

When I was a child, a child in a Scottish village, I spent a lot of time looking at paintings with my aunt. She wasn't really my aunt, and they weren't really paintings, but a love of imagined worlds was born on these quiet afternoons. I can see now that we were looking at the sentimentally rural, but I did not see it then and I doubt my aunt did either. Her collection was from the second-hand shop and an old print of harvesting or soft light in the glen were the only mirrors of country life that working people in our community had. I can see now that these views neatly elided the insecurity and violence that agricultural poverty produced in our actual lives, but I was seven and the birds we traced as they flew through a skin of blue also flew through me.

Art is of value if it helps us to live. It does not move political conditions on the ground, but it can move how we feel about them and what we are able to imagine. I started making my own painted worlds after my aunt was gone. They were a place to go, a place I could build from my angle of the light. In time I would realise that not all views are born equal and that sharing my oily visions might be a waiting game, but my aunt had also explained that the light in painting was like the stars for indoors. She thought painted colours travelled as starlight did, from a place of creation often long gone and far away, straight through time to where we were, in her living room, looking. These childhood portals still glow in my mind, but I can see now that the light of the past also has black holes.

In the last decade, the light laid down by Swedish artist Hilma af Klint (1862-1944) has circumnavigated the globe. I recently saw one of her paintings reproduced on a pair of socks, but for a hundred years, almost no museum would put her actual paintings on a wall.<sup>2</sup> When I wandered through *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future* at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2018<sup>3</sup> over half a million others had just done the same thing. Her great series, *The Paintings for the Temple*, was being belatedly recognised as a Modernist break-through and this exhibition had just broken the institution's attendance record. As the twentieth century had barrelled towards its idea of 'progress' however, historians had rejected the notion that these paintings were even art. This happened to the creative work of many women and people of colour, but as that same progress now returns us a toxic storm, the need for other voices, for a different angle of the light, has become insistent.

The most reproduced work within af Klint's series is *The Ten Largest*, 1907. As I sat among these huge panels in the museum, I felt the lifting joy of their unfurling colours, but I also felt the holes, an aspect of their light I was unable to see. Cultural objects accumulate the story of what they are as part of their social life. If they are not valued, this narrative accumulation does not happen, and if they survive at all, their light arrives as a material holder of a history still to be written. These century old brushstrokes are now going through a remarkable delayed socialisation, exhibited around the world, but they were not valued or exhibited in their own time, and the story of this work therefore has gaps.

*The Ten Largest* had been made in a period of intense industrial development and I wondered if this had more impact on the artist than had so far been recognised. Af Klint prioritised her religious beliefs in the notebooks she left, but tracing social connections and activities that she did not choose to write about permitted a different story, one of love and politics, to unfold. I found a life woven into an almost forgotten network of what we might now call feminist activism, of women working in Sweden but part of a wider web of people and ideas that spread across different countries, classes, and times. Their interconnected voices have been shouted out of the historical record, but these suffragettes, social reformers, and anonymous embroiderers created the web of activity that was the necessary support on which these paintings could be made.



Studio view, *The Hague*, 2024  
Photo: Janice McNab

*The Ten Largest* are unique within the artist's oeuvre. They are part of her larger project, and tied to what came before and after, but they are also a singularly tumbling overflow of colour and light. A personal story lies at their core, but as part of an expansive idea about connection that embraces plants, animals, and land, and is tied to an ecological mindset held within Sweden's agrarian past. This was not seen in 1907, but it has become increasingly visible in our current time of environmental distress.

History is always also about the present. We filter the past through the priorities of our own time and as our world spirals into climate chaos, this angle of the light illuminates *The Ten Largest* in a new way. As I was writing, it also began to shine into my studio and the worlds I continue to build there. It came filtered through a 1950's scarf printed with flowers, and with my own thoughts about land. The scarf had belonged to my mother but the shadows of animals and birds that I painted through its patterns first rose through *The Ten Largest*, as the ghostly afterimages of anonymous embroideries.

As the violence caused by climate breakdown increases around us, re-imagining the connections between people and things has become a pressing need, and looking back to previously disregarded ways of living and seeing is one way we might interrogate the numb disconnection of the present. *Galaxy Ballroom* is a dance between now and then and the silk hills of my mother's scarf were painted to a tune that is both an elegy and a love song to a different, still possible future.

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Ottilia Adelborg  
Photo: Swedish National Archive,  
public domain

Ellen Key speaks at a meeting of The  
Women's Political Suffrage Association  
(FKPR), Visingsö, June 20, 1915  
Photo: Jönköping County Museum,  
public domain

Ottilia Adelborg's 1904 diary  
The Ottilia Adelborg Museum, Gagnef,  
Sweden  
Photo: Janice McNab

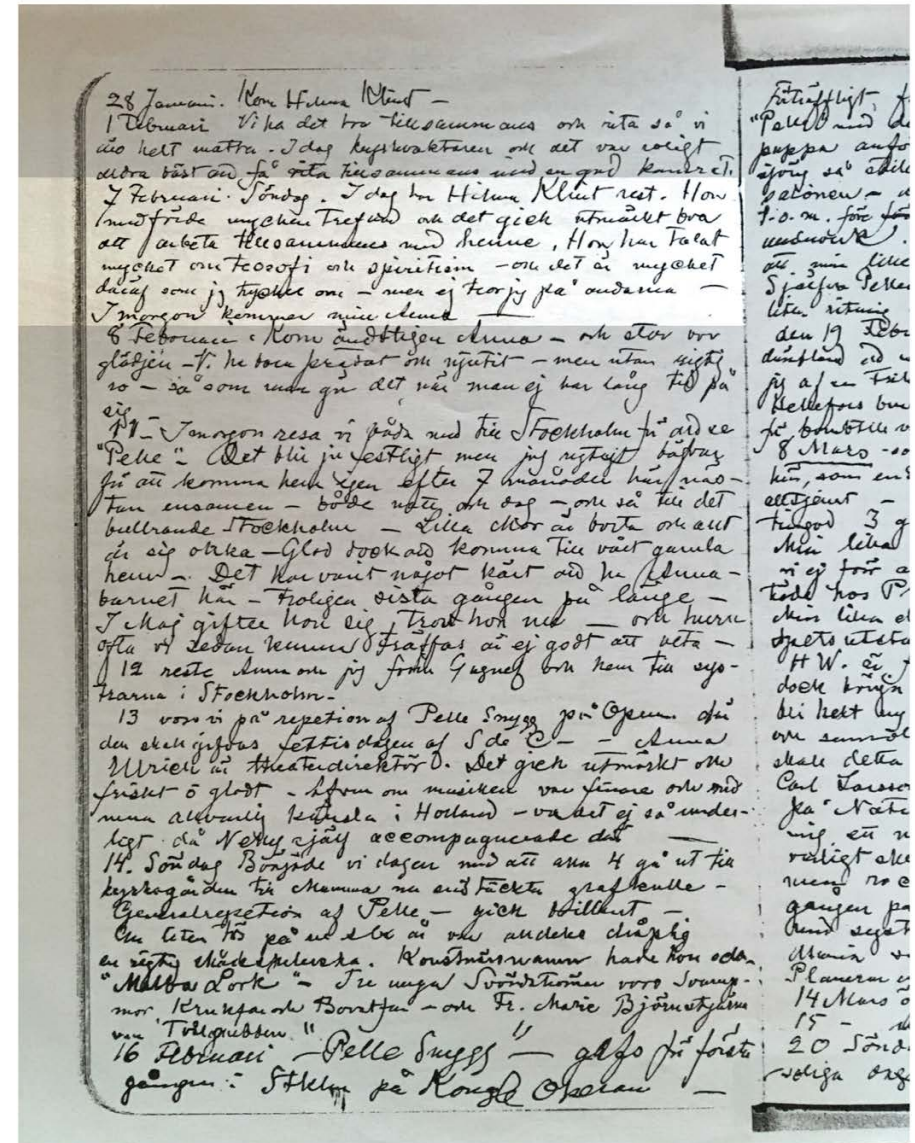


In the 1890's, Hilma af Klint shared a studio with one of Key's followers, the children's author and educator Ottilia Adelborg.<sup>9</sup> In 1903, the same year that *Beauty in the Home* was published, Adelborg moved from Stockholm to Gagnef, a remote village of log cabins and farms in the Dalarna region that railroads had recently made more accessible. Ellen Key's aesthetic revolution was rooted in the life and decorative traditions of this area but many of these families were struggling. Working aged men often had to travel far away to find paid employment and women had become unusually self-reliant in terms of both farming duties and community life. Unlike others who moved to the countryside in this time of change,<sup>10</sup> Adelborg was committed to feminist social reform. She collected historic clothing and handcrafts, but she also built a school where young village women were taught textile techniques by their elders and could earn a scarce cash income selling the lace they learned to make. A 1904 diary entry notes a visit from her friend.

February 7, Sunday. Hilma Klint (sic) 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.<sup>11</sup>

Towards the end of her life, af Klint would write that:

[Ottilia] was brave, preserving, strong and true. What has been the millstone round her neck was her orthodox being. In the next incarnation she must fight to overcome this. (November 11, 1935)<sup>12</sup>





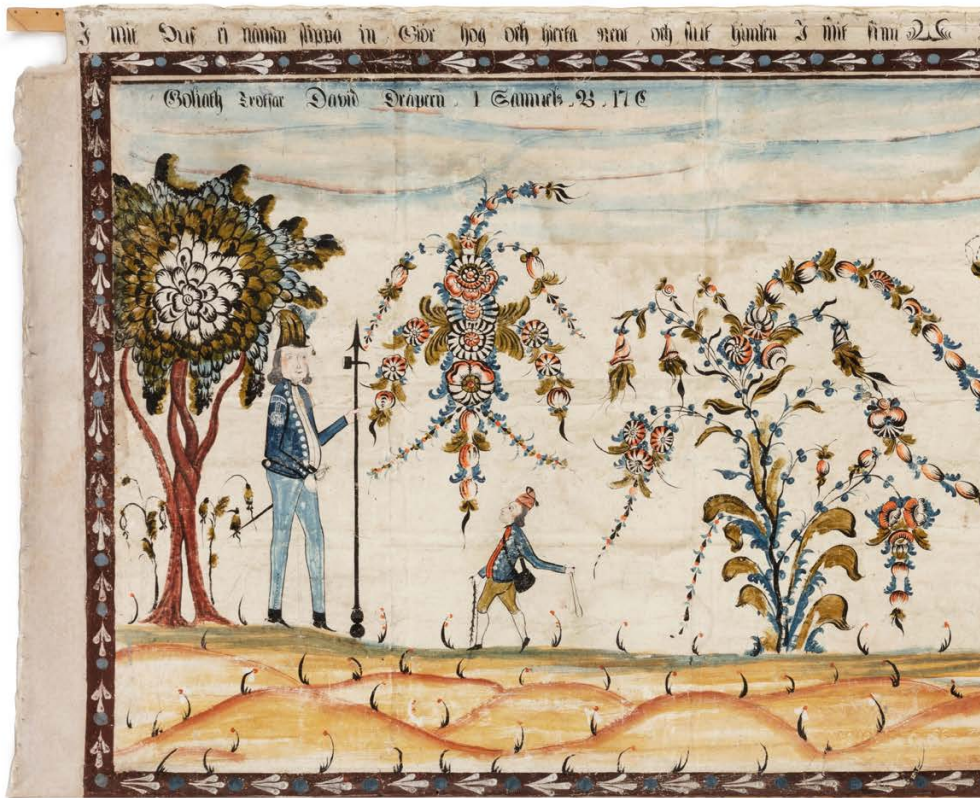
Women's dress bonnet  
Nineteenth century, wool and silk  
Collection Gagnefs Minnestuga, Gagnef  
Photo: Janice McNab

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*The Ten Largest, No. 3*  
*Youth, Group IV, 1907*  
Stiftelsen Hilma af Klints Verk  
Photo: Moderna Museet, Stockholm

The 1903 poster also quotes the cultural obsession of the day, the clothing that defined Sweden's agrarian past. Otilia Adelborg was busy amassing a collection and it still exists, in the house she built in Gagnef.<sup>38</sup> This embroidered tangerine bonnet is one of a number she found, all sewn with the same colours, patterns and structure. In line with the sumptuary history to which it belongs, these patterns are not random, they are designed to encode meaning, and this cap denotes formal dress for the adult women of Gagnef. If we compare it to the freely spiralling tendrils of *The Ten Largest, No. 3, Youth*, we see the same orange ground supporting the petals and fronds of the cap as they deconstruct and float across the tangerine dreamscape of the painting. Curling tendrils and concentric circle flowers spreading from the garden depicted on the cap to the flat surface of the work.







A *kurbits* represents a complex idea of fertility that is tied to biblical stories but also has roots in an earlier vitalist past, and as a more diffuse form, it permeates all ten panels. Dalarna's folk painters would let it soar over their depictions of everyday life, a symbol of the reproductive power of the living world that also found its way onto furniture and clothes. It tends to have a strong central column, but has no absolute form as it is a flower of the imagination, a mutable representative of growth and renewal. In *The Ten Largest*, No. 6, *Adulthood*, its enlarged black flowerhead is reminiscent of those sewn onto women's outdoor hand warmers, which are also recorded in a 1857 watercolour. Af Klint's petals hang above a performative inscription of letters that the flower of 'life itself' seems to release, along with encoded male and female pollen-like circles.



*David and Goliath*, a Dalarna kurbits or Valley Painting by Mats Persson Stadig and Gop Erik Danielsson, Bjursås, 1815  
Dalarna Museum, Falun, DFK 0419-11  
Paint on paper, 303 x 142 cm  
Photo: public domain

Cash money was tight in subsistence communities and the people of Dalarna did not buy expensive oil paintings. Artists moved between villages and would often swap their work for goods rather than money. They had no training and would freely compose imagery in perspective-free patchwork formations. They tended to use large sheets of paper that could be rolled up and stored, ready to be pinned on log cabin walls during the seasonal calendar of festivities that punctuated a rural year. Af Klint once described *The Ten Largest* as 'beautiful wall coverings'<sup>43</sup> and their size, materials, imagery, and compositional logic all appear to pay homage to these *kurbits* paintings.

