



The Ten Largest, No. 3, Youth, Group IV, 1907, HAK No. 104. By courtesy of the Hilma af Klint Foundation. Photo: The Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden.

# Secondary Study Guide

## *Hilma af Klint: The Secret Paintings*

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# About the Exhibition

## *Hilma af Klint: The Secret Paintings*

### About the Artist

Swedish artist Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) was a pioneer of abstract art but for many years her paintings were hidden from the world. Af Klint was among the first generation of women to graduate from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm. She had a successful career painting naturalistic portraits and landscapes but chose to pursue a far more experimental artistic pathway. At the age of 44, af Klint broke with tradition and began creating abstract works in radiant colours, with otherworldly shapes, enigmatic symbols and words painted on huge canvases. She developed this visual language in an era offering limited creative freedoms for women and is an important voice to consider alongside Kasimir Malevich, Vassily Kandinsky, and Piet Mondrian—artists historically credited with inventing modern European abstraction.

### About the Exhibition

The exhibition centres around af Klint's major project *The Paintings for the Temple* (1906–1915), a cycle of paintings made up of different series, devoted to spiritual themes. It includes *The Ten Largest* (1907)—brightly coloured abstract works, each over three metres tall, that chart the human life span from childhood to old age. *The Swan* (1914–15) and *The Dove* (1915) are series of works with symmetrical compositions that depict birds in representational and abstract form. The three-part *Altarpieces* (1915) show geometric shapes as paths to enlightenment. Painted in a spectrum of colours, they incorporate metallic leaf to create an effect of radiating light and energy. The exhibition also features early botanical studies, and automatic drawings undertaken with The Five—a group of women artists who used séance and prayer to channel unseen forces into art.

### Themes and Ideas

Af Klint's quest was to understand the visible and invisible mysteries of the world and communicate them through art. Her work drew on interests in maths, science, and nature, seen through a

spiritual lens. Like many artists and thinkers at the time af Klint was interested in spiritualism. She believed her paintings were guided by higher beings, offering messages to uplift humanity.

The works often depict a union of opposites - up and down, light and dark, male and female, spirit and matter. They suggest a desire to transcend binary thinking and to rediscover a wholeness in which all things are connected. Af Klint developed a complex system of symbols, letters and words to convey these messages, The colour blue represents femininity, and yellow denotes masculinity, with green as the unity of the two. Spirals show evolution, and circles represent completion and oneness.

Af Klint's work can be understood in the wider context of the Modernist search for new forms of thinking at the beginning of the twentieth century. She lived in a time of great scientific advances that expanded the perception of the world beyond the ordinary senses, from the invention of the telephone to the discovery of x-rays. Many people looked to spirituality as a means of reconciling religious beliefs with these new scientific revelations. Alongside her interest in spiritualism, Af Klint studied theosophy—a movement incorporating ideas from multiple world religions that influenced many artists at the time.

Af Klint felt that her artworks contained messages for all humanity but that only a future audience would understand them. It was her wish that her paintings remain hidden until at least 20 years after her death. Since then the spiritual nature of the work allowed some art historians to dismiss her contribution.

As writer Jennifer Higgie puts it 'when men like Kandinsky, Malevich and others explored spirituality, it was considered a serious endeavour. But when a woman followed the same path, she was dismissed as insignificant at best, a crank at worse.'<sup>1</sup> But her time has finally come and the recent rediscovery of Hilma af Klint's work has been captivating audiences around the world. It has changed our

understanding of art history, playing into a larger reconsideration of our cultural narratives that asks us to question who is included and who is left out.

### Related Artists

**Georgiana Houghton** a British painter who produced swirling, abstract spirit drawings in the 1800s. [georgianahoughton.com](http://georgianahoughton.com)

**Emma Kunz** a Swiss artist and healer who explored spirituality through geometric abstract drawings [serpentinegalleries.org/whats-on/emma-kunz-visionary-drawings-exhibition-conceived-christodoulos-panayiotou/](http://serpentinegalleries.org/whats-on/emma-kunz-visionary-drawings-exhibition-conceived-christodoulos-panayiotou/)

**Kathy Barry** a New Zealand artist who makes geometric paintings as encoded diagrams. [kathybarry.co.nz](http://kathybarry.co.nz)

## Visiting the Exhibition

### Viewing, experiencing, responding

Visit the exhibition and approach an artwork that you are drawn to. Stand quietly and look carefully, making a note of your feelings and experiences. Look for symbols and analyse the visual qualities of the work. Following your experience, document what you noticed.

Describe the shapes, are they large or small, geometric or biomorphic? What do they remind you of?

Describe the colours, how do they make you feel?

Describe the lines. Are they long and looping, dotted or dashed? Do any of the lines turn into letters? Where do you notice lines leading your eye around the image?

Comment on symmetry – look for line symmetry (reflection), or radial symmetry (rotation)? What effect does that create?

Comment on contrast – look for large and small shapes or dark and light colours. What effect does that create?

Which part of the image captures your attention first? Why?

Speculate on the meaning or message based on what you can see.

Look at the placement of other artworks nearby.

How does the artwork you have selected relate to the other works around it?

### Discussing and Reflecting

What do these artworks communicate to you?

Working in pairs share your understanding of af Klint's artwork with a classmate. How are your interpretations different/similar? What personal, cultural or spiritual experiences have affected your interpretation?

Do you find the spiritualist practises and ideas within af Klint's artworks challenging? Discuss.

Why do you think exhibitions of Hilma af Klint's work are proving so popular with audiences today?

### Compare and Contrast

During your visit take particular note of Hilma af Klint's *Altarpiece, No 1*. Back at school research Godwit/Kuaka by New Zealand artist Ralph Hotere. [citygallery.org.nz/exhibitions/ralph-hotere-godwitkuaka/](http://citygallery.org.nz/exhibitions/ralph-hotere-godwitkuaka/)

### Further Research

Watch videos and read articles about the exhibition [www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/whats-on/programs/hilma-af-klint-at-home/](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/whats-on/programs/hilma-af-klint-at-home/)

### Symbols and their Meanings

Af Klint developed a complex system of symbols, letters and words to convey her messages, e.g. blue represents femininity, yellow is masculinity, with green as the unity between the two. A small selection of some other examples include:

**Dove**—peace; unity.

**Swan**—union of opposites.

**Snail**—creation; development; evolution.

**Circle**—oneness; the eternal.

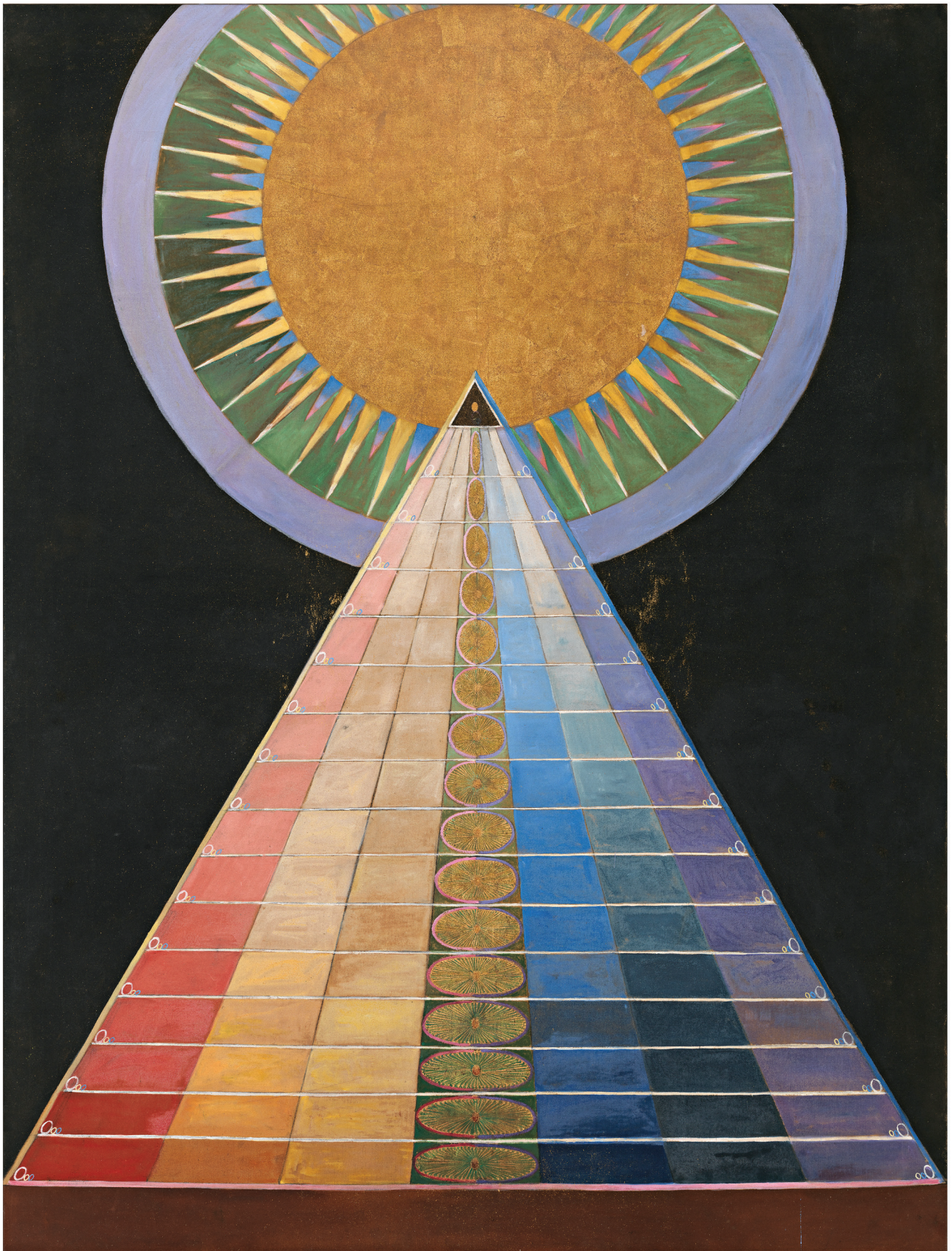
**Triangle**—ascending/descending from a spiritual plane to a physical plane.

**Square**—the elements; human nature; instincts; physical body; life force; emotion

**Spiral**—spiritual evolution; growth; change; progress.

**Spectrum (rainbow)**—oneness with nature.

<sup>1</sup> Higgle, J. (2021) 'Becoming one again: The role of gender in the creation and reception of Hilma af Klint's art', in *Hilma af Klint: The Secret Paintings*, Art Gallery of New South Wales and City Gallery Wellington, 2021, 77.



Altarpiece, No. 1, Group X, 1915, oil and metal leaf on canvas, 2375 x 1795mm, HAK No. 187. Courtesy of the Hilma af Klint Foundation. Photo: The Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden.