



THE INVENTOR / Alhazen is often credited as the inventor of the first *camera obscura*, or pinhole camera



Dubai Moving Image Museum

A curious balance of science and whimsy that immediately appeals to all: history buffs, creatives, art enthusiasts, photographers and children, large and small

Words by [Harry Tanner](#) / Images by [Farooq Salik](#)

There is something magical about the Dubai Moving Image Museum (DMIM). Perhaps it's the ghostly cutouts in the Shadows section, or the rowdy scenes depicted in the rarity show boxes, where multi-layered illustrations form the first examples of 3D imagery. Maybe

it's the names: phenakistoscopes, zoetropes and the magnificent Kaiser panorama. It sounds more like a science exhibition than an antique collection, and in many respects, that's exactly what the early study of the moving image was – one big science experiment. “It was through these experiments that much of what we know about light and the way we see it was

discovered,” says Mandy Aridi, the effervescent museum manager, who talks passionately about the collection. And with good reason, the story of the moving image, or to be precise, the pre-history of cinema, is as wonderful as it is long.

The story begins 30,000 years ago, when early man drew scenes depicting hunting, farming and other rituals on the walls of caves. This

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was the first time that mankind had attempted to capture an image of a moment in time. The next big step was the development and refinement of the *camera obscura* – the earliest form of pinhole camera – by the Arab scientist Alhazen in the 11th century.

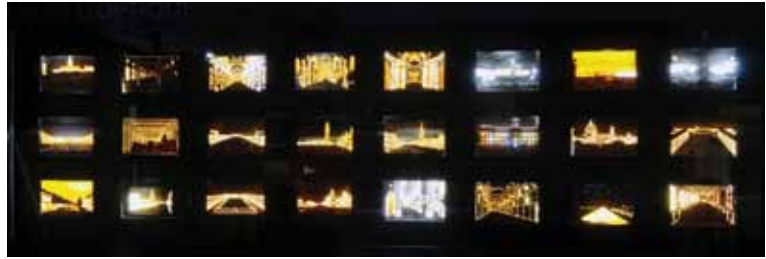
The collection, and the pre-history of cinema, ends with the advent of the moving video image, when the Lumiere brothers unveiled their first movie clip in the Grand Café on the Boulevard des Capucines in Paris on December 28, 1895. After that day, the marvellous machines that once captivated adults and children alike became obsolete – relics of the past.

Fortunately, there are those who treasure those relics. Like the earliest breakthroughs in the history of the moving image, the collection is the result of one fanatical enthusiast. For the past 30 years, Akram Miknas has been collecting paraphernalia relating to the moving image.

His obsession with the world of sound and movement is no surprise. Akram is the chairman of MCN Holdings, one of the largest creative conglomerates in the Middle East. He was born in Lebanon, where he set up his first company, Fortune Promoseven, in Beirut, in 1968, when the city was enjoying its heyday as the ‘Paris Of The Middle East’.

The collection began when Akram bought a zoetrope in London’s Portobello Market – a cylindrical spinning top, with images and slits on the outside through which one can glimpse what appears to be a moving image.

THE COLLECTION, AND THE PRE-HISTORY OF CINEMA, ENDS WITH THE ADVENT OF THE MOVING VIDEO IMAGE



PERSPECTIVE VIEW / The *Vue d’optique*, or perspective view (above), was popular during the 18th and early 19th centuries

Since then his passion has taken him all over the world looking for new additions to his collection, which also includes clocks, music boxes and toys.

“I once heard about a piece in Holland. At the time, searching on the internet was not an option, so the only way for me to see and inspect the item was to visit Holland and to check it [out] myself,” he recalls. “The whole experience cost three times the price of the actual item. This was about 27 years ago, in my early years of collecting.”

The collection has grown and grown ever since, leading Akram to the decision to open the museum. “I like to share what I’ve got with people. I think it’s important for people to understand the value of the image and its contribution to humanity. It would be unfair to keep it to myself,” he says. “I really want to contribute to education, and I want our youth to be able to see that tablets like the iPad and Sony were the result of thousands of years of

developments. I cannot predict what the future will hold, but I will not be surprised with whatever it is.”

The building that houses the museum is known as the MCN Hive, and the buzz of activity in the lobby level leaves no doubt as to why. Built by Akram as a home base for his many creative agencies, the new building in Dubai’s Tecom neighbourhood is a hotbed of creativity. The museum has already been booked out for several corporate events, school visits and even yoga classes, and there was perhaps no better endorsement of the vitality of the space than when a rival creative agency tried to book it for a function.

“It’s a space that triggers creativity,” says Mandy, as we wander through the lobby, past a trio of beautiful 19th century chairs from a Parisian theatre. “The collection is a combination of visual



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communication and the media industry. The two are parallel and intertwined.”

DMIM is one of three such collections in the world. Every object in the collection represents a relevant step in the evolution of the moving image from cave paintings to cinema. Light, and the absence of it, are perhaps the fundamental ingredients in the evolution of the moving image; it's that split second of “non-light” in between different moving images or frames that gives the impression of movement.

The most impressive items are the three vast Magic Lanterns, the earliest form of image projector. Within a large black box, an oil lamp would shine light through a cylindrical tunnel on to glass slides, on which images were hand drawn. By adding more tunnels, the operators could create complex images that combined the pictures from two or three different slides. It was the birth of animation.

As the popularity of the moving image grew, the devices became smaller. One of the most prized possessions in the collection is the 19th century German toy Magic Lantern made in the shape of an Ottoman Palace, with designs based on 1001 Arabian Nights, one of only three surviving specimens.

In another nook, four Mutoscopes look like mailboxes with handles on the side. One shows an original Charlie Chaplin animated sequence,



LATEST MODEL / The museum's exhibits chart the history of the moving image, and include early cameras

IT'S IMPORTANT FOR PEOPLE TO UNDERSTAND THE VALUE OF THE IMAGE AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO HUMANITY

and using it feels unbelievably nostalgic. As well as providing entertainment for visitors, these devices were early perpetuators of celebrity. “They allowed people like Charlie Chaplin to become well known all over the world in an age before the internet and IMDB. They were fame-enablers,” says Mandy.

Another favourite item is a black and white photo of a young Walt Disney playing with a praxinoscope, a 19th century animation device that resembles a bedside lamp. This revolutionary invention played a fundamental role in improving early understanding of the moving image. Without it, Walt Disney would never have brought joy to the world with his motion pictures, and we would not have blockbuster 3D movies.

The DMIM is a fundamental experience for anyone with an interest in media forms, from still photography and the 3D images of peep show books to the wondrous world of Magic Lanterns, and one of a number of new cultural institutions that reflect the growing



LONG HISTORY / The history of the moving image began long before the first movies were shown in cinemas

interest in the arts in Dubai.

“I think it's a natural progression for Dubai. Up until now, the art has mainly been for commercial purposes. I'm happy that now this museum can offer a non-materialistic objective to culture,” Akram reflects.

“In every country I learn something different and unique because I believe every culture has something unique to it. To be truthful, I found one common factor in humanity and that is the love of discovering and learning. Whatever the methods applied, the objectives were always the same. The curiosity of mankind is something that never ceases to impress me.”

Visit DMIM and you will acquire a renewed appreciation of the world of motion pictures.

dubaimovingimagemuseum.com