

The history of magic and the mind

Magic is undoubtedly an ancient art. The earliest reported magic trick (the 'cup and balls' trick) is almost 5,000 years old (2,700 BC) by Dedi in ancient Egypt. The same trick was performed over 2,000 years ago in ancient Rome.

The cup and ball trick has been used for centuries since by street hustlers to con people out of money. In fact, throughout time magic has often been used to trick people into believing that the magician held some other kind of 'power', such as great gambling skill, the ability to make mechanical objects that are 'alive', or the possession of almost miraculous skills at lock-picking, psychic abilities or psychological 'mind-reading'.

Another example of an ancient magic trick is the 'Indian rope trick'. This trick has been reported to be performed in India for hundreds of years. The trick is performed outside. The magician throws a rope up into the air. The rope surprising stays standing up, reaching up into the air. The Magician's boy assistant then climbs up the rope and apparently disappears into thin air at the top. The magician then climbs up the rope and also disappears. The audience hear them argue, then the limbs of the boy all fall down to the ground. The magician comes back down, places the boy's limbs into a basket, and the live boy climbs back out.

Recent researchers have claimed that the whole story may be a myth. But others have claimed it was a genuine trick, and have explained it by the idea that the magician hypnotised all the audience at once, and performed the trick at dusk, with the low sun in the eyes, near a tree with low-hanging branches, which could have held the top of the rope up.

A lot of ancient magic came out of tricks used to cheat people at gambling. Playing cards have long been used in magic tricks. Although their exact origin is a mystery, it's widely believed that playing cards were invented in China, where they may have originally been a form of money. They would have been both the tools of gambling and the prize to be won. They then arrived in Europe, via Egypt, around the late 13th Century. The four suits of this pack were different to the ones we have today, they were polo sticks, coins, swords, and cups. The modern design originated in France in 1480.

During the sixteenth Century onwards, magic techniques began to be used to trick people into believing that amazing mechanical beings had been created. The most famous of these was the Mechanical Chess playing Turk. This was a 'clockwork' life-sized figure dressed in Eastern costume seated at a very large box with a chess board and pieces on top of it. When it was first publicly displayed in 1770, in the imperial court of Vienna, people were shocked and amazed. The 'clockwork' man could move his arms and play chess against a Human opponent. So well, in fact, that he could play it to world-class standards. The mechanical Turk was taken all over the world and played before large audiences, it even played against Napoleon and Benjamin Franklin. Of course, the Turk was really an elaborate trick, a real man was cleverly hidden inside the box, and controlled the mechanical arms.

It was, however, only in the 19th Century that magic really took off. The inventor of the magic stage show, in the modern sense, was a French clockmaker called Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin (1805-1871), who opened a theatre in which he would display mechanical animals he had created that appeared to be alive. A similar magic theatre, called the 'Egyptian Hall' was opened in London soon afterwards. Then came possibly the best known magician of all time, the escapologist Harry Houdini (1874-1926). Whilst Houdini had a range of genuine skills, such as lock-picking, that helped his performances, they were

undoubtedly also employing magic techniques for their effects.

The best modern example of the use of magic tricks to fool the public into believing that the performer has some amazing skill is mentalism. Mentalism is the branch of magic in which the performer appears to have mind-reading skills. Sometimes, however, they act like they are not a magician but are genuine mind-readers, using advanced psychological, or even psychic techniques. There are some genuine psychological techniques that can be used to apparently read what a person is thinking of, or to subtly make them choose one particular option from a list and then pretend that you can read their mind and guess which they picked. However, mentalists often embellish these techniques with props and tricks from traditional magic in order to appear more mentally skilled than they really are.

Of course, you could argue that by hiding the 'magic' nature of such performances, greater levels of wonder and amazement are provoked in the audience, and hence more fun is had. Yet I believe even if a performer takes that route, they should eventually 'come clean' and reveal to the audience if not exactly *how* the trick was done, but that at least it was a trick. Whilst we should admire the ingenuity and skill of magicians who put on honestly described performances, I believe we should remain alert to those who claim additional powers when in fact they are just using the traditional effects of trickery.