

Press Kit: Hilma af Klint and Wassily Kandinsky. Dreams of the Future

Hilma af Klint and Wassily Kandinsky
Dreams of the Future

K20, March 16 – August 11, 2024

Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf

Press conference and preview

Thursday, March 14, 2024, 10 am, K20

With:

- Susanne Gaensheimer, Director Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf
- Julia Voss, Curator of the exhibition
- Daniel Birnbaum, Curator of the exhibition

K21

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#K20afKlintKandinsky
#afKlintKandinsky
#K20

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

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.

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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.

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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.

“Hilma af Klint and Wassily Kandinsky were pioneers of abstract art, but af Klint's paintings were not shown publicly until 1989. The fact that works by these two artists are being exhibited together here for the first time is a unique opportunity. Hilma af Klint and Wassily Kandinsky were trailblazers in their time, breaking new ground in painting with their abstract works of art and creating a new style. Hilma af Klint was an unusual woman who was ahead of her time. Wassily Kandinsky was a trained lawyer who had the courage to choose painting. It is also an exhibition about visionary thinking and innovation. We are very pleased to be able to support the “Dreams of the Future” exhibition.”

Dr. Andreas Kamp, CFO HSBC Germany

“The comparative study of the works of af Klint and Kandinsky in Hilma af Klint and Wassily Kandinsky. Dreams of the Future marks a unique moment in art history. This fascinating and progressive approach offers the opportunity to experience the original works of these two outstanding artists in a way that has never before been available to the public,” enthuses Martin Hoernes, Secretary General of the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation.

Media partner of the exhibition:
 Rheinische Post

Media partner of the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen:
Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung

Supported by the Ministry of Culture and Science of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia

Audio guide to the exhibition—available exclusively and free of charge with the admission ticket!

Join Anna Schudt and Moritz Führmann on a tour of the Hilma af Klint and Wassily Kandinsky exhibition: A free audio guide takes you through the extensive exhibition and provides a deeper insight into the important works of Hilma af Klint and Wassily Kandinsky. The spoken texts were written by the curator and author Julia Voss and the curator Daniel Birnbaum.

Anna Schudt is an actress and International Emmy Award winner. From 2012 to 2022, she was part of the Dortmund Tatort team Bönisch/Faber alongside Jörg Hartmann. Moritz Führmann inspires both theater and film audiences as an actor. He has appeared in Tatort and SOKO Leipzig.

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The audio guide will be available in German, English, and plain language (D). It can be used with your own smartphone. Headphones are recommended.

Supporting Program

Opening of the Exhibition

Friday, March 15, 2024, 7.30 pm

K20

Speakers:

- Susanne Gaensheimer, Director Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf
- Ina Brandes, Minister for Culture and Science of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia
- Leopold Freiherr von Diergardt, Chairman, Freunde der Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen
- Julia Voss and Daniel Birnbaum, Curator

Sneak Peek – Preview for Young Adults with Julia Voss

Friday, March 15, 2024, 4:00 – 5.30 pm

Free admission with student ID card

Registration required

Guided Tours

Saturdays, 4:00 – 5:00 pm

Sundays and public holidays / 3:00 – 4:00 pm

Fee: 3 €, registration required

as well as during the KPMG Art Evenings / April 3, May 1, June 5, July 3, August 7

Free admission, registration on site

Themed Tours

Thursdays / 4:30 – 5:30 pm

Fee: 3 €, registration required

“The Making of...”: The Exhibition Hilma af Klint and Wassily Kandinsky

Guided tour with Agnieszka Skolimowska, Curator

Wednesday / June 5, 6:00 pm., participation free of charge as part of the KPMG Art Evening, registration on site

Gallery Talk in English

Wednesdays / April 3, June 5 / 7:00 – 8:00 pm

Free admission as part of the KPMG Art Evening, registration on site

Hilma af Klint and Wassily Kandinsky – Екскурсія виставкою українською мовою

Guided tour of the exhibition in Ukrainian

Середа / 1 травня, 5 червня / 19:00 – 20:00 год.

Вільний вхід в рамках мистецького вечора KPMG, реєстрація – в фойє музею.

Hilma af Klint et Wassily Kandinsky – Visite guidée en français

Guided tour of the exhibition in French
 Dimanche / 7 avril, 12 mai, 9 juin / 2:00 – 3:00 pm
 Prix: 3 EUR, réservation obligatoire

Guided Tour of the Exhibition in Plain Language (D)

Sunday / April 21 / 3:00 – 4:00 pm
 In cooperation with Lebenshilfe Düsseldorf e. V.

Exhibition Tour for the Deaf

Sunday / June 23 / 11:30 am – 1:00 pm
 Registration with the City Association of the Deaf Düsseldorf:
r.witgens@gl-duesseldorf.de

Guided tours for children (age 5 and older)

First visit the exhibition, then get creative yourself!
 Sundays / 3:00 – 4:00 pm
 Admission free, registration required

Discussion

Pictures for the Future

Julia Voss and Daniel Birnbaum, the curators of the exhibition, in conversation with Kolja Reichert, Chief Curator K21
 Wednesday / April 3, / 8:00 pm
 Free admission as part of the KPMG Art Evening

Scenic Reading

The 5 Lives of Hilma af Klint

In his graphic novel *The 5 Lives of Hilma af Klint*, the artist and illustrator Philipp Deines recounts the eventful life of the now world-famous Swedish artist. Julia Voss, co-curator of the exhibition, closely accompanied the creation of this graphic novel. Biography, art history, and contemporary storytelling combine and complement each other in these visual worlds inspired by the work of af Klint. Based on the book, Philipp Deines and Julia Voss will present a staged reading for adults and young people from the age of twelve. Upon request, Philipp Deines will sign his book after the performance.
 Saturday / April 20 / 3:30 pm
 Admission free, registration required

Reading and Discussion

with Julia Voss on her book *Hilma af Klint and Wassily Kandinsky Dreams of the Future*
 Friday, July 19, 6:00 pm, Auditorium K20
 The event is part of the 25th Literarischer Sommer/Littéraire Zomer 2024
 Tickets available exclusively at: www.literarischer-sommer.eu
 At 5:00 pm, a guided tour of the exhibition *Hilma af Klint and Wassily Kandinsky. Dreams of the Future* will be offered for participants

Exhibition Preview

Mike Kelley. Ghost and Spirit
March 23 – September 8, 2024

Press Conference: March 21, 2024, 11 am at K21

The work of Mike Kelley (1954–2012) is experimental, opulent, and irritating, making it widely acknowledged as one of the most influential contributions to the art world since the late 1970s. The Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen presents a comprehensive retrospective at K21, in collaboration with Tate Modern, London, the Bourse de Commerce/Pinault Collection, Paris, and Moderna Museet, Stockholm.

From spiritualist notions to heavy metal to Superman comics, Kelley draws on the images and myths of pop and subculture to pose perennial questions about man's place in the world and society. The themes of his work range from the influence of politics and education to class and gender affiliation: In the 1990s, his "handicraft" and stuffed animal works posed puzzles, and it became apparent that something sinister, threatening, and twisted lurked behind the seemingly harmless toys. One of his last major bodies of work, *Day Is Done* (2004-2005), references images of high-school performances and carnivalesque events. Kelley understood them as sites of ritualized deviations from social conventions. Art itself can be conceived as part of these spaces, providing a stage for the artist's role—a role portrayed by Kelley as that of a highly fragile figure.

Supported by the ART MENTOR FOUNDATION LUCERNE, Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts, and Hauser & Wirth.

Media partner of the exhibition
 Monopol

Visions of Tomorrow. Histories of Abstraction
from July 6, 2024

Press Conference: July 4, 2024, 11:00 am at K20

In response to the challenges and crises of the twentieth century, artists embarked on a journey to question the world and explore new horizons. Pioneering painters like Etel Adnan, Paul Klee, Henri Matisse, Alice Neel, and Andy Warhol created groundbreaking, visionary artworks. While art provided havens and spaces for reflection, it also functioned as both a mirror and an engine for social change. The K20 Collection's newly redesigned presentation weaves together the diverse histories of abstraction with contemporary issues. By exploring connections, intersections, and ruptures spanning across yesterday, today, and tomorrow, it unfolds in a loosely chronological order and intertwines thematic galleries with islands of encounters. With this reenvisioned collection presentation, the Kunst-

sammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen showcases its iconic paintings and introduces new acquisitions, dedicating itself to the polyphonic and dynamic histories history of abstract twentieth-century abstract art.

Lars Eidingen. O Man
August 31, 2024 – January 26, 2025

Press Conference: August 29, 2024, 11:00 am at K21

The artist Lars Eidingen (b. 1976 in Berlin) captures the majority of his photographs with his smartphone. His approach testifies to his strong connection to the time in which we live. Eidingen's photographs portray conditions and situations that are often inconspicuous and go unnoticed in everyday life. By placing them at the center of the image, Eidingen invites the viewer to explore themes such as urban life, nature tamed by man, and the vulnerable body, as well as poverty, despair, madness, and loneliness. The exhibition, conceived in close collaboration with Eidingen, presents a selection of new photographic and video works.

The exhibitions on the Bel Etage are sponsored by the Foundation for Art, Culture, and Social Projects of Sparda-Bank West.

Media partner of the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen:
Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung

Supported by the Ministry of Culture and Science of the State of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia

Annex

Biographies

Hilma af Klint

1862

Born on October 26 in the barracks at Karlberg Palace in Solna near Stockholm. Her father is a naval admiral and head of the cadet school there; her grandfather was a famous cartographer and naval officer.

1880–1881

Attends preparatory painting courses at Kerstin Cardon's art school and at the Technical University in Stockholm. Her ten-year-old sister Hermina dies. Becomes friends with Anna Cassel.

1882–1888

Studies at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm and receives a prize at graduation for her painting *Andromeda*.

1896

Joins the "Edelweiss Society." Founds the spiritual group "The Five" together with Anna Cassel and three other friends. The meetings are recorded in minutes and automatic drawings. Makes a name for herself as a landscape and portrait painter and regularly participates in exhibitions.

1900–1904

Works as a draughtswoman at the Veterinary Institute in Stockholm, together with Anna Cassel. They travel together to Italy. Both join the Theosophical Society.

1906–1908

Begins work on the cycle *Paintings for the Temple* in November with the *Primordial Chaos* series. Other series are created, including *The Ten Largest*. The group of "Five" dissolves, and a group of thirteen women is formed. Her mother Mathilda goes blind. Af Klint gives up her studio.

1908

Attends Rudolf Steiner's lectures in Stockholm and asks him in a letter to look at her paintings. Presumably shows her paintings to Steiner in Stockholm in early 1910.

1912–1915

Resumes work on the cycle *Paintings for the Temple*, which, by 1915, comprises a total of 193 paintings. Purchases the lake house “Furuheim” on the island of Munsö. Exhibits spiritual paintings together with Anna Cassel at the International Congress of Theosophists in Stockholm in June 1913.

1914

Exhibits together with the “Föreningen Svenska Konstnärinnor” (Association of Swedish Women Artists). An academic painting entitled *Hard Work* is shown at the Baltic Exhibition in Malmö, presumably without a visit from her there.

1916

Lives a few blocks away from Galerie Gummesson, where Kandinsky’s exhibition takes place; no entries in her records from that year, but the intense press coverage makes it likely that she knew about the exhibition.
 Kandinsky’s name is not mentioned in her notebook until 1927. Works on the *Parsifal* series in the fall.

1917–1920

The *Atom* series is created. Finishes building the studio house on Munsö. Moves to the island with her mother and Thomasine Anderson. Af Klint’s mother dies in 1920. In October, she travels with Anderson to Dornach and joins the Anthroposophical Society. Eight more trips to Dornach until 1930.

1922–1926

From now on paints almost exclusively using the wet-on-wet technique. Moves to Uppsala together with Thomasine Anderson.

1927/28

Travels to Amsterdam and London. Exhibits works from the cycle *Paintings for the Temple* at the World Conference of Spiritual Science (organized by the English Anthroposophical Society) in London in July 1928. Together with Anna Cassel, af Klint transcribes her early notebooks and destroys the originals.

1931–1934

Designs a spiral temple building for the island of Ven. Marks almost all notebooks with the string “+x” and decrees that all works with this string may not be exhibited again until 20 years after her death. Moves to Helsingborg in southern Sweden, then to Lund in 1934.

1937–1943

Gives a lecture on her art to the Anthroposophical Society in Stockholm in April 1937. Anna Cassel dies in 1937, and af Klint gives guided tours of her studio in Munsö. Thomasine Anderson dies in 1940.

1944

Af Klint dies on October 21 after a streetcar accident in Djursholm near Stockholm. Bequeaths more than 1,000 paintings and well over 100 notebooks to her nephew Erik af Klint.

1970–1988

Paintings by af Klint that her nephew offered to the National Museum and the Moderna Museet in Stockholm for exhibitions in 1970/71, were rejected on the grounds that the paintings “resembled Kandinsky’s.” Works by af Klint are shown for the first time in the group exhibition *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890–1985* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. First solo exhibition in 1988 in Suomenlinna/Sveaborg near Helsinki, Finland.

Wassily Kandinsky**1866**

Born in Moscow on December 4, the son of Wassily Kandinsky, a tea merchant, and Lidia Ivanovna Ticheeva. He learns German at an early age from his Baltic grandmother.

1876–1885

Grows up in Odessa and attends the humanistic secondary school. Spends his summers in Moscow from 1879.

1885–1892

Moves to Moscow and begins to study law and economics. Marries his cousin Anja Schemjakina and lives with her until 1904.

1895–1901

Decides to give up his academic career and moves with his wife to Munich, where he attends Anton Ažbe’s private painting school. Studies at the academy under Franz von Stuck. Founding of the artist group “Phalanx.”

1902–1907

Decides to give up his academic career and moves with his wife to Munich, where he attends Anton Ažbe’s private painting school. Studies at the academy under Franz von Stuck. Founding of the artist group “Phalanx.”

1908

Returns to Munich. Rents an apartment on Ainmillerstrasse in Schwabing, a popular meeting place for artists. Excursions to the countryside around Munich together with Gabriele Münter.

1908

Attends Rudolf Steiner's lectures in Munich. He will refer to Steiner in his book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*.

1909–1913

Gabriele Münter buys a house in Murnau, where the couple lives. The "New Munich Artists' Association" is founded, with Kandinsky as chairman. The association is dissolved in 1911. First exhibition of the *Blauer Reiter* editorial team at Galerie Thannhauser in Munich. His book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* and the first edition of the almanac *Der Blaue Reiter* are published by Piper Verlag. One of his works is sold in the United States at the Armory Show.

1914

Participates in the *Baltic Exhibition*, but does not travel there. Expelled from Germany after the outbreak of the First World War. Flees to Switzerland together with Gabriele Münter. Returns to Moscow at the end of the year.

1916

Travels to Stockholm shortly before the end of 1915. The exhibition at Galerie Gummesson in February causes a great stir in the press; opinions are divided. Dedicates the text *Om konstnären* (On the Artist) to Gabriele Münter. The relationship ends. Returns to Russia and meets his future wife Nina in Moscow.

1917–1921

Expropriated during the revolution in Russia. Marries Nina and lives with her in Moscow. Takes on various leading roles in the newly founded art institutions of post-revolutionary Russia. Their son dies in June 1920 at the age of two. Invited to the Bauhaus in Weimar and returns to Germany.

1922–1925

Teaches at the Bauhaus in Weimar until the school moves to Dessau in 1925. Founds the artists' association "The Blue Four."

1926–1932

Teaches at the Bauhaus in Dessau until the school is closed by the Nazis in 1932. In 1926, the art theoretical publication *Point and Line to Plane* is published. Large solo exhibition with 53 paintings and as many watercolors in Braunschweig. Participates in the first survey exhibition *Wege und Richtungen der abstrakten Kunst* (Paths and Directions of Abstract Art) in Mannheim. The monograph by Will Grohmann is published. Becomes a German citizen in 1928. First solo exhibition in Paris.

1933/34

Moves to France. Declines Josef Albers's invitation to teach at the Black Mountain College in the United States. Lives with Nina in Neuilly-sur-Seine, a suburb of Paris. Solo exhibition at Galerie Cahiers d'Art in Paris.

1936–1938

His paintings are shown in ground-breaking exhibitions of abstract art in New York—in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection and at The Museum of Modern Art. In Germany, his works are confiscated from museums and shown in the propaganda *exhibition Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art). Becomes a French citizen.

1944

His works are shown in the group exhibition *Konkrete Kunst* (Concrete Art) at the Kunsthalle Basel. Kandinsky dies in Neuilly-sur-Seine on December 13.

1948–1959

Works by Kandinsky included in the 24th Venice Biennale. 1949 Major exhibition of the "Blauer Reiter" in Munich. 1957 Gabriele Münter donates significant parts of her collection of Kandinsky's works to the Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus in Munich. His paintings are represented at the first two documenta exhibitions in 1955 and 1959, including *Composition IV*, *Composition X*, and *Transverse Line*. These works are now part of the collection of the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen.

Wall Texts

Introduction

Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) and Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) are today considered important pioneers of abstraction. Despite this common ground, their works have only occasionally been shown together in large group exhibitions. With some 120 oil paintings, watercolors, gouaches, and drawings, this exhibition offers the first opportunity to view the work of these two artists together. The point of departure is abstraction, to whose development in Western painting both made decisive contributions.

The exhibition focuses on similarities as well as differences. Af Klint and Kandinsky lived at almost the same time and were trained at art academies before turning to abstract painting. Both were forty-five years old when they created their early abstract masterpieces, independently of each other, and both wanted to do much more than invent a new style of painting. They saw their painting as the beginning of a widespread social movement, to which art was to lead the way.

For the longest time, the reception of their respective works was very different. Wassily Kandinsky was already successful in his own lifetime. His paintings and writings have influenced generations of artists. In contrast, Hilma af Klint's posthumous fame came with a long delay. The turning point for her only came in the twenty-first century. Her retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2018 broke all records. The museum has never had so many visitors as for this exhibition. The outsider became a star. She is an important inspiration for many artists—just like Kandinsky. This makes it a good time for a juxtaposition of their works.

Abstraction

Unbeknownst to each other, Hilma af Klint and Wassily Kandinsky both began to paint abstractly. Af Klint created her first nonrepresentational series in 1906/7, while Kandinsky painted his first abstractions in 1910/11. Both broke with the figurative art in which they had been trained. They saw their non-objective painting as a forward-looking development. This is particularly evident in the works in this room: In 1911, Kandinsky was convinced that the time was not yet ripe for “purely abstract forms.” Thus, *Composition IV* contains echoes of a landscape, as well as the outlines of horses or lances. The painter also called it *The Battle*.

Af Klint developed her abstractions in extensive series of paintings created between 1906 and 1915. The term “abstraction” does not appear in her extensive notes. All of her series together form the cycle *Paintings for the Temple*. In the series *The Swan*, the representational forms dissolve from painting to painting. The opposites of black and white come together in a circle.

The contemplation of the paintings was intended to inspire new thoughts and emotions. Hilma af Klint and Wassily Kandinsky dreamed that their innovative painting could transfigure humanity.

The Spiritual

For Kandinsky and af Klint, “spirit” and “spiritual” were key concepts. In 1911, the painter wrote his famous text *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Hilma af Klint often used these terms in her notebooks. Both artists understood “spirit” as a principle of movement that could change and transform anything material. In their view, the natural sciences had proven this ability to change. Physicists like Marie and Pierre Curie had shown that atoms could be split. The Curies also proved that elements decay through radioactivity. Invisible forces could therefore bring about great changes. Af Klint and Kandinsky were also inspired by new ideological movements such as Theosophy and Anthroposophy. The political divisions, crises, and wars that characterized the early twentieth century reinforced the artists’ views. A new spirit was needed. Non-objective painting was one expression of this.

Tempel and Museum

Kandinsky was an important representative of the European avant-garde. He worked with museums, commercial galleries, and artist-run associations. He was a teacher at the most influential experimental art school of the time—the Bauhaus. By the early decades of the twentieth century, he was a household name in Munich, Berlin, Moscow, Paris, and New York. He was hailed as a pioneer. His paintings found their way into the most important museums of the Western world, securing his legacy once and for all.

Hilma af Klint never participated in the world of avant-garde movements and manifestos. Instead, she created her own creative cosmos, inhabited primarily by women. She invented new ways of sharing her art, including a kind of miniature museum. In ten blue-bound albums, she presented reproductions of her most important cycle, *The Paintings for the Temple*. They allowed her to show the works to viewers in other countries.

Af Klint exhibited her spiritual works in non-commercial spaces in Stockholm and London. She dreamed of a spiral building constructed to house her most important body of work. Sometimes she referred to her temple as a church for a new era, sometimes as a museum. The temple remained unrealized. In the early 1930s, the painter finally decreed that her works would not be accessible until twenty years after her death.

Teamwork

Both Kandinsky and af Klint worked in collectives. In Kandinsky’s case, the groups in question belonged to the European avant-garde. With Franz Marc, he edited the almanac *Der Blaue Reiter*, published in 1912. Together they organized exhibitions of the group *Der Blaue Reiter* in Munich and in other German cities. Gabriele Münter played an active role in many of these projects. A decade later, when Kandinsky joined the faculty of the Bauhaus

in Weimar, he found a new environment in which to pursue his interests in dialogue with colleagues such as Paul Klee.

At the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm, af Klint became friends with Anna Cassel, one of the four women with whom she founded “De Fem” (The Five) in 1896. Active for more than ten years, the group recorded messages from higher spirits. In trance-like states, they believed they were in dialogue with mystical beings with names such as Amaliel, Ananda, and Gregor. Af Klint occasionally asked other members to participate in the production of her paintings. A group of thirteen women was formed in 1907. Some of the members, including af Klint, were romantically involved. Around 1919, a woman named Thomasine Anderson became her partner and collaborator. The creative impulse, af Klint would insist, came from a collective realm inhabited by a plurality of spirits.

The Ten Largest

The series titled *The Ten Largest* lives up to its name: These are the largest works Hilma af Klint ever painted. She created them in 1907 in a studio in the center of Stockholm. She developed her own technique to cope with the size. She covered the canvases with paper and painted with tempera.

Unlike Kandinsky, af Klint did not sign her works. She was convinced that higher forces were involved in the creation of her paintings. In her notebooks, she mentions her friend Cornelia Cederberg, who helped with the execution of *The Ten Largest* according to the artist’s instructions.

Af Klint also called the series *Evolution Pictures*. The works are assigned to the stages of life: childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age. Everything is in motion here. The paintings show forms that could be microscopically small or astronomically large. Opposites dissolve. Mixed colors, connections, and tangencies permeate the pictorial spaces. Working on the paintings required both mental and physical strength. “What I needed was courage, and I was promised courage,” af Klint wrote in her notebook.

St. George

The story of the knight who slayed the dragon is a Christian legend. According to tradition, George was asked to help free a town from the siege of a monster. All the sheep had already been fed to it. Next, the king’s daughter was to be sacrificed. George prayed to God and received the strength to defeat the dragon.

Saint George appears repeatedly in the works of both Kandinsky and af Klint. Kandinsky put him on the cover of the almanac *Der Blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider almanac) in 1912 and painted him frequently. In 1915, af Klint created the series *The Dove*, which includes paintings depicting the saint. In her notebooks, she repeatedly referred to herself as “Saint George.” The painter was familiar with the famous medieval sculpture of the saint in Stockholm Cathedral. Kandinsky was inspired by popular depictions in Upper Bavaria—such as those found on reverse glass paintings.

For both artists, the dragon slayer embodied many things at once. He was a pioneer of a new art. A fighter against academicism and materialism. Alter ego, a good luck charm, and patron saint. His strength came from his faith, and his spirit conquered matter. This made him a role model for spiritual painting.