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## GENDER RECONCILIATION IN HILMA AF KLINT'S PAINTINGS\*\*

**ABSTRACT:** Hilma af Klint is a Swedish artist who lived and worked at the end of the nineteenth and during the first half of the twentieth century. Her paintings with abstract motifs were hidden from the public eye for a long time, and they attracted the attention of scientists during the previous two decades. The paper will draw attention to one of the frequent themes in her works – gender duality, a topic which was close to the artists of Symbolism whose work temporally overlaps with the period of af Klint's creation. Unlike her contemporaries, painters who mostly represented gender duality as a conflict and a struggle for supremacy, af Klint portrayed the female and male principle as partners and accomplices in creating life on earth and maintaining balance in the entire universe by employing abstract motifs. The topic of gender reconciliation in the works of Hilma af Klint will be analyzed through her good knowledge of nature and many years of work on studying and drawing plant and animal species, as well as the role of women's emancipation and their inclusion in public artistic life at the end of the nineteenth century.

**KEYWORDS:** Hilma af Klint, abstract art, gender duality, women's creative production.

### **Hilma af Klint and women's creative production**

Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) was a Swedish artist who painted her works at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. (HIGGIE 2016: 13) Born in a wealthy Swedish family of naval officers, af Klint obtained a good education in her family home, especially in the fields of geography, biology and mathematics, and the summers spent in her family home at Lake Mälaren, where she was surrounded by nature, sparked in her the desire to research and sketch the world of living things. (MIDAVAINÉ 2015: 6–7) In 1880, Hilma af Klint began studying at the Stockholm's polytechnic school of that time where she commenced to draw portraits and landscapes. (MIDAVAINÉ 2015: 7) Two years later,

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in 1882, she enrolled at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, where she continued to create works within the same genres. (FER 2020: 105)

Hilma af Klint belonged to the second generation of women enrolled at the Academy in Stockholm. Like many other Swedish educational institutions, the Academy opened its doors to women students during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to be more precise, in 1864. (RYLE 2018: 10) These changes in the higher education system in Sweden were a consequence of a series of social and economic changes which, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, influenced a change in the status of women in society, as well as them taking part in the public sphere. (ДИГА 2007: 35, 149, 183; RYLE 2018: 10) The sudden growth of population and the forming and strengthening of the upper class led to the need for female population to be educated in a large part of western Europe, and Sweden was no exception. (RYLE 2018: 10) While formally being given the same rights as their male counterparts, women who attended the Academy were faced with a series of prejudices, as well as negative criticism, solely based on their gender. One of the leading representatives of National Romanticism (an art movement which left a big mark on Swedish culture at the end of the century), Carl Larsson, spoke openly and publicly disfavoring women artists and women's creative production arguing that there was not a sole true artist among them, which was why they were to leave the Academy at once. (MIDAVAINÉ 2015: 11–12) His misogynistic attitude was supported by the writer and painter August Strindberg who was of the opinion that women who defied the traditional roles of wives and mothers and tried to partake in creative endeavors were unstable and suffered from a mental illness. (RYLE 2019: 77)

Such was the environment in which af Klint studied, along with other women – Lotten Rönquist, Elisabeth Wähling, Charlotte Wahlström and Anna Cassell, who later became her colleagues and close friends. (MIDAVAINÉ 2015: 11) Making a joint effort, they attempted to stress the importance of women's creative production in a male-dominated environment, and they ran a campaign against chauvinism at the Academy.<sup>1</sup> (MIDAVAINÉ 2015: 11–12) In 1896, together with Anna Cassell and three other women, Hilma af Klint formed a group called The Five, and every week they organized séances for summoning spirits, and they also did automatic drawing and writing believing that during these activities their hand was led by a higher being, ghost or deity. (HIGGIE 2016: 15; HENDERSON 2019: 72; OBRIST 2020: 102). Meetings of The Five were some sort of a safe harbor for these artists. Only women could attend them, and they took place in private rooms. Women who partook in activities pertaining to occultism and spiritualism were judged to a lesser degree by the society than the ones who wanted to be recognized and acclaimed as artists. (JOSEPH 2020: 134) As mediums, women were given the rare opportunity to find themselves in roles which were not tied to their gender, and the state of trance they fell into during the séances gave them the opportunity to say and do things for which they would at least be reprimanded. (JOSEPH 2020: 134)

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<sup>1</sup> In 1910, the Society for Swedish Women Artists was founded, whose aim was to present women's creative production and to stress the importance of Swedish artists in culture. Hilma af Klint worked as a secretary of the society during 1912. (MIDAVAINÉ 2015: 12)

At the same time, theosophical teachings mostly promoted gender equality, which is the reason why they were of interest to many women. (HIGGIE 2016: 13)

Spiritualism and communication with higher spheres represented a pivotal part of af Klint's life and work. In 1904, af Klint stated that she received an order from the High Master, ghost Amaliel, to paint the immortal aspects of a man. (PASI 2015: 105; HENDERSON 2019: 73; OBRIST 2020: 102) At that point she began working on a large sequence of abstract paintings called *Paintings for the Temple*. (BIRNABAUM, ENDERBY 2016: 10) She wrote then that these paintings were drawn directly through her, without any preparatory sketches and with great force. She believed that Beings of Higher Spheres were talking through her, so she painted quickly never changing a "single brushstroke". (OBRIST 2020: 102)

During the painter's life, not many people were given the opportunity to see these works. One of them was Rudolf Steiner, the Austrian philosopher and founder of a special field of theosophy, anthroposophy.<sup>2</sup> (STEINER 2003) Due to being interested in esoterism and theosophy, af Klint followed the work of the Theosophical Society, founded by Helena Petrovna, known as Madame Blavatsky, and the work of English theosophers Annie Besant, Charles Webster Leadbeater, and Rudolf Steiner. (HIGGIE 2016: 13–14; LEON 2020: 9) Af Klint's private library contained their works, as well as different theosophical magazines which were published in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century. (RYLE 2019: 74) In 1908, Rudolf Steiner visited af Klint in her atelier in Stockholm, and upon that occasion, the artist asked for his opinion on her new, abstract works. (LEON 2020: 8) Steiner expressed his skepticism regarding what he saw during his visit, adding that men and women had not reached the same stage of development yet, her paintings being proof of that. (RYLE 2019: 77) He advised her against displaying her work in public because the world was not prepared for it at that point, which probably influenced af Klint's decision to leave a will in which she legally binded her friends and relatives to make sure that her abstract works would remain hidden for the period of twenty years after her death.<sup>3</sup> (RYLE 2019: 77)

### Gender duality in the work of Hilma af Klint

Themes in Hilma af Klint's abstract (or semi abstract) oeuvre from the first and second decade of the twentieth century were very similar to those pertaining to the art of Symbolism, a literary and art movement, which was popular in European culture at the end

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<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Steiner transferred his philosophical and metaphysical ideas into visual language through architecture. He designed seventeen buildings, and some of them, such as the Goetheanum Second Building in Dornach, Basel, Switzerland (built in the period 1924–1928), are considered one of the best examples of Expressionist architecture. In Rudolph Steiner's architectural creations, artistic elements conveyed the messages of his anthroposophical teachings about organic forms and the connection between function and form. In this way, Steiner exerted an indirect and direct influence on the work of many contemporaries such as Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, František Kupka and others. (ADAMS 2005: 205, 207–208, 219)

<sup>3</sup> At the beginning of 1980s, these paintings were offered to the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, where they were not accepted. In 1986, Hilma af Klint's abstract works were exhibited for the first time for visitors at the exhibition *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890 – 1986* in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which directed the public and scientists' attention towards the forgotten works of this artist. (HIGGIE 2016: 13)

of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century. Just like symbolist artists, af Klint was also interested in the reality found outside the earthly world comprehended by senses, and in the higher spiritual levels of consciousness, which are revealed to people by the means of dreams, fantasies and hypnosis. (EHRHARDT 2000: 17; FACOS 2009: 9; БОРОЗАН 2018: 17–18) In her case, the connection with higher spheres was accomplished through visions and the communication with ghosts during spiritualistic séances. (HENDERSON 2019: 72) Being interested in occult themes, esotery and theosophy, as well as for the world of nature, flora and fauna, the space and the current scientific discoveries, af Klint managed to connect the teachings, theories and ideas of these disciplines in her paintings. (BIRNABAUM, ENDERBY 2016: 9–10; RYLE 2019: 70; LEON 2020: 4–6) The most recurring themes in her paintings are the evolution and the travelling of the soul, the systematization and discovery of relations among living organisms, but also the duality of different phenomena of the earthly world, primarily gender duality and their mutual relationship. (HENDERSON 2019: 72; RYLE 2019: 70; LEON 2020: 11)

Gender duality was a prominent theme in symbolist art, which was expressed in the works of many artists through the genders' struggle for a dominant position and power. (FREVERT 2017: 31–40) The motif of the evil femme fatale, who threatens to endanger the man, and even the survival of the entire human species with her sexuality, was a recurring theme in the art at the turn of the century. (HOFSTÄTTER 2000: 25–26; FACOS 2009: 115–116) This motif appeared in culture as a result of social and political changes which took place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as of the growing demands for greater rights and freedoms of women at the end of the century. (DIJKSTRA 1988: 210; BERLANSTEIN 2001: 8; MENON 2006: 28–39) The dissatisfaction and fear caused by the change in the traditional gender hierarchy in patriarchal societies was reflected, among others, in the representations in which a woman's nature was reduced to her physicality and instinct as an act of alluding to her reproductive role, as well as to lesser intellectual capacity than that of a man. (ДИГА 2007: 181; MATHEWS 2000: 92) Which is why, in the works of artists at the turn of the century, gender struggle almost always ended in favour of the male gender, while women were represented as beings that were irrational, overly emotional, and insufficiently intellectually elevated.

In the works of Hilma af Klint, gender duality was not negated, but it was represented in a different manner. In a great number of her paintings, the artist stressed the binarity and duality of the male and female principle, but she rarely showed them as being in struggle with each other. Instead, in her paintings, the two genders almost always complete each other in some act of cooperation and permeation with the aim of surpassing their differences and merging into singularity. (HENDERSON 2019: 72; LEON 2020: 11)

### *Primordial Chaos*

A big sequence of paintings titled *Paintings for the Temple* represents the starting point of Hilma af Klint's studios engagement with themes of cosmogony, soul's travelling through astral planes, and gender duality. This sequence, divided into several smaller

sequences, was started in 1906 with a series of paintings titled *Primordial Chaos*, which encompasses 26 small canvases. (BIRNABAUM, ENDERBY 2016: 10; ISENBERG 2020: 26) *Primordial Chaos* was envisaged as a sequence of paintings which describe the origin of the world, and the inception of any kind of polarization – the birth of duality in the primeval period, long before man appeared. (BIRNABAUM, ENDERBY 2016: 10) Even at that time, the painter included her own gender symbols in her visual language, which she was to use in her later works. The symbols were the following: the colours blue, yellow and green, the letters U and W, as well as the motif of the spiral or snail house. (LORECK 2015: 36–37; BIRNABAUM, ENDERBY 2016: 10–11)<sup>4</sup>

When one takes a closer look at the painting *Primordial Chaos, No. 16* (1906–1907), one can notice that on the blue coloured background spirals of yellow and green colour were painted and shown from different angles. (Figure 1) The spiral was one of Hilma af Klint's most recurring symbols, which is found on the majority of her abstract works, and is particularly present in the sequence *Primordial Chaos*. (VOSS 2016: 28; LOMAS 2020: 120) For af Klint, the spiral represented the physical equivalent of spiritual transformation, and the direction in which it went revealed whether the male, or the female principle was represented. (MIDAVAINÉ 2015: 42) It is possible that af Klint's interpretation of the spiral's symbolism was influenced by the ideas of the theosophers Annie Besant and Charles Webster Leadbeater who were of the opinion that the spiral changes gender depending on the direction of the screw.<sup>5</sup> (MIDAVAINÉ 2015: 42) The importance of the motif of the spiral for Hilma af Klint is also shown in her desire that, some day, all of her works in the sequence *Paintings for the Temple* be exhibited in a spiral-shaped building, whereby the visitor, by walking through the collection, would also be symbolically crossing the road of the envisaged evolution. (VOSS 2016: 25)

In the second painting in the same series, *Primordial Chaos, No. 5* (1906–1907), the motif of the snail house is present, instead of the spiral, it being another recurring motif in af Klint's paintings, which carries the message of progress, development, and the evolution of spirit. (ISENBERG 2020: 27) (Figure 2) Just like in the case of the spiral, the direction in which the unwinding of this shape was represented displayed the sexuality of the symbol. At the same time, there are two more important symbols of the male and female principle in the painting no. 5 of this series – the letters U and W, whereby the letter U is the motif of man and ghost, and the letter W the symbol of matter and woman. (LORECK 2015: 37; VOSS 2016: 34) It was probably the case that during the process of assigning symbolic meanings to certain letters of the alphabet, af Klint had in mind Otto Weininger's book *Sex and Character* from 1903, who, in favour of the man, used the letter M to represent the male principle, ghost and intellect, and the letter W to represent women, of whom he wrote in

<sup>4</sup> Rules and laws of her intimate system of symbols can be deciphered today owing to numerous writings and notes which the artist left – around one hundred texts and over twenty six thousand pages of manuscripts in personal notebooks accompany Hilma af Klint's paintings. (LORECK 2015: 36; HIGGIE 2016: 13)

<sup>5</sup> These ideas can be found in the book *Occult Chemistry: Clairvoyant Observations on the Chemical Elements*, which Annie Besant and Charles Webster Leadbeater published in 1919 in London. (RYLE 2019: 75)



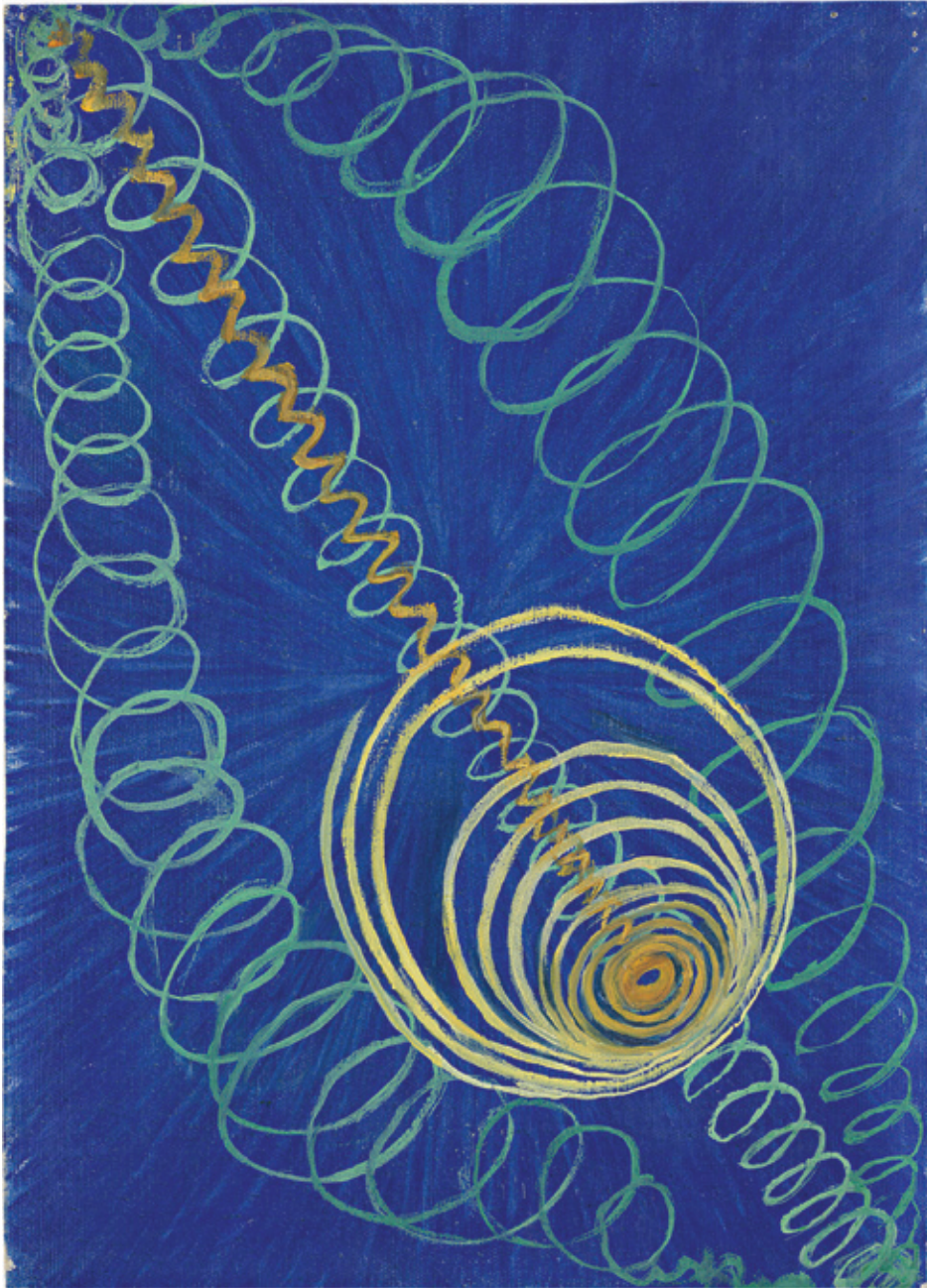


Fig. 1. Hilma af Klint, *Group I, Primordial Chaos, No. 16*, 1906–1907 (The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm, Photo: Albin Dahlström, the Moderna Museet, Stockholm, source: Wikimedia Commons, public domain)

a very disfavoured manner. (Voss 2016: 33) It is also possible that, as a reply to Weininger, who claimed that “in the whole history of the world, there is no woman whose thought could measure up to that of a man”, af Klint opted to take up the letter W, the mark for the principle of her gender, and to change its role in her work.

At the top of the painting *Primordial Chaos, No. 5* these two letters are shown connected, but they occur again as separated in the painting of the snail house – the letter U is found in its center, where it all begins, and the letter W at its end, or to be more precise, at the final stage of development, the one in which the world was located at the moment when the painting was made. Considering that the observer is given the view of the vital core of the snail house, it can be assumed that the artist predicted the continuation of the development, yet another step of growth and evolution, which was possible only in union, and through the cooperation of man and

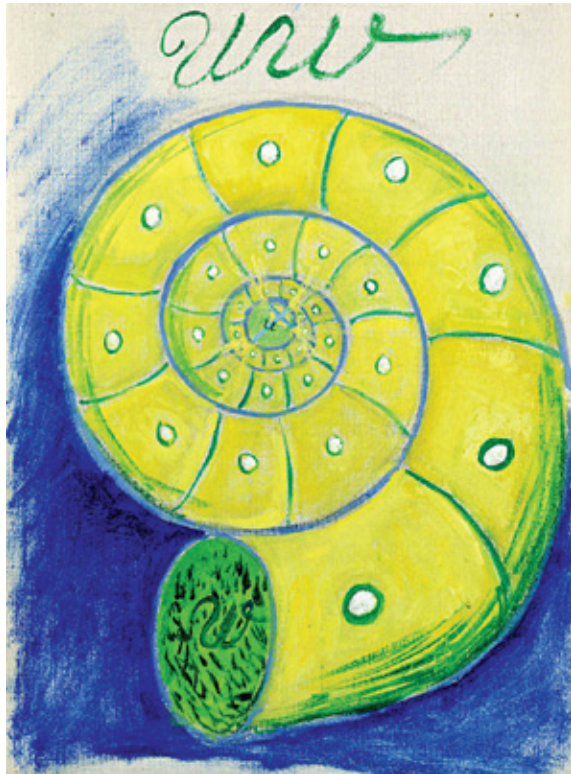


Fig. 2. Hilma af Klint, *Group I, Primordial Chaos, No. 5*, 1906–1907 (ISENBERG 2020: 40)

woman connected with the motif of the letters shown on the top of the painting. Taking into account that the snail is an organism which in itself combines the female and male sexual characteristics, and that in the theory of Charles Darwin, whose work was very familiar to af Klint, the snail is represented as an example of a hermaphrodite, it is understandable that she opted to employ the motif of the snail house as a symbol of development and the growth of spirit and body through the cooperation of the two genders. (Voss 2016: 28)

In the paintings from the series *Primordial Chaos*, three colours dominate, which are important for understanding sexuality, and gender relations in the art of Hilma af Klint. These are the following three colours: blue, yellow and green – the final being the colour made by combining the former two, which were to remain present in the majority of the future subsequences *Paintings for the Temple*. For af Klint, the colour blue represented the woman, yellow symbolized the man, and the colour green was the colour of their union. (BIRNABAUM, ENDERBY 2016: 10–11) In her notes, af Klint wrote that she considered blue to be the colour of “strong and genuine natures”. (ISENBERG 2020: 26) It is assumed that her personal symbolism was influenced by the ideas of theosophers, but also by the book

*Theory of Colours* written by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in 1810. According to Goethe, blue was the colour of darkness, and yellow of light, and they represented the two sides of the same medal, while the colour green, which was made by mixing the two, represented the elevated state of the spirit. (LORECK 2015: 36; BIRNABAUM, ENDERBY 2016: 11) On the other hand, Rudolf Steiner interpreted green negatively as a “mere reflection of nature”, while the colour yellow represented “the glow of the spirit”, and blue “the glow of the soul”. (MIDAVAIINE 2015: 37–38) Annie Besant saw green as the colour of adaptability and divine power, and she considered light pink, which was also a recurring shade in af Klint’s paintings, as the colour of the “absolute unselfish love made available only to sublime natures”. (MIDAVAIINE 2015: 36–37, 45). Just like in the case of other motifs, Hilma af Klint took over meanings which coincided with her own private reflections from the theories and teachings of intellectuals and theosophers whose work she knew and respected, making changes where necessary in order to adapt them to her own ideas on the symbolism of certain colours and motifs.

### *Evolution*

The relation and the symbolism of colours can also be interpreted on the paintings of the sixth sequence *Paintings for the Temple – Evolution* which deals with the principle of polarity in the world, and is manifested in different forms: light and darkness, good and evil, man and woman, who together, with cooperation and leadership manage to cross to a higher degree of the spiritual plane. (MIDAVAIINE 2015: 40; HENDERSON 2019: 80) In the painting *Evolution, No. 13* from 1908 the motif of the mandala positioned in the middle filled with geometric shapes is surrounded with the body of a snake which has two circles in her mouth – a yellow and a blue one.<sup>6</sup> (Figure 3) It is probably the ancient motif of a dual disk, *vesi-capiscis*, the sign of intersection of sets, the connection of opposites and unity. (LOMAS 2020: 125) The yellow and blue circles are repeated in the bottom left corner of the painting, in the hand of the figure painted on the blue background. It is opposed, like mirror image, by the right side of the canvas where a yellow lion is shown in a yellow field. The duality of yellow and blue motifs is also represented in a few shapes and details in these paintings, always like an equal, identical image of the opposing one in the mirror.

Hilma af Klint left a note regarding the sequence of paintings *Evolution* where she described the previous painting, no. 12, as a representation of the first people who use their “organ of love” and “no longer approach each other physically but only spiritually, in spite of demonic temptations. That’s when they are ready to merge into Eros, that is, into one.”

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<sup>6</sup> Mandala or “magic circle” is a geometric projection of the world that shows the structural unity of the microcosm and the macrocosm. According to Carl Gustav Jung, the mandala is one of the oldest archetypal symbols of self, center, wholeness and inner harmony in which opposites are reconciled. The ouroboros, a snake biting its own tail, is another ancient motif of the union of opposites and sexes, and Jung believed that the ouroboros can represent the primal unity of soul opposites and the union of the conscious and unconscious in man. (TREBJEŠANIN 2011: 255–257, 427–428)





Fig. 3. Hilma af Klint, *Group VI, Evolution, No. 13*, 1908 (MIDAVAINÉ 2015: 72)

(MIDAVAINÉ 2015: 44) The next painting in the sequence, no. 13, shows that a man and a woman have not yet reached the final step in their development, considering that they have not fully merged into a singularity, which is in af Klint's paintings mostly represented in green colour, with their yellow and blue principles in equilibrium and balance, like two folded sets of the antic motif *vesicapiscis*.

#### *Tree of Knowledge*

In 1913, following the series of paintings titled *Evolution*, Hilma af Klint began working on a series *Tree of Knowledge*, which abounds in stressed duality of shapes and symbolic colours. (Figure 4) Apart from doubled blue and yellow discs and the symmetry of stylized branches and roots on the left and right sides of the canvas, the middle segment of the trunk repeats the motif of the birds that gradually intertwine in order to merge at the top of the tree into a sign resembling a sideways eight – the symbol of eternity. By employing schematized representations of the tree and the living world co-existing with it, af Klint

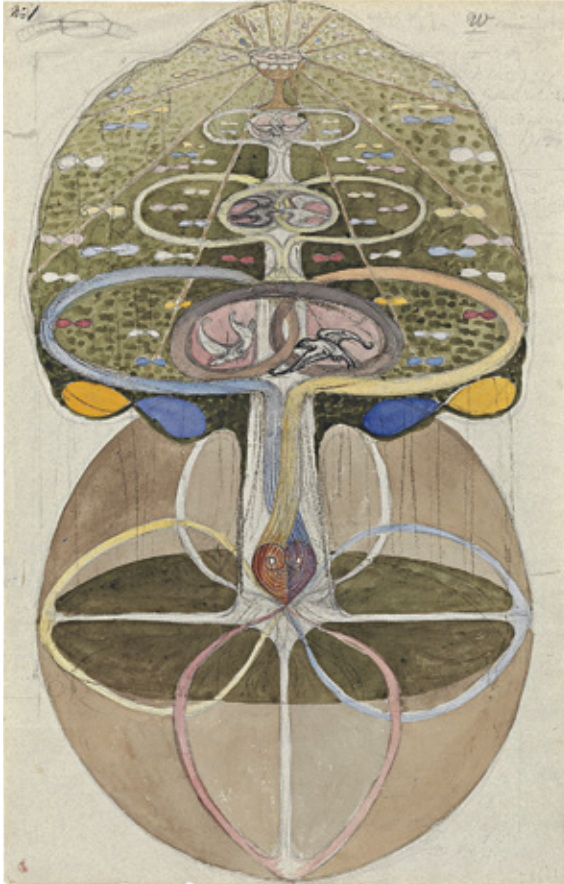


Fig. 4. Hilma af Klint, *Group VII, The Tree of Knowledge, No. 1*, 1913 (RYLE, Jadranka. “Reinventing the Yggdrasil: Hilma Af Klint and Political Aesthetics.” In *Formation – Nordic Journal of Art and Research* 7.1 n. pag. Web, 16)

wanted to represent the similarities of the evolutionary development of the human soul and the soul of plants, connecting her knowledge of esoterism with that of natural sciences.<sup>7</sup> (LEON 2020: 14, 17) Af Klint’s continuing work in the domain of botanical art taught her to carefully observe plants, their shapes, patterns, regularity and symmetry. (LEON 2020: 16; LOMAS 2020: 115) This artist felt great empathy towards the world of living beings and in her notebooks, filled with sketches of the most diverse plant species reduced to simple geometric shapes, there is a quotation which is preserved and which states her desire to “truly understand nature and all its living beings, to enter their core and connect with different shapes of life and existence on earth”. (LOMAS 2020: 123) As someone who studied nature and attempted to genuinely understand it, Hilma af Klint was aware of the fact that the process of evolution was possible solely through reproduction – merging and new birth, as well as that in nature, every shape of life has its match, and that life is, by itself, the consequence of the merging of opposites, i.e. genders.

Besides the painter’s interest in the world of nature, the motif of the tree in af Klint’s work is also often connected to

Yggdrasil, the holy tree of Norse mythology, which was represented in a somewhat similar manner in the literature of the late nineteenth century – as a trunk whose roots and canopy pass through the intersection of several parallel planes.<sup>8</sup> (TREBJEŠANIN 2011: 219–220; RYLE

<sup>7</sup> Considering her interest in natural sciences, it is assumed that Hilma af Klint was acquainted with Charles Darwin’s sketch *Tree of Life*, which the scientist drew in his notebook in 1837 and which represents the first visual display of his theory of evolution. Until the end of the nineteenth century, this sketch was reproduced in scientific literature and was known to a wider scientific community. (VOSS 2016: 23–24)

<sup>8</sup> The tree Yggdrasil was represented in this manner in M. Mallet’s book *Northern Antiquities* published in 1847. (RYLE 2018: 7)

2018: 2, 17) In mythology, these parallel planes represent the worlds inhabited by gods, people and giants, and in whose middle part the holy tree is located, oak or fir, as the symbol of growth, creation and universality. (BRUCE-MITFORD 1996: 96; BIDERMAN 2004: 78) An important function of this tree is also tied to the predicted end of the world when Yggdrasil's trunk, according to myth, would open up and take in the last living man and woman as a pledge to the salvation of the human species and new life. (RYLE 2018: 8) The motif of Yggdrasil was very popular in Swedish art at the end of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century, especially in the works of artists who belonged to the National Romantic movement, in which some of af Klint's professors from the Academy were involved. (RYLE 2018: 2) The dominant ideology of artists who belonged to this movement was the promotion of national identity by preserving Swedish culture and tradition, whereby motifs taken over from Norse mythology, as well as landscapes which celebrated the beauty of autochthonous Swedish nature, came to be distinguished as the favourite themes of these artists.<sup>9</sup> (FACOS 1998: 2–5; 2009: 151, 162) Nevertheless, in her sequence *Tree of Knowledge*, af Klint breaks with such tradition, representing the holy tree as a diagram, a scheme filled with esoteric or personal symbols, which evolves from canvas to canvas like a real plant species, and in whose canopy – the higher sphere, the process of the transformation of polarities into a final, spiritual singularity takes place.

### *The Swan*

Traditional Scandinavian motifs became a prominent field of interest for Hilma af Klint again the following year (1914) when she began working on the upcoming subsequence *Paintings for the Temple* titled *The Swan*. (RYLE 2019: 70) White swan, an autochthone species of the European north, is a symbol of Scandinavian nations, and is related to Valkyres in Norse mythology, for whom it was believed that they possess the power of transforming into the shape of this bird. (BIDERMAN 2004: 193) The motif of the swan is also present in esoterism, which is why, according to Madame Blavatsky's opinion, this bird is the embodiment of the “mystery above all other mysteries” and she calls it a “spiritual majesty”. (HIGGIE 2016: 17) Like in the case of Yggdrasil, Hilma af Klint employed the swan as a motif of nature through whose transformation she was to exhibit her personal ideas on gender and duality

The first painting in the sequence, *The Swan, No.1*, shows two symmetrically represented swans on black and white backgrounds. (Figure 5) The traditional symbolism of the black swan as dark, lunar and female, and the white swan as solar, sunny and male is reversed in this painting by af Klint's personal colour symbolism: in her notes, the artist wrote that blue legs and the beak of the white swan are signs that it is female, whereas yellow legs and the beak of the black swan disclose that it is male. (RYLE 2019: 79) In the first painting of

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<sup>9</sup> At the beginning of the 20th century artists such as František Kupka (*The Beginning of Life*, 1900) or Gustav Klimt (*The Tree of Life*, 1909) also interpreted motif of tree in a similar way – as a symbol of birth, growth and development, the three-part structure of the world and the process of the human life cycle. (JONES 2012: 4–23; FREYTAG 2012: 69, 83)



the sequence, two gender-determined swans are represented symmetrically, and at ease, as two representatives of their species that are equals. However, in the paintings that follow, swans no longer remain in their halves of the canvas, but are shown amidst the process of intertwining their wings and necks in some sort of a struggle or dance. Their interaction leads to the mixing of their bodies – even in the painting *The Swan, No. 4*, although represented during a struggle, both animals each have one blue and one yellow leg, their beaks are also painted in both colours, with their wings beginning to attain lighter and darker shades resembling the wings of the opponent. (RYLE 2019: 80)



Fig. 5. Hilma af Klint, *Group IX, The Swan, No. 1*, 1914–1915 (RYLE 2019: 79)



After they have physically evolved into beings which contain the essence of both genders, Hilma af Klint, began to abstract their bodies. In the painting *The Swan, No. 8*, instead of two birds on the canvas, all groupings of cubes are represented, arranged in circles, in the same relation of balance and symmetry as is the case in the painting no. 1. (RYLE 2019: 80) The shape of the animal body gets excluded completely, the swan becoming a cube, circle, an irregular geometric shape, and by such abstraction of shape the clear line between the male and female polarity stops being visible. By varying the form of the swan, Hilma af Klint



Fig. 6. Hilma af Klint, *Group IX, The Swan, No. 17*, 1915 (Photo: Moderna Museet / Albin Dahlström, Wikimedia Commons, public domain)

simplifies it to such a degree that what was a clearly defined plurality at the beginning of the sequence becomes a singularity in time. (LEON 2020: 11) In the two final paintings of this sequence, *The Swan No. 17* and *The Swan, No. 18*, every resemblance to the swan as an animal is lost. (Figure 6) From the starting equality and peaceful coexistence, through struggle and intertwining of physical characteristics, and reaching the loss of physicality and crossing into the domain of ideas, by the schematization of the swan, Hilma af Klint achieved the transformation of gender duality into an androgynous hybrid represented in clear geometric shapes. (RYLE 2019: 85) Through this process af Klint has once again stressed her conviction that after bodily, earthly laws and temptations, genders can coexist in peace and harmony, as well as that reconciliation carries their souls into higher spheres of reality. (HENDERSON 2019: 86) By losing their physical animal characteristics, the swans lose their physicality tied to earthly matter, instincts and sexuality. By losing their bodies, the loss of bodily urges occurs, and the swans cross into the world of geometric symbols, spiritual ideas, and by merging overcome their limitations and differences.

#### *The Atom Series*

The symbolism of genders, of their mutual balance and aiming towards unity and reconciliation can also be noticed in the abstract works of Hilma af Klint which were created after the artist finished the big sequence *Paintings for the Temple* in 1915. In 1917, af Klint began working on a sequence of small drawings titled *The Atom Series*. (HENDERSON 2019: 75) That same year (1917), the physicist Ernest Rutherford successfully split the atom into smaller parts, and the news of this experiment inspired Hilma af Klint's pondering over the nature of the atom, which can be seen from her texts written during that year. (RYLE 2019: 71)

The research conducted by Ernest Rutherford, Niels Bohr, and other scientists at the end of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century shaped not only the scientific ideas of that time, but also had an influence on artists whose sensibility was attuned to contemporary scientific research. The material reality, which artists of Symbolism wanted to part with in the middle of the second half of the nineteenth century, began to attract a new generation of artists who created works close to symbolist art at the turn of the century. (HIGGIE 2019: 14) Science showed that the physical world was filled with unexplored, unknown properties and characteristics, as well as that its materiality was as puzzling as the higher spiritual spheres of parallel worlds that were discussed by theologians and esoterics. (RYLE 2019: 73) Hilma af Klint recognized the potential for artistic expression of her ideas which came to her due to novel scientific discoveries, which is why she opted to carry over her belief in gender balance and equilibrium from the global and cosmic plan to the level of the micro world – the atom. (MIDAVAINÉ 2015: 50)

Hilma af Klint saw the spiritual similarity between the atom and the human soul. (MIDAVAINÉ 2015: 49) The following sentences, which the artist wrote in the upper right corner on a drawing from the series no. 7, show that the atom was not only a physical object for

af Klint, but also a symbol of a shape present in the earthly, but also in the higher sphere: "The atom has at once limits and the capacity to develop. When the atom expands on the ether plane, the physical part of the earthly atom begins to glow." (MIDAVAINÉ 2015: 50) (Figure 7)

In her drawings, atoms are represented by the shape of a square (symbol of earth, woman, harmony, order, wholeness and unity in many mythologies) who's inside, as the series

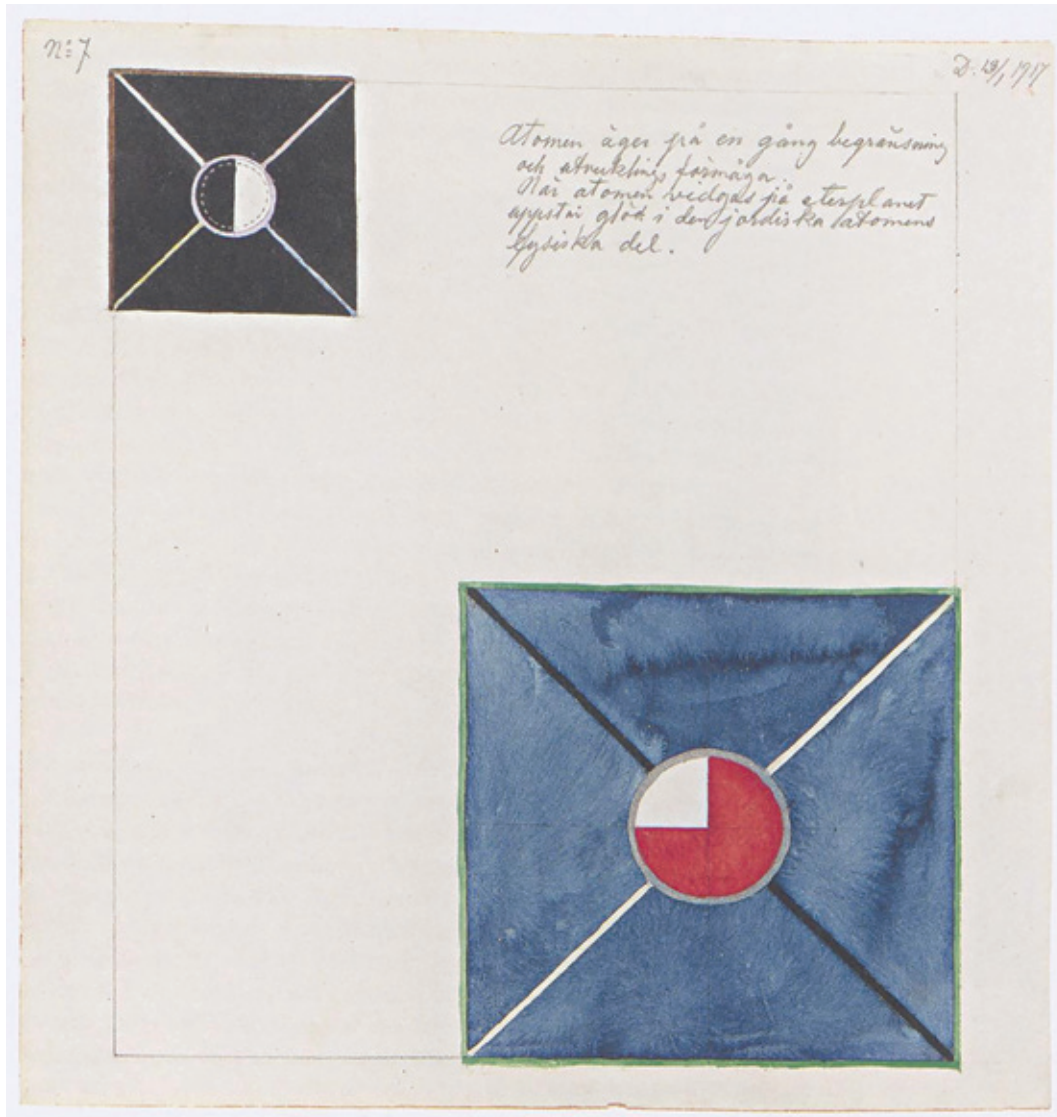


Fig. 7. Hilma af Klint, *The Atom Series, No. 7, 1917* (MIDAVAINÉ 2015: 74)

of drawings progresses, becomes more and more divided, broken up and complex. (TREBJEŠANIN 2011: 239; LORECK 2018: 43) This division of the atom into smaller elements is the answer to new knowledge on the nature of the atom, but it is simultaneously the sign of an evolutionary process which has still not finished. (MIDAVAINÉ 2015: 51) Just like in the case of her previous series of paintings, the selected object or motif, in this case the atom, goes through a string of changes, which anticipates its potential for growth and development, more than it illustrates a final or finished process. Into the painting of inanimate matter, a particle without gender or sex, Hilma af Klint brings in the characteristics of sexuality by yet again using the symbolism of colour. This time, instead of employing blue or yellow, the female and male principles are represented by the duality of black and white, while green is still the colour of their unity. (RYLE 2019: 72) By using green, af Klint frames the squared atoms, alluding to their ultimate androgynous nature, which will be reached through the transformation of smaller, inner, gender-determined parts that change in their own rhythm aiming towards balance and perfection embodied in the singularity, just like in the case of the swan or the tree.

### Conclusion

By observing the paintings of Hilma af Klint, and by analyzing her series of semi abstract paintings which were created during the first two decades of the twentieth century, the conclusion is reached that the theme of sexuality and gender duality was a recurring one in the works of this artist. Unlike numerous artists of Symbolism at the turn of the century who interpreted this topic mostly through gender struggle, in Hilma af Klint's works gender and duality are represented in a different manner: rarely through the struggle for authority and power, and more frequently by representing peaceful correspondence, alliance and mutual striving toward higher goals, like overcoming the material plane and crossing into the spiritual one. In the paintings which belong to the series *Primordial Chaos*, *Evolution*, *Tree of Knowledge*, *The Swan* and *The Atom Series*, by employing a line of personal, intimate symbols (objects and colours), as well as by arranging these elements on the canvas in such a manner that they are always in an equal, symmetrical relation like a mirror image of each other, she stresses the importance of cooperation and alliance of the male and female principle. Symbols of one gender are usually not in a superior position in regard to the marks of the other, so it can be concluded that Hilma af Klint aimed towards the reconciliation and the ultimate equating of genders in their absolute equality, and not towards the favourization of the female over the male principle, or vice versa.

Gender reconciliation can thereby be considered as one of the most important themes in af Klint's oeuvre, and the choice of the abstract over the figural way of painting speaks of the exclusion of the bodily factor, which she accomplished by the schematization and geometrization of the represented motifs. Her reduction of entire plant and animal species to the simplest geometric symbols shows that Hilma af Klint wanted to discover the spiritual essence of living beings (and other phenomena of the sensual world, like planets or atoms).



The spiritual or conceptual essence of natural shapes was not contained in their bodily, and thereby not in their gender, sexual, and carnal identity either, but in the conceptual one, which the painter sketched by using the gender neutral language of geometry and symbols. By avoiding figuration, she achieved to avoid casual or intentional sexualization of the body, and also to separate the idea of sexuality from the ideas of man and woman, i.e. from the members of the human species. As someone who spent the course of her entire life interested in nature and all its life forms, af Klint regarded gender and sex as one of the characteristics of the entire cosmic setup and the necessary requirement for the survival of the species, and not as the struggle for equality of social and political rights and privileges between men and women in an isolated moment in history, and a limited geographical area to which she belonged.

Finally, the universal unification of genders in the creative production of Hilma af Klint leads not only to the balance which is necessary in a society of codified patriarchal values (whose rules affected a few practical aspects of her work and life), but also to another big topic in her work – to evolution. As can be seen from the analysis of the abovementioned works, only when together, polarities can pass through the process of evolution, and the cosmic balance, which af Klint believed to be their final merging into the primary state of singularity, is achieved by reconciliation, alliance and mutual striving towards a higher goal.

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## ПОМИРЕЊЕ ПОЛОВА У СЛИКАРСТВУ ХИЛМЕ АФ КЛИНТ

### Резиме

Хилма аф Клинт је шведска уметница која је живела и стварала крајем XIX и у првој половини XX века. Посматрањем и анализом серија њених апстрактних слика насталих током прве две деценије XX века, долази се до закључка да је тема полности и дуалности полова била често заступљена у раду ове уметнице. За разлику од великог броја уметника који су на преласку векова интерпретирали ову тему кроз борбу полова, у Хилмином раду полност и дуалност приказане су на другачији начин: ретко кроз борбу за власт и моћ, а много чешће приказом мирног сагласја и сарадње мушког и женског принципа. На сликама које припадају серијама *Примордијални хаос*, *Еволуција*, *Дрво знања*, *Лабуд* или *Ајом* уметница низом личних, интимних симбола (предмета и боја) и распоредом ових елемената на платну (тако да се они увек налазе у равноправном, симетричном односу као слика у огледалу једни других) подвлачи значај савезништва полова. Она је веровала да само заједно полови могу да превазиђу ограничења наметнута њиховом физичком природом (телесност и материјалност чулног света) и еволуирају у виши ступањ постојања, сферу духовних вредности. Еволуција је стога покретачка сила која доводи до неминовних промена у односу полова и њиховог помирења зарад вишег циља. Одабиром апстрактних мотива и свођењем природних облика на геометријске симболе Хилма аф Клинт брише одлике материјалног света сводећи живоотиње, биљке или природне појаве на идеје које превазилазе полност користећи притом свој лични језик симболике мотива, знакова и боја.

Кључне речи: Хилма аф Клинт, апстрактна уметност, родна дуалност, женска стваралачка продукција.