

LOIE FULLER AND THE MAGIC-LANTERN

by Jody Sperling

Angel.
Butterfly.
Demon.
Dragon.
Dove.
Fairy.
Flags—All Nations.
Flowers—Rose, Lily, etc.
Lighting Flashes.
Owl and Bats in Sky.
Peacock with Tail Spread.
Portraits—Washington, etc.
Plaid Design.
Rainbow.
Sheaf of Wheat.
Spider in Web.
Snake.
Sky with Stars.
Sunburst.
Witch in Sky.¹

These are the “Skirt Dancing Effects” offered for sale in T. H. McAllister’s catalogues of magic-lantern slides published in the early 1900s. By this time, the use of stereopticon (or magic-lantern) slides had become a common feature of specialty skirt or serpentine dance acts. Lanternists would project slides onto dancers’ voluminous skirts; dancers would manipulate the drapery to catch and display the images.

The skirt dance, which originated in the English music hall in the 1860s, became a craze in New York by the late 1880s. In her 1891 *Serpentine Dance*, Loie Fuller expanded on the popular genre by adding volumes of fabric to her skirts and applying innovative lighting techniques to their illumination. Fuller’s original inspired a legion of imitators, so called “serpentine” dancers. Her creative use of colored lights in the original *Serpentine*, her first dance, shows the influence of lantern technology. But although she used special lighting effects to color and sculpt the look of the fabric, Fuller did not yet project images onto her costume. She was familiar, though, with the use of the magic-lantern in theatrical productions. In the 1880s, she had appeared in plays that used stereopticon projections for scenic effects, depicting sunrise clouds, grottos, thunderstorms, and other phenomena.²

After the success of the *Serpentine* in New York, Fuller headed to Paris in 1892 to escape personal and legal difficulties. She soon became a sensation at the Folies-Bergère, where she spent the next several years developing her craft for an adoring Parisian public. A technological

wizardress, Fuller conducted her own chemical experiments, engineered special lighting instruments, made her own gels and lantern slides, and trained a staff of electricians to expertly operate the equipment. She was constantly refining her stagecraft—she had to, to stay ahead of her imitators. One early innovation was a revolving disc of gels which, when placed in front of a stage-light, created shifting, multi-hued patterns on her swirling costumes.

In 1893, Fuller returned to New York briefly, and showed a suite of new dances. Of her opening at the Garden Theatre a *New York Herald* reviewer wrote that it was “no wonder that Paris went wild over La Loie” for her “grace, her bewildering costumes and the wonderful light effects were beautiful and dazzling.” He added: “By the clever manipulation of a stereopticon pictures were thrown on her whirling skirts in a way that made a novel and startling effect.”³ A writer for *The New York Times*, was less impressed and thought her genre of dancing belonged to “variety.” This writer thought the “stereoptic portraits of Gen. Washington and Mr. Cleveland that decorated the person of Miss Fuller in one of the movements of her dance” were out of place, although he conceded later that on the whole her “rapturous” reception was “deserved.”⁴

In 1896, Fuller embarked on a more extended US tour which was to inspire a fresh batch of imitators. Fuller had used stereopticon effects in her 1895 *Salomé*, to depict clouds, a storm, the moon, and a sea of blood.⁵ In her US tour she presented a suite of dances, including her famous and widely-imitated *Fire Dance*, which had developed out of the “Sun Dance” from *Salomé*. In the *Fire Dance*, Fuller used a patented device—a glass-plate on the floor with illumination from below—to create the illusion that she was engulfed by flames. The trick of “fire” was something that lanternists had been toying with for years—but Fuller’s was a unique approach. She always, by the way, made her own slides, never ordering them from the likes of McAllister.

The dance on her 1896/97 tour that specifically showcased stereopticon effects was *The Firmament*. This dance, a reenactment of Creation, was not her most favored; usually her *Fire* or *Lily* dances were better received. Of a performance at Koster & Bial’s *The New York Times* reported:

[*The Firmament*] contained stereopticon effects—flowers, faces, moons, stars, and the like, thrown on her waving skirts—that had an unpleasant cheapness and were in questionable congruity with the other effects. They could all be very well spared.⁶

It’s interesting to note that although Fuller’s dances were generally admired, critics directed negative comments towards the magic-lantern effects. Her imitators, apparently, did not score much better with critics in this regard. In 1902, one jaded writer commented that since Fuller’s 1896 appearance:

[T]here has been the same old opening dance, the fire and the lily, together with one other dance generally devoted to the display of some bad stereopticon slides. These have varied from time to time as our National Heroes or wall paper designs have become the material for display. . . It appears to be accepted as a theory that the dances may not be improved upon, and the stereopticon abominations have been retained until the use of the lantern in the act is to invite criticism.

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This writer goes on to lament that the possible uses for the lantern in performance have not been developed. He proposes that the “glycerine tank,” panorama slides and “other mechanical effects aside from the snowstorm and the shower of roses” would make “pretty and effective additions to an act.”⁷

There is certainly a gimmicky aspect to this genre of performance that made it an easy target for critics. Novelty was essential to the lantern dance. This novelty even included current events and local prejudices. Patriotic imagery—portraits of presidents, flags, etc.—was a regular subject for lantern-serpentine numbers. Years after Fuller used Cleveland’s image to ill-effect, he appeared again in Seattle performance given by a Mlle. Diana. This description gives a colorful account of the audience reaction.

During her performance the face of President Cleveland was thrown upon her moving skirt. It was greeted with a mighty hiss as soon as the features were recognized. Immediately afterwards the likeness of ex-President Harrison appeared and was greeted with a mighty shout of approval. The operator withdrew the picture, but the crowd stamped and whistled until he flashed it on again, whereupon they arose in their seats and gave one mighty howl of satisfaction.”⁸

Maud Madison, another Fuller imitator who fortunately kept detailed scrapbooks of her stage appearances, also manipulated patriotic imagery to advantage. Madison went on an extended tour of Canada and the Eastern US in 1897/98. Wherever she went she tailored her patriotism to fit her surroundings. In Nova Scotia, instead of presidents and stars-and-stripes, it was the face of Queen Victoria and the Union Jack that graced her skirts.⁹ Madison also expressed Cuban-patriotism in her performances during the Spanish American war. It’s likely that she used lantern images in her “Cuban” dances. Presumably she ran this 1898 advertisement found in her scrapbook:

Serpentine Dancer with Stereopticon and War Slides at Liberty for Company, or Dates.¹⁰

An 1898 review of one of Madison’s lantern dances, notes that it was “particularly good” because it was “a greater novelty” than the other numbers on the program.¹¹ But, novelty can never be long-lived.

The August 1896 issue of the London-based *Optical Magic Lantern Journal and Photographic Enlarger*, features the first, and far as I can tell the only, article devoted to skirt and serpentine dances in the periodical’s history. The article recommends, for “a most charming illusion,” the use of cromotropes which produce a kaleidoscopic effect. (This effect, along with the glycerin tank slide, will be demonstrated later in the presentation.) The writer also cautions, “[it] is hardly necessary to state that this class of lighting and illusion should not be attempted without proper rehearsal beforehand.”¹² One can imagine that the average Variety dancer with a lantern did not have the same technical acumen as Fuller, nor did she take the care that Fuller did with her projections. And she didn’t produce the same results. When lantern and skirt worked together, they could produce undeniably novel effects. When they didn’t, the effect was simply tired.

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These “electric dances” or “electric serpentine dances,” as they came to be called, sprung into being at a time when the idea of the motion picture was being conceptualized. Coincidentally, the same issue of the *Optical Magic Lantern Journal* which features the serpentine dance article also contains a discussion of Edison’s new kinetoscope. In the 1890s, people were fascinated with the idea of getting pictures to move. There were endless methods to achieve this end. Terry Borton will elaborate on some of these methods in his portion of the talk. This brief entertainment fad of the lantern dances was one way to get images to move. Another, longer-lasting one, of course, was the movies. By the time movies were a viable entertainment, the lantern dance had faded from view.

Fuller continued using lantern and lantern-inspired effects in her pieces after her 1896 *Firmament*. For Fuller, however, the projection of images was only ever one of a palette of visual effects. By 1908 she was working with a company of dancers and used projections more as scenery, than as “costume.” Later, in the 1920s, Fuller had turned to filmmaking itself, as one means to achieve moving pictures.

In an 1896 interview, Fuller acknowledges that “people have used [the lantern] before” her, but warrants that she uses it “to best advantage.” She claims to have experimented with the lantern for five years before “taking the public into her confidence.” She continues,

[w]e work together, the lantern and I. There is not the least slip by chance in the business. I see the colors just as you see them in a kaleidoscope, know where they will fall, and adopt the movements of the dance to their effects. That’s how the living picture is made.¹³

The *Magic Lantern Dance* that you are about to see is not a literal reconstruction of a Loie Fuller dance. Rather, it is a creative enactment in the style of Fuller’s many imitators. Think of this simply as the latest electrical serpentine dance. The music is arranged and performed by Jeff Middleton.

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¹ McAllister, p.24.

² Current, p.95 and Sommer, p.64.

³ *New York Herald*, 17 August 1893, p.6 c.4

⁴ *New York Times*, 17 August 1893, p.4 c.5

⁵ Sommer, p.64

⁶ *New York Times*, 25 February 1896, p.5, c.4

⁷ clipping from Locke, dated 16 November 1902 and signed Epes W. Sargent

⁸ Todd, p.7, quoting E. C. Elliott, *A History of Variety-Vaudeville in Seattle from the Beginning to 1914*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1944), p.42.

⁹ "A Noble Revenge," clipping dated 10 May 1898, paper unknown, in *Madison Scrapbooks*.

¹⁰ clipping, probably from *The Clipper*, *Madison Scrapbooks*.

¹¹ clipping, April 1898, *Madison Scrapbooks*.

¹² Bishop, p.131.

¹³ *New York Times*, 1 March 1896, p.10, c.5. It is interesting to note that the "living picture" itself was another sub-genre of lantern entertainment. Actors would assume positions from paintings while scenery and costumes were projected onto them. "Posing" was another related sub-genre. A 1908 catalog of lantern slides and motion pictures features an extensive selection of "posing" slides, for use by skirt or serpentine dancers. These slides showed a female figure in one or another sort of national costumes with the face whited-out. A sequence of such slides were projected onto a poser—"a lady in a white dress"—in order to create the illusion that she was changing costume. See: *Amusement for Profit*, pp.313-314.