

Painting the Cosmos: A Key to the Influence of Theosophy on Modern Art

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IN the past thirty years, much has been said of Theosophy's influence on modern art. This influence, beginning soon after the founding of the Theosophical Society (TS) and reaching a peak at the opening of the twentieth century, was well attested in the early stages of artistic Modernism, its most visible effects emerging in the radical transformation of the visual arts into different lineages of abstraction in painting. This story has been well documented now including the waning of this influence and the general marginalization of the fact of this deep influence for reasons of history, fashion, politics, and inevitability of changing conditions under unfolding cycles.

This condition would persist until the late twentieth century when serendipitous discoveries and those same changing, cyclical conditions would once again push the awareness of these theosophical influences back into the broader consciousness. These currents would take their most manifest form in the exhibition, "The Spiritual in Art: Abstract

Painting, 1890–1985", first staged at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1986, thereafter traveling to Chicago and The Hague. In the exhibition catalog, in essay after essay, art historians of the era demonstrated the foundational influences of Ageless Wisdom traditions on artists of the early twentieth century — most regularly from close readings of theosophists H. P. Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* and Annie Besant's and C. W. Leadbeater's *Thought Forms* — and the continued evidences of this influence into the (then) present.

Today, this exhibition has taken on an almost legendary status among contemporary artists. Currently, there is the sustained exhibition of these historic artworks in a way that likely eclipses their popularity during the lifetimes of the actual artists. Most overtly, the works of Hilma af Klint have travelled the globe to wide acclaim and has shone a light of renewed or new interest into her contemporaries. In America, a traveling exhibition of the Transcendental

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Painting Group (“Another World: The Transcendental Painting Group”) has, for the first time, fully investigated the works of this association of artists, deeply influenced by their theosophical studies.

The recent publication of Carolyn Wayland’s *Painting the Cosmos: A Metaphysical Universe* (Shakti Press, 2021) opens up a unique insight into this history from the perspective of a practicing artist. Across the four sections of *Painting the Cosmos*, Wayland employs her skills as a painter and explanatory proficiencies as a teacher to depict and describe fundamental doctrines of the Ageless Wisdom tradition. The text centers around thirty-three paintings most commonly picturing specific teachings from *The Secret Doctrine*. Attempts at visualizing these metaphysical doctrines have been executed before — James Perkins’s *Visual Meditations on the Universe* (1984) comes most immediately to mind — but it is Wayland’s use of “abstract” painting that is particularly illuminating.

If, as the art history so attests, we can look to the influence of Theosophy as critical to the emergence of abstraction in painting in Europe, America, and beyond, then we can see Wayland’s paintings and the intent behind *Painting the Cosmos* as something like coming full circle or returning to the roots. It is through the very mode of her painterly vocabulary — gestural, expressive, symbolic colors and geometric forms — that we can trace this artistic language back to its source in those artists of a century ago who first attempted this same effort in the modern era. Conse-

quentially, we can use the thirty-three paintings presented in *Painting the Cosmos* as a lens to better understand this theosophic influence.

Although aimed at a wider audience who might be unfamiliar with the metaphysics of the Ageless Wisdom traditions and the history and influences of the TS, an audience which Wayland capably addresses in the preface and introduction, the persistent reader will begin to notice a certain formal vocabulary which resonates with historic, twentieth-century abstract painting. That is to say, in the act of painting inspired by passages from *The Secret Doctrine*, Wayland arrives at a series of works which seem to recapitulate the visual language of abstract painting of the previous century.

It is the pairing of this formal vocabulary with specific, fundamental concepts (the first fundamental proposition, *pralaya*, periodicity, and so on) and, importantly, associated quotations from *The Secret Doctrine* itself (“... let him set out with the postulate that there is one absolute Reality which antecedes all manifested, conditioned being”, and so forth) which shines a strong and clarifying light into the influence of Theosophy on modern art.

Although much has been written about this influence, it is almost always in the most general sense. Vanishingly few are the art historical scholars with a strong command of the metaphysics and associated theosophic texts; even rarer is the contemporary artist with this same perspective. Thus, I would like to look at a

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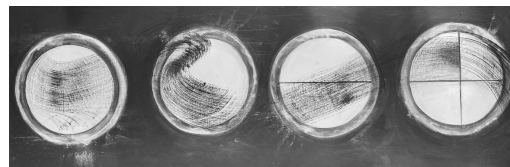
few examples from Wayland's effort in comparison to art historical analogues to further emphasize this point.

Fittingly, Wayland opens the introduction with a quote from Piet Mondrian. Comparing the paintings made during that artist's transition into abstraction during the 1910s (Mondrian became a member of the TS in 1909) with Wayland's painting and comments in the "Cosmic Evolution" section makes clear the relationship I wish to highlight. In "Cosmic Evolution", Wayland presents the first four stages of the famous sequence of sacred geometry from *The Secret Doctrine's* "Proem" along with a summary of the related text:

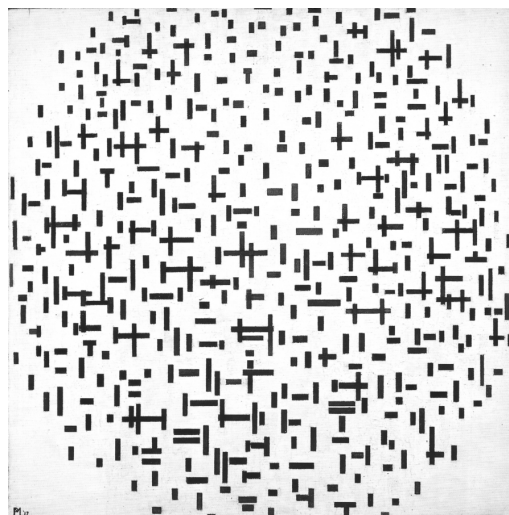
After this, time and space manifest, symbolized by the horizontal line dividing the circle in half. The vertical line further divides the circle into the duality of spirit and matter, which are not two independent principles but two aspects of the absolute reality.

If we use this presentation as a lens to consider the early abstract works of Mondrian — for instance, *Composition with Lines* (*Composition in Black and White*) from 1917 — one notes immediately the same formal elements: the ellipse, the horizontal line, and the vertical line. Indeed, it is this very doctrine that Mondrian aimed to embody in his "*Nieuwe Beelding*" ("Neoplasticist") works: a cosmic harmony of the union of "vibrations of energy" represented by horizontal and vertical lines. Wayland's rendering of "Cosmic Evolution" and Mondrian's "*Nieuwe Beelding*" are in fact near equivalents, inspired by both artists'

study of the same aspects of *The Secret Doctrine*.



"Cosmic Evolution" by Wayland



"Nieuwe Beelding" by Mondrian

Continuing, I want to jump ahead to a later work in Part III of Wayland's *Painting the Cosmos*: "The Identity of All Souls with the Universal Over-Soul". Here the artist pairs quotations from *The Secret Doctrine* discussing the soul and Over-Soul with her own summary:

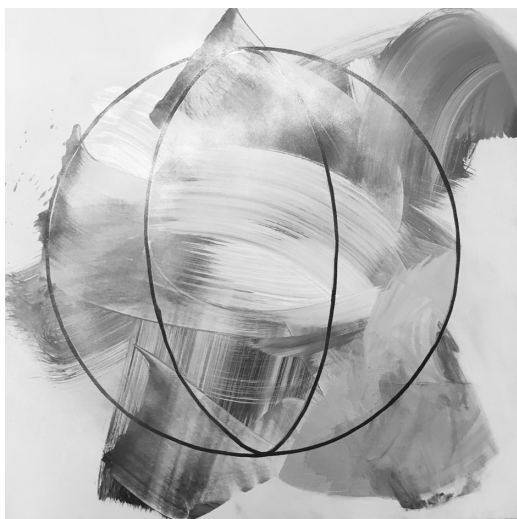
Every form, every being, is a spark of this universal Over-Soul or 'spirit', which is its essential identity and connection with all other beings.

She pairs this with an intriguing image: a circle containing a vertical, pointed oval shape, a *vesica piscis*. With this pairing of image and words, I want to now look

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again at another historic artist known for his commitments to the Ageless Wisdom, traditions and study of *The Secret Doctrine*: Emil Bisttram, cofounder of the American Transcendental Painting Group (1938-1942). Here Bisttram's *Cosmic Egg* series — produced in the 1930s during the artist's embrace of abstract compositions — is particularly illuminating; one in particular, *Creative Forces* (1936), has an element I would like to highlight. Setting aside momentarily the cluster of prismatic forms that occupy the lower two-thirds of the painting (I will return to that next) and instead focusing on the upper third, we see again the same element from Wayland's depiction of the Over-Soul: the *vesica piscis*. In this case, we have Bisttram's own words to confirm my argument. He describes these colored rays as having

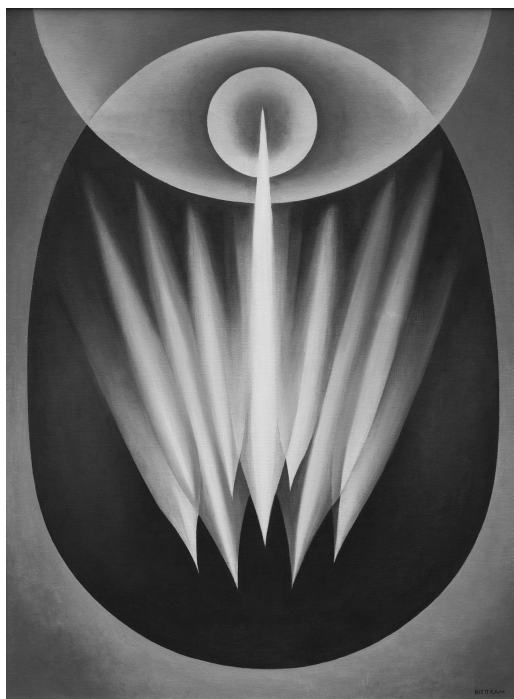
... received their source out of the One, which is within the egg and yet outside of



"Over Soul" by Wayland

it, the One being suspended of another still larger egg, or Infinity.

Both artists have homed in on the shape produced by the overlapping disks and the conceptual implications of this formal arrangement to depict this doctrine: unity and diversity yet all inseparable from a greater totality. As an artist myself, I find their solution particularly elegant and evocative.



"Creative Forces" by Bisttram

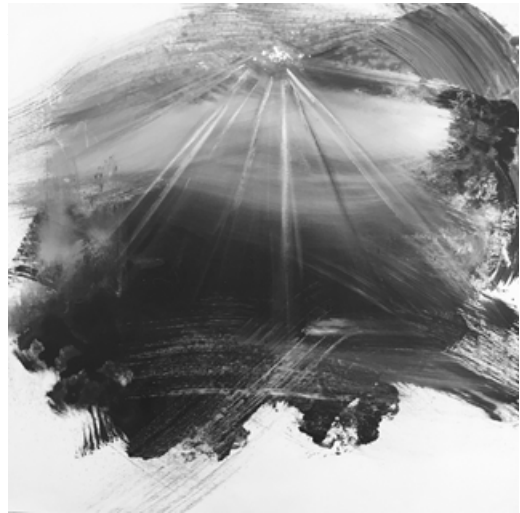
Finally, I want to address a third section and artwork from *Painting the Cosmos*, "The Seven Rays: Seven Creative Forces". In this section, Wayland presents a brief summary of the doctrine of the Seven Rays including a list of corresponding qualities attributed to each Ray:

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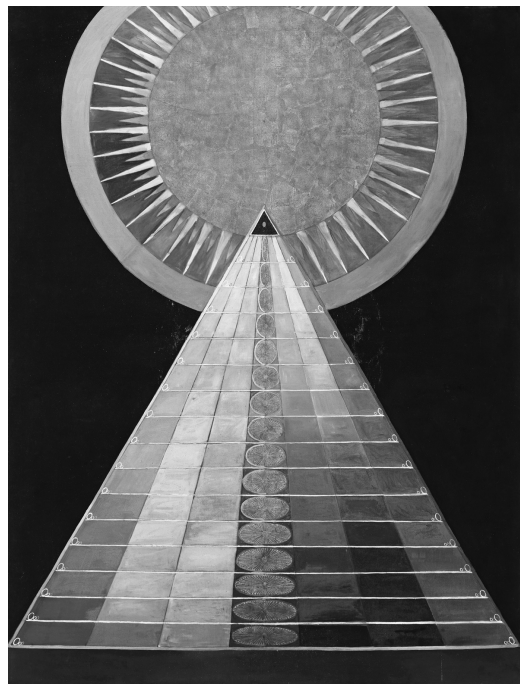
They are the primeval seven rays, each ray representing both a manifestation of the supreme and an eternal truth or quality.

She pairs this discussion with an image of seven beams of light emanating from a cluster of white points, the entire element forming a triangle against a ground of black and white brush strokes. Circling back to Bisttram's *Creative Forces* — if it was not abundantly clear already — it is unambiguously that artist's effort to visualize the same doctrine. However, to really emphasize the point and underline how often representations of the Seven Rays appear in the work of modern, theosophically influenced artists, let us look to another historical example and what is likely the most well-known of the same: Hilma af Klint's *Group X, Altarpieces, No. 1* (1915).

Indeed, both Wayland and af Klint settle on a similar composition in their visualizations: a triangle of colored rays emanating from a common point, from red on the left to violet on the right, on a field of black. Although I am not yet aware of any statements by af Klint definitively linking the specific doctrine to this painting, the many facts of her biography and historical context produce overwhelming evidence for the connection. Scholarship has established that *The Secret Doctrine* was a subject of study for The Five, the group of quasi-spiritualist peers that af Klint met with regularly around the turn of the previous century. Indeed, she had a copy of *The Secret Doctrine* in her personal library until she died: the foundation that bears her name



"Seven Rays" by Wayland



"Group X" by af Klint

possesses this copy to this day. Regardless, to those familiar with ageless wisdom teachings, the intent is abundantly

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evident and Wayland's presentation further bolsters the point. As I stated at the beginning, the theosophical influence on modern art is well established now. There is really no ground to assert otherwise. However, as much as the fact of this relationship is unassailable, its specific character — between inspiring doctrine and artistic form — is so far only loosely understood, especially to the contemporary artist, art historian, and general public. I believe this presents an uncommon opportunity for the student of the Ageless Wisdom traditions. I picked three examples here guided by the parallels I

observed when first reading Carolyn Wayland's *Painting the Cosmos*; it is in no way an exhaustive investigation of either the book or the art historical record. I hope this inquiry will encourage others to look more closely and with a different lens at the art of the twentieth century — especially abstract painting — and reflect on how this historic influence might be continuing to unfold in this present cycle today.

(*Painting the Cosmos* is published by Shakti Press, an imprint of Fohat Productions, and is available via their website fohatproductions.com)

Kandinsky points out [in his book *The Spiritual in Art*] that Theosophy (in its true sense; not as it generally appears) is yet another expression of the same spiritual movement which we are now seeing in Painting.

Piet Mondrian