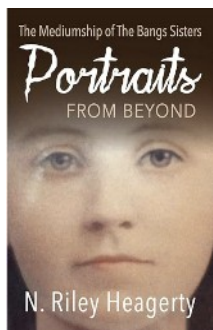


Portraits From Beyond: The Mediumship of the Bangs Sisters

by N. Riley Heagerty



The Bangs sisters were genuine mediums with a very unusual gift. They developed the ability to produce full-color *precipitated paintings*—artworks said to be created by a spirit guide. Remarkably, these paintings appeared in broad daylight without either sister touching the canvas.

Author N. Riley Heagerty presents testimony from two so-called “debunkers” who attempted to explain how the sisters might have deceived people. However, he also outlines the weaknesses in their theories and concludes that the Bangs sisters were mediums of the highest order. It’s difficult to look at the portraits and the detailed accounts of how they were produced and believe otherwise.

Lizzie and May Bangs were sisters living in Chicago in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, known for their mediumship involving slate writing and *precipitated spirit paintings*. Little had been written about them until Heagerty sought to fill that gap, compiling contemporary accounts from books, journals, and newspapers—both supportive and skeptical—along with examples of the portraits produced during their séances.



According to Heagerty, Elizabeth “Lizzie” Bangs was born in 1859, and Mary “May” Bangs in 1862. Their mother, Meroe, was also a medium, and both daughters displayed mediumistic gifts from childhood, allowing them a long apprenticeship before establishing their own work. In 1874, the family reportedly experienced poltergeist activity, which their mother claimed marked the beginning of the sisters’ communication with spirits.

Over time, the Bangs sisters demonstrated a wide range of psychic phenomena, including materializations, clairvoyance, clairaudience, automatic writing, slate writing, and even typewritten messages that appeared on a machine without visible human intervention.



Heagerty devotes part of his book to describing the sisters’ slate-writing séances. Blank pages were placed between two slates along with specific questions—often sealed in envelopes—and the slates were

secured with stout rubber bands. When later opened, intelligible responses to the questions appeared, apparently written by spirit communicators.



The precipitated paintings, which began in 1894, remain the most extraordinary aspect of the Bangs sisters' mediumship. *Precipitated art* is defined as spirit-created art formed without the artist's physical touch. During séances, two framed canvases were often propped on a table before a window and enclosed by curtains. As the sitters watched, images would slowly appear on the canvases, sometimes with details changing before their eyes—such as the opening of eyes or adjustments in facial features.

In one instance, a portrait first appeared with the subject sporting a full beard. When the sitters commented that the man had worn only a goatee in later life, the portrait altered accordingly—the beard shortened before their eyes.

In another session, a sitter carried a photograph of his deceased relative in his pocket but did not show it to anyone. The resulting spirit portrait was identical to the photograph, except for the absence of a Masonic pin the man had often worn in life. When the sitter mentally requested the addition of the pin, it appeared on the painting in the correct position.



Skeptics pointed out that sitters frequently brought photographs of the person they wished to contact, implying that the sisters might have copied them. However, this theory faltered in cases like that of Mr. Ghose, whose son's portrait accurately captured his distinct coloring—something that could not be discerned from a black-and-white photograph. This suggested

that the creative intelligence behind the paintings was drawing from more than mere photographic reference.

It was also claimed that the sisters' portraits were completed far more quickly than any human artist could manage and that the paintings bore no visible brushstrokes.

Today, the [Hett Art Gallery at Camp Chesterfield](#) in Indiana preserves 26 of the Bangs sisters' precipitated portraits—tangible reminders of one of the most remarkable and mysterious chapters in spiritualist history.

