

# Defying Gravity!

## *A Brief History of Juggling*

Though the word *juggler* comes from the Latin root *joculari*, meaning "jest," juggling has been considered a serious art, a challenging sport, and a rewarding recreation throughout its history.

No one knows for sure when juggling was invented, but it has been around for thousands of years. The earliest known records of jugglers are wall paintings found in an Egyptian tomb from about 2000 B.C..

Asians have a long history of prop manipulation. Among other things, the Chinese were known for juggling sticks and *diabolos* (sort of like a yo yo on a tightrope). The Japanese performed ball and stick play from which modern ball juggling may have developed. Many Asians practiced *antipodism* or juggling with their feet.



Egyptian depiction of juggling

In the 4th and 5th centuries B.C., many jugglers were featured in Greek art and pottery. It was a form of recreation for the Greeks, and many participants were women.

There is a lot of information about juggling from the 4th century A.D. to the present. Statues, pottery, paintings, and ancient writings all show that it was widespread. The Romans even juggled weapons and shields as part of their military training.

In the Middle Ages, most kings and lords had a *court jester* or clown who could juggle. Other jugglers moved from town to town to earn their living, passing on news and gossip as they traveled. Sadly, jugglers during this time were not highly regarded because entertainers were considered vagrants and outcasts.



Mexican art, about 950 A.D.

After the Middle Ages, juggling began to make a comeback in Europe. Some towns had full time *Ball-Masters* who performed and taught people how to juggle and walk the tightrope.

Juggling has also been practiced for centuries by the Aztecs and other native Americans. In some cultures, the *shaman* or priest juggled as part of their religious ceremonies.

In the early 1800s, juggling was prominent in circus and variety shows, the most popular forms of entertainment at the time. Most of what we know about these performers comes from *show bills* or posters that exaggerated the things they could do.

By the 1900s, most jugglers were working in circuses and *vaudeville* or variety theaters. When movies and television were invented, circuses became less common and vaudeville faded away. Then in the 1960s, various forms of juggling started to become popular once again.

Today, juggling continues to be explored and enjoyed as art, sport, and recreation.