

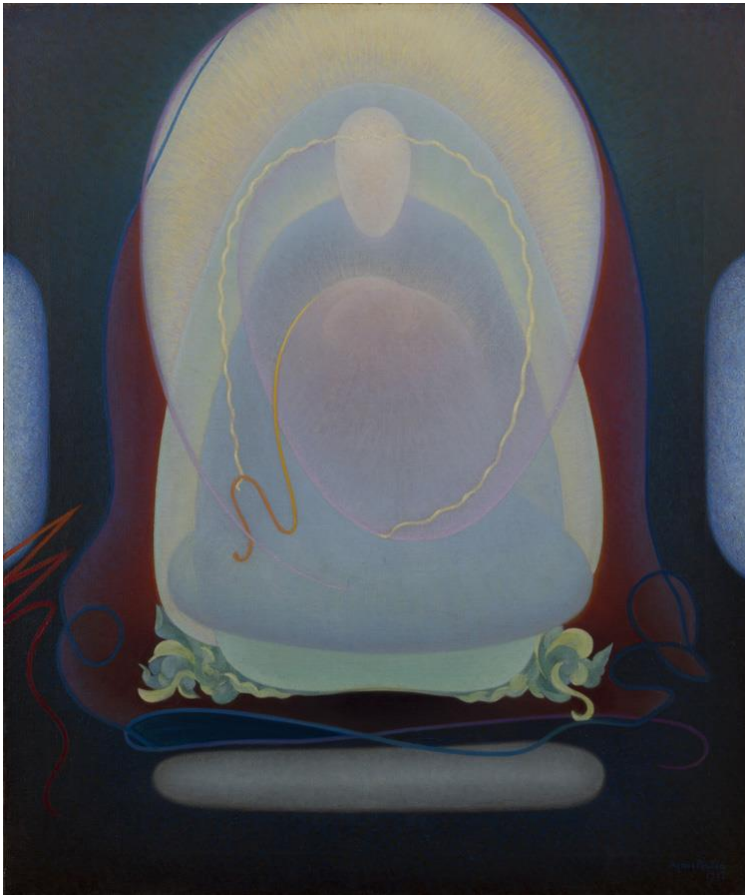
WHITNEY

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PRESS RELEASE



Agnes Pelton, *Mother of Silence*, 1933. Oil on canvas, 30 × 25 in. (76.2 × 63.5 cm). Private collection

LANDMARK EXHIBITION OF THE WORK OF AGNES PELTON, UNSUNG VISIONARY PAINTER OF THE SUBLIME, TO OPEN AT THE WHITNEY IN MARCH

NEW YORK, NY, December 16, 2019—*Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist* is the first solo exhibition devoted to Pelton (1881–1961), a pioneer of American abstraction, in twenty-five years. Consisting of forty-five luminous canvases made between 1917 and 1961, the exhibition is a rare opportunity to experience Pelton’s profoundly spiritual body of work and to confirm her place in art history. Organized by the Phoenix Art Museum, it opens at the Whitney Museum of American Art on March 13 and runs through June 21, 2020.

“In complicated and turbulent times like these, Pelton’s paintings touch us through their vivid color and dreamy intimacy,” said Scott Rothkopf, Senior Deputy Director and Nancy and Steve Crown Family Chief Curator. “As with our recent focused surveys of Archibald Motley and Grant Wood, this exhibition highlights our commitment to rethink and rediscover historical figures, thereby providing a more complex and inclusive view of American art.”

Whitney curator Barbara Haskell, who is overseeing the installation in New York with Sarah Humphreville, senior curatorial assistant, noted, “Agnes Pelton spent her career channeling her flashes of heightened spiritual consciousness into luminous visual images, creating what she called ‘windows of illumination’ opening onto a radiant spiritual world. Her work takes us on an inner journey.”

After originating at the Phoenix Art Museum, the exhibition was seen at the [New Mexico Museum of Art](#), prior to coming to the Whitney. Following the New York presentation, it will travel to the [Palm Springs Art Museum](#), August 1–November 29, 2020.

Agnes Pelton harnessed abstract forms and shimmering veils of color to portray the spiritual enlightenment she experienced in dreams and meditation. Exposure to Wassily Kandinsky's book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, in which the Russian abstract painter called upon artists to express their inner, spiritual lives through abstract form, led Pelton to embrace abstraction.

Her depictions in the 1910s of dreamlike, single female figures communing with nature were well received. In the mid-1920s, she turned her attention away from this subject matter to focus on the unseen, spiritual world. Her concurrent move to Water Mill, Long Island, and subsequently to Cathedral City, a small community near Palm Springs, California, isolated her from the mainstream art world, which took little notice of her symbolic abstract paintings. Her greatest support came from the short-lived Transcendental Painting Group of New Mexico (1938–1942), a collection of artists who shared her belief that abstract art could transport viewers to enlightened realms. Not until her first retrospective in 1995 did her luminous images of transcendent enlightenment begin to receive their due.

Like Georgia O'Keeffe, a contemporary with whom she is sometimes compared, Pelton studied with Arthur Wesley Dow. Both artists shared an affinity for the landscapes of the Southwest. Pelton painted conventional desert landscapes and portraits to make a living, but she continued to hone her symbolic abstractions throughout her career. It was her abstract studies of earth and light and biomorphic compositions of delicate veils, shimmering stars, and atmospheric horizon lines that would eventually distinguish her body of work. Relatively unknown during her lifetime, Pelton and her work have remained underrepresented within the field of American art until today.

Pelton's artistic breakthrough came in the mid-1920s with a series of works depicting intangible subject matter: air, light, water, and sound. Soon thereafter, Kandinsky's insistence that art has an obligation to lead viewers to spiritual awareness merged with Pelton's immersive study of Theosophy, the occult philosophy established in the United States in the late 19th century by Helena Blavatsky, which taught that humans are divine entities who desire to return to their spiritual home in the world beyond the material. Under the influence of these dual inspirations, Pelton modified her motifs, combining occult symbols such as stars, mountains, and fire with a formal vocabulary of curvilinear, geometric forms and layers of delicate color to symbolize the journey from earthly concerns to transcendent reality.

Music played a large role in Pelton's early life. Her mother ran the Pelton School of Music, and Pelton studied piano throughout her teenage years. The subject matter of *Being* (1926), Pelton's first totally original abstraction, is the ineffable ethereality of music and its connection to color, which functioned for Pelton like a "voice" or "vibration," filling the viewer's consciousness. Looking back on *Being* in 1929, she wrote that its dynamism resulted from the "interplay of different color vibrations—colors catching the eye excessively as sequence of sound in music."

Pelton studied Agni Yoga, a practice based on the idea of fire as a metaphor for the powerful yet dematerialized force that exists within each person and can guide the individual to higher consciousness. Inspired by her study of the discipline, Pelton included fire imagery in a number of her works to symbolize the "Creative fire of the Universe" within herself and others that she expressed in her abstractions. As she noted in her journal, "In the fire world I perceive beauty in the abstract as a living power." Concurrent with her investigation of Agni Yoga, stars too began to appear as a key motif in Pelton's work in the late 1920s, serving as guides to the far-off realm of spiritual enlightenment. Pelton wrote about stars as "messengers," symbols of "transcendent light, answering through darkness the rising peaks of aspiration."

The dreams and visions Pelton depicted in her paintings often took the form of narratives that portrayed the journey from the darkness and oppression of the earthly world to the realm of enlightenment. In *Ahmi in Egypt* (1931), part of the Whitney's permanent collection, a white swan—a traditional symbol for the female body—proceeds on the blood-red river of life, from the dark chaos of earthly concerns to the divine light of transcendence, as represented by the star in the distance. For Pelton, water, a frequent motif, symbolized selflessness. Having no shape of its own but instead assuming the shape of its container, it is the archetypal

emblem of acquiescence and acceptance. In *Sea Change* (1931), also a work from the Whitney's collection, the movement of water serves as a metaphor for spiritual energy and the relinquishing of ego. After moving to California, Pelton derived continued inspiration from the desert's vast, uncluttered expanse.

Many of the mystics who were central to Pelton's spiritual development were women, from Theosophy's founder Madame Blavatsky and her successors, Katherine Tingle and Annie Besant, to Helena Roerich, whose transcriptions of her clairvoyant séances with Blavatsky's invisible guru Master Morya formed the core of Agni Yoga's teachings. Pelton copied extensive passages in longhand in her journal of mystic texts, especially the lectures and teachings of Blavatsky. Pelton's painting *Barna Dilae* (1935) is a portrait of one of the artist's female "spirit guides."

Central to several of Pelton's late works—*Interval* (1950), *Departure* (1952), and *Light Center* (1960-61)—is the form of the circle, a form with no beginning and no end. It has often been used by artists to suggest infinity and self-contained harmony. Not surprisingly, given Pelton's belief that art should convey "the interpretation of the higher possibilities of vision," she often incorporated circles in her compositions, as in *Interval*, where one appears as a calm radiance at the center of a storm.

Curatorial Credit

Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist is organized by the Phoenix Art Museum, and curated by Gilbert Vicario, The Selig Family Chief Curator. The installation at the Whitney Museum is overseen by Barbara Haskell, curator, with Sarah Humphreville, senior curatorial assistant.

Exhibition Support

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About the Whitney

The Whitney Museum of American Art, founded in 1930 by the artist and philanthropist Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (1875–1942), houses the foremost collection of American art from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Mrs. Whitney, an early and ardent supporter of modern American art, nurtured groundbreaking artists at a time when audiences were still largely preoccupied with the Old Masters. From her vision arose the Whitney Museum of American Art, which has been championing the most innovative art of the United States for more than eighty years. The core of the Whitney's mission is to collect, preserve, interpret, and exhibit American art of our time and serve a wide variety of audiences in celebration of the complexity and diversity of art and culture in the United States. Through this mission and a steadfast commitment to artists themselves, the Whitney has long been a powerful force in support of modern and contemporary art and continues to help define what is innovative and influential in American art today.

Current and Upcoming Exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art

The Whitney's Collection: Selections from 1900 to 1965	Ongoing
Jason Moran	Through January 5, 2020
Order and Ornament: Roy Lichtenstein's Entablatures	Through April 2020
Pope.L: Choir	Through March 8, 2020
Rachel Harrison Life Hack	Through January 12, 2020
Alan Michelson: Wolf Nation	Through January 12, 2020
Making Knowing: Craft in Art 1950–2019	November 22, 2019–January 2021
fruits, vegetables; fruit and vegetable salad	January 15–February 17, 2020
Cauleen Smith: Mutualities	February 17–May 17, 2020
Vida Americana: Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1925–1945	February 17–May 17, 2020
Jill Mulleady	On View March 2020
Salman Toor: How Will I Know	March 20–July 5, 2020

Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist	March 13–June 21, 2020
Dave McKenzie: The Story I Tell Myself	April–May 2020
Prints from Everyday Objects	June–September 2020
Julie Mehretu	June 26–September 20, 2020
Working Together: The Photographers of the Kamoinge Workshop	July–October 2020
Around Day's End: Downtown New York, 1970–1986	July–October 2020
My Barbarian	Opens September 2020
Public Art Project: David Hammons: Day's End	Opens September 2020
Jasper Johns	Opens October 28, 2020
Dawoud Bey: An American Project	Opens November 2020

The Whitney Museum of American Art is located at 99 Gansevoort Street between Washington and West Streets, New York City. Museum hours are: Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday from 10:30 am to 6 pm; Friday from 10:30 am to 10 pm. Closed Tuesday except in July and August. Adults: \$25. Full-time students, visitors 65 & over, and visitors with disabilities: \$18. Visitors 18 years & under and Whitney members: FREE. Admission is pay-what-you-wish on Fridays, 7–10 pm. For general information, please call (212) 570-3600 or visit whitney.org.

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