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REVIEWS

Painting Transcendence

A Jungian Lens on the Works of Hilma af Klint

MARYBETH CARTER

Review of: *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, with the cooperation of the Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm, October 12, 2018, to April 23, 2019.

Immediately on viewing the works of Hilma af Klint (1862–1944), an artist who was a contemporary of C. G. Jung (1875–1961), I experienced a surge of excitement from the bold images and symbolic themes that can also be found in C. G. Jung's art. Both af Klint and Jung employed intentional nonfigurative and representational images to convey ideas and transcendent experiences, such as those found in *The Red Book*. Furthermore, automatic painting, used by Jung when he created his mandala drawings, was also utilized by af Klint for many of her works. In many ways, their art and artistic techniques are a reminder of the cultural context in which they lived. It was a time of seances and a sense of the otherworldly, the emergence of theosophy and psychology, the fascination with the supernatural and the unconscious, and the revelation of Darwinian evolutionary theory along with the scientific revolution in physics and atomic theory. These influences were apparent at the recent solo exhibition of af Klint's work at the Guggenheim Museum in New York (October 12, 2018, to April 23, 2019), with hundreds of her works (1906–1920) on display. Organized by Tracey Bashkoff, Director of Collections and Senior Curator, with David Horowitz, Curatorial Assistant, the exhibit, *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future*, was organized by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, with the cooperation of the Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm.

Hilma af Klint was a Swedish artist who formally trained at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm where she graduated with honors. Her initial work tended toward landscapes, portraits, and botanical illustrations, which she regularly exhibited. When af Klint joined the Theosophical Society in Sweden in 1889 (Bashkoff 2018, 133, fn. 19), she began to engage in spiritual work that influenced her artistic style and

subject matter. A practicing Lutheran, af Klint participated in regular study of the Christian Bible, prayer, and seances with four other women who called themselves “the five” (*De Fein*). They recorded the content that emerged during their seances and engaged in automatic drawing. In 1904, af Klint consented to serve as a medium to “Amaliel, one of the High Masters” (129), who frequently spoke to her during seances and for whom af Klint channeled more than 193 paintings and drawings. She wrote: “I was told I was a pioneer and committed to an uncomprehended working method.”¹ Again she wrote: “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 brush stroke.”² In 1908, af Klint invited Rudolf Steiner, a leader in the Theosophical Society and, later, the Anthroposophical Society, to view the paintings she created in response to the “commission” from the High Masters. Even though these are the very paintings so many of us rushed to see on display at this exhibit, Steiner purportedly discouraged af Klint from painting in this manner or showing these artworks in public. Neither the exhibit nor the books about af Klint state why he was so discouraging, although it is noted that af Klint held Steiner in high regard. His declination is curious, because, in 1922, when she once again offered her work to be displayed in the rebuilt Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland, which had been destroyed by fire and which housed the meetings of the Anthroposophical Society, Steiner declined again to include her works.³ I wonder why he did not want af Klint’s paintings to be seen in public—not even within the walls of the Theosophical Society—and af Klint gives us no clues. Perhaps the paintings, which were a direct transmission from the High Masters, were so unusual for the time (abstract paintings when the abstract movement itself had not yet occurred) that Steiner thought af Klint’s spiritual artwork would not be understood by the majority of people.

Over the years, af Klint traveled several times to Dornach, Switzerland, for research and study at the Goetheanum, where she was finally able to donate her work on flowers, crosses, and lichen to the Theosophical Society as well as a complete copy of her series *The Tree of Knowledge* to a fellow society member. In 1928, af Klint traveled to London to exhibit a rare showing of her works and delivered a presentation about her series *Paintings for the Temple*, at the World Conference of Spiritual Science and its Practical Applications. In 1931, af Klint created architectural plans for a circular temple that she hoped would one day house her artistic works commissioned by the High Masters. The temple would include four spiraling interior levels with a tower in the center space. Before her death in 1932, she meticulously archived her notebooks and works, leaving explicit instructions with her nephew to store the more than 1000 works and 125 notebooks. She told him to refrain from exhibiting the paintings until twenty years after her death, although we do not know precisely why this was important. Perhaps because af Klint spent the entirety of her life developing her inner capacity to receive spiritual instruction, she hoped that with the passage of time other people would develop this capacity as well. As a result they would have a greater ability to receive the message inherent in these spiritual paintings. Despite this mystery about time and the showing of her work, her family followed

her wishes, then created a foundation to care for and exhibit her works and notebooks in order to make the paintings available to those who seek spiritual knowledge, to preserve her work, and to protect it from those who might disrespect it (Linden 1998, 8). Many years passed before an art institution expressed interest in showing her paintings. Finally, in 1986, the first posthumous exhibit of af Klint's works appeared at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). The exhibition, entitled *The Spiritual in Art—Abstract Paintings 1890–1985*, posited af Klint as an abstract artist.⁴ It would be another thirty-two years before a second exhibit in the United States—and af Klint's first US solo exhibition—was held at the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

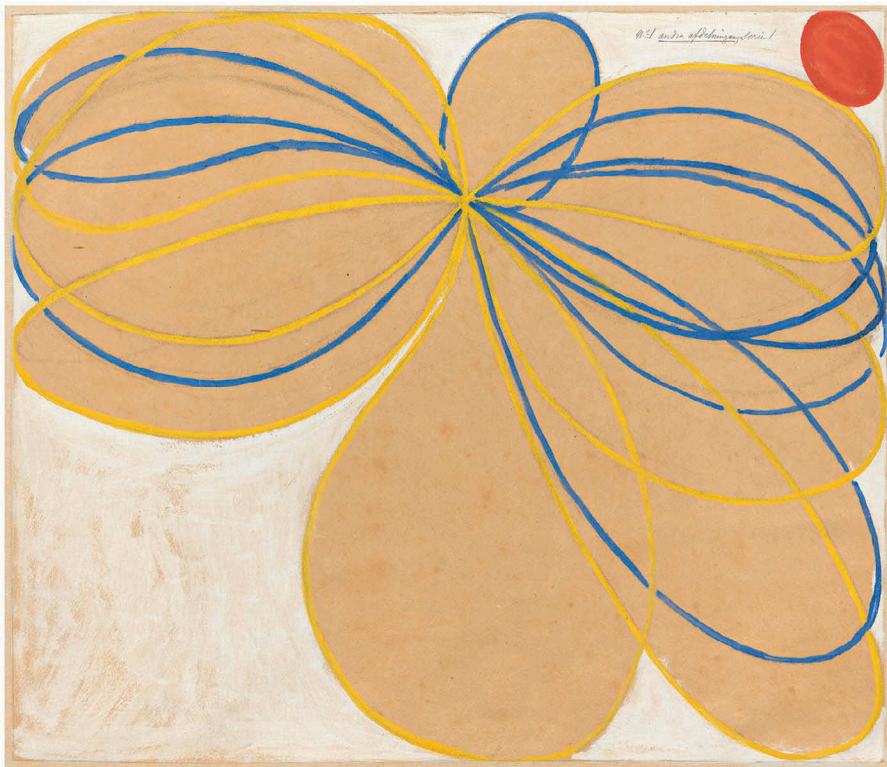
The Guggenheim, with its focus on nonobjective painting styles, was an exceptional space for the af Klint exhibit. Stepping from the entrance into the museum's central area, I was immediately in view of the magnificent spiral staircase, which beckoned toward af Klint's captivating paintings and drawings. There is an incredible parallel between the Guggenheim's 1959 Frank Lloyd Wright-designed circular building, with its sweeping interior spiral staircase and Hilma af Klint's spiritually inspired architectural plans for a circular temple. Her blueprint for the temple included a spiral staircase that connected the four floors to provide an experiential encounter as one walked up the staircase to view the more than 193 works she had created. af Klint completed the architectural rendering of the temple in 1931, one year after Hilla Rebay, an artist and guide to Solomon R. Guggenheim in the acquisition of his collection of abstract art, proposed the creation of a circular building in New York City to house his extensive collection of art. We are fortunate that such an incredible building exists in which to house the solo exhibit of af Klint's works.

A notable instance of automatic drawing/painting, which was also used by Jung in his mandala drawings (Jung 1961/1963, 195⁵), is af Klint's series of paintings she channeled in 1907. Working as a medium to allow the images to transfer directly to brush and canvas, af Klint painted the series *The Paintings for the Temple*, which is comprised of ten larger-than-life paintings (10' × 6.5') consisting of tempera on paper and mounted on canvas (Hilkestrom and Voss 2018, Guggenheim exhibition notes). Each painting depicts a stage of the human lifecycle, and she intended for them to be hung in the circular temple she wanted to have built. The developmental stages of childhood, youth, adulthood, and old age suggest biological stages of growth and human potential. The painting *No. 7, Adulthood* is represented by a large yellow image with three mandala-like "petals." Each petal contains a Roman numeral: I, II, or III. This rendering of the numbers within the oval petals reminds me of the alchemical precept⁶: "the one becomes two, two becomes three and out of the third comes the one as the fourth," which represents the dynamic unfolding from unconsciousness, to the emergence of one-sided consciousness, to the cognition of the opposites of consciousness and unconsciousness, and finally to the integration of duality into a new conscious attitude through the process of individuation. Metaphorically abstract circles, spirals, and other evolutionary-like life symbols of various pink, orange, blue, and purple organic forms—circles, spirals, flowers, egg-like ovals, and quaternity symbols—surround the yellow mandala. As I stood before the larger-than-life-size paintings, the images delightfully flowed from one canvas to the next. As one writer observed, "standing before the paintings, one becomes privy to the dance of life."⁷ Truly, I did experience an uplifting feeling when standing before these glorious paintings.



Hilma af Klint, *Group IV, The Ten Largest, No. 7, Adulthood (Grupp IV, De tio största, nr 7, Mannaåldern)*, 1907 from untitled series. Tempera on paper mounted on canvas, 315 × 235 cm. The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm. (Photo: Albin Dahlström, the Moderna Museet, Stockholm. Guggenheim, by permission.)

During this period of automatic painting (1906–1908), af Klint continued as a medium for transmitting another series painted with oil on canvas, entitled *Eros* (1907). With the *Eros* series, af Klint displayed an abstract design that suggests movement, growth, dynamism, and wholeness conveyed using dark blues, greens, grays, and yellows to evoke depth and primordial nature. The paintings include actual words such as *Eros*, *wu*, *evolution*, and *U*, as imperative gestures. For af Klint, *w* stood for “man and matter” whereas *u* stood for “woman and spiritual.”⁸ The syllable *wu* is af Klint’s code for the complementary nature and resolution of duality into unity.



Hilma af Klint, *Group V, The Seven-Pointed Star, No. 1* (in *Grupp V, Sjustjärnan, nr 1*), 1908 from *The WUS/Seven-Pointed Star Series (Serie WUS/Sjustjärnan)*. Tempera, gouache, and graphite on paper mounted on canvas, 62.5 × 76 cm. The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm.
(Photo: Albin Dahlström, the Moderna Museet, Stockholm. Guggenheim, by permission.)

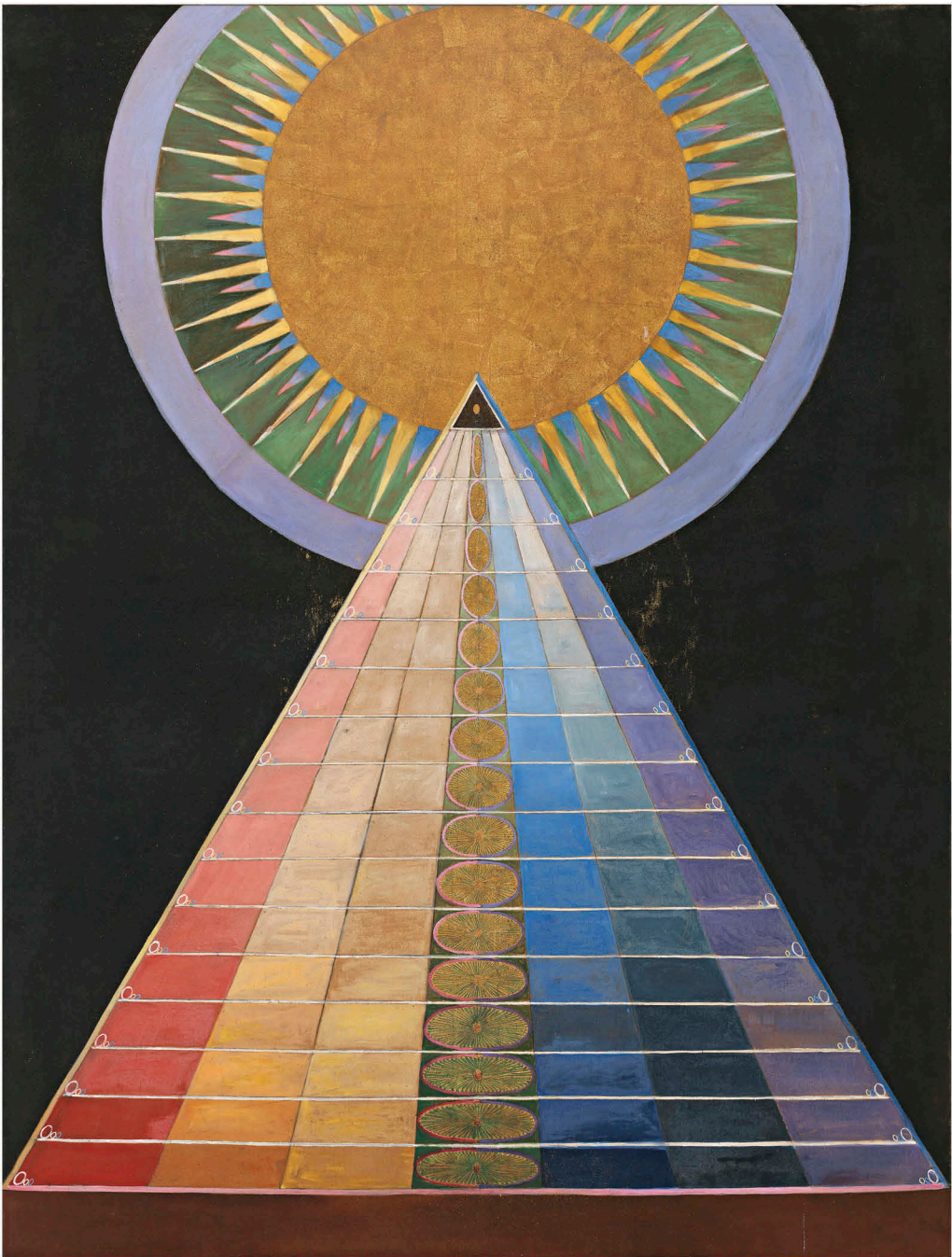
The *Seven-Pointed Star* series (1908) created with tempera, gouache, and graphite on paper and mounted on canvas, as well as the *Evolution* (1908) series created with oil on canvas, illustrates how af Klint rendered her view on evolution as both biological and spiritual within the cosmological milieu (Hilkestrom and Voss, 2018, Guggenheim exhibition postings). af Klint “was convinced that in parallel with the material world lies an inner one, that the contents of the inner dimensions are exactly as true and real as are those of the outer one.”⁹ She painted and drew the figure of the spiral as

a symbol of evolution, which she conceptualized as biological and spiritual growth, and also depicted it as a snail's shell. af Klint rendered the number *seven*, a symbol of completion in many world religions, into mandala-like forms of petals, ovals, pentagonal-shapes, spirals, and circles within circles. Depictions of Adam and Eve, sperm and eggs, and the centrality of the black serpent represent duality within the motion of evolution juxtaposed with the resolution and integration of consciousness with a new attitude.

After concluding this initial series of automatic paintings, af Klint did not paint for four years during which time she honed her capacities as a medium to an even greater degree. When she began painting and drawing again, it was to continue exploring concepts about personal growth and the experience of transcendence. For instance, in *The Swan* series (1914–1915), af Klint utilized the comprehensibility of representational figures, depicted by a white swan and a black swan in an oppositional yin/yang relationship. These interconnected swans evolve throughout the series into complementary abstract forms that suggest change, multiplication, growth, and unity, out of which something totally new has emerged that can only be suggested through an abstract, versus representational, image.

In the *Altarpiece Series* (1915), af Klint painted three magnificently large paintings using oil and metal leaf on canvas that were intended for the altar of the proposed temple (Hilklstrom and Voss 2018, Guggenheim exhibition postings). The pieces are vivid in color and awe-inspiring in their size as well as in their intensity of geometric form. Dynamically, the altar paintings juxtapose the interrelational movement from the material plane to the psychic level and back. In one of the altar paintings, these concepts are symbolically illustrated using a triangle, that is, a pyramid, as an ascending motif painted in rainbow colors with a center core of golden spheres. The peak of this triangle pierces a giant golden orb surrounded by the color green, which represents the unity of duality (male blue with female yellow as described earlier) in af Klint's spirituality. The green painted area has become encircled in a ring of violet color. The triangle and the sphere are connected through penetration and receptivity, suggesting they influence each other in a bidirectional flow. This great span of the color spectrum through form brings to mind Jung's theory of the psychoid realm, which he proposed spanned from ultraviolet to the infrared energies. As Daniel Birnbaum, Ann-Sofi Noring, and others stated in the preface to the catalog of the Hilma af Klint retrospective exhibition at Moderna Museet in Stockholm, "No one painted like this at that time: remarkable color combinations, monumental formats, shapes that are once both organic and otherworldly."¹⁰ Each of the three altar series paintings are abstract and vibrant in color and are stunning when viewed as a triptych, as they would be if installed as the altar piece in the temple.

In all, af Klint's *Paintings for the Temple* period is comprised of more than 193 paintings. Over the course of her life, she created more than 1300 works and 125 notebooks (approximately 26,000 pages of sketches and writings [www.hilmaafklint.se]) that depicted her conveyance and exploration of spiritual concepts based in the theosophical tradition. Until she died in 1944 at the age of eighty-two, she pursued her studies and mediumship while staying involved in various spiritual movements. She strove to understand the meaning of the content conveyed to her in the seances with the High Masters. Now, af Klint's artwork is increasingly shown posthumously to the public, and current generations are eagerly drawn to her work. On the day I went to the exhibit, the



Hilma af Klint, *Group X, No. 1, Altarpiece (Grupp X, nr 1, Altarbild)*, 1915 from *Altarpieces (Altarbilder)*. Oil and metal leaf on canvas, 237.5 × 179.5 cm. The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm. (Photo: Albin Dahlström, the Moderna Museet, Stockholm. Guggenheim, by permission.)

Guggenheim was filled with hundreds of people pondering her esoteric paintings. It seemed as if each of us was hoping to find a spark of the divine or to connect with a spiritual meaningfulness in her numerous images. The themes in her works are also ones that are central to Jungian psychology, a few of which are the Parsifal myth, nature and the tree of life, duality and quaternity, evolution and transformation, and the relationship of the material (including the atomic) plane to that of the transcendent. I am reminded of Jung's theory that the spontaneous production of archetypal images—which “are forced upon the conscious mind by dreams and visions” including symbols [such as the quaternity] that have “the quality of numinosity, often in high degree”—spans cultures and spiritual traditions (Jung 1938/1989, CW 11, ¶¶101–102). Yet there is a difference in how we most often view Jung's images in his publications, such as *The Red Book*, and seeing af Klint's works at this exhibit. For we usually see Jung's art within its intended context, so the images and their themes can help to guide those of us who study Jungian psychology and engage in Jungian analysis in gaining knowledge and transformation. Although af Klint's images in her drawings and paintings were incredibly well-presented in the beautiful Guggenheim, they appeared there devoid of the context that she and the High Masters intended. They were created specifically to be displayed in the temple, the design of which had been conveyed to af Klint in a vision. Had it been built and filled with this incredible artwork, it presumably could have engendered an embodied experience for those who walked through its four ascending levels. The various paintings and their symbolism were intended to stimulate the seeker who would have some familiarity with the spiritual concepts evoked by the images and words. Even so, in lieu of the intended temple that af Klint rendered into a blueprint for some future construction, the Guggenheim Museum was a perfect representational structure for our postmodern time in which to present such an extensive show of her work. As I joined the hundreds of people who slowly climbed up the ever-winding spiral staircase of the Guggenheim, an imaginal experience was sparked in me of a transcendent temple containing these larger-than-life paintings filled with images, letters, words, and color. Perhaps, one day, af Klint's envisioned temple will be built to house these spectacular paintings. In the meantime, I hope that as af Klint's works become more available, we will gain even more insight into the context and meaning of her transpersonal experiences that she strove to convey through spiritual art.

NOTE

References to *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung* are cited in the text as CW, volume number, and paragraph number. *The Collected Works* are published in English by Routledge (UK) and Princeton University Press (USA).

ENDNOTES

1. Hilma af Klint, from notebook HaK556, entered on February 10, 1908, <https://www.hilmaafklint.se>.
2. “Hilma af Klint: Swedish Painter,” The Art Story, <https://m.theartstory.org/artist-af-klint-hilma.htm>.
3. Johan af Klint and Hedvig Ersman, “Inspiration and Influence: The Spiritual Journal of Hilma af Klint,” *Checklist*, October 11, 2018, <https://www.guggenheim.org/blogs/checklist/inspiration-and-influence-the-spiritual-journey-of-artist-hilma-af-klint>.
4. *The Spiritual in Art—Abstract Paintings 1890–1985*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), <https://www.hilmaafklint.se>.
5. “Jung and Mandala,” Carl Jung Resources, <https://www.carl-jung.net/mandala.html>.
6. Axiom of Maria, Wikipedia, https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Axiom_of_Maria.

7. "Hilma af Klint: Swedish Painter," The Art Story, <https://m.theartstory.org/artist-af-klint-hilma.htm>.
8. Ibid.
9. "About Hilma af Klint," Hilma af Klint, <https://www.hilmaafklint.se/about-hilma-af-klint>.
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ABSTRACT

Marybeth Carter reviews the first extensive US solo exhibition of *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future*, shown at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, with the cooperation of the Hilma af Klint Foundation, in Stockholm, Sweden. af Klint was a contemporary of C. G. Jung, and her works contain motifs and images that invoke a sense of familiarity due to their similarity to those found in *The Red Book*. In addition, they convey her interest and participation, like that of Jung, in the seances and spiritualism of the time.

KEY WORDS

art, automatic drawing, C. G. Jung, Hilma af Klint, individuation, Jungian psychology, psychoid, seances, spiritualism, theosophy