

Photography: Viewing the Unseen

Reviewed by Kimberley Anne Garcia

The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult

Metropolitan Museum of Art

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It is human nature to believe, often in the unbelievable. The photography exhibit, *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art presents a wealth of information on photography's early role in the human examination of the paranormal. Evident throughout human existence is our predisposition to the allure of the unseen, a fascination and attraction for the ethereal present even today. This retrospective glimpse elicits ironic amusement from today's viewers. Certainly there is humor in the primitive cozenage of photographs like those of 'Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Fairies' but modern viewers of this dynamic exhibit are left to contemplate the possibility of our own "Cottingley fairies affair" of the present or even the future.

The Met's exhibit, running from September 27 through December 31, 2005, is a smaller version of the exhibit presented in the Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris in 2004, the first of its kind to assimilate the diverse examples of Occult photography from North American and European private and public archives. The entire French compilation of photographs and historical information is included in the Met's catalogue of the exhibit *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult*, available for sale. The Met's exhibit includes 120 of these photographs and, though it spans a time period through the 1960's, it focuses primarily on the period from the 1860s to WWII, the time of Henry Houdini, mediums, and seances, and the advent of photography as a consumer product. It was during this time, in the early years of photography, that experimentation resulted in a variety of 'tricks' to manipulate the final image. What better medium to prove the existence of ghosts but photography, a medium (unlike digital photography) that is still widely—and mistakenly—held to provide 'truthful' representations of reality?

The Perfect Medium presents both sides of the issue—skeptics in the active paranormal debate also employed photography for evidence to contradict the Spiritualist movement begun in the 1850s—while objectively refraining from commenting on the displayed photographs’ genuineness, granting viewers an unbiased, though nevertheless entertaining glimpse at the past’s and reflectively our own attraction to the allure of the preternatural.

The exhibit is divided into three sections. The first involves photographs taken of spirits, emanations supposedly not visible to the human eye, but rather captured and later revealed through the development process. While retaining its status of impartiality, the exhibit presents ‘scientific’ explanations posited by skeptics of the time. These spirit photographs were possibly either manipulated in the dark room or staged during photography, often to the same amusing results for today’s viewers as evoked by the second and closely related section of the exhibit. The second section includes photographs documenting the practices of mediums and the events of séances, capturing physical occurrences that an eyewitness would have actually seen. Such documentation was of importance to scientific studies at the time, but even now presents interesting historical and social perspective, especially on some of the risqué and peculiar manifestations of rather suspicious ‘ectoplasm.’ A more introspective source for paranormal photography can be found in the third section, displaying an increasingly modern mind-set. Appropriately entitled “fluids” many of these photos make claim to capturing the vital forces of artist through direct physical contact with the photographic plate rather than with the use of a camera. Potentially the most honest of the three, this section contends the creations are the literal manifestations of the artist’s mind, yet the preternatural possibilities of the exhibit’s photos remains an earnest attractions throughout the exhibit.

These spirit photographs were prevalent following periods of war, initially the American Civil War, then the French war of 1870, with a later revival after the First World War. Naturally, spirit photographs were first commercially sold in the United States, the first know photographer to do so, William H. Mumler. Several of his photos are on display including one of the trance-induced manifestation of a spiritual ‘double’ behind a young medium called “Master Herod.” Mumler’s own wife was a know for her medium abilities, but it was Mumler who in 1869 was accused and later acquitted of fraud in a well-publicized trial.

Also married to a medium—his second wife—Sir Arthur Conan Doyle has a interesting presence within the exhibit. Doyle asserted the authenticity of the photographs created by Elsie Wright and Frances Griffiths, who were just sixteen and ten. The children produced several photographs of fairies near their home in Cottingley, Yorkshire, two of which are on display in the exhibit. One image was brought to the attention of the author who at the time was researching fairies for a book he later published. Frances Griffiths revealed the truth after the death of Elsie Wright in 1981. She confessed the fairies in the photographs were copies of illustrations, which they propped up with hat pins. Out of deference to Doyle, the two girls never contradicted him, the controversy of the photos becoming known as the “Cottingley fairies affair.” While there is testimony that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was the victim of ‘Lock Ness Monster’ photographic deception, he proved his convictions from beyond the grave, himself a the subject of a spirit photograph also on display.

William Hope, a spirit photographer accused of fraud and defended by Doyle, produced several pictures, as early as a week after the death of Doyle, some with Doyle’s spirit and others including “psychographs” or handwritten messages. Many were taken in the presence of Doyle’s widow and son, Denis Conan Doyle, who appears with the spirit of his father in the exhibit’s photo. Doyle’s widow, believing her departed husband could communicate with the living, employed the medium Minesta (alias Grace Cooke), and just a few days after his funeral, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle manifested himself through the medium. The exhibit later explains how some psychographs were produced and used during séances, yet does not comment on the reliability of these ‘mediums’ for such communications, leaving the viewer to ponder the possibilities of motives and means, or even the possibility of guileless paranormal activity. The exhibit does, however, present the case of Édouard Buguet, a spirit photographer convicted of fraud in 1875 after admitting that he created his photographs using double exposures. Many of his Spiritualist clients refused to believe his confession, though Buguet worked for a time as a “photographer conjurer,” employing his previous charlatanic techniques purely for entertainment purposes. Entertainment becomes a prevalent element in connecting with the paranormal.

The documentation of medium activities became the subject of scientific study and consequently photographs as can be seen in the second part of the exhibit. A common phenomenon was the production of ectoplasm issuing from parts of the medium. While there is no photograph of Minesta communicating with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, there is one of the medium

Mary M. (Mary Marshall) with ectoplasm displaying Doyle's portrait. Mary M. was known for ectoplasm bearing famous personalities, while medium Eva C. was no doubt famous for bearing a bit more than just ectoplasm. There are several photographs by Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, a doctor and pioneer of psychotherapy, who studied mediumistic phenomena; one of his subjects was Eva C. Among the many photographs of Eva C., who conducted séances "à la naturel", includes one of a luminous apparition between her hands that was not mentioned in Schrenck-Notzing's account of the séance. Schrenck-Notzing noted the "absolutely unknown" quality through which a completely naked Eva C. without a concealing sleeve to hide cloth produced a photograph with a "Complete Ghost." But it's easy to wonder with a medium like Eva C. what the real attraction was.

Eugene Thiébault's photograph of Henri Robin "and a Specter" show some of the obvious commercial qualities of entertainment that Henri Robin as an illusionist could formulate in his "phantasmagorical" theater on the boulevard du Temple in Paris. With the introduction of a new flexible gelatin silver bromide emulsion in the 1880s, amateur photographers spoofed spirit photography for entertainment such as the ghost of Bernadette Soubirous progressing across the image. The final section of the exhibit returns to a more earnest examination of the 'unseen.' Without the medium of the camera, fluidic photography attempted to capture 'vital fluids' through direct contact with sensitized photographic plates. These experiments included "fluidic photographs of thought" which transmitted images from the mind to the plate through physical contact. Begun in the 1860s, but prevalent at the turn of the century with figures such as Hippolyte Baraduc and Louis Darget, these attempts continued into the twentieth century and show the progression of our cyclic attention to the paranormal.

Based originally on the 1770s notion of "universal fluid" and evolving into a truly modernist view in reflection of human's interior examinations, recording human emanations reached its height in the youngest photographs on exhibit, the work of Ted Serios in the 1960s. Jule Eisenbud, a psychiatrist examined Serios's "thoughtography" in which Serios concentrated in the attempt to replicate onto Polaroid film images hidden from him. Serios's success varied as can be seen in the photographs on display. The only explanation critics of Serios can attribute to his projections of 'thought' rely on the "gismo" Serios attached to his camera, but whether or not he used this to conceal images for projection onto film remains a mystery.

Whenever belief is threatened the necessity for it grows. In this new century as science and technology encroach further into our daily lives, humans remain seduced by the promise of glimpsing the yet-unknown. Just look at the Sci-Fi battle between science and the unknown playing out on weekly television; *CSIs* versus five new network shows all vying to be the new *X-Files*. From real-life ghost and haunting investigators, to a show actually entitled *Supernatural*, not to mention a remake of the 1970's *NightStalker*, it is clear human nature remains consistent or at least cyclic. It is no wonder then that in the mid-nineteenth century—a time preceded by tremendous technological advancements and a paradigm of scientific thought—that the Spiritualist movement began, and people demanded a view into the netherworld. But wherever there are believers, there are also skeptics. Did Sir Arthur Conan Doyle become his own proof of the supernatural after his death? Is photography a reliable witness? These are questions contingent on what we believe. The Met's exhibit is the *Perfect Medium* for such an examination.