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Madame Giradelli, The Celebrated Fire-Proof Female

This print is from our collection of Georgian prints. It was by Charles Williams and was published by S W Fores.

There was always a lot of excitement when Madame Girardelli, the famed incombustible lady, was in town. People would flock to see her awe-inspiring acts. Josephine Girardelli was born in Italy in the 1780s and moved to England in the 1810s to tour her show. On 14th December 1818 she appeared in Newcastle, having previously been in Edinburgh and Glasgow, before working her way down to the south of England. She was patronised by the royal family, so it seems that Prince George, the Prince Regent and future George IV, was a fan.



Her act appealed to all levels of society, rich and poor people would be in the audience. It can be imagined that a hush fell over the crowd when the curtains opened, and she appeared on the stage.

The first thing Madame Girardelli did was swish nitric acid around her mouth. No doubt there would have been gasps when she spat it out onto an iron bar, the sizzle proving that it really was acid!

Next, she showed the crowd a pan of boiling oil in which she cooked an egg, before taking a mouthful of the oil. She swirled it around her mouth and spat it out onto fire or a block of wood, to doubly prove it was boiling hot.

The next act involved some audience participation. She put some molten red sealing wax on her tongue and invited someone to make a seal impression on the wax. The person was always amazed, because they could feel the heat, but could not see any burns!



She then scooped up with her bare molten lead and put it in her mouth. After a short time, she spat out coin-shaped pieces of solid lead, indicating that her mouth had cooled the metal.

For the final act, Josephine picked up a red-hot shovel, moved it over her feet, arms and hair without suffering any burns or setting fire to her hair. She then kicked the shovel until it bent and the piece de resistance was when she put her tongue on the shovel. Hissing could be heard, but again, Madame Girardelli suffered no damage.

The audiences she performed in front of will have left the halls and theatres astounded by what they had seen. One hopes that there was a warning at the end to tell people not to try the acts at home!

Of course, there were scientists and sceptics who wanted to know how she did it. She claimed that she used “a secret composition” to protect herself, but scientists said there was no ointment which could have stopped her skin and mouth from burning. No-one had worked out how she did it and no evidence of trickery was ever found.

Josephine Giarardelli left England when she was still famous and no more was heard of her. But she will forever be known as the “Queen of the Fire Eaters”.