

# *Hilma af Klint at the Guggenheim*

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*Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future*, exhibition catalogue,  
Tracey Bashkoff et al., Guggenheim Museum Publications.

*Hilma af Klint: Notes and Methods*, edited by Christine  
Burgin, The University of Chicago Press.

THE EXHIBITION of the almost unknown Swedish artist Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) at the Guggenheim Museum begins with one of the biggest bangs to hit the New York art world. In the oddly shaped space with a high ceiling that is just off to the side and at the start of the museum’s ramp, there are ten enormous abstract pictures—each roughly ten-and-a-half feet high by seven-and-a-half feet wide—that can make you giddy with wonder and delight. Painted in tempera on paper and then mounted on canvas, they are pictures in which, set against backgrounds of orange, lavender, or other tones, forms and shapes of many varieties seem to expand out toward us as we look, the way firecrackers do at the last minute. We see forms that, placed with a seeming helter-skelter impetuosity, suggest tendrils, petals, shells, or nipples, while others recall hex signs from the side of a barn or hot water bottles.

In these grand, joyous, yet mysterious and untitled cornucopias—they are all called *Untitled Series* and have descriptive subtitles as well—there are also loop-de-loop lines and tiny, self-contained designs snuck in here and there, which are barely visible at first. There are letters from the alphabet—the artist is particularly inventive about the letter *H*—and words that might spell something in Swedish but perhaps don’t spell anything. And while af Klint’s pictures in one moment make us think of the everchanging life of an Alexander Calder mobile, she elsewhere presents a gridded, and looming, square that might have come from the rule-regarding mind of Sol LeWitt.

What makes af Klint's unbounded paintings especially momentous, however, are a number of details, starting with the fact that all the pictures are dated 1907. Perhaps not every viewer will be aware of the precise developments of modern art, but some will know that in these works (and others in the show) we are probably looking at the first abstract paintings. Of course, there are abstract passages in artworks going far back in time. "Abstract art has always existed," wrote the critic Thomas Hess, but until the twentieth century "it never knew of its existence." Specifically, it was in an exhibition in Munich in late 1911 that Vasily Kandinsky presented what for over a century now have been acknowledged as the first abstractions—the first pictures in which, while there might be in them allusions to the natural world of appearances, these allusions feel as if they are there by chance. They are subsidiary to the formal balances and the relative force of colors—and to the larger idea—animating the work we see.

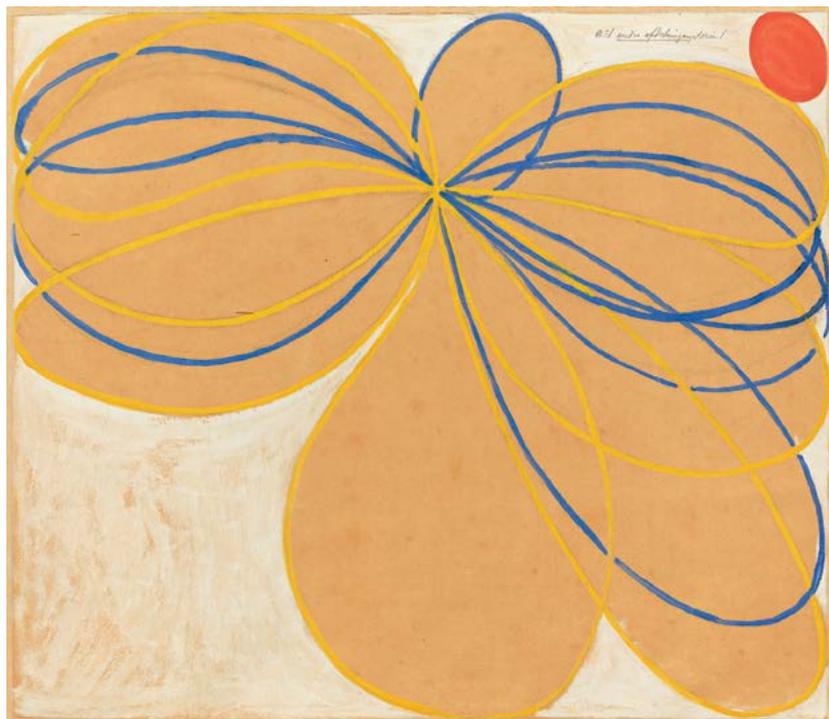
Building on our now knowing that af Klint was there before Kandinsky—and before Arthur Dove, who ventured into abstraction not long after Kandinsky, and who was followed in short order by Robert Delaunay, František Kupka, and Francis Picabia—is the signal detail that the Swedish artist was a woman. There were a fair number of women artists drawn to abstract art in the years after Kandinsky's breakthrough. They included Sonia Delaunay, Natalia Goncharova, and Sophie Taeuber-Arp, whose pictures and wood sculptures of interlocking shapes are among the quiet treasures of twentieth-century art.

But none of these figures, I believe, were capable of the heroic and enveloping pictures at the beginning of the Guggenheim show. Nor were Dove, Robert Delaunay, or Kupka, and certainly not Picabia, he of the thrown-together exercises in whatever was provocative in a given moment. Undoubtedly, part of the excitement and crowds that af Klint's exhibition have generated are owed to the sense that it breaks open an old, settled story and makes us see the past differently. The exhibition is changing, as Roberta Smith wrote in the *New York Times*, "a long-held assumption . . . the narrative that abstract painting was the early-twentieth-century invention of a few white male Europeans."



Hilma af Klint, *Group IV, The Ten Largest, No. 7, Adulthood*,  
1907. Tempera on paper mounted on canvas (124 × 92.5 inches).  
The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm.

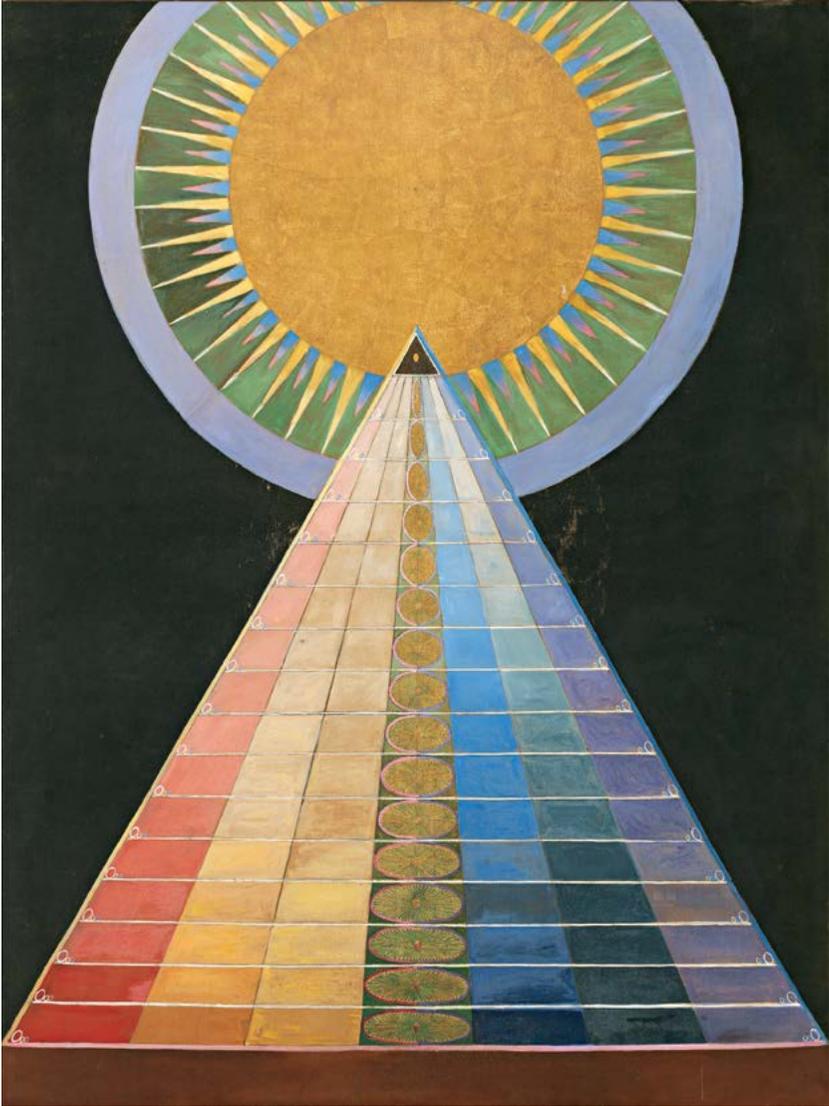
Photo by Albin Dahlström, the Moderna Museet, Stockholm.



Hilma af Klint, *Group V, The Seven-Pointed Star, No. 11*,  
1908, from *The WUS/Seven-Pointed Star Series*. Tempera, gouache,  
and graphite on paper mounted on canvas (24.5 × 30 inches).

The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm.

Photo by Albin Dahlström, the Moderna Museet, Stockholm.



Hilma af Klint, *Group X, No. 1, Altarpiece*, 1915,  
from *Altarpieces*. Oil and metal leaf on canvas (93.5 × 70.5 inches).

The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm.

Photo by Albin Dahlström, the Moderna Museet, Stockholm.



Hilma af Klint, drawing from The Five notebook HaK 1522,  
1904. Pencil on paper (12 × 10.25 inches).  
The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm. From *Hilma af Klint:  
Notes and Methods*, edited by Christine Burgin,  
The University of Chicago Press.

Hilma af Klint's pictures have been seen in this country in piecemeal fashion since the 1980s, but the current exhibition gives American audiences their first extensive look at her work. It follows similarly large exhibitions that have been held in recent years in London and northern Europe. That an artist of obvious historical importance who died in 1944 is only now being seen in full is partly due to her own wishes. She stipulated that her personal works, which were her abstract paintings and drawings—pictures she almost never exhibited publicly and left in their entirety to her nephew—not be seen for twenty years after her death. This accounts for the subtitle of the current show—*Paintings for the Future*—but not for the relative silence of the half century since her prohibition was lifted. It doesn't explain why, for example, af Klint's work was not part of the Museum of Modern Art's encyclopedically large 2012 exhibition *Inventing Abstraction, 1910–1925: How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art*. She isn't even in the index of the show's comprehensive catalogue.

But then degrees of eeriness and the inexplicable are at the center of af Klint's paintings. She was an academically trained artist who exhibited and sold her naturalistic landscapes and portraits in the years before the First World War. But she was also a person with a powerful connection to religious thinking of many varieties and to spiritualism, with its belief that we can communicate with the dead and that unseen, mystically perceived forces are part of reality and can explain it. Most of her abstract paintings and drawings, which largely date from around 1904 through the early 1920s, are about her explorations of or knowledge of spiritual realms. (The exhibition, consisting primarily of these pictures, includes as well a sampling of her naturalistic works.) Creating many of these paintings and drawings, moreover, she worked as a medium. She fashioned her pictures, in effect, under the prompting of an otherworldly spirit.

Absorbing af Klint's work, viewers may feel that they must hold in their minds that the forms, even the colors, in her pictures express symbolic meanings—such as that blue stands for female, yellow for male, and green for the idea of union. That her pictures were made by someone who believed herself to be a medium for unseen forces

presents an even bigger barrier. It makes us wonder if we have any liberty in appraising her mind and motives. Yet I think most viewers ease these concerns as they encounter a body of work that quickly comes to feel coherent.

Af Klint was continually charting progress to a purer, less corporeal state, which perhaps explains why she worked in series all the time and why she was drawn to Darwin's theory of evolution (or at least the version that equated evolution with progress). Each of her series forms a kind of symbolical visual novel, and part of the appeal of her work is that in any given series she is far from obvious in how she moves from beginning to end. With the large *Untitled Series* that begins the exhibition, it is only because of the subtitles that we realize we are looking at the ages of man, beginning with childhood. A series from 1915 subtitled *The Swan* starts off with naturalistically drawn swans, goes through numerous permutations, and ends with completely abstract, and handsome, pictures that, we think, might have in them some aspects of those swans, with their long necks and jagged wingspans.

As each of her series is somehow about attaining a state of greater purity, so her work as a whole has the shape of a single large progression. Following it chronologically, we go from pictures that suggest the forms and textures of our earthly existence—an early series has the subtitle *Primordial Chaos*—to works of geometric purity. We travel from images that, like those in the *Untitled Series*, have words and letters and rounded, vaguely plantlike forms—and convey a sense of energized interactions, even weather conditions—to pictures that give us stilled, enigmatic emblems of some state of mind. These later, more geometric pictures are for this viewer less engaging than her earlier ones, yet the exhibition as a whole presents the lively challenge of fathoming a new language.

A playwright looking to make Hilma af Klint a character would have room for invention since we have little anecdotal sense of her as a person. She came from a renowned family, a number of whose members had distinguished themselves in the navy. Her father, a commodore, taught math at a naval academy (and authored a book

on trigonometry), and, although the psychology may be glib, it is hard to resist thinking that something of the geometric nature and feeling for precision that mark many of af Klint's pictures owe a fair amount to him. She never married and had no children. She lived with her mother and when her mother died she lived with her mother's nurse.

She wasn't, though, as writers point out, a spinsterish recluse. She was part of Stockholm's artistic and intellectual community and had a number of close friends. In different years, when she traveled in Germany, Italy, and elsewhere, she might make drawings, usually of religious images, after old-master paintings in museums. Yet she kept the artistic community of her day in the dark regarding the work she did as a delineator of metaphysical realms. We apparently have no idea, in addition, what she thought about the art of the turn of the century in general, let alone abstraction in painting or the modern movement. But then it is not clear whether, when she made her visionary, nonrepresentational pictures, she thought of them as "abstractions" or even as "art."

What mattered to her was her spiritual existence. Already in her late teens she was involved with the spirit world and séances, and when around this time her little sister died af Klint drew closer to ways of communicating with those no longer with us and to religious thought in general. She was an observant Lutheran from childhood, and she added to her Christian faith an avid involvement with Theosophy, which held that we can come to an awareness of the inner workings of the universe on our own, apart from the creeds of organized religion (and which, as a movement of the late-nineteenth century, attracted numerous artists and writers, including Kandinsky and William Butler Yeats). In time, af Klint's concerns grew to include Rosicrucianism and Buddhism, and then the science of evolution and the atom. She seems to have believed, as Theosophists generally did, that all forms of metaphysical thought contributed to the same stream of spiritual enlightenment.

In the 1890s she and four other women began to hold séances on a regular basis. They called themselves The Five and acted as mediums for messages and drawings communicated to them by different

named female and male “High Masters.” In 1904 one of the masters asked the members to stretch themselves by making paintings that would adorn a temple. Af Klint, who was one of the two practicing artists in the group and the member who, from 1903, seems to have done most of the drawings—and who was something of a commodore herself—eventually took on the challenge. When we read that the canvases in the *Untitled Series* have, among their subtitles, *The Ten Largest*, the meaning is that they were the largest works for this temple.

Af Klint described how her mediumship operated. She wrote of a series she did in 1907, which is not in the current show, that “The pictures were painted directly through me, without any preliminary drawings and with great force. I had no idea what the paintings were supposed to depict.” And about the pictures subtitled *The Ten Largest*, she added, “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.”

Af Klint’s candor about how her pictures came about has led some viewers to question if she were an artist at all. The attitude of the writers contributing to the fine catalogue of the current show is nuanced. It is that the mystical origins of af Klint’s work must be taken into account and that understanding those origins is part of how we appreciate the pictures. The sense we get from these commentators and from the voices in a roundtable discussion about her that is made up largely of artists—it is one of the best parts of the catalogue—is, essentially, that she had a method and it worked for her. One wonders whether our repeated exposures in recent years to the art of Martín Ramírez, James Castle, and other figures who made their pictures only after they had been institutionalized, or who suffered serious physical impairment—and our increasing unwillingness to believe that such work needs to be held as a separate entity, away from the endeavors of “real” artists—has enabled us to see all artists as mediums of a sort.

Some of af Klint’s most bewitching images can be found in the pencil drawings that were made during the séances of The Five. Of those on display at the exhibition, one, which suggests flowers with

wobbling thin stems floating lazily on a page, is particularly striking; and a near-dozen even better drawings have been reproduced in a new volume entitled *Hilma af Klint: Notes and Methods*. (The chaste directness of this book's appearance would certainly have appealed to the artist.) These additional pencil drawings, done in mostly soft tones, are also somewhat naturalistic. The images suggest flowers, winged insects, atmospheric gusts, and lines of force. There are also cruciform shapes that seem to flutter, like moths. But there is something so indefinite about the forms, and so strange about the way they relate to one another, that we can feel, looking at the drawings, that we have entered a dream world.

Maybe more quickly than the paintings that followed them, the drawings show that af Klint, at least in her first years working as a medium, had a distinctive and maybe original sense of how to show the inner space of a picture and how to organize the elements in it. Her approach is different from that of most other early abstractionists, in part because it had nothing to do with Cubism. The abstract pictures that artists began making in the years before the First World War derived to a degree from this style. Pablo Picasso was known for believing that abstraction would never have a place in his own art, but the Cubist pictures that he and Georges Braque began making around 1908—when af Klint was already in high gear with her own work—provided a kind of support system for the abstractionists who started appearing a few years later.

If Kandinsky was the catalyst for artists to try their hand at abstraction, Picasso and Braque's invention, which was a step away from abstract art to begin with, gave artists a way of making a bridge from the existing forms of the natural world to an abstract realm. Picabia and Delaunay, and then the more formidable Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich, who developed their respective abstract styles a little later, all started off as Cubists of a sort. Mondrian, one can feel, never lost his roots in this art. Even Kandinsky, who came to his conception of abstraction in ways that had little to do with Cubism or Picasso, made pictures that, like Cubist canvases, showed the world as a mesh of interlocking forms.

Af Klint wasn't interested in such a locked-in system (not that she was necessarily aware of what was happening in avant-garde circles in Paris in these years). On the contrary, her early pictures—exemplified by the series *The Ten Largest*—present the idea that shapes and other elements, such as alphabet letters or words, don't have to be tautly in sync with one another. These pictures say, too, that the background for forms or words can be empty and yet be a necessary element in the whole.

What she was doing might seem anomalous when her art is seen next to the abstract work that came into being in the years prior to the war. Yet one can also believe that af Klint was laying the groundwork for painting styles that came after the heyday of Cubism, beginning with the art of Joan Miró. In his radical pictures of the late 1920s and 1930s, he used words, individual letters, and amounts of bare background much the way af Klint did, and his pictures, like hers, communicate an almost taunting insouciance. He would, I think, have particularly responded to a marvelous group of her canvases from 1907 with the subtitle *The Eros Series* in which, against white or pale pink backgrounds, she casually placed shapes here and there and added words written in a fey, curlicued script.

By 1908, af Klint had done a good amount of distinctive work. Her pride, possibly, led her to show her pictures to the educator and Theosophist Rudolf Steiner. This seems to have been the first time she organized such a presentation. It also appears to have been the last. Steiner, who had his own ideas about art and architecture, was not impressed. He had his doubts about her having made these pictures as a medium, and he didn't want to offer any interpretations of them. He said she already had her interpreter.

Although we don't seem to know what pictures she showed him, she must have brought forth her *Untitled Series*, and in fairness to Steiner what person in 1908, coming cold to these works, would have known what to say? She might have been even more deeply wounded if she had invited a fellow painter. However we want to finesse the moment, the artist Amy Sillman, in the catalogue's roundtable discussion, may be right in declaring the event "The worst studio visit ever!"

As it happened, things did unravel a bit for af Klint from this point. Her mother went blind the same year, and because she wanted to care for her parent (her father had died), and possibly because she was bruised and deflated by Steiner, she did not work again, even on her realistic landscapes and portraits, for four years. When she got back to making pictures in 1912, she worked less as a medium than as someone listening to “an inner voice,” writes Tracey Bashkoff, who organized the Guggenheim show. The artist finished a good deal of work by 1915, including the complex series subtitled *The Swan* and three imposing upright canvases entitled *Altarpieces*. Featuring large circles, triangles, and very pointy rays, the pictures were meant to bring to conclusion the entire group of what is known as *The Paintings for the Temple*.

But her work had changed. Her robust handling of paint, her feeling for naturalistic rounded forms, and her seeming spontaneity were gone. In these newer works, even in the *Altarpieces* and *The Swan* series, af Klint appears less attempting to keep up with the flow of feelings coursing through her than carefully executing designs that were already in her mind. Absorbing the *Altarpieces*, with their many colored-in, intricate parts, we experience mostly the labor that went into realizing them.

The last works in the exhibition are primarily small oils from the late teens and early 1920s. They (and a few modestly sized watercolors from later years) appear to be the last pictures af Klint made. She was now in her late fifties and no longer worked as a medium; but she maintained her involvement with different religious beliefs and she added to them an interest in the properties of plants, color theory, and the symbol of the atom. These concerns formed the springboard for pictures that contain circles, checkerboards, triangles, and squares on their own. There might be an occasional word or cruciform shape, but mostly we are left with the impression of geometric forms set against plain backgrounds—and the sense that these flavorless images are not by anyone in particular.

She continued to be involved with Rudolf Steiner’s teachings, attending his classes in Switzerland and going there for study at his

institute even after his death. Much of her energy in these and the following years went into putting in proper shape the books created by The Five and her own later findings as a spiritualist. She left behind, we read, “126 annotated notebooks, a dictionary to her own work, and more than twenty thousand pages of text describing her spiritual investigations.” Part of her legacy was a multi-volume, small-size catalogue, called *The Blue Books*, of the nearly two hundred pictures that make up *The Paintings for the Temple*. She had all the works photographed, then affixed each photograph to one side of each opened spread. On the facing page she placed a small and exact watercolor painting she made of that work, sometimes including notes about its meaning.

There is something disheartening about all the labor that of Klint expended on work she had already done and particularly on her written projects. She had become her own painstaking and meticulous historian. Yet her efforts attest to her will, stamina, and belief. The fact of those many thousand “pages of text” is as colossal in its way as the ten paintings that greet us at the beginning of the exhibition.

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