THE FRINGES OF IMMORTALITY: A GOODLY COMPANY AND ARTISTIC COLLABORATIONS IN VISIONARY ART 1880-1930

by

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Abstract

My dissertation, *The Fringes of Immortality: A Goodly Company and Artistic Collaborations in Visionary Art 1880-1930* engages with fluctuating and often intermingling concepts of spirituality that took place in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century England. My discussion examines mediumistic visual representation inspired by interest in modern Spiritualism and modern Theosophy and takes the form of two case studies that focus on the work of visionary artists, Georgiana Houghton (1814-1884) and Ethel le Rossignol (1874 – 1970) both of whom believed that they were the recipients of information disclosed by disembodied entities. My study reconstructs possible meanings embedded in mediumistic images to disrupt longstanding artistic hierarchies that label visionary art as marginal.
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I dedicate this dissertation to my beloved family: both this side and the other. I love you.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Established culture lays down such rigid conditions for appreciation and evaluation that it simply stifles invention and brands as worthless anything which lies outside its exclusive bounds.¹

There are various methods of making the immaterial and unknowable visible and from earliest prehistoric times art has served as an adjunct to the spiritual quest, codifying ancient myths and rituals in order to access the supernatural.² Many late-nineteenth-and early-twentieth-century artists demonstrated interest in alternative belief systems including modern Spiritualism and modern Theosophy at a time when Darwin’s evolutionary theory and Curie’s examination of microorganisms reinforced the power of scientific knowledge in the minds of British society. Simultaneously, the production of recognizable, overtly religious imagery was overwhelmed by technological advances and the deterioration of faith in religious doctrine. Fantastic and spiritually inspired representation uncovered a rich multi-dimensional layering of meaning that helped to develop and redefine social and cultural ideologies regarding spirituality and modernization. Fairy and spiritual subject matter was incorporated into aestheticism and thus crossed artistic and cultural boundaries and challenged conventional perceptions of

belief systems that pertained to religious conceptions of life and death. Investigation of artistic production that transformed fantastic imaginary beings and spiritual phenomenon into physical form is complex because the inherent ephemeral nature of fairy and spirit re-created through visual representations ensures a continuous flux which makes definitive attempts at categorisation of supernaturally inspired art works elusive. While such resistance to classification deflects attempts to restrict the autonomy of the artist ironically it also serves to obscure fantastic and spiritually inspired work. As a result, artists whose work could be connected with supernatural phenomena including fantasy, spirituality and the occult sciences are often denounced as frivolous and uncomplicated or suffering from personal delusion or even psychosis.

My dissertation, *The Fringes of Immortality: A Goodly Company and Artistic Collaborations in Visionary Art 1880-1930* engages with fluctuating and often intermingling concepts of spirituality, religiosity and the occult sciences that took place in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century British culture. Initially, I became interested in fantastic imagery because of the way in which nineteenth-century artists attempted to re-create imaginary entities within a natural setting. Examination of diverse representations of fantastic beings led to the discovery of pictorial depictions of the human spirit. Artists who produced images of disembodied human entities were inspired by a belief in the spiritual and the conviction that a sentient autonomous essence of the individual continued to exist after physical death. Some of these artists believed they worked in collaboration with powerful spirit guides to produce various intriguingly
multilayered pictures that embody elements of contemporary social and cultural ideology interwoven with scientific discoveries about the nature of the material world and the spiritual spheres. Fantastic and spiritually inspired pictures, produced by both male and female artists, were of interest to people of all classes. Pictures that represented notions of the supernatural were inspired, in part, by social and technological expansion as well as by scientific discoveries which contradicted long held religious doctrine that had been accepted as the truth.

Explorations of the occult sciences included fascination for magical fairies, mischievous elves and often malevolent goblins believed to occupy areas that existed in-between the material and ethereal worlds or in interstitial spaces. Concurrent with interest in depictions of fantastic creatures was a tremendous influx of curiosity about the nature of the heavenly spheres combined with efforts to initiate and sustain intercommunion between the material world and the ethereal realms. Despite popular interest in the occult sciences in England during this period, pictorial representations of spiritual spheres did not enjoy the same recognition as did depictions of fairy realms. As a result, representations of the realms of spirit are often misunderstood and, in addition, misrepresented in the twenty-first century because conceptions of ethereal worlds have been characterised as frivolous and either erroneously categorized, ridiculed or completely ignored. Despite such derision, however, spiritually inspired artistic production is marketed online and, though unacknowledged, is blatantly exploited.
Celebrated artists of the era, however, demonstrated serious interest in spiritual phenomena; the Romantics, for example, were fascinated by the occult sciences and preoccupied with the nature of the cosmic orientation of universal forces explored by poets such as William Wordsworth, John Keats, Lord Byron, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Furthermore, the Romantic reverence for Shakespeare, Medieval romance, legends and authors such as Sir Walter Scott helped to establish and then perpetuate belief in supernatural phenomena as an important aspect of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century British consciousness.

Comparatively well-known artists who produced fairy paintings including Henry Fuseli, Richard Dadd, and John Anster Fitzgerald have been disparaged because of the fantastic mysticism characteristic of many of their pictures. Consequently, these artists are often first portrayed as mentally ill or suffering from an addiction and then discussed as artists. Fuseli’s fairy painting *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (c. 1785), for example, was greatly admired for its technical proficiency and imaginative content but critics focused on Fuseli’s supposed “eccentricities” and he has since been characterised as, “shockingly mad, mad, mad, madder than ever.”

Similarly, historians and critics focus on Dadd’s “madness” rather than his academically trained skills as an artist as motivation for production of his fairy paintings. Historian Christopher Wood, for instance, writes that because “he went mad, Richard Dadd is the one fairy painter

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3 The College of Psychic Studies, for example, sold copies of Le Rossignol’s book *A Goodly Company* and continues to sell greeting cards that feature reproductions of her paintings despite their lack of knowledge of the content of her visionary images.

everyone has heard of. He was mad Dadd. He only painted about ten fairy pictures, but
two of them, painted after he went mad are undoubted masterpieces of the genre.”
Repeated allegations of insanity or drug and alcohol addiction as motivation for the
production of art informed by fantasy, spiritualism or the occult sciences serve to
undermine art produced by visionary artists. Despite consistent disparagement, however,
aspects of the ethereal in the form of fairy imagery or representations of life after death
were integrated into the fabric of art produced during the late nineteenth and early
twentieth century in Britain. Morris and Co., for example, incorporated fairy imagery
into interior decoration in the form of painted tiles, panels, and wallpaper as well as into
fashionable dress and jewellery design. Fairy and ethereal subject matter became the
focal point of paintings, illustrations and even theatrical productions. Artists associated
with the Aesthetic Movement and Art Nouveau such as Walter Crane and Glasgow artists
Margaret and Frances Macdonald, who were inspired by Continental Symbolism,
icorporated notions of the fantastic and spiritual into their artistic production. 6

My initial focus to examine fantastic imagery, however, was transformed into
an analysis of the nature of mediumistic visual representation when I discovered that by
the mid-nineteenth century fairies were conceived of as embodiments of dead family
members or as the result of individually produced thought-forms that developed into
entities that were referred to as “elementals”. My present study draws associations
between seemingly disparate ideas about how artists made visible the invisible or

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6 Ibid, p. 74.
attempted to re-embody the disembodied and also links the production of visionary representation with denunciation of religious doctrine that no longer offered solace in support of individual inquiry about the nature of life after death. My examination of mediumistic visual representation thought to have been inspired by or manifested though intercommunion with unseen entities includes a specific focus on images produced by visionary artists Georgiana Houghton (1814-1884) and Ethel le Rossignol (1874 – 1970) both of whom believed they were the recipients of information disclosed by powerful disembodied entities. I supplement my case studies by including a comparative analysis of work produced by other visionary artists including French artist Fernand Desmoulin (1858-1914) and Swedish artist Hilma af Klint (1862-1944).

Late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century artists and critics including Evelyn de Morgan, Estella Canziani, G.F. Watts, John Ruskin, Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian experimented with new knowledge gained through the examination of modern Spiritualism and modern Theosophy. British artist Estella Canziani (1887-1964), for instance, merged her belief in spiritual phenomenon with her understanding of folk and fairy lore and believed that part of the success of her fairy painting *Where the Little Things of the Woodland Live Unseen (1914)*, was the result of the picture’s spiritual content and British public demand for mystical themes. She wrote about her easy familiarity with spiritualism as well as her spontaneous experiences with extraordinary perceptions, “[s]ometimes clairaudient voices, foreknowledge, ‘sensing’ and messages have come which have been of the greatest value in difficult times of strain.” Canziani’s
acceptance of the existence of a spiritual world was an integral part of her life as it was for other artists working and living in England. “This subject,” she wrote, “was accepted as one of the many unlocked doors in the search for Truth, which needed experiment and study” and as such was considered a respectable contemporary avenue of investigation. Artists joined organizations such as The Society of Psychical Research and the Theosophical Society in an effort to expand their knowledge beyond the confines of science and the material world. Twenty-first-century attempts to compartmentalize spiritually inspired art ignore the significant impact that modern Spiritualism, modern Theosophy and the occult sciences had in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Western Europe.7

Despite relative obscurity, works produced by mediumistic artists are revolutionary templates from which lauded modernists drew inspiration for their own artistic production. Art work produced by self-proclaimed visionary artists who believed their art was channeled from the spiritual spheres has, in the twenty-first-century, been

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7 Estella Canziani, Round About Three Palace Green (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1939), pp. 41, 82-5. Frederick Myers, Edmund Gurney, and Frank Podmore’s popular book, Human Personality and Phantasms of the Living was originally published in 1886 and was well-received by some of the earliest members of the Society for Psychical Research including, Professor of Moral Philosophy at Cambridge University, Henry Sidgwick; pioneer in electromagnetism and telegraphy, Sir Oliver Lodge, Nobel laureate in physics, Lord Rayleigh, artist and critic John Ruskin, Romantic artist G.F. Watts, poet Lord Alfred Tennyson, philosopher Gilbert Murray and British Prime Minister Arthur Balfour. Canziani recollected her friend and mentor Gilbert Murray’s avid interest in psychic phenomenon and his fascination with the history of religiosity which was shared by his contemporaries. Also see, Duncan Wilson, Gilbert Murray OM 1866-1957 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 10-11, 117, 162, 274,
labeled as “fringe” “outsider” and/or evocative of “some form of insanity” rather than as an expression of the avant-garde. Conversely, artists such as Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian whose work also benefited from knowledge of the occult sciences enjoyed successful careers and are celebrated as the precursors, or more precisely the “fathers” of modern art. Recently, however, Jon Thompson, curator of the 2006 exhibition *Inner Worlds Outside*, re-inscribed visionary art as an example of outsider art which he characterised as a product of a “quintessentially modern state of consciousness that arose as part of the spirit of fin de siècle.” Thompson argues that outsider art is in fact indistinguishable from avant-garde art. In addition, he posits high modernism as born out of the “radical breaking point” or interstitial fissure created through the production of mediumistic art. 

One of the objectives of the exhibition was to “explode many of the myths surrounding outsiders and to identify the parallels between “Outsider Art and Insider Art” or art that has been accepted within the rubric of modernism and to acknowledge the

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8 Jon Thompson, “The Mad, the ‘Brut’, the ‘Primitive’ and the Modern” in *Inner Worlds Outside* (Whitechapel: London, 2006), pp. 11, 12, 59. *Inner Worlds Outside* was held at Whitechapel Gallery in London between 26 April and 2 July 2006. The work was also exhibited at Sala de Exposiciones de la Fundción “La Caixa”, Madrid, 27 January – 2 April 2006 and at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, 25 July – 15 October 2006. The title of the exhibition, *Inner Worlds Outside*, was taken from a phrase by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who championed intuition over the rational, and romanticism over classicism. Precedents for such exhibitions include Entartete Kunst (Degenerate art), an exhibition instigated by the National Socialists in Germany in 1937 that presented the work of established artists, such as Paul Klee, Oskar Kokoschka and Wassily Kandinsky alongside works by psychiatric patients drawn from Austrian art historian Hans Prinzhorn’s Collection in Heidelberg. This exhibition aimed to discredit the avant-garde by drawing attention to its similarities with the art of the ‘insane’. “Ironically – albeit for ideologically dubious reasons – this can be seen as the first example of curatorial practice associating mainstream and outsider art.” More recent examples include *Documenta 5* in Kassel in 1972; *Paris-Paris, 1937-1957* in 1980 at the Pompidou Centre in Paris; *Parallel Visions: Modern Artists and Outsider Art* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and in the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid in 1992. In various ways, these exhibitions sought to address the status of Outsider Art and its relevance to mainstream art practice.
impact of “Outsiders on some of the greatest names of twentieth-century art.”

Thompson’s assertion that “historically speaking, both ‘Insiders’ and ‘Outsiders’ are products of the condition we call ‘modernity’” provides the beginnings of the framework for my own examination of how depictions of the ethereal spheres in visual culture functioned in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century England. While the works of outsider artists may constitute what might be considered by some as an extreme response to modernity, they are nevertheless thoroughly embedded in the history of modern art and in its cultural legacy. Visionary artists, similar to artists who produced fairy paintings, are characterised as mentally unbalanced or childlike and formalist critical discourse, it seems, has conspired to deprive mainstream art of any reference to spiritual or occult content. Despite Thompson’s connection of visionary art with the avant garde, Curator, José F. Conrado de Villalonga in his introduction to the exhibition Inner Worlds Outside, reminds us that “Outsider Art includes individuals producing art from the ‘fringes of society’, who typically consist of psychiatric patients, criminal offenders, self-taught visionaries and mediums, amongst other so-called eccentric individuals.” Visionary art, produced by self-proclaimed mediumistic artists and exhibited under the rubric of outsider art then is summarily associated with insanity and criminal behavior and as a result has not been considered worthy of academic study.

9 Jon Thompson, “The Mad, the ‘Brut’”, p. 51
11 Ibid. pp. 9-13, “Outsider Art” or “Art Brut” has been categorised since the mid-twentieth century as distinct from established mainstream artists in that it comprised art products from the “fringes of society”, and artists typically included psychiatric patients, criminal offenders, self-taught visionaries and mediums. In artistic circles, artists such as Paul Klee, sought art that was supposedly spontaneous and unadulterated.
Thompson argues that work produced by historians such as Hans Prinzhorn, whose book *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* (1922) establishes powerful links between outsider art and psychiatry has served only to further the negative impact on the historical treatment and contemporary status of visionary art. Consequently, research of the subject has focused on psychoanalytical perspectives to the exclusion of other methodological approaches that offer a more comprehensive understanding of work produced by mediumistic artists. Renowned artists such as Desmoulin who believed that he worked in concert with unseen entities in the production of his pictures functioned alongside virtually unheard of artists such as visionaries like Houghton, le Rossignol, and af Klint. Houghton, for example, produced some of the first abstract works in the history of western art including *The Eye of God* (1862) and she attributed specific meaning to the particular shapes, colors and directions that she included in her visionary images. She believed that she worked in collaboration with spiritual beings and she interweaved her knowledge of botany and her familiarity with biblical text into her mediumistic images.

Curator Michel Thevoz of The Other Side Gallery in London England uses Dubuffet as a guide for his interpretation and writes that, “Art Brut”, or “Outsider Art”, consists of works produced by people who for various reasons have not been culturally indoctrinated or socially conditioned. There are all kinds of dwellers on the fringes of society. Working outside [the] fine art “system” (schools, galleries, museums and so on), these people have produced, from the depths of their own personalities and for themselves and no one else, works of outstanding originality in concept, subject and techniques. They are works, which owe nothing to tradition or fashion. The term outsider art came from the title of a book by Roger Cardinal published in 1972 that was meant as an English translation for ‘Art Brut’, other terms used in connection with outsider art are raw, brut, naive, compulsive, independent, visionary, spiritual, folk, self-taught, marginalized and finally intuitive; see, The Other Side Gallery – Contemporary Outsider Art for London. “What is Outsider Art?” [http://www.theothersideartgallery.org](http://www.theothersideartgallery.org): 1-2.

Thompson, “The Mad, the ‘Brut’” p. 54.
disrupting boundaries that excluded women’s participation in important religious activities. Houghton trusted that her abstracted and symbolically dense visionary paintings provided a conduit through which viewers might experience both physical and spiritual healing.

I discovered Le Rossignol’s mediumistic paintings while conducting research at the College of Psychic Studies library in London England. Like many artists of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century she practiced the art of automatic drawing and in her book, *A Goodly Company* (1958) she provided an in-depth discussion about her inter-communication with disembodied entities and believed that her visionary narrative was produced as a result of her communion with spirit. Le Rossignol produced her narrative as a pictorial “assurance of survival after death.”14 Her mediumistic pictures, though exhibited in the context of Spiritualism, in fact, represent teachings espoused by modern Theosophical philosophy that teaches that humanity gained spiritual enlightenment developed through repeated cycles of death and rebirth in the material planes followed by evolution through the spiritual realms. Spiritualist and Theosophist, Hilma af Klint’s abstracted paintings were exhibited for the first time outside of Sweden at the Camden Arts Centre in London England in 2006. Like Desmoulin, Houghton and Le Rossignol, af Klint believed that she worked in concert with powerful spiritual beings and she carefully transcribed her experiences as a mediumistic artist in her diaries.15 Af Klint trusted that her ability to communicate with ethereal beings inspired the production of

visionary images that were meant to educate viewers about the reality of the spiritual spheres.

Art by visionary artists is complex and deliberately challenges viewers to decode the symbolism embedded within the images. When initial attempts to uncover possible meanings inherent to the pictures are unsuccessful, however, mediumistic images are labeled as “impenetrable by others” and then erroneously marked as the product of insanity and thus at “risk of being neglected or destroyed”. “It is likely,” writes, art critic Roger Cardinal, “that a considerable amount of private writings and pictures have, in the course of time, been cast aside and lost…”16 English artist Georgiana Houghton, for example, made visionary pictures during much of her career as a practicing artist yet only a few remain, thirty-five of which are in the custody of the Victorian Spiritualists’s Union in Melbourne, Australia. Rachel Oberter writes that although Houghton’s mediumistic images,

line the wall of the meeting room, with a photograph of the text on the back hung below each watercolor…even in this most sympathetic environment, they are not necessarily interpreted as Houghton would have wished… The watercolors are appreciated as decorative objects, which fill the church-like space, and they are viewed as proof that spirits can communicate with humans. Yet even leaders of this organization admitted to me that they had not read the explanatory texts.17

My initial investigation into Le Rossignol’s visionary narrative garnered similar response from members of the College of Psychic Studies in London England. Le Rossignol’s book along with reproductions of her work in the form of greeting cards had been relegated to the cellar and although the decorative content of her pictures were admired the possible symbolic significance of Le Rossignol’s visionary images had been lost.  

Critic Sarah Kent’s 2006 review of af Klint’s visionary paintings exhibited in Britain for the first time at the Camden Arts Centre in 2006 pointed out obvious connections between af Klint’s large abstracted paintings and those produced by Kandinsky, Mondrian and Malevich whose images were also informed by their interest in modern Spiritualism and modern Theosophy. Kandinsky’s and Mondrian’s early abstract compositions recreate a visual representation of Theosophists assertions that thoughts are visible as auras in the form of emanations of coloured lights that surround the physical body. Pictures produced by these artists demonstrates their knowledge of modern Spiritualism and modern Theosophy as well their interest in the occult sciences that was also shared by Houghton and af Klint both of whom produced abstracted paintings well before their now celebrated male modernist contemporaries. In addition, both artists experimented with automatic representation more than thirty years before the

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18 After I demonstrated interest in Le Rossignol’s paintings copies of her book *A Goodly Company* and Le Rossignol greeting cards were brought out of storage.
19 Sarah Kent, “Immortal, Invisible…” *Time Out*, p. 37. Sarah Kent reviewed the exhibition of Hilma af Klint’s images held for the first time in Britain at the Camden Arts Centre in April of 2006.
Surrealists were lauded for their adaptation of the techniques of automatic writing and painting, and yet Houghton’s and af Klint’s art work remains obscure. Le Rossignol’s abstracted visionary narrative that represents Theosophical ideology about the evolution of the soul through the spiritual spheres is revolutionary yet while myriad literature focused on the work of Kandinsky and Mondrian ensures familiarity with their pictures, scholarly writing about Houghton’s, af Klint’s and Le Rossignol’s abstracted visionary paintings is negligible.21

Feminist art historians including Linda Nochlin, Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker write about the many obstacles endured by women artists whose work had been summarily dismissed and ultimately, up until recently, erased from the history of art.22 In light of this research, Houghton’s, Le Rossignol’s and af Klint’s status as a women artists who practiced in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century explains, in part at least, their relative obscurity. Even so, while the work of many women artists of that era has since been recovered mediumistic images produced by women visionary artists remain

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21 Hilma af Klint: The Greatness of Things, ex. catalogue (The Douglas Hyde Gallery, Trinity College, Dublin, 2005). Only 600 copies of the catalogue were published. An inability to access primary notes written by af Klint in her native language precludes me from including her as a case study in this dissertation but the information gleaned from the 2006 exhibition and the accompanying catalogue offer an a context within which to better understand the work of the visionary artists that will be discussed at length in the remainder of this study.

unknown even today. While af Klint was reticent about exhibiting her visionary paintings she did not hide her aptitude for inter-communication with the spiritual spheres. Houghton and Le Rossignol were open about their belief. They insisted they collaborated with unseen entities in the production of their paintings and they did not attempt to justify their mediumistic abilities under the secure rubric of scientific investigation. Their open admission of the belief that they worked in collaboration with unseen entities further upset possible inclusion in written accounts of the history of art.

Admission of interpersonal communication with spiritual entities combined with their status as nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century women artists precluded commemoration of their

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23 Press release, *Hilma af Klint: Geometry and Spirituality: Godly Instructions in Geometric form*, Bildmuseet UMEA University (June 2004). Visionary artist Hilma af Klint’s paintings that focused on her use of large bold forms and strong, saturated colors painted directly onto raw canvas that highlighted her ambition “to define the existence that is not visible” were exhibited for the first time in the United States in Los Angeles County Museum of Art’s 1986 exhibition *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*. The 1989 exhibition *Secret Pictures by Hilma af Klint*, held at the P.S. 1 Museum in Long Island City, Queens presented her work as that of a virtually unknown Swedish portrait and landscape painter. The first large one woman exhibition was held in Sweden in 1989 at Moderna Museet in Stockholm. In 1998, Södertälje Konsthall had a large exhibition that focused on af Klint’s anthroposophical period and her Paintings of the Temple Series were shown at the Liljevalchs Konsthall in 1999. Today the collection is owned by the Hilma af Klint Foundation.

24 Often contemporary reviews of Af Klint’s work are dismissive and even disparaging. Roberta Smith, for example, wrote that although af Klint’s achievements “may never be anything more than a footnote to 20th-century art history” an in-depth study of her innovative abstracted paintings would offer “a long and fascinating one that touches on many other artists’ activities.” Smith’s own assessment, however, reveals her ignorance of the content and therefore significance of af Klint’s abstracted paintings. While Smith, for example, appears to applaud af Klint and her focus on spirituality she simultaneously ascribes af Klint’s “lapses in abstract purity and taste” to her affinity with spiritualism. Rather than discuss af Klint’s art production for its own merit Smith offers a systematic comparison of af Klint’s ‘most strange” paintings with those produced by the so-called fathers of modernity including Edvard Munch and Kenneth Noland. Smith’s concluding assessment of af Klint’s spirit paintings is a disparaging but typical response to work that has been produced by women and particularly by women who were inspired by their connection to modern spiritualism. She wrote, “In a sense these works could have been painted yesterday and this is both their strength and their weakness: Startlingly fresh, they are also eternally innocent, they seem almost to exist beyond time but they also lack the specific wisdom that only time endows.” In, Roberta Smith. “Review/Art; Hilma af Klint, Explorer In Realm of the Abstract, *New York Times*, (3 February, 1989): p. 26/C.
visionary representations. Houghton integrated her artistic and mediumistic abilities to produce visionary images that facilitated a meditative response in viewers. af Klint and Le Rossignol explored various facets of modern Spiritualism and absorbed radical theories about spiritual evolution promoted by innovative Theosophists Helena P. Blavastky (1831-1891), Annie Besant (1847-1933) and Charles Leadbeater (1854-1934) and transformed and then expanded on those ideas in their visionary paintings. These artists extended their interest in the investigation of the esoteric sciences and honed their clairvoyant abilities so they believed that they communicated with unseen entities and transcended the limits of physical reality.

My examination of the visionary images produced by Houghton and Le Rossignol are informed by the writings of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Spiritualists and Theosophists such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930), Blavatsky, Besant and Leadbeater to facilitate a more inclusive understanding of the some of the social conditions under which spiritually-inspired visual culture flourished in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century England. My work reconstructs possible meanings embedded in visionary images and encompasses the social and cultural significance of the mediumistic pictures in relation to other artistic production of the same period. By integrating my analysis of visionary images produced by self-proclaimed mediumistic artists within the social, cultural and historical framework of England I hope to disrupt

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longstanding artistic hierarchies that label visionary art as marginal and in so doing contribute to a more inclusive understanding of the production of mediumistic imagery.

**Literature Search**

Renewed interest in modern spiritualism and theosophy in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-centuries in Britain encouraged debate and elicited controversial perspectives that were published in the burgeoning spiritualist and theosophical periodicals of the era some of which are still in print today. The spiritualist movement generated a proliferation of written material that provide ample social and political framework for this examination but despite such rich documentation varied, often contrasting perspectives require an equally flexible inquiry rather than a more rigid empirical one. Books including Maurice Tuchman’s *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1885* (1986), Wassily Kandinsky’s *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912), and André Breton’s *The Magnetic Fields* (1920) offer analyses that tends to obscure visionary paintings and drawings under the rubric of a modernist discourse. One of my objectives in this thesis, however, is to explore how visionary images functioned in the spiritual experience of a community which believed that they were the recipients of messages embodied in paintings and drawings produced under the inspiration of the spirits. In order to gain an appreciation of the intellectual and emotional climate during which mediumistic drawings and paintings flourished I began my inquiry with an in-depth evaluation of primary materials on which to base my interpretation of the visionary images produced by Georgiana Houghton in the mid-nineteenth-century and Ethel Le
Rossignol in the early-twentieth-century. Consequently, I spent many hours in the reading rooms at the British Library and the British Library Colindale, Harry Price Library, the College of Psychic Studies and the Society for Psychical Research pouring over hundreds of articles that chronicled personal experiences and that argued about the social and political consequences of intercommunication between the material world and the spiritual spheres. Some commentaries represent the perspectives of middle and upper class people while others offered analyses of the results of contemporary psychic research in relation to innovative discoveries made by scientists.

Since my initial study was focused on an examination of the relationships between fantastically inspired aesthetic visual culture and social, political and artistic transformations experienced in England my second chapter offers a contextual framework from which to understand how the waning fascination with the figure of the fairy was replaced by investigations conducted by Spiritualists and Theosophists alike of the existence of the spiritual spheres and subsequent evolution of life after physical death. My primary sources about the conflation of “nature spirits” with disembodied family members was augmented by Carole G. Silver’s *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness*, (1999) in which she offers a comprehensive examination of the possible origins of fairy and fairy lore and focuses on the ways in which fairy representations interconnected in nineteenth-century British culture. She draws on scientific and occult writings and also offers insightful examinations of fairy paintings produced from the mid-nineteenth-century. Nicola Bown in *Fairies in Nineteenth-
Century Art and Literature (2001) discusses the ways in which fairy representations in paintings were utilized as vehicles of consolation to an often disillusioned English public and offers an innovative social and cultural perspective. The Victorian Supernatural (2004) edited by Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett and Pamela Thurschwell, an interdisciplinary study that explores nineteenth-century fascination with ghosts, fairies, and occultism, expands on debates about relationships between high and popular nineteenth-century culture and contemporary notions of the supernatural. This book provided the tools for my transition from examination of fairy representation to an analysis of visionary art.

Janet Oppenheim’s comprehensive study The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914 (1985) provides an extensive examination of the social and political context which fostered public fascination with spiritualism and psychical research in Britain and her chapter “Theosophy and the Occult” is particularly informative providing important insight about the fluctuating relationship between Spiritualists and Theosophists at the turn of the century in England. Alex Owen argues in The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern (2004) that interest in occultism in Britain before the onset of WWI was an intellectual exercise which expanded on notions of rationality and human consciousness as opposed to an indulgence in frivolity. Her observations helped to support my discussion about the importance of visionary art within the context of art historical research. Her examination of the establishment and politics of the Theosophical Society was particularly helpful for
my analysis of the framework within which Le Rossignol produced her mediumistic paintings. Owen’s earlier work, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (1989), is equally comprehensive and her investigation of how roles of women in their capacity as spiritualist mediums disrupted conventional class and gender relations in nineteenth-century British society informed my own study. I, however, argue for a much more autonomous collaborative interaction between drawing and painting mediums and their spiritual guides. Finally, Joy Dixon’s *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (2001) was particularly valuable for my examination of the relationship between modern theosophical philosophy and the feminist movement in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century England.

My second chapter closes with a quote published in the *An Illustrated Spiritual Periodical* that encouraged emerging public fascination with automatic writing and drawing and focused attention on the production of mediumistic art production. Newspaper articles that drew links between spiritualism and art production fostered discussion about the complexities inherent in attempts to reproduce the ephemeral in visual terms. My third chapter expands on the ways in which artists traversed the boundaries between the material and the spiritual to produce paintings informed by their knowledge of alternative esoteric philosophies and this chapter also includes discussion of examples of visionary art produced between the mid-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-centuries. The paucity of scholarly literature that offers insightful examination of visionary imagery cultivated a reliance on primary sources but my research was
supplemented by several important secondary sources which included Maurice Tuchman’s catalogue for his exhibition *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1885* (1986). Although the catalogue privileged abstracted art produced by male modernists Tuchman’s chapter “Hidden meanings in abstract art” included an informative discussion about how artists were informed by their interest in mysticism and occultism. Especially useful for my study was Åke Fant’s chapter “The Case of the Artist Hilma af Klint”. Roger Cardinal’s exhibition catalogue *Inner Worlds Outside* (2006) was valuable for my preliminary examination of visionary art because the exhibition drew parallels between Outsider Art, which includes visionary art, and avant-garde art and also offers clarification of the way in which renowned artists of the twentieth-century were informed by art produced by largely unknown nineteenth-century artists. Several recent examinations of the impact of the spiritual realms and both art and literature served to corroborate my own research. Charles Colbert, for example, in his article “Harriet Hosmer and Spiritualism” (1996) offers an interesting examination of sculptor Harriet Hosmer’s (1830-1908) work, arguing that assessments of her art are superficial and often erroneous because modernist writers disregard her strong connection with spiritualist ideology. Similarly, Judy Oberhausen in her recently published article, “Sisters in spirit: Alice Kilping Fleming, Evelyn Pickering de Morgan and 19th-century spiritualism” (2009), offers an innovative examination of the relationship between poet Alice Kipling Fleming (1868-1948) and Evelyn Pickering De Morgan (1855-1919) both of whom shared an interest in spiritualism and in particular automatic writing. Oberhausen
discusses how spiritualism affected the lives of both women and how their beliefs are reflected in both De Morgan's painting *The Valley of Shadows* (1899) and in the verses that Fleming wrote for the painting. Other contemporary examinations of the impact of spiritualism have been published by literary historians. Jennifer Bann, for instance, in her “Ghostly Hands and Ghostly Agency: The Changing Figure of the Nineteenth-Century Specter” (2009) investigates the connection between the spiritualist movement and the literary ghost story while Leigh Wilson in her article “Dead Letters: Gender, Literary History and the Cross-correspondences”(2007) examines an important series of automatic messages received by the Society of Psychical Research between 1901 and 1930 and considers various early twentieth-century theories of language that privileges interpretation over the automatic writing as evidence of intercommunication between the material and the spiritual. Finally, Sally Promey’s book *Spiritual Spectacles: Vision and Image in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Shakerism* (1993) provides a well-documented interdisciplinary study in her examination of “gift drawings” believed to be the result of messages from the spirit world and produced by Shakers in the mid-nineteenth-century America.

Material gained through perusal of spiritualist and theosophical periodicals provide the structure from which to appreciate some of the central concerns of spiritualism and theosophy and was critical to my interpretation of the content and symbolic significance embedded in Houghton and Le Rossignol’s visionary paintings. My examination of Georgiana Houghton’s mediumistic pictures was anticipated by
Rachel Oberter’s *Spiritualism and the Visual Imagination in Victorian Britain* (2007) in which she provides an extensive evaluation of intersections between spiritualism and visual art in late-nineteenth-century London. Oberter’s study focuses on visionary art produced by Anna Mary Howitt-Watts and Georgiana Houghton and argues that their highly mediated works were the result of a complex process of revision, translation and exegesis. My examination of Le Rossignol’s visionary narrative was supplemented by her book *A Goodly Company* (1958) in which she provided extensive but complicated text meant to clarify the symbolic meaning of her visionary images. My reading of her writings was further informed by her private automatic writings and also by Annie Besant’s theosophical treatise *Esoteric Christianity* (1905) in which she wrote about theosophical conceptions of Christianity. My examination of the possible symbolic significance of Le Rossignol’s visionary paintings within the context of theosophical philosophy also benefited from Besant’s and Leadbeater’s books *Thought-Forms* (1901) and *Occult Chemistry: A Series of Clairvoyant Observations on the Chemical Elements* (1908) in which they offer a variety of examples of visual manifestations of the ethereal spheres in the form of colors and shapes.
CHAPTER 2

‘Twaddle”? Spiritualism, Theosophy and the Fairy in Late-Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth-Century Britain

Laws, belonging to an unknown science, are as certain as any which regulate phenomena upon the physical plane of life, and are nearly as easily learned, Such knowledge would not make Spiritualists less spiritual, but far more so; nor could it destroy Spiritualism by transforming it into something else. On the contrary, the science still unknown, is the only true foundation for that we term Spiritualism…26

In mid-nineteenth-century Britain, scientific explanations varied and discoveries such as Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution in 1859 and Louis Pasteur’s detection of the microorganism in 1862 were amalgamated with explorations of ethereal spaces, instigating new conceptions of the origins of humanity as well as theoretical hypotheses about the future.27 By the late-nineteenth-century activities such as table-rapping and tilting séances, in which mediums demonstrated telepathic abilities, and scientific research meant to illustrate the existence of the spiritual spheres were common.28 Psychical researchers including Arthur Conan Doyle focused more closely on systematic investigation hoping to reconcile paranormal experience with scientific discovery.

Advances in science and technology encouraged ever more sophisticated exploration of supernatural phenomenon and analyses of narratives about experiences with ethereal messengers, professed psychic abilities, dreams and concepts of reincarnation were conducted. The possibility that humans have the potential to exist on a continual basis in a multi-dimensional, multi-temporal universe was discussed and debated throughout the nineteenth- and early-twentieth century.

Publishers of Light magazine acknowledged the confusion of interest in all things spiritual and noted that ‘this Spiritualism’ was having an extraordinary impact on “so many…departments of life” including religion, social roles and scientific research and, as such, “the task of keeping its issues clear is one that calls for constant labour and vigilance.”29 Fascination with the occult sciences, wrote the anonymous author, needed to be tempered by an adherence to logical thought and rigorous, meticulous, and most importantly, scientifically based observation of the facts. Having clarified an insistence on scientific evidence the author simultaneously cautioned against arbitrary dismissal of the tenets of Spiritualism and quoted from a letter in which the writer admitted complete ignorance of Spiritualist philosophical perspectives while simultaneously summarily rejecting it. “I do not wish to enter into discussions on the subject of Spiritualism. I know little of it, nor do I want to know. But I do want to remark that every time a late denizen of earth ‘communicates’ with his erstwhile acquaintances here, it is the same ‘twaddle,

29 Twaddle,’ Its Meaning and Purpose,” Light XXXVII:1651 (August 1912), p. 414
twaddle.’ The response reflects the ongoing conflict between those who believed in the existence of the continuation of life in the ethereal spheres and those who did not.

We admire the candour with which our correspondent...admits her ignorance of the subject concerning which she delivers her opinion. We wish her example were more widely followed. As to the question of ‘twaddle, twaddle,’ we have as little tolerance for it as anybody, especially as in our time we have to wade wearily through many reams of it....Again there are so many different points of view as to precisely what constitutes twaddle.\(^{30}\)

Although Victorians poked fun at their own fascination with questions about the existence of life after death many believed that communication between the material and ethereal worlds was possible. Absorption with the investigation of paranormal occurrences was closely associated with an emerging enthusiasm for fairy and folk-lore and researchers and spiritual practitioners connected such disturbances to the elfin and fairy species.\(^{31}\) Mid-nineteenth-century Spiritualists and those interested in conducting research into claims made by Spiritualists included the belief that fairies, sometimes referred to as “elementals” or “nature Spirits”, were closely connected with, or even personified, the deceased. As early as 1864, for example, an article appeared in the newly published *Spiritual Times and Weekly News* that connected Shakespeare’s plays

\(^{30}\) “Twaddle,” p. 414.

featuring fantastic creatures, which included fairies, with disembodied entities that figured prominently in Spiritualist belief systems.

Macbeth, Hamlet and the Tempest...are introduced with singular felicity all spiritual impressions of their author. In Macbeth we have ...(the) soldier-king who ...behold(s) the spirit-apparition of his victim...The good and the evil aspects of Spiritualism are again fully depicted in the philosophical play of Hamlet...by the introduction of the spirit-apparition of his father and the address put into the mouth of the prince shows a mind intimately acquainted with the laws of spiritual phenomena...Here are the good and evil spirited agencies fully recognised as similar demonstrations would be at a séance in the presence of Mr. Home or any other medium in possession of the required influence...all variety of phases are manifest throughout all the interesting scenes of spirit life brought before us from the evil sprite who appears to delight in tormenting suffering mortals to the delicate aerial whose mission it is to guide charm and serve the behests of the grand-master of spirit phenomena...32

Information about fairies proliferated throughout Britain in the form of art objects, theatrical productions and also in written material such as stories and poetry. Many of these references to fantasy and fairy land operated as vehicles with which to disseminate highly developed ideologies of preternatural phenomenon. Spiritualist Magazine, for instance, contains several accounts that focus on connections between interest in fairy lore and newly developing ideas about life after physical death. In this particular example published in 1875, the writer described Shakespeare’s writing as:

a revelation of fairy life, in which the chief characters bear the traditional names of Oberon, Titania, Puck, and others,

but are represented as a superior order of beings, living in a sphere near to our earth, to which they migrated from some other planet or asteroid…At the fairy festivals there is much discourse about man’s power of communication with spirits over the animal and vegetable world.33

In the early-twentieth-century British people attended plays such as Maurice Maeterlinck’s *The Blue Bird* (1908) which tells the story of two children who befriend a fairy and are sent to search the world for the blue bird of happiness during which they meet the soul of their unborn brother.34 Later, Goldwyn Pictures produced their film *Earthbound* (1920) advertised as a “film play of life after death.” The story told of a man who had become bound to the earth “not only by his desires, but by the things he had left wrong.” Once the spirit had righted perceived wrongs he was free to “take a step onward towards the greater and better life that awaits him…to go towards the Light.” *Earthbound* was a successful production and well attended by both Spiritualists including Clementine Churchill (nee Hozier) and Theosophists such as Stanley De Brath.35

Families and friends participated in table turning parties and sought out the guidance of mediums who warned of the perils of interference with often malicious beings that came in the guise of the so-called harmless fairy. One enthusiast wrote about the confusion that surrounded efforts to make contact with other worldly entities.

I think there is too much time and space used in emphasising the dangers attending converts to Spiritualism…the first being: “Elementals, or Nature Spirits.” We are told by one to consider and gain more

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knowledge about them; we are warned by another against their malignity and cunning; we are informed by a third that we probably owe to them the most beautiful and convincing phenomenon Spiritualists can witness—materialisation; till those who are on the verge of earnest investigation must run off in a state of bewilderment and fright—thankful to escape from the horrors depicted by certain morbidly inclined minds…I no more doubt the existence of such creatures as “elementals” than that of mites in cheese, but I do doubt the advisability of searching for and bringing out intellect to bear upon them, which, I should imagine, would be just the way to attract and entangle ourselves with them. Now, I have the pleasure of knowing many Spiritualists, some of twelve and twenty years’ standing, and either mediums or sitters in circles, but none of them seem to know much about “elementals.”

Fairies were identified with many entities of the supernatural world and were known by a variety of names and descriptions. They were, for instance, understood as beautiful or as hideous; some resembled humans while others had wings and carried

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36 Marie Gifford, “Elementals, or Nature Spirits,” Light VIII: 366 (January 1888), p. 11. Janet Oppenheim, in her The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914 (1985) offers a thorough account of the activities of “psychical researchers” that were members of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) founded in London in 1882. Oppenheim distinguished between “spiritualist” and “psychical researcher” in her examination writing that the terms “designate distinct approaches to psychic phenomena. The Spiritualist...were likely to attend séances in an accepting frame of mind. Believing, as they firmly did, in human survival after death and in the possible activity of disembodied human spirits, they did not hesitate to assert the reality of communication with the dead and to accept as genuine most of the phenomenon that they witnessed...Psychical researchers...trod with greater circumspection and even...skepticism.” See Oppenheim, pp. 1-4. I do not draw such a clear cut separation between spiritualists and psychical researchers. Psychical researchers used modern scientific methods in order to test the validity of claims of supernatural phenomenon but some, such as founder of the SPR chemist William Crookes and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle self-identified as spiritualists. Also, many spiritualists were cautious about what they learned in their experiments and did not necessarily accept claims of communication at face value.

magic wands or pipes. Inhabitants of the elfin world were most often invisible according to folklorists and although they could be seen by clairvoyants they also had the ability to make themselves visible to ordinary humans. Some were ambivalent or benevolent while others were viciously malevolent. The origins of fairies were studied and some theories included the idea that fairies were the result of thought-forms; that they embodied the souls of the dead or that they were entities caught between heaven and earth. Other researchers and scholars believed that fairies acted as guardians of the dead and custodians of the natural world. Fairies were also considered to be fallen angels that had been cast out of heaven with Lucifer and condemned by God to remain in the elements of earth.

Members of The Society for Psychical Research took investigation of supernatural phenomena seriously and connected inexplicable occurrences with both fairy and spiritual activity. Renowned Spiritualists such as social and political historian Lord Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803-1873) speculated, for instance, that it could well be the fairies, rather than the souls of family members or friends who had passed over, that caused the disturbing raps and knocks frequently experienced at spiritual gatherings.

As late as 1913 anthropologist Dr. Evans Wentz (1878-1965) who had secured a science degree at prestigious Oxford University for a thesis proving that fairies actually existed, submitted an article to *The Daily News and Leader* entitled “The Fairy-Faith”. He wrote

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about his experiences with the fairies and his ideas are worth quoting because they
demonstrate the propensity for scholars to conflate investigations of the existence of life
after physical death with belief in the existence of fairies which were theorised as a
different species; humanity’s anthropological ancestors; or re-embodiments of dead
family members or friends.

I am obliged to admit that when in those places I have felt
invisible presences all round me…(others) have had the
same mysterious feeling in the same places, and a few, who
are gifted with seership, have on rare occasions while there
beheld wondrously beautiful tall beings, radiant and
glorious, with arms of more brilliant colours than any
colours known to men….I have often thought that very
much, if not all, of the weird phenomena, well attested to-
day by eminent psychical researchers, such as the
movement of physical objects without known agency, the
tossing of plates and cups and saucers or other household
furnishings, showers of stones in or outside of houses said
to be haunted, and many more similar meaningless
happenings, are due directly to the mischievous little fairies
of this order, which medieval mystics called elemental, on
account of their dwelling in the different elements of
nature—the air, the earth, the water, the fire…I can only
suggest that the phenomena attributed by the Celtic peoples
to invisible or fairy agency are in most cases identical with
the phenomena attributed to the agency of spirits amongst
ourselves; and that if there are spirits, then there are fairies,
because a fairy is a spirit, but not always the spirit of a man
or woman. The ghost-world and fairy-world are not
distinguishable sometimes, although an ordinary ghost is
not a true fairy.  

40 “Fairies, Ghosts and Spirits,”p. 9.
Spiritualists, then, tended to conflate belief in the existence of disembodied human entities with fairies while Theosophists believed that fairies or “nature-spirits” occupied a separate but equal evolutionary path alongside humanity.

The precepts of the modern Theosophical Society founded in 1875 by Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891) and Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907) were informed by knowledge collected from Euro-Western modern spiritualism and examinations of Eastern philosophies. During the early years theosophists capitalized on the popularity of modern spiritualism and, initially, were closely affiliated with the movement “whose origins antedated [the] Society by some twenty-five years [and] during the first year of its existence, the English Theosophical Society continued to be recruited almost entirely, if not solely, from Spiritualist ranks.” Janet Oppenheim notes that one of the main differences between theosophists and spiritualists was the reality of communication with identifiable spirits of deceased people. Blavatsky taught that attempts to communicate with spirits during a séance could be a dangerous venture because it attracted nonhuman or less developed human entities that had the capacity to cause havoc in the material world. But her cautionary did not extend to the practice of automatic writing which

41 The Theosophical Society moved its head quarters from New York to India in 1879. From the mid-1880s on the society attained notable popularity in England, America, the Continent, and India. It promoted ideas of reincarnation and karma in Western European society and also popularized Tibet as the land of ageless wisdom. The Society fostered interest in the West of Buddhism practiced in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Hinduism in India and encouraged the comparative study of religion. Theosophists also persuaded followers that the essential teachings of all the great religions are one.  
42 Janet Oppenheim, The Other World, pp. 164-65.
was elevated “to near sacred status in Theosophy” especially since Blavatsky claimed that the great founding texts of Theosophy had been dictated to her by the Mahatmas.\(^{43}\)

The Theosophy Society also incorporated ideas from sources such as Rosicrucianism and amalgamated the esoteric ideology of German Christian mystic, Jakob Böhme (1575-1624) with writings by other European philosophers including Swedish scientist and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772).\(^{44}\) Blavatsky and Olcott produced an infrastructure that included a specific agenda of objectives that expanded Darwin’s theory of natural selection to include the evolution of the soul. Blavatsky wrote several widely read books including *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) that corroborated her re-conceptualization of Hinduism and Buddhism with information taken from Christianity and various elements of mythology. Her books develop a highly complex hybrid of texts that evaluated humanity’s place in the progression of the cosmos and her complicated process of human evolution traces the cycles of life in which the physical body on death is transformed in the spiritual spheres before emerging into

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\(^{43}\) Ibid. p. 173.

\(^{44}\) The term Rosicrucian is derived from the Latin word for rose cross. A brotherhood was established in Germany in 1614. Pamphlets distributed called for a general reformation of knowledge and society based on the principles of Christian Rosenkreutz (1378-1484) who learned about the mystical value of numbers, alchemy and magic during his travels in the East and in Europe. The supposed re-discovery of Rosenkreutz’s writings generated a new enthusiasm for Rosicrucianism and people joined the new society in its directive of renewing humanity through Rosicrucian knowledge and returning to the state of Adam in Paradise. Rosenkreutz’s writings were published in the form of a book entitled *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz* by Johann Valentin Andreae and over time, Rosicrucian principles were incorporated into the rites and doctrines of The Theosophical Society, Freemasonry and societies such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn founded in London in 1888; Joséphin Péladan’s Orde Kabbalistique de la Rose +Croix: Salons de la Rose + Croix and Rudolf Steiner’s Anthroposophy.
another life in the physical realms. Blavatsky taught that the path towards enlightenment was earned through the successful completion of a series of stages that take place in both the material and ethereal spheres. According to Theosophical teaching, this process of development is repeated until the entity has attained divine awareness facilitating the final stage of full ascension into “spiritualization” or unification with the almighty.

Second generation theosophical leaders including writer and feminist Annie Besant (1847-1933), clergyman Charles Leadbeater (1854-1934), respected scientist Stanley De Brath (1854-1937), and author Alfred Percy Sinnett (1840-1921) extended Theosophical activity to include investigations of occult chemistry and geometry and produced written accounts and visual representations of esoteric phenomena called thought forms which they combined with results from their research on the continued evolution of the soul through reincarnation and ascension. Theosophists also taught that the process of reincarnation included the rebirth of the soul into a new human body whose physical and social condition depended on the actions of past lives and that many

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45 Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology* (London: The Theosophical Publishing Company, 1877); *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion and Philosophy* (London: The Theosophical Publishing Company, 1888). Belief in reincarnation was contested in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century England and while some Spiritualists were open to the notion of reincarnation others did not necessarily concur with Theosophical philosophy that promoted concepts of re-birth. One reason is that many Spiritualists remained true to Christian ideology that rejected ideas of reincarnation. See for example, “Karma, Nature Spirits, and Reincarnation,” *Light* XXXV: 1821 (December 1915), p. 586; G.R. Dennis, “The Lambeth Conference II: The Report on Theosophy,” *Light* XL: 2071 (September, 1920), p. 298. The author argued that the committee in their examination of Theosophical literature was “unable...to accept the doctrines of reincarnation and karma” despite the fact that those same doctrines had once “formed part of the inner teachings of the Early Church...and were not condemned as heretical until B.C. 553.”
incarnations were required to complete spiritual development. The process of human evolution, according to theosophical teachings, performs as a narrative of spiritual awakening as each entity interacts with matter thereby coming to know itself though the evolution of consciousness. As individual souls develop towards enlightenment they also contribute to the evolution of human consciousness as a whole. Similarly, powerful entities who have achieved enlightenment by learning to combine self-sacrifice with love and harmony in their life cycles eventually ascend to the highest realms of the spiritual spheres and gain recognition by Theosophists as mahatmas or masters. A belief not unlike that promoted by adherents of the Christian faith in which individuals are sanctified as saints based on their adherence to an existence free from “sin and perfect in righteousness and purity.” According to Theosophical philosophy and Christian faith these highly evolved beings work ceaselessly in their attempts to guide and protect the evolution of humanity and to preserve the teachings of Spirit.46

In the last decades of the nineteenth-century, publications on Eastern mysticism in England increased and Besant and Leadbeater promoted further interest in Eastern religious and spiritual ideas in their popular books, Thought-Forms (1901) and Occult Chemistry (1908), which discussed the importance of sacred geometry as a conduit towards the rediscovery of the universal language of truth, beauty, evolution and harmony.47 In their books, they promoted geometrical forms as blueprints of creation as

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well as interfaces between the visible and material worlds and the invisible and immaterial spheres. In addition, eight editions, of Alfred Percy Sinnett’s *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883) offered a theosophical interpretation of Buddhist traditions and appeared between 1883 and 1903.\(^{48}\) Another of Sinnett’s books *The Growth of the Soul: A Sequel to ‘Esoteric Buddhism* was published in London in 1896 and again in 1905. Stanley De Brath’s *Psychic Philosophy* (1921) amalgamates ideas about Spirituality and Christianity with Theosophical philosophy and was published in three editions in England by 1921.\(^{49}\)

Spiritualists and Theosophists employed scientifically based hypothesis and newly developing technologies that proliferated during the period to prove the existence of elementals and their connection to human souls. In 1915, one staunch believer submitted a letter to Spiritualist periodical *Light* in response to an earlier article that discredited such belief and used Theosophical philosophy to demonstrate his conviction in the existence of nature spirits or elementals:

> you mention Mr. Venning as “having been informed by a spirit communicator…that there were no such beings as elementals, Nature spirits, &c.” The purport of this communication is at such colossal variance with what I firmly believe to be the facts of Nature that I am going to


attempt to establish a case for the existence of non-human creatures of the kind called Nature spirits by short process of logical inferences… I would expect to find just about what clairvoyant Theosophists describe—In short, wherever a vast domain of Nature is, whether physical, ethereal or super-ethereal, there, I believe one may confidently look for and find…innumerable creatures sharing those conditions in just the same way as the innumerable variety of our “younger brothers” share with us this world in which we now find ourselves.  

Prominent scientist William Crookes (1832-1919) believed that it was his duty to study preternatural phenomena and during his investigations, which were considered scrupulously conducted and impartial, he developed a favourable view of Spiritualist beliefs. Crooke’s report of 1874 expanded on his earlier research and concluded that these phenomena could not be explained away as mere trickery and stated that further research was warranted. He was not alone in his assessment. Fellow scientists who came to support Spiritualists’ and later Theosophists’ assertions about the existence of disembodied entities included biologist Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913), physicist Oliver Joseph Lodge (1851-1940) and physicist Lord Rayleigh (1842-1919). Scientists investigated occurrences of paranormal activity and elaborated on how elementals manifested in the physical world as well as on the possible similarities and differences between elementals and human beings:

the floating, ephemeral forms… have their origin, on the microcosmic plane…presiding over and regulating nature. ..All elementals have a soul and are living. The inhabitants of the elements are named Saganes (Saganae), i.e., elements. They are not inferior to men, they differ from

men by having no immortal soul… We call them beings but they are not of Adam’s kin… They know all that is going on, and do often reveal it to men, who are able to converse with them. But they are very unreliable, and some are treacherous… Of a necessity, elementals are drawn in immense numbers to physical séances… Elementals are drawn into overt action by regular rhythmic sounds and concentration of mind…. At physical séances the prevailing desire is that spiritual entities shall visibly and tangibly manifest their presence. 

Despite reports from several renowned scientists that supported claims of paranormal activity many were convinced that Spiritualism was fraudulent, and Crookes’ final report so outraged the scientific establishment "that there was talk of depriving him of his Fellowship of the Royal Society." Defense of Crookes’s testimony, however, came in the form of a letter by Hans Christian Anderson (1805-1875) and was published in the *Spiritualist:*

This month the Royal Society has to sit in judgment upon itself, in determining whether it shall accept or reject Mr. Crookes’s record of “Psychic Force” experiments. If the members of the council accept the paper they will do so in the face of popular clamour, such as a few individuals only, like Professor Huxley, are men enough to face; if they reject it, the act will live in history as a greater fall than their suppression of Franklin’s first paper on lightening conductors. The present council is very deferential to rank, wealth, caste, and popularity, and the independent members of the society are not altogether satisfied with the régime…

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By the late-nineteenth-century writings by Theosophists were published in Spiritualist journals and an article published in *Light* entitled “Spiritualism and Theosophy” encouraged Spiritualists to study Theosophical philosophy. The anonymous author argued that Theosophists’ theory of the evolution of the spirit after physical death was an enlightening one and provided a “rational explanation of many problems which, to Spiritualists who have not studied it still remain unsolved.” The author also focused attention on Theosophists’ study of how “elementals” fit within the prescribed hierarchy writing that the “humblest ‘elemental’- which for many decades has been a part of Theosophical teaching: and in, ‘the race that have never reached material manifestation’ we have the Devas and nature-spirits of Theosophy.” Leadbeater dedicated a chapter in his book *The Hidden Side of Things* (1913) to the “Nature-Spirits” and wrote that they should be regarded as the original occupants of the landscape and that they were powerful beings whose evolution was understood as “separate and apart” from that of humanity. “We must not make the mistake of thinking,” wrote Leadbeater, of humanity’s “line of development” as the only one:

> Even in this world of ours the divine life is pressing upwards through several streams, of which ours is just one, and numerically by no means the most important…humanity in its physical manifestation occupies only quite a small part of the surface of the earth, entities at a corresponding level on other lines of evolution not only crowd the earth far more thickly than man, but at the same time populate the enormous plains of the sea and the fields of the air…the nature-spirits, for example, neither have

been nor ever will be members of a humanity such as ours, yet the indwelling life of nature-spirits comes from the same Solar Deity as our own, and will return to him just as ours will.  

Leadbeater also provided a comprehensive diagram that described in detail his version of the evolutionary path which included the developmental trajectory of gnomes and ethereal fairies into the spiritual realms.

Spiritualism, wrote one advocate of the importance of scientific discovery to support faith in the afterlife,

is the belief in the existence of SPIRIT AS A PERSON, endowed with mental perceptions and powers of force, by which he can, though invisible, act according to his invisible psychic powers, as man can with his visible physical energies.

Spiritualists and Theosophists believed that life in the Spiritual realms was every bit as active as that lived in the material worlds and their terminology illustrates the interconnection between the two. They used scientifically based language in their treatise to distinguish their beliefs from what they considered mere ‘superstition’ promulgated by ignorance and so devoid of any rational educated perspective. Those who were prepared to entertain the idea that ‘millions of spirits exist around and among us’ were equally anxious to distance their belief in the continued existence of the disembodied spirit from superstition. Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), for instance, cautioned that,

These examples of undeniable apparitions…fall like the seed of the husbandman, into fertile and prepared soil, and are usually followed by a plentiful crop of superstitious figments, which derive their sources from circumstances and enactments in sacred and profane history, hastily adopted, and perverted from their genuine reading.  

Spiritualists and Theosophists redoubled their efforts to work diligently within the framework of scientific discovery and moved steadily away from connections with folklore in an effort to subdue the skepticism of the unconverted. Anthropologist and prolific writer Andrew Lang’s (1844-1912) *Blue Fairy Book* (1889) was considered to be one of the most beautifully illustrated fairy tales of the nineteenth-century and his many collections of fairy tales are popular even today. Lang, however, also advocated for the serious study of paranormal events and served as President of the Society of Psychical Research in 1911. In his article “A Question of Evidence” he questioned the validity of ‘physical phenomena’ and promoted a vigilant stance against any possible fraud on the part of the medium. He wrote, “fraud is the most probable explanation of physical phenomenon, because they are so often caused by fraud.” Conversely, however, Lang reasoned that “accounts of telepathy or apparitions” are less susceptible to deliberate deception because, “in cases of telepathy and apparitions, though some witnesses may be liars, while all are fallible, there is only the very slight chance of deliberate imposture from without.”

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death of the body and they also promoted the idea that unseen entities communicated with and through those in the material world.

Throughout the nineteenth-century and well into the twentieth people of many different classes and various social and cultural backgrounds believed in the possibility that human beings survived death and their belief was based on perceived manifestations of the ethereal as well as experiential and scientific evidence. In the early part of the twentieth-century Besant and Leadbeater expanded Blavatsky’s teachings about the evolution of the soul through the spiritual spheres included the results of what they referred to as scientifically conducted research. Their books advocated for further study of the ethereal realms and featured matter-of-fact writing about intercommunion between the material and spiritual realms. Besant, for example, wrote,

> The idea that clairvoyant observation is possible is no longer considered insane. It is not generally accepted, nor indeed is it accepted to any large extent. A constantly growing minority, however, of fairly intelligent people believe clairvoyance to be a fact, and regard it as a perfectly natural power, which will become universal in the course of evolution.58

Besant’s and Leadbeater’s book *Thought-Forms*, for instance, offered a systematic analysis for the existence of forms which were produced, they believed, as a result of energetic vibrations generated by thoughts and feelings. Their conclusions were liberally quoted in the Spiritualist journal *Light*. One anonymous author supplemented notes

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about the impact of energetic forms by cautioning Spiritualists to keep “a strict and constant watch, not only on our actions, but also on our inmost thoughts.”

Spiritualists and Theosophists wrote about the results of their research and attempted to overcome stubborn resistance of the categorical definition of ethereal spaces by implementing codification strategies approximating methods used by the Linnaean system of plant classification. Simultaneously, developing interest in Spiritualism and Theosophy involved a period of transition in which those who had advocated Christian religious doctrine, as one example, adjusted their beliefs to incorporate elements of alternative philosophies. Christian Spiritualist and Pre-Raphaelite artist, Anna Mary Howitt Watts’s (1824-1884) writings, for instance, were published extensively in various Spiritualist journals of the mid-and late-nineteenth-centuries and she combined her growing conviction in Spiritualism with her faith in Christianity. Howitt described flowers, for example, with Christianity as “the most exquisite creations of God” and as

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60 Oppenheim, *The Other World*, pp. 193-97. Oppenheim writes that Theosophists claimed to be scientific while at the same time rejecting materialism. Theosophists’ ideas of scientific proof was focused on metaphysics and the occult as opposed to modern scientific inquiry that was based on an empirical foundation.
62 Pamela Gerrish Nunn, “A Centre on the Margins” in *Re-Framing the Pre-Raphaelites: Historical and Theoretical Essays* ed. Ellen Harding (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1996), pp. 43-60; Also see, Jan Marsh and Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Pre-Raphaelite Women Artists* (Manchester: Thames and Hudson, 1997), pp. 56-57. Gerrish Nunn writes about Howitt’s status within the Pre-Raphaelite circle stating that, “Ruskin’s amateur friends Eleanor Vere Boyle and her cousin Lady Waterford were both praised for their work in the movement’s early discussions, while women who came within the Brothers’ acquaintance – Howitt, Benham Hay, Bodichon, Boyce, Siddal – were considered by themselves and treated by their male friends as artist members of the circle. Howitt was among those invited to write for the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood’s short-lived magazine *The Germ*, and later *The Crayon*…”

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being “associated especially with heaven” and also with Spiritualism as an advanced symbolic language of the ethereal worlds.63

Spiritualists and Theosophists also co-opted Christian doctrine that conceptualized humans as tripartite beings composed of body, soul and spirit with the spiritual element conceived of as an unseen but communicative presence that remained after the death of the body. Spiritualists’ and Theosophists’ knowledge of the nature of the spiritual spheres was also informed by the writings of scientist and philosopher, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) who taught that, the world of spirit is intermediate between heaven and hell and is the first receptacle of souls after death. 64 Spiritualists and Theosophists incorporated their knowledge of the Bible that teaches that the body is only one element of the individual who is also in possession of a spirit and a soul. The spirit, according to scripture, for example, acts as a conduit of communion with the heavenly spheres and also with God while it simultaneously enables humanity to function in the spiritual realms. Conversely, the soul is confined to the realm of the body and the material world and facilitates self-consciousness and human personality. The soul, then, from a Spiritualist and Theosophical perspective is pivotal in that it is responsible for decisions and choices that impact the experiences and evolution of the spirit after

physical death.\(^6\) Spiritualists and Theosophists focused on the importance of the spirit component of humanity as essential to their continued progression in the spiritual spheres and also as the vehicle through which communication between the ethereal and material worlds were maintained.

Exploration of the fantastic and spiritual realms provided inspiration for artistic production at the same time that it was subjected to scrupulous scientific observation. Consequently, Henry Fuseli’s, Richard Dadd’s and Estella Canziani’s fairy paintings, for example, were linked with spiritual phenomena. Artists were among those who became interested in the idea that disembodied spirits could communicate with and through the living and they believed that investigation into supernatural phenomena was as valid as any other scientifically based examinations that were conducted at the time. Interest in the occult sciences continued as an important aspect of intellectual, spiritual, emotional and imaginative pursuits and took its place in the domestic centre of daily life. Men and women who participated in séances conducted in parlours in which they attempted to “lift the veil between the spirit and material worlds” also looked at paintings such as Holman Hunt’s *The Light of the World* (1851) in which he depicted the living Christ as resurrected from death. They were similarly fascinated by contemporary popular serialized adventure stories set in the Valley of the Kings while they also debated the validity of modern spirit photography.\(^6\) In addition, Spiritualist journals appealed to

\(^{65}\) Job 32:8; Rom. 1:9; Luke 1:46-47; Rom. 9:1; 8:16; Mark 2:8; Job 7:15; Lam. 3:20, RSV; 2 Sam. 5:8; Deut. 6:5.

“people of education and culture” and dispelled lingering remnants of “ridicule and abuse” of Spiritualist and Theosophical beliefs and flourished at the end of the century. The earliest Spiritualist newspapers for instance, provided scientifically based analyses of the study of the occult sciences in the form of shorthand reports that were “adapted to the requirements of the scientific mind.” 67 In the latter part of the nineteenth-century the Theosophical Society began to distribute reading material including The Theosophist (1879) and The Path (1886-1896) which disseminated and expanded on research conducted on the evolution of humanity through the spiritual spheres. 68 Printed material in the form of pamphlets, journals and newspapers disseminated information about occurrences of supernatural phenomenon and provided a forum in which interested readers could write about their own experiences while keeping current with contemporary agenda of Spiritualism and Theosophy. An important function of these periodicals was to maintain and safeguard the history of Spiritualism and Theosophy not only in form of writings but also images. The Spiritualist is one example of several periodicals that took advantage of emerging public interest in automatic writing and drawing and published

67 William H. Harrison, “An Illustrated Spiritual Periodical,” Spiritualist 5: 24 (December 1874), p. 281. One of the earliest Spiritualist periodicals was The Spirit World, published in 1853 but was issued only once. The Yorkshire Spiritual Telegraph was established in 1855 and then renamed the British Spiritual Telegraph in 1857 but was discontinued the next year. Toward the end of 1860 The Spiritual Magazine was founded and become one of the leading Spiritualist periodicals until 1875. The Spiritual Times ran from 1864 to 1866 and in 1867 Human Nature was founded and ran until 1877. The Medium was absorbed into the Daybreak in 1869 and the new periodical under the title The Medium and Daybreak continued until 1895. The Spiritualist Newspaper first published in 1869 and under the abbreviated title The Spiritualist ran until 1881. The Christian Spiritualist published on a monthly basis until 1871 and Light appeared in 1881 and continues to be published today by the College of Psychic Studies in London England. The Two Worlds began publication in 1888 and is also still in circulation today as is Psychic News, founded in 1932. 68 Helena Blavatsky introduced The Theosophist (1879) other periodicals distributed at the time include The Blavatsky Lectures (1918); The Herald of the Star (1912-1927); Lucifer (1887-1897); Occult Review (1905-1939); The Path (1910-1914) and The Theosophical Review (1897-1909).
examples of visionary pictures as well as relevant articles on the subject. Visionary
representation became an increasingly important element of Spiritualism and scientific
journalist William Henry Harrison who in 1869 became the founder editor of the
_Spiritualist_ argued for a periodical dedicated to the dissemination of mediumistic art.
Harrison wrote,

_I have discovered that there are mediums in private life who
possess spirit drawings of remarkable power and beauty,
some of a symbolical character, others representing scenes
and landscapes such as were never seen upon this earth.
Consequently it has been suggested that the engraving of
many of these pictures would be good work done in the
cause of Spiritualism, and prove of considerable interest to
the subscribers and their friends._ 69

He believed that reproduction of visionary pictures would benefit the cause of
Spiritualism while capturing the attention of subscribers. Harrison was convinced that
the appearance of an illustrated Spiritual periodical would appeal to an educated public
thus helping to ward off “lingering remnants of ridicule and abuse of Spiritualism still
rampant in the public mind.” 70

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70 Ibid. p. 281.
Chapter 3  
Art and the Supernatural

Nineteenth-century British society linked interest in the spiritual spheres with art production. In 1880, for example, editors of the *Spiritualist* dedicated an article to the subject and offered specific examples that associated art with the spiritual:

> The two have been intimately connected...Gods and demons, saints and specters, have afforded at least one-half of the subjects for art. The supernatural, in the shape of religious mythology...in the shape of spectral fancies...with the advent of Romanticism. From the gods of Iliad down to the Commander in Don Giovanni, from the sylvan divinities of Praxiteles to the fairies of Shakespeare, from the furies of Aeschylus to the archangels of Perugino.

Simultaneously scholars acknowledged some of the complexities inherent in the attempt to reproduce the ephemeral in visual terms. In so doing, analogies between ideas of the supernatural and the illogical which was associated with ethereality, and art production and logical thinking, which was connected with empirical scientific research, produced an inherent and ongoing antagonistic relationship between the two:

> The hostility between the supernatural and the artistic is well-nigh as great as the hostility between the supernatural and the logical. Critical reason is a solvent, it reduces the phantoms of the imagination to their most prosaic elements; artistic power, on the other hand, moulds and solidifies them into distinct and palpable forms; the synthetical definiteness of art is as skeptical as the analytical definiteness of logic. For the supernatural is necessarily
essentially vague, and art is necessarily essentially distinct:
give shape to the vague, and it ceases to exist.  

Artists produced work that was informed by their knowledge of the occult
sciences and religiosity but comparatively few of them represented visual accounts of
spiritual activity in the ethereal spheres and fewer still believed that their art production
was the result of interconnections between themselves and unseen entities. Some of the
earliest examples of visionary art were recorded in the writings of mid-nineteenth-century
Spiritualist, William Wilkinson who described in detail how Elizabeth Wilkinson’s
experimentation with automatic writing developed into spiritually directed symbolic
pictorial representations. Elizabeth practiced for many weeks but her attempts to contact
the dead were unsuccessful until on “8 January, 1857, a slow and tremulous motion of the
pencil commenced.” Rather than the expected written communication the paper was
filled with depictions of small and simple flower drawings which, over time, became
progressively more intricately detailed and larger emerging and often extending beyond
the boundaries of the pages. Elizabeth Wilkinson’s first finished example appeared,
according to her husband, as though it belonged “to no known order, though it is of a
beautiful and complex shape…”  

“Her hand”, he continued, traveled in “a series of
rapid movements, described round it the petals of a flower, and next added the stem and a
series of leaves. Strange! that a lady, for the first time in her life, should, unknowingly,

draw a complicated geometrical series, and then make it the centre of a flower.”\textsuperscript{73}

According to William Wilkinson’s chronicles, Elizabeth Wilkinson, in collaboration with unseen entities, continued to produce ever larger and more complex geometrical figures during intercommunion with spirits.

Prominent member of The British National Association of Spiritualists (BNAS) Benjamin Coleman investigated numerous examples of the production of spirit art and published the results of his examinations in his book \textit{Spiritualism in America: with Fac-similes of Spirit Drawings and Writing}.\textsuperscript{74} He believed that particularly sensitive

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image}
\caption{Executed through the mediumship of Mrs. E.J. French. \textit{Spirit Flower}, 1861, coloured pencil. Reproduced from Benjamin Coleman, \textit{Spiritualism in America: with Fac-similes of Spirit Drawings and Writing}, 1861.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{74} Benjamin Coleman, \textit{Spiritualism in America: with Fac-similes of Spirit Drawings and Writing} (London: F. Pitman, 1861).
mediums had the potential to make paintings that appeared to be “produced by the spirits without the hand of the medium.” Representations, according to Coleman, produced in collaboration with spirit entities became more precisely rendered and progressively more symbolically complex over time. Many examples of spirit drawings and paintings included in his volume appear to have been produced by women and, initially at least, often in the form of flowers. (fig. 3-1) Women mediumistic artists, however, were not necessarily acknowledged for their skills, one early critic, for example, lauded the “two very exquisite imitations of American flowers” produced “through the hand of Mrs. Mapes” whose reproductions were so perfectly rendered that “we imagine no mere artist could equal them, and certainly not a woman artist.”

Extensive research has been conducted about the dismissive treatment of women artists and their work in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century but, in spite of dismissal of their talents, experimentation with automatic writing and drawing offered possible avenues through which women’s art production could excel.

Spirit flowers produced by women artists through the intervention of disembodied entities were considered useful as ornamental objects and also as indisputable scientific proof of the intercession of the spiritual spheres in the material world. Pictures that reproduced recognizable images, in particular, were considered immutable evidence of collaboration between the material and the spiritual worlds by the scientific community. Realistic representations, initially at least, were preferred over more abstracted images,

there are other drawing and painting mediums, who waste their time year after year, by
drawing or painting incomprehensible things under spirit influence, which things are of
less use to the world, than if they had spent the same time in knitting stockings, or
sweeping a street crossing.”

Despite the belief that realistically depicted representations of the natural world were evidential of spiritual activity nineteenth-century artist
Georgiana Houghton and early-twentieth-century artist Ethel Le Rossignol believed that they produced abstracted images in collaboration with disembodied entities.

The idea that visionary artists were the mere instruments of the ethereal entity is contradicted by evidence of cautionary writings that alerted artists to remain cognizant and to strive to maintain a joint effort between their own consciousness and that of the unseen spirit. Mediumistic artists were instructed, for example, to remain entirely autonomous despite their alliance with disembodied entities:

For the benefit of the many mediums who have thus sacrificed their independence and right of private judgment to disembodied spirits, these words are published as a delicate hint, because their palpable waste of time brings discredit upon themselves and upon Spiritualism. Any spirit, in or out of the body, who assumes the absolute control of any other spirit, cannot be a high one, for such a line of action cannot be justified.

By insisting on the maintenance of cooperative effort between artist and spirit entity, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century visionaries ensured the maintenance of their autonomy.

77 Ibid. p. 157.
The proposed ability of artists to produce visionary art became a popular topic and Spiritualist journals, including *Medium* and *Spiritualist*, wrote about experiments that included participation in séances which featured the production of music, drawings and paintings that were presented as having been produced in collaboration with spiritual beings.78 People of every class and all walks of life who believed that they possessed visionary abilities including artist Georgiana Houghton and cabinet maker David Duguid (1832-1907) exhibited examples of their “direct paintings and drawings” at well attended Spiritualist venues. Houghton, as a practicing artist, produced portrait and landscape paintings before she developed her interest in automatic drawing, while Duguid professed to have no artistic training before he became famous for the production of his mediumistic paintings and drawings. Critics published their responses in Spiritualist periodicals writing that, “the audience was numerous and highly attentive, then devoted considerable time to the inspection of the pictures present…” Exhibition of visionary paintings and drawings were often accompanied by lectures that described the symbolic significance of the images providing important information about the content of the work as well as methods of production. One lecturer attempted to classify “the various schools of mediumistic art, showing the great diversities of operation, the widely different meanings which may be found in the pictures produced.” In addition, mediumistic

78 “Mr. Rippon, the Musical Medium and Spirit Artist,” *Medium* II: 50(March 1871), p. 89.
paintings and drawings were sold or used as door prizes in order to support the artists and
to help disseminate Spiritualist ideologies.79

Spiritualists debated the merits of establishing a “new pictorial magazine or
newspaper that shall reflect the heavens as well as the earth” but there was concern with
regard to how the subject matter produced by visionary artists could be sufficiently
verified. Others argued that attempts to represent ethereal spaces in material form served
only to reduce them to commonplace physicality. One reader expressed both their interest
and their concern in a letter submitted to the Spiritualist writing, “if you say such a scene
and such a face is a transcript from above, or the third heavens, who will believe it? And
if from the earth only, where lies the novelty, the grandeur, or the transcendentality?”80
Despite reservations about the production of visionary pictures artists attended lectures
that offered perspectives on the ways in which to represent ethereality in material form
and some discussions focused on how particular modern artists had conducted successful
experiments with the reproduction of transcendental experience in their images.

Many artists of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century supported modern
techniques promoted by the Aesthetes, for example, who endorsed the idea of art for art’s
sake leaving little room for symbolic elements that were meant to reveal fragments of the
spiritual spheres. Spiritualists, however, attended meetings offered by members of the
London Spiritual Alliance, some of which were held in the Salon of the Royal Society of

79  J. Burns, “A Lecture on Spirit-Drawings and Trance-Paintings,” The Medium and Daybreak, 93, III (12 January, 1872), p. 15. An example of a visionary oil painting by David Duguid is on permanent exhibition at the Glasgow Association of Spiritualists.
Artists, and at which spirit art was one of many topics discussed. Artists including
August Rodin, Elihu Vedder, William Blake, William Turner, Gabrielle Rossetti, John
Everett Millais, and Holman Hunt were regarded as “spiritual workers” because they represented the “highest truth in their works.” Rodin’s art, for example, was singled out as an example of spiritualist ideology because Rodin himself had declared that “art should be directed to bringing forth from Nature the psyche which resides in all things, and communicate to the world the fragments which the artist may find of the eternal secret of existence.” But even though Spiritualists applauded Rodin’s art as an attempt to capture the ethereal in physical form, they also agreed it “can never be really adequate; because art is a material expression of spiritual truth, and whenever the spiritual seeks expression in the material, it is always bound to lose in the process.” Spiritualists also argued that artistic representations of the spiritual in visual and material culture

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necessarily conflated ideologies of spirituality and religiosity that blurred the boundaries between the non-conformist interstitial space of the ethereal worlds and long established man-made religious doctrine.

Holman Hunt’s painting *Triumph of the Innocents* (1876) (fig. 3-2), was presented as an example of an artist’s method of conflating religious doctrine with Spiritualist ideology. Hunt’s painting depicts the Holy Family accompanied by the Spirits of the Innocents and, while the infant Jesus is clairvoyantly aware of the visitors from the spiritual spheres that surround the family, neither The Blessed Virgin nor Joseph appear to notice their presence. Hunt’s painting, according to late-nineteenth-century Spiritualist ideology, implies that knowledge of the spiritual world would develop over time as spiritual entities themselves became aware of their own change in status from a physical being to an ethereal entity:

> The little ones in the air behind have hardly awakened to the new life – they are rubbing their eyes as if awakening from sleep. In differing revelations of sorrow, they show the influence of earthly terror and sufferings still impressed upon them. In the foreground the chief little fellow has looked in vain for the wound which ushered him into the higher realm – the sword-cut is still seen on his little robe, but there is no trace of the wound upon himself.  

American Symbolist artist, Elihu Vedder’s (1836-1923) designs, which illustrate *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (1884), served as another example of artists representing

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ethereal spaces by blurring spiritualist beliefs in life after death with religious doctrine. Vedder’s inclusion, Spiritualists argued, of relevant verses, such as ‘I sent my soul through the Invisible, Some letter of the afterlife to spell; And by and bye my soul return’d to me,” which accompanied his illustrations were considered especially enlightening. Vedder’s luminous images, enhanced by relevant verses, were conceived of as representative of out-of-body experiences. Nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Spiritualists believed that representations of the human spirit was no more indicative of insanity than were depictions of the angels of the Christian faith and William Blake’s picture, *Death’s Door* (1805) (fig. 3-3), published in Robert Blair’s (1699-1746) poem, *The Grave*, was conceived of as a rational example of how the spiritual element of an individual separates from the body upon death:

As the door of the grave opens, the darkness within is oppressive…but the darkness is only for the feeble body

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83 Helen A. Harrison, “Art Review; Illustrations that Breathed Life into Rubaiyat,” *The New York Times* (March, 19980, pp. 1, 2. *Elihu Vedder’s Drawings for the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*: Art Museum, the Museums at Stony Brook, 15 March – 17 May 1998. English poet Edward FitzGerald (1809-1883) translated a selection of poems originally written in Persian. Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam of which many were attributed to Persian poet, astronomer and mathematician Omar Khayyam (1048-1131). A Persian ruba’i is a two line stanza with two parts per line. He produced almost 1,000 epigrams on the transience of existence and the uselessness of mathematics, science, or religion to untangle the knotted meaning of life. The word “Rubaiyat” is derived from the Arabic root for four or “quatrain”. The translated poem was considered one of the most popular examples of Oriental literature, amongst artists of the nineteenth-century. In the mid-nineteenth-century FitzGerald’s translation was circulated amongst the most influential artists and writers of the period including Rossetti, Algernon Swinburne, William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones and John Ruskin before it arrived in America. Elihu Vedder made fifty-four complex drawings for the 1884 edition of Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam which sold out in six days. Critics rushed to acclaim it as a masterwork of American art, and Vedder as the master American artist. Vedder created designs for the entire book -- its cover and lining paper, its compelling drawings, and its eccentric hand-drawn letters. Made with ink, chalk, pencil and watercolor, the highly imaginative, dream-like illustrations provide an early example of the swirling, curvilinear Art Nouveau style….In England and America, the slim volume was handed from artist to artist, and it served as a touchstone for the spiritual and poetic in a time of strident materialism.

84 Taverner, “The Spiritual in Art,” p. 152.
which is blown into it by the gusts of the tempest without. Above that grave there is the sunlight of the day. In the blaze of the golden light the spirit rises with eyes turned heavenward. The lifting of the body by arms and legs is wonderfully drawn, showing that all the power at command would be used to push the earth and everything material far away. His renovated man is liberated, and in the glory of strength and hope he will mount higher than every the mind dreamt possible when encased in the worn-out, decrepid (sic) body, which is seen fumbling its way into the rest of the grave.”

Although artists experimented with ideas about the possibilities of life after


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85 Ibid. p. 140.
physical death and the existence of the spiritual spheres, they often chose to keep their interests private to avoid ridicule. Blake, for example elicited angry response from contemporaries when they saw that he depicted not only unconventional figures of angels but also human spirits in his illustrations included in the Book of Job (1826) the Book of Revelation, Edward Young’s (1681-1765) Night Thoughts (1742) and Blair’s poem The Grave.86 Blake’s images were initially conceived of as mystical and therefore strange, but when he declared that his portraits of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Moses, and other leaders of spiritual thought, were painted from his visions, his contemporaries questioned his sanity. Undaunted, Blake insisted that entities appeared to him on a regular basis. His friend astrologer John Varley (1778 – 1842) observed that Blake sketched his spiritual visitant’s as if they were posing, drawing with “the upmost alacrity and composure looking up from time to time as if he had a real sitter before him.” If the visitor disappeared, according to Varley, Blake would stop drawing until it returned writing, “I am really intoxicated with vision every time I hold a pencil or pen in my hand.”87 Blake’s candor about his commiseration with spirits resulted in his denigration. Many artists, aware of Blake’s treatment once he had publicized his belief in the existence of unseen entities, kept their own interests and activities with regard to experimentation with other worldly phenomenon a closely guarded secret.

86 Blakes’s Illustrations of the Book of Job refers to a series of twenty-two engraved prints published in 1826. In 1795 Blake was commissioned to illustrate a new four-volume deluxe edition of The Complaint, and the Consolation; or Night Thoughts by Edward Young. First published from 1742 to 1745, Young’s meditative poem of almost ten thousand lines of blank verse remained popular throughout the eighteenth century.
Late-nineteenth-century artist Evelyn Pickering De Morgan (1855-1919), for example, inhabited the privileged social and artistic circles of her time and her paintings, such as *The Passing of the Soul at Death* (c. 1917-1918) (fig. 3-4), were informed by her interest in spiritualism. Her mother-in-law, Sophia Frend De Morgan, was a pre-eminent figure in modern Spiritualism and her book, *From Matter to Spirit: The Result of Ten Year’s Experience in Spirit Manifestations intended as a Guide to Inquirers* (1863), emphasized how private spiritualist practice could become an aid to artistic creativity. “Automatic writing and drawing were vividly illustrated and encouraged as means by which individuals with highly developed spiritual natures could become mediums for the conveyance of spiritual truths.” Even with the support of her family and friends, such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Evelyn De Morgan “chose to keep private an interest in
spiritualism and specifically in automatic writing.”

Pre-Raphaelite artist Gabriel Dante Rossetti’s paintings and drawings art were also believed to have been influenced by the spirit of his dead wife Elizabeth Siddell (1829-1862), and as a result he was sometimes branded as “mad because he dared to depict elements in his scenes which he knew to exist, but which the vulgar eye could never see.”

Rossetti’s painting, *The Blessed Damozel* (c. 1874) (fig. 3-5), was presented as evidence for Spiritualists that he, consciously or not, produced some of his paintings in association with his dead wife.

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89 Tavener, “The Spiritual in Art,” p. 152.

90 William Michael Rossetti, *The Blessed Damozel: Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London, 1898), pp. vi, viii. According to Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s brother the picture was informed by his poem “The Blessed Damozel” written in 1848 long before he married Elizabeth Siddell in 1860. Even so, according to Michael Rossetti, the poem was based on Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s response to Edgar Allen Poe’s poem *Raven*.
Rossetti’s representation of a young woman who waits by the gates of heaven while her earthbound lover, depicted in the predella, grieves for his loss exemplified clear evidence for Spiritualists of Rossetti’s ability to absorb subtle communication from the spiritual spheres in the production of his picture. While other versions of the painting represent reunited lovers who embrace in the background, Spiritualists theorized that this particular painting demonstrated Rossetti’s fascination with the possibility that he might reunite with his wife in death. Rossetti’s painting, *How They met Themselves* (1864) (fig.3-6), which depicts two lovers walking during the twilight hour before being confronted (1845), he is quoted “I saw that Poe had done the utmost it was possible to do with the grief of the lover on earth; and so I determined to reverse the conditions, and give utterance to the yearning of the loved one in heaven.”
suddenly with a vision of themselves in the future, served as another example of Rossetti’s connection with the spiritual spheres. Rossetti’s paintings were both informed by and also amalgamated with writings, including his own poetry, which resulted in the production of an intertextual material representation of a multi-dimensional and multi-temporal existence. His images helped to generate further discussion about alternative methods of expressing ideas about the ethereal spheres in visual form.
George Frederic Watts’s (1817-1904), painting The Denunciation of Adam and Eve (1873) (fig. 3-7), which depicts a man who sits at the base of a tree with eyes cast to the ground while several spiritual entities appear to prevent him from rising, also engendered examination of various ways of representing ethereality using material tools. The picture’s companion piece, The Creation of Eve (1865) (fig. 3-8), which depicts the same figure miraculously empowered with the strength to rise towards the light of heaven, offered further evidence for Spiritualists that Watts’s paintings demonstrated his familiarity with the Spiritual realms. Both of Watts’s images were highlighted as representative of especially successful examples of the amalgamation of the ethereal with the physical because they describe the potential of the material world to destroy both the physical and the spiritual body, while they also demonstrate humanity’s ability to discard
the negative embodied in the material world and to transcend into the spiritual spheres. Watts’s paintings were conceived of as representative of the re-birth of the spirit after physical death. “No man”, wrote one ardent Spiritualist, “ever devoted himself to the artistic expression of the spiritual more than Mr. George Frederick Watts.” 91 Among these artists that produced pictures that were informed by an interest in Spiritualism and conventional religion only Blake was outspoken about his professed intercommunication with unseen spirits.

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As the century progressed less renowned artists proclaimed their abilities as visionary artists and exhibited their spirit pictures on a regular basis in shows that were advertised in newspapers devoted to the investigation of the spiritual spheres. Spiritualist journals such as *Medium and Daybreak* and *Light* magazine advertised their focus as devoted to the dissemination of information concerning the history, philosophy, and teachings of Spiritualism. In an effort to fulfill their commitment to such knowledge, editors of these papers included sections devoted to the examination of spirit exhibitions, and in 1870 *Medium and Daybreak* provided a detailed and favorable account of


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author James Martin Peebles’s (1822-1922) spirit art exhibition. The authors stressed the collaborative efforts of men and “Ladies and their assistants” in ensuring the exhibition’s success:

> The walls of the rooms were tastefully decorated with wreaths of artificial flowers….Many objects of art and interest were kindly contributed to adorn the walls and entertain the assembly. Mr. J.T. Taylor bestowed the use of two large portfolios of rare and beautiful photographs…Mr. F. Hockley contributed a group of objects of great rarity and value.  

Viewers were afforded the opportunity to look at examples of visionary art and also to peruse a collection of books focused on spiritualism, astrology and the occult. Many of these volumes, such as John Dee’s *Conferences with Spirits by the Magic Crystal* (1659), John Aubrey’s *On Ghosts, Dreams, Apparitions, and Crystal Calling* (n.d) and *Magic Circles, Invocation, Calls, &c* (1570), were considered important collection items and provided invaluable knowledge for interested readers. This particular exhibition also included more contemporary volumes, such as John Varley’s *Zodiacal Planisphere* (1828), that contained two large plates of William Blake’s representations *Ghost of a Flea* (c.1819-1820). Finally, the walls of the exhibition were covered with mediumistic art and spirit photographs most often produced by artists unknown in contemporary art history but renowned within spiritual circles of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Britain.

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93 “Soiree to J.M. Peebles,” *The Medium and Daybreak* 10 (June 1870), p. 73.
In the latter part of the nineteenth-century Glasgow painting medium David Duguid had gained a reputation as a visionary artist of exceptional talent and one section of the exhibition was devoted to the display of his celebrated trance pictures. Duguid believed that the paintings were produced while his body was occupied by an unseen entity that rendered him into a state of trance. His popularity opened the door for more prestigious exhibitions that presented opportunities for less renowned visionary artists, many of whom were women, to display examples of their direct spirit drawings and paintings. Magazines and journals that were devoted to the dissemination of information about spiritualism offered further opportunity for promotion of spirit art produced by mediumistic artists:

Very conspicuous objects were a series of eight direct spirit drawings, through the mediumship of Mrs. Guppy…Amongst other specimens on the walls were a spirit drawing by Mr. Rippon, and two spirit drawings by Miss Hay…We must not omit to notice some pictures of birds, flowers, and mottoes done in colours by a young lady whose hand is moved automatically to paint them. Another object of great interest was a photograph of one of Mr. G. Child’s very wonderful spirit drawings which was described in Human Nature for January 1869.  

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94 “Soiree to J.M. Peebles,” *The Medium and Daybreak* 10 (June 1870), p. 73. Other items on display included, *La Science Kabalistike*, containing the *Isagoge*, n.d. (*Isagoge* – goodness without god metaphysical naturalism – or an introductory study of the bible); *The Astrologer of the Nineteenth Century, Conducted by Members of the Mercurii*, n.d; Rabbi Solomon, *The Clavis; or Key to the Mysteries of Magic*, n.d; *Magia de Profundis (MSS.): The Key of Solomon the King: The most ancient book on Magic*, 1494; The MSS which contains the seals of about 300 spirits; Barrett’s *Magus; Henry Cornelius Agrippa on Occult Philosophy, with the Magical Elements of Peter d’Abano*, 1533; Reginald Scott’s *Discovery of Witchcraft*; 1651; *Corlum Reseratum Chymicum*, 1612; John Porter; MSS, 1583; *Qanoon-e-Islam*, a very rare work on Spirit Raising, Calling, Charms for Casting out of Devils, &c; and an *Autograph, Speculum*, 24th September, 1560, of Hugh Draper when confined to the Tower of London for sorcery – a copy of which he carved on his cell in the Tower. Chaldean Talismans, Indian Puletahas and Spells, Freemason Symbols.
Medium and Daybreak recorded another successful exhibition of spirit drawings, this time held 1875 in Brighton England. The exhibition attracted considerable attention and contained over five hundred spirit watercolours and drawings produced by famous medium Catherine Berry (1813-1891). Psychical researcher, Frederick Myers (1843-1901) noted that visionary drawings exhibited a fusion of arabesque with ideography…they partly resemble the forms of ornamentation into which the artistic hand strays when…dreaming on the paper without a definite plan…they pass by insensible transitions from direct pictorial symbolism to an abbreviated ideography mingled in its turn with writing of a fantastic or ordinary kind.  

Berry’s “curious water-colour pictures” were conceived of as chaotic but were redeemed by their decorative qualities. Berry, however, believed that a “more minute survey reveals a wonderful design in construction and purpose whatever it may be.” Berry’s assertion that her visionary paintings require more than a cursory assessment in order to be understood is echoed by other mediumistic artists.

Announcements for exhibitions of visionary art productions were not limited to Spiritualist journals. The Daily Mail of 1875, for example, wrote about Berry’s exhibition of spirit water-colours and elaborated on the nature of the images as illustrative of the origin of the species: “they are executed with an elaborateness as regards details which is really marvellous, and if they were only classified and arranged

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95 Catherine Berry was considered to be a powerful medium of her day and her visionary pictures were discussed in detail in her book Experiences in Spiritualism: A Record of Extraordinary Phenomenon (London, 1876).
96 Spence, Encyclopedia of Occultism, p, 77.
97 Ibid. p. 77.
in a scientific manner, might be of good service, and even now they are well worthy of a view.” Support from non-Spiritualists newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* enhanced credibility of visionary images in the general public view.98 Berry’s mediumistic pictures garnered so much attention, in fact, that another non-Spiritualist Newspaper, the *Brighton Gazette*, of the same month contained a long review of the history of spiritualism.

Exhibitions of spirit art most often included a lecture detailing the symbolic meanings inherent to the representations in an effort to inform viewers that were ignorant of the content of the images. Although Catherine Berry’s spirit art was considered to exude “a deep and recondite meaning,” viewers required further elucidation in order to glean the “deeper spiritual insight to unravel their meaning.” These particular images, according to Berry, were meant to “represent the beginning of life; to solve in a manner…the difficulties which Darwin, Huxley, and other great physiologists and naturalists are unable to do with unaided reason.” The author of the article, although willing to record the event in a mainstream non-Spiritualist journal was not altogether convinced by the authenticity of neither Berry’s spirit art nor its intent, and wrote only that mediumistic art “appears to be a curious phase of this new religion.” 99

Swedish poet and writer Princess Mary Despina Karadjia was a member of the royal family and spent many years living in London where she produced automatic

drawings that were exhibited in 1900. Light magazine recorded Karadja’s description of the events that led to her new found ability to produce mediumistic drawings that were considered worthy of exhibition. Her recollection mirrors experiences recalled by other mediumistic artists:

I was dining at Stockholm with a relative, Baroness L.L., and a friend, Baroness H.F., who had for many years been an ardent Spiritualist. In the course of the evening somebody suggested trying to obtain automatic drawing or writing... Very soon my hand began to move, and I drew with amazing accuracy on free-hand, without taking any measure whatever, this geometric figure. The drawing is mathematically perfect; the lines are as clear and firm as if drawn with a ruler. Yet the main value of the drawing lies in its spiritual signification, which was explained to me several months afterwards through automatic writing. On showing the picture to some friends I was surprised to see them exchange startled glances. Without knowing it I had reproduced one of the secret symbols of the Freemasons. No woman on earth could, through normal means, obtain possession of this figure or grasp its hidden sense.

Karadja described in detail one of her visionary drawings in which she had rendered a pyramid composed of seven steps surmounted by a “double triangle with an eye in the centre” while the apex of the double triangle was crowned by the sun. Theosophist and editor of Light magazine, Alfred Sinnett, validated Karadja’s account when he wrote that she “in no way exaggerated the mechanical accuracy of the original drawing, nor the

100 Research suggests that Karadja died in 1935 she wrote several books on Spiritualism including Mary Karadja, Esoteric Meaning of the Seven Sacraments (London: Wooderson, 1910); King Solomon: A Mystic Drama: Mystic drama in five acts and an epilogue, with commentaries (London: Keegan Paul, 1912); Towards the Light (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1909).


102 See, Karadja, Mary. Esoteric Meaning of the Seven Sacraments, n.p., Wooderson, 1910. The double triangle surrounded by the rays of the sun recalls the emblem of the Theosophical Society.
absolute straightness of its lines.” He also noted that in his opinion her work “constitutes by far the most wonderful manifestation he has ever encountered of this peculiar superphysical art.” Sinnett acknowledged the “hundreds of other spirit drawings” that he had seen, but he lauded Princess Karadja’s as exemplary, stating that “no artist living in the flesh could possibly have drawn, with the free hand, the double-triangle, pyramid…”103 Interest in the production of automatic drawings permeated all levels of society including those associated with different religious orders and societies including Spiritualists and Theosophists.

Interest in representations of the spiritual spheres through visual culture gradually supplanted depictions of fantasy and fairy land which, by the end of the nineteenth-century had, for the most part, been relegated to the nursery. In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, however, mediumistic artists continued to produce and exhibit their visionary art.104 Despite resistance to representations of the spirit world through material culture, many artists and viewers conceived of visionary art as authentic symbolic expressions of the spiritual spheres. Members of the International Congress of Spiritualists and Occultists Assembly, for example, believed that there existed a profound connection between the material and the spiritual world that was realized through the

103 “Symbolic Automatic Drawings,” p. 332. Karadja founded the White Cross Union and was President of the Universal Gnostic Alliance founded in January 1912 to propagate knowledge of “the Great Spiritual Laws which rule the Universe, and thus promise the spiritual evolution of the human race.” Sinnett’s praise might well have been exaggerated because of Karadja’s status as an aristocrat.
104 Artists such as Leonard Sarluis produced Symbolist paintings exhibited at the Salon de la Rose Croix and Spiritualists considered them visionary in nature. The Mystic Order of the Rose+Croix was founded in France by Rosicrucian’s Josephin Peladan (1859-1918) and exhibited and promoted art whose subjects were inspired by religion, mysticism, legend, myth, dream, allegory and some poetry. The Mystic Oder of the Rose+Croix held six salons from 1892-1897 and exhibited the work of approximately 250 artists during this period.
production of visual culture and opened the first and only exhibition of spirit art at the Paris Exposition of 1900. The exposition included demonstrations of hypnotism and table-turning, the summoning of spirits, faith-healing, astrology, alchemy, clairvoyance, prophecy and also provided information on the importance of dreams and the powerful energetic qualities of symbols. Lectures augmented the display and facilitated discussions between representatives of different countries and from many different schools of thought. This exhibition was considered pivotal for modern Spiritualism and represented a summation of Spiritualist research at the fin de siècle while it also served as a starting point for future investigation.

One of the objectives of the exhibit was to provide material evidence of spiritual existence and the “Musee Spirite” or Spiritualist Museum was one of the first of its kind in the history of the movement and was certainly the largest and most inclusive. It contained long tables filled with objects purported to be connected with the ethereal realms, including plaster cast imprints of human faces which were meant to offer material proof of the existence of spirits normally unseen. These molds, according to the founders of the museum, were taken “from impressions made at séances by spirit presences.” One of the most important and most well attended components of the exhibition was the display of visionary drawings and paintings believed to have been executed under spiritual guidance or in collaboration with unseen entities. Spirit art covered every available space on the walls as well as the tables provided and included representations of human faces and figures as well as decorative and abstracted designs. Although,
members of the International Congress of Spiritualists and Occultists and the artists who participated in the exhibition vowed that the objects were indisputable evidence of life after death, international viewers’ responses were mixed. Some gave credence to the objects displayed while others were vitriolic in their response. Even the anonymous author of the article that described the exhibition, for example, suggested that the artists who believed they worked in collaboration with unseen beings to produce their visionary paintings had, in fact, been working under the influence of mind altering drugs. The author continued writing that the art exhibited was “supposed to have been executed under unearthly guidance” yet exhibited a “certain strange ‘intensity,’ like work that might be done in an opium dream.”

Contempt, such as that demonstrated by critics of the “Musee Spirite,” was also visited upon French painter and engraver Fernand Desmoulin (1855-1914) whose visionary paintings were exhibited at the exposition, and the artist became a prime target for critics who rejected any notion of the value visionary art production:

Among the pictures on the walls of the Musee Spirite are some crayon drawings shown by M. Desmoulin, well known in Paris as an etcher, whose admirable work won for him his decoration as an officer of the Legion of Honor. Yet this accomplished artist, a man of the highest position in the intellectual life of France, exhibits with pride at the Musee Spirite worthless work which, he is persuaded, he executed under spirit guidance. It is certain that before he took to dabbling in spiritualism he would have looked on the feeble things with utter contempt.

106 Ibid. p. 2.
The author finished his diatribe with a lament about the pitiable state of the once great artist and prayed that the once “able artist” would soon recover from the delusion that he produced “spirit pictures”. Desmoulin, however, responded by providing evidence of his serious reflection with regard to his experience with automatic art production and rejected both acidic critical responses that questioned his grasp of his insanity and the scientific communities’ application of the “subliminal consciousness theory” which argued that visionary drawings were simply the result of subconscious auto-suggestion. Desmoulin reasoned, instead, that his “instructor’ could “simulate spirit agency very well at times” and decided that “no explanation of that mental order would in any way satisfactorily account for the phenomenon.” “Instructor”… he reasoned “acts and talks with such freedom and independence that you are obliged to treat him as a rational, if invisible personality.”

Psychologist and co-founder of the Institute of Field Limits of Psyche Djohar Si Ahmed wrote about the recent discovery of late nineteenth-century artist Fernand Desmoulin’s “several hundred pages of drawings and automatic writings” that had been abandoned after his death in 1914. Desmoulin was a successful engraver and portrait and landscape artist when, in 1900, he developed an interest in spiritualism at which time he became convinced that he produced pictures under the influence of spirits. Publishers of the Spiritualist periodical, *Light*, were quick to draw attention to Desmoulin’s recently

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107 Ibid. p. 2.
109 Djohar Si Ahmed, “La Traversée spirite de Fernand Desmoulin” (International Institute Metapsychique)http://www.metapsychique.org/La-traversee-spirite-de-Fernand.html
acquired interest in automatic writing and mediumistic art production and wrote about his submission of visionary portraits to the ‘Congrès Spirite’ held in Paris in 1900. The author of the article offered a description of some of the images that he had seen:

much interest was aroused by a number of pencil drawings of figures and heads obtained automatically through Fernand Desmoulin, a celebrated painter… The faces mostly were large, and many had the eyes closed; and encircling each was the semblance of a filmy mist, conveying to the spectator the impression that each face was peering out from an impenetrable background of darkness and gloom. The various expressions of each face were silently eloquent of the tortured soul within, and as one gazed upon them the faces alternately repelled and fascinated.  

In late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century England Spiritualists and Theosophists, despite their differences, often cooperated with each other and as a result Desmoulin’s spiritual portraits were analysed using a Theosophical perspective that focused on the development of the soul after physical death. One critic, for example, wrote that Desmoulin’s portraits revealed the “very sad, and even terrible” conditions endured by those spirits “recently passed over from the lowest grades of humanity” (fig. 3-9). Spiritualist concerns about the verification of communication between the living and the dead merged with Theosophical ideas about the evolution of the soul through the spiritual spheres. These ideas were amalgamated with rigidly maintained social class systems that

often categorize the ruling class as morally and therefore spiritually advanced while the lower classes were labeled as morally and spiritually inferior. Consequently, critics noted that, “The brutal and repulsive” representations of less evolved spirits were augmented by “[a] few portraits” that depicted “a more advanced stage of spirit condition, for these are drawn with lighter touch, while flowers around heads, and faces do not give one the same impression of misery and obscurity of atmosphere as do the others”112 (fig. 3-10).

Desmoulin’s celebrity as “a familiar personality in the leading literary and artistic society of Paris” whose “affection for Zola is well known” was an important element of Spiritualist journals that published information about his visionary images.113 Light, for example, highlighted Desmoulin as a man of high standing and impeccable judgement: “[s]urrounded as this artist is by a brilliant and materialistically inclined circle of friends, it was through a purely accidental occurrence that he became roused into the desire to

112 Ibid. 595.
exploit spiritistic phenomenon.”  

Desmoulin’s status as a male artist living in fin de siècle Paris meant that, despite his digression into mediumistic drawing, he was characterized as knowledgeable, authoritative and not given to hysteria. Spiritualist journals capitalized on late-nineteenth-century perceptions of masculinity as associated with controlled rationality:

M. Desmoulin, who knows nothing about the science or theories of Spiritualism, listens very attentively to any hints or explanations which may be forthcoming from friends more acquainted with our facts than himself. The interviewer asked him whether he had any ideas concerning how the phenomenon might possibly be produced, and obtained the reply, ‘I state facts; I do not explain. All this work is foreign to my usual thought and style. I live in an atmosphere of practical, matter-of-fact people, who care nothing for mysticism, and I myself, so exact and painstaking in my work, have nothing in common with that Instructor who, extravagant in his methods, flings in his portraits without apparently heeding where he will put the eyes, nose, or mouth.’

While Desmoulin appeared to reject the notion of a collaborative effort in the production of his mediumistic images, suggesting that he was no more than an instrument without autonomy, he simultaneously maintained self-rule by demonstrating that he was fully conscious during the process:

M. Desmoulin seated himself at the table with his paper and pencil… A few moments afterwards… commenced to draw… a spirit form [was seen] clairvoyantly overshadowing M. Desmoulin as he drew, the peculiarity being that the right half of his body only was influenced or controlled. M. Desmoulin remained perfectly conscious,

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115 Ibid. p. 595.
Desmoulin’s celebrity as an artist of status and one accepted by the Parisian intelligential of the period was considered above reproach and thus less likely to suffer the same level of derision afforded women artists who believed that they produced pictures in collaboration with unseen spirits.

The advent of WWI substantially increased Spiritualist’s and Theosophist’s promotion of the reality of life after physical death and new converts integrated their responses to scientific discovery, industrialization and uncompromising religiosity of the mid- and late- nineteenth centuries with reactions to the unprecedented horrors of The Great War of 1914-1918. Consequently, exhibitions of mediumistic art continued to draw public attention, and in 1913 *Light* magazine introduced a series of water-colour drawings exhibited in London as “inspired” and full of “spiritual beauty.” The artist, a woman, remains anonymous, but relationships to the symbolic content, style and composition of G.F. Watts’s work was commented upon at length, and in 1915 the symbolic and psychic representations of a husband and wife team gained recognition in Edinburgh Scotland. 117 Working as a unit they became renowned and gained respect by Edinburgh Spiritualists for their visionary pictures. One painting produced by the couple, entitled *The Dawn of Peace*, was particularly significant in relation to WWI. The picture,

according to the artists, had commenced “thirty-seven years ago” but was deliberately hidden from public until October 1913, “when the artists were strongly impressed” that the image was to “be finished and exhibited by 1915.” The painting, according to the couple, was meant to foretell the end of the horrors of WWI: “the picture is finished, and the end of the beginning has indeed commenced, for the reign of Anti-Christ is waning, and the dawn of peace is breaking through the fire and smoke of Armageddon.” The huge mediumistic work measured seven feet high by five feet wide and was exhibited at Shandwick-place Edinburgh for three weeks with the proceedings for admission donated to the British Red Cross Society.  

The Great War acted as a catalyst to major social and political transformations for men and women throughout Europe and North America. In the years before, Spiritualism offered opportunities for women to disrupt a patriarchal ideology that constructed them as spiritual and other-worldly in an effort to justify social and political confinement to the domestic world. The New Woman of 1880s, for example, galvanized issues of social and political equality between men and women and invested mediumistic women with social and cultural authority contradicting androcentric discourse that privileged ecclesiastical doctrine and science above Spiritualism and intuition. After the war Spiritualists experimented with revolutionary ideas of the Theosophical Society and made connections between the evolution of the soul in the afterlife and politically stimulated social reforms.

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in Britain. Ellis Powell, editor of the *Financial News* and author of several books on psychic science, for example, advocated complete social and political overhaul informed by belief in the immortality of the human spirit. He wrote,

> if we are right in our conviction of the deathlessness of the personal consciousness – the immortality of the spirit – that each individual soul is precious in the eyes of its Creator, that each constitutes a form of self-expression by Him, and that each has an appetite for its own continuance...for its own development – then psychic research and Spiritualism leap at once to the premier place among the social sciences. They are the mainsprings, the foundations of democracy, the justification of social reconstruction.

People advocated for the support of a worldwide religious, social, political and even spiritual evolution which they hoped would result in global unification and peace.

Spiritualist Sir Arthur Conan Doyle encapsulated one important component of this

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120 Ellis T. Powell, “Spiritualism and Social Reconstruction: Reform as Viewed from the Higher Psychic Standpoints,” *Light* XL: 2077 (October 30, 1920), p. 350; XL: 2078(6 November, 1920), p. 366; XL: 2079 (13 November 1920), p. 382; XL: 2080 (20 November 1920), p. 398; 27; XL: 2031 (November 1920), p. 414. Powell wrote about Theosophist’s belief that the same spirits return over and over again to experience mortal life. People who believed that on the death of the body the individual the soul was often reincarnated into the material world were referred to as re-incarnationists. Powell referred to the work of Harvard psychologist and Professor of Philosophy, William James (1842-1910) who was also trained as a medical doctor. He wrote books on the science of psychology, psychology of religious experience and Spiritualism, including *Human Immortality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine* (Boston and New York: Riverside Press Cambridge, 1898) and *The Will to Believe, Human Immortality* (New York, Longman’s Green and Co., 1897).
overwhelming reaction against conflict when he characterised the war as a spiritually inspired opportunity to demonstrate self-sacrifice though which humanity would evolve towards enlightenment:

It has been our fate among all innumerable generations of mankind, to face the most frightful calamity that has ever befallen the world…If our souls, wearied and tortured during these five dreadful years of self-sacrifice and suspense, can show no radical changes, then what souls will ever respond to a fresh influx of heavenly inspiration?...Why was this tremendous experience forced on mankind?...[the reasons are] essentially religious, not political… A thousand years hence those national results may matter little, but the religious result is the reform of the decadent Christianity of to-day, its simplification, its purification, and its reinforcement by the facts of spirit communion and the clear knowledge of what lies beyond the exit-door of death.121

Men and women rejuvenated their interest in modern Spiritualism and participated in alternative belief systems such as those promoted by the Theosophical Society which amalgamated beliefs of modern Spiritualism with Eastern mysticism to advance ideas about the continued evolution of the soul after physical death. 122

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122 London Lodge of the Theosophical Society was founded in 1878 by Charles Carleton Massey (1838-1905) originally under the name British Theosophical Society of the Arya Samaj of Aryavart. The London Lodge was the first official lodge of the Theosophical Society in London since its foundation in 1878. The new society was originally affiliated with the Hindu reform movement Arya Samaj that promoted the authority of the Vedas, texts that were believed to have originated in ancient India. In 1882, the Arya Samaj and the The London Lodge separated, and the name of the lodge was changed to British Theosophical Society and in 1883 it became the London Lodge of the Theosophical Society. The first president was Charles Carleton Massey from 1878 to 1883; Anna Kingsford 1883. In 1883 Alfred Percy Sinnett became a member of the London Lodge at which time it was separated into those who followed Kingsford and those who followed Sinnett. Charles Webster Leadbeater became a member in 1883 but was accused of engaging in sexual activities with young boys and was forced to resign in 1906. Annie Besant became the president in 1908.
During the years before WW1 feminist writers including Helena Blavatsky and Annie Besant, validated women’s spiritual experiences by conceptualizing them as exemplifications of conduits of exceptional intuition that facilitated enhancement of artistic ability.\(^{123}\) The emergence of Theosophical philosophy had a significant impact on fin-de-siècle and early-twentieth-century writers and artists throughout Western Europe and served to enhance perceptions of women as talented artists and spiritual mediums.
Consequently, images produced by women visionary artists who thought that they communicated with spirits enjoyed a resurgence of popular attention after the war, much of that interest, however, was generated by viewers who practiced an unbiased approach to the teachings of Spiritualism and the writings of the contemporary advocates of Theosophy. (fig. 3-11)

The Spirit of Freedom The gale is passing, but fluttering in its wake comes a new spirit-dazed-half fearful – but
heedless of the institutions, ideas, and conventions that perished in the storm.124

Beginning soon after the end of WWI, periodicals, such as The Sketch and Eve catered to a generation of women who had been changed by their experiences of the war and who were excited by their new found freedom in the aftermath of the fighting. The journals featured cheerful banter and included whimsical scenes of romance and playful sensuality. The magazines focused on the possibilities of “The Spirit of Freedom” that could now be enjoyed by women “of all classes.” These periodicals promoted the newly emancipated woman and included images of spirit art produced by women artists who believed they worked in collaboration with unseen entities. While these powerful visionary pictures demonstrated women’s new found independence in their capacity as artists whose work was publicized they also reveal a deep-seated anguish that remained prevalent for years after the end of the war. Women artists produced visionary images as a form of catharsis that facilitated recovery from devastation caused by The Great War. Unfortunately, despite feminist writings that disrupted trivialization of women’s spiritual activities, their mediumistic pictures were often misunderstood by viewers who were either unfamiliar with or dismissive of Spiritualist and Theosophical ideas about communication with unseen entities.

Women advocates of Theosophy and Spiritualism who fought for social and political reform and challenged patriarchy provoked a backlash from the male establishment. Medical institutions, for example, warned of the onset of “utramania” and

applied the term to women who characterized themselves as feminists or spiritualists. American physician Frederic Marvin, for instance, warned that the “utromaniac”, “becomes possessed by the idea that she has some startling mission in the world, she forsakes her home, her children, and her duty, to mount the rostrum and proclaim the peculiar virtues of free-love, elective affinity, or the reincarnation of souls.” As a result, women artists, including Georgiana Houghton and Ethel Le Rossignol, who rejected established doctrine and publically announced their affiliation with Spiritualism and Theosophical philosophy respectively risked public ridicule and worse, incarceration in the lunatic asylum.

Despite risk of ridicule or retaliation, women participated in the investigation of alternative or esoteric spirituality by becoming active members of associations including

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the Spiritualist movement and the Theosophical Society. Visionary artist and Spiritualist Hargrave Martin, for example, worked under the pseudonym “Candida” and exhibited her pictures ‘drawn under spirit control’ at the sixty-fifth exhibition of the Society of Women Artists. Sketch magazine published black and white reproductions of her drawings filling the centre of the page but offered only a brief description of the method used to produce the “decorative and peculiar” work. (fig. 3-12) A 1920 edition of the “fashionable woman’s journal,” Eve Magazine, also contained a

![An Extraordinary “Spirit” Picture](image)

Figure 3-13: Hargrave Martin (Candida). Spirit Picture, 1920. Ink on paper. Reproduced from Eve (1920)

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126 E.B. “The Position of Woman in Spiritualism,” Light XXX: 1552 (October 1910), p. 488. E.B. is vehement in her discussion of the “intolerable” subjugation of women in the name of religion and the benefit of Spiritualism to a “thinking woman”. She writes, for example, “Our spirit friends teach us that God is just; that He never meant for one sex to rule the other…men and women stand equal on the Spiritualist platform, and they work as equals in the administration of their churches.”


128 Ink of different colours was spilled on the paper and the artist “under psychic control,” scratched the background using a penknife.
reproduction of another of Martin’s disturbing yet powerful spirit drawings 129 (fig. 3-13).

The editors of the periodicals perceived the renewed public interest in paranormal phenomenon which included the production of mediumistic pictures and so published reproductions of Martin’s drawing in an effort to capitalise on interest in the “present public discussion on inspired drawings.” The forceful design of Martin’s image fascinated readers, and the author of the short article commented on the difference between Martin’s work done without intervention of unseen entities, described as of “the pretty Christmas card variety,” and those produced “under inspiration, and when practically in a trance condition” Martin produced “a much more powerful type of picture.”130 Martin described how the pictures were made:

The technical processes of these (inspired) drawings are simply amazing and make me gasp—large pieces are ‘chipped’ out one only uses pens and penknife, and black and blue ink, and the scraping and rubbing that goes on almost shakes my arm off, the lights in the picture are obtained by the slashes of a penknife on the blue surface, slashes apparently given in the most careless fashion, but producing surprising results.131

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130 My emphasis on the word “practically”. Although women at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth-century enjoyed a new-found freedom in their experimentations with their mediumistic abilities those abilities were often characterized as manifestations that “emphasized women’s dumb passivity rather than their former role as articulate vehicles for divine truth.” Ann Braude’s, Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 175. Also see, Alex Owen, The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England (London: Virago Press, 2004); John Durham Peters, Speaking Into The Thin Air: A History of the Idea of Communication (London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 63-108, 137-176. Women artists such as Georgiana Houghton and Ethel Le Rossignol wrote in their personal notes about the collaborative nature of their communication with unseen spirits.
The title of Martin’s picture was unfortunately omitted from the article but the author noted that it was given “under control” but also that it served as a commentary on modern theatrical production in London with which Martin, as a contemporary woman, would have been familiar. The didactic nature of Martin’s forceful picture, which appears to point humanity away from sin and towards spiritual salvation, is reinforced by the author’s description of its content:

The centre of the picture is occupied by a bird-like animal of an unearthly type; the plumage seems to be composed of spikes with peacock eyes and the “bird” is in the position of one darting on its prey, or exercising great vigilance symbolic of vanity, love of applause, etc. On the right is a cross upon which an expressive figure of Christ is stretched, the light aforementioned falling on the figure in remarkable way. On the left is a small door way, lighted, and out of this looks a small figure, seeking inspiration from the rays or lines of light streaming from the feet of the Christ, but this contact the malignant “bird” with its mundane tendencies endeavours to prevent. Certainly the drawing gives a sense of power, even in reproduction, and provides an excellent symbolic suggestion to those who feel the triviality of the modern drama and are in sympathy with the attempts of the repertory theatres to speak to man’s higher self. 132

Martin offered no more insight into the symbolic significance of her visionary art and her choice to produce her mediumistic paintings under cover of her pseudonym “Candida” demonstrates her reluctance to reveal her belief in her ability to communicate and to work in collaboration with unseen spirits. Nevertheless, Martin’s, alliance with spiritual beings permitted her departure from the production of “pretty” pictures and facilitated instead

132 Ibid. p. 32.
her ability to produce and exhibit powerful representations. In addition, although Martin appears to assume the position of passivity when she described her amazement at the content of her images, she simultaneously reveals her belief that she produced the paintings in collaboration with, rather than under the control of, spiritual beings when she described herself as being “practically” in a trance during the production of her visionary pictures as opposed to completely under the control of spirits. Martin’s choice to paint under the pseudonym “Candida” protected her identity and simultaneously demonstrated her autonomy. Martin’s assumed name is also the title of Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw’s (1856-1950) popular play in which the female protagonist “Candida” demonstrates her intelligence and her independent nature. Visionary artists Georgiana Houghton in the mid-nineteenth-century and Ethel Le Rossignol in the early-twentieth-century demonstrated their independence when they openly professed their belief that they collaborated with unseen spirits in the production of their publically exhibited mediumistic images.

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133 Shaw’s play was first published in 1898 as part of his Plays Pleasant. The Royal Court Theatre at Sloane Square in Kensington staged several productions of the play between 1904 and 1907. Candida is presented as a strong contemporary woman responsible for her husband’s success. See also, Adams, Elsie Bonita, Bernard Shaw and the Aesthetes (Ohio State University Press: Ohio, 1986), p. 107. The English translation for the Latin word “Candida” is clear and white like that of pure quartz crystal.
Chapter Four

Healing Vibrations through Visionary Art

Circles are the highest symbols...Fragments are all parts of circular bodies, as a piece of granite rock is a part of those primitive formations that encircle the earth. Atoms gyrate upon their axes and follow the line of their strongest attractions. Things move in spirals...Sea-shells are built up spirally. Vines ascend forest trees spirally. Particles of steel flying toward a magnet move spirally. This law, with few exceptions, applies to atoms, worlds, systems, civilizations, and all those historic cycles of ever-recurring spiritual epochs and eras that distinguish antiquity.

In the mid-nineteenth century, British visionary artist Georgiana Houghton produced groundbreaking abstracted visionary pictures that incorporated layer upon layer of intricately rendered and interconnected circle and spiral shapes that embodied nineteenth-century ideas about the transcendental value of circular shapes. Houghton believed that she worked in collaboration with ethereal beings and she expressed ideas about the nature of the spiritual realms though her visionary art. Her experimentation with vibrant

135 Visionary images produced by women mediums, in particular, are difficult to locate and often fragile. Their pictures are rarely exhibited on the walls of art museums and instead are either lost or remain as reproductions in nineteenth-century Spiritualist journals. As a result, they are absent from most academic art historical literature. In some fortunate cases, however, visionary pictures are stored in manuscript collections or displayed on the walls of Spiritualist churches.
colours and manipulation of form prefigured early modernist painting techniques and the visionary nature of her pictures also foreshadowed mediumistic paintings produced by contemporary artists including twentieth-century Canadian artist Alma Rumba (1902 - 1978). Rumba’s visionary paintings have been exhibited at venues throughout Ontario Canada including the Art Gallery of Ontario, York University Art Gallery, and the Art Gallery of Mississauga. Her mediumistic images were also featured in Jeremiah Munce’s award winning documentary “The Alma Drawings,” presented at the Hot Docs Film Festival in Toronto Ontario in 2005. Scholars of the late-twentieth century who have studied her visionary representations posit that her imagery acted as educational tools while they also facilitated unconscious spiritual and physical healing in viewers.137

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The infinitely mutable qualities inherent to visionary imagery offer opportunities to transgress boundaries of time and topography and also to explore possible connections between Houghton’s visionary images of the mid-nineteenth century and Rumball’s images produced in the mid-twentieth century. Interstitial space is theorized as existing as a window through which to re-negotiate and perhaps re-conceptualise material culture, and as such I hope to take advantage of visionary artist’s ability to transcend fixed ideas of the material world. With this idea in mind, I introduce twenty-first-century preliminary scholarly examination of images produced by visionary artist Alma Rumball

Figure 4-1: Alma Rumball. *Fuchsia Joy* 1960, coloured pencil on paper. Privately owned. Reproduced from a card.
in order to afford a more malleable framework than has thus far been employed within which to conduct my inquiry into the nature of nineteenth-century visionary artist Georgiana Houghton’s mediumistic paintings. I will examine Houghton’s visionary representation within a late-nineteenth-century social and political context enhanced by a cursory examination of theoretical methodologies introduced by twenty-first-century interrogations into mediumistic representation.

Rumball, like Houghton, produced drawings that included circular and spiraled shapes in the form of sea shells which she believed acted as portals between the spirit and the material world. *Fuchsia Joy* (1960) (fig.4-1) for example, depicts a densely layered intricately constructed garden filled with myriad organically shaped forms that seem to draw the viewer’s eye into the center of the picture while simultaneously encouraging a more comprehensive perusal of the entire drawing. Rumball filled her image with living things in the form of densely tinted flower shapes within which she concealed creatures including pollinating bees and the spiraling shape of a snail-like form. Her image evokes a sense of serenity and is reminiscent of an uncultivated hospitable environment in which a variety of species of plants and animals flourish together in harmony.  

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138 Snails have also been associated with laziness but also used as a form of divination. They have symbolized rebirth and their ability to appear and disappear was connected with the waxing and waning of the moon. From a psychological perspective the soft interior is related to the subconscious state while the hard exterior is connected with consciousness. See, Ad de Vries, *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1976), p. 430; J. C. Cooper, *Symbolic and Mythological Animals* (London: Aquarian Press, 1992), p. 213.
Buddhist, Tibetan and Hindu masters whose particular rhythms, produced in the form of curves, dots and repetitive circles and spirals, stimulate a meditative response from viewers. Like Houghton’s and Rumball’s images thangka are constructed using a precise and ritualistic method in which grids of angles and intersecting lines are systematically transcribed onto a flat surface and the sacred imagery serves as a teaching tool and as a focus of meditative contemplation leading towards transcendental enlightenment. As a result of twenty-first-century fascination with discoveries about the possible nature and content of Rumball’s visionary drawings, spiritual leaders and scholars of the scientific and medical communities continue to conduct examinations of her extraordinary images in an ongoing effort to unlock the densely coded meaning of her symbols. In the meantime, spiritual teachers of many different faiths and belief systems have characterised Rumball’s pictures as subliminal activation drawings that were created to generate feelings of peace, to facilitate healing in viewers and as coded symbols that portend the eventual ascension of humanity. Houghton’s and later Rumball’s images


140 Alma Rumball’s daughter-in-law Wendy Oke attended the 30th Anniversary SSF-IIHIS (The International Institute of Integral Human Sciences) Conference 2005 where she presented her lecture “The Automatic Drawings of Alma Rumball: Indications of Cosmic Designs through the Unconscious” followed by a two hour workshop and discussion session. SSF-IIHIS annual international conferences host scholars within a multidisciplinary and multicultural forum that includes presentations by practicing Buddhists, Benedictine Monks, astronauts, mathematicians, physicists, medical practitioners, cellular biologists, psychotherapists and interfaith ministers. I am grateful to Wendy Oke who shared unpublished
are analogous because they are conceived of as the product of discourse between the material and spiritual spheres and so disrupt borders created by physical constructions of time and space. Other important correlations between works produced by both artists are that they are the product of a synthesis of Spirituality, religious conviction and artistic practice which culminated in intricately rendered drawings and paintings believed to encourage spiritual enlightenment and to facilitate energetic healing.

The idea that ethereal entities had the capability and the desire to communicate with individuals in the material world was a familiar concept for Spiritualists in nineteenth-century Britain and the method by which this was accomplished was published and widely disseminated on a regular basis in articles and in books on the subject. One unidentified author, for instance, whose information was received through spiritual entities in the form of automatic writing, described the phenomenon as “sufficiently well known.” The author wrote that it was common practice to expect intelligent communication between the living and the dead “through the medium of movement of physical objects, pro-ceeding from intelligences wholly independent of the persons present.” And that various messages in the form of writing and drawing had been verified absolutely as having been received by “disembodied entities.”

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documentation that traces the results of her travels, her research and her interviews conducted over a thirty year period with me during my visit between 31 July and 5 August 2009. Oke, who has served as custodian of Rumball’s visionary images beginning at the time of her death in 1978 also afforded me the opportunity to examine Rumball’s original pictures.

141 *Glimpses of a Brighter Land.* [Received by automatic writing] (Bailliere, Tindall, and Cox, London, 1871), p. VII.
142 Ibid. p. VIII.
143 Ibid. p. IX.
Houghton practiced as a professional portrait and landscape painter before she became fascinated with new opportunities offered by nineteenth-century spiritualist belief systems and, beginning in 1861, she spent time experimenting with different methods of communicating with unseen entities and attended and later conducted regular séances at which she participated in automatic writing and drawing sessions.

Houghton was not given to fancy and she demonstrated her interest in spiritualist practice while she maintained an open but yet critical approach to messages that professed to have originated from the spirit world. Over time Houghton became convinced that she did indeed communicate with disembodied entities and although she asked for advice from spirits she did not believe that their “changed conditions” which placed them “beyond that of the earth” made them infallible and she weighed carefully any advice offered before it was either “accepted or rejected.”\(^{144}\) Houghton became proficient using pencils at first in her automatic drawing sessions and soon began to experiment with paintbrushes and watercolours.

During this preliminary learning period Houghton discovered that spirits communicated representations of everyday life in symbolic form. Her interest in

\(^{144}\) Georignana Houghton, *Evenings at home in Spiritual Séance* (London: Trübner & Co., Ludgate Hill, 1881), pp. 71, 261-63. Houghton demonstrated a balanced perspective in her examination of Spiritual practice in the nineteenth century and believed that unbiased research was a necessary component to the progression of the movement. She wrote about the development of The Dialectical Society which held one of its first meetings on the 13 April 1869. “A very important step was now taken, which was an evidence how rapidly Spiritualism was making itself felt, so that it could no longer continue to be quietly ignored as a fallacy of fraud.” Houghton’s capacity to think critically was demonstrated when she wrote that the Dialectical Report had been “formulated into a volume” that she considered a valuable source of information and she did not “at all mind the antagonistic element it contains, because everyone who enters upon a study of the subject ought to see all that our opponents have to say, and their own common sense may sometime shew them what great unfairness is often exhibited. Besides which, we want no blind believers.”
symbolic representation through spiritual guidance was augmented by information
gathered by other Spiritualists of the period who had published treatises in the form of
Spiritualist texts and journals offering detailed information on the symbolic significance
of various visual forms. Spiritualist symbolic reference differed from those of the
Symbolist tradition espoused by modern symbolist and abstract artists including Wassily
Kandinsky, Edvard Munch and Kazimar Malevich. They had absorbed the writings of
philosophers such as Stéphane Mallarmé and Maurice Maeterlinck whose work was
informed by ideas that focused heavily on “the gloom of the Spiritual atmosphere” or the
“laws of duality and correspondences in synesthesia.” In contrast, mediumistic artists
who also considered themselves Spiritualists believed that the symbolic meanings
inherent to their visionary work supported ideas of spiritual love, goodness and purity;
ideas that were thought to promote celestial wisdom and that were embedded in the forms
and lines that made up various visionary images. The symbolic meaning of red, for
example, could be emblematic of “spiritual love” white, “purity and goodness” while
blue was reserved for references to “the celestial dwelling place of the Almighty.”
Houghton augmented her study with information that she came to believe was channeled
from the highest spheres of the ethereal world. During her lifetime, Houghton actively
promoted and exhibited three core forms of the mediumistic symbolic watercolors that

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145 Wassily Kandinsky, Concerning the Spiritual in Art, trans. Michael T.H. Sadler (London: Tate
146 Glimpses of a Brighter Land, p. 25.
she believed resulted from her intercommunion with unseen entities including representations of God the Father, The Holy Trinity and spirit flowers and fruits.

A number of Spiritualist texts supported the idea that mediumistic writing and drawing was provided “through the passive hand of the Medium” without the intervention of any “mental volition on his or her part” and compared the artist to a mere device of communication “simply used as a machine.” 147 Houghton, however, adhered to information obtained through automatic writing sessions that stated that spiritual entities did not usurp the will of the medium. “Yet think not by this we control your actions. You can act and think, and we only try to influence your actions through your mind, to purify and raise the tone of thought; to ennoble your ideas, and help, not force, you to progress.” 148 Houghton did not suspend conscious control in which she acted merely as a passive instrument exploited by active autonomous spirits. She addressed implication that she was a passive recipient of spiritual control and provided an account of a particular instance in which she believed that one of her spirit guides had dared to imply that she took no part in the construction of the mediumistic paintings:

[the unseen entity] told me that I was ‘only a machine,’ to which I demurred, and brought him to acknowledge that I had taught him much about modern colours, although he guided my hand in the use of them, but I could always leave off when I pleased; so he admitted his error, and promised never to call me a machine again. 149

147 Ibid. p. ix.
148 Ibid. p. 15. It is not uncommon to see contradictions in nineteenth-century examples of automatic writing.
149 Ibid. p. 20.
Houghton’s hand might be guided by the spirits but it was her knowledge of contemporary social conditions and writings and her skill with the use of modern colours and drawing techniques that produced the finished painting. Houghton’s ability to establish and maintain a sustainable working synchronization between medium and spirit entity was attained through a meditative process that facilitated a cohesive fusion between her energy and that of the attendant spirit guide. It was this process, she believed, which resulted in a collaborative effort between the material and the spiritual that culminated in the production of powerful mediumistic images.

Houghton actively promoted her mediumistic paintings during a period in which nineteenth-century women artists were denigrated and the rise of socialist imperatives and women’s suffrage were beginning to take root. She wrote letters to the most prominent and widely read spiritualist magazines of the era including *Medium and Daybreak*, the *Spiritual Magazine* and the *Christian Spiritualist* to encourage support for her exhibitions, in part, because she believed that her visionary images were intended as inspirational messages for the public.\(^{150}\) She was also keenly aware that, “some persons may question the utility of spiritual art” but believed that “we need in this world something more than mere food and clothing, and drawing is one method by which our

\(^{150}\) Georgiana Houghton, “Another exhibition of Spirit-Drawings,” *The Medium and Daybreak*, 83: 72 (3 November, 1871), p. 359, “Having sent the following article to the *Spiritual Magazine* and the *Christian Spiritualist*, perhaps you will also be so good as to insert it in your paper, as from its extensive circulation it may bring the idea before persons who may not see the other periodicals, and I should wish to do all in my power towards the fulfillment of the plan, so as to have no cause for self-reproach if it should not be carried out....”
invisible friends have illustrated many new thoughts.”  

Houghton persevered despite trivialization of the importance of her visionary art by male art critics that professed a belief in the existence of life after death yet disparaged the symbolic content of her pictures. She gained inspiration from the spiritualist gatherings that she attended and admired the “the grit of the energetic workers in Spiritualism, those who had borne the brunt of the battle from the beginning; never having been daunted by the unpopularity of the cause they had espoused, nor by the ridicule to which it had subjected them.”  

She joined with the most enthusiastic of Spiritualists that wanted to share “some striking fact of their own experience to contribute to the general store of knowledge.”  

In solidarity with other Spiritualists who worked tirelessly to educate the public about modern Spiritualism, Houghton exhibited her pictures on a regular basis during afternoon receptions that she held at her home and also in an exhibition held in the more formal venue of the New British Gallery in Old Bond Street in London.

The idea of an active presence as inherent in visual art that depicted spiritual or religious content is not a new concept and was an important component in the production of sacred imagery in Byzantine and Western European art from the sixth to the thirteenth centuries. Images used for devotional purposes and that decorated interior sacred spaces where venerated as capable of performing miraculous acts and in some cases were

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152 Ibid. pp. 83, 84.
153 Houghton, *Evenings at Home*, pp. 83, 84, 359. When she wrote to the *Medium and Daybreak* to persuade them to circulate information about her automatic paintings she made clear her intention to introduce the ideas of Spiritualism to the public. “I should wish to do all in my power towards the fulfillment of the plan, so as to have no cause for self-reproach if it should not be carried out….”
believed to have originated in the heavenly spheres. Some pictures were considered archiropoietic which meant that they had been produced through the hand of God and in so doing had been spiritually transformed through divine intervention. Houghton believed that her visionary watercolours embodied similar active transformative energy that could be accessed by the viewing public. She described an event that exemplified the healing potential of her visionary images:

[Mrs. Rolls] took home her picture, and one day when a friend was coming to see her, who did not know that she had it, she took it into the sitting–room, still wrapped in its papers. After some little time, the young lady said, ‘It is a most curious thing, but I feel just as I do when I am looking at Miss Houghton’s drawings.’ Mrs. Rolls then told her that she really had one in the room, and produced it to be admired and enjoyed.

Houghton’s abstracted watercolour *The Omnipresence of the Lord* (1862) (fig.4-2) can be conceived of as an image that activates self-healing and transcendental experience in

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viewers and appears to vibrate from beneath the surface of the pigment in a transcendental sweep of energetic line and colour. Her drawing exudes a timeless quality depicting a space in which time and place is irrelevant. Her image emanates an ethereal luminosity as though light rather than tint was used to create the background over which spiraling white lines guide the viewer’s eye throughout the surface of the image.

Houghton’s multiple layers of interconnected lines over colour oscillate between order/disorder, recede/advance, movement/stasis, material/immaterial, instantaneous/continuous, moment in time/eternity, resolve/dissolve, figurative/non-figurative, order/chaos, temporal/spatial, interior and exterior and microcosm and macrocosm producing a sense of multi-layered, multi-dimensional and multi-temporal spaces.

Applications of vibrant yellows, reds and greens appear to pulsate beneath coils of bright streaks that help to integrate unbound energies with stabilizing influences.

Houghton’s image relates notions of the mechanisms of the interior body in the form of active cells, and essentially what we might now perceive of as molecules and DNA sequences while it simultaneously envisions star and planetary evolutions of the cosmos. Her visionary picture suggests a miraculous and supernatural space; a tempest; a transformative fissure harbouring no inhibitions or constraints whose surface both conceals and reveals the notion of profound mystery. An absence of straight line in favour of strong interchangeable curved contour produces a harmonious patterning and acts to create a compelling ebb and flow or centripetal/centrifugal component to the
image which draws the viewer’s eye towards several interconnected vortexes while simultaneously redirecting the gaze over the entire surface of the picture plane.

The vigorous mark making produces ambiguous vacillations between representations of physically dense three dimensional qualities that appear to dissolve and then reappear out of flattened, shallow two dimensional spaces. Houghton, despite the energetic convergence of line and colour, maintains a meditative balance of serenity within chaos through her use of a harmonious system of compositional lines. The configuration of overlapping lines and forms appear to lead the viewer on a roller coaster ride throughout the canvas while they also serve to maintain control over the deeper more mysterious components of the image. Houghton’s use of dark tones in greens, blues and reds serve to intensify and to contradict the various shades of yellow pigment that lead the eye towards the background of the image and also suggest the existence of unknown territories while they simultaneously offer respite from the powerful energetic force embodied in the whirl of line.

Houghton’s use of a combination of analogous and complimentary colour and repetitive, rhythmic, circular shapes unifies the content of her image and constructs a finely tuned and harmonious balance between order and chaos. In addition, the frame serves to contain the powerful force so as not to overwhelm the spectator while Houghton suggests the trajectory of continuity outside the confines of the border. Finally, she constructed a diagonal line that divides the cluster of active vortexes through which rays of white hot energy emerge on the upper left of the image from the lower right part of the
picture which reveals a still active yet comparatively serene and peaceful surface. Her use of a strong diagonal creates an asymmetrical balance while drawing attention to depth through subtle perspective conveying a sense of movement and speed.

A number of members of the artistic community in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Britain were involved in Spiritualism including critic John Ruskin and artists such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, James McNeill Whistler, Phoebe Traquair, William Holman Hunt, James Tissot, and G.F. Watts. And paintings such as Rossetti’s *Beata Beatrix* (1864-70), for example, in which he depicted his wife Elizabeth Siddall in a medium-like trance suggests knowledge of some of the tenets of modern Spiritualism. The innovative abstracted qualities of Houghton’s visionary pictures, however, eclipsed figurative representations of Spirituality produced by artists such as Rossetti.

Houghton’s title *The Omnipresence of the Lord*, offers insight into, if not the meaning of her picture, then possible sources that informed the content of her image.

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She made no secret of her devotion to Christianity and to the teachings of the Bible which she easily amalgamated with her Spiritualist beliefs and she took pride in her ability to provide clergymen of every denomination insight to the significance of her visionary drawings. Houghton conceived of her images as inspired by scriptural text but also as active productive extensions of Biblical writings. In her role as a teacher to male clergy Houghton disrupts boundaries that prevented women from taking part in ecclesiastical functions of the church. Houghton also made clear that she was as committed to Spiritualism as she was to Christianity and she wrote:

> When I go away, I shall have no objection to the commonplace chronicle of “died, on such a day,” for we literally do have to pass through the change called death, and no one who is either a Christian or a spiritualist, and I thank God that I am both, considers that death signifies annihilation; it is simply the dissolution of the mortal form, from which the spirit has been liberated.  

Houghton believed that clergy might benefit from close readings of her visionary images which had been delivered to her from spirits that dwelled in the highest and most powerful realms of the heavenly spheres. She wrote about the impact of one of her sermons:

> A clergyman friend of mine asked the spirits of what benefit a belief in Spiritualism could be to him, and was told that it would give him the certainty of the hereafter; to which he replied that he already had that, and the answer was, “Yes, with your reason, but this gives vitality to it.” And that is just what it seems to me. We believe what the Bible teaches us, but Spiritualism brings all those past events into our daily life, and links us so closely with all those who have

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been God’s agents in the past, that thousands of years seem but as yesterday, and those whose names have hitherto been only as words, we recognise as among our friends.\textsuperscript{159}

Houghton’s status as a visionary artist provided an avenue through which she reinterpreted and built upon androcentrically dominated religious text in the form of symbolically profound visual cultural production.\textsuperscript{160}

Her revelations would have also been supported by the work of other earlier progressive speakers and writers such as John Wesley (1703-1791) whose sermons, which focused on the omnipotence of God, were published several times during his lifetime and continued to appear in print long after his death.\textsuperscript{161} Wesley was one of several prolific writers on the subject of Christian virtues within the context of everlasting life and he often included and expanded on well known quotes from the scriptures. He recognized the incredulousness of sustaining a belief in the existence of an afterlife while he also publically affirmed his conviction that God was spirit, eternal and omniscient:

\begin{quote}
Indeed, this subject is far too vast to be comprehended by the narrow limits of human understanding. We can only say, The great God, the eternal, the almighty Spirit, is as unbounded in his presence as in his duration and power…he
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid. p. 62.
\textsuperscript{160} Houghton spoke with clergy who attended her exhibitions and believed that she was responsible for interpreting the “new truths” embedded in her images. She recalled that she answered “many questions” and that one of her “clerical friends, after having been with [her] for some hours…told [her] that he carried away with him subjects of no end of sermons”. Houghton, \textit{Evenings at Home}, p. 91. Rachel Oberter came to similar conclusions in her study \textit{Spiritualism and the Visual Imagination}, p. 320.
\textsuperscript{161} Wesley helped to organize Christian societies throughout England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland and he developed the idea of personal accountability which he promoted through his sermons. His accounts with regard to the duration and power of a universal God were not uncommon in nineteenth-century notions of Christianity.
is said to dwell in heaven: but, strictly speaking, the heaven of heavens cannot contain him; but he is in every part of his dominion. The universal God dwelleth in universal spaces...he regulates the motions of the heavenly bodies, of the sun, moon, and stars; that he is...The all-informing soul, that fills, pervades and actuates the whole. 162

English critic John Ruskin’s book Modern Painters published over a course of five volumes, from 1843 to 1860, inspired the work of the Pre-Raphaelites and would have been accessible to other practicing artists including Georgiana Houghton. 163 Ruskin also endorsed the idea of the ubiquitous omnipotence of God:

He is equally in all, or without all. Many have been the disputes among philosophers whether there be any such thing as empty space in the universe; and it is now generally supposed that all space is full...But the Heathen himself will bear us witness...'All things are full of God.' Yea, and space exists beyond the bounds of creation...even that space cannot exclude Him who fills the heaven and the earth. 164

Although Ruskin wrote that no mortal could convey the essence of the power of God he also believed that a sense of the omnipotent nature and glory of God might be conveyed through an inspired combination of colour and light. Houghton’s visionary picture

163 Ruskin became a firm believer in Spiritualism and when he was reminded of his former disbelief in the immortality of the soul he remarked to a friend, “Yes, I remember it very well. That which revived this belief in my mind was, more than anything else, the undeniable proofs of it offered by Spiritualism.” J.M. Peebles, M.D., M.A., Ph.D., What is Spiritualism? Who are These Spiritualists? and What can Spiritualism do for the World? (Michigan: Peebles Publishing Co., 1910), p. 78. Houghton was acquainted with Peebles’s work and she wrote about welcoming him to England. Houghton, Evenings at Home, p. 276.
164 John Ruskin, Modern Painters (London: Smith and Elder, 1846), pp. 168-170. This excerpt reiterates philosophical ideologies about a microcosm for the divine macrocosm.
presents a visual representation of Ruskin’s conception of that which is omnipotent and therefore unknowable.

Clergy absorbed Houghton’s teachings and they attended exhibition of her images but artists who did not necessarily understand the symbolic content of her pictures were, nevertheless, fascinated by her innovative technical proficiency and focused on the abstracted style of her visionary pictures. Artist Frederick Wilson (1858-1932), for example, offered an insightful perspective as Houghton’s contemporary when he wrote about his impression of her visionary pictures and he commented in particular on the “beautiful workmanship” of Houghton’s “spiritual flowers” which he characterized as a “new revelation.” Wilson admired Houghton’s ability to apply colour which he considered especially extraordinary because of her successful use of the “most powerful combination of primary colours” that produced a convincing representation of a

165 Houghton. *Evenings at home*, pp. 167, 246. Artists of the nineteenth-century were as interested in the phenomenon of the spirit world as were many others of the period but the risk of ridicule meant that many kept their interest in Spiritualism private. Even so, Houghton refers to two artists that demonstrated curiosity in spiritualist practice. “On January 4th 1868 I had gone to a séance at Mrs. Guppy’s…there were eleven persons present (one of whom was Mr. Holman Hunt) including myself.” Another artist that Houghton referred to by name in her autobiography was feminist activist, satirist and artist Florence Claxton who had exhibited paintings with the Society of Women Artists and had attended Houghton’s exhibition. Houghton wrote that, “the sweet artist and very charming person, had been brought by a friend to my Exhibition in Old Bond Street. She afterwards came here to see me, and pressed me very warmly to spend an evening with her, although I usually decline all such invitations I could not resist her, and went.” Florence Claxton’s sister, artist Adelaide Claxton, appears also to have indulged her interest in aspects of the Spiritual spheres and her painting *Wonderland* c. 1860 depicts a small child engrossed in her reading unaware that she is surrounded by phantoms.

166 Frederick Wilson, “Spirit-Picture Exhibition,” *Medium and Daybreak* 63: II (16 June 1871), p. 193. Frederick Wilson (1858-1932) became one of the leading craft artists for Louis Comfort Tiffany & Co., making stained glass windows that focused on ecclesiastical leaded-glass design during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century. He was born and raised in Britain and gained training in painting and design from his father. He was an established artist in Britain when he immigrated to the United States sometime between 1891 and 1892. Wilson worked at Tiffany Studios for almost thirty years and most of his designs were conducted there but at times he designed for other studios including Heaton Butler & Bayne, Godwin Studios, The Gorham Company, Judson Studios, and the Los Angeles Art Glass Company.
“mystified rainbow” as well as the effect of her groundwork “awash in a blend of colours.” He was equally intrigued by her capacity to achieve and maintain cohesiveness in her paintings without benefit of outline. Wilson wrote that Houghton’s foundation provided the perfect ethereal background for the “curves, spirals, floats of colour, curlicews, shell involutes, and ramifications” that filled the surface of her canvas. He was inspired by Houghton’s use of scriptural texts as an explanatory tool for her spiritualist paintings in which titles such as *Glory be to God*, *The Hands of the Holy Ghost* and *Eye of God* were meant to help clarify the content of her pictures.\(^{167}\) Wilson valued Houghton’s technical ability but despite her inclusion of referential material intended to support understanding of the content of her visionary pictures and his best efforts to comprehend the symbolic nature of her forms, her mediumistic images, for him, bewildered “all attempts at explanation or resemblance.”\(^{168}\)

Wilson’s belief that many of Houghton’s mediumistic pictures were “professedly religious” was reinforced by her use of titles that had been informed by her knowledge of religious scripture. Consequently, Houghton’s attempts to clarify the spiritual sense of her paintings through the use of what she considered to be relevant scripture did not always meet with success. Despite his enthusiastic response to her images, for instance, Wilson confessed that he could find no correspondence between the content of Houghton’s paintings and the text that was meant to inform them. Nevertheless, he remained passionate and was particularly enthusiastic about Houghton’s representations


\(^{168}\) Ibid. p. 193.
of spirit flowers and fruits in which every line and colour professed meaning. Wilson
drew correlations between Houghton’s explanation of the significance of particular
colours used in her images and his own study of the meaning of colours that had been
recently published in a popular Spiritualist journal. Despite his own inability to discern
the meanings inherent in Houghton’s paintings, Wilson conceded that viewers initiated in
the complex symbolism of Spiritualism would “doubtlessly trace the resemblances
through the previous intuition” through “a common language of the initiated.”

Houghton believed that the pictures that resulted from her intercommunication
with unseen entities were augmented by her experiences in the material world including
her familiarity with contemporary literature and especially texts that focused on
botany. She would certainly have had access to books that included poetic
descriptions, exemplified by the following excerpt, that express the symbolic value of
flowers:

Flora’s light-pictures are never repeated; her kaleidoscope is
always turning. Flowers are the universal moralists; not one
but has its lesson, its sermon, or its song…Faith and duty,
and love and hope, and peace and gladness, smile on their
dewy faces; fading in quiet hands, they speak of death;
creeping over low green graves; they whisper of
immortality. They are the emblems alike of feasting and

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169 Wilson, “Spirit-Picture Exhibition,” p. 193
170 Although, there is no direct evidence that Houghton read material on botany I believe that it would have
been impossible for her not to have some familiarity with botanical symbolism. In this excerpt from her
autobiography Houghton talked about her familiarity with the vibrant colour of flowers which prepared her
for her future work in Spiritualism. She included another anecdote about her familiarity with botany when
she wrote about her dismay at having to leave her greenhouse behind as a result of a move. “When I came
away on Monday evening, I brought home a beautiful bunch of flowers from their garden, which as an
especial treat, for the having to do without flowers was a great loss to me when we came to live here, as we
had always been accustomed to so great an abundance, both from garden and greenhouse.” Houghton,
Evenings at Home, pp. 23, 278.
mourning, of speech and silence, of sorrow and hope, of
grief and love.  

Botany became a popular and fashionable activity beginning in eighteenth-century
England and enjoyed cultural status being sanctioned as an activity that combined
amusement with improvement. The simplicity of the Linnaean sexual system for naming
and classifying plants according to the reproductive parts of flowers helped to bring
botany into prominence. During this period women took advantage of their access to
studies of horticulture and collected plants, studied them, represented them in images and
wrote popular books on botany. As a result, the study of flowers and plants became
widely associated with women and consequently gender coded as feminine.

Concurrent with Houghton’s floral representation and her spiritual development
was the growing fashion for books about the language of flowers which offered women a
way to combine botany, art, and morality. Consequently, the results of women’s interest
in plants and flowers permeated diverse social, moral, religious, literary, and spiritual

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172 Ann B. Shteir, *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science: Flora’s Daughters and Botany in England 1760 to 1860* (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 13-15. In England, the artificial system for classifying plants that was promulgated by the Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus gave botany a boost, and the Linnaean system played a central part in making botany accessible to different groups and levels of enthusiasts. Linnaeus (also known as Carl von Linné) based his taxonomy on one diagnostic feature of a flower – the reproductive part. Linnaeus’s sexual system, as it was called, assigned taxonomic centrality to the part the flower plays in plant reproduction. He divided the plant kingdom into classes and orders by singling out the male and female reproductive parts of plants. As a theory about forms of order in nature, the Linnaean system, like any explanatory system, had many social meanings and was used for several different often contrasting purposes. An occasional poem from the 1780s, for example, represented Linnaean botany as a panacea for social disorder. One example describing the, “Backwardness of the Spring Accounted For” depicts Jupiter descending to earth on May Day to look for signs of a burgeoning new season. Jupiter finds instead that Flora’s kingdom is in disarray, in a “confusion of Manners and Morals.” Flowers are acting out of turn, not respecting their elders and betters; the “Vagabond Fungus”, for example, is treading ‘on the toes of his highness the Oak.” David E. Allen, *The Naturalist in Britain* (Princeton. N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994).
ideologies during a time when the ongoing industrialization of the English landscape encouraged a taste for horticulture, floriculture and botany. One particularly significant example is the enthusiasm for ferns which took place between 1840 and 1860 and which was prevalent blending aesthetics, science, art, and even fashion. Women collected ferns while walking through the woods, they bought tropical specimens from nurserymen and dried and pressed ferns making them a fundamental feature of their front parlours. Women filled albums with pressed flowers of every variety and decorated breakfast and drawing rooms with cases filled with live and exotic specimens. They also produced flower forms out of wax, wool and yarn, paper, and even shell and used the flower motif in the production of wall paper, fabrics and tile designs.  

John Lindley, eminent professor of botany, wrote widely read books that were meant to instruct women about how to appreciate his conception of the language of flowers and insinuated a mysterious symbolism that he believed was inherent to many flowers and plants:

The power and wisdom of the Deity are proclaimed by no part of the Creation in more impressive language than by the humblest weed that we tread beneath our feet; but we must learn to understand the mysterious language in which we are addressed; and we find its symbols in the curious structure, and the wondrous fitness of all the minute parts of which a plant consists, for several uses they are destined for. This, and this only, is the "language of flowers." 

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The systematic vocabulary of the “language of flowers” was further popularized through the dissemination of small decorative books that listed symbolically coded messages represented by specific flowers. 175 Some of the earliest and most influential of books on the language of flowers were written by women and published in the early nineteenth-century and they included annotated lists of flowers and trees which described the author’s perception of the symbolic meaning of each flower or tree.176 Artist and writer Eliza Eve Gleadall, for example, published The Beauties of Flora (1834-37) which consists of forty folio-sized lithographs of flowers that were drawn from nature and embellished with botanic, poetic, and emblematic material. The flowering plants are characterized in her writings as affording “a chaste recreation” for youth, blending “information with amusement.” Gleadall also taught that “there is religion in a flower,”

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176 De Genlis, Bouquet de Sentiment ou Allégorie des Plantes et des Couleurs, Paris, 1816; The most influential of these early books was Charlotte de La Tour’s Le Langage des Fleurs, Paris, 1819. See Nicolette SOURCE, The Victorians and Their Flowers (London: Croom Helm, 1983), pp. 29-65.
which can be discerned by becoming familiar with the symbolic significance of particular flowers and plants. The garden wallflower, according to Gleadall, for instance, is representative of “Fidelity in Misfortune” and the lily of the valley signifies “Purity and Return of Happiness.” Each flowering plant in her collection was identified botanically and located within both the Linnaean and natural systems of plant classification. Gleadall also included instructions about how to mix shades and tints to effectively reproduce the realistic colour of particular plants. The illustrations included in her text are specific and suggest her familiarity with illustrations of flowers as well as her knowledge of plants in their natural surroundings.

Translations and new progressively more complex interpretations of flower and plant symbolism became available “all over Europe and throughout the Americas in Spanish, German, Italian, Dutch, and English.” Nuance of meaning assigned to specific flowers began to diversify and reflected the particular social and cultural ideologies of authors complicating efforts to decode the symbolic significance of

177 Eliza Eve Gleadall, The Beauties of Flora, 2 vols. (Wakefield, 1834 -37). A prospectus from the 1830s announces that Miss Simpson and Miss Gleadall have “a Vacancy for one or two Young Ladies, who may be very eligibly accommodated as parlour boarders, and receive private lessons.” Along with tuition in English grammar, history, reading, and “fashionable works,” they also offered French, Italian, music, drawing, dancing, writing, geography, and astronomy.

178 Shteir, Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science, pp. 96, 159. Mary Roberts’s one introductory botany book, Wonders of the Vegetable Kingdom Displayed (1822), is saturated with references to what she referred to as the new religiosity. Roberts writes about topics in plant physiology, including perspiration, roots, plant nourishment, motion, and the dissemination of seeds and extensively develops the theme of plants as moral and religious emblems. As her title might suggest, descriptions of plants such as the Oriental poppy serve “spiritual purposes” “Like the brilliant poppy [man] is not the flower of a day. The seeds of piety to God, and benevolence to man, are ripened in his bosom, destined to germinate and blossom in a richer soul, the garden of immortality.” See, Mary Roberts, Wonders of the Vegetable Kingdom Displayed, London: Whittaker, 1822, p, 72.

179 Walsh, Language of Flowers, p. 220.
flowering plants. In addition, authors took advantage of their knowledge of “folklore, natural science, classical languages and mythology, the Bible, Ovid, Homer, Virgil, Boccaccio, Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Percival” and produced progressively more complex flower and plant symbolism. \(^\text{180}\) Books such as Henry Philips’s *Flora Histories* (1824), for example, focused on the history of plants and later publications such as Anna Pratt’s *Flowers and Their Associations* (1840) and Mrs. Loudon’s *The Ladies’ Flower Garden of Ornamental Annuals* (1849) combined botanical information with poetry, folklore and legend. Botanical manuals often included floral lexicons that offered alphabetical lists of flowers and their meanings based on Charlotte La Tour’s *Le Langage des fleurs* (1819) in which she wrote about how flowers embodied encoded messages through colours, positions, and combinations of blooms. \(^\text{181}\) Publishers produced many flower books for mass consumption, often combining literary and visual material in a poetic and artistic mélange. \(^\text{182}\)

\(^\text{180}\) Ibid. p. 222.

\(^\text{181}\) Walsh, *Language of Flowers*, p. 7. Some books, such as Jane Giraud’s *The Flowers of Shakespeare* (1850) and William Elder’s *Burn’s Bouquets* (1875), concentrated on the floral iconography of a single source, but far more common and certainly more popular was the compendium, such as John Henry Ingram’s *Flora Symbolica* (1869), which combined a cultural “history” of traditions and rituals, with separate entries on individual flowers and a double lexicon of both flowers and their meanings. Ingram acknowledged his reliance on other writers such as Mrs. Loudon and Eliza Cook, but he urged his readers to observe nature and trust their own intuition, explaining “some flowers, indeed, almost bear written upon their upturned faces the thoughts of which they are living representations,” including the “childlike Daisy” or the “glowing Rose.” For more information on the language of flowers in the nineteenth-century see, Mrs. John Claudius Loudon, *The Ladies’ Flower-Garden of Ornamental Annuals* (London: William S. Orr and Company, 1849); Henry Philips, *Floral Emblems*, (London: Saunders & Otley, 1849); Frederic Shoberl, *The Language of Flowers: With Illustrated Poetry* (London: Saunders & Otley, 1834); Robert Tyas, *The Sentiment of Flowers: or, Language of Flora* (London: Tilt, 1836).

Editions of the floral lexicon were followed by writings that broadened the language of flowers to include discussions about the manifestation of human traits in individual blooms. Thomas Hood in his poem “Flowers” (1827), for example, declared the violet a “nun” and the pea a “wanton witch,” preferring to “plight with the dainty rose/For fairest of all is she.” Similarly, Elizabeth Barrett Browning in her “A Flower in a Letter” (1844) allocated human characteristics and abilities to flowers when she wrote about the “thousand Flowers—each seeming one/that learnt, by gazing on the sun/to counterfeit his shining—/or told of how the “Red rose, used to praises long” was “contented with the poet’s song.” Flowers were interpreted as vessels of moral meaning and spiritual enlightenment that were enhanced by the study of seventeenth-century emblem books that endowed plants with religious symbolic meaning in the Christian and especially evangelical tradition. Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, for instance, published books about flowers within the rubric of evangelical piety and combined elements of morality, spirituality and religious doctrine writing that, “next after the blessed bible, a flower-garden is to me the most eloquent of books—a volume teeming with instruction, consolation, and reproof” and that “the evening primrose always is, always will be, a momento of what I shall no more enjoy on earth.” Tonna believed that many plants native to Britain served as “momentos” of persons or sentiments illustrative of “the Christian character.” The hawthorn tree, for example, reflected the

185 Shteir, *Cultivating Women,* p. 158.
“changeableness of earthly things… alike with the worldly moralist and the more spiritual instructor” and she also associated plants with references to an “early happy death,” and the importance of warring against the kingdom of darkness.187

Simultaneously, representations of flowers and plants appeared in modern paintings of the period produced by artists such Whistler in *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl*, (1862) the same year that Houghton produced some of her earliest visionary paintings in the form of representations of spirit flowers. English art critic Walter Pater inspired the art production of the Pre-Raphaelites and he wrote that a complete understanding of the content of their images depended upon the viewer’s fluency in the esoteric language of symbols.188 Pater noted that Rossetti, for example, often included representations of flowers in his paintings but believed that the uninitiated saw the plants as merely decorative when in fact to the informed viewer “the flower speaks parables.”189 Artists such as Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones and George Frederick Watts would have been aware of these writings and they painted pictures that combined public accounts of the symbolism of particular flowers and plants with more personal


188 The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood formed in 1848 in Britain consisted of John Everett Millais, Dante Gabrielle Rossetti and William Holman Hunt. They exhibited for the first time at the Royal Academy of art in 1849 almost a decade before Houghton produced her abstracted visionary paintings.

significance whose meaning could be decoded by only a select few. Such an abundance of conflicting information on the application of meaning to specific flowers meant that readers and viewers needed to apply a contemplative and careful analysis of both textual and visual descriptions of plants in order to successfully decode possible symbolic significance embedded in the contemporary paintings of the period.

Georgiana Houghton wrote that her experiences as a practicing artist helped to facilitate and to maintain mutually beneficial creative dynamics between herself and her spiritual guides that culminated in the production of mediumistic paintings that helped to educate viewers about the complexities of life. She incorporated her knowledge of the activities and writings of other innovative contemporary artists and writers of the period and like them took advantage of all the possibilities at her disposal to enhance her collaborative efforts. During the earlier phase of the development of her mediumistic abilities Houghton saw the drawings produced by visionary artist Elizabeth Wilkinson. Houghton admired the intricately rendered flower drawings and described them as “beautiful” and she was fascinated that the images had been executed through Wilkinson’s “hand by her son in spirit life.” Houghton believed that her ability to interact with spirits meant that she had a special sacred purpose in life which was to spread the messages of spirit in order to educate as many people as possible. She appreciated the symbolic value of flowers and worked to establish connections with unseen entities that

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would enhance and expand on her ability to depict flower and plant forms that were rich in Spiritual symbolism.

Houghton would have been privy to information later provided in William Wilkinson’s book in which he described in detail his wife’s interest in modern ideas about Spiritualism. He wrote that she was intrigued by the recent “modern revealments” of spiritual inquiry that suggested that many of these “‘new facts’ are not really so very new after all…they have merely in these later days been overlaid and kept down by science, and by the minds of the ‘learned’.”

Elizabeth Wilkinson, buoyed by her discovery of modern Spiritualism worked for many weeks in an attempt to make contact with unseen entities so that she might communicate with her recently deceased son. Her messages gained through automatic writings developed to incorporate the production of “small…simple” and curiously unfamiliar flowers. With practice she began to produce larger and ever more complex floral designs that eventually “extended beyond the paper” and that, according to William Wilkinson, generally belonged “to no known order, though it is of a beautiful and complex shape.”

Elizabeth Wilkinson’s movements during her collaborative efforts with unseen entities were described as long and rapid as she rendered the different elements of each flower producing innovative representations in “decided lines, beautiful forms, and combinations never before thought of…It would be impossible, without seeing them, to form an idea of their nature and

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194 Ibid. p. 12.
variety, so entirely new are they…” 195 William Wilkinson was particularly fascinated by the hundreds of evolutions, intricate shadings and precise techniques required to produce each of the flower drawings. 196

Elizabeth Wilkinson believed that her visionary images were produced through the auspices of those from the spirit world and that the resulting series of pictures formed a “most remarkable one, for the novelty and evident symbolism” which was considered to be among their “most striking characteristics.” 197 She exhibited her images to a “great number of persons who have seen them during their progress” and viewers remarked on the innovative design and the inherent qualities of symbolism that made them so distinctive “from other drawings of an ordinary kind.”198 Consequently, symbolic significance of flowers and fruits became an important component of Spiritualist texts and depictions of flower and fruit forms, many of which were thought to have been rendered in collaboration with unseen entities, were considered analogous to the state of the human soul:

> To-day it is the spirit of one you never knew on earth, but who watches over you daily and hourly, and with anxious eyes sees your spiritual development. Some days your flowers and leaves spread forth brightly and gloriously to the sun of light and true knowledge, and the petals expand in size and increase in brilliancy of hue, also in fragrance. At other times your petals close and shrink, and even wither; such are the days when thoughts of earth fill your mind…So must the new celestial idea be drawn into the brain of man, and must there take root and gradually

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195 Ibid. p, 13.
196 Ibid. p, 16.
198 Ibid. p, 34.
expand, and throw up shoots and bring forth leaves and flowers ere the fruit can ripen; and again must the fruit have time to come to perfection and to germinate seeds.\textsuperscript{199}

Wilkinson’s mediumistic artistic abilities began to gain notice and enthusiastic friends experimented with intercommunication between the living and the dead. Some discovered that they also possessed varying degrees of mediumship which resulted in the production of visionary images that also evoked an “undefinable spirit or symbolic character.” William Wilkinson’s investigation into automatic drawing led him to

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.4\textwidth]{flower-and-fruit-of-henry-lenny}
\caption{Georgiana Houghton. \textit{The Flower and Fruit of Henry Lenny}, 1861, watercolour on paper. Victorian Spiritualist’s Union Melbourne, Australia. Reproduced with permission.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{199} Ibid. p. 22.
conclude that artists that practiced “in England, and in Ireland, America, France, Germany and Australia” were experimenting with automatic drawing which resulted in the production of images that embodied the “same unmistakable characteristics” that he came to refer to as “divine botany.”200 William and Elizabeth Wilkinson’s promotion of mediumistic flower representations as conduits of spiritual messages or characterisations of the human soul provided a platform from which Houghton could pursue her life’s mission to educate the public about modern Spiritualism.

Inspired by her knowledge of the visionary flower forms produced by Elizabeth

![Figure 4-4: Georgiana Houghton. The Flower of Warrand Houghton, 1861, watercolour on paper. Victorian Spiritualist’s Union Melbourne, Australia. Reproduced with permission.](image)

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200 Wilkinson, Spirit Drawings, p, 37.
Wilkinson, Houghton began to make her own flower portraits during intercommunication with her spirit guides. She believed that the images that resulted from her automatic drawings were gifts from God and that they represented “flowers of the spirit-land.” Her collaborative efforts culminated in the production of a series of images including, *The Flower and Fruit of Henry Lenny*, (1861) (fig.4-3) in which she used varies shades of blue, green and yellow to depict abstracted flower-like forms overlaid with thick dark curving lines and *The Flower of Warrand Houghton* (1861) (fig.4-4) that depicted various organic forms produced by applying meticulously rendered minuscule brushstrokes in red, blue, green and yellow pigment over a white background. Each element of her flower portraits mirrored the “earthly understanding of the heart” of particular individuals and was representative of the inner life “with its passions, its sentiments, and affections.”

The repetitive fibrous line patterns, for example, that complete the upper portion of *The Flower of Warrand Houghton* (1861) were meant to depict the individual thoughts experienced by Warrand Houghton during his lifetime on earth. The larger, bolder marks rendered in various colours represented the intensity of his emotional responses to new acquaintances and unfamiliar situations. Houghton explained the significance of the coloured filaments that protruded from the centre of representative flower drawings which she believed recorded “each action of the life” of the particular individual for whom the drawing was made. Accordingly, the line direction in her mediumistic drawings was significant because each directional mark was

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indicative of the spiritual results of either good or evil acts that had been perpetrated by individuals during their time on the earth. Similarly, the strong upward sweeping lines in Houghton’s *The Flower of William Harmon Butler* (1861) and *The Flower of Helen Butler* (1867) (fig. 4-5) for example, denoted the good, strong spiritual characters of William Harmon Butler and Helen Butler.  

Houghton published the results of one of her automatic writing sessions in which she received an explanation of the spiritual significance of her symbolic flower pictures. Her description helps to clarify the connections between her symbolic visionary images and the immaculate incarnations of humanity that exist in the spiritual realms:

> simultaneously 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 infants awakening powers,

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expressing them by colour and form, until by degrees the character and life stand revealed in the floral emblem; each tint, whether strong or delicate, being clearly understood by spirit beholders; each petal, floret, fibre, and filament shewing forth like an open book the sentiments and motives, however complicated, of the human prototype. 203

Houghton’s mediumistic representations, however, portrayed only a small fraction of those portended in the corresponding spirit flowers that existed in the heavenly spheres and her relatively few lines used to render the spirit portraits in the form of flowers expressed only those emotions experienced by the spirit while in the physical body. Her visionary portraits, then, fell far short of “the originals” found in the spheres whose powerful energetic lines “rise away from them, forming a kind of transparent external network which gives a warm glow to the whole.” 204 Even so, Houghton was convinced that it was her life’s work to continue to produce and to exhibit her visual representations of individual souls in an effort to spread the word that life did indeed exist in another form after the death of the physical body. 205 She believed that, even though, her representations provided only a symbolic material representation reminiscent of its original ethereal counterpart, her pictures acted as a site across which viewers could reconcile beliefs that their conduct in the material world would impact directly their experience of the afterlife.

As Houghton’s flower forms became more intricate in their design and symbolic intent they also presented more of a challenge for viewers. According to Houghton’s

203 Houghton, Evenings at Home, p. 25.
204 Ibid. p. 25.
interpretation of her automatic writings her unseen collaborators could provide only a
modicum of the entire meaning inherent to her representations. Though her ability to
communicate with powerful unseen entities was extraordinary they were limited by her
physical state of being which meant that her re-presentations of the flower forms of the
world of spirit were mere “miniatures of the realities” of the spheres whose spirit flowers
far exceed their material counterparts both in “their glorious hues” and in their ability to
transcend mortal language.206 Despite the constraints produced by the limitations of the
material body and of language Houghton continued to transgress boundaries between the
living and the dead and to offer detailed descriptions of her understanding of the
symbolic nuances that were embedded in her visionary paintings.

Houghton connected her belief in the existence of spiritual entities that
communicate with the living with her understanding of Christian belief systems as
articulated in Biblical texts. Consequently her collaboration with unseen entities who
utilized her artistic training and her understanding of spirituality in the form of Christian
worship produced visionary paintings that reveal a complex combination of ethereal
abstraction and material symbolism that proved difficult for the uninitiated to
comprehend. Houghton however persisted in her attempts to translate and to clarify the
messages inherent in her work and was dedicated to the dissemination of knowledge
about the spiritual significance of her mediumistic pictures. She taught that her
visionary paintings facilitated discourse between the material world and the spiritual

206 Ibid. p, 25.
spheres on the nature of life after death as well as on importance of living a spiritually fulfilled life while gaining experience in the material world. Houghton’s mediumistic abilities as an artist who worked in collaboration with powerful unseen entities progressed from the production of symbolical flowers to the creation of visionary pictures that produced knowledge of profound religious and spiritual philosophical ideas meant to encourage a cleansing transcendental experience in viewers.

For Houghton and many other middle-class Spiritualists in Britain, Spiritualism did not replace Christianity, but rather enriched long-standing Christian beliefs:

What I have striven to prove is that Spiritualism is not come in place of Christianity; for where would have been the gain in casting off that great joy and happiness, only to receive a something else in exchange? What I maintain is that it is bestowed as the Crown to all previous knowledge. ²⁰⁷

Houghton believed that the mediumistic images that resulted from her collaborative effort offered a visual description of written accounts of God’s productive benevolent nature as described in the New Testament. She focused on the representation of the compassionate nature of God in opposition to the destructive malevolent omniscience proscribed by the Old Testament. Houghton, through the guidance of unseen entities, specifies particular ways in which her mediumistic images communicate complex pluralities of the nature of spirit. Her visionary picture *The Holy Trinity (1861)* (fig. 4-6) exemplifies Houghton’s ability to represent a unified entity that is composed of three separate divine beings that embody individual characteristics which can be discerned by viewers in the material
world. She continued her endeavours to provide analyses of the symbolic content her
paintings by including written guidelines on the verso of her mediumistic representation.
Houghton’s watercolour depicts a forceful array of layered, interconnected lines of colour
that appear to oscillate between the material and the ethereal worlds. Powerful sweeps of
red, blue and yellow race across the surface of the page leading the viewer’s eye outside
of the confines of the frame and then back along a diagonal trajectory that seems to rush
across the centre of the picture plane. Houghton’s automatic writing introduces her
representation as being “drawn by D. through the mediumship of Georgiana Houghton”
and she stipulates that this particular “drawing will require a great deal of explanation, as
every stroke was full of meaning”.

As Houghton made clear in her writings, her visionary images require a
thoughtful and focused analysis that take into account the intertextual component of her
work and also acknowledge the importance of her process. Houghton’s description of the
visual elements of her representation is painstaking and she included information about
the importance of the process of producing mediumistic images. She began each of her
collaborative efforts by obtaining a spiritually sanctioned meditative state that enabled
intercommunion between the material and the ethereal worlds. Part of her ritual included
giving “praise and thanksgiving to the Giver of Life, Love, Hope and Faith” a practice
that she believed permeating each of her mediumistic pictures with immense spiritual
powers. Another important element of the performance was Houghton’s employment of
continuous and repetitive labour “having been begun, continued and completed” over a
time period of almost nine hours.²⁰⁸ Houghton, in her automatic writing, draws attention to her repetitive use of divisions of three, her focus on primary colours and she also equated the water that she used to mix her colours with “the waters of tribulation, of regeneration, of suffering, of bitterness, of zeal and of baptism, typifying all that the Soul must undergo to prepare it for the reception of God into the entire being.”²⁰⁹

Houghton wrote that “The Holy Trinity was first represented in this drawing in the blue vault of heaven appearing as a glorious light” which embodied notions of God the Father, “by whom all things were created.” God the Son emanated from the Father and God the Holy Ghost proceeded from the “Father and the Son” and then descended “to the earth as the Comforter and Consoler of all mankind.” Houghton also described how representations of Holy Trinity were made manifest through the application of an intricate combination specific colours combined with a very particular line direction. She wrote, for example, that yellow was a personification of God the Father and also symbolic of faith while blue represented the physical manifestation of God the Son and also denoted hope and the colour red was an embodiment of God the Holy Ghost and also symbolized charity/love.²¹⁰ Houghton explained that although three separate colours were used to symbolize separate manifestations of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost

²⁰⁸ Houghton, *The Holy Trinity*, 1861, verso, this material was sent by e-mail by Anne Lamont of the Victorian Spiritualist Union on January 11, 2010. Lamont also included an image of Houghton’s written description of the content of her visionary picture. Houghton tended to use the terms charity and love interchangeable but always in reference to her representation of the Holy Spirit. Houghton, underlined her statement “these three are one” twice to demonstrate the importance of the unity of the Trinity.
²¹⁰ Ibid. verso.
in actuality “these three are one”. 211 Houghton was also explicit when she discussed the significance of her directional line writing that lines that moved upwards represented God the Father, lines that crossed over one another referred to God the Son and those that moved downwards corresponded to God the Holy Ghost. In addition, the three types of directional lines that harmonize with the three entities where also symbolic of the three characteristics, faith, hope, charity/love embodied by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit respectively.

The complexity of Houghton’s intertextual visionary representation becomes clear when examined within the context of the Biblical text that she often used to inform her collaborative work. The Holy Trinity as understood within the rubric of scriptural text is incarnate as a tripersonal divine being that maintains distinctions between the Father, Son and Holy Ghost while concurrently preserving unity. The unity of God then in scriptural texts is composed of three coequal, coeternal, coinfinite entities that coexist as one but also performed as distinct personalities. God the Father, as a distinct personality, for example, planned salvation while God the Son executed deliverance on the cross and God the Holy Spirit revealed the message of liberation under the doctrine of common grace. 212 Distinctions between the three components of the Trinity are described in Corinthians as “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God [the Father] and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit” 213 While scriptures differentiate between the three entities of the

211 Ibid. verso.
212 Jn 4:34, 5:17, 12:44; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Eph 3:11; Jn 4:34; 5:17; 1 Pet 2:24; 3:18; Rom 5:8; Heb 10:7; Jn 16:8-11.
213 1 Corinthians, 13:14.
Trinity they simultaneously make clear the existence of one God. What appears to be a contradiction actually exemplifies the idea that one of the mysteries of the Holy Trinity is that it is the embodiment of a truth that can never be fully understood using natural reasoning. Humanity’s reliance on rationale is thus disrupted and replaced with notions of faith.

Each spiritual component of the Trinity, then, provides important divine intervention for the deliverance and protection of humanity. Houghton encapsulated Biblical ideology in her intertextual, abstracted visionary picture by rendering God the Father initially as a “glorious light” depicted in yellow pigment in the form of upward directional lines successfully encapsulating God the Father’s omniscience as well as his exalted position in the highest realms of the heavenly sphere. God the Son is represented using blue coloured pigment that recall the colour of the sky which connects to the “blue vault of heaven”, as described in Houghton’s written analysis of the symbolic content of her image, and from which the light of the Father emerged. In addition, God the Son as He who was also born from that light is represented through lines that cross over one another connecting Him with human incarnation as well as with His sacrifice on the cross. Houghton embodied ideas about the God the Holy Ghost in the form of red descending lines that symbolize the Holy Ghost’s function as comforter of humanity who resides in the lower spheres of the earth plane. Houghton was clear in her automatic writing that each mark in her visionary work is “full of meaning” which suggests that every element of her image embodies more than one meaning. Consequently,
Houghton’s process of giving “praise and thanksgiving to the Giver of Life, Love, Hope and Faith” further imbued her image with potent spiritual powers. In Houghton’s representation, God the Father is related to the concept of faith which coincides with the conviction that humanity must exercise faith in order to believe in the existence of an omniscient being which cannot be seen. Similarly, God the Son is connected with hope in incarnation in the flesh to provide hope for the salvation of humanity and God the Holy Ghost vibrates with the word love which is demonstrated in an ability to provide comfort and consolation to humanity.

Illustrations of the Holy Trinity as expressed in the physical world in the form of light and colour are also provided in Biblical text. One written description, for example, reveals that “God is light and in Him there is no darkness” another example recalls Jesus’s statement that “I am the light of the world.” He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life.”214 The concept of light can be understood from several different perspectives outside of those described in the Bible including scientific perceptions of colour theory that help to enhance ideas of the unity of the Holy Trinity as exemplified in scripture and subsequently in Houghton’s visionary picture. Light that emanates from the sun, for example, or through a prism, reflects as pure white despite that it contains all the colours of the spectrum including the three primary colours red, yellow and blue used in Houghton’s collaborative representation of The Holy Trinity.215

214 Jn 1:5; Jn 8:12. Pre-Raphaelite artist, William Holman Hunt was also inspired by scriptural text when he produced his oil on canvass “Light of the World” (1851-53).
215 Every ray of light is made up of the three primary colours, red, yellow and blue and when a ray of light touches an object so that the red and yellow are absorbed, the colour reflected is blue. Similarly, if yellow
Houghton was aware of the power of symbolism and she knew that although symbols cannot completely encompass truths as profound as those embodied in conceptions of The Holy Trinity viewers continued to seek and attempted to comprehend immanent representations of transcendent truth. Representations of The Holy Trinity exist throughout the history of European and Western art production and are usually depicted in the form of variations of the triangle. Houghton, however, disrupted emblematic depictions of religious and spiritual content by replacing the symbol of the triangle with straight or curved lines. Although the equilateral formation of the triangle is considered to be a powerful pictorial depiction of the coequal and stable nature of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost the form also supports distinctions and divisions between the three entities disrupting the unified nature of the Trinity. Houghton’s representation of The Holy Trinity in the form of subtle integrations of line, colour and multiples of three, serve to enhance Biblical exegesis that promotes theological concepts of trichotomy, unification and ultimately, procession.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle explained the powerful symbolic significance of the number three writing that:

Of two things or men, we say ‘both’ but not ‘all.’ Three is the first number to which the term ‘all’ has been appropriated.”…A single occurrence is of no significance. A repetition is noticeable, but might easily be the result of coincidence. A third occurrence of the same nature gives the event the impress of law….The theologian makes a

and blue are absorbed the colour perceived is red. Houghton, as an artist would have knowledge of colour theory.
point of the three days entombment of Christ, for “in three
days is proved all deed and fiat veritable.”

When Houghton wrote that “[t]here are innumerable repetitions of these symbols” in her
visionary picture she drew attention to the repetitious patterns of three in the form of lines
which made incarnate God the Father, God the Son and The Holy Spirit and also
represented a propensity for unity and continuity. Concepts of units of three are repeated
throughout the Biblical text that Houghton often used to describe the symbolic
significance of her abstracted representations. The young Jesus, for example, spent three
days in the temple before his parents found him, the feeding of the five thousand began
only after the crowd had followed Jesus for three days, the apostle Peter denied Jesus on
three occasions and the universe was created in six days. Perhaps the most
significance reference to the symbolic importance of three in the framework of the New
Testament and in the context of Houghton’s mediumistic picture is that Jesus lay in his
tomb for two days before he rose from the dead on the third and demonstrated his
omnipotence.

Units of three then represent a pattern that is indicative of continuity, unity and
also purposeful activity. Biblical authors use symbolic representations of three to
emphasize the absolute alignment between action and consequence that moves along a
straight directional line. Houghton’s use of tri-coloured lines in her mediumistic
representation recalls scriptural passages that position the number three as the

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217 Ibid. pp. 1, 2.
continuation or alignment of a condition or idea and also reiterate her conviction that the three separate entities that make up The Holy Trinity are one. The conception of three points or components that make up a line reinforces ideas of straightforward continuous action, consequence and unity. Houghton’s presentation of The Holy Trinity as free-flowing tri-coloured lines that function as a unified entity disrupts depictions of the Holy Trinity in the form of a triangle that rejects rather than promotes ideologies of continuity and unity.

Houghton duplicated Biblical references to the three attributes of God the Father, God the Son and The Holy Ghost, faith, hope and love, which are represented in the form of an interconnection of perpendicular, parallel and concentric lines that eventually unite in one point. Viewers that associate the number three with the form of a triangle relate the terms faith, hope and love with the three separate, distinct and independent corners of the triangle. In contrast, Houghton’s use of lines as opposed to triangles to depict The Holy Trinity links the three entities along a line that reproduces the essential codependence of the three qualities while it also develops the idea that God the Father, God the Son and The Holy Ghost are three distinct yet unified omnipotent being. Houghton envisaged Biblical text that taught that, “Faith, hope and love are not three independent qualities, but are three closely related milestones in our spiritual pilgrimage; love is not
independent of faith and hope, but is the highlight of our spiritual growth. Straight line imagery supports this relationship better than triangle imagery." 218

Houghton, in concert with her spirit guides intertwined, colour, line and symbolic textual reference to symbolize separate yet simultaneously unified beings. She concluded her written exegesis about the symbolic meaning of her visionary image by encouraging people to follow their own path but to also “do their utmost thus to fulfill His Will, and shed the rainbow hues of Faith, Hope and Charity over all with whom they come in contact.” Houghton’s reference to the rainbow is also significant in relation to Biblical text and the symbolic significance of her visionary picture because it recalls the covenant forged between God and humanity, at the time of the flood:

I will remember my covenant, which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh. And the bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth.219

The rainbow is made up of seven separate colours which include the primary colours of yellow, blue and red that served as symbolic representations of God the Father, God the Son and the Holy Ghost and that were simultaneously linked with faith, love and hope in Houghton’s image. Her reference to the rainbow with which she completed her written

219 Genesis 9:15-16.
explanation on the verso of her visionary image served to unite her symbolism of interconnected unity depicted in her abstracted image with the everlasting covenant forged between God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost and humanity as described in Genesis. Houghton’s own visionary image can also be understood as a visual embodiment of this covenant because it is representative of intercommunion between material and spiritual world. Furthermore it serves to encompass the viewer, in their efforts to unlock the symbolic significance inherent to Houghton’s visionary image, whose meditative interaction with the work completes the interface of three and as such produces meaning. As Houghton, wrote on the verso of her visionary picture, “in actuality “these three are one”.

Houghton’s writings imply that each of the entities that form the Holy Trinity focus on the activities of the material world from various perspectives. Her complex written narrative of the multifaceted nature of God also includes a descriptive chart that serves to direct the viewer’s eye to specific colours and lines in the painting that are indicative of the importance of separate elements described in the image. Houghton’s mediumistic paintings traverse the connection between perceptions of how the concept of oneness or individuality is understood within the realms of the material world and how individualism might be expressed within the multi-temporal, multi-dimensional field of the spiritual spheres. Consequently, examinations of Houghton’s visionary paintings from an objective perspective propose only one of several possible viewpoints and so offer
opportunities to gain further understanding of the significance of her mediumistic images by developing a more inclusive and expansive multilayered interrogative enquiry.220

Houghton’s depiction of the Trinity, for example, as expressed within the Catholic tradition, disrupts androcentric, monolithic ideologies of the nature of God. Monolithic monotheism, for instance, envisions one god that has no inherent relational attributes and therefore no ability for intercommunication. According to texts of the Old Testament his function is reduced to delivering the law and prescribing and enforcing the doctrine of obedience to that restrictive law. According to contemporary theologians, the first principle of Biblical doctrine stipulates that the Holy Trinity is inherently mysterious and as such its revelation is only possible through the intercession of love and knowledge considered two of the most important spiritually motivated activities. Consequently, it is only through the comprehension of the true concept of love that civilization may one day live the conception of the Trinity. Love combined with knowledge, does not provide the key to total command of the mystery of the Trinity but it does offer an avenue through which humanity may experience a more abundant and insightful living experience.

Houghton’s visionary pictures enhanced by written and verbal explanatory tools are nevertheless limited by the three-dimensional qualities of the material world. Consequently the language of text and symbol to describe transcendental meaning are not

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220 Oberter, _Esoteric Art_, pp. 224-25, for example, offers an objective materialistic analytical approach rather than an innovative perhaps less fixed more fluid perception of Houghton’s writings and images. Oberter states for example, “if this eye is understood rather than expressed, how are we supposed to see it in the drawing? As for the Son, the text states that his “eye of Pity” gazes upon the sins of human beings, but again, there is no mention of what the eye looks like.”
always easily accessible nor are they universal and so are inherently insufficient
descriptors of the multidimensional reality of Spiritual conceptions of the implication of
the Holy Trinity. The Old Testament’s use of the word person, for example, implies a
broad range of meanings including living being, soul and breath. Similarly, the New
Testament uses the Greek word *anthropos* which also refers to gender free descriptions of
living being, soul and breath. The word person then does not imply an independent
gendered center of consciousness or personal center of action instead it suggests a
"distinct manner of being" or one spiritual and absolute reality that subsists in a threefold
manner of being. Houghton’s abstracted portrayal of multiplicity in the form of the Holy
Trinity offers opportunities for intercommunication between entities that are separate and
distinct yet simultaneously one. Also in her capacity as a conduit between the material
world and the spiritual Houghton interrupted a fundamentally male dominated doctrine
that perpetuates the ideology of a triune that effectively excludes women while she
expanded the boundaries of communication between the spirit and the material world.
Houghton, then, performed as a messenger or physical incarnation of the word of the
Sacred Triad channeled through the body of a woman.

Artist Frederick Wilson’s thorough description of Houghton’s images helps to
augment other stylistic assessments of her work that were published in the Spiritualist
literature of the period. But the innovative style and complex symbolic content of her
paintings requires a significant amount of thoughtful deliberation from viewers, rather
than a superficial judgment based on aesthetic qualities alone. Editors from the
Spiritualist periodical *Medium and Daybreak*, for example, did not support a more attentive approach to understanding the implication of Houghton’s collaborative works and instead opted for the much more cursory and often dismissive examination commonly afforded works produced by women artists in nineteenth-century Britain.²²¹ In one excerpt from the same article, for example, the author acknowledges “great neglect in the matter of Miss Houghton’s admirable Gallery of Spirit Drawings…We saw one of [her] drawings some years ago, but it was not a very striking specimen.” ²²² Later in the same response the critic opts for a superficial characterisation of Houghton’s pictures which focuses on the quality of the design effectively eliding any reference to the symbolic content of her representations. “The beauty and richness of the colours at once fascinate the eye, and a closer inspection interests the mind by the wonderful indications of design which run through each drawing.” ²²³

Houghton, undaunted, planned every detail of the organization of her solo exhibition (1871) of 155 of her mediumistic watercolours which she arranged in a double line that surrounded the entire room and which began with her earliest pictures executed ten years before in 1861 and concluded with examples of her most recent mediumistic pictures. The series of paintings was exhibited so that they formed an informative study of the progression of her visionary art production. Houghton transformed the content of her pictures by using innovative juxtapositions of vibrantly hued colours and also

²²¹ “Miss Houghton’s Exhibition of Spirit Drawings,” *Medium and Daybreak* II: 75 (September 1871), pp. 296-7.
²²² Ibid. p. 296.
²²³ Ibid. p. 296.
progressed from simple shapes and lines to interconnected, complex designs. Ultimately, her images embodied a harmonious blending of richly hued and variously rendered lines which often crossed over and blended into one another. Her well considered arrangement of her paintings encouraged viewers who walked about the circumference of her gallery to note the transformative qualities of her visionary imagery.

She included a carefully catalogued listing of the titles of her paintings enhanced by explicate discussions of the meanings of her visionary pictures as well as descriptions of the means by which she produced her spirit images. In an effort to shed light on the meaning of the complex symbols inherent to her pictures Houghton also supplemented her explanations with what she considered to be relevant “extracts of some of the explanatory texts including pertinent quotes from the Bible.” She wrote that her choice of text was augmented with intercommunication sessions with her unseen collaborators:

I must here allude slightly to the method by which I receive inspirationally the interpretations of my drawings so as to explain something of what has thus been taught me. When the time comes for me to receive the interpretation, I place the drawing before me [so that] messengers may enable me to understand the truths they have embodied in form and colour.224

224 Houghton, *Evenings at Home*, pp, 73, 74. Houghton used scriptural text in an effort to augment the spiritual content of the pictures in her exhibition but it was not an uncommon practice for nineteenth-century artists and curators to include textual references in an effort to enhance the impact of the content of the picture as well as to educate the viewer. The Whitechapel Free Art Gallery, for example, opened for the first time in the spring of 1881 in the rooms of St. Jude’s parish school in East London’s Whitechapel. The gallery was created by the vicar and his wife, Samuel and Henrietta Barnett, and was an attempt, in part, to use the display of art objects as a way in which to promote social reclamation and urban renewal in some of the poorest areas of London. The Barnetts, with the help of men and women from the more affluent West End of London, hoped to encourage “the cultural and spiritual elevation of East Enders and, more generally, the foundation of harmonious social relations between rich and poor” by exhibiting pictures that promoted their version of “moral values”. The Barnetts applied the aesthetic theories of art critic John Ruskin who argued in *Modern Painters* that the production of art and the ability to see and understand it
Houghton’s attempts to clarify the spiritual symbolic meaning of the content of her paintings using biblical text meant that some viewers, not surprisingly, connected her scriptural selections too closely with religious doctrine. Initially, Spiritualist viewers, who rejected any association with the pious doctrine of organized religion boycotted Houghton’s exhibition of spiritual pictures believing them to promote the cause of religiosity rather than spiritual enlightenment in the practice of modern Spiritualism. While Spiritualists repudiated connection with organized religious affiliation that promoted a dogmatic doctrine they also rejected the idea that “Spiritual Intercommunion runs counter to, or ignores Christianity.” Many Spiritualists of the nineteenth-century argued that the tenets of both belief systems agreed perfectly because they emanated “alike from one common source of all good— the Supreme Deity; as having the same

was connected to the elevation of moral and religious sensibilities. The Barnetts also, however, sincerely believed that “great art transcended social divisions and created a pool of shared emotions, thoughts, and sensations that would tie all men and women together.” In addition, catalogues were created whose entries were meant to provide detailed descriptions of exactly how “the poor of Whitechapel” were meant to see and to interpret the art exhibited. These catalogues were intended to “teach the people how to look at pictures,…and [pointed] more to the moral than the artistic side of the picture…” Firms such as William Morris and Company donated their time and goods to the gallery and artists such as George Frederick Watts, and the Pre-Raphaelites exhibited their paintings regularly. See Seth Kovan, “The Whitechapel Picture Exhibitions and the Politics of Seeing,” in Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff, eds, *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp, 22-48. Also see, Judith Walsh, “Language of Flowers in Nineteenth-Century American Painting,” *Magazine Antiques*, Vol. 156, No. 4 (Fall, 1971): 220; in which Walsh discusses the nature of books that assigned appropriate scriptural verses as well as short extracts from contemporary poetry included to enhance the description of plants and flowers. Diana Maltz, *British Aestheticism and the Urban Working Classes, 1870-1900: Beauty for the People* (New York: Palgrave, 2006). Also, for more on attempts to enlighten the working classes see, Diana Maltz, *British Aestheticism and the Urban Working Classes, 1870-1900: Beauty for the People* (London: Palgrave, 2006)

225Spiritualists may have been cautious in the beginning because of Houghton’s choice to use biblical text to explain the meaning of some of the symbols in her pictures and also because many of those who attended her exhibitions were clergy.
glorious object — the development of the immortal soul.”

Writers in one spiritualist journal helped to dispel the idea that Houghton’s exhibition promoted traditional religious doctrine while they simultaneously trivialized Houghton’s work along with her efforts to disseminate the Spiritualist teachings inherent to her visionary pictures:

the catalogue fails to give any conception of the nature of the drawings; a theological idea takes possession of the mind instead of the more evident impression of wonderful artistic manipulation and effect. We fear, indeed, that many Spiritualists have frightened themselves away from the exhibition with this theological bugbear; but we can assure them, however much of it there may be in the catalogue, there is no theology in the pictures, at least as far as we could perceive.

The results of the article were positive, however, because Spiritualists attended Houghton’s exhibition and many worked to decipher the ethereal messages embodied in her images:

Houghton’s spiritual images began to gain currency as capable of channeling higher forms of communication as that which appeals to the perceptive faculties, the external mind or the intellect. Her spiritual images transcended the boundaries of the material and therefore physical world of three dimensional objects and penetrated the

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228 Georgiana Houghton, “Another exhibition of Spirit-Drawings,” The Medium and Daybreak II: 83 (November 1871), p. 359. In a letter to the Spiritualist journal Medium and Daybreak Houghton wrote that she was responding to “several inquiries as to the number of visitors to my own Gallery…Of paying visitors, including the seven season-ticket holders, there were exactly eighteen hundred and fifty; but there were a great many free admissions, of which no record was kept, so that at the very least we may calculate that there were altogether two thousand, only about one-tenth part of whom were Spiritualists; so it will be seen how large has been the proportion of those who have ventured out of their usual path to judge of so great a novelty for themselves; and I am happy to say that during all the four months that it has been open I have had many deeply interesting conversations; and I feel sure that my Exhibition has brought the certainty of spirit-agency to some who would not have attended to the subject in any other form.
human psyche facilitating a meditative calmness and spiritual transcendence. Houghton was also committed to providing specific interpretations of each one of her drawings which extended to her communicating her findings at length with those who attended her exhibitions. She spoke about her production of innumerable repetitions of important symbols and believed that this repetitive process helped to facilitate a harmonious flow of ideas that offered opportunities for viewers to expand their consciousness within a safe environment so that humanity need not “struggle alone but instead know that they were everywhere surrounded by spirit who continue to support, strengthen, and comfort all of civilization.” Houghton provided information with regard to the purpose of her visionary paintings but she also believed that it was necessary for viewers to meditate on the content of the pictures in order to extract meaning that benefitted them as individuals and in some cases lead to physical and/or spiritual healing. Contemplation of Buddhist thangka paintings, for example, produced by artists in the Buddhist tradition are filled with symbolic iconographic pictorial records that serve as a meditative guideline through which viewers embark on personal transcendental experiences. Viewers are instructed to sit before an image and to focus on the content until they had achieved a condition of meditation which facilitated a contemplative state of mind which in turn led to spiritual equilibrium. 229

Critics, however, refused to invest time in a focused contemplation of Houghton’s visionary pictures and so did not discern relevant connections between the content of her

images and her written explanations of their Spiritualist symbolism. Instead, they dismissed Houghton’s efforts to clarify the meaning of her art and wrote “we cannot say anything about the explanations given in the catalogue-they are beyond our comprehension.”°230 Similarly, descriptive reviews in the Spiritualist located Houghton’s abstracted mediumistic pictures in the realism of the material world and ignored her explanations insisting instead that Houghton’s representations of “growing spirit flowers” were not convincing because “they all cut off square at the edges” and were missing “their stalks.”231 Critics adamantly refused to acknowledge Houghton’s efforts to reveal the meaning of her pictures and instead focused on a comparative formal analysis that relied on assessments between the levels of realism displayed in her flower representations with naturalism.

Reviewers did not, however, dispute Houghton’s claim that her visionary pictures were the result of a collaborative effort between the spirit and the material world; on the contrary, they acknowledged the connection and then noted that Houghton had misinterpreted the intention of her spiritual associate summarily accusing her of the reductive thinking that they themselves displayed:

We none of us know the conditions which colour the communications of spirits as they pass through the organism of a medium, and there is a possibility that Miss Houghton accepts literally teachings intended to be symbolical, for the information that reaches the consciousness of a medium may be one thing, and the

230 Miss Houghton’s Spirit Drawings,” The Spiritualist I: 22 (June 1871), p. 175.
231 Ibid. p. 175.
information which the spirits intended to convey may be another.232

Nineteenth-century Spiritualists and non-Spiritualists alike often failed to acknowledge the transitional, ethereal quality of Houghton’s symbolic paintings and instead conceptualized her elusive images within the realm of definitive classifications and categorizations. In so doing, they overlooked the complexities of the content of her visionary images and as a result often misunderstood the intention of the symbolism embedded in her pictures.

Critics, however, who did not appreciate the symbolic nature of Houghton’s visionary paintings commented on her skillful use of colour and praised her command of drawing skills but credited the intervention of unseen entities for her “expertly rendered art work…the general opinion is that the design, execution, and effect which Miss Houghton’s drawings display, indicate a power greater than that which any artist would venture on claiming.”233 Writers did not recognize Houghton’s artistic ability noting instead that “artists usually claim some merit in the production of their works – time spent in preparatory study and exercises, thought expended in designing and care bestowed in execution.” They rejected any perception that Houghton had used her combined skills as a trained artist and medium to produce her pictures and argued that “the spiritual origin of these drawings” signaled the passive nature of the “medium-artist, who is taken possession of by the spirits and without thought and application is made to

232 Ibid, p, 175.
perform the most wonderful tasks.” Even though critics noted that as Houghton gained experience she produced more complex and intricately rendered images they attributed the “abundant indications of progress and improvement” that were obvious in Houghton’s visionary pictures to “the action of spirit-artists through her than from premeditated intention on the part of the medium.” Houghton’s visionary images made up of multifaceted configurations of finely and broadly interwoven curved lines that covered the entire surface of the paper were meant to evoke more than a pleasing aesthetic. Rather, the profoundly symbolic nature of Houghton’s mediumistic paintings was meant to invoke a transcendental experience in viewers. And she eschewed such commentary writing that her pictures were the result of a collaborative effort between the material and spiritual worlds and that spirits helped to provide the content of her drawings while she was responsible for their stylistic components. She was not concerned about her choice to hone her abilities to communicate with unseen entities and believed that she “need have no fear, for that my previous education had been given as a preparation for the work I was to do, and having in former years been accustomed to drawing flowers from Nature, with all their brilliancy of colouring, my brain was already trained to bear what my eye was fitted to receive.”

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abilities honed over a lifetime of practice combined with her ability as a medium contributed to the production of her images.

Critics, however, continued to disparage her attempts to disseminate knowledge about modern Spiritualism and one letter published in a popular Spiritualist paper exemplifies the tongue-in-cheek contempt that the male critics and writers reserved for women artists and especially those that professed the ability to work in collaboration with, rather than as mechanical devices of, unseen entities:

We plead guilty to great neglect in the matter of Miss Houghton’s admirable Gallery of Spirit Drawings. A complimentary card was sent us for the opening day, and afterwards a special admission at all times, and yet this meritorious exhibition had not a visit from us. And what shall we plead in extenuation of our conduct? The very telling excuse that we were so continuously occupied that the duty of going down to Bond Street was put off from day to day, with the hope that after the events of “this week” the pressure of affairs would be a little more relenting. Our visit at last was accomplished through a mere accident. Coming home weary after a long walk in the City, a friend fairly dragged us off in his cab…

Houghton, despite the obvious condescension demonstrated by well-respected Spiritualist newspapers, continued to produce her images that were combined with detailed verbal descriptions and written explanatory accounts that she affixed to the verso of some of her paintings. Some of the most important tools for decoding the meanings of her visionary pictures are in the form of these explanations. Her sophisticated descriptions provide a key to the symbolic representations encoded in her images and were meant to provide

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236 “Miss Houghton’s Exhibition of Spirit Drawings”, pp. 296-7.
further clarification of the messages embedded in each work. Houghton believed that her
explanations of the content of her automatic drawings were obtained through her
intercommunication with disembodied beings whose ultimate goal was to provide
spiritual enlightenment and hope and healing for humanity.

Houghton realized that her efforts to educate the public on the important message
of her visionary paintings were misunderstood and often mocked and she wrote about her
frustration:

I have endeavoured to make my language as clear and
unambiguous as possible; but still I know that
misunderstandings may arise, for I have often heard my
own words distorted into something absolutely the reverse
of what I have meant. 237

Even so she remained undaunted in her endeavour and believed that her spirit paintings
brought evidence of sentient life after death to the people who attended her private and
public exhibitions and especially to those who professed a skeptic reaction to the idea of
spirit-agency after physical death. Houghton was well known among London
Spiritualists and despite reviews that attempted to belittle her work her exhibitions of
spirit pictures were well attended. Her innovative spirit drawings, done in water colours
and executed through her mediumship, fascinated viewers, many of whom struggled to
unlock the symbolic meaning inherent in her complex abstracts.

Houghton continued to work towards her goal of making her mediumistic pictures
available to as wide an audience as possible and worked to establish an annual exhibition

of spiritualist paintings. She wrote to well-known Spiritualist journals including *Medium and Daybreak*, *Spiritual Magazine Christian*, and *Spiritualist* about her idea. Houghton believed that her exhibition in Old Bond Street was successful and offered to organize an extended annual “exhibition of Drawings, to consist of works executed through different mediums.” The positive response from those in attendance at her exhibition at Bond Street prompted her to write that, “[t]he more I have heard on the subject during the time that my own Gallery has been open the more convinced I am that a very interesting collection may be made.” Houghton performed extensive preliminary planning and offered to “send perhaps a dozen or so” of her visionary pictures “(or more if they should be wished for)” she also offered to include “six or seven drawings by other mediums” and encouraged other visionary artists to submit their own mediumistic pictures for public exhibition. Houghton was enthusiastic about the possibilities of such an exposition and suggested that it be extended from a national status to a global one. She, envisioned an annual international exhibition that focused exclusively on mediumistic images writing that although “a suggestion was made in this paper that works of art not executed mediumistically should also be admitted to the same Exhibition” she believed

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239 “I have endeavoured to gain all the information I could as to the method by which it may be accomplished. Mr. McNair, who has acted as manager and secretary for my Exhibition and has had much experience in similar arrangements, would be willing to undertake the working details; and he tells me that the usual plan is for a sum to be guaranteed sufficient to meet the expenses, say be subscribers of £5 each; then there must be one gentleman who will undertake the duty of treasurer, and at least three or five who will finally form themselves into a “hanging” committee, and perhaps for that purpose some artists may kindly volunteer who already have experience in that line. It will also be requisite to know if the pictures will be forthcoming, and whether the numerous artist-mediums will kindly do their utmost to ensure a successful result by contributing their works for the purpose.” Houghton, “Another exhibition of Spirit-Drawings,” p. 359.
that the display “ought to be confined exclusively to spirit drawings or paintings, there being plenty of other galleries for this world artists.” 240

Houghton was aware that she treaded in uncharted waters when she embarked on her mission to make communication between the material and the immaterial spheres available to as many people as she could. She understood that her position as a woman artist who experimented with mediumistic paintings made her a target of some of the most vitriolic critics. Women visionary artists had to confront efforts to anthologize Spiritualism. Many physicians argued that Spiritualism produced insanity and attracted those who were already insane and the perceived loss of conscious control which was believed to occur during a mediumistic intercommunion with unseen entities aroused fear and suspicion in some public arenas. In addition, the classification of Spiritualism as a religious delusion was a way for opponents to diminish the threat of a belief system that disrupted boundaries and enabled them to attempt to assert control and to impose conformity. Alex Owen writes, for example, that to categorize mediumistic abilities as a condition of mania was a common method of forcing conformity to social norms. Women who participated in modern Spiritualist activities such as automatic writing and drawing were often diagnosed as suffering from hysteria and were labeled as displaying “neurotic temperament,” which demonstrated their emotional weakness and a lack of will-power. 241 Houghton wrote about her own experience with attempts at just such a diagnosis,

I made an engagement to go on November 21 to a séance at Dr. Dixon’s...where Madame Besson and other mediums were to be present, among whom was Mr. Eyre, and I took my drawings with me....A few days afterwards Mr. Eyre was strongly impressed to go to my cousin, Mrs. Pearson...with a message for me...It was to the effect that I must entirely give up my drawing mediumship, for that the action of those brilliant colours would be injurious to the brain, and produce all kinds of dreadful calamities. My cousin gave the message very strongly, for Mr. Eyre had been so exceedingly urgent that they clearly were alarmed, and she wished me at once to promise that I would obey his directions. But I said that on that point I would be only guided by my own spirit friends, whom I accordingly consulted, and was told that I need have no fear, for that my previous education had been given as a preparation for the work I was to do, and having in former years been accustomed to drawing flowers from Nature, with all their brilliancy of colouring, my brain was already trained to bear what my eye was fitted to receive.  

Houghton was bluntly forthright in her refusal to be intimidated and instead responded that:

there are puny beings with half an intellect, or one bemuddled with greed of gain or worldly advantage, who will say – Are you sure you are not self-deceived? that you are not a victim of fancy or imagination? and such-like twaddle. They are not worth heeding, because it is their own inaptitude that renders them blind.  


242 Houghton, *Evenings at Home*, p. 23
243 Houghton, *Evenings at Home*, pp. 213, 214. Houghton was clear about the social stigma attached to Spiritualist’s belief systems and about the negative impact that it had on practicing mediums. The following are two examples of her thoughts on the subject. “A non-professional medium...will not submit to the gross suspicions and coarse tests of skeptical enquirers. Those class of insults need a golden salve. Why, their very language on the subject, although perhaps put politely, is sometimes intolerably insulting, almost as if they would think it quite natural that you should recount a string of falsehoods (not to use a stronger term) for the purpose of convincing them! Convincing them of what? “Another suffering that comes upon professional mediums, which none could be expected to bear without full compensation, is that
In the nineteenth-century Houghton’s abstracted images contravened conventional
stylistic imperatives perpetuated by the Royal Academy and transgressed boundaries
between the material world and the ethereal. Consequently, despite her painstaking
attempts to clarify the symbolically dense character of her spiritual pictures the breach
between her visual representation and her textual references did not offer an easy route to
understanding and at times appeared to impede such revelation.

Similarly, current efforts to uncover meanings embedded in Houghton’s
mediumistic works offer interpretations based on objective perspectives that replicate the
often reductive readings employed by nineteenth-century critical reviews. Rachel
Oberter in her extensive examination, for example, offers a largely objective analysis of
Houghton’s visionary images she writes for example,

Some of Houghton’s symbols are mimetic; the hand of God,
for instance, is represented by five spirals, which resemble
five fingerprints. The fingerprints form a synecdoche for
the whole hand, which in turn conveys the more abstract
concept of God helping people on earth. Other shapes in
this watercolor also allude to the concepts that they
represent. The long, narrow sequence of curved lines
projecting out diagonally from the bottom left corner of the
paper evokes the finger of God that it is supposed to
signify...yet other symbols take on different forms in
different drawings. For example, in Glory Be to God, the
eye of God is not represented by a large, open spiral with a

the atmosphere around them becomes tainted by the unwholesome spiritual elements which emanate from
the worldly, the vicious, and the skeptical, who form the large bulk of their visitors, for even a pleasant
outside aspect may conceal heart-blackness.”

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long tail, as it appears in The Eye of God, but rather by a cluster of small, tightly wound coils.\textsuperscript{244}

Houghton occupied the interstice in which she believed that her collaborative interconnection with powerful unseen entities facilitated the production of visionary images that disrupt contemporary androcentric empirically based ideologies that restrict humanity to the boundaries of physicality and with it objective classification. The inherent multi-dimensional nature of visionary painting ensures a transitional quality which makes definitive attempts at objective classification elusive. Houghton’s mediumistic paintings are the result of a collaborative intercommunion between embodied and disembodied entities and as such are mutable, fluctuating, interstitial works which resist restrictive categorizations. Interstitial spaces are theorized as existing between dominators and dominated: an interstice or empty space between structures providing opportunities from which to re-negotiate socially and culturally proscribed identity and to open up possibilities for the exploration of multi-dimensional, multi-temporal alternative realities. Visionary art is difficult to classify because it functions in the interstices and so falls between the spaces of recognized genres. Consequently, application of a potentially reductive entirely objective correlation between recognizable material sign and transcendental symbolism in an effort to decode the intricately rendered

and subtly interweaving forms of Houghton’s mediumistic pictures serve to undervalue the symbolism inherent to her pictures.

Houghton believed that her visionary pictures acted as conduits to the “peaceful, harmonious, spiritualising influences” that served to circumvent the physical consciousness and to address the sentient spiritual element of all living beings. Her mediumistic images recall the thankga paintings of the centuries old Buddhist tradition while they prefigure, by almost a century Alma Rumball’s healing visionary images. In the mid-nineteenth-century, Houghton wrote in detail about the healing qualities that she believed her mediumistic paintings possessed and she trusted that they were endowed with immense spiritual power. She wrote that unseen entities impressed upon her which drawings would most benefit particular viewers and that these individuals, simply by being in the vicinity of her spirit pictures, would experience a sensation of healing. She taught that if viewers spent time in contemplation of her paintings they would eventually gain understanding of the symbolic intention embedded in her spirit drawings and would also experience both

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246 Oberter, *Esoteric Art*, p, 229, Thirty-five of Houghton’s mediumistic paintings were donated to the still active spiritualist community Victorian Spiritualists’ Union in Melbourne, Australia in the early twentieth century. The watercolors line the wall of the meeting room, with a photograph of the text on the back hung below each watercolor.
physical healing and an intense spiritual awakening. Even writers of the local Spiritual journals who made light of Houghton’s paintings commented on the “spiritualising influence” of her pictures:

There is a group of nine pictures in the right-hand corner which exercise a most wonderful influence on the mind of the beholder. A calm, peaceful, harmonious, spiritualising influence steals over the consciousness. The cares and animosities of life seem to flee away and a new and higher atmosphere is respired…This, indeed, is the special merit of these works. They grow upon the affections the longer they are examined, and though no tangible description of the effect may be possible, yet you feel the spirit has been enriched and gratified by the result.

Georgiana Houghton’s abstracted, deeply symbolic mediumistic paintings can be characterized as pioneering and she shared her perceptions of her abilities to facilitate intercommunication between the physical and material worlds. She believed that the complex symbolic content embedded in her pictures provided a conduit through which viewers might experience both physical and perhaps more importantly, spiritual healing.

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248 Miss Houghton’s Exhibition of Spirit Drawings,” p. 296-7
Chapter 5
Evolution and Exegesis: ‘The Spirit of Freedom’ through Visual Narrative

I encountered London artist Constance Ethel Le Rossignol’s (1873-1970) pictures for the first time while conducting research at the College of Psychic Studies in London England in 2006. I was immediately struck by the pale figures floating within vibrantly hued, yet nebulous, backgrounds. The symbol-laden psychedelic gilded gouaches, many of which are encased in large gold coloured wooden frames, seemed oddly out of place on the otherwise serene walls of the college. I was curious to learn more about these peculiar images. Who, for example, had produced these abstracted pictures and why? What was their significance to the college? My initial inquiries garnered little results and after further investigation I learned that the images had been donated by an undisclosed benefactor and that the artist believed that she worked in collaboration with disembodied entities to produce these mediumistic paintings. After extensive research I discovered an anonymously written article entitled “Art from the Other Side” which offered a summary of Le Rossignol’s “renderings” and relied on the only source of information available provided by the artist in her book *A Goodly Company* (1958).\(^{249}\)

\(^{249}\) “Art from the Other Side” in *Mysteries of the Unknown Search for the Soul* (Alexandria Virginia: Time-Life Books Inc, April 1997), p. 112. To my knowledge, this is the only assessment of Le Rossignol’s life and work. As with many women artists before the mid-twentieth-century Le Rossignol’s contribution has been unrecognized and when she died in 1970 she left her work in the care of her companion Mrs. Summers to “deal with according to her known wishes.” Le Rossignol’s wishes are not clear and as a result her pictures along with several copies of her book published in 1958 were donated to the London College of Psychic Studies.
Although the anonymous author appreciated Le Rossignol’s pictures, produced between 1920 and 1929, as representative of “the afterlife” attempts to unlock the significance of her series of multifaceted drawings and paintings using the text provided in her book proved onerous. “By the time she painted these final pictures,” writes the frustrated author, “Le Rossignol’s symbolism had become impenetrable, and her…beguiling descriptions of a paradise peopled with luminous souls had given way to bizarre ramblings.” The writer supplied an extract from Le Rossignol’s book a line that mysteriously reads “The NINE entering REALITY-IN-OPERATION is thus the crucial at-one-ment” and was meant to augment the complex symbolism of her paintings. It seems that Le Rossignol’s attempts to clarify here serve only to further confuse the issue and the author of the article gave up attempts to extract any meaning and relegated Le Rossignol’s “enigmatic works” to the realms of the “demented.” I was not satisfied with this analysis and though recognizing that Le Rossignol’s pictures and writings would be difficult to comprehend I also believed that they warranted further analysis and my subsequent research indicates that her images are, in fact, not the result of “bizarre ramblings.” In this chapter I argue that Le Rossignol’s pictures represent a

250 Art from the Other Side, p. 112.
251 My initial attempts to uncover more about the nature of Le Rossignol’s visionary images was much improved when I discovered in the summer of 2007 that her mediumistic pictures and automatic writings and notes were being sold on E-bay. American author Jeannette Stark provided information about dozens of Le Rossignol’s “drawing books” that were filled with “nudes, faces, [and] forms” and also with “buildings, scenery...fierce faces and faces of dead people”. The original owner of Le Rossignol’s private writings, drawings and paintings kept them hidden in a garage for over thirty years before they were offered for sale. The owner, who insisted on remaining anonymous and who referred to Le Rossignol as “that mad woman” has, despite obvious denigration of her status as an artist of merit, nevertheless profited from the sale of her artistic production. Email dated 21 July 2007, email dated 28 July 2007. Because Le Rossignol’s narrative was exhibited at the College of Psychic Studies it did not appear that her work was
multifaceted, intertextual narrative that explicates the fundamental philosophical precepts of late-nineteenth-and early-twentieth-century adherents of Theosophical philosophy that focused on the evolution of the human spirit after physical death.

Le Rossignol’s series of forty-two paintings is divided into three segments with the first section of her triune describing humanity’s evolutionary beginning in the material world, and consists of fourteen graphite black and white illustrations. The second section of fourteen pictures represents the trials and tribulations of humanity which are both extended, through reincarnation, into the material world, and experienced by disembodied entities during their travels through the lower and middle spheres of the spiritual realms. These paintings provide further elucidation on particular elements of the evolutionary process which include representations of Darwinian Theory expanded to embrace Theosophical examples of the accelerated progression of the soul after physical death. The final segment of images portrays the continued trajectory of souls into the highest realms of the ethereal worlds which culminate in their spiritual enlightenment and intercommunion with God. Key examples from Le Rossignol’s pictures will be examined within the framework of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century social and cultural perspectives, with focuses on a more specific analysis of her images within the context of Theosophical philosophy explicated by the writings of Annie Besant, Charles Leadbeater, Alfred Sinnett and Stanley De Brath. In addition, I will provide further

informed by her knowledge of Theosophical philosophy. I wrote to the London Theosophical Society in order to gain available information regarding Le Rossignol but the librarian refused to provide any information. Barry Thompson, email message to author, April 26, 2010.
insight into the content of her narrative in relation to Christian representations of The Stations of the Cross.

In an initial assessment of Le Rossignol’s images, as they are currently exhibited at the College of Psychic Studies, it becomes clear that the narrative element of her pictures is destabilized in favour of their ornamental characteristics. Her pencil drawings, for example, that trace the initial experiences of the afterlife as described by Theosophists and her unseen collaborators, are not exhibited alongside her more vibrantly coloured paintings. Consequently, despite the prevalence of her images on the walls of the College and the interest that they garner from twenty-first-century viewers from all over the world almost nothing is known about the content of these original pictures or about the artist who produced them. However, when Le Rossignol displayed her narrative visionary pictures for the first time at the London Spiritual Alliance in 1929 her exhibit “An Exhibition of Psychic Drawings” was highlighted in the spiritualist journal *Light* and received excited response from viewers. Theosophist, Stanley De Brath, a respected scientist and author who conducted research on contemporary ideas of religion, science and psychic phenomenon, introduced Le Rossignol’s presentation of images with enthusiasm. De Brath’s lectures on the results of his research were well attended and his articles including “Spiritualist and Science” in which he discusses the Theosophical concept of the evolution of the human spirit after bodily death were also published in the
spiritualist journals including *Light* magazine as well as Theosophical periodicals such as *Theosophical Path Magazine* and *Theosophical Quarterly Magazine.*

De Brath lauded Le Rossignol’s pictures as symbolic of the evolutionary process of humanity in the ethereal realms and further praised her images for demonstrating the capacity to facilitate comprehension in all who “would seek to understand the Divine Purpose in the development of the human spirit.” He extolled the “high artistic merit” of Le Rossignol’s paintings stating that her “beautiful and highly artistic” drawings exemplify the “most remarkable symbolic pictures that have come to the notice of the Alliance.” In addition, he reiterated the importance of Le Rossignol’s mediumistic images in their capacity as vehicles of Theosophical teachings about the evolution of the spirit by stating that they “have a great significance on the development of the Human Spirit” and characterised them as “deeply mystical” conduits of “spiritual influence.” De Brath’s praise of Le Rossignol’s pictures suggests that he shared her belief in

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253 De Brath opened Le Rossignol’s first exhibition on Monday the 6th May 1929 at the headquarters of the London Spiritualist Alliance at 16, Queensberry Place, S.W.7. The London Spiritualist Alliance has since been renamed The College of Psychic Science.
Theosophical precepts that a clear “understanding of the Great Force and Will of the Guiding Power” which was guided by “Faith, Harmony, Love, Concentration, [and] Inspiration” influenced “the soul in its upward career.” In 1929, Le Rossignol’s visionary paintings were considered of particular importance because of their ability to portray, in pictorial form, “the progress of the spirit throughout its life journeys.” Le Rossignol’s sequence of visionary images that deal directly with the multi-faceted, multi-dimensional, interconnected progressive patterns of individual spirits corresponds with ideas about the development of the soul through evolutionary progression that was cultivated and disseminated by adherents of Theosophical teachings. Blavatsky, one of the founders of the modern Theosophical movement, for example, wrote about one of the fundamental principles of Theosophy; that harmony between individuals fostered enlightenment:

> one eternal Truth, and one infinite changeless Spirit of Love, Truth and Wisdom in the Universe, as one Light for all, in which we live and move and have our Being... We are all Brothers. Let us then love, help, and mutually defend each other against any Spirit of untruth or deception, “without distinction of race, creed or colour.”

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254 De Braths’s descriptive language is repeated in Theosophical texts published during the period.
256 Helena Blavatsky, Collected Writings, One Eternal Truth, XIII (1891), p. 269.
These principles of the Society were echoed throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century by the leading advocates of Theosophical ideologies about the evolution of the soul. A.P. Sinnett in his book *Growth of the Soul* (1905), for instance, offered a contemporary and scientifically based synthesis of many of Blavatsky and Olcott’s re-conceptualizations of the writings of mystics and adepts throughout Eastern and Western Europe. Sinnett expanded on the “fundamental teaching put forward in ‘Esoteric Buddhism’” in which he reasserted that Theosophical examination of metaphysics is grounded in experiment and observation that can be conducted by “a good many people.”

He transformed Blavatsky and Olcott’s complicated narrative so that it would resonate more easily with a wider audience and he reaffirmed the importance of

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reincarnation in the successful evolution of the human spirit while he offered his more simplified conception of the “infinite resources of the spiritual planes.” Sinnett theorised that accelerated advancement through the spiritual spheres was earned by those “prepared to make immediate temporal sacrifices” which would enable them to “pass on towards a loftier” spiritual evolution. This choice to make sacrifices, according to Sinnett, was based on an individual entity’s desire to enhance and support the progression of others. Viewer’s who attended Le Rossignol’s exhibition in 1929 would have had access to writings such as Sinnett’s when they were first confronted with her visionary narrative.

Le Rossignol’s pictures, Spirit House (c. 1920-1929) (fig. 5-1), Unity of Love: Man and Woman’s Form in One (c. 1920-1929) (fig. 5-2), Workers in the Sphere of Holiness (c. 1920-1929) (fig.5-3) and The Power of Thought, The House not Made With Hands (c. 1920-1929) (fig. 5-4) are included in the first section of her three part series and suggest her familiarity with late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century interest in fantasy and visionary illustrated subjects described by Diana Johnson in her chapter on “Fantastic Illustration and Design in Britain, 1850-1930” as appearing “in varied guises – from episodes drawn from Arthurian legends through the strangely delicate and simplified representations and verses of Kate Greenaway to scenes from Shakespeare…” Johnson made important connections between nineteenth- and early-

\[\text{\textsuperscript{258}}\text{Ibid. p. xiii.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{259}}\text{Ibid. p. 21.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{260}}\text{Diana L. Johnson, Fantastic Illustration and Design in Britain, 1850-1930 (Rhode Island: Museum of art, Rhode Island School of Design), p. 9.}\]
twentieth-century artists’ attraction to an illustrated, immaterial, imaginary counter-world to the harsh reality of a war-weary material world that offered viewers a respite in a space in which time and place has no meaning:

From the mid-nineteenth century to the period immediately following World War I, it was precisely the creation and description of such counter-worlds that became the major preoccupation of a wide range of artists, writers and designers, who, while not English by birth or even by nationality, all produced their work in England or for the very receptive English market. 261

Le Rossignol’s earliest drawings embrace the illusionistic value of fantastic representation in their ability to suggest ambiguous spaces that transcend time and space while they simultaneously describe in meticulous detail the architectural structures that make up part of the landscape of the spiritual spheres. Like other artists of the period she may have been aware of critic John Ruskin’s insistence on realistic detail in imaginative representations which was still prevalent in the latter part of the nineteenth-century. Le Rossignol invented ways to depict experiences of the imagination in a pictorial language that resonated with viewers while simultaneously suppressing realistic, almost photographic, re-creations of the natural subject matter of everyday life. She circumvented rational depictions of imaginative landscapes by distorting form and perspective, by filling the surface of the picture plane with detailed patterning and by juxtaposing incongruous elements and, later, colors. 262 Le Rossignol’s stylistic techniques used in her images correspond with those of other artists of the late-nineteenth

261 Ibid. p. 10.
262 Ibid. p. 10.
and early-twentieth-centuries that evaded Ruskin’s criticism of abstracted representations and disrupted naturalist notions of materiality. Her visionary images differ from fantastic illustrations of the era, however, because they are informed by her knowledge of Theosophical philosophy and because they exemplify her belief in her ability to intercommunicate with unseen entities of the spiritual realms.

*Spirit House* (fig.5-1) rendered on a vertical, rectangular surface depicts figures set in a classical architectural space in keeping with Ruskin’s insistence on the adherence to realistic representations of the natural world. Le Rossignol, however, depicted an architectural structure in response to her belief that powerful unseen entities introduced her to the forms of the spiritual spheres and then taught her to symbolically represent “ideas” in her images as opposed to “the actual language of thoughts” so that she could produce realistic depictions of what she saw that would resonate with viewers as immaterial.263 A monumental, three-dimensional composition is elided in favour of a flattened linear representation to suggest the idea of the ethereal realms. Le Rossignol learned, through her intercommunication with her spirit guides, that her depictions of draperies in her pictures was symbolic of the idea or concept of great speed and was also

suggestive of the active nature of “light vibrations” rather than to represent any semblance of materiality. Reference to light vibrations in the context of Le Rossignol’s mediumistic representation of activity within the architectural spaces of the spiritual spheres was especially important because it symbolized the ability of spirits to learn to not only exist in the ethereal spheres but more significantly to produce their new surroundings using only the vibrations of their thoughts:

This drawing is to show you our spirit house where I inhabit. You must not think it is some way of showing an allegory. The spirit life is not an allegory but a great reality. There are some newly arrived spirits that experience difficulty adapting to their new surroundings because they have not yet learned to think positive thoughts.  

Over time Le Rossignol believed she earned the ability to re-conceptualise ideas of time and space and then to represent the reality of the spiritual spheres in symbolic form using various pictorial elements including spiralling vortexes and interconnected discs to depict the existence of multiple dimensions in the ethereal worlds.

Le Rossignol’s automatic writings offer detailed accounts of her intercommunion with spiritual beings and she believed that they guided her interventions into the ethereal spheres while they simultaneously offered instruction on the importance of her use of symbolic language as opposed to allegorical representation to describe what she saw. Le Rossignol’s ideas replicate those espoused by Annie Besant in her efforts to “unveil the deep truths” that she believed were embedded in most religions including Christianity but were cloaked under allegorical rhetoric and visual representation. Besant taught that

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265 Ibid. p. 22.
esoteric nature of Theosophy meant that advocates eschew religious texts that provided attenuated teachings for public consumption expressed as allegory and instead excavate the “hidden teachings” of “practical mysticism” articulated most profoundly through symbolism. Besant drew comparisons between Neo-Platonic theurgist Iamblichus Chalcidensis (c. 245-325) whose practice invoked the appearance and intervention of divine or supernatural beings into the affairs of humanity with the activities of the modern adepts of the late nineteenth-century. Le Rossignol’s written descriptions of her experiences as a mediumistic artist in which she believed she traversed boundaries throughout the spiritual spheres under the auspices of her powerful guides emulates Besant’s claims that spiritually enlightened adepts have the ability to summon powerful beings who called “upwards their souls to themselves, procuring them a Union with

Figure 5-2: Ethel Le Rossignol. *Unity of Love: Man and Woman’s Form in One*, c. 1920-1929, graphite on paper. Reproduced from Le Rossignol, *A Goodly Company*.

themselves, and accustoming them, while they are yet in the body, to be separate from bodies, and to be led around to their eternal and intelligible principle….”  

Le Rossignol’s *Unity of Love: Man and Woman’s Form in One* (fig. 5- 2) promotes Theosophical philosophy that men and women were meant to exist in harmony with one another in order to accelerate the evolution of all humanity. She began her mediumistic narrative in 1920 and she underscored the physical differences between men and women while simultaneously highlighting the harmonious unity enacted between them. Her depiction of unity, unaffected by difference between the sexes, reflected a feminist politics of the period adopted by women such as Theosophist Florence Wyman Richardson (1889-1968). Richardson used the analogy that, “[t]he magnet has two poles, positive and negative. They are opposite ends of the same thing, and by the complementary use of both we get their common force – magnetism…Only in their perfect equality can they demonstrate power” to describe ideal relations between men and women. Richardson wrote that difference was articulated in the “active, initiative, positive, masculine principle” which “expressed itself in strength and intellect” and the “passive, receptive, negative feminine principle” expressed as “gentleness and affection.” She also argued, however, that “each individual contained both the masculine and the feminine principle, one expressed and one latent, and through spiritual evolution in the highest spheres individuals embodied both the masculine and the feminine in unification.

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with the Almighty.”

Le Rossignol’s initial depictions of difference between men and women enacted in the material and astral worlds was transformed in the later images of her narrative to represent the harmonious unification of masculine and feminine qualities embodied in entities that had ascended into the highest ethereal spheres.

As Le Rossignol progressed as a drawing medium, the content of her pictures became more complex and incorporated more complicated symbolic elements exemplified by her *Workers in the Sphere of Holiness* (fig. 5-3) in which she depicts stylized figures that appear to traverse at will throughout the spiritual spheres and the

![Figure 5-3: Ethel Le Rossignol. *Workers in the Sphere of Holiness* c. 1920-1929, graphite on paper. Reproduced from Le Rossignol, *A Goodly Company.*](image)

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material worlds. She used a complicated series of interconnected curved and straight lines to suggest multi-dimensional spaces and her inclusion of symbolic emblems, resembling those that appeared in popular Theosophical texts of the period, including Besant and Leadbeater’s *Occult Chemistry*, demonstrates her knowledge of Theosophy. Le Rossignol adapted her understanding of Theosophical symbolism and combined that with knowledge, gained through intercommunication with her guides, to produce an emblematic language that she hoped would resonate with perceptive viewers. Le Rossignol included a depiction of a key emblem in her *Workers in the Sphere of Holiness* (fig.5-3) in the form of a symbolic representation of the “all-seeing eyes” which she repeated in several pictures throughout her narrative. She highlighted the importance of this particular emblem in her automatic writings and offered detailed accounts of the significance of the “Watcher of the Spiritual Spheres.”

If the souls in this sphere of spirits would wish to return to the earth, when they desire with all their aspiration and love to descend into the astral sphere of earth, he wills them to return for a short portion of their soul life, while one of the souls is still on earth and the other in the sphere of spirits in order to comfort their souls by seeing each other again. He watches at the gates of the spiritual sphere, and lets no soul return who does not will with all his heart’s desire. 269

Le Rossignol’s depiction of the “all-seeing eyes” in her visionary pictures reproduce esoteric codes of belief disseminated in the writings and lectures of adherents of the Theosophical Society. The “Silent Watchers,” in the hierarchy of the Theosophical design for the spiritual spheres, for example, are conceived of as highly developed

spiritual entities that act as guides. Le Rossignol’s emblems are symbolic representations of those spirits that have evolved to the highest state of spiritual enlightenment but yet choose to postpone the pursuit of their own evolutionary path towards illumination in order to support the progression of less developed souls.

Le Rossignol’s *The Power of Thought, the House not Made With Hands* (fig. 5-4) rendered on a vertical rectangular surface illustrates spirits that focus their mental energetic vibrations in an effort to channel their thoughts to induce materialization of

their spiritual surroundings.\textsuperscript{270} Once again, Le Rossignol provided a description of her picture that parallels Besant’s and Leadbeater’s theory delineated in their book \textit{Thought-Forms} (1901) in which they described both the composition and the effect of thought forms that were believed to produce a “radiating vibration” generating “floating forms” which could be discerned by clairvoyants:

\begin{quote}
The thought itself appears first to clairvoyant sight as a vibration in the mental body, and this may be either simple or complex. If the thought itself is absolutely simple, there is only the one rate of vibration, and only one type of mental matter will be strongly affected…There are many varieties of this mental matter, and…each one of these has its own especial…rate of vibration…\textsuperscript{271}
\end{quote}

Le Rossignol’s depiction of spiritual beings who construct their surroundings using only their thoughts corresponds with Besant’s and Leadbeater’s philosophy that thought forms emitted a variety of shapes depending on the force and type of emotion or thought that precipitated them. As she progressed in the production of her pictures Le Rossignol began to include colour to articulate vibrating shapes that possessed the power to radiate throughout the spiritual and material spheres.

Le Rossignol believed that her mediumistic pictures disrupted notions about the inaccessibility of the heavenly spheres in the material world and wrote, “[t]he spiritual world is all around each one but not every soul perceives and knows of it...” She noted

\textsuperscript{271} Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater, \textit{Thought-Forms} (India: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1901), pp. 9-11. Besant wrote in the foreword to the text that some of the details of their ideas about the existence of thought forms appeared as an article in \textit{Lucifer} (later the \textit{Theosophical Review}). This first edition appeared in \textit{Lucifer} XIX (September 1896), pp. 65-75. The article is signed by Annie Besant as sole author and twelve of the 54 plates included in the joint publication appeared in her original article.
that her images were meant to educate viewers about the truth of their spiritual heritage as well as their responsibility to one another as they worked towards spiritual enlightenment. Her narrative about the evolution of the spirit was meant to guide viewers towards a more tolerant response to the possibilities of continued existence after death. Le Rossignol was hesitant about exhibiting her images in public but believed that she received direction from her guides to publicise her spiritual experiences:

You can speak now when you wish about [these] spirit communications but draw more pictures first, and then you will show them to the world. Show them to your friends first, and then to those who are interested in psychic research. Spirits have sought an artist and are able to show by your hand that spiritual life is a fact and not a fiction.272

She trusted that her visionary paintings demonstrated that humanity could be assured of an afterlife in which individuals supported one another in order to accelerate the progression towards enlightenment. Le Rossignol believed that her pictures not only educated humanity about the reality of evolution in the spiritual spheres but also that they presented indisputable proof that communication between the spiritual and the material world was indeed possible. “You are being given a series of symbolical drawings which are to convince others of the possibility for spirit communication, and which will be a beautiful assurance of the future life.”273 Le Rossignol’s narrative was also meant to persuade humanity of the importance of their responsibility of graduating to higher spheres of existence through effort. She wanted to encourage viewers that they were not

alone in that endeavour and that they would receive the intervention and reassurance of
the masters who existed in the highest realms of the spiritual spheres. She wrote about the
significance of the evolutionary experience depicted in her visionary paintings:

it is the greater soul-life after this sphere is passed. The
whole pattern of growth must follow a design in order that
the soul may enter the sphere of wisdom. All is mirrored
there. The earth life is only a small bit of our lives – so
small, I see now, that it matters only as a training ground.274

The evolutionary nature of Le Rossignol’s visionary narrative relates the elation
experienced by those who have evolved into a more enlightened state of spiritual
awareness but also depicts the miserable reality of the lower levels of the astral world to
which less advanced entities are relegated according to deeds enacted while on the
material plane. Le Rossignol’s representation of different levels of the spiritual spheres
reflects both Spiritualist and Theosophist tenets which stated that “those who did no work
for the world” while they lived on the material plane had not earned the “privilege of
enlightenment in the higher spheres.” Theosophists taught that the repeated process of
reincarnation facilitated evolution but that less progressive spirits “must have many more
lives to free them from the bondage of the untrained will.”275

Le Rossignol’s images The Unloving Soul After Death (c. 1920-29) (fig. 5-5), The
Mystery of Birth and Spiritual Love (c. 1920-29) (fig. 5-6), The Lover of all Men is now
Freed from the Body (c. 1920-29) (fig. 5-7) and The Four Messengers (c. 1920-29) (fig.
5-8) are a particularly significant component of the fourteen paintings in her second

275 Le Rossignol, Private Automatic Writings (10 August 1920), p. 22
portion of her triune because they exemplify consequences of behavior in the material world and also deal with the transformative potential of birth and death. Le Rossignol used geometrical lines and spherical forms in her visionary pictures to represent evolution as a harmonious hierarchal design in which less advanced souls wait in the lower spheres for support and the opportunity to reincarnate while more advanced spirits attain the ability to traverse into the highest spheres. According to Theosophical philosophy highly developed spirits offer solace and direction for less enlightened entities that are relegated to the lower spheres but spirits who have surrounded themselves with negative thought forms are not aware that help is available and so search for the light of God before they can benefit from assistance offered. Le Rossignol expanded on this Theosophical ideology about the hierarchy of spirit development in her explanation of her visionary picture *The Unloving Soul After Death* (fig.5-5) writing that her representation of the “sorrowful or angry” spirits that are depicted waiting in a static space will remain in
stasis until they perceive that their mission in life is to help others through self-sacrifice. Only then, according to Le Rossignol, will they have earned the privilege of a new physical awareness on the earth. Her automatic writings are filled with exclamations about the expansive nature of life in the spiritual spheres and in this passage she writes about the importance of “social and individual duty” for the continued development of the spirit:

The reality is so much more surprising to those who have never believed in the spiritual life. The short life on earth is marvellous, but troubled with so many cares that it is hard to realise the mysterious state of unhappiness of those who on earth cared nothing for their social and individual duties for they are now enclosed in their own woes and sorrows, as they have never loved or helped others. They seem as if imprisoned, but they are enclosed by their own selves. They wait to be re-incarnated in the world bodies.  

Le Rossignol’s conviction that spirit entities remain in the lower ethereal realms until they have earned their rite of passage either as reincarnated into the material spheres or as occupants of higher spheres reserved for “spirits who, shining in the sphere of light, show their light to those who are in the darkness of sorrow and ignorance” was shared by adherents of Theosophical philosophy. Theosophist Alfred Sinnett, for example, devoted a chapter to the natural and inevitable reality of reincarnation of the spirit into the physical body which offered redemption for troubled souls:

Purpose worth speaking of can be served by studying the teachings which constitute in their entirety the Esoteric Doctrine until the student is in the first instance completely

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277 Ibid, p. 10.
saturated with the conception that the growth and development of the human soul is accomplished by means of successive returns to physical life (with intervening periods of spiritual rest) which, regarded in the aggregate as a process of Nature, make up what is generally called the theory of Re-incarnation.278

Le Rossignol’s knowledge of Theosophical teachings coincided with information that she believed she had received from the spiritual spheres. Her picture *The Unloving Soul after Death* (fig. 5-5) depicts sorrowful souls cloaked in darkness and bound by metaphorical chains built through negativity and demonstrates the value of evolutionary progression through the auspices of reincarnation. This picture is also indicative of Le Rossignol’s development as a mediumistic artist because it marks her transformation from graphic illustration to painted imagery.

Le Rossignol, wrote in her private notes that she believed that her spirit guides encouraged her to develop her mediumistic drawings to include the application of vibrant colour including gold. The use of gold in the form of gold leaf or gold paint is traditionally paired with egg-tempera painting both of which continue to be used in religious and spiritual imagery.279 Her unseen collaborators offered suggestions on how she might symbolize the reality of the spiritual realms by applying various hues to her visionary images. During one of her automatic writing sessions Le Rossignol learned

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279 LeRossignol, began to experiment with the application of colour in the second section of her three part narrative beginning with *Figure No. 19*. The deep saturated hue of her colours suggests the use of gouache which artists used instead of egg tempura in an effort to further reflect the spiritual nature of Byzantine religious painting.
that she needed to rely on her experience as a trained artist and then to expand on that
knowledge despite the limited nature of her material tools:

She had seen the lovely skies in the south and [had] tried to paint sunshine in the world of men. You cannot paint sunshine but you try to suggest the light of the sun and the less bright by shadows. So the brilliance of the spirit sphere can only be suggested in tones of colour painted with the darkness of shadows. The bright and glorious spirits always radiate light round them. The woeful ones in the darkness, lost and weary, are the grey hue of the sky in a fog, green and blue in somber shades and mingled shadows.

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Throughout the history of Western and European art colour has acted as a symbolic conduit for the deliverance of enriching experiences that go beyond the world of things. The nature of colour is often seen as an intangible concept and so evokes a sense of the intangible which is ironically supported by the materiality of pigment. 281 Colour, for example, can elicit feelings and thoughts which, from a Theosophist’s perspective, generate form which has the ability to actively affect the environment. Besant, however, understood the difficulty of representing the spiritual spheres using material resources. “To paint in earth’s dull colours the forms clothed in the living light of other worlds is a hard and thankless task; so much more the gratitude to those who have attempted it. They needed coloured fire, and had only ground earths.” 282 Besant’s quandary was one that Quattrocento artists also considered. They attempted to depict “forms clothed in the living light” using pigments such as ultramarine blue to represent the mantel worn by the

Virgin Mother in sacred Christian paintings produced in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Cennino Cennini, for example, wrote in his treatise about the glorious “character” of ultramarine blue which is especially enhanced by its combination with gold:

Ultramarine blue is a colour illustrious, beautiful, and most perfect, beyond all other colors; one could not say anything about it, or do anything with it, that its quality would not still surpass. And because of its excellence, I want to discuss it at length, and to show you in detail how it is made. And pay close attention to this, for you will gain great honor and service from it. And let some of that color, combined with gold, which adorns all the works of our profession, whether on wall or on paint, shine forth in every object.283

Medieval artists used combinations of dyes, pigments and metals to produce sacred works of art that were meant to speak “for themselves using the language of beauty” and the “beauty” portrayed was equated with “the splendour of the truth.”284 Colour and metal, for example, were meant to embody the sacred transcendental nature of the words and images portrayed in illuminated manuscripts. Artists wrote about looking ‘through’ paintings to the invisible realities they depicted. Cennini taught painters to use their skills to “discover things not seen, hiding themselves under the shadows of natural

objects.” 285 Medieval religious paintings are the result of a holistic approach; of cooperation between people; alchemists who made pigments and transformed base lead into gold, artists who transformed the canvas and produced images and viewers who meditated on those paintings. Scientist and art conservator, Spike Bucklow writes about the spiritual significance of pigment and metal in the production of contemplative sacred images. “Religious contemplatives were transformed – by the grace of God – from imperfection towards perfection. The contemplative’s transformation of humble matter is there for all to see. When viewed alchemically, colours, in art or anywhere else in the world can be spiritual supports for the soul’s journey.”286

Le Rossignol, during intercommunication with her guides, learned that her goal as an artist was to produce “beautiful” paintings meant to educate and also to embody the transcendental splendour that would help to facilitate universal understanding about the reality of the spiritual realms. “The goal of art is beauty” she wrote,

but the goal of the spirit artist combines Wisdom with Beauty. The sketches you are shown have been with this twofold object – to give designs of world-wide interest, which will open the eyes of men on earth to the glorious world of spiritual power which is all about them. The loveliness of the greatest works of art is to aid the souls to understand that the troubles of the material world are but transitory.287

Le Rossignol also incorporated techniques into her mediumistic narrative which parallel those used by artists who produced the highly spiritual panel-paintings made for

286 Ibid, p. 221.

Byzantine churches in which gold leaf backgrounds were intended to contribute to the sacredness of the divine figures represented. Medieval treatises explained the shimmering effect of the gold which when illuminated by candle-light produced a radiant transcendence reminiscent of scriptural references to the Glory of God. Le Rossignol’s intention to capture the presence of the Divine by applying gold leaf in her image mirrored those of the Byzantine artists.

Her experimentations with gold leaf in her visionary pictures evoke the alchemist’s ideas about the inherent metaphysical qualities of the precious metal. Gold was considered especially exceptional because it is not dependent on any one of its components for existence and therefore represents one of the few truly holistic elements in the material world. According to the teachings of the leading adherents of Spiritualism, Theosophy and Christianity, human bodies are composed of elements of heaven and earth so that spirit and body are bound together in order to maintain existence in the material world. At death, however, material bodies are absorbed into the earth and the spiritual element is then free to evolve in the ethereal realms. Alchemists, in their capacity as proponents of esoteric science, teach that gold is composed of fire, air, water, and earth but unlike the human body the elements of gold are “bound together for all eternity”; gold, then, having ‘come into being’ does not ‘pass away’. The precious metal is also representative of the embodiment of love of such an intense nature and purity that its power cannot be broken and so conquers even death. Gold is symbolic of eternity and
is emblematic of “a physical trace of the immortal in the realm of mortality.” Le Rossignol’s use of gold in her visionary images rejuvenated alchemist’s claims of the sacred nature inherent in gold in that transmutation of raw metals into gold are equivalent to the transformation of the spirit into everlasting life.

Le Rossignol’s mediumistic narrative took on new light when she began experimenting with colour application and also with gold leaf. Along with other contemporary artists of the early-twentieth-century including Austrian painter Gustav Klint (1862-1918) and Glasgow artists Margaret MacDonald (1864-1933) and Frances MacDonald (1873-1921) Le Rossignol’s work was informed by an interest in the Arts and Crafts, Symbolist and Art Nouveau Movements. Klint, for example, used bold colours, geometric patterning and gold in his innovative painting *The Kiss* (1907-08) which depicts a couple enveloped in layers of gold who appear to merge with the surface of the decorative picture plane. Margaret and Frances MacDonald also produced avant garde art when they collaborated on an art-book entitled *The Christmas Story* (1896) which included spiritual and religious images rendered in watercolours, enhanced by gold and silver paint and informed by text. Ethel Le Rossignol, experimented with different styles and mediums and used elements of decorative patterning, geometric forms and

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gold leaf or paint in her visionary art. She amalgamated contemporary and medieval text, materials and techniques to clarify the significance of the symbolic content of her mediumistic imagery which had been produced to illicit a profound transcendental transformation in viewers. Le Rossignol’s use of geometric symbols and repetitive patterning is linked with the contemporary aesthetic values of the Art Nouveau, Art Deco, Symbolist and Arts and Crafts Movements. But her paintings in which an illusionistic sense of space was replaced by a focus on the flat decorative aspects of paint and gold on canvas disrupt even contemporary notions of space and dimension and oscillate between a two dimensional surface and the suggestion of innumerable dimensionalities.

As a practicing artist Le Rossignol would have known about the properties of colour and may even have read books by medieval artists such as Cennini. She was certainly familiar with the writings of Besant and Leadbeater who had assimilated information gained from a plethora of sources including those presented in medieval texts and scientific discourse and then written about the energetic qualities and symbolic significance of colour. Their book *Man Visible and Invisible* (1902), for example, provided a detailed chart that described the symbolic meaning of particular colours they believed were emitted energetically from the body and each colour denoted a particular condition. A vibrant blue, for instance, symbolized mental, emotional and spiritual states such as “high spirituality”, “devotion mixed with affection”, “devotion to a noble ideal” and “pure religious feeling” and the intensity of the thought or feeling was revealed
though the purity and density of the hue. Conversely, the same blue tinged with grey or black symbolized negative characteristics such as “selfish religious feeling” and the energy produced by both the “pure” thought or feeling or the “selfish” thought or feeling had the capacity to elevate or harm others and as a result either accelerate or slow the evolutionary process. Le Rossignol’s colour symbolism is similar with those of Theosophists but she also adapted the symbolic meaning of some colours to coincide with information received from her spirit guides. For Le Rossignol, for instance, yellow/gold is wise; grey is woeful; green is trust; gold/purple is joy; azure is aspiration; white is God; blue/orange/rose is wisdom and love. For Theosophists, yellow/gold is intellect; grey/black/brown is depression, malice, avarice; green is adaptable and sympathetic; brilliant gold/indigo is purity.

Le Rossignol’s familiarity with Theosophical colour symbolism was enhanced by her ability to communicate with spirits who she believed had evolved into the highest spheres of the spiritual realms and this quote from her personal ledgers of automatic writings provides an in-depth synthesis of the potential of colour and form to represent in the idea of energy transference within and between the material and the ethereal:

The spirit sphere surrounds the earth and all spirits can have insight into the souls of men and women. They cannot always see the earth as it is in a dense atmosphere...each soul is enclosed in an aura of light and oval sphere around their bodies. All are surprised that none can hide his thoughts. It is the aura which reveals them, for colour changes with every emotion and shows...thoughts passing

out of the soul. Some are wise, and they are golden. Some are woeful – they are grey. Some give of their trust – they are green. Those who are sad because they have neglected others are seen to throw off misty clouds. Some who are glowing with joy are shining in purple and gold. The azure aura means aspiration – yet the aura is incomplete when it does not show every colour. White is Ohm – God and the Word. The Whiteness of Holiness is not only symbolic but reality. The heavenly light is white and shines without burning. This aura is instructive and tells us of what these souls are thinking, by the radiance or colour shining in their auras. The colours which show wisdom and love in the souls’ aura are blue, orange and rose.

Le Rossignol used her knowledge of the symbolic significance of auric colours in her visionary narrative to give visual form to the energetic power generated by thoughts, which in turn, serve to form a method of communication understood by all evolved spirits of the cosmos. During the transition period in which she manipulated line and form in her graphite illustrations, and also experimented with colour in her painted images, she oscillated between black and white illustrative and vibrantly coloured representations of

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the spiritual realms.

Le Rossignol’s use of coloured pigment became an integral symbolic component of her spiritual images by the time that she produced her *The Mystery of Birth and Spiritual Love* (fig. 5-6) which symbolized the complicated process of spiritual reincarnation within the rubric of physical difference between men and women, sexuality and reproduction.\(^{292}\) Her account of the ethereal and material evolution of humanity through communion between the sexes described the importance of a harmonious spiritual as well as physical union between men and women that she believed would lead to the production of enlightened children capable of accelerating humanity’s evolution towards enlightenment. Le Rossignol’s account of the spiritual and physical relationship between men and women corresponds, in part, with writings by Stanley De Brath in which he discusses the importance of spiritual companionship in building a secure family unit:

> The Philosophy of spirit-life is, then, recognition of Man as one social organism, every member acting more or less directly on every other, both here and in the unseen…Every one of us influences others directly and indirectly – each one is helping or hindering the Coming of the Kingdom, which is the blending of all purified perceptions in the reign of co-operative love, and this none can avoid here or hereafter.\(^{293}\)

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\(^{292}\) Le Rossignol, *A Goodly Company*, p.33. Figures No. 19, 23 and 24 are reproduced in black and white but the original paintings that hang in the College of Psychic Studies are vibrantly coloured. Rossignol had begun to incorporate colour in an effort to describe the brilliance of the spiritual world beginning with *Figure No. 19*.

De Brath expanded on his idea that relationships between men and women were consummated not only on a physical level but more importantly on a spiritual one by conflating “natural science” with Spiritualism, Theosophy and the writings of other faiths including Christianity in his chapter “The True Romance”. But while De Brath appears to support equality between genders, “[T]he woman’s cause is man’s. They rise or sink Together, dwarfed godlike, bond or free” his misogynistic agenda, one that supported the subjugation of women, is clear:

It is not a woman’s function to re-formulate a working philosophy, and too many have let all go, throwing the child out of the theological tub along with the water in which it has been washed, or losing themselves in the hazy mysticism which accepts the symbolism of all religions and the discipline of none.  

Le Rossignol’s focus on sexual difference in her visionary narrative corresponds with her concern to represent the importance of conception, birth, rebirth and the family unit. Her preoccupation with depictions of reproduction within a stable family unit coincides with early twentieth-century Theosophist’s plans for the reception of “New Age” which included the reconstruction of society after WWI. Embedded in societies’ conceptions about relationships between the sexes within the politics of difference coincided with “fears of racial decline” which encouraged the development of campaigns to improve the “quality and quantity of the nation’s births.” Consequently, in the

aftermath of the war support for motherhood increased. Eleanor Rathbone (1872-1946), for instance, leader of the newly formed National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship argued that feminists had undervalued motherhood and she initiated campaigns “for maternal health, improved working-class housing, family allowances, and protective legislation for women workers.”

Theosophists participated in campaigns that linked motherhood to concerns about the “health of the race” and they attempted to “assert their authority, on both scientific and spiritual grounds, to intervene in the development and sustenance of an “imperial race.”

Although Le Rossignol may have been aware of early-twentieth-century public and political concern about the “health of the race” her automatic writings represent conception and birth as an individual spiritual journey rather than an exercise in the promotion of eugenics; on the other hand, her depictions of a Eurocentric family unit suggest that she may have supported such a cause. Theosophist Emily Lutyens (1874-1964) wrote about the spiritual significance of motherhood within the framework of feminist politics and her *The Call of the Mother* (1926) combined “a new feminist

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296 The National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship was formerly the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies.

297 Late-nineteenth-century fears of racial degeneration were legitimised by science with the emergence of an active and vocal eugenics movement which provided the underpinning for a variety of legislative initiatives. By the turn of the century in England fears of racial decline prompted campaigns to increase the quality and quantity of the nation’s births. See specifically, Davin, “Imperialism and Mother-hood,” pp. 90-101, 123-24; Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration*, pp. 3-17, 138-62.
analysis of motherhood with a profound sense of spiritual mission.” Lutyen’s work fused actual and spiritual motherhood by conflating ideas of motherhood with the Mother of God. She argued that the “physical and material degradation of motherhood” was indicative of the “degradation of the Divine Feminine principle itself” and that in reality a woman’s ability to produce children set her “apart as something sacred.” Le Rossignol produced her visionary narrative in the early-twentieth-century between 1920 and 1929 and so had access to Lutyen’s writings published in 1926. As well, associations between motherhood and spiritual elevation were also encouraged by Theosophists in the late-nineteenth century. Lutyen, for example, quoted Blavastky’s Master Koot Hoomi’s teachings of 1883 that, “woman’s mission is to become the mother of future occultists – of those without sin” the note also posited the “elevation of woman” as crucial to spiritual evolvement and ultimate salvation. The Theosophist’s agenda to promote motherhood as key to humanity’s continued evolution in the material world and the spiritual realms begun in the late-nineteenth-century was accelerated after WWI. Le Rossignol’s visionary images highlight the importance of the spiritual as well as the physical bond between men and women in their unified commitment towards the procreation of what Lutyen referred to as a “race of Buddhas and Christs” who will ensure humanity’s

299 Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, p. 212-213; Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 174-77. Oppenheim writes that amicable ties that had existed between the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) was ruptured in 1885 when Richard Hodgson issued a report that accused Blavatsky and Olcott of whole sale fraud. Letters purported to have been issued by Theosophical Society Mahatmas Koot Hoomi were attributed to Blavestky.
ascension in the spiritual spheres. Lutyen drew from Theosophical teachings informed by Eastern philosophy to support her argument and drew associations between the spiritual aspects of motherhood with “divine creativity” going so far as to consecrate the act of motherhood as a “manifestation of that divinity.”

The material facts of conception, pregnancy, and childbirth were thus consecrated and made sacred. As a priestess, the mother presided over the sacrament of birth...[she] was not only a priest, but also a Christ-figure; bearing children in blood and pain, like Christ crucified, “she has descended into hell in order to bring back heaven, she has passed through the valley of the shadow of death in order to give birth to life.” Motherhood was therefore a great initiation into spiritual mysteries, a transfiguration, an illumination, and an expansion of consciousness.

Le Rossignol’s depictions of relationships between men and women in the spiritual realms and the material world rejects De Brath’s representation of women as antagonists and instead represents a harmonious, symbiotic interconnection between men and women.

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Le Rossignol’s division of her narrative into three sections clarifies the significant differences between the lower realms, which include the earth plane and the astral worlds, and the higher spheres; but also describes the importance of the transitional period between mere awareness of higher spheres and complete transformation. According to Theosophical philosophy the lower vibrations of the material and astral worlds sustain the less evolved entities and the higher spiritual realms support the more elevated spiritual vibrations of those spirits who aspire to become masters. Le Rossignol’s *The Lover of all Men is Now Freed from the Body* (fig. 5-7) painted on a vertical rectangular surface illustrates the ascent of the human spirit towards “wisdom” which is conceived of, in Theosophical teachings, as an enlightened state of being that resulted in the ability to transcend the material and astral worlds and to flourish in the
higher realms of the spiritual spheres. Le Rossignol draws on the literature by Blavatsky, Besant and Leadbeater which are permeated with terms such as “wisdom”, “harmony” and “love” often related to ideas about humanity’s aspirations towards attainment of perfection through evolutionary progression. Le Rossignol’s *The Four Messengers* (fig.5-8) painted on a spherical canvas marks the transition between the second and third segment of her narrative and also serves as the point at which she expanded her experimentation with gold coloured paint to include the application of gold leaf. Her representation of non-verbal forms of communication was achieved by depicting sweeping vibrantly coloured waves of “scarlet, orange, green and blue” hued ribbons of energy that appear to emerge from the higher beings and engulf the spiritual realms in a celebratory song praising the soul’s passage into the highest spheres; an achievement gained through self-sacrifice and, according to Le Rossignol’s writings, the application of

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“the way of wisdom and will in harmony.” The soul’s transformation into enlightened spirit is symbolized by an elaborate crown reminiscent of re-conceptions of ancient Egyptian ceremonial dress produced during the Art Deco period of the early-twentieth-century. During her automatic writing sessions Le Rossignol learned that spirits work with “artists and teachers” to inspire humanity by communicating through music, painting, writing and drawing, the products of which serve as vehicles for the universal dissemination of expression thereby opening the “great doors of wisdom.”

Music and art has the capacity to demonstrate to the world the great harmonizing qualities of sound and visual beauty which attract and inspire the soul. “When the Master speaks, the spirits are given the greatest arts. When He speaks, He sends waves of thought to His Messengers, who are, esoterically one with His great wisdom. He speaks in music which spirits may hear – and they respond by sounds which spiritually minister to their souls, which give those on earth the Master’s life-giving message. This work is to show the soul’s progress in the spiritual sphere. This is shown astrally, not as they appear in the earth-life. Where men and women work as teachers and artists, the astral sight is given and the secret of master wisdom is revealed to them when they are inspired by the spirits of good. They are allowed freedom and power in one of the ways of good. Partaking of the spiritual food from the spirit messengers of the masters, they willingly spend themselves while

302 Le Rossignol, A Goodly Company, p. 43. Le Rossignol’s use of ribbons issuing from the mouth as indicative of language can be found in Quattrocentro art. Quattrocentro Italian artist Simone Martini’s The Annunciation and Two Saints, tempera on wood, 1333 is one example. Le Rossignol draws on other medieval resonances surrounding the use of gold leaf in paintings. The intention in Byzantium was to capture the presence of divinity in the painted image. I wish to thank Dr. Cathleen Hoeniger for reminding me of the importance of gold in medieval painting. Also, see Umberto Eco, The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988). Le Rossignol’s colours have the saturation and density of gouache pigments and the use of gouache and tempura as mediums have connections with transcendental experiences and spirituality. See, Daniel Varney Thompson, The Practice of Tempera Painting (New York: Dover, 1962); Daniel Varney Thompson, The Materials and techniques of Medieval Painting (New York: Dover, 1956) and Daniel Varney Thompson, The Craftman’s Handbook: The Italian “Il libro dell’arte” Cennini, Cennino (New York: Dover, 1954).
inspiration fires their souls with eagerness to carry out the vision they remember.\footnote{Le Rossignol, \textit{Private Automatic Writings} (1920).}

Le Rossignol’s \textit{The Rose of Unity} (c. 1920-1929) (fig. 5-9) is the first painting of the third segment of her narrative and introduces the first representation of the Rosicrucian “rose of unity” symbolized by the depiction of seven “messengers” or “archangels” that greet, energize and support newly arrived entities’ continuation of their pursuit of wisdom and enlightenment in the highest spheres.\footnote{A Goodly Company, p. 44.} In this transformative painting, Le Rossignol amalgamates the beliefs of many faiths and philosophies in her representation of the rose as a conflation of a multitude of energetic colours in the form of a circle enclosed by seven Ohm symbols which are held in place by the interconnected bodies of the powerful Masters. The sign of ohm is a device believed to facilitate holy
meditation in the Hindu and Buddhist faiths and in Theosophical philosophy it is the symbol of ultimate universal reality in the divine power of God. Le Rossignol’s inclusion of the Rosicrucian emblem exemplifies Theosophical doctrine that posits a reverence for elements of all religions. She used terms such as “Golden Rose of Unity” “Holier Rose” and the “Rose of Good” in her automatic writings and although she did not refer to the Rosicrucian Order by name the emblem that she depicted in her painting is associated with the Order. The Rose Cross was symbolic of the teachings of a tradition that formed within Christian ideology and while the members of the Rosicrucian Order revered Christ they denounced the power of the Pope.

In the early-twentieth-century Rosicrucian Max Heindel (1865-1919) emphasized the emblem’s symbolic connection with the evolution of humanity in the spiritual spheres. The Rose Cross has been associated with the “love of God” under the auspices of the “beauty of brotherhood” but is also conceived of a symbol of the human process of reproduction elevated to the spiritual. The fundamental symbols of the Rosicrucians were the rose and the cross with the rose representative of women and the cross with men. “As generation is the key to material existence, it is natural that the

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306 See, Max Heindel, *The Rosicrucian Philosophy in Questions and Answers Vol. 1* (California: The Rosicrucian Fellowship, 1909). According to Max Heindel the essential difference between Rosicrucian and Theosophical philosophy in the nineteenth-century was that Rosicrucian teachings focused on Western European perspectives to the exclusion of interest in Eastern philosophical ideas demonstrated by Theosophists. Heindel also wrote that Rosicrucians focused more on life in the material world as opposed to Theosophists who attempted to understand the ethereal spheres. Le Rossignol’s inclusion of Eastern philosophy in her textual and visual representation suggests that she was informed by the Theosophical philosophy that integrated ideas from many faiths and philosophies and also Theosophical study of thought forms in connection with their interest in the powers latent in man.
Rosicrucians should adopt as its characteristic symbols those exemplifying the reproductive processes. As regeneration is the key to spiritual existence, they therefore founded their symbolism upon the rose and the cross, which typify the redemption of man through the union of his lower temporal nature with his higher eternal nature.” 307

Le Rossignol, in her visionary pictures, depicted only the ‘female rose’ representative of women’s ability to reproduce and also as a conduit through which entities traverse the spiritual realms in an evolutionary process of re-birth and transformation.

The Creative Power of the Spirit (c.1920-1929) (fig. 5-10) is painted onto a vertical, rectangular canvas and Le Rossignol used brilliant colour augmented with

Figure 5-10: Ethel Le Rossignol. The Creative Power of the Spirit, c.1920-1929, Gouache/watercolour on paper, Reproduced from Le Rossignol, A Goodly Company.
reflective gold to represent entities whose ethereal bodies appear to generate a continuous vibrational energy that permeates the spiritual spheres. She also depicted a much larger version of the Rosicrucian rose which acts as a portal through which powerful entities traverse the spheres in their pilgrimages between the astral and material worlds and the spiritual spheres. Her visionary painting is accompanied by detailed text which provides an extensive narrative detailing the complex process represented in her picture of the ascension of the spirit which is achieved, in part, through reincarnation into the material realms followed by further development in the spiritual spheres. Le Rossignol’s automatic writings reveal that on fulfillment of the requirements for spiritual growth, humanity becomes one with the presence of “endless being, endless harmony and endless power.” 308 She further developed the teachings of the Theosophists by highlighting the


evolution of a particular entity that operates as the embodiment of all humanity whose advancement into the higher spheres has culminated in transformation and enlightenment.

Le Rossignol’s picture *The Sight of the Master* (c. 1920-1929) (fig. 5-11) is produced using brilliant colours of blue, red, gold and violet and represents the visit of what she refers to as the “Immanent Master” or “Christ Ideal”. Le Rossignol, in intercommunication with her guides, represents in symbolic form, Jesus Christ of the Christian faith as figurative of all humanity and as interconnected with the Rosicrucian rose and the emblem of Theosophy. The symbolic reference to Christ is shown poised in the upper portion of the picture plane with arms extended to either side and is surrounded by the auric colours of the Theosophical emblem of the double triangle.309 Prominent in the centre of the figure’s chest is the Theosophical “eye of wisdom and protection” or the “all-seeing eye of God” from which the sevens rays of light radiate. The seven rays of light are representative of the hierarchy of the Theosophical Masters and also analogous to the seven lamps of fire in the *Book of Revelation* as well as the "seven ways of bliss" presented in Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine*.310 Le Rossignol’s automatic writing describes the glorious nature of a visitation from the Almighty, “Aspirants are seen

309 Auric colours consist of variations of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and purple/violet. Generally, each colour energy is believed to run down the spine with red at the base followed by orange, then yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet/purple at the crown in the same order depicted in Le Rossignol’s paintings. Negative personalities can have grey, brown or black auras.

310 Some modern Theosophists picture this hierarchy as the model of the divine Trinity: the first ray is at the top; the second ray forms the first lower corner; rays three through seven form the second. Robert Ellwood, *Theosophy: A Modern expression of the wisdom of the Ages* (Wheaton, Il. Quest Books, 1994), 140-143: Also see Annie Besant’s description of the seven components that make up the physical and spiritual body *The Seven Principles of Man* (1907).
joyfully ascending to the glory of union with the ministering Archangelic presences in the flaming wisdom of the master.”  

As her mediumistic abilities became more attuned Le Rossignol’s depictions of the succession of the evolution of humanity in her visionary narrative became more decorative and progressively more complex parallel with Theosophical tenets of the accumulation of knowledge gained as the spirit advances towards enlightenment. Le Rossignol symbolized Theosophical ideas about the gradual evolution of humanity from the heavy vibrations of the material and astral worlds into the higher realms of the spiritual spheres occupied by the Masters by developing her narrative to incorporate ever more complex and colourful images that include multifaceted symbolic forms such as emblems, geometrical signs, orbs, insignia, crowns, and rays of glittering gold surrounded by swirling, vibrantly coloured ribbons of energy. 

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Le Rossignol’s *The Nine entering Reality-in-Operation* (c. 1920-1929) (fig. 5-12) introduces a far more ordered geometric pattern than any used in her previous images, which subdivides precisely the picture plane into distinct yet parallel areas that resolve themselves into a conflation of the sign of the Christian cross with the Rosicrucian “rose of unity”. The intertwined emblems are further crowned with a twelve pointed star reminiscent of the twelve Disciples of Christ that surround the Christ-like figure resplendent in the centre of her picture. Le Rossignol’s accompanying text relates that the “Christ Figure” is “seen in Countless radiant signs in the development of the twelve-pointed star” and is also shown “with the nine Heads surrounding the heart. The NINE entering REALITY-IN-OPERATION is thus the crucial At-one-ment.” Her reference to the number nine and its culmination in the creation of everlasting reality can be connected with Theosophical philosophy and with Christian theology both of which refer to the nine levels/paths of spiritual development in which the third, fourth, fifth and sixth, stages of the Theosophical initiation correspond with the Christian path of enlightenment that includes reverence of the Transfiguration, Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension. Le Rossignol’s visionary image combined with her automatic writings detail the path towards union with the Almighty; or as Le Rossignol writes, “the crucial At-one-ment”.

Le Rossignol’s terms were meant to clarify the complicated symbolic significance of her visionary picture that depicts the ability of the ascended master to unify the

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individual entities of the spiritual realms into a perfectly harmonious whole. She provided the key but viewers are expected to spend time and effort in order to uncover the meanings that were embedded in her pictorial narrative and attendant writings. Her pictures, which make up the last section of her narrative, are informed by, Annie Besant’s writings about Christian perceptions of the life of, “The Lover and Lord of Men.” Le Rossignol’s representations of spiritual beings who wear the crown of enlightenment, for example, replicate Besant’s introduction of mythological narratives about the Sun-God of ancient Egyptian faith. Besant’s discussion about historical theatrical productions that showed “living pictures of the occurrences in the higher worlds that became embodied in myths… represented by actors” was re-conceptualized in Le Rossignol’s visionary narrative that depicts the transcendence of the soul towards unification with God which includes Christian perceptions of the life of Christ. “Depictions of the Sun-God,” wrote Besant, are “sometimes found sculptured within a circle of the horizon, with the head and feet touching the circle at the North and South, and the outstretched hands at East and West” reenacting His crucifixion. Besant’s description of the triumphant Sun-God/Christ figure is re-created in Le Rossignol’s *The Sight of the Master* (fig. 5-11) which focuses not on the pain and sorrow of Christ’s sacrifice but is instead symbolic of “the purest joy the world can hold – the joy of freely giving – [typifying] Divine Man now standing in space with arms upraised in blessing, casting about his gifts to all

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313 Ibid, pp. 56, 58.
humanity, pouring forth freely of himself in all directions.”  

Theosophists argued that Christ’s life, as depicted in the Christian doctrine of the Atonement, appears in exoteric teaching as attached only to the Person of Christ; in esoteric philosophy, however, the doctrine of the Atonement is conceived of as “belonging indeed to Him…but as being only secondarily reflected in Christ” suggesting that Christ demonstrated a level of self-sacrifice that could and should be emulated by “every Christ-soul that threads the way of the cross.”  

Christ’s death, according to Theosophical philosophy, does not absolve humanity of their sins but rather points the way to eventual salvation which is gained through self-sacrifice. Besant taught, for example, that only when humanity evolves towards enlightenment and becomes more attuned to esoteric rather than exoteric teachings will they comprehend the true meaning of self-sacrifice which is embodied in Christ who serves as a manifestation of the “Law of Sacrifice” or “Law of Atonement” which lies at the root of evolution and culminates in the joyous At-One-Ment of all of humanity with the Almighty. Le Rossignol’s writings then, which have been misunderstood as “bizarre ramblings”, in fact reflect her knowledge of contemporary theoretical concepts that distinguish between Christian accounts of The Atonement accomplished through the suffering and death of Christ and a Theosophical philosophy in which Christ’s self-sacrifice serves as an example to which all men and women should aspire in order to attain At-One-Ment or unity with God.  

315 Ibid, p. 64.
316 Ibid, p. 61.
317 Rom 3:25, 26: John Shelby Spong, Why Christianity must Change or Die (San Francisco: Harper, 1998), p. 84.
The Master as Distributor (c. 1920-1929) (fig. 5-13) and The Unsealing of the Mysteries (c. 1920-1929) (fig. 5-14) are painted on spherical surfaces and annotated with Le Rossignol’s automatic writings that illuminate the complex symbolism inherent to both mediumistic pictures. Her painting The Master as Distributor (fig. 5-13) reveals a god-like central figure whose ten arms symbolize, according to Le Rossignol, “the nine standing behind him, in true alignment” representing the unified whole which is made up of entities that act on both an individual level and also in perfect unison. The central figure wears the golden crown of the Sun-God and is in possession of the symbolic accoutrements of enlightenment representative of the realization of the power of expressive thought. Thought forms in Le Rossignol’s visionary narrative have now evolved to the point where they possess the ability to transcend barriers of the physical as well as of time and space and are sustained through the perpetuation of the life force.
which is generated through enacted power of harmony and love combined with wisdom.\textsuperscript{318}

Le Rossignol’s *The Unsealing of the Mysteries* (fig. 5-14) amalgamates complex concepts of geometrical and numerological symbolism that serve as both a unifying force and also as a conduit of powerful energy that is permeated with and sustained through Theosophical teachings about the value of love combined with wisdom. Aspects of the complexities of the symbolic signification of numbers particularly in connection with sacred geometrical forms permeated many religious and esoteric texts including Theosophical writings and Christian biblical manuscripts. Le Rossignol’s geometric pattering is a pictorial representation of a regenerative force that emanates from, what she referred to as the “lower central symbol…the perfect crystal treasure” or the

\textsuperscript{318} Le Rossignol, *A Goodly Company*, p. 61.
Rosicrucian Rose of Unity, depicted on the lower section of the canvas, and which infuses the entire spiritual realm with an eternal and unifying energetic pulse. Her automatic writings offer further clarification about the sacred symbolic nature of her visionary painting.  

The lower central symbol, the perfect crystal treasure, represents the infinite stream of dispensation which enables the Givers to work in blessed companionship wherein there is liberation from the immaturity of unfolding consciousness. The design of the twelve givers is to show their communication from one sentient controlling personality in one isolated corporeal form, to the glorious emancipation of interweaving consciousness of each, of the strength of the pure Creator in a great companionship of attained unity. 

Le Rossignol’s representation of a harmonizing geometrical design constructed with ethereal bodies made of light and auric colour corresponds with Theosophical philosophy that describes the transformations undergone by the spirit during the process of evolution.

Figure 5-15: Ethel Le Rossignol. *Consummation*, c. 1920-1929
Gouache/watercolour on paper, Reproduced from Le Rossignol, *A Goodly Company*

319 Ibid, pp. 61, 62.
The final image of Le Rossignol’s visionary narrative *Consummation* (c. 1920-1929) (fig. 5-15) is representative of the splendid culmination of the evolutionary process of humanity. The central, androgynous figure referred to in her automatic writings as the “Infinite Absolute”, is adorned with the magnificent golden crown of enlightenment which generates golden waves of the swirling energetic vibrations that sustain all life in the cosmos. The powerful energy emanating from the sacred figure is depicted symbolically in the form of eight highly decorative, emblematic interconnected mandalas that fill the lower half of the canvas. In addition, interconnecting golden lines of energy flow from the central figure which is enveloped by precisely placed successions of vibrantly hued colours, including red, orange, yellow, green, blue and violet/purple all colours indicative of the energetic vibrations that are believed to sustain the physical and spiritual body. The permutation of vibrant colours, decorative lines and patterns with symbolic emblems and geometric figures produce a palpable energetic pulse meant to generate a powerfully transcendental response from viewers.

Le Rossignol’s picture depicts the ultimate consolidation and unification of the physical and, perhaps more importantly, the spiritual evolution of humanity into the highest echelons of the ethereal realms. Her monumental figure is meant to represent the apex of perfection and is described in her automatic writing as symbolic of the “unveiled omnipotent” or that which remains unseen because of its all pervasive nature. She gave material form to omnipotence in her visionary painting in which she represented the
Almighty in shining “beauty, power, wisdom, ordered harmony and…charity.” 321 Le Rossignol’s picture is representative of the amalgamation of powerful deities from many religious belief systems to which humanity aspires to reach at its most evolved spiritual state of existence. The figure embodies a convergence of the potent spiritual beliefs honoured throughout history and in many cultures, and represents a unification of different elements of faiths, including those of the Egyptian Pharaohs, with contemporary symbols of religious orders that focus on elements of Spiritualism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Theosophy and Rosicrucianism.

Le Rossignol’s narrative is unique as an example of mediumistic painting that foregrounds the teachings of Theosophy but she was not alone in her endeavour to engage with contemporary interest in alternative belief systems including Spiritualism and Theosophy. Other avant garde artists of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-centuries demonstrated interest in the teachings of Theosophical tenets that amalgamated modern Spiritualist ideology with Eastern mysticism. Abstract artist Wassily Kandinsky, for example, wrote in his book Concerning the Spiritual in Art (1912) about what he termed the “Spiritual Revolution” and he believed that his abilities as a synesthetic enabled him to discern sounds generated by shapes and colours. Kandinsky wrote that the sound vibrations were not arbitrary but instead constituted a form of universal language, his knowledge of the philosophical developments of the Theosophical society

and in particular the writings of Besant and Leadbeater about how feelings are visible as aura-emanations of coloured light informed his abstracted paintings.

Piet Mondrian’s geometrically abstracted paintings also parallel Theosophical theories about the transformative influence of sacred geometry and he joined the Society in 1909 and remained a dedicated Theosophist until his death in 1944. Mondrian drew connections between modern scientific discovery and theosophical re-conceptualizations of Darwin’s theory of evolution to include humanity’s continued transition and progression in the ethereal spheres. He believed that evidence of such transcendental evolutionary development could be observed in art production.

There are two paths leading to the Spiritual; the path of learning, of direct exercises (meditation, etc.) and the slow certain path of evolution. The later manifests itself in art. One may observe in art the slow growth towards the Spiritual, while those who produce it remain unaware of this. The conscious path of learning usually leads to the corruption of art. Should these two paths coincide, that is to say that the creator has reached the stage of evolution where conscious, spiritual and direct activity is possible, then one has attained the idea art.  

Le Rossignol’s representations of interconnected squares that cover the surface of the picture plane of her The Unsealing of the Mysteries (fig. 5-14) are also present in Mondrian’s paintings.

While Kandinsky and Mondrian in an attempt to look beyond surface appearances and to access deeper levels of reality used their knowledge of Theosophical philosophy to inform their paintings, British artist Reginald Willoughby Machell (1854-1927) made art that intentionally promoted Theosophical ideas about the evolution of the soul in his painting *The Path* (1895) (fig. 5-16). Machell was a member of the Royal Society of British Artists and also exhibited at the Royal Academy before he met Blavatsky and became a member of the Theosophical Society in 1888. Consequently, like Le Rossignol, he produced paintings that depicted the Theosophical philosophy of the evolutionary development of humanity from the material world and into the spiritual realms by representing trans-dimensional spaces in his images through which entities could traverse time and space. The artist offered a description of the symbolic

Figure 5-16: Reginald Willoughby Machell, *The Path*, 1895, oil and gesso. Theosophical Society, Pasadena California. Reproduced with permission.
significance of the content of his painting writing that, “The Path is the way by which the human soul must pass in its evolution to full spiritual self-consciousness.” Similar to Le Rossignol, Macnell used pictorial and emblematic devices, such as multiple triangles and interconnected circles in order to define various planes of existence in the spiritual spheres and also that connected the ethereal worlds to the material. Further, his depictions of celestial figures who support humanities’ endeavors to attain enlightenment through self-sacrifice and purification, and that rejoice at the “triumph of a new initiate” are equally represented in Le Rossignol’s mediumistic paintings. Unlike Le Rossignol, however, and in keeping with other male artists such as Kandinsky and Mondrian, Macnell did not profess intercommunication with unseen spirits when he produced his Theosophical painting now exhibited prominently at the International Headquarters of the Theosophical Society.

Visionary abstract artist Hilma af Klint (1862-1944) shared Le Rossignol’s determined nature when she also broke boundaries in her capacity as a practicing artist of the late-nineteenth-century, first because she was a woman and second because she believed that her work was produced in collaboration with unseen entities. Af Klint was familiar with the basic tenants of Theosophy and she used her knowledge as an artist and her abilities as a visionary to produce paintings that represented the continued evolution of humanity in the higher spiritual spheres that travelled between the material world and

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323 Machell’s painting is on permanent exhibition in the administration building of the International Headquarters of the Theosophical Society in Pasadena California. E-mail sent 8 February 2010 contained Machell’s writings about his work.
the ethereal realms. She believed that she received information through her automatic writings and also through her astral travels that were guided by spirits. Her ideas were synthesized from her knowledge of a Theosophical philosophy that promoted the idea that action and thought produced on the physical plain are subsequently manifest in the spiritual spheres and that humanity’s aim is to obtain enlightenment through a progressive evolvement throughout the ethereal realms. Af Klint, combined her knowledge of the symbols and illustrations in two of Blavatsky’s major written texts, *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine* with the diagrammatic imagery of Besant’s and Leadbeater’s examination of occult chemistry. Besant and Leadbeater offered diagrams of chemical elements including images of what they referred to as the “ultimate atom” composed entirely of spirals and considered the fundamental unit of the physical universe. Af Klint’s mediumistic painting *The Evolution* (1908) (fig. 5-17) is part of a

324 Ringbom, “Transcending the Visible” p. 139.
series of sixteen paintings that were informed by the writings of Blavastsky, Besant and Leadbeater and were meant to “signify the attempt by the human race to widen our perspective by descending into the coarsest forms of matter” after which, through a series of transformations, they would eventually renounce the physical world in favour of the spiritual.  

Af Klint produced over one thousand mediumistic paintings between 1906 and 1940 but believed that the visionary nature of her images would not be well received by early-and mid-twentieth-century viewers and so requested that they be kept hidden until twenty years after her death. Consequently, the first major exhibition of af Klint’s paintings took place in the United States in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art’s 1986 exhibition “The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985.” Af Klint’s idea to keep her pictures in hiding until they could be revealed to a more tolerant audience was an astute one. Even in the late-twentieth-century, however, reviewers and critics disparaged her images based on their connection with the esoteric sciences. Critic, Roberta Smith, in response to af Klint’s first major exhibition in 1989, for example, commends the artists use of “large…bold” forms, “strong, saturated colors…painted directly onto raw canvas with brushy tin washes” but simultaneously describes Af Klint’s

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326 Hutchinson, *Hilma af Klint*, pp. 2, 29 Hutchinson wrote that is was his belief that “the true significance of Hilma’s visionary art has yet to be fully recognized…” The book was published in a limited edition of 600 copies in response to the Camden Arts Centre’s 2006 exhibition “Hilma af Klint: An Atom in the Universe”. When Af Klint died in 1944 she left all of her work to her nephew Vice-Admiral Erik af Klint who maintained the more than one thousand paintings and 124 notebooks before he began to exhibit them, according to her wishes, beginning in the 1960s. Her paintings were exhibited locally but few people paid attention to them until Erik af Klint made contact with Professor Sixten Ringbom who arranged to exhibit them in the 1986 exhibition, “The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985”.
“most strange” paintings as ones that include “lapses in abstract purity and taste” and ascribes those “lapses” to Af Klint’s affinity with spiritualism. While Smith is dismissive of Af Klint’s open interest in esoteric sciences, critic Adrian Searle is vitriolic about her fascination with, and investigation of, Spirituality and Theosophy. He is particularly derisive about her believe that she worked in collaboration with unseen entities in the production of her visionary paintings. He writes, for instance, “[p]erhaps she felt that the world was not ready for them. In some respects, the world never will be ready for the occult symbolism and spiritualist gibberish that her work was derived from, and from which she gained her inspiration.” In fact, Af Klint’s paintings were the result of her thorough training as an artist, her knowledge of mathematics, astronomy and music, her study of the esoteric sciences and her familiarity with Theosophical philosophy.

Af Klint’s narrative that included her visionary picture The Evolution was exhibited, along with a selection of her other paintings, at the Camden Arts Centre in Camden England in 2006 and garnered a more positive response from viewers than that of her 1986 exhibition. But even in the twenty-first-century, writer and critic Sally O’Reilly questions the relevance of the spiritual content of af Klint’s paintings in “our technological culture”. O’Reilly writes, “we might consider her claim to have painted

329 Hutchinson, Hilma Af Klint, p. 6. Af Klint studied at the Swedish School of Arts, Crafts and Design and after taking up further studies in portrait painting she enrolled in the Academy of Fine Arts where she studied for five years. In addition, she worked from 1900-1901 as a draughtsman in Stockholm and also produced illustrations for periodicals. Hilma Af Klint.
from the astral plane under the guidance of Higher Beings as delusional.” O’Reilly then theorises about ways in which to “relieve Af Klint’s work of the prejudice leveled at mysticism” one of which is to discuss her works in the context of art history; but not within an art historical perspective that maintains the integrity of Af Klint’s objectives in which she writes about her intention to produce mediumistic paintings in collaboration with unseen spirits. Rather, O’Reilly wishes to perpetuate the predisposition to elide discussion about the nature of visionary and mediumistic experiences in which artists believe that their art is the result of their intercommunion with ethereal entities and instead suggest mundane comparisons of Af Klint’s paintings to the more palatable figurative compositions produced by surrealist artists. This recent trivialization of af Klint’s visionary paintings parallels limited yet equally uninformed observations made about Le Rossignol’s mediumistic works.

Contemporary male artists inspired by modern spiritualist ideology preserved a careful distance from any personal connection with the supernatural. Mondrian, for example, despite paintings such as Evolution (1911) (fig. 17) in which he pursued the transcendental possibilities of imagery, maintained that his work remained “entirely outside the occult realm”. His interest in spirituality and religious philosophies, he insisted, was grounded purely in his attempts to gain general knowledge, “I try to attain occult knowledge for myself in order to gain a better understanding of things.”

330 Sally O’Reilly, Hilma af Klint, catalogue published to accompany the exhibition Hilma af Klint: An Atom in the Universe at the (Camden Arts Centre, 17 February – 16 April 2006)
Similarly, Kandinsky’s treatise on spirituality in art production was and still is characterized as “a publication of great theoretical importance” and is discussed in relation to lauded Roman architect Vitruvius’s treatise *On Architecture* (27-23 BC), and Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Artists*. Consequently, Mondrian and Kandinsky have been historicized as renowned Modernists while revolutionary women artists Ethel Le Rossignol, Georgiana Houghton and Hilma Af Klint, whose abstracted paintings demonstrated their knowledge of modern Spiritualism and Theosophy remain largely unacknowledged.

Unlike her male contemporaries, Le Rossignol, did not sublimate her interest in spiritualism and other alternative religious philosophies such as Theosophy into a “scientific examination” nor did she doubt that her paintings were produced in collaboration with unseen spirits. She actively and openly pursued her mediumistic abilities in the production of her visionary pictures. As a result, her ground-breaking paintings are often trivialized rather than valued and her beliefs, shared by other visionary artists including Af Klint, and Houghton, as well as adherents of Spiritualism, Theosophy and Rosicrucianism, about continuance of life after death, are more often than not glibly disparaged.

Ethel Le Rossignol’s book *A Goodly Company* was “privately published” in 1958 by one of her brothers and when he announced with enthusiasm “look what Ethel has

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332 Ibid., pp. vi, xii. Vasari’s book was published in 1550 and 1568.

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brought out!” his passion was soon doused with disinterest from both the Le Rossignol family and “the world at large.”334 Despite obvious dismissal of her achievements, Le Rossignol believed that her experiments with automatic writing put her into contact with unseen entities that communicated the conditions of life in the spiritual spheres. Her extensive writings provide detailed accounts of what she believed she had learned about the nature of the ethereal spheres. She educated viewers about the importance of gaining wisdom through a focused concentration and she believed that her pictures facilitated a meditative process that helped to achieve a higher spiritual awareness. Le Rossignol trusted that the focused concentration needed to discern the symbolic content of her narrative and automatic writings required effort and that the resulting meditative state, when combined with “goodness, holiness and love”, were essential conditions for the successful evolution of the spirit though material and the spiritual spheres.335

“Humanity”, wrote Le Rossignol, “must continue to strive towards attaining and then fine tuning positive characteristics through the diligent application of “will and wisdom” a level of consciousness that she believed could be obtained through the practice of meditation.336

On close, examination of the layout of her book, A Goodly Company it becomes clear that Le Rossignol produced a series of pictures, that record the basic tenets of early twentieth-century Theosophical beliefs, and that they are evocative of Roman Catholic

334 “Art from the Other Side,” p. 112.
335 Le Rossignol, Private Automatic Writings (9 March 1920), pp 1-3.
pictorial narratives of the crucifixion of Christ in the form of the Stations of the Cross. Le Rossignol’s sequence of events for example, is composed of forty-two paintings which, when divided by three, the number of the Trinity, are equal to the fourteen representations included in the Traditional Stations of the Cross. The Christian narrative that describes the condemnation, tribulations and crucifixion of Christ is intended as a devotional device to facilitate meditation and prayer. Furthermore, the three components of the Stations of the Cross, purgation, illumination, and union are repeated in Le Rossignol’s visionary narration of the evolution of the spirit. The three elements of the Stations of the Cross, within the context of Christian Spirituality, are meant to assist devout viewers along a sacred walk that requires a series of “hierarchal actions” or “spiritual exercises” which are combined with organized sessions of focused mediation and prayer. Concentrated prayerful contemplation on the “the three spiritual ways” achieves purification of the spirit which leads to illumination infused with wisdom or comprehension of mysticism, which in turn facilitates transformation of the spirit and experiential knowledge of God. Annie Besant, in her book, Initiation, *The Perfection of Man* (1923) co-opted and expanded on Christian ideas about the purification of the soul through sacrifice and meditation when she wrote:

There is a Path which leads to that which is known as Initiation, and through Initiation to the Perfecting of Man; a Path which is recognised in all the great religions, and the chief features of which are described in similar terms in every one of the great faiths of the world. You may read of it in the Roman Catholic teachings as divided into three parts: (1) The Path of Purification or Purgation; (2) the Path of Illumination; and (3) the Path of Union with Divinity. You find it among the Mussalmans in the Sufi - the mystic - teachings of Islam, where it is known under the names of the Way, the Truth, and the Life. You find it further eastward still in the great faith of Buddhism... It is similarly divided in Hinduism...339

Besant noted that the perfection of the soul was obtained though the successful completion of the three stages of purification. She adapted a Christian ideology that taught that one of the avenues towards the perfection of the soul was through thoughtful meditation of The Stations of the Cross to coincide with Theosophical philosophy that believed that enlightenment was attained through reincarnation and spiritual evolution of the soul. Besant conceived of Christian notions of purgation, illumination and union as symbolized in the form of the birth, baptism and the transfiguration of Christ which she again transformed to correspond with Theosophical tenets that teach that the soul evolves along “the path of union” which is symbolized by “masterhood, liberation [and], final salvation.”340

Contrary to disparaging assumptions about the state of Le Rossignol’s mental well-being she demonstrated the same scepticism during the initial months of her

340 Besant, Initiation, the Perfecting of Man, pp. 1-8.
interaction with unseen entities that Georgiana Houghton discussed when she wrote, in the mid-nineteenth-century, about her experiences with automatic writing. Le Rossignol’s notes indicate that she was not, at first, convinced that her ability to communicate with disembodied spirits was genuine and she tested the information that she received during her automatic writing sessions.341 Once she was convinced that she was indeed the recipient of communication from unknown sources she practiced until she became more comfortable with her mediumistic abilities and came to trust that her intercommunion with “spiritual teachers” who supported her “efforts to become more proficient” in automatic writing. Le Rossignol, honed her ability to intermediate between the material world and the spiritual realms and continued to improve until she had learned to work in alliance with spirit entities to produce visionary art. Her goal, she wrote, was to produce pictures that would “become active in the cause of service and love to man and woman.” 342

Le Rossignol, also shared Houghton’s belief that she worked in collaboration with, as opposed to acting as the mere vehicle of, spiritual intercommunication. She wrote, “you are always mistress of your own soul...souls are not controlled at all by other spirits, only by their own wills.”343 She was familiar with Theosophical beliefs about the energetic power of thought and noted that “spirits surround[ed] everyone in the material world” and that thoughts generated from the material world impact both physical and

Le Rossignol demonstrated her interest in contemporary inquiry of various forms of religious and spiritualist belief systems, philosophical ideology and scientific discovery in her original automatic writings. She wrote about her experimentation with the automatic writing practiced by Spiritualists of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-centuries and as her mediumistic abilities developed she used her skills as an artist to produce a symbolic visionary narrative of Theosophical philosophy that focused on evolutionary theory. Biographical information about Ethel Le Rossignol is limited but it is clear that she trained as an artist in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century.\footnote{S. Le Rossignol, \textit{Historical Notes with Special references to the ‘Le Rossignol’ family in Jersey} (1917). An examination of one of the few sources of information on Ethel le Rossignol, S. Le Rossignol’s book proved curiously elusive with regard to Constance Ethel le Rossignol. Her father, Alfred le Rossignol is noted to have been born in Buenos Aires on the 13 Feb 1840 he married Jemima Mclean and was a successful merchant in Buenos Aires. Evidently, Alfred le Rossignol’s success allowed him to maintain residence in both Buenos Aires and Britain. Sources, however, differ with regard to surviving children, according to S. Le Rossignol, Alfred le Rossignol and Jemima Mclean left only two sons behind at his death.}

\footnote{Le Rossignol, \textit{Private Automatic Writings} (May 19 1920), p. 18}
She produced portraits, landscape paintings and also experimented with architectural design. Her art indicates that she was familiar with contemporary interest in the use of geometric forms, patterning and design rendered onto a flattened picture plane. Le Rossignol’s drawings completed in the first half of the ten year period in which she produced her mediumistic series of paintings beginning in 1920 appear to have been informed by her knowledge of classical and medieval art, her familiarity with illustrations by visionary artist William Blake and Theosophist John Flaxman, but also with illustrators connected with the Romantic, Aesthetic and Art Nouveau and Art Deco Movements.346

depth in 1909, both were living in South Kensington at the time of their father’s death. Another entry within the same source, however, acknowledges the birth of two daughters, Ethel Constance and Anne Lillian who died at the age of nineteen years on 10 November 1889. Also, included are images of Ethel, Anne and their father Alfred le Rossignol. In the 1901 Census for residents of Kensington Constance Ethel Le Rossignol is listed as an art student. Le Rossignol exhibited one painting entitled Elsie at the Royal Academy in 1907. See, 1891 British census records Constance Ethel Le Rossignol lived at 7 Upper Phillimore Gardens Kensington she was 17 years of age at the time. She and her siblings were all born in Buenos Aires Argentina, although her widowed father Alfred Le Rossignol was born in Jersey. According to the 1901 British census the family was still living in the Kensington area and Constance Ethel Le Rossignol was listed as unmarried at the age of 27. In addition, Constance Ethel Le Rossignol gives her occupation as Art Student on the 1901 census.

346 Alexander Gilechrist, Life of William Blake with Selections from his Poems and Other Writings, (2 Vols.) London: Macmillan, 1880, pp. 33-35. Allan Cunningham, Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, and Sculptors, and Architects, 1829 quoted in Margaret Ruth Lowery, Windows of the Morning: A Critical Study of William Blake’s Poetical Sketches, 1783, New Haven: Yale, p. 45. Robert Hindmarsh, Rise and Progress of the New Jerusalem Church in England America and Other Parts, London: Hoderson and Sons, 1861, p. 23. The idea that Helena Blavatsky and Olcott were the first founders of The Theosophical Society is misleading as demonstrated in Alvin Boyd Khun’s treatise A Modern Revival of Ancient Wisdom, New York, 1930, in which he discusses Blavatsky’s and Olcott’s connections with Spiritualism and their interest in Eastern philosophies which led to a new interpretation of ancient doctrine. He paints an unflattering portrayal of Blavatsky’s representation of the original philosophical tenets that can be traced back to ancient times. For the purposes of this examination, I will refer to Hindmarsh’s examination of the first traces of Emmanuel Swedenborg’s teachings as they appeared in London in 1750 when publisher John Lewis printed translations of Swedenborg’s Arcana Coelestia (Heavenly Secrets). From 1763 to 1781 translations of Swedenborg’s Doctrine of Life; Brief Exposition of the Doctrine of the New Church; Intercourse Between the Soul and Body under the title A Theosophic lucubration on the nature of Influx, as it respects the Communication and Operations of Soul and Body; Heaven and Hell and True Christian Religion, containing the Universal Theology of the New Church. The new society named The
Le Rossignol’s liberal use of decorative patterning combined with the oriental qualities of her visionary pictures indicate that she also participated in early-twentieth-century contemporary interest in the influx of Non-Western art into England including Indian, Persian, Arabian, Chinese and Japanese design. She may well have looked at the illustrations of artist Walter Crane, for example, who is one of the first English artists and designers to infuse his book designs with “translations from the clearly outlined, flattened forms and decorative patterns found in Japanese art.” 347 Le Rossignol’s use of intricate design indicate that she was also familiar with the work of artists such as William De Morgan whose interest in the linear patterns featured in early Syrian and Persian art objects that were imported into England in the mid-nineteenth century informed his own drawings. The images that complete the first segment of her visionary narrative, for example, demonstrate her experimentation with flattened forms and decorative patterns found in the illustrations of other contemporary artists of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century.

In addition, contemporary interest in illustration provided an acceptable avenue through which Le Rossignol could render her mediumistic experiences in pictorial form. In the early-nineteenth-century literary investigations of the nature of the spiritual spheres were combined with scientific discoveries including Darwin’s theory of evolution and the

Theosophical Society, instituted for the purpose of promoting the Heavenly Doctrines of the New Jerusalem, by translating, printing, and publishing the Theological Writing of the Honourable Emanuel Swedenborg was established in London in 1783 the same year that John Flaxman became a member. pp 2-23.

347 Johnson, Fantastic Illustration and Design, p. 20. Crane was inspired by a book of Japanese prints received in 1867.
introduction of high-powered microscopes that made the previously invisible realms of microorganisms visible which were then represented in illustrations and published in academic periodicals. Simultaneously, scientists investigated the claims of those who believed in the existence of the spiritual spheres and one informative example is the popular text entitled, *Ghost-Stories: Collected with a particular view to counteract the vulgar belief in ghosts and apparitions* (1893) which contained a series of illustrations that recorded in precise and scientific terms the manifestation of spirits.\(^{348}\) Additionally, spiritualist journals and magazines such as *Medium and Daybreak* and *Spiritualist Magazine* also published reproductions of spirit drawings and paintings on a regular basis throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries in Britain. Similarly periodicals published by the Theosophical Society including *Theosophical Path Magazine* and *Theosophy Magazine* disseminated information that was considered to be grounded in irrefutable scientific fact that supported belief in the continuation of the soul in the spiritual spheres.

Blake’s visionary graphic images, were revered by early-twentieth-century artists who were fascinated by esoteric ideology, and his illustrations of Edward Young’s poems "Life, Death, and Immortality"; "Time, Death, Friendship" and “The Nature, Proof, and “Importance of Immortality" all of which focused on the nature of life after death and were included in his book *Night Thought* (1742) was widely circulated in popular culture.

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\(^{348}\) Johnson, *Fantastic illustration*, p. 22.
in Britain.  

Le Rossignol, could not have been ignorant of images disseminated in popular Spiritualist and Theosophical journals and published in books including those produced by Blake and Flaxman whose interest in Theosophy, Spiritualism, Swedenborgian theology and Eastern religious traditions was depicted in their representations.  

Theosophists and Spiritualists alike were also inspired by the “beautifully illustrated exposition of the results of the ‘higher clairvoyance’” recently issued by the Theosophical Publishing Society. Besant’s and Leadbeater’s, book *Thought-Forms* garnered interest as had Leadbeater’s “striking book on ‘Man, Visible and Invisible’” and the editors of the Spiritualist periodical *Light* recalled Leadbeater’s explanation, in his first book on the subject, of “the aura or emotional body of man” depicted as encompassing the body in “an egg-shaped cloud, capable of taking on the most diverse colours according to the emotions prevailing at the time.”  

Besant and Leadbeater’s sequel that taught that thoughts were born of emotions that could be perceived by clairvoyants as ‘thought-forms’ was familiar to artists of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-centuries.

> Every thought gives rise to a set of correlated vibrations in the matter of this [the mental] body, accompanied with a marvellous play of colour, like that in the spray of a waterfall as the sunlight strikes it, raised to the nth degree of colour and vivid delicacy. The body under this impulse  

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350 Blake was open about his belief that he communicated with unseen entities on a regular basis and Flaxman also made known his interest in alternative belief systems including Theosophy and Eastern philosophies.  
351 Besant and Leadbeater, *Thought-Forms*, pp. 18, 19.
throws off a vibrating portion of itself, shaped by the nature of the vibrations as figures are made by sand on a disc vibrating to a musical note—and this gathers from the surrounding atmosphere matter like itself in fineness from the elemental essence of the mental world. We have then a thought-form pure and simple. And it is a living entity of intense activity animated by the one idea that generated it… Each man travels through space, enclosed within a cage of his own building, surrounded by a mass of the forms created by his habitual thoughts. Through this medium he looks out upon the world, and naturally he sees everything tinged with its predominant colours. Thus until the man learns complete control of thought and feeling, he sees nothing as it really is, since all his observations must be made through this medium, which distorts and colours everything like badly-made glass.352

Theosophists believed that these powerful thought-forms could be transported throughout the material and spiritual spheres under the influence of the vibration of emotion. The idea that atmospheric and acoustic vibrations could produce form had been revealed in several demonstrations at Spiritualist and Theosophical gatherings in which vibrations produced “sound-forms” on sand or on glass plates or “voice-figures” on fine powder sprinkled on a stretched membrane. Figures, drawn by means of pendulums, were meant to demonstrate how vibrations could produce solid forms through the manipulation of physical and ethereal matter.

Theosophists and Spiritualists connected demonstrations of the power of thought vibrations to the production of solid objects as was described by Besant and Leadbeater. Thought-forms exhibited physical characteristics in that they were considered to be detached fragments of the mental body and as such generated particular shapes and

352 Ibid, pp. 18, 19.
colour forms that made visible various mental and emotional states of the body. Blue, for example, symbolized religious feelings while yellow represented intellect, green, sympathy and pink harmony and love. Furthermore, the deeper and more vibrant the hue the purer the emotions and conversely the more clouded the colour the more selfish were the feelings that gave rise to them. In addition, the more powerful the emotion that produced the thought-form the more vivid and solid the form appeared to the clairvoyant. The coloured shapes of thought-forms were also considered to be “strangely symbolical” with some shapes graphically describing the feeling that gave rise to them. Greed, avarice and ambition, for instance, produce hooked forms that resembled grasping hands while a questioning thought generated a spiraling line. Similarly, feelings including anger, devotion and affection that were directed towards other people or objects produced forms that appeared as projectiles reminiscent of streaks of lightening that, if strong enough, affected the recipient of the thought-form. Besant and Leadbeater cautioned that the feelings and the thoughts that were generated from them needed to be positive and loving or else closely guarded because thought-forms that were “urged by a strong and well-trained will” had the capacity to produce equally powerful demonstrations of good or evil.353

Le Rossignol’s mediumistic pictures incorporate many of the forms described by Theosophists and her complex use of colour and design is certainly informed by her knowledge of material disseminated by the Theosophical society. She produced a

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spiritual narrative that evolves towards a transcendental pinnacle which represents humanity’s final destination as united with the eternal source or that energy that was believed to have the capacity to generate everlasting life. Le Rossignol’s familiarity with Theosophical teachings that had incorporated Hindu, Buddhist and Christian beliefs into their own philosophy suggests that she would also have recognized examples of the sacred art produced by the spiritual adepts of the communities. Her mediumistic paintings share some of the meditative qualities inherent to religious images produced throughout history and in many cultures. Le Rossignol’s use of spherical surfaces, for instance, as support for her images reproduces the symmetrical, rhythmic and powerfully spiritual circular shape of the mandalas, produced by Hindu and Buddhist adepts. Like Le Rossignol’s paintings, mandalas are enhanced by deep hues of contrasting saturated colours and balanced formal elements that are used to help to focus the viewer’s concentration.\(^{354}\)

In Hindu and Buddhist culture, a mandala which is the Sanskrit word for “round” or “circular,” is a symmetrical image used to assist in meditative exercises that require a focused concentration. The pictorial content of the mandala can be purely geometrical in the form of interpenetrating triangles within concentric circles or alternating concentric circles and squares, for example, or it can be figurative, depicting spiritual beings such as Buddhas, bodhisattvas, demons, and deities, whose placement forms geometrical patterns from the centre to the perimeter of the image. Le Rossignol incorporates elements of both

\(^{354}\) Le Rossignol’s narrative was exhibited in 1929 before Carl Jung published his treatise on the meditative qualities inherent to mandalas.
techniques in several of her paintings and most particularly in *Master as Distributor* and *The Unsealing of the Mysteries*. Like Le Rossignol’s visionary pictures, mandalas are produced using different mediums including graphite and paint and each image is meant to represent a microcosm or spiritual diagram of the universe that illustrates various principles, qualities, and forces that are often personified by entities depicted in the material and spiritual spheres.

Le Rossignol’s representation of entities that appear to both embody and generate energy that propels them throughout the spiritual spheres share characteristics with entities depicted in Buddhist and Hindu mandalas that are also represented as having the power to traverse between the ultimate source of life and alternative dimensions throughout the ethereal planes. In addition, her ability to actively establish and then maintain intercommunication between herself and powerful spiritual entities in the production of her narrative is consonant with the most revered Tibetan adepts of the ages who believed that the act of producing mandalas was a spiritual activity which itself facilitates meditation, relaxation and ultimately spiritual evolution. Mandala art offers viewers opportunities to explore the deepest aspects of their souls and are thought to have the potential to act as tools of transcendence experience and complete spiritual transformation.

While Le Rossignol’s visionary pictures employ thematic and stylistic elements from history including symbolic references they also encapsulate thoroughly modern concerns with regard to the production of flat, patterned, decorative and abstracted motifs.
that were evident in contemporary late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century art. Despite her adaptation of alternative belief systems which she amalgamated with her knowledge of contemporary and historical art production, Le Rossignol’s images employ a deliberate application of formal elements that serve to characterize the key tenets of early-twentieth-century modern Theosophy. Each of her paintings incorporates compositional lines that imply an implicit harmony framed within a timeless transcendental space while they simultaneously employ intricate references to spiritual science in the form of complicated applications of numerology and alchemy; again, ideas that are fundamental to Theosophical philosophy.

As Le Rossignol’s ability to maintain intercommunication with powerful entities of the spiritual spheres developed the paintings in her visionary narrative became progressively more complex and included intricate combinations of curved and straight lines that produced a sense of energy often anchored within vertically and horizontally balanced axis. Her implementation of deliberate patterning and symbolic emblems refers to contemporary ideas informed by Neo-Platonic philosophical inquiry that theorized that basic patterns are reproduced at all stages of the cosmos from the largest universal level to the smallest metaphysical level with the pinnacle of existence being summarized in humanity. Le Rossignol included reference to emblems and patterns that were meant to represent micro and macro elements of the cosmos such as cellular biological structures of the physical body and coiled spirals of the galaxies that had appeared in Besant’s and Leadbeater’s treatise *Occult Chemistry*. 

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Mathematics was considered to be one of the purest of all branches of knowledge, and Theosophists popularized the saying attributed to Plato, that “God geometrizes.” Blavatsky’s “Dots, Lines, Triangles, Cubes, Circles’ and…” ‘Spheres…’", as represented in Le Rossignol’s narrative are all symbols used in various mathematical equations and Theosophists believed that mathematical symbols, especially in the form of numerology and geometry, helped to unravel the mysteries of life and to explain humanity’s evolutionary advancement towards the source that unifies all.355 Besant and Leadbeater in their book Occult Chemistry produced an elaborate chemical analysis of materiality by using complex mathematical equations and intricately designed geometrical and spiraling forms. In addition, Besant and Leadbeater read about German physicist Ernst Chladni’s (1757-1827) scientific experiments that used acoustic vibrations to fabricate an energetic force capable of producing all the shapes of the visible as well as the invisible cosmos. Theosophists re-conceptualized Chladni’s discovery of the effects of sound vibrations in the material world as a channel through which to contact entities of the spiritual spheres. Besant and Leadbeater, in their book Thought Forms, expanded Chladni’s discoveries to include the idea that energetic vibrations which were generated by thoughts and feelings produced tangible thought-forms that have a profound effect on the human mind, body and spirit.356 These sound vibrations that gave form to thoughts and feelings also produced pulsating and often vibrantly hued colours in the shape of

356 Besant and Leadbeater, Thought-Forms, pp. 16-17.
radiant waves or clouds of varying shades similar to those found in rainbows and that are described in detail in Leadbeater’s *Man Visible and Invisible* and Besant and Leadbeater’s *Thought-Forms*. Le Rossignol’s narrative is alive with colourful rainbow-like ribbons that are meant to act as conduits of communication and also as energetic vibrations that assist in the transportation and transformation of spiritual entities.

Besant in her book *The Ancient Wisdom* (1899) made connections between Theosophical interpretations of the geometrical forms used by mathematicians and in their application to scientific discoveries with regard to acoustic vibrations and colour theory with Theosophical conceptions of the heavenly spheres. One Theosophical tenet argues that ideas of heaven are produced on the mental plane of existence in which the individual constructs their understanding of their existence using their thoughts and feelings which in turn have a direct impact on the interconnected material and spiritual spheres. Besant also made correlations between thoughts that served to construct a vibrantly beautiful ethereal materiality that could only be discerned by the highest adepts, to highly creative art production. Even so, she understood the difficulties of representing such transcendental glory using the course materials of the physical world.

On earth, painters, sculptors, musicians, dream dreams of exquisite beauty, creating their visions by the powers of the mind, but when they seek to embody them in the course materials of earth they fall far short of the mental creation. The marble is too resistant for perfect form, the pigments too muddy for perfect colour. In heaven all they think is at

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once reproduced in form, for the rare and subtle matter of the heaven-world is mind-stuff, the medium in which the mind normally works when free from passion, and it takes shape with every mental impulse. Each man, therefore, in a very real sense, makes his own heaven, and the beauty of his surroundings is indefinitely increased, according to the wealth and energy of his mind.\textsuperscript{358}

Le Rossignol, in her capacity as a highly attuned adept used knowledge gained through her intercommunion with spirit guides and re-conceptualized Besant and Leadbeater’s written interpretation of Chladni’s experiments with sound vibration to produce visual representations of their complex ideas.

Le Rossignol’s pictures produce a visually balanced representation of the microcosm/macrocsm correspondence whose balanced unification makes up, according to the advocates of Theosophy, the very fabric of existence.\textsuperscript{359} Her visionary images are replete with Theosophical, Christian and Rosicrucian symbolism including repetitive representations of the cross, the swastika, arrows, the sign of the Alpha and the Omega, squares, isosceles triangles, pyramids, and interconnected apexes and concurrently active spherical shapes.\textsuperscript{360} Le Rossignol layered her forms on a two dimensional flat surface to suggest the potential for a multi-dimensional space and also to describe space in a

\textsuperscript{358} Annie Besant, \textit{The Ancient Wisdom}, p. 185.

\textsuperscript{359} Ideas about microcosm and macrocosm can be found in literature promoted by the Theosophists such as Helena P. Blavatsky in her book \textit{The Key to Theosophy} (London: Theosophical University Press, 1889) in which she writes, “Man is the microcosm of the macrocosm; the god on earth is built on the pattern of the god in nature…”, p. 83; Blavatsky refers to aspects of microcosm and macrocosm in her book \textit{The Secret Doctrine}, Vol. 1, p. 269 and \textit{Isis Unveiled}, pp., 276, 458. The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was active in Great Britain in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century and part of their teachings about spiritual development included discussions about concepts of microcosm/macrocsm.

\textsuperscript{360} The sign of the swastika is part of the emblem for Blavatsky’s Theosophical Society which was implemented before the Nazi Germany co-opted the sign. The Theosophical Society in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century advocated a harmonious interaction between all of humanity regardless of race, religion or gender but much of the earliest literature is blatantly racist and sexist.
consistent and orderly manner in keeping with Theosophical teachings about the maintenance of a harmonious balance as well as to represent their interest in solid scientific data that they believed served as evidence of the existence of the spiritual world.

Le Rossignol conflated important emblems of different faiths and beliefs in which her amalgamation of the interlaced triangular emblem of the Theosophical Society with the Rosicrucian rose and the Christian cross produced a hybrid symbol that acts as an instrument of connection between different belief systems as well as a conduit between the spiritual spheres and the material worlds. The Theosophical emblem, an ancient symbol that represents perfect balance with the upward/downward pointing triangles representative of masculinity and femininity, is implicit as reflective of perfect unison, balance and wholeness. Le Rossignol reinforced the idea that her narrative of visionary pictures are representative of an interconnection between different planes of existence by developing paintings that depict multi-coloured spiraling vortexes that appear to traverse multi-faceted layerings of interweaved spiritual planes. Similarly, in several of her visionary pictures she suggests the infinitesimal nature of the cosmos by arranging figures and other elements of her images to converge on her representation of the all powerful deity and in so doing she produced the appearance of a vanishing point that disappears only to, once again, reemerge reminiscent of Theosophy’s ideology of the infinite nature of humanity. Le Rossignol represents in pictorial form elements of
Theosophical philosophy that teaches that humanity sustains an infinite nature through the auspices of reincarnation and evolution.

Le Rossignol employed little modeling in her painted visionary pictures and instead produced a saturated yet uniform tonal quality that was meant to foster harmony in viewers. In order to suggest a sense of depth in a multi-level cosmos, she employed techniques used by Hindu and Buddhist artists, including the use of vibrantly saturated pigments to represent spiritual entities of the higher spheres that also occupied higher points on the canvas depending on their spiritual development in the hierarchy of the ethereal planes. Conversely, she depicted less advanced spirits by muddying the saturated colours and using various quantities of grey and blue to depict the materiality of the embodied occupants of the material world as well as those spirits caught in the dense atmosphere of the astral planes. Le Rossignol’s technique of using colours such as grey, brown, and black to depict less evolved entities that demonstrate characteristics or emotions revolving around depression, anger and sadness is informed by her knowledge of Besant’s and Leadbeater’s research in which they state that spirits that generate less developed emotions such as anger project darkened thought forms as opposed to the brighter hues generated by more evolved thoughts.

In collaboration with her unseen guides, Le Rossignol used multicolored interconnected ribbons that symbolized energy flow while they were also symbolic of conduits of the melodious sacred language of the ethereal realms. She applied the harmonious currents of the colour wheel in which complementary hues melt one into the
other to produce an analogous sense of synchronization. Her placement of the colours used to produce her sinuous lines of energy is precise and produces visual references to Theosophical writings about the infinity of life in the ethereal worlds. The ribbons of energy are formed, for instance, by placing deep indigo beside vibrant purple which in turn flows into blue then towards green which melts into yellows and oranges that blend into red which flow once again into shades of purple before they are re-submerged into hues of indigo. Le Rossignol’s coloured ribbons of energetic vibrations intermingle with, and then regenerate from, the dark blue of the background of her painted visionary pictures. Furthermore, her choice of hue and placement echo the colours of the spiritual aura that, according to Spiritual and Theosophical teachings, act as a barrier of protection and also as a conduit of communication. Her depiction of powerful energetic waves that make up the auric field are able to traverse space and time by fabricating vortexes that transcend dimensions and that also act as conduits of language and knowledge facilitating continuous regeneration and communion in the cosmos.

Le Rossignol, would have had access to information about colour theory in experiments that had inspired other contemporary artists of the period. Nineteenth-century colour theorists such as chemists Michel Chevreul (1786-1889) and Ogden Rood (1831-1902), for example, theorised that color must be classified according to different wavelengths of light which in turn create a continuous spectrum with no beginning or end may well have been of particular interest to Le Rossignol. In addition, her paintings provide a visual interpretation of Besant’s and Leadbeater’s book *Thought Forms* in
which they discuss the significance of the different colours of the auric field as well as the active nature of colour vibrations. Art historian Henry Sayre writes about the impact of Besant and Leadbeater’s book on late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century avant garde artists using Pablo Picasso’s painting *Woman with Book, 1932*, as an example. Picasso’s painting according to Sayre,

contains a “Key to the meaning of colours, and not surprisingly, mint green, the color of Marie-Thérèse’s hair, is the colour of “sympathy,” and violet, the other color that dominates her face, suggests “love for humanity.” More precisely, violet is “a mixture of affection and devotion… and the more delicate shades of [it] invariably show the capacity of absorbing and responding to a high and beautiful ideal.” Picasso might not have read the book, but its classifications were so popular that he almost could not have escaped them, and, evidently, they are at work here.

Le Rossignol used hues that are included in Chevreul’s colour wheel and also in Besant’s and Leadbeater’s description of the human aura. These colours, are found in rainbows, which are re-produced in her paintings in the same complementary juxtapositions, which when combined, produce the white light of the Omniscient being, a form of which is represented in her final painting of her visionary narrative, *Figure No. 42 Consummation*.

In this work, Le Rossignol, amalgamated symbolic allusions to the emblems and belief systems of the Theosophical Society in the form of interlaced double triangles, the Rosicrucian Order in her automatic writings about The Rose of Unity and in her

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depictions of a portal through which entities traverse boundaries, and the Christian belief system in her representations of Cross, the Trinity and in her adaptation of the elements of the Christian Stations of the Cross. Le Rossignol, in concert with her unseen collaborators, produced an intertextual visionary narrative in which humanity evolves to such a degree that it becomes one with the alpha and the omega; the eternal being; the ‘infinite absolute”. She was aware of the complex nature of her visionary narrative of spiritual evolvement which culminates in the unification of all life while also maintaining the sentient individuality of each entity. Le Rossignol concluded her book *A Goodly Company* that recorded her experiences as a mediumistic artist and writer with her own words.362

To those who have followed the story of these pictures to this final page it can only be repeated that they were given as a joyful reassurance of the spiritual spheres, showing the archangels, the angels and the different creations—lower and higher—as man has slowly evolved through animal to man, from man to spirit, from spirit to angel and from angel to participator in the unveiled purpose of God.363

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**Conclusion**

Visionary images have been characterised as the product of insanity -- yet also as revolutionary expressions of the avant-garde which anticipated modernist art. Nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century artists were informed by contemporary social and cultural ideologies that included a developing curiosity about the nature of the spiritual spheres explored through alternative belief systems including Spiritualism and Theosophy. Georgiana Houghton and Ethel Le Rossignol initiated intercommunion between the material world and the ethereal realms and believed they worked in collaboration with powerful spirit guides to produce their multifaceted pictures. Houghton conceived of visionary images as instruments of physical and spiritual healing while Le Rossignol believed that her mediumistic narrative explicated Theosophical philosophy about the evolution of the human spirit towards enlightenment. Both artists re-embodied the disembodied to produce images that disrupted religious doctrine and in so doing traversed successfully nebulous boundaries between life and death.

My second and third chapters outlined associations between declining absorption in the figure of the fairy and emerging fascination with conceptions of life after death. I discussed exploration of paranormal phenomenon in the context of newly evolving scientific discovery and charted correlations and variances between Spiritualist and Theosophical philosophy. I traced initial attempts to communicate with disembodied entities of the spiritual spheres through table turning and automatic writing which was
then transformed into the production of mediumistic images. My discussion of some of the complexities inherent in attempts to encapsulate the ephemeral in visual terms led, paradoxically, to an exploration of how interest in the spiritual spheres fostered new interpretations of work produced by eighteenth-century artist William Blake as well as by contemporary Pre-Raphaelite artists. Subsequently, I located work produced by less renowned visionary artists who operated within the rubric of contemporary late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century-art production and then identified some of the ways in which mediumistic artists’ approaches differed from their contemporaries. I narrowed my analysis of the methods employed by mediumistic artists and focused more closely on important interface within Spiritualist communities that culminated in the formation of societies such as the International Congress of Spiritualists and Occultists responsible for organizing the first international exhibition of visionary art. My analysis expanded to encompass an outline of the social and political impact of the aftermath of WWI which stimulated feminist agendas of the emancipation of women and rejuvenated revolutionary ideas about the evolution of the soul in the afterlife. This exploration highlighted connections between newly liberated women and the promotion of Spiritualist and Theosophical philosophy that celebrated women as talented artists and spiritual mediums which cultivated a more convivial environment within which to exhibit their art.

Chapters Four and Five encompassed my analysis of works produced by visionary artists Georgiana Houghton in the mid-nineteenth-century and Ethel Le Rossignol in the
early-twentieth-century. I situated my examination of Houghton’s pictures within the context of late-nineteenth-century intellectual inquiry that synthesised Spirituality and elements of Christianity with artistic practice. I traced Houghton’s development in the perfection of her mediumistic abilities which was augmented, I argued, by her assimilation of contemporary fascination with botany. I concluded that Houghton amalgamated her familiarity with botany and the automatic drawings of Elizabeth Wilkinson with her own in-depth knowledge of scriptural text to produce symbolic watercolors which she actively promoted as capable of facilitating physical and spiritual healing in viewers. My analysis of Le Rossignol’s visionary narrative re-contextualized her art within the rubric of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Theosophical philosophy which disseminated ideas about the evolution of the human spirit after physical death. I examined key examples of Le Rossignol’s series of paintings within the context of works produced by other avant-garde artists of the period and also in relation to medieval imagery that was meant to illicit transcendental transformation in viewers. I traced Le Rossignol’s progression as an artist and noted that as her mediumistic abilities developed her depictions of the evolution of the soul became more symbolically complex. I concluded my study by providing further insight into the content of her narrative in relation to Christian representations of The Stations of the Cross. What has emerged, through these examinations, is a visionary imagery that produced new cultural meaning, one that was informed by a passionate interest in
Spiritualism and Theosophy and which offered a cathartic self-healing and activation of
the spiritual psyche.

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