

The story of The Amazing Chang's Willow Pattern Plate

Vicki Slade, Curatorial Officer, Leamington Spa Art Gallery & Museum

The Amazing Chang is a firm favourite among many modern magicians – David Copperfield is a fan – but he has largely disappeared from the public consciousness in the mists of time.

But his story has been told in a new biography by Sandra Evans and we now have some oral history memories from people who remember seeing him perform and wandering around Leamington flamboyantly dressed in a bowler hat and carrying a cane.

We also have many props used by the man who was born Samuel Lewis Whittington-Wickes in the town in 1893 and who, aged just 12, ran away from home only to reappear years later as a successful illusionist.

He toured the UK and appeared in Paris and New York with an act that included catching a bullet in his teeth.

This plate, however, was one of his most accomplished illusions. The traditional Willow Pattern story was invented by the English ceramics industry as a marketing tool some 200 years ago and relates the tale of Koon-Se, the daughter of a wealthy mandarin who fell in love with her father's servant. Because the daughter was promised in marriage to a duke, the lovers ran away together. They were captured and sentenced to death. The gods, however, looked down favourably on the couple and turned them into doves.

It's all captured here on the plate and Chang would tell the story while magically bringing all the characters to life on stage.

The plate has been loaned to us by Davenport's Magic in London who, once our exhibition is over, are planning a museum of magic in Norfolk.

I do know how Chang pulled off the Willow Patter Plate trick...but I'm sworn to secrecy.

Images:

The Amazing Chang exhibition graphics

Portrait of Samuel L. Whittington Wickes - Image courtesy of Paul Kieve, London

The Amazing Chang Lobby Cut-Out (2009), recreated by artists Lynsey Cleaver and Fran Booth

Willow Pattern Plate Illusion courtesy of Davenports Magic, London

Willow Pattern Plate Image (2009), by artists Lynsey Cleaver and Fran Booth

Banner advertising The Amazing Chang's Illusions (detail) courtesy of Davenports Magic, London