Why Hilma af Klint's Occult Spirituality Makes Her the Perfect Artist for Our Technologically Disrupted Time

At the Guggenheim, "Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future" makes you rethink what it means to be modern.

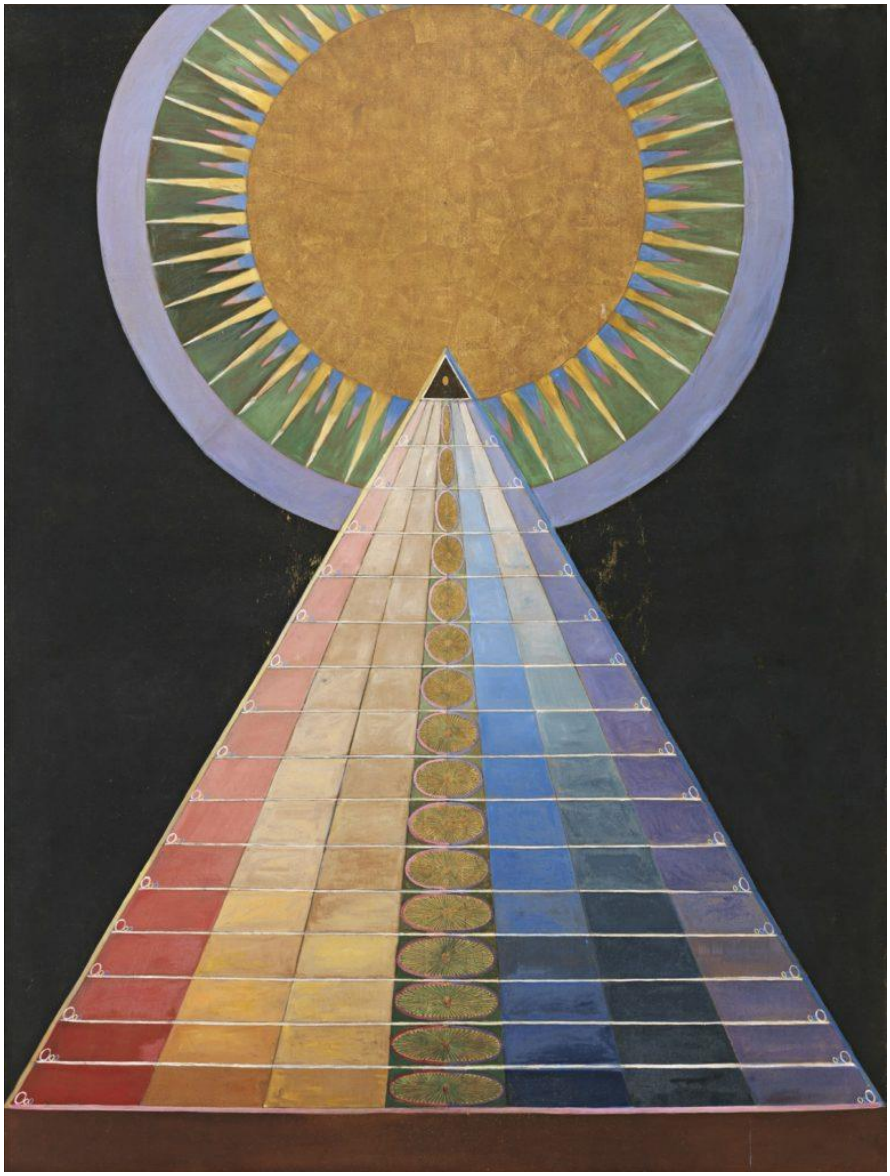
Ben Davis, October 23, 2018

Installation view of Hilma af Klint's "The Ten Largest." Image courtesy Ben Davis.

I can't help but agree with all the praise being heaped on the Guggenheim's big Hilma af Klint show. It's great, great, beyond great.

Assembled in a chronological progression up the museum's spiral, the show feels like both a transmission from an unmapped other world and a perfectly logical correction to the history of Modern art—an alternate mode of abstraction from the dawn of the 20th century that looks as fresh as if it were painted yesterday.

It’s hard to quibble with the sheer level of painterly pleasure of af Klint’s sui generis style. So instead I’ll take a moment to focus on why this show feels so right for right now.



Hilma af Klint, *Altarpieces: Group X, No. 1, Altarpiece* (1915). © Stiftelsen Hilma af Klints Verk.

A Style of Her Own

Part of that has to do with her status as a powerfully convincing and long-underappreciated voice. Now happens to be a very exciting moment in art history, with loads of new scholarship disrupting the old Paris-to-New York, Modern-to-contemporary throughline, reconsidering the stories of minorities and the colonized, “outsiders” of all kinds, and also of women.

Af Klint's body of work really only began receiving attention in the 1980s and is only now getting the kind of widespread acclaim it really deserves—she doesn't even feature as a footnote in the catalogue for MoMA's "Inventing Abstraction" show, and that was just five years ago! She therefore fits comfortably within the rediscovery zeitgeist.

Born in Sweden in 1862 and descended from a distinguished clan of naval heroes and maritime cartographers, she trained formally as a painter at Stockholm's official academy. The Guggenheim exhibition opens with a small sample of her landscapes and portraits, which show a deft, accomplished naturalism.

Hilma af Klint, *Untitled Series: group IV, the Ten Largest, No. 7, Adulthood* (1907). © Stiftelsen Hilma af Klints Verk.

But the works she turned to in her forties, like “The Ten Largest” (1907), are something else again. The suite of 10 wall-filling paintings represent an abstract symbolic depiction of the cycle of life: the first two represent childhood, followed by panels representing youth, adulthood, and old age. Full of wheeling abstract figures, they are nevertheless wonderfully balanced, both in their individual compositions and within the broader series.

They are also, to a contemporary eye at least, very feminine, in a way that stands as a pre-rebuttal of the machismo that later came to dominate abstract rhetoric as it rose to art historical preeminence. The works of “The Ten Largest” are not figurative, but the forms they channel—the blossoms, lacy garlands, and curlicues; the looping, cursive lines of cryptic text that surge across the surface; the palette of pinks and lavenders, peaches and baby blues—draw freshness, to a contemporary eye, from their symbolic associations with feminine iconography.

Installation view of “The Ten Biggest.” Image courtesy Ben Davis.

At the same time, all this is splashed at such a brazen scale that it also undoes period stereotypes of feminine modesty and decorum—though this unleashed expressive freedom was probably itself made possible by the fact that af Klint hardly ever showed these works publicly.

Channeling Abstraction

So there's that: Hilma af Klint's example shows the symbolic power that a woman artist could draw both in spite of and because of the constraints put on her by her time period and her culture, making her a convincing heroine for today. But there is another aspect of Hilma af Klint that makes her oeuvre enter into harmonic relation with the present.

That is her occultism.

Af Klint's interior life, I gather, remains a bit of an enigma, glimpsed through hints and fragments in her journals. What is definitely known is that she had begun attending séances as a teenager, using them as a way to contact her younger sister, who had died young. Af Klint's turn to abstraction grew from experiments with contacting the dead, particularly as part of a group of women who christened themselves the Five, going into trance states or channeling with a machine called a psychograph.

Example of automatic drawing created by The Five. Image courtesy Ben Davis.

The spirals, percolating patterns, and scrawled text fragments of the Five's automatic pencil drawings appear like the primal chaos out of which the bold abstraction of "The Ten Largest" emerged.

The Five believed they had been contacted by the “High Masters,” spirits called Amaliel, Ananda, Clemens, Esther, Georg, and Gregor. One of these would give af Klint the mission that would become “The Paintings for the Temple,” the multi-part cycle that occupies most of the Guggenheim show. “Amaliel offered me a commission and I immediately replied: yes,” she wrote. “This became the great commission, which I carried out in my life.”

Occult Modernism

Though unique and all her own, af Klint’s spiritualist passions were fertilized in the larger developments in European fin de siècle culture. Early on, the Swedish artist found a home as a Theosophist, shortly after that movement opened a lodge in Stockholm.

Founded in 1875 by Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891), a Russian émigré to the United States, Theosophy was a New Age philosophy *avant la lettre*. It combined three pillars: advocacy of a universal brotherhood of man; interest in non-Western philosophy and religion as a source of renewing wisdom; and a belief in communing with ghosts. The last, according to Blavatsky, was the least important—but very clearly appealed to the spiritualistically inclined af Klint.

Hilma af Klint’s “Primordial Chaos” series. Image courtesy Ben Davis.

This improbable synthesis captured the hearts of Americans and Europeans disoriented by the 19th century's concussive changes, in a time when science was crowding religion, and electric light, the telegraph, the phonograph, and other world-changing developments were altering the textures of life, making the once-miraculous seem abruptly possible.

In rapidly evolving Sweden, Lars Magnus Ericsson would found his telephone company in 1876; less than 10 years later the Scandanavian nation had the world's most complex network and Stockholm had the most telephones in the world. In that febrile moment, no wonder people believed that it might also be possible to rig a system to listen to voices from beyond!

Hilma af Klint, *The WU/Rose Series: Group I, Primordial Choas, No. 12* (1906-07). Image courtesy Ben Davis.

(Af Klint had good company in Theosophy among Europe's Modernist big guns. Wassily Kandinsky, for one, also counted Theosophy as an inspiration, citing Blavatsky in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, the pamphlet he wrote that provided the basis for his "non-objective art.")

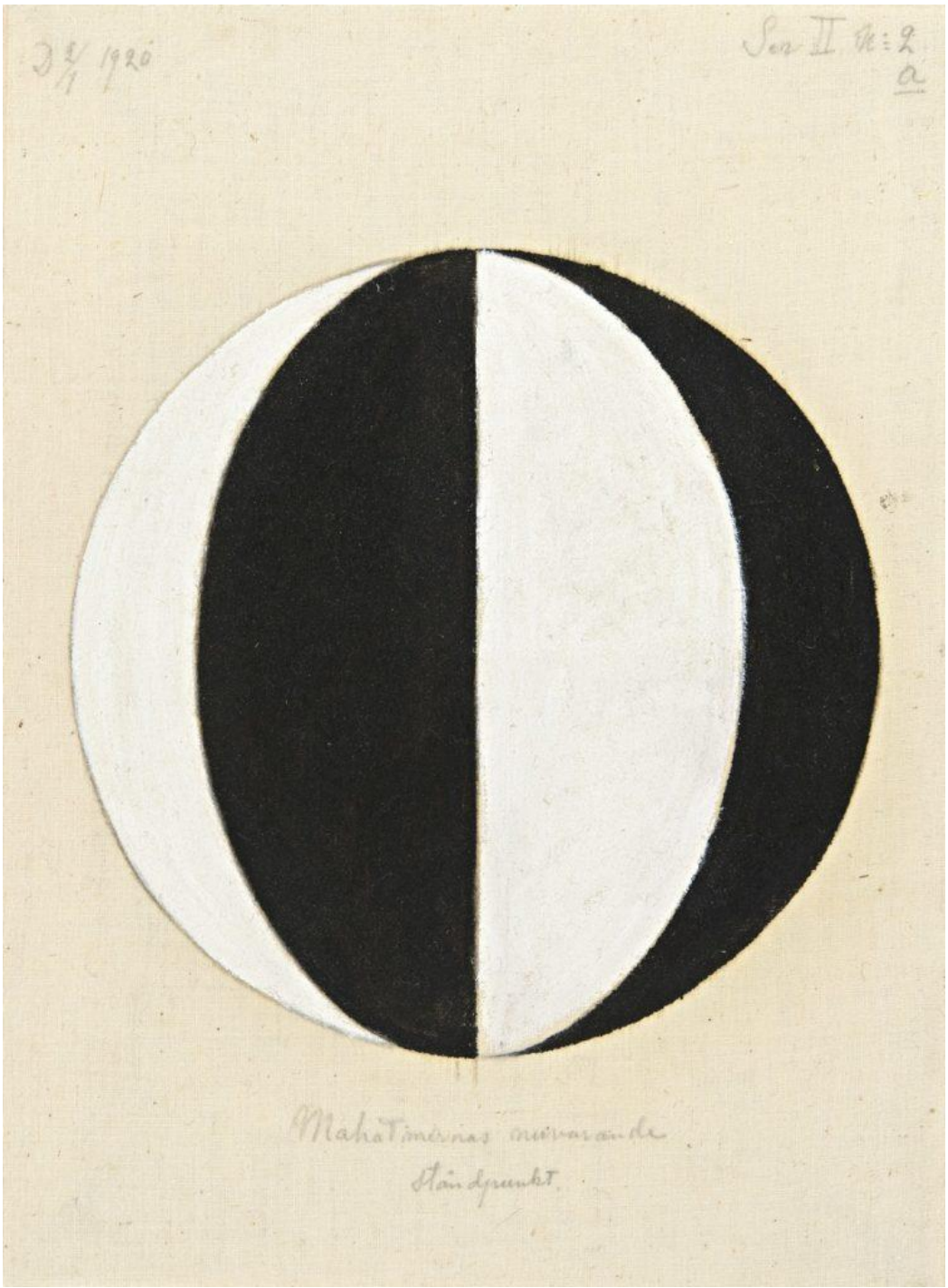
Among other things, the Theosophist craze fed on interest in older secret societies that had shadowed the Enlightenment, especially the legend of the Rosicrucians, supposedly a secret order promising spiritual knowledge to reform mankind, involving both study of ancient mystic traditions and a belief in alchemy.

The esoteric philosopher Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), who passed through Theosophy before founding his own doctrine of Anthroposophy, reclaimed the ideas of Rosicrucianism as a "spiritual science," capable of returning a sense of the purpose of humanity to a world grown disenchantingly materialist. Steiner in particular was a huge influence on af Klint—in fact, he was the only person she sought out to show her paintings to (though when she finally convinced him to see them, in 1909, he was shatteringly underwhelmed).

Signs of All Times

All of these interests are key to understanding Hilma af Klint's aesthetic. For instance, in 1920, she made a series of small works that begins with a single circle, half black and half white, called "Starting Picture"—the world as a balanced duality, physical and material, dark and light.

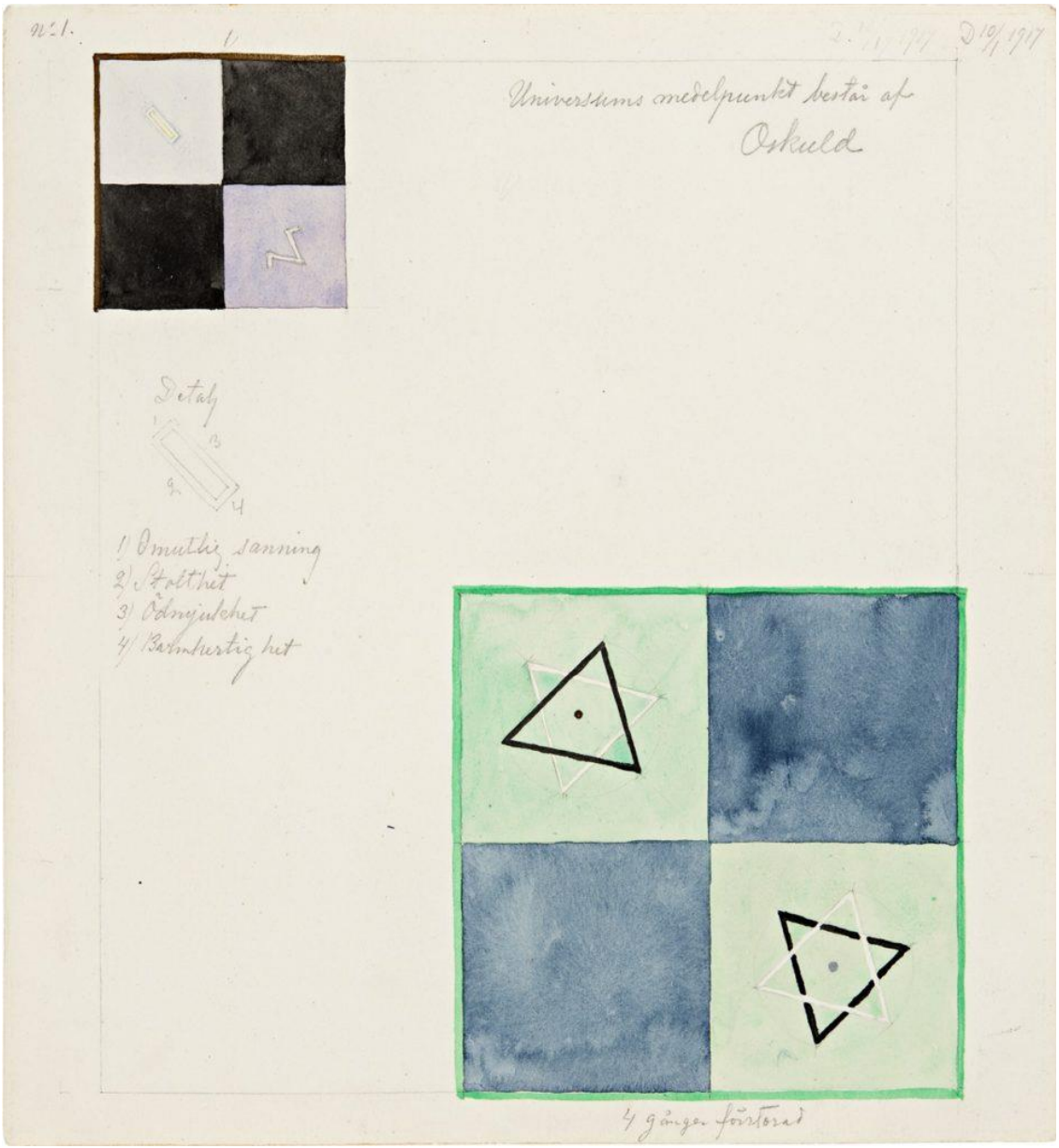
Subsequent entries in the series offer similar circles, differently divided up between black and white: one divided into four alternating slices; one with black crescents framing a white center; etc. The titles suggest they are supposed to represent different graphs of the great spiritual traditions: "The Current Standpoint of the Mahatmas," "The Jewish Standpoint at the Birth of Jesus," "Buddha's Standpoint in Worldly Life," and so on.



Hilma af Klint, *Series II, Number 2a: The Current Standpoint of the Mahatmas* (1920) © Stiftelsen Hilma af Klints Verk.

What specifically this means, I have difficulty grasping. But the idea quite clearly emerges out of the syncretic foment of the greater intellectual milieu—that all world religions are permutations of one spiritual background pattern that is revealing itself.

Theosophy was obsessed with esoteric symbols—its seal famously mashed together the swastika and the ankh as well as the ouroboros and a hexagram formed of interlinked white and black triangles. The latter recurs frequently in af Klint's paintings.



Hilma af Klint, *The Atom Series: No. 1 (Nr 1)* (1917). Photo by Albin Dahlström, the Moderna Museet, Stockholm. Courtesy of the Hilma af Klint Foundation and the Guggenheim Museum. Note the black-white hexagrams at bottom right.

So do astrological symbols, another major interest thrown into the era's great melting pot of occult interests. You see them arrayed around the borders of paintings in her "The Dove" series.

Hilma af Klint, *The SUW/UW Series: Group IX/UW, The Dove, No. 14* (1915). Clockwise from top left, the symbols are for Aquarius, Pisces, Capricorn, and Sagittarius. Image courtesy Ben Davis.

Af Klint's gorgeous series "The Swan" is among the least abstract of her great cycle of works, which generally have the feeling of diagrams being permutated. "The Swan" centers on the image of the titular bird, but mirrored and repeated, transforming it into a hieratic emblem. (In Blavatsky's 1890 essay "The Last Song of the Swan," she had

described the symbol of the swan as being particularly important, representing “the tail-end of every important cycle in human history”; in alchemy, it stands for the union of opposites.)

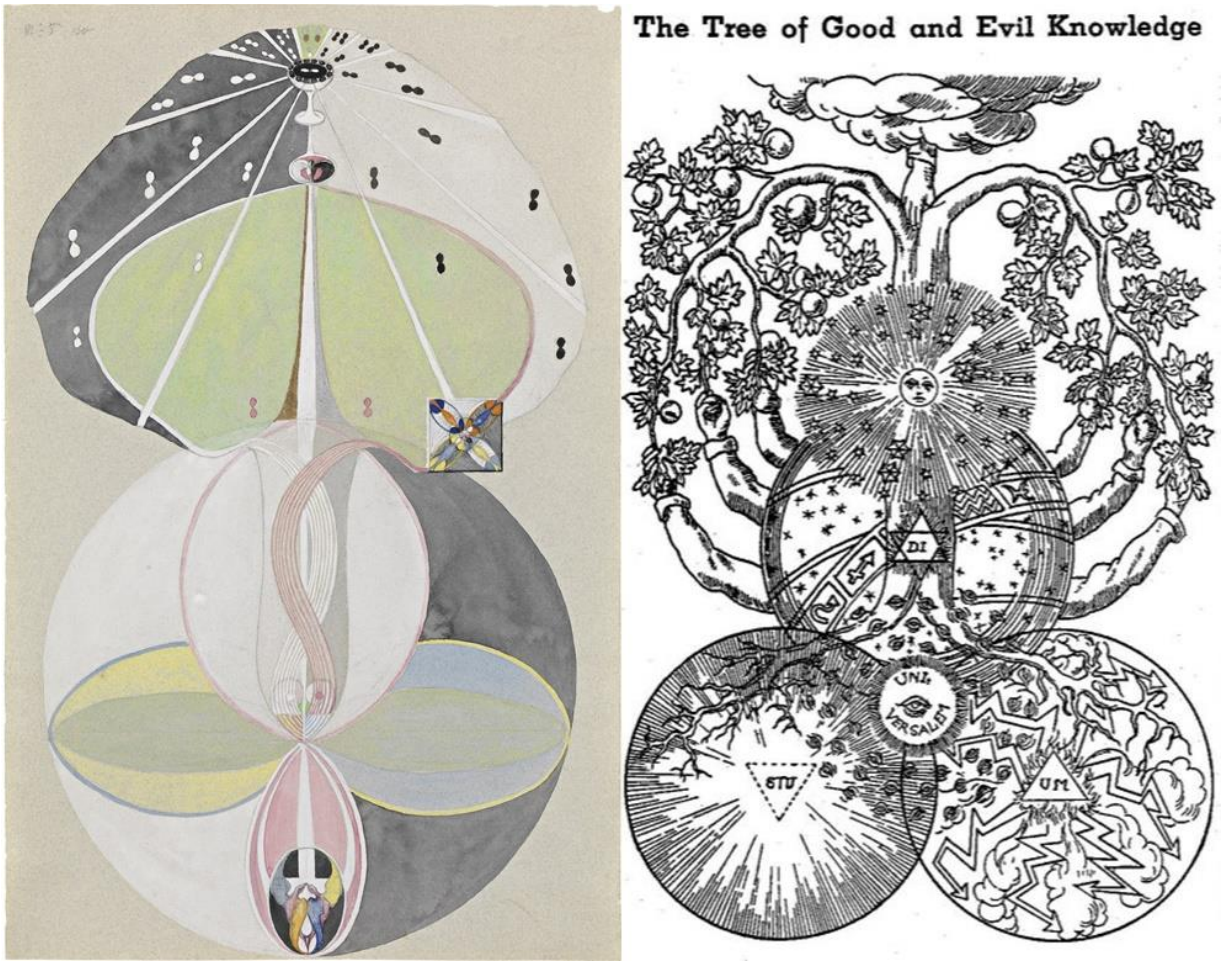
Hilma af Klint, *The SUW/UW Series: Group IX/SUW, The Swan, No. 7* (1915). Note the heart pieced by a cross at the center, a Rosicrucian symbol. Image courtesy Ben Davis.

Painterly Alchemy

While today af Klint’s paintings strike us as forcefully individual, they were certainly first appreciated as icons of mysticism. She had but one real public showing of her work, at a meeting of the 1928 World Conference of Spiritual Science and Its Practical Applications in London, where a program noted that the Swedish painter considered her works to be “studies of Rosicrucian symbolism.” (It is not known which of her paintings were shown.)

As a font for artistic inspiration, the spiritualist and esoteric domain was certainly fertile. Crack open the 1785 compendium *Secret Symbols of the Rosicrucians*, a classic of European occult literature, and its plates appear as a treasure trove of figures that predict af Klint’s graphic interests: hexagrams and sigils, sunbursts and spirals, mirrored animals and abstract figures diagramming the unfolding of the divine light.

Compare the graphics in *Secret Symbols*'s illustration of "The Tree of Good and Evil Knowledge" to a work from Hilma af Klint's own "Tree of Knowledge" series, which offers gnomic variations on the same theme. You can definitely see both the inspiration, even as you see how much more rarified af Klint's version is.



Left: Hilma af Klint, *Serie W, Nr 5. Kunskapens träd* (1915). © Stiftelsen Hilma af Klints Verk.
Right: Plate from *Secret Symbols of the Rosicrucianians of the 16th and 17th Centuries* (1785).

Even Hilma af Klint's mandate that her work be kept secret for decades after her death until the world was spiritually ready for it is a spin on the myths of Rosicrucianism, which introduced itself in its manifestos as a secret order that had stayed hidden until the world was ready for its spiritual reform.

Unless you are a believer in otherworldly visitation yourself, you would probably expect that the cosmic voice within would actually, when decoded, boil down to ideas imprinted from the ambient social environment. This demystifies, but in no way undoes, the magic of Hilma af Klint's art.

Message to the Future

So: What to do with Hilma af Klint's art? Can we separate out those aspects that make it prophetic of Modern art from those aspects linked to an actual mystical-prophetic belief system?

The impulse is understandable: The former puts this vibrant artist in the company of the most revered artistic figures of the century to come; the latter emphasizes elements that connect her more to "kitsch" spiritual aesthetics, fortune tellers and crystal healers and chart readings and all of that.

Installation view of Hilma af Klint at the Guggenheim. Image courtesy Ben Davis.

"Taking af Klint seriously as an artist, in my view, actually *requires* us to take some critical distance from the mysticism that might have enabled her to make such innovative work," art historian Briony Fer argues in the catalogue. I think it undeniable that the sense that af Klint's "Paintings for the Temple" are straining to connect the dots of an invisible order is part of their allure. Even so, I do get that a more formalist reading, focusing on her as an inventive individual, seems the most promising way to make the case for her in the present.

My argument, though, is that all that occult stuff *is* what makes her particularly interesting in the present—probably more interesting than modernists who were outwardly more individualistic and purely formal.

We live today in a time of almost universal domination by the mercenary values of profit, immersed in the cheerful ideology of high-tech disruption and economic creative destruction. We also happen to live in a time of unleashed irrationalism and improbable conspiracy theories of all kinds, welling up everywhere.

So it's very instructive to be reminded that all that proto-New Age, occult symbolism that af Klint drew upon did not simply represent a lapse back into pre-Enlightenment superstition. In fact, for thousands upon thousands of people (including many artists), this was the specific form that modernity took.

And it was also not, by and large, the form it took for the poor or unlettered. Theosophy and its kindred philosophies, with their grandiose spiritual pseudo-science and their remixing of the world's myths and religions into a master code, appealed, on a profound intuitive level, to people who believed in the authority of scientific knowledge, but still felt that the emergent modern world left a hole to be filled in terms of purpose or meaning.

This included relatively well-off and intelligent people like Hilma af Klint, who had time for study and travel, and resources to embark on a personal artistic-spiritual journey.

Installation view of Hilma af Klint's "The Dove" paintings. Image courtesy Ben Davis.

Her beliefs are out there—but on the whole pretty benign and of course self-contained. I'm not trying to compare af Klint to the more disreputable type of present-day conspiracists or toxic myth-makers.

I'm more trying to say that the example of her work's allusive magnetism can help us see one function that obsessions with secret signs and improbably all-connecting codes serve, one that makes them harder to dislodge than if you simply believe they are logic errors. And that is that they can be beautiful. They return a sense of mystery and order to a world that seems dispiriting and beyond control.

Hilma af Klint wanted her art hidden from the world until society was ready for it. What exactly that would have meant to her remains elusive. And nevertheless, she has surfaced right on time.

"Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future" is on view at the Guggenheim, through April 23, 2019.