

## Between the Physical & Psychical: Esoteric Representations of Nature in the Work of Hilma af Klint

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Swedish artist Hilma af Klint (1862-1944) lived both near to and at a distance from the material world. In the early stages of her artistic development she produced portraits, landscapes, and botanical works. Although these works of precise naturalism executed in watercolor, ink and graphite on paper, and oil paint represent concrete forms, it is clear in her early works that she also already expressed an interest in the evolution of the physical world. When she began producing automatic drawings with her séance group The Five (De Fem), her work became for her truly transcendent. The medium itself suggests a weightlessness, an extremely delicate aesthetic both of and too perfect for this world. She communed with the spirits and developed graphite automatic drawings of mimetic abstraction – drawings that were grounded in her physical and psychical visual experiences. The states she represented convey an acute awareness and dependence on the relationship between phenomenology and naturalism. In other words, the religious and esoteric practices af Klint explored, in addition to her artistic styles suggest an interest in how everything in the universe affects and resonates with everything else, the inherent relationship between the material and immaterial.<sup>1</sup> Af Klint's mature paintings, often described

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<sup>1</sup> Af Klint's investigation of these realms was developed through myriad systems and symbols that speak to her experience(s) in the world. Symbolism is an old form of visual expressions that communicates thoughts and emotions about the world. Like af Klint, others in history such as Italian cosmological theorist Giordano Bruno have charted an understanding of the universe through a series of archetypal images, signs, and ideas. For Bruno, the function of images and signs demonstrates that the act of seeing and receiving of images is of great importance, if not more important, than the language of philosophy. Bruno was interested in the duality of nature and the divine. He argues that we understand "by composition, combination, plurality of terms, by means of discourse and reflection" and not by any "simplicity." This is an incredibly modern statement that proceeds well-known twentieth century philosophers such as Ernst Cassirer and Susanne Langer, who both argued the importance of the art symbol. They believed that the prime symbol of art could only be understood independently from discourse. Giordano Bruno, *On the Composition of Images, Signs & Ideas* (New York: Willis, Locker & Owens, 1991), 29. For further reading on art and symbol see Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University

as *abstract*, later in life, in addition to the *Tree of Knowledge* series and her Flowers, Mosses and Lichens notebook demonstrate this emphasis on relationships. In particular, they juxtapose the physical and metaphysical – favoring a partial representation or what abstract art scholar Raphael Rosenberg would describe as *animatic* rather than *abstract*, a term defined as beyond mimesis, “that is to say not committed to the imitation of nature.”<sup>2</sup>

Recently, the social, spiritual, and theoretical have been brought together in new syntheses over the years. These scholarly approaches often focus on af Klint’s relation to the fixed meaning of abstraction within the standard narrative of European modernism rather than a deep exploration of her interest in the scientific and esoteric. Whatever their strengths, they thus negate the overall complexity of her work and development as an artist.<sup>3</sup> This paper will address af Klint’s plant research through the lens of the scientific and esoteric. Specifically, it will explore the multivalent elements present in af Klint’s *Tree of Knowledge* series and her Flowers, Mosses, and Lichens notebook. I argue that af Klint’s diagrammatic images provide us with an alternative understanding of nature, the totality of the existence of matter in biological and cosmological form.<sup>4</sup> Her analytical method allows the image to act as a didactic and possible model of expression that engages with nature and the world in new ways. Thus, af Klint’s non-

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Press, 1980); and Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art developed from Philosophy in a New Key* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953).

<sup>2</sup> Karin Althaus, “World Receivers: Georgiana Houghton, Hilma af Klint, Emma Kunz,” in *World Receivers*, eds. Karin Althaus, Matthias Mühling, Sebastian Schneider (Munich: Lenbachhaus, 2018), 23.

<sup>3</sup> More recently, scholars have addressed af Klint’s botanical works. However, these works do not receive as much attention as her spiritual works. Scholar and Hilma af Klint biographer Julia Voss explicitly addresses af Klint’s interest in science in her essay “Hilma af Klint and the Evolution of Art,” in *Hilma af Klint: Painting the Unseen* (London: Koenig Books, 2016), 24-28. Voss has approached af Klint’s works from a perspective outside of the abstraction debate. She addresses the evolution from af Klint’s academic works to her “partly abstract” works produced beginning in 1906. Voss cites nineteenth and twentieth century naturalists and philosophers and aims to acknowledge the influence that biology and science had on af Klint’s artistic practice. The influence of science is just as important as the role spirituality played in the development of af Klint’s works.

<sup>4</sup> The word *nature* carries a loaded value here. Within the context of this paper, *nature* is indicative of myriad energies from a multitude of biological and cosmological matter oscillating between macro and micro, outer to inner. This includes that which is not visible, and can only be experienced through the reciprocity and perception of *nature*.

representational approach to documenting her engagement and unity with the natural world suggests the need for a deeper understanding of how spirituality and science interacted with one another during the first two decades of the twentieth century, and why even a vague understanding of her relationship to science, spirituality, and visual art might help us think more critically about her work.<sup>5</sup>

Af Klint no doubt believed in the entrancing power of nature, its theological dimension and the capacity to understand it through a sacred and scientific lens. She was born at Karlberg Palace, Stockholm, Sweden to Swedish naval commander Captain Victor af Klint and Mathilda af Klint on October 26, 1862 during a time in history when non-representational art, esoteric spiritual theory, and new religious movements were gaining momentum. Art and culture during the turn of the century in Europe was shaped by new scientific discoveries, mystery schools of thought, and prevalent spiritual and occult themes in avant-garde art. Science was proving the efficacy of intuitive observations about the world and religious syncretism was influencing modern culture.

In 1880, af Klint attended The Technical School recognized today as the University College of Arts, Crafts and Design in Stockholm where she began to study portrait painting.

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<sup>5</sup> In 1874, the French educator and founder of Spiritism, Allan Kardec aptly states: "Spiritism, having taken the proportions of a science requires a scientific language." See Allan Kardec, *Book of Mediums Or, Guide for Mediums and Invocators* (San Francisco: Weiser, 1970), 200. Only a couple of decades after this text was first published, mystic philosophers, scientists, and visual artists alike focused their attention on the unseen liminal space between physical, astral, and mental planes. See also philosopher Henri Bergson attempt to redefine the relations between science and metaphysics and intelligence and intuition in the early twentieth century. Bergson insisted on the importance of increasing thought's possibility through the employment of intuition, which acknowledged the absolute and real [of life]. He posits further that science is understood in terms of intellect insofar as it has the capacity to deliver the physical operation of an object from all outside views. However, it is intuition that enables the viewer to penetrate the object and "grasp what it is that intelligence fails to give us, and indicate the means of supplementing it." Bergson's interest in immediate experience and intuition in tandem with his understanding of the necessity of utilizing the mechanism of intelligence [science] speaks volumes to the important role of the scientific imagination during the turn of the century. For further reading, see Henri Bergson, *The Creative Evolution* (New York: Camelot Press, 1911), 171-3, 194-6.

Between the years 1882-1887, she attended the Royal Academy of Fine Arts and was awarded a studio in the Atelier Building where she worked professionally as a portraitist and landscape painter. Not long before attending the Royal Academy, she had joined the Spiritist movement in 1879 at the age of seventeen, and was a member of the Spiritist Literature Association. The Spiritist movement helped af Klint to have contact with and assist the soul of her sister Hermina who died in 1880. However, af Klint left the Spiritist movement in 1882 and by 1889 joined the Theosophical Society, an anti-authoritarian women's liberation theology, where she continued to seriously engage freely with the spirit world and studied other tenets of Western esotericism.

She became a member of the Theosophical Society the first year the Society in Scandinavia started in Sweden. Not long before she joined, she had begun to produce rough sketches that include some of the same motifs seen in the *Tree of Knowledge*, such as the chalice, flora, crucifix, and geometric shapes. She also experimented with mediumistic writing at this time. Among other visual representations of Christian and esoteric iconography, these images would become common motifs throughout the years spent with her séance group The Five, in addition to the iconography present in her later large-scale paintings.

The Five was founded in 1896 by af Klint and four other women.<sup>6</sup> They met regularly to commune with spirits, from which 100s of automatic drawings and writings were produced.<sup>7</sup> Their meetings started with a prayer, a meditation, a sermon, and finally an analysis of one text in the New Testament followed by the séance. Af Klint's role was as a medium and her contact with the spirits they called "The High Ones."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The group included Anna Cassel, Cornelia Cederberg, Sigrid Hedman, and Mathilde Nilsson.

<sup>7</sup> Automatic drawing is a process of drawing in which the hand is guided without conscious effort.

<sup>8</sup> It is important to note here that there were two kinds of spirits. The High Ones had no names and were directing their views down to the ordinary spirits on the astral level in order for the latter to relay these messages to the human beings on the physical level. The ordinary spirits names were: Ananda, Amaliel, and Georg, to name a few most important.

Af Klint's involvement with The Five in tandem with her professional work demonstrates only part of her complexity as an artist and esotericist. Between the years 1900 through the early 1930s, she would begin her well-known series the *Paintings for the Temple* (1906-1915), meet the prolific Austrian spiritual leader and founder of the Anthroposophical Society Rudolf Steiner for the first time in Stockholm in 1908, join his Anthroposophical Society in 1920,<sup>9</sup> publicly exhibit conventional works at the *Baltic Art Exhibition* of 1914, and rigorously tease out and work between scientific themes and spirituality in her visual art.

Unlike today, science and the occult were not necessarily distinguished separately in the early twentieth century. The coexistence of seemingly disparate beliefs of the day demonstrate the period's willingness to create the space necessary to articulate and theorize the union between scientific thinking, esotericism, and visual arts. Even though af Klint was not under full spiritual guidance during the production of the *Tree of Knowledge* series or her Flowers, Mosses, and Lichens notebook, these works systematically visualize the access she had to higher knowledge and the spiritual lives of plants via the etheric plane, the plane, according to Theosophists, that exists just above the physical. In developing these works, af Klint sought to not only penetrate and understand the natural world, but also develop a diagrammatic language that alludes to her interest in the didactic nature of this material. As such, it's important that art history see beyond form, recognize the challenges present in canonical parameters, and reassess relationships to language and the realm of the spiritual.

Although in reference to Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel, art historian Keith Moxey states in his text *Visual Time: The Image in History*: "The image is, at one and the same time, the location where material and spiritual worlds collide."<sup>10</sup> I would like you to keep this in mind throughout

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<sup>9</sup> Af Klint left the Anthroposophical Society in 1930 and never returned to Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland.

<sup>10</sup> Keith Moxley, "Bruegel's Crows," in *Visual Time: The Image in History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 91.

this talk as we think together on af Klint’s work that addresses both her solidarity with the planet and her interest in the emotional lives of plants. I rather enjoy thinking these works exist in-between the body and the earth, a space cultural ecologist David Abrams describes as the location where the mind arises and dwells.<sup>11</sup> In this way, perhaps we can practice the Victorian philosophy of *honest doubt*, a rejection of institutional religion and scientific naturalism in order to make meaningful connections between science, spirit, and imagination.

The visual form of the diagram and its emblematic production of image, sign, word, and symbol is rich with potent allure. This is something af Klint perhaps understood from a young age born into a family of naval officers and cartographers, in addition to her training in mathematics and natural sciences. Cartography, for instance, is one visual modality combining both science and aesthetics that organizes spatial information for effective navigation. Over time, and as seen in her *Tree of Knowledge* series and *Flowers, Mosses and Lichens* notebook, af Klint’s need for systematization becomes explicit and demonstrates her discursive form of visualization that explores human existence with the intent to convey spiritual truths about the world. This is depicted through a personalized color theory and visual vocabulary inspired by the esoteric tenants of Spiritualism, Rosicrucianism, Theosophy and Anthroposophy, as well as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Theory of Colours* (1810). Although in 1913 af Klint focused her attention on Steiner’s Anthroposophy and its doctrine of spiritual science, earlier scientific and esoteric influences intersect within the *Tree of Knowledge* series.

She was first introduced to Steiner’s Theosophical writings in 1889 before he founded the Anthroposophical Society in 1913. As previously mentioned in this paper, 1889 was the year af Klint joined the Theosophical Society. At this time in history, scientists and mathematicians such

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<sup>11</sup> David Abram, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 111.

as the astrophysicist J.C.F. Zöllner and British science fiction writer and mathematician Charles Howard Hinton were theorizing on the concept of fourth dimensional space, a topic that would influence Theosophists Charles Leadbeater and Steiner, among others.

Art historian Linda Dalrymple Henderson describes Hinton's understanding of the spatial fourth dimension in her essay "Hilma af Klint and the Invisible in Her Occult and Scientific Context."<sup>12</sup> An authority who popularized the concept of the fourth dimension, Hinton attempted to expand upon Kant's 'space sense' concept, stating it "could be educated and enlarged to perceive a fourth spatial dimension through focused study of the spatial arrangement of forms – in this case a complex system of multicoloured cubes representing sections of the four-dimensional hypercube or tesseract."<sup>13</sup> Henderson believes Hinton's pragmatic approach to "enlarging consciousness" was appreciated by Steiner and notes his introduction to Hinton whilst giving lectures in Europe as early as 1905.<sup>14</sup>

Af Klint attended a Steiner lecture in Stockholm in 1908, the same year she met Steiner for the first time. In 1912, she would hear Steiner lecture again. It is likely possible her attendance at these lectures, in addition to the material circulating at the time indicate her knowledge of the fourth dimension and the preparation for access to higher planes, such as the astral. Steiner used the concept of the fourth dimension to discuss the locale of the astral plane, a concept that grew out of n-dimensionality, a theory that space was relative instead of absolute. Thus, space could be experienced personally and suggested the possibility of a higher reality. This intermingling and borrowing from science, mathematics, and esoteric philosophy reveals itself in af Klint's *Tree of Knowledge* series.

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<sup>12</sup> Linda Dalrymple Henderson, "Hilma af Klint and the Invisible in Her Occult and Scientific Context," in *Hilma af Klint: Visionary*, eds. Kurt Almqvist and Louise Belfrage (Stockholm: Narayana Press, 2019). 77.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 79.

For Theosophists such as Leadbeater, astral vision exists above etheric vision.<sup>15</sup> It is important to note here the appropriation of scientific terminology. In *The Chakras* (1927), Leadbeater states that the etheric should not be confused with the aether, “which some consider to be the medium for electro-magnetic waves.”<sup>16</sup> Although it is not documented that af Klint owned this particular text by Leadbeater, especially since it was published after the time period the *Tree of Knowledge* was produced, Leadbeater’s understanding of the chakras draws on Eastern thought, where he cites both ancient Hindu texts to the esoteric philosophy of H.P. Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine*, a text af Klint had copies of in her personal library. Therefore, it can be contended that despite the year of *The Chakras* publication, af Klint would have come into contact with these ideas in earlier works Leadbeater cited in his text.

The *Tree of Knowledge* series demonstrates af Klint’s living communion with both spiritual and natural worlds, and her adherence to successive higher planes: ether, astral, and mental. Building on a familiar archetypal form of esoteric ideas, the tree of good and evil, af Klint’s *Tree of Knowledge* series unites both science and occultism, practice and theory, male and female, and the interconnection of various planes. Historically, the tree of life or tree of knowledge plays a crucial role in the imagery of the Old Testament and Judeo-Christianity. Since the time of Pythagoras, the tree of knowledge has been adapted and appropriated in order to visualize meaning in both spatial and allegorical contexts.<sup>17</sup> Af Klint juxtaposes both metaphor with diagram and science with occultism, which would have been fundamental elements during

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<sup>15</sup> It is important to note prominent Theosophist Annie Besant defined the astral world as a definite “region of the universe, surrounding and interpenetrating the physical, but imperceptible to our ordinary observation because it is composed of a different order of matter.” Everything in the universe from the subdivisions of physical matter to higher worlds coexist and maintain a link. Annie Besant, *Man and His Bodies* (India: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1896), 38.

<sup>16</sup> C.W. Leadbeater, *The Chakras* (Illinois: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1927), 3.

<sup>17</sup> Johanna Drucker, *Graphesis: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 97.

this time in history. Much like seventeenth-century Christian mystic and German philosopher Jakob Böhme who clothed his mystical perception of spiritual worlds in alchemical terms, af Klint also employs the combinatoric, didactic, and hybrid system of the diagram, a schematic visual form that was essential to the intellectual inquiry in early modern scientific disciplines.

Early modern European mystics like Böhme and Johann Georg Gichtel, both whom belonged to the spiritual and cultural movement of the Rosicrucian Order, shared a familiarity and interest in inner illumination through clairvoyance and the chakras, a term in Sanskrit signifying a wheel. Af Klint's spiritual diagrams perhaps suggest her understanding of the chakras, points of connection in which energy flows from one body to another.<sup>18</sup> This is where we begin to see clearly a spiritual knowledge that can best be described with a passage written by French philosopher of phenomenology Maurice Merleau-Ponty: "It [the body] breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system."<sup>19</sup> Af Klint's *Tree of Knowledge* is a system designed to visualize her version of the manifestation of both an inner journey and her interest in promoting unity.

Beginning with an inclusion of some of her signature symbols and colors, such as the tree of life, birds, heart, spirals, and the chalice known in Christian symbology as the grail signifying our higher self, af Klint charts the evolution of humankind from earthly to higher spheres. Through her particular color theory, yellow symbolizing the energy of the male and blue the female, af Klint's biological language depicted in the first drawing of the series shows these colors in an upward motion circling around two birds, one black and one white (fig. 1).<sup>20</sup> The

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<sup>18</sup>The belief held that human life simultaneously exists in two parallel dimensions, one "physical body" (*sthula sarira*) and other "psychological, emotional, mind, non-physical" it is called the "subtle body."

<sup>19</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1962), 203.

<sup>20</sup>Af Klint was also painting *The Dove* series in 1915, fourteen oil paintings make up this series that draws upon Christian symbols for peace and unity, the allegory of Saint George and the Dragon, and the signs of the zodiac.

streams of intertwining colors branching out from the heart at the center of what might be understood as the base chakra or four petals of the lotus flower draw to mind Leadbeater and Theosophist and women's rights activist Annie Besant's representation of the male and female hearts in their text *Occult Chemistry* (1908). This text like the syncretic nature of af Klint's visual art includes the relationship between spirituality and materialist sciences of the day, such as chemistry and physics, and furthermore incorporates the spiral and heart motifs that appeared in the early automatic drawings of The Five.

In relation to the chakras, the heart could be understood as the vitality globule or the ultimate physical atom, where atom refers not to a chemical but what Leadbeater defines as "the basic type of matter in the highest sub-plane of each plane of nature."<sup>21</sup> The force from the atom of the heart pushes the energy upward in a two passage system indicative of the upward flow and traditional two way passage of the kundalinī, the energy at the base of the spine. This energy in Indian texts is often referred to as "she", where kundalinī in some forms of yoga is centered in the "chamber in the heart."<sup>22</sup> Leadbeater argues further that "if we imagine ourselves to be looking down into the bell of a flower of the convolvulus type, we shall get the idea of the general appearance of the chakra. The stalk of the flower in each springs from a point in the spine."<sup>23</sup> Again, this book was published by the Theosophical Society years after the *Tree of Knowledge* was produced. However, knowledge of the etheric body was widely dispersed throughout Theosophical texts of the day and can be contended that af Klint would have likely been familiar with these concepts from her engagement with the work of Blavatsky and perhaps other publications on the subject, such as Besant's *A Study of Consciousness* (1900).

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<sup>21</sup> Leadbeater, *The Chakras*, 35.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

As the birds ascend, they draw closer and become a mirror image as their positions shift from right to left and left to right until they merge completely. After the silence of their echo, the figures coalesce into a unified whole represented by a single, much smaller, white dove, the color of Klint used as a symbol of purity. Her interest in the spiral is thus signified here both literally and metaphorically as seen in the curvature circling of lines whilst it's possible to also imagine the motion of the birds as they become one. The continued intertwining and union of representational and nonmimetic forms, physical and psychological worlds, emerge at the top of the tree with a chalice or higher self that emits twelve rays that extend both in upward and downward directions. Considering of Klint's interest in overcoming duality, the rays may symbolize the twelve signs of the zodiac, known to be divided into a light and dark two-part system.

As the *Tree of Knowledge* progresses in both its form and narrative, methodical shifts and transmutations begin to take place (fig. 2). Similar in composition, the streams shift from yellow and blue to black and white where they seem to be led by the birds in flight rather than the streams encasing them as seen in the first drawing. The translucent canopy of the tree loses some of its foliage and the multicolored lemniscates also known as the mathematical symbol representing infinity decrease in number. Rather than the birds outlined in black or depicted as purely white, the bird is painted subtle shades of grey perhaps indicating the slow merge from two to one. The chalice too shifts in color from its original gold to white.

In images three and four (fig. 3 & 4), the chalice changes positions entirely and moves to the center of the diagram where it joins the heart, which is no longer depicted spiraling inward on itself, but colored a solid shade of red, a color indicative of passion or physical/spiritual love. The base of the tree becomes a helix or induction coil which pours energy in an upward motion

toward the center where the heart and chalice mingle, and the birds both black descend encased by the circular motion of energy that might suggest their link to the astral and etheric bodies.

Both the roots and position of the lotus flowers rest upon two horizontal lines. This might be perceived as the three-tier system of successive higher planes: ether, astral, and mental. The lotus flowers are more pronounced and play an important role in the process of transformation. Leadbeater discusses the lotus in his text on the chakras. He states, “The mouth of the flower-like bell of the chakra is on the surface of the etheric body, the stem of the trumpet-like blossom always springs from a centre in the spinal cord.”<sup>24</sup> The way he describes the role of the lotus is mirrored in images three and four of af Klint’s series.

Although closely related in composition, image four includes a white cross at the bottom positioned in the middle of the helix and in-between the two birds. The white cross is a prominent symbol in Rosicrucianism, but normally has a rose in the center. There are several meanings associated with the cross, one in which it represents the human body, and in Theosophy, the cross is a symbol of procreation.

In a shift of symmetry, af Klint incorporates the square with a flower in the shape of an x cross and a traditional crucifix in the last few compositions (fig. 5 & 6). The birds positioned at the bottom center are connected and delicately fold their form around the white crucifix. The helix has been removed from image five and replaced again with colored streams ascending from the heart. This time, the pink stream connects to an offset square with a flower forming an x. It’s possible the number of pedals indicate a primary force that radiates out into the body much like the spokes of a chakra wheel. In yogic practice, numbers and letters symbolize “the total creative power or life-force coming into the body.”<sup>25</sup> Af Klint’s didactic illustrations link the tree of life

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 102.

with religious, philosophical, and esoteric traditions, in addition to occult science. The body is represented by a series of spirals, geometries, and flora until she eventually depicts the figures of two angels, and in the last image the figures of a man and woman ascend from the spiral that flows from the floral square.

In addition to an interest in the physical world of nature, af Klint seems also to have engaged with the world of sound as well (fig. 6). To my knowledge, there is no evidence we know of that af Klint read about the transcendent power of music.<sup>26</sup> Yet, it was not uncommon in hermetic and alchemical circles during the early modern period to integrate music with mystical and esoteric theories of the universe. This type of musical alchemy is sometimes described as the Song of the Angels. Angels themselves might best be understood as omnipotent beings that exist in the intermediary space between heaven and earth, or in the context of af Klint, this could be the realm of the etheric. It is important to note that Theosophy and Anthroposophy both share an interest in the music of the spheres. It's likely she read about cosmic music during her research in Theosophy and Anthroposophy.

Steiner, for instance, gave musical lectures and developed an Anthroposophical Tone-Zodiac. In *The Music of the Spheres*, Joselyn Godwin discusses the interpretation of Steiner's tone-zodiac. The text states, "Regarding the musical analogies...there are archangels, spirits of music, who carry these influences down."<sup>27</sup> Image six depicts what is perhaps trumpets or vocal sounds vibrating and circling in a downward motion to the core of the spiral ladder. Steiner's

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<sup>26</sup> Note that musical notation can be found in a handful of The Five drawings from the years 1899 and 1904. See archival notebooks Hak1516\_Haks3 and Hak1519\_Haks6 available at The Hilma af Klint Foundation in Stockholm, Sweden. Hilma af Klint also notes the collective sound wave of mosses in her Flowers, Mosses and Lichens notebook. See *Hilma af Klint: Notes and Methods*, ed. Christine Burgin (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 236.

<sup>27</sup> Joscelyn Godwin, *Harmonies of Heaven and Earth: Mysticism in Music from Antiquity to the Avant-Garde* (Rochester: Inner Traditions International, 1995), 147. For further historical reading on the music of the spheres, see sacred texts by Hermes Trismegistus and the ancient texts of Pythagoras.

tone-zodiac is not “merely vibration but spiritual being” where “each tone exists in the twofold mode of (1) the vibrating air and the ear, and (2) an inner experience on the etheric and astral levels.”<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, these tones and keys are the “vehicles for the impulses of the angelic hierarchy under whose care the human race develops.”<sup>29</sup> This is an important statement to consider, as the final images of the *Tree of Knowledge* dissolve and reconstitute (fig. 7 & 8). Two bodies link with the world in what might be an attempt to visualize dissolving boundaries in cosmic harmony.

It would be impossible without thorough investigation of af Klint’s archival notebooks to completely decode her symbology, and it is not my intention to necessarily do so here, but rather demonstrate the importance of science and religious syncretism in her work as a visual method designed to teach us something about ourselves and the world. It is clear the *Tree of Knowledge* series visualizes a process of evolution inspired by a pastiche of scientific and esoteric philosophies. Yet, some art historians, such as Briony Fer posit in her essay “Hilma af Klint, Diagrammer” in *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future* that “to focus only on the occult symbolic meanings of her work leads inevitably to an interpretive dead end.”<sup>30</sup> Fer’s argument is valid when she mentions that to take af Klint seriously as an artist that it “requires us to take some critical distance from the mysticism.”<sup>31</sup> I wonder though, how might one take that distance from such a central aspect of the work? She had access to the higher knowledge that she documented in her journals. She depicted multiple worlds such as the natural, scientific, and cosmic.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Briony Fer, “Hilma af Klint, Diagrammer,” in *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2018), 164.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

If we can acknowledge her explicit response to both esotericism and science, then we must find a way to incorporate the language of each into the history of art, to discuss in tandem rather than taking *critical distance* from one approach in favor of another.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps historian Reinhart Koselleck was onto something when he stated: “History can be rationalized through language, but this does not mean that it is anywhere close to becoming rational.”<sup>33</sup> And, Moxey might describe such a merge of disciplines as “the imaginative intervention of the art historian” when he speaks of analyzing the “extraordinary objects that constitute the history of art.”<sup>34</sup>

This, in part, requires artists, research practitioners, and art historians alike to recognize and accept that if af Klint explored and depicted what was concealed behind appearances, then we must too attempt to traverse “dimensions inaccessible to our senses” or find a way to look beyond the horizon of traditional linguistic genesis in order to think more critically about the complexity of the layered narratives and symbology that exist in her work.<sup>35</sup> She accepted the natural world’s kindredness, and the wonder that dwells in both physical and psychical realms of consciousness. She employed a figurative visual language whilst maintaining a nonfigurative representation of the natural world as she moved into a realm beyond division and hierarchy.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> There are a number of repeatability topics and lack of durable innovation revolving around a great deal of scholarship on af Klint. Repetition is valid as long as innovation is incorporated. Late historian Reinhart Koselleck would describe this as a narrative of traditional repetition that solidifies and grinds the history in a place that inhibits change. This repetition is often vacuous, causal, and structurally repetitive both institutionally and linguistically in recognized language, i.e. to place af Klint largely within the realm of *abstraction*. Fortunately, we are now beginning to slowly see a shift in scholarly approaches on af Klint that addresses the *abstraction* debate more critically. Over the years, I have stumbled upon only one instance that argued the legitimate danger of placing af Klint in such a framework. This can be found in Annika Öhrner’s review of the Hilma af Klint exhibition catalog for the 2018 exhibition *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future* held at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in NYC. Annika Öhrner, “Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future,” *Women’s Art Journal*, Spring/Summer 2019, 47.

<sup>33</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*, ed. Hent de Vries (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 23.

<sup>34</sup> Moxey, *Visual Time*, 32.

<sup>35</sup> Abrams, *Becoming Animal*, 4.

<sup>36</sup> I’m reminded of Algerian born artist Jean-Michel Atlan. In 1950, a text he wrote entitled “Abstraction and Adventure in Contemporary Art” was published in an issue of the journal *Cobra*. Cobra is an acronym for the cities the group was based: Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam. Similarly to af Klint, Atlan believed in the cosmic power of metamorphosis as experienced in the *presence* of forms. More importantly, he asserted the popular forms of

This is emphasized further in her Flowers, Mosses and Lichens notebook, where her method of analysis, emotional and spiritual in nature, seeks to develop the taxonomic energetic nature of plants.

Although vehemently faithful to light, shadow, and the rules of perspective in depicting natural history illustrations, Goethe was delighted to merge art and science, as evidenced in his work *The Metamorphosis of Plants* (1790). More importantly, he believed image making required what he described as “exact sensory imagination, by which one might penetrate the surface of things and gain the depths.”<sup>37</sup> Af Klint explores a version of Goethe’s sensory imagination in her Flowers, Mosses and Lichens notebook. In this notebook, she researched 146 specimens and developed a diagrammatic language of the emotional and spiritual lives of plants. There are two copies of the notebook. In 1927, she would donate the original copy to the archive of Natural Sciences at Steiner’s Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland, a curious endeavor as it is known Steiner rejected the abandonment of the figurative in favor of an abstract pictorial language.

In this notebook, af Klint, again, dissolves the boundary between material and spiritual worlds. She does this through an exploratory and geometric process where the human soul links with the plant soul. Through the lens of science and spirit, af Klint captures the energetic vitality in each of the plants she includes in the notebook. She has given them lives of their own, developing a complex system of geometries and directives that open up, fold in, swirl, mirror, pulse, and radiate. Her chosen symbology charts emotional states of being, such as innocence

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his day were neither abstract nor figurative. Atlan states, “To see this through to the bitter end, some of us today risk our necks. We turn our backs on vain quarrels about doctrine, resolutely committing ourselves to those directions which fashion and the public can barely follow.” An excerpt of the text can be found *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Idea*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 624-25.

<sup>37</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Metamorphosis of Plants* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009), xxviii.

and self-will, states of longing, and spirituality. The directional lines signify movements or the motion in which mental and physical healing might occur in the human body.<sup>38</sup>

Despite what might be perceived as energy contained, the energy inside expands far beyond the geometry. The images are alive. The introduction to Merleau-Ponty's *Art and Phenomenology* states that even the "highly manipulated abstract view or form...cannot help but give us again what the world already gives us as we encounter it in our daily life, "unthinking" actions and movements."<sup>39</sup> In other words, the world of appearances can be perceived in an infinite number of ways depending on the spaces in which objects are experienced. For af Klint, the lives of plants were experienced and explained as they act upon the body in the physical, etheric, and astral planes.

Gregor, one of the High Master's af Klint communed with in the early stages of her psychical development, spoke to her and said, "By occult knowledge I understand, namely, all the knowledge that is not of the sense, not of the intellect, not of the heart, but is the property that exclusively belongs to the deepest aspect of your being."<sup>40</sup> Like her depictions of human and nonhuman bodies mirroring each other to form a unified whole, Gregor's statement begs the initiate, the observer, the researcher, the artist, to not only observe the object but let the object penetrate the very essence of their being. Af Klint provides proof of what such a deep penetration and encounter with the world looks like through her eyes. This view was not only deeply personal, but strong enough for her to believe it must be understood by others. Leadbeater and Besant explain in their text *Thought Forms* originally published in 1901: "As knowledge

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<sup>38</sup> In her Flowers, Mosses and Lichens notebook, af Klint states, "Help me to improve the kidneys of humanity." *Hilma af Klint: Notes and Methods*, ed. Christine Burgin (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 182.

<sup>39</sup> Joseph D Parry and Mark Wrathall, "Introduction," in *Art and Phenomenology*, ed. Joseph D. Parry (New York: Routledge, 2011), 3.

<sup>40</sup> Gurli Lindén, *I Describe the Way and Meanwhile I am Preceding Along the Way* (Sweden: Rosengårdens Förlag, 1996), 13. Gregor is one of the principal teachers or High Masters af Klint communed with in The Five.

increases, the attitude of science towards the things of the invisible world is undergoing considerable modification...Ether is now comfortably settled in the scientific kingdom [and]...Roentgen's rays have rearranged some of the older ideas of matter, while radioactivity has revolutionized them, and is leading science beyond the borderland of the ether into the astral world."<sup>41</sup> Af Klint's radical and self-generating system of the energetic lives of plants was intended to be a common language, and that language was best portrayed through blurring the lines between visual art, spirituality, and science.

There is still much critical research to be done on the work and life of af Klint, and this paper in particular barely touches the surface of the depth and complexity of only one facet of her work. Fortunately, other art historians and research practitioners continue to engage in this present moment with more attention paid to the necessary and intensive archival research of materials available through the Hilma af Klint Foundation located in Stockholm, Sweden.<sup>42</sup> As these materials continue to be mined, we develop a clearer understanding of af Klint as an artist who worked on her own terms, a polymath working through multiple disciplines and mediums to teach us something new about the world. The harmony and energy between seemingly disparate worlds and disciplines is apparent in her total oeuvre from the most subtle to the most dramatic, where the union of all forms and colors penetrates our lives in myriad ways.

As we find ourselves tangled and held softly in a complex web of perhaps mere feeble attempts at translating or decoding her language without the required assistance of her handwritten notes, we must think about what these images might teach us about the world and

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<sup>41</sup> C.W. Leadbeater and Annie Besant, *Thought Forms* (London: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1905), 11.

<sup>42</sup> Historian Julia Voss recently published the first biography of Hilma af Klint. The first edition is in German with an English translation to be released in 2021. Julia Voss, *Hilma af Klint – "Die Menschheit in Erstaunen versetzen": Biographie* (Germany: Fischer, 2020). Hedvig Martin-Ahlén, a PhD candidate at the University of Amsterdam, also dives deep into the archives with a focus on the automatic drawings of The Five.

ourselves. I would argue that her work has the power to “inaugurate a time of its own,” not to be contained to what was or what’s to come, but what is happening right now.<sup>43</sup> As Moxey states, “The picture itself...militates against the limitations of descriptive language by insisting that we go further.”<sup>44</sup> Af Klint gives us permission to go further, to react and begin a new form of historical writing that requires imagination, presence, and a reexamination of art history, as well as a grasp and understanding of both science and esotericism.<sup>45</sup>

To discuss her work selectively and reductively eclipses our understanding of her and the art’s significance. Formally and independently trained, af Klint was a code maker and breaker who clearly demonstrates the didactic, perceptual, and somatic exchange between the work, the artist, and the viewer. As such, experience, embodiment, and reflection play pivotal roles in how she represents nature in the *Tree of Knowledge* series and her Flowers, Mosses and Lichens notebook. Visual art acts upon the viewer and the space it occupies. This work can then tell us something about her perception of the world and our own experiences within it as we continue to acknowledge human experience, emotions, and behaviors as an important approach to the study of af Klint’s philosophical aesthetics.

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<sup>43</sup> Moxey, *Visual Time*, 98.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 59.

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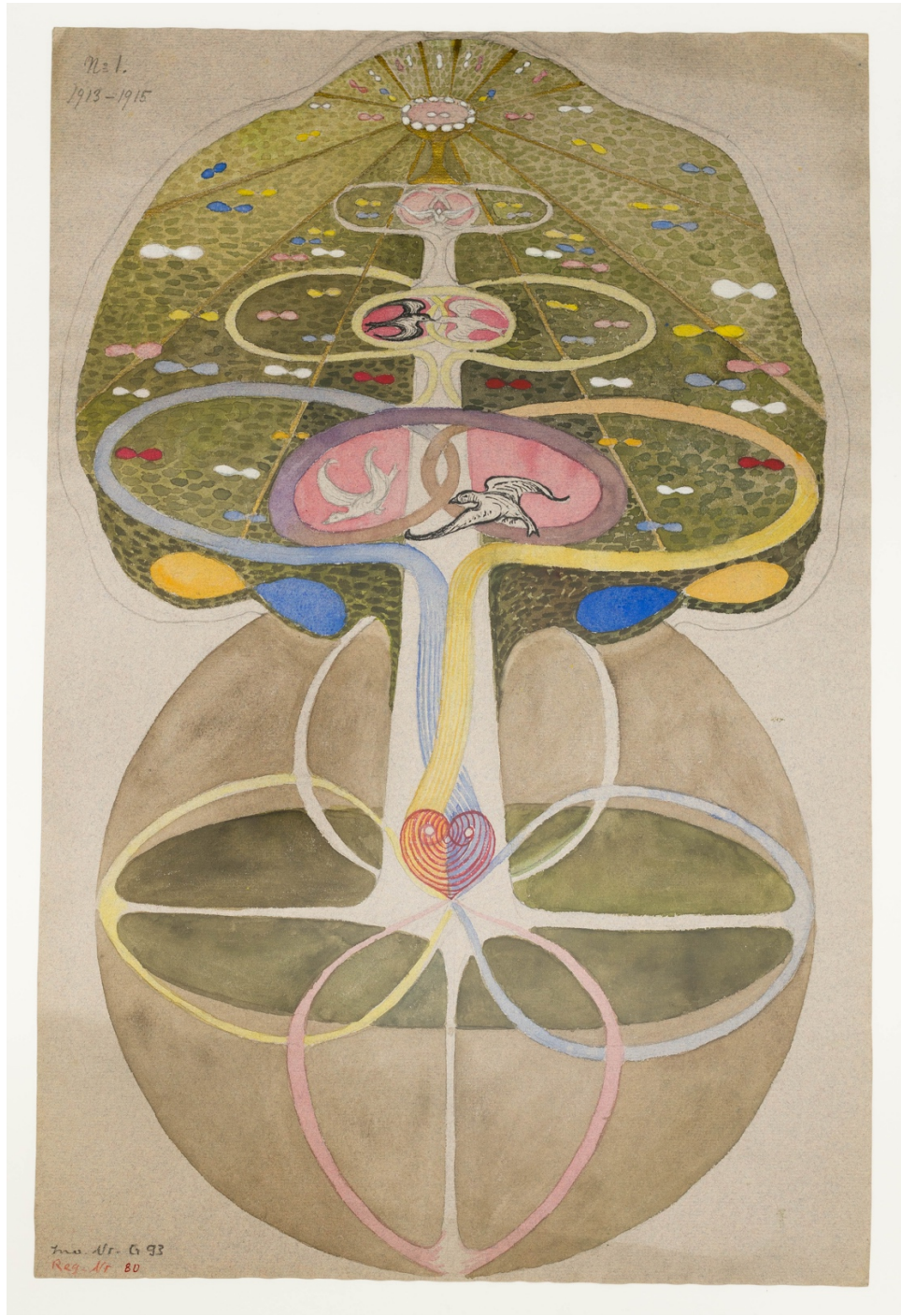
Images

Figure 1: *Tree of Knowledge Series, 1913-1925*

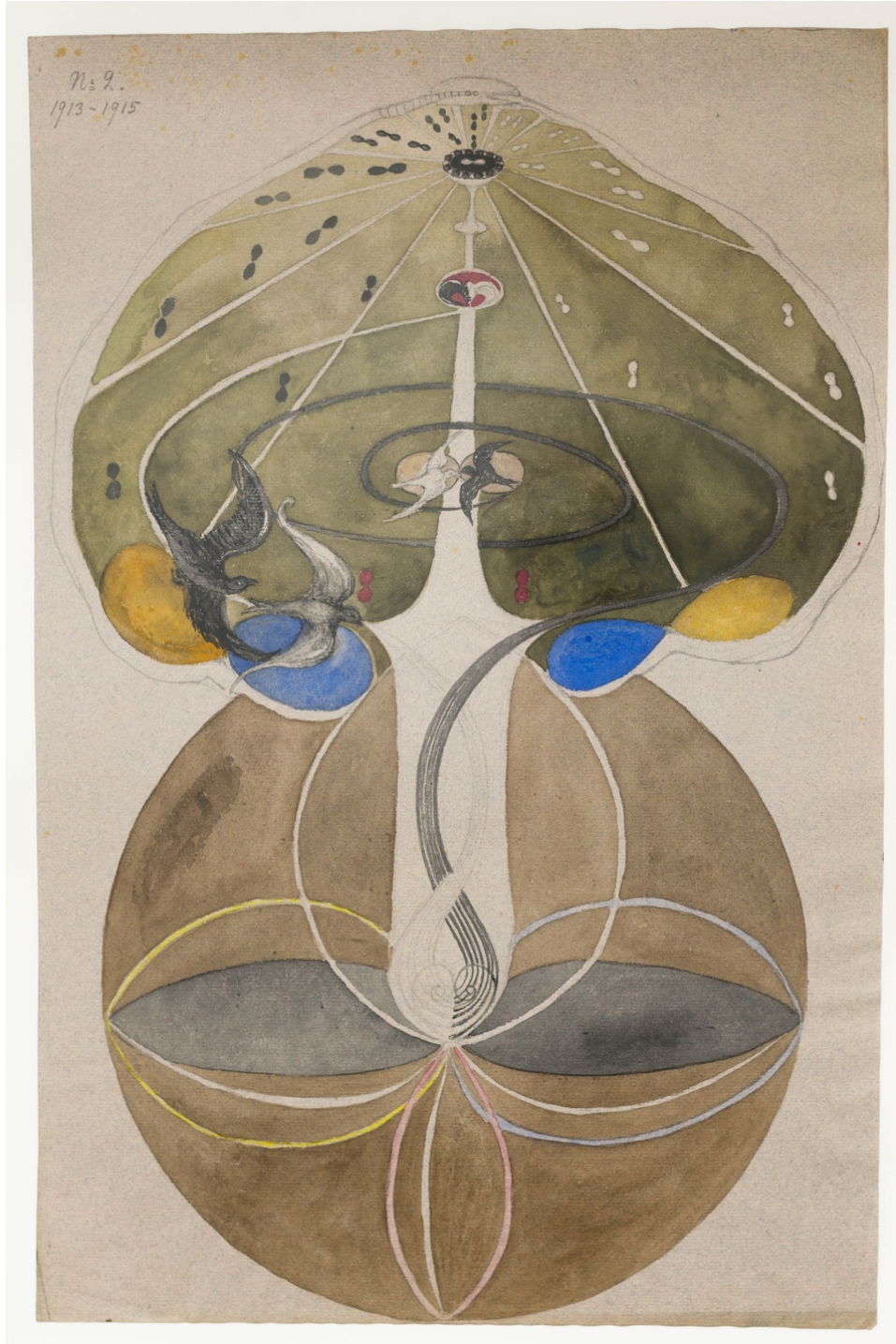


Figure 2: *Tree of Knowledge Series*, 1913-1925

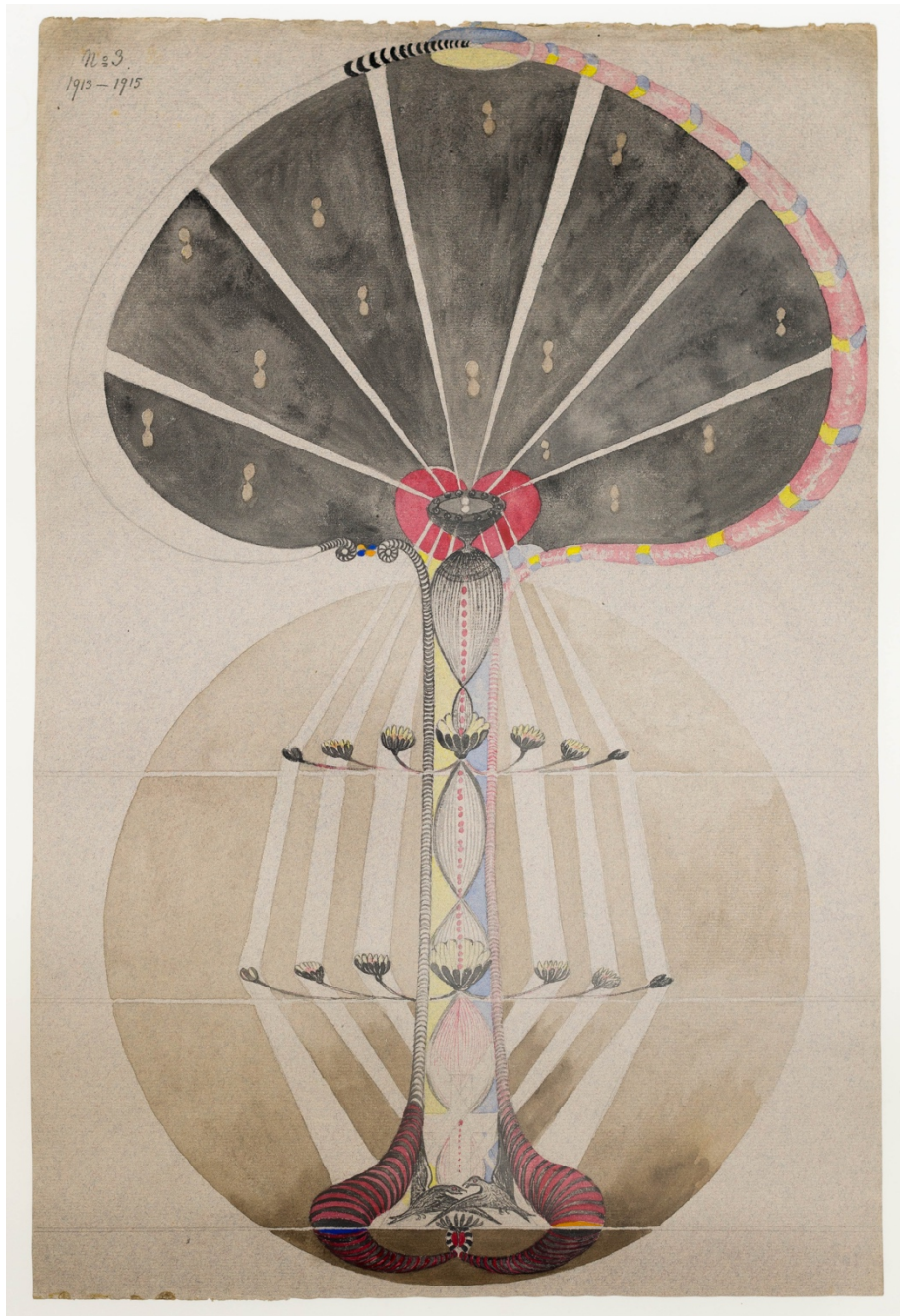


Figure 3: Tree of Knowledge, 1913-1925

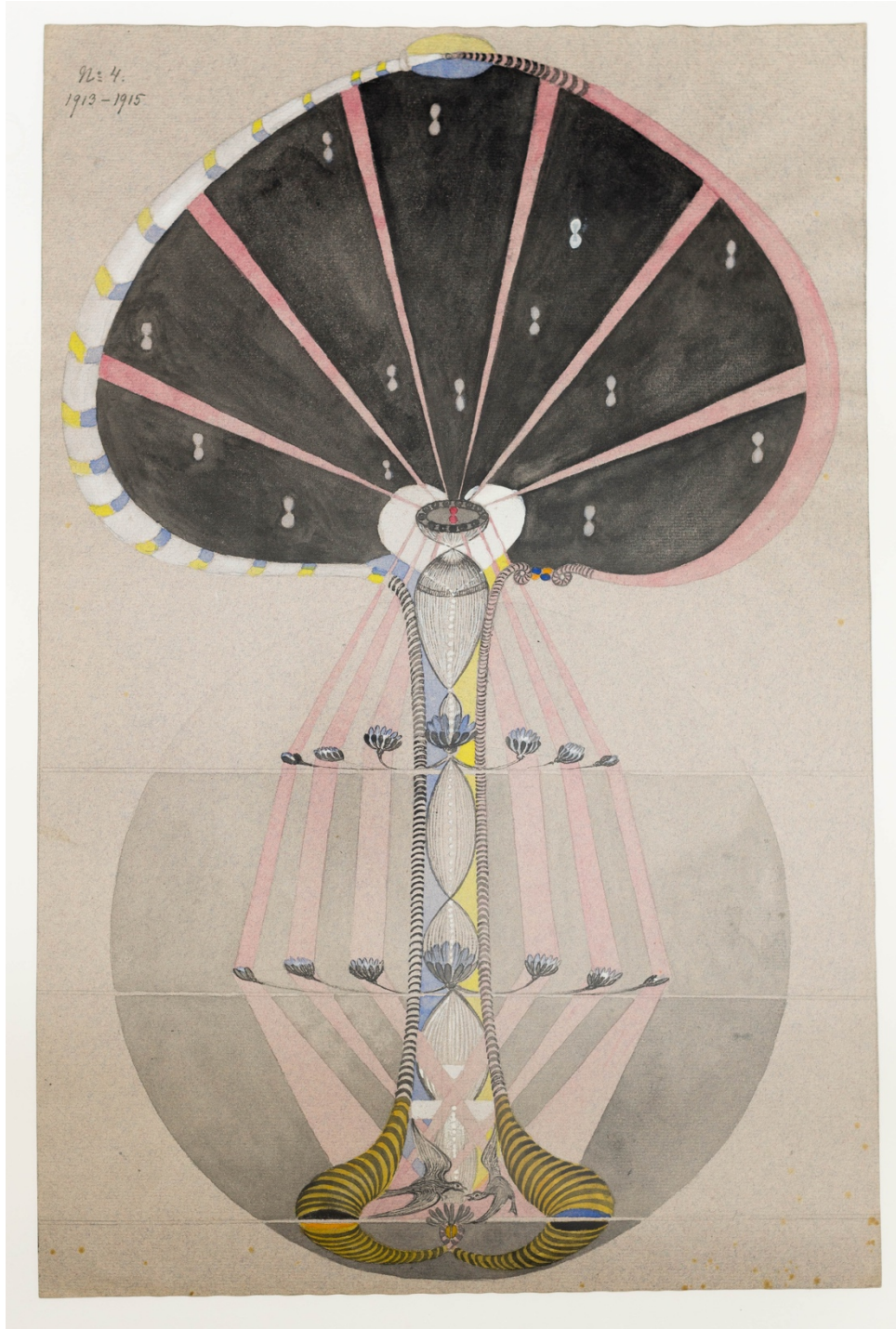


Figure 4: *Tree of Knowledge Series*, 1913-1925

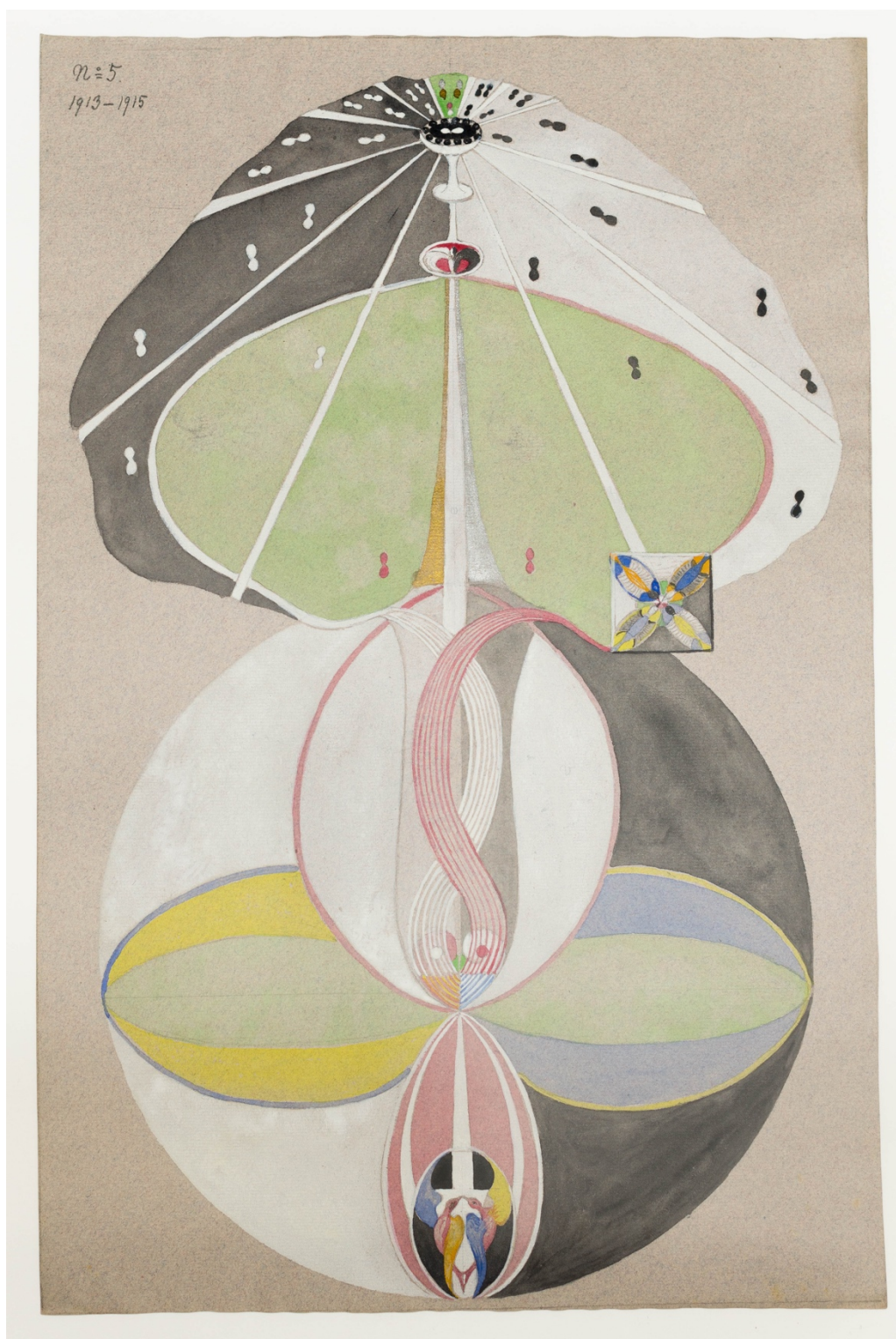


Figure 5: *Tree of Knowledge Series*, 1913-1925

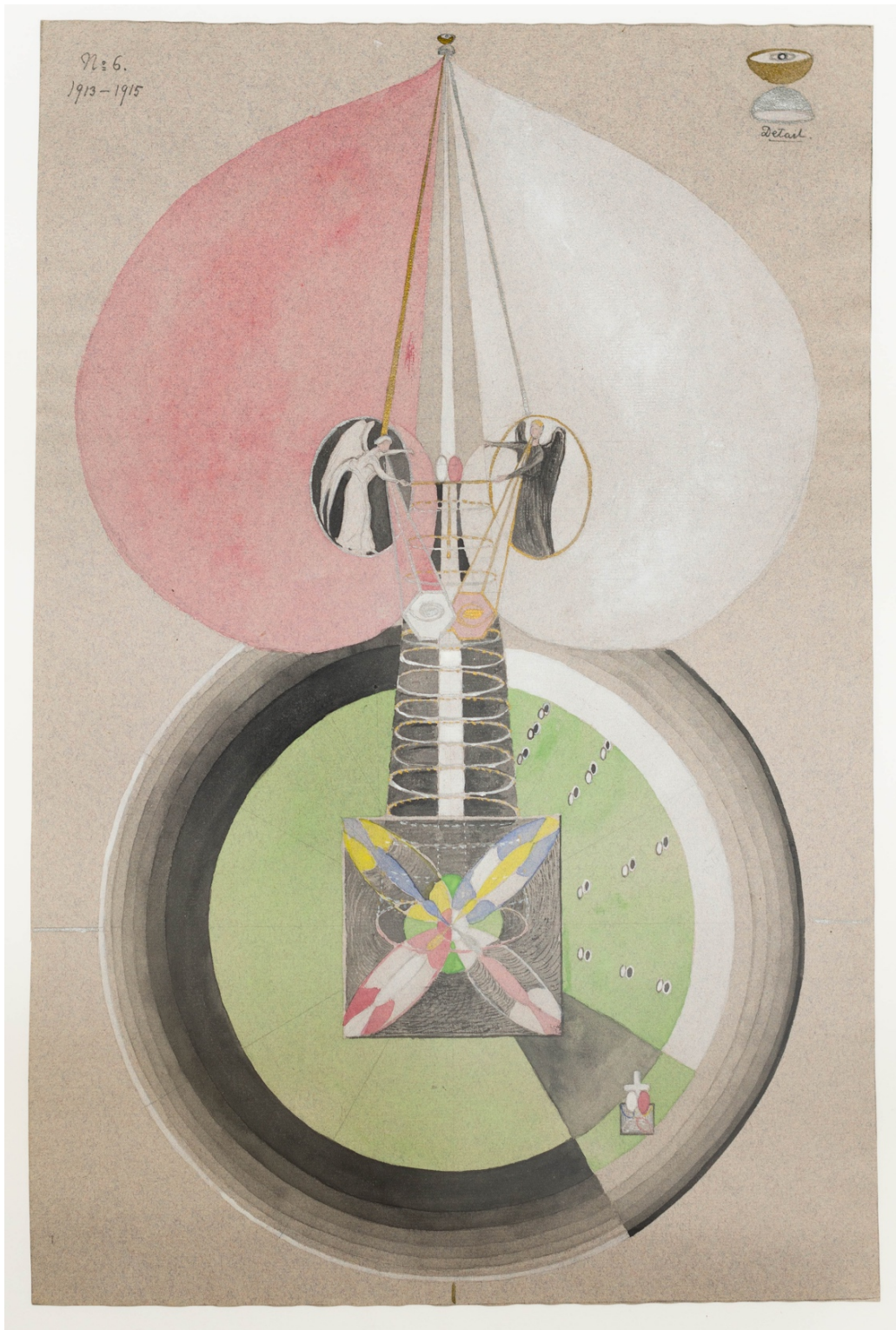


Figure 6: *Tree of Knowledge Series*, 1913-1925

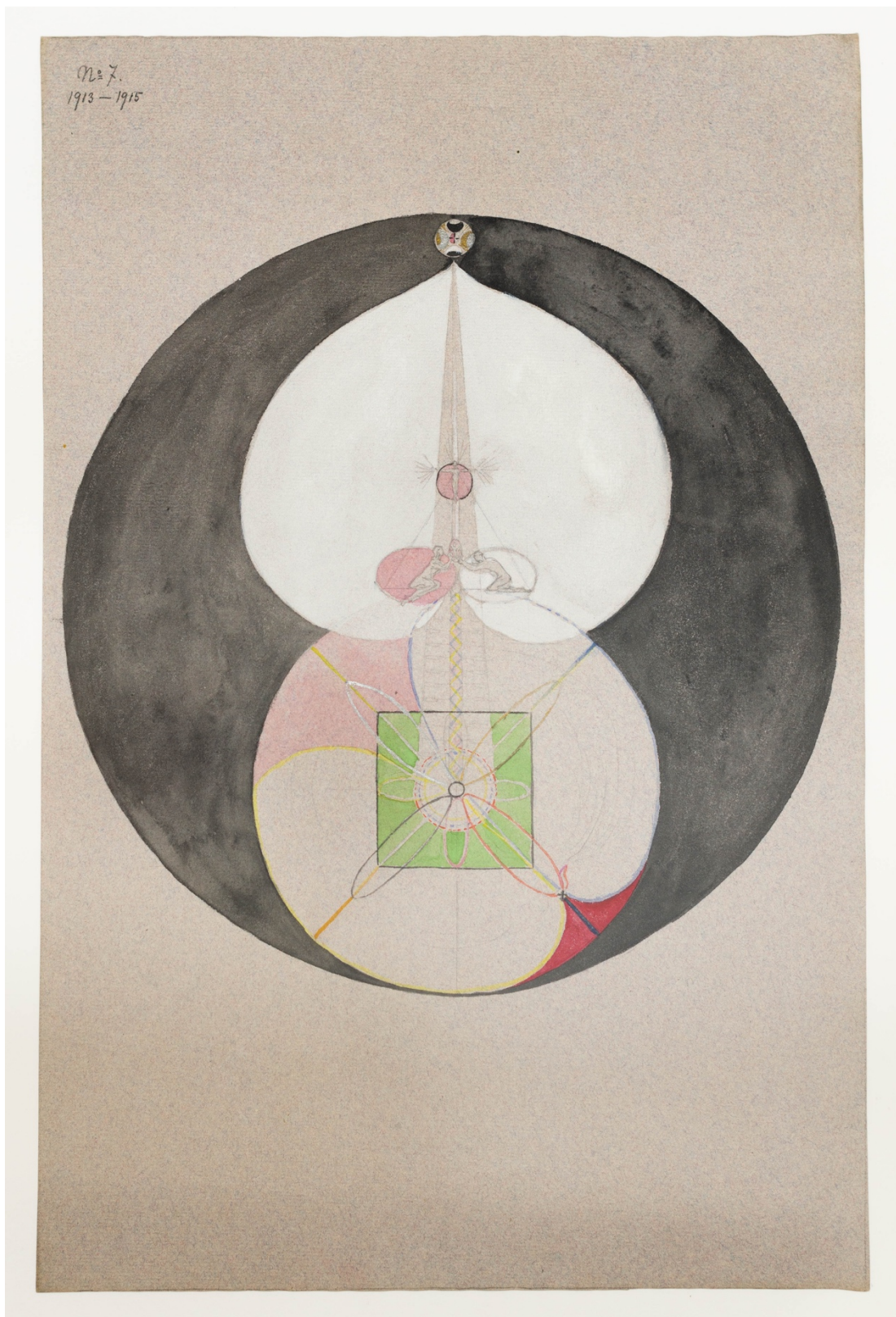


Figure 7: *Tree of Knowledge Series*, 1913-1925



Figure 8: Detail of Fig. 7