



The Ten Largest, No. 2, Childhood, Group IV, 1907, HAK No. 103. By courtesy of the Hilma af Klint Foundation. Photo: The Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden.

Teachers' Resource

Hilma af Klint: The Secret Paintings

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City Gallery Wellington's
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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 kept secret. She began her career as a successful portrait and landscape painter but turned away from naturalistic painting 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.

Af Klint's quest was to understand the visible and invisible mysteries of the world and communicate them through art. She was inspired by a deep fascination with the natural world, and by numerous scientific advances of her era which expanded the perception of the world beyond the ordinary senses, from the invention of the telephone to the discovery of x-rays. She investigated world religions and, like many artists and thinkers at the time, was interested in movements such as spiritualism and theosophy. She believed her paintings were guided by spirits and offered messages to uplift humanity. Her paintings often show dualities—up and down, light and dark, male and female, spirit and matter. They suggest a desire to transcend binary thinking, and point the way towards union, harmony, and connection.

Af Klint felt that the world was not ready for her paintings and that only a future audience would understand them. It was her wish that the work remain hidden until at least 20 years after her death. The recent rediscovery of these paintings has captivated audiences around the world and changed our understanding of art history.

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.

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 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.

Useful Information

Hilma af Klint: The Secret Paintings

Art Terms

Symbol—A sign or shape used to represent an idea.

Symmetry—When shapes are repeated and moved by flipping (reflection) or turning (rotation).

Abstract—Art that doesn't show reality, but instead uses lines, shapes, and colours to achieve its effect.

Biomorphic—Abstract forms and shapes that suggest living organisms.

Geometric—Straight lines and regular shapes such as circles or squares.

Automatic drawing—A process of drawing freely without conscious control.

Wet on wet—A technique where paint is applied to wet paper or added into wet paint to create soft, blended effects.

Tempera—paint made with coloured pigments mixed with a binder, historically egg yolk.

Kupu Māori

Āhuahanga—shape.

Porohita—circle.

Tapatoru—triangle.

Tapawhā—rectangle.

Tapawhā rite—square.

Tohu—symbol.

Hangarite—symmetry.

Hangarite whakaata—line symmetry, reflective symmetry.

Hangarite hurihanga—rotational symmetry.

Pre-Visit Activity

Student discussion. What are some reasons artists choose to make art? Can artworks communicate a meaning or message? Discuss and give examples.

Watch a short video about Hilma af Klint to find out about her life and work. artgallery.nsw.gov.au/art/channel/watch/visionary-artist-hilma-af-klint/

Post-Visit Reflection

Repeat the discussion. What are some reasons artists choose to make art? How do artworks communicate a meaning or message? Has any thinking changed or expanded following the visit?

Further discussion. What did students discover at the gallery? What new thoughts were sparked? What artworks or inquiries do they feel inspired to make?

Post-Visit Activities

On the following pages you'll find a selection of ideas for art, maths, and science inquiries.

Activities can be adapted to suit year level.

Further Information for Teachers

Videos about the artist and artworks artgallery.nsw.gov.au/whats-on/programs/hilma-af-klint-at-home/

Teaching materials from the Guggenheim Museum's 2019 exhibition *Paintings for the Future* guggenheim.org/teaching-materials/hilma-af-klint-paintings-for-the-future

An article about Hilma af Klint tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-27-spring-2013/first-abstract-artist-and-its-not-kandinsky

Post-Visit Activities

Hilma af Klint: The Secret Paintings



The Cycle of Life

The Ten Largest (1907) is a series of paintings, each over three metres tall, that chart the human lifespan through childhood, youth, adulthood and old age.

These artworks were painted in tempera on giant sheets of paper and mounted onto canvas, each taking only four days to complete.

Make a mood board

Use images, colours, and words to describe the qualities you associate with childhood, youth, adulthood, and old age.

Draw or paint each stage

Use only shapes, colours, and lines. Experiment with composition to change the mood or energy of each stage.

Reflect on the results

Share your artwork with the class. What did each life stage mean to you? Did everyone think the same? What compositions emerged as a result?

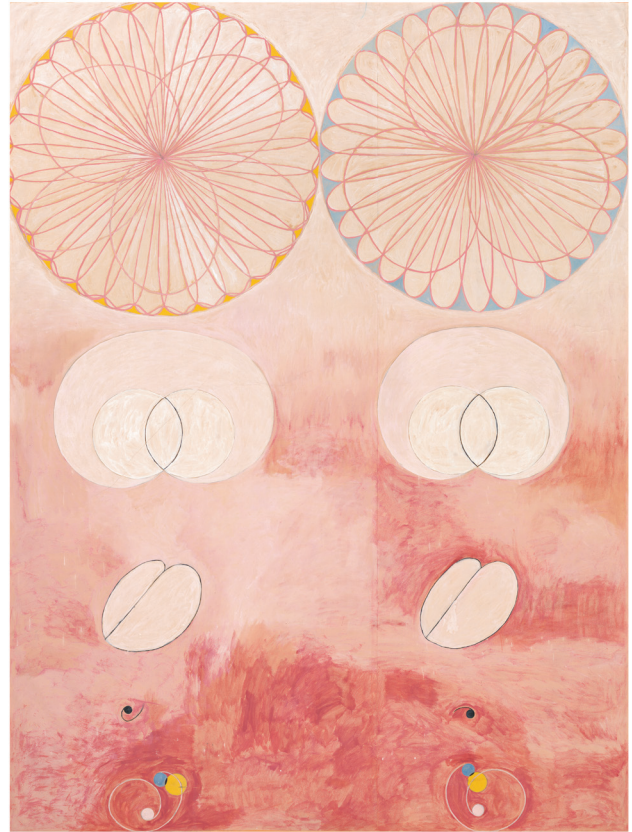
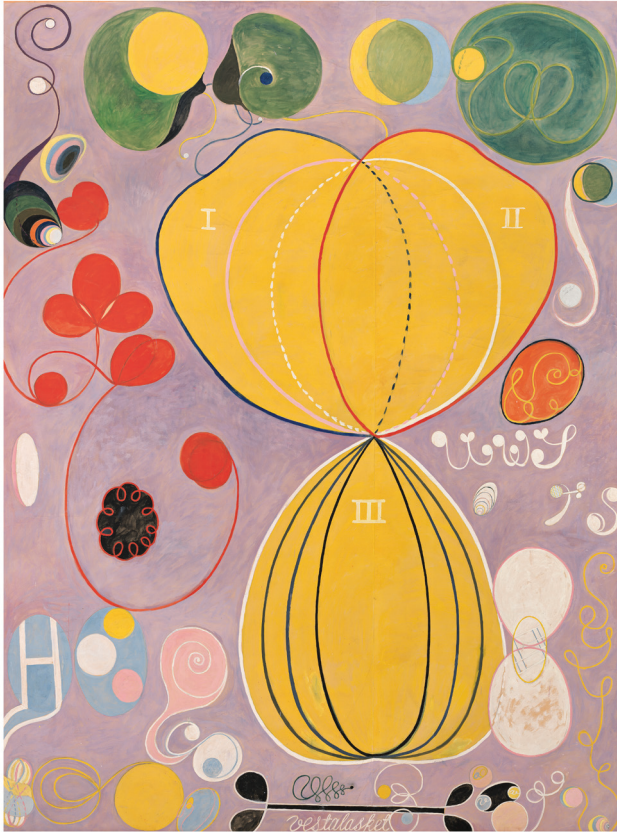
The Ten Largest, No. 1, Childhood, Group IV, 1907, tempera on paper mounted on canvas, 3210 x 2400mm, HAK No. 102.

The Ten Largest, No. 3, Youth, Group IV, 1907, tempera on paper mounted on canvas, 3210 x 2400mm, HAK No. 104.

By courtesy of the Hilma af Klint Foundation.
Photo: The Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden

Post-Visit Activities

Hilma af Klint: The Secret Paintings



Find out about Maramataka, the Māori lunar calendar

Observe and record the shape of the moon over a month and learn the Māori names for the moon phases. Think about how Maramataka guides activity throughout the year.

www.tepapa.govt.nz/discover-collections/read-watch-play/maori/matariki-maori-new-year/nights-maramataka-maori-lunar

Investigate a cycle from the natural world

E.g. the life cycle of a plant or butterfly, the water cycle, the orbiting planets in the solar system.

Make an artwork

Visualise the cycle you have studied. What interesting form could your artwork take? Perhaps a painted diagram, a sequence of photographs or observational sketches, a collage of shapes arranged in arc, circle, or ellipse, a length of fabric printed with a repeat pattern of significant shapes, a stop-motion animation, a dance or performance

Display and share your artworks

Display your artwork alongside the research that inspired them.

Reflect on the results

What did you learn about cycles in nature? Which artworks were the most informative? Which ones felt the most wonderful?

The Ten Largest, No. 7, Adulthood, Group IV, 1907, tempera on paper mounted on canvas, 3210 x 2400mm, HAK No. 108.

The Ten Largest, No. 9, Old Age, Group IV, 1907, tempera on paper mounted on canvas, 3210 x 2400mm, HAK No. 110.

By courtesy of the Hilma af Klint Foundation.
Photo: The Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden

Post-Visit Activities

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Shapes and Symmetry

The Swan series begins with a pair of swans. Their shapes and colours are mirrored—one is white on a black background with blue beak, the other black on a white background with yellow beak. Throughout the series the swans become increasingly stylised and abstracted.

Make a series of artworks to explore the process of abstraction

Start with a recognisable image of a bird, animal, or plant form. Take a photograph or make an observational drawing using shading and perspective.

Make a second image that moves towards abstraction. Try removing details, flattening space, or simplifying the form.

Make a third image that is completely non-representational. Try tracing and transferring shapes, erasing and joining up lines.

Explore symmetry

Use a ruler to divide a square of paper in half or into quarters. Choose a motif from your abstraction series. Make an artwork using symmetry to mirror the shape and colour scheme.

Reflect on the results

Discuss as a group, can you guess the subject matter that the abstract images originated from? What was interesting or challenging about this process? What more could you try?

The Swan, No. 1, The SUW Series, Group IX, 1914-15, oil on canvas, 150 x 150mm, HAK No. 149.

The Swan, No. 9, The SUW Series, Group IX, 1915, oil on canvas, 1495 x 1495mm, HAK No. 157.

By courtesy of the Hilma af Klint Foundation.
Photo: The Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden

Hilma af Klint: The Secret Paintings



Automatic Drawing

Af Klint made automatic drawings with a group of women artists known as The Five. To make these works they moved their hands freely around the page without thinking what the drawing should look like.

Make an automatic drawing

Close your eyes and move your pencil around the page. Enjoy the movements without thinking of what you are drawing. Open your eyes, does the drawing remind you of anything? Reinforce some lines and add some colour. Give your drawing an imaginative title.

Try this: listen to music while making your drawing, experiment with fast or slow, loud or soft music – how did music affect the lines you made?

Try this: Make an automatic drawing with both hands simultaneously, a pencil in each hand. Will the lines follow each other, mirror each other, or follow individual paths?

Reflect on the results

Swap drawings with a partner and compare interpretations, did everyone see the similar things in the shapes and lines? How did it feel to make a drawing without having to control the outcome?

Find out more

Research the Surrealists – a group of artists who used automatic drawing to tap into the unconscious mind.

The Five, *Untitled*, 1908, dry pastel and graphite on paper, 532 x 634mm, HaK 1252.
The Five, *Untitled*, 1908, dry pastel and graphite on paper, 532 x 634mm, HaK 1274.
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