

# GUGGENHEIM BILBAO

Press release



Opening on October 18

## Hilma af Klint

Sponsored by



In consonance with our commitment to culture and the arts, Iberdrola is proud to sponsor the exhibition dedicated to the work of Hilma af Klint at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao.

An artist who was deeply interested in the philosophical, spiritual, and esoteric, but also in the scientific, Af Klint created original pieces that captured currents and energies invisible to the human eye, striving to portray reality from a new perspective that would bring us closer to the ultimate truth.

The force of her creativity, the power of her imagery, the boldness of her colors, and the complex symbolism of her compositions made this Swedish painter a person who truly was ahead of her time, both artistically (she is considered a pioneer of abstraction) and conceptually. In fact, she left specific instructions in her will to refrain from exhibiting her works for at least twenty years after her death. Hilma af Klint went relatively unnoticed in her lifetime, not for lack of success but because of her own belief that contemporary audiences were not ready to understand her creations.

In her attempts to express the spiritual through painting, Af Klint employed an innovative language full of geometric shapes, organic forms, signs, and symbols culled from myriad sources. She worked with pre-existing motifs and references to envision and materialize new, unusual images, producing an astonishing iconography that is a universe in its own right, with codes which experts have only been able to decipher in recent decades.

For all these reasons, we are delighted with this opportunity to welcome and admire the complex, ground-breaking, fascinating art of Hilma af Klint in Bilbao.

Ignacio S. Galán  
Executive Chairman of Iberdrola

## *Hilma af Klint*

- Dates: October 18, 2024–February 2, 2025
  - Curators: Tracey Bashkoff, Senior Director of Collections and Senior Curator, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and Lucía Agirre, Curator, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao
  - Sponsored by: Iberdrola
  - With the cooperation of the Hilma af Klint Foundation
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- Swedish artist Hilma af Klint eschewed her traditional pictorial training in order to focus on a new type of abstract art informed by her deep spiritual commitments.
  - The artist devoted nearly a decade to her *Paintings for the Temple*, which represents a radical effort by af Klint to find visual expression for a transcendent, spiritual reality beyond the observable world.
  - Hilma af Klint rarely exhibited her most innovative works during her lifetime, and nearly a century would pass before they finally received the recognition they deserve.

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents *Hilma af Klint*, a comprehensive survey of the career of Swedish artist Hilma af Klint (b. 1862, Stockholm; d. 1944, Stockholm), sponsored by Iberdrola. The show spans from her early works on traditional themes, her automatic drawings and her most outstanding series, including *Paintings for the Temple*, *Parsifal*, the *Atom Series*, to the watercolors of her final years.

The artist exhibited her production in her lifetime, but mostly her more traditional figurative paintings. She rarely presented her abstract art publicly, and never showed it in mainstream artworld settings. She instead sought to share it with likeminded spiritual communities but struggled to find an enthusiastic audience. Coming to believe the world was not yet prepared to accept her work, Hilma af Klint took pains to store and catalog it so that the society of the future would receive it in an orderly fashion. Her art had to wait nearly one century for the recognition it deserved.

In 1906, Hilma af Klint began her most important and ground-breaking project, on which she spent almost a decade. Her *Paintings for the Temple* comprise a total of 193 paintings and drawings in which the artist set aside her formal education to instead create a new, nonobjective art informed by her relationship with spiritualism and other philosophies, such as Rosicrucianism, Theosophy, and later Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy.

Intended to hang in a spiral temple that was never realized, the *Paintings for the Temple* explore what remains hidden from the human eye, a topic which interested both the scientific and spiritual movements of the day and which was of great interest to Hilma af Klint and other modernist artists.

## EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

### Gallery 205

#### **Early Years**

Born into a family whose meritorious military service had garnered them a noble title, Hilma af Klint was privileged enough to access education and formal training. Her father, who eventually rose to the rank of naval commander, taught astronomy, navigation, and mathematics and was descended from cartographers. Hilma af Klint's spiritual paintings and drawings are informed by her familiarity with the language of cartography and other sciences.

In addition to learning from her family, Hilma af Klint received a conventional art education at the Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts, one of the first institutions to admit women and allow them to draw live models.

#### **Spiritual Drawings, The Five**

Like many of her contemporaries, Hilma af Klint saw no contradiction between the spiritual and scientific realms. In fact, she believed that both were means of attaining a higher truth. The artist's interests led her to participate in séances, which were popular in her time, though questioned by established religions.

In 1896, af Klint joined Anna Cassel, Cornelia Cederberg, Sigrid Hedman, and Mathilda Nilsson to form a group that called themselves De Fem (The Five). These women met regularly to hold séances, communicate with the beyond, and channel their experiences into writings and automatic drawings, as on view in this exhibition.

#### **Primordial Chaos, Group I, The WU/Rose Series (Paintings for the Temple)**

Hilma af Klint believed she and The Five had been commissioned by higher spirits to produce the *Paintings for the Temple*, and in 1906 she began working on the first series entitled *The WU/Rose Series*. Here the letter W may represent matter while the U may stand for the spirit, making WU a duality. (Hilma af Klint's journals reveal that letters had many meanings for the artist.)

The rose is likely a reference to the Rosicrucians, a secret society associated with the esoteric knowledge of alchemists, founded in the 17th century by Christians who were opposed to the rigid church dogma of their day and whose main emblem was the Rosy Cross or Rose Cross. Af Klint and her circle even held their spiritualist séances before an altar with a rose in the middle of a cross.

The first group of *Paintings for the Temple*, titled *Primordial Chaos*, contains twenty-six canvases related to Theosophical teachings about the birth of the world. In them, the painter focused on the Theosophical notion that there had been a oneness at the beginning of the world which subsequently shattered, and that life is a quest to reunite the opposing forces (e.g. good and evil, masculine and feminine) that were torn apart at the beginning of creation.

Two years earlier Hilma af Klint had joined the Theosophical Society, a movement founded in New York that sought to gain knowledge of a deeper spiritual reality through intuition, meditation, and other means of transcending every-day human consciousness.

### **Eros Series, Group II, The WU/Rose Series (Paintings for the Temple)**

The group that Hilma af Klint began working on for the *Rose Series* is called *Eros*, after the Greek god of love, associated with fertility and desire. Here the artist introduces elements that propose a balance between the opposing forces of masculine (symbolized with her use of the color yellow) and feminine (of blue).

### **Gallery 206**

#### **The Large Figure Paintings, Group III, The WU/Rose Series (Paintings for the Temple)**

These ten paintings were created between May and December 1907. In the first, a woman becomes one with the swan: her torso is covered in feathers, and two swans' heads emerge from her body. In addition to the bird's significance in mythology and ancient legends, for Helena Blavatsky, founder of Theosophy, the swan symbolized the grandeur of the spirit.

The masculine and the feminine are separated in the first four works of this group, never directly touching but connected by intermediate elements like a spiral or the row of human figures depicted in the fourth canvas, creating a triangular composition with the yellow man on the left and the woman in a subtle blue cloak on the right.

After the fifth work, where figuration vanishes altogether, male and female meld together, repeatedly returning to the Theosophical idea of life as a quest to reunite the opposing forces that were one at the beginning of the world.

### **Gallery 207**

#### **The Seven-Pointed Star, Group V, The WUS/Seven-Pointed Star Series (Paintings for the Temple)**

In the first set of works that comprise *The Seven-Pointed Star*—a title that refers to the symbol used in many religious and occult traditions—the size of af Klint's paintings increased little by little.

The artist wrote that her spiritual guides had instructed her to paint three sets of seven pictures at seven-day intervals. Hilma af Klint's use of lines in this series recalls her automatic drawings but it is more controlled, and we can see how her work had begun to display certain characteristics that would later become associated with some Modernist abstraction, such as a reductive approach to color and composition, as well as a lack of implied pictorial depth.

#### **The Evolution, Group VI, The WUS/Seven-Pointed Star Series (Paintings for the Temple)**

While working on her *Paintings for the Temple*, Hilma af Klint did not usually show them to outsiders, but she invited one of the people she admired the most—Rudolf Steiner, leader of the German Theosophical

Society—to view them in her Stockholm studio. Af Klint continued to work steadily on the *Paintings for the Temple*, finishing a canvas every three days between February and April 1908.

These works contain references to the theories of evolution that were still being debated at the time, half a century after the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, but were not the primary source for af Klint's treatment of theme, as her approach was more aligned to Steiner's and other Theosophical ideas in which evolution is a spiritual process where the soul evolves and gets closer to the divine.

### Gallery 209

#### **The Ten Largest, Group IV (Paintings for the Temple)**

In September 1907, Hilma af Klint had a revelation that she was to create “ten paradisaically beautiful paintings” that would give the world a glimpse of the four stages of human life: childhood, youth, adulthood, and old age. The following month, she began working on *The Ten Largest*.

Probably made on the floor at least in part because of their massive size, which would have been unusual at the time, these works were hastily executed following the instructions of af Klint's spiritual guides. They were painted with the tempera technique used during the Renaissance and are reminiscent of the Florentine church altars that she had admired a few years earlier. Like Renaissance masterpieces, the art of Hilma af Klint served to inspire spiritual reflection.

### Gallery 208

#### **The Swan, Group IX/SUW, The SUW/UW Series (Paintings for the Temple)**

In 1908, Hilma af Klint took a four-year break from her *Paintings for the Temple*. When she returned to the series in 1912, the artist still believed that the spirits were guiding her, albeit in a different way: now she had more agency in the choice of colors and composition.

In these canvases of 1915, the swans become increasingly abstract geometric shapes. Initially they are painted in black and white, with subtle hints of yellow and blue, conveying the dualities of light and dark, life and death, or male and female. As the series progresses, the animal dissolves into geometric compositions, although figuration returns in the final work, where the swans intertwine and are accompanied by highly symbolic geometric shapes like the hypercube.

### Gallery 204

#### **Tree of Knowledge, The W Series (Paintings for the Temple)**

Between 1913 and 1915, Hilma af Klint painted the *Tree of Knowledge*. Related to the biblical account of how the world began, this work blends Christian imagery with af Klint's mystical and Theosophical beliefs.

With ornamented curves, muted colors, and motifs borrowed from nature, it combines scientific diagrams and decorative elements inspired by Art Nouveau, a very popular style at the time. The silhouette of a tree passes through the center of two spheres: the lower representing the earthly plane, while the more organic sphere above represents the divine. The chalice, a sacred vessel, is depicted in various sizes, colors, and compositions, radiating energy as a nexus between opposites.

### Gallery 203

#### **The Dove, Group IX/UW, The SUW/UW Series (Paintings for the Temple)**

In 1915, Hilma af Klint started a group entitled *The Dove*, a bird which for Christians is a symbol of the Holy Spirit and messenger of the divine. Abstract forms and figurative and chromatic symbolism gradually materialize in the canvases, where we also find Saint George and the Dragon engaged in mystical combat, a battle between good and evil. According to af Klint's notes, Saint George was one of her alter egos, and slaying the dragon represented triumph over darkness.

#### **Group X, Altarpieces and Human Chastity, Closing Painting (Paintings for the Temple)**

Completed in 1915, these three altarpieces are the final group and compendium of the artist's *Paintings for the Temple*. In one of her notebooks, Hilma af Klint set out her vision for the temple: a nearly round building with three levels connected by a spiral staircase. A fourth-story tower with an altar room would house these paintings.

The altarpieces appear to relate to Theosophy's version of evolutionary theory, in which evolution occurs in two directions, elevating from the physical to the spiritual and descending from the divine to the material world. In them, we see the culmination of the forms, colors, and motifs used throughout her temple project. The importance of these paintings for the artist is underscored by her use of metal leaf, which confers a luminous quality and is often employed in traditional religious art. Although the altarpieces effectively concluded the greatest project of her life, Hilma af Klint made one last piece for the *Paintings for the Temple*, a small canvas titled *Human Chastity*.

### Gallery 202

#### **The Parsifal Series and The Atom Series**

After finishing her *Paintings for the Temple*, in 1916 Hilma af Klint began *The Parsifal Series*, a title that alludes to the Knight of the Round Table who sought the Holy Grail in Arthurian legend. Made at her lake house over a ten-week period, in these paintings the artist continued to seek the meaning of the messages she received from the spirit world.

Af Klint built a studio on the grounds of her villa in 1917, and that same year she created *The Atom Series*. Theosophists believed that they could see atoms through clairvoyance, and for Hilma af Klint, who was fascinated by the natural world, atoms were a gateway to the cosmos. In her notes, the artist wrote that the atom goes through a process of development and progresses towards oneness, much like her own spiritual path.

### Geometric Series and Watercolors

The years from 1917 to 1920 were a transitional period in Hilma af Klint's work, coinciding with her growing interest in the theories of Anthroposophy and with the death of her mother, whom she had cared for, in 1920. That year, Af Klint applied for admission to the Anthroposophical Society and turned over a new leaf.

In her increasingly colorful geometric paintings, circles and crosses orbit and collide with larger geometric shapes: the artist remained committed to her quest to decipher the relationships between spiritual forces and portray the invisible.

Influenced by Steiner, who believed that close observation of the natural world would allow one to experience the spiritual world, in 1922 Klint changed her entire approach to making art and began to paint *On the Viewing of Flowers and Trees*, watercolors of botanical forms that aspired to portray the spiritual forces of nature. The artist used a wet-on-wet technique for these works that involved moistening the paper with a damp sponge so the paint could run freely when applied, letting the colors generate the subject matter.

### CATALOGUE

This exhibition will be accompanied by a profusely illustrated catalogue with texts by the curators of the exhibition, Tracey R. Bashkoff and Lucía Agirre; David Max Horowitz, and Julia Voss, in which they examine the life and work of Hilma af Klint in late 19th and early 20th-century Europe.

### DIDAKTIKA

The Museum designs educational spaces, digital content, and special activities to complement each exhibition as part of its Didaktika project, providing tools and resources to enhance the audience's appreciation of the works on display.

The Didaktika space for this exhibition, *Encounter with an Era and an Artist*, is sponsored by Fundación EDP. In this area, visitors can learn about the major social changes and innovations that marked the late 19th and early 20th centuries and influenced the life and art of Hilma af Klint, such as spiritualism, the rise of Theosophy, women's liberation movements, and technological breakthroughs.

An audiovisual production featuring curator Tracey Bashkoff, a summary of Hilma af Klint's biography, and a copy of the exhibition catalog round out the Didaktika experience.

### Programs

Opening Talk (16 October)

Conversation between exhibition curators Tracey Bashkoff and Lucía Agirre in the Auditorium.



Shared Reflections\*

Guided tours in which Museum staff members offer different perspectives on the works in the exhibition:

- Curatorial Vision (October 23) with Lucía Agirre, Museum and exhibition curator
- Key Concepts (November 6) with Luz Maguregui Urquiza, Museum's Education Coordinator

\*Sponsored by Fundación Vizcaína Aguirre

**Cover image:**

Hilma af Klint

Group IX/SUW, The Swan, No. 12, The SUW/UW Series, 1915

Oil on canvas

151.5 x 151 cm

Photo: The Moderna Museet, Stockholm,

Courtesy The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm, HaK 160

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**For further information:**

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Images for the use of the Press

*Hilma af Klint*

Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa

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Hilma af Klint

*Summer Landscape*, 1888

Oil on canvas

88 x 148 cm

Dorsia Hotel, Gothenburg, Sweden

Photo: Courtesy The Hilma af Klint Foundation

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Hilma af Klint

*Untitled*, The Five, 1908

Dry pastel and graphite on paper

53.2 x 63.4 cm

Courtesy The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm, HaK 1252

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Hilma af Klint

*Primordial Chaos, The WU/Rose Series, Group I, No. 15, 1906-07*

Oil on canvas

52 x 37 cm

Courtesy The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm, HaK 15

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Hilma af Klint

*Eros Series, The WU/Rose Series, Group II, No. 5, 1907*

Oil on canvas

58 x 79 cm

Courtesy The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm, HaK 31

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Hilma af Klint

*The Large Figure Paintings, The WU/Rose Series, Group III, No. 6, 1907*

Oil on canvas

162.5 x 139.5 cm

Courtesy The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm, HaK43

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Hilma af Klint

*The Seven-Pointed Star, The WUS/Seven-Pointed Star Series, Group V, No. 2, 1908*

Tempera, gouache, and graphite on paper, mounted on canvas

75.5 x 62 cm

Courtesy The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm, HaK 49

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Hilma af Klint

*The Evolution, The WUS/Seven-Pointed Star Series, Group VI, No. 16, 1908*

Oil on canvas

102 x 133 cm

Courtesy The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm, HaK 84

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Hilma af Klint

*The Ten Largest, Childhood, Untitled Series, Group IV, No. 1, 1907*

Tempera on paper, mounted on canvas

322 x 239 cm

Courtesy The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm, HaK 102

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Hilma af Klint

*Tree of Knowledge, The W Series, No. 1, 1913*

Watercolor, gouache, graphite, and ink on paper

45.7 x 29.5 cm

Courtesy The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm, HaK 133

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Hilma af Klint

*The Swan, The SUW/UW Series, Group IX/SUW, No. 13, 1915*

Oil on canvas

148.5 x 151 cm

Courtesy The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm, HaK 161

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Hilma af Klint

*The Dove, The SUW/UW Series, Group IX/UW, No. 1, 1915*

Oil on canvas

151 x 114.5 cm

Courtesy The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm, HaK 173

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Hilma af Klint

*Retablo, Retablos, Grupo X, No. 1, 1915*

Oil and metal leaf on canvas

237.5 x 179.5 cm

Courtesy The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm, HaK 187

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Hilma af Klint

*Buddha's Standpoint in Worldly Life, Series II, No. 3a, 1920*

Oil and graphite on canvas

37 x 28 cm

Courtesy The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm, HaK 471

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Hilma af Klint

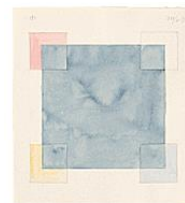
*The Parsifal Series, Group III, No. 121, 1916*

Watercolor and graphite on paper

25 x 27 cm

Courtesy The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm, HaK 327

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Hilma af Klint

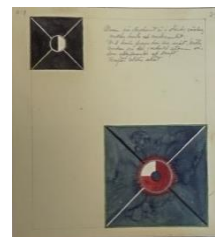
*The Atom Series, No. 8, 1917*

Watercolor, graphite, and metallic paint on paper

27 x 25 cm

Courtesy The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm, HaK 360

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Hilma af Klint

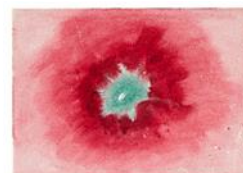
*Untitled, On the Viewing of Flowers and Trees, 1922*

Watercolor on paper

18 x 25 cm

Courtesy The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm, HaK615

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Photograph of the Swedish artist Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) at her studio on Hamngatan in Stockholm.

Courtesy The Hilma af Klint Foundation

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