



# Spiritualism and the Mystery of Modern Art

Massimo Introvigne  
Conference "The Science of Things Spiritual"  
Lily Dale, July 28, 2017

Above: Spirit art by Madge Gill (1882-1961)

# “ An Embarrassing Story ”

- ▶ “The fact is, theosophy [but the same judgement is applied to Spiritualism] is embarrassing. If there is one thing you do not want your hardcore modernist to be, it is a member of an occult cult [...]. [This] takes art into Dan Brown territory. No serious student of art history wants to touch it.”

Waldemar Januszczak (right)  
Superstar British art historian  
*The Sunday Times*, 21 February 2010



## Six Years Later: Januszczak 2.0

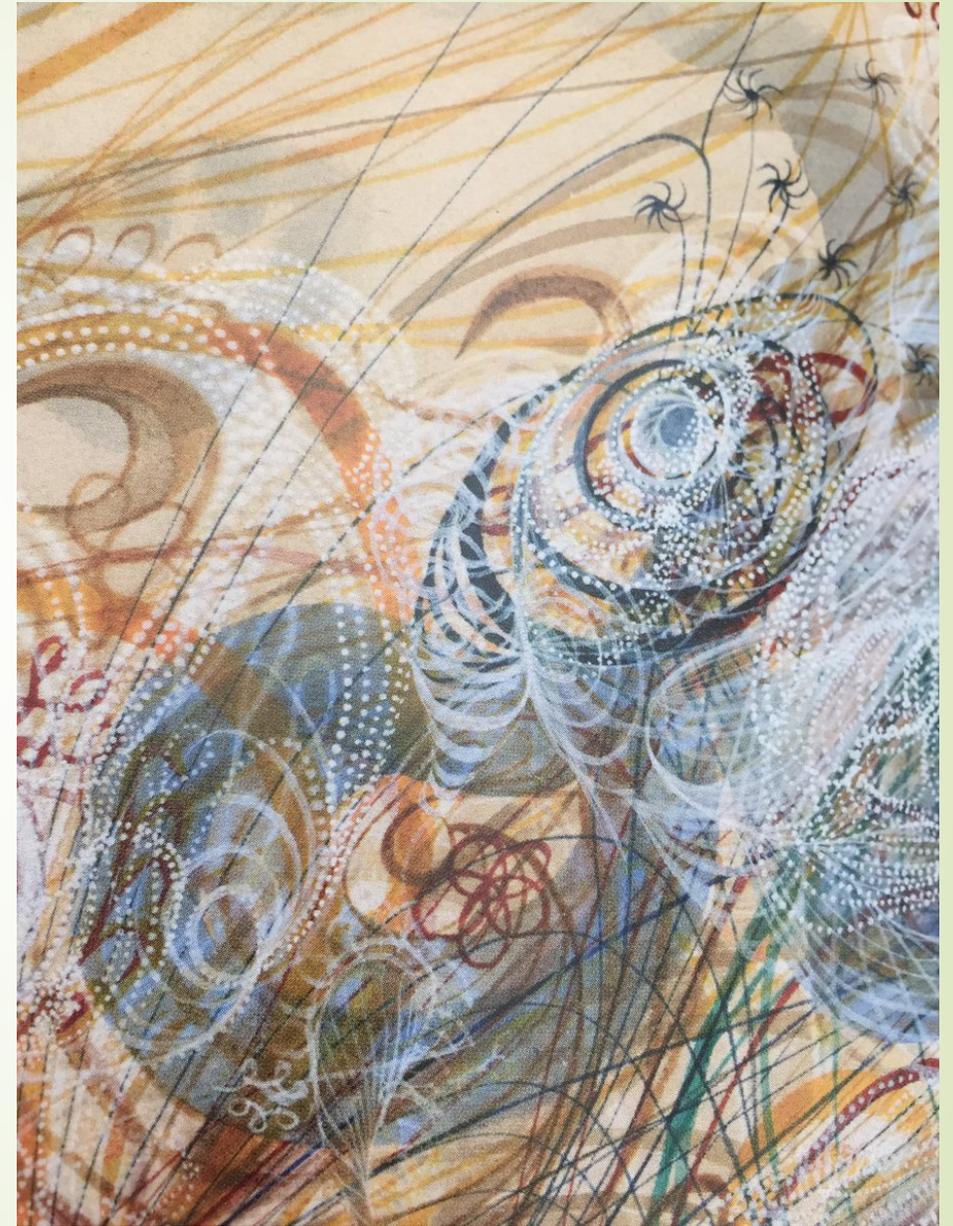


- ▶ “Only rarely in my time as an art reviewer have I felt as flabbergasted as I was by the watercolours of [spirit painter] Georgiana Houghton. Her dates had me rubbing my eyes in disbelief. She did this when? Out of nowhere, like an unforeseen comet, a career has appeared in art that rewrites the whole story.”

Waldemar Januszczak  
“The Woman Who Changes Everything”  
*The Sunday Times*, 25 July 2016

## Januszczak 2.0 (II)

- Rediscovering Houghton is “an event of tremendous art-historical significance. Not just because Houghton predates Kandinsky and Mondrian by half a century, but because her motivation throws so much clear light on their motivation. All the famous pioneers of abstraction — Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian — were spiritualists [...]. But in all their cases, the occult aspect of their creativity has been actively suppressed in the canonical story of modern art. Potty spiritualist imaginings have never been allowed to disturb the smooth progress of progress. On this astonishing evidence, however, the potty spiritualist imaginings were the key ingredient.”





# But What Is Spirit Painting?

► Given that spirit paintings have exerted a decisive influence on modern art, there is a certain confusion on what spirit painting exactly is.

We can distinguish at least three different cases:

1. Precipitated paintings
2. Portraying the spirits during seances
3. Painting with hands guided by the spirits

# 1. Precipitated Paintings



- ▶ The first case is “precipitation” of works of art that appeared on canvas (or on paper, or on a slate, left), ostensibly without the use of human hands, during a Spiritualist seance. In this case, the mediums claimed that the spirits produced the paintings directly, rather than by guiding the hands of a human artist

# David Duguid

- ▶ The first famous medium who was able to “precipitate” spirit paintings was Scottish cabinet-maker David Duguid (1832-1907). Although Duguid often painted with his hands guided by spirit painters, including Jan Steen (1626-1679) and Jacob van Ruisdael (1628-1682), his guides also produced “direct” (precipitated) works during his seances, including some that illustrated his 1876 spirit novel (or historical account) *Hafed, Prince of Persia* (1876)

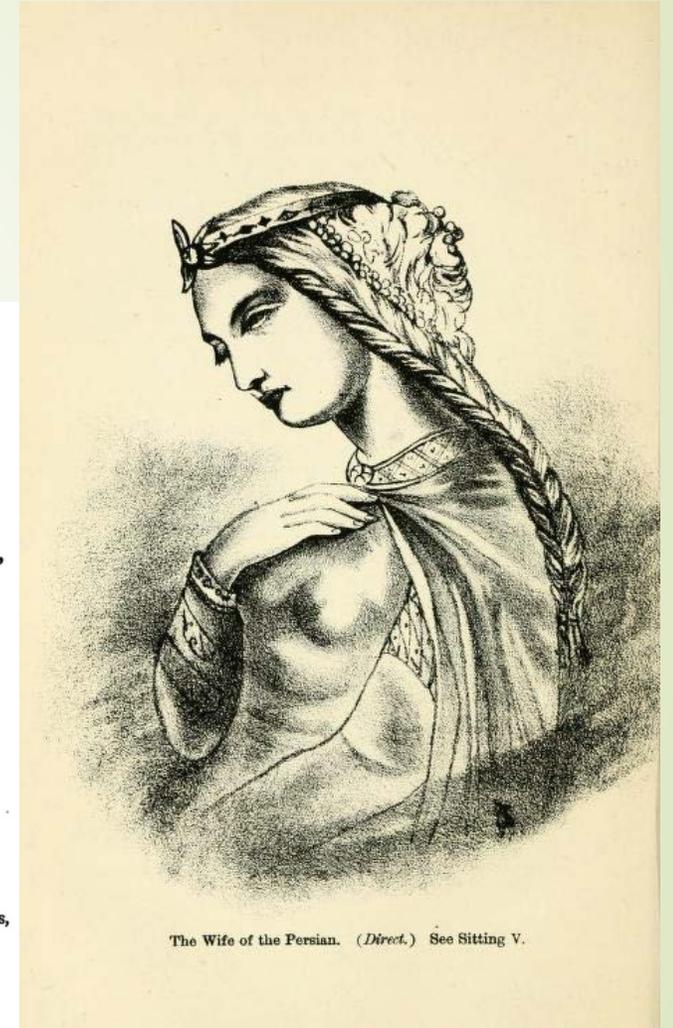


HAFED PRINCE OF PERSIA:  
*HIS EXPERIENCES*  
-IN-  
EARTH-LIFE AND SPIRIT-LIFE,  
BRING SPIRIT COMMUNICATIONS  
RECEIVED THROUGH MR. DAVID DUGUID,  
THE GLASGOW TRANCE-PAINTING MEDIUM.  
**With an Appendix,**  
CONTAINING COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPIRIT ARTISTS,  
RUISDAL AND STEEN.

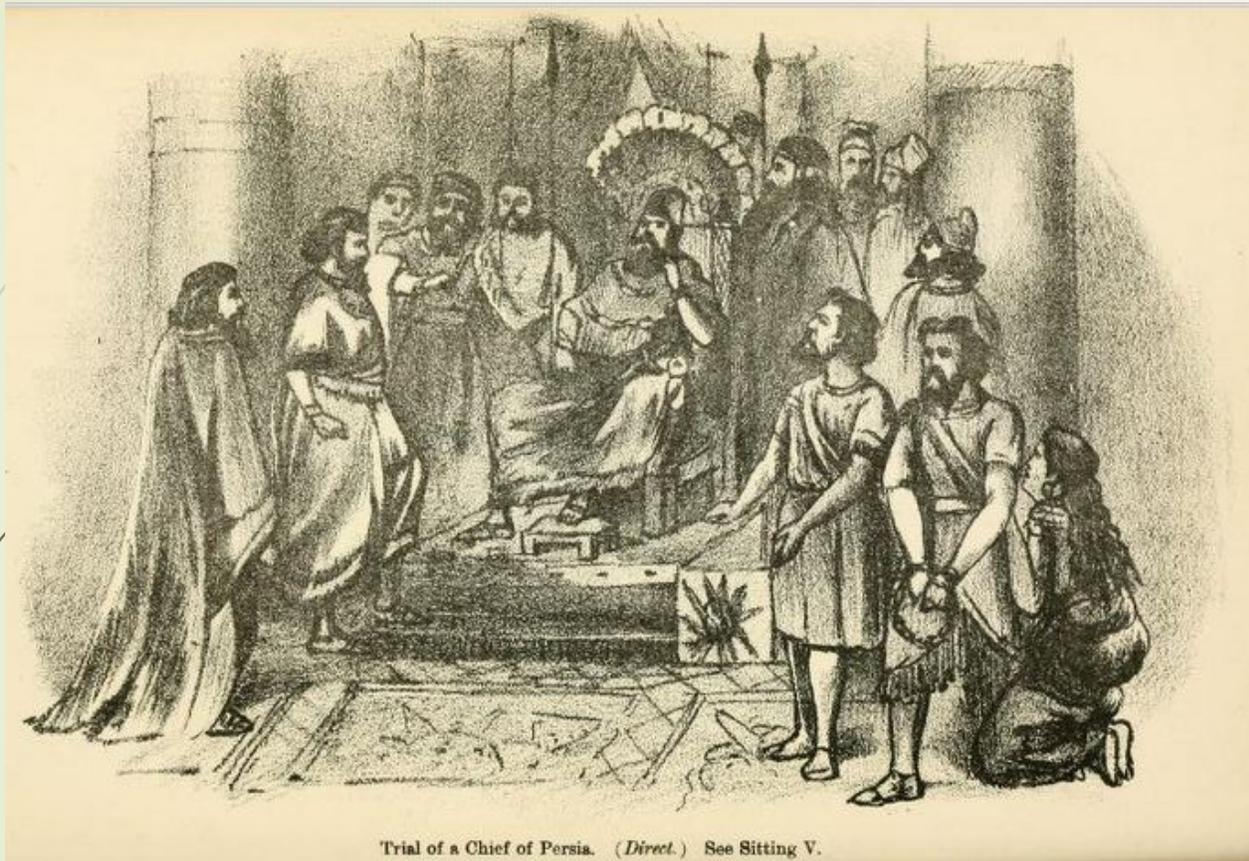
Illustrated by Fac-similes of FORTY-FIVE DRAWINGS and WRITINGS,  
the Direct Work of the Spirit.



LONDON:  
JAMES BURNS, 15 SOUTHAMPTON ROW, W.C.  
GLASGOW: H. NISBET, 219 GEORGE STREET.  
1876.



The Wife of the Persian. (Direct.) See Sitting V.



- Duguid's "direct" illustrations for *Hafed, Prince of Persia*

# Spirits and Copyright



MOSES CONSECRATING BEZALEL AS AARON'S SUCCESSOR.  
Cassell's Family Bible.

x1.

Between pages 29 and 30.



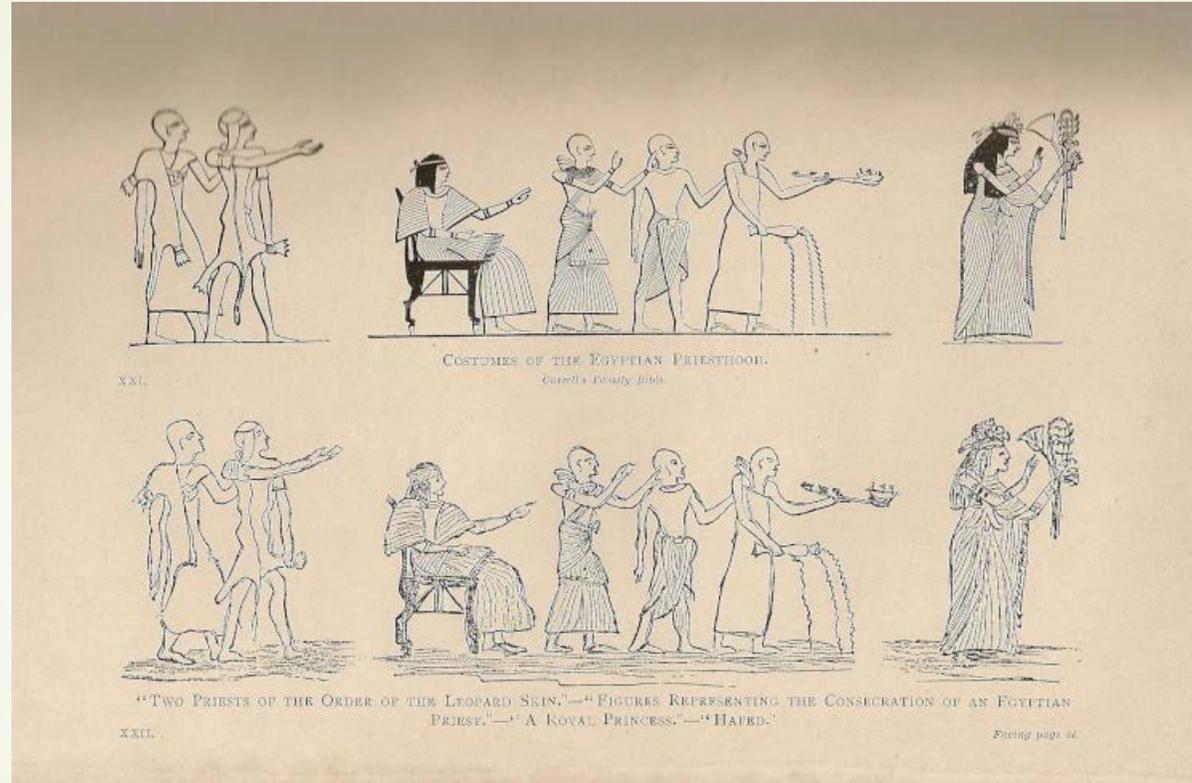
HAFEZ INDUCTED INTO THE ORDER OF THE MAGI.  
Illustration of the ceremony in "Hafed" of the "Jewish" Bibles.

x11.

Between pages 29 and 30.

- One problem with Duguid was that the spirits of Steen and Ruisdael were apparently not familiar with copyright laws. Several "direct" illustrations in the first edition of *Hafed* were suspiciously similar to the popular *Cassell's Family Bible* and had to be expunged from the second edition

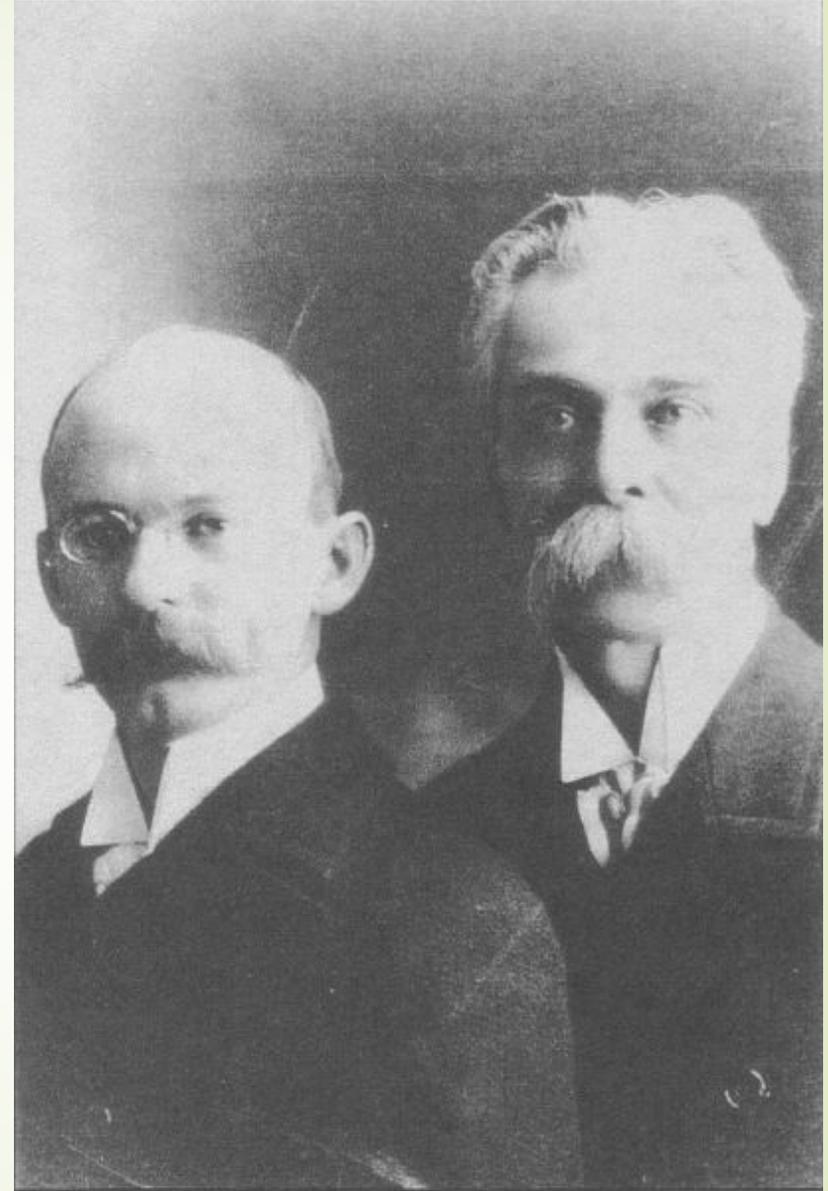
# Alternative Explanations



- For the believers, similarities with the *Cassell's Family Bible*, in both the "direct" and the "guided" spirit paintings of *Hafed*, were not conclusive evidence of fraud. If one believed that the spirit were at work, they could well have worked with material they found in the mind of the medium, including reminiscences of the *Cassell's Family Bible*

# The Campbell Brothers

- ▶ Among the first mediums who specialized in precipitated paintings were Lily Dale's Campbell brothers. Allen Campbell (1833-1919) and Charles Shourds (1863-1926) were not brothers, but lived and held seances together



Charles Shourds and Allen Campbell.



## Lincoln Appears

- ▶ Their most famous portraits, such as Lincoln's, were done in public, with the Campbell brothers' hands never touching the canvas

# Azur, A. Campbell's Spirit Guide

- ▶ Statement of six witnesses: "During the entire séance [of June 15, 1898] there was light enough for us to see everything perfectly and note the gradual growth of the painting on the canvas. Mr. A. Campbell was entranced and Azur, using his organism, gave us some very beautiful words [...] After some music, additional lights were brought, the curtain withdrawn, and lo! The picture was complete. [...] While we were admiring it, there came at the back of the head a six-pointed star, which is now distinctly seen"



# The Bang Sisters



- ▶ Not less famous for precipitated spirit paintings were the Bang Sisters, Elizabeth (1859-1920), and May (Mary) Elvira (or Eunice) (1862-1917), who kept cottages both at Lily Dale and at Camp Chesterfield, Indiana



- ▶ The Bang Sisters precipitated (and sometimes spirit-painted) portraits of deceased persons. They were repeatedly denounced as frauds, but vigorously defended by a significant portion of the American Spiritualist community

# "The World's Worst Woman"

- Unfortunately, spirit paintings became connected with the notorious "Swami Laura Horos," a.k.a. Ann Odelia Diss Debar (1849-1911?), who claimed to be guided by the spirits of old masters. Debar ended up in jail in 1901, sentenced to seven-year imprisonment both for fraud and for immoral sexual practices in her temple in London. Contemporary media labeled Debar as "the world's worst woman," which made precipitated spirit paintings especially suspect



# Rol and Goya



- And yet witnesses attested that in the presence of somebody very different from Debar, famous Italian psychic Gustavo Adolfo Rol (1903-1994), a man who never accepted money for his seances and was famous for his charitable activities, “brushed moved by themselves” to paint, or previously controlled white sheets of paper displayed works signed by Goya (left), Braque, or Kandinsky – although Rol was not sure of what part of their “intelligent spirit” had produced the artworks

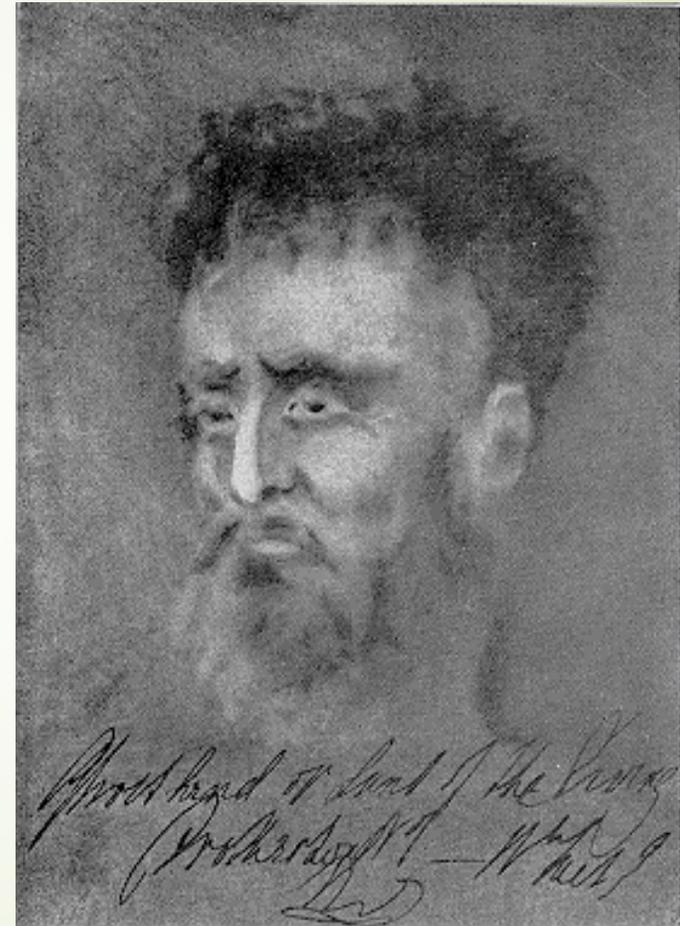
# Madame Blavatsky, Spirit Painter



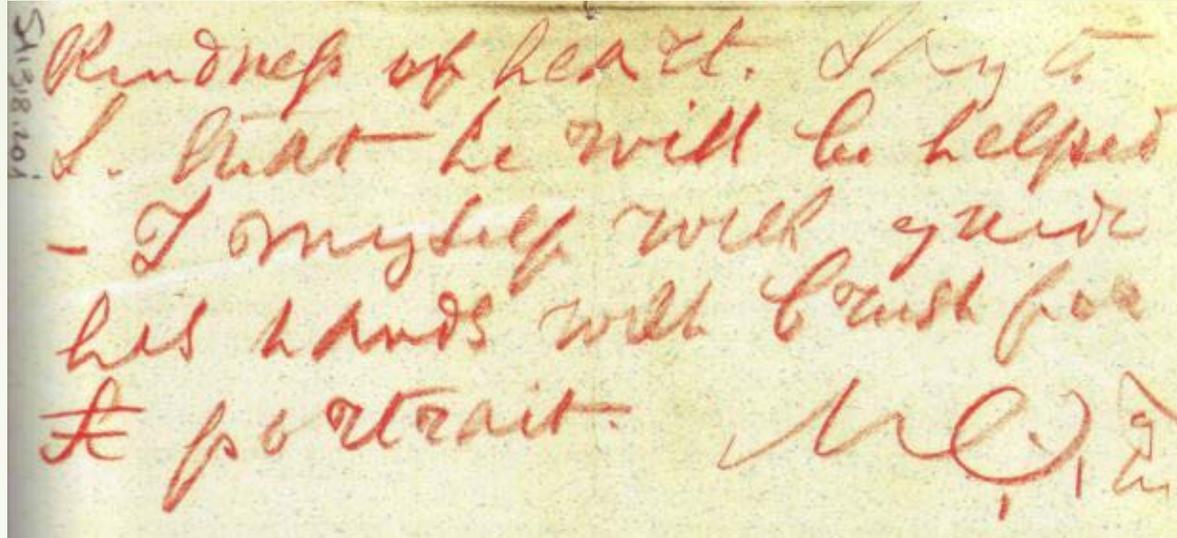
- At the time of the Campbells, or before, none other than Madame Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891), in the early phase of her career, was also busy precipitating spirit paintings. In his definitive 2001 study, John Patrick Deveney claimed that her productions were “in the dozens”
- They included a portrait made in 1875 of the mysterious John King (left) – who, Blavatsky later claimed, was one and the same with Theosophy’s Master Hilarion – ...

# Blavatsky: The First Theosophical Painter?

- ▶ ...and another, of 1877, of one "Tiruvalla Yogi: from "Ghost Land or the Land of the Living Brotherhood" (right). Although most of these works were "precipitated," they may imply that the first of a long list of Theosophical painters was none other than Madame Blavatsky herself



# While We Are at Blavatsky...



Kindness of heart. Say to  
S. that he will be helped  
- I myself will guide  
his hands with brush for  
a portrait. Morya

- Theosophical Masters are not spirits but century-old human beings living in Tibet or other secret places. However, Theosophical “Masters painting” was clearly indebted to early Blavatsky’s spirit painting
- For the most famous Master painting experiment, German Victorian painter Hermann Schmiechen (1855-1925) was personally selected by Master Morya. In a letter received by Madame Blavatsky, now at the Winterthur Library in Winterthur, Delaware, Morya wrote: “Say to S.[chmiechen] that he will be helped – I myself will guide his hands with brush for K[oot Hoomi]’s portrait”

# Laura Holloway



- Morya also wrote: "Take her with you to Schmiechen and tell her to see." From the context of the letter, it was clear that the unnamed "her" was Laura Holloway (1848-1930), a colorful American author, Spiritualist medium, feminist lecturer, and Theosophist

# Cigarettes and Masters

- ▶ In 1912, Holloway would tell the story of how she attended with several other Theosophists, including Blavatsky, a session in Schmiechen's studio. Holloway (right) was not a smoker, but Blavatsky insisted she smoke a cigarette (perhaps containing more than tobacco?), which put her in the right state to influence Schmiechen's mind



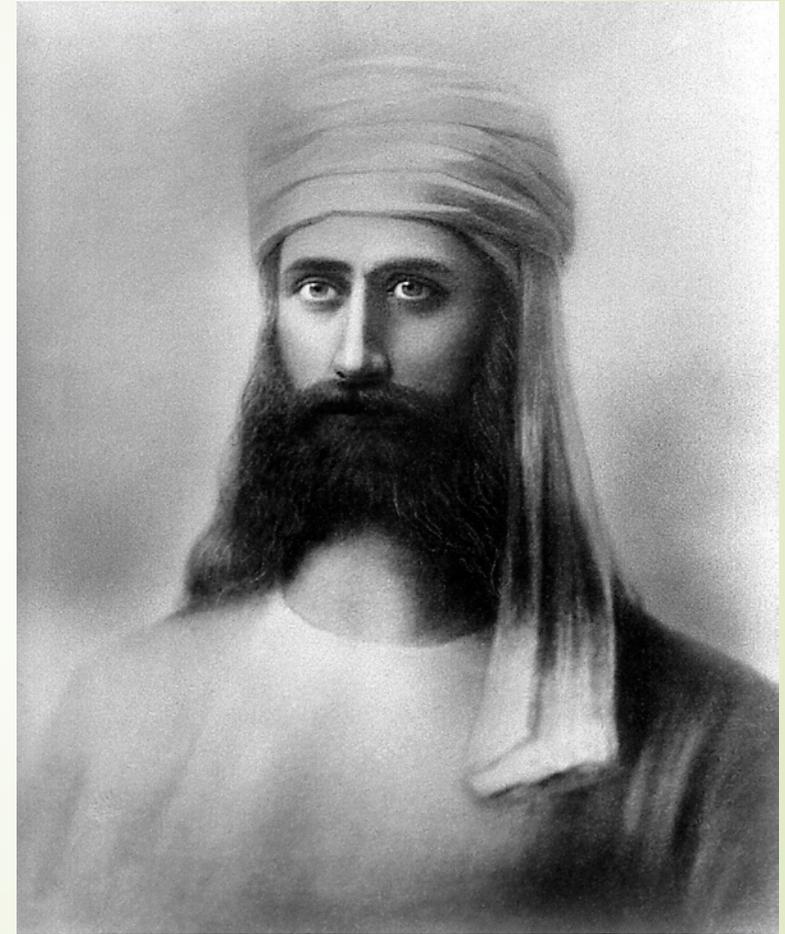
# Painting the Masters



- ▶ If we trust Holloway's later recollections, Schmiechen painted Koot Hoomi (left) first. She saw the Master "standing near Mr Schmiechen" and heard Blavatsky correcting Schmiechen when she believed the painter deviated from Koot Hoomi's likelihood, even if "she sat where *she could not see the easel, nor know what was on it*"

# Blavatsky and the Portraits

- ▶ Holloway reported that Schmiechen then went on to portray Master Morya (right), and this portrait was also approved by Blavatsky. According to Blavatsky, a chain was set in motion whereby she received the images of the Masters and transmitted them telepathically to Holloway, who in turn transmitted them to Schmiechen's mind, while the painter's hands were guided by the Masters. The similarities with spirit paintings are obvious



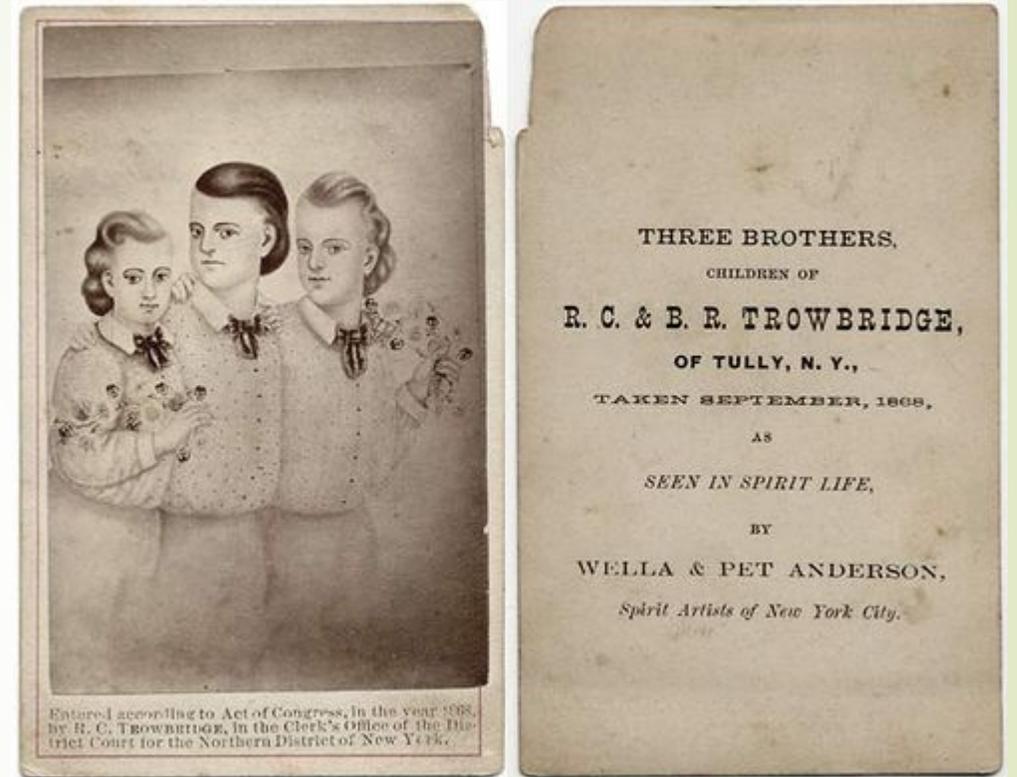
## 2. Portraying Spirits During Seances



- ▶ In the heydays of Spiritualism, it became very common for mediums to sketch portraits of spirits who they claimed were present during the seances. Victor Hugo (1802-1885) was a better writer than he was a painter, and the spirit painting he produced during seances held at his home are hard to decipher. Other mediums produced better results

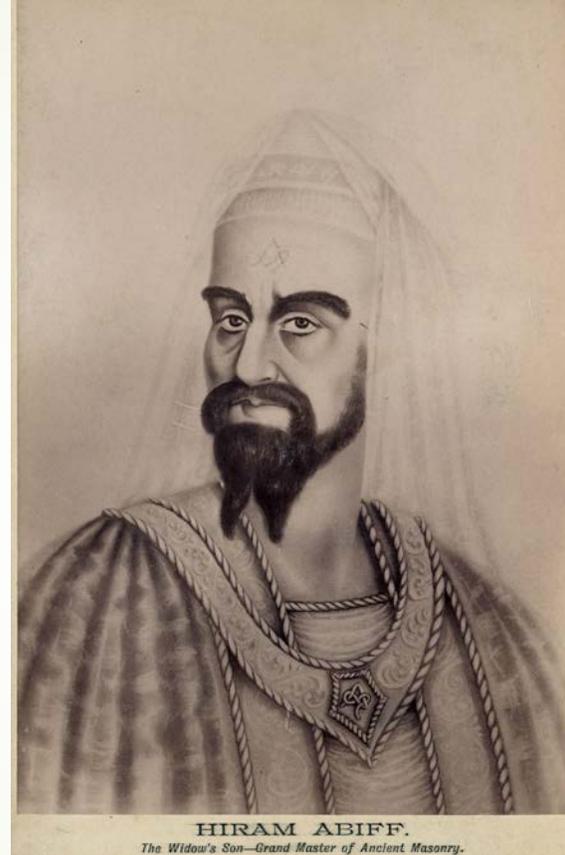
# A Dynamic Couple

- Those who sought portraits of the deceased loved ones in the United States fueled a flourishing Spiritualist market. Prominent there was the couple of Wella Percy (1833-1900?) and Lizzie Pet Anderson (1839?-1896), partners in life and Spiritualism, although they divorced in 1875



**Spirit Medium.**  
**M**RS. PET ANDERSON GIVES LOCATION  
of mines, etc., and spirit information in  
regard to stocks, etc., 325 ½ Bush street, rooms  
8 and 9, San Francisco. jan16-1m

# Portraits from Atlantis



- ▶ The Andersons did more than paint deceased spouses and children for wealthy clients. They channeled and painted masters of wisdom such as Confucius, the legendary Masonic ancestor Hiram Habiff, and members of "a band of Old Atlantis"

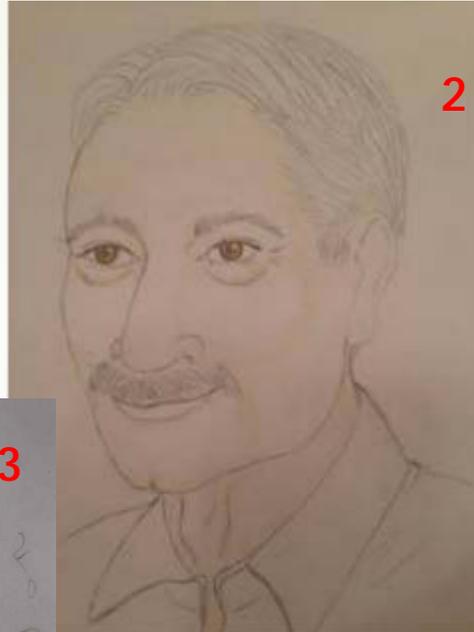


## A Continuing Practice

- ▶ Spirit portraits emerging during seances rarely became part of mainline art. However, the moving practice continues to this day. Says Coral Ryder, a well-known British medium: "I do not see the spirits that I draw, my hand is guided, I therefore do not know how close a likeness I have created unless shown a picture for comparison" (above). Lily Dale's Susan Barnes regularly offers similar demonstrations of spirit art (below)



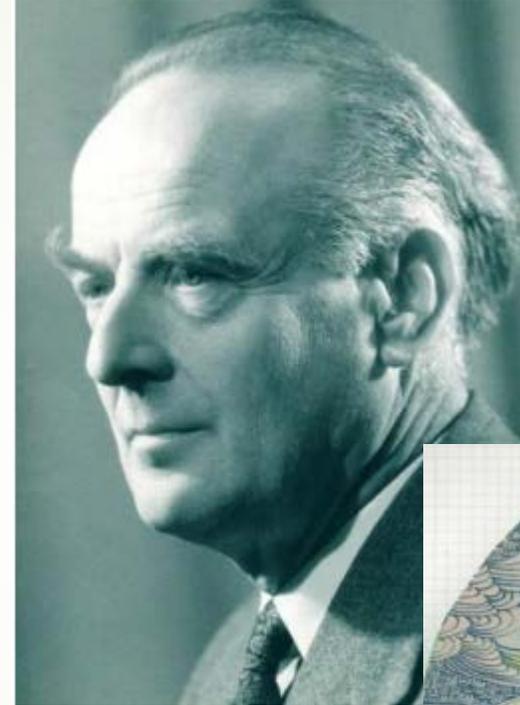
# Some Additional Spirit Artists



- There are several hundred spirit painters in this category today. In addition to Coral Ryder and Susan Barnes, renowned for the quality of their paintings are Ann Bridge Davies in Britain (1), Francesca Ferraro in Canada (2), and Angelique van Bezouwen in the Netherlands (3)

# Auragraphs

- Close to the second category of spirit paintings are auragraphs, which represent a person's past, present, and potential as seen by a medium or clairvoyant. The name was coined, and the technique developed, by British medium Harold Sharp (1890-1980) with the help of his spirit guide, an Austrian monk called Brother Peter



# Contemporary Auragraphs



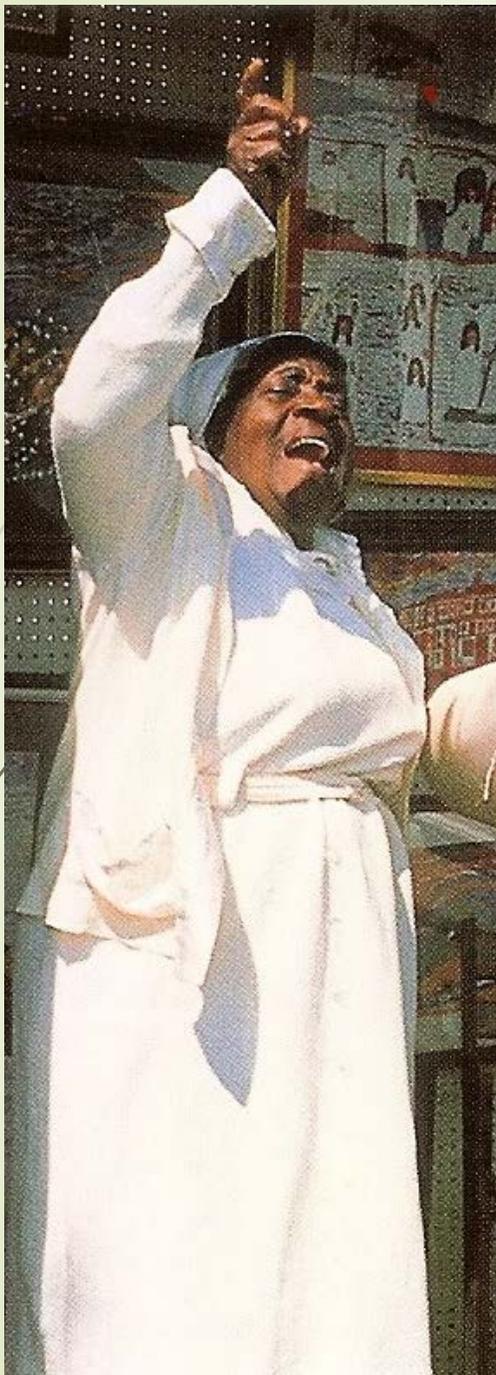
- ▶ Contemporary spirit artists, such as Susan Barnes, continue to produce auragraphs

# Spirit Photography

- ▶ Spirit photography for Spiritualists is not art but an apologetic way to strengthen their claims. There were and are, however, artistic photographers that are inspired by Spiritualism in their work. One classical example is Czech photographer František Drtikol (1883-1961). A contemporary case is American photographer Shannon Taggart, who also produced some of the more impressive photographs internationally of contemporary seances and mediums (right)



### 3. Hands Guided by Spirits



- ▶ Spirits often guide the medium's hands in our category no. 2 as well, but the difference with our third category is that here, rather than portraits of the spirits themselves, different works of art are produced. Some distinguish between works created in a trance (normally very rapidly), a semi-trance (Sister Gertrude Morgan, 1900-1980, left), or in full consciousness

# Brazilian Trance Art



- Within Brazilian Spiritualism, trance painters often channel famous painters and sculptors, and produce works in their style at surprising speed. José Medrado, of the Cidade da Luz, channels, inter alia, Renoir and Degas

# Luiz Antônio Gasparetto



- ▶ As famous as Medrado in Brazil is L.A. Gasparetto, who paints and sculpts with his hands guided by Degas, Botticelli, Modigliani, and many other famous artists

# Spirit Architecture



- ▶ Brazilian mediums produce spirit sculptures in addition to spirit paintings. Spirit architecture also exists. Iulia Hasdeu (1869-1888), a young Romanian poet who had died at age 18, revealed through mediums to her famous father, philologist Boian P. Hasdeu (1838-1907), the architectural plans for her grave in Bucharest and the famous "Castle Hasdeu" in Câmpina

# Maffei and Rosazza



- ▶ Another example of spirit architecture is the Italian village of Rosazza, near Biella, built between 1880 and 1899 for Italian senator and Freemason, Federico Rosazza (1813-1899), by painter Giuseppe Maffei (1821-1901). It was based on plans he received from the spirits of Augustine of Hippo (354-430), who was never an architect in his life, and an unnamed man from Volterra, Tuscany, who, not surprisingly, recommended to introduce elements from his home city

# Outsider Art?



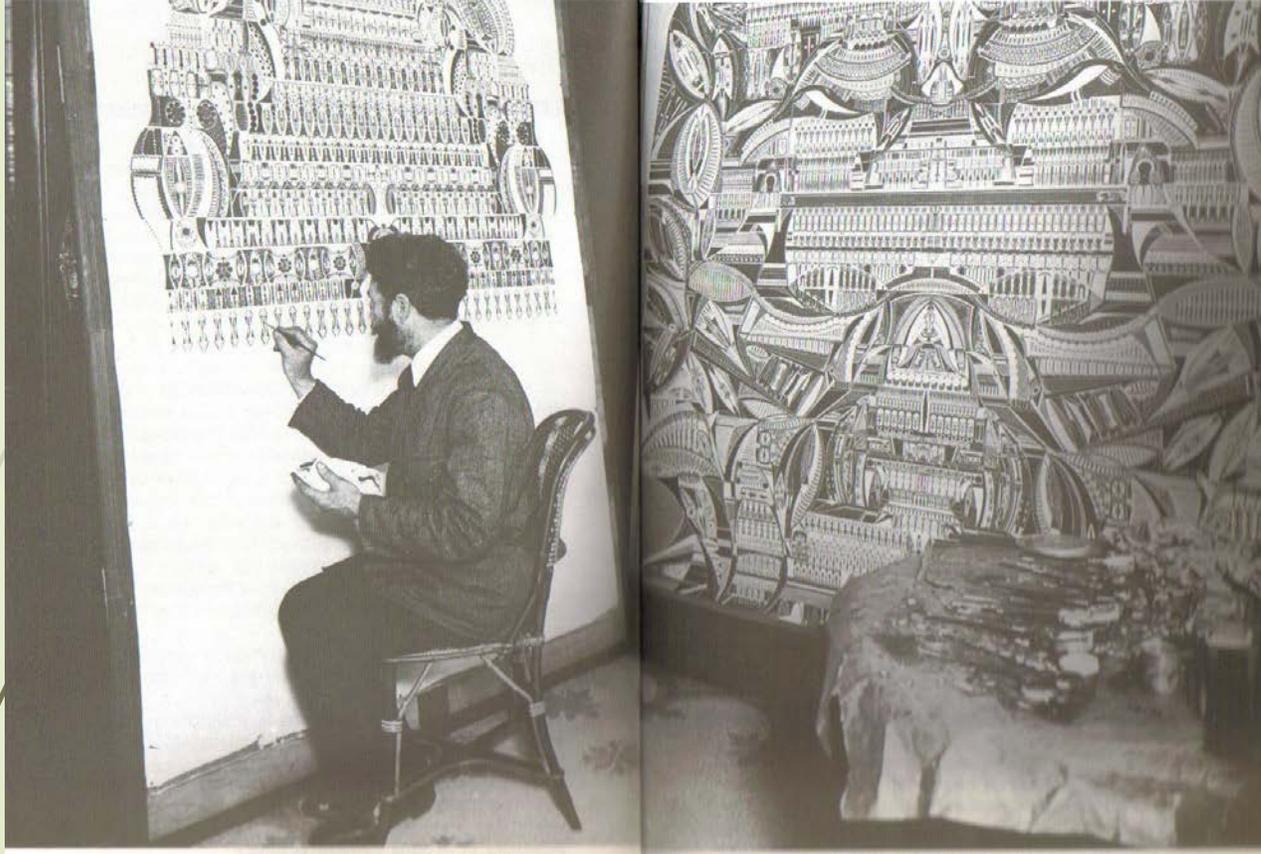
- Degas is crucial for the history of art, Degas "as channeled by Medrado (or Gasparetto)" for the art historian is just a curiosity. Other artists who claimed to work with their hands guided by the spirits, however, produced highly original paintings. Initially, they were studied only under the category of "outsider art" or "art brut," which also includes work by street artists and psychiatric patients. Sometimes, spirit artists were psychiatric patients, such as the Swiss medium Héléne Smith (Catherine-Elise Müller, 1861-1929), who painted inter alia visions of the Planet Mars and was studied by psychiatrist Théodore Flournoy (1854-1920)

# Madge Gill



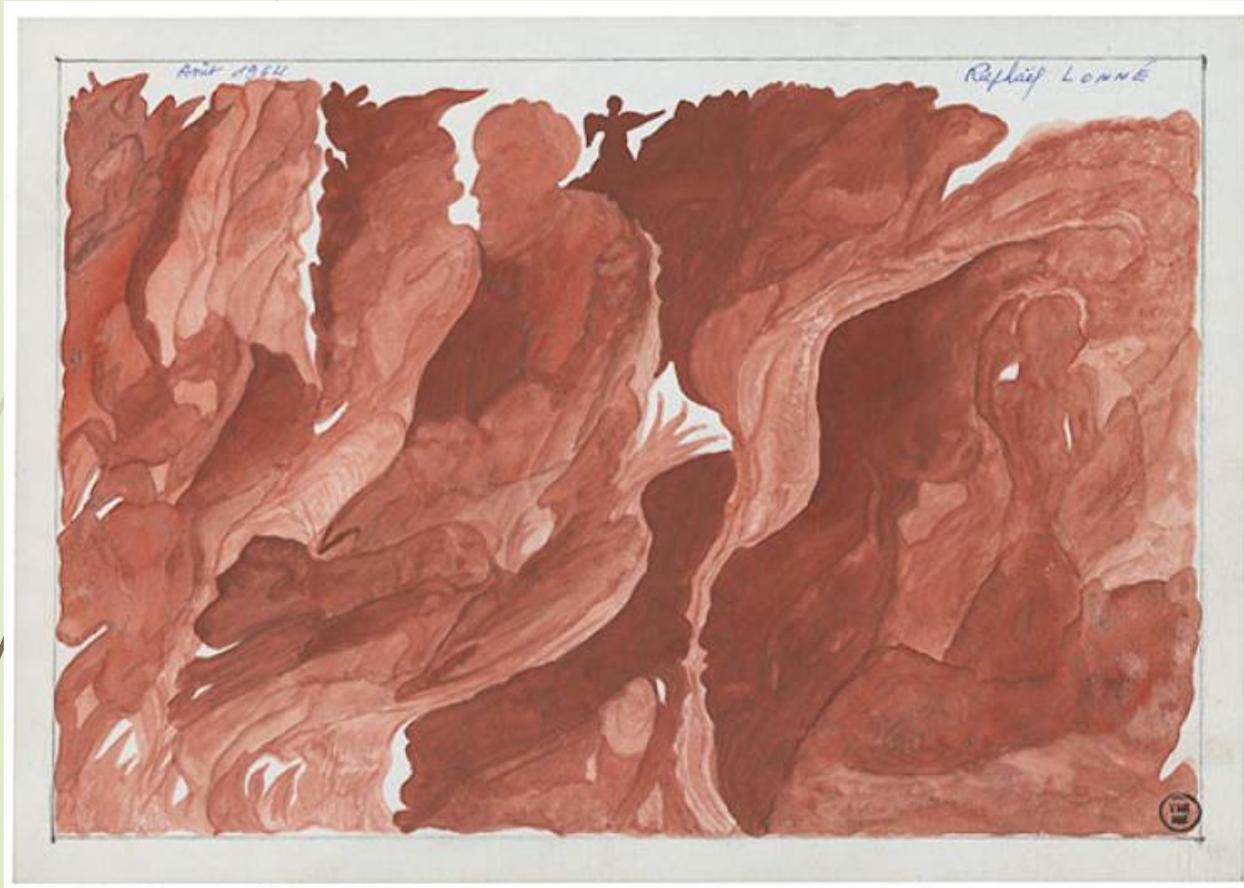
- ▶ However, "outsider art" is a contested category. Critics also tend to slowly recognize "outsider" artists as part of "mainline" art history, not to mention the high prices their works command at auctions. This is the case of British artist Madge Gill (1882-1961) who, with hands guided by the spirit Myrninerest (My Inner Rest), created thousands of postcard-size ornate drawings, and some huge works on calico

# Augustin Lesage



- Outsider art specialists also hail Augustin Lesage (1876-1954), a French coal miner, as a leading Spiritualist painter, "abandoning himself completely to the directing hands of his spirit guides in a euphoric state" (D. Wojcik)

# Raphael Lonné



- ▶ France produced a number of spirit artists included in the category of "outsider art", from Victorien Sardou (1831-1908) – who was certainly part of the mainline as a playwright – to Laure Pigeon (1882-1965). A notable spirit-outsider artist was postman Raphaël Lonné (1910-1989)

# Anna Zemánková



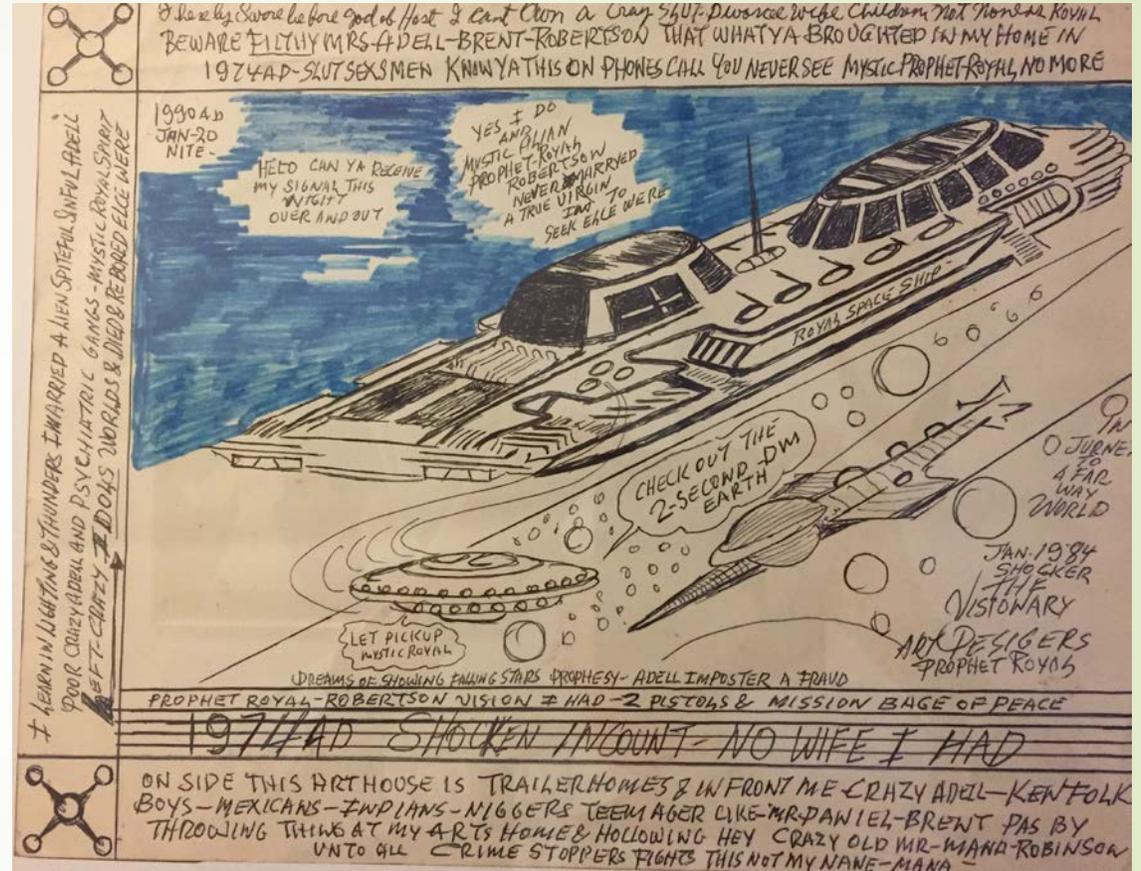
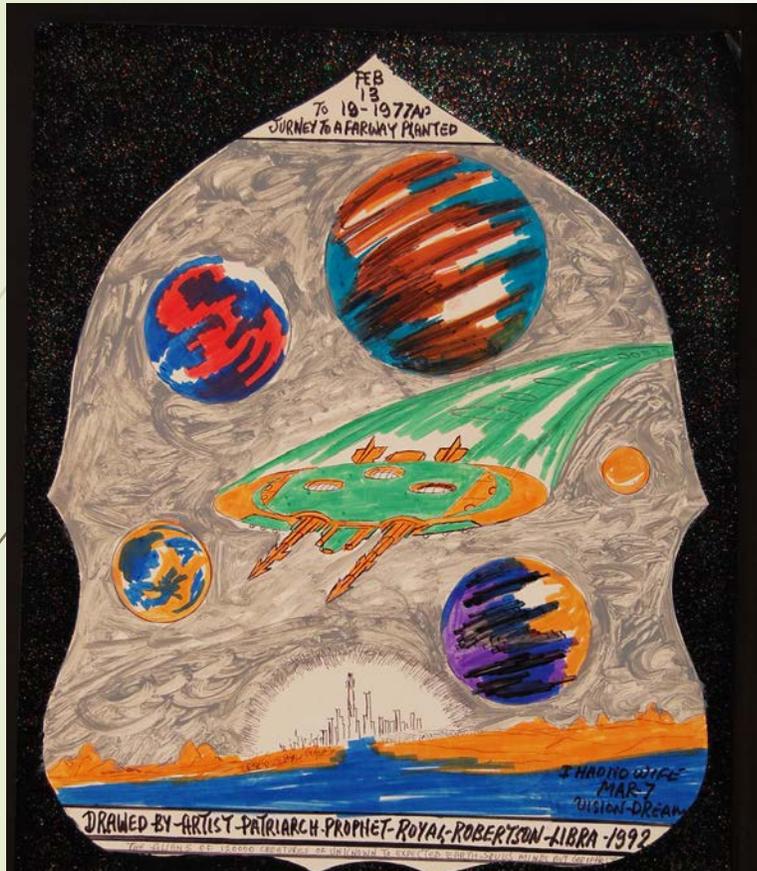
- An example of the perils and ambiguities of the category of outsider art, as applied to artists guided by spirits, is Czech painter Anna Zemánková (1908-1986). As her work command increasingly significant prices, merchants try to downplay her Spiritualist side, although she maintained that her works “painted themselves,” as the spirits guided her

# Outsider Spirit Art in the Netherlands

- ▶ At the other extreme (little studied spirit artists, with almost no market), Utrecht's foundation Het Johan Borgman Fonds performs a remarkable work in preserving paintings by lesser known Dutch spirit artists, some of them artistically interesting, such as Jan Huibreght Verwaal (1889-?)

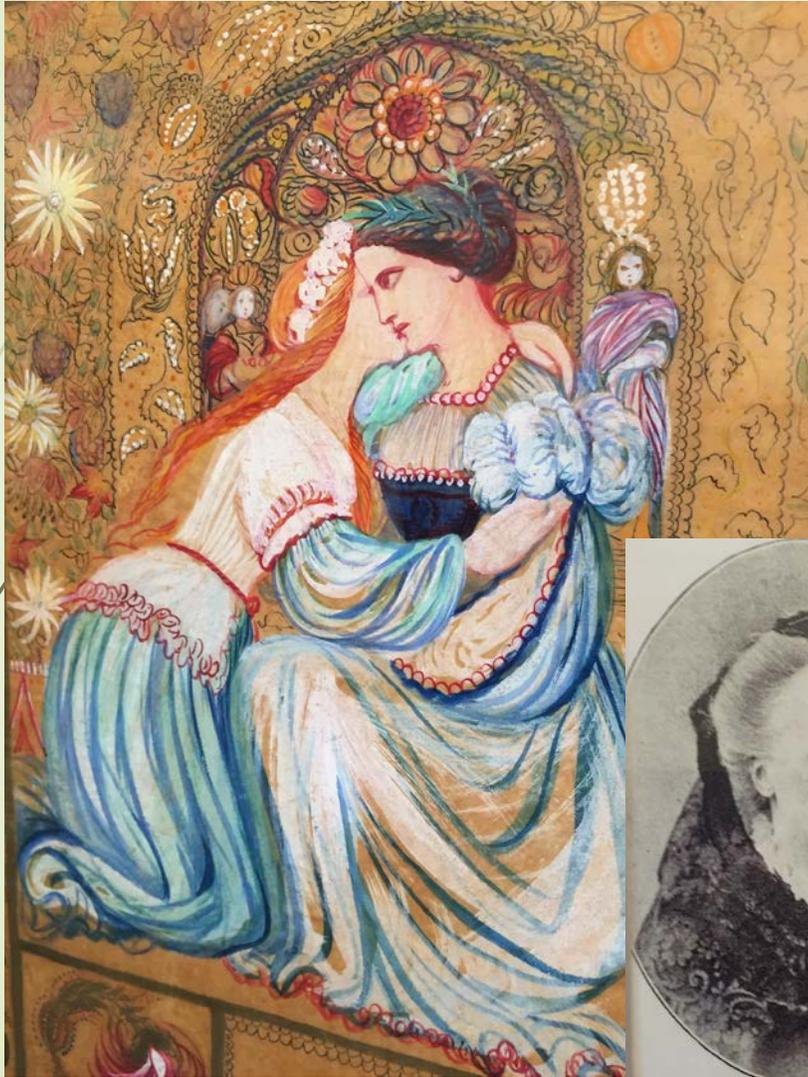


# Trance Contacts with the Aliens



- ▶ A parallel genre with respect to spirit art comes from trance contacts with the aliens. They were part and parcel, for example, of the work of another leading American outsider artist, "Prophet" Royal Robertson (1936-1997)

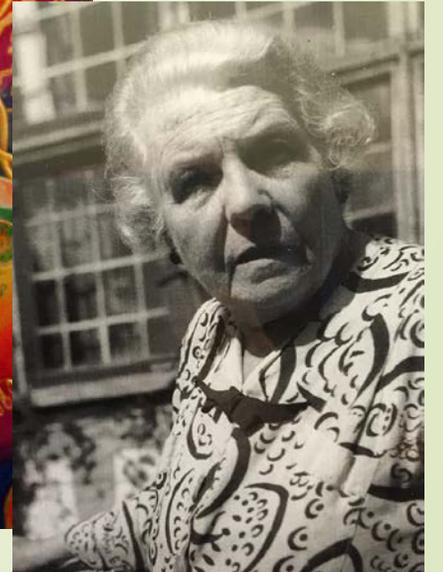
# Three Important British Artists



- In Britain, however, art historians – with a little help from scholars of Western esotericism such as Marco Pasi – started noticing recently that some spirit-guided artists played an important role in the birth of European modern art. The 2007 Ph.D. dissertation at Yale by Rachel Oberter, “Spiritualism and the Visual Imagination in Victorian Britain,” singled out Georgiana Houghton and Anna Mary Howitt-Watts (1824-1884, left). Subsequent exhibitions included in this mainstreaming process Ethel Le Rossignol (1873-1970)

# Le Rossignol's Fantastic World

- ▶ Howitt-Watts's (or her spirits') promising career was cut short by mental illness. Ethel Le Rossignol painted only 44 works and always insisted their real author was the spirit "J.P.F." Their meaning was explained in her large format self-published 1933 book, *A Goodly Company*. Her fantastic, idiosyncratic style confined her in an artistic niche

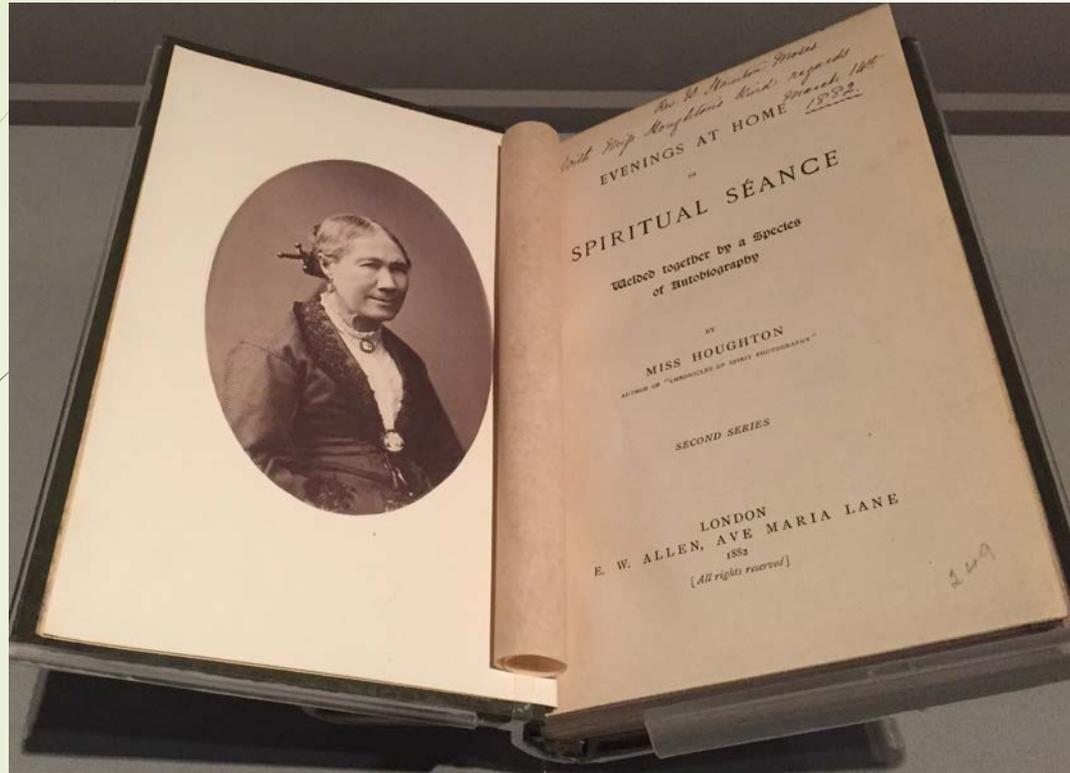




## A.M.T. Pery

- ▶ Alice Mary Theodosia Pery (1833-1906), a member of a prominent British aristocratic family, never signed her works but was known to, and influential on, Georgiana Houghton (and possibly Madge Gill). She claimed that spirits quickly produced “lines, oval, circles, and other curved lines” through her hands, and she then filled the empty spaces with her own artistic skills

# Georgiana Houghton



- Georgiana Houghton (1814-1884) was a medium who claimed that, when painting, her hands were fully controlled by her guides, including an otherwise unknown "deaf and dumb" deceased painter called Henry Lenny and the great Correggio (1489-1534). Her self-financed show in London in 1871 did attract notice, although later she was forgotten

# The Eye of God



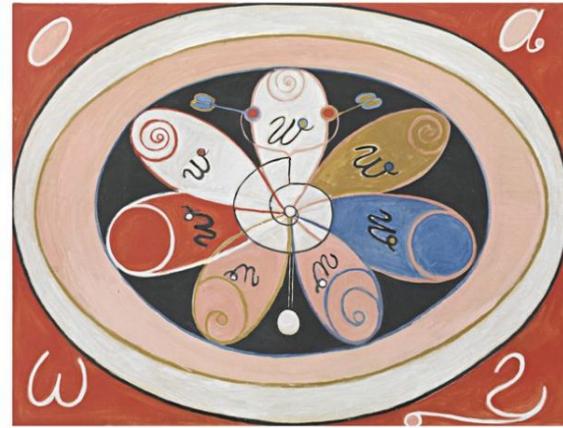
- ▶ Houghton insisted that her *The Eye of God* (ca. 1862) was actually painted by Correggio. He had very much changed his style in the spirit world...

# Did She Invent Abstract Art?



- ▶ Although it is amusing to hear a (former?) nemesis of spiritualist-esoteric art such as Januszczak proclaiming that Houghton invented abstract art before Kandinsky, and even action painting before Pollock, all this should perhaps not be exaggerated. Paintings such as *The Portrait of the Lord Jesus Christ* (1862) actually combine traditional Christian and Spiritualist imagery with surprisingly modern combinations of lines and colors

# Hilma af Klint (1862-1944)



- Oberter and Pasi have noticed the similarity between the careers, and late recognition of Houghton and Swedish painter Hilma af Klint
- The role of af Klint as another pioneer of abstract art is now increasingly recognized. Af Klint was instructed by spirit guides, although how exactly they guided her work is a matter of debate. She was also a member of the Theosophical Society

# Kandinsky and Spiritualism

- ▶ As Pasi noted, perhaps we should not really date back abstract art from Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) to af Klint or Houghton, because they did not offer a *theory* of abstract
- ▶ But what about Kandinsky himself? He did refer to Spiritualism in his notebooks, and performed parapsychological experiments, including psychic lifting of tables and telepathic communications from Munich with friends in Russia. He hailed defenders of Spiritualism such as German scientist Johann Karl Friedrich Zöllner (1834-1882) as brave men maligned by the prevailing academic materialism



# Kandinsky, Psychic Artist?



- ▶ The influence of Theosophy on Kandinsky (and on a great deal of other modern art luminaries, including Mondrian, Lawren Harris, Malevich, and Giacomo Balla, to mention only a few) is now generally acknowledged. Unlike Mondrian and Harris, Kandinsky was not a card-carrying member of the Theosophical Society. Nor was he a spirit artist. However, he attended lectures by Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) and, when the latter saw his paintings, he asked: "He can do things and he knows things. Is he clairvoyant?"

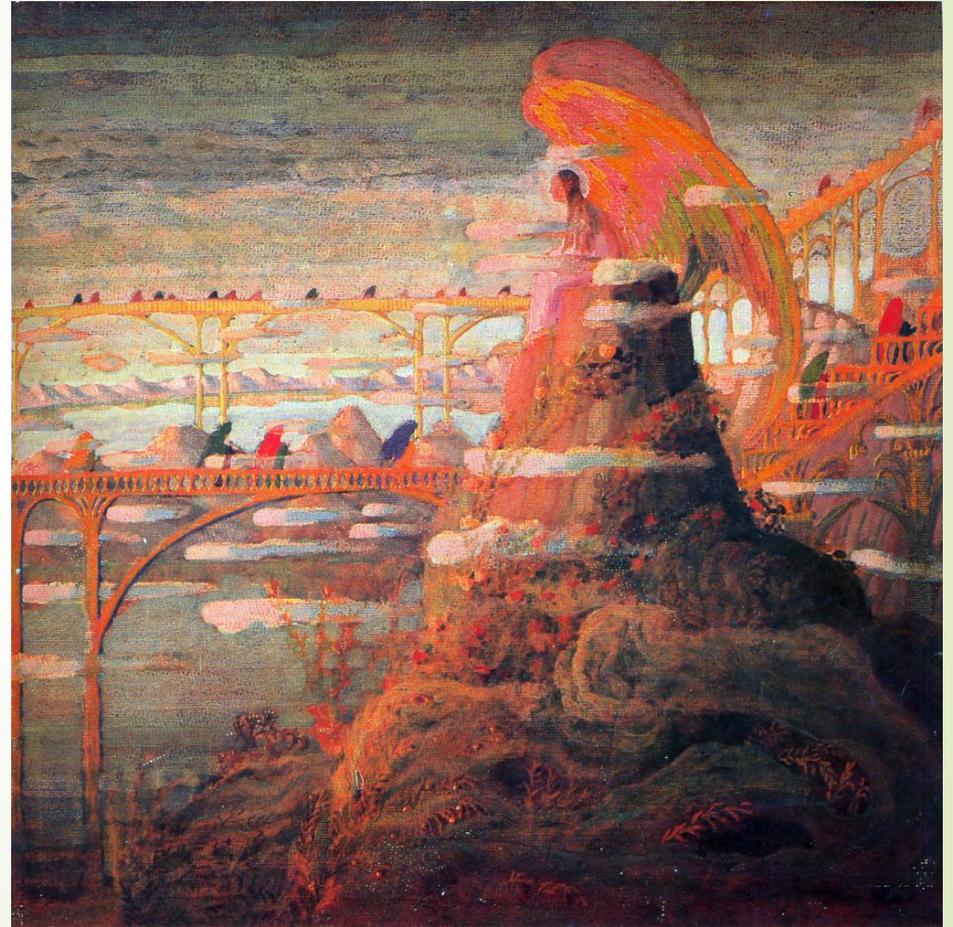


## František Kupka, Medium

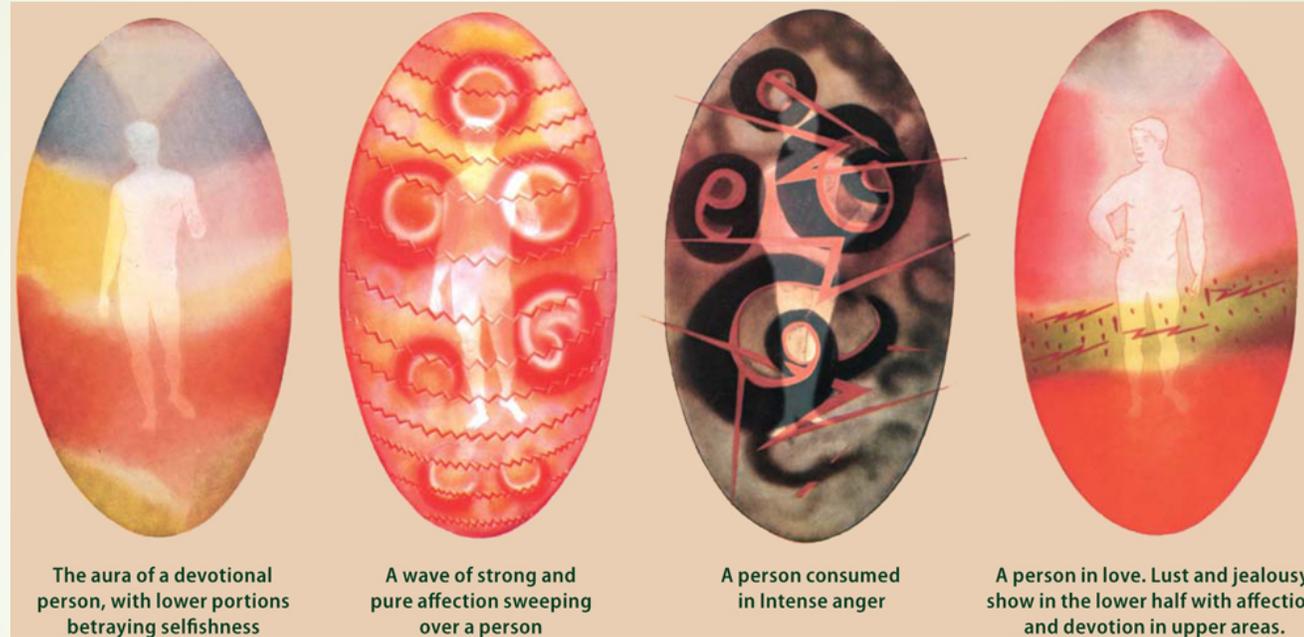
- It would be easy to present a laundry list of modern artists interested in Spiritualism. Futurists were influenced by spirit photographs. And it is perhaps more than a curiosity that Czech painter František Kupka (1871-1957), who went from the Theosophy-inspired *The Way of Silence* (1900-1903, above) to the abstract *Amorpha* (1912, below), started gaining his life as a Spiritualist medium

# Čiurlionis and Spiritualism

- Kupka is a key link in the passage from symbolism (although this is now a contested category) to abstract art. Another is Lithuanian painter and composer Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1875-1911: *Prelude-Angel*, 1909, right). He also attended Spiritualist seances in the meetings of the proto-Theosophical group in Warsaw led by his mentor, Kazimierz Stabrowski (1869-1929)



# Besant, Leadbeater, and Count Prozor



- Although their influence should not be exaggerated, the fathers of abstract art were somewhat influenced by *Thought Forms* by Theosophical leaders Annie Besant and Charles Webster Leadbeater (1905) and by Leadbeater's *Man Visible and Invisible* (1902). The latter volume's illustrations had been clairvoyantly produced by the Lithuanian Theosophist Count Maurycy Prozor (1849-1928), and both books included the artistic results of psychics "seeing" emotions and feelings, which again had some similarities with spirit art

## In Conclusion

- ▶ In conclusion, we can perhaps agree with Januszczak that Houghton (right), and af Klint, and others, not only, in their own way, anticipated Kandinsky and Mondrian but also helped critics notice how Spiritualism, Theosophy, what some call “occulture,” and the occult milieu in general. were important to their understanding of modern art – although angry reactions to the current Guggenheim exhibition of the Rosicrucians (one *New York Times* critic called their art “tasteless,” “nauseating” and “sordid”) show that not all have been persuaded



# A Role for the Spirits



- For scholars of Western esotericism, Spiritualists caught “in the air,” before others, ideas whose time was coming. For believers, perhaps, the spirits presided at the transition towards a different art, more attuned to modern times

Above: Hilma af Klint



For more information: [maxintrovigne@gmail.com](mailto:maxintrovigne@gmail.com)