

# 'A Universe in a box': The Expansive Lantern Slide Collection of Museums Victoria

Recently, Lead CI, Martyn Jolly spent an informative morning at Museums Victoria with Lorenzo Iozzi, Senior Collection Manager of Images for History and Technology. Of all the collecting institutions in Australia Museums Victoria is the furthest advanced in making its magic lantern collections available for research and engagement. They have over 11,000 slides in their History and Technology collection, 3,000 slides in their Natural Sciences collection, and 1,500 slides in their Indigenous Cultures collection. Their slide collections not only include thousands of regular square glass slides, but hundreds of mechanical slides and panoramic slides as well.



Staff working on the re-housing and digitalisation of lantern slides at Museums Victoria. Photo supplied.

About five years ago Lorenzo launched an initiative within the Museum to conserve and catalogue these slides. Over a period of five weeks, after almost a year of planning and preparation, about thirty of his colleagues pitched in, removing the slides from their original boxes (which were preserved separately), barcoding, cataloguing, conserving, rehousing and photographing them. The metadata on the slide mount also captured in the photographs. Using their individual expertise his colleagues added additional data to the online records. As a result not only are all the slides safe and accessible, but about 4000 are online waiting to be used.





Lorenzo Iozzi with a sample of Museums Victoria's lantern slides and magic lanterns. Photo credit, Martyn Jolly.

Joining these 15,500 slides are about fifty magic lanterns which range from magnificent triunials, to humble toy lanterns. Where does all this material come from? Although the museum has been collecting lantern-slides since its inception in 1854, a large proportion of its current collection, over 5,500 objects, was acquired from the English cinema historian David Francis. He had assembled the collection in the 1960s, and in 1975 the then Australian Film Institute and the Victorian Government acquired it with a view to establishing a Melbourne Museum of the Moving Image. Although this initiative eventually contributed to the formation of the Australian Centre for the Moving Image in 2002, by [1990 the David Francis Collection had been accessioned into Museums Victoria](#). David Francis became one of the developers of the British Film Institute's Museum of the Moving Image in the 1980s. Now, with his partner Joss Marsh, he is housing his current collection in the soon to be opened [Kent Museum of the Moving Image](#).

mechanisms. For instance a wooden container with a sliding lid neatly holds nineteen astronomical slides, from ['Half Moon & Crescent Moon'](#) to ['Tides: Spring Tides'](#), it's a universe in a box. The printed reading explaining the heavenly motions illustrated in each slide can be found on [Lucerna, the Magic Lantern Resource](#)

As well as a the clock-work solar systems and illustrations of lunar eclipses, the museum holds a whopper mechanical slide measuring 270 x 170 mm. Although it is similar to slides made by Newton and Co, this one is too big for any ordinary magic lantern and was perhaps manufactured for an institution such as the Royal Polytechnic or the Adelaide Galleries. It illustrates night and day. At the centre of the slide a world globe seen from above the North Pole, with the continents scored by meridians, is surrounded by a bezel segmented into twenty-four hours. Around it revolves a sun bursting through painted clouds and a moon hiding behind painted clouds. Recently this astronomical material has been used for the PhD

A special feature of the collection are the astronomical slides, many of which are orrery slides, mechanically replicating the motion of the Newtonian universe using intricate rack and pinion



Astronomical slide from Museums Victoria's collection

research of Martin Bush on the history and cultural meaning of science and astronomy in Australia.



Lantern slide of Edwardian Interior

Much Museum material comes from the activities of Victorians. For instance the Museum holds over 2700 slides by the ornithologist [Archibald James Campbell](#), 1853 to 1929, a keen member of the Field Naturalists Club of Victoria, and author of the book *Nests and Eggs of Australian Birds*, 1900. Scratching the surface reveals more intriguing images yet to be researched, such as some Autochrome slides of elegant Edwardian interiors.

Because of its size and breadth the Museums Victoria collection is definitely one of the most significant collections of its type, with rich content in scientific, social and technological history. It's online database, which documents slides as both images and objects, as well as many lanterns and related ephemera, is also making the collection very accessible.

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