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'Works of art without parallel in the world': Georgiana Houghton's Spirit Drawings

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Publication date

2016

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Georgiana Houghton: Spirit Drawings

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Citation for published version (APA):

Grant, S., & Pasi, M. (2016). 'Works of art without parallel in the world': Georgiana Houghton's Spirit Drawings. In E. Vegelin van Claerbergen, & B. Wright (Eds.), *Georgiana Houghton: Spirit Drawings* (pp. 9-23). Paul Holberton Publishing.
https://assets.courtauld.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/31133344/Houghton_final_double-compressed.pdf?_ga=2.159036090.1017069893.1577102601-460544997.1577102601

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“WORKS OF ART WITHOUT PARALLEL IN THE WORLD” GEORGIANA HOUGHTON’S SPIRIT DRAWINGS

SIMON GRANT AND MARCO PASI

Georgiana Houghton (1814–1884) spent most of her life in Victorian London as a single woman (fig. 1). She came from an ordinary, respectable middle-class English family, and apart from her active involvement in spiritualism – then at the height of its popularity – led a relatively unremarkable, quiet life. After her death, she was soon forgotten and, until recent times, her name was rarely mentioned by historians, even in well-documented studies of spiritualism.¹ Yet, during her life she produced some of the most astonishing works of art that have reached us from that period – in her own words, “Works of art without parallel in the world”.² These seemingly abstract and richly symbolic works were hardly appreciated or understood during her life and were as soon forgotten as their author. After more than a century of oblivion, this exhibition and catalogue seek to bring Houghton’s remarkable works to the attention of a new audience.

Houghton was born on 20th April 1814 in Las Palmas, on the island of Grand Canary, the seventh child of George and Mary Houghton. In London she lived in genteel poverty, her merchant father having lost money in a series of unlucky trading ventures.³ We know surprisingly little of her biography before her work as spirit artist and medium, though from her two-volume memoirs, *Evenings at Home in Spiritual Séance*, we know that she had trained as an artist, but renounced art on the death of her beloved younger sister Zilla Rosalia, herself a “charming artist”, who had died in 1851 aged 31. She was deeply affected by her sister’s death, which had come some years after the loss of her younger brother Cecil Angelo, aged nine in 1826. Like many of her generation who witnessed death in the family, she looked to any means to find explanations and comfort for

her loss. Houghton was still grieving for Zilla in 1859 when her cousin put her in touch with a neighbour, Mrs Marshall, who, it transpired, was a well-known spirit medium. Through her, she took part in her first séance. The experience astonished her.

After just one session with Marshall, Houghton felt that what she had seen and heard was “all sufficient” to convince her that she was capable of doing it herself, and spent the following three months in rigorous training, with help, involvement and encouragement from her mother. Houghton was spurred on by her deeply held Christian faith, and validated her purpose in those terms. Her great aim was, as she wrote in *Evenings at Home*, “to show ‘What the Lord hath done for my soul’ by granting me the Light now poured upon mankind by the restored power of communion with the unseen”.⁴

She soon began with the practice of ‘table tipping’ (a process in which, like a *ouija* board, a table was used to receive ‘messages’ from spirits) and after hearing in July 1861 about the spirit drawings of Mrs Elizabeth Wilkinson (on whom more below) she turned to drawing. Having initially made a small number of images with the aid of a tool known as a *planchette*, she began the first of her free-hand images of spiritual flowers and fruit, led by a growing number of ‘spirit guides’.⁵ The first of these was a man called Henry Lenny, described as a “deaf and dumb artist”. Later guides included great artists from the past, such as Titian and Correggio. By October 1861 she had her first communication with her “appointed guardians”, Zacharias, John and Joseph. At the end of 1862 she began in earnest her “Sunday evening pen and ink drawings”,⁶ under the direction of a larger group of these “high spirits”.



1. Georgiana Houghton (1814–1884), photograph used as the frontispiece to her *Evenings at Home in Spiritual Séance, Prefaced and Welded Together by a Species of Autobiography*, 2nd series, London, E.W. Allen, 1882

During the following years, and probably up to her death, she continued to produce drawings, using watercolours and ink, under their direct guidance. As well as her hand being directed by her ‘spirit guides’ to create her drawings, Houghton very regularly communicated with other spirits, including family members, whom collectively she called her “invisible friends”.

HOUGHTON AND BRITISH SPIRITUALISM

In order better to appreciate Houghton’s artistic activity and the context in which it took place, it is important to say something about the development of spiritualism in Victorian Britain, and also about its social and cultural relevance. With its origins in the United States in 1848, with the famous rappings of the Fox sisters in upstate New York, spiritualism arrived in Britain in 1852, when the first of a long series of American mediums, Mrs Maria Hayden (1826–1883), travelled to London. It then spread quickly across the country.⁷ In 1853 the first British spiritualist journal, *The Spirit World*, began publication. The spiritualists’ belief that the living could communicate with the dead dwelling in the spirit world was largely played out in the shape of the séance, in which participants would attempt to contact the spirits of dead family members, friends and others through the conduit of a spirit medium. The appearance of mediums able to produce seemingly extraordinary phenomena during the séances, such as Daniel Dunglas Home (1833–1886), created an enormous interest and made spiritualism almost instantly fashionable with all social classes. By the time Houghton was active, spiritualism was well developed, with numerous local groups and societies engaging in private and public séances. Historian of spiritualism Alex Owen remarks that Houghton was a “private medium”, as opposed to a “public” one.⁸ This means that she mostly operated within a small circle of relatives and friends, and did not hold public séances open to strangers and for which usually a fee would be paid.

Spirit phenomena would typically include table rapping, table tipping, levitations, ‘automatic’ writing and drawing, as well as, most controversially, ‘apports’ – or manifestations of material objects.⁹ Houghton’s own descriptions in *Evenings at Home in Spiritual Séance* are filled with examples of séances she held as a medium and hosted at her house, and those of others that she attended. She reports witnessing various fruit and vegetables (bananas, dates, an onion ...) as well as flowers and other objects.¹⁰

More ambitious (and unexplained) apports from other reports included the appearance of, variously: a six foot sunflower, “sea water and live star fishes”, “three ducks prepared for cooking”, a pile of snow, and, perhaps most famously, the transportation of Houghton’s friend and fellow medium, the heavily built Mrs Agnes Guppy (1838–1917), from her house in Highbury to central London – a distance of three miles.¹¹

Houghton would soon become part of what could be called an inner circle of influential spiritualist practitioners that included Agnes Guppy, Daniel Dunglas Home, Emma Hardinge Britten (1823–1899) and Mary Marshall (1842–1884), and they would often attend each other’s séances. Another important acquaintance was that with John Murray Spear (1804–1887), one of the most prominent American spiritualists, radical agitator, social reformer, and inventor of spirit machines.¹² Spear and his family spent some time in England in 1863 and became close friends with Houghton. He clearly had a significant influence on her, and it was he who gave her the name ‘Holy Symbolist’ (later modified to ‘Sacred Symbolist’), which she cherished afterwards and sometimes used in the descriptions of her drawings.

Houghton increasingly acquired a position of visibility within the spiritualist movement. When a body was formed in 1869 to investigate the phenomena of spiritualism, called the London Dialectical Society, she was invited to give her opinion and describe her experiences as a medium. The final report of the Society, including her testimony, was then published in 1871, and offers today a very vivid image of the movement at the time.¹³ Another sign of her prominent role in the spiritualist community was her election in 1874 to the council of the recently formed British National Association of Spiritualists.¹⁴

Those who took part in the activities of spiritualists ranged from amused dabblers to those who immersed themselves in systematic investigation of its method and purpose. As such, spiritualism appealed to all social classes, and there were rumours that even Queen Victoria had

sought to contact her husband Albert after his premature death in 1861.¹⁵

Spiritualism’s ascendancy also came at a time when Victorian society was undergoing immense social and cultural upheaval. Women were beginning to enjoy greater personal freedoms, both at home and in the emerging world of work, and the ‘darkened room’ of the séance offered an immensely liberating environment.¹⁶ More widely, geological findings and evolutionary theories as well as other scientific advances, coupled with the crisis of orthodox faiths that emerged, led to a fundamental questioning about the very nature of existence and origin of man. It was no surprise then, that it would lead many to explore the possibility of the idea of a tangible afterlife, and, as Lynda Nead writes, a “longing to animate the dead”.¹⁷

As a result it attracted such intellectual luminaries and distinguished men as the chemist and physicist Sir William Crookes (1832–1919),¹⁸ Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913),¹⁹ naturalist, explorer, geographer, anthropologist and biologist, who had published a paper on the theory of natural selection in the same year as Darwin, and engineer Cromwell Varley (1828–1883), best known for his work on the transatlantic telegraph cable.²⁰ It is interesting to note that Houghton created two spirit portraits of Varley and his wife. Mrs Varley was one of the most regular attendees at Houghton’s séances.

Unsurprisingly, spiritualism also had many detractors.²¹ Several mediums were caught using tricks in order to produce spirit phenomena artificially, and frauds were exposed. But for sceptics the problem of spiritualism was not just the fraud but also the sanity of the mediums and the other persons involved. An article published in the *British Medical Journal* in the summer of 1871 pointed out that “so-called spiritualistic manifestations are simply due to a particular nervous temperament, and to certain forms of disease which have long been recognised and are thoroughly understood by the medical profession”.²² As Alex Owen has shown, female mediumship posed significant challenges to the dominant values and norms

of behaviour of mid-Victorian society. The attempt at medicalisation and pathologisation of mediumship can be seen, therefore, as a response to these challenges.²³ Female mediums could be perceived as mentally disturbed persons who were in need of medical attention and, in some cases, of forced confinement in psychiatric asylums. Owen emphasises the relation that existed between these attempts and the particular social fragility of women at the time, due to their inferior legal status. There is an indication that even Houghton's sanity was questioned. In her autobiographical book she writes that at one point a doctor was called by members of her family to inquire about her involvement in spiritualism. Georgiana came to no harm, however, perhaps partly because the doctor in question was a homeopathic physician sympathetic to spiritualism.²⁴

BRITISH SPIRITUALISM AND VICTORIAN ART

Many artists were inexorably drawn to the ethereal and tantalising world of spirits. Most notable among them were members of the Pre-Raphaelite group, some of whom Houghton had met or who were in close connection with her network. The most prominent was Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882), who had first attended séances at the house of Houghton's friends the writers William (1792–1879) and Mary Howitt (1799–1888) in 1856–58, possibly along with his wife Elizabeth Siddal (1829–1862).²⁵ After Siddal's death, Rossetti had constantly felt her presence and in 1865 organised séance evenings at his Chelsea studio in order to communicate with her spirit.

Rossetti's brother William Michael also came under the spiritualist spell, and went to over twenty séances between 1865 and 1868. He kept a séance diary to record the events. At one session in early 1868, led by Mrs Guppy, Houghton was present along with artists including William Holman Hunt.²⁶ Appropriately for the people gathered, "direct drawings" were produced by the spirits. As Houghton wrote:

Pencils and sheets of note-paper were on the table ... and soon after the gas had been turned out, one sheet was brought and laid lightly on my hand ... we then heard the scratching sound of the pencil upon it The spirits then by raps requested a light, when they found that they had been drawing a rather ferocious looking animal ... [with] huge claw-like feet.²⁷

Rossetti's friend and neighbour J.M.W. Whistler was also enraptured by spiritualism, and, as fellow artist Mortimer Menpes recalled, for years he "potttered with table-turning and spirit-rapping".²⁸ He had also attended a number of séances at the Rossetti house. A more sceptical John Ruskin had been aware of spiritualism since the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning had tried to interest him during D.D. Home's first visit to England in 1855, and had told Ruskin of her experiences with mesmerism.²⁹ His first experience of a séance, however, was not until 1864, through his friendship with William and Georgiana Mount-Temple, hosted by a friend of Houghton's, Mrs MacDougall Gregory, and led by Mrs Marshall. However, by 1868 Ruskin had "done with mediums".³⁰

The male Pre-Raphaelite artists reflected their interest in spiritualism by the inclusion in their paintings of knowing symbolic references and images of women in trance-like or dream-like states. While they witnessed spirit drawings being produced, they did not make such works themselves. Instead, their considered response was figurative, allegorical, personal and highly emotionally charged. The most potent example is Rossetti's *Beata Beatrix*, of which the artist made several versions from about 1863. Rossetti combined the story of the death of the poet Dante Alighieri's beloved Beatrice Portinari with that of his wife Elizabeth Siddal, who had died just a year before the first picture was started, and places her portrait at the centre of the story. In it the symbols are clear – the poppy for death, sleep and consolation (and a nod to her laudanum overdose), and the dove (which Rossetti variously depicts as red or white) as the Holy Spirit ('Dove' was also Rossetti's

pet name for Lizzie). However, rather than depicting what many viewed as Beatrice/Lizzie's demise, the painting had stronger spiritualist meaning for Rossetti. In a letter of 1871 to Mrs Cowper-Temple, who would later own a version of the painting, Rossetti explained that it was "not at all intended to represent Death ... but to render it under the resemblance of a trance She sees through her shut lids, is conscious of a new world."³¹ These symbols would also appear in William Holman Hunt's portrait of his dead wife's mother *Mrs George Waugh* (1868), which he painted around the same time as a haunting posthumous portrait of his wife, *Fanny Waugh Hunt* (1866–1868). Whistler's 'Nocturnes' and portraits of women such as *Symphony in White, No. 1* (or *The White Girl*, 1861–62) were described by several critics as being seemingly symbolic of transitory worlds. The French critic Fernand Desnoyers thought *The White Girl* to be a portrait of a medium, and Whistler to be "*le plus spirite des peintres*".³²

While it is clear that at the time some British artists had an interest in spiritualism – and Houghton was acquainted with them – the relationship between art and spiritualism also went in the opposite direction, with mediums who, around the mid-1850s, began to produce drawings during their séances. Typically, the mediums who produced these works would ascribe their authorship not to themselves, but rather to the spirits who they claimed were guiding their hands while in a state of trance or sometimes even in full consciousness.³³

One of the first, if not the very first, medium artist to emerge in Britain was Anna Mary Howitt (1824–1884), daughter of William and Mary Howitt, whom we have already encountered in connection with the group of the Pre-Raphaelites.³⁴ The Howitts were among the most prominent personalities in the world of British spiritualism and their daughter Anna Mary was a writer of fiction, memoirs, biography and poetry, as well as an accomplished artist, having trained at Henry Sass's Art School (at the same time as Rossetti and W.H. Hunt). She had exhibited her paintings at the Royal Academy, and set up a group



2. Anna Mary Howitt (1824–1884)
Design with central figure, c. 1857
Ink and watercolour on paper, 190 x 270 mm
Cambridge University Library, Society for Psychical
Research Archives (SPR/MS/65/9/45)

known as 'Sisters in Art'. She became disillusioned with her artistic practice after Ruskin made some caustic comments about it. She then discontinued her work as an artist and became interested in spiritualism. After a while, she began to produce a new kind of art, in the form of finely detailed and elaborate spirit drawings (see fig. 2). Many of them featured complex floral whorls and sinuous, elaborate patterns done with a fine hand, some filled with feverishly written pencilled words across the pages. One of her most regular subjects, however, was a female Christ-like figure that suggests her earlier pursuit of feminist causes had not



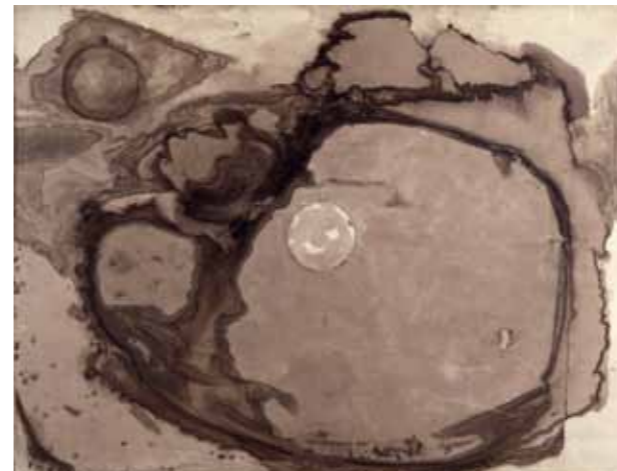
3. Barbara Honeywood (1827–1895)
No title (Album Page XIV), c. 1864
Watercolour on paper, 360 x 245 mm
Bethlem Museum of the Mind, Beckenham

abated. As Rachel Oberter has commented, such a pictorial rendering of “the feminine side of Christ” was part of a strand of “feminist millenarian theology” in Victorian culture.³⁵ Opinions about Howitt’s drawings differed: the writer Margaret Oliphant described them as “wonderful scribble-scrabbles”,³⁶ while one of the ‘Sisters’, Bessie Parkes, thought her works were “some of the most delicate, beautiful drawings ever done by a woman’s hand”.³⁷ In any case, Howitt’s drawings were very probably the first

to reach a wider public than that of a normal séance. Some of them were in fact used as illustrations in Camilla Crosland’s 1857 book on spiritualism *Light in the Valley*.³⁸

Another group of early spirit artists based in London was the Wilkinson family, which included the homeopathic physician and editor of Swedenborg’s writings Dr J.J. Garth Wilkinson, his brother William M. Wilkinson, owner and editor of the important spiritualist journal *The Spiritual Magazine*, and his wife Elizabeth. The Wilkinsons had lost a child and thought that the drawings they produced during their séances were sent by him. Based on these experiences, in 1858 William Wilkinson published the first book entirely devoted to spirit drawings.³⁹ Houghton recalled in her autobiography that it was Wilkinson’s example that gave her the idea to start experimenting with spirit drawing.⁴⁰

As Houghton’s artistic experiments began to be known within the spiritualist community, her reputation grew. Houghton would show the growing portfolio of her drawings to many curious admirers across London, who became numerous enough for Houghton to set up weekly sessions at her home. Among these visitors were a number of spirit artists, including George Childs (1798–1875), better known for his romanticised views of the industrial revolution, and Thomas Heaphy (1813–1873), a friend of both Charles Dodgson and John Ruskin and known for his pictures of ghosts. Spirit artists would also come to her for guidance. Henry Collen (1797–1879) – “a dear old gentleman”, as Houghton remembered him – had been Queen Victoria’s miniature painter but wanted to “resuscitate the dormant talent”⁴¹ of his spirit drawing and, after a few sessions with her, found that he was able to make “rather elaborate spiral lines”.⁴² Perhaps the most notable and talented beneficiary was a well-connected lady called Barbara Honeywood (1827–1895), who had arrived at Houghton’s door in 1863 with a letter of introduction from Heaphy. At first Honeywood produced figurative floral images, much as Houghton had done in her early works, but within a year her style had changed and her drawings became as colourful and as abstract as Houghton’s own,



4. Victor Hugo (1802–1885)
Taches-planètes, 1857
Pen and brown wash on paper, 450 x 585 mm
Musée du Louvre, Paris

and clearly showed the influence of her teacher. Several of these have survived (see fig. 3).⁴³

If we look at other countries, such as France, we can easily find other examples of the relationship between spiritualism and art. Between 1853 and 1855, while engaging in spiritualist séances during their exile on the isle of Jersey, Victor Hugo (1802–1885) and his son Charles (1826–1871) produced a series of remarkable drawings and watercolours (see fig. 4). Another famous example is that of Victorien Sardou (1831–1908), who, during a period of crisis in his career as a playwright, devoted himself to spiritualism and began creating drawings and engravings directly inspired by his mediumistic experiences. Some of them were published as early as 1858 in the leading French spiritist journal *La Revue Spirite*.⁴⁴ Sardou’s images show strange landscapes from other planets and fantastic, otherworldly palaces. Renewed success with his dramas made Sardou’s enthusiasm for spiritualism cool down, which remained therefore, like for Hugo, an episode in his biography.

THE WORKS AND THE MESSAGE

As we have noted earlier, Houghton began practising spirit drawing in 1861, and continued at least until the late 1870s and possibly even later.⁴⁵ We can notice a clear development in her style. At the beginning it is easy to recognise shapes of plants, flowers and fruits, which is confirmed by the titles of the works (see fig. 5). The images are not supposed to reproduce natural vegetation, however, but have instead a spiritual meaning. Houghton explains, for instance, that “with the birth of a child into the earth life, a flower springs up in spirit realms, which grows day by day in conformity with the infant’s awakening powers”.⁴⁶ What we see in these drawings are the flowers that in the spirit world correspond to particular persons living, or having lived, in the material world. Houghton explains that the colours and the shapes have a symbolic meaning, which can be easily understood by spiritual beings, but not by normal persons: “to dwellers upon earth the pictured



5. Georgiana Houghton
Plant of Zilla Rosalia Warren, 8th April 1862
Watercolour and gouache on paper laid on board,
326 x 237 mm
Private collection

representations require interpreting”,⁴⁷ otherwise their true meaning will be missed. But one should also keep in mind that what one sees in the drawings is just a pale copy of the original. Their earthly support can hardly render faithfully the “glorious hues” of the spiritual world.

With these early images the visual language remains figurative, even if it is not meant to represent the natural world. But soon the style becomes increasingly more complex, with a point where no clear objects can be recognised. Interestingly, this gradual shift in style is concomitant with a change in the subject. Beginning with *The Holy Trinity*, dated 29th November 1861, we move from the various forms of spirit vegetation to abstract theological notions. According to Houghton “this drawing was the first of the Sacred Symbolism, which I have found the chief characteristic of my work”.⁴⁸ This ‘sacred symbolism’ seems to be based on a complex system of correspondences based on colour and shape, of which she offers the key in the catalogue of her 1871 exhibition.⁴⁹ Yellow, for instance, represents God the Father, but also faith and wisdom. Orange is power, violet heavenly happiness, and so on.

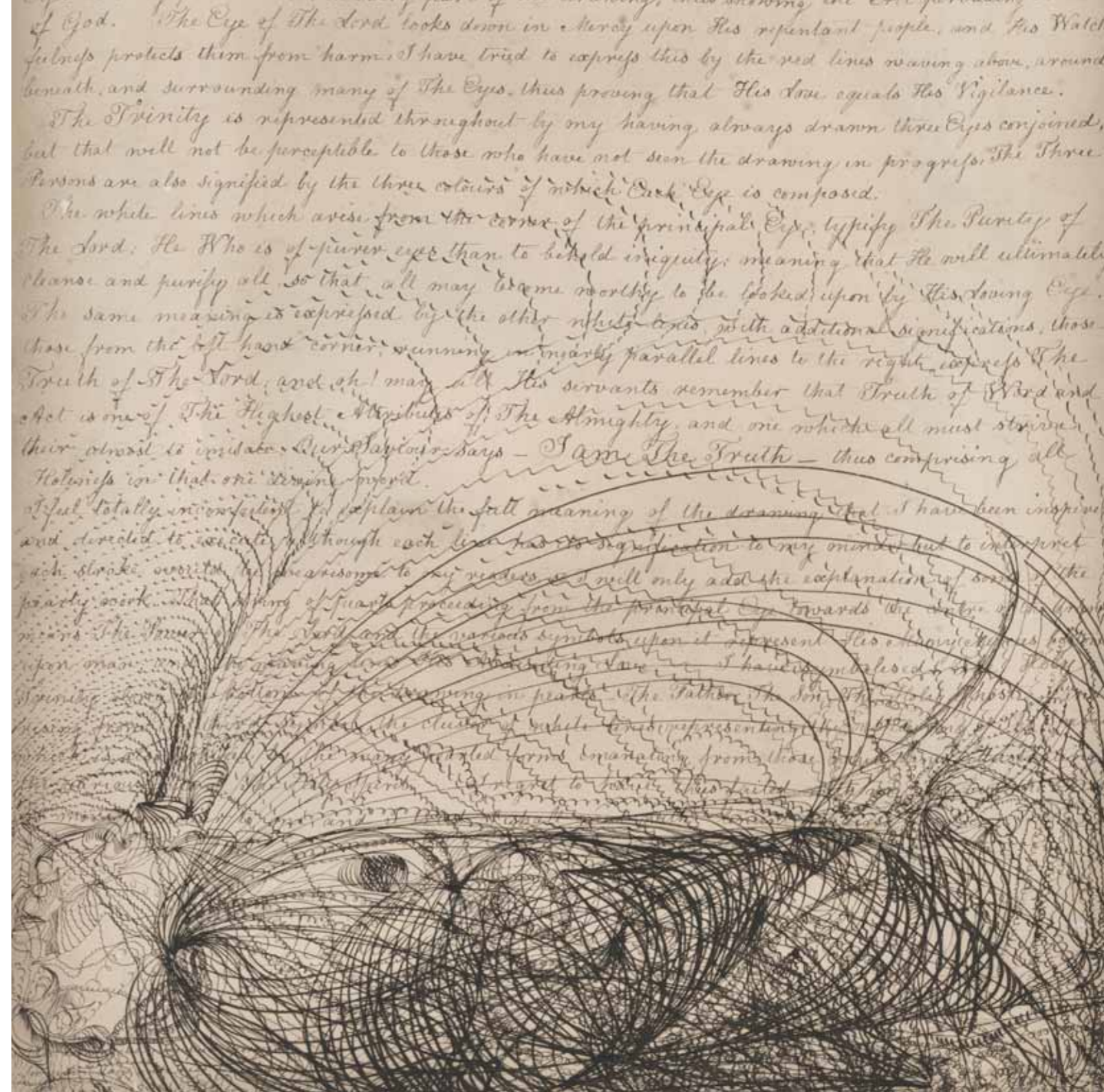
A third kind of subject encompasses what Houghton refers to as “crowns” and “monograms”. They are the subtle, colourful emanations of every “thought, word, and deed” of a particular person.⁵⁰ These are like fine threads of spiritual matter, which are woven together and can only be seen by those who have access to spiritual reality.

After her early shift to a non-figurative style, Houghton remains consistent: all her extant drawings from that moment on show complex patterns of colours without any apparent, recognisable object (see fig. 6). The only exception is a drawing dated 8th December 1862, *The Portrait of the Lord Jesus Christ* (cat. 9). Here the face of a bearded man, obviously Jesus Christ, emerges from within the usual web of colour lines and patterns. Interestingly enough, a work of this title is not mentioned in the catalogue of the 1871 exhibition and may therefore not have been included.

Another remarkable aspect of the drawings is that most of them have an appended explanation, which Houghton usually received from the spirits via automatic writing. These texts give us important details about the drawings, such as the date on which they were composed. But they also offer us the key to their complex symbolism, which is complemented by the explanations in the 1871 catalogue. The texts, therefore, are fully part of the artwork, and the strict relationship between visionary images and texts makes one think immediately of William Blake, who was an inspirational figure for many English spiritualists.

Although Houghton’s style can be called ‘abstract’ *avant la lettre*, it is also important to keep in mind that her drawings were never objectless. They are in fact always highly symbolic and they represent ‘something’, even if this something happens to belong to another world and be invisible. The symbolic aspect of her work reduces perhaps to some extent the gap between it and that of the other artists active in the period, such as the Pre-Raphaelites. One should not push the analogy too far, however, but acknowledge the difference existing between her drawings and the high forms of art of her time.

In her ‘abstraction’ Houghton was different not only from the mainstream artists, but also from the other medium artists of her time, most of whom remained faithful to more traditional forms of figurative representation. Of all these artists, Houghton is clearly the most radical, at least in terms of her artistic language, in the sense that she shows a decisive, uncompromising departure from current artistic canons. While she did this, she still tried very explicitly to be part of that same art world. No other spirit or medium artist during the second half of the nineteenth century, and at least until the emergence of modernism and the avant-gardes in the early twentieth century, was more consistent than her in this respect. Houghton’s drawings were certainly supposed to be an illustration of the spiritual world and a visual support for the teaching of spiritual principles, but she did not see them as purely didactic. Houghton also strongly believed in their artistic quality, which for her made



their spiritual message even more powerful and cogent. And while she would take no credit for this message, which she saw as originating from other sources, she would certainly take some credit for the artistic value of the drawings. In the catalogue of her 1871 exhibition she notes that, while the spirits could in principle choose anybody to convey their messages, it was logical that they would choose a well-trained artist when those messages needed to take a visual form: “The spirits ... can of course better guide the trained hand, and make a more speedy progress if they are thus relieved from all the elementary part ... for no person can spring, at one bound, to a pinnacle of art perfection, any more than an acorn can in one season become a widely spreading oak”.⁵¹

A few more words should be added about Houghton’s own spiritual vision.⁵² If we place her ideas within the broader context of nineteenth-century British spiritualism, there is nothing in them that is particularly original or odd. Like most British spiritualists at the time, she is eager to show that spiritualism is perfectly compatible with Christianity, even if it is a Christianity that is heavily influenced by the large legacy of the Swedish visionary Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) and rejects some of the dogmas of more orthodox Christian Churches. Just as Swedenborg claimed to be able directly to see the spiritual world, Houghton claims to depict it with the help of her spirit guides and to make it visible for those who do not possess the gift of Swedenborg’s spiritual sight. But in Houghton’s vision we notice a millenarian element which is also typical of her age and especially of the milieu in which she moved. She sees her work as announcing a “Third Dispensation”, which is supposed to be imminent.⁵³ It is the dawn of the age of the Holy Ghost, an age of increased spirituality and proximity to God’s revelation, coming after the two earlier ages of the Father and of the Son. This tripartite vision of history, and the feeling of imminence in its denouement, shows the unmistakable influence of the spiritual tradition of Joachim of Fiore, of which there was a strong revival in Britain at that time.⁵⁴ Human beings are on

a long path of evolution, which continues indefinitely after death. Advanced spirits turn into angels and archangels and may offer help from the other world to those who still live in this one. The drawings allow us to catch a glimpse of the spirit world, and they become, therefore, evidence of its existence.

THE 1871 EXHIBITION AND ITS RECEPTION

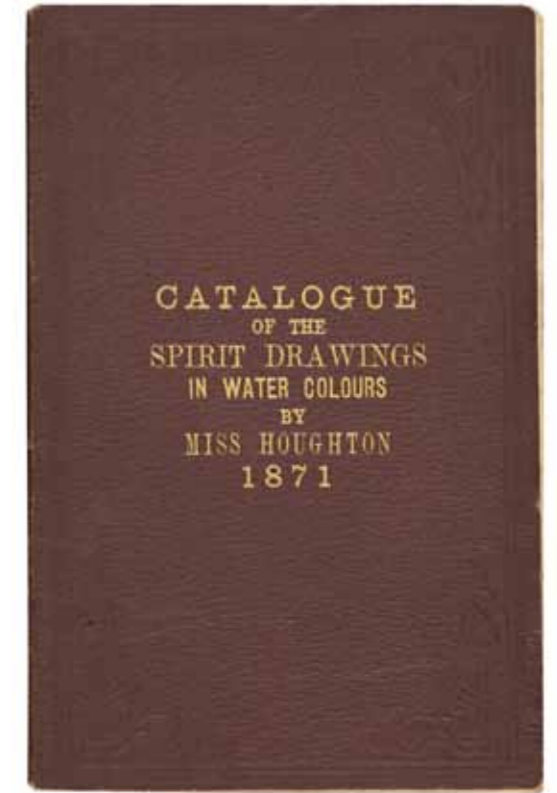
In 1871 Houghton realised her dream of having a large exhibition of her spirit drawings. She wrote later that the 155 works exhibited accounted for all the drawings in her possession, as well as a number borrowed back from their owners. It offered, in other words – with a possible few exceptions – a full account of her output over a ten-year period.⁵⁵ What is most remarkable about this undertaking is the scale and ambition of her project and the short time it took to come to fruition. After the encouragement of an artist friend called “Mr L” in her book, she was put in touch with a Mr McNair, a manager for several exhibiting venues, who offered the New British Gallery, at 39 Old Bond Street, for a period of almost four months over the summer. In the second volume of her *Evenings at Home*, Houghton offers what must be one of the most extensive insights into Victorian exhibition-making. She describes all practical matters, including the nature of the catalogue, printed in two versions, one with pink tinted paper and brown cloth cover (fig. 6) and a special edition for Queen Victoria, printed in pink satin and bound in white calf and gold.⁵⁶ She arranged an extensive advertising campaign that included the distribution of leaflets, placards and posters, as well as advertisements in the newspapers. She enlisted the services of a Mr Spencer, picture framer, though she insisted that she herself put together each work, “hammering in every nail with my own hands”.⁵⁷

Houghton hung the work herself, and decided on prices, with help from her “unseen friends”. Once the exhibition opened, she spent almost every day talking to visitors, answering queries and trying to convert them to the

spiritualist cause. Visitors who showed special interest were invited to observe her working on drawings at home. Many of her friends from spiritualist circles visited the exhibition, but Houghton found the most sympathetic visitors were members of the clergy (including one who commissioned a ‘portrait’) as well as artists, such as the satirist Florence Claxton and the American sculptor and spiritualist William Wetmore Story. One of the most significant visitors was Leah Fox Underhill (1813–1890), who, together with her two younger sisters, had played a key role in the origins of the spiritualist movement in upstate New York in 1848.⁵⁸

Houghton’s exhibition was received with a mix of bafflement, hilarity and scorn by the press, with reviewers unable to come to terms with either the images or their intent. In one article the reviewer suggested that if “the readers were to imagine such a thing as an accurate copy of coloured and white Berlin wools, all tangled together in a flattened mass, framed and hung round a gallery, some idea could be formed of the appearance of this most strange exhibition”.⁵⁹ In another article the reviewer writes how “a visitor to the exhibition is alternatively occupied by sad and ludicrous images during the whole of his stay in this gallery of painful absurdities”,⁶⁰ while a third exclaims: “We should not have called attention to this exhibition at all, did we not believe that it will disgust all sober people with the follies which it is intended to advance and promote”.⁶¹ This last reviewer goes further and describes how he viewed her work “with horror and alarm, for we had never been so impressed before with the strange hallucinations of which the human mind may be capable If we were to sum up the characteristics of the exhibition in a single phrase, we should pronounce it symbolism gone mad.”⁶²

Such vitriol was unsurprising at a time when the gallery-goer was more likely to see paintings by the Pre-Raphaelites, and the most radical art being painted in London was works such as Whistler’s *Nocturne: Blue and Silver – Chelsea* and Monet’s *Thames below Westminster*. However, Houghton, it seems, was prepared for this kind of



6. Cover of the *Catalogue of the Spirit Drawings in Water Colours, Exhibited at the New British Gallery, Old Bond Street. By Miss Houghton, through Whose Mediumship They Have Been Executed*, London, 1871

public onslaught – the press had enjoyed lampooning the vagaries of the spiritualist movement since its early years in Britain. Houghton wrote how the “scoffs of the ignorant”⁶³ were unimportant to her and placed as much regard on the message of the works, as on the artistic skill which they undoubtedly contained – believing that her art “could not be criticised according to any of the known and accepted canons of art”.⁶⁴

Some reviewers, however, were more sympathetic to what she was doing. The writer for *The News of the World* started off by extolling Houghton’s technique, and the

way “the brilliancy and harmony of the tints ... engage attention”.⁶⁵ To help the reader imagine pictures so unusual for an art exhibition at the time, the reviewer could not help making a slightly far-fetched comparison with a well-known contemporary painter: “The idea presents itself to the imagination of a canvas of Turner’s, over which troops of fairies have been meandering, dropping jewels as they went”. Houghton was described as “a clever and tasteful artist ... a sincere believer in what she says”.⁶⁶ The author then observed that “the lady and her drawings constitute a little poem, fanciful and beautiful, its aims and ends being to establish the holiness and beauty of pure religious principle, and the happiness which it creates in this life leading to the greater happiness hereafter”.⁶⁷ Similarly positive was a review that appeared in *Queen*, a society periodical set up by Samuel Beeton. At the outset, the author made it clear that trying to make sense of what he had seen at the exhibition was not so easy: “The water-colour drawings ... are so extraordinary in character, and are so entirely opposed to one’s ideas of art, ancient or modern, that criticism in the ordinary manner becomes difficult, not to say impossible”.⁶⁸ But in spite of the lack of a convenient framework for understanding Houghton’s art, it is significant that the reviewer could eventually appreciate it also, if not mostly, from an aesthetic point of view: “Many of the drawings may look like singular and confused scrawls; but they are elegantly minute in their tracery, frequently beautiful in form, and in their bold and often violent contrasts of colour never *inharmonious*”.⁶⁹ One visitor observed that the drawings resembled what could be seen through a microscope, whilst another suggested affinities with fossilised plant life. Such comments offer a tantalising glimpse of wider aesthetic and conceptual frames of reference for the drawings’ detailed patterns and structures.⁷⁰

From a purely financial point of view, the 1871 exhibition was a failure. Houghton spent most of her savings on it, and it almost ruined her. A subscription was raised by friends to help her through this crisis. To her dismay, and in spite

of the relative support of the spiritualist community, she sold only one of the exhibited works. But in another sense the exhibition was not a failure at all, and she reached an important goal with it. Houghton did not want to show her works only privately to her spiritualist friends and acquaintances, as most other spirit artists were doing, but rather wanted to exhibit them in a space that would define her as an artist. This is an indication of her desire to have her drawings recognised not only as objects with a deep spiritual value but also as artistic works. And that she was consistent in her artistic ambition is confirmed by the fact that she submitted her works on a number of occasions to art institutions such as the Royal Academy or to the Dudley Gallery, so that they could be included in their exhibitions.⁷¹ It is not surprising that her attempts were regularly frustrated; what is surprising is that, while she was surely well aware of the difference between her art and the art that was fashionable in her day, she did not lose faith in the value of her work and kept on bringing it to the attention of the art world. Also significant is the fact that in the 1871 census, when she had to indicate her occupation, she simply called herself an “artist”.⁷² In this context it is also worth noting that, soon after her exhibition closed, Houghton took some ultimately fruitless steps to promote the idea of a larger exhibition of spirit drawings, to which different artist mediums would contribute. She herself noted that she owned a number of such works.⁷³

It is certainly understandable that, when historians began to rescue Houghton’s drawings from oblivion, they tried to place her within the narrative of abstraction, identifying her as an early precursor of the radical evolution of artistic language in the early twentieth century. Such an interpretation undoubtedly has its merits, but perhaps the most interesting question is not related to the development of abstraction as a specific style, but rather to the cultural, social and even psychological circumstances that made it possible for Houghton to create a body of artistic work that, in relation to her time, was so consistently and defiantly radical.⁷⁴

LATER LIFE AND AFTERMATH

Soon after the 1871 exhibition Houghton met Frederick Hudson (1818–1900), a photographer who was at that time experimenting with spirit photography.⁷⁵ She began to collaborate with him, appearing in a large number of Hudson’s photographs. After a while, however, suspicions were raised about the authenticity of Hudson’s photographs, which indirectly also affected Houghton. In 1882, when her collaboration with Hudson had already come to an end, she published a book where she described the work she had done with him and confirmed her belief in the presence of spirits in his photographs.⁷⁶ For a period, spirit photography became her primary concern, but after an interregnum she returned to drawing. Alongside her “sacred work”, she accepted commissions for spiritual monograms, which became an important if still comparatively modest source of income. Houghton continued in her last years with her mediumistic activities and died in 1884. Her name was remembered for a while within British spiritualism, but both she and her artistic works were eventually largely forgotten. A group of her drawings were shipped some time after her death to Australia, but there is no clear evidence as to when or why. They came into the possession of the Victorian Spiritualists’ Union, in Melbourne, one of the first spiritualist organisations in the world, which has preserved them to this day. This collection of 35 drawings is the largest that has survived. A smaller group of seven drawings, bound into an album, is cared for by the College of Psychic Studies in London. A single drawing is part of the ABCD collection, a private ‘art brut’ collection based in Paris, and three further works are in private hands. This is all that is known of Houghton’s artistic work, although further drawings may yet come to light. It is to be hoped that the present exhibition will bring fresh attention to Houghton’s work and will contribute to a better assessment of its exceptional qualities.



7. Georgiana Houghton
No title, c. 1872
Watercolour and gouache on paper
laid on board, 326 x 237 mm
ABCD collection, Paris

NOTES

- 1 To give just one example, she is not mentioned at all in the classic study of British spiritualism: Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850–1914*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- 2 Georgiana Houghton, *Evenings at Home in Spiritual Séance, Welded Together by a Species of Autobiography*, 2nd series, London, E.W. Allen, 1882, p. 76.
- 3 Sara Williams, 'Introduction', in Georgiana Houghton, *Evenings at Home in Spiritual Séance*, Brighton, Victorian Secrets, 2013, p. 5.
- 4 Georgiana Houghton, *Evenings at Home in Spiritual Séance, Prefaced and Welded Together by a Species of Autobiography*, 1st series, London, Trübner & Co, 1881, p. v.
- 5 Houghton, *Evenings at Home*, 1st series, p. 14.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 7 There is now an enormous body of scholarly literature on spiritualism, which has grown particularly in the last ten years. A brief but excellent introduction, with suggestions for further reading, is John Patrick Deveney, 'Spiritualism', in Wouter J. Hanegraaff et al. (eds.), *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2005, vol. 2, pp. 1074–82. Also very useful for an introduction to the subject is Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn (eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult*, Farnham and Burlington, Ashgate, 2012.
- 8 Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp. 67, 151.
- 9 Drawings produced by medium artists in the context of nineteenth-century spiritualism are often imprecisely referred to as 'automatic' in secondary literature. However, as Rachel Oberter conveniently notes, 'automatic drawing' was not a term used by Houghton. In fact, most medium artists in the 1850s and 1860s referred to this practice as 'spirit drawing'. According to Oberter, the first instance of the term 'automatic drawing' was in an essay written in 1875 by Anna Mary Howitt, but published only after her death in 1889. The term was later popularised by psychical researchers such as F.W.H. Myers and then became part of the vocabulary of Surrealism ('Spiritualism and the Visual Imagination in Victorian Britain', PhD dissertation, Yale University, 2007, pp. 13–16).
- 10 Houghton, *Evenings at Home*, 1st series, p. 151. On Mrs Guppy see also Molly Whittington-

- Egan, *Mrs Guppy Takes a Flight: A Scandal of Victorian Spiritualism*, Castle Douglas, Neil Wilson Publishing, 2015.
- 11 Houghton, *Evenings at Home*, 2nd series, pp. 97–101. Houghton knew her as Agnes Nichol, before she married Mr Guppy in 1867.
- 12 Spear projected a number of machines allegedly under the direct guidance of the spirits of famous scientists, such as Benjamin Franklin. These included a machine for perpetual motion and an improved version of the recently invented sewing machine. None of these machines was ever commercially successful. See John Benedict Buescher, *The Remarkable Life of John Murray Spear. Agitator for the Spirit Land*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 2006. For Spear's relationship with Georgiana, see pp. 255ff. Interestingly enough, Spear's sewing machine project has been used as a subject for a video work by Danish contemporary artist Joachim Koester (b. 1962), 'Of Spirits and Empty Spaces' (2012).
- 13 London Dialectical Society, *Report on Spiritualism of the Committee of the London Dialectical Society*, London, Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer. Houghton's testimony is at pp. 153–57. The report included interviews with and testimonies from practically every prominent person in the British spiritualist movement at the time. Famous persons who were also known to have an interest in spiritualism without necessarily adhering to it, such as Edward Bulwer Lytton, were also asked to give their opinion on the matter.
- 14 Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 67.
- 15 As *The Year-Book of Spiritualism for 1871* recorded: "Among investigators we may number divines, logicians, and teachers in our schools of learning; physicians and lawyers; men of note in the art, sciences and literature; statesmen": cited in Oppenheim, *The Other World*, p. 29. See *ibid.* for the rumours about Queen Victoria.
- 16 For more on this see Owen, *The Darkened Room*.
- 17 Lynda Nead, *The Haunted Gallery: Painting, Photography, Film c.1900*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2007, p. 82.
- 18 Sir William Crookes (1832–1919), respected chemist and physicist, had been inspired by Faraday's proposal of a "fourth state of matter" (see Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, date?, p. 224) and investigated the paranormal from a scientific perspective.
- 19 Alfred Russel Wallace was, as Janet Oppenheim

- notes, "archetypal of a man who managed to reconcile the Darwinian view of nature, the inexorable workings of evolution, with a belief in the efficacy of spirit agents at large" (Oppenheim, *The Other World*, p. 296).
- 20 Richard J. Noakes, 'Telegraphy is an occult art: Cromwell Fleetwood Varley and the diffusion of electricity to the other world', *British Journal for the History of Science*, 1999, vol. 32, pp. 421–59. Cromwell Varley's cousin John Varley (1850–1933) was the grandson of John Varley (1778–1842), painter and astrologer who collaborated with William Blake on their 'visionary heads', which could be called the first automatic drawings. John Varley Jr was one of three artists who drew the illustrations for Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater's *Thought-forms* published in 1905.
- 21 The Spiritualist, writer and friend of Houghton's William Howitt in a letter to D.D. Home (29th April 1876) complains about *The Times*, who "are always writing against spiritualism": Archives of The Society of Psychical Research, Cambridge University, DD Home material SPR.MS28/358.
- 22 *The British Medical Journal*, vol. 2, no. 550 (15th July 1871), pp. 71–72.
- 23 The 'neurotic temperament' of women was a phrase often used by doctors, and many in the medical profession regarded the work of these women as a sign of their mania, hysteria or mental instability. In his pamphlet *Spiritualistic Madness* (1877), L. Forbes Winslow stated that spiritualism was "the curse of our age" and was the main cause of madness in England, particularly among "weak-minded women" and among those "of that desponding and melancholic type known as 'religious insanity', so prevalent in the present century". For more on this see Owen, *The Darkened Room*, pp. 149–56.
- 24 Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 151. See also Houghton, *Evenings at Home*, 1st series, p. 24.
- 25 See J.B. Bullen, 'Raising the Dead: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Willowwood" Sonnets'.
- 26 Cited in Mark Cole, 'A Haunting Portrait by William Holman Hunt', *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art*, vol. 77, no. 10, p. 361. Hunt had become interested in spiritualism after his wife Fanny Waugh died in childbirth in 1866, only one year after they had been married.
- 27 Houghton, *Evenings at Home*, 1st series, pp. 167–68. In his séance diary W.R. Rossetti also noted how the pictures of a crane, an angel and a griffin had been produced "by the spirits".
- 28 Mortimer Menpes, *Whistler as I Knew Him*,

- London, Adam & Charles Black, 1904, p. 64.
- 29 Tim Hilton, *John Ruskin: The Later Years*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002, pp. 349–50.
- 30 Cited in Van Akin Burd (ed.), *Christmas Story: John Ruskin Venetian Letters of 1876–1877*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 1991, p. 68.
- 31 Cited in Andrew Wilton and Robert Upstone (eds.), *The Age of Rossetti, Burne-Jones & Watts: Symbolism in Britain 1860–1910*, exh. cat., London, Tate Gallery Publications, 1997, pp. 154–57.
- 32 Elizabeth R. and Joseph Pennell, *Life of James McNeill Whistler*, London, William Heinemann, 1920, p. 74.
- 33 The most complete study of British spirit artists in the Victorian period is the unpublished doctoral thesis by Rachel Oberter we have already referred to (note 9).
- 34 On A.M. Howitt and her artistic work, see Alexandra Wettlaufer, 'The Politics and Poetics of Sisterhood. Anna Mary Howitt's "The Sisters in Art"', *Victorian Review*, vol. 36, no. 1 (Spring 2010), pp. 129–46; and Rachel Oberter, "'The Sublimation of Matter into Spirit': Anna Mary Howitt's Automatic Drawings", in Kontou and Willburn (eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion*, pp. 333–58.
- 35 Oberter, "'The Sublimation of Matter into Spirit'", p. 348.
- 36 Cited in Wettlaufer, 'The Politics and Poetics of Sisterhood', p. 143.
- 37 Cited in John Hanners, 'A Tale of Two Artists: Anna Mary Howitt's Portrait of John Banvard', *Minnesota History Magazine*, vol. 50, no. 5, 1987, p. 204.
- 38 Camilla Crosland, *Light in the Valley*, London, G. Routledge and Co., [1857].
- 39 William M. Wilkinson, *Spirit Drawings: A Personal Narrative*, London, Chapman and Hall, 1858.
- 40 Houghton, *Evenings at Home*, 1st series, p. 14.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 142.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 143.
- 43 These works were discovered in an album in Portobello market in the 1930s and are now in the collection of the Bethlem Museum of

- the Mind. They were originally believed to be the work of a man going through a nervous breakdown.
- 44 On Hugo's and Sardou's artworks inspired by spiritualism see *Entrée des médiums. Spiritisme et Art de Hugo à Breton*, exh. cat., Paris, Maison de Victor Hugo, 2012.
- 45 The latest date we have comes from a drawing dated 6th April 1877 (*The Monogram of Mrs. Isabel Houghton*). However, some of her other works from the same period are not dated and may have been produced later.
- 46 Georgiana Houghton, *Catalogue of the Spirit Drawings in Water Colours, Exhibited at the New British Gallery, Old Bond Street. By Miss Houghton, through Whose Mediumship They Have Been Executed*, London: W. Corby, Printer, 1871, p. 8.
- 47 *Ibid.*
- 48 *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.
- 49 *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 30–32.
- 50 *Ibid.*, pp. 21–26.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 52 Houghton's religious ideas have been discussed by Rachel Oberter, 'Esoteric Art Confronting the Public Eye: The Abstract Spirit Drawings of Georgiana Houghton', *Victorian Studies*, vol. 48, no. 2 (Winter 2006), pp. 221–32; and Maggie Atkinson, 'Healing Vibrations through Visionary Art', *Religion and the Arts*, vol. 19 (2005), pp. 339–88.
- 53 Houghton, *Evenings at Home*, 1st series, pp. v–vi.
- 54 On the influence of the Joachimite tradition in Victorian Britain, see Warwick Gould and Marjorie Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore and the Myth of the Eternal Evangel in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002.
- 55 Houghton, *Evenings at Home*, 2nd series, p. 44.
- 56 Houghton, *Catalogue*.
- 57 Houghton, *Evenings at Home*, 2nd series, p. 72.
- 58 *Ibid.*, pp. 101–02.
- 59 *Daily News*, 27th May, 1871. Popular during the Victorian era, 'Berlin wools' were colourful

- embroidery works used for house decoration, for instance on furniture or sofas.
- 60 *Pall Mall Gazette*, 30th May 1871.
- 61 *The Examiner*, 27th May, 1871.
- 62 *Ibid.*
- 63 Houghton, *Evenings at Home*, 2nd series, p. 91.
- 64 *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- 65 Cited in *ibid.*, p. 77.
- 66 *Ibid.*, pp. 77–78.
- 67 *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- 68 Cited *ibid.*, p. 82.
- 69 *Ibid.* Emphasis in the original.
- 70 *Ibid.*, pp. 91 and 96.
- 71 In 1865 the Royal Academy accepted two drawings but never showed them. In all subsequent attempts, coming after her 1871 exhibition, Houghton's works were rejected. See Houghton, *Evenings at Home*, 1st series, pp. 89–91; and Houghton, *Evenings at Home*, 2nd series, pp. 113 and 128.
- 72 Census Returns of England and Wales, 1871, class RG10, piece 14, folio 59, p. 40, GSU roll: 838752. Ten years later, for the 1881 census, she described herself as an "artist in water colors [sic] under spirit guidance".
- 73 Houghton, *Evenings at Home*, 2nd series, p. 104.
- 74 See the following essay in this catalogue for further considerations about Houghton's relationship to abstraction and a possible comparison with the Swedish painter Hilma af Klint (1862–1944).
- 75 On Hudson and Houghton, see Sarah Willburn, 'Viewing History and Fantasy through Victorian Spirit Photography', in Kontou and Willburn (eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion, Nature Exposed: Photography as Eyewitness in Victorian Science*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005, pp. 84–110.
- 76 Georgiana Houghton, *Chronicles of the Photographs of Spiritual Beings and Phenomena Invisible to the Material Eye. Interblended with Personal Narrative*, London: E.W. Allen, 1882.