

being human

personal and cultural renewal
in the 21st century

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*Hilma af Klint, SUW/US Series: Group IX/UW,
The Dove, No. 1 (1915), oil on canvas*

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"Art for the future" arrived for many this year, out of a Swedish woman's deep commitment to higher realities, made over a century ago.

Where does eurythmy come from, and where is it taking us? From the Word, to the Word.

The remarkable impact of Shakespeare—does it emerge from rarely-noticed spiritual depths?

Conduit—Laura Summer cheers a book's words and its images.

Hilma af Klint at the Guggenheim Museum

A Significant Artistic Event in the Artworld

by David Adams

The recent large exhibition of 168 of the paintings of Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) filling the Guggenheim Museum in New York City has been making huge waves in the mainstream and online artworld, waves that have been flowing ever since the first and still largest solo show of her work at the Moderna Museet (Modern Art Museum) in Stockholm in 2013. The latter show, "Hilma af Klint: Pioneer of Abstraction," of 230 paintings was the most popular show the museum has ever held, deeply moving many visitors and traveling to seven further venues throughout Europe so that it was seen by more than a million people.



Photograph of Hilma af Klint, ca. 1910



Hilma af Klint, *The Ten Largest* (1907–1908) "Pioneer of Abstraction" Exhibition, Moderna Museet, Stockholm 2013

Likewise, the Guggenheim show is the most-visited in its sixty-year history (over 600,000 persons) and included many references to Rudolf Steiner and anthroposophy (not all of them accurate) in its wall placards and sold-out catalog. Her work seems to be especially appealing today to younger persons, and many enthusiastic reviews one reads stray quite a bit from the usually more sober tone of professional art critics, art historians, and artists. A few brief samples:

"This is, without a doubt, one of the most extraordinary exhibitions I have ever seen."

Jennifer Higgle, co-editor, *Frieze* (art magazine) 2013

"I can't help but agree with all the praise being heaped on the Guggenheim's big Hilma af Klint show. It's great, great, beyond great." "[Her] obsessions with secret signs and improbably all-connecting codes . . . return a sense of mystery and order to a world that seems dispiriting and beyond control."

Ben Davis, *ArtNet News*, 2018

"When first visiting the exhibition "Hilma af Klint—a pioneer of abstraction," it made me speechless: exuberant colour compositions in over-dimensional paintings that seemed very familiar. Why have they [been] kept from me so long?" Halina Dyrschka, German film director and producer, 2018

"Between 1906–1915, there followed 193 paintings—an astonishing outpouring . . . she worked as if possessed—in the grip of what can only be described as inspiration."

Kate Kellaway, *The Guardian*, 2016

Born near Stockholm, Sweden, Hilma af Klint joined the first generation of women to receive a formal artistic training at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm from 1882 to 1887, mostly

painting conventional naturalistic landscapes and portraits. But from childhood she seems to have had a degree of natural (atavistic) clairvoyance and began attending then-popular séances already in secondary school. This interest in spiritual matters was stimulated by her communications with a younger sister who died from influenza. In 1896 she formed with four other women “The Five,” a Christian spiritualist group that met weekly for ten years and received and recorded many communications from disembodied spirits, including passively creating various “automatic drawings.” In 1889 she joined the Theosophical Society, which she remained with until 1915/16, then joining the Anthroposophical Society in 1920.

From 1906 to 1908 she allowed the spirits (“High Masters”) from the séances (in which she had become the chief medium) to guide her artistic hand in undertaking to paint 111 of mostly abstract pictures involving spiritual content and symbolism. These included several thematic series, particularly ten large, unique paintings from 1907 to 1908, approximately 10’5” high by 8’ wide, on the theme of the four ages of human life, which evoke some of the strongest positive reactions from viewers today. I myself found experiencing their scale in person to be an almost overwhelming experience. She certainly produced large abstract paintings years before those men up to now hailed as the founders of abstract art (such as Kandinsky, Malevich,

Kupka, and Mondrian).

In 1908 she persuaded Rudolf Steiner to visit her studio to see some of these. After

quiet contemplation, he told her a few esoteric things about them, stated that only in fifty years might people be able to understand them, and objected to her method of working mediumistically and passively, encouraging her to develop her own conscious spiritual faculties as a more modern way to obtain and express spiritual knowledge.

From 1912 to 1915, still in contact with her spirit guides but working more independently, she continued her series called *Paintings for the Temple*, completing 193 paintings organized into 16 series. This series culminated in three large “altarpiece” paintings intended to summarize all her work to that point. She then continued with a variety of other series of paintings up to 1920. She felt her esoteric paintings originated from the astral world and she was working within the Rosicrucian stream of spirituality, including quietly incorporating a lot of background esoteric color and number symbolism.

From 1920 onward, when she became able to travel, she made regular visits to Dornach, observing the art of the first Goetheanum, speaking with and attending lectures by Steiner, studying the Goethean and anthroposophical color theories (including “painting out of the color”), and eventually

joining the new First Class of the School of Spiritual Science. Starting in 1922 she changed her style to paint



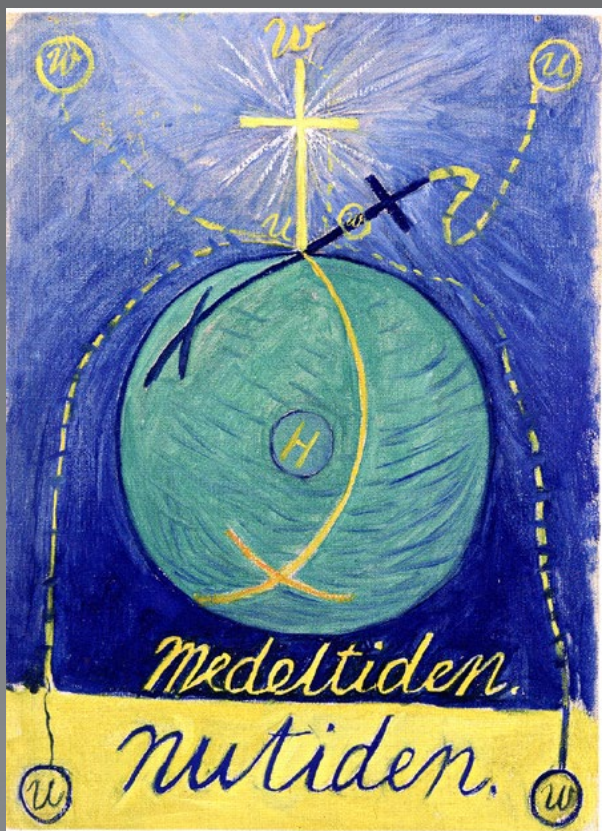
Hilma af Klint, *Primordial Chaos Series* (part, 1906-07), at the Guggenheim Museum, NY



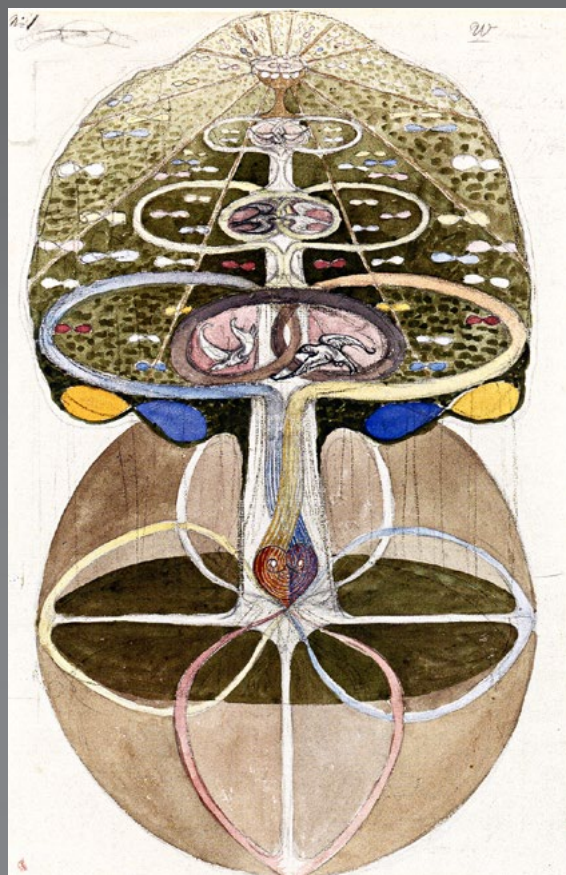
Hilma af Klint, *Ten Largest* (1907-8), at the Guggenheim Museum, New York



Hilma af Klint, *Group 1, Primordial Chaos, No. 16* (1906-07), oil on canvas



Hilma af Klint, Group 1, *Primordial Chaos*, No. 12 (1906-07), oil on canvas; "medeltiden" = Middle Ages, "nutiden" = modern times



Hilma af Klint, *W Series: Tree of Knowledge*, no. 1 (1913) watercolor, gouache, graphite, and metallic paint on paper



Hilma af Klint, *Ten Largest*, No. 3, *Youth* (1907), tempera on paper, mounted on canvas



Hilma af Klint, *Ten Largest*, No. 7, *Adulthood* (1907), tempera on paper, mounted on canvas

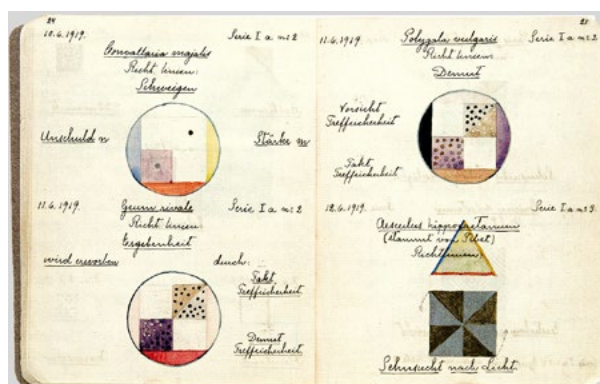
only in wet-on-wet watercolors, creating more than 200 watercolors in this style. Some seem to be based on meditative exercises from *How to Know the Higher Worlds*, while one of her largest late projects of these years were clairvoyant, meditative artistic botanical studies, annotated in German (often very esoterically or enigmatically), covering hundreds of plant species, and recorded in three notebooks that she donated to the Goetheanum.

Although she was able to exhibit and talk about her works at the World Conference of Spiritual Science in London in 1928, she became disenchanted with the power jockeying among Steiner's successors after his death and never returned to Dornach after 1930 (although her notebooks claim she remained in contact with Steiner after his death in 1925). Much of her later life was occupied with organizing, documenting, and interpreting her life's artistic work, looking to future generations that might be ready to understand them. She specified that her work should not be exhibited until twenty years after her death and should never be sold.

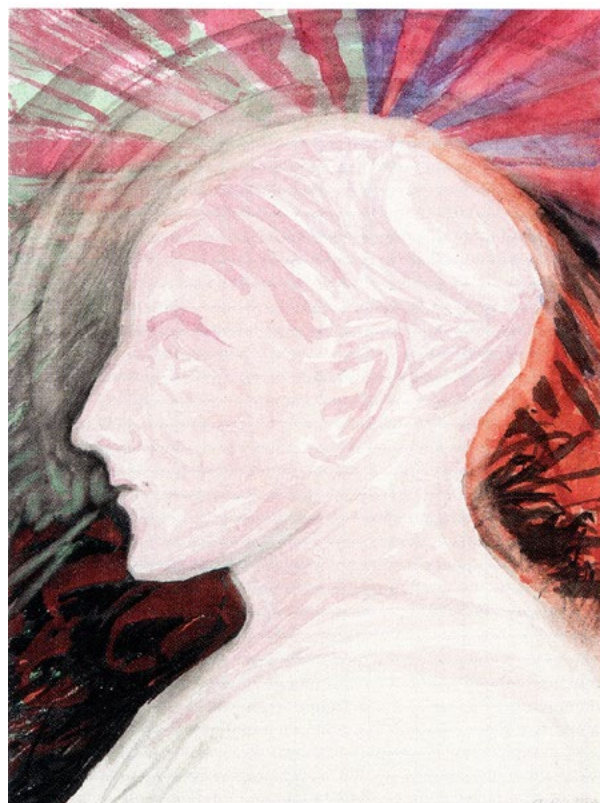
At her death in 1944 she left behind in the care of a nephew more than 1,300 paintings, sketchbooks, and 124 notebooks with more than 26,000 pages (mostly in Swedish and still largely untranslated). Her work remained largely unknown and unappreciated (except by a few, most of them Swedish anthroposophists like



Hilma af Klint, WUS/Seven-Pointed Star Series: Group VI, Evolution, No. 15 (1908) oil on canvas



Hilma af Klint, *Flowers, Lichens, and Mosses* (1919-20) pp. 24-25 ink, watercolor, and graphite on paper, HAK 586



Hilma af Klint, *Untitled* (1933), watercolor

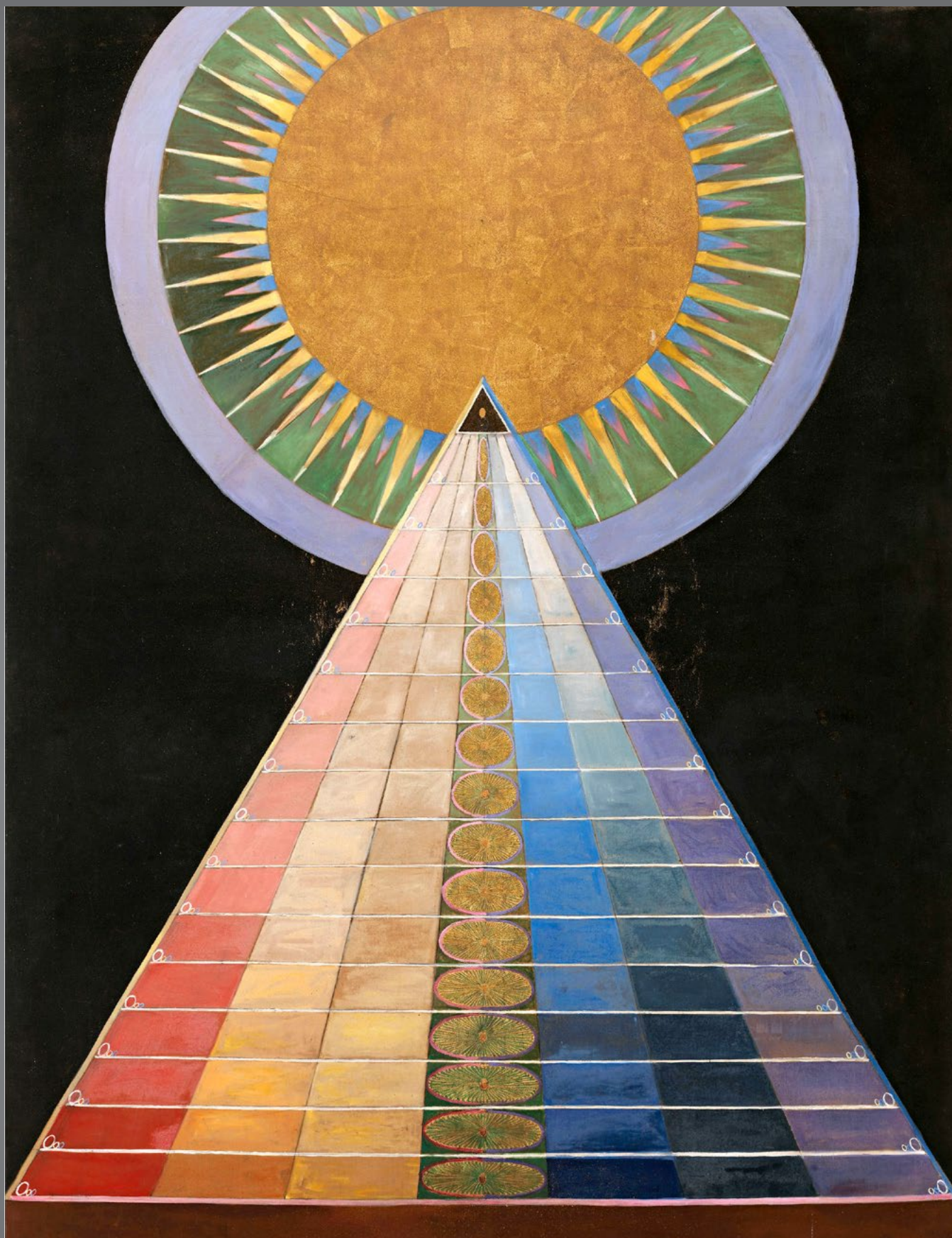
Ake Fant and Arne Klingborg), until a few examples were exhibited in the 1986-87 revelatory show, "The Spirit in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985," shown in Los Angeles, Chicago, and The Hague, 42 years after her death.

The dramatic reappearance of af Klint's artwork in recent years like a kind of opened time capsule has been confounding mainstream art's somewhat rigidified understanding of the history of modern art and providing an example of a groundbreaking early modern female artist who unusually practiced art purely as a selfless service to humanity and the spiritual world. Both the anthroposophical world and the mainstream artworld are struggling to re-evaluate and incorporate the inspiring example of her work. There were even some eurythmy "flash mob" events staged inside the Guggenheim before the exhibition closed on April 23, organized by Spring Valley eurythmist Alexandra Spadea.

My much longer discussion of Hilma af Klint's life and work from an anthroposophical perspective is online at www.anthroposophy.org/afklint

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Note:
All works shown on pages 28-34 are in the collection of the Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm, Sweden [www.hilmaafklint.se].



Hilma af Klint, *Group X, No. 1, Altarpiece* (1915), oil and metal leaf on canvas



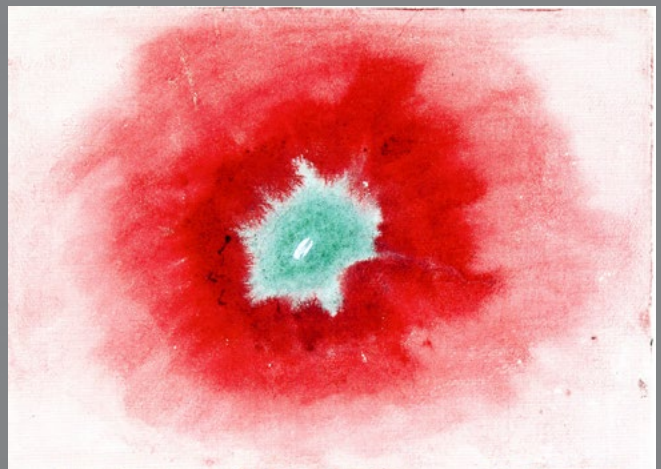
Hilma af Klint, SUW/UW Series: Group IX/SUW, *The Swan*, No. 17 (1915), oil on canvas



Hilma af Klint, *Untitled* (1930), watercolor



Hilma af Klint, *On the Viewing of Flowers and Trees: Wheat and Wormwood* (1922), watercolor



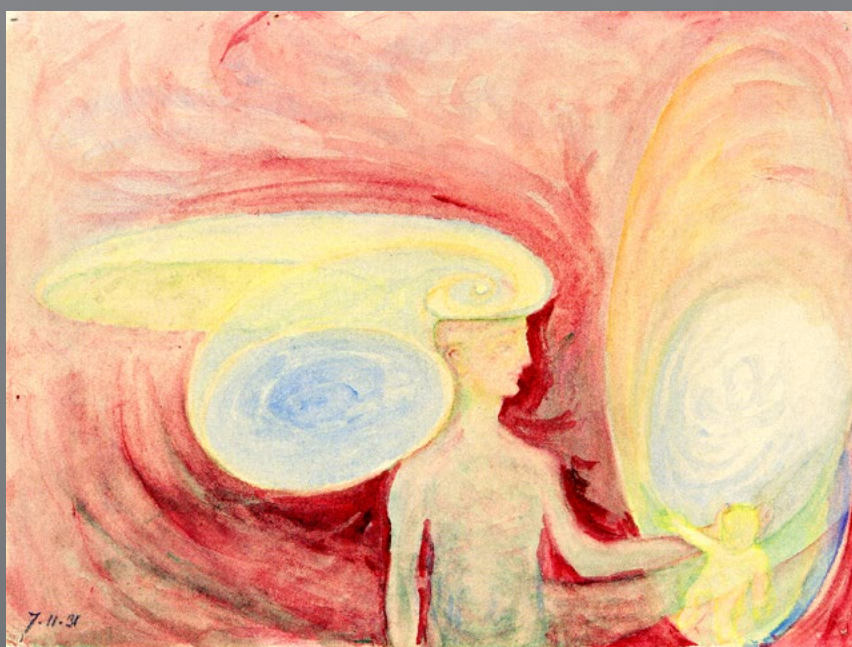
Hilma af Klint, *On the Viewing of Flowers and Trees: Untitled* (1922), watercolor on paper



Hilma af Klint, *On the Viewing of Flowers and Trees: Untitled* (1922), watercolor



Hilma af Klint, *Untitled* (1931), watercolor



Hilma af Klint, *Untitled* (1931), watercolor



Hilma af Klint, *Untitled* (1941), watercolor