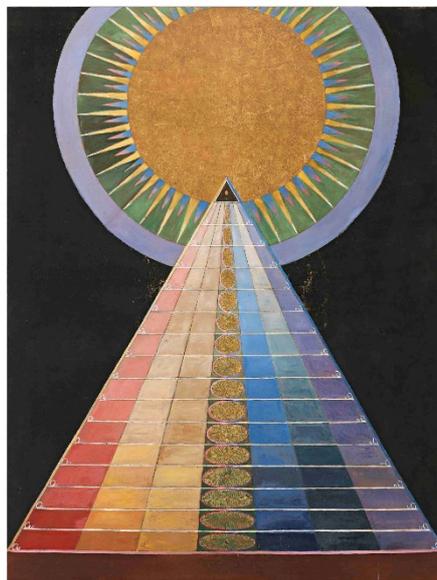


Press Release

HILMA AF KLINT

PAINTING THE UNSEEN

3 March – 15 May 2016
Serpentine Gallery



Serpentine Galleries presents an exhibition of Swedish painter Hilma af Klint (1862–1944), who is now regarded as a pioneer of abstract art. While her paintings were not seen publicly until 1986, her work from the early 20th century pre-dates the first purely abstract paintings by Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich. This Serpentine exhibition focuses primarily on her body of work, *The Paintings for the Temple*, which dates from 1906–15. The sequential nature of af Klint's work is highlighted by the inclusion in the exhibition of numerous paintings from key series, some never-before exhibited in the UK.

After graduating from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm in 1887, af Klint took a studio in the city where she produced and exhibited traditional landscapes, botanical drawings and portraits. However, by 1886 she had abandoned the conventions she learned at the Academy in favour of painting the invisible worlds hidden within nature, the spiritual realm and the occult. She privately joined four other female artists to form a group called 'The Five'. They conducted séances to encounter what they believed to be spirits who

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wished to communicate via pictures, leading to experiments with automatic writing and drawing, which pre-dated the Surrealists by several decades.

In 1905, af Klint received a 'commission' from an entity, which the group named Amaliel, to create her most important body of work, *The Paintings for the Temple*. Consisting of 193 predominately abstract paintings in various series and subgroups, the artist painted a path towards a harmony between the spiritual and material worlds; good and evil; man and woman; religion and science. This major work charted the influence of science and religion on af Klint's works, from the discovery of electromagnetic waves to the spiritual teachings of anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner. Steiner was af Klint's mentor and his presence in her life resulted in the cycle becoming more orderly with depictions of symbols and motifs, such as shells, snakes, lilies and crosses, from his spiritual movement.

Hilma af Klint painted in near isolation from the European avant-garde. Fearing that she would not be understood, she stipulated that her abstract work should be kept out of the public eye for 20 years after her death. While the works were not exhibited for a further 20 years, it subsequently came to be understood alongside the broader context of modernism at the turn of the 20th century.

The exhibition is co-curated by the Serpentine Galleries in collaboration with Daniel Birnbaum, Director of Moderna Museet, Stockholm.

Julia Peyton-Jones, Director, and Hans Ulrich Obrist, Co-Director, Serpentine Galleries, said: "Hilma af Klint is a pioneer of abstract art and the earliest artist we have ever exhibited at the Serpentine. Since her work was last exhibited in the UK, a large body of her paintings has been restored, thanks to the efforts of the Moderna Museet and the Hilma af Klint Foundation. This has allowed never-seen-before works and series to be displayed, a number of which will be brought to the Serpentine for the exhibition."

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Serpentine Gallery, Kensington Gardens, London W2 3XA

Serpentine Sackler Gallery, West Carriage Drive, Kensington Gardens, London W2 2AR

Image Credit:

Group X, No. 1. Altarpiece

Oil and metal leaf on canvas

237.5 x 179.5 cm

Courtesy of Stiftelsen Hilma af Klints Verk

Notes to Editors

Swedish painter Hilma af Klint (1862-1944, Stockholm) began training as an artist in Stockholm in the 1880s, studying at the Technical School before attending the Royal Academy of Fine Arts from 1882-7. Upon her death in 1944, she left her estate, comprising of over 1,000 works and 125 notebooks to her nephew, Erik af Klint, stipulating that the works could not be seen for at least 20 years. The first public exhibition of af Klint's abstract works was in 1986 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which not only placed her

within a modernist tradition, but revealed her to be one of the first abstract painters.

The artist has subsequently been exhibited at The Drawing Center, New York (2005–6); Santa Monica Museum of Art (2005–6); Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin (2005–6); Camden Arts Centre, London (2006); Bochum Kunstmuseum (2008); Moderna Museet, Stockholm (2008); Centre Pompidou, Paris (2008); Centre Culturel Suédois, Paris (2008); Haus der Kunst, Munich (2009); Museum voor Moderne Kunst, Arnhem (2010); and at the Central Pavilion of the 55th Venice Biennial (2013). Her work has also been subject to a major touring exhibition, *Hilma af Klint – a Pioneer of Abstraction*, which was organised by and shown at Moderna Museet, Stockholm in 2013, before touring to Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin (2013); Museo Picasso Málaga (2013–4); Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk (2014); and Henie-Onstad Art Centre, Oslo (2015).

HILMA AF KLINT EXHIBITION SUPPORTED BY

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Fig. 1 Hilma af Klint at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Stockholm, c. 1885

Directors' Foreword

Between 1906 and 1915 Swedish artist Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) created her most important body of work, *The Paintings for the Temple*. The cycle comprises 193 predominately abstract works, pre-dating the first recorded non-figurative paintings by the established progenitors of abstraction: Robert Delaunay (1885–1941), Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), František Kupka (1871–1957), Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935), and Piet Mondrian (1872–1944). Af Klint's extraordinary and complex works are painted methodically and sequentially in series which are divided into further groups of works. The paintings are characterised by the artist's hybrid imagery of signs and symbols drawn from her engagement with contemporary science and esoteric religious philosophies, from the discovery of electromagnetic waves to the spiritual teachings of anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925).

Af Klint received an academic art education in portrait, landscape and botanical painting at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm from 1882 to 1887. In secret, however, she rejected tradition and redirected her acute observational skills to depict the unseen worlds hidden within nature, science, the spiritual realm and the occult. From the late 1880s she privately joined four female artists to form a group called *The Five (De Fem)*. Collectively, they conducted séances, leading to experiments with automatic writing and drawing, which anticipated the Surrealists by several decades. In 1904 af Klint received a message from a divine entity to create *The Paintings for the Temple*, where she sought to depict a harmony between the spiritual and material worlds; good and evil; man and woman; religion and science. This theme of duality is reflected formally in her work through the use of colour, composition and symbols and in the way in which abstraction and figuration co-exist and are presented without hierarchy.

Af Klint's paintings have only just begun to receive their due attention. During her lifetime she exhibited and was known as a landscape and portrait artist but chose not to show her abstract works publicly during her lifetime. Af Klint extended this wish into death, her will stipulating that the paintings should not be seen for 20 years after she died. The works were first exhibited in 1986 and have since established that the historical narrative of abstraction in twentieth-century art was not a closed book.

Af Klint is the earliest-born artist ever to be shown in a one-person exhibition at the Serpentine. This presentation of her work titled *Painting the Unseen* focuses on several key series from *The Paintings for the Temple* alongside a selection of notebooks and two later series from the 1920s. Since af Klint's work was last exhibited in the UK, a large body of her paintings have been restored, thanks to Moderna Museet in Stockholm and the Stiftelsen Hilma af Klints Verk. The Serpentine's interest in presenting af Klint initially came from Moderna Museet's 2013 survey exhibition, *Hilma af Klint – A Pioneer of Abstraction* conceived by its Director Daniel Birnbaum who is also the co-curator of *Painting the Unseen*. We thank him for sharing his expert knowledge and enthusiasm for af Klint's work and for collaborating on this Serpentine exhibition.

The Serpentine has long been inspired by af Klint, a passion shared by artists Kerstin Brätsch and Adele Röder (DAS INSTITUT) whose exhibition at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery is presented concurrently to *Painting the Unseen*. Brätsch and Röder, like so many contemporary artists, have been influenced by af Klint's cosmic abstraction and her visionary approach to painting. By pairing these artists across the two Serpentine exhibition spaces we highlight what af Klint predicted – that one day she would be cited as a pioneer for future generations.

Hilma af Klint: Painting the Unseen would not have been possible without the generosity of a number of individuals and organisations. First and foremost, we are extremely grateful to the Stiftelsen Hilma af Klints Verk for working closely on this project and for lending to the Serpentine all the works in the exhibition. In particular, we would like to express our thanks to Patrick O'Neill, Chairman of the Board, and Ulf Wagner, Member of the Board, for their assistance and for sharing their extensive knowledge of af Klint's extraordinary oeuvre. The realisation of this exhibition is due to the Hilma af Klint Foundation's collaboration, for which we are immensely grateful.

We are appreciative of the Anglo-Swedish Literary Foundation's important contribution towards this catalogue and we also thank Carl Kostyál and those donors from the Hilma af Klint Exhibition Circle who wish to remain anonymous for their vital assistance towards the exhibition.

We would like to thank the authors of this catalogue for their insightful contributions to the growing research on af Klint. An introduction by co-curators Daniel Birnbaum and Emma Enderby discusses each series of paintings in the exhibition and positions af Klint's oeuvre within the wider framework of twentieth-century modernism. Co-editor of *frieze* Jennifer Higgie's biographical text on af Klint's life contextualises the period in which she was painting and

the influences upon her work. In her essay, Julia Voss draws parallels between af Klint's work and Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution.

We are indebted to la Rinascente for very generously sponsoring this exhibition and we would like to thank Vittorio Radice, in particular, together with his team Tiziana Cardini, Tommaso Radice, Benedetta Gambino, Letizia Novali and Monica Ferreri, for their ongoing support.

The public funding that the Serpentine receives through Arts Council England provides an essential contribution towards all of the Galleries' work and we remain very thankful for their continued commitment.

The Council of the Serpentine is an extraordinary group of individuals that provides ongoing and important assistance to enable the Serpentine to deliver its ambitious art, architecture, education and public programmes. We are also sincerely appreciative for the support from the Americas Foundation, the Learning Council, Patrons, Future Contemporaries and Benefactors of the Serpentine Galleries.

Finally, we would like to thank and celebrate the co-curators of the exhibition, Daniel Birnbaum, Director of Moderna Museet, Stockholm, and Emma Enderby, Associate Curator at Public Art Fund, New York. Our gratitude is also extended to the Serpentine team: Lizzie Carey-Thomas, Head of Programmes; Melissa Blanchflower, Exhibitions Curator; Mike Gaughan, Gallery Manager; and Joel Bunn, Installation and Production Manager, who have worked closely with the wider Serpentine Galleries staff to realise this exhibition.

Julia Peyton-Jones
Director, Serpentine Galleries
and Co-Director, Exhibitions and Programmes

Hans Ulrich Obrist
Co-Director, Exhibitions and Programmes
and Director of International Projects

Painting the Unseen

Daniel Birnbaum & Emma Enderby

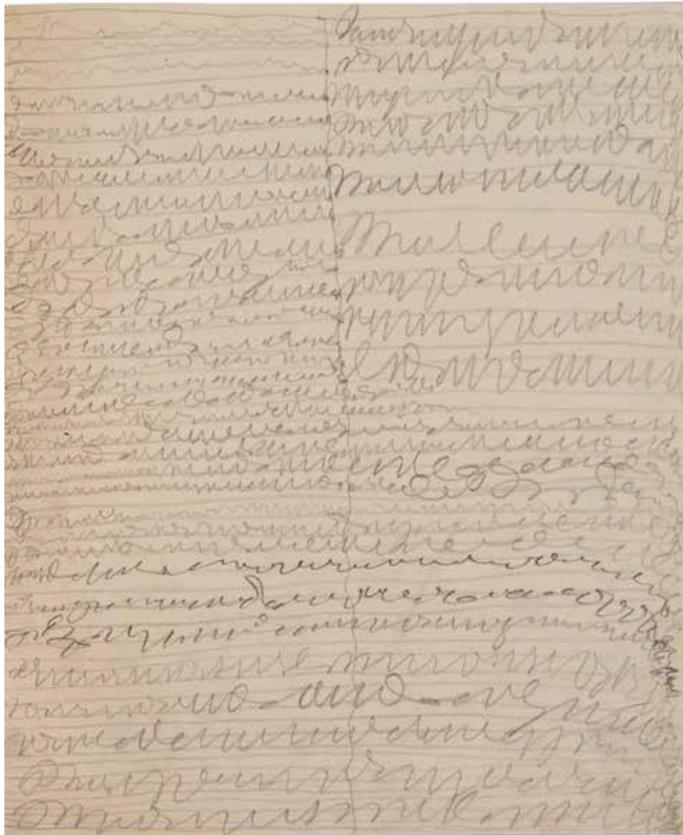


Fig. 2 Automatic writing by The Five, 1896–8

The critical assessment of Hilma af Klint's art has just begun, as has her influence on other artists. This belated reception is an anomaly that creates complications for anyone trying to theorise her work in the art-historical terms formulated in the twentieth century. On the one hand, her break with the naturalistic paradigm of painting that was taught at art academies across Europe is in many ways comparable to that made by the artists traditionally seen as the pioneers of abstraction, such as Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian. On the other hand, while her male contemporaries exhibited widely, published manifestos, crafted educational programmes, and combined their interest in the metaphysical with radical politics and the founding of institutions, af Klint worked in near isolation, save for her exchange with a group of women who gathered in a northern Stockholm studio to commune with spirits. In other words, her version of the non-figurative had no public dialogue. Do the concepts with which we describe the innovations of the early avant-garde apply to an artist whose work seems to have invented its own language and belated reception? Hardly. And yet, af Klint was working within the same social context and background as her well-known contemporaries and formulated an abstract language just as unexpected and unprecedented as any artistic achievements created during this historical moment of progressive experimentation.

Af Klint worked in series. While the works within a series are necessarily homogenous, her series themselves are also bound together – through their repeated forms, fluid interchanging of abstraction with figuration, and continued imagining of unseen worlds. The exhibition at the Serpentine focuses on five of her series – nearly half of *The Paintings for the Temple* – accompanied by two later series and a selection of her notebooks. *The Paintings for the Temple* were created between 1906 and 1915, following a decade in which af Klint attended spiritual gatherings with a collective of female friends who called themselves The Five. In trance-like states, the group believed they could communicate with mystic beings named the 'High Masters' – transcribing their messages via automatic writing and drawing (fig. 2; pp. 168–70). These techniques allowed af Klint to begin crafting a new visual language, moving away from her formal training

rooted in the realistic depiction of nature. However, while abandoning convention resulted in paintings that appear to have arrived from nowhere, afKlint understood the forces that dictated and were depicted in her paintings as present in everything that is alive. Form is never distinct from life in her art.

AfKlint undertook *The Paintings for the Temple* as a commission from one of the High Masters. The works share motifs with the transcriptions of The Five, and afKlint understood them to be messages painted through her. But her use of colour, permutations of geometric forms, symbolic ciphers and atomic-to-cosmic scales cast a groundbreaking and unique oeuvre, as undefinable today as a century ago.

Briony Fer has described afKlint's work as a 'self-generating occult symbol-system', but one also derived from nature, religion, language and science in addition to the supernatural.¹ AfKlint's many notebooks, which expound and elaborate on the sometimes enigmatic symbology of her work, offer a codex to this system (p. 172). Logarithmic spirals and tendrils represent evolution; the letter 'U' stands for the spiritual world, opposing 'W' for matter; the ancient *vesica piscis* (the intersection of two overlapping discs) signifies its traditional theme of unity, creation and the inviolability of geometry. The colour yellow and roses stand for masculinity; the colour blue and lilies denote femininity.

The Paintings for the Temple is a complicated, nuanced and elusive body of work. With its 193 paintings categorised into series, groups and subgroups, a didactic reading of the cycle is not straightforward. The whole sequence can be better understood as afKlint's pursuit of an original 'oneness' – a basic unity that she believed existed at the world's creation. AfKlint felt this integrity had since been lost, giving way to a world of polarities: good and evil, woman and man, matter and spirit, macrocosm and microcosm. She saw these dichotomies as having become the principle of all life.

The series within *The Paintings for the Temple* individually try to reconcile these divisions – each in their own scale, aesthetic and theme – while simultaneously revealing her many influences from the time in which she painted. Starting in 1906, the 26 small canvases of the *Primordial Chaos* (p. 37) group introduce the origin of the world and the birth of this polarised state. The predominant colours of these works – yellow (masculine), blue (feminine),

¹ Briony Fer, 'Hilma af Klint and Abstraction', in Kurt Almqvist and Louise Belfrage (ed.) *Hilma af Klint. The Art of Seeing the Invisible* (Stockholm: Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation, 2015) p. 15.

green (the unity of the two) – resonate with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Theory of Colours* (1810). Goethe placed yellow 'next to the light' and blue 'next to the darkness', seeing the colours as complimentary.² Green was the harmonious result of their mixing and '[t]he beholder has neither the wish nor the power to imagine a state beyond it.'³ *The Ten Largest* (p. 65) charts the stages of a human's growth, from 'childhood' to 'old age' and the paintings' diverse forms and floral imagery – germ cells, blossoms, seeds, stamens – morph between a microscopic and macrocosmic range reminiscent of Ernst Haeckel's *Art Forms in Nature* (1904). The later 16 paintings of *Evolution* (p. 77) depict the division of light and dark, male and female, and while the title probably relates to an esoteric cosmology, it also evokes one of the most scientific, religious and philosophical debates of the period.

After completing the *Evolution* paintings in 1908, afKlint met her mentor Rudolf Steiner – a theosophist and later founder of another esoteric spiritual movement, Anthroposophy. Steiner's faith in and emphasis on introspection perhaps influenced afKlint away from her previous automatic techniques, leading her to paint more considered, deliberate personal interpretations when she returned to painting several years later.

In her subsequent series for *The Paintings for the Temple*, afKlint incorporated the iconography of these enchanted philosophies. The 24 works in *The Swan* (p. 95) integrate the bird – a key symbol in alchemy – into her antecedent dichotomies of light and dark, male and female, before the works become purely abstract and referential of Goethe's diagrammatic colour wheels and research into optics, known to and studied by Steiner. The 14 paintings of *The Dove* (p. 121) use the Christian symbol for peace and unity, while flitting between figuration and abstraction, and the final three *Altarpieces* (p. 137) mark afKlint's professed realisation of 'oneness' in their arresting geometric abstraction.⁴

While *The Paintings for the Temple* were completed in 1915, afKlint continued to paint numerous abstract series to give order to her worldly observations. In 1919, she meticulously studied the relationships between flowers, mosses and lichens with geometric forms, resulting in works that can be viewed alongside contemporary scientific research (p. 174). In *Series II* (p. 143) she used a geometric form, and black and white to cleanly define the dualities inherent within several

² Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours* (London: John Murray, 1840) p. xlii.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 316, section 802.

⁴ Iris Müller-Westermann, 'Paintings for the Future: Hilma af Klint – A Pioneer of Abstraction in Seclusion', in Iris Müller-Westermann with Jo Widoff (ed.) *Hilma af Klint – A Pioneer of Abstraction* (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 2013) p. 42.

of the world's religions. And in her later watercolours, such as the *On the Viewing of Flowers and Trees* works (p. 153), she abandoned geometric abstraction in favour of allowing colour to define the sensation of viewing nature. While this method is a clear departure, it is reminiscent of her automatic techniques used two decades earlier – the artist, at the age of 60, coming full circle in her exploration of the unseen.

Is af Klint the first modern abstract artist? What is known is that in 1906, after a prolific period of automatic drawing, she began a body of work that can arguably be considered as anticipating the later famous breakthroughs of abstract pioneers between 1910 and 1913, including Wassily Kandinsky's first abstract watercolours, František Kupka's first Orphic works, and Robert Delaunay's first target-like discs. However, perhaps the most interesting issue is not how af Klint can be made to fit into the standard narratives of European modernism, but rather how her art breaks out of these accounts and how she, if taken seriously as an artist, challenges them. Her art had absolutely no institutional support and, needless to say, no lobby in the art market. This makes her predicament quite different from that of her most celebrated contemporaries. Although she described herself as a pioneer, she had no immediate followers or disciples, and so never gave rise to a school. If that were to happen now, which no longer seems totally implausible, it would occur with an unusual delay of a century. Finally, if we try to force her art into the traditional concept of abstraction – for what else can we call it? – it will not be without a certain amount of force, and there is certainly no place in the formalist scheme created by Alfred H. Barr for the Museum of Modern Art in the 1930s waiting to be filled by her radiant imagery (fig. 9). More interesting is the question of what happens to his scheme, still so influential in the institutional and academic worlds, if her art is given due weight and attention? Perhaps here lies an opportunity. For af Klint demands that we reinvent or at least reconsider the seemingly fixed trajectory of abstraction, an art-historical canon that persists in defining the language and theory of the twentieth century.

Longing for Light: The Art of Hilma af Klint

Jennifer Higgie

The motives for the creation and reception of art are never neat: the work of the remarkable Swedish artist Hilma af Klint is a case in point. When she died in 1944 at the age of 81, her will stipulated that her paintings – which numbered over 1,200, along with 100 texts and 26,000 pages of notes – could not be viewed until she had been dead for 20 years; she believed the world was not yet ready for her message. She was right – but it took even longer than she imagined. In 1970, Moderna Museet in Stockholm was offered the entire af Klint estate for free, but its director Pontus Hultén, said no, dismissing her as a spiritualist, despite the fact that spiritualism had influenced many of the great – male – innovators. It wasn't until 1986, when curator Maurice Tuchman selected 16 af Klint paintings to be included in his exhibition *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art that her work was shown publicly for the first time.

Af Klint was born in Stockholm in 1862 to a bourgeois, Protestant family; her father was an admiral and a mathematician. After an apparently idyllic childhood – summers were spent at the family farm, Hanmora, on the island of Adelsö, where af Klint immersed herself in nature – at the age of 20, she enrolled at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm. After graduating, she rented a studio next door to the Swedish Association of Art, which, in 1894, staged an exhibition of more than 100 of Edvard Munch's (1863–1944) paintings. We have no idea what af Klint felt about Munch, but it is hard not to imagine that his approach – which privileged an inner reality over an external one – had some impact on her evolution as an artist.

In time, af Klint made her name as an accomplished, if fairly unadventurous, portrait, landscape and botanical artist (fig. 3; 8); however, she had a clandestine life. In 1879, she had begun participating in séances and developed her interest in Theosophy, an esoteric belief system that, amongst other ideas, promoted equality of the sexes. It was co-founded in 1875 by the magnetic Russian occultist and medium, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, who, in her first book *Isis Unveiled* (1877) declared that: 'No form can come into objective existence – from the highest to the lowest – before the abstract ideal of this form – or, as



Fig. 3 Hilma af Klint, botanical drawings, c. 1890s

Aristotle would call it, the *privation* of this form – is called forth.’¹ It is surely no coincidence that the idea of contacting spirits corresponded with Heinrich Hertz’s discovery of electromagnetic waves in 1886 and Wilhelm Röntgen’s invention of the X-ray in 1895: for the first time, science acknowledged that energy could be transmitted through airwaves and the invisible could be made visible. It is, perhaps, difficult for us to fully grasp how these innovations must have impacted on the collective imagination of the late nineteenth century.

In 1880, the death of af Klint’s young sister Hermina deepened af Klint’s curiosity about religion and spirituality and around this time she joined the Theosophical Society. Inspired by the British theosophists Annie Besant and Charles Webster Leadbeater, it is likely that she read their co-authored book, *Thought-Forms: How Ideas, Emotions and Events Manifest As Visible Auras* (1901), which included chapters on ‘The Difficulty of Representation’, ‘The Meaning of the Colours’ and ‘The Form and its Effect’. The book also included wildly celestial illustrations of the manifestations of thought or feeling as form, such

¹ H.P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled* (Wheaton: Quest Books, first published 1877, reprinted 2015) p. 310.

as ‘Vague Religious Feelings’, ‘An Intellectual Conception of Cosmic Order’ and ‘An Aspiration to Enfold All’. According to the authors: ‘Three general principles underlie the production of all thought-forms:– Quality of thought determines colour. Nature of thought determines form. Definiteness of thought determines clearness of outline.’² It is a manifesto that could have been a template for the secret paintings that af Klint was to create only five years after the publication of *Thought-Forms*.



Fig. 4 One of The Five’s meeting places, 1890s

In 1896, af Klint and a group of four other women artists – Anna Cassel, Cornelia Cederberg, Sigrid Hedman and Mathilde N. (her surname is lost) – created a spiritualist group named The Five (*De Fem*; they were also called The Friday Group). Apart from Cassel – who was af Klint’s close friend, a fellow student at the Academy and a respected landscape painter – not much is known about the women, but af Klint was to meet with them until her death. Their aim was to explore the mystical – but to them, also very concrete – realms that they believed existed beyond what is commonly described as ‘external reality’. Every week they met in each other’s studios and homes (fig. 4) in order to contact the ‘spirit world leaders’ or ‘High Masters’ including Ananda, Amaliel, Clemens, Esther and Gregor. They made ‘automatic’ drawings (fig. 2; pp. 168–9) and *cadavre exquis* 30 years before the Surrealists. While they undertook their

² Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater, *Thought-Forms: A Classic of the Victorian Occult: How Ideas, Emotions and Events Manifest As Visible Auras* (London: The Theosophical Publishing House, first published 1901, n.d.) p. 23.

research, af Klint continued to paint traditional landscapes and portraits in order to earn an income. A vegetarian passionate about animals and plants to the point of obsession, she also worked as a draughtswoman for the veterinary institute around 1900.

During a séance with The Five in 1904, af Klint was told by Amaliel that she had been ‘commissioned’ to make paintings ‘on the astral plane’ in order to represent the ‘immortal aspects of man’.³ So began her astonishing, monumental cycle *The Paintings for the Temple* that comprised various series and groups, including: *Primordial Chaos* (1906–7), *The Ten Largest* (1907), *Evolution* (1908), *The Swan* (1914–5), and *The Dove* (1915). Between 1906–8 she executed 111 paintings; she stopped for four years to look after her mother, to whom she was very close, and who had lost her sight. (Interestingly, many spiritualists believe that the blind, who cannot be distracted by the visible world, have the power to see the unseen.) During this time, af Klint became deeply immersed in Rudolf Steiner’s writings; he believed in an ideal life as one that balanced opposing forces, and that spiritualism should be accorded the same respect as the natural sciences (fig. 5). Steiner visited af Klint’s studio in 1908, when he was the General Secretary of the German section of the Theosophical Society (he founded Anthroposophy in 1912), but although he admired some of the paintings, he was critical of af Klint’s work as a medium and declared that her art would not be understood for 50 years. His judgement apparently devastated her and possibly affected her decision not to allow her paintings to be seen until two decades after her death.

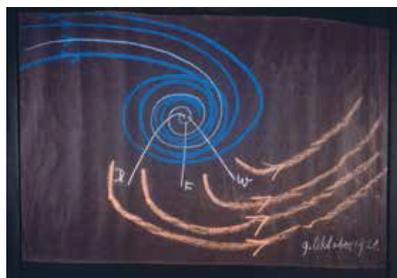


Fig. 5 A blackboard drawing by Rudolf Steiner from a 1921 lecture

³ Iris Müller-Westermann with Jo Widoff (ed.) *Hilma af Klint – A Pioneer of Abstraction* (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 2013) p. 278.

In 1912, af Klint began a new cycle of 82 paintings; by 1915, the ‘commission’ was completed. It was a staggering achievement; most of the pictures communicate their esoteric message in a language that is – even if you have no idea what any of it means – deliriously beautiful. Hot, vivid colours – burnt oranges, dusty pinks, ochre yellows and blood reds – dissolve and re-form from image to image into myriad shapes that leap, pulse and shimmer with an energy that feels as fresh as a spring morning. Some of the pictures are three metres high; af Klint worked on many of them on her studio floor like a cosmic Jackson Pollock. While certain symbols and signs are reiterated – spirals, triangles, men and women, flowers and birds – each series has a different personality. Af Klint – freed as she supposedly was from self-expression – went wherever her guide led her. The result is a body of work that moves seamlessly between minimalism, abstraction and figuration; numerals, texts and diagrammatic shapes drift in and out of focus like guests dazzled by sunshine at a garden party: birds, especially, recur again and again, possibly because Blavatsky had written that the swan embodies the ‘mystery of mysteries’ and the ‘majesty of the Spirit’.⁴

Perhaps the most astounding and visceral series is *The Ten Largest* (p. 65), a study of the four ages of man: childhood, youth, and adulthood are evoked with bright flower-like shapes that float like bubbles through sky-blue, orange, and lavender grounds embellished by cryptic diagrams and codes – such as ‘00’ or ‘Vestalasket’ – formed in an ecstatic curlicue script. In the final image of the series, old age is intimated in a dreamy monochromatic expanse; death, here, is imagined not as something to fear but rather something to welcome, simply a release into a new kind of reality.

Apart from the three enormous *Altarpieces* from 1915 (p. 137), it is obvious that the cycle’s title refers less to a literal building than to a unified place of astral knowledge. Af Klint said of her process: ‘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; nevertheless, I worked swiftly and surely, without changing a single brushstroke.’⁵ She was, though, in no way a passive receiver of these messages. In her notebooks, it is clear that af Klint spent years analysing the meanings of the images she had created; from 1917–8 alone, she wrote 1,200 pages of a text titled *Studier over Sjålslivet* (Studies on Spiritual Life).

⁴ Pascal Rousseau, ‘Premonitory Abstraction – Mediumism, Automatic Writing, and Anticipation in the Work of Hilma af Klint’, in *ibid.*, p. 170.

⁵ Iris Müller-Westermann, ‘Paintings for the Future: Hilma af Klint – A Pioneer of Abstraction in Seclusion’, in *ibid.*, p. 38.

It is important to reiterate that af Klint was a professional artist who was in touch with new developments in modern art. Interestingly, when in 1914 some of her more conventional paintings featured in the Baltic Exhibition in Malmö, Wassily Kandinsky's were included in the Russian section. We can only speculate why she felt the need to hide her work away and turn her back on the market: her will stipulates that *The Paintings for the Temple* cannot be sold individually. Although women did not have the full vote in Sweden until 1919, relatively speaking, it was less difficult to be a female artist in Scandinavia than it was in other European countries – they were allowed to study art alongside men. In Paris, by comparison, women were excluded from the state-sponsored *École des Beaux-Arts* until 1897 and were not admitted to German academies until 1919. In the nineteenth century, quite a few Swedish women – including Eva Bonnier, Hanna Hirsch, Amalia Lindegren and Maria Röhl – had successful art careers. That said, it's irrefutable that although women artists were tolerated, they were rarely, if ever, encouraged to express the kind of radical ideas that marked their male contemporaries as innovators. All of the teachers at the Academy were men, and it was generally assumed that women might paint as a hobby until they married, when they were expected to devote their time to family. (It is telling that many nineteenth-century female artists, such as af Klint, remained single.) Even though af Klint was one of the earliest Western artists to wholeheartedly engage with abstraction, the most visible discussions of it as a viable new artistic language were conducted by men, all of whom were proficient at self-promotion. Robert Delaunay, Wassily Kandinsky, František Kupka, Kazimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian – who were all interested, to varying degrees, in spiritualism and Theosophy – contributed to, and were written about, in articles, manifestos, lectures and journals, in none of which af Klint took part. How responsible she was for her own exclusion and whether or not anyone outside her close circle was open to seriously engaging with her ideas at the time is debatable. Although she designed an unrealised, spiral-shaped temple for the display of her pictures,⁶ if we go purely by her actions, ultimately she seemed more interested in visually exploring and responding to a spiritual cosmos than she was in hosting an exhibition of her paintings in a traditional gallery. But whatever her reasons for her secrecy, her seclusion allowed her immense artistic freedom.

There are many conceivable explanations for the stipulation in af Klint's will that her work should not be seen until 20 years after her death: Steiner's negativity is one, but it is also possible that her motives were purely practical. Af Klint died in 1944 (curiously, the same year as Kandinsky, Mondrian and

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

Munch); World War II had been raging for five years and an allied victory was by no means a certainty. Despite Sweden's neutrality, perhaps the artist was worrying less about the response from the art critics than she was about a Nazi victory and what the ramifications of such a catastrophe might be on Europe's cultural landscape – without a doubt, her art would have been labelled degenerate. (Interestingly, in 1932 she created a small picture, *A Map: Great Britain* (fig. 6), in which a head, positioned over Europe, spews dark flames towards the UK: a premonition of the horror soon to come.) It is also likely that af Klint felt that the message her paintings embodied would have inevitably (and understandably) been overshadowed by the drama of the war unfolding around them.



Fig. 6 Hilma af Klint, *A Map: Great Britain*, 1932

Over the past few decades, af Klint's reputation and influence has grown. I first heard about her from the artists Frank Hannon and Donna Huddleston when, in 2005, they staged a homage to the Swedish artist in their show *Dear Hilma* in a series of charmingly run-down rooms in London's Fitzrovia; enigmatic drawings – some abstract, some figurative – glowed in the soft light of a re-created nineteenth-century living room. I saw af Klint's work in the flesh for the first time at London's Camden Art Centre in 2006, in *Hilma af Klint: An Atom in the Universe* and was staggered at their strange beauty. In 2013, hundreds of thousands



Fig. 7 Hilma af Klint's home, Uppsala, Sweden, c.1930

of people visited *Hilma af Klint – A Pioneer of Abstraction* at Moderna Museet in Stockholm; the show then travelled to Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin and Museo Picasso Málaga, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebæk, and Henie Onstad Kunstsenter in Oslo. I know of many artists who travelled across Europe to see it. I, for one, went, and cannot remember seeing another exhibition that has so astonished, excited and perplexed me.

Af Klint's indifference to personal gain, her openness to new ways of understanding our environment and her profound commitment to her life-long artistic and spiritual research continue to be inspirational. In the book *The Legacy of Hilma af Klint* (2013) nine contemporary artists, including Karl Holmquist, Helen Mirra, Christine Ödlund, Fredrik Söderberg, Sophie Tottie and R.H. Quaytman respond with images and text to af Klint's exploration of the spiritual and natural worlds, ethics, gender, religion and science. Quaytman (who helped organise the exhibition *Secret Pictures by Hilma af Klint* at PS1, New York in 1989) declares that: 'In the history of artists I can use, she stands firmly next to and in some ways above Malevich, Kobra and Mondrian. Because unlike them she used what artists today also use: temporality, seriality, language, the unconscious, science and sexuality.'⁷

Af Klint's final diary entry reads: 'You have mystery service ahead, and will soon enough realise what is expected of you.'⁸ Even at the end, she was still searching. Perhaps for her, it was just the beginning.

⁷ R.H. Quaytman, 'De Fem', in Daniel Birnbaum and Ann-Sofi Noring (ed.) *The Legacy of Hilma af Klint: Nine Contemporary Responses* (Cologne: Verlag Der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2013) n.p.

⁸ Kathleen Hall, 'Theosophy and the Society in the Public Eye', <http://tinyurl.com/zg8lmsk>, accessed 10 January 2016.

Hilma af Klint and the Evolution of Art

Julia Voss

A good work of art is like an enticement, a lure. It makes viewers curious, tempts them to come closer and when they bite, it pulls them on a long cord into something new and unexpected.

The world into which Hilma af Klint's works pull us is, on the one hand, a historical one. The artist was born in 1862, studied at the Royal Academy of Art in Stockholm from 1882 to 1887 and then painted mostly portraits and landscapes, often in a late-Impressionist style. She took part in international exhibitions, such as the Baltic Exhibition in Malmö in 1914, to which Wassily Kandinsky had also sent a painting.¹ But in 1906, with the view of Lake Malären (fig. 8), af Klint began to create a second, parallel oeuvre, partly abstract, partly figurative. The laws of optics and central perspective that she had learned at the Academy no longer play a role here. During her lifetime these paintings were never exhibited publicly and before her death, in 1944, af Klint decreed that they should not be shown for another 20 years. With this gesture, she was already focusing on a future world.



Fig. 8 Hilma af Klint, *Landscape/Lake Malären*, 1906

¹ Iris Müller-Westermann with Jo Widoff (ed.) *Hilma af Klint – A Pioneer of Abstraction* (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 2013) p. 38.

As we now know, it took longer than 20 years. It was not until 1986, with the exhibition *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985* in Los Angeles, that the pictures were first shown publicly. And almost another 30 years passed until the opening of Moderna Museet's major retrospective *Hilma af Klint – A Pioneer in Abstraction* of 2013. Af Klint had entrusted her work to a coming generation, the spectators whom she felt still had to evolve during her lifetime. Was that the future she had in mind when she entitled her 1908 series *Evolution*?

Evolution in Science and Art History

Ever since Alfred H. Barr, the founding director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, presented his now-famous diagram in which he equated the history of styles with the genesis of species and portrayed their succession as a progressive development leading to abstraction (fig. 9), the Theory of Evolution has been an established part of art history. This system has sometimes prompted artists to classify themselves as pioneers and a wish to be recognised as the inventors of abstract art. As late as 1949 the Franco-German artist Hans Arp wrote in irritation to a colleague that the exhibition *L'art abstrait. Ses origines. Ses premiers maîtres*, held in the Parisian Galerie Maeght 'has led to an unending dispute about the dates of the first abstract pictures'.² Even today, MoMA insists on 1910 as the starting point for abstract art and the artistic canon created by Barr.³

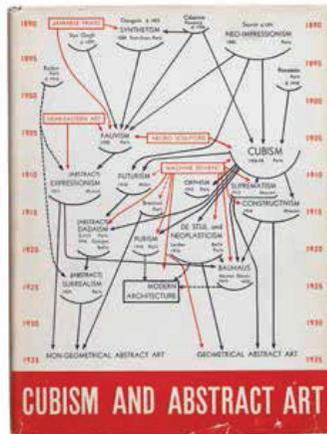


Fig. 9 Alfred H. Barr, cover of the exhibition catalogue *Cubism and Abstract Art*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1936

In af Klint's cycle of abstract works which began in 1906, four years prior to MoMA's starting point, she was evidently concerned with a different evolution in art. Where the Serpentine Galleries brings her work for its second showing in the city – her work was first shown at Camden Arts Centre in 2006⁴ – this time, her pictures can be seen in the vicinity of the places and institutions where Charles Darwin had developed his Theory of Evolution more than 100 years earlier. In Great Marlborough Street, to the west of Hyde Park, the young researcher rented a flat in 1836 following his return from his voyage around the world. Within a radius of just a mile were the institutions whose experts helped Darwin to catalogue the collection of animals and plants assembled during the voyage: the British Museum in Great Russell Street, the Hunterian Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields and the Zoological Society in Bruton Street. During the first



Fig. 10 Charles Darwin's 'Tree of Life' sketch, 1837–8

² Letter by Hans Arp to Hans Richter (31 August 1949), *Hans Richter Papers*, B.VII.3, Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York; quoted in Medea Hoch, 'Sophie Taeuber-Arps interdisziplinäres Werk im Ordnungssystem der Kunstgeschichte', in Aargauer Kunsthaus and Kunsthalle Bielefeld (ed.) *Sophie Taeuber-Arps, Heute ist Morgen* (Zürich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2014) p. 216.

³ See the exhibition catalogue, *Inventing Abstraction, 1910–1925* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2013). Af Klint seems to be so indigestible to the Barr system that her name is not even mentioned in the catalogue's footnotes.

⁴ *Hilma af Klint: An Atom in the Universe*, Camden Arts Centre, London, 17 February – 16 April 2006.

summer following his return, Darwin sketched out the iconic basic design of his Theory of Evolution in a notebook (fig. 10). He began the page with the phrase ‘I think’ and then switched to an image to express his thoughts. Along the lines of his small drawing, he compared the stations in the history of creation to an ongoing, many-branched process of development. He arranged the finches of the Galapagos Islands, the skins of which he had brought back to England, in his travelogue so that they not only revealed their diversity to the reader’s eye but also indicated their possible genesis (fig. 11). The individual, static images dissolved together and formed a series.

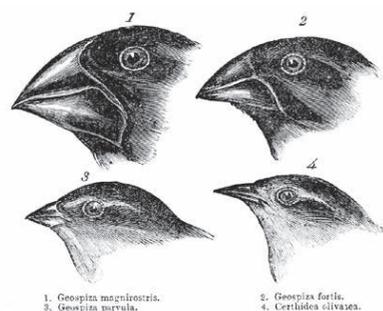


Fig. 11 Charles Darwin's drawing of finches, 1845

In the past, af Klint has often been denounced as a spiritual artist. The debate about the extent of her links to Theosophy seems to have rendered some formal aspects of her work almost invisible, as well as her background in science. Around the turn of the century, she was employed at the veterinary institute in Stockholm as a draughtsman, and numerous paintings point to a lifelong interest in the Theory of Evolution. She used the term in work titles or wrote it directly on the canvas, such as in *Primordial Chaos*, No. 23 (p. 60). Moreover, from 1906 onwards she worked almost exclusively in series, a visual formula that in science is closely linked to the Theory of Evolution – from Darwin’s finches to Ernst Haeckel’s embryos (fig. 17). In addition, her series build progressively, and

together form a further, even larger series, which she planned to exhibit in a spiral-shaped building that she called ‘The Temple’. Just as Darwin likened the history of species to a ‘chain of being’, so af Klint worked on a ‘chain of seeing’ that was intended to make the viewer a witness to and participant in a process of development.

The Spiral of Life

This process of development began for af Klint in 1906. The resources and methods of classical painting no longer sufficed for what she wanted to depict on canvas. Art itself needed to undergo an evolution. With the small-format series *Primordial Chaos*, consisting of 26 individual works, she decided to create a world of form to which she would repeatedly return. Right from the start, a recurrent motif was the spiral, which she also intended as the exhibition structure for her works at a later date. It coils like a whirlpool into the blue background (*Primordial Chaos*, No. 19, p. 56), marks the outlines of snail shells (*Primordial Chaos*, No. 4, p. 41), superimposes itself as a dotted line (*Primordial Chaos*, No. 9, p. 46), is pulled apart into a green loop, or shines like the inside of a light bulb (*Primordial Chaos*, No. 16, p. 53). In later works too, the spiral fills the entire picture surface in a complementary contrast of blue and yellow (*Green Algae*, p. 164) or rolls like ball lightning towards the viewer (*Untitled*, p. 165).

The term ‘evolution’ derives from the Latin *evolvere*, which literally means ‘to roll out’, ‘to unroll’ or ‘to disclose’. Thus the very word describes the form of a spiral and refers to a process as yet incomplete. In this sense, Darwin’s Theory of Evolution not only contains the idea that everything is the result of a process of becoming, which in itself was a radical notion at the time, but also that there is no final result. His theory also leaves open to discussion the point where the natural kingdom ends and society begins. Social reformers, visionaries and utopians felt encouraged to enlist Darwin’s writings to their own fields. Karl Marx, for instance, sent Darwin a dedicated copy of *Capital*, while the women’s rights activist and theosophist Annie Besant hoped – in vain – to win his support for her campaign for contraception.⁵ It is well-known that Darwin himself preferred to keep his distance from political movements. His commitment to civil rights was confined to speaking out against slavery and stating that all people shared a common origin.⁶

⁵ See Janet Browne, *Charles Darwin. The Power of Place* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002) p. 443–4.

⁶ See Adrian Desmond and James Moore, *Darwin’s Sacred Cause: Race, Slavery, and the Quest for Human Origins* (London: Penguin Books, 2010).



Fig. 12 Linley Sambourne,
'Man is but a Worm', *Punch's Almanack for 1882*

Despite this, Darwin was the originator of a huge ideological shake-up. This was reflected in a legendary caricature by Linley Sambourne, chief cartoonist of *Punch*, England's then most popular satirical magazine. The image centred around the form that recurs as leitmotif in af Klint's work: the spiral (fig. 12). Sambourne, who lived to the southwest of Hyde Park, in Stafford Terrace, and whose house now accommodates a museum, referenced Darwin's last book, *The Formation of Vegetable Mould through the Action of Worms*, published a few months before the researcher's death. In this work the evolutionary theorist reports how he investigated the intelligence and other cognitive abilities of earthworms, testing, for instance, their musical sensibility by placing an earth-filled pot on the piano and getting his sons to play for its occupants. Sambourne's caricature transforms Darwin into a recumbent Father God, based on Michelangelo's fresco on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. His creation, his Adam, emerges from a vortex of organisms that revolve out of the letter sequence 'chaos' and lead from a worm through a monkey to a top-hatted English gentleman. The conviction that nature has only flowing transitions and no categorical differences had led Darwin to suppose that in principle all qualities might be present in even the most modest life-forms. While Darwin transmuted plants to animals and animals to humans in his texts, Sambourne depicted evolution as a kind of slow-motion Surrealism.

In the background of his evolutionary spiral, Sambourne depicted a counter-image: the old world order arranged in concentric circles. This was how Robert Fludd, for instance, had portrayed the creation of the cosmos in the seventeenth century. In the nineteenth century, the system of concentric circles was continued by Louis Agassiz, a zoologist teaching at Harvard who achieved prominence as a bitter opponent of Darwin. In a programmatic manner, this illustration formed the frontispiece of Agassiz's book *Principles of Zoology* in 1848, a standard work that Darwin held in his library. Like a double insulating layer, concentric circles surround the centre of Agassiz's system of order, in which there are no transitions or connections (fig. 13). The origin of species is an ideal centre, a divine heaven of ideas with subdivided kingdoms. It would be hard to find a more apposite way of summarising the two contrary systems than circle and spiral: on the one hand the harmonious, permanent order, and on the other hand the dynamic and constant process of change.

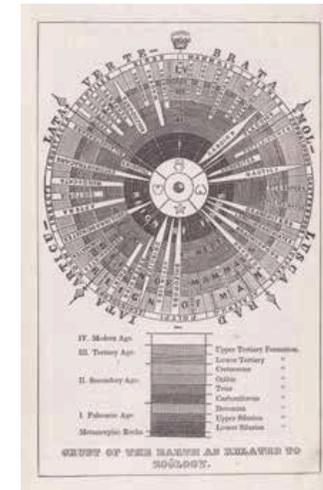


Fig. 13 Louis Agassiz and A.A. Gould,
Principles of Zoology, 1848

7 See Julia Voss, *Darwin's Pictures: Views of Evolutionary Theory, 1837-1874* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

af Klint used the spiral in several ways. As an artist she was fascinated by its radiating dynamism and thus by the painterly element of this form, which pulls the viewer into the picture like a maelstrom and simultaneously, as with a centrifuge, expands the visual space. Like Sambourne, she also understood the spiral as a symbol of evolution, for instance when in the eponymous first work of the series she uses spirals to flank the word 'evolution' (p. 78). In other pictures the spiral also appears in a figurative manner. She references the shell of the snail, a genus that by the eighteenth century was known to include numerous hermaphroditic species. Many snails – such as the Vineyard or Burgundy Snail – have both male and female organs, possessing gonads that produce egg cells and sperm cells. Darwin dealt with hermaphrodites at some length in both the animal and plant kingdoms in *On The Origin of Species*, where he discusses snails as examples of the hermaphroditic forms of land dwellers.⁸

Hermaphrodites and Eros

In her images, af Klint communicates the special quality of the snail. Like hermaphrodites, her paintings contain female and male sexual organs without these being assigned to a body or a species. To give one example, ovary-shaped elements stylised to dancing lines move through the bodiless black oval of *The Ten Largest, No. 6, Adulthood* (p. 71), while a bright-blue bubble floats towards them, containing two spheres that resemble testicles. In the following painting (p. 72) a sperm seems to set course for the centre of the picture, while two snails with green shells unite, and outlines reminiscent of eggs, egg cells, shoots or seeds swarm across the canvas. And finally, in the penultimate picture of the series, *Old Age, No. 9* (p. 74) we see, against a flesh-coloured background, a five-stage development with growth and cell division that produces two forms that revolve like Ferris wheels. To give two final examples from other series: sperms wriggle through *Evolution, No. 11* (p. 88) and in the middle of *The Swan, No. 17* (p. 112) we see half of a circle that could also be described as a female breast.

Throughout all these transmutations and metamorphoses, the art of af Klint lets forms, outlines and shapes resonate like echoes without remaining focused on a single quotation. The world of her creative activity is itself in a process of evolution. In constant variations she invents intermediate forms of each element, with flowing transitions between abstraction, symbol, sign and letter. The flow

⁸ See Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, 6th edition, with additions and corrections to 1872 (London: John Murray, 1888) p. 79.

of images is an intoxicating mix, revealing the free play of life forces: moving, melting, joining; turning, inseminating, growing; flowering, playing, mating.

The unusual and remarkable way in which af Klint uses the representational repertoire of natural sciences is best revealed in a comparison with other artists. The extension of her artistic vocabulary can be interpreted alongside the art of the early twentieth century, which was also part influenced by the Theory of Evolution. A particularly heated debate concerned the so-called 'battle of the sexes'. Darwin's theory of sexual selection, which ascribed the choice of partner to the female of the species, generated particularly fierce responses. A good example is a work by the Munich-based artist Franz von Stuck (1863–1928), who in 1905 presented *Fighting for a Woman* at the exhibition of the Munich Secession (fig. 14). Set against a seething volcanic landscape, two men, more beast than human, enter into combat, while the attendant woman appears to be both referee and prize. Her admirers seem to regress to the status of primitive monsters, but in striking contrast, she resembles the stereotype of the modern woman, with styled hair and make-up. To the narcissistic wound already suffered by humanity, dubbed the 'kinship with apes' by Sigmund Freud in 1917, and in this case to be interpreted chiefly as a narcissistic wound to men, the painting now adds a further wound: the equality of the sexes. Representations of women as an overwhelming threat first appeared in the paintings of von Stuck and many other artist colleagues at the time when women began to struggle for their civil rights.



Fig. 14 Franz von Stuck, *Fighting for a Woman*, 1905

Similarly, Edvard Munch gave his Madonna – a fallen saint – an attractiveness both threatening and disturbing (fig. 15). In this case, her counterpart is not a primitive human, but in the lithographed version Munch too intimates that the laws of sexual attraction are subject to the laws of nature and can be located at the physiological level: around the gleaming female body swim sperms that lead to an embryo.

The young Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) created a completely different image of sexuality in a drawing dated 1902–3 (fig. 16). He had just moved into a flat in Montmartre, the red-light district of Paris. He set his pair of lovers on a throne-like bed, the head of which is embellished with ornaments representing the male and female genitals: an erect penis as bedpost; a vulva on the right side, mirrored on the left; two small spiralling testicles, the lines of which grow upwards to a flowerlike glans. This unusual drawing is one of the few examples of turn-of-the-century art in which sexuality does not seem threatening and the woman is not reduced to an object. With light strokes and a few colour washes, Picasso lets the man and the woman coalesce; his head disappears between her open legs as if they, at least for the duration of their union, could become a single organism.



Fig. 15 Edvard Munch, *Madonna*, 1895–1902



Fig. 16 Pablo Picasso, *Two figures and a cat*, 1902–3

Superorganism

AfKlint could have seen only one, at most, of the pictures cited here. After completing her studies she received one of the coveted studios from the Academy, which she shared with two other female artists. The studio was at Hamngatan 5 (fig. 18), close to the city centre and an address familiar to every artist in Stockholm. It was in the direct vicinity of Blanch's Café, a meeting place for writers, musicians and artists, and the same building housed the gallery of the Swedish Association of Art. Among the most famous exhibitions here was Munch's show in 1894, which included *The Scream* and a version of the *Madonna*; the latter work was presented in a frame that resembled that of the lithographic version but was later removed and lost. However, neither von Stuck's nor Picasso's work were ever exhibited, ruling them out as possible templates or sources for afKlint. It is likely that her interest in the natural sciences played a stronger role within her paintings than the work of her contemporaries. Scientific works, which circulated widely in the second half of the nineteenth century thanks to cheap printing techniques, formed an antecedent for the sperms, embryos and genitals in modern art. Ernst Haeckel for instance, Darwin's most influential follower in Germany, was not the first to depict an embryo's stages of development, but the wide distribution of his books and his outstanding abilities as an artist made the illustrations, which ranged from embryos to radiolaria, accessible to a mass public (fig. 17).⁹

⁹ See Nick Hopwood, *Haeckel's Embryos. Images, Evolution, and Fraud* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015).

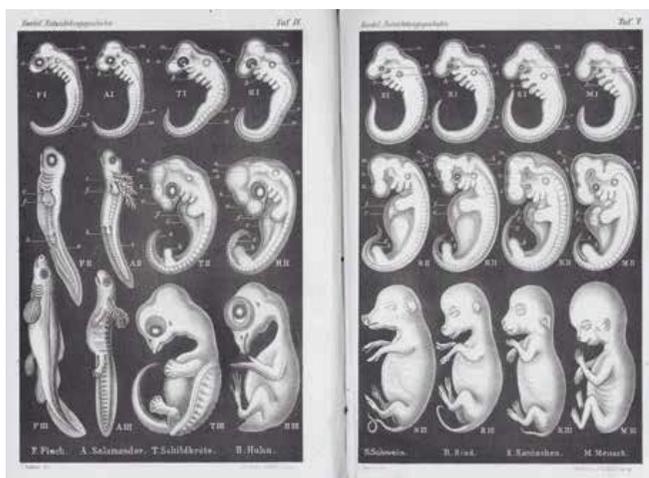


Fig. 17 Ernst Haeckel's 'Comparative Chart of Embryos', 1874

When compared to von Stuck or Munch, afKlint steered her own individual course. Picasso, who in fact exhibited his drawings in public as infrequently as afKlint did her paintings, had gone furthest in dissolving the boundaries between bodies. AfKlint simply did away with all mortal frames and boundaries. Her spirals, circles, spheres, lines, symbols, signs and letters move towards the viewer, whirling and gyrating. In *The Ten Largest*, the objects could be the size of planets or as tiny as paramecia. Depending on one's perspective they shrink us to the size of Gulliver in Brobdingnag or make us giants in Lilliput. AfKlint abolishes boundaries in the space between the picture and the viewer. As in a superorganism, they form a community, for which the artist has assigned the spiral the function of the skin.

We have no Rosetta Stone for decoding afKlint's pictures or translating them into text. Nonetheless, it is interesting to conjecture that some of her imagery was a subversion of that adopted in a certain book, published in 1903, with which she was surely familiar; its reception must have shown her how little she could

expect to be understood by her contemporaries. *Sex and Character: A Fundamental Investigation* was written by Otto Weininger, a budding philosopher aged 23, the son of a Hungarian Jewish family in Vienna. His work was in part a eulogy to the genius and intellect of outstanding men; for women he reserved a torrent of hatred. The book became a runaway success, whose admirers included the Swedish dramatist August Strindberg, who described Weininger's work as 'that of a courageous male warrior'. Weininger had declared war on the notion of female creativity, no matter whether women wrote, painted or composed. According to him:

'It is enough to make the general statement that there is not a single woman in the history of thought, not even the most manlike, who can be truthfully compared with men of fifth or sixth-rate genius, for instance with Rückert as a poet, Van Dyck as a painter, or Scheirmacher as a philosopher.'¹⁰

Sibylla Merian, Marie Vigée-Lebrun, Angelika Kaufmann, Rosa Bonheur – all these painters are cited by Weininger only to deny any greatness on their part. He assigns the letter 'W' to the female sex, or more precisely to the 'ideal female', and 'M' to the male sex, defining the supposed difference as follows:

'The female [W], moreover, is completely occupied and content with sexual matters, whilst the male [M], interested in much else, in war and sport, in social affairs and feasting, in philosophy and science, in business and politics, in religion and art.'¹¹

He was particularly irked that in reality man and woman never existed in pure form which in his view made it even more necessary to separate the sexes in philosophical terms. In this context Weininger quoted Darwin and his studies of hermaphroditic beings, which as we have seen, also attracted the attention of afKlint. But in contrast, Weininger wished to restore order to the world of thought and spirit, to create a clear sexual hierarchy in which women are subservient to men. He viewed female artists as 'masculine women', and he believed that in modern society men are threatened by 'feminisation' – a process that Weininger, trapped in pronounced self-hatred, saw as being particularly advanced in Jews.

¹⁰ Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character*, London, 6th edition (London: William Heinemann, 1906) p. 69.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

'W', according to Weininger the cipher for the ideal woman, often appears in af Klint's works, either as a title or painted image. At one point in her writings she assigns 'W' the meaning of 'matter'. In her paintings 'W' leads a life of its own: like a chameleon the letter takes on wavelike lines, disappears behind spheres, circles, stands on its head or dissolves into patterns. 'W' fills the canvas as in *The Ten Largest, No. 8* (p. 73), and even more frequently it forms communities with other letters.

We do not know how af Klint stood on the so-called women's question; little is known about her private life. Her notes reveal that she formed a group with four other women, who called themselves The Five (*De Fem*). Up to 1908, numerous works resulted from this collaboration. One of these friends, Anna Cassel, funded a studio building for af Klint on the island of Munsö, where she lived with her mother for 12 years. When the latter died in 1920, af Klint shared a flat with her mother's former nurse. It was in the company of other women that af Klint seems to have found confirmation that the world was less confined, ordered and fixed than was generally claimed. With her paintings she created spaces that were both physically and mentally far distant from the grim battle of the sexes invoked by Munch, von Stuck and Weininger.

Weininger, who committed suicide shortly after publication of his book, was convinced that letters and words were sufficient to express what he wanted to say. Af Klint continued to paint throughout her life until she died in 1944 at the age of 81. She must have believed the opposite. Words were not enough by far. Traditional, academic art was not enough. Art itself had to undergo an evolution and only a new kind of art, an evolved art, could create the space for a freedom of thought for which she had few allies in her time. This art could call into question the order of things, which seemed fixed and stable according to so many. This art could help to perceive what had previously been invisible and to think what had previously seemed unthinkable. And maybe one day, in time, another generation, a future viewer, would welcome and appreciate that evolution of art.

The author thanks Johan af Klint and Nick Hopwood for generously supplying the images for fig. 8 and fig. 17 in this essay.



Fig. 18 Hilma af Klint in her studio at Hamngatan 5, Stockholm, 1895

HILMA AF KLINT
PAINTING THE UNSEEN
SERPENTINE GALLERY
3 MARCH – 15 MAY 2016

All works by Hilma af Klint are courtesy of Stiftelsen Hilma af Klints Verk.

SOUTH GALLERY

The WU/Rose series: *Primordial Chaos*, 1906–7



Group I, No. 1. Primordial Chaos, 1906
Oil on canvas
53 × 37 cm



Group I, No. 2. Primordial Chaos, 1906
Oil on canvas
53 × 36.5 cm



Group I, No. 3. Primordial Chaos, 1906
Oil on canvas
53 × 37 cm



Group I, No. 4. Primordial Chaos, 1906
Oil on canvas
53 × 37 cm



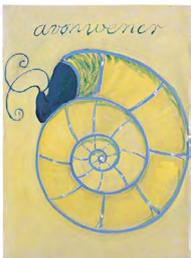
Group I, No. 5. Primordial Chaos, 1906-7
Oil on canvas
53 × 37 cm



Group I, No. 6. Primordial Chaos, 1906-7
Oil on canvas
52.5 × 37 cm



Group I, No. 7. Primordial Chaos, 1906-7
Oil on canvas
53 × 37 cm



Group I, No. 8. Primordial Chaos, 1906-7
Oil on canvas
53 × 37 cm



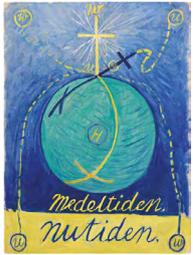
Group I, No. 9. Primordial Chaos, 1906-7
Oil on canvas
51.5 × 37 cm



Group I, No. 10. Primordial Chaos, 1906-7
Oil on canvas
51.5 × 37 cm



Group I, No. 11. Primordial Chaos, 1906-7
Oil on canvas
51 × 37.5 cm



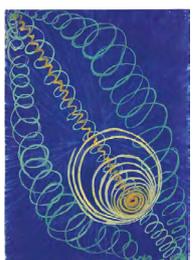
Group I, No. 12. Primordial Chaos, 1906-7
Oil on canvas
53 × 37 cm



Group I, No. 14. Primordial Chaos, 1906-7
Oil on canvas
50 × 38 cm



Group I, No. 15. Primordial Chaos, 1906-7
Oil on canvas
52 × 37 cm



Group I, No. 16. Primordial Chaos, 1906-7
Oil on canvas
53 × 37 cm



Group I, No. 17. Primordial Chaos, 1906-7
Oil on canvas
52.5 × 37 cm



Group I, No. 18. Primordial Chaos, 1906-7
Oil on canvas
52 × 37 cm



Group I, No. 19. Primordial Chaos, 1906-7
Oil on canvas
51.5 × 37 cm



Group I, No. 20. Primordial Chaos, 1906-7
Oil on canvas
52.5 × 37 cm



Group I, No. 22. Primordial Chaos, 1906-7
Oil on canvas
51.5 × 36.5 cm



Group I, No. 23. Primordial Chaos, 1906-7
Oil on canvas
52 × 37 cm



Group I, No. 25. Primordial Chaos, 1906-7
Oil on canvas
52.5 × 37.5 cm

Series X: *Altarpieces*, 1915



Altarpiece, No. 2, 1915
Oil and metal leaf on canvas
238 × 179 cm



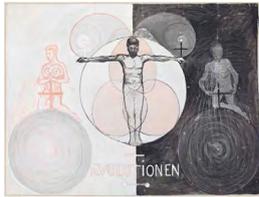
Altarpiece, No. 3, 1915
Oil and metal leaf on canvas
237.5 × 178.5 cm



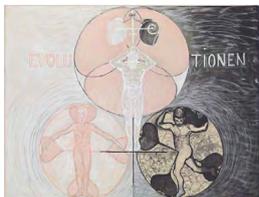
Altarpiece, No. 1, 1915
Oil and metal leaf on canvas
237.5 × 179.5 cm

EAST GALLERY

The WUS/Seven-Pointed Star series: *Evolution*, 1908



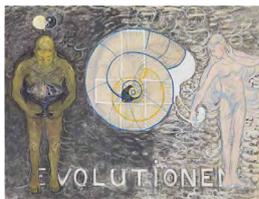
Group VI, No. 1. Evolution, 1908
Oil on canvas
102.5 × 134.5 cm



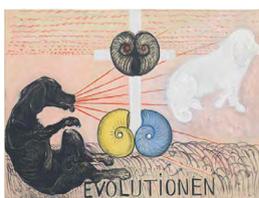
Group VI, No. 2. Evolution, 1908
Oil on canvas
100 × 131.5 cm



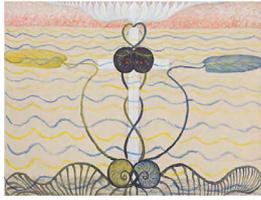
Group VI, No. 3. Evolution, 1908
Oil on canvas
102.5 × 133.5 cm



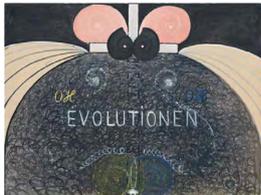
Group VI, No. 4. Evolution, 1908
Oil on canvas
104 × 133.5 cm



Group VI, No. 5. Evolution, 1908
Oil on canvas
100.5 × 133 cm



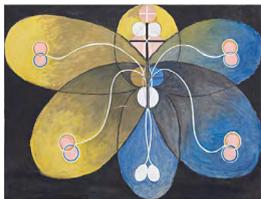
Group VI, No. 6. Evolution, 1908
Oil on canvas
100.5 × 132.5 cm



Group VI, No. 7. Evolution, 1908
Oil on canvas
101.5 × 132.5 cm



Group VI, No. 8. Evolution, 1908
Oil on canvas
103 × 133 cm



Group VI, No. 9. Evolution, 1908
Oil on canvas
101 × 131.5 cm



Group VI, No. 10. Evolution, 1908
Oil on canvas
102.5 × 132.5 cm



Group VI, No. 11. Evolution, 1908
Oil on canvas
102.5 × 133.5 cm



Group VI, No. 12. Evolution, 1908
Oil on canvas
102 × 133 cm



Group VI, No. 13. Evolution, 1908
Oil on canvas
99 × 129.5 cm



Group VI, No. 14. Evolution, 1908
Oil on canvas
99.5 × 129.5 cm

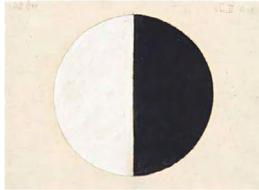


Group VI, No. 15. Evolution, 1908
Oil on canvas
99 × 130 cm



Group VI, No. 16. Evolution, 1908
Oil on canvas
102 × 133 cm

Series II, 1920



No. 1. Starting Picture, 1920

Oil on canvas

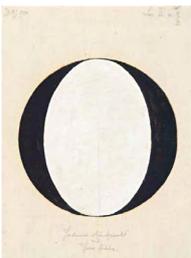
27 × 36.5 cm



No. 2a. The Current Standpoint of the Mahatmas, 1920

Oil on canvas

36.5 × 27 cm



No. 2b. The Jewish Standpoint at the Birth of Jesus, 1920

Oil on canvas

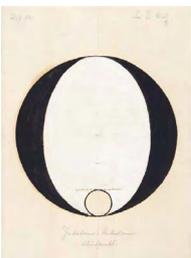
36.5 × 27 cm



No. 3a. Buddha's Standpoint in Worldly Life, 1920

Oil on canvas

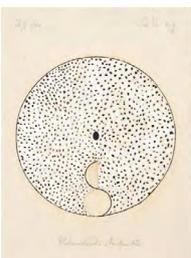
37 × 28 cm



No. 3b. The Standpoints of Judaism and Heathendom, 1920

Oil on canvas

36.5 × 27 cm

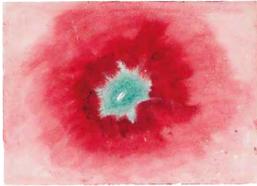


No. 3c. The Mohammedan Standpoint, 1920

Oil on canvas

36.5 × 27 cm

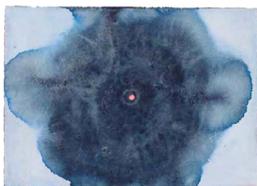
Picture series: *On the Viewing of Flowers and Trees*, 1922



Untitled, 1922
Watercolour on paper
18 × 25 cm



Untitled, 1922
Watercolour on paper
18 × 25 cm



Untitled, 1922
Watercolour on paper
18 × 25 cm



Wheat and Wormwood, 1922
Watercolour and graphite on paper
17.5 × 24.5 cm



Untitled, 1922
Watercolour on paper
18 × 25 cm

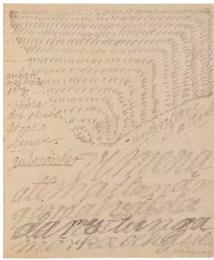


Untitled, 1922
Watercolour on paper
18 × 25 cm

Notebooks, 1896–35



Notebook 2 (The Five), p. 4, 1896–8
Graphite on paper



Notebook 7 (The Five), n.p., 1903–4
Graphite on paper



Notebook (The Five), pp. 79–80, 1901–2
Ink on paper



Notes on Letters and Words Pertaining to Works by Hilma af Klint
Notebook, pp. 30–1, 1907–35
Ink on paper



A Work on Flowers, Mosses and Lichen
Notebook, pp. 34–5, 1919–20
Ink, watercolour on paper



Notebook 3, spread 5, n.d.
Graphite, watercolour and photograph on paper

NORTH GALLERY

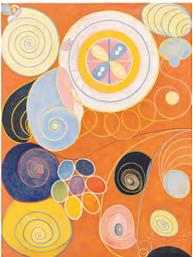
The Ten Largest, 1907



Group IV, No. 1. The Ten Largest, Childhood, 1907
Tempera on paper mounted on canvas
322 × 239 cm



Group IV, No. 2. The Ten Largest, Childhood, 1907
Tempera on paper mounted on canvas
315 × 234 cm



Group IV, No. 3. The Ten Largest, Youth, 1907
Tempera on paper mounted on canvas
321 × 240 cm



Group IV, No. 4. The Ten Largest, Youth, 1907
Tempera on paper mounted on canvas
315 × 234 cm



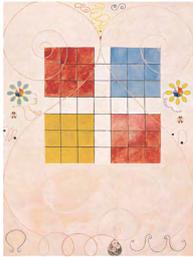
Group IV, No. 6. The Ten Largest, Adulthood, 1907
Tempera on paper mounted on canvas
315 × 234 cm



Group IV, No. 7. The Ten Largest, Adulthood, 1907
Tempera on paper mounted on canvas
315 × 235 cm



Group IV, No. 8. The Ten Largest, Adulthood, 1907
Tempera on paper mounted on canvas
322 × 239 cm



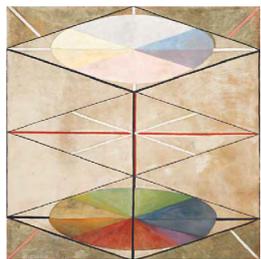
Group IV, No. 10. The Ten Largest, Old Age, 1907
Tempera on paper mounted on canvas
320 × 237 cm

WEST GALLERY

The SUW/UW series: *The Swan*, 1914–5



Group IX/SUW, No. 21. The Swan, No. 21, 1914–5
Oil on canvas
153 × 153 cm



Group IX/SUW, No. 23. The Swan, No. 23, 1914–5
Oil on canvas
152.5 × 150 cm



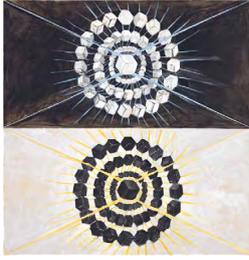
Group IX/SUW, No. 9. The Swan, No. 9, 1914–5
Oil on canvas
149.5 × 149 cm



Group IX/SUW, No. 7. The Swan, No. 7, 1914–5
Oil on canvas
148.5 × 149.5 cm



Group IX/SUW, No. 1. The Swan, No. 1, 1914–5
Oil on canvas
150 × 150 cm



Group IX/SUW, No. 8. The Swan, No. 8, 1914–5
Oil on canvas
152.5 × 149 cm



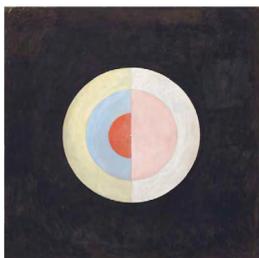
Group IX/SUW, No. 13. The Swan, No. 13, 1914–5
Oil on canvas
148.5 × 151 cm



Group IX/SUW, No. 17. The Swan, No. 17, 1914–5
Oil on canvas
150.5 × 151 cm

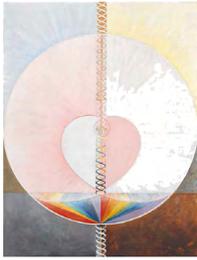


Group IX/SUW, No. 12. The Swan, No. 12, 1914–5
Oil on canvas
151.5 × 151 cm



Group IX/SUW, No. 16. The Swan, No. 16, 1914–5
Oil on canvas
154.5 × 151 cm

The SUW/UW series: *The Dove*, 1915



Group IX/UW, No. 25. The Dove, No. 1, 1915
Oil on canvas
151 × 114.5 cm



Group IX/UW, No. 29. The Dove, No. 5, 1915
Oil on canvas
152.5 × 117.5 cm



Group IX/UW, No. 27. The Dove, No. 3, 1915
Oil on canvas
155.5 × 115.5 cm

HILMA AF KLINT: PAINTING THE UNSEEN
Serpentine Gallery
3 March – 15 May 2016

WALL TEXT

Swedish artist Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm from 1882 to 1887 and exhibited publicly as a portrait and landscape artist. In secret, however, she rejected traditional representation, instead using her acute observational skills to depict unseen worlds hidden within nature, science, the spiritual realm and the occult.

From the late 1880s she formed a group with four other female artists called The Five (*De Fem*). Collectively, and in private, they conducted séances leading to experiments with automatic writing and drawing, which anticipated the Surrealists by several decades. In 1905 af Klint received a message from a spiritual entity encouraging her to create what was to become her most important body of work: *The Paintings for the Temple*. This cycle, realised between 1906 and 1915, comprises 193 predominately abstract works that pre-date the first non-figurative paintings by artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian. Painted methodically and in series, af Klint's cycle is characterised by hybrid images and symbols drawn from her engagement with contemporary science and esoteric religious philosophies, from the discovery of electromagnetic waves to the spiritual teachings of the philosopher Rudolf Steiner.

This exhibition focuses primarily on works from across six key series of *The Paintings for the Temple* that chart af Klint's pursuit of an original unity. She felt that the principle of equilibrium and 'oneness' was lost at the world's creation, giving way to a universe of polarities: good and evil, woman and man, matter and spirit, science and religion, macrocosm and microcosm, which she sought to understand and resolve in her paintings. Duality is reflected formally in the cycle through the use of colour, composition and various signs, and in the way in which abstraction and figuration co-exist, presented without hierarchy.

After completing *The Paintings of the Temple*, af Klint continued to paint in series but on a smaller scale. Two groups of work in the exhibition from the 1920s demonstrate how she continued her enquiry into the principles of life through the lens of philosophy and nature. The exhibition also includes a number of her notebooks. These record her meetings with The Five and their automatic techniques, as well as her lifelong desire to annotate and analyse the meanings of the images she created.

Af Klint's work has only just begun to receive its due attention. During her lifetime she chose not to exhibit her abstract works publicly, and she extended this wish into death, stipulating in her will that the paintings should not be seen for 20 years after she died. However, they were not exhibited until 1986 and have since established that the historical narrative of abstraction in twentieth century art is not a closed book. Contemporary artists have cited af Klint's cosmic abstraction and her visionary approach to painting as an inspiration, perhaps bringing to fruition her prediction that one day she would be seen as a pioneer for future generations.

EXTENDED WALL LABELS

[SOUTH GALLERY]

The concept of the spiral and sequence is fundamental to af Klint's work and this Gallery brings together the first and final series from *The Paintings for the Temple* – the artist's most important body of work comprising 193 paintings made between 1906 and 1915, which she began at the age of 44. Influenced by her contact with the spiritual world as a medium, the cycle sought to understand the relationship between the spiritual and material worlds, good and evil, man and woman, religion and science.

PRIMORDIAL CHAOS (1906–7)

THE WU/ROSE SERIES

The works in *Primordial Chaos* are af Klint's first abstract paintings, and pre-date the earliest non-figurative paintings by the pioneers of abstraction. The series examines the origins of the world at the point at which unity was split into polarities, when the dualities of light and dark, male and female became the basis for all life. *Primordial Chaos* introduces motifs and symbols that reoccur throughout af Klint's oeuvre. The spiral and snail represent evolution and give form to contemporary scientific discoveries such as the frequencies of the electromagnetic wave. Text and handwriting stem from the automatic writing practices of The Five (a group she formed with five female artists) and af Klint identified the letter 'W' as representing matter and 'U' as standing for the spiritual. The predominant colours of these works hold symbolic meaning too, with yellow representing the masculine and blue the feminine; green signifies the unity of the two.

ALTARPIECES (1915)

SERIES X

Af Klint envisioned the *Altarpieces* as the culmination of an unrealised installation of all *The Paintings for the Temple*, housed within a spiral-shaped temple that she designed. Geometric form and clarity of vision demonstrate her arrival at 'oneness' and, with this final series, the triangle is an ancient symbol that points towards enlightenment, connecting the material and spiritual worlds. It signifies how af Klint perceived the visible and unseen not in opposition, but as interconnected.

[NORTH GALLERY]

THE TEN LARGEST (1907)

The series *The Ten Largest* charts the cycle of life by representing the four ages of humankind: childhood, youth, adulthood and old age. This Gallery presents eight works from this monumental series, which were painted on paper on the floor of af Klint's studio and later pasted onto canvas. Af Klint was an acute observer of nature; she was an accomplished botanical artist and worked as a draftsman at the Veterinary Institute in Stockholm in 1900. *The Ten Largest* works are characterised by diverse floral and biological imagery resembling cells, blossoms, seeds and stamens – organic forms that are emphasised by af Klint's looping handwriting. The paintings morph between a microscopic and macrocosmic range, simultaneously proposing worlds of molecular cells and the expanse of the universe.

[EAST GALLERY]

EVOLUTION (1908)

THE WUS/SEVEN-POINTED STAR SERIES

The 16 paintings of the *Evolution* series depict the divisions of light and dark, male and female. The combination of figurative and abstract elements within mirrored compositions further emphasise the central importance of polarity within af Klint's paintings. While the title most likely relates to an esoteric cosmology, it also evokes Charles Darwin's *Theory of Evolution* (1859), the most important scientific, religious and philosophical proposition of the period. This theory chimed with Theosophy's central belief on the origins of humanity, of which af Klint was a follower.

[WEST GALLERY]

THE SWAN (1914–5)

THE SUW/UW SERIES

After completing the *Evolution* paintings in 1908, af Klint met her mentor Rudolf Steiner – a theosophist and later founder of another esoteric spiritual movement, Anthroposophy. Steiner's faith in and emphasis on introspection perhaps influenced af Klint away from her previous automatic painting techniques, leading her to create more considered, deliberate personal interpretations when, several years later, she returned to painting after a break to care for her mother from 1908–12.

In *The Swan* series af Klint integrates the bird – a key symbol in alchemy – into her previous dichotomies of light and dark, male and female. The series increasingly become purely abstract and geometric, making reference to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's diagrammatic colour wheels and research into optics, known to and studied by Steiner.

[SMALL WEST GALLERY]

THE DOVE (1915) THE SUW/UW SERIES

The Dove paintings sit within the same series as *The Swan* works. Both groups shift between figuration and abstraction and draw upon the iconography of birds found within esoteric and Christian symbolism.

[SMALL EAST GALLERY]

SERIES II (1920)

After completing *The Paintings for the Temple* in 1915, af Klint continued to paint numerous abstract series. These show an increased reduction of form giving order to her worldly observations. In *Series II* af Klint used the simplicity of the circle, as well as black and white, to define the dualities inherent within many of the world's religions.

ON THE VIEWING OF FLOWERS AND TREES (1922)

THE PICTURE SERIES

In this late watercolour series, af Klint abandons geometric abstraction in favour of allowing colour to define the sensation of viewing nature. She intuitively reveals the inner essence of a plant over its external reality. While this approach represents a clear departure in her practice, it is reminiscent of the automatic techniques she used two decades earlier in the *Primordial Chaos* and *The Ten Largest* series. The artist, at age 60, had come full circle in her exploration of the unseen.

NOTEBOOKS BY THE FIVE

During her lifetime, af Klint made over 125 notebooks, comprising around 25,000 pages. In 1896 af Klint formed a spiritualist group named The Five (*De Fem*) with four other women artists. Collectively, they sought a spiritual reality beyond what they could perceive with their eyes. They met often at each other's homes and participated in séances, believing they could communicate with mystic beings whom they named the 'High Masters'. This practice had parallels with contemporary scientific advancements including the discovery of various unseen frequencies such as the electromagnetic wave and the X-ray. The Five collectively authored works, creating automatic drawings and writings that anticipated the Surrealists by several decades. Af Klint was the principal medium of the group, who transmitted messages from the 'High Masters'. In 1905 she received the individual commission to create *The Paintings of the Temple*.

NOTEBOOKS BY HILMA AF KLINT

During her lifetime, af Klint made over 125 notebooks, comprising around 25,000 pages. She believed that she was communicating with the spiritual world and she used her notebooks to annotate and analyse the meanings of the images she had created through the guidance of these spirits. The notebooks are systematic in their approach and can be likened to scientific research journals.

The pages on display show the different ways in which af Klint used notebooks, from diagrammatic studies of flowers, mosses and lichens, to meticulously coding the meanings of words and symbols that appear in her paintings. She never made preparatory sketches for her works, though in later years she made small watercolour copies of her paintings in her notebooks, as well as photographs to document and catalogue her work.