





ALEXANDER POSTER ART: NIELSEN WAGC

The address is easy to pass by as you walk down West 30th Street. Situated between Broadway and 5th Avenue in midtown Manhattan, the building houses the studios of a couple photographers, some architectural firms, a rug supply store, private residences, and an Indian restaurant. And yet, not quite hidden on this typical New York City street, it is here you may discover one of the most remarkable repositories of magical knowledge in the world today. And while you may visit this brick-and-mortar establishment, one of the true wonders of The Conjuring Arts Research Center is how it can come to you.





*The main salon of the Conjuring Arts Research Center, with small display cases behind the desk of the Head Librarian.*

#### A RARE LIBRARY

In person, the Research Center is accessed by an elevator. Stepping out onto the fifth floor, you turn left down a short, dimly lit hallway. A few framed magic posters grace the walls, but what really draws people in is the sight that is viewed through the one doorway at the end of the hall: a wall of magic books. Entering the main room you see the shelves all along your left side as well as in front of you and extending the length of the room on both sides. We've all been in libraries before, but this one is a magic library, in most senses of the word.

The Center occupies more than half of the fifth floor, 2,600 square feet filled with bookshelves and display cases, interlaced with a variety of historic props, visual puzzles, skulls, and ephemera. You'll find folding lockpicks made for Houdini by chief assistant James Collins, printing plates for Theodor Deland's marked decks, Alexander Herrmann's wallet, and Charles Jordan's hand-made decks, of which there are no other known examples. Here, too, is a medal of Heironymous Scotto, circa 1580, the first card magician for whom a facial image still exists. Scotto used the medal as a calling card, cast in gold, silver, or lead depending on how important the recipient was.

The library boasts over 9,500 books on magic and related arts, not counting numerous shelves stocked with full runs of conjuring magazines. These are encountered as you reach the far end of the room, turn left, and enter a smaller area holding a conference table. More

books are shelved here as well, and around the corner stand two tall cases filled with over 200 black binders, housing a copious amount of correspondence, instruction sheets, and various paper files. A large number of these are Jean Hugard's files, including his translations of the work of Henri Decremps, 18th-century French author of classic magic texts. Many notebooks are labeled as containing instruction sheets, alongside files of letters from William Zavis (magician and collector of magic books), Murray contracts, Cardini correspondence, and more.

Carpeted floors and velvet curtains help give the main salon the atmosphere of a private club rather than a public library, and the establishment

really is a mixture of both. No doubt there are plenty of treasures throughout these rooms, yet the pride of the library still resides several steps away. Behind an inauspicious door and a tall mirrored-glass window is the rare book room. Temperature-controlled to remain at 60 degrees, with a 50% humidity level, the room houses tomes that are centuries old. Many of them are unique, either in being one-of-a-kind, or in being preserved by magicians and readily available for study.

A first edition of Erdnase? Yes, there it is, but it is one of the newer items in the room. Far more unusual is a manuscript penned by a student of Charlier. How about a first edition of *Discoverie of witchcraft*? Of course; it's in the case on the far wall, alongside a second edition, a couple of thirds, and more. In fact, the Research Center probably has most every edition... except for an ancient Dutch translation, in which the magic section was omitted.

And while Scot's famous text is often thought to be the first magic book in English, the Conjuring Arts library contains books that pre-date Scot, including some that are mentioned in the *Discoverie*.

"There are books here you'll never find in other magic collections," says Bill Kalush, the man primarily responsible for this marvelous assemblage. "Either they don't know about it, or it contains just a small section that is tangentially related to magic." Yet as Kalush understands, all these ancient printed works are vitally important in the history and understanding of conjuring, and his pas-

sion is in discovering them and making their knowledge more widely known.

Examples of such a previously overlooked pieces of history include a book from the 1630s on Roman oil lamps, including one lamp that is decorated with a performance of the Linking Rings. There is a copy of the first English book on microscopy with a description of a water-spouter, along with an explanation of his feats, and a Belgian law tome from several centuries ago describing how cheating is done at dice. An unusual "Trenchier book" in Swedish is all about knives and their proper use in food preparation — how to carve poultry for cooking or make vegetables decorative — which also has a large section on magic, tricks with which to entertain after the meal.

Of course, many of the rare possessions are full magic books or, even more unique, manuscripts. The library has about 1,000 volumes published before 1900; roughly 350 of them are from before 1701. The earliest book in English is from 1562; there are a lot of rare Italian books, the first of which is from 1519. Kalush says he is "tremendously interested in ancient books in all languages." The oldest book in the collection, written in Latin, dates from 1497, but Kalush admits, "Even I think there is very little reference to magic" in that one.

It is probably the best collection of rare magic books in the world, although Kalush would not say so himself, and happily acknowledges other fine private collections. What makes the Conjuring Arts library all the more remarkable is that Kalush has only seriously been collecting books for about ten years.

#### CARDS AND BOOKS

Now just 40 years old, Bill Kalush grew up in Lansing, Michigan, gaining his interest both in magic and in books from his father, a hobbyist magician who had seen Blackstone when he was young. "He was the one who really encouraged me," Bill recalls of his father. "He did bits of card magic; he was charming and charismatic, and knew the performing part. He knew how to make what he was doing seem really important."

As a youngster, Bill begged his parents to take him to the Abbott's Get-Together in Colon. They relented, but on one condition. Bill's mother, a typesetter for a magazine, had seen an article on Robert Lund's American Museum of Magic, which had recently opened. She said they could go to Colon, but had to stop at the Museum as well. Bill grudge-

ingly agreed, yet once he was inside the Museum he found himself “enthralled.” The seeds of his future passions were sewn there.

While Kalush is interested all aspects of magic, especially on theoretical and cognitive levels, his own practice has been almost exclusively in sleight of hand with cards. “I started young with cards,” he says, modestly adding, “I was lucky enough to have a few people who were really talented teach me some things.” He notes that certain types of personalities, like his own, “do what they’re good at and leave the rest on the table.” He found he had the ability to practice and had “a little bit of a knack” for the card work. “Because of that,” he says, “I got the most gains out of that quicker; I just focused on my talent.”

Although he used to perform, he now practices solely for his own edification. He describes himself as “the luxurious amateur; I can do magic when I want to, on my terms.”

His skills have gained him a strong reputation in the magic world, singled out by none other than Dai Vernon as a master of the Classic Pass. Always quick to shift credit to his mentors and inspirations, Kalush cites Michigan magician Carl Mainfort as his first teacher, “an old-time guy who was a friend of Cardini and did everything in Erdnase. After him, Chuck King taught me an awful lot.” Then Kalush got to know Brother John Hamman and Bob Stencel, who he deems “one of the greatest thinkers in card magic, bar none, of all time.”

Bill’s interest in history lay dormant for quite a few years, until he met Ricky Jay. “His influence was tremendous,” says Kalush. “He is extremely knowledgeable and his enthusiasm for it is contagious.”

Bill was set on his own quest for knowledge when he asked questions that didn’t have answers. Learning that no one had yet done a bibliography of books on card tricks, he thought, “Well, there’s a good project for me,” and started cataloging all such books in the New York Public Library. “And I realized what a monstrous project that was.” That is one of several projects he still would like to complete, including other specialized bibliographies, but for now they are on the back burner as other endeavors take precedence.

Research in one area may lead to surprising travels in another direction. Kalush says, “It’s fun to explore in a world where no one has gone before, and there are so many unexpected alleyways in magic.” His own searches have led him to an understanding of history beyond that of magic. Certainly he is well versed in his chosen field, but he also

adds historical context to conjuring knowledge, adding important perspective to relate the magicians of the past to their distinctive times. This can unveil more new information and leads. Learning that there were magicians in the retinue of Charles V, the 16th-century King of Spain who became Holy Roman Emperor, led to the information that the King was a fan of magic, and became a builder of automata after he abdicated.

A depiction of jugglers (as magicians were known in those days) in a 1514 tome of Catholic law led to a rough translation of the page, telling that 200 years earlier Pope Boniface VIII had ruled that “clerics who practice the juggling art will lose their clerical privileges and will be treated like buffoons.” Kalush wondered, “Why would you make a rule against that unless it was a problem?” Further study showed that the use of jugglery had aided Boniface to gain his own power, after which he wanted to make sure no one took it from him in the same manner.

One of Kalush’s recent paths has immersed him in the world of Houdini, a journey that has led to some extraordinary areas. The Houdini project will culminate in the publication this fall of a new biography, *The Secret Life of Houdini*. Working with noted writer Larry Sloman, Kalush says the book will feel “like a thriller, with a different style than most biographies.” Related in a fast-paced style, it will include stories that have not been previously unearthed, along with interesting observations regarding Houdini’s relationship with his parents, and fascinating revelations regarding Superintendent Melville of Scotland Yard. The focus will be on Houdini’s motivations, what he did differently than anybody else, and how and why he attained his lofty goals.

The book is being crafted from thousands of pages of material that Kalush feels sure have never been analyzed by anyone before. Much of this comes from the vast archives in the Library of Congress — 16,000 pages worth of material. Sorting through these pages and making sense of them was a monumental task. He needed some way to help organize it all.

#### ASK ALEXANDER

Bill Kalush got the idea for a massive file of scanned documents on a computer system, and found a way to make it happen. The Library of Congress collection was the start, with those many thousands of pages on paper and microfilm being digitized and stored as computer files.

From that point, more and more pages were scanned and added to the growing



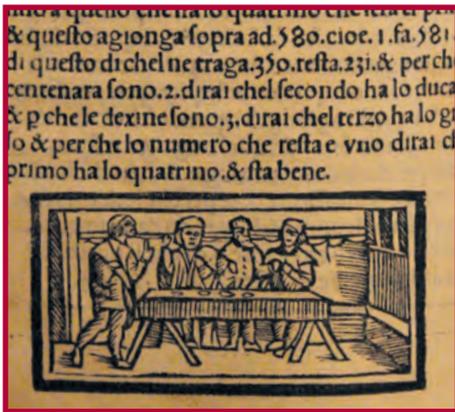
PHOTOS: STEVE CUIFFO



Harry Kellar’s top hat, on display in the rare book room. A rare illustrated page from a 1514 book of Catholic, with the Pope’s warning for “clerics who practices the juggling art.”

database, all internally searchable. Numerous interconnections became manageable as names could be traced from place to place, time to time. Should a character become important to the Houdini story, any previously unnoticed mentions could be easily searched to see in what context they might appear elsewhere. Had the pages not been transferred to the computerized files, each new lead would have meant once





[Top] *Thesourio de Prudentes* by Gaspar Cardozo de Sequeira, published in 1612. The Portuguese text, from earlier Italian and French editions, details what is now known as the *Si Stebbins* stack. [Above] “This is a great book,” says Kalush: *Libro da Abaco*, published in 1520 Venice, has woodcut of man reading the minds of three spectators.

again combing the thousands of pages individually. A task on the order of Sisyphus suddenly became manageable.

With the expansion of the database, Kalush recognized further potential, and knew that such a resource would be a boon to other magicians and historians. Why stop at just the Houdini materials? When searching through magazines for Houdini references, why not scan in the rest of the pages as well? They might certainly be useful some day. Gradually, whole files of magazines were scanned, along with books both ancient and modern, letters, scrapbooks, clippings, and other printed arti-

facts. The database grew, and along with it a sense of what it might one day become. Why not keep going until *everything* pertaining to magic and conjuring would become readily accessible for study? And it could be open to any serious student of the art.

It is a tremendous undertaking, but Kalush truly believes it possible.

Having put their first trial online only a year ago, The Conjuring Arts Research Center is well on its way to digitizing everything in its collection, and more. Already there are around 650,000 pages scanned and searchable, with roughly 10,000 more pages being added each week. This enormous database was christened *Ask Alexander*, after the well-known posters and slogan of “The Man Who Knows,” magician Claude Alexander Conlin.

The amount of information available through “The Computer Who Knows” is staggering, as is the ease and speed in finding even the minutest references. When Kalush first showed the operation to historian and author Mike Caveney, he asked Mike to name a magician. Bill typed it in on *Alexander* and quickly had a large listing of all the mentions in hundreds of publications. Mike recalls, “What would take me two years of research to find, *Alexander* located in about 15 seconds.” Caveney right away offered Kalush loan of whatever items he wanted to add; he and others have since been supplying a steady stream of materials to accompany the Center’s own wealth of information.

Type in “Cardini” and *Alexander* quickly shows you that 4,125 references have been found, in 603 documents; “Blackstone” reveals the name used 13,656 times throughout 928 publications. The search engine brings up on the computer screen a listing of all the relevant files; each one is a hyperlink to a pdf file of the original source, so the text can be fully examined, one page at a time. Thanks to modern electronic wizardry, the wit who once stated, “The best way to keep a secret in magic is to publish it in a magazine,” is being proven wrong.

Kalush explains, “The way *Alexander* works is, if you come here with a laptop computer, you have access to almost all of it. There are some tiny parts of it that we aren’t allowed to give out access to, because people have asked us not to. We can put it in for my use, but they don’t want it accessible — private letters, things like that. But for the most part, the vast, vast majority of it, you can see if you come here.

“Our feeling is, if we have the material here in the library, it is fair use to use

*Alexander* as a database. We have the book here and you could look at the physical copy, so it doesn’t hurt to be able to look at it on the computer. It’s kind of like looking through a magnifying glass.” Or an extensive, detailed index that can tell you which volume to pull off the shelf nearby.

Accessibility is what the project is all about, and the wonders stored on *Alexander* are available to people who join and support Conjuring Arts. Different membership levels, ranging from \$95 to \$495 per year, receive varying amounts of access to *Alexander* from their home computers, potentially placing the entire world of magic literature at their fingertips.

In dealing with potential copyright issues, Kalush feels that “an awful lot of the copyrighted material is probably fair use if we put it on *Alexander*, as it’s on a page-by-page basis.” He says, “We probably could put almost everything out there, but the magic world is small, and we don’t want anybody upset with us.” They are careful not to intentionally allow access from outside the library to copyrighted material without permission. If a copyright owner really wants to be omitted from the available files, Kalush will take them off. As he says, he already has the information himself, and if sharing it upsets others, he doesn’t need the hassles of dealing with it.

#### CONJURING ARTS RESEARCH

The on-going *Alexander* project is “a monumental expense,” says Kalush. Conjuring Arts has been established as a non-profit corporation, and has been accepting endowments, donations, and memberships.

The library is not technically in private hands, but is controlled by a small Board of Directors. Their interests are in serving the public, and a good Board will ensure that the Center will continue on in perpetuity, and not be dispersed among private collectors or swallowed up by a giant corporation that knows nothing about the subject.

“One of the reasons I don’t believe in giving magic collections to libraries,” says Kalush, “is they have so much material that’s not their focus, not their interest, that things get lost. Not literally lost, but might as well be. They have it, but you can’t find it. A rare copy of *Ein Spiel Karten* may not seem so important if you have a Gutenberg Bible and so many other books. And manuscript material in particular is notoriously difficult to catalog. This kind of material is so specialized it should stay in the magic world, where it can get proper attention and

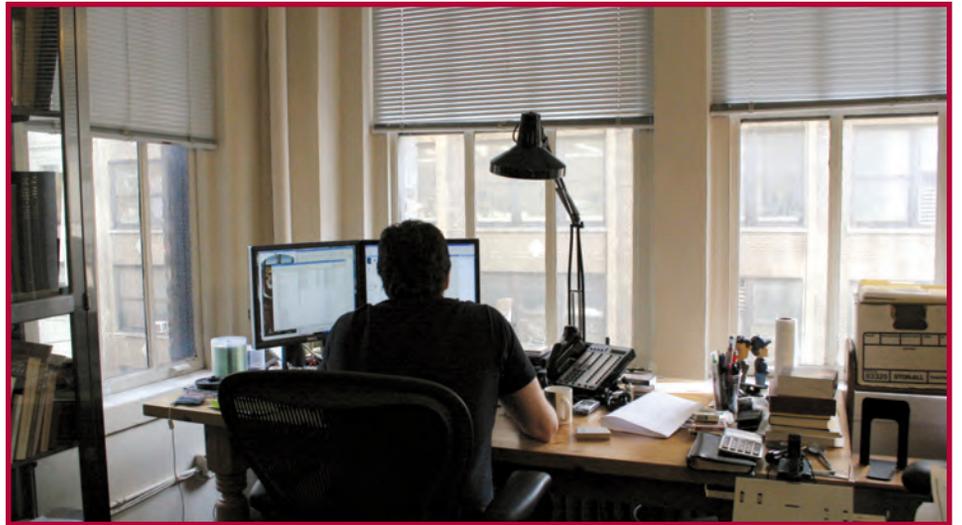
not just be ‘one more book.’” Naturally, the digitization process will prevent items from disappearing like the crate in the final scene of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, but most libraries cannot afford the time and expense of scanning their entire collections.

Much of the present Conjuring Arts library is from Kalush’s personal collection, put on semi-permanent loan; other collectors have loaned items as well. New acquisitions by the Center itself are owned by the library, not by any individual. The Board of Directors controls what is done with the materials, and how they will best be used to serve the public. Along with Kalush, the Board is comprised of Las Vegas attorney and Slydini student Phil Varrichio; Steve Cuiffo, described by Kalush as a “brilliant actor and magician;” David Singmaster, a professor of mathematics in London; and Bill’s dear friend David Blaine, whom he jokingly refers to as simply “a young kid from New Jersey.”

*Ask Alexander*, and the Research Center in general, have quickly grown to require a full-time staff to support them. While claiming to be “a little part” of the operation, Kalush is the driving force behind all this. He is quick to give credit to the rest of the talented crew behind the scenes. “I’m really lucky to have each and every one of them,” he says.

The present staff includes Head Librarian Carrie Schulz, whose desk visitors encounter when they first enter the Research Center. The rest of the staff is headquartered in an adjacent room where much of the magic of *Alexander* takes place. Electronic equipment runs continuously as files are prepared and searched, documents scanned and uploaded. Gary Au, *Alexander*’s Information Technician, is the only magician on the staff; nearly everyone else comes from the realms of history and library science. Across the room, Sarah Galvin conducts various researches, while Sara Dockery spends the days digitizing the files, rescuing them from obscurity. Kalush’s own desk is situated near that of Creative Director Kenlynne Rini, who handles public relations, communications, fundraising, and design. Mike Friedman does all the coding on *AskAlexander.org*. And while much of the room seems focused on electronics and technology, Lori Pieper also concentrates on more low-tech information repositories, poring over ancient texts. The official translator for Pope John Paul I, she is able to decipher original sources in Latin, German, Italian, French, and Spanish, and is working on adding other languages to her repertoire.

Not all of the Center’s dissemination



[Top] Some of the Conjuring Arts staff gathered in the conference room. (Left to right) Lori Pieper, Gary Au, Pavel Goldin, Sara Dockery, Carrie Schulz, and Kenlynne Rini. Bill Kalush is barely visible reflected in mirror at upper left. [Above] The mysterious Bill Kalush, the man behind the Research Center and *Ask Alexander*.

efforts have gone toward cyberspace; they do a small business in publishing special material, items from the collection that Kalush feels deserve to be put on paper, along with the scholarly *Gibecière* magazine for Conjuring Arts members. In all their projects, the focus is on making otherwise obscure information much more widely available. In the short time it has been in operation, the Center has already become a known resource for scholarly pursuit even outside the magic world. Other institutions around the world turn to them, not only for conjuring information, but for the other history found alongside the magic on the shelves.

Kalush feels, “The more people who can use this type of material, the better for all of us.” While the Center is open to the public,

visitors do have to qualify to come in, a stipulation true of many non-profit research centers. Conjuring Arts currently gets researchers in several times a week; they try to limit these appointments to one a day, and will discourage visitors from arriving in person if they can get the same amount of information from the web.

With *Ask Alexander*, there may come to be less and less need to arrive physically at the Center. As Bill Kalush says, “It’s a new way to do research, and not just in magic; this is the electronic age. It is amazing how much information has been published, but is hard to find... until now, anyway.” ♦

For more information on *The Conjuring Arts Research Center*, visit [www.conjuringarts.org](http://www.conjuringarts.org).

