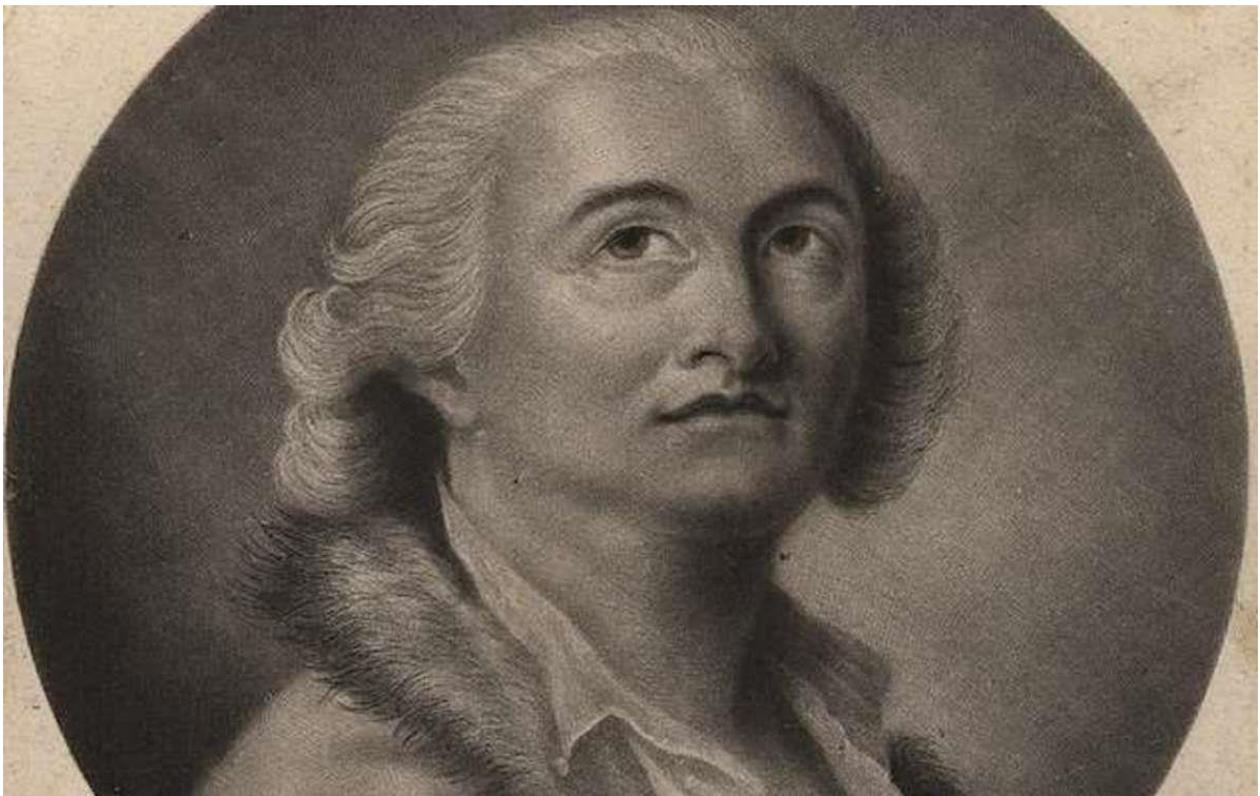


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# Count Cagliostro: Spiritualist, Con Artist, or Both?

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When it comes to examining the life and times of Count Alessandro di Cagliostro, one lingering question remains unanswered: *Who exactly was he?* That's not an easy question to answer.

This is not due to a lack of documents on the man (there's quite a bit of that), nor his place in history (he plays a significant role in French history). The problem is that Cagliostro was an alias for an Italian adventurer and commoner whose past was made up and his stature at the time was dubious.

Cagliostro may well be remembered as the mystic and magician that became a favorite among the royal European courts of the late 1700s. He'll also be forever ingrained in history for an event that spurred the French Revolution. And, more than 200 years after his death, he's become a significant figure in the New Age movement. Yet, the mystery (and charlatanism) that surrounds Cagliostro will likely mar a true understanding of who this person really was.

## **His Real Identity (Maybe?)**

There are several theories surrounding the origin of Cagliostro. Some vary in details, but there are several that have been consistent with each other. One such example has to do with his real name and birthplace. Many scholars agree -- as well as some documents from the era -- agree he was born Giuseppe Balsamo, on June 2, 1743 to a poor family in Palermo, Sicily.

Many accounts state that Giuseppe/Cagliostro's early life was wrought with tragedy and neglect. His father died when he was young, and his mother, not being able to care for him, sent him to his wealthy uncle to live. Young Giuseppe was a handful. He ran away from his uncle's home. And, when he was returned, was sent to a seminary school. Eventually, he ran away from the school, only to be returned and enrolled in another school.

As a student, he showed great promise. He excelled in the study of medicine and chemistry. However, Giuseppe was still a flight risk and often disagreed with the

teachers and administrators. As a result, he either bounced from one school to another or repeatedly fled them. Finally, he was enrolled in a Benedictine monetary school. This would be the extent of his schooling.

After the Benedictine school (which he was either expelled or ran away from) Giuseppe furthered his education on the streets. He traveled with a rough crowd of vagabonds. There, he learned the art of the con. Although the police in Palermo knew Giuseppe well, he managed to avoid serious jail time with the help of his uncle.

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By age 17, however, Giuseppe was exposed to something that would eventually alter his life. The occult and alchemy captured his attention. Alchemy was the belief that common metals can be transmuted into more precious metals. The practice had been around since medieval times, and it was still practiced by occultists and pseudo-scientists of the 18th century. Giuseppe would eventually become very knowledgeable in this practice by the time he met a goldsmith named Vincenzo Marano.

Marano met many alchemists during his travel to Palermo. However, young Giuseppe impressed the gullible man. In fact, Marano believed that Giuseppe could turn metal into gold, and the youngster was more than willing to demonstrate his powers. However, seeing an opportunity, he asked Marano for sixty ounce of Gold to conduct a magical ceremony that would reveal a hidden cache of treasure with "immeasurable wealth." Marano relented and gave him the gold.

However, Marano was fooled. At midnight he was led to a field outside Palermo where he was jumped and robbed by one of the thugs Giuseppe had hired. After that night, Giuseppe did what he had done best up to that point; he ran away from Palermo. This moment would also mark the last time, the name "Giuseppe Balsamo" would be used.



## A Journey to Somewhere

Where he went was a matter of conjecture. He claimed he traveled to places such as Egypt, Greece, Persia, Rhodes, India and Ethiopia where he learned the dark arts of the occult. This may have included the ability of *scrying* ( the ability to use a crystal ball to tell the fortune of others or call spirits). No records are available to verify his travels.

By the time he returned to Naples, Italy in 1768, he was well versed in these arts. And he was a new man who would quickly woo the royal courts of Europe. This included the most powerful of the time: France.

## **A Con Becomes a Count**

Something else happened when he returned to Naples. He became known as Count Alessandro di Cagliostro. Cagliostro claimed to be the son of the Prince and Princess of the Anatolian Christian Kingdom of Trebizond and had been orphaned at an early age. He was raised by the Grand Master of the Knights of Malta and by the Sharif of Medina (who he claimed had raised him to be Christian, despite holding a common Muslim title).

Although he was now known as Count Cagliostro, the old Giuseppe still remained. In Naples he teamed up with one of the thugs he paid to have Marano attacked. There, the two opened a Casino where they bilked wealthy patrons out of their money. Once the authorities wised up to their schemes, they chased Cagliostro and company out of the city.

Later, he went to Rome and found a new partner in crime, his wife Lorenza Feliciani. There, he began practicing in magic arts until a member of the Inquisition suspected him and his wife of heresy. He ran away to Spain, spent several years there, and then returned to his home town of Palermo, only to be arrested by Marano. He escaped that situation when a nobleman from England intervened. Again, Cagliostro was on the move.

## **The Count Comes to Paris**

As time passed, Cagliostro was making a name for himself, as well as being associated with various groups. He became closely associated with the Freemasons, even going

as far as establishing several Masonic lodges in England, Germany, Russia and France.

Later, he and his wife settled in Paris in 1772. There -- while selling magic elixirs and conducting séances -- he caught the attention of King Louis XVI. Cagliostro was invited to entertain the King and his wife, Maria Antoinette. It started a new chapter in Cagliostro's life; one in which he was held in high esteem rather than loathed as a con artist. As a result, he became a regular fixture at the Court of Versailles. All seemed well for the much respected count. However that prestige wouldn't last.



Portrait painting of Queen Marie Antoinette of France

## **The Affair of the Necklace**

In 1785, Cagliostro was implicated as an accomplice in the Affair of the Necklace, one of the major events that would lead to the French Revolution. This complex event came

to light when the queen was accused of defrauding the royal jewelers of the cost of a diamond necklace through the use of con artists. Several people were arrested, including Cagliostro. Ironically, the seasoned conman may have had nothing to do with it. Despite being acquitted, Cagliostro was sent to Bastille prison for six months before being kicked out of France.

This event marred Cagliostro. He was not welcomed where he went. In 1789, he and his wife moved back to Rome. Again, his past caught up with him. The agents of an inquisition found him. This time, however, his wife betrayed him by making a deal with the inquisition members for her freedom.

In 1791, he was arrested and imprisoned in the Castle of Saint Angelo. He was accused of heresy, magic, freemasonry and was sentenced to death. Later, he was commuted to life by the Pope.

**His death wasn't believed at first. Many in Europe thought he had managed to cheat that.**

Cagliostro tried to escape, but was overpowered. Even that gift he had perfected when he was Giuseppe had failed him. Instead, he was sent into solitary confinement in the castle of San Leo near Montefeltro. There, on August 26, 1795, he died.

His death wasn't believed at first. Many in Europe thought he had managed to cheat that. However, a report commissioned by Napoleon confirmed his death.

Since his death many have labeled him as a charlatan and fake including historian Thomas Carlyle who referred to him as "The Prince of Quacks". However, there have been many - even today - who claimed that Cagliostro got a bad rap. Among his defenders was Madame Blavatsky, the woman who popularized scrying and fortune-

telling at the turn of the century. Others, such as *Theocracy Magazine* in 1938 considered him a guru of occult magic (similar to New Age thoughts, today).

In the latest posthumous chapter in Cagliostro's story, the mystery con man has managed to make a name for himself. Some with the New Age movement regard him as a great man. Still, many historians consider him a professional con artist. And considering that many still talk about him, he must have been a good con artist.



'Conte di Cagliostro', by Jean-Antoine Houdon, 1786, marble - National Gallery of Art,  
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