



# ILLUSIONS THE ART OF MAGIC

Large Print  
Exhibition Text

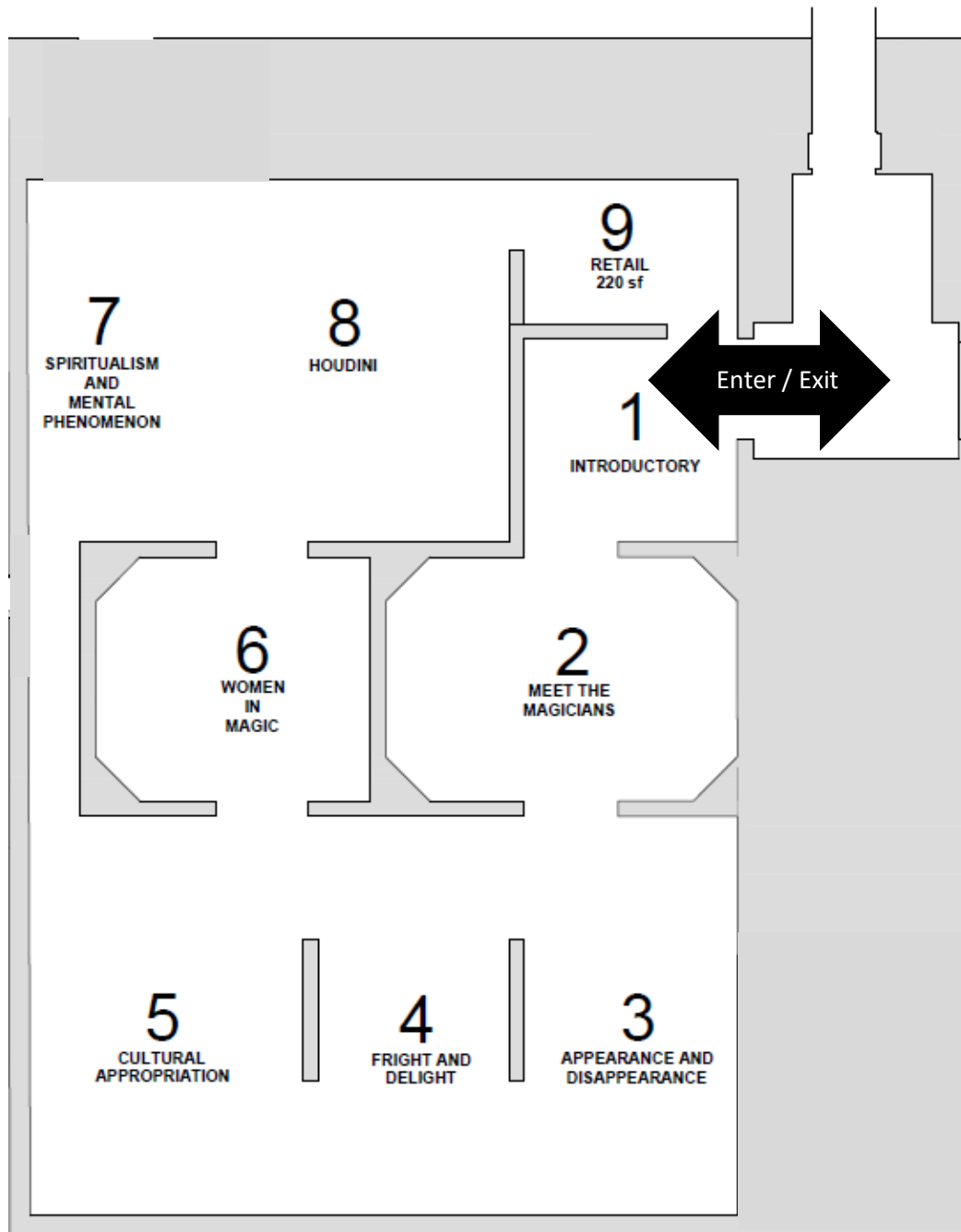
This exhibition is organized by the McCord Museum in Montreal.  
All of the framed posters on view are from the McCord's Allan  
Slaight Collection.

**Lead  
Supporters**

La Fondation Emmanuelle Gattuso  
The Slaight Foundation

# Exhibition Overview

There are 9 sections in this exhibition, including a retail shop. Visitors will enter Section 1, upon turning right, after passing through the entrance.



## **Section 1**

Content: Exhibition title wall with 1 photograph and partnership recognition, and 2 posters on the wall.

Environment: shared thoroughfare with exhibition exit.

## **Section 2**

Content: 9 posters on the wall, 1 projected film with ambient audio, and 1 table case containing 4 objects

Environment: darkened gallery setting with no seating.

## **Section 3**

Content: 9 posters on the wall.

Environment: standard gallery setting with no seating.

## **Section 4**

Content: 9 posters on the wall.

Environment: standard gallery setting with bench seating.

## **Section 5**

Content: 8 posters on the wall, 1 short film with ambient audio, 1 table case containing 9 objects, and an interactive activity station with seating.

Environment: standard gallery setting with no seating.

## **Section 6**

Content: 7 posters on the wall.

Environment: standard gallery setting with no seating.

## **Section 7**

Content: 6 posters on the wall.

Environment: standard gallery setting with no seating.

## **Section 8**

Content: 7 posters on the wall, 2 projected silent films, 1 table case containing 15 objects, and a free-standing object.

Environment: standard gallery setting with dim lighting. No available seating.

## **Section 9 (Retail Shop)**

Visitors must enter through the retail shop to exit the exhibition.

## **Exit**

Environment: shared thoroughfare with exhibition entrance.

# Illusions: The Art of Magic

From death-defying escapades to sleight of hand, feats of magic have captivated the popular imagination for centuries. Between roughly 1880 and 1930, scientific progress and a booming entertainment industry fuelled new developments in the art of magic. Audiences flocked to theatres across North America to see performances that promised levitation, decapitation, straitjacket escapes, and more. The stunts and illusions of magicians such as Harry Houdini and Howard Thurston were so popular that the era became known as the Golden Age of Magic.

In the late 1800s, significant advances in printing technology enabled the mass production of vibrant, colourful posters. Advertisements papered the streets, promoting performers who were as famous for their creative flair and showmanship as for their magic tricks. The fantastical imagery in the posters, film clips, and ephemera in this exhibition transformed magicians into some of the world's most mesmerizing celebrities.

Lead image, on exhibition title wall:



Caption: Allan Slaight holding his three-volume publication, *The James File*, around 2000 © CNW Group/Magicana

The Allan Slaight Collection, named for Canadian businessman, philanthropist, and magic enthusiast Allan Slaight, is comprised of 600 posters and more than 1,000 rare books and documents from the Golden Age of Magic.

Acquired by the McCord Museum thanks to La Fondation Emmanuelle Gattuso, the Allan Slaight Collection is the only one of its magnitude in Canada.



Adolph Friedländer, Hamburg

## **Comedians de Mephisto Co. allied with Le Roy-Talma-Bosco**

1905

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.318



Strobridge Lithographing Co., Cincinnati  
& New York

## **Thurston the Great Magician**

1908

chromolithograph

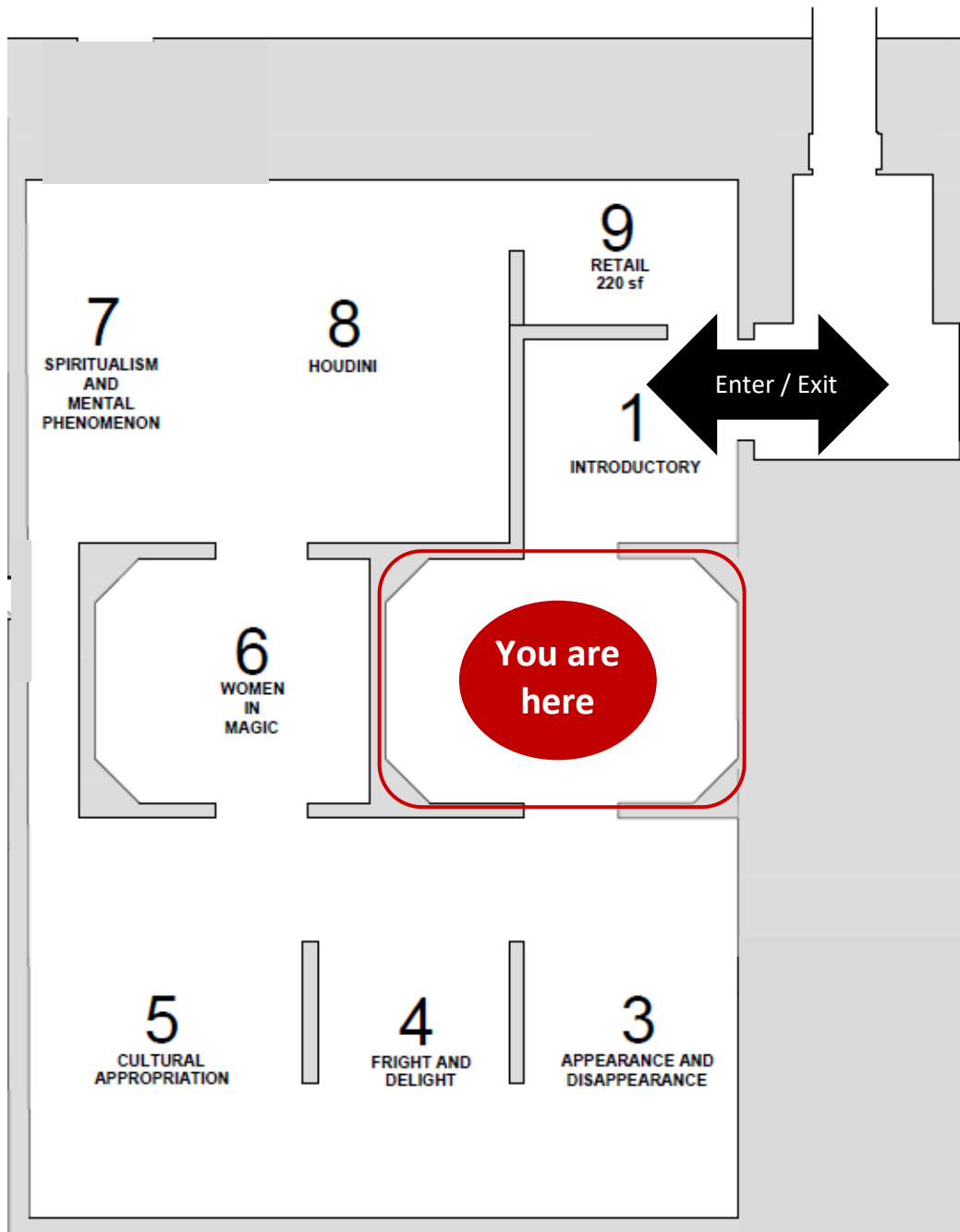
McCord Museum, M2014.128.540





There are 9 sections in this exhibition.

You are now entering Section 2: **Meet the Magicians**



## Section 2:

# Meet the Magicians

*“The magician takes the ordinary something, and makes it something extraordinary.”*

—Christopher Priest, *The Prestige* (1995)

Who’s your favourite celebrity? What about them appeals to you? Do they have a scandalous life story? Are they a charismatic and captivating entertainer? The magicians of the Golden Age possessed these traits and more, making them some of the first major celebrities in the Western world. Show business pioneers, they became household names in major cities across North America and Europe.

In this section, you will meet the stars of the exhibition: Alexander and Adelaide Herrmann, Harry Kellar, Howard Thurston, Chung Ling Soo, and Harry Houdini. These were the most famous magicians in the world from the late 1800s well into the 1930s. Their compelling onstage personas and eye-catching promotional materials, from show posters to self-published autobiographies, appealed to the public appetite for mystery, wonder, and above all, entertainment.



Adolph Friedländer, Hamburg

## **Le Roy-Talma-Bosco**

1910

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.316



W.J. Morgan & Co. Litho., Cleveland

## **Keene**

around 1900

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.273

## From Houdin to Houdini

*“A professional magician was best thought of not as a performer of juggling tricks, but rather as an actor who played the role of someone who possessed supernatural powers.”*

—Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin

French magician Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin (1805–1871) is widely recognized as the father of modern magic. He helped transform the practice from a pastime for the masses into a form of entertainment for the wealthy. Houdin worked as a clockmaker early in his career—which might be why he became one of the first magicians to include technology and automatons in his act. We can also credit him with changing the fashion game for magicians. His costume—dark tailcoat, trousers, white shirt, bowtie, top hat—was typical for Victorian gentlemen at the time, but it was considered revolutionary to wear such an outfit on stage.

Unknown, Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin, 1855. Photo: © The Print Collector / Alamy Stock Photo



Strobridge Lithographing Co., Cincinnati  
& New York

## Harry Houdini

1911

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.224

*"It's not the trick. It's the magician."*

—Harry Houdini

Perhaps the most famous magician of all time, Harry Houdini (1874–1926) built his career on a combination of self-promotion, escape artistry, and inspired showmanship. The Hungarian-born American Erich Weiss created the stage name Harry Houdini as a tribute to his hero and the “father of modern magic,” Jean-Eugene Robert-Houdin.

Unlike many other magicians of his time, Houdini did not capitalize on the public’s fascination with the otherworldly in his advertising or performances. He famously railed against mediums and

spiritualists who claimed to connect with the dead. His show posters, which are primarily portraits and illustrations of his illusions, emphasize the authority and self-assurance of the magician himself.



James Upton Ltd., Birmingham

## **Chung Ling Soo and his Ten Assistants**

around 1915

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.441



Unknown filmmaker

## **“Blackstone Handkerchief Trick”**

date unknown

video (black & white, sound, 3 min. 3 sec.)

Magicana

Harry Blackstone (1885–1965) was a key transitional figure in the history of American magic. His career stretched from the peak of the Golden Age to the advent of television and film. Known for his shock of messy white hair and impish wit, Blackstone continued to delight audiences well into the mid-1950s. This footage of his famous dancing handkerchief trick showcases his cheeky stage persona





Strobridge Lithographing Co., Cincinnati  
& New York

## **Thurston, Kellar's Successor, Invested with the Mantle of Magic**

1908

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.516

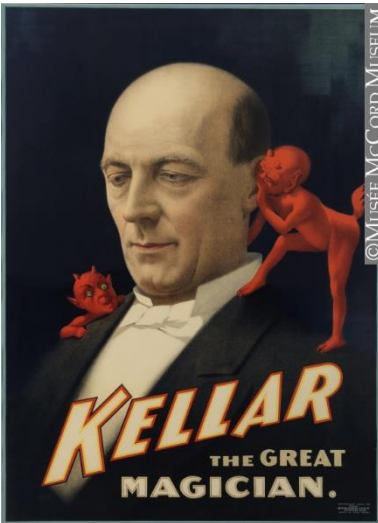
*"You can fool the eyes and minds of the audience, but you cannot fool their hearts."*

—Howard Thurston

This poster depicts the historic moment when Howard Thurston (1869–1936) received the "mantle of magic" from his established colleague Harry Kellar. The two magicians carefully planned this passing of the torch—in fact, Thurston had paid to be named Kellar's official successor. They eagerly played up the drama and spectacle of the occasion.

Thurston's story is a strange blend of fact and fiction; indeed, he authored several

sensational memoirs. A runaway, he spent his young adulthood travelling across the United States, picking up work as a newsboy, a jockey, a bellhop, and even as an evangelist. One evening, Thurston caught a performance by the great Alexander Herrmann, and was inspired by his over-the-top antics. Thurston went on to include dancing girls, a full orchestra, and fantastic feats of engineering in his own shows.



Strobridge Lithographing Co., Cincinnati  
& New York

## **Kellar, the Great Magician**

1894

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.288

*"The end of all magic is to feed with  
mystery the human mind, which dearly  
loves mystery."*

—Harry Kellar

Harry Kellar (1849–1922), born Heinrich Kellar, was a prolific Golden Age performer. Described as the “dean” of American magicians, Kellar acted as a mentor and friend to many of his renowned peers, including Harry Houdini and Howard Thurston.

Kellar was famous for two things: his spectacular version of the “levitating woman” trick and his posters, which featured whispering devils. Audiences were enticed by the implication that the magician had used dark dealings to gain otherworldly powers, and filled theatres to watch his act night after night. One of the most respected showmen of his time, Kellar continued to perform until he was almost 60 years old.



The Metropolitan Printing Co., New York

## **Herrmann the Great Co.**

around 1900

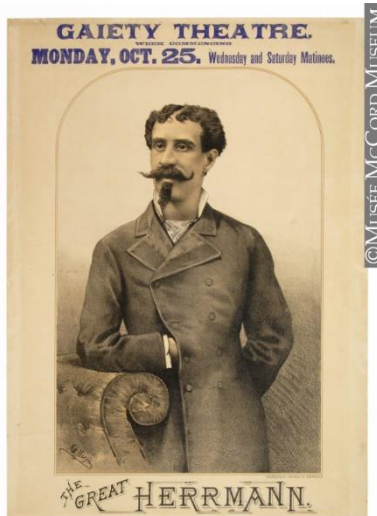
chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.201

# The Art of the Poster

Chromolithography, a unique method of making multicolour prints, became one of the most successful methods of printing developed in the late 1800s. Creating a chromolithograph required significant collaboration. First, the artists would trace the lettering and other key motifs with a black outline. Then, the colour artists would take over and fill in the shapes and letters with vibrant colours. The colours were printed separately, always in the same order: yellow, then red, and finally blue and black.

Standardized poster sizes varied, depending on the performer or advertiser's budget. In North America, the "sheet" was the basic unit of size. A poster could be anywhere from 3 to 24 sheets—the difference between a framed painting in your living room and a billboard.



Strobridge Lithographing Co., Cincinnati  
& New York

## The Great Herrmann

1880

McCord Museum, M2014.128.202



## Adelaide Herrmann, Queen of Magic

1903

McCord Museum, M2014.128.208

chromolithographs

*“Great magicians are born, not made.”*

—Alexander Herrmann

For years, the Herrmann dynasty ruled America’s magic scene, with Alexander and Adelaide acting as king and queen. A tall, slim, goateed showman who wore knee breeches and a long tailcoat, Alexander (1844–1896) was the quintessential Golden Age magician. His wife and business partner, Adelaide Scarsez (1853–1932), was an enigmatic performer in her own right. Together, they were a well-matched team.

Adelaide, who began her magic career as Alexander’s assistant, understood the spectacle of magic shows and had a mind for business. When her husband

died suddenly in 1896, Adelaide insisted that the show must go on. She became a hugely popular performer in North America and Europe, and the most famous woman magician of her time.

**Presented in the table case, stationed in the center of the section, are the following contents:**

## **The Oldest Trick in the Book**

### **1. Props for the Cup and Ball Trick, also known as “The Oldest Trick in the Book”**

around 1920

3 tin cups, 3 crocheted balls, and wood wand

David Ben Collection

Behold, three unassuming tin cups, three crocheted balls, and a wand. Although they may not look like much, these are essential props for one of the most enduring tricks in magic history. Dating back 2000 years, this feat is considered the supreme test of the master magician. It uses every trick of the trade—making things vanish, reappear, and transform. These items belonged to Canadian Dai Vernon (1894–1992), one of the most influential magicians of the 1900s. Vernon used these props in his New York City shows in the 1920s and 1930s.

### **2. Floyd G. Thayer**

**Thayer Quality Magic Catalogue No. 7**

1928

book

David Ben Collection



### 3. Hofzinsner Card, Queen of Clubs and King of Hearts

around 1850

paper playing cards

David Ben Collection

This special card set, designed so that the individual cards appear to transform into one another, is the invention of Austrian-Hungarian magician Johann Hofzinsner. A pioneer of parlour magic, Hofzinsner had a private salon in Vienna where he dazzled patrons with his unique brand of sleight-of-hand magic.

### 4. Charles-Joseph Panckoucke (editor)

born Lille, France, 1736

died Paris, France, 1798

#### **Figures de Magie Blanche**

plate 6 from *Recueil des Planches du Dictionnaire*

*Encyclopedique des Amusemens des Sciences*

*Mathématiques et Physiques*

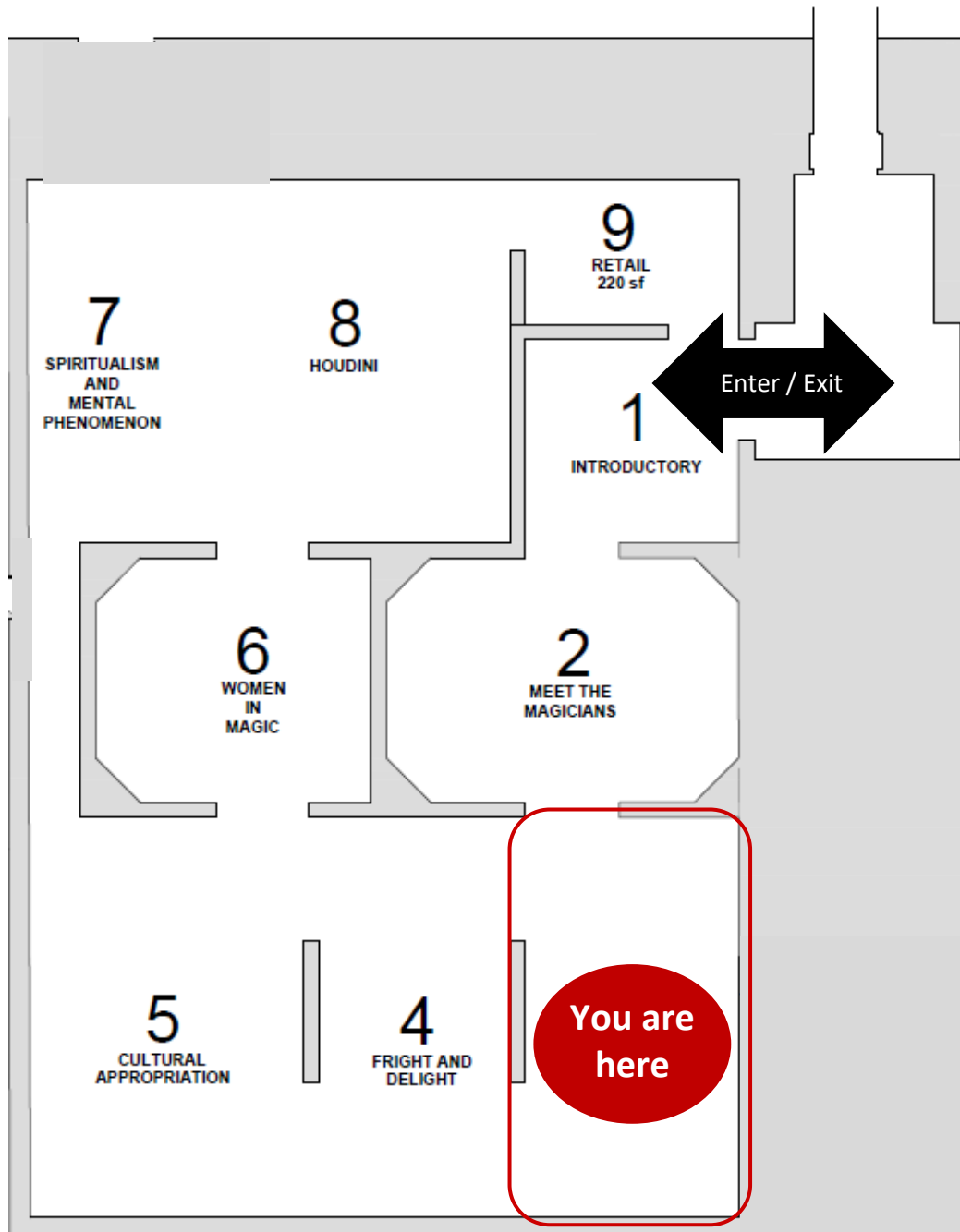
1792

book

David Ben Collection

There are 9 sections in this exhibition.

You are now entering Section 3:  
**Appearances and Disappearances**



### Section 3:

## Appearances and Disappearances

*“My object is to mystify and entertain. I wouldn’t deceive you for the world.”*

—Howard Thurston

A magician makes a coin appear seemingly out of thin air. Later in the act, he leads a 10,000-pound elephant onstage, and makes her vanish. Emerging from the void is one thing ... but disappearing without a trace—how terrifying!

Throughout the Golden Age of Magic, performers competed with one another to create the most jaw-dropping illusions involving appearances and disappearances. Although magicians have long excelled at making small objects vanish before spectators’ eyes, they took this skill to the next level in this era. With a simple flick of the wrist, a white sheet would fall away to reveal that the woman, car, or even elephant hidden behind the curtain had suddenly disappeared.



Strobridge Lithographing Co., Cincinnati  
& New York

## **Kellar's Beautiful Production— The Queen of Roses**

1895

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.294



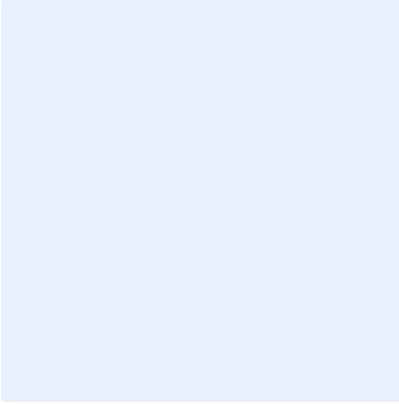
The Dangerfield Printing Co. Ltd., London

## **Maskelyne & Cooke's Mysteries— The Artist's Dream**

around 1894

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.354



The SchmitzHorning Co., Cleveland

## **Germain the Wizard**

around 1908

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.171

Born Charles Mattmueller in Cleveland, Ohio, Karl Germain got his start in magic at the age of 18, touring with a travelling troupe. This poster shows him at the height of his career. In his promotional materials, Germain is often surrounded by symbols and structures with an ancient, mystical aura, such as Egyptian columns.



Sydney Day, The Printer Ltd., Sydney

## **Hugard's Fascinating Illusion— “The Birth of the Sea Nymph”**

around 1920

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.232

In this illusion, Jean Hugard produces from a shell a nearly naked woman—an assistant in the guise of a mythological sea nymph. “The Birth of the Sea Nymph” is the magician’s spin on Chung Ling Soo’s “Birth of a Pearl” illusion. Hugard performed this trick in Coney Island, New York, between 1919 and 1926, where he also had his own theatre.

Born in Australia under the name John Gerard Rodney Boyce, Hugard came to the United States in 1916, presenting himself as Chin Sun Loo, a Chinese magician. He authored and edited over 30 magic texts and was a Dean of the Society of American Magicians.

## **The Artists Behind the Magic**

Although thousands of promotional magic posters made their way across the world between 1880 and 1930, they were produced by a very small number of printing companies. These vivid large-scale works—including the ones in this exhibition—were collaborations between the artists who designed the posters, the illustrators who drew the images, and the lithographers who operated the printing presses. Poster design attracted creators at every level, from painters to commercial designers who believed posters were the perfect vehicle for advertising.

These prints were created as temporary advertisements that would soon be papered over by posters belonging to rival magicians or competing attractions. The artists who designed them never would have imagined these works hanging in a museum.



Adolph Friedländer, Hamburg

## **Floating lady from coffin**

1913

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.496



Strobridge Lithographing Co., Cincinnati  
& New York

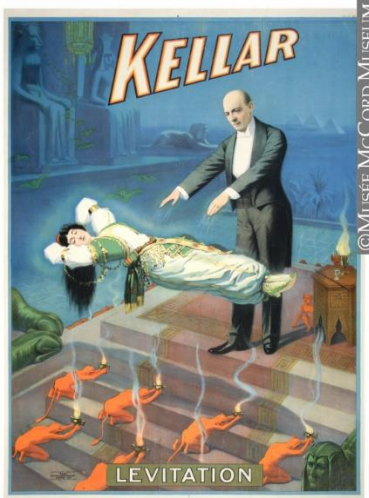
## **Thurston the Great Magician— Levitation**

1914

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.542





Strobridge Lithographing Co., Cincinnati  
& New York

## **Kellar—Levitation**

1900

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.296

“The Levitation of Princess Karnac” cemented Harry Kellar’s legacy as one of the great magicians. His assistant, dressed in “Hindu” costume, appeared to be hypnotized and suspended in mid-air above a fully lit stage, while a solid hoop passed over her.

A 1907 theatre program described the act as “the most daring and bewildering illusion,” one that “surpasses the fabled feats of the ancient Egyptian sorcerers.... The result of these labours is a veritable masterpiece of magic, the sensational marvel of the twentieth century, and the crowning achievement of Mr. Kellar’s long and brilliant career.” Ironically, although he made his name with this feat of levitation, Kellar actually stole the trick from magician John Nevil Maskelyne.

## Tricks of the Trade

The saying “a magician never reveals his secrets” has never been entirely true. The transmission of illusions, direct or indirect, happened in four main ways: through family, by way of an official succession (such as Kellar handing down his empire to Thurston), in books and publications, and finally as a result of espionage.

Some magicians would even sneak into their rivals' shows to take notes about their acts. Harry Kellar famously attended John Nevil Maskelyne's performances at the Egyptian Hall in London. He even hired Maskelyne's assistant, Paul Valadon, to uncover the secret of levitation—one of the most famous illusions of all time.



The Otis Lithograph Co., Cleveland

## Thurston's Greatest Mystery— “The Vanishing Whippet”

1929

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.534

Known for his elaborate appearing and disappearing acts, Thurston introduced “The Vanishing Whippet” as his closing number during the 1928–1929 season. As described in the show’s program, this was “the largest and most baffling illusion ever presented.... A real automobile and seven beautiful girls vanish on a brilliantly lighted stage.”



Adolph Friedländer, Hamburg

## Kassner der Grosse Zauberer

1929

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.262

# **The Story of Modern Magic**

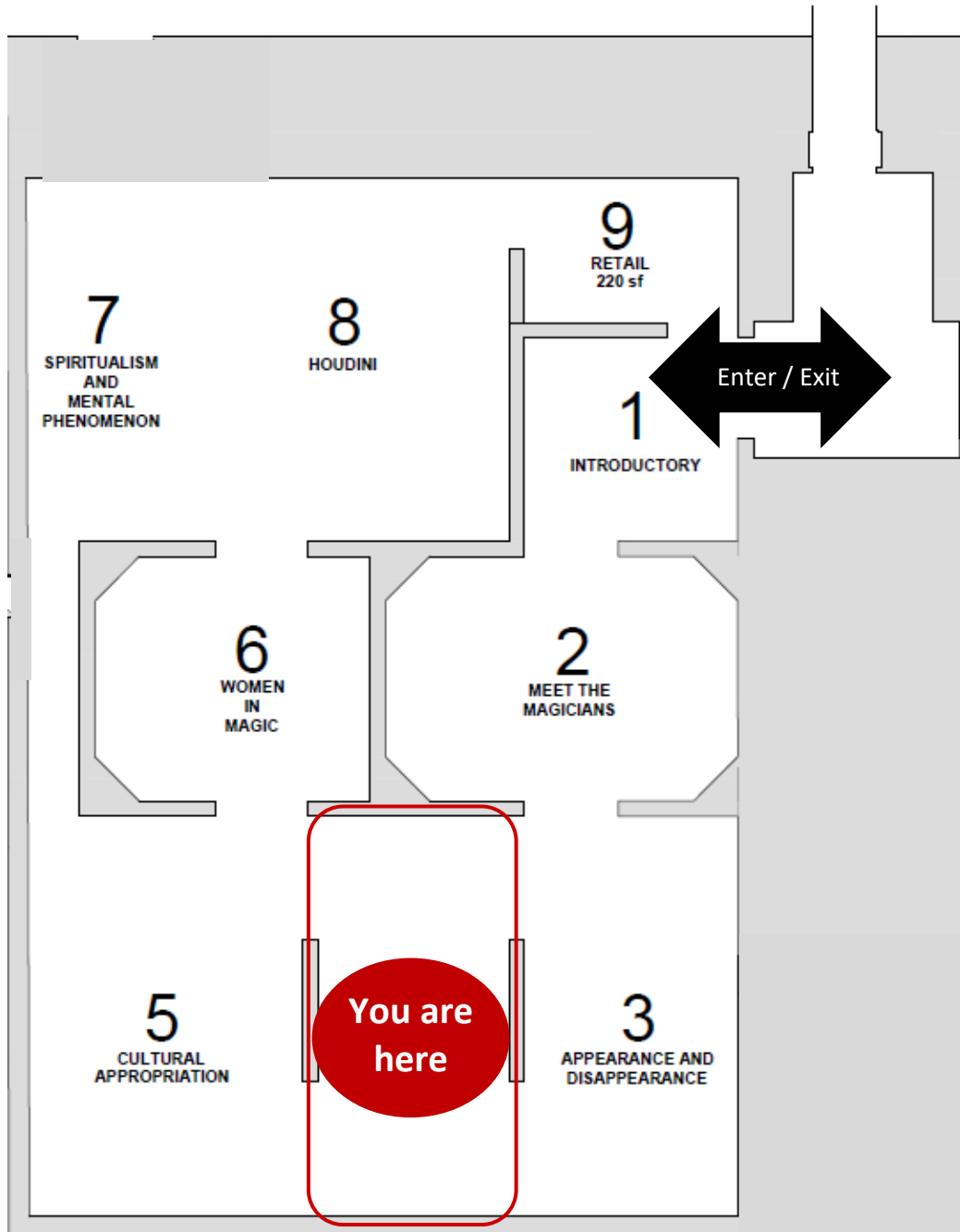
What is magic? Simply put, it is the production of phenomena that appear to defy the laws of nature. There are two approaches to this practice. The first, wizardry, comprises sorcery, mystical acts, and the supernatural. The second, secular magic, includes prestidigitation (tricks and sleight of hand), juggling, and conjuring. Advancements in science and technology in the mid-1800s pushed this latter category toward what we now call modern magic.

The late 1800s also marked a revolutionary era in show business. Minstrel, circus, and variety shows were distilled into a distinct new style known as vaudeville. With its reliance on over-the-top spectacle, this genre was fundamental in shaping the Golden Age of Magic.



There are 9 sections in this exhibition.

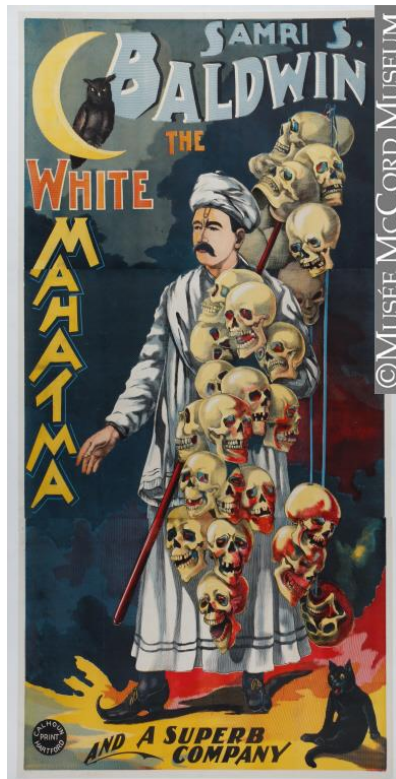
You are now entering Section 4: **Fright and Delight**



## Section 4:

# Fright and Delight

Golden Age magicians owed some of their success to advances in science and technology. Even so, the idea that these performers somehow tapped into another realm to access their powers bolstered their public reputations. Magicians cleverly played on people's fascination with mystery and the dark arts, performing illusions that involved a combination of spectacle, fear, voyeurism, and humour. The posters here reveal magicians making pacts with the devil, conjuring dark spirits, and consorting with frightening paranormal creatures.



Calhoun Printing Co., Hartford

**Samri S. Baldwin, the White Mahatma, and a Superb Company**

around 1890

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.28



Strobridge Lithographing Co., Cincinnati  
& New York

## **Kellar**

1899

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.299

Here, the dapper Harry Kellar links arms in a toast with a grinning, devilish figure. This character's distinctive red hat and cape suggest he is likely Mephistopheles from the German story of Faust.

This tale inspired many artists. According to legend, in the 1500s, a man named Dr. Faust signed a pact with the devil. He received universal knowledge and access to all forbidden things in exchange for turning over his soul to Satan's servant Mephistopheles.





Forbes Lithograph Manufacturing Co.,  
Boston & New York

## **Herrmann's Latest Novelty—Black Art**

1889

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.205

Alexander Herrmann was one of the first magicians to use occult imagery in his advertising materials. He appears in the upper left corner of this poster, releasing an ethereal woman from his shiny top hat. Below him, a devilish being stands opposite a Jesus-like figure who holds a magic wand. The new craze of black art, billed as “Ancient and Modern Magic,” drew massive audiences to Herrmann’s shows, where they might witness a decapitation— and perhaps experience a visit from the devil himself.



Strobridge Lithographing Co., Cincinnati  
& New York

## **Thurston the Great Magician— Arrow Shot Through a Girl's Body**

around 1910

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.518



The Otis Lithograph Co., Cleveland

## **Carter the Great—A Night in China**

1926

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.88



The National Printing and Engraving Co.,  
New York, Chicago, St. Louis

**Fredrik the Great, World  
Renowned Magician—Direction of  
A.M. Roberts**

around 1910

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.161



Imprimerie Harfort, Paris

**Harold présente la plus terrifiante  
des expériences—Le coupeur de  
têtes**

around 1940

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.194



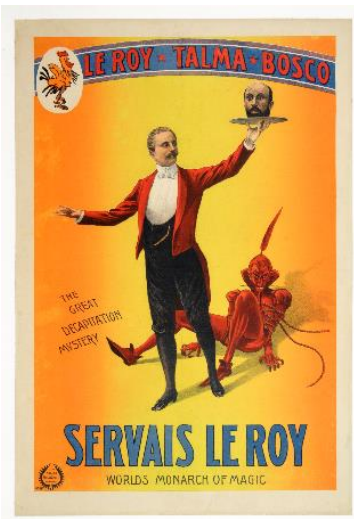
The Metropolitan Printing Co., New York

## **Adelaide Herrmann and Company**

around 1905

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.207



Adolph Friedländer, Hamburg

## **Le Roy, Talma, Bosco—World's Monarchs of Magic**

1907

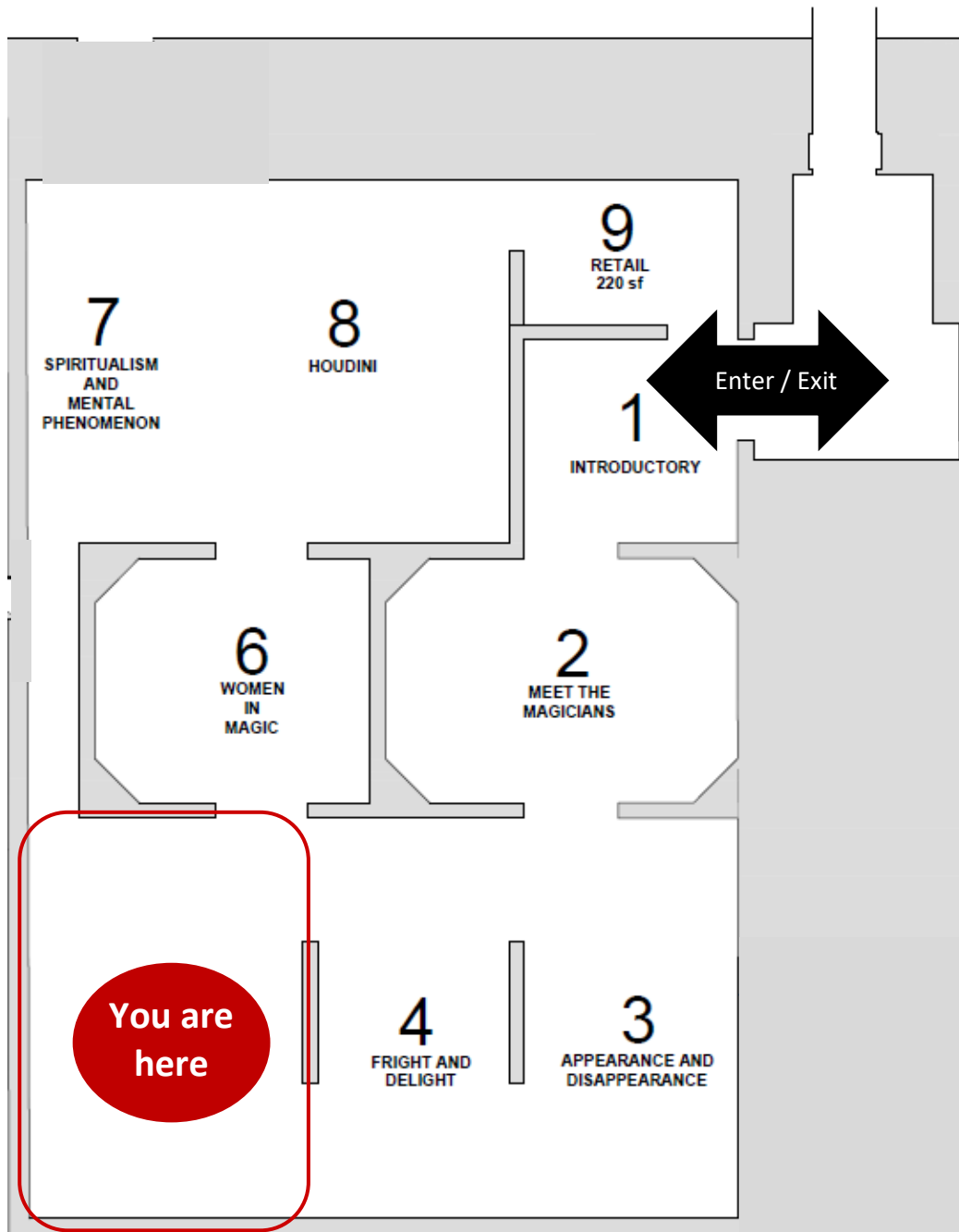
chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.322



There are 9 sections in this exhibition.

You are now entering Section 5:  
**Cultural Appropriation in Magic**



## Section 5:

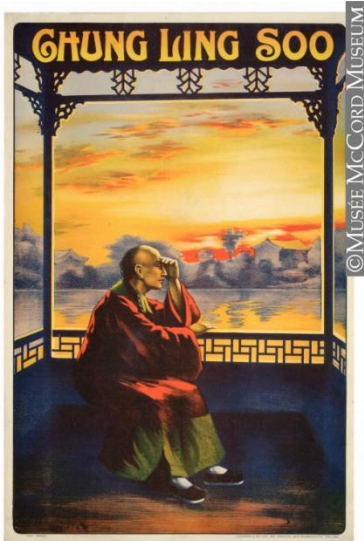
# Cultural Appropriation in Magic

Orientalism—exaggerated, often condescending representations of Eastern cultures—swept the Western imagination in the late 1800s. The Golden Age of Magic, in spite of all its cultural advances, also reinforced colonialist attitudes of the time.

Although immigration was at an all-time high in America, the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act barred new Chinese immigrants from entering the United States. At the same time, members of the upper-middle classes filled their homes with Eastern fashions and décor, such as silk kimonos and pagoda-inspired furniture.

Magicians, always eager to capitalize on a trend, brought Orientalism and all its trappings into their acts through lavish sets, costumes, and even new identities. They created a fantasy for their audiences, presenting artificial constructions of cultures and countries that most of their fans were not able to visit themselves.





Horrocks & Co. Ltd., Ashton-under-Lyne

## Chung Ling Soo

around 1910

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.446

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Unknown printer

## FuManchu, the Devil Doctor

1930

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.40

.





Adolph Friedländer, Hamburg

## **Handy-Bandy, the Oriental Sorcerer**

1927

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.193

.



Latscha, Paris

## **Okito**

1928

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.35

Okito—born Theo Bamberg—began performing magic before he was 11 years old. He was a member of the famous Bamberg family—one of the most illustrious magic dynasties in the world. When he was 18, however, Theo began to lose his hearing. This prompted him to create the stage persona “Okito”—a name he came up with by rearranging the

letters in “Tokio.” The character of Okito could only speak Japanese, which meant that he could perform completely silent stage shows in Europe and America. As this poster reveals, his persona combined references from multiple cultures.



The Otis Lithograph Co., Cleveland

**Carter the Great Sweeps the Secret of the Sphinx and Marvels of the Tomb of Old King Tut to the Modern World**

1926

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.89

Charles Joseph Carter (1874–1936) won his fame as a master magician by travelling extensively throughout the world. Between 1900 and 1936, “Carter the Great” made eight world tours. He travelled mainly in the East, and he drew on his time there in his advertising posters. The imagery often blends several different cultural influences—from

Egyptian pyramids to Indian turbans. He carried 22 tons of equipment, or “ponderous impedimenta”(a phrase from one of his lithographs), from country to country by ship, and through India by oxcart. Carter’s friends admired the massive scale of his sets; to that end, Harry Kellar once wrote, “Don’t change your show, Charlie, just keep it big as hell and paint it once a year.”



The Otis Lithograph Co., Cleveland

## **Carter the Great—The World’s Weird Wonderful Wizard**

1926

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.79

## A MAGICIAN'S TAKE

“This three-sheet beautifully dominates any wall it resides on. I love it for its composition: a contemplative Carter gazing softly into his all-knowing crystal ball while playful chaos tumbles around him. How can any viewer not be intrigued?

In 1925, Carter found himself halfway around the world in India, and at odds with his printer in Chicago, who refused to fulfill a massive print order. Without enough advertising, Carter was forced to cancel the rest of his fifth world tour.

As a result, Carter struck a new relationship with the Otis Lithograph Company of Cleveland. Eighteen months later, this poster is one of the early results of their new partnership.”

—Julie Eng, Magician

Photo: © May Truong, 2019

## **“Marvellous Chinese Conjurer” Chung Ling Soo**

One of the most successful magicians of the Golden Age was known as Chung Ling Soo. Born William Ellsworth Campbell Robinson, Soo expertly pandered to his audiences' expectations about Chinese culture with his exaggerated impersonation of a Chinese magician. He understood that people did not want to see a genuine Chinese magic show; they wanted an imitation that would fuel their fantasies.

Many magicians assumed Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and other racialized identities in their acts, donning glossy black wigs and applying greasepaint to their faces. Robinson prided himself on what he believed was an “authentic” imitation. He modeled his identity closely on a real Chinese magician by the name of Ching Ling Foo, whom he had seen perform in the United States. Robinson did not speak on stage but mastered pantomime, punctuating each illusion with expressive gestures and dramatic poses.



J. Weiner Ltd., London

## **Chung Ling Soo, around 1908**

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.436



J. Weiner Ltd., London

## **The Chung Ling Soo Mysteries**

around 1916

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.444

## **Chung Ling Soo and the Deadly Bullet Catch**

Soo's death was as dramatic as his life in magic: he died on stage performing his dangerous "bullet catch" trick. In this act, which he had performed for years, he would stand before firing guns and catch their bullets in a china plate. Before the performance, the announcer would boom, "Ladies and gentlemen, if you please... Chung Ling Soo now demonstrates how he was condemned by the Boxers during the rebellion, and executed by firing squad. How he defied their bullets! And again, tonight, on our stage just as in Peking, many years ago."

On March 23, 1918 at 10:45 pm, the guns fired, and Chung Ling Soo crumpled. Although he had never before uttered a word during his performances, that night he cried out audibly in perfect English, "Oh, my God. Something's happened. Lower the curtain." His true identity was revealed only after his death.



## **At Home with a Magician: Julie Eng**

Runtime: 4 min. 38 sec.

Meet Julie Eng, the executive director of Magicana, a Toronto-based arts organization dedicated to the advancement of magic. She's also a magician.

Watch her reflect on growing up in a household filled with magic, and listen to her story about her father, Tony Eng, and the controversy surrounding his former stage costume.

And watch Julie talk about the symbolism in one of her favourite posters in the exhibition, The Chung Ling Soo Mysteries (on display in this gallery).





## **Activity station: Make Your Own Magic Poster**

Every magician in the Golden Age had a brand. Houdini filled his posters with images of himself performing dangerous feats and baffling illusions. Kellar brought viewers into a different world, crowding his posters with imps and devilish beings.

What is YOUR magic brand? Create your stage persona using the symbol legend, write your tagline (sell yourself!), and share it on social media.

### **THE BOOK OF KNOWLEDGE**

Knowledge and training; this book is a manual of black magic and dark arts (in the posters, the devil is often peering over the magician's shoulder interpreting this text).

### **OWLS**

Knowledge; a bird of the night, the owl is also a symbol of death and darkness.

### **DUCKS**

Immortality.

## **GEESE**

Vigilance and guardedness.

## **GRASSHOPPERS**

Fertility and luck.

## **SKULLS**

Honour after death.

## **DEVILS**

The supernatural transfer of magical and mystical knowledge.

## **RABBITS**

Prosperity and abundance; rabbits are also a universal symbol of magic.

## **CRYSTAL BALLS**

Mind-reading and seeing the future.

## **PYRAMIDS AND THE SPHINX**

Secret-keeping; the Sphinx is the guardian of secrets and mysteries.

## **BLACK CAT**

Sending messages; black cats have the ability to guide spells to the correct person.

## **PIG**

Fortune and fertility, as well as overindulgence and greed.

## **COCKATOO**

Spontaneity and fearlessness.

**Presented in the table case, stationed in the center of the section, are the following contents:**

## **The Imitation Game: From Ching Ling Foo to Chung Ling Soo**

The photographs and ephemera in this case reveal just how far impersonators would go in order to bolster the ruse of their false identities. The story of the Chinese magician Ching Ling Foo is crucial to understanding the social phenomenon of magician-impersonators. Foo was the first modern East Asian magician to achieve world fame, and he brought many illusions to American audiences. After Chung Ling Soo (or William Robinson) saw Foo perform, he challenged Foo to a public duel in order to reveal who was the superior magician. When Foo failed to show up, Chung Ling Soo claimed his legacy as the so-called “Original Chinese Conjuror.”

- 1. Chung Ling Soo letterhead with inscription and signature (signed by Soo’s son Hector Robinson)**

1910

paper stationery

David Ben Collection

- 2. Unknown maker, British  
Chung Ling Soo promotional postcard**

around 1910  
postcard  
David Ben Collection

3. Unknown maker, British  
**Chung Ling Soo with Suee Seen and Bamboo Flower**  
around 1910  
postcard  
David Ben Collection

4. Unknown maker, British  
**Chung Ling Soo promotional postcard**  
around 1910  
postcard  
David Ben Collection

5. A.M. Wilson (publisher)  
***The Sphinx*, Vol. XIII, No. 2, Featuring Chung Ling Soo,**  
**April 15, 1914**  
magazine  
David Ben Collection

6. Unknown photographer  
**Jean Hugard, "The Birth of the Sea Nymph"**  
around 1917  
gelatin silver print

## David Ben Collection

Here, Jean Hugard performs an illusion dressed as one of his alter egos, "Chin Sun Loo." In this trick, called "The Birth of the Sea Nymph," an assistant materializes from a large oyster shell. As this photograph shows, magicians would devise lavish stage props and set artistry for their acts.

### 7. Unknown photographer

#### **Promotional portrait of Ching Ling Foo**

around 1915

gelatin silver print

David Ben Collection

### 8. A.M. Wilson (publisher)

#### ***The Sphinx*, Vol. XIII, No. 4, Featuring Harry Kellar and Ching Ling Foo, June 15, 1914**

magazine

David Ben Collection

### 9. **Advertisement for Rush Ling Toy, 1916**

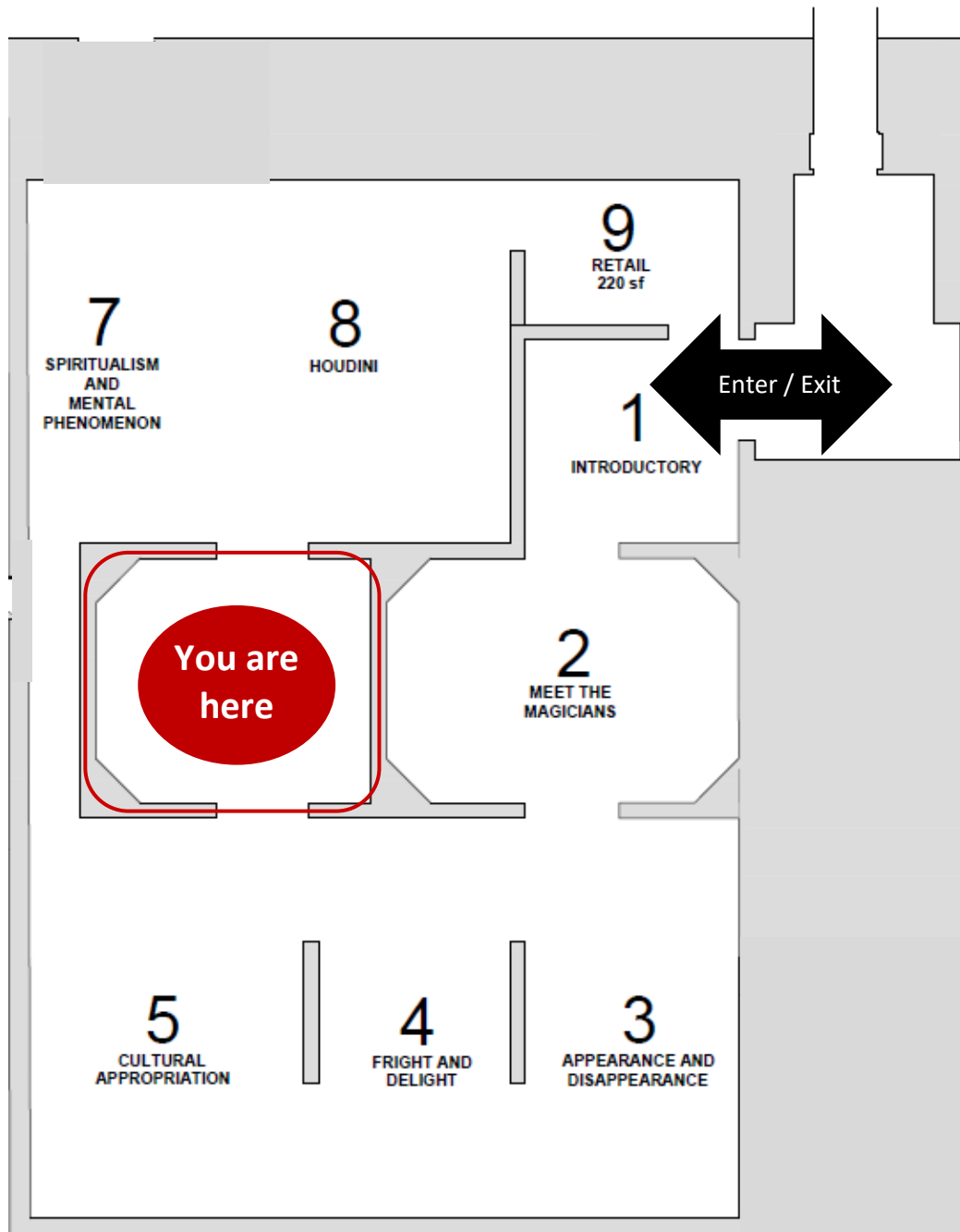
newspaper

David Ben Collection



There are 9 sections in this exhibition.

You are now entering Section 6: **Women in Magic**





## Section 6:

# Women in Magic

Magicians make women levitate and vanish; they impale them and set them ablaze; they saw them in half; they stab, decapitate, bind, and dismember them. In a performance, the magician is in the position of absolute power. This power is a recurring trope in posters that portray the male magician as having complete control over the body of his female assistant.

By the early 1900s, women were more visible in public life, and a number of them moved beyond the role of “lovely assistant.” Magic allowed female magicians like Mercedes Talma, Adelaide Herrmann, and Mme Maudeena Heller to occupy a position of authority. That said, the magic world today remains quite gendered. Women only account for approximately 5 percent of the membership of magic societies.



Maurice Harfort, Paris

## **Mme Linardini dans le Supplice Indien!**

around 1925

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.335

Fright and delight were not only provoked by devils and otherworldly creatures—they were also common reactions to other cultures. Popular literature and art during the Golden Age of Magic was filled with romanticized and mostly inaccurate depictions of Indigenous people in North America. This depiction of Mme Linardini—blonde and delicately featured—contrasts with the men in the poster, who have grim expressions and wield their weapons with menace. For her signature illusion, “Torment at the Hands of the Indians,” the performer donned a blindfold and hung over a campfire. These stereotypes of Indigenous people played directly into the public’s assumptions and their fears of the unknown.



Calhoun Printing Co., Hartford

## **Miss Baldwin, a Modern Witch of Endor**

around 1890

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.29



Affiches Américaines Ch. Lévy, Paris

## Miss Marianna De Lahaye—Magie & Illusion

around 1898

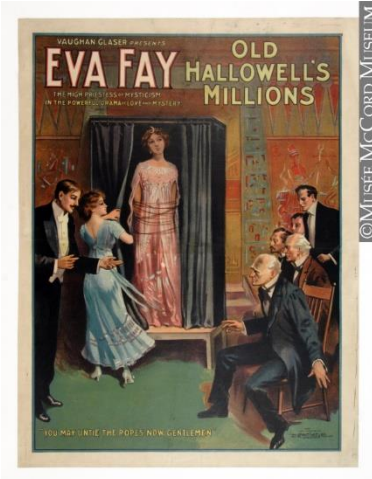
chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.558

## A Shifting Climate

In the late 1800s, there were two competing ways of understanding the role of women in society. For some, the ideal woman was compared to an “Angel in the House”—submissive, pure, and largely confined to the domestic sphere. But the empowered figure of the “New Woman” challenged that tradition. The New Woman claimed a position in the public world, joining the workforce and advocating for her rights. She drove a broad and lasting change: by 1922, women had won the right to vote in much of North America and made up almost 20 percent of the workforce.

During a performance in England in 1921, the magician P.T. Selbeit debuted a new illusion: sawing a woman in half. A master of self-promotion, Selbeit publicly offered a Suffragette leader named Sylvia Pankhurst 20 pounds a week to serve as his victim. She did not respond, but the stunt found favour with audiences.



The Courier Co., Buffalo

## **Vaughan Glaser Presents Eva Fay, the High Priestess of Mysticism**

1911

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.898



P.C. Grosser Show Print, Melbourne

## **Mme Maudeena Heller, in her Mesmeric Trance Portrayals**

around 1909

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.197

For centuries, the idea persisted that women were naturally both weak and evil. This supposedly made them susceptible to the lure of spiritualism and the dark arts. However, by the late 1800s, women magicians began to play on these suspicions in their acts. Performers such as Mme Maudeena Heller, pictured here, claimed to be

mediums. Others performed as mentalists, using quick wit and perceptiveness to dazzle their audiences. Although the popular health writer S. Weir Mitchell had argued in 1872 that a woman's "womanly usefulness was endangered by steady use of her brain," female magicians understood the strong mental powers required to perform magic. They subverted the social expectations placed upon them, outwitting and outperforming many of their male counterparts.



David Allen & Sons Ltd., Belfast

### **The Incomparable Vonetta**

around 1910

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.573



The Metropolitan Printing Co., New York

## **Adelaide Herrmann and Company**

around 1900

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.209

*“I do not wish to stand alone on the unique fact that I am the only woman prestidigitatrice on the stage today. I shall not be content until I am recognized by the public as a leader in my profession, and entirely irrespective of the question of my sex.”*

—Adelaide Herrmann

Although Adelaide Herrmann began her career in magic as her husband's assistant, she quickly became a star in her own right. Through her performances, posters, and writing, she constructed an outspoken public persona that defied the gender expectations of her time. Herrmann even played up the violent aspect of stage performance—see the poster nearby that shows her decapitating her female assistant. With

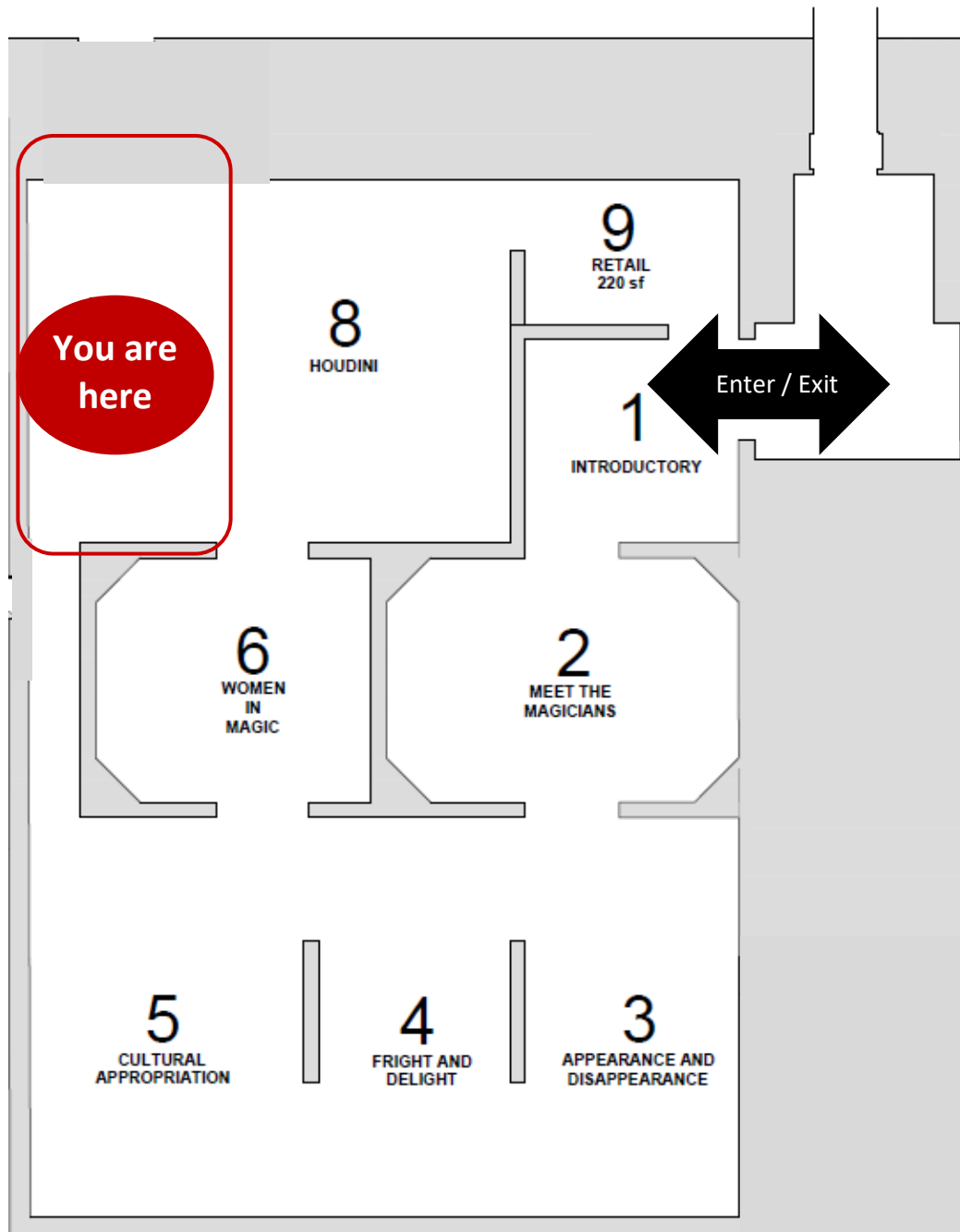
her talent and business acumen, Herrmann was an unstoppable force, and she regularly toured the major vaudeville circuits until she was in her mid-seventies.





There are 9 sections in this exhibition.

You are now entering Section 7:  
**Spiritualism and Mental Phenomena**



## Section 7:

# Spiritualism and Mental Phenomena

The belief that the soul survives after physical death is central to many religions. Spiritualism takes this one step further, claiming that the spirits of the deceased can physically connect with the world of the living. Spiritualism took off in the late 1800s and experienced a boom in response to the devastation of the First World War. Families were torn apart by the conflict, and many looked to the spirits of their loved ones for solace. They attended séances with hopes of connecting to the netherworld, and embraced new photographic technologies that promised to capture spirit visitations otherwise invisible to the human eye.

Similarly, “mentalism,” an ability to manipulate the mind that was so powerful it was considered magical, was incredibly popular at this time. Mentalists can make predictions about your future based on your physical appearance, or tell the story of your past by listening to the way you speak. They analyzed human behaviour so accurately that they convinced audiences of their connection to a mystical realm.



Av Yaga, Bombay

## **Alexander, the Man Who Knows**

1915

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.3

Why do we go to fortune tellers and have our palms and cards read? Because we long to know the future and seek answers to age-old problems in life and love. Enter Alexander, “the Man Who Knows.” Born Claude Alexander Conlin Sr. in 1880, he was perhaps the most successful telepath and “seer” of the Golden Age. Alexander had excellent business sense: he sold his iconic crystal balls, gave private readings, and even ran a question and answer column in a local newspaper.

# Mentalism

There are four categories of illusions involving mentalism:

1. TELEPATHY

the ability to read a person's thoughts

2. CLAIRVOYANCE

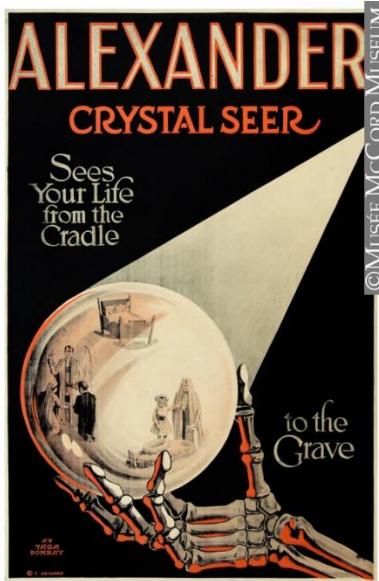
the ability to see things that are hidden

3. PRECOGNITION

the ability to predict the future

4. TELEKINESIS

the ability to move physical objects with mental strength alone



C. Alexander, Av Yaga, Bombay

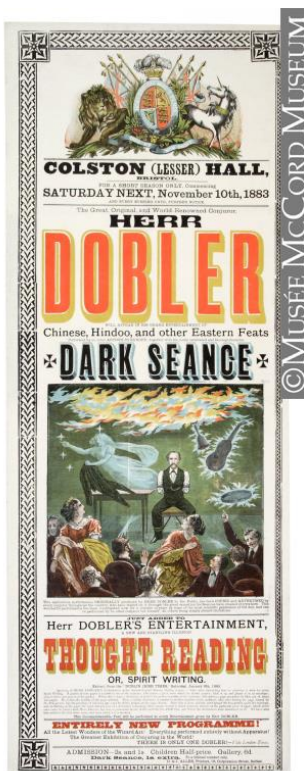
## Alexander, Crystal Seer, Sees Your Life from the Cradle to the Grave

1915

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.7

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D. & J. Allen, Belfast

## The Great, Original, and World Renowned Conjuror, Herr Dobler, will appear in his Grand Entertainment of Chinese, Hindoo, and other Eastern Feats

1883

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.140



Strobridge Lithographing Co., Cincinnati  
& New York

## **Kellar and his Perplexing Cabinet Mysteries**

1894

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.301

### **👉 A MAGICIAN'S TAKE**

“This extraordinary poster stops me every time. Perplexing is an understatement. Animated imps uncrating spirits; dark-world creatures lurking in line. And just what are those ‘Little Men’ in morning coats and spats discussing?”

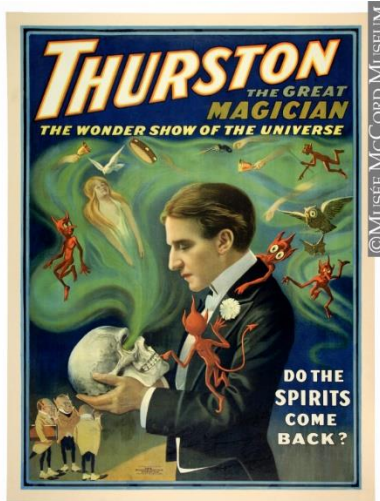
Imps and underworld figures have long been associated with magic posters—perhaps representing a deal with the devil in exchange for power. We have Kellar’s manager, Dudley McAdow, to thank for dreaming up such characters for this 1894 poster. And what an imagination he possessed! He is also responsible for the early use of imps as seen in Kellar’s striking portrait poster (also from 1894) found earlier in the exhibition.

I love how the Little Men have aged over the years, getting a bit more plump and wearing specs, as they migrate with the magic mantle, which was passed from Kellar to Thurston when Thurston bought Kellar's show in 1907. Look for them in the Thurston poster nearby, as he gazes intensely into the spirit world. The Little Men only appeared the one time with Kellar here, but they must have signed a more lucrative deal with Thurston because they start carrying a ledger in their many appearances later in his posters—perhaps keeping accounts of secrets shared!”

—Julie Eng, Magician

Photo: © May Truong, 2019





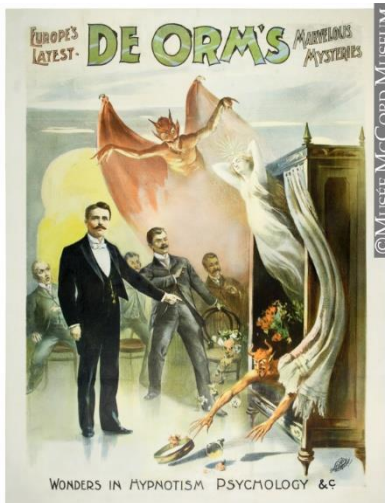
Strobridge Lithographing Co., Cincinnati & New York

## Thurston the Great Magician—Do the Spirits Come Back?

1915

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.421



Liebler & Maass, New York

## Europe's Latest—De Orm's Marvelous Mysteries

around 1900

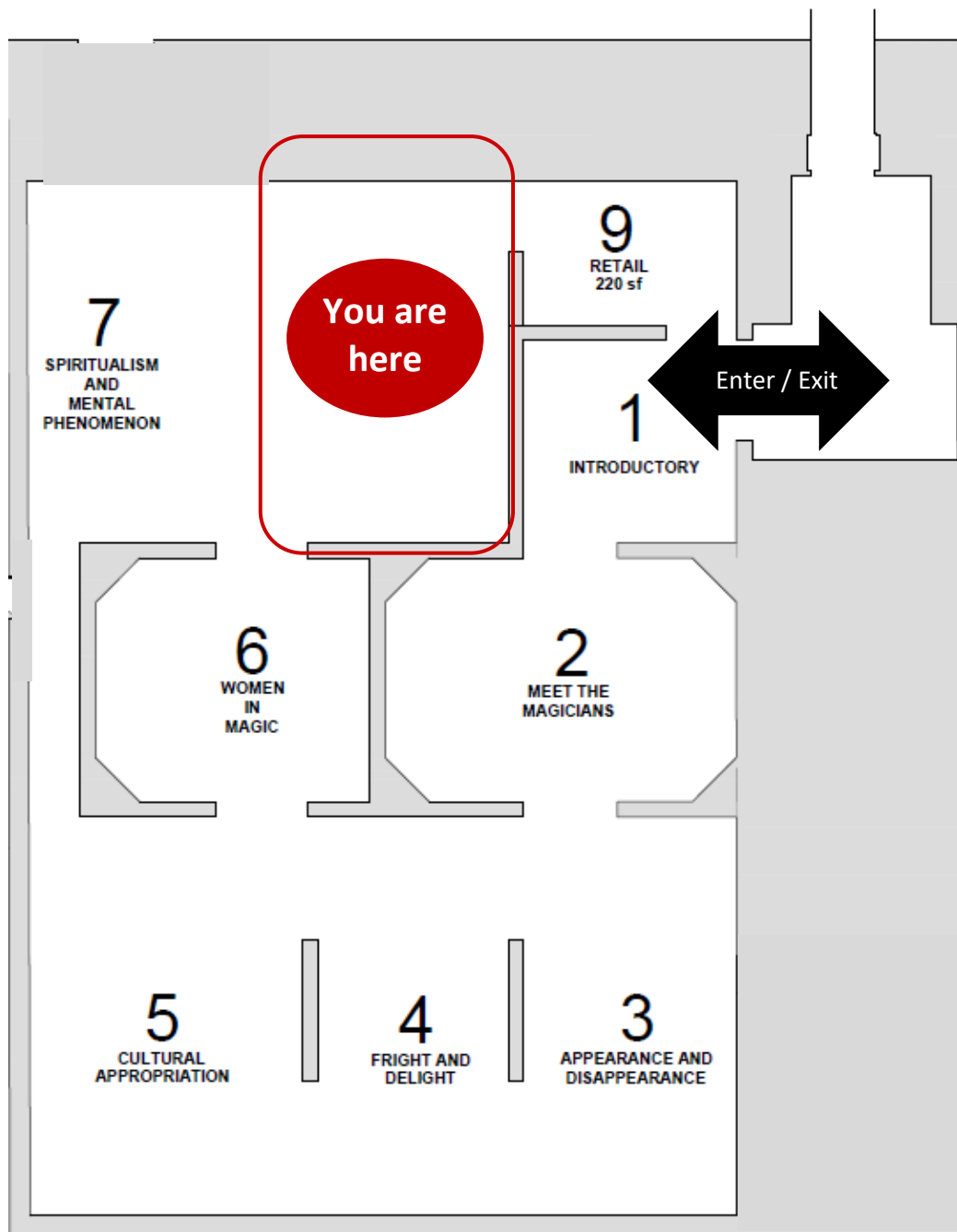
chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.139

This poster claims to reveal “wonders in hypnotism and psychology.” We may consciously understand that we cannot really be “hypnotized,” but that does not stop us from wanting to give it a try. The idea that we cannot always trust our minds is unsettling—but also, for some, deeply alluring.

There are 9 sections in this exhibition.

You are now entering Section 8:  
**Harry Houdini: The Master of Escape**



## Section 8:

# Harry Houdini: The Master of Escape

Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw once said that Harry Houdini had a place beside Jesus Christ and Sherlock Holmes as one of the three most famous people, real or imagined, in the history of the world.

Have you ever accused anyone of “pulling a Houdini”? Houdini’s name is associated so powerfully with escape artistry that it has become a figure of speech. He was a short but muscular man, and his natural athleticism was one of the keys to his success. He started his career performing card tricks, but things really took off when he debuted his escape act. He presented other largescale illusions like the “Vanishing Elephant,” and went on to become a film star and producer.

Houdini’s magnetic personality was central to his fame, and the posters in this gallery reflect his self-confidence and business sense. He spent as much time promoting himself as he did escaping—perhaps one reason that his legacy endures to this day.



Strobridge Lithographing Co., Cincinnati  
& New York

## Houdini Presents His Own Original Invention

1916

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.223

In 1913, Houdini debuted one of his most harrowing escape tricks: the legendary Chinese water torture cell. The illusion consisted of three parts. Houdini's assistants would:

- 1) Lock his feet in stocks;
- 2) Suspend him from his ankles, in mid-air;
- 3) Lower him into a glass tank overflowing with water, and lock the cell.

Then a curtain would descend. The assistants would stand by with axes, ready to break the glass if necessary. Two minutes of suspense followed, fear and anticipation building in the theatre. Just in time, Houdini would burst through the curtain, smiling, and take a bow.



Howard K. Elcock, Strobridge  
Lithographing Co., Cincinnati & New York

## Harry Houdini's Original Creation

1914

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.222



Heinrich Barkow, Altona

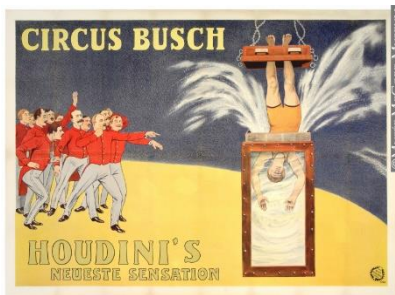
## **Der Mann in der Kanne—Direktor Kassner**

around 1920

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.254

Houdini's amazing feats inspired a slew of imitations. Here, magician Alois "Direktor" Kassner advertises his take on Houdini's escape act, "The Man in the Can." Although many copycats achieved success, none of them ever reached the level of Houdini.



Adolph Friedländer, Hamburg

## **Circus Busch, Houdini's Neueste Sensation**

1913

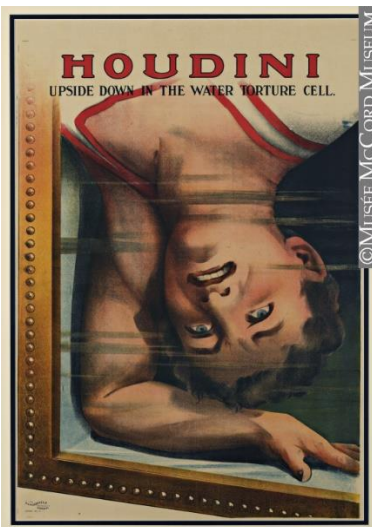
chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.228



# The Tragic Death of Houdini

On October 22, 1926, Houdini was in Montreal, Quebec, backstage at a show. A student asked him if he knew how to sustain blows to his abdomen without injury. Houdini said yes, but before he could brace himself, the student delivered the punch. Just over a week later, the great Houdini was dead. His appendix had ruptured and doctors were unable to address the peritonitis that followed. Harry Houdini died on October 31—Halloween, which is also National Magic Day. Thousands showed up to mourn at his funeral, and each year on October 31, magicians gather at his gravesite in Queens, New York, to pay their respects to the master of escape.



The Dangerfield Printing Co. Ltd., London

## **Houdini Upside-Down in the Water Torture Cell**

around 1915

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.229



The Donaldson Litho. Co., Newport

## **Escape Artist**

around 1915

chromolithograph

McCord Museum, M2014.128.483

Stock posters, produced in mass quantities by printers all over North America, were very popular by the early 1900s. They depict the key characteristics of standard tricks performed by different kinds of magicians—in this case, we see an escape artist. Their layout typically included a blank space for performers to add their names and information about the location and timing of upcoming events.





Unknown filmmaker

## **Houdini playing cards**

around 1920

video (black & white, silent, 2 min.)



## **Houdini straitjacket**

around 1910

video (black & white, silent, 1 min. 35 sec.)

Magicana

This footage hints at the range of Houdini's magical practice. In the first clip, Houdini goes back to his roots: card tricks. In the second, he performs his infamous straitjacket escape. Public, outdoor escapes became an important feature of his appearances in each city. Houdini's fearlessness in the face of physical threats was a large part of his mass appeal, and word of his arrival would draw crowds of thousands of people.



Unknown maker

## **Houdini straitjacket**

around 1910

canvas jacket with leather trim, brass buckles and straps

Collection of Dr. Sheldon Jafine

In 1896, Houdini saw his first straitjacket—the garment that inspired one of his most impressive acts. Assistants would strap Houdini in and suspend him upside down from a height. Houdini would then twist and shimmy until he escaped. He performed this feat in full view of thousands of onlookers. On one occasion, high winds threw him against the side of a building. This led to the addition of a safety wire, so his assistants could pull him away from danger if necessary. Watch Houdini escape for an enthralled audience in the film clip nearby.

**Presented in the table case, stationed in the center of the section, are the following contents:**

## **The Cult of Harry Houdini**

Harry Houdini

born Budapest, Austria-Hungary (now Hungary), 1874

died Detroit, Michigan, United States, 1926

1. E.P. Dutton & Co. (publisher)

**Miracle Mongers & Their Methods**

1920

book

McCord Museum, M2014.128.725

2. Will Goldston, Ltd. (publisher)

**Magical Rope Ties & Escapes**

1920

book

McCord Museum, M2014.128.723

3. George Routledge and Sons, Ltd. (publisher)

**Handcuff Secrets**

1910

book

McCord Museum, M2014.128.717

United States Postal Service (printer)

4. **Stamped envelope and sheet of 20 first edition Houdini postage stamps, July 3, 2002**

sheet of postage stamps

David Ben Collection

5. Teral Garrett

**Portrait of Harry Houdini**

around 1910

gelatin silver print

David Ben Collection

Elsewhere in this exhibition, there is a large portrait poster of Harry Houdini based on this photograph. The likeness is striking, and the artists expertly captured Houdini's expression of confidence and determination. Yet there is one key difference between the two images. In the poster, his hands are smooth and unscarred. Here, they are the opposite. When Houdini was young, he studied lock picking. This skill came in handy for the future master of escape. Night after night, year after year, Houdini subjected his hands to vicious abuse. Nobody said escaping from handcuffs, restraints, and locked cells was a painless pursuit!

6. **Houdini's personalized powder puff**

around 1910

McCord Museum, M2014.128.653.1–.2

**7. Handcuffs and key used by Harry Houdini**

around 1945

McCord Museum, M2014.128.691.1–.2

From around 1895 onward, Houdini began locking himself in handcuffs in his routines. He used a variety of methods and techniques to accomplish his escapes, including lock picks, secret assistance, and sometimes, brute force.

**8. Campbell & Gray (photographers)**

Active United Kingdom, late 1800s–early 1900s

J. Beagles & Co. (publisher)

Active United Kingdom, late 1800s–early 1900s

**Houdini in chains**

around 1910

postcard

David Ben Collection

# Magic in Toronto

9. Unknown photographer  
**Exterior of Arcade Magic Store, Toronto**  
around 1930  
gelatin silver print  
David Ben Collection

For decades, every magician who passed through Toronto dropped by the Arcade Magic and Novelty Shop. Located in the former Arcade Building at Yonge and Queen Streets, the shop started as the Japanese Novelty Store. It began carrying magic tricks during the First World War. Special guests ranged from internationally acclaimed performers like Harry Houdini and Harry Blackstone to beloved local magicians like Sid Lorraine and David Ben. These individuals would sign cards and visitor books and sometimes even put on a show. Although the store closed in the 1980s, it remains an important cultural touchstone for Toronto magicians.

10. **Visitors' book for the Arcade Magic Store, Toronto**  
1941  
signed guest book  
David Ben Collection

11. **Flyer for magic supplies, Toronto**  
around 1920

printed flyer  
David Ben Collection

12. Sid Lorraine (Sidney Richard Johnson)  
born St. Neots, Huntingdonshire, England, 1905  
died Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 1989

**Collected Secrets**

1923–24  
notebook  
David Ben Collection

13. **Streamline playing cards**

around 1940  
autographed deck of cards  
David Ben Collection

14. Sid Lorraine (Sidney Richard Johnson)  
born St. Neots, Huntingdonshire, England, 1905  
died Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 1989

**Just Scraps from Everywhere**

1923  
scrapbook  
David Ben Collection

15. Murray A. Sumner  
Canadian, 1902–1987

**Loose pages from *Notes on Tricks***

1929  
pocket notebook  
David Ben Collection

You have completed the exhibition. Please visit the retail shop and return this guide upon exiting.

