

Discover Hilma af Klint's Art

Explore the Legacy of a Pioneering Artist

Hilma af Klint (26 October 1862 – 21 October 1944) was a Swedish artist and mystic whose paintings are considered among the first abstract works known in Western art history. A considerable body of her work predates the first purely abstract compositions by Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian. She belonged to a group called "The Five", comprising a circle of women inspired by Theosophy, who shared a belief in the importance of trying to contact the so-called "High Masters"—often by way of séances. Her paintings, which sometimes resemble diagrams, were a visual representation of complex spiritual ideas.

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Early life of Hilma af Klint



From her family, Hilma af Klint inherited a great interest for mathematics and botany. She showed an early ability in visual art and, after the family moved to Stockholm, she studied at Tekniska skolan (now Konstfack) in Stockholm, where she learned portraiture and landscape painting.

Hilma af Klint was the fourth child of Mathilda af Klint (née Sonntag) and Captain Victor af Klint, a Swedish naval commander, and she spent summers with her family at their manor, "Hanmora", on the island of Adelsö in Lake Mälaren. In these idyllic surroundings she came into contact with nature at an early stage in her life, and a deep association with natural forms was to be an inspiration in her work. Later in life, Hilma af Klint lived permanently on Munsö, an island next to Adelsö.



Her conventional painting became the source of her income, but her 'life's work' remained a quite separate practice.

She was admitted to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts at the age of twenty. Between 1882 and 1887 she studied mainly drawing, portrait painting, and landscape painting. She graduated with honors, and was allocated a scholarship in the form of a studio in the so-called "Atelier Building" (Ateljébyggnaden), owned by The Academy of Fine Arts between Hamngatan and Kungsträdgården in central Stockholm. This was the main cultural hub in the Swedish capital at that time. The same building also held Blanch's Café and Blanch's Art Gallery, where conflict existed between the conventional art view of the Academy of Fine Arts and the opposition movement of the Art Society (Konstnärsförbundet), inspired by the French plein air painters. Hilma af Klint began working in Stockholm, gaining recognition for her landscapes, botanical drawings, and portraits.

Spiritual and Philosophical of Hilma af Klint

Spiritualism

"Spiritism is a reincarnationist doctrine established in France in the mid-19th century by the author and educator Allan Kardec. It explains the cycle by which a spirit supposedly returns to material existence after the death of the old body in which it dwelled, as well as the evolution it undergoes during this process."

In 1880 her younger sister Hermina died, and it was at this time that the spiritual dimension of her life began to develop. Her interest in abstraction and symbolism came from Hilma af Klint's involvement in spiritism, very much in vogue at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Her experiments in spiritual investigation started in 1879. She became interested in the Theosophy of Madame Blavatsky and the philosophy of Christian Rosencreutz. In 1908 she met Rudolf Steiner, the founder of the Anthroposophical Society, who was visiting Stockholm. Steiner introduced her to his own theories regarding the arts, and would have some influence on her paintings later in life. Several years later, in 1920, she met him again at the Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland, the headquarters of the Anthroposophical Society. Between 1921 and 1930 she spent long periods at the Goetheanum.

Af Klint's work can be understood in the wider context of the modernist search for new forms in artistic, spiritual, political, and scientific systems at the beginning of the twentieth century. There was a similar interest in spirituality by other artists during this same period, including Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, Kasimir Malevitch, Fidus, and the French Nabis, in which many, like af Klint, were inspired by the Theosophical Movement. The works of Hilma af Klint are mainly spiritual, and her artistic work is a consequence of this. She felt the abstract work and the meaning within were so groundbreaking that the world was not ready to see it, and she wished for the work to remain unseen for 20 years after her death.

Modernism

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Hilma af Klint felt she was being directed by a force that would literally guide her hand. She wrote in her notebook:

The pictures were painted directly through me, without any preliminary drawings, and with great force. I had no idea what the paintings were supposed to depict; nevertheless I worked swiftly and surely, without changing a single brush stroke.

Artistic Career of Hilma af Klint

1906

At the age of 44, af Klint painted her first series of abstract paintings. *Svanen* (The Swan), No. 17, Group 9, Series SUW, October 1914 – March 1915, a work never exhibited during af Klint's lifetime.

The works for the Temple were created between 1906 and 1915, carried out in two phases with an interruption between 1908 and 1912. As af Klint discovered her new form of visual expression, she developed a new artistic language. Her painting became more autonomous and more intentional. The spiritual would continue to be the main source of creativity throughout the rest of her life. The collection for the Temple is 193 paintings, grouped within several sub-series. The major paintings, dated 1907, are extremely large: each painting measures approximately 240 x 320 cm. This series, called *The Ten Largest*, describes the different phases of life, from early childhood to old age. Quite apart from their diagrammatic purpose the paintings have a freshness and a modern aesthetic of tentative line and hastily captured image: a segmented circle, a helix bisected and divided into a spectrum of lightly painted colours. The artistic world of Hilma af Klint is impregnated with symbols, letters, and words. The paintings often depict symmetrical dualities, or reciprocities: up and down, in and out, earthly and esoteric, male and female, good and evil. The colour choice throughout is metaphorical: blue stands for the female spirit, yellow for the male one, and pink / red for physical / spiritual love. *The Swan* and *The Dove*, names of two series of the Paintings for the Temple, are also symbolic, representing respectively transcendence and love. Understood as gates to other dimensions, her paintings call for interpretation on a narrative, esoteric and artistic level while evoking primordial geometry and humanistic motifs. When Hilma af Klint had completed the works for the Temple, the spiritual guidance ended. However, she continued to pursue abstract painting, now independent from any external influence. The paintings for the Temple were mostly oil paintings, but she now also used watercolours. Her later paintings are significantly smaller in size. She painted among others a series depicting the stand-points of different religions at various stages in history, as well as representations of the duality between the physical being and its equivalence on an esoteric level. As Hilma af Klint pursued her artistic and esoteric research, it is possible to perceive a certain inspiration from the artistic theories developed by the Anthroposophical Society from 1920 onward.

Through her life, Hilma af Klint would seek to understand the mysteries that she had come in contact with through her work. She produced more than 150 notebooks with her thoughts and studies.

1908

Klint met Rudolf Steiner for the first time. In one of the few remaining letters, she asked Steiner to visit her in Stockholm and see the finished part of the Paintings for the Temple series, 111 paintings in total. Steiner did see the paintings but mostly left unimpressed, stating that her way of working was inappropriate for a theosophist. According to H.P. Blavatsky, mediumship was a faulty practice, leading its adepts on the wrong path of occultism and black magic. However, during their meeting, Steiner stated that af Klint's contemporaries would not be able to accept and understand their paintings, and it would take another 50 years to decipher them. Of all the paintings shown to him, Steiner paid special attention only to the Primordial Chaos Group, noting them as "the best symbolically". After meeting Steiner, af Klint was devastated by his response and, apparently, stopped painting for 4 years. Steiner kept photographs of some of af Klint's artworks, some of them even hand-coloured. Later the same year he met Wassily Kandinsky, who had not yet come to abstract painting. Some art historians assume that Kandinsky could have seen the photographs and perhaps was influenced by them while developing his own abstract path. Later in her life, af Klint made a decision to destroy all her correspondence. She left a collection of more than 1200 paintings and 125 diaries to her nephew, Erik af Klint. Among her last paintings made in 1930s, there are two watercolours predicting the events of World War II, titled *The Blitz* and *The Fight in the Mediterranean*.

Despite the popular belief that Hilma af Klint had chosen to never exhibit her abstract works during her lifetime, in recent years art historians such as Julia Voss have uncovered evidence that af Klint did attempt to show her work. Around 1920 in Dornach, Switzerland, af Klint met Dutch eurythmist Peggy Kloppers-Moltzer, who was also a member of The Anthroposophical Society. Later, the artist travelled to Amsterdam, where she and Kloppers discussed a possible exhibition with the editors of art and architecture magazine *Wendingen*. Although the Amsterdam talks were not successful, at least one exhibition of af Klint's abstract works took place in London several years later, in 1928 at the World Conference on Spiritual Science in London, for which Kloppers was a member of the organizing committee. Originally, af Klint was excluded, but after Kloppers' insistence, she was added in the list of participants.

1928

She sailed from Stockholm to London, along with some of her large-scale paintings. In her postcard to Anna Cassel (discovered only in 2018) af Klint wrote that she was not alone during this 4-day trip. Despite af Klint not having named her traveling companion, Julia Voss suggests that it was most likely Thomasine Andersson, an old friend from De Fem days. Voss also suggests that it is probable that the works were from the Paintings for the Temple series.

1944

Hilma af Klint died at 81 in Djursholm, Sweden,[24] after a traffic accident. She had exhibited her work only a handful of times, for the most part at spiritual conferences and gatherings.[25] She is buried at Galärvarvskyrkogården in Stockholm.

Signature Style

- Symbolism with a combination of geometry, figuration, scientific research and religious practices.
- Her symbolic visual language has an ordered progression that reflects her understanding of grids, circles, spirals and petal-like forms.
- Spiral forms appear often in her art. Spiral suggests growth, progress and evolution, color choices also are metaphorical in nature.

Erik af Klint

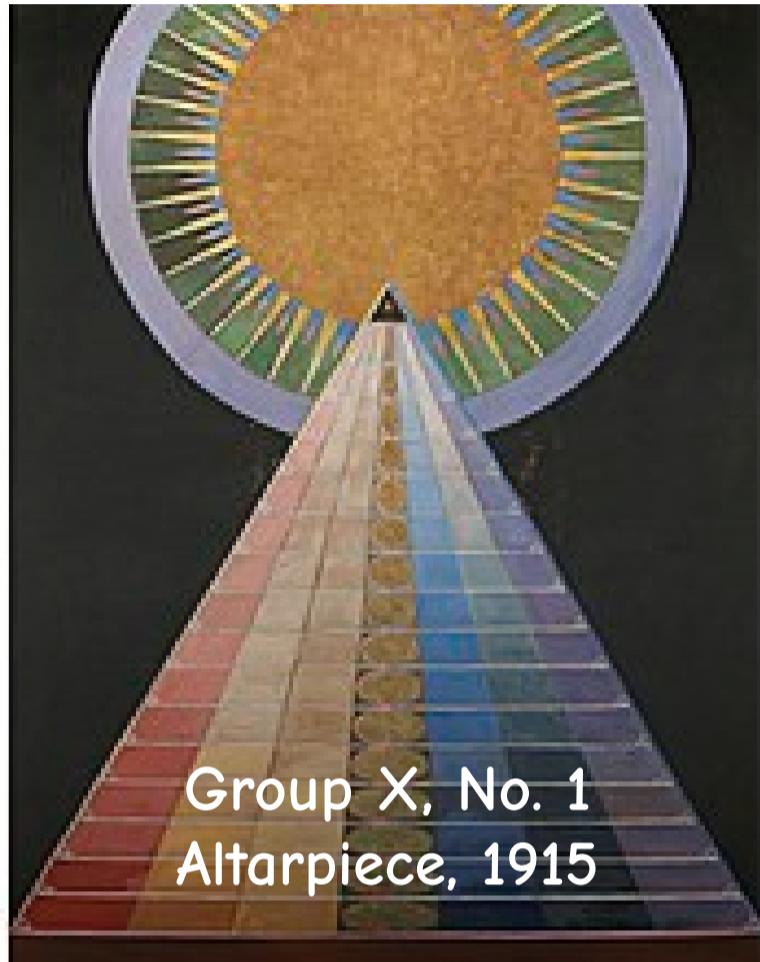


In her will, Hilma af Klint left all her abstract paintings to her nephew, vice-admiral **Erik af Klint** of the Royal Swedish Navy. She specified that her work should be kept secret for at least 20 years after her death. When the boxes were opened at the end of the 1960s, very few persons had knowledge of what would be revealed. In 1970 her paintings were offered as a gift to Moderna Museet i Stockholm, but the donation was declined. Erik af Klint then donated thousands of drawings and paintings to a foundation bearing the artist's name in the 1970s. Thanks to the art historian Åke Fant, her art was introduced to an international audience in the 1980s, when he presented her at a Nordik conference in Helsinki in 1984.

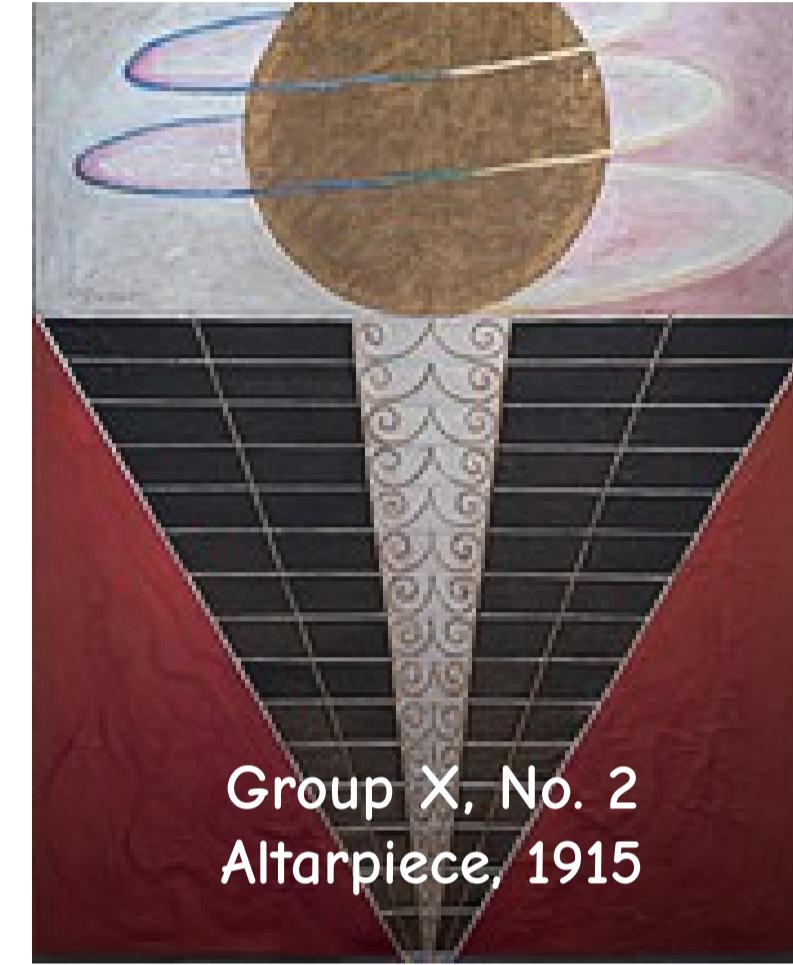
The collection of abstract paintings of Hilma af Klint includes more than 1200 pieces. It is owned and managed by the **Hilma af Klint Foundation** in Stockholm, Sweden. In 2017, Norwegian architectural firm Snøhetta presented plans for an exhibition centre dedicated to af Klint in Järna, south of Stockholm, with estimated building costs of €6 to 7.5 million. In February 2018, the Foundation signed a long-term agreement of cooperation with the Moderna Museet, thereby confirming the perennity of the Hilma af Klint Room, i.e., a dedicated space at the museum where a dozen works of the artist are shown on a continuous basis.

Hilma af Klint Foundation

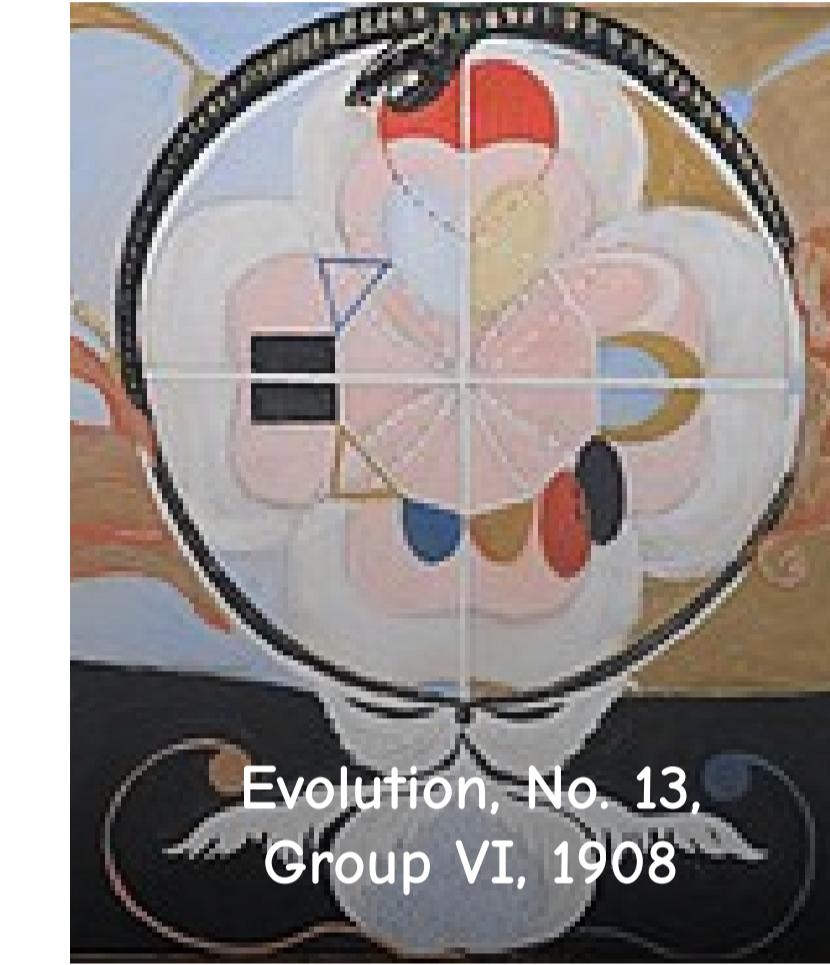




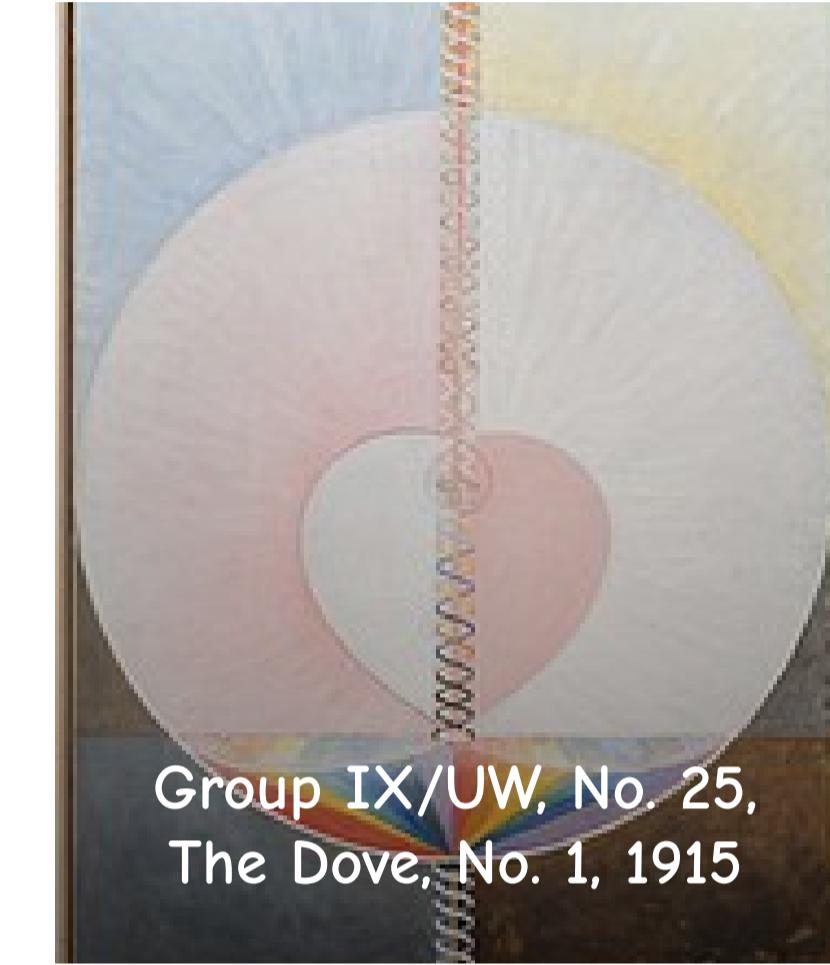
Group X, No. 1
Altarpiece, 1915



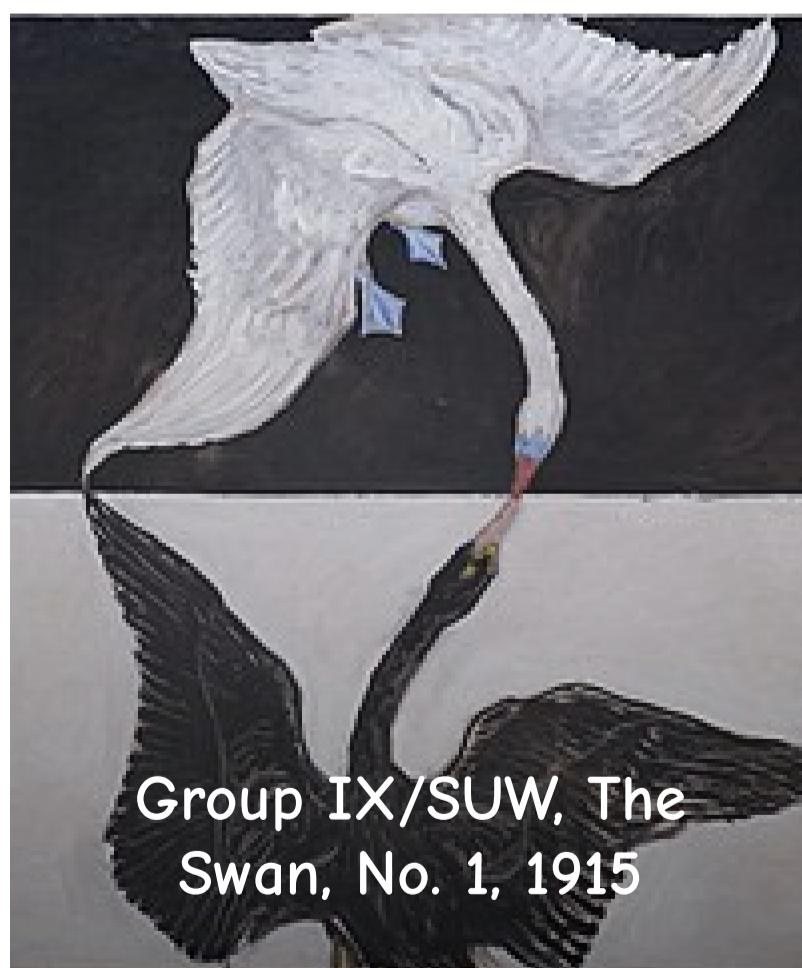
Group X, No. 2
Altarpiece, 1915



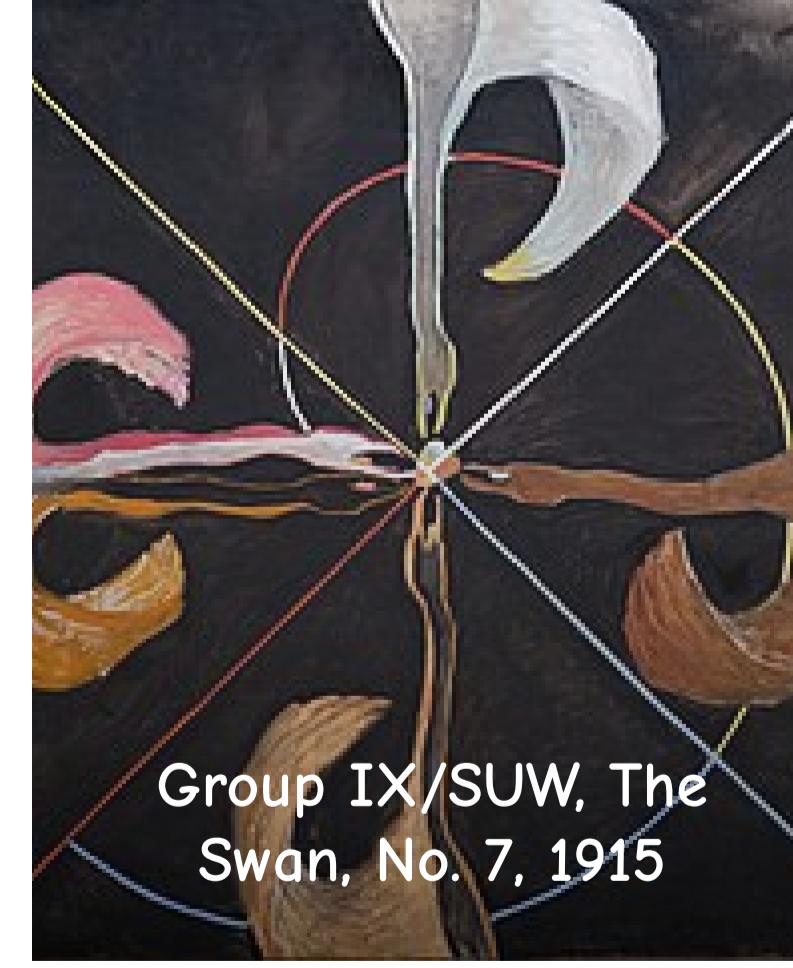
Evolution, No. 13,
Group VI, 1908



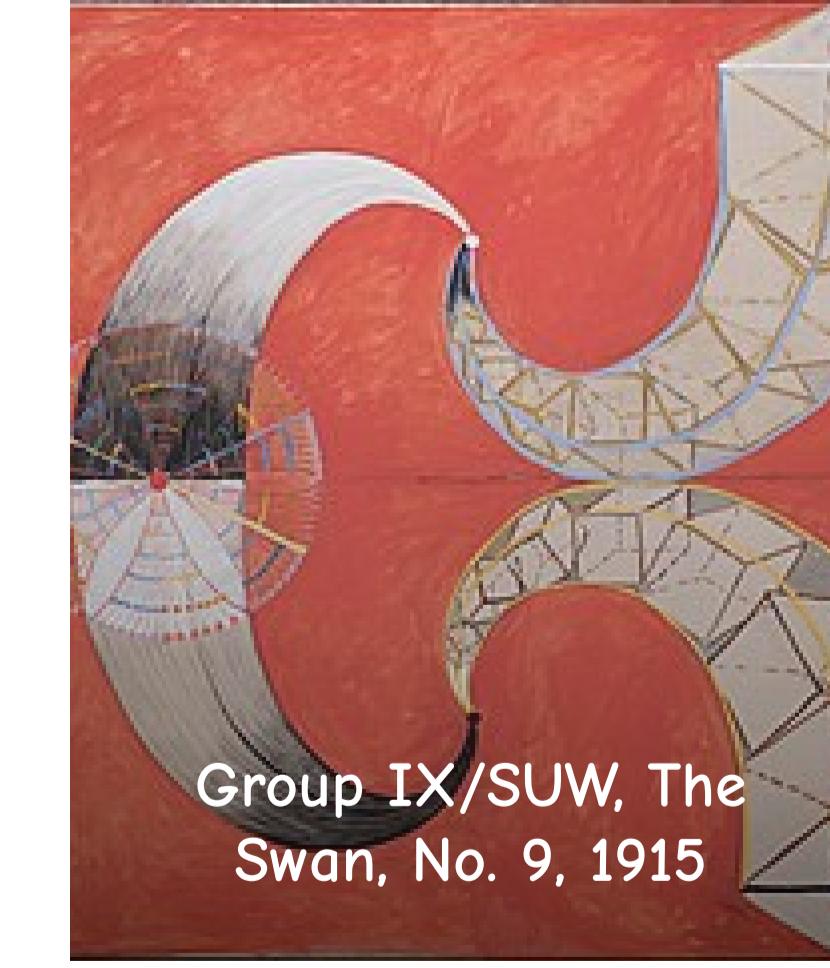
Group IX/UW, No. 25,
The Dove, No. 1, 1915



Group IX/SUW, The
Swan, No. 1, 1915



Group IX/SUW, The
Swan, No. 7, 1915



Group IX/SUW, The
Swan, No. 9, 1915



The Swan, No. 10,
Group IX/SUW, 1915