Sylvia Ballhause
The Strindberg Gold Sample



Abb.: Gold paper by August Strindberg; reproduction: National Library of Sweden, 2011

Gold is sunlight,
photographed
and
fixed.

August Strindberg (1849–1912) wrote this note on one of his many slips of paper now among his personal papers in the National Library of Sweden. For years, he was obsessed with the idea of synthesizing gold. Like many alchemists before and after him, he failed at this.
The chemicals Strindberg used in his experiments were likely used in early photographic experiments as well. Like the first pioneers of photography, Strindberg began working with chemically coated papers exposed to light. This actually produced surfaces that shone like gold. To him, this was scientific evidence that what looks like gold here is gold as well. Strindberg arrived at the conclusion that the pioneers of photography had actually aspired to transmute silver into gold.

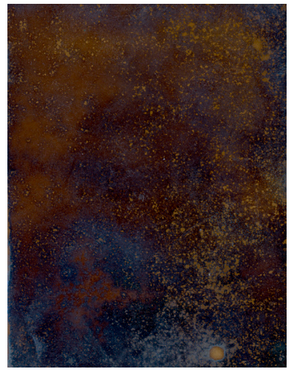
Celestographs

— Text by Kim Knoppers

The most celebrated of all polymaths is, of course, renaissance man Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) who attempted to understand nature by means of meticulous observation and detailed drawing. The thickness of tree branches, the light of the moon, the mysterious presence of seashells high in the mountains; Da Vinci wrote and drew beautifully and meaningfully about it all. He was also interested in finding the soul by studying the internal structure of the human body. Sadly, he never found it.

Less well known but with interests as broad was August Strindberg (1849–1912). A cultural omnivore and father of modern Swedish literature, he did not just write fiction and plays but threw himself into essays, cultural analyses and autobiography. He also engaged in radically experimental painting and photography. When he was struck down by writer's block and a mental crisis in the late 1880s, a period known as his *Inferno* years, he began to experiment in natural science. He published his findings in his *Blue Books*, which bring together chemistry, botany, astronomy, alchemy and optics.

Strindberg began experimenting with photography as early as 1865. Distrusting photographic equipment for its departure from, and disturbance to, reality, he began making his own cameras out of cigar boxes. He also produced photograms—photographs made without a lens or indeed any kind of camera. A photogram in which magical gold-coloured specks glow out of a brown and blue surface is part of his suggestive *Celestography* series. This nineteenth-century alchemist smeared photographic plates with salts in solution, before



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exposing them to the night sky and shortly afterwards plunging them into developing fluid.

During his *Inferno* crisis Strindberg became convinced he was on his way to discovering a number of scientific truths, one of which was that all material, even if seemingly lifeless, has the potential to transform and grow. The artist had no influence on the actual creation of the image, and Strindberg therefore concluded that the picture was the product of nature, automatism and chance. This self-acting power was comparable to the life force of plants and animals and underlined his belief that images were natural creations. Resemblances between the organic and the non-organic confirmed that the same life forces are at work everywhere.

His interest in the occult brought Strindberg to the early alchemists, who attempted to transform matter and were obsessed with the need to discover how to make gold out of other materials. Contemporary artist and curator Sylvia Ballhause points to this in her research-based *The Strindberg Gold Sample* (2011), taking as her starting point Strindberg's claim that 'gold is sunshine photographed and fixed.' By means of the chemicals used in photography and the workings of light, Strindberg managed to create surfaces that gleam like gold. Gold-coloured sparkles can also be seen in his celestographs, although the gold there is moonlight photographed and fixed.

Strindberg sent his photograms to Camille Flammarion, astronomer and founder of *Société Astronomique de France*, hoping to receive scientific endorsement. This was in vain. The photograms were of course not evidence of successful scientific experiments, they merely reflected the chemical reaction between the salt solutions, the paper and light. Atmospheric particles, or specks of dust in the developing fluid, became suggestive impressions of a starry sky. Art historian Douglas Feuk has called this 'the materialization of dreams'. Strindberg was convinced that nature had a spiritual quality, revealed to us by a number of obscure and impalpable signs.

The suggestive celestographs can be regarded as reflecting a restless, wayward, occasionally deranged soul. Although August Strindberg's fame does not approach that of Leonardo da Vinci, perhaps he was more successful at finding and capturing the soul. His own soul, at least.

All images from the series *Celestographs* © August Strindberg, courtesy of The National Library of Sweden Flickr account

Image from the series *The Strindberg Gold Sample* © Sylvia Ballhause, courtesy of the artist