

Magic formula

Simon Coronel is one of a privileged few to access an amazing magical collection buried in the heart of Melbourne, writes **Blanche Clark**

BLINK and you'll miss it. Prise your eyes open with matchsticks and you'll miss it. The card in Simon Coronel's hand changes from a five of clubs to your chosen card, in this case a jack of hearts, in a nanosecond.

There's no mysterious shuffling. The cards are face up and it's done with a feathery sweep of his fingers.

It's magical, though Coronel, 24, would rather be called an illusionist than a magician. No red-lined satin black cape for him. No bisecting scantily clad assistants on strobe-lit stages.

Coronel likes to get up close and personal and make your jaw drop. He's

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a magician's magician, impressing those who know every trick in the book.

He has won five awards, including the 2004 Australian Society of Magicians Close-up Magic Competition.

Perhaps what makes Coronel such a master is that he has read every trick in nearly every magic book.

His obsession began as a first-year engineering-arts student at the University of Melbourne, when he joined the Magicians' Society.

"I saw the most astonishing trick I'd even seen and this guy was going to teach me how to do it," he says of the first club meeting. "It wasn't easy, but eventually I managed to get the hang of

it and went away with my imagination going wild."

Coronel voraciously sought out any information on magic he could find at local and university libraries.

"I went on the internet, started to keep an archive, went to see as many performances as I could, and watched magic shows on TV."

Coronel's obsession began to echo that of 1930s Melbourne magician the Amazing Alma, whose fanatical collection he stumbled across on the State Library of Victoria's website.

William George Alma bequeathed it to the library on the condition that only magicians and genuine researchers

could access his models and magic instructions. He died in 1993 aged 89.

The W. G. Alma Conjuring Collection contains more than 3300 books, 60 magazines, 1500 photographs, 250 posters, hundreds of files on individual magicians, scrapbooks, programs, letters and other magic memorabilia.

Several times a week, sometimes for up to five hours at a time, Coronel would enter the secure reading room at the library, take out the restricted three books and make notes.

"Initially I was looking for the tricks and methods to do illusions, but what I found was far more than that. I discovered the history, the psychology and the performance aspect of it."

Now mere mortals can view some of the collection at the library's exhibition, The Changing Face of Victoria. There is



also more about Alma, born William George Bishop in Melbourne in 1904, the son of a magician and pianist.

Alma's mother forbade her son to dabble in magic, after his father disappeared on tour, turning up in Hawaii.

State Library curator Dominique Dunstan says: "It must have been in the blood because he was fascinated. At the age of 13, he did his first little magic show down at the church hall."

In the 1930s Alma set up his own business, the Alma Magical Company. The library's display is based on a photo of the window of his shop in Clarendon St, South Melbourne.

Alma became known as the Amazing Alma and in 1954 became a member of the Magic Circle, a famous English club established in 1905.

Coronel says there are still three old

magic clubs in Melbourne: the Australian Society of Magicians, the Magic Circle of Victoria and the International Brotherhood of Magicians.

But younger magicians, such as Coronel, are keen to debunk the mystery surrounding magic.

"Magic has suffered from being closed off. This is one reason it tends to be stuck in a very old-fashioned style," he says. "I'm trying to treat magic as any other art form, whether it's painting, acting or stand-up comedy."

He has some advice for anyone interested in learning magic.

"You need to be obsessed."

The Changing Face of Victoria, Dome Gallery, Level 5, Entry 1, 328 Swanston St. Free entry. Ph: 8664 7000.

You can see a preview of one of Coronel's latest tricks at www.simoncoronel.com

► **Dab hand:** magic has caught the imagination of Simon Coronel.

Picture: ANDREW TAUBER