

Movable Books at *Pescara Comix* 2025

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ABSTRACT

As part of the program for the 12th edition of *Pescara Comix & Games 2025. International Pop Culture Festival I* gave a session entitled *Movable Books: Discovering the Construction of a Pop-Up Book*. This interactive, educational presentation focused on how movable books are designed and built in 2D and 3D. It combined an historical overview with simple practical demonstrations so brought the public closer to the world of these paper wonders.

KEYWORDS

Paper engineering; *Pescara Comix*; pop-up books.

CITATION

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The 12th edition of *Pescara Comix & Games 2025. International Pop Culture Festival* was held in Montesilvano (Pescara, Italy) on September 12-14 2025.* The event has a broad focus, ranging from the world of comics to cinema, games, and entertainment. For this latest edition, the conference room hosted my talk: *Movable Books: Discover the Construction of a Pop-Up Book. How a Movable Book is Built from 2D to 3D*. Together with the organizers, I chose descriptive titles and subtitles specifically to communicate with a broad audience that does not necessarily know the world of movable books or its language. It was essential that the explanations emerged directly from the program.

A 50-minute meeting was held on each of the three days. Although the core structure remained constant, I varied some of the materials to ensure that no two sessions were identical, offering new elements even to those attending multiple times. During the interlude before the talk, videos of various pop-up books being leafed through were projected on the screen to show their movement. This silent introduction successfully captured the attention of those present.

The approach I adopted involved an introduction to paper engineering through its various multimodal applications. To provide the technical context, I presented – live or on-screen via photos and videos – static or dynamic origami, paper automata, three-dimensional sculptures, and movable books. This provided a reference point that served as the center of crossroads. The focus then shifted to movable books, guiding the audience toward a deeper exploration of their history, design, and construction. Given the breadth of the subject, I calibrated the presentation to prevent the density of information from overwhelming clarity; rather than an encyclopedic review, my goal was to lead the audience through a logical, engaging, and enjoyable journey.

The presentation began by showing images of flaps from Matthew Paris' *Chronica Majora* and René Descartes' *De homine figuris*, as well as volvelles from Petrus Apianus's *Cosmographia*. The audience was very attentive and astonished to discover that flaps and volvelles have such ancient origins and that these mechanisms were used by scholars within volumes of anatomy or astronomy. Associating mechanisms found today mainly in books for children's entertainment – like those shown in the introductory video – with distant eras, the study of the human body or the celestial world, and figures such as Descartes, proved to be a surprising revelation.

Regarding *De homine figuris*, to highlight a still-living bond between past and present – manifested in the continuity of mechanical form and theme – I presented the book *Il corpo umano. Una guida all'anatomia (The Human Body: A Guide to Anatomy)* by Richard Walker and Rachel Caldwell. This work pairs classic flaps with other interactive components which, based on the same principle of overlapping, are already structurally folded to fit onto mechanical parts that develop three-dimensionally, accompanying the reader in the discovery of the human body, layer by layer.

Continuing with interactive mechanisms and maintaining chronological references, I showed self-produced examples of metamorphic books, illustrating the various combinations obtainable based on the position of the flaps. On the screen, I displayed photos of the first books of this type, as well as *harlequinades* by Robert Sayer, emphasizing their connection with the *Commedia*

* The translation of this contribution, originally written in Italian, was produced in order to provide wider dissemination of the content to an international audience. It was carried out by the Author in collaboration with Jacqueline Reid-Walsh.

dell'Arte and its masks, such as Harlequin, who remains well-known to both adults and children. Following the strategy of combining figures and/or texts, I introduced the later mix-and-match books along with creations by Lothar Meggendorfer, a great innovator to whom significant space was dedicated. Regarding his movable panorama I presented a reproduction of *The Doll's House*, which amazed the audience due to the contrast between its compactness when closed and the large space required when opened due to its three-dimensional design. The artistic component, with its lines and colors, was also highly appreciated. At the end of the session, several attendees approached the book, asking permission to photograph it.



Fig. 1. || Example of a self-made metamorphic book conceived by the Author.

Still within the realm of interactive mechanisms, I discussed pull-tabs, showing a video titled *Sempre allegri, bambini! Lothar Meggendorfer* from the YouTube channel of Fondazione Tancredi di Barolo – MUSLI Torino (https://youtu.be/_uKKn8lY2PI?si=uhAnL0xHyRiNViIn). I frequently encouraged the audience to put themselves in the shoes of a person of that era encountering something as innovative as Meggendorfer's movable books, which even today – despite the infinite variety of wonderful options on the market – possess something magical and astounding. In relation to the video, I referred to MUSLI and its activities, inviting participants to visit this museum as a destination to delve deeper into the world of movable books and stand before the volumes that excited so many children – and certainly many adults – of the earlier time. Next, I showed examples of 'dissolving pictures mechanisms' found in recently produced books, referencing those of Ernest Nister, who first introduced them in the later 19th century. Remaining within Nister's publications, I leafed through reprints of his books where figures eventually 'pop-up out' from the page through the effect of overlapping layers which are spaced apart. This served

as the hook to discuss the first ‘automatic books’ and fully three-dimensional pop-ups, which can be viewed from 360 degrees – an innovation dating back to just before the 1930s.

I then moved on to a brief hands-on demonstration for an audience that remained highly involved and passionate across all three days. I constructed a basic ‘V-fold’ and a ‘parallel-fold’ starting from a single sheet of cardstock, showing how cuts and folds result in a movable structure. I then asked the audience to use these two models as a reference, encouraging them to identify the same mechanisms within recent pop-up books and to signal their discovery by mimicking the movement of one or the other with hand gestures!

In this context, participants were able to interact with a selection of books, including Robert Sabuda’s *The Little Mermaid* and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, Matthew Reinhart’s *Cinderella* and *LEGO Pop-up*. Since modern pop-up books are not exclusively aimed at a young audience and do not necessarily have the sole purpose of entertainment, the selection also included volumes such as *La Divina Commedia. Inferno. Pop-up book* by Massimo Missiroli and *Hokusai Pop-ups* by Courtney Watson McCarthy.



Fig. 2. Robert Sabuda’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and *The Little Mermaid*, Lothar Meggendorfer’s *The Doll’s House*.

Finally, to recall ‘panorama books’, another 19th century invention, while also showing their incredible technological evolution, I presented *Harry Potter: A Pop-Up Guide to Hogwarts* also by Matthew Reinhart. The audience at a fair like *Pescara Comix & Games* is naturally sensitive

to ‘Potterhead’ themes; furthermore, based on the reactions of wonder during the presentation of Reinhart’s books, they seemed to have learned to expect great creativity and structural complexity from this author. Nevertheless, the impression was that no one present expected a volume so extraordinary that it could even transform – thanks to its magnetic spine – into a giant three-dimensional map! Once opened, it invites the reader to explore every small detail. At the end of the session, many participants approached me to admire the great complexity of this work up close.

In conclusion, bringing to a pop culture festival the theme of animated books – still little known – was a very rewarding challenge. This is particularly true for *Pescara Comix & Games*, where the audience consists mainly of young people rather than children (who many erroneously consider the only audience for pop-up books). Seeing how the talk sparked the interest of viewers of all ages, leading them to ask questions, return for the next day’s session, photograph the volumes, and desire to know this world better was a great satisfaction. “Wow, thanks, I didn’t expect this!” is what many attendees told me as they left the conference room.



Fig. 3. Event poster featuring Robert Sabuda’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, whose set includes glasses.