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‘Hilma Af Klint’s use of spirituality within her practice.’

Visual Culture

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‘Hilma Af Klint’s use of spirituality within her practice’

Throughout this research essay, I am going to be unfolding Hilma Af Klint's use of spirituality within her practice and its highly influential role played in the development and making of her life works. I will be outlining a number of topics and themes that led to the works produced by Hilma Af Klint, including The teachings of Theosophy, its founders, and history. I will also be outlining the relationship between Theosophy and its effect on Modern Art and the abstract movement, Hilma Af Klint’s involvement in Theosophy and her desire to seek a deeper meaning of the universe and the founding of ‘De Fem’. I will also be unfolding the series commissioned to Af Klint from the guides titled, ‘Painting’s for the Temple’ and how religious practices influenced this.

Theosophy is a philosophical and theological belief system that holds that the truest knowledge is acquired via a direct contact of the soul with the Divine Reality, not through reason or the senses. The study of the Masters' or Mahatmas' teachings is known as Theosophy. It is a technique for studying Ancient Wisdom and a way to search for the ultimate truth. Theosophy has increasingly incorporated Hindu and Buddhist ideas and concepts, with a distinctive belief in rebirth consistent with Karma, a Hindu concept.

The teachings of Theosophy should not be taken literally through preaching and teaching, but rather as a set of principles that will guide the adherent in the proper

path and provide guidance on discovering the truth which is ultimately what is being sought. ‘Theosophy is not meant to contradict other religions, rather, it is meant to shed light upon and make sense out of areas that may not be that clear’. (*Theosophy,* 2022)

Theosophical teachings have their roots in ancient times, but Helena Blavatsky co-founded The Theosophical Society, the most well-known contemporary organisation of adherents to these beliefs, on September 18, 1875, in New York. The Ukrainian-born aristocrat would subsequently become known around the world as the leading Theosophist, despite accounts of her life before her 1873 arrival in the US being notoriously unreliable. Before settling into a career as the favoured metaphysician and occultist of New York society, Blavatsky is said to have worked as a concert pianist, a medium, and a circus performer in Europe.

In her book written in 1877, ‘Isis Unveiled’, Blavatsky describes it as being "a plea for the recognition of Hermetic philosophy, the anciently universal Wisdom-Religion, as the only possible key to the Absolute in science and theology.” (Blavatsky, 2012). In this book, Blavatsky collected a variety of occult-related themes and reinterpreted them in light of the time's scientific advancements and a growing understanding of non-Western religious practices. Scholars have noted how extensively Blavatsky copied from numerous books that were prominent among occultists at the time, and the work has frequently been criticised as being a plagiarised occult work. Her book ‘The Secret Doctrine’, is split up into two volumes, the first called ‘Cosmogenesis’ and the second, ‘Anthropogenesis’. (*The secret doctrine* 2022).

According to Blavatsky's 'The Secret Doctrine, Theosophy is based on three key ideas. According to the first, there exists an omnipresent, almighty, unlimited "power" that cannot be adequately expressed or comprehended by the finite human mind. "To call it a being, a God, or even to try and give it a name is to do a great injustice. There is no word to describe it, but 'power' will be used from now on. To know this 'power' is to know the truth, and it is the truth that we seek. It is only through our many lives and stages of consciousness that we will begin to comprehend the 'power'." The second principle addresses timelessness and the infinite potential of 'the power'. "It is boundless, and because we are part of it, we are also boundless. For now, it will suffice to say that man and all matter are immortal in the greater scheme of things." The third tenet focuses on wholeness and completion. "EVERYTHING is part of a whole, which we can not fully comprehend, but we can be sure exists. All that we think, feel, and do is not only part of who we are, but part of the universe. Even the universe is part of something greater. It is limitless and infinite." (Blavatsky, 1893)

A criticism of Theosophy as a system of religious rituals and set of beliefs would be its application to daily life. Despite being respected, Theosophy provides a lot of interesting information regarding the metaphysical reality, rebirth, and the spiritual development of humanity. As Theosophy places a lot of emphasis on its interest in metaphysical realities and "hidden" knowledge, it does not appear to be applicable in this sense to daily existence.

The connection between Theosophy and Modern Art or Modernism was an intriguing convergence. Modernism, which emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, is both a philosophical and artistic movement, a response to a greater understanding of cosmic truth. The spiritual goals developed through the teachings of Theosophy and other texts were made visible in modern abstract art. The main emphasis was on society and culture, which starting in the early twentieth century sought a new alignment with the knowledge and ideals of contemporary industrial life. Modern art sought to break away from the conventional or classical forms and subjects that had previously surrounded it. Artists around the world used new imagery, materials, and techniques that they felt better reflected the realities and hopes of modern societies. (*Modernism,* 2022)

Many artists who were looking for higher spiritual truths and a non-perceptual base for their work turned to Theosophy for guidance, and it backed the idea that totally spiritual art would have no basis in natural objects and would be entirely abstract. This is why Theosophy and modern art fit together so well. The idea that artists themselves may be considered initiates and that they had a responsibility to enlighten humanity made Theosophy undeniably alluring to some artists. The utilisation of Theosophical Concepts, such as the 25 colours arranged in order connected with the human aura related to sensations and emotions discovered by Charles W. Leadbeater and Rudolf Steiner, began to converge and develop within the Modernist movement. These colours acted as a guide represented in the human aura ranging from ‘Higher Spirituality’ (light blue) to ‘Malice’ (black). (*Theosophy and visual arts,* 2022). Theosophy was starting to become a large influencer of worldly

views amongst artists who had an interest in spirituality and were hungry to search for a deeper meaning within the world.

As with other contemporary abstract artists like Piet Mondrian, Wassily Kandinsky, and Kasimir Malevich, Hilma Af Klint had a spiritual interest. However, it's interesting to note that she started abstract painting before them. Kandinsky, a proponent of the Expressionist Abstract movement, was quick to claim the title of being the first-ever abstract artist. ‘When Wassily Kandinsky wrote to his New York gallerist he was clearly anxious to reassure him once again that he had painted his first abstract painting in 1911: “Indeed, it’s the world's first-ever abstract picture” (Voss, 2022). What Kandinsky did not know was that the Swedish painter, Af Klint, had created the first abstract painting in her Stockholm studio in 1906, five years before him. Kandinsky himself was never a part of the Theosophical Society but quoted books like Madame Blavatsky’s ‘The Key to Theosophy’ and read books such as ‘Thought Forms’ by Theosophists Annie Besant and Charles Webster Leadbeater which had a massive impact on his way of thinking and served as inspiration for his book ‘Concerning the Spiritual in Art’. (*Wassily Kandinsky* 2022) In this publication, Kandinsky described his belief in Art as having the power to transcend and tap into the spiritual world and evoke emotion within the viewer.

Artist Piet Mondrian actively used the basis of Theosophy as his main worldview and as a source of inspiration within his work, seen especially in his Neoplasticism concept he believed it was the “most objective and rational way to transmit the Theosophical idea of the Absolute” (*Theosophy and visual arts* 2022). He featured the Theosophical doctrine of ‘Evolution’ as the theme and title of his “monumental

triptych” thought to have been based on an excerpt from Madame Blavatsky's ‘Isis Unveiled’ which believes that three spirits live within a person.

Thanks to the fact that Sweden allowed women to study art long before Germany, Italy or France, this meant that as a nineteenth century woman she was given a unique disposition of the tie which allowed her to pursue her interests and exceptional talents freely. So, in 1882, she started studying art at Stockholm's Royal Academy of Fine Arts where she excelled in her studies.

Af Klint used her artwork to explore concepts and aspirations that went beyond the bounds of the physical world. As a protestant believer, she was open to alternative spiritual approaches and it was not a surprise that Af Klint, including many other artists, sought out the Theosophy Organization as an alternative to the rigid ideals of academic art. Although Af Klint had involvement in a Swedish Lodge as early as 1889, little is known about these encounters. On May 23, 1904, she became a member of the Stockholm Lodge of the Theosophical Society. Theosophy claimed to be the first European religious organisation to not discriminate against women. She was known to be interested in esoteric literature, especially Blavatsky's "Secret Doctrine," which would have ultimately inspired her in her artistic field as these inspirations can be observed in her work. ‘Af Klint had a very specific creative technique, working through a dialogue between the unconscious and the conscious, and her knowledge of occult texts may have been a subliminal influence that led her to inspired mediumistic messages as well as to her later, more conscious work.’ (Theosophy Wiki, *Hilma Af Klint* 2021)

Hilma Af Klint formed ‘The Five’, a spiritualist group, in 1896 while enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts with four other female artists: Anna Cassel, Sigrid Hedman, sisters Mathilda Nilsson and Cornelia Cederberg (de Fem). The spiritualist group, which was composed of female artists, would meet on Fridays between 1896 and 1906 to engage in seances, prayer, and meditation in order to interact with spiritual beings. Gregor, Clemens, Amaliel, Ananda, Theosophus, and Esther were some of the spiritual masters that would communicate with the women during these seances while they lay on a bed. Each of the superior beings had their distinct personalities. The women would carefully take notes and record what happened in the meetings. There are fifteen books of sketches from these meetings, the early ones being more simplistic and as time moved on they became more advanced and detailed, a large number of these mediumistic drawings have been preserved.

De Fem developed a large number of automatically generated drawings and phrases by giving up conscious control over the creation process. The Masters would personally appear to the group at their seances and pledge to assist them in their spiritual development. They would produce automatic drawings, a technique that the Surrealists would employ frequently throughout the 1920s. ‘Af Klint’s hand would move automatically and without her will, making her an artistic tool for the group’s spiritual leaders. She was constantly surprised by the result of her unconscious activities and would be unable to explain them.’ (Theosophy Wiki, *Hilma Af Klint* 2021)

The women of the organisation were introduced to the teachings of their unseen leaders during the course of their ten-year instruction. It was frequently emphasised

how dangerous it was to grow overly attached to the bodily forms. Hilma Af Klint's contribution to the group was modest at first, but with time she steadily rose to the position of leadership. ‘On one documented occasion in 1899, the supernatural guides encouraged her to look into a glass of water two-thirds full in order to train her perception. That particular time she did not see anything but the masters encouraged her not to give up hope and they assured her “we still have our plan”’. (Hutchinson et al., 2005)

She was promised by the guides in 1905 that she would work to further the mysteries, and in 1906 she started her Paintings for The Temple series. Between 1906 and 1915, she would be working on this commission for the Masters, which would completely alter the course of her life. The Målningarna Till Templet or ‘Paintings for the Temple’ consists of 193 paintings and drawings divided into several series and groups. In all there are 12 principle groups and 4 preparatory groups, all of them carefully numbered and dated. None of the paintings are signed. Each group has its own characteristics.

When she started this body of work, it was also an opportunity for her to express her questions about what it means to be in the world and how it all comes together visually. It was commissioned by the higher powers. This results in a realisation of the interconnectedness of all people, which would serve as the inspiration for her most empowering body of work. The series Paintings for the Temple's overarching subject is to portray several aspects of human evolution. The works also address the various stages of growth that every person experiences during their time on earth. The temple in the title not only refers to a physical building, which Af Klint designed,

and imagined would house the works, but also the body as a temple for the soul. The names of the series' within 'Paintings for the Temple' are the following; 'Primordial Chaos' (1906-1907), 'The Ten Largest' (1907), 'Evolution' (1908), 'The Swan' (1914-1915), 'The Dove' (1915), 'Altarpiece' (1915).

Twenty-six works make up the first cycle of the series, titled "Primordial Chaos." These pieces' major themes explore the idea of origin and the essence of the universe in all of its incarnations. This series is also referred to as the 'WU' series, where 'W' represents man and matter and 'U' represents woman and spirituality. This symbolism is a part of a language created by Af Klint within her paintings, another example being that the colour blue represents the male and yellow, the female. Where the two colours collide they create a green, implying that harmony is spiritually important. 'This series recalls images and snapshots of the moment of creation where the sperm meets the egg'. (Dyrschka, 2019)

The series 'The Ten Largest', a group of ten paintings that are included in the 'Paintings for the Temple' series are a symbolisation of the four phases of human life, Birth, Youth, Adulthood, and Old Age, as interpreted by Af Klint. These paintings depict a space that is not constrained by time or space, with soft colour palettes and tones that vary between all ten pieces. Highly symbolic forms, such as spirals, egg-like shapes, flowers, and petals, as well as what appear to be subtle words or sentences, are also incorporated into the paintings. The ten works were created between November and December of 1907 on huge sheets of paper that were later glued onto the canvas.

Fig. 1: Hilma af Klint 'The Ten Largest', No.6 Adulthood, 1907.

The "Seven-Pointed star" series, also known as the "Evolution" series, features the Christian tradition as a sign of protection and guidance. The seven points of the star represent both the seven days of creation and the perfection of God. Again employing colour symbolism and form representation to communicate the story, some of the pieces discuss religious events like the creation of Adam and Eve. Throughout this series, abstraction and figuration co-exist, and within these pieces, there seems to be a focus on the egg and its protection, as well as it being highly sought after in search of enlightenment.

In this 'Evolution' series, and throughout all of Af Klint's works we see her knowledge and interests in the scientific research of the time coming out through her abstraction and speaking on subjects such as the new discoveries of the Atom, Charles Darwin's evolution theory and the scientific quest for a deeper understanding of the males

place in the world. We might interpret the broken lines in some of her works as symbols for the brain's unseen gamma waves, which are involved in cognitive function, memory, learning, and information processing. Af Klint also employs the shape of the double helix, which may serve as a metaphor for DNA. This demonstrates Af Klint's in-depth comprehension and deliberate use of symbolism in her artwork to suggest, in a sense, another universe not too far from our own. (Dyrschka, 2019)

‘From 1908 to 1912, she ceased working temporarily to take care of her poorly mother and also to study esoteric Christianity and Steiner’s literature on Rosicrucianism.’ (Moderna Museet, 2022) From resuming the series in 1912, the works had a more pronounced influence of Christian symbols and the abstractions within her work seemed to be of a more geometric nature. In the suite ‘The Swan’ that was painted between 1914-1915, the symbolism of the swan, in many religions and mythologies relates to the ethereal and of transcendence, and through the swan, Af Klint explores a black and white swan striving for unity in the world. The swan is either represented as an animal or through Hilma's use of spirals and circles in her symbolic language. In contrast to the other series in "Paintings for the Temple," this series seems to have an underlying battle; this might be a symbol of the conflict between the good and the bad, peace and war, and the spiritual and physical realms and the celestial and the infernal.

The 'Dove’ series is the most intimate of the series, depicting a dove, the symbol of the Holy Spirit in Christianity and more widely considered an emblem of peace and a messenger of the divine. The creation of matter from light serves as the suite's main

theme, and it also examines birds as creatures of the land, sea, and sky. The struggle that was earlier depicted in "The Swan" collection has gracefully changed into the dove's peace. ‘In ‘The Dove, No. 5’ we see Af Klint’s religious symbols merge with her own language of abstraction, not obvious upon first look but there is a miniature ‘holy family’ encased in the prominent white feathers of the dove centred in the piece. The man is blue, the woman is yellow and the baby is red, the colour red prominent but as a force of joy instead of disruption.’ (The Art Story, 2022)

Fig 2: ‘The Dove, No.3’, 1914-1915, Hilma Af Klint.

We can witness a change in Af Klint's artwork toward harmony, peace, and tranquillity via this series. Possibly a symbol of the inner serenity she had attained, due to her increased knowledge of the universe, and of the harmony between the spiritual and the material. We see a representation of this change in the first painting

in this series, for instance, a heart is resting within a spiralling double helix, with a rainbow forming the base of the circle.

Amongst her final collection of works for the Paintings for the Temple, she produced three large ‘Altarpieces’. Within this painting we see reflections of Egyptian temples, symbolisms, and reminders of the Egyptian belief and worship of life after death, structures built using high levels of intuition and spiritual backgrounds. In ‘Altarpiece No.1’ we see an equilateral triangle centred within the piece with a sun rising above it. The triangle is rich in colour with graduated building blocks of rainbow colour with a centre spine of decadent gold colour. The sun features tones of golds, greens, blues, and purples, all placed on a black background giving the colours a new life. These colours each represent a symbolic meaning within the Theosophical and Anthroposophical spiritualist theory developed by Charles W. Leadbeater and Rudolf Steiner. (*Theosophy and visual arts,* 2022)

From examining each of these series within ‘Painting’s for the Temple’, it is evident that Christianity, Buddhism and Theosophy all played a major role during the development and creation of these commissioned works. Even post ‘Painting’s for the Temple’, she continued to work on drawings and paintings that hold symbolism and inspiration drawn from many world religions as seen in ‘The Teachings of Buddhism’, 1920. In this particular piece she focuses on Buddhism but makes similar pieces in relation to Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

Af Klint was still eager to expand her knowledge and in 1920 became a member of the Anthroposophical Society. Anthroposophy is described as being a study of

human development, being and nature. Set up in 1924 by Rudolph Steiner, Anthroposophy is a spiritual science and philosophy that addresses the fundamental needs of individuals as well as the need to establish an entirely free relationship with the outside world. It aspires to close gaps between the sciences, the arts, and human spiritual endeavours as the three main foundations of human civilization and to progress not just natural scientific research but also spiritual scientific study. “The term ‘anthroposophy’ predates Rudolf Steiner. The word ‘anthroposophy’ comes from the Greek (anthropos meaning ‘human’ and sophia meaning ‘wisdom’). It can also be translated as ‘wisdom of the human being’ or understood as ‘consciousness of one’s humanity’”. (Sydney Rudolf Steiner College, 2023)

She stepped away from creating for a short time until 1922 and came back ready to make works influenced by the Anthroposophical readings of Goethe’s ‘Theory of Colours’, which embodied a ‘floating colours’ style, which would be a stye that Af Klint would apply for the rest of her life. To achieve this ‘floating colours’ style she painted with water colours using a wet in wet technique, however she adapted this style to become her own by utilising the colour black within her pieces. In 1930 she broke away from the Anthroposophical Society when her research to decipher messages within her works based on their teachings became inconclusive. (*Goethe's theory of Colours* 2019)

Due to her scientific interests and her research into organic growth, Hilma Af Klint developed a distinctive style of symbolism in her art, which finally gave rise to her abstraction. The viewer of her works is highly engaged by her use of mathematics, figuration, symbolism, language, scientific inquiry, and religion, which provides

insight into her personality. In the notebooks that accompany her paintings, she goes into great detail on the meaning of each of her symbols. In her later years, af Klint conducted extensive and in-depth study in notebooks, which she filled with descriptive notes and analyses of symbols and colours. She also continuously researched and produced series on paper.

Although her work has been hidden from the world up until recent years, Af Klint worked confidently at the service of her occult beliefs, her work was designed to transcend messages to humanity, and in doing so provoked the minds of its viewers. Her work portrays themes that can still be related to today and over a hundred years later these questions of the unknown still surround scientists and artists of today.

Overall, from examining and looking at the series of works created by Hilma Af Klint between the years of 1906 to 1915, we can see that there has been a profound amount of spiritualism utilised within her practice as a standpoint for inspiration of her works, the discovery of her own personal interpretation of the universe and its meaning, the human journey through life and her own personal journeys through the creation of her works. Spirituality in the form of Christianity, Buddhism, Theosophy and representations and notes of her own experiences with seances and spirit guides have been a prominent theme throughout her works. Although unfortunately not being exhibited or overly recognised throughout her own lifetime, she felt the world was not ready for her work. From today's standpoint, her utilisation of the spiritual had a revolutionary effect on our reflections of artworks being produced at the time. Her dedication to the research and immersing herself within the practice of spirituality alongside its translation to physicality is something to be admired.

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