



The Elegant Rebellion of Hilma af Klint

Lucy Bartholomee

To cite this article: Lucy Bartholomee (2025) The Elegant Rebellion of Hilma af Klint, *Art Education*, 78:5, 46-52, DOI: [10.1080/00043125.2025.2549961](https://doi.org/10.1080/00043125.2025.2549961)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043125.2025.2549961>



Published online: 28 Oct 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



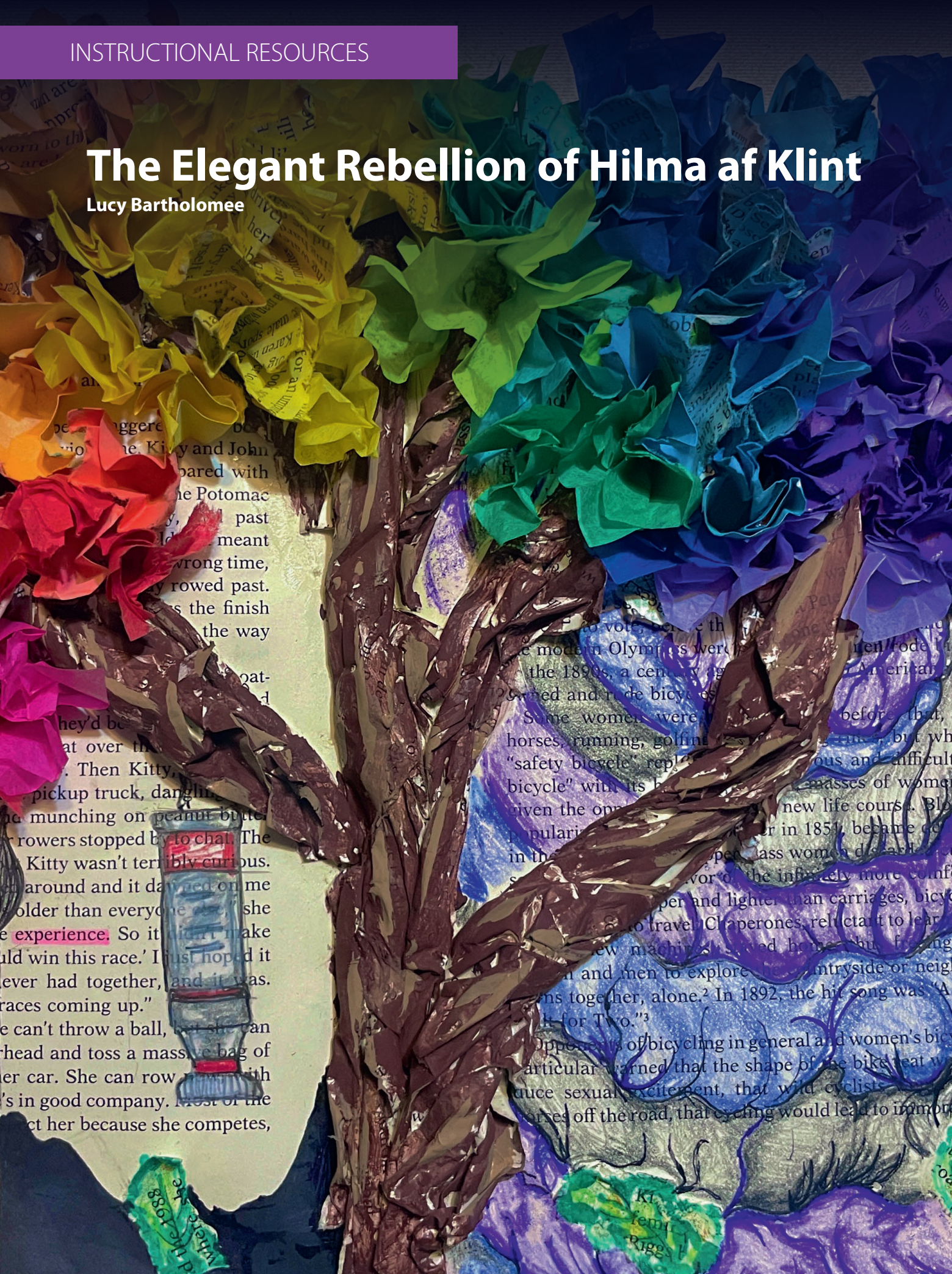
View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

The Elegant Rebellion of Hilma af Klint

Lucy Bartholomee



Hilma af Klint was a truly original, progressive artist creating pure abstractions well ahead of her time. Hilma af Klint's paintings inspire today through vibrant, confident designs: curvilinear marks that lead the eye toward or around well-crafted shapes, featuring hues that are simultaneously gentle and boisterous. Her life story demonstrates how creative endurance can resist patriarchal institutions seeking to diminish the artwork of women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual or ally, and other sexual and gender minorities (LGBTQIA+) artists.

Af Klint's wholly original abstract paintings were initially rejected in part because they were not representational. Pure abstraction was not known in the European art world when she began these works during the years 1890 to 1908, a fact that places her work at the forefront of creative innovation (Greenburger, 2020; Voss, 2022). She also faced bias against her spiritualist practices and her long-term relationships with women, both personal and spiritual. In this instructional resource, I elevate a queer woman artist who was marginalized in her lifetime. Many of us live and work in states with increasingly aggressive antiwoman and anti-LGBTQIA+ laws. As the mother of a trans daughter, as a White woman living in one of these hostile states, and as a human, I am dedicated to pushing back against this pressure.

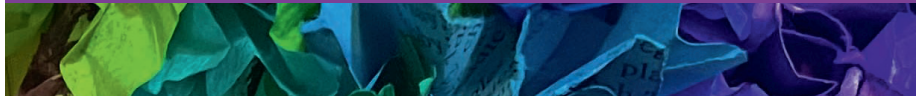
Today, af Klint's bold compositional style is remarkably fresh and speaks to contemporary audiences. Visual connections with modern and contemporary women artists offer opportunities for compelling discussion in areas such as the use of color, abstraction, symbolism, and spirituality. Consider the work of Yayoi Kusama, Muxxi, Rachel Garrard, Loie Hollowell, Alma Thomas, and Agnes Pelton. Af Klint's creativity and courage brought forth images for the future, a rich source from which we can glean inspiration for ourselves and for our students.

Biography

Women who are professional artists have been required for centuries to struggle against societal norms and demands. The life of a woman artist in 19th-century Sweden, when af Klint came of age, was a mixture of opportunities and barriers.

Hilma af Klint was born in 1862 in Stockholm, Sweden, into an upper-middle-class family of naval officers and business owners (Voss, 2022, pp. 15–18). They spent summers in the countryside around Adelsö, where she discovered the natural world and felt deeply connected to the organic beauty of the flora and fauna (Burgin, 2018, p. 7). Her technical skills flourished in her early artwork of landscapes, detailed plants and flowers, and other nature-related subjects. In Stockholm, she studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, where classes for women were strictly segregated, school leadership was hostile to female students, and there were no women instructors (Voss, 2022, p. 52). Af Klint graduated with honors in 1887 and was awarded a prestigious studio space (Fiore, 2018) where she worked as a professional

Af Klint's wholly original abstract paintings were initially rejected in part because they were not representational. Pure abstraction was not known in the European art world when she began these works during the years 1890 to 1908, a fact that places her work at the forefront of creative innovation. She also faced bias against her spiritualist practices and her long-term relationships with women, both personal and spiritual.



artist in Stockholm for several years, mostly creating landscapes, botanical or medical illustrations, and portraits (Greenburger, 2020; Voss, 2022, pp. 102–111).

During this time, starting in 1880, she became interested in the spiritual aspects of life. She joined a Theosophical Society¹ in 1889 and was active until 1915, where she explored aspects of life or reality beyond the physical world and engaged in efforts to communicate with the spirits that occupied a metaphysical plane (Burgin, 2018, p. 14). In 1896, she began regular meetings with The Five—a close-knit spiritual community that led to a monumental transformation in her artwork (Voss, 2022, p. 85). The Five were five women who met to speak about spiritual things—sometimes Christian, often metaphysical—and hold séance-type sessions, inviting the spirits to speak to them. One of The Five, Anna Cassel, was also af Klint's lifelong friend and partner (Greenburger, 2020; Voss, 2022).

The spiritual sessions included automatic drawings² during the spiritual sessions. All of The Five participated in these drawings, but af Klint gradually became the primary medium. She heard distinct spiritual voices giving her guidance for the drawings, which became more specific over time (Voss, 2022, p. 117). These fascinating drawings, recorded in large sketchbooks, ranged from free-form scribbles to dynamic compositions. Representational elements are present (such as a single eye, trees, and various florals), and text is frequently used (af Klint, 2022; Burgin, 2018, pp. 15–27). I find the pages filled with purely abstract shapes and markings, liberated from representation, visually compelling and suggestive of the paintings to come.

In 1906, she received a directive, which she interpreted as a commission, from the spirits to create the large-scale works known as *The Paintings for the Temple*, which included *The Ten Largest*. She wanted these to go into a spiral chapel where visitors could slowly encounter the paintings in a specific order that would guide them toward a spiritual plane or metaphysical experience (Voss, 2022, p. 8). At first, she wrote in her journals that the directives for the paintings were coming through her hand, from the spirits to the canvas. For 2 years, she painted without sketches and gradually came to the viewpoint that the designs were coming to her fully formed: words, text, images, and colors (Voss, 2022, pp. 142–147).

As she painted, af Klint also filled several journals with photographs and small color reproductions known as the *Blue*

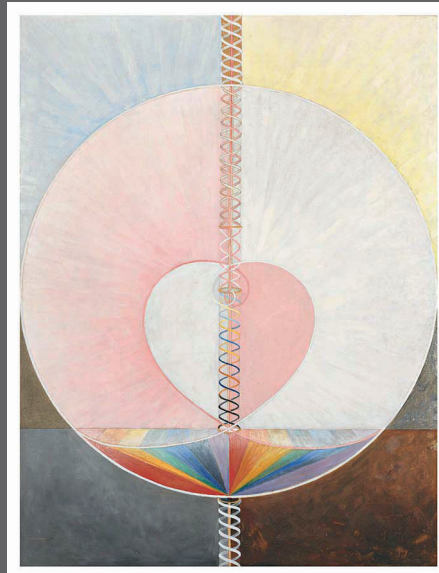
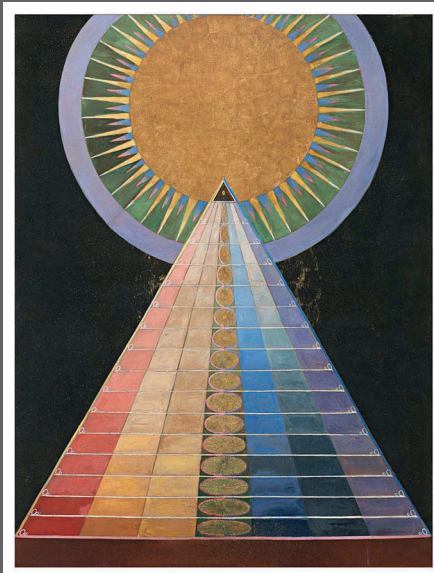


Figure 1. Hilma af Klint, *Altarpieces, No. 1, Group X*, 1915. Courtesy of ©Hilma af Klint Foundation.
Figure 2. Hilma af Klint, *The Dove, No. 1, The UW Series, Group IX*, 1915. Courtesy of ©Hilma af Klint Foundation.



Figure 3. Emely Guerrero, *Almas Gemelas*, 2024. Gouache on canvas, 24 x 24 in. Courtesy of the artist. Student artist statement: "In my Visual Culture class, I learned about Hilma af Klint's spiritual approach to art which inspired me to create *Almas Gemelas*, referencing Gustavo Cerati's song 'Alma.' The song's theme is about living in a fantasy world with your soulmate, and I portrayed that with vibrant gouache paints that interpret weather maps in an abstract form and incorporated the song's lyrics around the edges of the piece in white ink."

Books. She was compelled to share her images with others and wanted to document her vision for an exhibition of the *Paintings for the Temple* (Burgin, 2018, pp. 30–34). In 1908, she brought photographs of these unique paintings to Rudolph Steiner, a prominent philosopher and leader in the spiritualist movement, but he rejected them completely. He told her not to try to exhibit any of her paintings or show them to anyone (Greenburger, 2020). His swift and crushing dismissal caused af Klint to retreat from painting for several years. She even left her companions and went to live with her aging mother (Voss, 2022, pp. 156–157). She exhibited a few representational artworks in a 1913 group exhibition of the Theosophical Society in Stockholm and had only one exhibition of her abstract works, much later, in London in 1928. This exhibition apparently met with little success (Voss, 2022, pp. 6, 251), and only a handful of her abstract works were exhibited around Europe in later years. Thus, her artworks were essentially unknown for most of the 20th century.

Nine years later (in 1917), af Klint settled in Munsö, not far from that childhood home in Adelsö, with Anna Cassel and a few other female friends. Their new home was secluded in the countryside where they could live with a measure of privacy. They farmed and raised animals for income and continued their spiritualist practices. By 1930, af Klint was painting again and regularly communing with the spirit world (Voss, 2022, p. 255). She believed in the importance of her abstract artworks and began detailed designs for a temple that would present the artworks in a transformative sequence. It is intriguing that af Klint's temple designs bear much resemblance to the Guggenheim Museum in New York, but there is no evidence that her designs were known to Frank Lloyd Wright or others involved with the spiraling architectural marvel (Bashkoff, 2018, p. 212; Voss, 2022, pp. 265–268).

Although af Klint's journals make no specific declarations about her sexuality, her relationships with women and her

writings lead many scholars to assess that she was nonbinary or lesbian (Adler, 2019; Chin, 2024; Nichols, 2024). Biographer Julia Voss (2022) described how af Klint's writings include discussions about gender fluidity and masculine and feminine traits that are not tied to particular genders. In the *Paintings for the Temple*, she often assigned the color yellow to the masculine and blue to feminine, but she also allowed these colors to combine and change roles. Shells and nautilus forms recur in her work, representing the snail, a hermaphroditic creature (Voss, 2022, p. 136). Af Klint wrote, "Eros is the fusion of all colors, and announces, among other things, understanding in love" (as cited in Voss, 2022, p. 137). Her approach to sexuality and identity has been influential on contemporary queer artists, including the creators and producers of the 2024 opera *HILMA*, based on the artist's life and work (Nichols, 2024). The inclusion of af Klint's work in art curricula can be similarly inspiring for queer youth and other marginalized students.

Af Klint left her artwork and estate to her nephew with strict instructions not to show her paintings until 20 years after her death in 1944. Her compelling artworks were to remain largely unknown for much longer. The art world first took notice from a 1986 exhibit at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Interest in her work slowly increased until the blockbuster exhibition Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, which ran from 2018 to 2019. Recognition and demand for her work is growing, with exhibits across the world, along with continued research and reevaluation of the 20th-century art history canon.

Even today, af Klint's life and work are unconventional. Women artists still struggle for equitable recognition from critics and the art market, challenges af Klint faced more than a century ago. I find her work uplifting and singular. In discovering her paintings, I received that rare joy of a first encounter with powerful artworks. Her creativity,



Figure 4. Stacie Brown, *Existence*, 2024. Oil and spray paint on canvas, 36 x 48 in. Courtesy of the artist. Student artist statement: "While most think of death as the end, it is the beginning of another journey. This piece shows the soul, life, and death but what we cannot see yet is what comes beyond those three."



Figure 5. Quana Jackson, *Lost in Translation*, 2024. Multimedia on paper, 12 x 15 in. Courtesy of the artist. Student artist statement: "The exploration of Hilma af Klint and her spiritual influence during that period served as the inspiration for this piece. I wanted to explore how there are different dimensions that can be experienced through stories. I used the text as a literal translation for the story element. When we read, it's like stepping into portals into other worlds. That's why I chose to create a 3-dimensional piece, to showcase how easy it is to truly get lost in what we choose to read."



Figure 6. Molly Ramos, *Recovered Dreams*, 2024. Multimedia on paper, 18 x 24 in. Courtesy of the artist. Student artist statement: "From a young age we're encouraged to become what we dream. We at least owe it to ourselves to make it come true."

as a personal trait or honed ability, dramatically impacted her life and work, enabling her to channel ideas and create artwork no one had seen before.

Instructional Strategies: Studio Topics

Af Klint considered the *Paintings for the Temple* series to be portals to the spirit world, or a doorway to spiritual ideas. On the earthly plane, her work offers terrific curriculum topics for art educators. One of the most beguiling aspects of her design is the way she structures a focal point. In some images (Figures 1 and 2) there is a clear linear direction leading the eye to a destination. Observation and visual analysis with students of any age offer opportunities to discuss how af Klint unifies each design through color, symmetry, rhythm, and effective use of negative space. Close observation allows students to analyze ways her compositions convey a sense of movement and a range of unique visual ideas.

Symbolism

Af Klint's artwork offers many possibilities to construct a meaningful studio curriculum that invites students to apply and manipulate concepts from other fields. I introduced af Klint to my university art students in a visual culture course with the provocation to consider inspiration from her artwork and biography for a studio artwork that included symbolism and text. The results were delightfully colorful, unique, and highly personal (Figures 3–6). In the spirit of elevating women artists, four female student artists are featured here. Each person brought their own unique perspectives and compelling concepts to their artworks, then utilized and transformed af Klint-inspired visual elements to convey those ideas. Discussion in class and their artist statements reflect a growing confidence in visualizing their perspectives, experiences, and personal creative styles.

Paintings such as *The Ten Largest*, No. 7 (Figure 7) are highly symbolic, with lines and text that convey coded messages. Within partial and pure abstractions, af Klint utilized shapes,

Figure 7. Hilma af Klint, *The Ten Largest*, No. 7, *Adulthood*, 1907. Tempera on paper, mounted on canvas, 315 x 235 cm. Courtesy of ©Hilma af Klint Foundation.



Figure 8. *Tree of Knowledge*, No. 5, *The W Series*, 1915. Watercolor, gouache, graphite, and metallic paint on paper, 45.8 x 29.5 cm. Courtesy of ©Hilma af Klint Foundation.

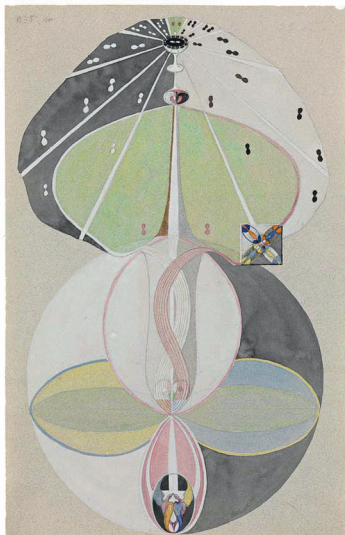


Figure 9. Hilma af Klint, *The Evolution*, No. 13, *The WUS/Seven-Pointed Star series*, Group VI, 1908. Oil on canvas, 99 x 129.5 cm. Courtesy of ©Hilma af Klint Foundation.



lines, and text to convey specific ideas. Advanced students can delve into her biography to consider the ways her spirituality and sexuality converged in these paintings. Students of all ages and levels can devise their own symbols to represent ideas. For example, students could create a set of shapes, colors, linear marks, or icons to represent personal elements (family members, friends, identity, beliefs, future goals, etc.), and then organize those symbols into a larger composition.

Through the lens of 21st-century visual culture, most people will have no trouble understanding this style of artwork, enjoying a well-designed composition, or extending the effort to interpret abstraction. Af Klint's work fills the canvas with unique coloration of soft yet vibrant hues. Her geometric designs suggest order and organization, always with a focal point to draw the eye—beckoning the viewer to an aesthetic and spiritual place.

Discussion Questions Utilizing the National Visual Art Standards

Select two to three artworks by af Klint and present these for discussion. Guide students in observing, identifying, analyzing, and critiquing with the following discussion questions, which are based on the National Core Arts Standards (National Coalition for Arts Standards, 2014). Where appropriate, encourage students to point out the visual evidence found in each artwork to support their observations.

Creating

Anchor Standard 2: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

Enduring understanding: Artists and designers experiment with forms, structures, materials, concepts, media, and artmaking approaches.

Discussion questions: What are the most prominent elements of art you see in each artwork? Which principles of art are most important to unifying each artwork, and where do you see these principles?

Enduring understanding: People create and interact with objects, places, and design that define, shape, enhance, and empower their lives.

Discussion questions: Hilma af Klint heard voices and received artistic directions from the spirit world for many years. What is your response to that idea or process? What are some sources and influences for your artistic choices?

Producing

Anchor Standard 4: Select, analyze, and interpret artistic work for presentation.

Enduring understanding: Artists consider various techniques, methods, venues, and criteria when analyzing, selecting, and curating objects, artifacts, and artworks for preservation and presentation.

Discussion questions: Why do you think af Klint's abstract work was rejected when it was first created? What happens if an artist feels their artworks are disregarded or rejected? Describe some outcomes from af Klint's decision to keep her work from the public. What do you think of her decision?

Responding

Anchor Standard 8: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

Enduring understanding: People gain insights into meanings of artworks by engaging in the process of art criticism.

Discussion question: Describe ways that af Klint combines text with shape, form, and other elements to convey ideas in Figure 7, *The Ten Largest, No. 7*. Compare this design with one of the others (choose Figure 1, 2, 8, or 9). What are the strengths and weaknesses of each?

Anchor Standard 9: Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

Enduring understanding: People evaluate art based on various criteria.

Discussion questions: Af Klint's work is sometimes credited as the first fully abstract artwork in European art history. What is the value or importance of originality when analyzing an artist's work or a specific artwork? What qualities make an artwork important or valuable to you?

Connecting

Anchor Standard 11: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

Enduring understanding: People develop ideas and understandings of society, culture, and history through their interactions with and analysis of art.

Discussion questions: What are some aspects of af Klint's paintings that allow you to understand the life of someone from a different time and place? How does art preserve aspects of life, in particular the life and work of Hilma af Klint?

Conclusion

I find af Klint's paintings fresh, delightful, and compelling. When I first came upon her work, it was through an art news headline declaring her abstract work to predate the male artists typically attributed with pioneering abstraction, upending the art history canon (Greenburger, 2020). Debate about such claims continues, especially regarding the inclusion of abstract elements in global artwork by Muslim artists, historic Indigenous artists, and others (Cramer & Grant, 2019). Discovering af Klint's artwork was a rare joy, as these new-to-me paintings brought a fresh aesthetic experience. They seem entirely contemporary today, in the 21st century, yet they were created well over a century ago. As I learn more about her life and delve into her artwork, I am inspired by her tenacity and her unique process. While some might be skeptical of her spiritual practices, I do not feel compelled to pass judgment on af Klint's experiences, nor do I want to shy away from her creative practice. I am content to accept that the work is uniquely and creatively her own, as was the life she carved out for herself.

Lucy Bartholomee, Assistant Professor and Area Coordinator of Art Education, Department of Art and Art History, University of Texas at Arlington. Email: LucyBartholomee@outlook.com

REFERENCES

- Adler, N. (2019, April 23). Hilma af Klint's queer clairvoyance. *Paper Mag*. <https://www.papermag.com/hilma-af-klint-guggenheim#rebelltitem3>
- af Klint, H. (2022). *Hilma af Klint and The Five's sketchbooks: No. S2, S6 and S13: 5 October 1896–10 January 1906*. Bokförlaget Stolpe.
- Bashkoff, T. (Ed.). (2018). *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the future*. Guggenheim Museum.
- Burgin, C. (Ed.). (2018). *Hilma af Klint: Notes and methods*. University of Chicago Press.
- Chin, M. (2024, May 23). *Inside the new opera reimagining the singular life of Hilma af Klint*. Artnet. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/hilma-af-klint-opera-wilma-2491925>
- Cramer, C., & Grant, K. (2019, September 28). *Who created the first abstract artwork?* Smarthistory. <https://smarthistory.org/who-created-the-first-abstract-artwork>
- Fiore, J. (2018, October 12). *How the Swedish mystic Hilma af Klint invented abstract art*. Artsy.net. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-swedish-mystic-hilma-af-klint-invented-abstract-art>
- Greenburger, A. (2020, April 14). Hilma af Klint pioneered abstractions and spoke with spirits. Here's why she's important. *ARTnews*. <https://www.artnews.com/feature/hilma-af-klint-who-is-she-famous-works-1202683824>
- National Coalition for Arts Standards. (2014). *National core arts standards*. State Education Agency Directors of Arts Education. <https://www.nationalartsstandards.org>
- Nichols, L. (2024, May 29). "HILMA": 20th-century queer visionary artist inspires 21st-century opera. *Philadelphia Gay News*. <https://epgn.com/2024/05/29/hilma-inspires-21st-century-opera>
- Voss, J. (2022). *Hilma af Klint: A biography*. University of Chicago Press.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR EDUCATORS

- Home: Hilma af Klint Foundation, <https://hilmaafklint.se>
- Hilma af Klint Paintings, Bio, Ideas | TheArtStory, <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/af-klint-hilma>
- Muxxi, <https://www.muxxi.me>
- Yayoi Kusama Art, Bio, Ideas | TheArtStory, <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/kusama-yayoi>
- How Hilma af Klint Invented Abstract Art | Artsy, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-swedish-mystic-hilma-af-klint-invented-abstract-art>
- 10 Women Abstract Artists on the Rise | Artsy, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-10-women-abstract-artists-rise>

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Theosophy is a spiritual movement that emerged in the 19th century encompassing a wide range of religious philosophies and mystical insights (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/theosophy>).
- ² Automatic drawing is a technique allowing free-range movement, such as a hand moving a pencil across paper without looking at it or planning for a defined outcome; allowing a subconscious influence on drawing; often associated with Surrealism, but also practiced by earlier artists (Bashkoff, 2018, p. 19).