HILMA AF KLINT AND THE NEW ART OF SEEING

Anna Maria Bernitz

At a séance in March 1899 Hilma af Klint received an important message: “Whoever has been given the power to see more deeply should dispense with form because differences of form are of such minor importance. [...] These forms would largely disappear if everyone had the ability to see more deeply into the actual essence of things” (Lindén 1997: 138). The same insight – that it is not things in themselves that are important but the transcendental dimensions beyond them – was experienced by many artists in Europe during the early years of the twentieth century. Abstract art is generally considered to have emerged in the second decade of the twentieth century. Hilma af Klint, however, painted non-figurative works as early as 1906. As a result she is sometimes regarded as a pioneer of abstract art. The earliest abstract art was created in such cities as Stockholm, Amsterdam, Munich and Paris by individuals unaware of each others’ work. In their various European locales, af Klint, Mondrian, Kandinsky, Malevich and Kupka ceased trying to give an illusion of reality and, instead, created a new art with a depth that was different from that which can be found through a visual perspective.

Despite the fact that the abstract painters were unaware of each other, there are recurring themes and unifying aspects to their work – seemingly magical coincidences, if one is unaware of the neo-spiritual movements that grew up and established themselves in the wake of industrialism, and of which theosophy was the most influential.

Born in Stockholm in 1862, Hilma af Klint grew up at a time when the official Swedish Lutheran Church was in a state of crisis. Darwin’s theory of evolution, published in the middle of the nine-
teenth century, had shaken the foundations of the church. Within
the Western establishment, people were highly receptive to new cur-
rents in science and philosophy and many were becoming unsure
about religion and experiencing something of a vacuum. In the lower
orders of society, religiosity also declined. In a world where tradi-
tional values no longer obtained, occultism and spiritualism, which
absorbed evolution into their doctrines, offered attractive alternatives
to established religions. The term ‘esoteric’ acquired its current
meaning in 1856 when the French mystic Eliphas Lévi applied it to
occultism. In 1883, the concept was introduced into the English lan-
guage via theosophy and not long afterwards it entered the Swedish
language.

Esoteric doctrines widely hold that nature has a soul and that
even inanimate matter, such as stone, contains cosmic energy. Magic
links, symbolic or real, are considered to exist between the visible
and invisible parts of the universe, and it is believed that communi-
cation between microcosm and macrocosm takes place by means of
intuition and channelling. Such communication could be achieved,
for example, with the help of symbols, rituals and, as in the case of
af Klint, communicating spirits. The idea that there is a correspon-
dence between all systems of belief and that esoteric knowledge is
to be found in all of the world’s religions appears in theosophy and
in most forms of Western esotericism. Often, this notion is related
to a belief that this unity has its origin in the tradition of alchemy,
which holds that all sorts of matter, living and dead, can be trans-
formed (or ‘transmuted’) into another form of matter.

One cannot overestimate the importance of theosophy in the
spread of esoteric ideas at the end of the nineteenth century. The
Theosophical Society was founded in New York in 1875 by Helena
P. Blavatsky and H.S. Olcott. Madame Blavatsky, a widely travelled
Russian polyglot, sought to promote widespread public acceptance
of occult doctrines. This was achieved through a succession of books
and writings, of which perhaps the most important was the 1500-
page *The Secret Doctrine*. Theosophy was influenced by Indian
thought, Western evolutionism, classical mystic traditions, gnosti-
cism and hermeticism, all richly infused with Mme Blavatsky’s own
theories and conclusions. A theosophical lodge was founded in Swe-
den in 1888, and Hilma af Klint became a member shortly after. Ac-
cording to her nephew, Erik af Klint, she was even considered for