



MAGIC LANTERN

A projection machine (laterna magica, phantoscope)

About the project

<https://tsaritsyno-museum.ru/events/special/p/lyudi-i-fondy-eng/>

J. Lancaster & Son Limited,
Birmingham, UK

Early 20th century

*Wood, metal, copper, brass,
buckram, glass*





SELECTED BY
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Evening at the dacha. The running around and pranks are over. It is time for a fairy tale. Everyone gathered in the living room, the candles were extinguished, the darkness lets your imagination run wild... Father had already installed the magic lantern. Inside the device, hidden behind a special door, a light bulb lit up (before electricity became common, it could have been a candle or a kerosene lamp). Here! It seems to be starting. An image suddenly appears on a homemade screen (usually made from a sheet) — a picture from a fairy tale or historical novel.

In dramatic scenes, the mother plays the piano to improve the experience. The children, frozen with excitement, watch as the pictures on the glass replace one another.

Alas, glass is a fragile thing. If it cracks, part of the image will be lost. This happens regularly, but it does not matter: we can figure out what is missing by ourselves.

There were, of course, miracles greater than children's fairy tales. For adults. In the shadowed hall, ghosts, monsters and skeletons suddenly appeared in puffs of smoke, as if from the underworld. Sound effects made it even more frightening. At such sessions, presenters could use several magic lanterns and a special machine to create smoke. By the way, other names for this optical device became clearer: 'horror lantern' and 'foggy pictures'.

Using a magic lantern, scientists clearly explained the laws of optics. Teachers also appreciated the convenience of the device for the educational process. During the lessons of God's Law, priests used it to show series of paintings on Bible subjects; teachers took a broad view: historical themes, literary works, monuments of architecture and art.

Entrepreneurs quickly sensed its benefits and launched a mass production of glass plates with images on a variety of subjects: from politics and education to comic series, sometimes

objectionable ones. Texts were added to the glass, and recommendations for accompaniment were given. This is how the magic lantern became a mass medium.

I learned all these details much later. First I saw this wonderful device in an old Saint Petersburg apartment, which my old friends intended to buy and invited me to see. It turned out that, while emptying the apartment, the owners were dismantling the mezzanine and came across a large box. It was not possible to find out who the device belonged to, but it is known that engineers, university professors, and gymnasium teachers lived on Kirochnaya Street, where the apartment was located, until 1917. When the Bolsheviks seized power, the house was 'densified', but still the people remained in their old apartments, occupying, however, only one or two rooms. Under these circumstances, there was no time for 'foggy pictures'. Over time, the magic lantern completely gave way to more advanced devices. A slide projector, for example.

Let us return, however, to the magic lantern from the Saint Petersburg apartment. A month and a half later, the owner sent it to Moscow: fortunately for us, there was no room for the old projector in the new building on Veterans Prospekt, where he moved from Kirochnaya Street. Since 2018, it has been displayed at the 'Tsaritsyno Dachas' exhibition. It is exactly in its place: watching 'foggy pictures' in good company was a favorite pastime of many Tsaritsyno summer residents.