

The Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen presents the first major exhibition dedicated to Hilma af Klint and Wassily Kandinsky

Hilma af Klint and Wassily Kandinsky
Dreams of the Future

K20, March 16 – August 11, 2024

Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf

Press Conference: Thursday, March, 14, 2024, 11 am at K21

The exhibition dedicated to Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) and Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) is a premiere. Although the artists have often been mentioned in the same breath for several years, their works have only occasionally been shown together in large group exhibitions. With a total of around 120 oil paintings, watercolors, gouaches, and drawings, they will be juxtaposed for the first time in a dialogical exhibition at K20 – Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen. The point of departure is abstraction, to the development of which both have made decisive contributions in Western painting. The juxtaposition offers the opportunity to illuminate their works in a symbiotic way.

In its early years, the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen focused on abstract painting. The museum's holdings include four works by Kandinsky from his most important creative periods, from *Composition IV* (1911) and *Transverse Line* (1923) to *In the Blue* (1925) and *Composition X* (1939). Kandinsky and af Klint thus meet in one of the world's leading collections of abstract painting.

For the director of the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Susanne Gaensheimer, this exhibition is, among other things, a contribution to art history: "For years, we have been working to expand our collection by specifically presenting and acquiring works by important modern women artists. With this exhibition, the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen is celebrating an art-historical highlight: For the first time ever, two of the most important modern painters, Hilma af Klint and Wassily Kandinsky, are being presented together in a comprehensive exhibition. Today, Hilma af Klint is considered one of the pioneers of abstract painting alongside established artists such as Wassily Kandinsky. With

this exhibition, we have succeeded in closing another gap in the history of art and looking at the history of abstraction from a new perspective.”

Germany offers an almost ideal resonance space for this encounter. Af Klint and Kandinsky wrote many of their texts in German, hoping to find open ears and eyes here.

For a long time, art history kept the works of af Klint and Kandinsky apart. The focus was on the famous Russian painter who co-founded the “Blauer Reiter” artist group in Munich, contributed to the discovery of abstraction, taught at the Bauhaus, and published *On the Spiritual in Art*, one of the most influential programmatic texts of the twentieth century.

In contrast, the unknown Swedish artist, who created huge nonrepresentational paintings in Stockholm, exhibited very few of them, and left behind thousands of pages of unpublished texts, disappeared into the shadows.

While af Klint and Kandinsky often associated similar ideas with their painting during their lifetimes, their works took on afterlives that could not have been more different after their deaths—both died in 1944. Hilma af Klint’s canvases ended up rolled up in crates in her nephew’s attic in Stockholm. The painter herself had decreed that they should not be exhibited again until twenty years after her death.

Kandinsky’s paintings, on the other hand, toured the world in numerous exhibitions after the Second World War and ended up in the collections of museums in New York, Tokyo, Paris, Basel, Munich, and Düsseldorf. His name and abstraction merged to create a success story. The Cold War set the course. In the second half of the twentieth century, nonrepresentational painting was seen as the epitome of a freedom offered by the West and forbidden by the East. When the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen was founded in West Germany as the new state art gallery not far from the federal capital of Bonn, key works by Kandinsky were acquired. They marked the beginning of the canon of abstraction.

In contrast, af Klint’s international breakthrough did not come until the twenty-first century. At the latest when the Guggenheim Museum in New York organized a retrospective in 2018, which was visited by 600,000 people, the Swede had become a star in art history. Among contemporary artists, her works have long been among the most frequently cited sources of inspiration. She was now also known to a wide audience.

The exhibition looks at both similarities and differences. Both af Klint and Kandinsky were academically trained before turning to abstract painting. Both were forty-five years old

when they created the key works on view in Düsseldorf. In Munich, Kandinsky painted the large-format *Composition IV* in 1911 and wrote his essay *On the Spiritual in Art*. In Stockholm, af Klint created her monumental cycle *The Ten Largest* in 1907, as well as other abstract series, including the completion of *Primordial Chaos*. Throughout their lives, both painters were preoccupied with the scientific revolutions of their time. They were united by their reading of books that described the discoveries in physics and chemistry as a turning point in history.

Both painters worked in communities. Kandinsky had founded the “Blauer Reiter” together with Franz Marc and later joined the Bauhaus in Weimar and Dessau. Af Klint was at the center of various women’s collectives, some of whose members helped her paint. Among the most important were the painter Anna Cassel and the nurse Thomasine Anderson, whose works are included in the exhibition.

In December 1915, Kandinsky traveled to Stockholm, where he also exhibited. There is no record of a meeting with af Klint. It is likely, however, that the painter knew about the exhibition. It was widely reported in the Swedish press. Kandinsky exhibited both figurative and abstract works. One of the paintings dealt with the legend of St. George, who had also been depicted in the almanac of the “Blaue Reiter.” The figure also played an important role in af Klint’s oeuvre: It was included in the 1915 series *The Dove* and appeared as an alter ego in the notebooks. The Düsseldorf exhibition also devotes a space to this striking parallel.

Among the differences were very different ideas about how art should be disseminated. Kandinsky used a network of various artist groups, museums, institutions, publishers, galleries, and collectors. Af Klint, on the other hand, planned a temple that would unite all her works. She also saw herself as a medium and left her paintings unsigned. However, both of them did not just want to create a new style with abstraction. They saw their painting as the beginning of a movement for society as a whole, to which art would point the way.

The exhibition was curated by Julia Voss and Daniel Birnbaum in close collaboration with Susanne Gaensheimer, director of the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, and Agnieszka Skolimowska, curatorial assistant.

In 2020, Voss published the highly acclaimed first biography of the artist, the original German edition of which, published by S. Fischer, became a *SPIEGEL* bestseller. Daniel Birnbaum is co-editor of the multi-volume catalogue raisonné of Hilma af Klint, published by

Stolpe Verlag. He was director of the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, which presented the comprehensive retrospective *Hilma af Klint: Pioneer of Abstraction* in 2013.

The exhibition is accompanied by a publication:

Hilma af Klint und Wassily Kandinsky träumen von der Zukunft, S. Fischer Verlag, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf 2024, authors: Julia Voss and Daniel Birnbaum with a foreword by Susanne Gaensheimer, ca. 208 p., numerous illustrations, in German, price: approx. 32,-

The exhibition is sponsored by Freunde der Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, HSBC Germany, the Karin and Uwe Hollweg Foundation, and the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation.

Media partner of the exhibition:

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Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung

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