

Hilma af Klint's new ways of seeing

Years before Kandinsky, a Swedish woman created magnificent abstract paintings.

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [July 31, 2019](#) issue



Hilma af Klint, detail from [The Ten Largest nr 3, Youth, Group 4](#), 1907.

In the lone art history class I took in college, I learned that in 1910 the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky made the first abstract painting. His untitled watercolor reminded me of the world revealed when a drop of pond water is put under a microscope—a world of forms in motion.

But years before Kandinsky, another artist was creating abstract paintings that illuminated hidden realities: Swedish painter Hilma af Klint, who recently had a major exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York called *Paintings for the Future*. When I visited on a cold day in January, the line of people waiting to see af Klint's work stretched out of the museum, around the corner, and down the block. Inside, a great crowd of people slowly wound their way past her monumental series of large paintings reflecting on the journey from childhood to old age, her altarpieces

for altars not yet made, and her diagrammatic images that investigate color and form with such precision and intensity that they seem to point beyond color and form to something further out.

Or maybe to something further in. The exhibition included two paintings of ring-encircled globes with something tiny at the center. If you could get close enough, you could see them: two tiny angels standing together, face to face, at the core of the world.

Trained as a painter at Sweden's Royal Academy of Fine Arts, af Klint exhibited and sold both landscapes and portraits. She was known as both a gifted painter and a botanical illustrator whose drawings of plants and flowers possess an arresting beauty, the fruit of what must have been a patient, reverent attention to the world.

A practicing Lutheran, she was deeply engaged with the scientific and spiritual currents of her day. She gathered regularly with a group of four friends, all women, to meditate, pray, read scripture, and connect to the invisible world of the spirit as mediums. She described this practice in her notebooks and sketched images of the spirit guides the group encountered—abstract, geometric shapes that she colored in with green pencil.

The Five, as this group of friends called themselves, often made drawings while reaching across the border between the visible and the invisible world. These automatic drawings led them in new directions—away from the understanding of the artist as an individual genius and toward a more communal art making arising out of spiritual practice, away from traditional forms and imagery and toward something new. Their spirit guides encouraged them to draw, to paint, to free themselves from the constraints of convention, to protect their work—messages that women artists did not often receive in the early 20th century.

The automatic drawing and communal art making af Klint practiced with the Five shook her free of her training as a naturalistic painter. Being in conversation with the spiritual world helped her cultivate new techniques, a new palette, new subjects, new scale.

By 1906, four years before Kandinsky's watercolor, af Klint was creating magnificent abstract paintings. A few years later, she no longer needed the direction of spirit guides—she knew what she wanted to paint. Her encounters with the world of the spirit through the practices of the Five were, for her, a bridge from one kind of art

making—one kind of seeing—to another. Today, as af Klint is being celebrated as an early practitioner of abstract art, it's interesting to ask whether she herself regarded the images she created as abstract. Maybe they were representational in that they were how she saw the invisible life of the world—the life of atoms not visible to the eye, the life of invisible growth and change. Maybe she saw a new kind of landscape—the real world all around her, alive and in flux.

Af Klint belongs to a long history of women artists for whom experiences of God, spirit, or an excess presence in the world opened the way for them to express their fresh visions. Believing that her contemporaries would not understand her work—a difficult studio visit by Rudolph Steiner reinforced this conviction—af Klint painted for the future. She did not exhibit her abstract work or put it on the market during her lifetime, and she stipulated that it could not be shown until 20 years after her death. She made her work for those who would come after her. She painted, in many ways, for us.

Her paintings of more than a century ago do speak powerfully in the present, as the long lines of people waiting to see them attest. Her vision of the world as alive and changing reminds us that we are alive and changing, too. Her life is an inspiration to cultivate practices that will help us shake free of our training, as she did. Think of all we have to unlearn: the ideologies of white supremacy we have all imbibed, the reluctance to believe women when they speak of sexual assault, the zero-sum view of the world that keeps children in cages along our border. Hilma af Klint reminds us that for change to come, we need communities within which to practice new ways of living, working, and seeing—communities from which our own gifts to the future might be fashioned.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “New ways of seeing.”