

David Zwirner Announces Hilma af Klint: Tree of Knowledge

An exhibition of a rare series of groundbreaking works

November 3–December 18, 2021

34 East 69th Street, New York



Hilma af Klint, *Tree of Knowledge, No. 1*, 1913–1915. Courtesy David Zwirner

David Zwirner is pleased to present *Tree of Knowledge*, an exhibition of a rare set of Hilma af Klint's groundbreaking 1913–1915 series of works on paper of the same title, on view at the gallery's 34 East 69th Street location in New York. This recently discovered group of eight watercolors is among the few works by the artist to exist outside of the holdings of the Hilma af Klint Foundation. This will be a singular opportunity for New York audiences to experience the artist's revelatory work, and follows the highly acclaimed 2018–2019 exhibition *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future*, held at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

Though little known during her lifetime and for decades after, Swedish artist Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) has come to be recognized as one of the most important and inventive artists of the twentieth century. When she began making vibrant, symbolic paintings as early as 1906, her work was radically unlike anything that had come before, and preceded the abstract work of artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, and Kazimir Malevich by several years.

In contrast to those artists, who were more broadly credited for inventing abstraction, af Klint was not directly engaged in any avant-garde circles or art movements, coming to abstraction through her own artistic and personal evolution and development. Af Klint studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm for five years starting in 1882, where she gained a reputation as an accomplished painter of naturalistic portraits and landscapes. As with many of her peers, af Klint was profoundly interested in spiritual movements and philosophies, including the then emergent teachings of Theosophy and Anthroposophy as well as Buddhism and Rosicrucianism, among others. She became actively involved in examining the mysteries of the supernatural world, and her interest in visualizing the invisible forces beyond the physical realm led her to explore and represent spiritualist ideas and sentiments in her art. Together with a group of like-minded women who called themselves "The Five," she held séances to communicate with the spiritual realm. In 1906, at the age of forty-four, af Klint accepted her major spiritual "commission": over the next nine years she created a series of 193 visionary works that she titled *Paintings for the Temple*, the dynamic and bold imagery of which was conveyed to her through a medium. These elaborate and profound compositions constitute some of the earliest abstract paintings in the history of Western art. Af Klint showed her work to very few people during her lifetime, believing that society was not ready to understand the nature of her art and that it should be left to future generations.

While the majority of her groundbreaking work is held together in the collection of the Hilma af Klint Foundation, this exhibition will feature a rarely seen set of af Klint's *Tree of Knowledge* series, which the artist created in 1913 and 1915 with renewed focus after her four-year hiatus after completing ambitious mediumistic paintings mentioned above. This series reflects her interest in distilling her iconography and in further articulating the spiritualist ideas and philosophies that she was engaged with. As Åke Fant notes, "All of the works in this series feature a tree with a heart-shaped crown. A circle surrounds the tree trunk. All eight paintings in this series feature variations on this theme. We are dealing with a process, here, that goes from innocence and balance to a complex bifurcation into male and female, to the Fall from Grace and the conception of a child."¹ These complex, dynamic compositions mix biblical references to Genesis with esoteric iconography and vivid colors and motifs. The undulous, organic forms recall the stylings of art nouveau with an almost taxonomic attention to detail, resulting in fully formed visual allegories about the circle of life and death, darkness and light, spirit and matter, and being and becoming.

In the early 1920s, af Klint gave the set of watercolors as a gift to Rudolf Steiner, the founder of the spiritual and philosophical movement known as Anthroposophy, which influenced her. Around 1927, the works came into the possession of Albert Steffen, who became president of the Anthroposophical Society after Steiner's death in 1925. It was not known that af Klint had made two versions of the *Tree of Knowledge* suite (the other is in the holdings of the af Klint Foundation) until the recent rediscovery of this set in the Albert Steffen Stiftung, Dornach, Switzerland. It is currently owned by a private collector.

On the occasion of the exhibition, David Zwirner Books will publish a fully illustrated catalogue around this body of work with a newly commissioned essay by celebrated af Klint scholar Julia Voss, whose comprehensively researched *Hilma af Klint, a Biography* is forthcoming from The University of Chicago Press in September 2022 (the bestselling German edition was published in 2020 by S. Fischer). Also forthcoming by David Zwirner Books in 2022 is *The Five Lives of Hilma af Klint*, a graphic novel by Phillipp Deines with a foreword by Julia Voss that illustrates key moments in the artist's life.

¹ Åke Fant, "Phase Two: The W Series, or 'The Tree of Knowledge,'" in *Hilma af Klint: Occult Painter and Abstract Pioneer* (Stockholm: Bokförlaget Stolpe, 2021), p. 64.

Accompanying this exhibition, David Zwirner Online will present an *Exceptional Works* online viewing room exploring the history behind this remarkable set of watercolor works on paper.

Hilma af Klint was born in Solna, outside Stockholm in 1862, and studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm from 1882 to 1888.

Due to her request not to show her work until decades after her death, her abstract work remained largely unseen for many years. The beginning of af Klint's broader international recognition came in 1986 in the group exhibition *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1945* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The exhibition traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, Netherlands, both in 1987.

Solo exhibitions of the artist's work have been presented at numerous institutions including P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Queens, New York (1989); Moderna Museet, Stockholm (1989; traveled to various venues in Scandinavia until 1991; also in 2005–2006); Albertina, Vienna (1991–1992; traveled to Kulturhaus der Stadt Graz, Austria, 1992; Museum Moderner Kunst, Passau, Germany, 1992); The Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin (2004–2005); Camden Arts Centre, London (2006); and the Museum voor Moderne Kunst, Arnhem, Netherlands (2010). In 2013 to 2016, a major traveling exhibition of her work took place at the Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin; Museo Picasso, Málaga, Spain; and the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark, among other venues. *Hilma af Klint: Painting the Unseen* was presented at the Serpentine Galleries, London, in 2016, and *Hilma af Klint: Possible Worlds* was on view at the Pinacoteca de São Paulo in 2018. In 2018 to 2019, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, presented *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future*, the first retrospective exhibition of the artist in North America. The exhibition attracted over 600,000 visitors, making it the most popular show in the museum's history. *Hilma af Klint: Artist, Researcher, Medium*, an exhibition featuring over 200 works by the artist, was featured at Moderna Museet, Malmö, in 2020 to 2021. From December 4, 2021, to March 27, 2022, *Hilma af Klint: The Secret Paintings* will be on view at City Gallery Wellington, New Zealand.

Several of af Klint's works are included in current group exhibitions, such as *The Art of Society, 1900–1945*, the inaugural collection presentation at the newly restored Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, which opened on August 22, 2021, and will be on long-term view until July 2, 2023. Her work will be part of *Women in Abstraction* at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, from October 22, 2021, to February 27, 2022; the show was previously on view at Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, in 2021.

Other notable group exhibitions featuring works by the artist include *Beyond Belief: Modern Art and the Religious Imagination*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (1998); *Traces du Sacré*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (2008; traveled to Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2008–2009); *Il Palazzo Enciclopedico*, 55th Venice Biennale (2013); *The Keeper*, New Museum, New York (2016); *Intuition*, Palazzo Fortuny, Venice (2017); *A New Age: The Spiritual in Art*, Tel Aviv Museum of Art (2019–2020); and *Yael Davids: A Daily Practice*, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Netherlands (2020).

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