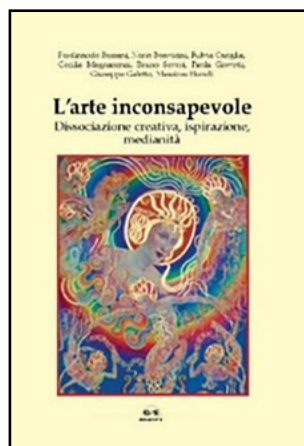


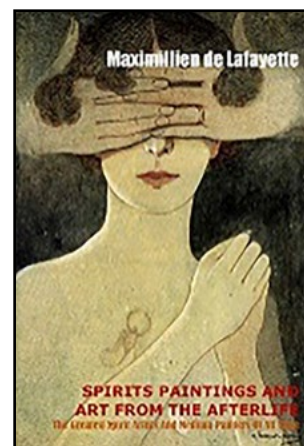
## Mediums that Paint and Draw<sup>1</sup>

Carlos S. Alvarado



Reviews of: *Spirit Paintings and Art from the Afterlife: The Greatest Spirit Artists and Medium Painters of All Time* by Maximilien de Lafayette. Times Square Press, 2015. Pp. 4259. Kindle Edition. \$9.99

*L'Arte Inconsapevole: La Dissociazione Creativa, l'Ispirazione, la Medianità: Studi sull'Arte Medianica* [Unintentional Art: Creative Dissociation, Inspiration, Mediumship: Studies of Mediumistic Art], edited by Massimo Biondi. GSE, 2018. Pp. 167. 18.00 Euros. ISBN 978-88-943176-1-9



In 1854, spiritualist and publisher S.B. Brittan presented an editorial in his New York newspaper *Spiritual Telegraph* in which he wrote:

The Spirits are doing some wonderful things in Washington, and among these a variety of drawings, ascribed to their agency, are worthy of particular attention. I have conversed with seven mediums of this description, five of whom, if I am rightly informed, had not acquired the slightest skill in the art by any previous discipline; but they are all at present employed as passive instruments in the execution of some very curious pictures which, as the Spirits distinctly affirm, are intended to represent the flowers, fruits, etc., of the higher spheres. These pictures do not, in all respects, conform to the accredited rules of art, but it must be conceded that very many of them are well drawn, while the shading is often delicate and beautiful (Brittan, 1854, p. 194).

In addition to Brittan, there were many early writings in the spiritualist literature about mediums who paint or draw, among them *Spirit-Art* (Hardinge, 1871) and *Spirit Drawings* (Wilkinson, 1864). A case achieving some prominence in England were medium's Georgiana Houghton's abstract watercolor productions, particularly when they were publicly exhibited in London in 1871 (Houghton, n.d.). There is an interesting literature of drawings and paintings produced by mediums, which is the topic of the two books reviewed here.

Some of the later literature about mediumistic painting and drawing includes overviews, such as

<sup>1</sup> Address correspondence to: [carlos@theazire.org](mailto:carlos@theazire.org)

*Pittura e Disegni Metapsichichi* (Egidi, 1954), and *Arte Medianica* (Giovetti, 1982), and studies of specific cases (e.g., Maraldi & Krippner, 2013; Osty, 1928). An early case was the Scottish medium David Duguid, who also produced direct painting and other phenomena. One occasion in 1868 he was seen to apparently enter a trance state, raise from his chair, and go to an easel to work. As stated in the article the medium worked very fast, stopping sometimes to look at his work, and sometimes changing part of it. He could also work in darkness. One time they noticed the medium, “to our astonishment, with what appeared to be a few careless daubs, inserted a pleasure boat, in which were several figures” (Anderson, 1868, p. 557).

The first book reviewed here, *Spirit Paintings and Art from the Afterlife: The Greatest Spirit Artists and Medium Painters of All Time*, with short essays and interviews with mediums, is a popular introduction to the topic. The discussion is organized in three sections covering performance styles and characteristics of the artistic productions (Part 1), contemporary artists (Part 2), and painters the author believes were clearly influenced by deceased painters (Part 3).

The author presents much information about mediumistic drawings and painting that will be useful to those interested in these phenomena. For one, de Lafayette identifies many mediums from the past (Catherine Berry, Elizabeth d’Esperance, David Duguid, Marjan Gruzewski, Hima af Klint, Augustin Lesage, John Ballou Newbrough, Heinrich Nusslein, Victorien Sardou, and Hélène Smith), as well as from more recent times (Luiz Gasparetto, Ginny Jones, Raphael Lonné, Matthew Manning, Jose Medrado, Coral Podge, Coral Ryder, Angélique van Bezouwen, Jennifer Wallens, and Alice Westernberg). Also useful is the information about the characteristics of some of these paintings, which is complemented by the high number of illustrations appearing in the book. In addition, there are occasional descriptions of the way these mediumistic artists work, such as obtaining information about their artistic piece via visual and auditory perceptions, as well as via feelings, and, occasionally, via apparent possession by a spirit.

The author identifies two types of artists. These are those who produce a work of art inspired or guided by deceased painters, and those who, guided by other spirits, specialize in portraits. Talking about the late Brazilian medium Luiz Gasparetto, de Lafayette notices that he could paint with his eyes closed, at a great speed, and that he could produce two paintings at the same time (see a video of Gasparetto’s performance here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ie4NjHYxSy0>). The medium has claimed that he was influenced by the spirits of such famous painters as Degas, Gauguin, Goya, Matisse, Renoir, Michelangelo, Rubens, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Van Gogh.

In addition, de Lafayette points out that mediumistic art was associated to other movements and topics. This included the *Art Brut* movement and paintings of the mentally ill. In fact, as the author says, these phenomena have had an impact on wider cultural spheres, among them aspects of modern art and surrealism (Dichter et al., 2007).

But regardless of all this general information the book is problematic in many ways. In addition to lacking footnotes to document many discussions or quotations presented throughout the book, the ideas presented are somewhat disorganized, with many unnecessary repetitions. Adding to this, the author does not include discussions about classic studies of the topic. For example, although the case of Hélène Smith (pseudonym of Catherine Élise Müller) is included, the discussion of Flournoy’s (1900) classic study about her fails to mention his comments about the paintings. The paintings, wrote Flournoy, were

not “executed in complete somnambulism.” He believed they could not be considered to be the product of automatic processes. “They are nothing more than simple compositions of the normal consciousness of Mlle. Smith” (Flournoy, 1900, p. 169, all quotes; see also Flournoy, 1901). Of course, this seems to presuppose that art cannot be produced mediumistically without an altered state, and that there are no degrees of automatic activity acting during apparent waking states.

Furthermore, there is no mention of important writings about H el ene Smith’s religious paintings that started after she was no longer in contact with Flournoy. I am referring to the studies of French psychological researcher Auguste Lema tre (1908) and to Swiss historian and archeologist Waldemar Deonna’s *De la Plan ete Mars en Terre Sainte* (On the Planet Mars in Holy Land, 1932). The latter is a fascinating study of the style and development of Smith’s paintings, and visions, including psychological speculations about their development. Deonna argued that the fertile imagination of the medium generated ideas to produce the paintings “by a slow mental incubation” involving “unconscious desires, childhood recollections, [and] autosuggestions” (p. 205, this, and other translations, are mine). Furthermore, the medium heard voices telling her what to paint.

Also ignored in the book is French physician and psychical researcher Eug ene Osty’s (1928) study of French painter Augustin Lesage, whose beautiful paintings included many details and geometrical forms reminiscent of ancient Assyrian, Babylonian, and Egyptian art (see <http://www.christianberst.com/en/artist/lesage.html>). Interestingly, at the time Osty’s interest in Lesage was covered by the Parisian press. The medium told a reporter that he was but an instrument to paint: “An unknown guide directs me . . . I do not know how to draw or to paint . . .” (Anonymous, 1927, p. 1).

Edited by physician and historian of Italian psychical research Massimo Biondi, the second book reviewed here is *L’Arte Inconsapevole: La Dissociazione Creativa, L’Ispirazione, La Medianit a: Studi sull’Arte Medianica* (Unintentional Art: Creative Dissociation, Inspiration, Mediumship: Studies of Mediumistic Art), the proceedings of a conference about mediumistic art held in 2017 organized by the Centro Studi Parapsicologici. This book is issue 47, 2018, of the *Quaderni di Parapsicologia*. The volume opens with an essay by physicist Ferdinando Bersani presenting an “Introduction to Mediumistic Art.” This is a good introduction to many important issues about the topic, and one that acknowledges some of the work that has been conducted on the subject, while realizing that little has been done in a systematic fashion. Bersani refers to mediumistic art, but he points out that he does not mean the action of discarnate spirits. Instead he uses “mediumistic” to indicate

a state of mind different from the ordinary one, in which skills emerge that the subject does not seem to possess in conditions of normal consciousness and that subjectively is often experienced as due to a sort of force external to consciousness, which guides the execution of the work outside or above the will, and beyond rational planning (p. 12).

Like Gruber (1980) before him, Bersani attempts to classify the different paintings and drawings he is familiar with. He proposes the following styles: figurative (or traditional); between figurative and surreal dreams; symbolic-figurative; symbolic-schematic (decorative elements in many shapes), decorative-morphogenetic (chaotic shapes); and mixed (of uncertain classification). While interesting, the types are in need of clearer description so as to be sure what is meant by some of these terms.

This discussion reminds me of previous writings on the topic. One example was Flournoy's (1911) description of the structure of the drawings of a lady who participated in a survey of mediums he conducted. He stated that the drawings had

an overabundance of ornamental motifs, sometimes drawn from geometry or architectural decoration (arabesques, triangles, hooks, circles and spirals, arches, scrolls, interlacings, etc.), sometimes recalling vegetable forms more or less stylized . . . It is rare that these bizarre sketches, sorts of reveries or disordered exercises of the pencil, present some unity of composition, or a marked symmetry . . . most of them have a fragmentary appearance (Flournoy, 1911, p. 165)

This introduction is followed by a section, edited by Bersani, in which many photographs of mediumistic paintings and drawings are presented. Starting with Lesage, the section features the productions of many others, among them Joseph Crépin, Evelyne Disseau, Gertrud Emde, Luiz Gasparetto, Giuseppe Lanzillo, Heinrich Nüsslein, Laure Pigeon, Coral Polge, Valdelice Salum, and Victorien Sardou.

Two chapters are devoted to specific artists: one on Giuseppe Lanzillo (by Nerio Bonvicini), and the above mentioned on Lesage and Gustavo Rol (by Paola Giovetti). The Lanzillo case, studied by Piero Cassoli and by other members of the Centro Studi Parapsicologici, showed changes in the type of paintings produced over time. The painter started with landscapes and later changed to portraits.

In his paper "Mediumistic Art: Between Parapsychology and Neuroscience," Giuseppe Galetta speculates on the role of mirror neurons in mediumistic art, due to a hypothesized action on creative automatism. In this view mirror neurons would be involved in the painter's imagery necessary for the production of art. The images would permit those "endowed with mirror neurons to set in motion the processes of creative automatism typical of the phenomena of mediumistic art, which could therefore be explained from a neuroscientific point of view" (p. 127).

This process, which may vary from individual to individual, could provide some people with a "hypersensibility" to environmental esthetic information from their surroundings that would allow the artist to automatically produce mental images. The sensory-obtained information, Galetta affirms, could also depend on suggestions from the environment, among them the suggestive influence of spiritualistic circles. The artists would access an "aesthetic memory" to produce their work. That is, "a repertoire of images already seen in some way and stored by the brain through the reading of books, seeing images on television or on the Internet, or visits to museums or art galleries" (p. 128). In addition to the interaction between mirror neurons and memories, the author also speculates about the involvement of the concept of creative dissociation.

Although the idea is interesting, and there is much to say, and even more to learn about, processes such as creative dissociation (Grosso, 1997), and the influence of indirect suggestions on mediumship, the speculations about mirror neurons are tentative at best, even though current research suggests some relations to non-mediumistic art production (Piechowski-Jozwiak et al., 2017). One hopes Galetta will make an effort to test the involvement of mirror neurons with mediumistic art experimentally so as to support his model empirically.

The final paper about artistic mediumship is by Massimo Biondi, entitled “Thoughts on Mediumistic Art.” He points to various commonalities in the art in question, such as “the obsessive repetition of the same distinctive trait, [and] the multiple replication of a single theme” (p. 157), as well as the difficulty of classifying the standard elements of the artistic production, and the lack of technical abilities of the painters.

Biondi sees no evidence of spiritual influence in these cases, and this includes the painters’ statements. For various reasons, he is also skeptical about psychiatric explanations. “Equally useless seems to turn to psychiatry” (p. 164), where the point of comparison is the art of the mentally ill. According to Biondi, “the close examination of biographies of mediumistic painters does not reveal - except perhaps in a couple of cases - mental disorders of marked severity, so the psychiatric relevance of the issue should be dutifully excluded” (p. 164). I do not believe that many today will agree with French writer Jules Bois, a student of the occult and psychic phenomena, when, he wrote referring to drawing mediums: “It is not the normal man who expresses himself in these drawings . . . It is the subnormal or below normal man, the abnormal one” (Bois, 1897, p. 419).

The psychopathological approach does not seem promising. However, and while agreeing with Biondi, we may still learn something useful from psychopathology in relation to mediumistic art. One possible line of approach is that we may consider that the automatism involved in pathological processes and mediumship are similar without implicating pathology. Frederic W.H. Myers speculated that supernormal and abnormal phenomena may act through the same channels. “If epilepsy, madness, &c., tend to split up our faculties in certain ways, automatism is likely to split them up in ways somewhat resembling these” (Myers, 1903, Vol. 2, p. 84). Once again, this is another interesting idea that needs empirical support, and one that should consider recent discussions of the relation between unusual experiences and psychopathology as one lacking evidence or having alternate explanations such as relations with a third unidentified variable (Cardeña, Lynn, & Krippner, 2017).

Another idea is the further exploration of similarities in the art of both mediums and the mentally ill (e.g., Gruber, 1980). Both similarities and differences could be instructive and could inspire theoretical developments dealing with the cognitive psychology behind the art of mediums and the mentally ill.

Other authors in the book address topics related to mediumistic art. These are artistic performance after near-death experiences (Fulvia Cariglia), musical mediumship (Cecilia Magnanensi), and psychedelic art (Bruno Severi). In her chapter about musical mediumship Magnanensi reminds us that artistic mediumship is not limited to painting. There are also cases of individuals with a disposition, or talent, to produce literature, music, and sculpture.

The books commented here are very different from each other. *Spirit Paintings and Art from the Afterlife* is really a popular book, and a loosely written one, while *L’Arte Inconsapevole* is clearly for higher level readers used to more systematic and scholarly discussions. The authors of the second book are also more in touch with the literature on the subject and are more concerned with scientific issues. For this reason, I consider Biondi’s to be the best recent general book on mediumistic painting and drawing available today.

But what can be said about the study of mediumistic art as a field of study? Osty (1928) con-



sidered mediumistic art as one of those topics at the boundary of psychology and psychical research. Certainly, this is an extremely underdeveloped topic that, as Cassoli (1984) has pointed out, has been mainly unexplored in the field of psychology. But the same may be said about the lack of attention to the topic by members of other disciplines interested in mediumship, such as parapsychology and anthropology. There is an urgent need for new studies, be they experiments, examinations of groups of cases, or of single cases, as seen in the study of Maraldi and Krippner (2013).

A research program on mediumistic art can focus on various issues. One is its relation to mediumship in general. How common is painting and drawing mediumship among mediums in general? Is painting and drawing related to other artistic mediumistic performances such as music and sculpture? Other questions can be related to the features of mediumistic painting and drawing. This could include the characteristics of the art (symbols, general style, topics, colors), and how inspiration is received (visions, voices, impulses), what Myers (1903) referred to as sensory and motor automatisms. In addition, this would be an opportunity to study the ill-defined concept of trance, which could involve alterations of different sorts and depths (on problems with lack of clear definitions of trance see Cardeña, 2011, pp. 4-5). Much has been said about these issues, but in an impressionistic way. Further work could analyze groups of cases so as to quantify the findings in a more precise way.

Other studies could focus on the painters, exploring psychological, social, and physiological aspects related to the medium (Maraldi & Krippner, 2013), and comparisons to non-artistic mediums, and to non-mediums. This could include investigation of developmental aspects, and about other mediumistic gifts and psychic experiences. For example, in addition to painting, the Spanish medium Josefa Tolrà was said to see auras and communicate with the dead. Furthermore, she wrote healing prescriptions, poetry, songs, and discoursed on science, and geography, topics about which she was not educated (Bonet, 2014).

Such work would allow for connections to other topics. This includes inspiration (Oleynick et al., 2014), and the cognitive aspects of the artistic experience (Wah, 2017). Studies about brain activity of mediumistic painters could be modelled after a recent study of automatic writing with Brazilian mediums (Peres et al., 2012).

Furthermore, the systematic study of artistic mediumship could be guided by specific theoretical concepts. The possibility that the paintings and drawings present examples of veridical mediumship could be considered. Inspired by claims that some mediums can draw portraits that correspond to deceased persons' photographs and the recollections of sitters, presumably without sensory information (Miller, 1943/1995), controlled experiments could be conducted. Research can also be tailored to test, and expand, the concept of creative dissociation (Grosso, 1997; Maraldi & Krippner, 2013).

Although it is easy to suggest ideas for future developments, the current lack of researchers involved in these topics will make the development of this sub-specialty of mediumship research very difficult. Nonetheless, one can always hope the future will bring more opportunities for research that can only expand our outlook of human potential.

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