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Jean Eugène ROBERT-HOUDIN (Blois, 1805 – Saint-Gervais, 1871)

"DOUBLE MYSTERY" CLOCK

Paris, circa 1850.
Crystal, gilded bronze

H. 55 cm (21 ½ ")
Diameter of dial: 12 cm (4 ½ ")
Square base: 18 x 18cm (7 ½ x 7 ½ ")
Signed on the dial: *ROBERT-HOUDIN/PARIS.*

Bibliography: Tardy, *Dictionnaire des Horlogers Français,* Paris 1971; Polichinelle, Jan-Oct 1983, pp. 40-48; Francis Maitzner, *Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin***,** *Horloger, mécanicien, prestidigitateur "L'histoire de sa vie,"* Bulletin ANCAHA, no. 58, été 1990, pp. 5-17; Richard Chavigny, *Jean Robert-Houdin Horloger,* Bulletin ANCAHA, no. 58, été 1990, pp. 19-28; J.C. Gendrot *La pendule mystérieuse de Robert-Houdin* Bulletin ANCAHA N° 58, été 1990, pp. 29-37; Paul Réal, *Restauration d'une pendule à trois mystères signée E. Robert-Houdin,* Bulletin ANCAHA, printemps 1998, pp. 39-44; Derek Roberts, *Mystery, Novelty & Fantasy Clocks*, Shiffer Publishing, USA, 1998.

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The circular dial, made from two clear glass plates of near-identical size, indicates the hours in Roman numerals and the minutes with precision indicators, with one arrow-shaped gilt-brass hand. The hours and signature are painted on the back of the first glass plate; the second glass plate moves with the hour hand.
The whole dial is contained by a gilt-brass surround that sits in a chased gilt-bronze mount supported by a crystal column terminating in four ormolu griffins on a red velvet terrace decorated with gilt-bronze scrolls motifs.
Like the dial with two glass plates, the crystal column is actually made of two separate crystal tubes, the inner one being fitted with rotating wheels at both ends. A long rod with an endless screw is the link between the glass inner column and

the removing middle dial, it is hidden within one of the decorative dial supports. The movement contained inside the base, is connected mechanically to the inner cristal column.

It is made of two separate trains (one for the strike and the other for the time) and ends with a platform escapement, with Swiss-type escape wheel, and cut bi-metallic balance wheel. The strike is every hour and half hour on a silvered bell and controlled by a countwheel. The movement is stamped *E. Robert-Houdin.* The same very long brass key is used for winding and setting the hands through 3 holes at the rear of the base.

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THE MYSTERY CLOCK

This so-called "double mystery" clock is the perfect expression of Robert-Houdin's talent as an illusionist. **First mystery:** the glass dial, on which the two hands seem to move as if by magic, has no visible means of propulsion. **Second mystery:** the dial, supported by a crystal column, has no apparent means of transmission. Perched on the summit of a perfectly transparent column, devoid of any workings, this dial became an object of fascination from its inception, intriguing collectors in quest of mystery and novelty ever since.

This model is the third of a series of six mystery-clock models known today, and is identifiable by its cristal column, introduced for the first time here.

According to Derek Roberts, Robert-Houdin introduced his first series of mystery clocks, the exact date of which is unknown, in the form of a griffin supporting a dial, the whole resting on a base that concealed the movement (Fig. 1).[1]

Fig. 1. Robert-Houdin
First mystery clock model

By 1838, it was followed by a second series, as seen illustrated in *Mechanic's Magazine,* dated 3 November 1838, and mentions its exhibition in the store window of the famous London silversmith Mr. T. Cox Savory, located near The

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[1] Derek Roberts, *Mystery, Novelty & Fantasy Clocks*, p. 223.

Exchange (Fig. 2).

Basing it on the previous model, but wanting to further develop his quest for mystery and excellence, Robert-Houdin devised a third series with a single-handed dial supported by a clear crystal column formed of two glass tubes. This model was commonly known as the "double mystery" clock (Fig. 3).

Fig. 2. Robert-Houdin
'Savory's Magnetic Timepiece' and standard single-handed mystery clock

Fig. 3. Robert-Houdin
"Double-Mystery" Clock

The fourth series, coincides with the addition of the minute hand driven by a tiny set of gears concealed behind the centre of the hands; the museum of magic (Maison de la Magie) in Blois, dedicated to Eugène Robert-Houdin, has a triple-mystery model in its collection (Fig. 4). The fifth series differs by the shape of its dial, which instead of being circular is now square, rendering the mystery considerably more complex. Robert-Houdin went as far as employing four sheets of glass to mask the mechanisms, which, to the clockmaker-magician's great satisfaction, perplexed and fascinated even his peers (Fig. 5). As for the sixth series, it employed the same type of mechanism as the previous model but the dial assumed different shapes such as oval and break-arch.

Fig. 4. Robert-Houdin
Triple Mystery Clock
(Blois, Maison de la magie, Robert-Houdin)

Fig. 5. Robert-Houdin
Square-dialled mystery clock

Mystery clocks would continue to be made along the same principles well into the twentieth century, not least by Cartier in the 1920s. Inspired by the mystery clocks of the previous century, a number of them were equipped with hands affixed to a revolving circular glass plate.

Eugène Robert-Houdin presented the first mystery clock at the Paris Exhibition of French Industry in 1839. His mystery clocks and a small automata 'The Player with the Beaker' earned him a bronze medal at the exhibition; the jury praised not only his inventiveness, but his business sense as well.

The *Moniteur Universel* of 10 June 1839 was even more enthusiastic, noting: 'In the category of precision instruments, there is no lack of amazing feats. The most remarkable is the "mystery clock" exhibited under no. 824 by Robert Houdin 13 rue Vendôme. This piece considerably perplexed the minds of horologists and visitors alike. [...] We render full justice to M. Robert-Houdin's fertile imagination in acknowledging that he has made a truly remarkable piece [...]. There are several versions: single or double-handed circular, square or octagonal dials mounted on opaque pedestals or single and double glass columns.' The success was such that the model was exhibited again in 1900 at the Paris Universal Exhibition, presented by a certain M. J. Olivier (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6. Clock by Robert-Houdin
1900 Universal Exhibition, Paris

Jean Eugène ROBERT-HOUDIN (Blois, 1805 – Saint-Gervais, 1871)

Horologist, illusionist, stage artist

André Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri (1819-1889)
Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin, 1855 (photograph, Musée d'Orsay)

'I am inclined to believe', noting in his biography "Confidences", that I came into the world with a file, a compass or a hammer in my hand, for from my earliest youth, these instruments were my rattles, my toys; I seemed to use them as other children learned to walk and talk.'

All his life, Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin was ruled by his passion, or mania, to invent and perfect, never ceasing to surprise and fascinate; his scientific and technical innovations as well as his remarkable talent as a magician secured his place in history.

The son of horologist Prosper Robert, Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin was born in Blois on 7 December 1805. Established as an horologist in Paris around 1835, Jean Eugène began his training in his father's workshop. Although Prosper Robert insisted that his son pursue a legal career, Jean Eugène preferred the domain of horology and began an apprenticeship under his cousin Jean Martin Robert, reputed to be the most skilful horologist in town.

Blois, home to the kings of France since the Renaissance, was one of the major horological centres at the time – in 1700, there were no fewer than 200 clockmakers working there. It was also here, in his hometown, that Jean Eugène Robert met his future wife, Josépha Eglantine Houdin, daughter of the well-established Blois horologist, Jacques Houdin, a monumental clockmaker who was summoned to Paris in 1820 to work for Bréguet. In late 1829, Jean Eugène Robert began working for his future father-in-law as a clock dealer, and on 8 July 1830 married his daughter whose surname became inseparable from his own, hyphenating it from then on as Robert-Houdin; it was officially recognised by Prince-President Louis-Philippe in 1852.

Shortly after his marriage, Robert-Houdin established himself in Paris where he became known for the construction of ingenious automata and machines of his own invention. He first settled at 63, rue du Temple, repairing clocks and watches. Nevertheless he continued to invent, creating a cabinet of curiosities where he would produce a series of completely new mechanical devices that were marvels of ingenuity. He was awarded numerous prizes and medals throughout his lifetime, including first-class bronze, silver and gold medals at the 1839, 1844, 1855 and 1859 French Industry and Universal Exhibitions.

Among his first inventions was the alarm-lighter clock for which he filed a five-year patent on 20 September 1837 for 'an alarm clock whose function was to have light upon waking.' It was activated by a watch movement with verge escapement, which released a small candle at the chosen hour — the tip of which, filled with a substance similar to that of German matches, was lit through friction. The success was such that it proved to be a financial boon to Robert-Houdin for many years to come.

This commercial success allowed him to move to 13 rue Vendôme, hire employees and devote himself to the construction of automata, among which were 'The Player with the Beaker', 'The Dancer on a Cord', 'The Singing Birds' and the creation of his first masterpiece of horology: the mystery clock. The latter, as we have seen, was the horological expression of his talent as illusionist and

became an object of curiosity, highly sought after by amateurs and collectors alike.

After this fruitful period, Robert Houdin devoted even more time to creating automata. At the Universal Exhibition of 1844, he exhibited on a circular platform his timepieces and other mechanical devices such as the 'Writer-Drawer', which King Louis-Philippe himself admired, and was finally sold for $4000 to the famous American showman, P. T. Barnum. Once again, the Central Jury confirmed his success, awarding him a silver medal for all his inventions.

He continued to invent, the list of which includes innovative devices like the electric distributer, electric regulator clock, a mechanism to detect leaks on ships, an electric plastron for fencers, a speedometer for automobiles.... without forgetting his famous "magic clock" invented in 1845, a true masterpiece, which he demonstrated as a stage act.

Like the mystery clock, the magic clock's hands moved without any apparent connection with the driving mechanism; two separate cords suspended the glass dial and bell, which, with a wave of Robert-Houdin's magic wand, would obey the various orders and commands stunned spectators might suggest (Fig. 7).
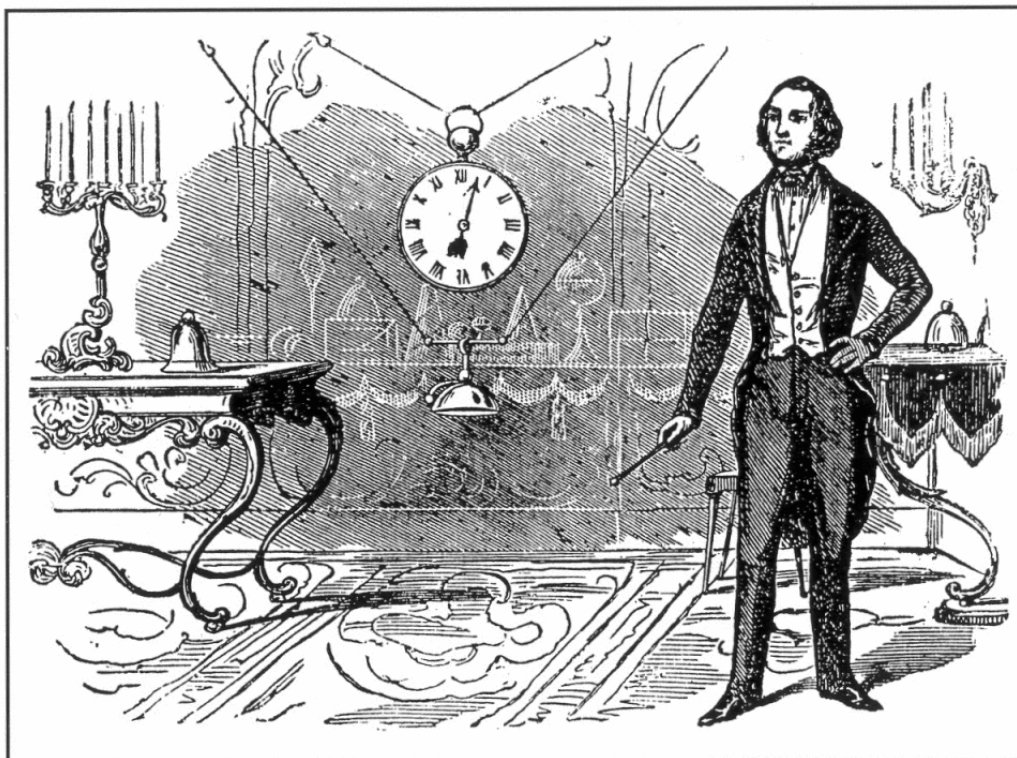

Fig. 7. Robert-Houdin, Magic Clock, 1845.

In addition to his talent as inventor, Robert-Houdin had a charismatic personality that enabled him to perform on stage and captivate his audience easily. Theatre lover, illusionist and actor at heart, he opened his own conjuring theatre at 14

Galerie de Valois at the Palais Royal in Paris. On 3 July 1845, Robert-Houdin premiered the first of his four "Soirées Fantastiques" where he paraded a host of mechanical marvels that would respond to his voice, obeying the commands that spectators would suggest. For numerous years he triumphed before his public, earning a reputation worldwide. His fame was such that in 1848 he travelled to London to perform at the St. James's Theatre, and also before Queen Victoria, who extended a personal invitation to have the magician perform at Buckingham Palace!

In 1855, Robert-Houdin and the Maison Destouche exhibited together at the Universal Exhibition, where they were awarded a First Class Medal for seven inventions: an electric regulator clock, a mantel clock, several large bell-tower dials, a mechanism to turn electric current on during the day and off at night, a new electric SMEE battery, an electric distributer (precursor of the electro-magnetic motor) and a new device to transfer electric current.
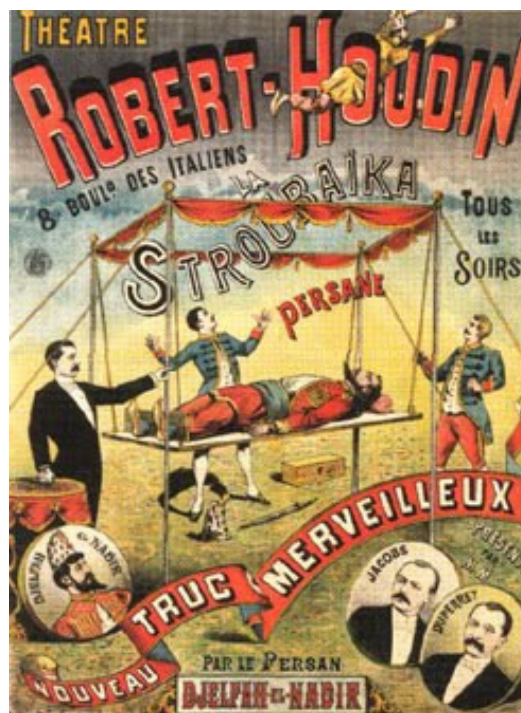
To this endless list, we can add that Robert-Houdin was one of the pioneers of the electric clock, for which he filed a patent in 1855 (Fig. 8).

Fig. 8. Electric Master Clock, signed Jean Robert-Houdin.
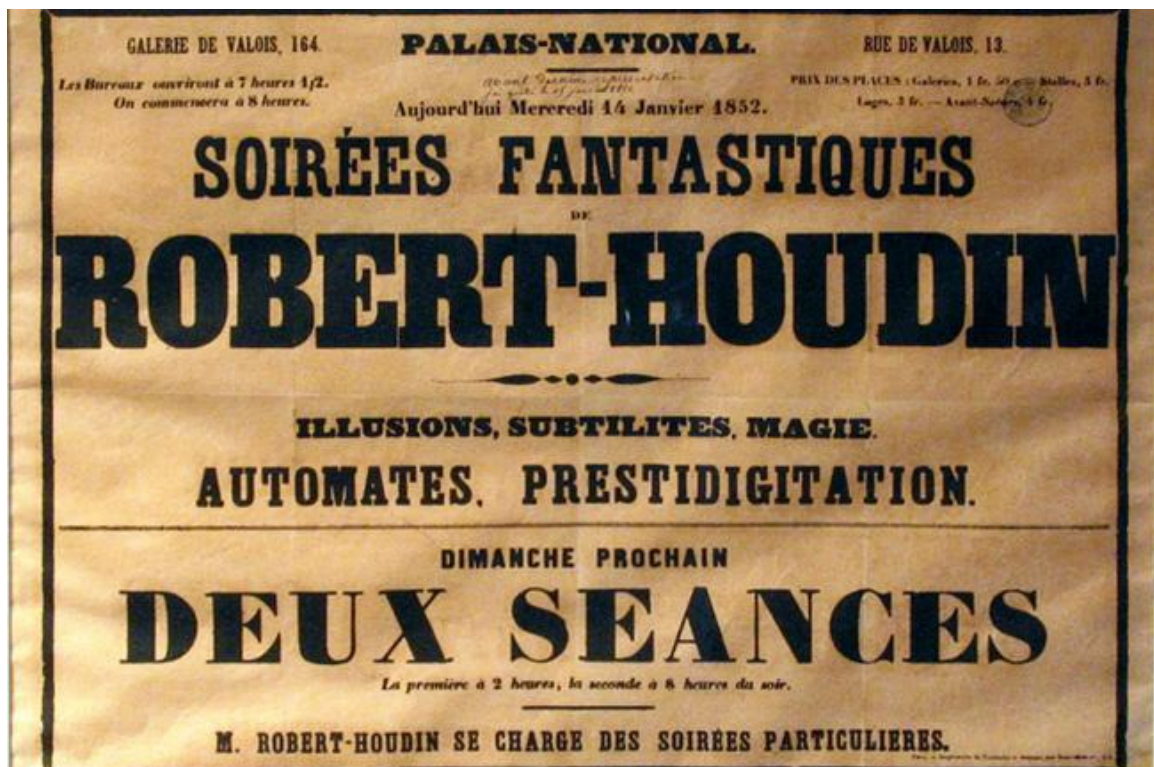
"Soirées fantastiques" Poster, Robert-Houdin Theatre, 1852

Robert-Houdin Theatre Poster, Persian Stroubaika
(Paris, Musée Carnavalet)

HARRY HOUDINI

(Budapest, 1874 - Detroit, 1926)

Arousing envy and admiration commensurate with his fame, Robert-Houdin was imitated and plagiarized by his peers, whether French or foreign, and his rival magicians were many.

Among these, the most enduring was the celebrated Harry Houdini (1874-1926), whose real name was Erich Weisz. An American of Austrian heritage, Houdini, from the start of his career, named himself after the famous French illusionist Robert-Houdin, an homage that was quick to conflate the two personalities.


Harry Houdini

Houdini was best known for his escape acts, where chained, he would free himself from inside, locked, water-filled trunks or milk containers. An enthusiastic follower of Spiritism, he actively sought to unmask mediums by publicly exposing their illusionist stunts.

In 1906, he published the book *The Unmasking of Robert-Houdin*. Here, Houdini savagely attacked the illusionist, debunking his discoveries so as to discredit his reputation and claim for himself the role of the world's greatest magician. In this way, the man who meant to efface Robert-Houdin from history managed to eclipse his name in part, not least in the Anglo-Saxon world.

APPENDIX

Documentation
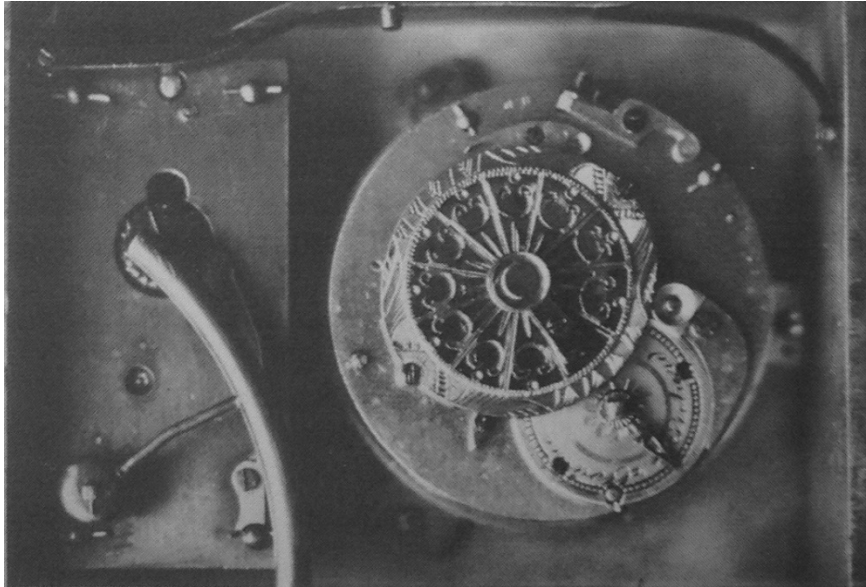
Alarm-lighter clock movement with verge escapement (1837)
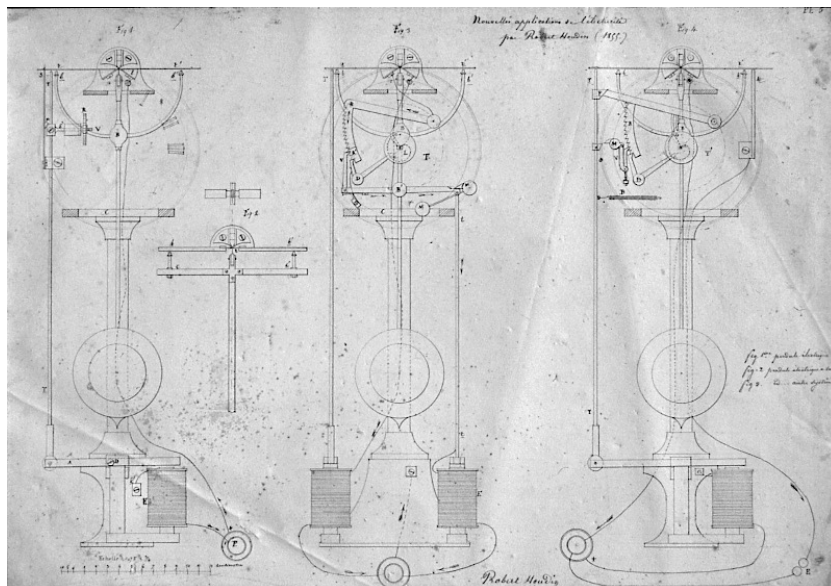
Design for an electric clock by Robert-Houdin, 1855 (Blois, Maison de la Magie)