

November 4, 2010

Lantern Slides at Getty Museum and American Museum of Natural History

By EVE M. KAHN

A COLORFUL HISTORY,

Real or Not

Explorers and missionaries around 1900 drummed up support for their travels by giving illustrated lectures back home. They fed hand-tinted glass slides into projecting lanterns, then watched potential patrons' jaws drop as the auditorium walls filled with Arizona canyons at sunset or crowds of Chinese children wearing embroidered robes.

After World War II, when the lantern technology became obsolete, the slides were destroyed in untold numbers. Institutions that still own boxfuls are now figuring out how to put them back on display.

In February, for an exhibition of early Chinese photography, the Getty Museum in Los Angeles will bring out a French Franciscan missionary's glass portraits of villagers and aristocrats. A new book, "Eduard Spelterini and the Spectacle of Images" (published by the Museum Bellpark in Kriens, Switzerland), reproduces a Swiss balloonist's early-1900s rosy Alpine views on glass. On Nov. 13 the [American Museum of Natural History](#) in Manhattan will show a fragment of its 40,000 lantern slides during the [Margaret Mead Film and Video Festival](#).

The natural-history museum used to lend the images to public schools statewide, preorganized in boxes for lectures on topics ranging from "Useful Trees" to "Life in a Congo Village" and "Minor Industries of New England." Albert Bickmore, a founder of the museum, dreamed up the slide-sharing program.

"He was a visionary, expanding the reach of the museum outside its walls," said Barbara Mathé, the institution's archivist.

In the 1960s a naturalist in the museum's education department, Carlton Beil, lugged hundreds of boxes of unwanted lantern slides to his 17th-century farmhouse on Staten Island. He piled them in the stairwell and basement. Five years ago the family gave them back to the museum, where they will be cleaned, digitized and sorted. Cataloging them may prove challenging, since captions along

the edges can be as unhelpful as “Italian girl” and “Goat and sled.”

For an hour and a half at the Mead festival, Ms. Mathé will show about 100 slides and a vintage projector. She will point out which color schemes on tribal outfits and rock outcrops are probably accurate, and which came from the imaginations of urban photography studio workers who had rarely traveled. The unrealistic palettes, she said, turn the slides into “little works of art on their own and very beautiful.”

AUCTION AT AN ART FAIR

Garth Clark and Mark Del Vecchio, dealers in 20th-century ceramics who ran a Manhattan gallery from 1983 to 2008, have moved to Santa Fe, N.M., and diversified into auctions. They will collaborate on two or three a year with the Cincinnati-based Cowan’s Auctions, and on Saturday, amid some controversy, [the first sale](#) will be held next door to the SOFA fair (short for sculpture, objects and functional art) at the Navy Pier in Chicago.

Estimates for the 84 lots range from \$1,200 to \$1,800 for a striped 1980s pot by the Vermont ceramist Karen Karnes to \$50,000 to \$90,000 for the California artist Peter Voulkos’s 1970s slashed stoneware cylinder that the auction catalog calls a “loving and transforming assault on shape and surface.”

Collectors have welcomed the planned sales, Mr. Clark said, partly because few American auction houses focus on ceramics. Appraisers have trouble finding public price records to determine the value of potential gifts to museums. [Internal Revenue Service](#) officials, Mr. Clark said, “are getting much, much stricter about recent comparative sales.”

Despite his “30 years of scrounging around in clay bins,” he said, he had never heard of about half of the auction’s consignors. Works by unfamiliar artists also turned up, including the New Orleans muralist Paul Ninas’s 1950s plate (\$2,500 to \$3,500) with intertwined Cubist figures in camouflage colors.

A few SOFA exhibitors, however, are concerned that the auction will distract buyers from the booths. “I think it is unfair to the dealers to have a competing business at an art fair,” said Donna Schneier, who has handled works in various media by artisans including Voulkos and Ms. Karnes.

Mark Lyman, an owner of SOFA, said that he was aware of the complaints but that the Cowan’s lots could also simply “attract a larger pool of dollars.”

PUZZLING TEAPOTS

Wei Zhang and Peter Rasmussen call their holdings of 1,400 [Chinese puzzles](#) “the art and intelligence collection.” Retired teachers who have homes in Northern California and Beijing, they have spent much of the last 13 years traveling to antiques fairs, auctions, galleries and flea markets

to find puzzles dating back 1,000 years.

On Saturday the Museum of Chinese in America in Lower Manhattan will display 100 of their sets alongside videos of traditional puzzle makers and solvers in action.

This married couple have acquired nested cubes, triangles and rings made of silver, jadeite, porcelain, wood and ivory and have researched how they were exported and subjected to scholarly study over the centuries.

Sometimes spending tens of thousands of dollars per acquisition, they also buy trick vessels with hidden compartments. Since around A.D. 960, Chinese artisans have made teapots that can be filled only through bottom holes, and “fairness cups” that leak out of concealed bottom holes if a pourer greedily fills them close to the brim.

“Here’s something we got today,” Mr. Rasmussen said during a recent visit to New York, pulling out a mound of Bubble Wrap he had just picked up at [Christie’s](#). Ms. Zhang sliced open the plastic and revealed a bottom-filling purple pot draped with green leaves, made around 1700. (It cost \$6,875 at a Chinese ceramics auction.)

She has been interested in puzzles, she explained, since her childhood in northwest China. During the Cultural Revolution, her father was imprisoned, and the family moved into a warehouse infested by rats. Expelled from school because of her father’s disgrace, she whiled away time making wire puzzles.

“We used them to lock up our storage boxes for food,” she said.

She and her husband plan to donate the collection to a museum, probably in China. Mr. Rasmussen occasionally suggests selling off their lesser examples, but then Ms. Zhang reminds him that she was born in a Chinese year of the dog.

“Once I get my jaw into something, I don’t let go,” she said.

At the Museum of Chinese in America, shelves running the length of the room are piled with reproduction puzzles for visitors to try. (The collectors have trained docents to give hints.) In one display case is a set of nine interlocked jadeite rings that belonged to Pu Yi, the last Chinese emperor.

In his thousands of rooms, Ms. Zhang said, “there’s no telling if he ever played with this.”