GRAND ILLUSIONS

A collector's devotion to illustrious artifacts from the golden age of magic

BY SHAUN TOLSON • PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK WILLIAMS

Dr. Timothy Moore's collection of magic memorabilia includes Howard Thurston's "floating ball" and promotional materials and ticket stubs associated with the magician (left), as well as top hats, oversize cloth playing cards, and artifacts used by other noteworthy magicians, such as Servais LeRoy (above).

TIMOTHY MOORE spent most of his teenage years during the mid-1970s mastering his repertoire of illusions as a promising stage magician. He won his first local stage contest at the age of 16 and a national stage contest the following year. He earned both victories with the help of a trick that produced half a dozen live doves individually and then made them all disappear at once (along with the large chrome birdcage that held them).

After his national victory, Moore was approached by Lance Burton, a younger aspiring magician who wanted to learn how Moore had produced the first of the six doves in his trick. Moore showed him, and the technique remained in Burton's stage act for 30 years. About four years after meeting Moore, Burton moved to Southern California and, with the right connections, he was soon performing for Johnny Carson in front of a live studio audience and millions of Americans watching at home. He would go on to become one of Las Vegas's longest-tenured headliners.

By the time Burton first appeared on TV, Moore had already performed in the Golden State himself; however, *his* Hollywood initiation resulted in a far different career path. Hired to entertain at a noteworthy Fourth of July party in Beverly Hills, Moore met a group of actors that included Farrah Fawcett, James Mason, and Jack Lemmon. Moore was ready to move to Los Angeles at the urging of Fawcett's manager, who proclaimed that he wanted to get Moore on television right away, but later that day, when Lemmon described the extreme lows of Hollywood life—the feelings of worthlessness when not working—the young illusionist changed his mind about a career in magic.

Moore enrolled in medical school instead, but he continued to practice and perform magic to finance his education. Those performances introduced him to people and venues that cultivated his desire to collect memorabilia from magic's golden age. Today, his collection features some of the most recognizable instruments and artifacts used by the greatest magicians of the 19th and 20th centuries. Moore sees his ownership of these items as a stewardship, in which his role is to preserve and share them. "Magic keeps you in a perpetual state of adolescence; my wife will attest to that," he says with a laugh. "We've been married for 28 years, and for many years she felt that I'd grow up and grow out of magic, and now she realizes that that's not going to happen. I'm probably never going to grow up."

Moore (above) performs with Karl Germain's spirit lock (top) from the early 20th century.

"MAGIC KEEPS YOU IN A PERPETUAL STATE OF ADOLESCENCE; MY WIFE WILL ATTEST TO THAT. I'M PROBABLY NEVER GOING TO GROW UP." —Collector Timothy Moore

As a child, Moore would watch his grandfather—a professional artist—paint landscapes. Moore decided to try painting too, and at age 10 he entered a newspaper-sponsored art competition. "Thank God I wasn't the grand prize winner," he recalls. "The grand prize was a set of Encyclopedia Britannica." Instead, Moore's consolation prize was an introduction to magic. "I was one of 10 runner-up winners," he explains, "and the prize was a magic trick—a ball and vase. I was absolutely fascinated by it, and so I was off to the races."

Within a year Moore was studying with George Kirkendall, a performing illusionist and manufacturer of magic-related apparatuses. Moore recalls how his instructor paraphrased the teachings of the late Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin: "It's not so much the trick but how it's presented; that's where the real magic lies. It's not just doing a magic trick that's important; what's important is that you become an actor playing the part of a magician." Heeding those words, the boy became an adept performer.

When Moore won his first national stage competition, he was offered contractual engagements at a variety of venues, including the Cedar Point amusement park in Sandusky, Ohio. During one summer-long engagement at the park, Moore was approached by an elderly gentleman named Stuart Cramer, who, as Moore would learn, was once a student of Karl Germain, an American magician who made his mark at the turn of the 20th century with sophisticated, intricate illusions. Cramer brought with him a carefully wrapped package that contained Germain's spirit lock—a signature piece from the late magician's act—and offered Moore the chance to buy it. The apparatus looked to be just a large iron padlock about the

Moore's collection began with vintage stone lithographs of magic's golden-age performers and evolved to include their stage-used artifacts.

Moore's favorite display includes numerous artifacts owned by Harry Houdini, including the magician's top hat and various handcuffs and leg irons that Houdini used during his escape artist routines.

size of a fist, but as Moore would later learn, the lock's appeal was its ability to spring open at the will of the magician who knew its secrets.

Moore didn't fully understand the item's relevance at the time, but he knew who would. He called Kirkendall, who paid $400 for the lock later that day (it's now thought to be worth about 60 times that amount). Kirkendall kept it for decades before finally bequeathing it to Moore under the condition that Moore prolong Germain's legacy by continuing to perform the trick. As Moore learned, Germain would present the lock to his audience by telling them the story of Dr. Faust, a 17th-century magician who often was believed to be a wizard and subsequently ended up in jail. Germain would turn the key to lock the device and would hang it on a chain, which he then held suspended away from his body. Germain explained how Faust would wait for a full moon to cast a beam of light through his jail cell's window. Using his finger to create a shadow in the light, Faust would bring his finger's shadow toward the jail cell's lock and, with a turn of his finger, he would use its shadow to unlock the door. At this point in the story, Germain's spirit lock would open on its own, which always drew a collective gasp from the audience.

"I had a nice collection at that point," Moore says of his assemblage of antique ball-and-vase tricks, "but I didn't own any pieces that belonged to important and historical magicians. The spirit lock was the first piece that belonged to a real historical individual of magic and it changed everything for me."

WHILE MOORE attended medical school, he took time to perform at Hollywood's Magic Castle, a Châteauesque mansion built in 1909 that continues to operate as a magic-oriented nightclub and is home to the Academy of Magical Arts. Moore grew fond of the antique

Each wing of Moore's three-wing showroom (below) includes custom-made display cases, though some artifacts, like Harry Jansen's beaver-skin top hat and souvenir cards, are displayed on shelves in front of related stone lithographs (above).

magic posters that the club displayed, and he resolved to have a similar collection of his own someday. About a decade later, as Moore began a renovation of his basement and game room, he decided that the room was a perfect venue to display a collection of antique magic posters. He just needed to find some.

Moore made a trip to Las Vegas to visit Norm Nielsen, the then-owner of the world's largest collection of antique magic posters. Instantly (and for obvious reasons), Moore fell in love with a poster titled "Moore the Magician," which he saw on display in Nielsen's home. The veteran collector owned the only two examples known to exist but he made a deal with the budding enthusiast: If Moore could bring him a piece that he didn't already own and one that he wanted, he would trade one of his Moore posters. "That was what really iced it for me," Moore recalls. "It took me a year and a half to find something that was up to his standard and worth trading for that piece, but by then I was woefully hooked. I just loved the stuff."

For the next decade, Moore focused on collecting antique examples of the ball-and-vase trick, as well as vintage stone lithographs of the most prominent early magicians—Harry Kellar, Howard Thurston, Robert-Houdin, and Alexander Herrmann, among others. However, Kirkendall's gift of the spirit lock in the spring of 2001 reminded Moore of the more engaging memorabilia connected to magic's early pioneers. That redirected his focus to stage-used artifacts and famous magicians' personal effects. Today, Moore's collection of more than 2,000 pieces includes Alexander Herrmann's

ring pistol, an instrument that the magician used during his entire career; Frederick E. Powell's center-stage table, which includes various wells and hidden trapdoors and was a focal point of the magician's show during the early 1900s; and various belongings of Harry Houdini's, including the magician's wand and top hat—the singular item that is most fawned over by contemporary magicians who visit Moore's private showroom. "They love picking up Harry Houdini's top hat," he explains. "It just raises the hair off the back of their necks, and that's what's so exciting—to bring over people who love magic and do it for a living. They understand that our art form is built on the shoulders of giants and here are these pieces that belonged to those giants. It's pretty indescribable."

Moore most recently acquired 11 items used by Robert-Houdin, who is known for taking magic off the streets and into the salons of Paris. He brought a new sophisticated approach to magic that changed the public's perception of it. "In the collecting world, to have anything that belonged to Robert-Houdin is a feather in your cap and quite an accomplishment because his material is quite rare," Moore says, adding that his own knowledge enhances that thrill of ownership. "Understanding magic history makes it much more exciting to have these pieces."

MOORE ACQUIRED his latest Robert-Houdin material at a Paris auction, but that's a departure from his typical method of procurement. As Moore explains, similar to the community of performing magicians, the society of magic memorabilia collectors is a close-knit group. "Almost all the items that belonged to [famous] magicians, I've been able to purchase from other magicians," he says. "Typically, they're older gentlemen who have realized that their temporary curatorship is winding down and they're ready to see it passed on to the next generation."

In that respect, collecting has rewarded Moore in ways that he could not have predicted when he entered the hobby more than two decades ago. "You go through life and you meet a lot of people," he says. "To have such a deep connection with someone you meet in the collecting world, it's almost an

One of Moore's favorite pieces is Alexander Herrmann's ring pistol, an item that the magician used over the course of his entire career.

instant bond and that's a thrill for me. It's such an invaluable thing. I can't imagine my life without collecting; it's so rewarding on so many levels."

Moore has learned that, as in any collectible genre, provenance is the most crucial aspect when valuing a piece and its authenticity. For that, a magic-apparatus collector strives to find photos of the performer using or posing with the object. Moore can present such photos for a number of artifacts in his collection, including Powell's center-stage table; and like most art collectors, Moore lets his visceral response influence his purchasing decisions. "As a rule of thumb, if something is beautiful and meaningful, I buy it," he explains. "I don't just buy what I think I should buy, I buy based on what's beautiful to me."

Together, Moore's various showrooms make up about 1,500 square feet, which is enough space to create an engaging display but not large enough to allow him to buy items without careful consideration. "You only have so much space," he says, adding that he has no intention of extending the size of his showrooms. Instead, he aims to enhance his collection by replacing lesser items with more meaningful ones, provided they come up for sale. "It allows a collection to grow and to become more important and more refined," he says of a collector's maturation in a specific field, "but I don't know that there's an easy way to get there; it's just part of the education process."

Like most serious collectors, Moore refuses to believe that he'll ever be satisfied with what he has; he'll always be digging and searching for the next great item. There are a few significant pieces currently on his radar, but Moore remains tight-lipped about their details. "You don't want to show your hand and let the world know what you're interested in," he says. "There are definitely pieces out there that I would love to have and I'm working on, but the last thing I would want to do is reveal what those items are."

What's the next great trick for Dr. Timothy Moore, the magician? If you're lucky, he may let you see Germain's famous spirit lock illusion. But the next endeavor of Dr. Timothy Moore, the collector? That remains a mystery. After all, a great magician wouldn't be great without a few tricks up his sleeve . . . or a few secrets. C

Moore's game room (above) now doubles as a showroom for his collection of antique magic posters, while his most significant magic artifacts, like Germain's spirit lock (top), are easily viewed in his second showroom.