the sterling efforts of Deac Rossell and others) remains stubbornly at 1659, this suggestion of a full-blown entertainment in a major city three years earlier was, to say the least, interesting. During cites his source for this reference as *Le Merveilleux et le 'théâtre du silence'* by Marie-Françoise Christout.² A little rummaging in a nearby university library turned up a copy of this book, which proved to be a wide-ranging history of 'the marvellous' as a concept, covering a huge range of media including dance, pantomime, stage magic, puppet shows and pyrotechnics.

In such an unfocused and generalised account the magic lantern, in the guise of the Phantasmagoria, gets little more than a passing mention. Christout quotes the Loret reference on a page on which she also asserts that the lantern was 'spread and discovered' by Athanasius Kircher and described in the 1645 edition of his *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae*. If one were starting from such a shaky factual basis, it would be easy to assume that Loret's 1656 description must be a show given with the lantern 'ten years after' its invention, and this is what Christout proceeds to do. The longer quotation she gives from the description of the show, however, seemed intriguing in itself and worth some further investigation.

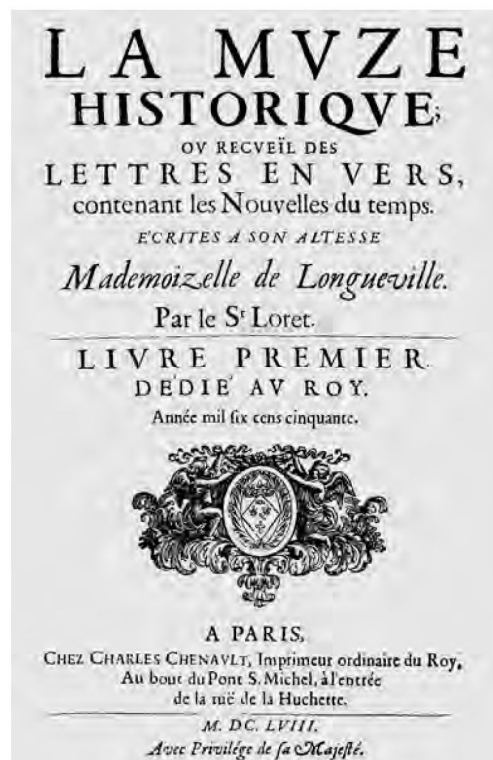
There is, of course, nothing new under the sun, and a bit of friendly advice from Stephen Herbert led me to a couple of other discussions of the same reference, which is from a work by Loret called *Le Muze historique*. As outlined in the *Encyclopaedia of the Magic Lantern*, Thomas Ganz had already discussed Loret's account in his *Die Welt im Kasten*, concluding that it refers to a magic lantern show, while Laurent Mannoni, in *Trois Siècles de cinéma*, preferred to see it as a demonstration of the camera obscura.³ Without further detail it was impossible to conclude which of these two authorities might be correct, so there seemed to be no choice but to track down the original text and see if that would provide any more conclusive evidence. This didn't prove too difficult: *Le Muze historique* is well known among French scholars as a source text for references to the Court and Parisian society during the regime of the 'Sun King', Louis XIV (1638–1715, reigned from 1643).

Jean Loret (Fig. 1) was born at Carentan, Normandy, in 1595. Little seems to be known about his life, but in his fifties he was in Paris, making what appears to have been a meagre living writing witty accounts of the life of the Court and city society. These appeared from 1650 onwards as *Le Muze historique*, published weekly under the guise of a series of verse letters to Loret's patron, Mademoiselle de Longueville (who later became Duchesse de Nemours). To judge from the surviving copies, these were not 'real' private letters which were later published, but accounts written for publication as a sort of semi-satirical weekly newspaper. It must have enjoyed some popularity and success, since publication continued for 15 years until just before Loret's death in May 1665, and the weekly parts were collected and published as three bound volumes between 1656 and 1665.⁴ Other writers of the time were publishing similar weekly *gazettes burlesques*, as these publications are sometimes known, and several of them continued publication after Loret's death, as detailed in an 1881 collection of their texts by Baron de Rothschild.⁵

The content of *Le Muze historique* is varied, but it set itself the target (in the subtitle of its bound version) of presenting 'Letters in Verse, Containing the News of the Time'



1. Portrait of Jean Loret, frontispiece of bound volume of *Le Muze historique* (British Library). The accompanying verse translates as: 'Here is the handsome, or ugly, Picture of Loret, / In France, for good or ill, he had some renown, / And Reader, as you view his book, / Judge whether he had a little Wit, or not.'



2. *Le Muze historique*, title page of Volume 1 (British Library)

NOTES

1. Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: the Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 265. A review of this book by Mervyn Heard appeared in *NMLJ* Vol. 9 No. 4 (Summer 2003), 61.
2. Marie-Françoise Christout, *Le Merveilleux et le 'théâtre du silence' en France à partir du XVII^e siècle* (Paris and The Hague: Editions Mouton, 1965). The Loret reference is at p. 147.
3. See David Robinson, Stephen Herbert and Richard Crangle (eds), *The Encyclopaedia of the Magic Lantern* (London: Magic Lantern Society, 2001), 177; Thomas Ganz, *Die Welt im Kasten: von der Camera Obscura zur Audiovision* (Zürich: Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 1994); Laurent Mannoni, *Trois Siècles de cinéma: de la lanterne magique au cinématographe* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1995).
4. Jean Loret, *Le Muze historique: ou, recueil des lettres en vers contenant les nouvelles du temps* (Paris: 3 vols, 1658–65). British Library shelfmark 84. h.5–7. The full run of the periodical comprises 16 'books' with approximately 30 'letters' in each, dated from 4 May 1650 to 28 March 1665.
5. See Baron James de Rothschild (ed.), *Les Continuateurs de Loret: lettres en verse de La Gravette de Mayolas, Robinet, Boursault, Perdon de Subigny, Laurent et autres* (1665–1689) (Paris: 1881).

(Fig. 2). What this meant in practice was a miscellany of Paris society news, mainly concerning the activities of the Court of Louis XIV; international events, particularly the wars and politics of other European states; curious stories of unusual or comical events and wonders; and occasional accounts of entertainments and spectacles, again mainly relating to the Court. The tone of the accounts was generally quite light and witty, as though hidden jokes and satirical references may be not far below the surface, if only one knew the personalities being described, but the accounts of such personalities were always deferential and flattering, perhaps reflecting the absolute control over publishing that the authorities enjoyed at this time. In other words, like much journalism before the twentieth century, *Le Muze historique* tended to give the accounts of things that its patrons were likely to want to hear, and that should always be borne in mind when considering it as 'evidence' of the events described.

There appears never to have been an English translation, but the British Library holds a copy of the original three-volume French bound edition, as well as a French reprint which appeared in the late nineteenth century. The seventeenth-century copy in the BL is from the Royal Library of George III, which was donated to the British Museum in 1823 as one of the major building blocks of the national collection. It carries the tantalising handwritten inscription 'Bibliotheca Colbertina' on its title page, suggesting that it was originally in the library of none other than Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619–83), Louis XIV's Minister of Finance and the founder of the Académie des Sciences.

The passage relating to the curious show is found in the second volume, in a 'letter' dated 13 May 1656 (which was a Sunday, giving the date cited by During, since the account refers to the previous Tuesday). The rest of the letter contains Loret's usual fare, including a story of a group of young barbers or surgeons who were mistaken for ruffians, an account of a feud in Caen between two gangs supporting the rival suitors of a young woman, and a straightforward Court report of the King's Sunday promenade. But Loret had also been sufficiently excited by a strange show he had seen to include a relatively detailed account, as follows (my translation; see also Fig. 4):

On Tuesday last, while paying court
To the beautiful Hôtel de Liencour,
Where everyone knows that there are housed
A great many excellent things,
I there took pleasure, for some little time,
In a quite rare entertainment
With which, in a surprising manner,
We were delighted by a certain Charmer
Who, in this exalted Palace,
(Which could pass for enchanted
If it were not real and solid)
Appeared as though she were another Armide.⁶
This charming Beauty, then,
Whose beautiful eyes, if it ever were so,
Each shone more brightly than a Star,
Extended in the air a plain sheet
On which, on my word as a man of property,
Nothing could be seen,
And, however, at the same instant,
(Where I had detected almost complete blankness)
One saw there beautiful Palaces,
People who were dancing Ballets,
People, who in their cut and thrust,
Appeared to be engaged in battle,
And then, one even saw



3. *Le Muze historique*, frontispiece of Volume 2 (British Library)

The flamberges flashing in the air,⁷
I saw there slightly muted lamps,
Bodies as faint as shadows;
But what caused me some surprise
Was that they had their feet above,
And in all their walking,
Dancing, battles, turns and postures,
(No more than the stars of the night)
They made no sound or noise;
Finally, seeing this Magic
Take place with so much energy,
Indeed I made, several times,
A number of signs of the Cross,
As though believing [myself] to be at a disaster.
But the cause of not being
Gripped with a great astonishment,
[Was] since Madame de Choisy,⁸
Who is known to have a Soul so beautiful,
So noble and so spiritual,
By this spectacle, upon my faith,
Was just as surprised as I.
The news which I present here
Is not of great importance;
But the account of it which I have given,
Is due to the rarity of the event:

This Magic is innocent,
I know its excellent fineness:
But though it pains me to be discreet,
I did not learn its secret.⁹

Such details as this account contains (and it's easy to share Loret's frustration that he 'did not learn its secret') point towards a performance using a camera obscura. There are four particular technical points which give vital clues:

- The image appears on a screen, so the performance is not a conventionally staged tableau or playlet;
- The picture appears suddenly as if from nowhere, so it must have been artificially produced in some fashion;
- The images are moving, suggesting a live action (or puppet) performance, but silent, which suggests they are conveyed from somewhere out of earshot, and also rules out a stage production. Moving images could, even at this early date, potentially have been created using mechanical slides, but unless Loret is being very generous with his description of the realism of the images, the complex actions described are beyond even the most advanced examples of that method;

- But above all, the images appear upside-down, a characteristic feature of the camera obscura unless a mirror is used to re-invert the image. This does not entirely rule out a magic lantern, of course, but if this were a lantern show as we understand them, even the most incompetent lanternist would probably have projected the slides right-way-up at least some of the time!

So the most likely explanation for Loret's astonishment is the use of a camera obscura to convey the image of a live action performance from a place outside the building or from an adjacent room. Although Loret does not make clear the time of day when the performance took place, the reference to 'slightly muted lamps' suggests that there is darkness where the action is performed, with torchlight providing the illumination; in that case it is hardly surprising that some of the bodies seen are 'faint as shadows', since the camera obscura requires very strong direct illumination to produce bright images.

Other descriptions of this type of show are,



4. Facsimile of part of *Le Muze historique*, Book VII, Letter 19 (British Library)

6. This refers to the character Armida, a Saracen sorceress, in the epic poem of the Crusades *La Gerusalemme Liberata* (1575) by the Italian poet Torquato Tasso (1544–95).
7. The *flamberge* was a type of sword with an undulating blade, originating in Germany and popular from the 15th to 17th centuries.

8. The Madame de Choisy referred to is probably Joanne Olympo Hurault de l'Hôpital, who married Jean de Choisy, Chancellor to the Duc d'Orléans, in 1628. She was a noted society hostess and member of the Court.
9. Jean Loret, *Le Muze historique*, Book VII, Letter 19, lines 153–206.

of course, fairly well known.¹⁰ The camera obscura itself belongs to the thirteenth century or earlier, and in 1656 its use for producing an entertainment spectacle was at least a century old. Such uses were described by Kircher in 1646 and Schott in 1657, among others, and the most celebrated account is that of Giovanni Battista della Porta, who gave a detailed description of such entertainments in the 1589 edition of his *Magiae Naturalis*:

That in a dark Chamber by white sheets objected, one may see as clearly and perspicuously, as if they were before his eyes, Huntings, Banquets, Armies of Enemies, Plays, and all things else that one desireth. Let there be over against that Chamber, where you desire to represent these things, some spacious Plain, where the Sun can freely shine: Upon that you shall set Trees in Order, also Woods, Mountains, Rivers, and Animals, that are really so, or made by Art, of Wood, or some other matter.¹¹

The content of the elaborate show implied by Porta's account sounds broadly similar to that outlined by Loret, or at least it is easy to imagine them as having been staged in similar ways. Without knowing more detail of the precise layout of the venue of Loret's show, it is difficult to do more than speculate about how exactly the performance was set up: whether there was 'some spacious Plain' available outside the building, or whether the dancing and fighting was staged indoors by artificial light.

The Hôtel de Liancourt¹² was the Paris mansion of Roger du Plessis (1598–1674), Seigneur de Liancourt and second Comte de La Roche-Guyon. Du Plessis was a member of the Royal Household and confidant of the King, and besides holding numerous positions of state was noted as an art collector (at least one painting by the French master Claude Lorrain was dedicated to him). Laurent Mannoni locates the Hôtel in the rue de Seine, on the south bank of the river not far from the present-day Invalides.¹³ Mannoni attributes the organisation of the show to the mistress of the house, Du Plessis' wife Jeanne de Schomberg (died 1674), presumably on the assumption that this is the enchantress with shining eyes described in such flattering terms by Loret. While this is quite possible, I wonder whether Loret's 'Armide' might not have been a mistress of ceremonies attached to the group of performers presenting the performance itself, a tantalising contemporary glimpse of a seventeenth-century show-woman. We shall, unfortunately, never know.

Whichever may be its true location, this town house, which Loret presents as a place of great wonder 'where everyone knows that there are housed a great many excellent things', might be imagined as a venue for society gatherings and staged entertainments of the type Loret regularly describes members of the Court enjoying. The fact that the venue was an aristocratic house gives us one further piece of important information about Loret's show: it was not a public performance, an event open to anyone who could pay the admission. We can assume that the King was *not* present (Loret would surely have made a point of mentioning him had he been there), but given that Madame de Choisy was a lady of some social standing, it is clear that this was a social event presented as part of the general round of entertainments for the elite of society.

It is also clear from Loret's description that this type of spectacle was not common. He comments twice on 'the rarity of the event', and shows no sign of being familiar with either the effect he has seen or the techniques which produced it. The rare nature of the event, and its presentation to an audience in the upper echelons of Paris society, both point to one aspect of such an entertainment: it must have been expensive to stage. Actors, costumes and properties

would no doubt be available at a price, but there must also have been costs for setting up the technical aspects of the camera obscura, someone with technical knowledge must have been involved, and no doubt there would have needed to be significant time for setting up and rehearsing the performance. All in all, this cannot have been an everyday occurrence, and would only be available in situations where location, resources and time could all be provided.

It seems clear to me that Loret's 1656 description is of a camera obscura performance rather than a lantern show, leaving the 1659 date for the earliest known lantern reference intact to ride another day. There has been much speculation, of course, about the origins of the magic lantern itself. This reference does not help particularly in that quest, in spite of its closeness to the dates we have for the lantern's first appearance, particularly because it is so lacking in technical detail. However, it does give us a reminder of one of the entertainment contexts into which the lantern emerged, and in doing so may suggest one of the reasons the lantern succeeded as an entertainment medium.

Whatever the (undeniable) scientific and educational impulses behind the development of the lantern, its entertainment use might be seen to stem from a very necessary economic impulse. Producing a spectacle of the kind Loret describes, using the camera obscura, must have been a serious logistical operation involving no small expense, much like presenting a stage play but with additional technical complications and costs. The development of a portable instrument which could apparently replicate the camera obscura effect (albeit with obvious differences: a lack of live action, diminished realism, and so on) and reproduce it repeatedly with no further major outlay, must have widened the availability of optical entertainment quite markedly.

In this respect there is an interesting parallel to the emergence three centuries later of the cinematograph, which shows a similar pattern of using a new technology to extend and mass-produce (approximately) the effect of an existing medium. In both cases the existing media were not in themselves changed by the appearance of a 'new' one – which in itself displayed some fundamental differences from the status quo and was not a simple modification – but the newcomer exploited a broadening of the market which, mainly for economic reasons, the existing media could not achieve. The effect presented by the newcomer (in one case the lantern, in the other the moving-picture apparatus) had some shortcomings when compared to the medium which later it was seen to have 'replaced', but in both cases one of the newcomer's main advantages was that it allowed related effects to be produced and reproduced more easily and cheaply. So, just as a greater understanding of the lantern trade and other media of the late nineteenth century would enlighten us about cinematograph practices and audiences, more knowledge about the camera obscura as a seventeenth-century performance medium could shed further light on the context into which the magic lantern first emerged.

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10. See Hermann Hecht, *Pre-Cinema History: an Encyclopaedia and Annotated Bibliography of the Moving Image before 1896* (London: Bowker Saur, 1993) for a broad survey of early camera obscura accounts, especially Hecht's summary of accounts by Athanasius Kircher in the first edition of *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae* (item 17) and Gaspar Schott in *Magia Universalis* (item 19).

11. John Baptista Porta (Giovanni Battista della Porta), *Natural Magick* (London: Thomas Young and Samuel Speed, 1658), 363. A longer version of this quotation, from the first English translation of Porta's 1589 work, appears in Laurent Mannoni, *The Great Art of Light and Shadow: Archaeology of the Cinema*, ed. and trans. Richard Crangle (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), 9. See also Hecht, op. cit., item 12C.

12. The term 'Hôtel' in this context indicates a large private house, not a public hostelry as we would understand the word 'hotel' today.

13. Mannoni, *Trois Siècles de cinéma*, 17. See also Pierre Couperie (trans. Marion Low), *Paris Through the Ages: an Illustrated Historical Atlas of Urbanism and Architecture* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1968), index. According to Couperie the Hôtel was at 14–16 rue de Seine, built by Le Mercier in 1623 and demolished in 1825. Du Plessis had a number of properties in different parts of Paris, and there might be some uncertainty as to exactly which 'Hôtel de Liancourt' is referred to by Loret. For example, a series of photographs of 21 rue des Bons-Enfants, near the Palais-Royal, taken by the great photographer of *fin de [19th] siècle* Paris Eugène Atget in 1907 and now held by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF reference Est. Eo 109b bte 3; T039466-9), carries handwritten notes reading 'Hôtel Liancourt. Comte de la Roche-Guyon (1636)'. See <http://gallica.bnf.fr/scripts/mosaïque.exe?O=3100016>, images 51–54 (web address correct at time of going to press).