



Ghostly Molds

How to make a plaster cast of your hand, even if you are not a spirit

Since the early days of Spiritualism, when mediums began producing physical phenomena, paraffin-wax molds supposedly modeled around materialized “spirit hands” during séances were considered some of the best pieces of evidence of the paranormal.

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

Molds have not always possessed these

public became aware of their existence thanks also to articles in popular magazines such as *Scientific American*.

Some of the plaster casts of these molds are still preserved at the Institut Métapsychique International in Paris (www.metapsychique.org), a fact that in part explains why the interest in the phenomena periodically resurfaces.

Alternatives to the Paranormal

Many (e.g., Coleman 1994a; 1995a) have pointed out various possible natural explanations accounting for the “ghostly mold” phenomena. Dr Robin Tillyard (1926), for example, suggested

porters of this method agree that it is possible to reproduce hands of different sizes and shapes 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, which allows a much sharper outline of the skin’s texture than plaster. This imprinting will at once be used as a mold for making a rubber glove showing all the typical marks of a real hand. This hypothesis, however, appears weak.

It is generally recognized that the paraffin molds are “first generation”

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characteristics, and even the celebrated medium D.D. Home warned against fraudulent mediums who produced these phenomena by casting molds of their own hands or smuggling prepared ones into the séance room. After a period in which interest in these phenomena faded away, they made a comeback in the Roaring Twenties with Polish medium Franek Kluski and others, and the general

Massimo Polidoro is an investigator of the paranormal, author, lecturer, and co-founder and head of CICAP, the Italian skeptics group. His Web site is at www.massimopolidoro.com.

the following: 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 then 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 molds using normal means requires only one rubber glove perfectly imitating the hand’s features. The sup-

porters of this method agree that it is possible to reproduce hands of different sizes and shapes 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, which allows a much sharper outline of the skin’s texture than plaster. This imprinting will at once be used as a mold for making a rubber glove showing all the typical marks of a real hand. This hypothesis, however, appears weak.

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.

Geley’s test doesn’t rule out the possi-

bility of obtaining convincing spirit molds by using gloves made with elastic and thicker materials, carefully crafted and not overly filled with water or air. However, in any case, the entire procedure appears unnecessarily complicated.

Here is an example of how certain books encouraging the belief in spiritualism claim the impossibility of obtaining molds by natural means:

The molds were shown to Gabrielli, a professional modeler, 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).

Or, again: “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 skeptics and believers in Spiritualism, it turns out that only one solution gives a convincing, rational explanation for the molds created by Kluski: it is simply the production of wax-molds directly from one’s hand, as also pointed out by Coleman (1995a).

Experimenting with Ghostly Hands

Along with my friend and colleague Luigi Garlaschelli, I decided to put my hands to the problem. Literally. We decided to make molds of our own hands to test how difficult this really was. Strictly following Geley’s instructions, we prepared two basins (each with a diameter of ten inches): one with hot water (approximately 5 liters at 55° C),



The author making “spirit molds”



Even with his finger pointed, the author was able to remove his hand from the mold without breaking it.

in which we poured a layer of molten paraffin (approximately 1 kg, previously melted in a pan with boiling water on a kitchen stove) and the other with cold water (5 liters), 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 fingers shaped like a V, one with a finger pointing out (a form which, according to Geley, should be 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. Regarding this shape, supporters of Spiritualism were categorical: “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 easily able to make some fairly thin molds (a couple of millimeters thick) just by immersing the hands one or two 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 noted from the photos that the wrist in



One of Frank Kluski's spirit molds found at the Institut Métapsychique International in Paris.

some of the molds 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 it 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 mold, 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 mold without damaging it.

In fact, a real hand is even more effective than any other artifice 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 gradually allows the rest of the hand to be removed; it's almost what happens when one pulls off a tight glove.

Later, when we had poured some plaster into a few molds, it turned out that we had made exactly the same copies as Kluski's, which are kept at the IMI (photo at left). The hands we obtained feature all of the hands' typical lines and also a few hairs stuck here and there. To convert a mold into a plaster cast, one has only to pour liquid plaster slowly into the mold. 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° to 80° C.

We noticed that the skin's wrinkles in our molds appeared further enhanced; they looked like hands of a person older than the original model. This phenomenon may be caused by either superficial features becoming more noticeable when this is the only information available on the hand—color, 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 molds could have been shaped with extreme care before a séance took place by the medium himself or his accomplices in the dark, jumbled up with other molds forged at the moment of performing the Spiritualist occurrence.

Our experiment, which anyone can 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

mold without breaking it has once again been disproved; and

2) the claim of the impossibility of removing a hand from a mold given strange shapes (e.g., clasped fingers, a fist hand, V-shaped fingers, etc.), has also been refuted; and

3) the hypothesis claiming the impossibility of removing a hand from a mold narrower at the wrist has been disproved.

Our little experiment, then, just happened to confirm Occam's Razor once more: the simplest hypothesis turned out to be the one capable of explaining the phenomenon most completely.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to my good friend and colleague Luigi Garlaschelli, with whom this experiment was conducted (an article about it was written and published in the July 1997 issue [Vol. 62, N. 848] of the *Journal of the Society for Psychological Research*). I also wish to thank Michael H. Coleman and Lewis Jones for their useful suggestions and help.

Note

1. It is interesting that one thesis of Kluski's advocates supporting the authenticity of the phenomenon assumes that the molds the medium obtained during the séances 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 molds kept at the Institut Métapsychique International almost none have this characteristic. The majority of the molds either end before the narrow part of the hand or include only the external, visible half of them, never the internal half. The discovery of this fact was just what induced us to try to reproduce the phenomenon of the spirit molds.

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