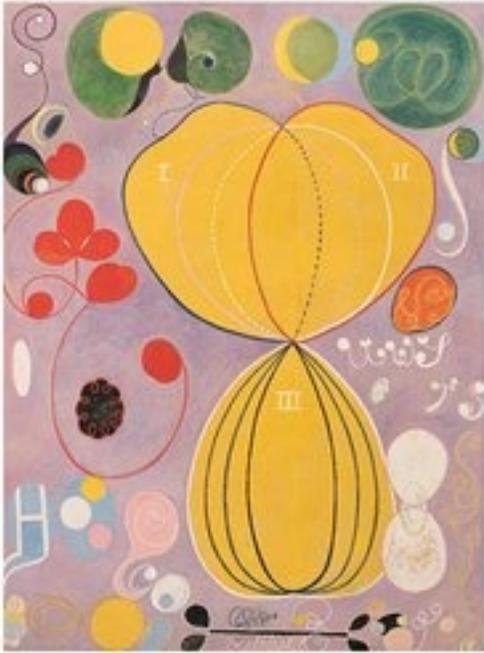


# Giving a Swedish Pioneer of Abstraction Her Due

By NATALIA RACHLIN

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Albin Dahlstrom/Moderna Museet  
"Group IV, No. 7, Adulthood"  
shows that Hilma af Klint was  
working with abstract imagery  
years before painters like

STOCKHOLM — On a cold evening in mid-February, an international mix of journalists, scholars and curators gathered inside the [Moderna Museet](#) in Stockholm for a first glimpse at an exhibit of works by a Swedish pioneer that threatens to upend long-held views about the origins of 20th-century abstract art.

The visitors to the exhibition opening at the Moderna, a contemporary art museum on the island of Skeppsholmen, were greeted by curlicues, snail-like spirals, geometric flowers, concentric circles, Venn diagrams and phrases in cursive script — all intertwined and juxtaposed on 10 canvases 3.2 meters, or more than 10 feet, tall and 2.4 meters wide. The works, featuring bubble-gum pink, burnt orange, peach, lavender, dusty blues and bright yellows, were at once enticing, playful and slightly trippy.

"It's pretty extraordinary to imagine this rather small woman, 157 centimeters tall or so, doing these huge paintings," said Iris Müller-Westermann, the curator of international art at the Moderna, which is showing "Hilma af Klint: A Pioneer of Abstraction," the first-ever retrospective of the Swedish painter (1862-1944), through May 26. "She was doing something that was not on the retina of people at her time, in terms of size, color, composition and, of course, the abstraction — she was very much a pioneer."

Indeed, as seen in the title of the exhibition, the Moderna shows af Klint as an innovator of 20th-century abstract art, one who worked with abstract imagery as early as 1906, arguably several years before [Wassily Kandinsky](#), [Piet Mondrian](#), Kazimir Malevich, Robert Delaunay and Frantisek Kupka, long considered the trailblazers of the movement.

"Kandinsky was actively campaigning for himself as being the first abstract artist, constantly writing his gallery and saying, 'Hey, you know, I was the first! I painted the first abstract painting in 1911!'" said Julia Voss, an art historian and art critic for the German daily Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. "He was obviously successful, as he's widely considered the father of 20th-century abstraction. But all the while, af Klint, much more privately, had already been creating these striking, abstract visuals for years."

In the March edition of the arts magazine Tate Etc., Ms. Voss campaigned on af Klint's behalf, arguing that the Swedish artist, not Kandinsky, was the first abstract painter of the 20th century.



Albin Dahlstrom/Moderna Museet  
Curiosity about the spiritual  
became a lifelong interest for af  
Klint, as seen in "Group X, No. 3,  
Altarpiece," from 1915.

Georg Imdahl, a professor at the [Academy of Fine Arts Münster](#) in Germany and an art critic for the daily Süddeutsche Zeitung, is more hesitant on the matter. "She developed somehow outside the art scene of the time, so I think we need to learn more about her intentions as an

artist,” Mr. Imdahl said. “That said, there are several of her works which I would consider integrating into a discussion of the genesis of 20th-century abstraction.”

The exhibition adds to the global debate about the canon of contemporary art. “In which box does this strange artist belong?” Ms. Müller-Westermann said of reactions to af Klint’s works. “Is she in the same box as Kandinsky and all the abstract pioneers, or maybe it’s easier to say it’s not art at all, just some woman who did something crazy?”

She continued, “The category does not interest me so much, to be honest; what intrigues me is simply to consider what is there. What did she see, what do we see?”

Af Klint, who was born in Stockholm, showed an early interest in nature, mathematics and art, and she began studying at the [Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts](#) in 1882. After graduating with honors in 1887, she quickly gained a reputation in the region for being a talented landscape and portrait painter.

While her representational work blossomed in the public eye, af Klint also continued a more private pursuit: she had begun showing an interest in the occult and attending séances as early as 1879, at the age of 17. Her curiosity about the spiritual realm soon developed into a lifelong interest in spiritism, theosophy and anthroposophy.

During the late 1890s, af Klint began holding séances with four female artist friends, and they meticulously documented their proceedings in notebooks. The four women practiced automatic writing and drawing, meaning that they did not consciously guide the movement of their pens, and it was during this decade of spiritual exploration that af Klint’s abstract imagery and motifs began to emerge.



Albin Dahlstrom/Moderna Museet  
"Group IV, No. 1, Childhood."  
Many of af Klint's works feature curlicues, snail-like spirals, geometric flowers, concentric circles, Venn diagrams and phrases in cursive script.

In 1904, during one of these sessions, a spirit allegedly told af Klint that she would make paintings that would represent the immortal aspects of man. This proved to be the turning point in af Klint’s work: from the naturalistic to the abstract, from portrayals of physical reality to conveying the invisible.

From 1906 to 1915, af Klint created what is considered to be her central body of work: [Paintings for the Temple](#), a grouping of 193 works. The artist claimed that she had merely served as a medium for the body of work, and that spiritual forces had guided her hand during its execution. As the commission progressed and the artwork developed from the organic and nature-inspired to the more geometric, af Klint explained, she increased control and influence over what she painted, serving more as an interpreter than as a medium.

While the artist’s naturalistic work continued to be exhibited in Stockholm and beyond during her lifetime, her abstract work was largely kept private. In her will, she even asked that her abstract paintings not be shown in public until at least twenty years after her death, noting that audiences were not yet capable of understanding her work.

The first large-format show to include af Klint’s abstract work actually came 42 years after her death, in 1986, when Maurice Tuchman, then the curator of contemporary art at the [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#), included her work in “The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985.” Since then, af Klint’s most recognizable works have been featured in shows at the [Museum of Modern Art PS 1](#) in New York and the Centre Pompidou in Paris.



Despite this, af Klint's position among her fellow abstract painters is not without its critics, and in the recent Museum of Modern Art show "[Inventing Abstraction, 1910-1925.](#)" which closed on April 15, none of her works were shown.

Mr. Tuchman, speaking by telephone from New York, explained that there were several reasons af Klint's works might sometimes be left out. "To a large degree, modern art history is made by the marketplace," Mr. Tuchman said. "Af Klint hasn't been out there to be seen and traded. She hasn't been purchased by important collectors and more importantly, major museums," he said about af Klint's work, which is owned exclusively by a foundation.

Both Mr. Tuchman and Ms. Müller-Westermann also cited the difficulties women faced in gaining recognition in an art world largely defined by men, and circumspection toward art with connections to the mystical and occult.

"'Spiritual' is still a very dirty word in the art world," Mr. Tuchman said. "When the prejudice against the idea of the spiritual life in af Klint's work is overcome, which will require scholarship, then perhaps she will really take hold in the broader conversation."

Moderna Museet  
Hilma af Klint in her studio in 1895.

The exhibition at the Moderna showcases the diversity of af Klint's work, from her early botanical studies to the ornamental and geometric abstract work that was so ahead of its time, and much of it is on display for the first time. It also undertook a major preservation project, involving extensive conservation work and the digitalization of some 26,000 pages of af Klint's notebooks.

Already, the international reach of the artist is growing. This summer, the Stockholm exhibition will go to the [Hamburger Bahnhof-Museum für Gegenwart](#) in Berlin, then to the [Museo Picasso Málaga in Spain in the autumn](#) and to the [Louisiana Museum of Modern Art](#) in Denmark at dates to be determined. Five of her works will also be featured in the Central Pavilion at the [Venice Biennale](#), which runs from June 1 to Nov. 24.

For the moment, though, Ms. Müller-Westermann is happy to see the show in Stockholm draw large audiences. "This was really an artist who dared to think beyond her time, to step out of what was commonly accepted," she said. "She had visions about bigger contexts where it was not about making money or being very famous, but about doing something much more humble: trying to understand the world and who we are in it."

*"Hilma af Klint, a Pioneer of Abstraction" is on view at Moderna Museet in Stockholm until May 26. It will be on display at the Hamburger Bahnhof-Museum für Gegenwart in Berlin from June 15 to Oct. 6 and at the Museo Picasso Málaga from Oct. 21 to Feb. 9.*

[http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/30/arts/artsspecial/Giving-a-Swedish-Pioneer-of-Abstract-Art-Her-Due.html?pagewanted=2&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/30/arts/artsspecial/Giving-a-Swedish-Pioneer-of-Abstract-Art-Her-Due.html?pagewanted=2&_r=0)