

## ILLUSIONS THE ART OF MAGIC

February 22, 2020

**CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS: VISUAL ART, MEDIA LITERACY, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY, HISTORY, SOCIAL STUDIES AND HUMANITIES**

Daring feats of magic and baffling illusions, as well as the colourful personas of magicians, have captivated the public imagination for centuries. *Illusions: The Art of Magic* will transport students back in time to the exciting period between 1880 and 1930 now known as the Golden Age of Magic.

As they travel through this exhibition, students will learn how advances in print technology in the late 1800s enabled the mass production of vibrant, colourful posters. By engaging with print material, film clips, and magical artifacts, students will explore printmaking techniques and contemplate important topics like cultural appropriation and the role of women in the world of magic.



Comedians de Mephisto Co. Allied with Le Roy, Talma, Bosco. Adolph Friedländer. 1905, 20th century. 186.5 x 266.5 cm. Purchase, funds graciously donated by La Fondation Emmanuelle Gattuso. M2014.128.318 © McCord Museum





Miss Marianna De Lahaye – Magic & Illusion. Charles Lévy, About 1898, 19th century. 124.4 x 89.7 cm. Purchase, funds graciously donated by La Fondation Emmanuelle Gattuso. M2014.128.558 © McCord Museum.

### ACTIVITY

- Create a postcard of one of the places, real or imagined, that you have observed in these posters. Use a colour palette similar to the poster's to create your illustration.

Significant advances in printing technology enabled performers to mass produce colourful and dynamic advertisements. Chromolithography, developed in the late 1800s, was a printmaking technique that required signification collaboration among artists who would trace the lettering, create a black outline, and then fill in the colour. They printed colours in a specific order: Yellow, Red, Blue, then Black.

Note: layering a screen run of yellow over a screen run of blue across the middle of the poster creates a green tone.

- How do you think the artists achieve the orange tone at the bottom? How do you know this?

This exhibition introduces visitors to the leading performers of the Golden Age of Magic, including Harry Houdini, the famous escape artist; Adelaide Hermann, the only woman magician of her time to perform the “bullet catch” trick; and William Ellsworth Robinson, an American magician who went by the stage name “Chung Ling Soo.

Use the Critical Analysis Process to explore the works in this exhibition.

### DESCRIPTION:

- What is your first impression of this poster?
- What do you think about when you see these posters all together?

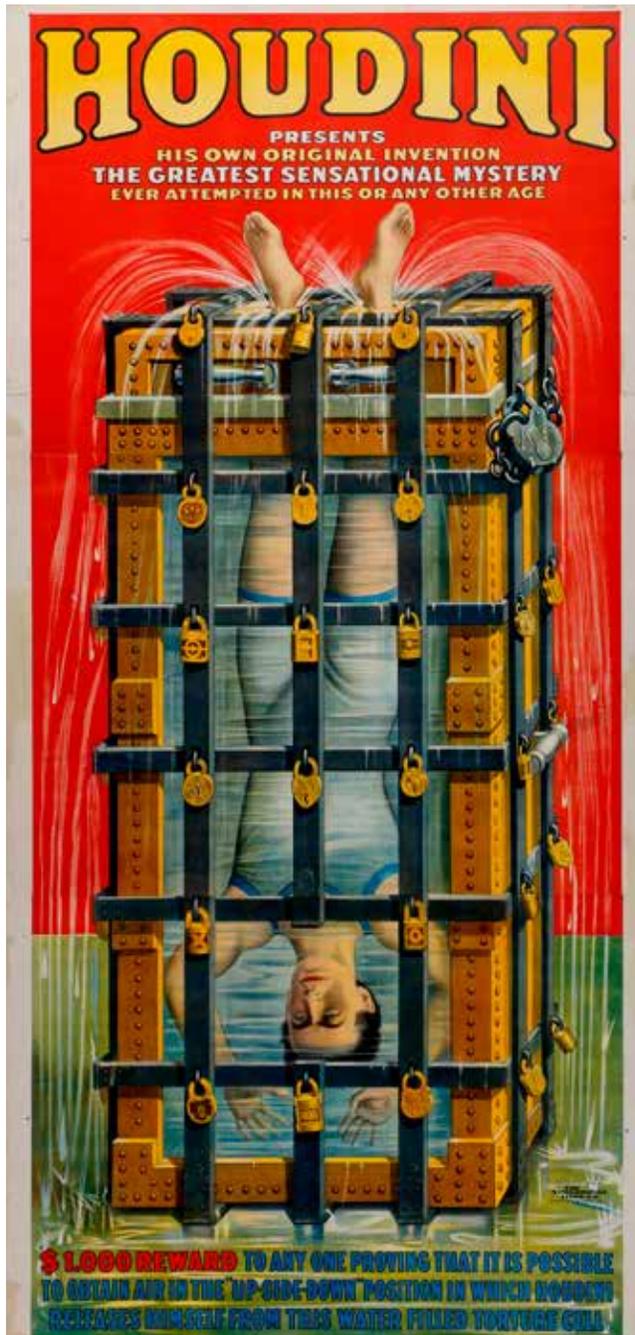
### CULTURAL CONTEXT:

- What do the posters reveal about the dominant ideas of this period, and about the ways in which these ideas were represented in art and advertisements?
- Do you notice any similarities to the way advertisements work today?

### ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION:

- What is taking place in the different images on this poster?
- How are women depicted in this poster? What do you notice about their costumes?
- How is the colour organized on this poster? What colour stands out most? Why do you think the artists combined the colours in this way?





Houdini Presents His Own Original Invention. Strobridge Lithographing Company 1916, 20th century. 214.1 x 101.6 cm. Purchase, funds graciously donated by La Fondation Emmanuelle Gattuso M2014.128.223 © McCord Museum

## HARRY HOUDINI

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. Houdini's magnetic personality was central to his fame and he spent as much time promoting himself as he did performing magic.

In 1913, Houdini debuted one of his most harrowing escape tricks: the legendary Chinese water torture cell. This illusion consisted of three parts. First, Houdini's assistants would lock his feet in stocks, then they would suspend him in mid-air from his ankles, and lastly they would lower him into a glass tank overflowing with water and lock the cell. The curtains would then descend. Anticipation and fear would build in the theatre. After two long minutes, Houdini would burst through the curtains!

### ACTIVITY:

Magicians like Houdini were not only great performers but capitalized on the public's fascination with their compelling personas. Through the fantastical imagery in their posters, magicians transformed themselves into some of the world's most mesmerizing celebrities. In this activity, have students imagine themselves as magicians with their own unique stage personas.

- Write an introduction for your performance. How would you introduce yourself to the crowd?
- How would you build anticipation for your death-defying performance? How would you perform the introduction?
- Create a poster that advertises your trick. What imagery would draw a large audience to your show?
- Take your inspiration from the exhibition. What would your poster say about you?

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