



**Three
Things You
Didn't Know
About
Magic**

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Three Things You Didn't Know About Magic

What we know today as magic, is actually an ancient performing art that has existed for several thousands of years. Today a magician entertains an audience by creating illusions of the seemingly impossible, this through means that are purely natural.

Dariel Fitzkee, a noted author on the theory of magic, wrote:

"The real secrets of magic are those whereby the magician is able to influence the mind of the spectator, even in the face of that spectator's definite knowledge that the magician is absolutely unable to do what that spectator ultimately must admit he does do.

Michael Jay, in a recent article to the magic community¹, said:

"This skilled magician is an adept at disguise and attention control. He employs physical disguise with his apparatus. He employs psychological disguise-simulation, dissimulation, manoeuvre, ruse, suggestion and inducement. He exercises absolute control over the attention of his spectator by forestalling it, by catching it relaxed, by dulling it, by scattering it, by diverting it, by distracting it, and by openly moving it away.

"He cleverly, skilfully and dexterously mixes the true with the false. With equal facility he convincingly interprets matters to accomplish his own ends. He contrives to so influence the things the spectator perceives that the latter is aware of them *as the magician desires*. All is built upon an unshakable foundation of naturalness, plausibility and conviction.

In other words, sleight-of-hand, psychological subtlety, applied technology, and even outright lies may be used.

History

The performance of magic dates back several thousand years and is even mentioned in several places in the Bible. However, the most ancient purposes of magic were quite different. Magic was not used to entertain, it was used to persuade.

Although there was showmanship and trickery involved in these early presentations, it was the purpose of these ancient practitioners to frighten and control the population ac-

¹, Jay, Michael, "The Magic Industry - Bringing It All Together"
<http://www.erraticimpact.com/cyberedit/termpapers10.asp>

according to the wishes and needs of the tribal council or village elders. This view helps to explain the whole concept of “secret knowledge” as the general populous could never know these methods.

The term *magic* is derived from the word *magi*, a Latin word referring to the Zoroastrians. The three Wise Men, the Magi, referenced in the story of Jesus are these very same people! However, the Zoroastrians were not sorcerers, they were generous, travelling missionaries. These teachers were known as astronomers, not as astrologers or alchemists. They were a well-studied people and they were quick to learn and absorb local customs and technologies wherever they travelled.

And throughout the millennia, those who followed, be it shamans, spiritual healers or medicine men, all relied on their arcane and secret knowledge to benefit their tribe. At least this was always the party line.

But if we consider magic as the art of deception, then there are both positive and negative aspects to consider.

On the positive side, thinking in terms of deception when problem-solving often leads to solutions not otherwise possible. Consider the story of the Trojan Horse for example and how this led to an otherwise unattainable victory for the Greeks over the city of Troy.

On the negative side, consider fraudulent mediums, faith healers, as well as con men and grifters. These unscrupulous people have long used conjuring techniques to cheat the gullible. Consider also such street hustles as *Three Card Monte* and *The Shell Game*.

The emergence of magic as a true performing art used to entertain the masses occurred in the 18th century.

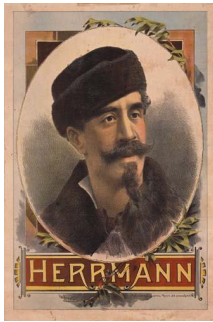
The father of modern magic is generally acknowledged as Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin. Born in 1805, in Blois, France, he began his career performing at private parties for Count de l'Escalopier. I imagine that these performances were very much like those seen in the 2006 film, “The Illusionist.” The Count later fronted him the money to open his own magic theatre in Paris. In July, 1845, he premiered his “Soirées Fantastiques”.

Robert-Houdin was studying watchmaking before he became a magician and his knowledge of the intricacies of the clockworks became a part of his contribution to the world of magic.

If you recall the “Orange Tree” effect in the movie, “The Illusionist,” that was the creation of Robert-Houdin.

Perhaps the most famous magician of all time is Ehrich Weiss. Born in 1874 in Budapest, Austria-Hungary as Erik Weisz, he arrived in the United States in 1878. He took the

stage name Harry Houdini as an homage to both Harry Kellar (the Dean of American Magicians) and Robert-Houdin.



The stereotypical image of the magician we hold today - wavy hair, top hat, goatee, and tailcoat - comes from this very same period. The image is of another Frenchman: Alexander Herrmann, seen to the left.

In magic, there is a true royal dynasty and it emerged at this time. There is a “Mantle of Magic” and it is an honour that cannot be bought or sold and has passed unbroken from one Master Magician to another.

The “Mantle of Magic” portrays the unspoken apprenticeship that existed among the great magicians of the day with the elder master magician taking the younger apprentice under his wing and when ready to retire, would “pass the mantle” to him.

It all starting with the unspoken apprenticeship between Harry Kellar, Howard Thurston and Dante. Here is how the line developed:

- Harry Kellar
- Howard Thurston, 1908
- Dante (Harry August Jansen), 1936
- Lee Grabel, 1955
- Lance Burton - May 12, 1994

What is interesting to note is that, with the exception of perhaps Lance Burton, these masters are not, today, household names. How many of these have you actually heard of?

Then consider, in comparison, the likes of:

- Harry Houdini, perhaps the most famous magician of all time
- Harry Blackstone, Sr. and Harry Blackstone, Jr.
- Leon Mandrake, known for his top hat, pencil line mustache and scarlet-lined cape, was the real-life basis for the comic strip that has been running continuously since 1934.
- Mark Wilson, who brought magic to television in 1955. His show, “The Magic Land of Allakazam” debuted in 1960 as the first television show to be videotaped and nationally syndicated, and ran until 1964.
- Paul Daniels, perhaps best known in Great Britain with his long-running television series that ran for an astounding 15 years (1979 to 1994).

- And a few of today's most prominent magicians: David Copperfield, Penn and Teller, David Blaine and Chris Angel,

None of these are part of the royal lineage, yet how many of these have you heard of?

Secrecy

Today, as in times of old, magic remains something of a closed and secretive society. And today magic is still largely passed from one magician to another in a great oral tradition which until recent years has aided in the maintenance of the great secrets.

That is why there is a magician's oath.

"As a magician I promise never to reveal the secret of any illusion to a non-magician, unless that one swears to uphold the Magician's Oath in turn.

I promise never to perform any illusion for any non-magician without first practicing the effect until I can perform it well enough to maintain the illusion of magic."

It is also why both the International Brotherhood of Magicians and the Society of American Magicians have a joint code of ethics which begins:

The International Brotherhood of Magicians and the Society of American Magicians join in recommending that all magicians adhere to the following code of ethical conduct:

- Oppose the wilful exposure to the public of any principles of the Art of Magic or the method employed in any magic effect or illusion.

Unfortunately, the secrets of magic are not quite as secure as they once were, with heavy exposure on television, the internet, and various print media.

It is said that there are more books written about magic than any other performing art. Fortunately, most of these books will never be found on the shelves of the local library or book store, except for the few that are specifically written for the general public.

These books of secrets are closely held by the magic community, with most working magicians maintaining their own private collections. These books are not hard to come by, but they can only be purchased through dealers catering specifically to the needs of the working performer or magic enthusiast.

Yet the real secret of the magician, as mentioned on the very first page of this article, is the skilfully mix of the true with the false to accomplish his own ends.

Myths

The Hand Is Quicker Than The Eye

It is uncertain, but it appears that the phrase, “The hand is quicker than the eye,” may date back to Roger Bacon in the 13th century. In any case, this phrase has been a staple of magician’s patter for a long time.

Truth be told, this is utter nonsense, both physiologically and psychologically! Simply try it some time. How fast can you actually move your fingers, hands or arms?

Try watching the movement of a baseball, hockey puck or golf ball. All of these can reach speeds exceeding 100 mph and with just a little practice you can follow these movements accurately as a professional athlete who generally must rely on this ability to play their game.

So what makes people think that a magician can move his hands any faster? In fact, the exact opposite is true. It is artifice and not speed that makes this type of magic possible.

The eye is remarkably fast and can discern both subtle movements and speed, yet sleight-of-hand is possible because the apparent movement of the hands are so in line with what is expected that the observer is unable to differentiate the erroneous portion of the movement; there is always a discrepancy!

An excellent example of this type of deception comes from the world of gambling. Known as the *second deal*, the dealer is able to take the second card from the top of the deck while making it appear that he is actually dealing the top card.

This is a very difficult action to perform successfully and takes months, even years of practice to achieve fluidity and stealth. It relies on the interaction of three concurrent actions:

- The movement of the cards themselves.
- The movement of the hands.
- The somewhat confusing optical pattern on the backs of the cards!

So in the end, what you get is *not* what you see!

Misdirection

Along this same line is something called *misdirection*.

Misdirection is something of a misnomer because it implies a deception when, in fact, what the magician is really doing is controlling your perception through actions that direct

your attention away from what is happening. The concept is extremely simple; the execution, however, may involve a lifetime of study and practice. The action becomes so natural and organic that it appears that nothing has happened.

It's done with smoke and mirrors!

Here's another belief among the viewing public: "It's all done with smoke and mirrors!"

Once upon a time this was true. There were many great stage illusions from the golden era of magic that did rely on mirrors and even a little smoke.

One of the most famous was called "Pepper's Ghost", a technique developed by John Henry Pepper in the 1860s. The technique involved a sheet of plate glass (not mirrors as often thought) and special lighting that was able to make objects (even people) appear, disappear and even morph into one another.

Today this technique is still used in theatrical productions and film-making to make ghostly apparitions appear. The best known use of this technique is in the "Haunted Mansion" attractions at Walt Disney World and Disneyland where the viewing panels are an astounding 30x90 feet!

As a side-note, this panel is actually made up of eight individual sheets of glass, yet each sheet is so large and heavy that they actually had to be flown in by helicopter *before* the roof was built.

I was quite surprised recently, while on the set of the television series "Ghostly Encounters". The crew began to set up to shoot a scene involving the apparitions and they were going to use this technique. Here the sheet of glass was a mere one foot square!

How'd He Do That?

So the next time you see a magician perform and you ask yourself, "How'd he do that," consider the following. If you were amazed by the impossible, the techniques you witnessed may have been centuries old and the skills demonstrated may have required years of study and practice.

If you were entertained and left with a sense of wonder, then that performer has truly done his work well. If you were left with a puzzle to solve and you are feeling foolish, consider the fact that the methods were a lot simpler than you think, and there really wasn't a whole lot to see.

If what you saw evoked the comment, "But he didn't do anything," then you may have been watching a true master at work. This is how magic is meant to look.

In the end, you really don't want to know how it was done! Really, that would spoil the

illusion.

And if you do ask, remember the oath of secrecy. Regardless of how the magician actually responds, he's not going to tell you.

Don't ask and you won't be disappointed. Simply enjoy that sense of wonder because that is what it's really all about.