

# SEEING THE LIGHT OF DAY

Pioneering abstract painter Hilma af Klint finally gets her chance to shine.

By Sahar Khan

Russian-born Wassily Kandinsky is generally accepted as the first artist to dabble in purely abstract paintings. But little-known Swedish painter Hilma af Klint (1862-1944) started creating abstract works in 1906, years before Kandinsky put paintbrush to paper for an untitled watercolor. "It's always hard to say that she was the first abstract artist because it opens up the question of what is abstract," says Tracey Bashkoff, director of collections and senior curator at the Guggenheim. "But what we do know is that by 1906, she was working in an abstract manner in large-scale paintings on canvas and paper. And that is definitely years before Kandinsky and Malevich and Mondrian and other artists whom we think of as the inventors of abstraction."

Bashkoff explores af Klint's work in *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future*, the first major solo af Klint exhibition in the United States. Opening this month at the Guggenheim, the show not only sheds light on the abstract narrative, but also introduces af Klint to a wider audience. The majority of her work is displayed at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, and only a few pieces have entered other collections. The mystery surrounding her oeuvre is due to af Klint's desire to keep her work private. She stipulated that her work remain hidden until 20 years after her death. Her nephew searched for venues after the interdiction but came up against uninterested gallerists. Consequently, the artwork languished in storage and wasn't actually seen by the public until 1986, 42 years after af Klint's passing. The reason for her secrecy? Af Klint didn't think society was ready to receive her work.

Although more than a century old, the work feels surprisingly contemporary. Af Klint's study of color theory informed much of her palette. She used colors in symbolic ways, a frequent practice at the time utilized by Kandinsky, Franz Marc and other abstract artists. But the way af Klint combines colors—psychedelic puce and heather green orbs twirling like whirling dervishes, turquoise and marigold lines that seem to spiral toward infinity—

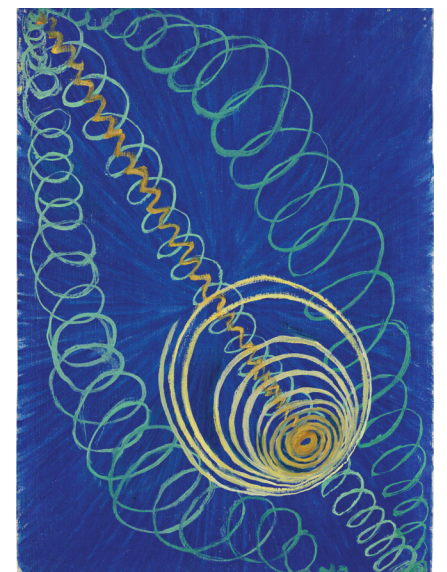


imparts a vibrancy that belies of-the-moment imagery. "I always get a sense that you're looking both at a microcosm and a macrocosm when looking at her work," Bashkoff says. "It looks like it might be an atom or it looks like it might be the largest planet you've ever seen."

In the long arc of art history, the discovery of af Klint's work is a recent one. It is, however, astounding enough to turn abstract art's narrative upside down. Bashkoff thinks that goes to show that the stories we tell about art history aren't always as ironclad as they seem. "And if Hilma has emerged," she says, "then who else will emerge?" Oct. 12-Feb. 3, 2019, 1071 Fifth Ave., [guggenheim.org](http://guggenheim.org)



From top:  
Hilma af Klint, "Group IX/SUV, The Swan, No. 17 (Grupp IX/SUV, Svanen, nr 17)" (1915, oil on canvas), 59.3 inches by 59.4 inches;  
Hilma af Klint, "Group IV, The Ten Largest, No. 7, Adulthood (Grupp IV, De tio största, nr 7, Mannaåldern)" (1907, tempera on paper mounted on canvas), 124 inches by 92.5 inches;  
Hilma af Klint "Group I, Primordial Chaos, No. 16 (Grupp I, Urkaos, nr 16)" (1906-1907, oil on canvas), 20.9 inches by 14.6 inches.



PHOTOS BY ALBIN DAHLSTRÖM, THE MODERNA MUSEET STOCKHOLM, COURTESY OF THE HILMA AF KLINT FOUNDATION, STOCKHOLM, © STIFTELSEN HILMA AF KLINTS VERK