

The Art/History of Magic

Magic is an art that truly mystifies people, and allows them to feel like a young child for just a moment. It allows people to leave the confines of reality, and actually wonder about the forces of the universe that are around us. What people see when it comes to magic is the practice of the person who does it, combined with theatrical use of the environment. There have been many ways in which this ancient art has been used, some good, some bad. But all in all, magic is a true wonder.

Magic is one of the oldest art forms in the world. There has been much evidence that it was around during the early Egyptian era. There were many different forms of magic in its early days. One of the oldest tricks to date was called the Indian Rope Trick, in which the magician threw a long rope up into a cloud, and his assistant climbed up the rope into the clouds. When the assistant didn't come down, the magician climbed up the rope with a knife in hand, and you would see the body part of the assistant come down. When the magician got down, he gathered all the pieces of the assistant, and with a flick, the assistant was restored to normal. This is just one of the older tricks there is. But there was another contraption that also was a sort of magic trick. It was called the automaton chess player, and it did exactly as it was called, it played chess, seemingly by itself. No automaton has ever excited as much admiration and controversy as did the chess-playing Turk in the late 18th century. This was one of the oldest things in magic, and even though it didn't technically do any magic tricks, it did help to inspire some of the greatest illusions in the world. The street performer began emerging as a respected entertainer during the 17th century. One of the few effects that were also very popular during this time period was the famous Cups and Balls trick. Magic history would have it that the

cups and balls trick was first portrayed in the burial chamber of one Beni Hassan. This is probably the oldest trick in the world, and it is still one of the most popular magic effects there is today. Back during the times of the medieval fairs, magicians also made their marks. At the great fairs, magicians began to set up booths for their shows where they performed at specific times and charged admission. By the time the American Revolution had come, public attitudes towards magicians had become more tolerant.

There were many different magicians in the old days that helped shape magic to where it is now. One of the first few magicians to do this was Pinette. Pinette was one of the leading magicians in the late 18th century. Giovanni Giuseppe Pinette, the leading magician of the 18th century, conjured in the finest theatres of Europe. Before he actually entered into magic, he was a professor of Physics. Because his demonstrations with physics experiments were liked by many people, he was often encouraged to show them publically. By the early 1780's Pinette was playing in Germany, billed as "Joseph Pinette, Roman Professor of Mathematics." Pinetti's stage setting was magnificent though simple: silk curtains, gilded tables, and two crystal chandeliers. Critics wrote that a large and distinguished crowd attended Pinetti's opening night. Professor Pinetti demonstrated that artistically presented magic is a theatre art as stimulating to the mind as drama or ballet.

Another great magician, who some are even named after, was Robert-Houdin. Robert-Houdin is considered the father of modern magic. France's greatest magician was born Jean Eugene Robert in Bloison December 7, 1805. He first started out as a clock maker, but a book that had been given to him by accident inspired him to go into magic. After he had learned about all the effects in the book, he paid a person names Maous to

give him lessons on manipulation. Maous taught his pupil juggling to coordinate his eye and hand, then explained the intricacies of the cups and balls. Jean Eugene practiced faithfully on his way to work, manipulating balls, and coins, his hands out of sight in the capacious pockets of his overcoat. Robert-Houdin undoubtedly first thought of becoming a professional magician himself in Comte's theatre. Robert-Houdin defined a magician as an actor playing the role of a man who could work miracles. As Robert-Houdin worked in his shop at 13 Rue de Vendome to finish the apparatus for a two hour show, he occasionally took time off to demonstrate a new trick for a wealthy neighbor who had purchased a "Mysterious Clock." Intrigued by the conjuring, the Count de L'Escalopier invited him to entertain at private parties. Convinced Parisian theatergoers would enjoy ingenious presentations as much as his guests had, the count invested fifteen thousand francs in Robert-Houdin's theatre project. There was a touch of Novelty in every number Robert-Houdin presented. A borrowed handkerchief appeared within one of the oranges which materialized on a mechanical tree. The fruit split into four sections as two butterflies came from nowhere to unfold the handkerchief in the air. In spite of the fact that he was putting on public performances at a theatre in Algiers, simply as entertainment, Robert-Houdin totally convinced the tribal leaders of his supernatural powers. The 1848 Revolution closed Parisian theatres. When Robert-Houdin traveled to London for a May opening at the St. James theatre, he scored a major triumph. He appeared before Queen Victoria at a Charity fete in Fulham and was invited to entertain her at Buckingham Palace. One of the few things in magic that Robert-Houdin improved upon was the suspension technique. He devised a method that eliminated the shielding cloth and brought the miracle out to full view. Robert-Houdin's inventions began to

interest many people and he soon had a sponsor who supported him in his desire for a theatre of magic. Robert-Houdin's mechanical inventions were very much a part of the western world's interest in what would become the Industrial Revolution. There was one claim that Robert-Houdin did indeed have supernatural power, and one effect he did seemed to prove it. After a display of well-done but hardly outstanding tricks-productions of flowers and cannon balls, and the transportation of coins from his hands to a closed crystal box-he challenged a strong man to lift a wooden box. The man lifted it easily, and then replaced it. Asked to lift it again, he found it impossible, then suddenly cried out and ran. Besides Houdin's great effects, he also did some book work. In addition to his memoirs, he wrote books on card manipulation, sleight of hand, stage illusion and the psychology of deception, which have been translated into many languages. Robert-Houdin died at the age of sixty-five in 1871. Until Robert Houdin, relatively little had been written for or by professional magicians. Not only was he a legend among magicians, but he had many different things named after him. It is unlikely that Robert-Houdin, whose performing career spanned only eleven years, ever imagined that a theatre bearing his name would last nearly eighty years, or that streets would be named for him in Paris, Blois, Bourges, and Caen. (The Illustrated History of Magic. Christopher, M. (1973) p. 139-152)

In magic history, there has been only one family that was truly a whole family of magic practitioners. The Herrmann's practiced magic the longest out of any family. For more than eighty years the name Herrmann drew crowds to theatres. Carl, the first of the family to achieve international acclaim, was slender, satanic in appearance, and wore a black moustache and goatee. His artistic sleight of hand, continental manner, sly sense of

humor, and ability to project his personality in the great opera houses of the world made him an attraction, critics said, on a par with the most talented actors, singers, and dancers of the nineteenth century. Despite his early skill as an entertainer, Carl, who lived in Paris as a young man, tried to please his father by earning a living away from stage.

Herrmann's magic was accompanied by a full "Italian Opera Orchestra" in the pit, but the music was forgotten in the rave reviews. One of Carl Herrmann's specialties was hurling playing cards with amazing accuracy into all parts of the house. Carl Herrmann had continued to perform regularly until 1870 when he concluded a farewell tour of the United States and returned to his home in Vienna. Carl Herrmann died in Carlsbad due to a lung inflammation on June 8 at the age of seventy-one and was buried in Vienna. The Herrmann name was carried on by Alexander, who had achieved great acclaim with his own magic production. Alexander delighted in extemporaneous magic. He reached in the air, not his pocketbook, for cab fees. He produced cigars from the whiskers of President Ulysses S. Grant. While Carl discarded his heavy equipment and specialized in magic without apparatus, Alexander gradually added big-scale illusions to his show. The morning of December 17, 1896, as the train approached Great Valley, New York, America's most popular magician died of a heart attack. Many contemporaries who saw Carl Herrmann in Europe said he was the finest magician who ever lived. Those who watched his brother perform in America made the same claim for Alexander. As a family of conjurers, the Herrmann's have never been surpassed. (The Illustrated History of Magic. Christopher, M. (1973). 173-198)

As with all showmanship business, magicians have to travel a lot in order to show their performances. Harry Kellar is known in magic history as the magician who traveled

the most. Kellar had been born in Erie, Pennsylvania, in 1849, but had been performing all over the world before he made a success in his own country. Young Harry enjoyed dangerous games. He won the admiration of other boys by standing motionless in the middle of the railroad tracks as a train approached, the jumping aside moments before the engine roared by. While employed as a “chore boy” on a farm of Henry C. Fiske in Buffalo, Harry read an exciting ad in the local paper; “The Fakir of Ava” needed a boy assistant. Terrified that someone else would get there first, Harry ran the two miles to the magician’s home in the suburb of Cold Spring. With the fakir’s reluctant permission, Kellar gave his first show in Dunkirk, Michigan, at the age of sixteen. Kellar conjured in English at the Lyceum Theatre in Shanghai, but he began to add several Chinese phrases to his vocabulary. Kellar established a new house record at the Comedy Theatre in New York during the 1886-87 seasons with 179 consecutive shows; then he toured the Midwest, breaking attendance records in Cincinnati and Chicago. Kellar levitated a table and escaped from ropes, after bells had rung and tambourines had played in the cabinet where he had been tied. There was a roar of applause as the tall, tanned magician bowed and started to walk towards the wings. Houdini ran out and brought him back to the center of the stage. America’s greatest magician should be carried off in triumph after his final public performance, Houdini said. Members of the society helped Kellar up into the upholstered seat of a sedan chair. Twenty-four men and women hurried onstage with baskets of red roses and yellow chrysanthemums and showered the old magician with flowers as the sedan chair was raised. The 125-piece Hippodrome orchestra played “Auld Lang Syne” and six thousand spectators rose to their feet and sang the nostalgic words as Kellar was slowly borne away. The greatest traveler among magicians died five years

later on March 10, 1922, following a pulmonary hemorrhage brought on by an attack of influenza. A few days before the end, Kellar sat up in bed to read French grammar. He was brushing up on his languages, he told his niece, because soon he might be taking another trip. (The Illustrated History of Magic. Christopher, M. (1973). P. 198-221)

Another great magician of the time around Harry Kellar was Howard Thurston. Howard Thurston is considered Harry Kellar's successor. When Howard Thurston purchased Harry Kellar's show in 1908, he was more interested in business advantages to be gained as the designated successor to America's most prominent magician than in the older man's equipment. Born in Columbus, Ohio, on July 20, 1869, Howard Franklin Thurston was the son of a carriage maker. Thurston had seen Herrmann in Columbus, and later he had learned to do several tricks from Professor Hoffmann's book, Modern Magic, for a Christmas party at Mount Hermon, but Thurston had forgotten how exciting an evening of sleight of hand could be. He later went on tour with Harry Kellar. Thurston asked to talk to Kellar before he made a final decision on his successor-if the reports of his impending retirement were true. Throughout the tour, Kellar introduced Thurston as his successor and, when Thurston took out his show the next season, it opened with a giant book on stage displaying pictures of Robert-Houdin, Phillipe, Herrmann, and Kellar. Finally Thurston himself stepped from the pages of the book. (The Blackstone Book of Magic and Illusion. Blackstone, Harry Jr. (1985). P.143-184)

One of the bigger eras in America, Vaudeville, had many great entertainers. Magic was big during this time. Harry Blackstone was one of the best magicians during Vaudeville. Blackstone was one of the magicians who truly used the media of his days. In city after city the newspapers carried personal stories about him,

and local stores and products were endorsed by him. Before he became a magician, Harry was a newsboy when he saw Kellar perform at McVicker's Theatre. Conjuring became the youth's hobby. Thoroughly at ease on stage, Blackstone was never ruffled. His coolness in what could have been a disaster in Decatur, Illinois, on September 2, 1942, undoubtedly saved many lives. During the early years of Blackstone's career, he had two major competitors: Harry Houdini and, perhaps more important, Howard Thurston. While Blackstone was living in New York, he appeared at sales meetings for large industrial firms there, and in other cities, dramatizing the selling points of new products. Blackstone's health began to fail the following year. He died in his home on North Sycamore Street at the age of eighty of pulmonary edema on November 16, 1965. In the late 1840's, Blackstone was billed as "The last of the Great Magicians," and indeed it did seem for a time that the great days of magic were over. (The Illustrated History of Magic. Christopher, M. (1973). P. 348-378)

Magic has a deep and complex history, which makes it hard to truly appreciate. But through the late 1990's, there have been magicians who have become very famous with younger people. Modern Magicians have also made their mark on society.

Lance Burton is one of the most famous magicians there is today. He first became interested in magic when he went to see a magic show. The Maestro there performed a trick known as "The Miser's Dream" and pulled silver coins out of his bewildered, impressionable assistant's ear. Lance thought, "what a great way to make money and people like you too". He was hooked on magic since. Lance entered his first competition as a junior magician at a convention in 1977 and walked away with first prize. On May 12, 1994 Lance Burton was given the honor of having the "Mantle of Magic" from

Master Magician Lee Gabel. In nearly every poll Lance Burton has been voted “Best Magician” and “Best Entertainer”. (Lance Burton: Master Magician. Date N/A.

www.Lanceburton.com/pages/about-lance.php)

Magic in itself is an ever growing art. The history surrounding it is just one thing that people are fascinated by. But what truly fascinates people when it comes to magic itself is how it is done. Magicians do hide things, but all of this is in the sense of entertainment. There are many principles that go into effect when a magician is performing. Probably the biggest thing that many magicians use to their advantage is the fact that they can control where they want the audience to look at the right moment. Many widely held beliefs about magic and magicians are erroneous: The hand is not quicker than the eye; skill and misdirection-getting the audience to focus its attention on the wrong place at the right time-is responsible for the mystery. There are many different ways that this can be done. This is what people call sleight of hand. It is the main thing responsible for many of the different tricks that magicians do. With Sleight of hand, it is often manipulation of one’s body or the objects that the person uses. All magic is illusion, but illusion among conjurers is a term applied to feats with human beings, large animals, or sizable pieces of apparatus. What magicians know how to do with such things is what gives them the advantage over an audience. For instance, sleight of hand comes in when a magician does a simple card trick. Sure, they know what they are doing, but the question is, are they doing it in a way that will amaze and entertain people? Magic itself is not just about all the tricks a person knows, but how they do it. Anyone can learn how to do a card trick, and anyone can know how a secret of magic works, but what they lack is the ability to perform it. This is what separates a magician from just a regular person who

likes to know how magic is done. When people see a magic trick, they don't know what to expect, and it is this mystery that truly allows the magic to become real. One of the few things that also aid magicians in this is the use of gimmicks. These mechanical additions, whether it is a small piece of tape, to something of complex machinery, are also able to help the magician with their magic. But in truth, it has to be the acting that makes the difference between a spectacular performance and a mediocre show. It is up to the magician to act as the one who can do the miracle of his work, and show the audience that he can perform things of imagination, and acting is the majority of it. The more poetic magicians will tell a story with their presentation of the magic, often achieving a sense of nostalgia. When a magician can connect to the audience on an emotional level, it is then when a trick truly becomes a spectacular effect. Magicians also need to know when they are being more than they should be. The biggest example of this is when magicians claim that they can actually do true magic. The magic that magicians do is just for entertainment, but there are those that will go beyond that line. When that happens, it signifies that this person does not just want to simply perform, but show that they can do actual miracles, and not act it. Most of the time it ends up failing, and this will give them a bad reputation. Another thing that can lower a magician's self-esteem are people who are out there just to expose magic, and show that it shouldn't be done. These are the hecklers. They can be troublesome, but the experienced magician knows how to do with them. But all in all, magic is there because people want it to be. People are always looking for reasons to explain things in our world, and this is just one of the many answers that are around. (The Illustrated History of Magic. (Christopher, M. (1973) p.6) (Abracadabra. Schiffman, N. (1997). All pages.)

Magic is an art that has many complex and deep mysteries around it. The history of it is much more detailed than what is written here, and it goes on. People love to be mystified by it, and that is why this art continues to grow. There will always be magic around, even if there are hard times in the world, because it allows for us to just let our imaginations run wild. It is an art of true astonishment.