



Louise Pound: A Folklore and Literature Miscellany

Volume 1
Number 3 *The Third Issue*

Article 2

October 2022

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Recommended Citation

Welsch, Antonia (2022) "Hilma," *Louise Pound: A Folklore and Literature Miscellany*. Vol. 1: No. 3, Article 2. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/louisepound/vol1/iss3/2>

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HILMA

by **Antonia Welsch**

All the air left my lungs and I sat staring dumbfounded at the screen. I'd heard of coincidences like this before—my dad being a folklorist, interest in such things was more than just a pastime—it basically served as our family's religion. Still, I couldn't quite believe what I was seeing.

It all started about nine months before when I'd made a vision board. A vision board is a very new-age term for a piece of cardboard with pictures glued to it. The thinking goes that if you cut out images from magazines that you are drawn to without thinking of an end purpose or design, they can come together on the board to reveal what wasn't immediately clear before—desires, themes, goals, and so on.

With a glass of wine in hand I went about cutting and pasting. In the center of my board I placed a painting of a pyramid with a golden sun behind it. I wasn't sure which pile of magazines it had come from but it was big and beautiful, with blocks of color making the shape almost look like a path propelling one forward. It was very striking. Around it I filled in other images and quotes that when read together, seemed to encourage me to keep pushing toward my creative goals while at the same time start coming to terms with my still relatively new role as a mother.

It had been a good two years but a hard two years. I was exhausted. I loved my son, deeply, but in that time postpartum had taken its toll on my mental health and it still consistently felt like I was coming up short. On any given day I could be a good writer, a good mother, or a good wife but never all three at once. And if I was being completely honest, rarely just two at once. I liked the strength in my vision board. The hope. The path forward.

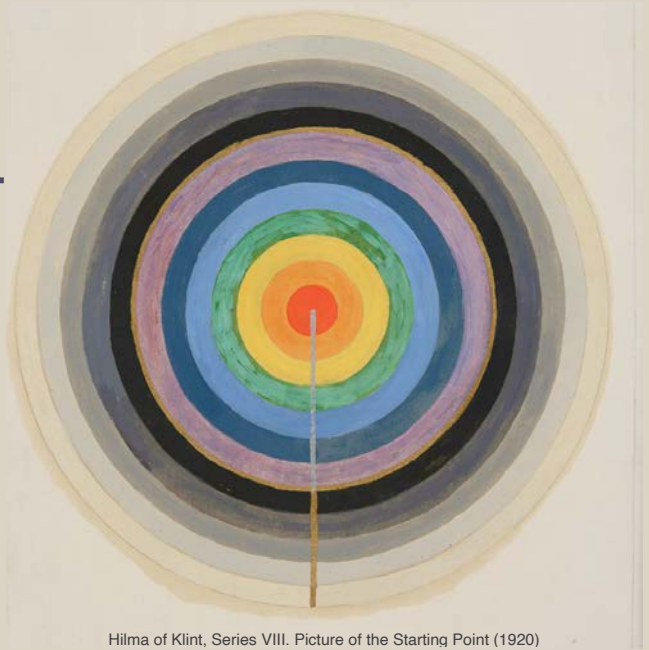
When I was done I put it in my office and life went on. It wasn't until several months later I thought of it again—I was scrolling through Instagram before bed and randomly, along with the entertainment blogs and memes in my feed, there was the pyramid painting.

"Funny," I thought, pausing to look at it. There were the same big blocks of color, the same golden sun. I'd never seen it before I made the vision board and yet here it was all these months later. I hit "like" and kept scrolling.

It took several months but the same thing happened again. Exactly. I was in bed, scrolling, and the pyramid painting appeared in my general feed. This time I paused and looked up toward my dark office across the hall. I knew I couldn't ignore the coincidence. I clicked on the image and whoever had posted it happened to list the artist's name at the top: Hilma af Klint.

I repeated the name. I hadn't heard of her before. I took a screenshot and uploaded it to my own Instagram story. "This painting seems to be following me around..." I wrote, only half joking. "But I love it."

And that's when, well, things intensified.



Hilma af Klint, Series VIII. Picture of the Starting Point (1920)

What I didn't understand was that all of my dad's musings and theories about coincidence happened when I was young, still living at home in the 90s, and at a time the internet didn't really exist. At least not like it does today. It was before social media and likes. Before algorithms and ads. Before small glowing screens that lived in our pockets. And the fact is, whether or not the internet is used for good or evil, it is at its core an amplifier. It takes whatever we put into it and exaggerates it back to us through similar posts, connections, and ideas. By putting my little spark of a coincidence into Instagram, I had effectively added kerosene to the flame. The next morning I was flooded with messages.

"So weird, I was just reading about Hilma af Klint!" a friend wrote. "I love her!"

"Did you see *The New Yorker* did a piece on her?"

"There's a book about her I actually just ordered--it's called *Notes and Methods*."

"Have you seen her other work? She's tremendous."

Suddenly her art was all over my feed and the book that had been recommended to me popped up again and again in the ad section every time I looked up the weather or news.

I learned that in the early 1900s, Klint belonged to a group called, "The Five," a circle of women who shared a belief in trying to contact entities called, "High Masters" by way of séances. The paintings Hilma made were her visual representations of the spiritual ideas delivered to her in these meetings. The pyramid painting was one of a series fondly titled, "Group X Altarpieces Nos. 1-3 (1915)." Despite its contemporary look, it actually (shockingly) far predated all of the modern abstract painters of our time.

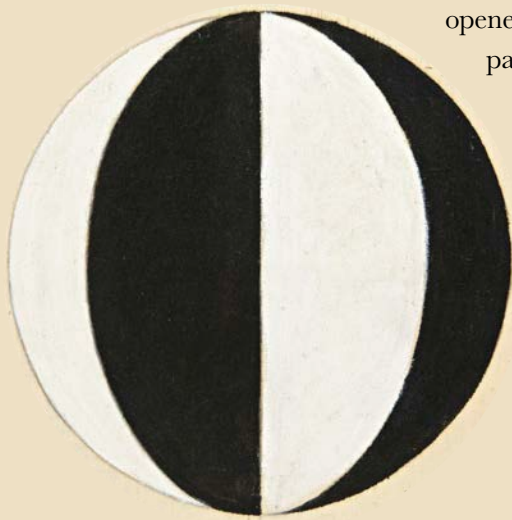
According to *The New Yorker* article, she continued this work of receiving messages and interpreting them until she met with Rudolf Steiner, a well-known Austrian polymath she admired who told her to "give up on the otherworldliness." After that meeting she all but stopped painting for four long years and was never able to recover the "selfless focus and intensity" of her early work. "She had been alone on a peak," the article said. "Until she was cast down by a sense of being seen—and sized up—by what she took to be unimpeachable authority."

I read the sentence a few times over. "She was cast down by a sense of being seen—and sized up—by an unimpeachable authority." I'd never heard a more accurate description of the pressures of modern motherhood in my life. Without hesitation, I clicked over to Google and bought the book, *Notes and Methods*, rush shipping. It was hard to put into words, but I felt connected somehow—seen by her, not because of the internet, but through it.

The day the book was set to arrive, I saw the mail carrier coming and opened my door, taking it directly from her. When I opened the package, I immediately began looking through the paintings and images I'd come to know so well. My hand happened to fall on page 29—a journal entry dated September 16th, 1903. September 16th was my birthday. 80 years after she wrote this.

The text read:

You are bewildered by what we have told you, but the phenomenon we are trying to explain is bewildering. What is this phenomenon, you ask? Well, beloved, it is that which we want to call the secret growing. How often have we heard you say that everything is futile, that nothing comes from all you labors. Yet like amorphous buds your endeavors sprout in all directions. You see everything as formless and you forget that this is a sign of life. Gradually the formlessness takes on more precise contours and the steadily growing roots feed an



Hilma af Klint, No. 2a, The Current Standpoint of the Mahatmas (1920)

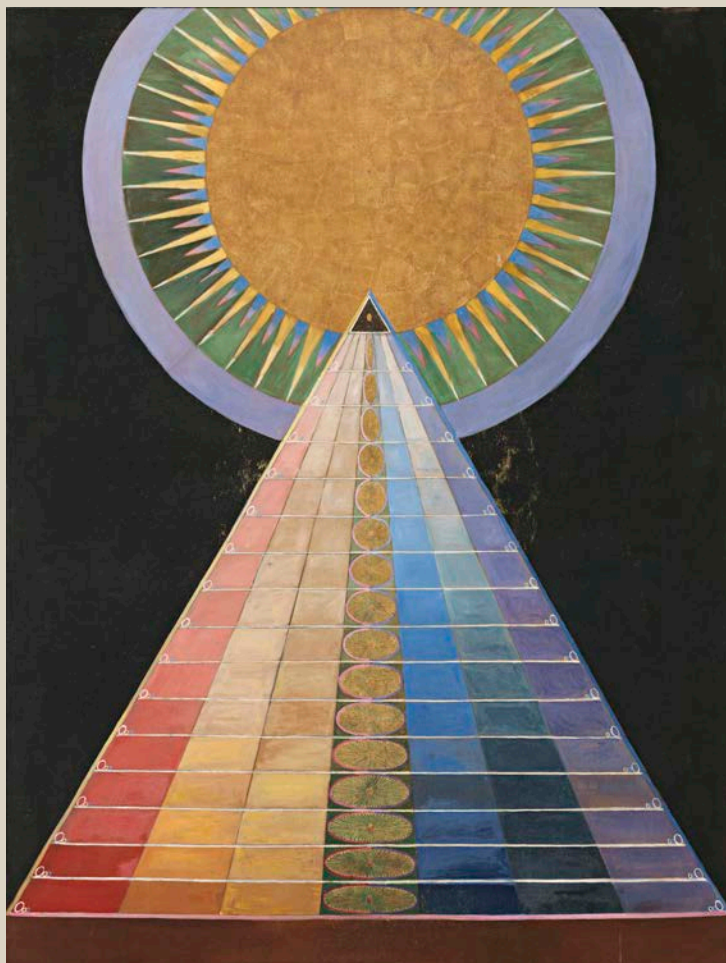
ever stronger plant, which will one day explode with an abundance of leaves and flowers. You know this is so, but you must perceive this knowledge with such vividness that you dare to build on it. You have to feel with certainty that even the smallest effort to grow in goodness leaves a clear trace inside you. When you do not see an outer result, this must not discourage or tire you in your efforts, for just as invisible hands help tend every plant on this green Earth, so every budding sprout of goodness is tended and shaped and protected by invisible powers and when the time comes your eyes will open and you too will see the beautiful plant that grew in secrecy, the product of your noble endeavors and your pure intentions. Accept our account as a greeting from us so that you shall never tire when all seems lost.

It sounds bizarre, but I couldn't help but feel like my life had led up to this. There was no way I could've known when I was making the vision board or when I was posting her painting to Instagram or when I was reading through the think-pieces on her that these were the words I needed to hear. Ached to hear, actually. As a writer. And a mother. And a woman. But most profound of all and the thing I couldn't quite fathom was that it had taken all these long months to get to me.

Later that night, I still felt airy from the revelation. After Henry had fallen asleep, I crawled into bed and opened Instagram. This time I decided to click over to my archive and look at my "memories"—the posts I'd uploaded this same date in years past. And that's when all the air left my lungs and I sat absolutely dumbstruck, staring at my screen.

It was the painting. The pyramid painting. The "Group X Altarpieces Nos. 1-3 (1915)." Flabbergasted, I read the caption next to it. "Here is what you posted on this day five years ago."

How was it possible I'd seen this image so many years before? How was it possible I'd seen it and also posted it *on this day*? How was any of this possible? Breathless, and with my hands still trembling, a smile slowly started to spread across my face. It was all I could do. 80 years. 5 years. 9 months. Pyramids and paintings. Hilma af Klint. Maybe my dad's conclusion was still the right conclusion after all these years and all the advancements in technology. The point isn't really to know or fully understand. All one can do is recognize and be grateful that they were a part of the coincidence. As Hilma herself wrote, "take it as a sign of life... a greeting, so that you shall never tire when all seems lost."



Hilma af Klint, Group X, No. 1, Altarpiece (1920)