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Houdini: A Magician Among the Spirits



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A virtual exhibit by Kimberly Louagie, Curator
 This exhibit was a short term exhibit that is no longer on view at the museum. It has been left on the website for your enjoyment.

Why did Houdini crusade against mediums? What is Spiritualism? Did medium debunking save Houdini's career? Has Houdini's spirit ever come back from the dead? These are some of the questions asked in the temporary exhibit entitled *Houdini: A Magician Among the Spirits*.



The exhibit departs from the familiar story of Houdini as escape artist, exploring instead his crusade against séance fraud and its connection to larger issues of crime, morality, and religion.

The story of Houdini's crusade is divided into three sections: Spiritualism, Medium Debunking, and Legacy. Each section includes rarely seen photographs and artifacts from the Sidney Radner, Anna Crankshaw, Tom Boldt, Chicago Historical Society, Library of Congress, and Outagamie County Historical Society collections. The exhibit is located on the second floor of the Museum, adjacent to the existing *Houdini!* exhibit, which surveys the magician's life and career.

- **Spiritualism**

This first section looks at the religion of Spiritualism and Houdini's place in its history. Many of us associate the word "spiritualism" with personal religious beliefs, but it is also the name of a religion which teaches that mediums can communicate with spirits of the dead.¹ It developed in the mid-19th century and within 20 years had an estimated one million members. The movement's popularity, however, dropped sharply by the end of the century mainly because many mediums were exposed as frauds.

The religion experienced a resurgence during World War I when families looked to mediums hoping to reach the souls of dead husbands, fathers, and sons killed in the war. This time, too, fraudulent mediums preyed on people's vulnerabilities. Houdini was at the forefront of exposing this second wave of mediums.



Houdini had been guilty of séance fraud himself, when his career was at its lowest. He hosted special Sunday night performances for the California Concert Company, a Midwestern medicine show, in 1898. During séances, Houdini floated tables and played musical instruments while tied to a chair. After the company disbanded, he and his wife Bess continued to give séances for local union halls and dime museums until they signed with the Welsh Brothers Circus, later that same year.

In 1899, Houdini's career skyrocketed and he left the medium business behind. He was only

reintroduced to the subject again in the early 1920s while trying to befriend Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, writer of the Sherlock Holmes mysteries and a Spiritualist leader. Doyle set up meetings for Houdini with several distinguished mediums hoping to convert him to Spiritualism. Houdini found that none of these mediums possessed supernatural powers, but rather were skilled magicians deceiving the public. He sympathized with people who sought ways to reunite with loved ones since he was tortured by his own mother's death almost ten years earlier. But unlike most séance goers, Houdini understood the trickery used by many mediums and was in a unique position to expose fraud. As a magician, he could reproduce "spirit phenomena," showing that the séance industry was a business based on exploitation.

The crusade also kept Houdini's name in the press which had the added effect of selling his lectures, books and shows. Earlier in his career, Houdini had used jail escapes and manacled bridge jumps to sell himself, but the aging magician was finding it increasingly difficult to perform these physically demanding publicity stunts. Exposing mediums assured Houdini front page headlines in major newspapers in the United States, Canada, and Europe.

- **Medium Debunking**

Magicians already had a tradition of exposing spirit phenomena before Houdini's crusade. Notable exposers were John Nevile Maskeylne and Alexander Herrmann, but Houdini was by far the most ardent enemy of the fraudulent medium.

Houdini actively exposed mediums by 1923. He attended many séances in disguise accompanied by a reporter and police officer to have mediums arrested and their stories published in local newspapers. He also hired psychic researchers to investigate mediums. He



sent them to cities ahead of his show to find frauds and report on their activities. When the Houdini tour came to town, he used the information in his performance. He often challenged local mediums to prove their powers on stage.

So popular was Houdini as a medium buster that he was asked to join a psychic committee by the science magazine, *Scientific American*, in 1922. The magazine offered a cash prize of \$2,500 to any medium able to produce a true physical manifestation before its committee. Several mediums came forward, but the most memorable was Margery.

Known as "the Boston medium," Margery's séance room was filled with flashes of light, sounds of bugle calls, rattling chains, and trance speaking. The first *Scientific American* subcommittee that tested her favored her ability. When Houdini sat with Margery, though, he found that she was no different than any other medium he had seen-she was a fraud. Houdini told committee members that he caught Margery levitating a table with her head and ringing a bell with her foot. After much heated debate, committee members voted four to one against awarding Margery the prize.

Just before the final report in *Scientific American*, Houdini challenged Margery to show her supernatural ability on stage in her home town at Boston's Symphony Hall. He offered her \$10,000 (\$5,000 to her and \$5,000 to the charity of her choice) if she could produce a manifestation he could not duplicate. Margery refused to perform under such conditions. Instead, Houdini recreated her séance for the Symphony Hall audience. The exposé was so popular with fans, that Houdini made the how-tos of slate writing, rappings, spirit hands, and bell-ringing a permanent part of his show after 1925. He also extended his challenge, offering \$10,000 to any medium who could produce true spiritual phenomena.

At the same time that Houdini was waging war against Margery, he was demonstrating medium techniques at universities, police academies, churches, banquets, and conventions. He published many articles and several books including *Houdini Exposes the Tricks Used by Boston Medium "Margery"* and *A Magician Among the Spirits*, both released in 1924. Houdini considered the latter book one of his great accomplishments. It exposed the methods of many famous mediums including the Fox Sisters, Davenport Brothers, Dr. Henry Slade, Eusapia Palladino, and Anna Eva Fay.



Houdini even took his war against séance fraud to Washington, DC when he testified before the House Judiciary Subcommittee on the District of Columbia in support of an anti-fortunetelling bill in 1926. The main point of contention in the proposed piece of legislation was the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom. Houdini argued that the business of mediums should not be connected to a religion. He told the committee "In this town at \$25 you are licensing blackmailing, rob[bing], and steal[ing], under the clairvoyant license.....I will show you murders and suicides, and where a medium has called a number of old men and women to finish their lives in order to join their friends."² Both Spiritualists and Congressmen questioned Houdini's personal religious beliefs and showmanship. The frustrated magician found himself defending his belief in God and denying that he himself had supernatural powers. The ban on fortunetelling in Washington DC failed. If passed, it would have outlawed fortunetelling for monetary gain, making it punishable by a fine not to exceed \$250 and/or imprisonment not to exceed six months.

- Legacy

Houdini was unpopular with many mediums and they began predicting

his death. Houdini commented, "I get letters from ardent believers in Spiritualism who prophesy I am going to meet a violent death soon as a fitting punishment for my nefarious work."³ Houdini died on October 31, 1926 from peritonitis, an infection resulting from a ruptured appendix, at the age of 52 years.

Many have since tried to reach the spirit of the renowned medium buster. Bess Houdini held a radio broadcast séance on the 10th anniversary of her husband's death. Houdini had promised his wife that if it were possible to contact the living after death, he would contact her through a code. Although various mediums claimed to have broken the code, Bess was not convinced. At her final 1936 séance she said, "Houdini did not come through. My last hope is gone. I do not believe that Houdini can come back to me—or to anyone.....The Houdini Shrine has burned for ten years. I now, reverently—turn out the light. It is finished. Good Night, Harry!"⁴



The popularity of Spiritualism declined in the 1950s because mainstream religions began to meet the needs of the post-war generations. Spiritualism also discredited itself with sensational spirit manifestations. Rappings, table levitations, spirit writing, trance speakings, and full materializations of ghosts became too dramatic and unbelievable. However, there are still 3,000 members in the National Spiritualist Association of Churches. This national body recognizes over 100 churches and two educational institutions—The College of Spiritual Science in Lily Dale, New York and the Morris Pratt Institute in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Belief in the supernatural continues to interest many Americans, although it is not usually associated with the religion of Spiritualism. Some people believe in haunted houses, love potions, and curses. Others are intrigued by psychics who read the future through tarot cards, tea leaves, and palm reading. Still others have faith in guardian angels, crystals, healing magnets, and good luck charms. Scientists continue to investigate such things as extrasensory perception (ESP), aliens from other planets, and ghosts. Some of the most popular books, television shows, and movies have a supernatural theme.

I invite everyone to visit *Houdini: A Magician Among the Spirits*, which will be open through July 1, 2001. It offers visitors an opportunity to learn about a crusade which defined the final epoch in Houdini's life. I extend special thanks to Sidney Radner, Tom Boldt, Anna Crankshaw, Reverend Cosie Allen, Massimo Polidoro, and Patrice Keane for their insight into this subject.



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Endnotes

1. The National Spiritualist Association of Churches defines Spiritualism as the "Science, Philosophy and Religion of continuous life, based upon the demonstrated fact of communication, by means of Mediumship, with those who live in the Spirit World."
2. The Fortune Telling Hearings before the Subcommittee on Judiciary of the Committee on the District of Columbia, United States Congress, House of Representatives, February 26, May 18, 20, and 21, 1926 on H. R. 8989 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1926), 9.
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3. Ruth Brandon, *The Life and Many Deaths of Harry Houdini* (New York: Random House, 1993), 113.

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