



Georgiana Houghton: Spirit Drawings

Simon Grant, Lars Bang Larsen, Marco Pasi

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The birth of abstract art is typically associated with Kandinsky and others in the early 20th century. Houghton's work, however, predates this momentous artistic breakthrough by half a century. In this respect, she anticipates the Swedish artist Hilma af Klint (1862–1944), whose work is now appreciated for its significance in the early history of abstraction.

Houghton was a prominent figure of the early spiritualist movement in Victorian England, which played a significant role in various spheres of 19th century culture and was later championed by such influential figures as Sherlock Holmes author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Spiritualism emerged as the belief that contact with a spirit realm was possible and that such communication could bring one closer to God. Houghton, a trained artist as well as a medium, pioneered the use of drawing as a method of channeling and expressing communications with spirit entities. During the 1860s and 1870s, she produced a series of unprecedented abstract watercolors as part of her practice as a spirit medium. Houghton called these works 'spirit drawings'. Remarkably complex, layered watercolors and technically highly accomplished, their bold colors and fluid forms have a mesmerizing and deeply absorbing effect. Detailed inscriptions on the back of the works declare that her hand was guided by various spirits, including family members, several Renaissance artists, such as Titian and Correggio, and higher angelic beings. Although produced in a very different context, Houghton's abstract works have close connections to the ways in which 20th Century artists developed abstract languages of art to transcend the everyday realm of representation and consciousness.

In 1871 Houghton rented a prestigious gallery space in Bond Street and presented 55 of her spirit drawings to a perplexed London audience. The critic from The Era newspaper pronounced it to be "the most astonishing exhibition in London at the present moment." The Daily News likened the works to "tangled threads of colored wool" and concluded that "they deserve to be seen as the most extraordinary and instructive example of artistic aberration."

Georgiana Houghton: Spirit Drawings will present more than 20 of these remarkable works. Unlike anything typically associated with Victorian culture, it will be a fascinating opportunity to consider their place within the history of art; both as products of their times and as precursors of radical 20th Century art.

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