THE POSTER
THE PRINTER
THE PERFORMER

The story of an iconic poster

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74 years ago, in 1944, on a visit to wartime London, I acquired an original Adolph Friedländer poster. It depicted a magician, Servais Le Roy, levitating his lady assistant. It was passed on to me in the most extraordinary of circumstances by Will Goldston, a well known magic dealer.

So how did this stroke of good luck happen? I was 17 years old and an enthusiastic amateur magician and had just found out that Will Goldston had a magic shop in Central London at No. 14 Green Street. Will Goldston was just a name to me then, but later I discovered that he was one of the most important and influential magic dealers of the 20th century. He was also an author of many fine books on magic and at one time performed using the stage name Carl Devo presenting a Black Art show. In addition, in 1911 he founded The Magicians’ Club.

Will Goldston’s shop was easy to find as Green Street (now called Irving Street) is quite short, linking Charing Cross Road with Leicester Square in Central London, just around the corner from The National Gallery in Trafalgar Square. The entrance to his shop was by a narrow staircase. On a wall at street level was a sign reading MAGIC SOLD HERE. I found the message irresistible, and rushed up the stairs. On the first floor landing was the door into the shop, displaying the sign WILL GOLDSTON LIMITED.

On the left is a still from a charming short black and white Pathé film entitled Dave and Dusty Magic Shop. It shows the eponymous Dave and his pet dog Dusty entering the shop. The narrator of this film announces it is Will Goldston’s Magic Shop. If you look at the counter to their left, you will see a Servais Le Roy poster hanging in front of it.
The shop was quite small. Everywhere I looked glass topped cabinets and shelves were full of magic tricks. Books and magazines were stacked all over the counters. I thought I had walked into an Aladdin’s Cave filled not with precious jewels, but with fabulous magic props, the like of which I had only read about.

Will Goldston let me absorb what I was seeing and then asked me what every magic dealer asks a new customer: “And what kind of magic do you do?” I told him, of course, all small effects like the Evaporated Milk Jug, Soft Soap and Bending Glass which I had purchased from Davenports. He left me to look around and I finally decided on a wooden drawer box. It was a bit scruffy so I guessed it was second-hand. It worked perfectly - all it needed was a spot of paint.

In 1944, in wartime England, there was, as some of you will remember, a serious paper shortage, so Will Goldston wrapped my purchase - the drawer box - in what I thought at the time was a sheet of black paper. To my surprise it turned out to be an original Adolph Friedländer poster which he had taken from a stack of them piled on the floor.

Research has revealed that Goldston had unbelievably been using these posters as wrapping and packing paper for some considerable time. He was known to tear up these posters and use the pieces as packing when sending off parcels.

And that, ladies and gentlemen is how the iconic Adolph Friedländer poster came into my possession - it was used as wrapping paper! The reason why I think it is such an iconic poster is because it illustrates a famous illusion that needs no written explanation, as I will discuss later.

The printer who created this poster was Adolph Friedländer, a famous German lithographer based in Hamburg, Germany. He founded his business in 1872 and it continued operating until 1935 when it was closed down by the National Socialist Party (the Nazis) as it was a firm owned and run by a Jewish family. After his apprenticeship in his father’s stone printing company Adolph, at the age of 21, set up his own business in the
St Pauli district of Hamburg printing labels for grocery and delicatessen stores. The St Pauli district was renowned for its many music halls and unique places of entertainment which were all close to Friedländer’s premises. This lead him inevitably to specialise in printing posters for the theatrical profession.

Between 1872 and 1935 his Hamburg firm produced over 9000 posters predominantly for music hall artists, circuses, puppeteers and magicians. These could be identified as authentic Friedländer posters by the symbol or printer’s mark found in the bottom right hand corner of each design. This was in the shape of a leaf with serrated edges, sometimes called a “Judenkirsche” or Jewish cherry. Enclosed within the leaf are the letters Lith followed by Adolph Friedländer - Hamburg. This trademark was first used in 1890. Each poster design produced by the Friedländer Company was assigned a number. The very last poster design produced by the firm before it was closed down, by the Nazis, was numbered 9078. The poster I have is numbered 4238.

Let’s take a look at some examples of Friedländer’s sublime art of poster making.
The poster on the left above is what is known as a stock poster where an artist could overprint his name. To the right, you can see the same design on the cover of an illustrated catalogue for the Friedländer Company published in 1904.

Through the artistic skills and high quality printing process, his firm became recognised internationally as one of the most important lithograph printers for music
hall artists and circuses and Adolph Friedländer became known as *The King of Lithographs*. Adolph Friedländer died in 1904, aged 53.

The Museum of Arts and Crafts in Hamburg, which is one of the most important European museums of art and science, and the Munich Stadtmuseum both have extensive collections of Friedländer posters, confirming their importance and current rarity in the world of commercial art.

Four years ago, in 2014, there was an important exhibition of Friedländer’s lithographs and posters at the famous puppet theatre (Theater Figuren Museum) in Lübeck, Germany. Although Adolph Friedländer’s business was closed down in 1935, 79 years later in 2014, his poster designs were still highly regarded as works of art, as can be seen by the holding of this retrospective exhibition in Lübeck.
In my opinion this Le Roy poster is one of the finest produced for a magician by Adolph Friedländer because of its simplistic design and, as I mentioned earlier, it needs no written explanation. However, if you look at the right-hand side, just below his hand, you can find a description in small print.

![Le Roy Poster Image]

When you look at this poster, the eye immediately goes to the central figure, Le Roy, and then to the floating lady, so you know straight away that the magician is performing the impossible - the levitation of a human being. The effectiveness of this poster also lies in the colours used - the brilliant yellow background highlighting the illusion. It is interesting to note that without exception, Friedländer’s Company only used four colours: yellow, red, blue and black.

Another feature of this poster design is that the assistant is depicted not lying in a perfect horizontal position, as can be seen in the many historic photographs of this illusion. Instead, as you can see, the top half of her body is slightly raised, which really gives the impression that she is actually floating in the air. In the background, leaning against the cauldron almost out of sight, is the all-important hoop, an essential prop in the presentation of the illusion. This is a perfect example of Friedländer’s attention to detail when designing this poster for Le Roy.
Some of Le Roy’s posters, like this one I showed you earlier, are so busy it would take some considerable time for a member of the public, or we magicians for that matter, to take it all in at first viewing.

Returning to my Le Roy poster, the illusion depicted is, as you all know, the *Asrah* illusion which Servais Le Roy is credited with inventing and first performed by him in 1902. Later he added the sensational vanish of the assistant while she was floating in mid-air. It was not until 1904 that Le Roy’s new version of the *Asrah* illusion was seen in London, which I believe was at the Alhambra Theatre in Leicester Square.

The Le Roy improved version of the *Asrah* illusion had a secret gimmick which was closely guarded and was always kept locked in a sturdy trunk when not in use. Only Le Roy had the key as he feared it could be pirated by less scrupulous magicians. However, on arriving at a new theatre when on tour and his staff began unpacking his scenery, props, etc, the trunk was found to have been broken open and the closely guarded secret item of equipment stolen. In Jim Steinmeyer’s book *Hiding the Elephant* he writes that Le Roy’s secret gimmick was stolen in 1910. Within weeks the Le Roy improved version of the levitation of an assistant was appearing in the programmes of his many rivals.

In Le Roy’s initial version of the illusion, the assistant floats above the magician without any covering. In his perfected or improved version, the assistant is covered by a silk sheet. When she is levitating high above the magician, the sheet is pulled away and . . . she has vanished into this air! In the words of Howard Thurston when he presented this illusion: “She vanishes like a faded cloud.”

Le Roy invested a great deal of money in all his posters, as he planned to use them over a long period of time. Highlighted at the top of my poster are three names - Le Roy, Talma and Bosco. These three artists performed as *The Triple Alliance*. Talma, who was Le Roy’s wife and principal assistant, was also an expert coin manipulator and was known as *The Queen of Coins.*
The original Bosco (Imro Fox) was a rather rotund gentleman who provided the comedy element in the show. When Imro Fox left the company, all replacement actors (six in all) were made up to look exactly like the original Bosco, allowing Le Roy to continue using old posters of *The Triple Alliance* he had bought years before. Here is the head of the original Bosco on the plate being held by Le Roy.

In the 1900s Servais Le Roy had a company in London at 54 Hatton Garden, Holborn, supplying illusions and painted scenery to the magic profession. It was there that he would be visited, whenever they were in London, by some of the famous magicians of the day, such as Chung Ling Soo, The Great Lyle, Carmo, Chefalo and De Biere. No doubt the subjects of their conversations would be the latest illusions, who was performing them and where they could be seen.

Servais Le Roy will always be remembered for the illusion that closed his stage show, he called it *The Three Graces*, and by all accounts it was sensational. Three strange forms each hidden under a large cloth, were produced one by one from a wardrobe-type cabinet. (You will know it as the *Cabinet of Proteus.* ) When the coverings were removed the forms were revealed to be three young ladies, dressed to represent Antonio Canova’s famous sculpture *The Three
Graces. The three graces were, in Greek mythology, the daughters of Zeus representing youth, mirth and elegance.

I have no idea how his audiences at that time would have reacted to seeing three semi-clad young ladies being revealed to them one by one and then watched as they grouped together in a pose mirroring the Canova sculpture. But obviously it was a hit and a show-stopper. Today, a modern version of this illusion is often called Things that Go Bump in the Night.

Servais Le Roy’s retirement in Keansburg, New Jersey, America, where he had toured with great success, was sadly marred by two incidents. In October 1930, at the age of 65, he was knocked down by a car and was severely injured, sustaining a fractured skull and several broken ribs.

When he was 75 years old he was persuaded by an old admirer and the Society of American Magicians to come out of retirement and give one more show, celebrating his long and successful career. On 6 June 1940 the Heckscher Theatre in New York was packed with an audience eagerly awaiting the appearance of a legend from the world of magic. The show had been advertised as “Never before such a magic show”, a billing that turned out to be prophetic - unfortunately for the wrong reason. Reports of the show say that although he received a great ovation when he walked on to the stage for the first time, from the beginning Le Roy seemed ill at ease and things started to go wrong.

To be fair, Le Roy had been only able to rehearse his complicated show for one day, with a new cast of assistants and backstage staff, all unfamiliar with Le Roy’s routines and the strict timing he required for the show to run smoothly. At times the wrong props were brought on, leaving Le Roy and the audience baffled as to what was happening. Again, reports of the show say that during the interval many of the audience left the theatre, no doubt not wishing to witness further the humiliation of one of the great magicians from the past.
The second half did not go any better, in fact it became obvious that Le Roy was struggling. Too much was going wrong, the stage manager decided to stop the show and brought the curtain down, bringing what should have been a great night of magic to a heart breaking end. In Sidney Clarke’s book The Annals of Conjuring he describes Le Roy as ‘one of the best conjurers of modern times’, as he undoubtedly was. However, Le Roy’s performance in New York in 1940 was the saddest of ends to a long and distinguished career and to a performer who was universally known as The World’s Monarch of Magic.

Le Roy was so distressed by what had happened he destroyed all his illusions and props. He never performed again. Servais Le Roy died 65 years ago on 2 June 1953.

Now I would like to make a final comment on the value of vintage magic posters. Artists, particularly magicians, would commission these eye-catching posters in order to publicise their acts. The posters would be pasted on billboards all over town and at the theatres where they were appearing. To the performer who had commissioned them, they were only of any value if what was depicted on the poster so intrigued the public they would go to the theatre to watch their performances. If the posters failed to do that then they were, to the performer, worthless. For that reason alone, they had to be eye catching and at times sensational.

Would these posters persuade you to buy a ticket to the show?
Today, these posters of past magicians in pristine condition can bring huge sums of money at specialist auctions.

I really have no idea how much my poster is worth today, to a collector. It is probably worth a few bob. But 75 years ago in 1944, to Will Goldston, the poster was only worth the price of a sheet of wrapping paper!

Thank you.