

The Art of H.C. Mansveld and Its Impact on the Public Perception of Dutch Spiritualism in the Period 1925–1939

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ABSTRACT: Spiritualism was a movement that gained high popularity in the inter-war period. Spiritualist communities, such as the Dutch Spiritist Society, set out to find proof for the Spiritualist thesis, which holds that existence does not end with death, but continues in a world beyond our earthly one. This community included a group of art-producing mediums, and their own art movement became known as mediumistic art. Mediumistic art is a form of trance creation, based on the premise that the artist (or so was believed) channels a spirit, who uses the artist's hands as his or her own in order to create art works. The Dutch painter H.C. Mansveld was such an artist, and he was highly praised in Dutch Spiritualist circles. Mansveld, however, never gained true popularity with the general public in Holland. This, the article argues, was the result of the dogmatic attitude held by the Spiritualist community towards Mansveld's case and what it meant for the Spiritualist thesis.

KEYWORDS: Dutch Spiritualism, Spiritualism, Spirit Art, Mediumistic Art, H.C. Mansveld.

Introduction

The Dutch Foundation Het Johan Borgman Fonds (hereafter referred to as HJBF) has initiated and has been involved in the past decade in actively archiving the history of 20th century Dutch Spiritualism, centered around the national Spiritualist society Harmonia, established in 1888. The results of this endeavor are publicly available at the Het Utrechts Archief (the city archive of Utrecht, The Netherlands), which holds over 5,600 folders with original documents, pictures, journals and booklets, dealing with all aspects of the Spiritualist movement in the Netherlands between 1890 and 2010.

Additionally, a study into the so-called “mediumistic art” was started in 2012 (Kramer 2015, Kramer 2018). Mediumistic art is often regarded as part of the *art brut* or *outsider art* movement. We, however, consider it to be a topic of its own, since it has certain distinct implications. Even though mediumistic artists are indeed “outsiders”—and not professional painters or sculptors—they have a specific purpose: to prove the existence of a world beyond our earthly one. This article is the result of an investigation on Dutch painter Hendrik Cornelis Mansveld (1874–1957), the most productive, discussed and influential medium-art-painter within the Dutch Spiritualist tradition. More specifically, it examines the impact of the reception of Mansveld’s work on the Spiritualist cause.

Mansveld and In-Trance Creation

On an August night in 1929, Johannes Pieter Smits (1891–1960)—a central figure in the Dutch Spiritualist community—and his wife knocked on the door of a small residence in The Hague, The Netherlands. They were invited in by 55-year old house-painter and decorator, H.C. Mansveld. Mansveld was a seemingly ordinary man, modest and appropriate. After the customary small talk, Mansveld, Smits and their wives adjourned to a small room, empty except for a table and an easel. They all sat down at the table. Mansveld took some pastels and waited. After a while, “something happened to Mansveld, he changed, his posture turned rigid and his eyes turned glazy.” Moving much slower than before, Mansveld picked up his painting tools and seated himself in front of the easel, his eyes looking upwards, as if awaiting something from above. Then, abruptly, Mansveld started painting. With surprising determination and pace, he applied his pastel to the canvas and within moments, he finished a complete composition. After this intense, in-trance burst of creativity Mansveld turned back to his old self (Smits 1929, 297–98).

This account seems quite extra-ordinary, but this method of painting was not uncommon in the 1920s and 1930s and was even practiced by many of the world most famous Surrealists, including André Breton (1896–1966), Joan Miró (1893–1983) and Salvador Dalí (1904–1989), and abstract expressionists like Jackson Pollock (1912–1956). Artists would detach themselves from precise, conscious and calculated painting, and instead let their subconscious take over in order to create works of art from free association or “automatic,” uncoordinated

movements of the hands. Mansveld, however, did not consider himself to be an artist of subconscious creativity. In fact, he did not consider himself to be an artist at all. The reason for this stems from Mansveld's fervent Spiritualism (or "Spiritism") and his strong belief in a world "beyond the veil," a transcendent world inhabited by the spirits of the deceased. When it comes to its practices, Spiritualism is quite diversified in the different ways of interacting with the spirit world. Mediums use instruments (like Ouija boards and planchettes), personal objects, music, their own senses, or get in a trance in their séances. And one very particular and interesting form of mediumistic communication is mediumistic art.

In 1920, during a séance, Mansveld received a message that he would become a medium himself and would start painting and sculpting in trance. Mansveld was untrained and uneducated in the practice of creative painting, and lacked the skills to create works of art. Nonetheless, one year later, Mansveld started to produce paintings during séances, but in this process of painting he did not see himself as the painter, but as the brush. The reason was that he believed that, during the séances, he was visited by the souls of deceased painters (some of them very famous even after they died), who would then inhabit Mansveld's body and through his hand move the brush on the canvas. The spirits would even finish the work off with their own signature. "When Mansveld paints, he is not Mansveld" (Smits 1929, 301)—because, supposedly, it was not Mansveld who was painting but the spirit moving his hands and body.

So, Mansveld was convinced that his creative trance was not fueled by his subconscious mind, but by a consciousness from above. This is why he distanced himself from the artworks he produced, and did not consider himself an artist. The perception of his art, specifically the Spiritualists' perception, eventually had severe consequences for Dutch Spiritualism, and the "Mansveld- case" revealed significant flaws in the mentality of the Dutch Spiritualists.

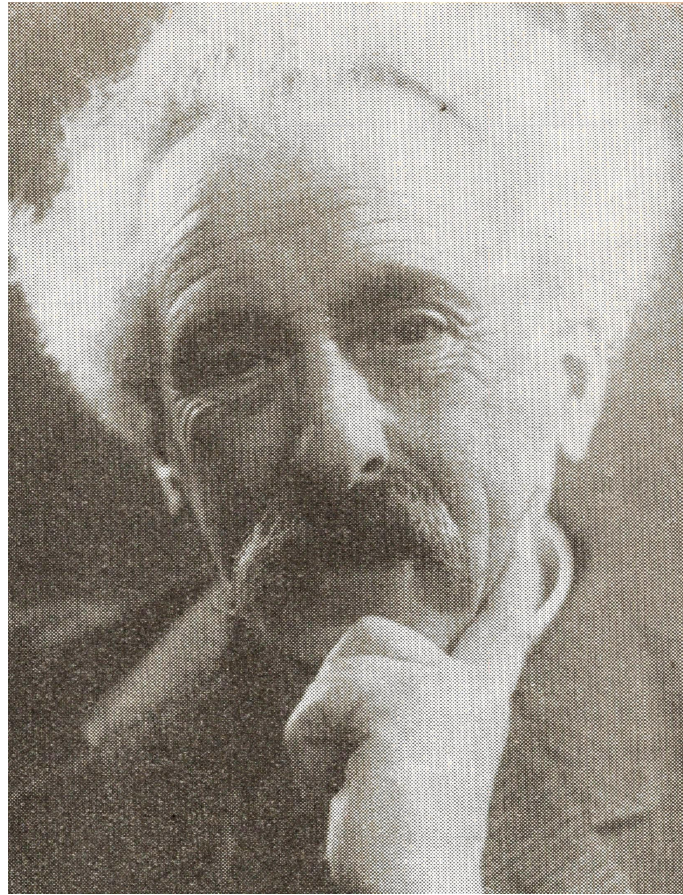


Figure 1. Photo portrait of H.C. Mansveld at age 81 (Smits 1955).

Mansveld as Proof for the “World Beyond the Veil”

After an exhibition in Berlin, in 1925, Mansveld became highly popular in Dutch Spiritualist circles. His popularity was strongly connected with the increased enthusiasm for Spiritualism in the inter-war period. The peaking interest in the spiritual was a result of the devastations of World War I. Millions of soldiers found their death in the trenches, leaving tens of millions in grief back home, and creating an enormous need for consolation. However, since many were unable to properly say goodbye to their lost ones, and were under high pressure to keep things running at the home front, there often was little closure. Thus, people turned elsewhere to alleviate their sorrows, and this led to a steep increase in the popularity of Spiritualism and its belief in a world beyond our earthly life. Many hoped that mediums and psychics could put them in contact with their lost relatives, and through this contact give them the closure they

otherwise lacked. Spiritualism thus became an established institution, criticized but not condemned, with Spiritualist societies and accompanying magazines and newspapers. Within the broad spectrum of Spiritualism, mediumistic art (or psychic art) served two purposes: it conveyed (like all Spiritualist practices) messages from the spirit world and, more importantly, it functioned as a prominent proof of the existence of a higher realm.

The idea of the existence of a higher world and the conception of a world or a life after death define the “Spiritualist thesis.” This is what made Mansveld so interesting for Spiritualists: his art provided a proof for life after death, i.e. for the thesis. Because how could a “simple,” untrained, working-class man with no significant talent for painting produce “great” works of art, if not through the (literal) influence of more gifted spirits of the deceased? Mansveld was not the only Spiritualist artist who was popular in the Netherlands. Other artists such as Jan Huibrecht Verwaal (1889–1972) and Jacoba Catharina Calkoen (1866–1944) were appreciated too. They produced abstract, intuitively painted works, displaying obscure, symbolic, and sometimes frightening scenes with spirits and demons, unusual landscapes and religious symbols, and sometimes unidentifiable shapes.

But Mansveld’s art was different, because his works were, unlike that of the others, not cryptic and abstract, but plain and figurative and close to natural reality. Mansveld’s art was original in its banality. This constituted the perfect premise for a proof of the afterlife, and was seen by the Spiritualists as very empowering for their thesis. The contrast between the simplicity of Mansveld’s person and the (supposed) grandeur of his work implied, in the eyes of the Spiritualists, a necessity for a life after death. The very “common” Mansveld produced paintings that only the greatest could, and therefore there had to be some sort of transcendental influence at work. Finding proofs for the Spiritualist thesis was of the utmost importance to the Spiritualist community at the time. The journals from the 1920s and 1930s are filled with accounts of Spiritualism and mediums that supposedly proved the existence of the transcendental world. Very often, this led to discussions in the more mainstream media about the validity of those proofs as well, with people questioning the mediums, their integrity and capabilities.

Mansveld's Limited Artistic Capabilities

Mansveld, provided a seemingly endless supply of “spirit-proving” artworks. The creative spirits were far from being idle. Mansveld “received” several hundred works, an estimate based on the fact that, by the late 1920s, he had already created at least two hundred pieces, and would continue painting until at least 1939. The works came from many different deceased artists, such as the Dutch Jacob Maris (1837–1899), Willem Cornelis Rip (1856–1922), and Théophile de Bock (1851–1904), the Belgian Henry De Braekeleer (1840–1888), and the French Loys Potet (1866–?) and Henri Fantin-Latour (1836–1904), among many others.

Reports in Dutch Spiritualist monthly journals like *Het Toekomstige Leven* and *Spiritische Bladen* show that Mansveld had many exhibitions where sometimes there were as much as two hundred paintings on display, with thirty different painters as the creative forces behind them (De Laat de Kanter 1925, 21). This is confirmed by a set of exhibition catalogues, preserved in the city council archive in The Hague, which list the works on display in two different exhibitions held in that city in December 1929 and September 1931, with up to seventy-four Mansvelds shown at once. At some exhibitions, including one held in Rotterdam in 1927, around six hundred people would visit in approximately three days, confirming Mansveld’s popularity in this period. A report about this exhibition also reveals the ambition that the Spiritualist community had to expand and reach a broader audience through mediumistic art. One of the three aims (besides providing proof for the thesis and establishing Spiritualism’s influence) of the exhibitions was to “draw the attention of the Dutch public” (W.A.B. 1927, 5). This shows Mansveld’s role for the Spiritualist community not only in providing evidence for the thesis, but also in attracting and convincing the public.

At some of these exhibitions, Mansveld would also sell his works for “good money” (“Spiritistische Kunst. Bijna Echt” 1927, 2). When hearing this, one might intuitively get suspicious of the motives of the medium-painter. It may seem as if he merely pretended to be gifted to give his paintings weight and sell them for more money. This would not be a fair suspicion, however, because Mansveld did not set prices for the works himself. Instead, he was convinced that the spirits of the deceased painters did. Once, at an exhibition, Mansveld was offered a thousand German marks by an enthusiast for a single work. After having

consulted his “spirit friends,” he gave the potential buyer the work for free, simply because that was the price set by the spirits. This is not the attitude of an imposter or a charlatan.

Additionally, there seems to be a consensus among not only Spiritualists, but also more impartial journalists who met the painter, that Mansveld was an ordinary, honest, and humble man. Based on the combination of these factors, we can safely assume that Mansveld was truly convinced of his gift as a medium, and was honorable in his motives. It would, thus, be pointless to question Mansveld’s integrity. However, what can and should be examined is Mansveld’s true quality as a painter. The implications of such an examination will show to be quite problematic for the “Mansveld-proof” of the Spiritualist thesis.

In the collection of the HJBF, there are fourteen paintings by Mansveld, of which most are attributed to a certain “J. Dulaque.” Research on Dulaque’s identity has not been fruitful, and he remains shrouded in mystery. Two of the works in the collection are attributed to the well-known French painter Henri Fantin-Latour and one is attributed to “George Verlain.” Verlain, like Dulaque, remains an unknown figure, despite research. Almost all of the works are made with pastel and vary in size. The smallest of the paintings are a mere 16 by 10 centimeters, while the largest work is 60 by 45 centimeters. Some depict cities or landscapes, others still lifes with flowers, and one shows a portrait of a sideways-facing woman.

Mansveld was unanimously praised by the Spiritualists for the “astonishing similarities” between his paintings and the ones made by the artists while they were alive. His pastels were described as “so beautiful that they looked like they were made with oil” (“Hooger Leven” 1936, 4). Once, a more skeptical visitor of one of the exhibitions in The Hague was unimpressed by a work by the spirit of the famous 19th century Dutch landscape painter Jacob Maris, saying that it did not look like a real Maris, and was much more “one-dimensional.”

The journalist reporting on the incident for *Het Toekomstige Leven* meagerly defended Mansveld by saying to the sceptic, “How would you paint if you were painting with a broomstick instead of a brush?” (“Tentoonstelling Mansveld” 1927, 15). By this, the Spiritualist journalist meant that Mansveld functioned as a bodily tool for Maris, but the difference in quality was due to the fact that Mansveld’s body was still the body of a non-painter, which would make it harder to make a painting equal in quality to the production of the Dutch master. This

rebuttal of the criticism reveals a biased disposition, grounded on the inherently biased dogmatic belief in the Spiritualist thesis, combined with a strong need to find proofs for it. This combination resulted in a lack of reasonable evaluation of Mansveld's work.

After analyzing the works in the collection of the HJBF, several observations about the artistic quality of the paintings can be made. The first is that Mansveld, in fact, was proficient in pastel painting. The works show a strong use of color and this leads to aesthetically pleasing pictures, with the bright or deep colored flowers in still lifes and the twilight skies and the reflecting seas in some of the cityscapes. Mansveld, thus, had definitely a talent for painting. However, after drawing a comparison between the paintings and the original works of the deceased artists, it becomes hard to deny the difference in quality.

Mansveld's inability to match the standard of the great painters of the past becomes most clear in his portraits. In the collection, there is a portrait of a woman which was allegedly received by Mansveld via the French painter Fantin-Latour. Fantin-Latour was one of France's most talented realist painters of the 19th century. Although he used a monochromatic palette, he created depth and shadows that truly brought his portraits and still lifes to life. Mansveld's portrait attributed to Fantin-Latour (which was painted with the depicted woman posing in the room) is quite the opposite: two-dimensional, anatomically incorrect, and too contrasting in colors. It does not share any clear resemblances with Fantin-Latour.

In the newspaper *De Haagsche Courant* of 13 December 1929, there is a reproduction of another portrait by Mansveld, this time attributed to Giovanni Bellini (1430–1516; "Mediamiek Verkregen Schilderwerk" 1929). It is quite similar to Mansveld's Fantin-Latour. Both figures have sharp facial features and are in a sideways-facing pose. Once again, this work is, if anything, a reduction of the true artistic genius of the original artist.

Mansveld's flower paintings are more impressive (perhaps his body functioned better as a tool for still lifes than it did for portraits). Most of the flower works in the collection of HJBF are attributed to "J. Dulaque."



Figure 2. Still life with flowers by Mansveld (37 x 46 cm), attributed to “J. Dulaque,” 1930 (work in the collection of HJBF).

Since we do not have any further information on Dulaque’s identity, a comparison is not possible. When measuring the Dulaque paintings not to original works, but to a standard of good painting in general, the same conclusions can be drawn as with the Fantin-Latours. Mansveld displays a solid style of painting, however, the only true excitement is contained in his use of colors, and even there he falls short of the truly brilliant.

This assessment of Mansveld as a painter might seem quite harsh and as a denial of his talent. This is, in fact, not the case. Considering Mansveld’s complete lack of training and artistic background, and the pace he held when painting his works, he truly was an extraordinary painter. Nevertheless, to claim there is a correspondence between the quality of the original works of some of the greatest painters of all time and the quality of the works “received” by Mansveld, is simply a stretch of reality. An art critic who wrote an article in 1926 on Mansveld, signed “P.K.-n.,” went even further in his criticism and condemned Mansveld’s art as not being art at all, because it merely reminds us of, but does not even resemble, the art of other painters (“P.K.-n.” 1926, 9). The critic is right in pointing out the gap in quality between Mansveld and the painters he supposedly channeled, but to deprive Mansveld of the label “artist” is unfair. Quite apart from

the ironic fact that Mansveld himself did not want to be called an artist in the first place—since he regarded himself merely as a medium, a tool—, his raw talent and remarkable production process make his status as an artist very much deserved.

Questioning the Validity of the Mansveld-Proof

The conclusions about Mansveld’s quality as a painter have significant consequences for Mansveld, and more importantly for what he stood for in the Spiritualist tradition in general. He was praised and popular for how “normal” his paintings were, and how much they resembled the old works. This resemblance was emphasized over and over again in the Spiritualist journals, because it was essential to make Mansveld a proof that there was life after death. Craving a proof like this, the Dutch Spiritualists were even too willing to see the resemblances with the great masters. In reality, however, the paintings are indeed adequate, but not awe-inspiring, like those of Fantin-Latour, Maris or Bellini. Cornelis Petrus Van Rossem (1885–1933) wrote an article for the *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* in 1930, about the “Spiritualist Mentality and its Shortcomings,” and also discussed Mansveld. Van Rossem was a lawyer who was affiliated with Spiritualism. He was interested in the idea of a transcendental world but expressed strong criticism towards the Spiritualist community. In his article, Van Rossem wrote that the Spiritualists were too eager in accepting Mansveld as an incredibly gifted medium-painter who produced great works of art. He argued that this “premature drawing of conclusions” made them lose credibility. He urged the Spiritualists to be more critical and less gullible, and believed that altering their approach would make much better “propaganda” for their cause (Van Rossem 1930, 3).

Van Rossem regarded the Spiritualists themselves as the reason Spiritualism was not receiving the interest and enthusiasm it deserved. The case of Mansveld was entirely in line with the mistake Van Rossem identified. Comparing a Mansveld to a Maris or a De Bock when looking for a proof of the Spiritualist thesis had a counter-effect on the Spiritualists’ credibility, and was therefore harmful to the institution of Spiritualism.

This credibility was of importance, even though it had no mentionable effect on the Spiritualists themselves, since most of them were already thoroughly convinced of the thesis and had grown accustomed to shielding themselves against skepticism. The general public, on the other hand, evaluated Spiritualism

a priori from a skeptical viewpoint, and needed to trust the integrity and intellectual validity of the Spiritualist community to get enthusiastic about its message and its thesis. Losing credibility as a result of the proof-seeking attitude might have had negative effects on Spiritualism in the eyes of those who were interested but not yet convinced.

This idea was already put into words in 1927 in a piece written by one “C.E.H.,” who identified Mansveld’s artistic shortcomings. However, he also expressed appreciation for Mansveld as an artist and interest in his trance-painting method. “C.E.H.” similarly criticized the Spiritualists for their unwillingness to open up the Mansveld case for scientific and psychological examination. Not just because it could help to give insights on what being in trance entailed, but also, and especially, because it could “help rid the world of the suspicion against mediumistic art” (“C.E.H.” 1927, 10). The loss of credibility and high suspicion towards Spiritualism confined mediumistic artists to a relatively large, but still limited audience. Perhaps, this is part of the reason why nowadays Spiritualist (or mediumistic) art has been mostly forgotten as an art movement, whereas automatism and Surrealism (also movements that sprung from in-trance painting) have gained mainstream popularity.

The Spiritualist Attitude Towards Criticism

Another critique Mansveld received over the years came from Professor Wilhelm Martin (1876–1954), who wrote an article for *De Groene Amsterdammer* in 1927, in which he questioned whether claiming the works were made by other painters was legal. In the 1920s, Mansveld would not add anything to the paintings himself. In his narrative, even the signature came from the painting spirits. The paintings would be signed with a simple “J. Dulaque” or “F. Latour” or sometimes “et ses amis” (“and his friends”) would be added, signifying the painters sometimes came to Mansveld in a group. In his article, Martin ironically, and as a juridical thought-experiment, asked the question whether Mansveld could possibly be sued for forgery. Since he created paintings that he would sign in somebody else’s name. Martin discussed the possibility of identity theft and falsification, and asked whether the deceased painters were not entitled to copyright (Martin 1927).

The angle of the article was ironic, but the Spiritualists responded aggressively, saying that the spirits themselves were the creators of the works, not Mansveld. They continued by arguing that, even if Mansveld should be considered as the author of the works, copyright was a privilege of the living, not of the spirits, because “only the living are subject to the law and have rights.” Therefore, they saw the criticism as unjust (Nederburgh 1928, 70). Furthermore, they pointed to the unambiguity of the situation, because they emphasized time and again that the works were created by the spirits of the painters after their deaths, not during their lives, thus ridding the case of any vagueness which could lead to people being deceived. Mansveld, according to the Spiritualists, affixed to the works what they called a “ghost-signature,” not a real one, and therefore did not produce forgeries.



Figure 3. *Handteekeningen* (Dutch for “signatures”) of many different deceased artists, written on a piece of paper by Mansveld during a séance (Smits 1929).

A journalist writing in the *Algemeen Handelsblad* evaluated the discussion and accepted the “ghost-signature” rebuttal, but then asked whether placing a “ghost-signature” on a painting was nonetheless punishable by the law. He

continued by arguing that article 225 of the Dutch Criminal Law held that the forgery of a document is punishable if: 1) the forgery was executed with the aim to present the document as real and unforged, and if 2) using the document can lead to a disadvantageous situation to others. The journalist realized quite well that the Spiritualists would respond to this in their usual manner, by saying that it was not forgery at all, since it was made by the spirits. He commented (as a pro-active form of rebuttal) that Dutch law does not recognize the possibility of a deceased person placing a signature. He then warned Mansveld to be cautious, since it could be well possible that a judge would consider the aforementioned criteria for forgery as met, and the painter would then risk a five-year prison sentence. Additionally, he blamed the Spiritualist community for harming Mansveld's defense, by being naïve in relying only on their Spiritualist beliefs, while they should examine the legal implications of the situation with a more rational and secular attitude ("Mediamieke Kunstwerken. Auteurs- En Strafrecht" 1927).

Although the Spiritualists did respond to Martin's critical article, they didn't offer any rebuttal showing they took it seriously. They simply dismissed it by arguing from their own dogmatic viewpoint, instead of engaging in a nuanced debate and respond to the questions Martin had raised. The author writing in the *Algemeen Handelsblad* sided with Martin in advising Mansveld to put a defense mechanism in place, by adding something to the ghost-signature that would state his own—at the very least physical—participation in the creation of the works ("Mediamieke Kunstwerken. Auteurs- En Strafrecht" 1927, 10).

Mansveld was defended by the Spiritualist community, but the article still left a lasting impression on him, and from that point on he would always add either his initials "H.M." or "received by H. Mansveld." This is, like the article by Van Rossem, another example of the criticism generated by the unwavering, unanimous believe in Mansveld's capabilities by the Spiritualist community and their reluctance to adapt or be open to the criticism or interests of others. Once again, the Spiritualists assumed a defensive attitude towards the criticism, and once again it led to the exact opposite of what they intended to achieve.

Conclusion

Mansveld played an important role in the tradition of Dutch Spiritualism. His incredible productivity, his ability to use pastels to make color come to life and

make works at least reminiscent of that of known masters, and his modesty and ordinary way of life, made him perfect as the foundation for a proof of the existence of a world beyond our own. Unfortunately for the Spiritualists, they overplayed their hand with excessive confidence in Mansveld. The unending praise and the lack of contrasting opinions and arguments within the Spiritualist community turned out to be counter-productive. It helped the sceptics in pointing out Mansveld's flaws and questioning both the validity of using him as proof for the Spiritualist thesis and the credibility of the community as a whole.

Even though Mansveld wrote that, "I hope that I can support and fortify some and if possible many, in their Spiritualist belief" (Mansveld 1939, 328), we cannot say with certainty that it was his personal priority to provide proofs for the Spiritualist thesis. Regardless of Mansveld, providing proof for the after-life is the essence of mediumistic art. And this is why a fairer assessment of Mansveld's abilities would have been more preferable for the Spiritualists. By making more room for the outsiders, with all their skepticism and their science-oriented mindsets, Mansveld's popularity might have come a long way. In other words, a more open, self-reflective and therefore intellectual approach by the Spiritualists to the art that arose out of their own movement, could have led to an increased interest in mediumistic art from people outside of their small and closed community. Perhaps, it could have placed mediumistic art in the limelight of a much broader audience, and truly integrate it in the (international) art world.

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