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Impossible Puzzles

The Mystery and The History

Impossible objects are the paradoxes of the puzzle world. They show that the impossible is truly possible. In this fabulously inciteful article Victoria Skye introduces us to the history behind impossible puzzles and the fun pieces of contradictory art that seem to defy the very laws of nature as we know them. You don't solve an impossible object by manipulating it like a standard mechanical puzzle; you solve it by answering the question "How was it made."

Photo by: Victoria Skye.

BY VICTORIA SKYE

There are many different types of impossible puzzles. The variations include assorted impossible wooden objects, endless designs of impossible playing cards and a mix of impossible bottles, just to name a few. They seem impossible because the pieces may fit inside one another or are folded, braided or linked in seemingly impossible ways. The common denominator in all impossible puzzles is that the pieces are solid and that there is no cutting and rejoining of the pieces to achieve the goal of impossibility.

If you ask someone to name an impossible object, they may mention an impossible bottle. An impossible bottle is a bottle filled with items

clearly too large for the bottle opening. Harry Eng, a teacher, magician and calligrapher, is the most recognized artist in the category of impossible bottles. He is considered the master of impossible bottles and made over 600 bottles in his short 10-year span of building them. He was born in 1932 and died in 1996. When asked how he made his bottles, he would often reply, "One must think long and hard for a while."

Harry loved magic and he spent a great deal of time practicing his magic and creating his own card routines. If Harry visited someone who had one of his bottles with a deck of cards inside, he would ask to see the bottle. Much to their shock, he would break open the host's bottle,

take out the deck of cards and proceed to perform incredible card tricks using the deck inside. Of course, Harry would always go home and make his hosts a new impossible bottle.

Harry was known for theming his bottles or using puns to describe his bottles. One of his bottles was a "ship in a bottle," which he created as an acknowledgment to the generations of the ship in bottle builders who came before him. It wasn't a traditional ship in a bottle, but a pun on the idea. Harry named it the "Cutter." It contains a pair of scissors as a pun for a type of ship called a cutter and a pack of cards representing the "deck" of the ship. The bottle is also filled with puns of other items that comprise the

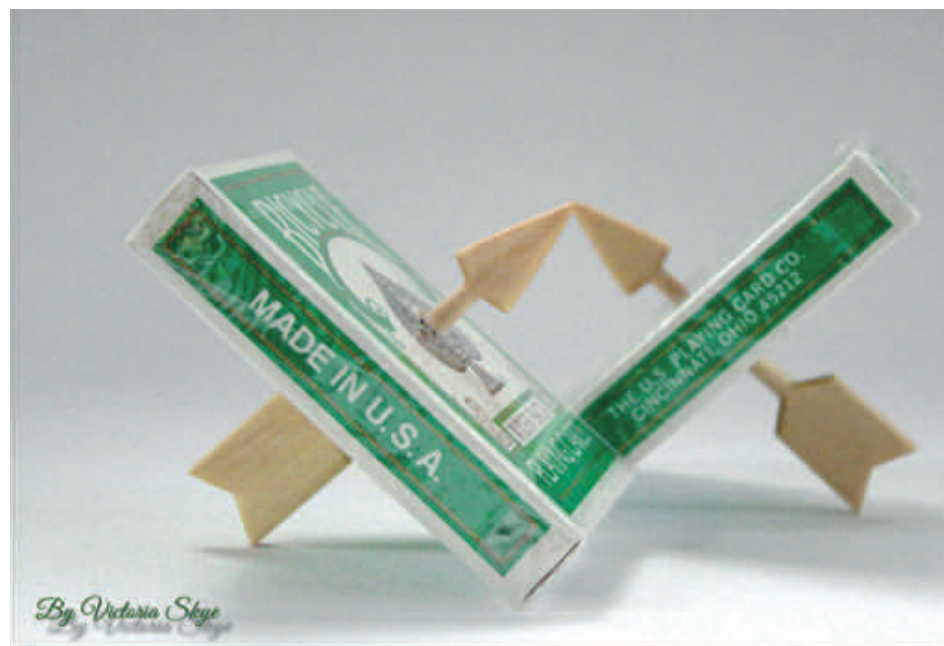


Photo by: Victoria Skye.

Solor magni asinis et ommodit
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rest of the ship. The bottle is surprisingly small, and it is hard to comprehend how he was able to fit all of the items inside, much less how he was able to insert them through the small opening of the mouth.

Harry has inspired many to follow in his footsteps, and many have tried to duplicate his ingenuity, but few have succeeded. One of those few is modern magician and bottle artist, Jeff Scanlan of Bottle Magic, who has mastered the creation of impossible bottles and continues to keep Harry's art form alive in his own style.

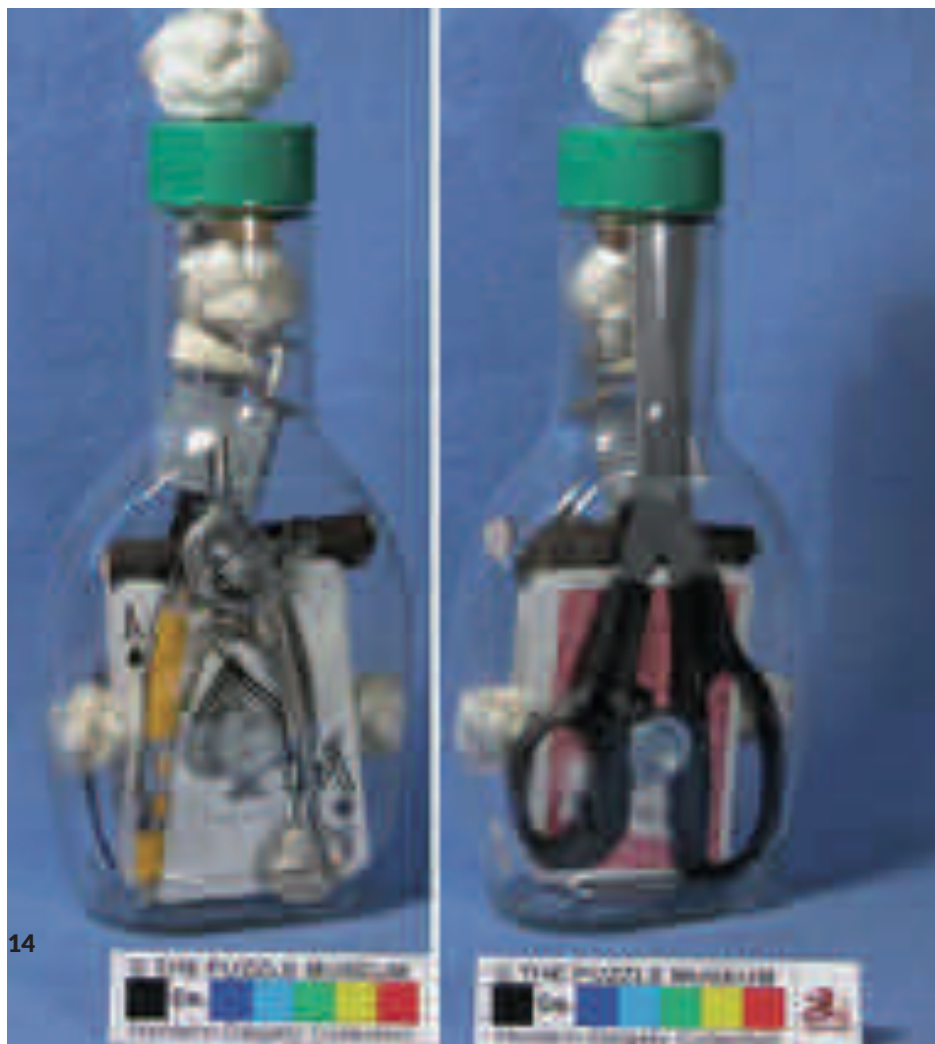
The history behind impossible puzzles is a fascinating one. Ships

in bottles and another type of bottle called "whimsy bottles" are the predecessors of today's impossible bottles. They date back to the 17th century and are thought to have begun with the Slavic and German culture. There is no doubt they originated before that, but there is no documented timeline to prove it.

Ships in bottles originated with the sailors while they were away on long voyages. They crafted the bottles to hone and show off their skills, to ward off loneliness and to have gifts for loved ones when they returned home. They made their own tools and used whatever materials they could find on board to

complete the bottles.

Whimsy bottles were named so because the art was created at the whim of the artist, or the contents were of a whimsical nature. A typical whimsy bottle may have included items that reflected the artist's profession or interests, such as carpenter tools carved from a single piece of wood or religious elements like crucifixes. Whimsy bottles also often depicted a scene from everyday life, such as a day in the mine or having a drink at a bar with the boys. Many of the bottles had an impossible stopper with a crossbar at the top that prevented anyone from opening the bottle. The bottles were an exhibit



Harry Eng Ship in a Bottle
Photo: Copyright (c)2012
Horden-Dalgety Collection.
<http://puzzlemuseum.com>

of the creator's artistic carving skills and were used in exchange for money or goods, as gifts or as memorials.

The oldest impossible bottle was known and that still exists is a whimsy bottle from 1719. The bottle's contents are typical of other whimsy bottles, but what makes this one more intriguing and baffling is that it was created by a man with no hands or feet. The creator of the bottle was a famous German man named Matthias Buchinger, whose determination knew no bounds.

He was an astounding magician, artist, calligrapher, and musician. He accomplished many of his arts with special instruments and tools that he made for himself. His bottle is a folk art bottle with a two-level mining scene and holds an inscription inside that reads "October ye 20 1719. This Work in This Bottle was Mendet by me Mathew Buchinger, born Without Hands or Feet in Germany Jany ye 3 1674."

The first mention I've been able to find of an impossible arrow is in an 1888 Scientific American Journal. It is a small article titled "Novel Puzzle" with an accompanying sketch of a solid wooden arrow placed through a hole in a solid wooden heart. The writer asks, "How did the arrow get

Matthias Buchinger Whimsy Bottle

Photo by: 'Alan Rogers, editor of the magazine of the European Association of Ships in Bottles' / European Association of Ships in Bottles



into the heart?" This is the type of enigma that impossible puzzle creators seek to inspire. There are scattered publications in science magazines, journals and woodworkers' books in the 1900s that contain impossible puzzle articles; but after 1960, the publications become scarce until they begin to pop up again in the 2000s. It's interesting how they disappear and reappear – like magic.

Many impossible puzzle artists are also interested in magic or are magicians themselves. Magicians believe in and share the impossible. Perhaps that is why I was drawn to the magical and mysterious collection of impossible objects and optical illusions at the 2010 Gathering 4 Gardner event at Tom Rodgers' home. Tom Rodgers is the founder of Gathering 4 Gardner, an event that honors the achievements of Martin Gardner by promoting recreational mathematics, magic, puzzles, and philosophy. When I looked around Tom's home for the first time, I saw that it was filled, wall-to-wall, with magnificent and beautiful puzzles of every classification, shape and size. Tom had an enviable collection of Harry Eng impossible bottles, Gary Foshee impossible arrows and a large assortment of other impossible objects. Tom also had an impossible optical illusion collection that included the works of Oscar Reutersvärd. On

the outside of his front property, he had a life-size impossible crate by Jerry Andrus that you could have your photo taken in, which in itself seemed like an oxymoron. I fell in love with the works of those impossible artists that day, and I returned numerous times to Tom's home during other G4G events.

Tom and I became friends and talked in more detail about impossible objects, and he told me personal stories of his friendship with the incredible and brilliant Harry Eng. I gifted Tom with one of my own impossible arrows, which then became a part of the very collection that had originally inspired my work. Tom Rodgers passed away in 2012, but I will always appreciate how he opened his home and shared his love and knowledge of puzzles and anything that challenged the mind with those of like spirit. His wife, Sarah, continues the G4G tradition.

Since my first exposure to impossible objects and optical illusions at the Gathering 4 Gardner event and subsequent visits to Tom's, I have had a curiosity to discover the secrets of illusion art and a drive to achieve the impossible. I have combined my backgrounds as a magician, mechanical and electrical designer, and woodworker to solve and create new impossible puzzles and optical illusions. I have used trial and error for days, weeks

and sometimes even years at a time to solve a step or create a new idea. I am one of the very few women in the magic, math, science, puzzle and woodworking communities, and I have now created hundreds of impossible objects and optical illusions.

All of my illusions are signed and dated and come with a certificate of authenticity. I have an "Impossible Arrow Through Magic Castle Deck Of Cards" displayed in the Magic Castle library in Los Angeles, California. My impossible objects and optical illusions are in numerous publications and have been collected by magicians and puzzle enthusiasts around the world.

My paradox puzzles and illusions are meant to exude the illusion of magic and to make you think. They are ultimately meant to show that the impossible is truly possible. As Audrey Hepburn said so eloquently, "Nothing is impossible – the word itself says 'I'm possible!'"



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