

GRISELDA POLLOCK

Stairways to Heaven

Hilma af Klint: A Biography

By Julia Voss

(Translated from German by Anne Posten)

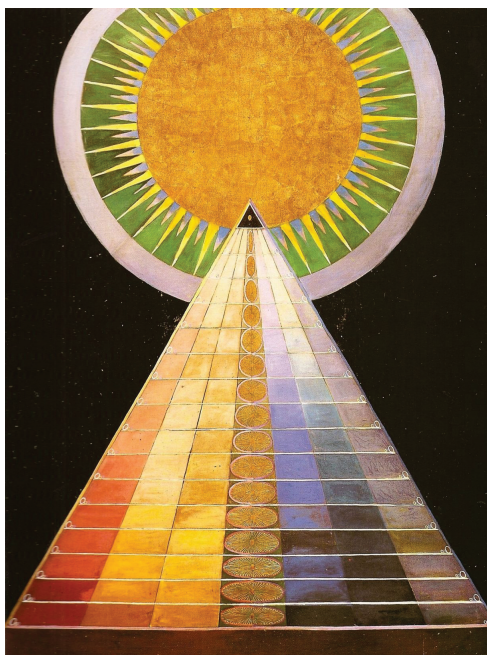
(University of Chicago Press 405pp £28)

Between October 2018 and April 2019, the Guggenheim in New York gave over its entire Frank Lloyd Wright-designed interior to the abstract paintings of the Swedish artist and medium Hilma af Klint, who died in 1944. The choice of location, with its spiralling structure, was a realisation of this artist's unfulfilled dream of exhibiting her spiritually inspired work in a building – she called it a 'temple' – whose form would lead the viewers upward on a journey to higher levels of experience and consciousness. The show broke the museum's attendance record, attracting 600,000 visitors, selling 30,000 catalogues and forcing organisers to extend visiting hours to accommodate the demand for tickets.

During her lifetime, af Klint tried several times unsuccessfully to garner attention for her abstract works. In 1932 she stipulated that her paintings should not be shown until twenty years after her death, by which point, she hoped, a world ready to appreciate them might have evolved. It took until 1986 for these works to be shown in public for the first time, when they formed part of an exhibition of abstract art in Los Angeles. That show's curator, Maurice Tuchman, heretically, if correctly, stressed the spiritual rather than the formalist impulses behind the development of abstract art in the early 20th century. In the then dominant narrative of its evolution, the 'embarrassing' engagements of many celebrated founders of abstraction with spiritualist movements such as Theosophy and Anthroposophy, and even with aspects of the occult, were veiled, if not repressed. In this cleansed version, the ruling triumvirate of Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian were presented as the originators of European abstract art. Almost every woman – and

there were many – who pioneered and participated in the elaboration of abstraction worldwide was sidelined.

The process by which af Klint was allowed into the margins of art history was slow. In the last decade, however, galleries in most major European, North American and Antipodean capitals have mounted exhibitions of af Klint's work. In



'Untitled #1', 1915

2023, she will feature in a double act with Piet Mondrian in a show at Tate Modern in London. She is also represented in the art market by a leading commercial gallery. Her archive, initially preserved by her family, is overseen by a foundation bearing her name.

Voss's book, the first fully researched biography of af Klint, was originally published in German in 2020 with the subtitle 'Die Menschheit in Erstaunen versetzen' ('To Astonish Humanity'). Part

of her purpose lies in critically examining through both feminist and socio-historical lenses the contents of the archive that af Klint left. To produce the book, Voss learned Swedish and painstakingly trawled through the 26,000 pages of the notebooks kept by af Klint and several of her life companions, also artists and spiritualists.

Born in Stockholm in 1862, af Klint was accepted into the city's Royal Academy of Fine Arts at the age of twenty and was soon earning a living painting and selling portraits and landscapes executed in an academic, naturalistic mode. In 1891, using a psychograph belonging to a fellow painter, she had her first experience communicating with higher worlds. In 1896, she joined with four other women to form

The Five, a spiritualist group with whom she would conduct weekly sessions of automatic writing and drawing for more than a decade. They received regular messages from higher beings, each with distinct names and identities. Soon af Klint and her friend Anna Cassel began receiving separate instructions from these 'higher ones' to create 'astral paintings'. Executed on both grand and intimate scales, the works were intended to capture the transformation, or fostering, of the human spirit on its upward journey away from the material and physical world to spiritual truth.

From her close analysis of the artist's notebooks, Voss traces in scrupulous detail af Klint's spiritually guided painting projects across many series. By 1908, af Klint had painted seven series totalling 111 works with titles such as *Primordial Chaos*, *Eros*, *The Large Figure Paintings* and *The Ten Largest*. Her paintings for the *Temple* cycle, finished in 1915, numbered almost two hundred, and in 1916 alone she created 144 works in a series she called *Parsifal*.

Voss documents af Klint's social and intellectual circles, her wide reading and her travels: to the Goetheanum, Rudolf Steiner's centre for spiritual research and teaching in Dornach, Switzerland; to Italy and Amsterdam to study artworks; and to London, to participate in the World Conference on Spiritual Science in July

A LOVE STORY
HUNDREDS OF YEARS
IN THE MAKING.



EMMA CORRIN
IN
ORLANDO
FROM THE NOVEL BY VIRGINIA WOOLF
ADAPTED BY
NEIL BARTLETT
DIRECTED BY
MICHAEL GRANDAGE
10,000 TICKETS AT £10
GARRICK THEATRE • FROM 26 NOVEMBER
ORLANDO.THEPLAY.COM

1928 with two thousand other attendees. Af Klint exhibited some of her large (two-to-three-metre) paintings at this gathering of those seeking to transform modern materialism through spiritual revolution. Her fellow spiritualists, however, failed to recognise their own aspirations in her non-representational visual forms: spirals, flows, geometric and organic shapes, all set with a palette of yellows, blues, pinks and purples.

Voss makes clear that, in exhibiting her work, af Klint was not addressing the art world:

She was not interested in buyers; she wanted an audience of seekers, people who would see in her paintings an alternative, a way out of materialism and toward 'new thoughts' and 'new feelings.' She wanted to open people's eyes to the fact that ... the world was larger than what could be seen, that it was mutable and subject to transformation. Consciousness could determine being. Humankind could connect with the living spirit that she thought united all beings, from fauna to flora and even ... the mineral world.

Af Klint herself had written in 1919, 'The livelier the vibration of the thoughts, the more flexible life on earth becomes, anyone will be able to work on matter with their imagination.' Her work represents a specific mixture of anti-materialism and mystic spiritualism, inspired by the new sciences of evolutionary biology and non-Newtonian physics, crossed with the unnerving theses of psychoanalysis, which dethroned reason with its talk of drives, dreams and the unconscious. A new idealism found form in symbolist painting and poetry as well as Expressionist visual art in which colour and shape alone might become the 'music of painting'; the age also saw political revolt among women and workers fired by utopian dreams of a better world than that produced by grinding patriarchal, capitalist modernity. Cultural history has preserved our respect for some of these developments, while failing to register how widespread and passionately held were the beliefs and aspirations of those who embraced spiritualist thought and practice in the arts, literature, religion and science. Theosophy and Anthroposophy were among the inspirations for many of the artists associated with the emergence of abstract art, from

Kandinsky and Mondrian to Klee.

Far from leaving this spiritualist cosmology as an eccentric, private project, Voss convincingly situates af Klint's singular undertaking in a wider European world, challenging misunderstandings that her work was secret or that she never travelled much outside of Sweden, which she did with Anna Cassel. Voss also reveals the dynamic cultural life of Stockholm, reminding us that Kandinsky and Gabriele Münter visited in 1916 and exhibited there. She also locates af Klint in a longer history of feminist thought, going back to Mary Wollstonecraft and considering contemporaneous challenges to notions of 'male genius', such as those expressed by Otto Weininger in his popular *Sex and Character*, published in 1903.

Af Klint worked largely with women in personal, sexual, intellectual and spiritual revolt. Voss delicately refers to several of Hilma af Klint's 'friends', not elaborating on the often queer character of the sisterhood of independent women with whom she associated. Over the course of her life – a time when spiritualism and women's revolt mingled with the displacement of rigid gender definitions – af Klint lived with several women, many of them artists, sharing with them deep emotional and clearly physical bonds. Voss also remarks on the coincidence of af Klint's presence in London in 1928 with Virginia Woolf's undoing of masculine and feminine binaries in her novel *Orlando*, published the same year.

Voss has produced an extraordinarily rich portrait of a radically unusual, but not eccentric, modern artist. While af Klint is now being hailed in art historical literature and museum exhibitions as a – if not the – 'pioneer of abstract art', this risks coming at the price of her being extracted from the remarkable milieu that generated her lifelong practice as a painter who believed she was delivering a message to humanity. Does it matter who came first in abstraction? Voss's biography makes af Klint so much more than an artist simply to be inserted into a more gender-inclusive canon of 'abstract art'. It saves af Klint from art history while sending us deeper into her world. Reading it was a revelation, and it has changed my understanding of the artist, the woman and her times.