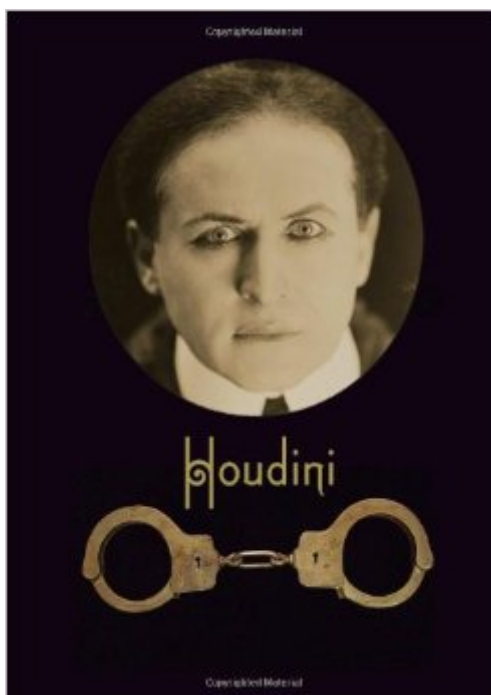


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Houdini: Art And Magic (Jewish Museum)



Synopsis

Born Ehrich Weiss in Budapest, Hungary, Harry Houdini (1874–1926) was a rabbi's son who became one of the 20th century's most famous performers. His gripping theatrical presentations and heart-stopping outdoor spectacles attracted unprecedented crowds, and his talent for self-promotion and provocation captured headlines on both sides of the Atlantic. Though Houdini's work has earned him a place in the cultural pantheon, the details of his personal life and public persona are subjects of equal fascination. His success was both cause for celebration in the Jewish community and testament to his powers of self-reinvention. In *Houdini: Art and Magic*, essays on the artist's life and work are accompanied by interviews with novelist E. L. Doctorow, magician Teller (of Penn and Teller), and contemporary artists including Raymond Pettibon and Matthew Barney, documenting Houdini's evolution and influence from the late 19th century to the present. Beautifully illustrated with a range of visual material, including Houdini's own diaries, iconic handcuffs, and straitjacket, alongside rare period posters, prints, and photographs, this book brings Houdini "both the myth and the man" back to life.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Houdini: Art and Magic" is a good companion to the recent Houdini retrospective at the Jewish Museum and elsewhere. The exhibition itself combined Houdini memorabilia (such as posters advertising his shows), artifacts from Houdini's performances (such as handcuffs from his collection

and a straitjacket), various personal effects such as family photos, and several pieces of conceptual art. It was a pleasure to see so much of this material in one place, and the book does a great job of reproducing most of it here, in a high-quality hardcover format. This is a book that will have a place in your library for years, alongside other magic-themed books you may own. Space is devoted to Houdini's personal life, his professional accomplishments, and - to a degree - his efforts to combat spiritualism. This isn't as good a read as I expected, however. It's somewhat of a stretch to connect Houdini to modern performance art, but the pieces of contemporary painting shown here seem to be "inspired" by Houdini without having anything really interesting to add to his legacy. A lot of the commentary in the various essays in this book also fall prey to this by trying to help Houdini "escape" from the world of illusion into the world of art. In my opinion, Houdini's magical achievements are stunning enough. So many once well-known magicians who have died in the past 25 years are now remembered only by other magicians whereas Houdini - dead for almost a century - still lives on in our imaginations. So, why not allow Houdini to speak more for himself by reproducing excerpts from some of his books? Even though these were ghostwritten, they do reflect Houdini's thoughts as he authorized these books.

The Jewish Museum in New York City created an exhibit of Houdini's art and magic (October 29, 2010 - March 27, 2011). The premier exhibition product was this book, *Houdini: Art and Magic* (2010), by curator and writer Brooke Kamin Rapaport, with contributions of chapters by historian Alan Brinkley on Houdini's immigration, historian Hasia R. Diner on Houdini's wife, curator Gabriel de Guzman on the Houdini's chronology, and biographer Kenneth Silverman on Houdini's Jewishness. I especially enjoyed Rapaport's chapter of interviews containing Q&A sessions with fifteen contemporary writers, magicians, and artists who talked about the lingering influence of Harry Houdini on their works and performances. E.L. Doctorow told how Houdini became a visual force for him as a writer. Raymond Joseph Teller (the silent half of Penn and Teller) told how Houdini, who died in 1926, continues to influence magicians and American culture today. Rapaport interviewed a number of creative people for whom Houdini became a "patron saint, role model, and inspiration," including such artists as, surrealist Matthew Barney, realist Whitney Bedford, wood artist Joe Coleman, sculptor Perah Coyne, painter and printmaker Jane Hammond, videographer Tim Lee, unconventional artist Vik Muniz, holographer Ikuo Nakamura, painter Deborah Oropallo, graphic artist Raymond Pettibon, Jewish artist Sara Greenberger Rafferty, conceptual artist Allen Ruppersberg, and minimalist Christopher Wood.

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