As their French name implies, vues d’optique are hand-colored etchings and engravings intended to be viewed through a convex lens. The lens would heighten the strong lines of perspective and bright hues that characterized these prints, so that the viewer’s perception of the scene’s depth was enhanced, making it seem more three-dimensional and thus more lifelike.

In many vues d’optique, including the Chinese palace shown here, parts of the scene were cut out and the holes backed with translucent colored papers, so that when the print was backlit, an illuminated night scene appeared. Street performers set up viewing boxes that showed, one after another, dozens of prints depicting famous sites and foreign lands—offering viewers an escape from their familiar surroundings, just as television, computers, and other boxed-and-lensed visual technology allow us glimpses of other places and people in contemporary life.