

Agnes Pelton (1881–1961) strove to portray a spiritual realm beyond material appearances. Her artistic breakthrough came in the mid-1920s in a series of abstract paintings depicting incorporeal subject matter such as air, light, water, and sound. In the decades that followed, as she began to immerse herself in the study of esoteric and occult philosophies, her imagery evolved. She paired the emotive power of ethereal abstract forms with delicate, shimmering veils of color and mystical symbols such as stars, mountains, and fire to represent the union with “Divine Reality” that she experienced in dreams and meditation. She once described her process of meticulously applying thin layers of pigment to create subtle, luminous hues as “painting with a moth’s wing and with music instead of paint.”

Pelton received little critical encouragement for her abstract paintings during her lifetime as a result of living away from the mainstream art world for most of her career, first in the relatively secluded East End of Long Island and later in the Southern California desert. To earn even a modest income, she painted portraits and realistic landscapes that she sold to friends and tourists. Her greatest support came from artists in the short-lived Transcendental Painting Group of New Mexico (active between 1938 and 1941), who shared her belief that abstract art could be a vehicle for transporting viewers to enlightened realms. *Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist* offers an important opportunity to experience the work of this previously little-known artist, and to contemplate her efforts to open “windows of illumination” onto the spiritual world.

Hear from artists, the exhibition’s curator, and scholars at whitney.org/Guide or rent a Mobile Guide.

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