

## Seeing and Depicting the Invisible

On Hilma af Klint's Modern Art and Spiritual Paintings

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When Swedish artist Hilma af Klint (1862-1944) died, she left an immense oeuvre of over 1,000 paintings and drawings and hundreds of notebooks. To all but a few of the artist's closest relations it had been unknown that she had even created such a substantial body of work. Moreover, af Klint's will stipulated that her work was to remain private for at least another twenty years after her death. Only in 1986 would some paintings be shown publicly, at the exhibition *The Spiritual in Art* in Los Angeles and The Hague. Af Klint's works suited this show very well. Kept secret from public eyes, considered sacred by the artist and her immediate circle, intended for a temple, and painted mediumistically under spiritual guidance, both the spirituality in her works and that inspiring their creation aligned with *The Spiritual in Art*.<sup>1</sup> The artist was presented as a major discovery and accorded significant attention alongside such canonized pioneers of abstract art as Vasily Kandinsky (1866-1944), František Kupka (1871-1957), Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) and Kasimir Malevich (1879-1935).

Since that grand introduction, works of af Klint have been exhibited at other shows, including large affairs rivalling *The Spiritual in Art* for size (and aim), such as Frankfurt's *Okkultismus und Avantgarde* (1995) or *Traces du Sacré* at the Centre Pompidou (2008).<sup>2</sup> These aimed to demonstrate that the spiritual, the sacred, enchanted, occult—the labels change, but the content is remarkably similar—played a specific and significant role in modern art. Their message concerning the impact of modern re-enchantment movements upon the European modernist and avant-garde arts is well taken. Af Klint's oeuvre, meanwhile, still remains largely unseen. Invariably, the larger and more colourful canvasses were selected for *The Spiritual in Art* and its ilk. Smaller local exhibitions attracted only elite

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Tuchman and Judi Freeman eds., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1986* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Veit Loers ed., *Okkultismus und Avantgarde: Von Munch bis Mondrian, 1900-1915* (Frankfurt: Schirn Kunsthalle, 1995); Angela Lampe and Jean de Loisy eds., *Traces du Sacré* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2008). As well, Joëlle Pijaudier-Cabot and Serge Faucherat eds., *L'Europe des esprits ou la fascination de l'occulte, 1750-1950* (Strasbourg: Musée d'art moderne et contemporain, 2011). Not exhibiting af Klint but still relevant is Christoph Wagner ed., *Das Bauhaus und die Esoterik: Johannes Itten, Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky* (Hamm: Gustav-Lübcke-Museum, 2005).

audiences even as they, too, presented only a selection of what is after all a sizeable, unwieldy and not so easily accessible oeuvre.<sup>3</sup>

A recent large retrospective show, *Hilma af Klint: An Abstract Pioneer*, organized by the Moderna Museet in Stockholm and subsequently travelling throughout Europe, ignited new and wider interest in the artist and her work. Several paintings also travelled to the 2013 Venice Biennale.<sup>4</sup> One might position *An Abstract Pioneer* within the persistent current of exhibitions continuing in the vein of *The Spiritual in Art*, recent (2015) examples of which are *Künstler und Propheten. Eine geheime Geschichte der Moderne 1872-1972* at the Schirn Kunsthalle and *Ænigma: One Hundred Years of Anthroposophical Art* at the Olomouc Museum of Modern Art.<sup>5</sup> The centenaries of many historical avant-garde movements are currently prompting a revisiting of modern art and its origin stories, another curatorial trend, which includes the 2012 show *Inventing Abstraction* at the New York MoMA.<sup>6</sup> Running parallel is the trend to highlight innovative female modern artists, such as *Sonia Delaunay* (Tate Modern, 2015).<sup>7</sup> In fact, one might see a crossroads of all these trends where attempts to explore the modern, female, occult artist, arguably positioned at the “dawn” of abstraction or modern art generally, meet. Here we encounter not only Hilma af Klint, but also Victorian mediumistic artist Georgiana Houghton (1814-1884), whose work was shown just recently at the Courtauld, London (2016).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John Hutchinson ed., *Hilma af Klint* (Dublin: Douglas Hyde Gallery, 2005); Sally O'Reilly, *Hilma af Klint: An Atom in the Universe* (Camden: Camden Arts Centre, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Iris Müller-Westerman and Jo Widoff eds., *Hilma af Klint – A Pioneer of Abstraction* (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 2013). Michael Juul Holm and Tine Colstrup eds., *Hilma af Klint: Abstrakt Pioner* (Humblebæk: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2014). Daniel Birnbaum and Ann-Sofi Noring eds., *The Legacy of Hilma af Klint: Nine Contemporary Responses* (London: Koenig Books, 2013). It should be noted that the qualification of af Klint as an *abstract pioneer* was explicitly attributed to her by one of the first scholars to seriously study her work, Åke Fant, in 1989, even as he had already implicitly put it forward in *The Spiritual in Art*. Åke Fant, *Hilma af Klint. Ockult målerinna och abstrakt pionjär* (Stockholm: Raster Förlag, 1989); idem, “The Case of the Artist Hilma af Klint,” in Tuchman & Freeman, *The Spiritual in Art*, 155-163.

<sup>5</sup> Max Hollein and Pamela Kort eds., *Künstler und Propheten: Eine geheime Geschichte der Moderne 1872–1972* (Frankfurt: Schirn Kunsthalle, 2015); Reinhold Fäth, David Voda, Andreas Albert eds., *Ænigma: One Hundred Years of Anthroposophical Art* (Olomouc: Olomouc Museum of Modern Art, 2015). Worth mentioning here is also Museum Kunstpalast's 2014 show on *Kunst und Alchemie*, which covered five centuries and included a large section on modern and contemporary art. Dedo von Kerksenbrock-Krosigk, Beat Wismer, Sven Dupré eds., *Art and Alchemy: The Mystery of Transformation* (Düsseldorf: Museum Kunst Palast, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Leah Dickerman ed., *Inventing Abstraction, 1910-1925* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Adeline Souverain ed., *Sonia Delaunay* (London: Tate Modern, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> <http://courtauld.ac.uk/gallery/what-on/exhibitions-displays/georgiana-houghton-spirit-drawings> (accessed 22 December, 2016). The seminal publication on this artist is Rachel Oberter, “Esoteric Art Confronting the Public Eye: The Abstract Spirit Drawings of Georgiana Houghton,” *Victorian Studies* 48, 2 (2006), 221-232.

Media cover of the Houghton-show stressed her supposed abstraction before abstraction in terminology—‘Houghton is arguably the first ever abstract artist’<sup>9</sup>—that closely copies such statements about af Klint. Yet for all that the point that af Klint created her first fully abstract works years before Kandinsky’s abstract watercolours has been made frequently,<sup>10</sup> it still remains to be seen what conclusions should be drawn from this. That the origins of abstract painting can be found before Kandinsky anyway and have a long history in the European nineteenth and arguably earlier centuries has already been shown by Raphael Rosenberg.<sup>11</sup> And while the forms of many of af Klint’s spiritual paintings may look abstract to contemporary eyes, it is questionable whether one can qualify her works as abstract in the classically formalist Greenbergian sense, that is, aesthetically completely autonomous.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, as the curator of *An Abstract Pioneer*, Iris Müller-Westermann, noted, af Klint’s works ‘are not concerned with the pure abstraction of color and form for its own sake; they are instead attempts to give shape to invisible contexts and make them visible.’<sup>13</sup> An argument could be made that af Klint painted forms invisible within ordinary reality, i.e. not mimetic in the traditional sense, but still existing on some alternate, spiritual plane. Accordingly Rosenberg has argued for af Klint’s spiritual works belonging to the particular category he has termed ‘amimetic’ images: images that depict invisible things, or ‘images representing something that as such is not visible.’<sup>14</sup> Such images are representational, even if not mimetic in the conventional sense. They do not mimic what can ordinarily be seen, but still depict things that religious or spiritual dogma take to be or have been, and hence, can be figuratively depicted; the ineffable, super-sensible, or primeval, such as the primal Hyle or the separation of light and darkness. Indeed, a long tradition of such images exists also in the history of western esoteric art.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> E.g. Jonathan Jones, “Georgiana Houghton. Spirit Drawings Review – Awe-Inspiring Visions of a Victorian Medium,” *The Guardian: Art & Design*, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/jun/15/georgiana-houghton-spirit-drawings-review-courtauld> (15 June 2016), accessed 7 December 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Exhibition reviewers love to point out this “fact”; for instance, Julia Voss, “Die Thronstürmerin,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine: Feuilleton* (16 April, 2011): <http://www.faz.net/-gsa-yvyw>.

<sup>11</sup> Raphael Rosenberg and Max Hollein eds., *Turner, Hugo, Moreau. Entdeckung der Abstraktion* (Frankfurt: Schirn Kunsthalle, 2007); although qualified to some extent by Leah Dickerman, “Inventing Abstraction,” in idem, *Inventing Abstraction*, 12-37.

<sup>12</sup> Or paintings that do not ‘describe things in a real or imaginary world’, Dickerman, “Inventing,” 14.

<sup>13</sup> Iris Müller-Westermann, “Paintings for the Future,” in idem and Widoff, *Hilma af Klint*, 33-5, 1 45.

<sup>14</sup> Raphael Rosenberg, “Was There a First Abstract Painter? Af Klint’s Amimetic Images and Kandinsky’s Abstract Art,” in *Hilma af Klint: The Art of Seeing the Invisible*, eds. Kurt Almqvist and Louise Belfrage (Stockholm: Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation, 2015): 87-100, 91-2.

In lieu of images, I invite the reader to visit <http://hilmaafklint.louisiana.dk/> for a high quality selection of her work.

<sup>15</sup> Accessible by means of compendia such as Alexander Roob, *The Hermetic Museum: Alchemy & Mysticism* (London: Taschen, reprint 2014).

Af Klint was hardly the first occult artist to depict invisible things. Neither was she the first nor the only *modern* artist to turn her art towards the invisible. Futurist Umberto Boccioni already noted that what ‘must be painted is not the visible, but that which was previously regarded as invisible, namely what the clairvoyant sees.’<sup>16</sup> Here, we may take “the clairvoyant” to be both the spiritualist or occult medium *and* the modern artist, who was similarly conceived of as a *voyant*.<sup>17</sup> Many artists around the turn of and well into the twentieth century considered the artist a visionary, a seer or clairvoyant with refined, higher and super-perceptible senses, attuned to the invisible in the visible and the interaction of matter and spirit. Af Klint may not have been in touch with the great inventors of modern art of her time, but—as will be discussed later—she was certainly keeping abreast of contemporary occult discourses, which touted both the perceptibility of the invisible (such as astral forms) and the leading role of the artist-seer.

Here, I will explore two interrelated elements of af Klint’s spiritual painting with its abstracted forms. I will discuss her states of mediumism, as these, as I will argue, might well be related to the new (abstracted) style she suddenly started painting in, which was radically different from her early (figurative) work. Discussing her mediumistic state will also provide another perspective upon her painting of abstract forms, as, as I will also suggest, there are indications she self-conceptualised as a medium *seeing* or being shown spiritual and immaterial, that is to say otherwise invisible, forms—hence, these could be depicted in a representative manner, even if not necessarily figurative. By way of mediumism I will also address the issue of gender, which has proven a continuously recurring theme in discussion about this artist. I will not address the issue whether her gender has led her to be ‘neglected’ or ‘ignored’ in canonical art histories, although it should be noted that the choice to keep her spiritual works private, and the resulting fact that few to none of those works circulate on the art market or are present in collections of major museums, surely also contributes. I will

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<sup>16</sup> Linda D. Henderson, “Vibratory Modernism: Boccioni, Kupka and the Ether of Space,” in: eds. Bruce Clarke & Linda D. Henderson, *From Energy to Information: Representation in Science and Technology, Art and Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 126–149, 128. See also Tessel M. Bauduin, “Science, Occultism, and the Art of the Avant-Garde in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Journal of Religion in Europe* 5, 1 (2012): 23-55; 30, 38-42.

<sup>17</sup> Katharina Harlow Tighe, “Die Schriften von Umberto Boccioni: Schlüssel zum Verständnis der Beziehung zwischen italienischem Futurismus und Okkultismus,” in Loers, *Okkultismus*, 469-476, 472-3. More on artists as hypersensitive geniuses (as well as the understanding of nervousness and hypersensitivity as part of the refining process on developing higher sensibilities in line with symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud’s famous call for a total derangement of the senses in the ‘Lettre de voyant’ [1871]), see also the classic study by Gwendolyn Bays, *The Orphic Vision. Seer Poets from Novalis to Rimbaud* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968), 69ff; and Dariusz Gafijczuk, *Identity, Aesthetics, and Sound in the Fin de Siècle. Redesigning Perception* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 84-5.

touch upon how societal norms gendered painting genres during af Klint's training and painting life, with the figurative, especially mimetic genres (still life, landscape, portraits) being deemed suitable to the female temperament, and creative invention to the male. In this context af Klint's turn towards what appears as abstraction may appear quite radical; I will explore how that might have been circumvented.<sup>18</sup> I hope to move beyond the sometimes rather polarised assessments of af Klint as a forgotten, neglected, marginalised or rejected "abstract pioneer", a mediocre artist whose spiritualist nonsense disqualifies from being a "serious" artist, or mystical painter of prophecies and visions, whose art was full of "hidden truths" humanity so desperately needs (apparently).<sup>19</sup>

### *Af Klint: Training and early career*

Hilma af Klint was classically trained as a painter, taking classes in portrait painting at Stockholm's Technical School (1880) before attending the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm (1882-87). Graduating with honours, the Academy provided her a studio in the art centre of Stockholm, together with two other (female) artists, where she would work until 1908. Af Klint made a living as an artist, focussing mainly on landscapes and portraits, many on commission. Her specialisation in these genres was not necessarily by choice; in accordance with the norms of the day, women were not thought able—or deemed suited, for that matter—to create. Active creation, for which a measure of genius was required, was beholden to male artists; women could only *reproduce*. Genres suitable for female artists were therefore those that required observation and copying of existing forms, such as portraits, still life and landscapes and similar minor genres, but also, for instance, botanical

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<sup>18</sup> During her lifetime the artist compiled many notebooks, but today only one has been published in facsimile in its entirety. While translations of sections are provided elsewhere, other notebooks are not integrally available in translation; as there are apparently some fourteen thousand pages of notes and sketches all together, I rely upon the choices of others that the translations are representative enough and cannot claim to provide complete insight into af Klint's thoughts. Hilma af Klint, *Blumen, Moosen, und Flechten* [Notebook No. 588], facsimile of hand copied manuscript from an original manuscript in the Goetheanum Archives in Dornach, 1919-20, in Birnbaum and Noring eds., *The Legacy*, n.p. (80 numbered pages in original). Daniel Birnbaum, "Universal Pictures: The Art of Hilma af Klint," *Artforum* 1, 5 (2013): 180-187, 185. Find a choice selection of translated excerpts in Gúrli Lindén, "Excerpts from Notes by Hilma af Klint," in Hutchinson, *Hilma af Klint*, 41-42, 64-65. Lindén has been working and publishing on Af Klint's notes, although only in Swedish: [Gurli Lindén](#), *Vägen till templet : Hilma af Klint : förberedelsestiden 1896-1906* (Svenska: Inbunden, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. for instance Eeva Siltavuori, "The Secret Pictures of Hilma af Klint," *Scandinavian Review* 77, 4 (1989): 34-37. An online search for reviews of and reactions to exhibitions of af Klint will yield a large crop of such (and other) positions.

studies and similar illustrative work from nature;<sup>20</sup> all genres that could be practiced in the environment of the home.<sup>21</sup> There is no indication of af Klint resisting such genre norms. During the 1890s she produced many meticulous botanical studies of plants and flowers, often untitled; her clear gift for observation landed her employment as a draughtswoman at the Stockholm Veterinary Institute (1900-01).<sup>22</sup> In her independent works, she painted in a conventional naturalistic style—‘skilful and not without aesthetic merit, but [lacking] a personal style’, as one scholar has put it<sup>23</sup>—frequently opting for landscape scenes of the Swedish countryside, which she exhibited and sold.<sup>24</sup> Af Klint was certainly exposed to the works of Edvard Munch (1863-1944), and both her Academy training and connections in the Stockholm art scene would have provided some opportunity to become familiar with innovations in painting at the time.<sup>25</sup> She however retained a traditional colour palette and painterly touch.

### *1905-1915: The Paintings for the Temple*

Between 1905 and 1915 af Klint created the works that form the basis for her often being positioned today as an abstract pioneer and/or spiritual visionary.<sup>26</sup> These works include foremost a large body of work known as the *Paintings for the Temple*, created in two stages: 1905 – 1908 and 1912 – 1915.

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<sup>20</sup> The Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm was one of the first in Europe to allow women to attend. As at other academies at the time and later, women were trained in still life and similar genres and in craft. Problematic was drawing after nude models, an essential skill to be mastered by all aspiring (male) artists but generally prohibited or otherwise hardly attainable for female artists; see also Oberter, “Esoteric Art,” 223. For a broad introduction to European developments at this time, see “Training and Professionalism, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries,” in ed. Delia Gaze, *Concise Dictionary of Women Artists* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 67-121. Essential reading is Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists”?, eds. Vivian Gornick and Barbara Moran, *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness* (New York: Basic, 1971), also published in *ARTNews* (1971): <http://www.artnews.com/2015/05/30/why-have-there-been-no-great-women-artists/> (accessed 20 December, 2016).

<sup>21</sup> Anna Maria Svensson, “The Greatness of Things – The Art of Hilma af Klint,” in Hutchinson, *Hilma af Klint*, 12-30, 14.

<sup>22</sup> Gustaf af Klint, “Hilma af Klint: A Short Memoir,” in Hutchinson, *Hilma af Klint*, 6-9, 6. Müller-Westermann, “Paintings,” 37.

<sup>23</sup> Anna Maria Bernitz, “Hilma af Klint and the New Art of Seeing,” in *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in the Nordic Countries 1900-1925*, eds. Hubert van den Berg, Benedikt Hjartarson et al. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), 587-597, 589.

<sup>24</sup> See for example *Spring Landscape – Scene from the Bay of Lomma* (1892) in David Carrier, “Hilma af Klint and the Spiritual in an Artist,” *Art Critical* (9 September 2015): <http://www.artcritical.com/2015/09/09/david-carrier-on-hilma-af-klint/>.

<sup>25</sup> Müller-Westermann, “Paintings,” 37-8.

<sup>26</sup> Kurt Almqvist and Louise Belfrage, “Hilma af Klint in Historical Context,” in idem, *Hilma af Klint*, 7-11, 7.

Still, the spiritual foundations were laid years earlier and comprise both Spiritualism and Theosophy. Af Klint had been involved in spiritualist séances since the late 1870s.<sup>27</sup> Spiritualism has its canonical origin as a modern occult movement in the Hydesville rappings (US) in 1848, but sprang for a large part from eighteenth-century western esoteric currents such as Mesmerism and Swedenborgianism.<sup>28</sup> In the second half of the nineteenth century it gained considerable traction across Europe, the UK, US and European colonies.<sup>29</sup> A movement with religious overtones, Spiritualism found its way into mainstream culture in many forms, ranging from large-scale public performances to the small and intimate settings of the home séance aimed at establishing contact with deceased loved ones. Scientists investigating spiritualist phenomena created the discipline of psychical research (parapsychology). Psychical research generated more attention for Spiritualism, even as the aims of obtaining empirical proof of spirit or psychic phenomena often clashed with the beliefs, religious and social aims, and also practices of Spiritualism.<sup>30</sup>

It was quite fashionable for genteel women—such as af Klint, who came from a family of naval officers—to participate in some séances, even if only for the social opportunities. For af Klint, however, it was quite serious. In 1896 she formed a Christian spiritualist group called ‘De Fem’ (the Five) with four others, including her friend and artist Anna Cassel (1860-1936).<sup>31</sup> De Fem held Spiritualism-inspired séances in which they practiced automatic writing and drawing, which had existed since the 1850s and had been one

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<sup>27</sup> Müller-Westermann, “Paintings,” 38.

<sup>28</sup> Adam Crabtree, *From Mesmer to Freud: Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing* (New Haven [etc.]: Yale University Press, 1993): 3-72; Bertrand Méheust, “Animal Magnetism/Mesmerism,” in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, eds. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Antoine Faivre, Roelof van den Broek, and Jean-Pierre Brach, 2 vols (Leiden [etc.]: Brill, 2005): 75-82; and in the same: Jean-François Mayer, “Swedenborgian Traditions,” 1105-1110. John W. Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in France* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2008): esp. 64-9. The return of mesmerism in popular culture in western Europe during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is discussed by Hilary Grimes, “Power in Flux: Mesmerism, Mesmeric Manuals and Du Maurier’s Trilby,” *Gothic Studies* 10, 2 (2008): 67-83; and Maria M. Tatar, *Spellbound: Studies on Mesmerism and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978/2015).

<sup>29</sup> Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989); Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

<sup>30</sup> Sofie Lachapelle, *Investigating the Supernatural: From Spiritism and Occultism to Psychical Research and Metaphysics in France, 1853-1931* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2011); Corinna Treitel, *A Science for the Soul: Occultism and the Genesis of the German Modern* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2004); Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> The group also included Cornelia Cederberg, Sigrid Hedman, and Mathilde N. (last name unknown). Christianity and Spiritualism could blend well, as for many the latter only enriched already existing beliefs; Oberter, “Esoteric Art,” 222. Each session of De Fem started and ended with bible readings and prayer.

of Spiritualism's main practices almost from the outset.<sup>32</sup> During the sessions, several spirits or higher beings made contact with De Fem, the most important ones identifying themselves as 'Gregor', 'Clemens', 'Amaliel', 'Ananda' and 'Esther'.<sup>33</sup> Collectively, these teacher-figures were referred to as 'The High Masters' ('De Höga').<sup>34</sup> Their 'instruction' of De Fem continued for ten years.<sup>35</sup> The spiritualist practice of De Fem was rather unusual: in contrast to the standard Spiritualist practice where the medium does both, here one person acted as relaying medium, communicating the message, another would note down what was said, eventually also drawing.<sup>36</sup> This enabled af Klint to participate actively without having to draw as well, which she preferred at first. Around 1905, however, things changed drastically when she accepted a commission from one of the spirits. This commission—or better, *The Commission*—was to create 'The Paintings for the Temple' ('Målningarna till templet'), which would form the artist's only body of work until 1915 and have a lasting impact on her life, career, and oeuvre. 'Amaliel offered me a task and immediately I said yes. It was the one great task that I carried out in my lifetime.'<sup>37</sup> Af Klint took to the Commission with a passion: between November 1906 and April 1908 she created 111 paintings, working all the while in a mediumistic state, describing herself as being entranced and receiving the images. Af Klint painted directly on the canvas without making preliminary drawings and quickly realised a substantial part of this commission, which she also called 'The Work'.<sup>38</sup> Eventually, it would comprise 193 paintings and drawings, consisting of 16 groups, four of which may be considered preparatory.<sup>39</sup> Not signed, all of the paintings are carefully dated, those correlating to diary notes, and numbered, indicating position within a series, even as the series themselves are consecutively numbered as well. Af Klint never worked serially before; the *Temple Paintings*, in contrast, consists only of series. The other great contrast with her

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<sup>32</sup> Müller-Westermann, "Paintings," 41; Bernitz, "Hilma," 591. Automatism would be appropriated and canonised as an artistic practice by Surrealism in the early 1920s; Tessel M. Bauduin, "The 'Continuing Misfortune' of Automatism in Early Surrealism," *Communication + 1*, 4 (2015): 1-42, 4, 26.

<sup>33</sup> Müller-Westermann, "Paintings," 41; Af Klint, "Hilma," 7. Ulf Wagner, "The Great Mission," in *Adam Fuss & Hilma af Klint: Kalleiser/Callings*, ed. Hasse Persson (Borås: Borås Kunstmuseum, 2011), 36-43, 40. "Amaliel" may be a name of Faroese origin, and Nordic in an exotic manner. Still, it is also a Kabbalistic angel name, lists of which circulated in many occult milieus.

<sup>34</sup> Svensson, "The Greatness," 16. Central revelatory agents in theosophical doctrine were the 'Hidden Masters' or Mahatmas. De Fem's contact with 'High Masters' rather than with spirits of the deceased—the former being not unusual but the latter more prevalent in Spiritualism—indicates confluence of spiritualist with theosophical ideas in their practice.

<sup>35</sup> Svensson, "The Greatness," 16.

<sup>36</sup> Svensson, "The Greatness," 16.

<sup>37</sup> Cited in Gertrud Sandqvist, "The Great Affirmation," in Almquist & Belfrage, *Hilma af Klint*, 255-270, 255.

<sup>38</sup> Af Klint, "Hilma," 7.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Fant, "The Case," 157. The distinction between preparatory and principal series is not always maintained, but it does shed greater light on the consistency and construction of the entire *Paintings for the Temple*-corpus.



early work is the radical change of style, first towards organic abstract(ed) forms, and after 1912 increasingly also incorporating and eventually almost entirely changing to geometric abstraction. It should be noted that, as Catherine de Zegher has also pointed out, non-objectivity and abstraction, both geometric and organic, were obviously not a kind of formalism for af Klint but a means of structuring transcendental ideas.<sup>40</sup> Af Klint was exploring occult realms such as the astral plane and the etheric plane. If one takes this at face value, she pioneered in exploring and mapping it, rigorously investigating every facet of the supra-physical and methodologically annotating and depicting each step of her (spiritual) journey, as Tine Colstrup has remarked.<sup>41</sup> One can postulate that, being familiar with the maps and diagrams used in naval exploration and travel, the use of abstract and geometrical symbols to convey very specific meaning and messages may have seemed quite natural to her. In the structuring of everything af Klint wanted to convey, abstraction served her well, but it was not an end in itself.

Af Klint's spiritual and occult worldview was, in addition to Spiritualism, shaped by another prominent occult movement: the Theosophical Society, the Swedish branch of which af Klint joined.<sup>42</sup> Wanting to maintain a distance from Spiritualism, leaders of the Theosophical Society (or TS) emphasised the grounding of their ideology in western and eastern knowledge traditions going back to ancient times, on the one hand, and on the other, in serious and rational investigation of contemporary issues, claiming kinship with scientific discovery. Thus such diverse concepts from the scientific discourse as non-Euclidian geometry and n-dimensionality, evolution, electromagnetism, wave and particle theory, the atom, eugenics, vitalism, the Freudian unconscious, and comparative (Indo-European) linguistics, among others, made their way into the Theosophical discourse, and by way of that

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<sup>40</sup> De Zegher, "Abstract," 22.

<sup>41</sup> Tine Colstrup, "What you see is not all you get – Om ånd og abstraction," in *Hilma af Klint: Abstrakt Pioner*, eds. Michael Juul Holm and Tine Colstrup (Humblebæk: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2014), 47-55, 48.

<sup>42</sup> Founded originally in New York, TS lodges in other parts of the world were quickly established, including a Swedish lodge in 1889. Af Klint became a member soon after and may have been considered for the post of chairwoman at one time. TS founder Olcott visited Sweden and the Stockholm TS in 1891 and in 1900; second generation-frontwoman Annie Besant (1847-1933) in 1894, 1898, 1904, and 1907, which lecture af Klint certainly attended; Bernitz, "Hilma," 588. Fant, "The Case," 156, 163n3 describes the occult (and other) literature in her library. She was registered as a member of the Adyar Society (headquarters of the TS in India) on May 23, 1904; Massimo Introvigne, "Theosophy and the Visual Arts: The Nordic Connection" (conference paper, 2014): <http://www.cesnur.org/2014/Nordic%20Theosophy%20and%20the%20Arts%20London.pdf>, 30. Under leadership of Besant, together with Charles Leadbeater, the TS consolidated its popular appear and reach but also slightly changed track in relation to the TS as it had been under Blavatsky, Olcott and others. Hence a distinction can be made between the TS under the latter—the first generation—and the second generation leadership of Besant and Leadbeater. Catherine Wessinger, "The Second Generation Leaders of the Theosophical Organisation (Adyar)," in *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, eds. Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 33-50, 34-7.

into occultism more broadly, albeit in somewhat adapted, and usually rather repurposed, form.<sup>43</sup> Although it cannot be further explored here, several of these concepts also found their way into af Klint's *Temple Paintings*, including occult dimensions, waves and radiation, evolution and ideas concerning the atom.

In her fascination for Theosophical ideas, integration of them into her art practice, and membership of the TS and later its offshoot, the Anthroposophical Society (AS) of Rudolf Steiner, af Klint was on par with her more famous contemporaries, whose reliance upon TS and AS ideas has been investigated by scholars and curators since *The Spiritual in Art*.<sup>44</sup> Within the Swedish context, important to mention are August Strindberg (1849-1912) who joined the Isis Lodge, an independent offshoot of the TS, in France, and Ivan Aguéli (1869-1917), who also encountered first generation Theosophy in France. Norwegian artist Munch moved in occult (Swedenborgian, mesmeric) and Theosophical circles when in Berlin in the 1890s, as did the Finnish painter Akseli Gallen-Kallela.<sup>45</sup> In short, across Europe and

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<sup>43</sup> An excellent study of this phenomenon, particularly pertaining to atomic theory, is Mark S. Morrison, *Modern Alchemy: Occultism and the Emergence of Atomic Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Also, Bauduin, "Science, Occultism," passim; Linda D. Henderson, "Die moderne Kunst und das Unsichtbare: Die verborgenen Wellen und Dimensionen des Okkultismus und der Wissenschaften," in: Loers, *Okkultismus und Avantgarde*, 13–32.

<sup>44</sup> Steiner associated with German theosophical circles from around 1900 to 1912, becoming General Secretary of the German section of the TS in 1902. When Af Klint met him in 1908, Steiner's vision was already diverging considerably from theosophical dogma, although the eventual foundation of the Anthroposophical Society (AS) happened only in 1912. Katharina Brandt and Olav Hammer, "Rudolf Steiner and Theosophy," in *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, eds. Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 113-134, 116-21. A major difference between the TS and AS is the emphasis of the former upon oriental wisdom, and of the latter upon occidental wisdom. Af Klint was more oriented upon the West than the East in her spiritual leanings, making her devotion to Steiner and eventual membership of the AS only logical. The continuing resonance of several theosophical ideas in the teachings of the AS (Brandt & Hammer 122-8) facilitated such a transition. For the TS see further James Santucci, "Theosophical Society," in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, eds. Wouter Hanegraaff et al., 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 1114-1123; and Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994). The essential study of the AS is Helmut Zander, *Anthroposophie in Deutschland: Theosophische Weltanschauung und gesellschaftliche Praxis 1884–1945*, 2 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> Henrik Johnsson, *Det oändliga sammanhanget. August Strindbergs ockulta vetenskap* (Stockholm: Malört förlag, 2015); Marja Lahelma, *Ideal and Disintegration. Dynamics of the Self and Art at the Fin-de-Siècle* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Helsinki, 2014); idem, "August Strindberg's Art in Modernist and Occult Context," in: *Occult Modernism: The Occult in Modernist Art, Literature and Cinema*, eds. Henrik Johnsson and Tessel M. Bauduin (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): forthcoming. Nina Kokkinen, "The Artist as Initiated Master. Themes of Fin-de-Siècle Occulture in the Art of Akseli Gallen-Kallela," in: *Fill your Soul! Paths of Reseach into the Art of Akseli Gallen-Kallela*, ed. The Gallen-Kallela Museum (Espoo: The Gallen-Kallela Museum, 2011): 46-59. Theosophical ideas circulated rather widely throughout Europe, the US and parts of India. Local branches produced lectures, leaflets and integral translations. Many of the more prominent members travelled and lectured all over the globe. In addition, Theosophical thought was abridged, cited, rephrased in non-TS publications and the thought of other occult figures, thereby reaching other and larger audiences; Russian mathematician and theorist of the occult fourth dimension P.D. Ouspensky (1878-1947) and Russian painter and theosophist Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947), for example, played a considerable part in transferring Theosophical thought to artists in Northern and Eastern Europe, including Balla, Kandinsky, Malevich. Introvigne, "Theosophy," 9; Linda D. Henderson, "Mysticism and Occultism in Modern Art," *Art Journal* 46:1 (1987), 5–8.

certainly also in Scandinavia artists became involved with Spiritualism, with the Theosophical Society, and/or with other occult movements or groups, including Swedenborgian, Ouspenskian, ritual magical, or masonic. Thus, too, af Klint—although the long period of time painting and large oeuvre created under spirit guidance *is* rather remarkable.

### *The Paintings for the Temple - Continued*

In 1908 af Klint's Commission was suspended.<sup>46</sup> She resumed work in 1912.<sup>47</sup> From 1912 to 1915 she created 82 works, The Work finally culminating in the central works of the *Paintings for the Temple: the Altarpieces* ('Altarmålning', 1915) [Figure 1]. Consisting of three large canvases, this group is central to her entire spiritual oeuvre. The *Temple Paintings* were indeed intended to be hung in a temple, which af Klint envisioned as a spiral, a nautilus shell-shape with in-turning and consecutively narrower corridors leading to a central holy of holies with the *Altarpieces*. The *Altarpieces* can therefore be considered to be both the apex and a summary of the spiritual journey that all 193 paintings and drawings comprising the *Paintings for the Temple* depicted.<sup>48</sup> The creation of the temple's *Altarpieces* only near the end of The Work demonstrates how af Klint had worked on the oeuvre from the outside in, as it were, from the very beginning of a spiritual trajectory through to the final moment of full revelation. The first series is called *Ur-Chaos* ('Urkaos', 1906-7), indicating that she really started at the beginning, both of time and matter.<sup>49</sup>

Af Klint's own spiritual journey seems to have paralleled The Work. Even as she painted, she began to understand. Yet the paintings are not particular but general; their didactic purpose extends to all of humankind. For all that 'mankind was not yet ready' for their message (noted in af Klint's will), the *Temple Paintings* in their eventual temple were intended to lead others too on a spiritual journey. Without a doubt af Klint understood herself to be a missionary. Addressing herself—that is, the spirit apparently writing through her addressing her—she wrote on 4 November, 1906: 'You will commence a task that will bring

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<sup>46</sup> Svensson, "The Greatness," 21, 25. Af Klint's mother needed care; Rudolf Steiner paid her a visit and disapproved of mediumistic painting; and, possibly most urgently, she was entirely exhausted.

<sup>47</sup> Müller-Westermann, "Paintings," 42.

<sup>48</sup> Bernitz, "Hilma," 591.

<sup>49</sup> See brief descriptions of all the groups of the *Temple Paintings* in Svensson, "The Greatness," 17-23. No *catalogue raisonné* or otherwise integral overview is available as of yet.

great blessings on coming generations'. The task was The Work; the aim, to save mankind. 'Your mission is to open their eyes to a life that lasts for eternity.'<sup>50</sup> But hers were still paintings 'for the future' and she kept them private. It should be noted that af Klint herself, on the other hand, was by no means secluded from ordinary life; she participated in social events and exhibited her early work until 1914.<sup>51</sup>

#### *After The Work: reflections upon mediumism*

In 1915 the *Paintings for the Temple* were completed. Almost immediately af Klint embarked upon an artistic journey to come to grips with what she had painted. This reflects the mediumistic-automatic character of her practice since 1906; she had been painting partly or fully entranced, and had known her paintings only in painting them. There was no (conscious) preconception and preparation; The Work was realised only and immediately in its creation. Facing this body of work, the artist responded with a phase of reflection, integration, deeper exploration, and eventually reinvention. Especially the *Parsifal Series* (three groups encompassing 144 works on paper) is an attempt to come to grips with the *Temple*-oeuvre. The time of reflection following immediately upon The Work shows a strong and fast tendency towards rigid geometric abstraction, with the artist reaching a minimalist state with *Parsifal*'s group 2, including section 4: six monochrome squares captioned 'forwards', 'downwards', 'backwards', 'outwards', 'upwards' and 'inwards' ('framåt', 'nedåt', 'bakåt', 'utåt', 'uppåt' and 'inåt') [Figure 2]. The directions are that of the spiralling spiritual trajectory. Af Klint added the captions on and in the *Parsifal*-subseries, in gothic lettering, in the direction of the movement they describe. Thus 'backwards' is written backwards; the letters of 'inwards' are superimposed in the middle of the square, consecutively smaller and reading from the outside in. They are written directionally mimetic, one might say; they represent what they are—I consider this indicative of, firstly, the didactic agenda underlying many if not all of af Klint's spiritual works, and, also, of her approach towards painting: still grounded in representation and figuration.

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<sup>50</sup> Cited in Birnbaum, "Universal," 185.

<sup>51</sup> Bernitz, "Hilma," 590.

Af Klint further investigated the standpoints of the world's religions; atoms, and the atomic structures of plants.<sup>52</sup> She also reconnected to the early formative years of her career: around 1919 her meticulous botanical studies return in combination with severely abstracted forms that represent spiritual forces [Figure 3].<sup>53</sup> In 1920 the artist stopped painting, picking it up again in 1922 and changing her painting style to wet-in-wet watercolours that are like spiritual reflections, painting over 200 watercolours.<sup>54</sup> This is the final phase in af Klint's painting life. Her notebooks of the time indicate that she still received trance visions and spirit communications, but these were no longer translated into paintings.

Late in life, therefore, af Klint ceased to paint mediumistically. Things had already been changing since the end of the Commission, however. On the brink of a new project in 1917, she wrote in her diary:

Hereafter I shall not receive my direct orders in the same way but must seek out guidance, which with a simultaneously visible and invisible finger will show me what I am to examine. Thus what is required of me is, rather that I should undertake my *own studies* than be lectured to with regard to what I am to present. During the foregoing period of development I have been like a vessel which is filled from above while it constantly overflows, always being more than full with the exception of brief interludes. Now the situation is reversed, now it is a matter of filling the bowl *by means of my own studies*, though still under guidance, yet still by means of free studies. At this moment, I shall receive the plan of work. Firstly, I shall try to understand the flowers of the earth, shall take as my starting point the plants of the world; then, I shall study, with equal care, that which is preserved in the waters of the world. Then it will be the blue ether with all its various animal species [...] and finally, I shall penetrate the forest, shall study the moist mosses, all the trees of the forest and the various animals that dwell among these cool dark masses of trees [...] (17 January, 1917).<sup>55</sup>

Besides the rather ambitious nature of the scope of the study the artist was to undertake—to understand ‘*all*’ the flowers, plants and animals of the world—two important insights into the development of af Klint's mediumism in relation to style and genre can be drawn from this entry. Firstly, the indicators of spiritual guidance af Klint had been receiving, was receiving at the moment of writing (‘At this moment, I shall receive the plan of work’), and would receive. This guidance was to be quite different from that during *The Work*: ‘I shall not receive direct orders the same way’. The situation would be ‘reversed’; while earlier

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<sup>52</sup> Müller-Westermann, “Paintings,” 50.

<sup>53</sup> Birnbaum & Noring, “Hilma,” n.p.

<sup>54</sup> Müller-Westermann, “Paintings,” 50.

<sup>55</sup> Lindén, “Excerpts,” 65 (emphasis added).

she had been a passive medium, the artist could now take a more active role: ‘I should undertake *my own studies*’. Making use of the well-known vessel metaphor—a rather obvious western cultural construct of femininity, indicating her self-perception as *receptive*—af Klint makes it clear that the filling of herself-as-vessel would now be undertaken by herself; ‘under guidance’, yet by means of her ‘own studies’. This development is not at complete odds with what had gone before; during the second part of *The Work*, from 1912 onwards, the artist had already felt more conscious during painting and able to exert some influence, in particular upon composition.<sup>56</sup> Such had not been her experience initially, between 1906 and 1908. Then,

[t]he pictures were painted directly through me, without preliminary drawings and with great power. I had no idea what the pictures would depict and still I worked quickly and surely, without changing a single brush-stroke.<sup>57</sup>

She was filled beyond the brim, ‘more than full’ and ‘overflowing’ with visions and instruction. From 1912 onwards, things changed somewhat. ‘No one guided her hand’, but the images she was to paint were now shown her ‘in the form of verbal reports or as direct internal images’.<sup>58</sup> The 1908-12 break bisecting *The Work* therefore served to emancipate her already partway from the mental painting state of 1906-08, which can be characterised as very passive and classically mediumistic, not least because of the urgent speed of execution and slightly excessive painting frenzy. Nevertheless, also in 1912-15 af Klint still painted directly on canvas or paper without preparatory drawings and maintained that the paintings came to her only during their actual painting process.<sup>59</sup> In other words, the artist still considered herself as a tool—a medium in both the mechanical and the spiritualist sense. The entire period of *The Work* (1905-15) can therefore be characterised as one of *manifestation*: the works came into being in their being painted. Hence too their direct didactic character for the artist herself, who mastered spiritual insights in painting them. It is tempting here to speculate, playing upon the general semantic overlap between seeing and understanding (“I see” in its use as “I understand”) that, as she painted, she saw—and as she *saw*, she painted. While some of the forms might be abstract, this clearly still has more to do with representation (even mimesis) than with abstraction.

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<sup>56</sup> Af Klint, “Hilma,” 8.

<sup>57</sup> Siltavuori, “The Secret,” 36.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>59</sup> Reading of their size ‘within herself’ and furthermore being strongly admonished to not let anyone see them Svensson, “The Greatness,” 18.

After manifestation came reflection, and integration, in 1915-16. This period served to further af Klint's self-awareness and her ability to actively and consciously make artistic decisions during painting. There is a considerable difference between being a vessel 'filled from above' and being able to fill that vessel 'by means of [one's] own studies'. The latter is furthermore characterised as *'free'*. Rather than being faced with a painting revealing itself only in the process of being painted, there was now room for conscious decision-making beforehand. Her reference to the fact that some sort of mentoring remained ('still under guidance'), illustrates the continuing presence of guiding spirits in af Klint's spiritual life and work. A *positive* presence—one should not make the mistake of thinking this type of mediumism a mere state of coercion. For all that they had put an immense task upon her, af Klint felt that the 'High Masters' also supported her in it.<sup>60</sup>

#### *Authority, agency, inner necessity*

Having established the different stages of her mediumism through the lens of the artist's own perception of them, and before I turn to the interrelation of figuration and abstraction in her work, I would further delve into the apparent need for mediumistic guidance. Every discussion of af Klint as an artist is unavoidably coloured by current debates concerning the (western) canon of 'abstract pioneers' and their gender, even as it is framed by the artist's own socio-cultural milieu that considered men to be creative and women reproductive. Additionally, there are the—still—controversial subjects of occultism in relation to modern art and of agency in cases of trance art or mediumistic art. Negative notions about contact with higher beings and principled views about artistic geniuses and authorship collide unproductively with claims to external guidance. The impression that af Klint's as well as Houghton's "pioneering" in abstraction is emphasised to mitigate the unfortunate fact of their mediumism, is not hard to escape. Yet it is an unproductive line of inquiry as much as it is irrelevant whether 'Amaliel' can, could, or did exist outside of af Klint's experience. That he and similar guides figured largely in her inner life is beyond doubt and therefore a base line to be incorporated in the picture we construct of this artist. As scholars, it is imperative to take both the discursive and the cultural reality of one's historical subject(s) seriously—and

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<sup>60</sup> For instance with 'lilies and roses'; Hedwig Saam and Miriam Windhausen eds., *De geheime schilderijen van Hilma af Klint – The secret paintings of Hilma af Klint* (Arnhem: Museum voor Moderne Kunst, 2010), 22.

as real. One can still, however, explore interpretations for the guiding spirits' perceived presence.

As has been tentatively put forward, the claimed presence of *male* guiding spirits may have formed a solution to the problem of creative agency and authorship that faced female artists in the later nineteenth century into the early twentieth.<sup>61</sup> The question of final creative authority could be deflected by emphasising the artist's role as mere medium and channel for ideas of a male, be he a Mahatma on a Tibetan mountain or for example the spirit of Mozart. More study of this subject is required, if only to problematize the question whether the providing of male authority for female creativity was a conscious strategy on the artists' part. There are several late nineteenth and early twentieth-century cases in European history of original women artists creating new forms of art while in states of trance, guided or unguided, including trance dancer Magdaleine Guipet (1876-?, the *Traumtänzerin*); all-round creative medium Hélène Smith (Catherine-Elise Müller, 1861-1929), who drew, painted, created fabulous narratives and invented languages; trance poet Clara Blüthgen (née Kilburger, 1856-1934), whose spirit guide eased the transition from a (successful) journalistic career to experimental poetry, drama and fiction; and trance painter Wilhelmine Aßmann (later Frieda Gentes, 1876?-?), whose unorthodoxly executed works afforded her a successful career and fashionable lifestyle in Berlin.<sup>62</sup>

Was it the case for women trance artist that 'some of life's fundamental experiences [were] too distressing to face as they are',<sup>63</sup> wherefore they were outsourced, as it were, to a spirit, angel, subliminal agent, or otherwise? In the case of af Klint, Fant offers the explanation of intervention of the unconscious to resolve distress: describing her mediumistic painting as 'a very specific creative technique, working through a dialogue between the

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<sup>61</sup> Treitel, *A Science*, 118-124.

<sup>62</sup> Pia Witzmann, "'Dem Kosmos zu gehört der Tanzende' – Der Einfluß des Okkulten auf den Tanz," in Loers, *Okkultismus und Avant-Garde*, 600-624, 620-4; Treitel, *A Science*, 117-24; Priska Pytlik, *Okkultismus und Moderne. Ein kulturhistorisches Phänomen und seine Bedeutung für die Literatur um 1900* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2005), 64-5. Théodore Flournoy, *From India to the Planet Mars*, ed. and intro by Sonu Shamadansi, foreword by C.G. Jung (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). Lachapelle, *Investigating*, 65-71. Zeynep Çelik Alexander, "Jugendstil Visions: Occultism, Gender and Modern Design Pedagogy," *Journal of Design History* 22, 3 (2009): 203-226, 214. Obviously the ground was prepared by Victorian spiritualist artists such as Houghton (as mentioned) and Anna Mary Howitt (1824-1884); Rachel Oberter, "'The Sublimation of Matter into Spirit': Anna Mary Howitt's Automatic Drawings," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult*, eds. Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn (Farnham: Routledge, 2012): 333-358, esp. 336-8. Serious and extensive study of the subject of trance painters in Europe, be they male or female, is long overdue. Oberter's PhD Dissertation *Spiritualism and the Visual Imagination in Victorian Britain* (Yale University, 2007) is unfortunately unpublished.

<sup>63</sup> Siltavuori, "The Secret," 37.



unconscious and the conscious’, apparently under ‘subliminal influences’.<sup>64</sup> Since Romanticism and certainly since Surrealism ‘unconscious’ and ‘subliminal’ are accepted Othered loci for artistic inspiration and authorship. Yet experiencing distress in the pursuit of painting is hardly unique. Kandinsky spoke in the 1910s of ‘strong inner tension’ when painting (nearly) abstract works and of painting ‘rather subconsciously’ when in that state. Indeed, his feeling of the necessity of certain forms was apparently so overwhelming that he gave himself directions—‘But the corners must be heavy!’—in a loud voice.<sup>65</sup> He elucidated upon inner necessity beautifully in *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (1912).<sup>66</sup> Historians of the arts have generally treated male artists who experience altered states and voices while painting differently from female artists experiencing the same. Agency is always ascribed to the man, be he dissociated, in mystical communion with higher beings or guided by deceased relatives (i.e., William Blake, Rainer Maria Rilke, Victor Hugo).<sup>67</sup>

What I would highlight is that artists who experience altered states and voices while painting may *themselves* also have interpreted it differently from their contemporaries of the other gender, on account of cultural gender norms of their time. Artists of either gender may have experienced ‘inner tension’ and anxiety when painting radically different forms, lines and colours; my suggestion is that perhaps when a Kandinsky hears a voice giving him directions regarding the painting of corners, he interprets it as his own, whereas an af Klint, imprinted culturally and at the Academy with the self-perception of not being able to create something out of nothing, interprets a directive-issuing voice as external. Along similar lines, an artist, having internalised that for her, as a woman, originality and radical creativity are simply not possible, may well find ascribing genial inspiration to a male entity or personality element the only plausible explanation—although this still remains speculation on my part. It could be ‘Léopold’ the guiding spirit (as in the case of Hélène Smith); it could also be the manifestation of (male) genius on the premise of a strong masculine side to one’s personality due to one’s homosexual nature (e.g., Gertrude Stein).<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Fant, “The Case,” 156.

<sup>65</sup> Kandinsky on the subject of his painting *Improvisation no. 30 (Canons)* (1913) in a 1913 or 1914 letter to collector Arthur Eddy, reproduced by the latter in idem, *Cubists and Post-Impressionism* (Chicago: McClurg, 1919 [1914]), 125-6.

<sup>66</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, ed. & trans. Hilla Rebay (New York: Solomon Guggenheim Foundation, 1946 [1912]), passim but esp. 55.

<sup>67</sup> Sheila A. Spector, “Blake, William,” in Hanegraaff et al., *Dictionary*, 173-177. Gísli Magnússon, *Esotericism and Occultism in the Works of the Austrian Poet Rainer Maria Rilke: A New Reading of His Texts* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2014).

<sup>68</sup> Chris Coffman, “Visual Economies of Queer Desire in Gertrude Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*,” *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 70, 4 (2014): 49-83. Due to

For mediumistic artists, it leaves the question whether the state of dissociation manifests to deal with being original, inventive and radical and resulting anxiety, or whether it was only when in trance that one's talent could find expression. The latter was the case with Aßmann, for instance.<sup>69</sup> I find it quite probable that Hilma af Klint fits the first category. *Every* element in the *Temple Paintings* was different from the established traditional work af Klint had been making before, from the bright colour palette to the strong lines and sinuous shapes, to the abstract forms, the brushwork, canvas sizes, preparation and priming, subject, iconography. Maybe therefore, as Lars Bang Larsen has suggested, we should consider the spirit guides catalysts for the artist's self-actualisation, the mere *possibility* of their existence easing the way for af Klint to move beyond what she had been taught at the Academy.<sup>70</sup> Thus, I argue, the radical new painting style af Klint found herself working in may have contributed to the depth of her mediumism in the years 1905-08. Many of the earliest of the *Temple Paintings* have a hasty and unfinished, even unskilful look to them. There are mistakes and technical mishaps. As neither af Klint's skill nor her proper training is in doubt, it seems probable that the sheer urge to commit her visions to canvas was so pressing as to preclude issues of technical or stylistic finesse. In her diary, the spirit guides cautioned her to put her ego aside and not to waste time on useless thoughts or worry over sub-standard colours, for instance<sup>71</sup>—in itself already an indication that she *did* worry about those things. In addition, I find it highly probable that a certain amount of de-skilling occurred, certainly in the early stages of The Work and the months leading up to them. Modern art has persistently tried to move beyond academic painting, to bypass one's training in favour of true creative expression. Af Klint too was traditionally trained, painting in an established style and touch. It seems likely that one of the reasons she held off drawing automatically in the sessions with De Fem, as noted earlier, was her experienced hand, which might inhibit the automaticity required in mediumistic drawing. De Fem's private sessions offered a safe environment to practice breaking with established academic form, and later she did execute many automatic

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considerations of space I only highlight here dynamics of *gender*, but just as important are of course class and formal training; many *male* outsider artists manifesting mediumism, for instance, had low status and/or lack of education to overcome.

<sup>69</sup> Treitel, *A Science*, 120-4.

<sup>70</sup> Lars Bang Larsen, "Sympati for det usynlige – Hilma af Klint og det esoteriske æstetik," in *Hilma af Klint: Abstrakt Pioner*, eds. Michael Juul Holm and Tine Colstrup (Humblebæk: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2014), 69-74, 71. As well, for all the deflection of issues of authority or socially unacceptable crossing of gender boundaries, spirit guidance should not be considered an "easy" way out. Af Klint was very sceptical about the spirits initially; this we know because in her early diaries the spirits frequently reproached her for her scepticism. Sandqvist, "The Great," 262.

<sup>71</sup> Svensson, "The Greatness," 17.

drawings and pastels, which clearly show a tentative approach and search for new lines and non-traditional forms that would come to full fruition in the *Temple Paintings*.<sup>72</sup>

*External form and colour: my heart's desire!*

One could hence interpret the mediumistic painting state that the artist manifested for The Work as a strategy towards dealing with the tension and demands of working in a style that was radically different and new, that required of af Klint an abstracted language of form, colour, and style that was entirely unlike what she had been taught, what she practiced and gained recognition and income with—and, very possibly, that she also *enjoyed*. Early on during The Work af Klint lamented having had to change her style:

I have been forced to refrain from what was my heart's desire in the days of my youth: being able to reproduce external form and colour. In other words I have in fact been driven back from a field of work [...].<sup>73</sup>

What's more, this new style required her to go against gendered norms current in artistic circles and culture at large, norms which we have no reason to believe she had not fully internalised herself and possibly subscribed to, partly or even fully. Her turn towards abstraction in her painting practice, or the fact that she served as secretary for the Society for Swedish Women Artists defending women artist's rights to the art market for a year,<sup>74</sup> should not automatically be understood as signs of protest against gender norms. There is no evidence at all that she painted in the feminine genres only under duress. On the contrary; firstly, she retained many figurative elements in her spiritual paintings, and secondly, she returned to it with a vengeance in 1917.

Throughout her spiritual painting, af Klint continued to incorporate representational forms: a nautilus shell or snail, symbolising the spiral, and the swan and the dove representing male and female spiritual avatars. Other recurring motifs include letters and words, flowers, dogs, snakes, male, female and androgynous figures, angels, including an

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<sup>72</sup> See the overview photo of several automatic pastels in Prinz, "A Modern Spirit," <http://www.artbouillon.com/2014/06/a-modern-spirit-hilma-af-klint-and.html> (image 10).

<sup>73</sup> Written in 1906 or 1907, cited in Siltavuori, "The Secret," 36.

<sup>74</sup> Bernitz, "Hilma," 590.

apocalyptic archangel and dragon, and even a classical river god.<sup>75</sup> Christological imagery also crops up frequently in the *Painting for the Temple*. However, she combined such seemingly conventional iconography with specific occult concepts, leading to quite unconventional paintings. *No. 5, Group VIII, The US Series* (1913), for instance, depicts a crucified figure multiple times, and as if X-rayed, that is to say with all major organs visible within the bodies [Figure 4]. Dualities are the major theme of this work, colour-coded yellow-blue and white-black, representing male and female, upward and downward, spiritual and material. The multiform cross is in fact a tesseract, a four-dimensional hypercube depicted in three dimensions. Theosophists had appropriated and popularised late nineteenth-century concepts of an occult fourth dimension that is spatial—for instance, extending into the ‘astral’ or otherwise supra-physical realm—rather than temporal; a metaphysical, spiritual dimension of intuition and higher truths. The impact upon the arts was considerable, as I have explored elsewhere.<sup>76</sup> The visibility of the organs also links to theosophical thought. Within second generation Theosophy, the invention of x-rays was perceived (as within society at large) as proof that the human eye, ordinarily used, is only a weak instrument of perception, and thus supported theosophical dogma concerning the possibility (even provability) of *other* forms of seeing, such as clairvoyance or ‘astral vision’. X-ray imaging apparently confirmed some of the particularities of astral vision, such as perceiving solid objects (such as bodies) as transparent; within theosophical occult circles an overlap between ‘astral vision’, ‘x-ray vision’ and ‘vision in the fourth dimension’ occurred, which seem to be synthesised in this painting.<sup>77</sup>

In 1915-16 af Klint created a fully figurative series on religious observants in poses of prayer or meditation; a group of nuns or priestesses, the ‘Feminine Series’, and of monks-priests, the ‘Masculine Series’ [Figure 5]. In the middle of all her abstraction, these paintings are conventionally executed with a loose semi-impressionistic touch in muted hues: her early, public painting style. For all its sudden return to full figuration, the subject of this series still is very much in line with the *Temple Paintings*. Increasingly af Klint had come to consider herself a priestess, and this series testifies to her deep personal spirituality and perhaps struggle to define her own role in what she was being shown and asked to paint. If, as seems to be the case, af Klint was deeply attached to her original style of painting, then this series’

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<sup>75</sup> In *No. 8, Group 3, WU Series: The Rose*, also known as *The Large Figure Paintings*, 1907.

<sup>76</sup> Bauduin, “Science,” 26-34; the seminal study of this topic is Linda D. Henderson’s *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidian Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 32 and passim.

<sup>77</sup> Bauduin, “Science,” 36.

conventional execution makes them only more personal. The almost entirely abstract *Parsifal Series* [Figure 2] was created only a few months later, demonstrating that by this time the artist moved relatively easily between these differing styles of painting—possibly because subject matter, spiritual reflection, and personal enlightenment were so closely related; to each other, and also to her early artistic work. We find further evidence of this in the later 1910s. When, in 1917, af Klint felt she could return to her ‘heart’s desire’—‘external form and colour’—she did so immediately. In an exciting integration of her traditional and her spiritual work, she created the flower-studies that combine botanical details with spiritually symbolic forms. An example is *Violet Blossoms with Guidelines* (1919) [Figure 3].<sup>78</sup> This is a clear sign, I find, that af Klint by no means resented having had to keep to the reproductive genres originally and possibly enjoyed doing botanical studies. In 1917, she combined them with the deep insights she had gained into the inner workings of the cosmos and mankind’s spiritual evolution during *The Work* and immediately after, creating a rather beautiful and quite fascinating integration of illustration from nature with geometric abstraction, of external observation with spiritual notions.

*To reproduce is first to see*

In closing, more than af Klint not challenging the gendered view of artistic creation (a woman is only able to reproduce, to mimic from nature); I would suggest she may have internalised it. Using the vessel-metaphor already points in that direction. For a female artist observation of the visible was key: the eyes enable the hands to reproduce. Such was the case when af Klint painted portraits and landscapes, when she drew her detailed studies of plants and flowers—and when making her spiritual works as well. As stated, during the creation of *The Paintings for the Temple*, she was ‘shown’ the images in some sort of way, let us say, before her inner spiritual eye:

I read off their size within me (158cm x 114cm). Above my easel I saw a Jupiter sign which was brightly illuminated and which was visible for several seconds. I immediately began to work in such a manner that the pictures were painted through me directly without any preliminary drawings and with great force.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> For a whole notebook of them, see: af Klint, *Blumen, Moosen* in Birnbaum & Noring, *The Legacy*.

<sup>79</sup> Svensson, “The Greatness,” 18.

Af Klint could, I argue, conceptualise her painter's activity to herself as a form of reproduction rather than active creation. Things visible and invisible were *shown* to her, something she indicates for the period of metaphysical study (1917ff.) as well—'a simultaneously visible and invisible finger will show me what I am to examine'. And perhaps what was not immediately shown (and hence required creation from nothing) was painted by another through her, and/or she would be given instructions. It appears from her notes that the artist felt that in some way she had laid eyes upon supra-physical realms, such as the astral plane. As she wrote around that time, her 'observations' 'extended beyond nature to the astral world'.<sup>80</sup> After *The Work* had been finished af Klint wrote that she would continue to 'portray the astral plane in colour and form'.<sup>81</sup>

Without a doubt she derived the idea of *seeing* the astral plane or forms thereon (and other planes) from Theosophy, specifically that of Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater, second-generation leaders of the Theosophical Society. Undertaking many experiments with spiritual, clairvoyant or third eye-vision together and individually, they 'saw' the astral plane and the 'thought-forms' upon it, or so they claimed. They made occult observations of chemical elements and atoms, for which only 'a very slight intensification of ordinary vision' was apparently necessary.<sup>82</sup> One area where occultism, Spiritualism, and psychical research met was in their shared endeavour to make the invisible visible. Indeed, visual confirmation is one of the central premises of both Spiritualism and psychical research, both disciplines' main claim to science as well as weapon against sceptics. Af Klint, involved with both Spiritualism and Theosophy, partook of these different, although neighbouring and often overlapping occult milieus simultaneously. Spiritualism offered a séance-culture of visual manifestation in mediumistic writing and drawing and otherwise; Theosophy, a combined emphasis upon spiritual cosmic structures and sacred geometry with the second-generation spotlight on clairvoyant observations of ethereal and astral planes and forms. Narratives about the visibility of particular phenomena, either in the physical (ordinary) domain or on etheric or astral planes, dominated in both milieus. To rephrase Boccioni, what should be depicted (spiritual concepts) is indeed what the clairvoyant painter *sees*.

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<sup>80</sup> Fant, "The Case," 158.

<sup>81</sup> Bernitz, "Hilma," 594 (my emphasis).

<sup>82</sup> Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater, *Occult Chemistry, a Series of Clairvoyant Observations on the Chemical Elements* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1909), 2. Idem, *Thought-Forms* (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1901). Charles Leadbeater, *Man Visible and Invisible. Examples of Different Types of Men as Seen by Means of Trained Clairvoyance* (Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1902).

In addition, I propose the possibility that af Klint interiorised the gender-discourse of her time concerning creation and reproduction, and turned to observation and visual examination precisely because of her femininity and self-understood nature of being a vessel. Thus, to conclude, her gender provided her with receptiveness and ability to observe and mimic, Spiritualism a self-conception as (guided) medium, and Theosophy the understanding that other realms and spiritual forms could be clairvoyantly observed—that is to say, were visible in some sort of way and could be represented. Her spirit guides and states of mediumism served her well: to overcome her traditional training and move towards pictorial and stylistic invention, as well as to confront the double-edged sword of her gender, which, while making creation and invention difficult if not impossible for her, at the same time made her ideally suited to be a receptive vessel. Af Klint set out to make visible the invisible supra-physical universe, spiritual teaching and ideas which already existed; the spirits were only now employing her to depict them, with the aim to create the temple that would save mankind.

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## Illustrations



1 Hilma af Klint, *Altopiece, No 3, Group X: Altopieces*, 1915, oil and gold leaf on canvas, 237,5 × 179,5 cm. Stiftelsen Hilma af Klint's Verk (photo: Moderna Museet/Albin Dahlström ©).



2 Hilma af Klint, *Inåt, The Parsifal Series, Group 2, Section 4: Det fysika planets konvolut* (“Statement of the Physical Plan”), 1916, watercolours on paper, 27 x 25 cm. Stiftelsen Hilma af Klint’s Verk (photo: Moderna Museet/Albin Dahlström ©).



3 Hilma af Klint, *Violet Blossoms with Guidelines, Series I*, 1919, watercolour, graphite and metallic paint on paper, 50 x 26,8 cm. Stiftelsen Hilma af Klint's Verk (photo: Moderna Museet/Albin Dahlström ©).



4 Hilma af Klint, *No. 5, Group VIII, The US Series*, 1913, oil on canvas, 155.5 x 114 cm. Stiftelsen Hilma af Klint's Verk (photo: Moderna Museet/Albin Dahlström ©).



5 Hilma af Klint, *No. 1, A Masculine Series*, 1915, oil on canvas, 50 x 32 cm. Stiftelsen Hilma af Klint's Verk (photo: Moderna Museet/Albin Dahlström ©).