

# The Acoustic Horn as the Clairvoyant's Tool

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It is common for tools created for specific tasks to be used for other purposes. Let us think of the playing cards so dear to magicians, and how they are often employed to have rabbits or bouquets appear out of hats; or of the lumberjack's saw, meant for cutting wood but capable of releasing incredibly-modulated sounds when bent and played with a bow. Even some medical tools have been used recreationally, and such profane uses may have sped up the popularity the investors of these tools certainly were hoping they could achieve – albeit in more traditional ways. A most notable instance is offered to us by radiological instruments. Invented by Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen in 1898, the X-rays were already being used one year later to inspect mummies in Cairo – not to contribute to paleopathology studies, but to help locate amulets and talismans hidden under millennia-old bandages. Soon after, X-rays made their entrance in country fairs, astonishing people with a clear view of bones with no incision on the skin having been previously performed.

For the acoustic horn, it would seem that the only relevant misuse of its intended purpose was its frequent appearance in satirical vignettes mocking deaf people. These vignettes highlight the common social disregard for hearing-impaired people that was widespread in the past, one that curiously did not seem to apply to blindness. Indeed, while the caring and respect for low-vision people seemed to be close then to an expected social obligation, losing one's patience after a

hearing-impaired person's third request to raise one's voice was seen as humorous and acceptable. However, it is in Eighteenth-century Venice that we find the most curious use of this medical tool. The renowned Venetian painter Pietro Longhi (1701-1785) inserts the acoustic horn in unexpected ways in three paintings, all sharing similar subjects and settings. Since the paintings belong to a time and a culture so distant from ours, it is not surprising that neither the visuals nor the title may be immediately clarifying as to what it is actually happening. Let us then analyze them carefully.

In the first painting, titled *The Fortune-Teller (L'indovina, 1752)* (Fig.1), an old woman is seen inspecting an elegant damsel's hand under the careful eyes of two gentlemen and a young commoner girl. The painting, like the other two, is set in the tiny piazza in front of the portico of the Ducal Palace in Venice. This *piazzetta*, delimited to the south by two columns and to the north by the bell tower of Saint Mark's Basilica, was a popular spot for wandering performers, as well as for the city's varied and heterogenous population of storytellers, swindlers, tooth-pullers and charlatans. Actors, jugglers, musicians and even exotic animals were often used as supporting acts. The scene portrayed in the painting would then seem rather obvious, if it were not that a long cylindrical barrel—telescopic and probably made of metal—catches the modern viewer's eye.

This "mystery" is solved through the second painting (Fig. 2), seemingly an extension



Figure 1a, Pietro Longhi, *L'indovina*  
Venezia, Museo di Ca' Rezzonico  
(permission required).



Figure 1b, part.



Figure 2a, Pietro Longhi, *L'indovino*, placement  
current unknown.



Figure 2b, part.

of the first. At the center we see the same sorceress, allowing us to assume she might have been a real person working among the colorful melting pot of the *piazzetta*. Most importantly for us, though, is the fortune-teller's companion. Standing behind her and donning elegant clothing (probably carefully chosen to look more professional), he is whispering in a client's ear using a long acoustic horn. At his feet we see a large open tome, almost certainly where he claimed his inspiration had come. It is worth noting that at the time the words "*as it is written in a book*" were of the utmost importance, given the widespread alphabetism of the general population and the reliability attributed to scholars and well-read people. This acritical faith in someone else's word will later apply to newspapers, radio, television and, today, the internet.

It is also true that despite the objectively predatory nature of the professions shown in these paintings, Longhi's keen eyes portrayed what he saw without judgment, choosing instead to imbue these pieces with a significant dose of good-natured irony. The same can be said of his contemporary, the Venetian playwright Carlo Goldoni (1707-1793), who employed a seemingly forgiving, worldly levity to write about the many "common" hypochondriacs of Venice. Compared respectively to the corrosive satire of William Hogarth's *The Charlatan* and the biting irony of Molière's *Tartuffe*, it seems like Venetian authors and artists tended to see malady and debauchery with less of a stern eye – a more modern view, perhaps, but also it is possible to interpret it as indulgent, or even favorable, toward swindlers and neurotics.

The sorceress is absent from the third painting (Fig. 3), allowing the male fortune-teller, who is wearing a powdered wig and a red tailcoat with golden trimmings, to be the absolute protagonist of the scene. Here too the teller is seen using the acoustic horn through which he is speaking while covering his mouth with a white handkerchief. Although it may seem that this was done solely to hide his words from prying ears and eyes, it was likely made to obfuscate his exact words and to distort his voice, so that the "prophecy" that reached his client appeared distant and unnatural -- and therefore that much more mystically hard to decipher. This affected

concern for privacy, a concept itself absolutely uncommon at the time, allowed these swindlers to add a layer of opacity and unreliability to their answers. The harder it was for the client to properly hear the prophecy, the more difficult it would have been to disprove its accuracy. It pays to point out that people in desperate need for an answer tend to believe only what they want to hear, and individuals like our fortune-teller certainly played upon this unfortunate instinct.

As we see in the painting, the fortune teller's camouflage is the precise opposite of what his fellow barker is doing: while one is hiding his words as part of his job, the other uses a megaphone to attract passersby and potential new customers. The two instruments work both in parallel and in opposite ways: while the megaphone expands sounds, the horn concentrates them, allowing them to reach, in an amplified form, a single individual. For those who may doubt whether the tool held by the fortune-teller is indeed an acoustic horn, we see similar models of various size and fixity in the catalog of London's Maw Company, the Nineteenth's century largest manufacturer and distributor of medical instruments (Fig. 4).

We can easily link this word-masking practice to the similarly opaque answers, made both phonetically and symbolically, given by the mythical oracles of Ancient Greece. Their obscure prophecies, often lending themselves to multiple interpretations, were habitually given in places, like caves, whose acoustics played in favor of misunderstandings and duplicity; moreover, they might have used physical instruments, like masks, to distort their precise words.

Interestingly, a century before Longhi's paintings the eclectic Jesuit visionary Athanasius Kircher was creating a statue called "The Oracle of Delphi." Kircher had taken the acoustical tube from the wall of his cubiculum and had installed it between a courtyard and a museum; the sound that passed through small hidden openings would arrive to the passersby seemingly out of nowhere, leaving them astounded. It is no coincidence that he claimed to have invented the first "modern" acoustic horn, which was inspired by the ideas of the Neapolitan Seventeenth-century "magus," Giovanni Battista Della Porta.



Figure 3, Pietro Longhi, *L'indovino*, Venezia, Gallerie dell'Accademia (permission required).

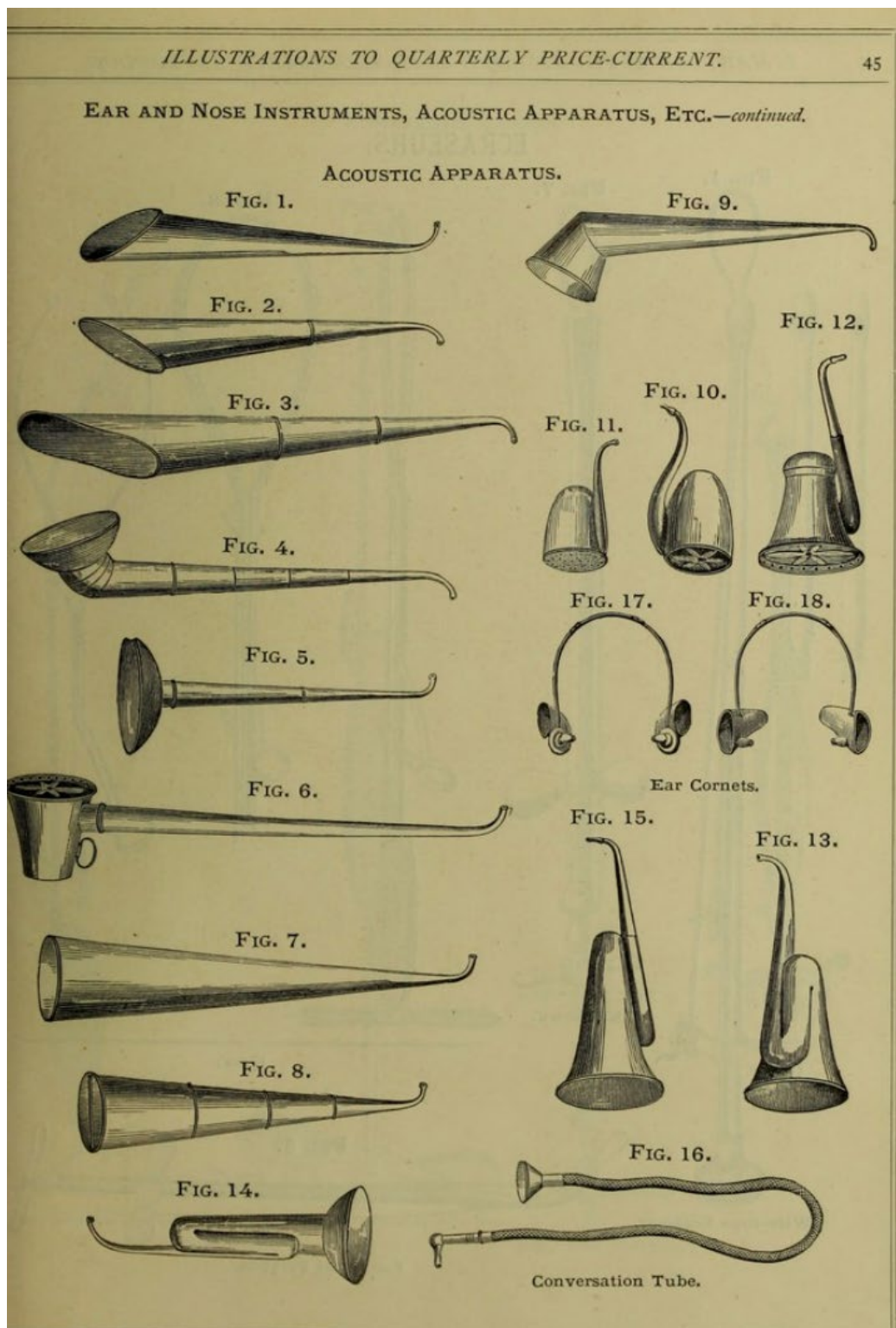


Figure 4, *Maw Catalogue* 1896, London, Wellcome Collection (permission required).



Figure 5, *L'astrologo*, engraving signed A. S. taken from a drawing by Francesco Maggiotto XVIII Century (permission required).

Once the viewer has been made aware of the connection between fortune-tellers and acoustic horns, other examples of this archetype in visual art come to mind. There's no need to focus on the many details that populate, more or less effectively, such works; the most relevant characteristics seem to be that they tend to have female protagonists and are almost entirely set in rural areas, with smaller towns appearing in the background through church steeples and domes.

Only one print, based on a work from Francesco Maggiotto (1738-1805) (Fig. 5), shows unique traits. In it, a male fortune-teller is seen reading the hand of a young farm girl, who seems to have stayed behind to receive prophetic insights while the other farmers have already left. The fortune-teller, who this time is without wig and with the acoustic horn positioned between his legs, is preparing for

the reading as described by a little inscription at the bottom:

*Non son già un ignorante Ciarlatano  
Ma i secreti so appien d'Astrologia  
Prendete, o bella, orsù la canna in mano  
Che io sentire vi farò la virtù mia.  
I'm but an ignorant Charlatan  
But the secrets of Astrology I know full well  
So take, oh beauty, the cane in your hand  
For I will make you feel my talents.*

Certainly not even the imaginative Kircher nor the practical Morland may have imagined that besides its use as a medical instrument, the tuba stentoreo phonica would find such an esoteric usage in the territories of the Serenissima, right in Venice's Saint Mark's Square.