

Hilma af Klint's Development of an Abstract Language through the Spiritual

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In recent years the art world has taken a new interest in spiritualist art; more specifically the spiritualist art made by the painter Hilma af Klint. Af Klint was born in Stockholm, Sweden in 1862, and raised in a middle-class family¹. She was innovative in the world of abstract painting and dealt with themes of spirituality; she was a pioneer in the field of formal art making, and was historically overlooked until very recently. Art history courses will tell you that abstract painting is attributed to artists like Kandisky, Mondrian, and Malevich; all of whom made groundbreaking strides forward in the direction of abstract painting, but Hilma af Klint was also making these strides, exploring and expanding what painting could be, and she was doing it earlier. Through her spiritualist practices, Hilma af Klint developed a new and unique abstract language and formal vocabulary.

So who was Hilma af Klint, and what exactly was she doing/creating? At the start of her six decade spanning career, before creating hundreds of paintings and thousands of pages of writings, she was one of the first women to study at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, in Stockholm. The academy then granted her a studio space in the Kungstradgarden area, an artistic neighborhood in the city, after she graduated with honors in 1887². From there she made money from commissioned portraits as she was a respected figurative painter in the area; she also painted landscapes, and drew illustrations for medical journals along with botanical drawings³.

¹ Dover, Caitlyn. "Who Was Hilma Af Klint?: At the Guggenheim, Paintings by an Artist Ahead of Her Time." *The Guggenheim Museums and Foundation*, www.guggenheim.org/blogs/checklist/who-was-hilma-af-klint-at-the-guggenheim-paintings-by-an-artist-ahead-of-her-time?gclid=Cj0KCQjwmIuDBhDXARIsAFITC_6mzcBkBLVLRf1qIWvUkixa76IetPQv7sYJVUvxDoG7ScI831QB1AwaAr8cEALw_wcB.

² Bashkoff, Tracey, editor. "'The World Keeps You in Fetters; Cast Them Aside': Hilma Af Klint, Spiritualism, and Agency." *Hilma Af Klint: Paintings for the Future*, by David Max Horowitz, Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2018, pg128.

³ Dover, Caitlyn. "Who Was Hilma Af Klint?: At the Guggenheim..."

Af Klint also traveled and continued to study art history into her adult life, with a particular interest in the old masters of the Dutch Golden Age and the Renaissance⁴. She kept a circle of other successful women artists around her like Edith Knaffl-Granstrom and Tyra Kleen. Af Klint and Kleen even served together on the board of the Association of Swedish Women Artists, which was founded in 1910⁵.

A huge aspect of af Klint's work is her intense interest in Spiritualism. Many people, and artists especially, were practicing spiritualism at this time, the turn of the century. Spiritualism is the belief that a person can communicate with a spiritual world, or spirits in another realm. Practitioners hoped to use the communication to learn about the divine and "the nature of existence"⁶ as Tracey Bashkoff, Senior Curator of Collections and Exhibitions at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and author of *Hilma af Klint Paintings for the Future*, puts it. Hilma was involved with several movements during her lifetime that took from Eastern and Western beliefs as well as beliefs from the occult, and was very interested in spirituality and science together⁷. Af Klint is said to have had a very "perceptive and sensitive nature" even as a child, and was also a practicing Christian. When she was eighteen years old, in 1880, Hilma's younger sister, Hermina passed away. This event propelled her interest in spirituality and religions even more⁸.

From around 1882 to 1887, the same time she was attending the academy, af Klint began learning about different religious subject matter, spiritualism as a whole, and started participating

⁴ Bashkoff, Tracey, and Julia Voss. "The Traveling Hilma Af Klint." *Hilma AF Klint: Paintings for the Future*, Guggenheim Museum Publishing, 2018.

⁵ Bashkoff, Tracey, and Julia Voss. "The Traveling Hilma Af Klint." *Hilma AF Klint: Paintings for the Future*, Guggenheim Museum Publishing, 2018, 58.

⁶ Bashkoff, Tracey. "Temples for Paintings ." *Hilma AF Klint: Paintings for the Future*, by Tracey Bashkoff, Guggenheim Museum Publishing, 2018, 18.

⁷ Dover, Caitlyn. "Who Was Hilma Af Klint?: At the Guggenheim..."

⁸ Bashkoff, Tracey. "Temples for Paintings ." *Hilma...*18.

in seances⁹. These spiritualist practices were very popular throughout Sweden, the United States, and England during this time.

Ideas around spiritualism came in great variety. The previously mentioned ideas, such as the belief in literal communication with the dead were aspects of spiritualism that were held mostly by everyday people and non-scholars. Another side of the movement, and a very relevant one to af Klint, was a more abstract version of spiritualism, specifically spiritualism in art.

Wassily Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, lays out what one of the time's leading artists had to say about looking at art through the lense of the spiritual. Kandinsky argues that art and spirituality were a moral answer to the materialism that he saw consuming the world¹⁰. He wrote that each work of art had an entire history of emotions, fears, and dreams behind it. Art should not be looked at for formal skill, but for a spiritual and emotional experience. He also argues that there is danger in putting too much importance on technological advances, instead of spiritual growth. He argued that art is an anchor in life, and that when life or society falls apart, people look inwards¹¹.

Af Klint's work falls very interestingly at an intersection between both sides of spiritualism; she took very seriously the more literal and ceremonial practices that swept the masses, but her work is also formal, symbolic, and was made to be reflected upon and experienced, like Kandinsky's spiritualism would call for. A lot of af Klint's work relied on her mediumistic practices, she would paint what she believed her spirit guides were instructing her to

⁹ Bashkoff, Tracey. "Temples for Paintings ." *Hilma...*18-19.

¹⁰ Kandinsky, Wassily. "Concerning the Spiritual in Art." *Free EBooks | Project Gutenberg*, 1912, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/5321/pg5321.html>, pg1.

¹¹ Popova, Maria. "Kandinsky on the Spiritual Element in Art and the Three Responsibilities of Artists – Brain Pickings." *Brain Pickings*, 2 June 2014, <https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/06/02/kandinsky-concerning-the-spiritual-in-art/>.

create so it was her interest in the occult side of spiritualism that pushed her work into the more elevated and philosophical side of the spiritual in art.

By 1896 Hilma af Klint was having regular meetings with four other like minded women to pursue their spiritualist activities, such as conducting seances. The women were Sigrid Hedman, Mathilde N (whose surname, according to Bashkoff, is not known), and Anna Cassel, a friend of Hilma's whom she met at the Royal Academy. The women called themselves De Fem, or The Five, and their practices together would play a leading role in af Klint's own artistic practice ¹².

According to Bashkoff, the women would meet on a weekly basis at one of their homes, or even one of their studios, to conduct their services. During their services the furniture would be set up so that each of them could kneel around an altar, and they included bible readings, benedictions, and sermons; relatively similar to many other church services. The five used a psychograph ("a tool used to record psychic transmissions"), to receive messages from "beings of higher consciousness"¹³. Af Klint and her four companions would even enter trance states to communicate with these spiritual beings, whom they referred to as De Hoga, (High Masters), or their "guides." The High Masters were believed to be identified as beings named Amaliel, Ananda, Clemens, Esther, Georg, and Gregor; it would be these spirits who would later give Hilma af Klint what she believed to be her life's mission as an artist¹⁴.

Today, we know how Af Klint perceived her spiritual teachers because she left behind sketches of the guide's forms; The Five recorded all of their activities and information in notebooks. They filled pages and pages of writings, messages, and automatic drawings; which is the process of writing or drawing messages sent to the receiver by one of the High Masters, the

¹² Bashkoff, Tracey. "Temples for Paintings ." *Hilma...* 19.

¹³ Bashkoff, Tracey. "Temples for Paintings ." *Hilma...* 19.

¹⁴ Bashkoff, Tracey. "Temples for Paintings ." *Hilma...* 19.

receiver (the person doing the drawing) would clear their mind of conscious thought in order to draw or write the information being passed along to them¹⁵. Hilma did not start doing the majority of the drawings until 1903. Bashkoff argues that it is possible that the “exercises in automatism may have provided the unlearning necessary to bravely step outside the confines of her academic art training and into a world of original imagery, of abstract forms she devised”¹⁶.

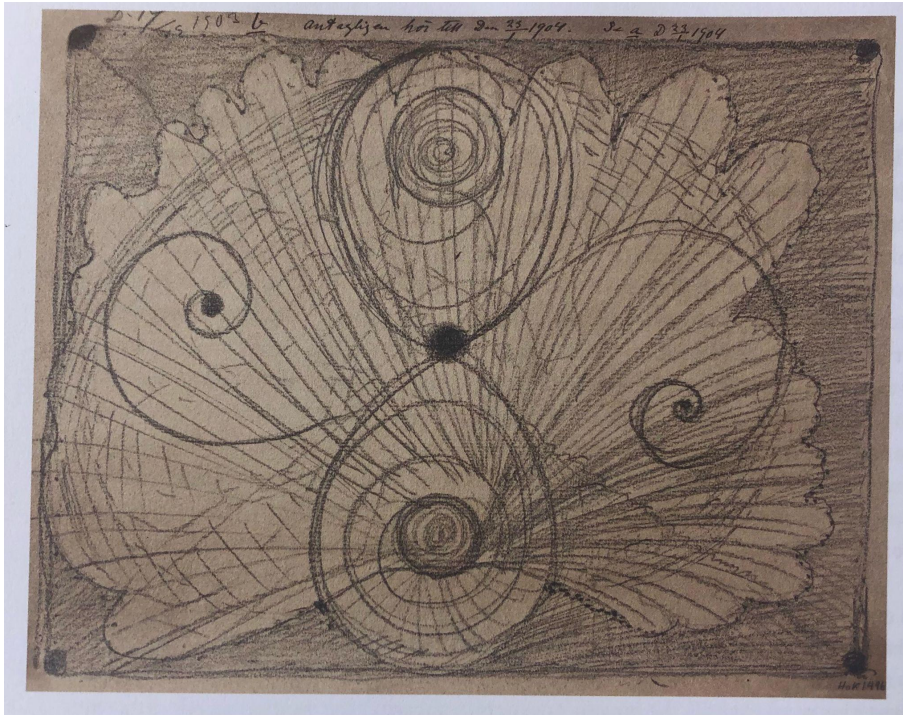


Fig 1, automatic

*drawing by The Five, 1903*¹⁷

In 1904 is when af Klint received word that she would soon have the commission of a lifetime. The guide Ananda informed Hilma that she wanted her to “convey the spiritual world in paintings”¹⁸. Shortly after, af Klint received messages from another guide, Georg, that she would design a temple. The temple would have a spiral path running through it and it would

¹⁵ Bashkoff, Tracey. “Temples for Paintings.” *Hilma...*19.

¹⁶ Bashkoff, Tracey. “Temples for Paintings.” *Hilma...*20.

¹⁷ The Five, Automatic Drawing, graphite on paper, 29.9x39.3cm, Bashkoff, Tracey, *Hilma AF Klint: Paintings for the Future*, 20.

¹⁸Bashkoff, Tracey. “Temples for Paintings.” *Hilma AF Klint: Paintings for the Future*, by Tracey Bashkoff, Guggenheim Museum Publishing, 2018, 20.

house her paintings. Hilma af Klint would spend years of her life creating 193 works referred to as *The Paintings for the Temple*. *The Paintings for the Temple* would be created in multiple series. These paintings, the earlier ones even more so, were spiritually guided and followed the instructions she received from the High Masters ¹⁹.

The other members of The Five expressed concern for Hilma, when the guide Ananda requested these paintings the other four women did not accept the task. They worried that “such an intense engagement with the spiritual realm could lead to madness”²⁰. But when Hilma af Klint received the commission from Amaliel on January 1, 1906, she wrote that, “Amaliel offered me a commission and I immediately replied: yes. This became the great commission, which I carried out in my life” ²¹.

According to Bashkoff, af Klint began her first group of *The Paintings for the Temple* in November of that year. She worked in series and groups and would work through stretches of intense production and then stretches of resting time. Each series followed the instructions she received from the spirits. Before she began her work she went through a period of purifying herself, for about ten months leading up to the start of her work she adopted a vegetarian diet and focused on self-discipline; she saw this work she was about to start as her calling. In the first few years of this great commission af Klint saw it as a “mediumistic transmittal of messages” ²².

Between October and December of 1907, af Klint made ten large scale paintings, all in slightly different sizes but around 10ftx7ft, and titled the series *The Ten Largest*. Bashkoff writes that in the series, “the cycle focuses on the stages of life and humanity’s connections to the universe”²³ The ten pieces all represent one of four stages of life: childhood, youth, adulthood,

¹⁹ Dover, Caitlyn. “Who Was Hilma Af Klint?: At the Guggenheim...”

²⁰ Bashkoff, Tracey. “Temples for Paintings .” *Hilma...*20.

²¹ Bashkoff, Tracey. “Temples for Paintings .” *Hilma...*20.

²² Bashkoff, Tracey. “Temples for Paintings .” *Hilma...*21.

²³ Bashkoff, Tracey. “Temples for Paintings .” *Hilma...*23-24.

or old age. Along with the series representing four life stages, it is believed that af Klint worked on each painting for four days, we know this from footprints left on the surface²⁴. Helen Molesworth, curator and critic, said of *The Ten Largest*:

“It seems like she is making pictures of how things are interrelated. She is trying to make a picture that draws on disparate fields of knowledge in a synthetic manner. She is producing a picture that is both image and diagram. . . . In essence, she’s offering a Gaia-like theory of radical holistic interconnectivity.”²⁵

Af Klint believed she was translating messages from the spirits she interacted with; in a notebook entry she wrote about her instructions for the series *The Ten Largest*, that she received from her guides and she said: “It was not the case that I was to blindly obey the High Lords of the mysteries but that I was to imagine that they were always standing by my side...It was the meaning of the leaders to give the world a glimpse of the system of four parts in the life of man.”²⁶

One of the works from *The Ten Largest*, “No.3, Youth” , (Fig.2,) stands at 321cmx240cm and is one of the two paintings that signify the second life stage according to the series, youth. Everything in the composition exists in an orange color field with no horizon line and a complete rejection of representational space. Circles, spirals, seashell-like shapes, and loosely flower-like structures all float around in the orange world. The flowy line work and thin lines of the spirals give the piece motion and a feeling that all the parts in it are alive and breathing. Af Klint uses a limited color palette of blue pink and yellow (outside of the deep orange negative space), except

²⁴ Bashkoff, Tracey. “Temples for Paintings .” *Hilma...*23.

²⁵ Dover, Caitlyn. “Who Was Hilma Af Klint?: At the Guggenheim...”

²⁶ The Guggenheim. “Group IV, the TEN Largest, No. 7, Adulthood (1907) by Hilma Af Klint.” *The Guggenheim Museums and Foundation*, 2018, www.guggenheim.org/audio/track/group-iv-the-ten-largest-no-7-adulthood-1907-by-hilma-af-klint.

for one smaller section of the composition where seven orbs, each orb being a different color of the rainbow, are arranged like a flower.



Fig 2, *The Ten Largest, No.3,*

*Youth*²⁷

Another work from the series is *No. IV, Adulthood*, (Fig. 3,) this work is one of four paintings in the series of the second to last stage, adulthood. All four of these paintings have the same warm lilac color field backgrounds. *No. IV* though, has three organic orb shapes towards the bottom of the composition, a white spiral with a black hole in the center of the canvas with two black arm-like forms coming from it, a light pink spiral in the upper left corner, and a yellow and blue floral shape in the top center. At the bottom of the canvas there are

²⁷ Klint, Hilma af. *The Ten Largest, No.3, Youth*. 1907, arthistoryproject.com/artists/hilma-af-klint/group-iv-no-3-the-ten-largest-youth/.

script-like letters with small spirals inside them. There are also letters floating up more towards the middle of the composition.



Fig 3, *The Ten Largest, No. 6,*

*Adulthood*²⁸

These letters are part of a language and code that af Klint created to put into her paintings, they are present in paintings from multiple series²⁹. Af Klint had notebooks dedicated to explaining her symbols and language; for example “U” stood for the spirit, and “W” stood for matter³⁰. Another motif the artist used throughout her life’s work is the spiral; visible in both

²⁸ Hilma af Klint, Group IV, *The Ten Largest, No.6 Adulthood*, tempera on paper mounted on canvas, 315x234cm, 1907, Bashkoff, Tracey, *Hilma AF Klint: Paintings for the Future*, 111.

²⁹ Bashkoff, Tracey. “Temples for Paintings.” *Hilma...23*.

³⁰ Bashkoff, Tracey. “Temples for Paintings.” *Hilma...23*.

paintings No.3 and No.6 of *The Ten Largest*. Bashkoff argues that because of the many different ways af Klint reuses the spiral that the form holds diverse meanings but overall becomes a symbol of “continual growth and change, for progress and evolution”³¹.

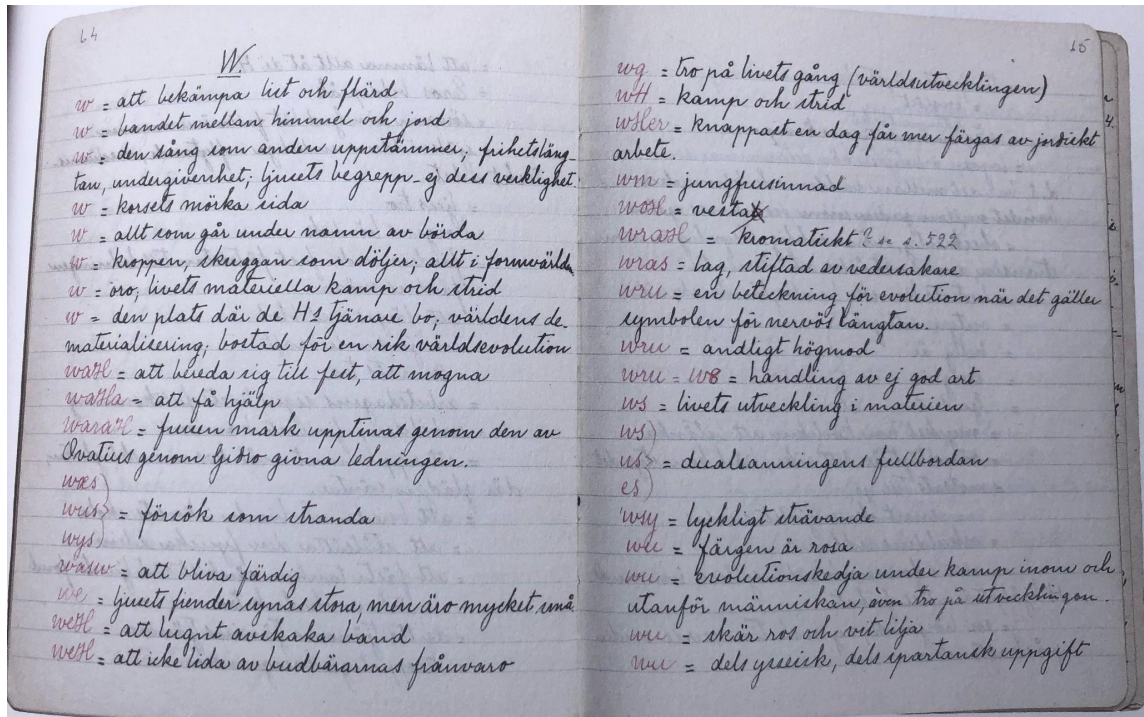


Fig 4, page from a notebook of Hilma af Klint³²

Af Klint was creating a complex and detailed language using letters in combination with abstract forms in painting in a way artists before her had not. She composed these works according to how her spirit guides instructed her. For example, af Klint said of her instructions for *The Ten Largest* that: “Ten paradisiacally beautiful paintings were to be executed; the paintings were to be in colors that would be educational and they would reveal my feelings to me in an economical way....”³³. And Hilma’s color choices were in fact educational and intentional; different colors represented different ideas. Blue and yellow are perhaps the most interesting

³¹ Bashkoff, Tracey. “Temples for Paintings.” *Hilma...22*.

³² Hilma af Klint, Notebook entry, 1906-07, pp.64-65. Bashkoff, Tracey, *Hilma AF Klint: Paintings for the Future*, 23.

³³ Bashkoff, Tracey. “Temples for Paintings.” *Hilma...23*.

pair throughout her work, yellow standing for masculinity and blue for femininity; while green represents the unity of the two. Similarly, af Klint, with her background in botanical drawings, also used roses and lilies to stand in for masculinity and femininity³⁴.

To dissect every symbol af Klint devised would be a much longer essay, but two more visual motifs of importance would be the swan and the dove; each having their own series. *The Swan* was twenty-four paintings made between 1914 and 1915, and *The Dove* (Fig 6) was a series of fourteen pieces made in 1915³⁵. Although an image of a dove or a swan is representational, the paintings as a whole are abstract, with the occasional piece of representational imagery. The idea of the dove is not entirely specific to af Klint though, the dove symbolizes unity and peace within Christianity³⁶; the artist commonly took from religions, folk art, nature, language, science and the occult to work through her symbols³⁷.

This way of combining ideas makes sense since Hilma most likely subscribed to Helena Blavatsky's Theosophy and how it combined science and spirituality in an attempt to sooth the human soul from misery by recognizing that all beings are united and connected³⁸. Bashkoff summarizes Theosophy as "a science in the service of spiritual wisdom³⁹". Af Klint was following these ideas with her work, taking images from science (such as plant life and the spiral) and combining them with messages she got from her occult activities in order to shed light on the human experience. Also in line with theosophical ideology is af Klint's work being

³⁴ Skidmore, Maisie. "Decoding the Spiritual Symbolism of Artist Hilma Af Klint." *AnOther*, 16 Mar. 2016,

www.anothermag.com/art-photography/8490/decoding-the-spiritual-symbolism-of-artist-hilma-af-klint.

³⁵ Bashkoff, Tracey. "Temples for Paintings ." *Hilma*...25.

³⁶ Bashkoff, Tracey. "Temples for Paintings ." *Hilma*...25.

³⁷ Bashkoff, Tracey. "Temples for Paintings ." *Hilma*...21.

³⁸ America, The Theosophical Society in. "H.P. Blavatsky and Her Writings." *Theosophical Society in America*,

2021, www.theosophical.org/component/content/article/25-online-resources/online-leaflets/1796-hp-blavat-sky-and-her-writings.

³⁹ Bashkoff, Tracey. "Temples for Paintings ." *Hilma*...22.

about unity and oneness⁴⁰. *The Swan* series (Fig 5) is a part of these ideas, the series addresses light and dark, life and death, and also masculinity and femininity; the dualities in life and how they exist and work together. Bashkoff points out how Blavatsky referred to the symbol of the swan as the “grandeur of the spirit”⁴¹.

These images, symbols, and colors make up the language that Hilma af Klint was developing in her new way of painting. The notes she left behind explaining these symbols and images are how you read her work and get to the messages she was translating from her spirit guides. This is her unique language and the abstract forms and symbols were her vocabulary.



Fig 5, *Group IX/SUW, The*

*Swan, No.1, 1915*⁴²

⁴⁰ Skidmore, Maisie. “Decoding the Spiritual Symbolism...”

⁴¹ Bashkoff, Tracey. “Temples for Paintings .” *Hilma...25*.

⁴² Hilma af Klint, *Group IX/SUW, The Swan, No.1*, oil on canvas, 150x150cm, 1915. Bashkoff, Tracey, *Hilma AF Klint: Paintings for the Future*, 140.

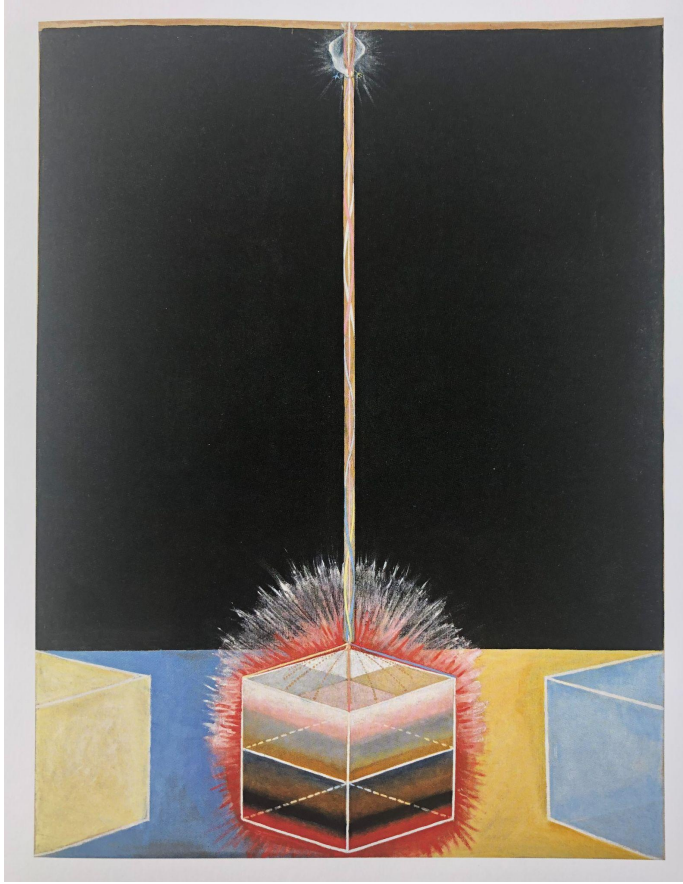


Fig 6, *Group IX/UW, The Dove,*

No.3, 1915 ⁴³

This new language that af Klint created is how she got to a point where she was painting completely abstract works of art, which was next to unheard of at the time she was starting. Through her practices as a medium she was able to surrender (or partly surrender) authorship of the compositions because she was following what her guides in the spiritual realm wanted her to translate and how they wanted it translated. Bashkoff makes an argument in her book, *Hilma af Klint Paintings for the Future* that because Hilma was creating her work based off what the high masters told her during her seances and automatic drawing sessions that those circumstances allowed the artist to give herself permission to reject representation ⁴⁴.

⁴³ Hilma af Klint, *Group IX/UW, The Dove, No.3*, oil on canvas, 155.5x155.5cm, 1915. Bashkoff, Tracey, *Hilma AF Klint: Paintings for the Future*, 155.

⁴⁴ Bashkoff, Tracey. "Temples for Paintings ." *Hilma...*20.

This idea could be supported by the fact that as af Klint worked and grew more confident in her artistic mission, her works, though still created through her spiritualist practices, became less dependent on direct and explicit instruction from her spirit guides and came more so from her own intuition. In 1908 af Klint met Rudolph Steiner, a Theosophist at the time, and although she kept her work mostly private, showed him the paintings she had worked on up until that point. He “encouraged her to rely more on the process of introspection,”⁴⁵ and after taking a four year break at this time to care for her mother who had gone blind, when af Klint returned to her quest to finish *The Paintings for the Temple*, she did in fact change who guided her compositions. She was now working under the authority of her own “inner voice”⁴⁶. The paintings that followed, including *The Swan* series and *The Dove* series, fell under this new era of painting for af Klint, inspired by her spiritualism but composed by her; so it was in this way that through the occult practices and spiritualist activities she broke through her academic training to the freedom to paint in a new and abstract way.

When I saw her retrospective at the Guggenheim in the spring of 2019, an acclaimed show with record breaking attendance,⁴⁷ I was confused when I arrived because I thought the work was supposed to have been painted around the 1910s; when I saw those monumental, fluid, organic and scientific looking abstractions I thought about how contemporary they looked and had to double check the dates. The name of the show was *Paintings for the Future*, and they really were.

⁴⁵ Bashkoff, Tracey. “Temples for Paintings .” *Hilma...24*.

⁴⁶ Bashkoff, Tracey. “Temples for Paintings .” *Hilma...24*.

⁴⁷ “Hilma AF Klint: Paintings for the FUTURE Most-Visited Exhibition in Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's History.” *The Guggenheim Museums and Foundation*, 2019, www.guggenheim.org/press-release/hilma-af-klint-paintings-for-the-future-most-visited-exhibition-in-solomon-r-guggenheim-museums-history.

Seeing her work in person and experiencing the pieces for myself, I felt the paintings had serious energy coming from them. When standing in front of the paintings, you can feel how intentional the imagery is and it is almost like the viewer can feel that the images mean something before even learning that they do. The spiritual energy and care that af Klint put into the works are tangible to viewers, even after all this time.

Because of the written instructions af Klint left behind in regards to how and when her work should be displayed, the 2019 retrospective, which was the artist's first major solo exhibition in the United States⁴⁸, was arranged in a way that was conducive to something similar to a spiritual experience. The spiral design of the Guggenheim fitting exactly what af Klint planned for to house her paintings made the flow of the exhibition feel so close to what the artist would have wanted; and that contributed to the spirituality of the show because it felt like it could have been put together by Hilma herself. The spirals could not be ignored, looking at her work and looking at the space, they were all around me. Getting to look at her notes from her seances and the drawings that represented communications with another realm; they looked so mystical and it was almost as if the story behind her work couldn't be factual.

Af Klint's paintings were truly ahead of her time. Anyone looking at her works would believe they were painted last year if that's what they were told. The work she made for this temple was not just abstract, but was also creeping into the conceptual.

One of the things that makes af Klint's body of work so important and innovative is how she was working in such contemporary ways, ways similar to conceptual art even. The argument can be made that her paintings were a very early version of some kind of conceptual art.

Although the conceptual art movement that took over the art world around the late 1950s-1970s

⁴⁸ "Hilma AF Klint: Paintings for the FUTURE Most-Visited..."

valued the idea behind a work over the formal or visual qualities it possessed⁴⁹, and af Klint's work was formally and materially thought out and important to her, her works were at the same time inseparable from the spiritual meanings behind them. And while it was obviously not unheard of for works of art to have meanings and stories behind them, most paintings or sculptures that did were able to be understood through their visual or aesthetic qualities alone. Hilma af Klint's work, though it could definitely be appreciated for its visual compositions alone without the understanding of the meanings behind them, they could not be truly understood without dissecting the symbols and ideas that af Klint wrote about in her notebooks and explanations of the pieces. Just looking at the work does not explain all that the work holds, like more historical narrative works of art that came before her.

The process that af Klint went through to create her work, the earlier works moreso, were crucial to the production of the pieces; it was not just about the finished product of a painting but how she arrived at it. For her *Seven-Pointed Star* series (example in Fig. 7), af Klint wrote, "I was systematically first to paint 7, then 7 more at intervals of 7 days, and then further 7. Each section with 7 paintings would be a whole, a star. One red, one yellow, and one blue⁵⁰." Her work is not just about the forms, she is using the abstract forms to communicate and translate messages she saw as coming from higher powers; so to miss the concept behind the physical piece of art would be to lose a significant part of the work, the same way it would be with a conceptual piece of art. Because of this, an argument can be made that her work is an early version of conceptual art.

⁴⁹ TheArtStory. "Conceptual Art Movement Overview." *The Art Story*, www.theartstory.org/movement/conceptual-art/.

⁵⁰ Bashkoff, Tracey. "Temples for Paintings ." *Hilma...24*.

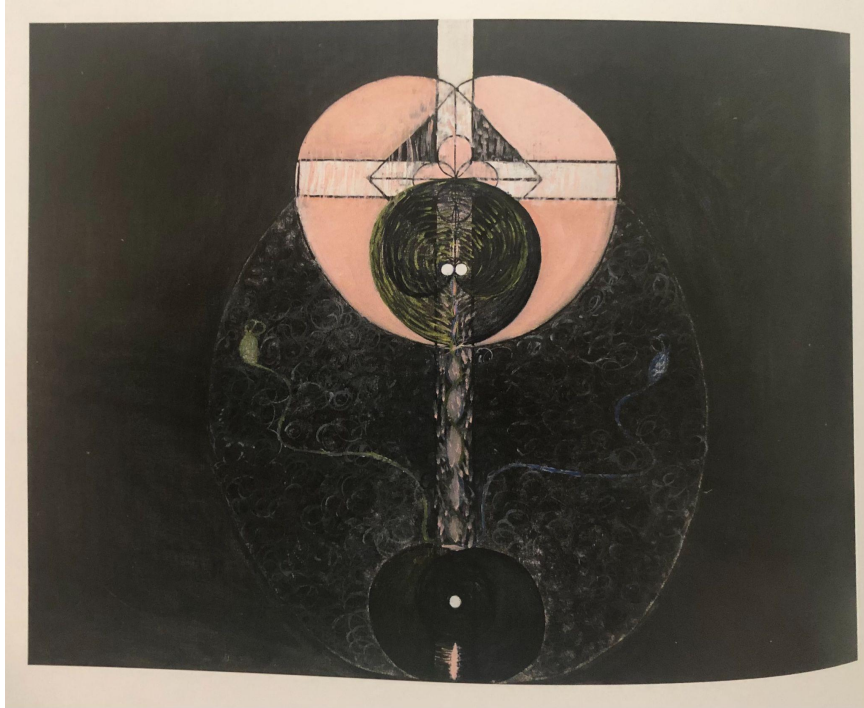


Fig. 7, *The WUS/Seven*

*Pointed Star Series, Group VI, Evolution, No.8*⁵¹

Af Klint understood this, and she wrote out plans and instructions for how her work should be viewed when the time came. She left sketched plans for the temple (Fig. 8) that was to house her paintings, she was planning the environment in which her work was to be experienced; Bashkoff summarizes her notes from a 1930-31 notebook entry:

“the building was to be round...Af Klint’s designs show a three-level structure of stacked rings, tapering upward and connected by a four-story central tower with a spiral staircase...Within each level, devotees would progress inward, winding from the periphery to the center, on a path in the shape of a spiral, the form so integral to the paintings...The spiral, symbol of evolution, progress, and growth, and linked to forces of nature, embodies and houses af Klint’s visions.”⁵²

⁵¹ Hilma af Klint, Group VI, Evolution, No.8, oil on canvas, 103x133cm, 1908. Bashkoff, Tracey, *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future...*122.

⁵² Bashkoff, Tracey. “Temples for Paintings .” *Hilma...*26.

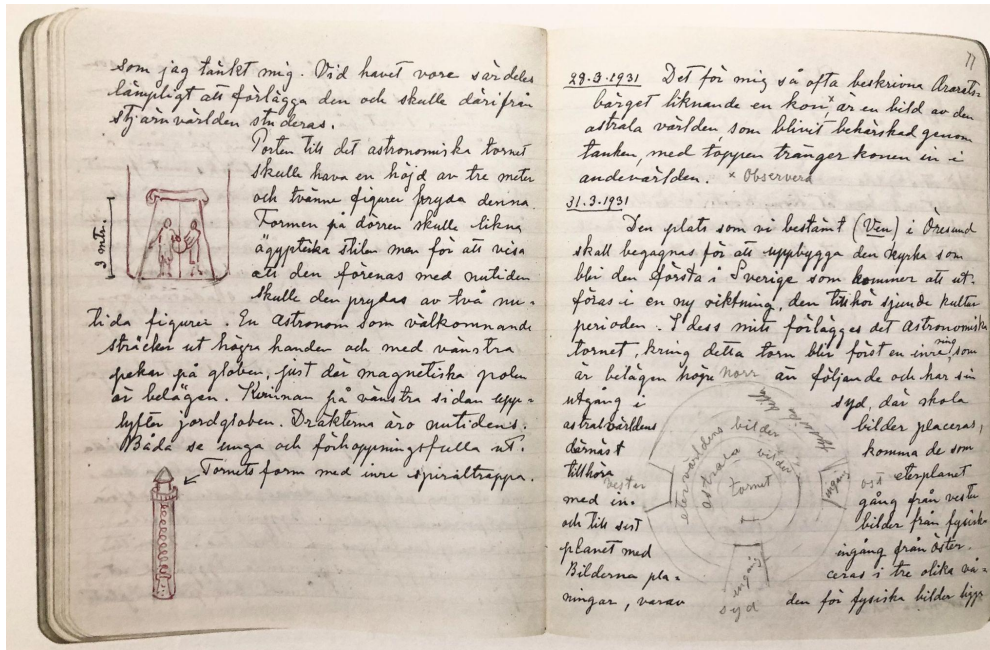


Fig. 8,

“Hilma af Klint’s plans for a temple, in a 1930-31 notebook”⁵³

This idea of leaving written instructions for how work is to be physically put together and then experienced by viewers was ahead of Hilma’s time. This process is another key component that makes af Klint a secret leader in conceptual art. Some of the most iconic works within conceptual art relied on written instructions by the artist on how to assemble and view the work. Works like Allan Kaprow’s 1959 *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, at the Reuben Gallery in New York, where participants were given instructions on how to interact and behave in the space⁵⁴, and work by artists like Sol LeWitt where he wrote up explicit instructions on how to create his wall drawings, example in Fig. 9, are examples of iconic pieces of conceptual art that depend on the use of instructions similar to af Klint’s temple.

⁵³ Hilma af Klint, notebook plans for the temple, pg 76-77, 1930-31. Bashkoff, Tracey. “Temples for Paintings.” *Hilma...*60.

⁵⁴ Beaven, Kirstie. “Performance Art: The Happening – Essay.” *Tate*, Tate, www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/h/happening/happening.

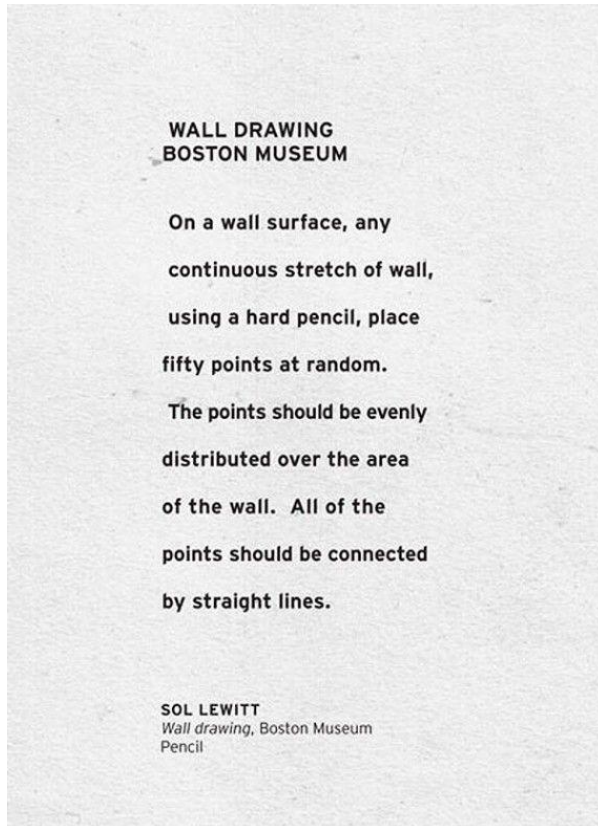


Fig. 9, Sol Lewitt, *Wall Drawing 104* ⁵⁵

In conceptual art the instruction and ideas would be more important than the piece itself. In af Klint's work the paintings are just as important, they exude a mysticism that continues to draw contemporary audiences to stare at them and reflect: so they are not completely works of conceptual art in that way, but these ties to conceptual art practices show just how new and innovative af Klint's way of creating was.

Af Klint's work was new and unique and innovative not only for its shared practices with art movements that wouldn't be popularized for another fifty or so years, but for much more obvious reasons as well; painters were not creating fully abstract large scale compositions like she was in 1908. She was finishing whole abstract series years before artists like Malevich, Kandinsky, and Mondrian were starting to create abstract paintings. Kazimir Malevich's famous

⁵⁵ ImprovisedLife. "Wall Drawing, ." *Sol LeWitt's Instruction For Wondrous Walls*.

first version of his *Black Square* was not displayed until 1915⁵⁶. Wasily Kandinsky was not making full abstract paintings until 1913⁵⁷; and Mondrian was not creating his cube paintings until the 1920s⁵⁸. While the work made by these three artists were important and indescribably influential to artists that followed, and af Klint most likely was familiar with Kandinsky's ideas about the spiritual in art by around 1914⁵⁹, the fact that she started painting these pieces even before their influence speaks volumes about how truly innovative her work was.

Most of Hilma af Klint's pieces completely ignored representation but on top of that she was adding text and codes into them along with the organic and mysterious forms. Af Klint made so many strides forward into the future of painting, with her rejection of the representational, the incorporation of text/codes, and the instructions on how and when to view her work, all with little to no precedent set before her for this kind of work. Af Klint was able to commit to trying so many new things in painting because of her earnest belief that she was serving a higher purpose, a spiritual one. She took on the lifelong task of completing *The Paintings for the Temple* because she believed in the mission that the high masters gave to her, to convey the spiritual realm through her paintings.

Partly because af Klint kept her work very private, hardly sharing it with anyone, she went unknown by the masses until recent history. Af Klint left strict instruction after her passing in 1944, that her work was not to be viewed by the public until at least twenty years after she

⁵⁶ Shaw, Philip. "Kasimir Malevich's Black Square." *Tate*, Tate, 1 Jan. 2013, www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/philip-shaw-kasimir-malevichs-black-square-r1141459.

⁵⁷ Hermo, Carmen. "'Nothing Whatever to Do with an OBJECT'-KANDINSKY'S First Abstract WORKS, 100 Years Later." *The Guggenheim Museums and Foundation*, 2013, www.guggenheim.org/blogs/checklist/kandinsky-first-abstract-works.

⁵⁸ Tate. "A Brief History of Abstract Art WITH TURNER, Mondrian and More – Look Closer." *Tate*, Tate, www.tate.org.uk/art/brief-history-abstract-art-turner-mondrian-and-more.

⁵⁹ Bashkoff, Tracey. "Temples for Paintings ." *Hilma...27*.

died⁶⁰. She knew the art world was not prepared for her and her work, and she was right because even though she died in 1944 her work was not publicly shown until 1986⁶¹. It is believed that Hilma wanted to wait for an audience that would truly understand her work and care enough to get to the deep meanings behind it. Bashkoff argues that part of the reason af Klint believed her work was for audiences of a future generation was because of the less than desired reaction she got from Theosophist Rudolph Steiner during their 1908 meeting about her work⁶². Another possible reason, written about by Andrea Kollnitz, professor of Art History and director of studies for basic and advanced level in Art History at Stockholm University, is af Klint may have somewhat feared rejection from the Swedish artworld; that the art scene there in the 1910s may not have been extremely welcoming to an artist as radical as af Klint⁶³. Adding to this may have been her awareness of an artist like Kandinsky, working with spiritual abstraction like herself, even getting critical reviews after a show in Stockholm in 1916 (73). These are some potential explanations for why af Klint believed her contemporaries were not ready for the body of work she was building.

But it was not just her own decisions around keeping her work private that kept her name semi-obscure for years, but also the fact that she was a woman making bold abstractions in the early 1910s. Most innovations in art history have been attributed to men, historically the field has been dominated by men, and when women dared to sneak in many times their work was not taken seriously; so is this a surprise that her work was overlooked for a period of time? No. But

⁶⁰ Dover, Caitlyn. "Who Was Hilma Af Klint?: At the Guggenheim..."

⁶¹ The Guggenheim. "Group IV, the TEN Largest, No. 7, Adulthood (1907) by Hilma Af Klint." *The Guggenheim Museums and Foundation*, 2018, www.guggenheim.org/audio/track/group-iv-the-ten-largest-no-7-adulthood-1907-by-hilma-af-klint.

⁶² Bashkoff, Tracey. "Temples for Paintings ." *Hilma...*24.

⁶³ Kollnitz, Andrea. "Questioning the Spiritual in Art: Hilma Af Klint, Vasily Kandinsky, and the Swedish Art World." *Hilma AF Klint: Paintings for the Future*, by Tracey Bashkoff, Guggenheim Museum Publishing, 2018, pp. 72–73.

Daniel Birnbaum, Swedish art critic and curator, points out that it would not really be strange for af Klint to find support in the esoteric circles that were dominated by women rather than the art world full of men. Also that af Klint feeling that her work is more at home in an imagined temple rather than a gallery is also not a surprise given the social circumstances she was living and working in⁶⁴. It is fact that af Klint did not receive any acknowledgment during the time she was working, or the decades following, for the innovations in painting that she developed but that does not mean she did not do it.

Hilma af Klint's body of work is truly prolific. Her paintings were unknown to the public for many years, but they pushed the boundaries of how one could paint and compose artworks. She devoted her life's work to translating messages from a spiritual realm and to conceptualizing about the great questions of the universe with her art. Through her spiritualist practices she created languages both of words and of images and made her own way of painting. The work she created for her *Paintings for the Temple* made her a pioneer in abstract painting and she deserves to have her name heard in every Art History 101 course for her uniqueness in the way she allowed her spiritualist mission to lead her to boldly leaning into an almost unheard of way of painting and developing her own new abstract language.

⁶⁴ Birnbaum, Daniel. "Another Canon, or Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists? ." *Hilma AF Klint: Paintings for the Future*, by Tracey Bashkoff, Guggenheim Museum Publishing, 2018, pp. 210–211.

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