

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

WALL TEXT

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

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

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

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

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

EXTENDED WALL LABELS

[SOUTH GALLERY]

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

PRIMORDIAL CHAOS (1906–7)

THE WU/ROSE SERIES

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

ALTARPIECES (1915)

SERIES X

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

[NORTH GALLERY]

THE TEN LARGEST (1907)

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

[EAST GALLERY]

EVOLUTION (1908)

THE WUS/SEVEN-POINTED STAR SERIES

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

[WEST GALLERY]

THE SWAN (1914–5)

THE SUW/UW SERIES

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

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

[SMALL WEST GALLERY]

THE DOVE (1915) THE SUW/UW SERIES

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

[SMALL EAST GALLERY]

SERIES II (1920)

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

ON THE VIEWING OF FLOWERS AND TREES (1922)

THE PICTURE SERIES

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

NOTEBOOKS BY THE FIVE

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

NOTEBOOKS BY HILMA AF KLINT

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

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