

THE EIGHTH EUROPEAN MAGIC HISTORY CONFERENCE

Vienna, August 2019 Reported by Jonathan Allen

The European Magic History Conference returned this autumn to Vienna for its eighth edition and was organised, as it was in 2009, by the urbane and ever-efficient Magic Christian. The intervening decade has seen significant changes in the way that magic history is undertaken, not least with the conjuring arts now a burgeoning field within both the sciences and the humanities, and versatile online resources such as Ask Alexander empowering a whole new generation of researchers. A body of knowledge, therefore, over which magicians and magic historians had previously enjoyed almost unchallenged authority is now greatly benefiting from insightful interpenetration from other scholarly fields, even if at times contestably so. Either way, magic conferences such as the EMHC increasingly reflect this changed reality and in Vienna many new voices, either directly or by inference, could be heard.

Delegates were welcomed by flag-waving staff at the eccentric Marchfelderhof restaurant, whose former guests have included both Napoleon Bonaparte and Joan Collins. The walls and ceilings of this modern-day *wunderkammer* north-east of the city are now virtually invisible behind the unbounded collections amassed by its past owners and current moving spirit, Gerhard Bocek. Beneath a ceiling strung low with music-themed bric-a-brac and irreconcilable chandeliers, the evening's mid-course entertainment included Viennese song from Charlotte Ludwig along with magic performances from Flo Mayer, Magic Christian, and a stand-out presentation by Wolfgang Moser of his "Any Drink Called For," incorporating an elegant silver kettle.

The principal conference venue was the opulent Hotel Stephanie where an unexpected guest checked in on the first morning in the form of an oil portrait of the Austrian conjuror Johann Hofzinsler (1806–1875) painted by Josef Matthäus Aigner in 1846. Magic Christian had searched for this lost work for more than two decades only to receive a phone call while napping on a commuter train from a woman whose family had, for over a century, known the painting simply as "The Uncle." Christian's delight at the painting's recovery and anticipation at its remaining secrets set the tone

for a productive three-day gathering of magical minds.

A focused lecture series began with Bernhard Schmitz's examination of another visual form which, at its best, can encapsulate its human



**Magic Christian with
Johann Hofzinsler**

subject: the bookplate or *ex libris*. Schmitz shared some of his growing collection of 1,200 examples including that of Professor Edwin A Dawes which features a busy alchemist/scientist alongside an entirely appropriate reference to the Italian polymath Giambattista della Porta. Is a bookplate a blemish upon an otherwise pristine volume, asked Schmitz, or a sometimes-decisive addition to a book's cultural biography?

Ian Keable built on his respected recent study of the English author Charles Dickens's brief conjuring career (between 1842 and 1849), noting how his knowledge of magic revealed significant details about other performers, while his experience as a writer enabled him to create an engaging playbill of his own. The writer's magical apogee was his 1849 appearance in Bonchurch on the UK's Isle of Wight as "Rhia Rhama Rhooos," a near-homonymic appropriation, as Keable demonstrated, of the Lisbon performer Kia Khan Khurse (Antonio Louis).

Anne Goulden's forensic approach to Lewis

Davenport's European performances shone much light on his fellow performers, such as the Benedetti Brothers with their enigmatic "One Violin Duet" and upon differing conventions within continental variety. Less restrictive safety precautions, for instance, meant that trapeze artists were allowed to perform in the auditorium, above the heads of the audience – this was not permitted in Great Britain at the time. Goulden further noted the links between early commercial cinema and Davenport's version of Buatier De Kolta's Expanding Die routine. Initially Davenport produced a Felix the Cat character from the expanded die – Felix was then a popular star of silent cinema – but later replaced him with Mickey Mouse when talking pictures were introduced.

Like the magician's bookplate, the magic-themed lapel pin communicates upon a miniature canvas and, as Wittus Witt pointed out, can also provide a snapshot of changing social codes. It seems inconceivable in an age of online social media, for instance, that a penalty might be imposed for not wearing a magic club membership pin, as was sometimes the case during the period when these often beautifully designed artefacts were commonplace and treasured.¹

Next, former Vienna federal police officer and author Max Edelbacher roguishly discussed the city's criminal gambling fraternities and what he termed "the covert part of the soul" as well as his own department's inventive techniques for disrupting Viennese lawlessness. The deployment of deception in unconventional contexts also featured in journalist and conjuror Jan Isenbart's presentation on the activities of magicians during periods of warfare, a talk much anticipated personally given my own research on the topic.² Noting magic's often-combative terms of engagement – magicians are always "at war" with their audience, performing "killer" effects, and so on – Isenbart fused the military strategist's "sand table" with the card table, the helmet with the top hat, and brought much compelling material to bear on this alternative theatre of magical activity.

The current president of the Austrian Magic Circle, Hanno Rhomberg, turned his attention to one of the country's earliest documented magicians, Joseph Fröhlich (1694–1757), and to the different ways in which under-acknowledged maverick figures can inspire public interest in magic history, especially when framed by innovative cultural arts programmes. In the same spirit, Marco Pusterla's concise account of the career of

British magician Bert Powell (1876–1955, aka Kuang Tseng or Quang Seng), as seen through the unpublished writings of his co-performer Molly Gerrard, highlighted the importance of valuing magic’s “smaller names” alongside its headliners. Flip Hallema rounded out the first day’s proceedings with an absorbing free-style associative history of the decapitation illusion, seen by him as a form of trivialised horror, whereupon delegates descended eighteen metres below ground to dine in the city’s tomb-like Twelve Apostles Cellar, there to be attended by strolling magicians Robert Woitsch and Raphael Macho, and by the vault’s centuries-old ghosts.

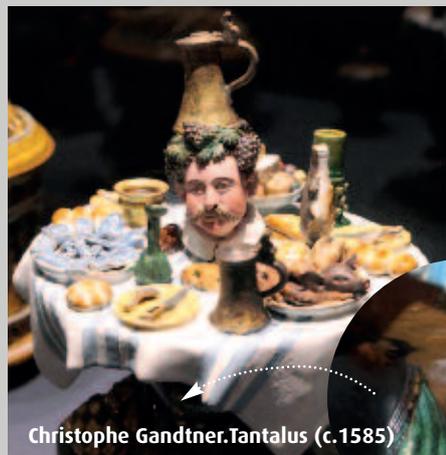
Day two opened with Jim Hagy signalling the previously unknown presence in 1893 of numerous magicians at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago (aka the Chicago World’s Fair) including Harry Houdini, Howard Thurston, Princess Nanna, Charles Roltare and others, as well as a notably high number of street magicians from other countries. This line of research developed alongside his partner Sage’s wide-ranging study of the fair, the latter of which incorporated a groundbreaking women’s pavilion and now-lost murals by American Impressionist Mary Cassatt and Mary Fairchild MacMonnies. Interestingly, the Hagys’ current study, also now available in the form of a handsome paperback *Fair Tricks*, is attracting attention elsewhere given its un-squeamish recognition of the Exposition’s tendencies towards racial and economic othering, tropes of course worryingly on the rise in the USA and across the globe.³

Steffen Taut discussed *The Conjuror* (1494), Hieronymus Bosch’s well-known painting linking harmless illusion with nefarious deception. Many EMHC delegates enjoy something of a “special relationship” with this depiction of a fifteenth-century cups-and-balls player (and nearby pickpocket) following an

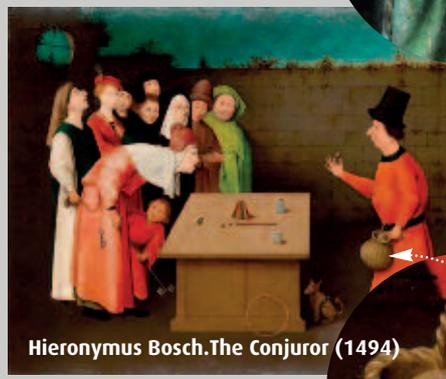


Carla Probst

extended personal audience with the work in Saint-Germain-en-Laye during the sixth conference edition in Paris. Poring over every symbolic and technical detail of the wooden panel, many eyes in Paris had honed in upon the contents of the performer’s left hand: did it contain a second ball, or a concealed wand, or even, as I proposed, a lever whose purpose it was to raise a puppet owl from the narrow-necked basket slung from the performer’s waist? In Vienna, Taut offered his own intriguing hypothesis by demonstrating how the same hand may be clutching the polished metal “end cap” of an otherwise invisible knife, thereby linking it visually and symbolically to the knife point detectable in the thief’s hand on the opposite side



Christophe Gandtner. *Tantalus* (c.1585)



Hieronymus Bosch. *The Conjuror* (1494)

of the composition.

Taut went on to share recent dendrochronology and infrared photography evidence provided by the international Bosch Research and Conservation Project, all of which supports existing doubts as to the presence of the Netherlandish painter’s own hand in this particular work. Even if the painting is proven beyond all doubt to be a later copy, Taut noted, it remains an undiminished example of Bosch’s mastery of iconographical ambiguity.

Such work exemplifies precisely the kind of interdisciplinary activity that conjuring arts research often now seems to give rise to. Here we have an experienced scientific researcher – Taut holds a PhD in nuclear chemistry – bearing



Stella Pusterla brings Molly Gerrard to life

down upon conventionally art historical questions while engaging tree-ring dating analysis to clarify issues that relate to a field of live performance. Expect comparable hybrid thinking as scholars continue to identify with what magicians have always understood about their art, that it operates from and through a highly promiscuous approach to knowledge production. Use whatever works, wherever it might come from.

Prompting recollections of Robert-Houdin’s 1849 automaton “Antonio Diavolo”, Ron Bertolla introduced EMHC delegates to “Ioni,” a trapeze automaton created in the mid-1960s by former juggler Alain Carbooter (aka Alain Diagora). The handling secrets and technology behind Ioni’s gymnastic virtuosity and uncanny psychological presence were guarded scrupulously by Carbooter who, as fellow performer Mike Caveney reported from the floor, would never take a

curtain call without first locking the figure in its travelling case. Ioni is owned currently by Carla Probst, who brought him briefly to life again in 2015 during a one-off performance at a museum at Sainte-Croix in Switzerland. Ioni was himself then revealed to delegates in full sequined garb behind protective glass and illuminated by a rectangle of show-lights, a relic of variety past who might well yet reawaken.

The accounts of Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin’s North African mission “can no longer escape critical analysis” declared François Bost at the start of his presentation on the French magician’s much self-mythologised diplomatic mission for the French Government in 1856. Bost went on to focus primarily on the strategist who had enlisted Robert-Houdin – the political director of the Bureau of Arab

Affairs, army colonel François-Edouard de Neveu – and with reference to a previously unknown letter from his own collection recast the episode as an inventive, although ultimately ineffective experiment in psychological warfare and “soft power.”

Practising judge Christian Theiß’s exploration of the increasing professionalisation of bibliographic methodologies by magic historians introduced news of the arrival of Volker Huber’s long-awaited bibliography of German magic books up to 1945. Theiß acknowledged the support of Volker’s partner Christina, which drew mutual gratitude from the Hubers in recognition of the lawyer’s repeated pilgrimages to Offenbach as this important bibliography made its way to print.

The final lecture sessions included Reinhard Müller’s precise investigation of a small cache of previously unidentified conjuror’s cards in



Marco Pusterla. Anne Goulden. Ian Keable

Augsburg’s State archive, and Peter Rawert’s reflections on the relevance of provenance research for magic historians. “Let’s not forget: a book is a piece of life,” cited Rawert from bibliophile Karl Wolfskehl, whereupon he recounted the story of his own third-edition copy of Reginald Scot’s *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584/1665). This included vivid tales from the life of the volume’s previous owner – the artist and skeptical occultist Robert Lenkiewicz – who had also controversially owned the skeleton of the witch Ursula Kemp (d.1582). The remains, it seems, only narrowly escaped accession to Rawert’s archives in Hamburg.

Later that afternoon attendees relocated to Vienna’s neo-gothic City Hall by way of a formal invitation from Mayor Michael Ludwig. Following an exacting presentation on the building’s architecture by Gerhard Muraier, delegates were granted access to the wood-panelled Council Chamber where hung an ornate historicist-style chandelier of such enormous scale that it can be entered by maintenance staff. In the chamber below, the

presence of numerous green-baized tables proved too great a temptation for some of the assembled magicians who, within minutes, had spread their cards and transformed the seat of Vienna’s municipal governance into something resembling the strip at Coney Island in its heyday.

Less improvised magic in another large space at City Hall (featuring Robert Woitsch, Mark Albert, Wolfgang Moser and Flo Mayer) preceded a lavish buffet during which conversations turned to individual discoveries within the capital’s other treasures, including Manfred Klaghofer’s Magic Box Museum, Vienna’s Theatre Museum and the formidable Kunsthistorisches Museum.

A highlight for many within the latter was Hans Schlottheim’s sixteenth-century gilded-silver automaton galleon that had “sailed” along banqueting tables in Rudolf II’s Prague court before firing miniature cannon at his presumably entranced guests. There too in a nearby vitrine, my attention was caught by a tin-glazed earthenware trick drinking vessel depicting the Greek mythological figure of Tantalus, crafted sometime between 1580 and 1590 by South Tyrolean master potter Christophe Gandtner. The gods punished Tantalus by eternally placing food and water just beyond his reach, and in Gandtner’s composition he sits astride a beer barrel with his (removable stopper) head poking through a hole cut in a food-laden tabletop. A revealing detail here for magic historians lies beneath the table: the figure’s supporting hands are clearly rendered by the artist, as if he was recalling a live performer. Might the Tantalus story have been commonly performed in such a way, in which case could it be considered alongside related performance technologies during precisely the same period, such as the decollation of John the Baptist as depicted in Reginald Scot’s 1584 *Discoverie*...? Food for thought, so to speak.

The nature of magic collecting itself came under scrutiny the following morning during the farewell session at Hotel Stephanie. What



Jim and Sage Hagy

becomes of the books, props, posters and other ephemera amassed by an individual over a lifetime of collecting? Is that collection’s capacity to produce and communicate knowledge in fact its principal asset? And how might an older generation convey to those younger, and less well positioned to collect, just how

exciting the past can be?

As for the artefacts themselves, Mike Caveney offered his “big river” model whereby collectors lift out material from magic’s rich historical current during their life only to cast it back into the flux of time once their task of possession is complete. Caveney’s model clearly challenges the more static models of institutional collecting and access that museums and other formal archives embody. As academia increasingly engages the conjuring arts, it will be interesting to observe whether the flux or stasis model best suits magic’s own priorities.

Needless to say, collectors will always collect due simply to the manifold pleasures of material things. On top of that, of course, is the persistent allure of the lucky find. An example of the latter briefly caused a stir amongst the morning’s flea market attendees when a rare photograph emerged from a crumpled folder of an impassive-looking David Devant, posed seemingly for a passport headshot. As I studied the image, I couldn’t help wondering what the great magician would have made of our era’s current turmoil and, as an itinerant performer, its increasingly unkind borders.

The European Magic History Conference 2021 edition will take place in London with Fergus Roy again confidently at the helm, as he was in 2011.⁴ As I crisscrossed the grey-green Danube during the Vienna conference and stared into its fast-moving opaque current, I felt reassured that the magic world’s big river remains so far unobstructed by the present failures of cultural imagination elsewhere. For the EMHC’s community at least, its plentiful and generous flow seems assured. ●

- 1 See *Zeitzeichen*, Wittus Witt, Verlag Magische Welt, Hamburg, 2019.
- 2 See Jonathan Allen, ‘Deceptionists at War’, first published in *Cabinet*, issue 26, 2007.
- 3 *Fair Tricks* is being offered at author events and is not being marketed, but you may be able to snag a copy by emailing the Hagys at reginaldscotbooks@comcast.net.
- 4 The dates for the EMHC conference in London are 9–11 September 2021. The city of Ghent in Belgium has been tentatively selected as host in 2023.