

Painting the Unseen: Enchantment in Hilma af Klint

Hilma af Klint's practice of mediumship enabled her to not only be entranced by spirits herself, but also to mesmerize an audience in a similarly bewitching way through her hundreds of enchanting artworks, especially her series *Paintings for the Temple*. A pioneer of abstract art at the turn of the twentieth century, Swedish artist Hilma af Klint predates modern canonical abstract artists such as Vasily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, and Kasimir Malevich. While Hilma af Klint's artistic inspiration fueled by Spiritualism and Theosophy was not particularly radical for her time, her large scale, bold colors, whimsical abstraction, and geometric forms were.¹ Rita Felski illustrates enchantment as being "soaked through with an unusual intensity of perception and affect; it is often compared to the condition of being intoxicated, drugged, or dreaming. Colors seem brighter, perceptions are heightened, details stand out with a hallucinatory sharpness... You are sucked in, swept up, spirited away, you feel yourself enfolded in a blissful embrace. You are mesmerized, hypnotized, possessed."² With Hilma af Klint's feet in two separate realms, she played the role of both the hypnotized and the hypnotist. Despite enchantment's association with self-loss, Hilma af Klint's work suggests otherwise in that enchantment can also be a means of self-discovery.

In order to conceptualize Hilma af Klint as both enchanted and enchantress, one must first contextualize her perplexing spirals, inexplicable symbols, and symmetrical binary oppositions. Af Klint studied at the Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm from 1882 to 1887 where she practiced how to observe the visible world by painting naturalistic portraits, but did so during a time in which scientific discoveries were unearthing an underlying

¹ McCoy, Ann. "Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future." *The Brooklyn Rail*. <https://brooklynrail.org/2018/11/artseen/HILMA-AF-KLINT-Paintings-for-the-Future>

² Felski, Rita. *Uses of Literature*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008. P. 55

invisible world. In 1886, Heinrich Hertz proved the existence of electromagnetic waves and successfully transmitted them from a sender to a receiver, which influenced the development of wireless telegraphy, radio, and x-rays.³ Also during this time was when the Spiritualist movement was sweeping through Europe, and in 1889 af Klint became a member of the Theosophical Society, which in addition to being tied to occultism, was also grounded in scientific discourse of evolution, non-Euclidian geometry, the atom, and the Freudian unconscious. In 1896, af Klint formed De Fem (“The Five”), a Christian Spiritualist group consisting of four other female friends who dedicated themselves to mediumship and held regular séances, documenting their transcendences from the physical realm through automatism.⁴

Af Klint’s engagement in Theosophy spiraled into an obsession with the ethereal and astral planes when her spirit guide, Amaliel, commissioned her to begin work on a series entitled *The Paintings for the Temple*. On November 4, 1906, af Klint was declared a missionary figure by Amaliel: “You will commence a task that will bring great blessings on coming generations... Your mission is to open their eyes to a life that lasts for eternity.”⁵ In other words, af Klint was endowed with the responsibility to re-spiritualize humankind that has evolved away from their spiritual selves by becoming engrossed in the material world; spiritual evolution called for a return to unity and Oneness.⁶ Although enchantment gently tugs the viewer into another dimension, Hilma af Klint’s work suggests that enchantment’s purpose is not to distract viewers away from their realities, but rather assist in helping them better understand the layered

³ Muller-Westermann, Iris. *Hilma af Klint: Notes and Methods*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018.

⁴ Bauduin, Tessel. “Seeing and Depicting the Invisible: On Hilma af Klint’s Modern Art and Spiritual Paintings.” University of Amsterdam.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Muller-Westermann, Iris. *Hilma af Klint: Notes and Methods*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018.

complexity of their realities. The logic of enchantment, therefore, rests its head upon the cliché that getting lost encourages exploration and discovery.

As a medium, Hilma af Klint's purpose was to transfer the visual images being sent to her into material form without knowing what the cacophony of symbols manifesting from her paintbrush meant. Af Klint is neither wholly creator nor translator of her work, but rather more like a cartographer of the ethereal and astral planes, much like Tolkien and his construction of Middle-Earth. Af Klint as a vulnerable viewer of her own work became evident in the 126 annotated notebooks she left behind as she tried to navigate her way through hairy, atom-like structures, rings of flowers, and converging yellow and blue circles. Felski mentions the misconception that enchantment assumes a closed critical eye: "In one sense, to be sure, the appearance of passivity is misleading; any form of engagement with a work of art requires a modicum of interaction. Readers and viewers engage in covert yet complex acts of decoding, their brains silently buzzing away, carrying out complex forms of mental processing, drawing upon accumulated reservoirs of tacit knowledge."⁷ Hilma af Klint's 20,000 pages of textual notes and dictionary suggests to critics that enchantment entails active participation and even an element of meticulousness. Enchantment *awakens* rather than sedates the viewer; it is energizing and igniting to the point where the feeling of being enchanted could become fetishized, but it is far from inducing a resigned shrug.

In addition to the dramatically large scale of af Klint's work, her loud, child-like colors absorb the viewer back into an earlier sense of self. Looking at one of Hilma af Klint's more popular works, *No. 7, Adulthood*, viewers are besieged with a discordant array of symbols, words, and letters that hover in the air. Some green swirls take the formation of snails and

⁷ Felski, Rita. *Uses of Literature*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008. P. 75

overlapping red ovals look like swollen buds bursting with growth, while other winding swirls dance around a large, yellow figure that looks like three converging petals; viewers are encouraged to get lost in a world of possibilities and indefinites. There is a sincere and endearing infantility to af Klint's work because it loudly babbles to us without saying anything solidly coherent, but it is simultaneously beyond our level of maturity and ability to comprehend. Af Klint's work is poetry outside of traditional language and is breathtakingly beautiful partly because we know we are cognitively incapable of appreciating it wholly in either its inexhaustible depth or baffling nonsense. Michael Saler draws an interesting connection between the emergence of a less inhibited imagination and the development of children's literature as a genre in the 1860's, claiming that the fantastic texts written for adults beginning in the 1880's were influenced by the fanciful freeness of a child's imagination.⁸ Af Klint boldly illustrates the epoch of adulthood in a stylistically childish and explosively playful way that still preserves an aura of sophistication because it transcends language and any form of meaning we can tag onto it. Perhaps af Klint's *No. 7, Adulthood* casts an ironic glance in the direction of people like uptight academics who shun enchantment and urges us not to abandon our divine, child-like charismas.

Another enchanting aspect of af Klint's work is her blatant push (whether or not intentional) for the exploration of an uncharted territory of beauty. Infused with a divine energy that embraces intensely bright colors and mind-bending structures, af Klint's work is a trailblazer in the land of Realism and what was considered beautiful. Contrary to the negative associations and assumed inauthenticity of beauty, recognizing an artwork as beautiful enhances our relationship to it: "Beauty bespeaks a positive value, a presence, an enrichment, even if the

⁸ Saler, Michael. "Modernity, Disenchantment, and the Ironic Imagination." 2004. P. 141

precise nature of that enrichment often eludes our analytical grasp.”⁹ Af Klint’s work is enlightened with a sublime beauty that transcends our understanding and speaks to us in a foreign language. To consider af Klint’s work beautiful is not only to acknowledge a shared aesthetic taste, but to feel its hinge on perception and consciousness rather than cognition. Similarly to the way our senses grow stronger when one is compromised, the enchanting qualities of Hilma af Klint’s artwork nudge us to loosen our grip on our logocentric values in order to feel more deeply what it connotes rather than denotes.

With enchantment being a new and emerging concept during the turn of the twentieth century, it is not surprising that af Klint ordered in her will that her work not be shown to the public until at least twenty years after her death because she feared the world was not ready to receive it. Enchantment has the ability to defy the audience’s perceptions of time and space, but with the abstract art movement not beginning until several years after af Klint’s paintings, her work becomes canonical and launches audiences ahead of their time. Grounded in the occult and scientific teachings of its time however, af Klint’s work does not entirely rip itself away from our recognizable world; it may transport us to a different realm, but it always brings us back.

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⁹ Felski, Rita. *Uses of Literature*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008. P. 65

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