

A history of 'ghost photography'



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As camera tech has evolved, so too has the photography of puzzling 'spirits'. Today, people even claim to capture ghosts in their smartphone photos.

Have you ever seen a photo claiming to have captured a ghost or spirit? With the popularity of photo-sharing via social media like Instagram and TikTok, many people claim to have photographic 'proof' of the supernatural. But are these photos real, a hoax, or something more? The answer, as we'll discover, says more about how smartphones take photos than anything supernatural. Ever since the camera was invented, spooks have appeared in photos. And with each advance in camera technology, new types of ghostly traces have emerged – or been deliberately conjured.

"I am a skeptic from the perspective of a photographer and as someone who doesn't believe in ghosts... there's not a lot out there that can't be explained with some

photographic technique,” says Michael Pritchard, director-general of the Royal Photographic Society.

The roots of spirit photography can be traced back to the 19th Century. During the 1850s and '60s, many photographers were experimenting with new effects such as double exposure film (think of this as early, early photoshopping). But some greedy photographers soon realized that these techniques could be exploited for profit.

An enterprising American amateur photographer called William Mumler is thought to be the first person to capture a 'spirit' in a photograph in the early 1860s.

This momentous image appeared to feature the apparition of his dead cousin. Ghost or not, it wasn't long before Mumler's 'talent' of capturing dead people on film (normally a relative) had become very popular. At the beginning, experts struggled to find anything fake about Mumler's spirit photographs. And so the amateur became a professional – with a very successful business of people trying to feel connected to lost loved ones (especially those that died during the Civil War).

Mumler may have achieved this by placing another glass 'plate' with the ghostly image over his camera while taking the photos. This double exposure technique not only captured the image of the client but also the ghostly image.

In one of Mumler's more famous efforts, the 'ghost' of Abraham Lincoln photobombs an image of his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln. The list of his clients grew, but so did his critics.

One particular skeptic of Mumler's work was the showman PT Barnum, who claimed that the spirit photos were preying on desperate people experiencing grief. This followed allegations that Mumler had broken into houses to steal photos of deceased relatives. Also, some of the 'spirits' featured in his photos were actually still very much alive.

Mumler was put on trial for fraud. During the trial, a deliberately bogus photograph was presented to demonstrate just how easy it was to make one of Mumler's spirit images.

Consider Mumler 'ghost-busted'. Mumler continued his career, however, and many other 'spiritual photographers' followed in his footsteps.

As ownership of cameras grew, spirit photography boomed. "By the 1880s anyone could pick up a camera and take a picture – it opened the door for some of the people who wanted to take advantage of people who had lost someone they loved".

By WWI, the sense of loss felt in many countries after the war led some to desire a reunion with their lost relatives and friends. William Hope, by then already an established spirit photographer, was one of those very willing to put his expertise forward.



Like Mumler, Hope had many claims from people trying to expose him as a fake. However, he continued to have a successful career. Some 'tricks' people think these photographers might have used included shaking the cameras during their long exposure, developing reels of film improperly, exposing lights to create 'orbs', etc.

Today's digital cameras are just as likely to create a fake haunting. Images can appear distorted for a variety of reasons.

You can also see ghost photography reborn with the rise of scary stories and spooky characters being photoshopped into images.

Despite our knowledge of computer-generated trickery in photos, it seems some are still willing to believe that spirits can be captured on camera. Indeed, according to a **Harris poll from 2013**, 42% of Americans believe in ghosts.

Like the ghosts themselves, our curiosity about the spirit world is immortal, and our ever-changing technology will always be used to 'prove' or 'disprove'.