

SPIRIT MOULDS: A PRACTICAL EXPERIMENT

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Since the early days of Spiritualism, when mediums began producing noticeable physical phenomena, paraffin-wax moulds supposedly modelled around materialized 'spirit hands' during seances were one of the best proofs presented as evidence of the paranormal.

Some of these moulds, in fact, seemed to possess the characteristics of 'permanent paranormal objects'. The empty paraffin moulds found at the end of seances, it was thought, could still be intact only because the hands around which the wax solidified had dematerialized.

Moulds have not always possessed these characteristics, and even D. D. Home warned against fraudulent mediums who produced these phenomena by casting moulds of their own hands or smuggling already-prepared ones into the seance room. After a period in which the interest in these phenomena faded away, they made a comeback with Polish medium Franek Kluski and others, and the general public was made better aware of their existence thanks also to articles in popular magazines such as *Scientific American*.

Some of the plaster casts of these moulds are still preserved at the Institut Metapsichique International in Paris, a fact which in part explains why the interest in the phenomena periodically resurfaces.

In consideration of the recent debate (Barrington, 1994a; 1994b; 1995; Coleman, 1994a; 1994b; 1995a; 1995b) over these paraffin-wax moulds, we should like to offer our own experience on the subject.

POSSIBLE NATURAL EXPLANATIONS

As already pointed out by others (Coleman, 1994a; 1995a), various possible natural explanations accounting for the phenomena (besides 'spirit intervention') have been proposed.

Dr Robin Tillyard (1926), for example, suggested the following method: a tourniquet is fastened to one arm, and the hand is allowed to swell; after this, the swollen hand is immersed into the paraffin and into cold water. The tourniquet is then removed and the arm is lifted upward, in order to allow the blood to flow, until the swelling has gone down. The hand, having recovered its original size, will allow the paraffin glove to slip off easily (especially if the hand had previously been smeared with glycerol).

A different procedure for casting spirit moulds using normal means requires only one rubber glove perfectly imitating the hand's features. The supporters of this method agree that it is possible to reproduce hands of different size and shape, and that the glove might be easily hidden on the medium's body. To obtain such a glove, showing the hand's fingerprints and its distinctive lines, one should first impress a real hand on dental wax - avoiding plaster - which allows a much sharper outline of the skin marks. This imprinting will at once be used as a mould for making a rubber glove showing all the typical marks of a real hand. This hypothesis, however, appears too weak.

It is generally recognized that the paraffin moulds are 'first generation' imprints; instead, following this technique, they would be 'third generation' imprints: first a negative in dental wax, then the rubber glove from this mould and finally the mould of paraffin over the glove. The end result would probably show some surface defects accumulated along the way.

Tests of this hypothesis, carried out by Gustave Geley (1923) with thin rubber gloves inflated or filled with water and then suspended in a basin containing paraffin, produced imprints showing the typical sausage-shaped fingers, clearly revealing that they were made with an inflated rubber glove.

This test by Geley doesn't rule out the possibility of obtaining convincing spirit moulds by using gloves made with elastic but thicker materials, carefully crafted and not overly filled with water or air. However, in any case, the entire procedure appears uselessly complicated.

An example of how certain books encouraging the belief in spiritualism claim the impossibility of obtaining moulds by natural means is given in these extracts: -

The moulds were shown to Gabrielli, a professional modeller, who stated that they could never have been forged with an ordinary process, as a human hand would have broken a paraffin glove when slipping out of it, A real hand coming out of a paraffin glove just one millimeter in thickness, like the gloves obtained at the IMI, is not possible; nor would it have been possible with a thicker glove, in that the palm of a hand is much larger than the wrist. The hand therefore would have had to break the glove to be able to slip it off the wrist. Contrariwise, the paraffin gloves are not damaged or broken at all. The only acceptable explanation was that the hand must have materialized into the glove itself. [Giovetti, 1988]

By no means could one have made only one paraffin mould of the two hands of a living person clasped in such

a way. [Dettore, 1981]

This double-handed mould is perhaps the clearest evidence for the impossibility of a normal removal of the genuine mould obtained from the paraffin. [Geley, 1923]

In reading these observations and comparing them with all the possible solutions suggested by both sceptics and believers in spiritualism, it turns out that only one solution gives a convincing rational explanation for the moulds created by Kluski. And it is simply the production of wax-moulds directly from one's hand, as also pointed out by Coleman (1995a).

OUR EXPERIMENTATION



We then decided to try and make some moulds of our hands to test how difficult this really was. Strictly following Geley's instructions, we prepared two basins (each had a diameter of 10 inches): one with hot water (approximately 5 litres at 55°C), in which we poured a layer of molten paraffin (approx. 1 kg, previously melted in a pan with boiling water on a kitchen stove), and the other with cold water (5 litres), which we later used to immerse our hands and allow the paraffin to solidify. In turn, we immersed our hands first in the basin filled with paraffin and then in the one containing water. We gave our hands different shapes: one open hand, one fist, another with two V - shaped fingers, one with a finger pointing out (which, according to Geley (1923), should have been considered "perhaps the clearest evidence for the impossibility of a normal removal of the genuine mould obtained from the paraffin"), and one with two hands clasped. We remind the reader what supporters of spiritualism have claimed regarding this shape: "By no means could one have made only one paraffin mould of the two hands of a living person clasped in such a way" (Dettore, 1981).

In all of these cases, we were able rather easily to make some fairly thin moulds (a few millimeters thick) just by immersing the hands a couple of times in the basin with the paraffin. But our most significant result was that in every instance we managed to remove our hands from the solidified paraffin glove without breaking it. In fact, it can be noticed from the pictures included that the wrist in some of the moulds that we have obtained is notably narrower than the width of the hand. This outcome is attainable by simply removing the hand very carefully.



Pictures in some books on spiritualism illustrate models reproducing parts of the human body that look like sculptures. These illustrations are followed by captions with statements like: "These shapes could not be removed from a mould without being broken", leading one to believe that this is the case. Actually, it is not the plaster cast that has to be removed from the thin wax mould - which really would be impossible to do without breaking it. One almost forgets that what has to be removed is a living hand, possibly the best-suited object to slip out of a mould without damaging it. In fact, a real hand is even more effective than any other artifices dreamed up to substitute for it. First, the paraffin doesn't stick to the skin, only to quite long hair. Nonetheless, if one moves the fingers very slowly, one will realize that every small bit one pulls out, will gradually allow the rest of the hand to be removed; that's almost what happens when one pulls off a tight glove.



Later, when we had poured some plaster into a few moulds, it turned out that we had made exactly the same copies as Kluski's, which are kept at the IMI. [1] The hands we obtained have all the hand's typical lines; and also a few hairs stuck here and there. To convert a mould into a plaster cast, one has only to pour 'liquid plaster slowly into the mould, When the plaster is dry, the outer paraffin glove can be removed, either by scraping it off with the fingers or by melting it in hot water; we preferred to melt it by placing it on a plate inside an oven at 70°/80°C. We realized that the skin's wrinkledness in our moulds appeared further enhanced: they looked like hands of a person older than the original model. This phenomenon may be caused by either greater evidence of superficial features when these are the only information available on the hand - colour, movement, etc. being absent - or by the paraffin shrinking while it was getting cold.

With regard to copies from hands smaller than those of the medium - or clearly different - it is well known that previously-prepared gloves have been repeatedly found hidden among the medium's and/or other accomplices' clothes (Coleman, 1994a; Polidoro, 1995). It would not be difficult to conclude, though, that particularly complex moulds could have been shaped with extreme care, before a seance took place, by the medium himself or his accomplices and, during the seance, jumbled up with other moulds forged at the moment of performing the spiritualist occurrence.

CONCLUSIONS

Our experiment, which everyone can try and repeat at home (plaster and paraffin are usually available in artists' shops), seems to suggest the following conclusions: -

- 1) the claim of the impossibility of removing a hand from a thin paraffin mould without breaking it has once again been disproved;
- 2) the claim of the impossibility of removing a hand from a mould having been given strange shapes (clasped fingers, a fist hand, V-shaped fingers...), has also been refuted;
- 3) the hypothesis claiming the impossibility of removing a hand from a mould narrower at the wrist has been disproved,

In closing, what we think the overall experience suggests is that, in the field of the paranormal, the simplest hypothesis will often explain a phenomenon most completely.

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Note 1

It is interesting to note that one of the theses of Kluski's advocates supporting the authenticity of the phenomenon assumes that the moulds the medium obtained during the seances were so tight at the wrist that it was impossible for a hand to come out. Although this statement, as demonstrated, is not true, of all the moulds kept at the Institut Metapsychique International almost none have this characteristic. The majority of the moulds either end before the narrow part of the hand or include only the external, visible half of them, but never the internal half. The discovery of this fact was just what induced us to try to reproduce the phenomenon of the spirit moulds.