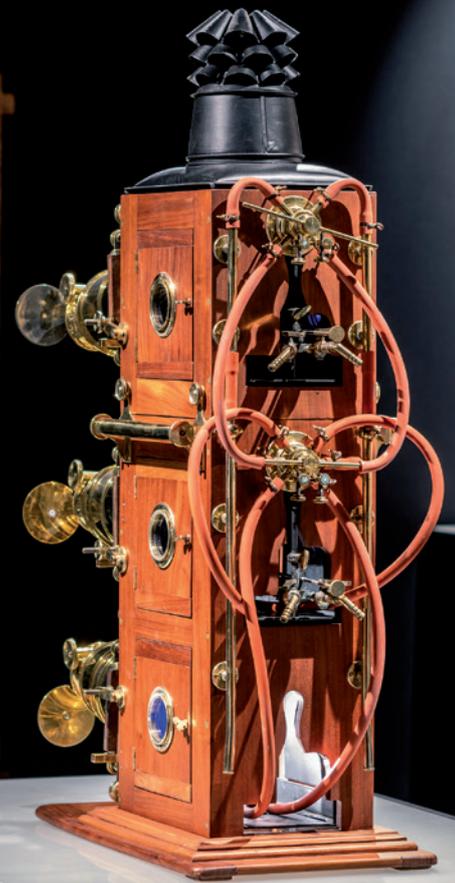


# 'Laterna Magica – the Simple Device that Changes the Way We View the World'

Marie-Anne Leonard

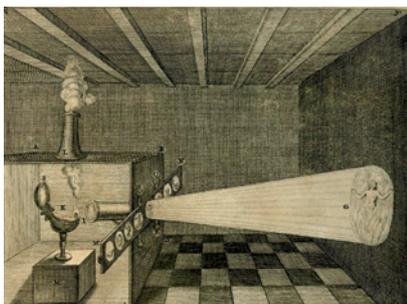


The Laterna Magica – or Magic Lantern – was like the iPhone of its time.

The idea sounds basic now - a slide projector and a light source projecting hand-painted slides onto a screen - but the device reinvented the way people saw the world throughout the centuries and its impact is still felt today.

## The Devil on the Wall

The reformation in Europe in the 16th Century was a very spiritual time where the Catholic Church ruled in matters of morality and law, until the



An illustration of a projection of hellfire or purgatory from Jesuit scholar Athanasius Kircher's 1671 study 'Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae'.

Protestants challenged their dogma. The Reformers made use of the printing radical plan.

"The Jesuits were very important for the Roman Catholic Church because they were multimedia people," explains Dr Andreas Scheucher, curator of the AV Stumpfl Museum in Austria. "They founded a special form of spiritual theatre and used the Magic Lantern. The first projected images were images of the devil."

Reinhold Stumpfl, the owner and founder of Canon partner AV Stumpfl, is an avid collector of this fascinating memorabilia. He asked his friend, Dr Scheucher, a recognized expert in visual storytelling, to curate the AV Stumpfl museum, where over two hundred artefacts from the history of projection technology are exhibited.

"The 'devil on the wall' shows how miraculous this technology would be for simple country people. The Jesuits

*"The idea of telling stories with pictures is as old as humanity itself"*

*Reinhold Stumpfl,  
owner and founder of  
Canon partner AV Stumpfl*

travelled widely using the Laterna Magica to spread church propaganda, and to show that if you were not a good Catholic, you would go to Hell. There's a connecting line beginning from the middle ages, right through to today where powerful images in projections are used to shock and influence."

This was probably the first use of broadcast images for the purposes of propaganda. As wealth moved from the hands of the church and aristocracy and into the hands of merchants, so did the use of the Laterna Magica.

## 'Phantasmagoria' – The Theatre of Horror

At the time of the French Revolution (1789-1799), stage magician Étienne-Gaspard Robert discovered how to project from two Magic Lanterns mounted on rails and used this simple invention to take full advantage of the mood of the Parisian people, who lived in a city shaken by riots. He performed terrifying shows of supernatural spectacles called 'Phantasmagoria', where his audiences were locked into a pitch-black 'dungeon' and subjected to all manner of moving projected horrors that increased or decreased in size, accompanied by eerie sound effects and phantom voices.

## An explosion of limelight

The early 19th Century was a time of great progress, filled with scientific discoveries and the exploration of new and exotic lands. One particular invention allowed images of these incredible spectacles to be broadcast in a huge and exciting way, breathing fresh air to the Laterna Magica, Dr Scheucher explains.

"In the middle ages, an oil lamp was used with the projecting apparatus, but when the oxy-hydrogen lamp was invented, it was a sensation. Hydrogen and oxygen were mixed, creating a

tremendous temperature in a chemical reaction so that a limestone began to glow with a very white light. This 'limelight' was about 6000-8000 lumen, which is brighter than average car headlights, so remembering that at this time the most people had seen was the light of a yellow oil lamp, you can imagine how they responded."

Astonishing images from around the world were meticulously hand-transferred onto glass slides in crisp, beautiful detail, and the "limelight" then allowed them to fill huge screens with news, discoveries and catastrophes, such as erupting volcanoes.

By the Victorian industrial revolution its popularity peaked and thousands of people descended upon the Royal Albert Hall, clamouring to see these

*"There's a connecting line beginning from the early times of mankind, right through to today where powerful images in projections are used by powerful people to shock and influence."*

*Dr Andreas Scheucher,  
curator of the AV Stumpf Museum.*

projection shows. "Many people believe that the Magic Lantern was a toy for children, but in this case it wasn't. It was very powerful and the apparatus used were big projectors with three lenses, dissolve units and limelight. It was the cinema projector of the 19th century."

Because "limelight" went on to be used in the illumination of theatres, the term has endured to this day to describe someone who is centre stage. This is just one of the legacies of the Laterna Magica.

The slides themselves have since become very desirable objects. "They are unique in colour and every slide is a piece of art. They are only about 8x8 centimetres big and more than 100 years old, yet the colours are so clear and when projected on a big screen, you see every detail.

You use your smartphone to view a slideshow. The word 'slide' comes from the Laterna Magica. It had a wooden slider to insert the image into the optical system and project it out, and this became the word we now use. In some ways you could say that the Magic Lantern is still alive"

The AV Stumpf Museum is open for group visits during AV Stumpf opening times, where you can see Reinhold Stumpf's unique collection in full and experience three cinemas, showing broadcast technology from throughout the ages – including the Laterna Magica. //



*Laterna Magica slides are meticulously painted and exceptionally detailed. (© AV Stumpf)*