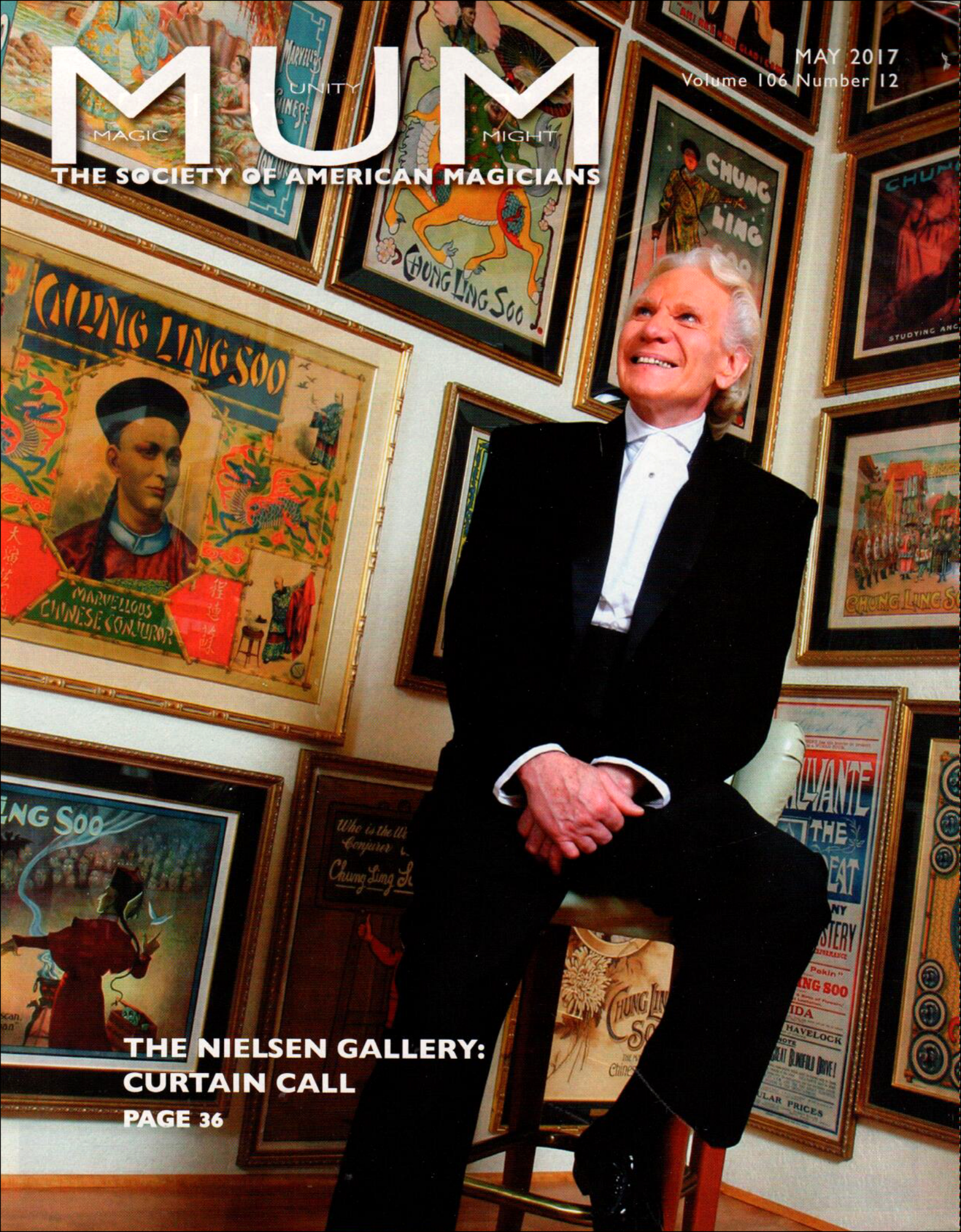


# MUM

MAGIC UNITY MIGHT

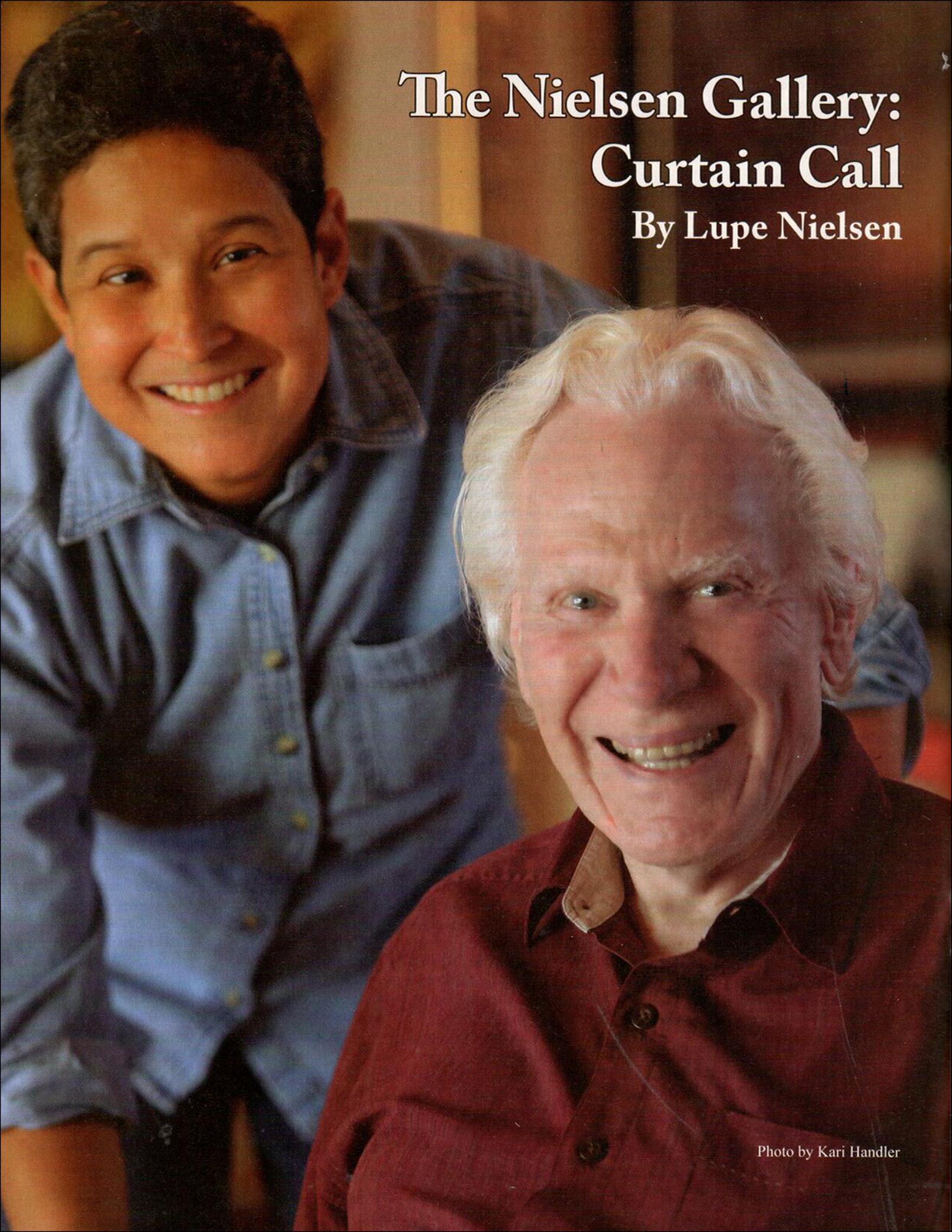
THE SOCIETY OF AMERICAN MAGICIANS

MAY 2017  
Volume 106 Number 12



**THE NIELSEN GALLERY:  
CURTAIN CALL**  
**PAGE 36**





# The Nielsen Gallery: Curtain Call

By Lupe Nielsen

Photo by Kari Handler



## THANK YOU!

This is the last installment of what has been a remarkable project – the Nielsen Gallery for *M-U-M*: eleven years and four months, featuring a total of 135 posters.

We want to thank *M-U-M* editors John Moehring (January 2006 – December 2008) and Michael Close (January 2009 – Present) for their expertise during our tenure with the magazine. Various authors contributed to the columns. Richard Hatch started the column with twenty-two articles; Tom Ewing wrote the bulk of the column through the years – ninety-one articles or sixty-eight percent of the output. Tom is a writing and research genius who was able to find and convey all the information with a uniquely engaging style. He even won the Leslie Guest award for the column. Other guest authors contributed to the column: James Alfredson, Mike Caveney, David Charvet, Gunther Dammann, Gabe Fajuri, Ann Marie Fleming, Charles Greene, James Hamilton, Steve Marshall, Martin Pacheco, William V. Rauscher, Jim Steinmeyer, Barry Wiley, and yours truly. Thank you all for making this project possible.

The images are part of the Nielsen Collection, a collection that took nearly twenty-five years to amass. The collection contained two thousand magic posters, half of which were vintage (before 1930), with over 150 unique pieces. The rest were contemporary posters (1930 to the present).

## THE NIELSEN MAGIC POSTER COLLECTION

Before we start the story, let's provide a brief background to Norm Nielsen's life. Norm Nielsen was born on February 17, 1934, in Kenosha, Wisconsin. At age ten he met a local barber, Herman Raditz, an amateur magician, who taught

Norm his first magic tricks. As a teenager, Norm went to his first magic convention, where he met Neil Foster. Meeting Neil kindled his desire to travel to California and learn magic at the Chavez Studio of Magic. After the Chavez Course, he went to an agent who told him, "You are magician number 658. You have the skills; now use them to create something original."

Norm eventually went back to Kenosha and opened a magic shop; he continued to work as a magician in the Wisconsin and Chicago areas. In the early 1960s he met Theo Bamberg (Okito), and from this master learned how to make Okito-style props.

In looking for something different, he decided to replace the Zombie Ball in his repertoire for a Floating Violin, and the idea of a "Musical Act" started to take shape. This was followed by creating a proper Coin Ladder that would look like a musical instrument, and which would be used for the Miser's Dream. The flute came next (Alan Wakeling's idea), while the card manipulation came from his education at Chavez. The final touch was the "Bowing Violin." Norm wanted to have various instruments come out at the finale, and Johnny Thompson suggested that he should keep it simple by only having the vanished violin come out and take a bow.

The turning point in Norm's career was his performance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. With the notoriety this show gave him, he obtained the contract for the Crazy Horse Saloon in Paris, and the rest is history. The exposure at the Crazy Horse allowed him to get booked in

every cabaret and nightclub venue in Europe for nearly twenty years. He was a busy performer.

Throughout his performing career, Norm did not pay attention to a single magic poster until twenty-seven years ago.

In 1990, while working at the Scala in Madrid, an Argentinian magician by the name of Victor King gave Norm, as a gift, a poster of Fu Manchu. The gift consisted of two posters of Fu. They were old and in pieces and he told Norm, "If you take the good half of each, you will get one nice poster out of them." Norm had the poster repaired and mounted and hung it in his office; it grew on him.



Soon after, at a magic convention, another poster caught Norm's eye. It was a poster of Frakson, the Spanish magician (*M-U-M* August 2009). Norm thought, "I know Frakson; we are good friends!" He purchased this poster from magic dealer Mario Carrandi, who also sold Norm a third poster with the



image of Carter and the “Priestess of Delphi.” These early posters were all it took – Norm was hopelessly hooked into collecting.

Norm became obsessed with magic posters. To find them he called other collectors, visited flea markets, and put ads in newspapers. Every day he got up and made a point to find a magic poster. One day the phone rang. A lady, who had seen his ad in the *L.A. Times*, told him, “I have a poster of the Great Herrmann. Would you be interested?” Norm was at her house in no time. To his amazement, the lady only wanted three figures for it. Norm couldn’t wait to pay her and take an exquisite Leon Herrmann home. On another occasion, a gentleman who had known a stagehand who worked in the Hardeen show called him offering him a Harry Houdini “Buried Alive” poster (*M-U-M* – October 2014).

all knew that one was dealing with others simultaneously. The outcome was rewarding when everything worked out; all the parties were happy with the deals and the treasures they took home.

The core of the Nielsen Collection came through the relationship that Norm had with his friend and mentor, Jay Marshall. Years before, Jay had acquired the Ed Miller poster collection. Norm purchased half of Jay’s collection. Notable posters from this collection were the Houdini “Sensation” (*M-U-M* – October 2011), the Thurston Mantle (*M-U-M* – May 2010) and the Triple Alliance “Talma Portrait” (*M-U-M* – September 2013).

As the years went by, we acquired other collections. A notable collection was the Cabot Collection from Wellington, New Zealand. Charles Cabot was an advance man for many shows that visited the island. He was in charge of publicizing the events, acquiring and distributing posters, etc. He was also the stage-door man at the State Opera House in Wellington. We obtained several gorgeous posters from the collection. A couple of the posters acquired in this deal that have been featured in this column were: Powell “Consultation” (*M-U-M* – November 2006) and McEwen “Vignettes” (*M-U-M* – May 2014).

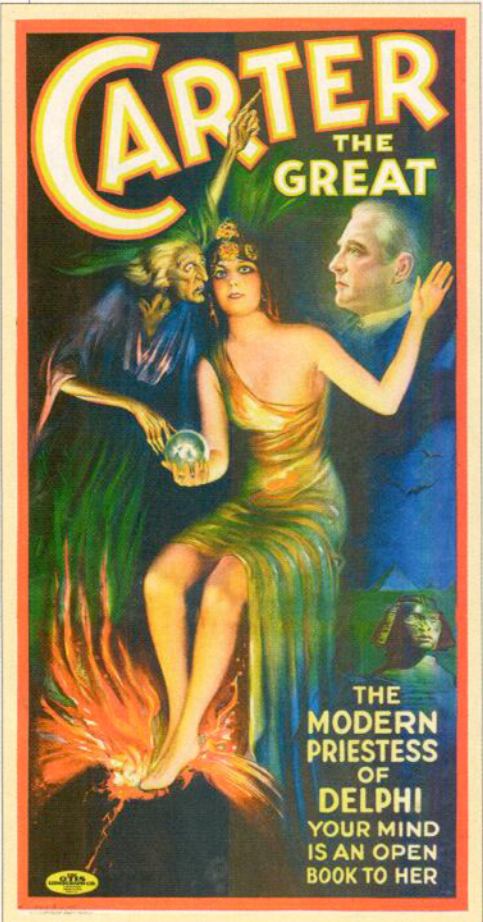
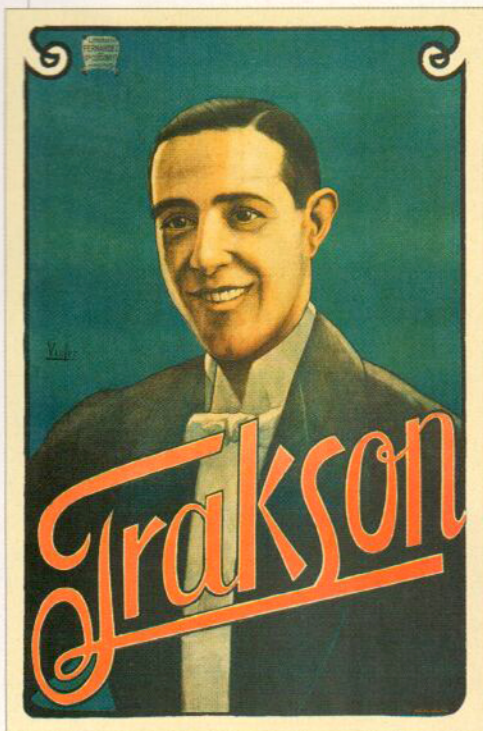
The late 1990s were filled with auctions, most notably those of the Magic Circle in London. This organization organized several high-end auctions to gather the funds to complete their brand new headquarter building. A poster featured in this column from those days was the Raymond “Noah’s Ark” (*M-U-M* – July 2008).

1999 marked an interesting year for the Nielsen Poster Collection. Christie’s in London held an auction that featured the Houdini “Water Torture Cell” poster, printed in 1912 by Dangerfield from London. We managed to buy this poster at auction for GBP 36,168.75 (\$56,000 in 1999 dollars). That was the highest amount ever paid for a magic poster at the



**Marshall Brodien, Norm,  
and Jay Marshall**  
(Photo credit: Anne White)

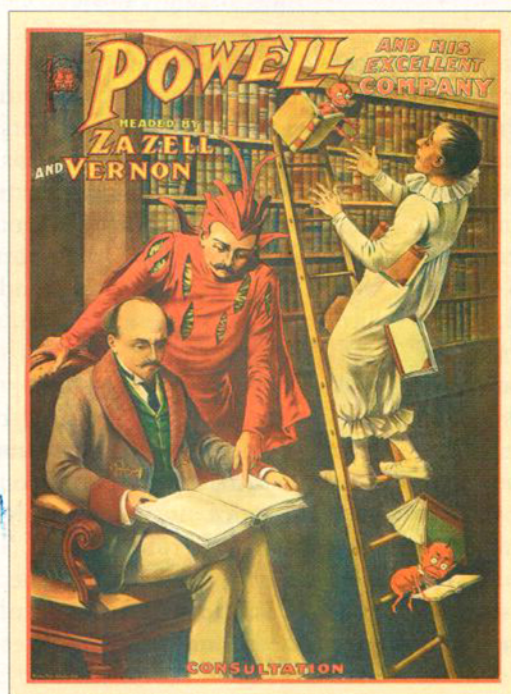
In those days, the wheeling and dealing were much fun. Sometimes there were three- or four-way deals among collectors. To get a poster, Norm had to deal with a collector who wanted a piece that was owned by someone else. This third party would only be willing to part with the initial piece if we obtained another item from a fourth party and so on. It took some negotiating and finesse to deal with several parties at once, and not







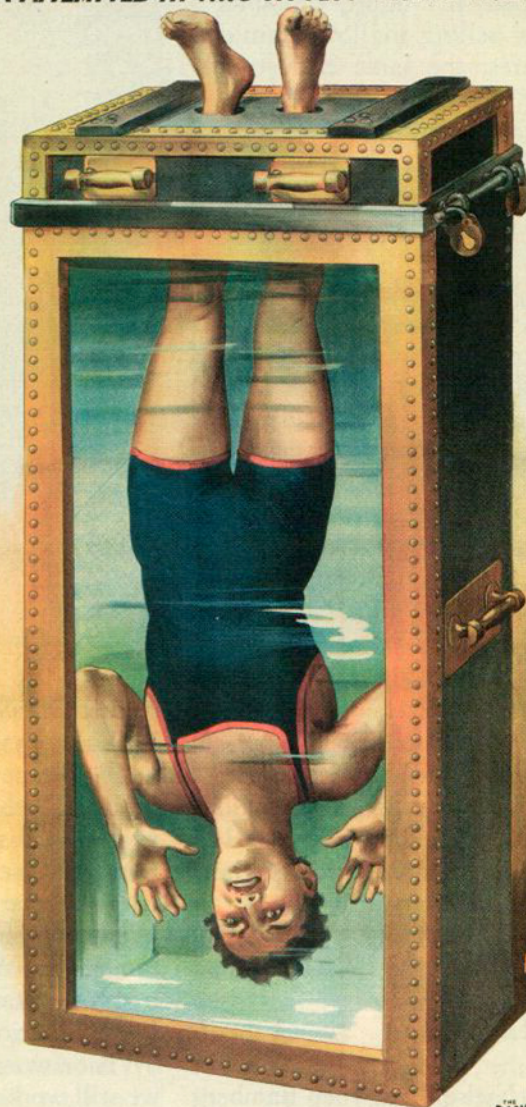
Talma Portrait



Powell Consultation poster

# HOUDINI

*PRESENTS HIS OWN ORIGINAL INVENTION  
THE GREATEST SENSATIONAL MYSTERY  
EVER ATTEMPTED IN THIS OR ANY OTHER AGE!!!*



THE DANGERFIELD  
LONDON

**\$200 REWARD TO ANY ONE PROVING THAT IT  
IS POSSIBLE TO OBTAIN AIR IN THE UP-SIDE-DOWN  
POSITION IN WHICH HOUDINI RELEASES HIMSELF  
FROM THIS WATER-FILLED-TORTURE-CELL.**

time (M-U-M – October 2006).

Another notable event was the sale of the David Price Collection in the year 2000. David Price's collection was probably the largest poster collection in North America

at the time. It was purchased by Mike Caveney and George Daily, who, to recover financially, split it up, kept the pieces they each wanted for their respective collections, and sold the rest to the magic-collecting

community.

The twentieth century ended, and a new century full of much magic and further poster acquisitions began. We continued buying posters throughout the first decade of the new century,



in spite of the collapse of the world economy on September 11, 2001, which considerably changed the poster market. Chung Ling Soo posters that in the late 1990s commanded five-figure amounts were now selling for low to mid four figures; the same correction happened with “midlevel” performers like Leroy, Carter, etc. Some of the early Thurstons, Kellars, and Houdini pieces did maintain some value.

We kept buying posters at auctions, from fellow collectors, from magic widows, and even from flea markets. If it was an attractive poster, Norm was quite efficient about having it mounted and restored, and then getting it back to frame it immediately for display. If a poster arrived in the morning, by afternoon, Norm would personally frame it and hang it on the wall, even though the glue holding the frame together was not yet dry.

Posters acquired in the early 2000s were: Annie Abbott “Casino de Paris” (*M-U-M* – March 2013), Frikell “Cheret” poster (*M-U-M* – March 2014), Robert-Houdin “Decapitation” poster (*M-U-M* – November 2012), and the Ionia “Three-sheet Portrait” (*M-U-M* – February 2007).

## THE OKITO-NIELSEN LINE OF MAGIC APPARATUS

Norm Nielsen met Theo Bamberg in 1961, and had a close friendship with him during the last few years of Bamberg’s life. Okito was living at the Wacker Hotel in Chicago; Norm used to visit him often and talk magic. They would go to Sears together to buy tools, and Okito even taught Norm about materials, paints, and the application of “varnish” decals on his apparatus.

One day, during one of his visits to Chicago, Norm asked Okito, “What do you have in that trunk at the end of your bed?” Okito replied, “My tools.” He then said, “If you want them, I would sell them to you for fifty



Annie Abbott “Casino de Paris” poster

dollars.” Miraculously, young Norm happened to have fifty dollars in his pocket (which was a rare occurrence in those days). He paid for the tools, but before he could take them home, Okito pulled them out and explained what he did with each one and what they were used for. Norm carried the trunk on the train back to Kenosha, Wisconsin. Upon his arrival, Norm brought the trunk into the house and told his first wife about the purchase. In appreciation for the tools, she said, “What a wonderful gift.” To this day, we still work with some of the Okito tools in our workshop. The straight edge he used and a few other items are precious to us.

Okito gave Norm permission to make any of his effects. This eventually became the “Okito-Nielsen” line of apparatus.

## RETIREMENT AND THE SALE OF THE COLLECTION

Life continued; the biggest highlight of the decade was Norm’s decision to retire as a performer on September 28, 2008. His last official

show was at the London Palladium, where he performed at the *A Tribute to Siegfried and Roy* show produced by Paul Stone. His act at the time was nearly perfect, and Norm was in perfect shape as a performer. At the age of seventy-four, after much traveling, and the decline of venues where acts like Norm Nielsen’s “Musical Act” could be performed, he decided that it was smart to retire while he was on top.

He took a break from travel and dedicated his time to work in the Nielsen Magic business.

In 2014, a few months after Norm’s eightieth birthday, he said, “I don’t expect to be around much longer; it is time to sell the collection. Besides, I want to see where a few things go, and enjoy my retirement.” This was a big call to action. The two of us run the business; keeping an exact and accurate listing of the collection was never a huge priority. On some occasions we acquired twenty pieces at a time. We kept a couple, traded half a dozen, sold a few others, etc. Wheeling and dealing was part of our lives, along with manufacturing Nielsen Magic props, making Okito-Nielsen items, performing shows, doing office work, and just having a life. Posters came in, some left, and some stayed.

It took me about four solid months to get a proper listing ready. I am grateful to our dear computer expert friend, Simone Marron, for her assistance in cataloguing the collection in Microsoft Excel.

Once you have a list, the next question is: How do you sell a large, specialized, and unique collection? We all know the market is quite small. The old, great collectors of magic are passing away, one after the other, and auctions are held for their respective collections quite frequently. Baby boomers are probably the last generation that appreciates the old memorabilia and the history of magic. This is followed by the Generation Xers, who, approaching middle age, probably have the financial means



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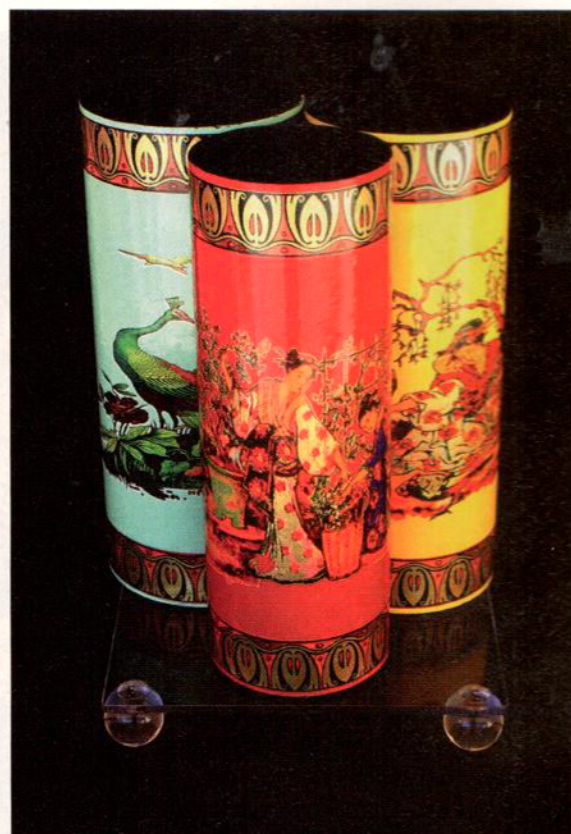
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**Checker Cabinet, Tea  
Cannister Mystery  
and the Okito/Nielsen  
Nested Tubes**



to afford the posters. Unfortunately, there does not seem to be much enthusiasm for collecting among Millennials. This could be because of sociological and financial factors, or the fact that it is a generation that tends not to accumulate stuff due to the constantly changing digital world.

Given the diminishing market, our first try was to identify the very wealthy individuals in our field. We counted three. Unfortunately, two were not interested at all, and the third one only wanted a few choice pieces, but did not want to buy the entire collection.

The next step was to sell choice pieces to select collectors who requested them, or who gathered their funds to purchase a few items. Our rules were simple: If you wanted to obtain an item before the auction, you had to pay the listed price plus a "cherry-picking fee," normally fifteen to twenty percent above the price. If three collectors or more requested a specific image, that poster would go to auction. Certain individual posters were sought after by only one person.

With the right price, we sold it. At this stage, about ten collectors bought – and paid high-end, premium prices – for ninety high-end pieces.

Although a few collectors bought some very nice pieces at premium prices, we were determined to have a few choice images for use in our public auctions. We walked a fine line: trying to maximize the financial gain early on and keeping the cherry-picking within reason. We did not want the public auctions to be devoid of great pieces; we needed a few "stars" to attract a special clientele to the events. We needed to offer fine Kellars, Thurstons, Houdinis, and Herrmanns.

Then came the time to pick a proper auction house. We contacted major auction houses – Christie's, Sotheby's, Heritage, etc. When choosing an auction house to sell your collectibles you have to keep several things in mind:

How knowledgeable is that company on the subject matter?

What is their commission fee? Auction houses charge a commission

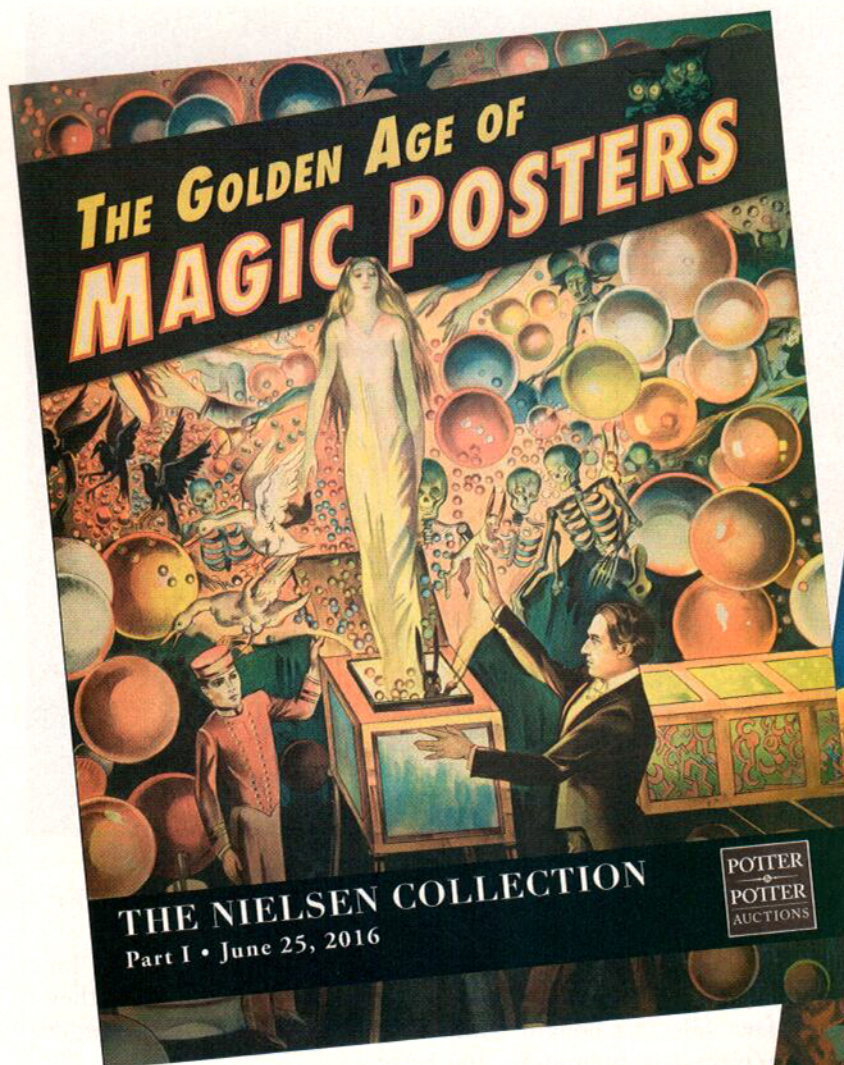
to the seller, which is an amount that can be negotiated.

What are they willing to do for you? How much publicity do they intend to do? Who is their target audience?

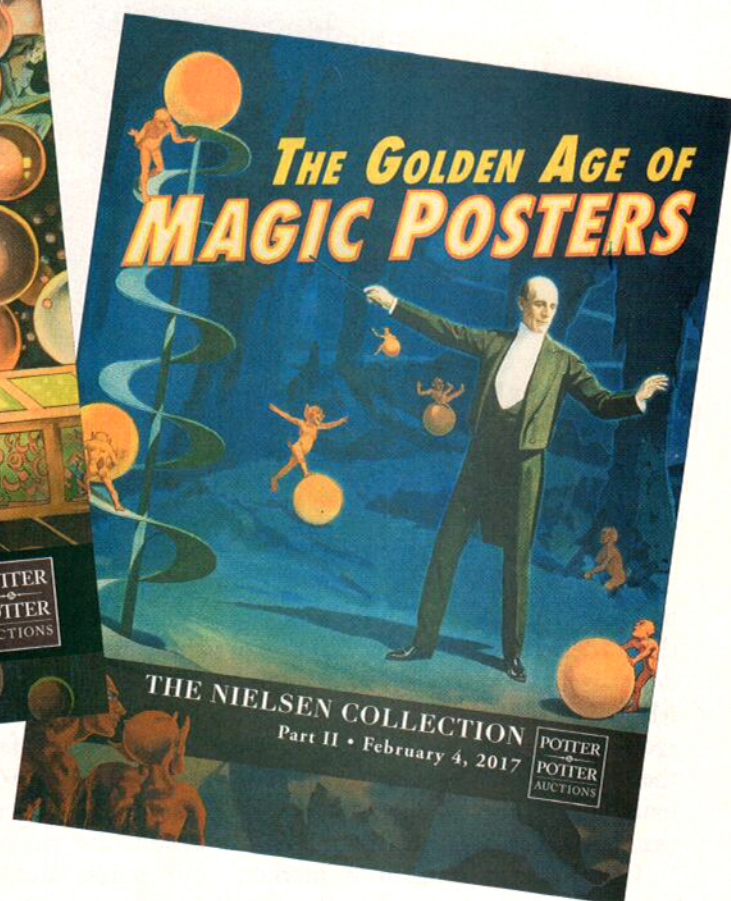
One of the major auction houses did make us a good offer. Unfortunately, during our interview with them, they had no idea what these magic posters were or their values. I asked them who would they use to research the items for the catalog, and the auction director had no idea. We opted to go with Potter and Potter Auctions, which is currently the premiere magic auction house in the United States. Also, Gabe Fajuri was willing to make a trip from Chicago, Illinois, to Las Vegas to pitch their services. His strategy worked, and we hired Potter and Potter for the job. In July 2015, he and his crew brought in a huge truck and picked up eight hundred of the main posters from the Nielsen Collection.

These were auctioned in two auctions, the first on June 25, 2016,





Magic Auction Poster Books



and the second on February 4, 2017.

The most notable things from the auctions were the record-breaking prices for some of the contemporary posters during the first auction and the world record of the most money ever paid for a magic poster during the second auction. That poster was the previously mentioned Houdini Water Torture Cell by Dangerfield, which brought in a whopping \$95,000 plus commission, for a total of \$114,000!

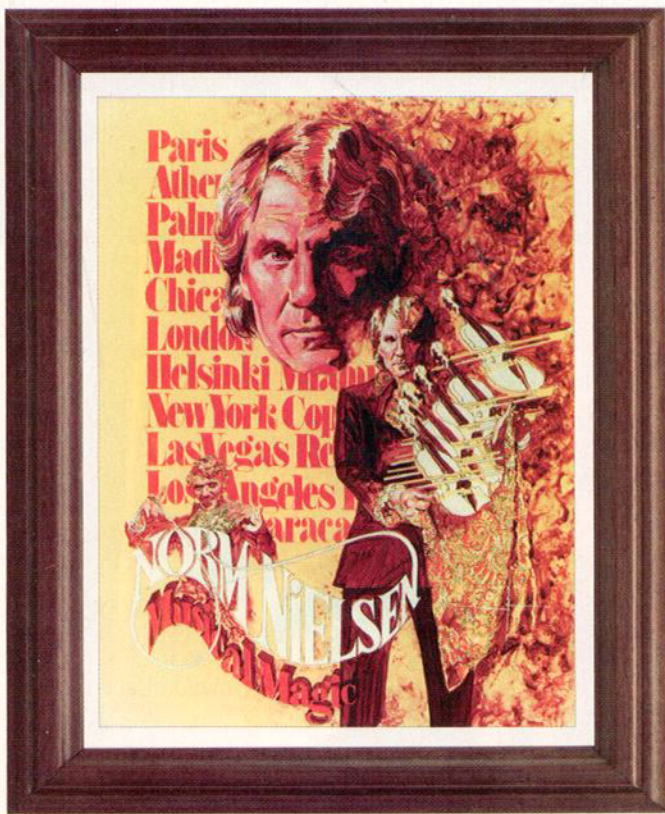
The most-asked question after the events was, "How did you do?" The answer is, "We did

well." However, things are not as spectacular as they may seem, because there were posters that sold for much less than what we paid for them, while others (like the Houdini) sold for far more than we invested. However, when considering everything, we did just fine. When selling your collection, do also keep in mind the tax liability involved, including the capital gains tax. In addition, you must factor in any expenses incurred in the sale of the collection plus the auctioneer's commission.

Still, overall, we were happy

with the results. For us, collecting is not necessarily an investment; we do it because we absolutely love these pieces. Nothing can replace the pleasure derived from acquiring and maintaining the posters, the relationships, friendships, and adventures we had throughout the years, and the learning experience that the posters have given us. The posters gave us purpose; by buying, selling, and trading them through our business, they have offered us financial gain like no other. When looking at the big picture, we consider ourselves very lucky.





So what is next? To answer that, do know that Nielsen Magic is not going out of business yet. We have sold 890 posters from the collection, and still have approximately three hundred vintage posters plus seven hundred contemporary posters left. Some of the vintage images are high-end pieces: rare Houdinis, Kellars, and Okitos. We are still manufacturing our line of magic apparatus: vanishing bottles, dove cages, and manipulation supplies. There is even the thought of gathering the entire Nielsen Gallery into book form as well.

Life continues, evolves, and changes. Collecting posters was an exciting and fulfilling part of our lives. The works of art that we adopted and cared for are now being passed on to other loving stewards in the magic world. ❖

**Norm Nielsen Musical Magic yellow poster - 1971  
(Half-sheet - 18" x 24")  
Design by Norm Nielsen, Artist - Ted Salter  
Available at [www.nnmagic.com](http://www.nnmagic.com)**

*Norm in his gallery with his posters*



*Photo by Zakary Belamy*