

The Mystery of Houdini's Disappearing Bookcase

Thanks to dogged detective work by a curator at UT's Harry Ransom Center, an important piece of furniture was rescued from oblivion. It goes on display this month.



By Katy Vine

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Harry Houdini in his home office, circa 1925.

Unidentified photographer/Courtesy of the Ken Trombly Collection/Harry Ransom Center/The University of Texas at Austin

The origin story of Harry Houdini's bookcase, which will be unveiled at Austin's **Harry Ransom Center**, at the University of Texas, this week as part of a major exhibit, sounds like the type of lore the legendary illusionist would have invented if it weren't true.

The record begins in the early 1900s, when, on the rare occasion that Houdini wasn't traveling the world entertaining audiences with his disappearing act and other magic tricks, he was at his townhouse in Harlem, New York. There, wearing his usual rumpled, striped button-down, he'd putter around rooms that were bursting with stacks of books. Since he'd finally started making money, he'd invested a good part of his fortune into a personal library—a collection that would prove that he was an intellectual, no mere vaudevillian, and allow him access to hallowed touchstones of relevant history.

Naturally obsessive, Houdini investigated the history of illusions, going back hundreds of years. He gathered ephemera on obscure magicians. He bought the 1584 first edition of *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, considered to be the first English-language book that explained magic tricks. He purchased the original handwritten trial testimony from what's known as the Affair of the Diamond Necklace, the 1784–5 scandal that set the stage for the French Revolution—mostly so that he could decide for himself whether the banished Italian magician Alessandro Cagliostro was truly involved.

Beyond magic, his curiosity ran deep into every possible root of his craft. He amassed playbills dating back to the 1770s. He bought a 1751 diary written by the famous British actor David Garrick. He acquired material around circus impresario P. T. Barnum.

Such a collector doesn't usually hide his prized possessions away in a closet.

Houdini was no different. He showcased his treasured acquisitions in three

prominent display cases: two bookcases for his magic collection and a third that held his theater library, an English mahogany piece.

Notably, this was not just any English mahogany piece. This was a bookcase formerly owned by the hugely influential nineteenth-century stage director Augustin Daly. It had been in the presence of greatness: the Autocrat of the Stage himself, known for his tyrannical management style, along with talented actors of the day. Houdini simply had to have it. Seduced by the idea that his cherished items inhabit yet another thematically relevant and valuable acquisition, he bought Daly's bookcase at auction, beating out a real estate developer named Messmore Kendall, who built one of the first movie theaters in Manhattan, with a \$3,000 bid.

The library was Houdini's prize jewel. He frequently conducted research with his books; he even hired a personal librarian to care for them. After a particularly turbulent plane ride, he once said, "I could think of nothing but my wife and my collection." For years, he told friends that he couldn't wait to retire so that he could spend the rest of his days revisiting the thoughtful and vast inventory of magic, theater history, psychic phenomena, spiritualism, witchcraft, demonology, and evil spirits.

Except, despite his meticulous caretaking, Houdini's dream of retiring among his books never came to pass. After the King of Cuffs died after his appendix ruptured in October 1926, his magic collection—some five thousand volumes and 120 scrapbooks—went to the Library of Congress, and the two corresponding bookcases deteriorated in his home for decades. One was eaten by termites. The other was rescued by famed magician **David Copperfield in 2017.**

Meanwhile, the drama collection and bookcase went on a different journey before ultimately ending up in Austin.

The first owner was Messmore Kendall, who had lost out on the bookshelf to

Houdini at auction. He was not about to let the piece slip through his fingers again. After the magician's death, he paid a visit to Houdini's widow, Bess Houdini, who told him that the drama library was still available. She would sell the bookcase to Kendall, she said, along with 26 crates of theater books as a bonus. No doubt, he jumped for joy as he left that meeting.

Kendall basked in the pedigreed bookcase's glow until 1958, when he got sick, moved to Florida, and sold the collection—bookcase and all—to Dallas theater magnate **Karl Hoblitzelle**, whose interest as a collector was natural. He had built a chain of theaters, and at one point owned 160 across the state and the South—including Dallas's Majestic and the Paramount in Austin (Houdini performed at both).

What might not have been obvious to everyone involved in the sale was that Hoblitzelle was also a generous philanthropist, preparing a gift that would prove foundational to UT Austin's then nascent research archive. The mogul immediately donated the drama collection to the university's new Humanities Research Center, founded the year before by provost (and future HRC namesake) Harry Ransom. Originally stored in the UT Tower, its collection is **now one of the most preeminent of its kind in the world**, with millions of documents, manuscripts, books, photos, and objects. **Since 1972, it's been housed in a ten-story building** on campus.

Over the decades, Houdini's items were so popular, drawing famous magicians and obsessives like Ricky Jay and Kenneth Silverman, that archivists hesitated to close the collection to the public so that it could be cataloged. Such an effort could take years, they argued.

That postponement came to an end in 2015, when the Ransom Center hired a curator for the theater and performing arts collection named Eric Colleary. A relentless, and relentlessly cheerful, researcher who tended to consider all items in his care as if they were the Dead Sea Scrolls, Colleary closed the

Houdini books and papers to the public so the archivists could get to work on them.

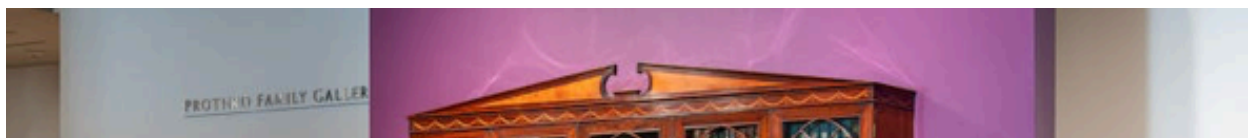
While he and his colleagues were scouring every piece of paper, he found something strange: an old news article from Kendall's papers referencing a bookcase. "He bought the piece of furniture, and all the Houdini books, too," the report said.

This stumped Colleary. He had taken several tours of the Ransom Center by the time he found the article. "Nobody ever pointed out a Houdini bookcase," he said.

Deepening the mystery, Colleary found a letter from 1958 warning archivists that the bookcase was packed up with the collection and was making its way to Texas from New York City. Moving the large furniture piece had proved challenging, wrote the appraiser overseeing the logistics. "The large Bookcase was the real problem, had 7 men, in all, at times, working on it, including the carpenter and superintendent of the building," he wrote. "I stress this so that the University may now plan some way to handle this, when it arrives at Austin." Even with the warning, UT officials couldn't figure out how to get the piece up the Tower stairs.

Hoblitzelle solved the problem, Colleary finally realized, by donating it to the Governor's Mansion. This understanding clarified the puzzle that had vexed him: The bookcase wasn't catalogued at the HRC because it was never part of its collection. The donation also posed a tantalizing opportunity for someone in Colleary's field. If he located the bookcase, he thought, he could reunite it with its original contents.

And thus began Colleary's hunt.





After many lives, Houdini's bookcase has been tracked down, reassembled, and restored. The public can view it starting August 29 at the Harry Ransom Center.

Trent Lesikar

In an old book showcasing Governor Price Daniel's collections, Colleary spotted the bookcase in a faded color photo. There it was on the page: the dramaturgical touchstone that had once ignited bidding wars in New York City had been thrust into pedestrian service, displaying a governor's collection of polished silver platters, anonymously witnessing the state leaders and tourists wandering past as if it were any old cabinet.

If only it had stayed there. Colleary reached out to the Governor's Mansion, whose gatekeepers told him that during a late-1980s remodel in the mansion, the bookcase was moved to the Capitol, where it sat in the governor's reception area.

But it was no longer there, either. When Colleary spoke with caretakers for the Capitol, they told him it had moved to the Bauer House, in Tarrytown,

the home of UT's chancellor, where its provenance was as unknown to employees as a desk from Ashley furniture. At one point, it sat on the first floor but was later relocated into a second-story office. There, some well-

meaning worker accommodated a printer cable by punching a hole in the bookcase's back panel. Someone less well-meaning placed a glass on the bookcase's base without a coaster, leaving a round water stain.

It hardly surprised Colleary at this point when the caretakers of the chancellor's house told him the bookcase hadn't been there since 2010.

"Well, where is it now?" Colleary asked. No one knew.

"We just sent it away," a caretaker responded.

"What happens when you send it away?" Colleary asked.

He would soon find out. In 2018—three years after he began his detective work on the bookcase—a longtime Bauer House facility manager met Colleary in a storage room in downtown Austin, where state-owned furniture of this sort ended up in decor purgatory. "I absolutely know what that is," the manager told Colleary. "I've moved it four times." The two men walked into the basement. And there, in separate pieces, tightly wrapped up in plastic, was the bookcase. "I was thrilled," Colleary said.

Working from old photos, conservators were able to replace missing decorative trim from one of the doors and stabilize trim on two others. They buffed out scratches and repaired any modern adjustments.

Now, for the first time since the 1950s, the books have been reunited with their bookcase, and, decades after their arrival in Austin, Colleary is ready to unveil the HRC's first Houdini exhibit to focus on the magician as a collector, on August 29. **"Houdini's Library," which runs through January 24, 2027,** will feature more than two hundred pieces that highlight the magician's life as a collector, including *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* and the David Garrick diary. And, of course, the bookcase.

While the bookcase was being reassembled earlier this year, Colleary showed me the pieces, looking upon them like a proud father. "The more I started

me the pieces, looking upon them like a proud father. The more I started digging into this, the more I realized that if Messmore Kendall hadn't asked about the bookcase, it's very likely that Bess would have sold off the collection and it would have been broken up—and we would have lost everything.”

The bookcase was the catalyst, he thought. And its disappearance was simply, in the end, an illusion.