

Room Decoration in Purple and Gray, 1917

Oil on canvas

The Wolfsonian—Florida International University, Miami Beach;
the Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection

Pelton described this mural as expressing “twilight ecstasy and [the] poetic beauty of night.” It was the culmination of her “Imaginative Paintings,” a group of works that depicted female figures communing with nature in dreamlike landscapes. Pelton achieved some success in New York in the 1910s with these paintings, showing two of them in the 1913 Armory Show—the exhibition that introduced vanguard European art to American audiences of the time—and in a seminal group exhibition at the prestigious Knoedler Galleries in 1917. Arthur Brisbane, an influential Hearst newspaper editor and brother of Alice Brisbane Thursby, a collector and primary champion of Pelton’s work in the 1910s, commissioned this mural for his apartment in Washington, DC. Pelton moved to Water Mill, New York, in 1921, soon after the death of her mother, with whom she had lived for most of her life. By 1926 the free-form lines in this composition’s background would become the central elements of her abstract paintings.

The Fountains, 1926

Oil on canvas

Collection of Georgia and Michael de Havenon

Water motifs appear frequently in Pelton's work. She described *The Fountains*, which features cascading water and an opalescent mist, as "an emanation of pure thought." The painting's original title, *The Fountains—Love*, suggests the benevolent energies animating and protecting life. Having no shape of its own but instead assuming the form of its container, water was the archetypal symbol of selflessness and acquiescence. For Pelton, water's ability to change shape signified transformation, psychic growth, and spiritual union.

Being, 1926

Oil on canvas

Private collection

The subject of *Being*, Pelton's first fully abstract painting, is air, whose currents coalesce here into circling bands of color. Like many artists of her generation, Pelton saw a connection between color and the experience of music. Music had played a significant role in Pelton's early life. Her mother ran the Pelton School of Music in Brooklyn, and Pelton studied piano throughout her teenage years. She wrote in her journal that the dynamism of *Being* resulted from the "interplay of different color vibrations—colors catching the eye successively as sequence of sounds in music."

The Guide, 1929

Oil on canvas

Orange County Museum of Art, California; museum purchase with funds provided through prior gift of Lois Outerbridge

Stars became a key motif in Pelton's work in the late 1920s, concurrent with her intense investigation of the spiritual practice known as Agni Yoga, which was founded in 1920 by the Russian Theosophists Nicholas Roerich (1874–1947) and Helena Roerich (1879–1955). In Agni Yoga, stars are guides to the far-off realm of spiritual enlightenment, symbols of divine knowledge. Pelton wrote about stars as “messengers” of “transcendent light, answering through darkness the rising peaks of aspiration.”

Sea Change, 1931

Oil on canvas

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of Lois and Irvin Cohen 99.64

Pelton's *Sea Change* depicts the movement of water, which the artist regarded as a metaphor for spiritual transformation and the relinquishment of ego. Like many artists of her generation, she was deeply influenced by Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) and his 1911 book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. His theories affirmed her own belief in the inherent spirituality of art, as well as the need to dispense with realism in favor of painting from what the Russian artist called the “vibrations of the soul.” Like Kandinsky, Pelton believed that art communicates the universal energies of both the seen and unseen world through color, which functions like “voice” or a “vibration” filling the viewer’s consciousness. In her journal, she described the blue in this picture as an “emotive color of astral body and astral wave” and the work’s pale azure blue as a “mystic blue . . . astral and spiritual.”

Art historian Suzanne Hudson discusses Pelton’s spirituality.

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Ahmi in Egypt, 1931

Oil on canvas

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from the Modern Painting and Sculpture Committee 96.175

The dreams and visions Pelton depicted in her paintings often took narrative form. In this picture, a white swan—a traditional symbol for the female body—sails on a blood-red river of life, from the dark chaos of earthly concerns to transcendence and ultimate enlightenment, as represented by the star in the distance.

Mount of Flame, 1932

Oil on canvas

University of New Mexico Art Museum, Albuquerque; bequest of Raymond Jonson, Raymond Jonson Collection 82.221.1950

Mountains, for Pelton, symbolized personal growth. Here, she underscores their transformative power by picturing them as host to ascending flames, which were central to Agni Yoga, a spiritual discipline based on fire as a metaphor for the powerful yet dematerialized inner force that can guide each individual to higher consciousness. Inspired by her study of the discipline, Pelton included fire imagery in a number of her works to signify 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 perceived beauty in the Abstract as a living power.”

Curator Barbara Haskell describes Pelton’s flame imagery.

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Sand Storm, 1932

Oil on canvas

Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas 2012.504

Pelton created this work in 1932, several days after moving from Long Island to Cathedral City, California, a small community near Palm Springs, where she witnessed a sand storm whose formlessness fascinated her. She described the picture's central image as a "pale, clear blue sky" ringed by clouds "seen through sand." The rainbow beneath this image symbolizes the essential benevolence she saw in the universe. For the rest of her life, Pelton derived inspiration from the desert's vast, spare expanse.

Artist Carrie Moyer talks about symmetry, color, and nature.



The Primal Wing, 1933

Oil on canvas

The San Diego Museum of Art; gift of the artist 1934.12

To Pelton, wings were metaphorical supports for the inner life force. In her journal, she described them as "moving, vibrating" with the whole universe, a testament to her belief in the connection between even the smallest elements of nature and great cosmic truths.

Mother of Silence, 1933

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Mother of Silence portrays the universe's divine feminine force, or World Mother as it is known in Theosophy. A spiritual movement focused on self-knowledge and encompassing ideas such as karma and reincarnation, Theosophy was developed in the late nineteenth century by Helena Blavatsky, a Russian émigré to the United States. Pelton depicts the figure as a "Mighty Angel" on a throne of jade, encircled by an ethereal glow. To Pelton, the image was a living presence to which she could turn for guidance. Several of her journal entries record the questions she asked of it and the answers she received.

Artist Mary Weatherford discusses silence in this painting.



Intimation, 1933

Oil on canvas

Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody; courtesy John Raimondi Gallery, Palm Beach Gardens, Florida

Pelton's study of Agni Yoga deeply influenced her spiritual philosophy and her subject matter. Photographs from the time suggest that *Intimation* depicts Nicholas Roerich, the Russian mystic who co-developed and promoted Agni Yoga with his wife, Helena. The subject's intense gaze, the amplified white of his eyes, and the halo of light around his head mark him as one of the "ascended masters" of Theosophy and Agni Yoga who have attained enlightenment.

Even Song, 1934

Oil on canvas

Collection of Leighanne Stainer

In *Even Song*, an inner glow illuminates a ceramic urn, used in many religions to hold the ashes of the dead. Pelton originally called the work *Attainment*, suggesting that this light symbolizes unity with divine fire in the afterlife. Like many of Pelton's paintings, *Even Song* functions like an Orthodox Christian icon, offering viewers a glimpse into the divine realm that awaits those who seek enlightenment while on earth. "Evensong" is the common name for the Anglican Christian church service held in the late afternoon or early evening that involves singing and music. Pelton's reference to it in her title reinforces the painting's connection to prayer and the afterlife.

Barna Dilae, 1935

Oil on canvas

UCI Institute and Museum for California Art, Irvine; the Buck Collection

This painting portrays a female "spirit guide." Many of the mystics central to Pelton's spiritual development were women, including Theosophy's founder, Helena Blavatsky; her successors Katherine Tingley and Annie Besant; and Helena Roerich, whose transcriptions of her séances with Blavatsky's invisible guru Master Morya formed the core of Agni Yoga's teachings. Pelton copied by hand long passages of mystical texts, especially the lectures and teachings of Blavatsky, into her journal.

Resurgence, 1938

Oil on canvas

Collection of Lynda and Stewart Resnick

In this painting, initially titled *Flight*, the triangular shape thrusting from the frozen landscape and pointing to a bright star signals spiritual movement from worldly problems toward a higher plane of consciousness. The image reflects Pelton's understanding that struggles on earth must be transcended in order to attain divine enlightenment.

Future, 1941

Oil on canvas

Palm Springs Art Museum, California; 75th Anniversary gift of Gerald E. Buck in memory of Bente Buck, Best Friend and Life Companion

Pelton painted *Future* as "a kind of 'Pilgrim's Progress,'" a guide for viewers from the chaos of the earthly world to the realm of enlightenment. To reach the "mountain of aspiration" in the distance, one had to journey "through darkness and oppression, across a stony desert . . . Through a symbolic arch is seen a mountain of vision, above which open by degrees, windows of illumination." Floating in the liminal space between earth and sky, the four glowing rectangles in the picture represented lighted rooms offering solace and comfort. To enter them, one first had to pass through "pillars not heavy but solid, of stone-like forms."

The Blest, 1941

Oil on canvas

Collection of Georgia and Michael de Havenon

The Blest portrays a group of shadowy, abstracted figures who have transcended their physical form to become disembodied energy. It was the only painting displayed on the altar at Pelton's memorial, chosen by her relatives who considered it a "spiritual parable" that would guide the artist into the afterlife.

Artist Carrie Moyer describes this glowing painting.

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Awakening (Memory of Father), 1943

Oil on canvas

New Mexico Museum of Art, Santa Fe; museum purchase, 2005

This work pays homage to Pelton's father, who died from a morphine overdose when the artist was ten. The painting symbolizes her father's enlightened rebirth, the dark rectangular form of his body at the bottom of the canvas summoned to awaken to a new life by a "golden trumpet flower . . . emitting light and sound." In the middle of the picture, between the luminous stars and far-off "mountain of release," a horizontal shape rises, symbolizing her father's "tragedies past." As Pelton wrote in her journal, "Stars come out, and the form buried below the purple mountain responds to the light of a new day."

Interval, 1950
Oil on canvas

Collection of Lynda and Stewart Resnick

Interval is one of many paintings that Pelton centered on a circle. With no beginning and no end, the form has often been used by artists to suggest infinity and self-contained harmony. Fittingly, given Pelton's belief in the power of certain shapes to convey "the higher possibilities of vision," she incorporated circles in her compositions to suggest the calm radiance at the center of a storm.

The Ray Serene, 1925
Oil on canvas

Collection of Lynda and Stewart Resnick

First Spring Garland, 1926
Oil on canvas

Collection of Lydia E. Ringwald

Meadowlark's Song, Winter, 1926
Oil on canvas

Collection of Maurine St. Gaudens

Ecstasy, 1928

Oil on canvas

Des Moines Art Center; Louise Noun Collection of Art by Women through bequest 2003.340

Incarnation, 1929

Oil on canvas

Collection of Leighanne Stainer

Star Gazer, 1929

Oil on canvas

Collection of Susan and Whitney Ganz

Hear about Pelton's approach to symbols and metaphors.

 803

Lotus for Lida (Egyptian Dawn), 1930

Oil on canvas

Collection of Lynda and Stewart Resnick

Translation, 1931

Oil on canvas

Collection of Fairfax Dorn and Marc Glimcher

Voyaging, 1931

Oil on canvas

Collection of Jeri L. Wolfson

Learn how Pelton portrayed color and sound in this work.

 805*Messengers, 1932*

Oil on canvas

Phoenix Art Museum; gift of the Melody S. Robidoux Foundation

Orbits, 1934
Oil on canvas

Oakland Museum of California; gift of Concours d'Antiques, the Art Guild of the Oakland Museum of California

Hear about how Pelton explored ambiguity in this work.



Day, 1935
Oil on canvas

Phoenix Art Museum; gift of the Melody S. Robidoux Foundation

Memory, 1937
Oil on canvas

Collection of Christina Buck

Alchemy, 1937–39
Oil on canvas

UCI Institute and Museum for California Art, Irvine; the Buck Collection

Fires in Space, 1938

Oil on canvas

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York

Red and Blue, c. 1938

Oil on canvas

Collection of Joe Ambrose

Challenge, 1940

Oil on canvas

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; museum purchase, Harriet and Maurice Gregg Fund for American Abstract Art, The Harriet and Maurice Gregg Collection of American Abstract Art 2000.134

Return, 1940

Oil on canvas

Collection of Joe Ambrose

Birthday, 1943

Oil on canvas

Collection of Robert Hayden III and Richard Silver

Prelude, 1943

Oil on canvas

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Hayden Collection—Charles Henry Hayden Fund and Tompkins Collection—Arthur Gordan Tompkins Fund

Ascent (Liberation), 1946

Oil on canvas

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York

Light Center, 1947–48

Oil on canvas

Collection of Lynda and Stewart Resnick

Art historian Suzanne Hudson explores this depiction of light.

 809

Focus, 1951

Oil on canvas

Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, Florida; purchase, R. H. Norton Trust 97.53

Departure, 1952

Oil on canvas

Collection of Mike Stoller and Corky Hale Stoller

Idyll, 1952

Oil on canvas

Collection of Jeri L. Wolfson

Hear how Pelton combined landscape, portraiture,
and abstraction.



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Light Center, 1960–61

Oil and charcoal on canvas

Euphrat Museum of Art, De Anza College, Cupertino, California;
gift of Cornelia Sussman and Irving Sussman