

Hilma af Klint & Piet Mondrian: Forms of Life



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The Beauty of Everyday Life

Gagnef Parish Dress – Formal Silk Bonnet 1890
Silk
37 × 19 × 18
Stiftelsen Gagnefs Minnesstuga



Throughout Hilma af Klint's youth, Sweden was in the throes of an intense, late industrialisation. Deprivation was widespread and by 1900 many of the artist's friends had become interested in a life reform movement led by progressive feminist and educator Ellen Key. Key's vision of a healthier and more ethical society merged elements of Sweden's rural past with progressive social ideas and industrial production methods. It was informed by English arts and crafts, but Key saw industrialisation as an essential component of her democratising ideas. In her essay 'Beauty in the Home',¹ she explored how readers could find their own 'everyday beauty' in the colours of a Gustavian past but with contemporary products which reflected the simple utility and design of rural crafts.² These thoughts would merge into her campaigns for educational and political equality and can still be traced in Sweden today.

In the 1890s, Hilma af Klint shared a Stockholm studio with one of Key's followers, the children's illustrator Otilia Adelborg.³ The two women remained friends and Adelborg records in her diary that, shortly after she moved from Stockholm to the rural village of Gagnef in Dalarna, af Klint went to visit:

February 7 1904. Hilma Klint left. She brought a lot of good companionship. We managed to work together very well. She talked a lot about Theosophy and Spiritualism, and some parts of that I do like, but I don't believe in the voices.⁴

This practical reformist would never embrace Theosophy, but the women shared a love of art and nature and both had sisters working for women's suffrage. They were also both engrossed in new projects: Adelborg was building a lace school in Gagnef and, within two months of her visit, in April 1904, af Klint's inner voices were telling her to create 'astral paintings'.⁵

She had not yet envisaged these, but her artistic metamorphosis had begun and Dalarna would play a seminal role, especially in the creation of *The Ten Largest*.

Gagnef was a community run by women. Traditional subsistence farming was becoming less viable and many men had to find paid employment elsewhere. Women worked the land and managed their society. Adelborg's lace school helped create cash income and preserved textile traditions that she also archived in an expanding collection of *Gagnefsdräkten*, the traditional local costume. These hand-made clothes were decorated with socially coded patterns that were often abstracted from the surrounding landscape.

This embroidered tangerine bonnet was part of the formal, or festive, dress of young women (left). If we compare it with the colours and freely spiralling tendrils of af Klint's *The Ten Largest, No. 3, Youth 1907*, the petals and fronds of the cap seem to deconstruct before our eyes to float across the tangerine dreamscape of the painting. Af Klint may not have fully realised where her work came from, but in a painting with 'Youth' in its title, she is clearly channelling the party caps collected by her friend.⁶

Other paintings quote head garlands (*No. 1*), hand-warmer patterns (*No. 6*), yellow birch leaf dye and the red lines embroidered on linens (*No. 7*) and, in *No. 10*, the self-coloured stitching of cream leatherwork (see p.115, top left). Adelborg also collected the birch bark templates used in patchwork and, when loosely strewn on a table, their decontextualised antlers, rising suns and tree fronds almost preview the way af Klint eases the cap design into abstraction.

In *The Ten Largest, No. 4, Youth 1907*, a flower shape on the lower right suggests a *kurbits*, the imaginary flowering gourd that was synonymous with Dalarna folk art (p.150). The *kurbits* represented fertility and often towered over religious scenes in composite paintings