



Art

## 'It's a hostile takeover': Hilma af Klint's family fight 'plundering' deal for her art

Relatives say involving gallerist David Zwirner would lead to 'commercialisation' of Swedish painter's work

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The family of the Swedish artist Hilma af Klint claim that a potential agreement between the foundation responsible for preserving her work and the gallerist David Zwirner could lead to a “plundering” of her world-renowned abstract art.

Klint family members say that a proposed deal between Zwirner, who is one of the biggest gallerists in the world, and the foundation's board would open the door to the “commercialisation” of the artist's work, which they say directly contravenes her wishes and the statutes of the foundation.

“This is a hostile takeover,” said Erik af Klint, who is the great-grandnephew of Hilma and also chairs the board, which is made up of four other members who back the proposed agreement. “The first paragraph of the statutes says the board needs to ‘care’ for the work and now they're selling it off.”

A battle for control of the foundation, which was set up almost 30 years after the artist's death in 1944, has raged over the last few years with legal cases in Sweden and accusations of attempts to cash-in on the relatively recent success of an artist who was largely unknown until the 1980s.

Born in 1862, Af Klint graduated from the Royal Academy of Arts, Stockholm in 1887 as a traditional landscape, portrait and botanical painter, but by 1906 - before Kandinsky, Malevich or Mondrian - she was producing groundbreaking abstract pieces.

Af Klint has recently been hailed as “the true pioneer of abstract art”, but during her lifetime was also dismissed as “a crazy witch”, in part because of her association with the philosopher and occultist Rudolf Steiner, whose anthroposophical society she joined.

It is understood there was an unsuccessful attempt to sign an agreement last week, with Zwirner, who has conducted sales of Af Klint’s work before and would become the foundation’s gallerist.

Zwirner claims the family, rather than supporting and protecting Af Klint’s work, are “sabotaging” it and preventing her from being a truly international artist.

“The family members are operating against the best interests of Hilma af Klint,” said Zwirner. “This is a power struggle within the board - we have a standoff between the four board members and one board member who is trying to sabotage them.”

The gallerist says that proceeds from sales of Af Klint’s work would be invested in preserving the 1,300 pieces currently cared for by the foundation, which are stored in Sweden.

Zwirner claims that the majority of the foundation’s board wants to continue the global exhibitions of Af Klint’s work to institutions including Guggenheim Bilbao, the Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

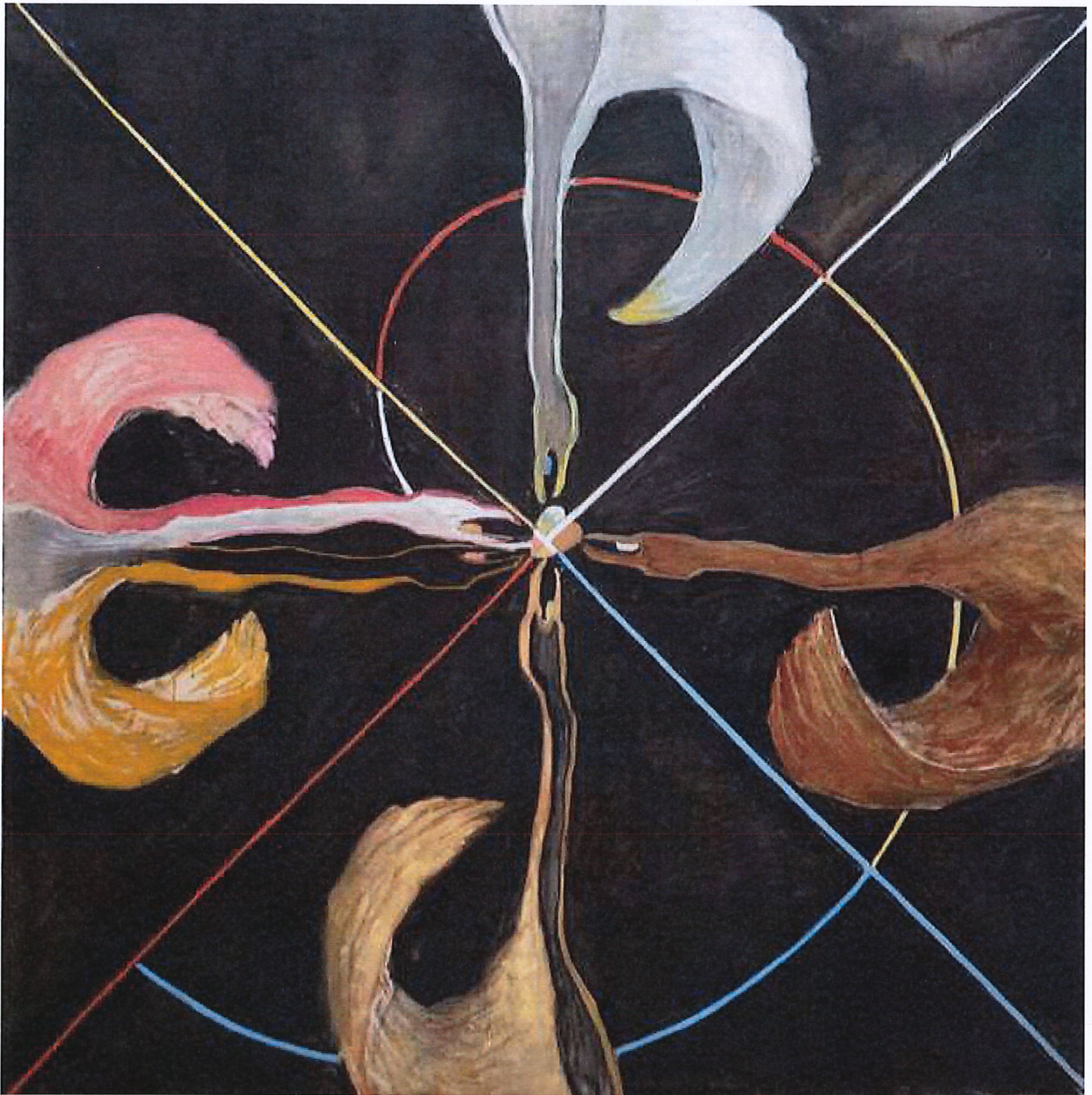
He added: “The board wants a collaboration with a commercial gallery to guide them into this next phase when some work might be potentially for sale. The idea that we are about to ‘plunder’ the foundation is completely absurd. We’re a seasoned estate-managing gallery ... they would like to shut everything down and do nothing.”

Erik and Johan af Klint, who is a former chair of the foundation and is the artist’s great nephew, argue that Hilma af Klint’s work isn’t like other art and that it has a spiritual dimension, which means it needs to be kept together.

“She painted in series and they need to be viewed together as a series should be. The paintings connect and to sell some within a series would interrupt that,” said Erik af Klint.

“It’s a plundering of the foundation,” said Johan af Klint. “It’s extraordinary and absurd.”





📷 'The Swan No 7', 1915, by Hilma af Klint Photograph: Heritage Images/Getty Images

Hilma af Klint was inspired by mysticism and the spiritualism of the theosophy and anthroposophy movements. She was in group of women calling themselves “The Five” who believed that they could communicate with mystic beings through meditation and seances, and transcribed their messages.

The work was rarely shown in her lifetime, and the vast majority of her pieces are held by the foundation rather than in private hands.

Erik af Klint said: “The fact the work is kept together is so unique, almost none of the work is lost ... As a family we do not believe that the work is meant to be commercialised, which has happened these last few years, and what we’re trying to do is bring it back to order.”



The foundation's statutes state that a series of paintings created between 1906 and 1915, comprising 193 works known as the "Paintings for the Temple", cannot be sold. But the statutes also say other work can be sold if it is in order to preserve the remaining pieces.

A spokesperson for the foundation said questions about the organisation's future financing and potential agreements with external parties are "strictly confidential".

The spokesperson said: "We will not comment on the work being carried out within the foundation's board, other than to express regret that confidential information and drafts are being leaked and discussed, as this harms the foundation's reputation."

It wasn't until 1986, when Af Klint was selected for a group show called *The Spiritual in Art* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, that many in the art world became aware of her abstract work.

The power struggle at the foundation will have a huge bearing on the future of Af Klint, who has become an international figure several decades after her death with successful shows at the Serpentine gallery in London, which transferred to the Guggenheim in New York, where it broke attendance records with about 600,000 visitors.

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