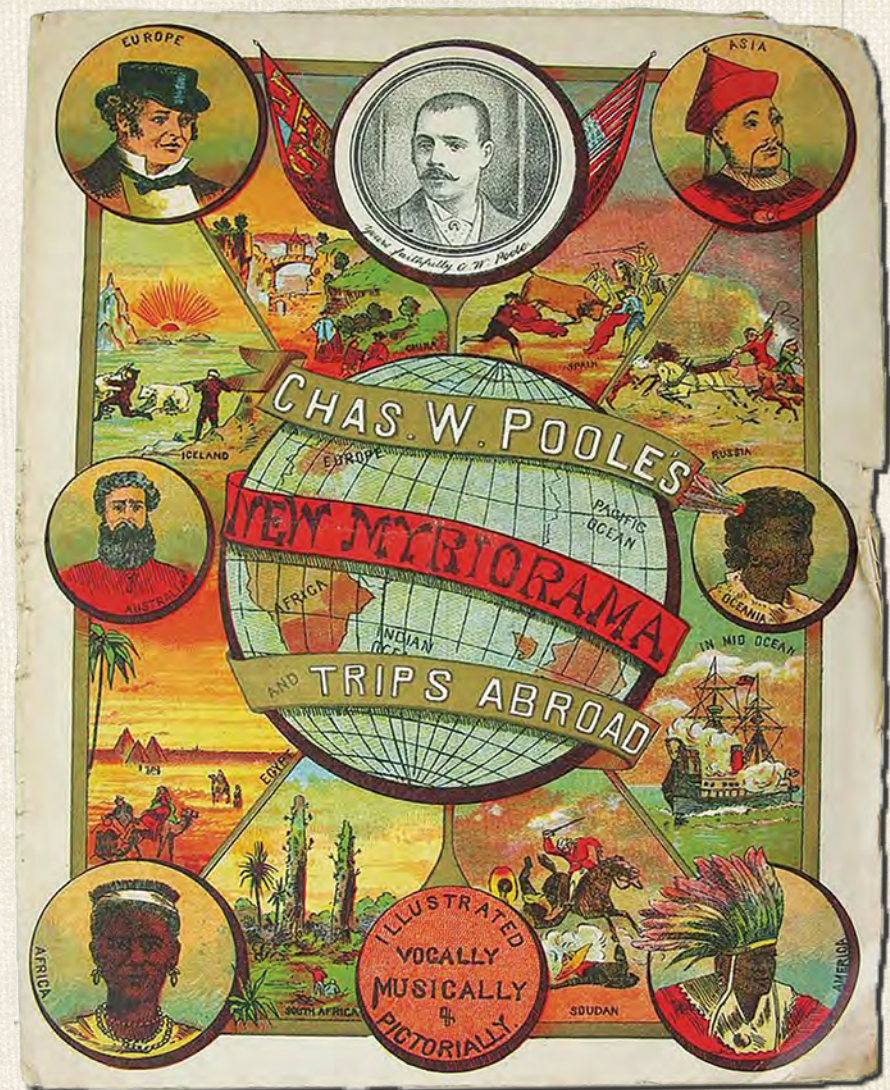


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MANY WORDS WILL BE WRITTEN
ON THE WIND AND THE SAND, OR
END UP IN SOME OBSCURE DIGITAL
VAULT. BUT THE STORYTELLING
WILL GO ON UNTIL THE LAST
HUMAN BEING STOPS LISTENING.

HENNING MANKELL



OFF TO THE PICTURES

THE MAGIC OF THE MYRIORAMA

From comic books to cartomancy, imagery and illustration have always been a great aid to storytelling. Today the magic of cinema and CGI have almost become commonplace, but before the big screen some inventive entrepreneurs came up with an equally dazzling spectacle. Olga Alexander looks into the history of the myriorama.



^ 'ITALIAN SCENERY' MYRIORAMA SET, SECOND SERIES. (C. 1824-32) BY JOHN HEAVISIDE CLARK

Since time immemorial, the art of storytelling has been used by humans to entertain, teach, advise and make sense of the world. We are blessed today to be able to engage in stories through all manner of mediums complete with wondrous special effects, but there was a time when raconteurs and storytellers had to be a little more inventive in how they presented their tales.

Myriorama - taken from the Greek myrios meaning 'multitude' or 'many', and orama meaning 'scene, view or landscape' - translates to many thousand views or landscapes. The concept was created in France by children's writer Jean-Pierre Brès (1782 - 1832) and involved a set number of printed illustrations on cards that could be rearranged in almost

endless patterns to create a seamless landscape. Illustrated throughout with beautiful pastoral landscapes, the cards contained various elements in the foreground to create interest and add to the storytelling element, while the backgrounds aligned no matter which order the cards were put in.

The first English myriorama was commissioned by Samuel Leigh and created by John Heaviside Clark in 1824. It featured 16 cards filled with gothic ruins, cottages, a lighthouse, a man fishing and castles, to appeal to an English audience. The English myriorama made many improvements on the original French versions including adding numbers, so people could note down a particularly interesting or fun sequence, and taking off the side borders for a

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THE ENTIRE MOVING PANORAMA WAS ILLUMINATED FOR THE SPECTATORS BY GAS BURNERS, WITH SOUND EFFECTS, MUSIC AND ENTERTAINMENT, SUCH AS ACROBATS AND JUGGLERS, INCLUDED TO HEIGHTEN THE EXPERIENCE.

more seamless background. At the same time a similar card set was created by English teacher T.T. Dales, who called them a 'panoramacopia'. Clark's second set of myriorama cards was commissioned after the wild success of the first; this time it was set further afield in Italy with a landscape featuring 24 numbered cards with a variety of people and architectural details that could be arranged into 620,448,401,733,239,000,000,000 sequences.

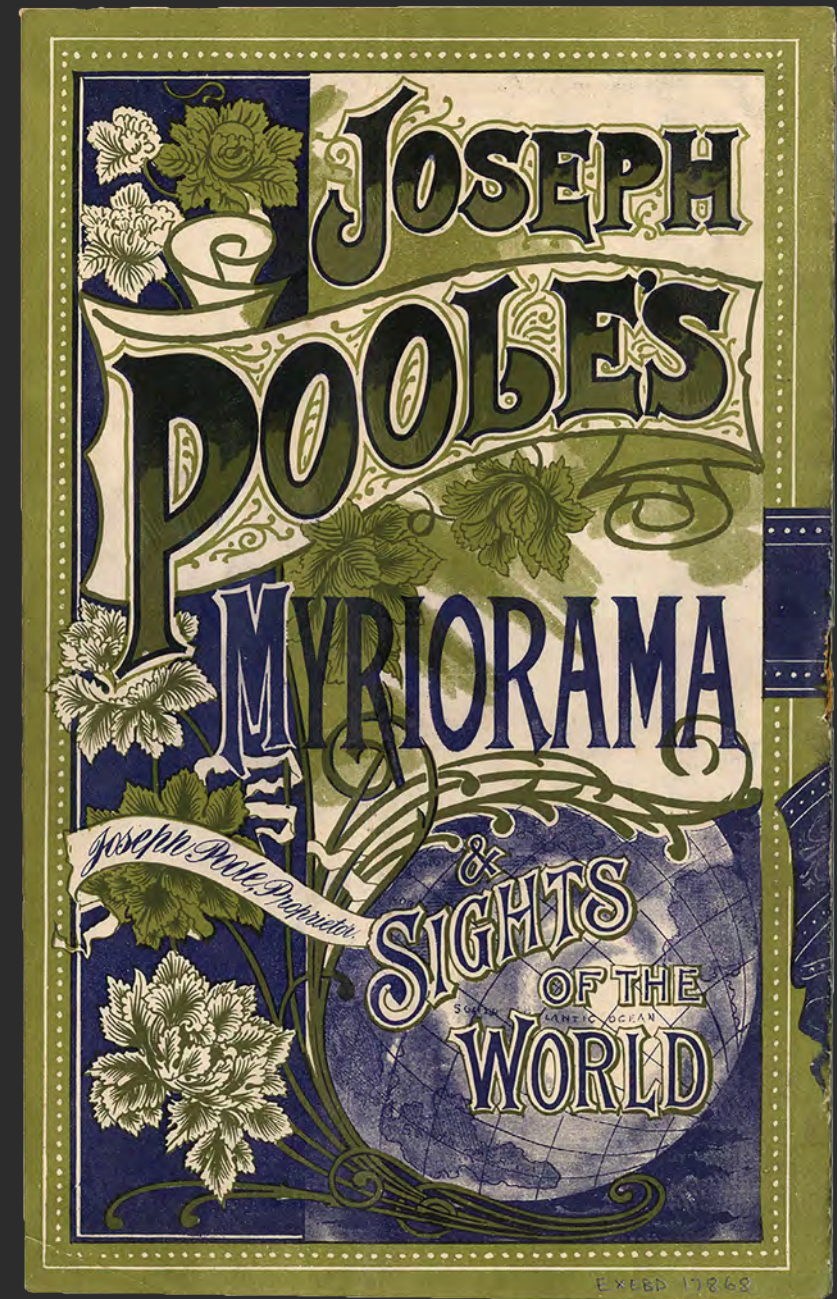
Initially, myrioramas started off as aids to help aspiring artists improve their techniques. They were seen as expensive tools to keep rich young ladies occupied in their drawing rooms. It was only later that they became a children's storytelling game. While they were popular in England and France, myrioramas were produced in other countries including Germany and the Netherlands.

Besides being used as an artistic tool or children's game, myrioramas were also used as entertainment for the masses, and they were quite the spectacle. Joseph Poole and his brother Charles set up what they called 'pictorial tours' that showcased moving myriorama-style photos and illustrations from exotic locales. They believed that travel was an important part of learning and because it was not available to everyone they wanted to bring that knowledge to as many people as they could.

“NOTHING SO PERFECT OF THE KIND HAS EVER BEEN PRODUCED.” WROTE THE TIMES IN 1891. “THE EFFECT OF LIGHT AND SHADE IS LITERALLY MAGICAL.”

A lot of work went into these pictorial tours. Visual artists were sent to different countries to document unique landscapes, monuments and points of interest before bringing back their sketches, after which a professional artist was then commissioned to recreate the scenes on canvas.

Custom built to measure a mile long and fifteen feet deep, the set up was such that the movement of the moving canvases (controlled by an instrument that the Poole brothers invented) caused no noise or friction, for a truly immersive effect. The entire myriorama, or moving panorama, was illuminated for the spectators by gas burners,



ADVERTISING POSTER FOR CHARLES POOLE'S MYRIORAMA 'SIGHTS OF THE WORLD' C.1891

< MYRIORAMA. A COLLECTION OF MANY THOUSAND LANDSCAPES (1824) BY JOHN HEAVISIDE CLARK.



▲ CARDS TAKEN FROM ERIC MAILLE'S 'THE ENDLESS ORACLE' (2022)

with sound effects, music and entertainment, such as acrobats and jugglers, included to heighten the experience.

Reception to the Poole Brothers' spectacle was superb. "Nothing so perfect of the kind has ever been produced," wrote *The Times* in 1891. "The effect of light and shade is literally magical."

The practice of the moving myrioramas naturally died out with the advent and popularity of cinema in the early 1920s. While the artistic aid and children's game also lost its cultural footing, there has been a revival in recent times of the myriorama as a storytelling device. One may argue that myrioramas were always storytelling devices, from presenting the progress of an artist to telling the stories of a specific landscape and place.

Between 2017-2019 Laurence King Publishers published a 'Magical Myriorama' series of four storytelling games. *The Hollow Woods* has filled its enchanted landscapes with witches, giants, unicorns, dragons and more. *The Shadow World*, set in 1900 London, is a science

fiction take on the classic where a scientist sets about creating a world below our own. *The Mystery Mansion* uses a mysterious country house as the setting with secrets abounding everywhere. In *The Endless Odyssey* we enter a world with one eyed monsters, winged creatures and vengeful gods.

Each game has 20 cards which allows for 2,432,902,008,176,640,000 different possible combinations. They all include a leaflet inviting you to get to know the characters and elements within each panel. Another leaflet contains instructions for four different games. Of course, no instructions are needed if you want to use this directly as a storytelling game.

Other contemporary examples of the myriorama include *Endless Journey*, illustrated by Tom Gauld, and commissioned by the Laurence Sterne Trust to promote Sterne's writing. Sterne, an Anglo-Irish author, is most well known for penning *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. The set contains 12 cards allowing for a possibility of 479,001,600 different combinations. A fan

“ MYRIORAMAS WERE ALWAYS STORYTELLING DEVICES, FROM PRESENTING THE PROGRESS OF AN ARTIST TO TELLING THE STORIES OF A SPECIFIC LANDSCAPE AND PLACE.

of Sterne's work would have a lot of fun trying to spot references to his characters and stories in the cards, and possibly creating their own alternative stories or endings set in his world. Even someone unfamiliar with his work would delight in Gauld's unique drawing style and historical details.

Other creative uses for myriorama cards include inspiration for plotting scenes. English author Sir Philip Pullman recommends myriorama cards for all fiction writers and uses a set of 24 cards for his own writing.

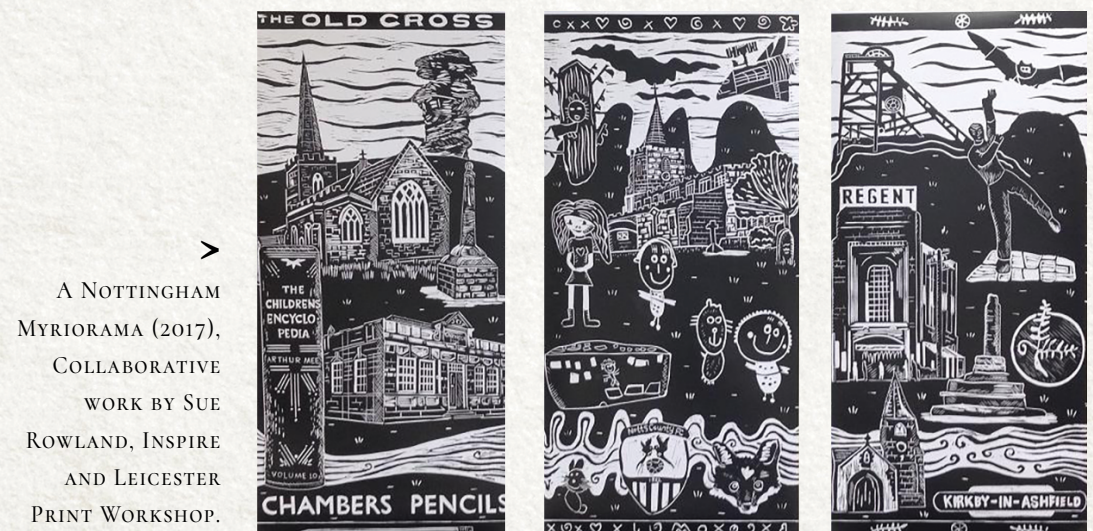
Tarot and oracle deck creators have also taken inspiration from myrioramas. Eric Maille recently completed a successful Kickstarter campaign for his myriorama-inspired oracle deck *The Endless Oracle*. The 50-card deck

takes elements from Arthurian and Greek myths and makes them universal to create something truly unique. Like a traditional myriorama, *The Endless Oracle* has specific features in each card to draw you in, including witches, giants, crumbling ruins to name a few.

Maille is quick to point out that while his oracle deck is myriorama-inspired, it goes its own way with "the visual fields of depth and perspective chang[ing] a little bit from card to card, sometimes pulling the viewer in for a close up of something small like a butterfly, or taking their gaze far off into the distance to watch giants amble through distant mountains". He also "encourage[s] people to leave a small amount of space between each card like the gutters in a comic book, but to also interpret those shifts in perspective". This process is called closure in the comic book world but lends itself well to divination practices.

So what is the link for Maille between myrioramas and divination? Why are they a good combination? "Cartomancy is a narrative art after all," he reflects. "When you pull cards for yourself or someone else, you're kind of dissecting a story and analysing it with the help of those cards," he adds. The myriorama style then, is perfectly suited to this type of divination work and continues to be a unique and important storytelling aid.

O.A.



➤ A NOTTINGHAM MYRIORAMA (2017), COLLABORATIVE WORK BY SUE ROWLAND, INSPIRE AND LEICESTER PRINT WORKSHOP.