Summer of Magic
On view June 15 – September 16, 2018

Selected PR Images

An enchanting summer awaits visitors to the New-York Historical Society with Summer of Magic, an exciting, museum-wide line-up of mesmerizing displays, evening programs, family activities, and free films that offer a historical perspective to the spectacle of magic and the magicians who became famous performing death-defying feats. From June 15 – September 16, visitors will explore rarely exhibited artifacts from the Golden Age of Magic—including unique items from David Copperfield’s private collection that Harry Houdini used to make his thrilling escapes—plus meet historical reenactors portraying the great illusionists of the past, try their hand at magic tricks, and learn about mind reading, women in magic, tragic performances, unsolved mysteries, and more.

Handcuffs used by Harry Houdini for the London Daily Mirror challenge, 1904
Copperfield Collection
Photo: Homer Liwag

Handcuffed, restrained in straitjackets, buried alive, locked in chests and thrown into the ocean, New York’s very own Harry Houdini (formerly Ehrich Weiss, 1874–1926) captured the world’s imagination and inspired future daredevil escape artists and illusionists far and wide. It took locksmith Nathaniel Hart five years to make the cuffs, and it took a challenge published in the London Daily Mirror to get Houdini’s commitment to attempt an escape. For some the whole affair was a publicity stunt. As for Houdini, he thought: “It was one of the hardest, but at the same time one of the fairest, tests” he ever attempted.
In 1894, Harry and Bess Houdini’s first escape act brought the newlyweds a touring contract with the Welsh Brothers Circus. The act involved one of them stepping with tied hands into a sack that was then tied closed and placed inside this locked trunk. A curtain was drawn and three claps (or seconds) later, when reopened, the couple would have magically traded places.

When performing the Metamorphosis Trunk, the Houdinis’ heights—Harry was 5’5” and Bess considerably smaller—probably helped the quick transition.

As part of the Milk Can escape act—which premiered in St. Louis in 1908—Houdini encouraged his audiences to hold their breath while he attempted to escape from this colossal locked can filled to the brim with water or, in some towns, local beer. Fearing an overzealous assistant—often picked from the crowd—would use the can’s handles to add more padlocks and chains, Houdini had them removed.
Three days before being locked inside a crate and thrown off a tugboat in the New York Harbor, Houdini stunned New Yorkers with a “double fold death defying” act by placing the milk can inside an iron bound chest.

When police handcuffs—or any handcuffs for that matter—proved too easy to escape from, the heavy canvas, metal rings, and reinforced leather straps of straitjackets enticed Houdini. From the first outdoor performance in Kansas City (1915) to New York, Houston, and Boston, Houdini performed suspended from cranes or tall buildings, preferably the ones housing major local newspapers.

The singing and dancing of Wilhelmina Beatrice Rahner (1876–1943), performing with the Floral Sisters on Coney Island in June 1894, captured the eyes and heart of Harry Houdini. Within weeks they were married and touring the Metamorphosis act across America. By 1900 the couple was setting box office records in London and Berlin. Working as Houdini’s assistant, Bess designed her own costumes. After Harry’s death, she briefly carried the magician’s mantle by freezing a man in ice, and conducted yearly séances to connect with her beloved husband.
Martinka Magic Shop was the earliest magic supply store in the United States and the birthplace in 1902 of the Society of American Magicians, the oldest magical society in the world. Opened by German immigrants Francis and Antonio Martinka in midtown in 1877, the shop served as a test site for new technological wonders and a gathering place for up-and-coming magicians.

Adelaide Scarcez (1853–1932) met Alexander Herrmann while he was performing in London and later married him in a ceremony at New York’s City Hall in which her betrothed produced rolls of bills from the mayor’s beard. As one of Alexander’s assistants, Adelaide first performed dressed in men’s garments. She and her husband soon learned the rich flowing fabrics of women’s costumes were advantageous for performing certain illusions. Upon her husband’s death Adelaide carried on the show and ultimately built a full repertoire as the Queen of Magic. Her most dangerous, death-defying performance was the infamous bullet catch act.
Curiosity got the better of Harry Kellar (born Heinrich Keller 1849–1922) when, as a ten-year-old druggist’s apprentice, he blew a hole in the ceiling of the shop. Despite numerous misfortunes—including losing all of his magic props in a shipwreck—Kellar booked performance halls in London, Rio, and Melbourne. Unlike his dexterous rival, Herrmann, Kellar—who was born in Pennsylvania to German immigrants—dreamed of elaborate illusions that required large stage sets and intricate machineries.

“Kellar Fools Roosevelts!” announced a New York Times headline on January 18, 1904. How did he do it? The performance involved loading the finger rings of six spectators into a pistol and firing straight at a locked wooden box. When the box was opened, it revealed a smaller locked box. When this box was opened another locked box was revealed, until the sixth was opened, containing only five of the six rings. The last ring—which on this particular occasion belonged to Theodore Roosevelt’s 12 year-old daughter—magically appeared hanging on a sash around the neck of Kellar’s favorite assistant, a white guinea pig.
A.C. Gilbert Mysto Magic Co.
**Mysto Magic Kit No. 25, ca. 1950**
Copperfield Collection
Photo: Glenn Castellano

Complete with a magician’s top hat, a sturdy wooden carrying case, and a theatrical curtain, *Mysto Magic Kit No. 25*—released in the 1950s—was most coveted by young magicians. Other companies like Chicago’s Fun Inc. and Brooklyn’s Royal Magic followed suit, producing magic supplies for all ages.

**Merv Taylor Round Birdcage Production, ca. 1960**
Copperfield Collection
Photo: Glenn Castellano

*Bird cages appearing out of thin air, and birds vanishing from cages, have long been part of magicians’ acts.*

Duffy Hudson portraying Houdini
Photo courtesy of Duffy Hudson

*Saturdays and Sundays from June 23 – August 26, New York’s magical past comes to life with historical magicians, fortune-tellers, escape artists, and other marvelous individuals from the past—all portrayed by Living Historians from the present, like Duffy Hudson as Houdini.*
Tanya Solomon, vaudeville style magician
Photo courtesy of Tanya Solomon

*Family fun takes place every weekend during the Summer of Magic. Living Historians like Tanya Solomon, a vaudeville style magician bring the past to life at the museum each weekend.*