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Research Paper

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**Gateway into The Abyss: Unlocking the Transcending Realms and Enlightened Truth
Through Exploration of Occult Iconography in Hilma Af Klint's The Swan No.24**

Abstract: Hilma Af Klint was a unique artist who worked during the early 20th century in Stockholm, Sweden. Klint is often regarded as a groundbreaking feminist artist whose abstract works were overshadowed due to the 20th century art world's patriarchal hierarchy. While to a certain degree, this is a plausible conclusion, this is more a modern construct. Klint was not an abstract feminist but a spiritual medium and devoted student of the occult. Her fascination with the spiritual realm is what led her to create her greatest works of art, the paintings for The Temple Series. Klint's use of occult symbolism and iconography dominates her work, especially in "*The Swan No. 24*". Through careful visual analysis of "*The Swan No. 24*" this paper will analyze and decipher Klint's code of spiritual transcendence. "*The Swan No. 24*" offers the viewer a spiritual portal or gateway to transcend reality. Klint offers us the keys and methods to unlock enlightenment through the convergence of the natural and spiritual world by using the conduit of science.

Somewhere in an elaborate parlor in Stockholm, Sweden, in the late 19th century, something profound and mystical is taking place. A gathering of five women is occurring, not just ordinary women, but rather a unique and eclectic mixture of artists, spiritual mediums, and occultists. This group of extraordinary women is called the Five, and this gathering will alter the course of one artist's life and work for all time.¹ Hilma Af Klint was a classically trained painter at the Stockholm Royal Academy who after the shocking death of her sister become obsessed with spiritualism and occult methodology. Klint's obsession with the transcending lines of the physical and spiritual planes. Is evident in her painting "*The Swan No. 24*" which uses visual metaphors and allegory to create a gateway for the viewer to decipher the hidden knowledge of the spiritual realm and unlock the enlightened truth. "*The Swan No. 24*" gives physical manifestation to the idea of the dominance and power that the spiritual realm holds over the physical world and how science is used as a transcending conduit to connect the two realms.

Hilma Af Klint is often regarded and revered as a feminist artist and a pioneer of early 20th-century abstract paintings who broke boundaries in a male-dominated world. This perception of Hilma Af Klint's paintings as referenced by Solly's article.² This perception may be correct to a certain degree.³ However, "*The Swan No.24*" (fig.1) is not a representation of feminist ideals but of deep spiritual and occult ideology. Hilma Af Klint was a sincere believer in the occult and spiritual mysticism, Klint's occult beliefs take precedence in these paintings, as

¹ Christine Burgin., *Hilma Af Klint: Notes and Methods* (NY, NY: Christine Burgin, 2018), 14.

² Meilan Solly, "From Obscurity, Hilma Af Klint Is Finally Being Recognized as a Pioneer of Abstract Art," Smithsonian.com (Smithsonian Institution, October 15, 2018), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/guggenheim-spotlights-swedish-spiritualist-hilma-af-klint-europes-little-known-first-abstract-artist-180970530/>

³ M. Catherine de. Zegher and Hendel Teicher, *3 x Abstraction: New Methods of Drawing by Hilma Af Klint, Emma Kunz, and Agnes Martin* (New York: Drawing Center, 2005), 12.

evident by the choices she makes in her art and her life by joining theosophical societies. This paper, through careful visual analysis of Hilma Af Klint's "*The Swan No.24*" (fig.1), will explore the hidden meanings behind the occult symbolism produced by Hilma Af Klint in her art. "*The Swan No. 24*" (fig. 1) represents Klint's fascination with the transcendence and convergence of power and her attempt to give physical form to the spiritual concept of fundamental truth. By analyzing the use of hue, shape, symmetry, and iconography, we will embark on a journey to unlock the visual cypher and step through the doorway that Hilma AF Klint offers the viewer. This painting forms a visual language for the viewer through spatial form, color and figural representations.

While Klint's "*Paintings for the Temple*" were initially meant for a serious student of spiritual mysticism who would recognize and analyze the spiritual clues of the "seven basic truths".⁴ The casual viewer can still embark on a moment of discovery and transcendence as evident with her wildly successful Guggenheim exhibition⁵. Klint planned for these paintings to act as a spiritual portal or gateway into another plane of existence, and to reveal a higher realm of knowledge and power for the human mind. Her artistic expression of scientific and natural elements offers a form of transcendence between truth and reality.⁶ Klint hints at the keys to decode these mysteries of the universe using visual language displayed in the occult iconography and symbolism evident in her series "*Paintings for the Temple*". These markers are especially prevalent in "*The Swan No.24*" (fig.1).

⁴ Marc Edmond Jones, *Occult philosophy: an introduction, the major concepts and a glossary: Key truths of occult philosophy, completely rewritten and expanded* (Philadelphia: D. McKay Co, 1948), 93.

⁵ Jenifer Higgie, "Review: Hilma Af Klint, A pioneer of Abstraction." *Frieze*, 2013, 1.

⁶ Jones, *Occult Philosophy*, 93.

To understand Klint's fixation on the occult we must first explore her background as a classically trained impressionist artist at the Stockholm Royal Academy. Hilma's early work consisted of impressionist style paintings featuring landscapes and some portraits. While at the Stockholm Royal Academy, Klint met up with a fellow student who introduced her to the idea of mediumship and occult spiritualism.⁷ In 1880 a tragic experience happened to Klint--the death of her sister--which changed her in a profound and deep way.⁸ This was the event that triggered her descent into the labyrinth of occultism. After the death of her sister Klint craved understanding and explanation of the world beyond ours. Klint wished to remove the veil between this realm and the spiritual one. This moment started Klint's association with a group of interesting women called the Five; this group consisted of Anna Cassel, Cornelia Cederberg, Sigrid Hedman, Mathilda Nilsson, and Hilma Af Klint herself.⁹ The group began their understanding of the occult and spiritualism with the teachings of Helen Blavatsky.¹⁰ Klint herself was particularly interested in spiritualism and its various schools of thought. In 1889 she joined the Theosophical Society and remained a member throughout her commission of "*The Paintings for the Temple*" until 1915.¹¹ Klint became infatuated with the teachings of Rudolf Steiner as a result she joined the Anthroposophical movement.¹² Klint was fascinated by the idea of hope and loss. This is evident in her letters to an unknown correspondent.¹³ "shaped and protected by invisible powers and when the time comes your eyes will open and you too will see"-Klint 1903.¹⁴ Klint believed that the occult and transcendent spiritualism was the answer to

⁷ Burgin, Hilma Af Klint: Notes and Methods, 14.

⁸Müller-Westermann Iris et al., *Hilma Af Klint a Pioneer of Abstraction*, 38.

⁹ Burgin, Hilma Af Klint: Notes and Methods, 14.

¹⁰ Müller-Westermann Iris et al., *Hilma Af Klint a Pioneer of Abstraction*,97.

¹¹ Burgin, Hilma Af Klint: Notes and Methods, 14.

¹² Zegher and Teicher, *3 x Abstraction*, 97.

¹³ Burgin, *Notes and Methods*, 29.

¹⁴ Ibid, 29.

all of life's mysteries. Klint believed that all moments and movements left traces on the human soul and mind. This is evident in the spiritual tone of her art like "*The Swan no. 24*" (fig. 1) which acts as a series of keys and maps meant to unlock the "the secret growing" as Klint called it, this spiritual pathway of enlightenment, knowledge, and hope. "You are bewildered by what we have told you, but the phenomenon we are trying to explain is truly bewildering."- Klint.¹⁵

Klint is often hailed as the first female abstract artist who was overlooked in history by her contemporaries. The exhibition at the Guggenheim presents her as an undervalued female abstract artist whose interest resided in breaking boundaries in a male-dominated art world.¹⁶ This view is promoted by Higgin's review of the show where she references Klint as being written out of history due to her femininity.¹⁷ Higgin and other contemporary art critics hail Klint as the first abstract feminist artist, a visionary marvel who dabbled and experimented with form and theme to create surrealist paintings.¹⁸ While this is true, her message is not a message of abstract feminism explored through the use of disorienting botanic shapes and lines. The series known as "*The Paintings for the Temple*", were actually a commission, not Klint's own expression of defiance against a male-dominated world.¹⁹

During a séance with The Five, a profound experience shook Klint to her core changing her life forever. During this séance a spirit guide came to her and told her she would be commissioned to create the greatest works of her life a series of paintings that would offer a transcendent experience for the viewer.²⁰ She would be the vessel for which the medium of art

¹⁵ Ibid, 29.

¹⁶ Julia Voss, "The first abstract artist? (And it's not Kandinsky) Focus: Hilma Af Klint," The Tate. March 12, <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-27-spring-2013/first-abstract-artist-and-its-not-kandinsky>.

¹⁷ Higgin, "Review: Hilma Af Klint, A pioneer of Abstraction." 2013.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Higgin, "Review: Hilma Af Klint, A pioneer of Abstraction." 2013.

²⁰ Burgin, *Notes and Methods*,16.

would intertwine with the invisible metaphysical ideas of spiritualism.²¹ Klint created these paintings on the commission of the High Master Amaliel, a leader who serves on the spiritual plane and understands the astral world.²² Upon the series' completion in 1917, Klint described the transcendent journey as the greatest work of her life.²³ Klint created these works by putting herself in a trance like state and allowing the spiritual realm to flow through her. Klint saw this as a method of investigation and exploration of spiritual ideas.²⁴

Klint combined her study and fascination with natural and botanical elements as seen in her early impressionist works with her later obsession with spiritual occultism. In her paintings, this combination of dualism is unique and creates a series of symbols and geometric language through which Klint can express the ideals of the spiritual world. This manifestation of spiritual dualism is evident in "*The Swan No.24*" (fig. 1) and its overlapping layers. The background of the painting forms a quadrant pattern. Each section features a differing color riddled with allegory--pink (justice), orange (holy), grey (unknown/injustice), and white (enlightenment).²⁵ The background consists of quick yet rough-textured brushwork emphasizing her impressionist roots. These four hues create a powerful symbolic background for dual swans: one black and one white shown intertwining and intersecting as one being. These figures are the main focus of this piece and encompass the entirety of the space. Their wings are stretched out to touch each plane forming another quadrant.²⁶ Each wing is in a symmetrical position stretching into the four corners. On the top portion of the painting, the wings converge and blend together highlighting

²¹ Burgin, *Notes and Methods*, 29.

²² Ibid, 257.

²³ Ibid, 16.

²⁴ Tallman Susan, "Painting the Beyond," *The New York Review of Books*, April 4, 2019, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/04/04/hilma-af-klint-painting-beyond/>.

²⁵ Burgin, *Notes and Methods*, 261.

²⁶ Bick, Andrew. "Hilma Af Klint: Painting the Unseen." *Art and Christianity*, no. 86 (2016): 10.

the contrast between dark and light. The swans' long serpentine necks curve into each other creating an infinity or Ouroboros symbol by the two beaks overlapping and converging into one another. Here, the black swan's beak devours the white swan's emphasizing power and dominance. This is a reference to the metaphysical devouring of the spirit realm and the material world. The swan's symmetrical convergence is continued in the mirroring of their head positions but at opposite angles. This visual allegory alludes to justice and injustice which creates the homogenous balance needed between the two realms. This is achievable only by two opposite yet parallel elements converging to create universal harmony.²⁷ This is evident in the placement and color combination chosen by Klint. The white swan's head is upside down and the feet are blue, whereas the black swan's head is right-side up and his feet are yellow. The black swan's beak is a deep red where the white swan features a natural yellow color. Tone and hue are a powerful conveyor of symbolism, and Klint uses the combination of natural and artificial color choices as signals to the viewers.²⁸ Klint is using these two figural representations to symbolize the transcendence of the metaphysical spiritual realm and the natural world intertwining and becoming one. The duality of yellow and blue create a visual allegory for fundamental truth.²⁹ The white swan's blue eye symbolizes true nature and mediumistic qualities; its gaze focuses solely on the black swan, whose darker and more passionate colors emphasize a deeper connection.³⁰ This reference to the black swan signals its preeminent position as a pivotal spiritual figure. The black swan's red eye is a crucial symbolic element, the deep blood colored eye looks directly out at the viewer, drawing them in attempting to communicate its secrets. The black swan acts as a profound messenger. While black and white elements are often used to

²⁷ Jones, *Occult Philosophy*, 153.

²⁸ Bick, Andrew. "Hilma Af Klint: Painting the Unseen." 10.

²⁹ Burgin, *Notes and Methods*, 263.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 257.

symbolize ying and yang, universal balance, or male and female duality, this is not what Klint is emphasizing in this painting. The white swan represents material reality which is deferring to the spiritual realm as represented by the visual allegory of the black swan. Here the black swan converges on the material world devouring and transcending the physical plane. The outward ruby red eye is an invitation to the viewer to converge and transcend into the abyss. The use of black and white references the duality of positive and negative forces or the *Pulmonaria officinalis* as referred to by Klint.³¹ Klint emphasized the balance of the universe, by using directional lines in the organization and placement of the figures and patterns. These elements create lines and spatial patterns which converge and extend to form the *Gagea lutea*, the six directional lines which are used to show and hide power.³² In “*The Swan No. 24*”(fig.1), Klint attempts to use this concept of convergence and conjuring to manifest divine spiritual power in the physical plane.³³ The black swan overtakes the white becoming an intersected figure, an infinite cycle of balance and need. The black swan’s power is emphasized in the red beak that clasps over the white swan’s beak dominating the figural representation of the material world and emphasizing the supremacy of the astral plane and the much-needed transcendence to the spiritual world. Like many followers of spiritual mysticism, Klint was interested in the power of the square intersecting the circle as drawing power from lines and intersections.³⁴ The model of an egg-shaped circle inside a square creates radical energy waves that flow out and ripple into the viewer and beyond, mimicking traces of power.³⁵ Not only do the background lines create a square, the wings of swan’s feathers brush out, forming a four pointed star within the quadrant.

³¹ Ibid,29.

³² Ibid,166.

³³ Paul Eli Ivey, *Radiance From Halcyon: A Utopian Experiment in Religion and Science*(Minneapolis: Minnesota univ. Press, 2013), 49.

³⁴Ivey, *Radiance From Halcyon*, 49-51.

³⁵ Ibid, 51.

The swan's twisting necks intertwine and converge at their beaks, not only forming an oval, but also an Ouroboros. The layering of converging lines and circles create planes of spiritual power. The object of power and symbolism most vital in this metaphysical rendering of spiritual power is the object resembling an electrical conductor which is partially electric blue and forms a circular-oval shape at the bottom and a bright yellow twisting at the peak. This object overlaps the two connected beaks. This symbolizes the metaphorical role of science in connecting the physical and transcendent realms. Within this shape is a circle intersected by a three-dimensional black cube symbolizing the uncharted territory of selfishness which features a secondary square with a multitude of hues including red, green, yellow, and brown.³⁶ Within this secondary square is a pyramid shape, indicating a starting point, featuring a red line shooting straight up.³⁷ These convergences of lines create a dual nature--a sacred and pure concept that relates to harmony within--such as life and matter or struggle and serenity.³⁸ Klint was a stark believer in occult and spiritualism as science, which is the creation of true universal justice. The heavy use of pink in this painting emphasizes justice in the face of injustice, as pink is symbol of Eros.³⁹

Emerging scientific methods were popular with occultists who saw them as healing tools and viewing methods for the spiritual plane. The revered Dr. William Dower, scientist and spiritualist disciple invented devices that he referred to as "Electronic Reactions of Abrams" (ERA).⁴⁰ Dower believed electricity and spiritualism combined could unlock radical healing

³⁶ Burgin, *Notes and Methods*, 263.

³⁷ Jones, *Occult Philosophy*, 77.

³⁸ Burgin, *Notes and Methods*, 257.

³⁹ Burgin, *Notes and Methods*, 258.

⁴⁰ Ivey, *Radiance from Halcyon*, 8.

treatments for diseases and cell therapy.⁴¹ “*The Swan No. 24*” references these concepts of healing and seeks to reveal them.

Each layer of Klint’s piece is riddled with symbolism and iconography and it’s important to remember that these paintings worked in tangent as part of a larger series, which existed for the consultation and deliberation of high ranking spiritual masters and not the layman.⁴² The mystic masters would have been adept at deciphering these coded symbols and iconography. Klint also uses color as a visual allegory. She calls the color yellow Gult which means color of light, wellspring of knowledge, and spiritual faithfulness.⁴³ Blue or blatt is the color of a true, loyal, and strong nature; it also represents the work of mediums.⁴⁴ The combination of elements: ascetic and vestel which manifest as representations for the masters of mysteries and correlate to the evolution of this world.⁴⁵

It’s important to note that there was a dramatic change in Klint’s artistic focus after her involvement with Rudolf Steiner who she greatly admired.⁴⁶ Steiner’s dismissal of Klint’s mediumistic paintings changed her in a profound way. Much as the death of her beloved sister opened this doorway, Steiner’s relegation of her mediumistic spirit painting as inane closed it.⁴⁷ Klint once described her paintings as flowing through her as the spirit guides took over, but after her encounter with Steiner, this cosmic connection ceased.⁴⁸ The spirit realm still guided and communicated these concepts to her but they no longer flowed through her.⁴⁹ Her time as a

⁴¹ Ibid, 76.

⁴² Burgin, *Notes and Methods*, 255.

⁴³ Ibid, 257.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 259.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 263

⁴⁶ Müller-Westermann Iris et al., *Hilma Af Klint a Pioneer of Abstraction*, 42.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 42.

⁴⁸ Higgie, “Review: Hilma Af Klint, A pioneer of Abstraction.” 2013.

⁴⁹ Burgin, *Notes and Methods*, 16.

vessel of spiritual expression was over. These later renditions express Klint's own transcendence of spiritual truths and her desire to unlock them.⁵⁰ "*Swan No.24*" acts as a physical representation of Klint's own experience with spiritual healing and enlightenment through mysticism and science. Her communication with the High Masters through seances revealed the fundamental need for balance and harmony between the material world and spiritual realm. The mystical elements of this painting communicate not only the equilibrium of unity and unrest they express the deep element of power and knowledge that transcends through all universal elements and the dominance of the spiritual realm over the material. The black swan's beak overtaking the white, his red eye looking outwards the viewer signals the power and dominance of the spiritual realm over the material.

The emphasis on the transcendence of the viewer into the spiritual realm is emphasized by the eye contact between the black swan and the viewer. "Drink to me only with thine eyes"- Darnis.⁵¹ Eyes are the window to the soul and the viewer's source of communication with the spiritual realm. Klint communicates through this painting that one way of reconnecting with the lost spiritual realm is through science. This is the conduit to bridge the gap between material world and the astral plane to reach an Enlightened and eternal truth.⁵² Klint's strategic placement of ascetic and vestal elements relay that "*Swan no. 24*" is a representation of the "Occult Sphere of Essene Origin"- Klint 1915.⁵³

Hilma Af Klint is truly an intriguing and enlightened artist whose paintings push the boundaries of abstract representations of naturalist elements. Her work presents a manifestation

⁵⁰ Jones, *Occult Philosophy*, 93.

⁵¹ Jones, *Occult Philosophy*, 52.

⁵² Ivey, *Radiance from Halcyon*, 55.

⁵³ Burgin, *Notes and Methods*, 256.

of occult symbolism and iconography as visual allegories for the transcending planes of the spiritual realm and the natural world. “*The Swan No. 24*” (Fig. 1) Is one of the most profound and important works in the series because of the direct engagement with the spiritual realm as represented by the black swan’s engagement with the viewer. This painting combines multiple layers of power and transcendence to convey the dominance of the spiritual realm over the material and to reveal that the key to unlocking the power of the universe lies within the sacred eye and science. Klint has created a visible manifestation of invisible realms of transcendence and power. “*The Swan No. 24*” invites the viewer in to experience for themselves these transcending realms of enlightenment.



(Figure 1) “*The Swan No. 24*”, Group IX-SUW, Series “*The Paintings for the Temple*”

Hilma Af Klint, 1915, Private Collection.

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