

Phoenix Art Museum

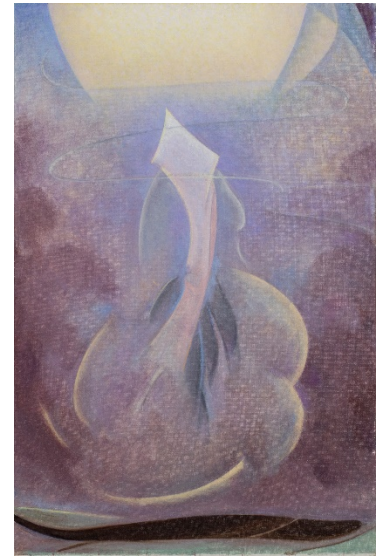
News Release

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Phoenix Art Museum presents largest survey to date of works by American modernist painter Agnes Pelton

Agnes Pelton: *Desert Transcendentalist* explores the work of a relatively unknown artist who was a pioneer of 20th-century American abstraction



Images, left to right: Agnes Pelton, *The Blest*, 1941. Oil on canvas. Collection of Georgia and Michael de Havenon. / Agnes Pelton, *Messengers*, 1932. Oil on canvas. Collection of Phoenix Art Museum, Gift of The Melody S. Robidoux Foundation. / Agnes Pelton, *Ascent (aka Liberation)*, 1946. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY.

PHOENIX (November 12, 2018) – Organized by Phoenix Art Museum, *Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist* is the first survey of the obscure American modernist painter in more than 23 years. Although she painted conventional landscapes and portraits, Pelton (1881–1961) is most celebrated for her abstract compositions that reflect her interest in esoteric subjects, including numerology and Agni Yoga with its principal focus on fire as a guiding force. The exhibition of more than 40 works from various private and museum collections, including the permanent collection Phoenix Art Museum, sheds light on Pelton’s artistic contributions to American Modernism, a movement more commonly associated with artists such as Georgia O’Keeffe (1887–1986) in the Southwest and Marsden Hartley (1877–1943) in New England. Furthermore, Pelton’s interest in spirituality and abstraction links her to a larger international movement that is only now being properly studied and contextualized. *Desert Transcendentalist* represents a fascinating reexamination of an overlooked female artist and her rightful place within the canon of modern and contemporary art history. After its premiere at Phoenix Art Museum, the exhibition will travel to the New Mexico Museum of Art in Santa Fe, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, and the Palm Springs Art Museum in California.

“We are delighted to share *Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist* with our community and other cities across the United States,” said Amada Cruz, the Sybil Harrington Director and CEO of Phoenix Art Museum. “This exhibition highlights an extraordinary painter who was under-recognized in her lifetime, and we look forward to presenting Pelton’s unique and ethereal works to our guests.”

Born to American parents in Stuttgart, Germany, Pelton and her family briefly lived in Basel, Switzerland, before returning to the United States in 1888. A graduate of the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, she exhibited in the Armory Show of 1913, yet her early abstractions didn't begin until the mid-1920s in New York.

Intentionally moving away from the mainstream arts community, Pelton eventually settled in Cathedral City, California, in 1932. Newspaper journalists sometimes compared her with Georgia O'Keeffe, who was six years her junior, as both artists studied with Arthur Wesley Dow in Massachusetts, and both shared an affinity toward 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.

"We are very excited to present Agnes Pelton to our guests," said Gilbert Vicario, the Selig Family Chief Curator at Phoenix Art Museum. "Almost nine decades since Agnes settled in Cathedral City, we are still laying the groundwork for a greater understanding of her contribution to American Modernism and abstraction, while embracing an appreciation of her work by a new generation of contemporary artists."

In addition to exploring the artist's contributions to American Modernism, *Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist* also examines her practice against a broader, international framework of artists who worked with spiritual and esoteric abstraction, including the occultist Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), and Hilma af Klint (1862–1944).

"The story of Agnes Pelton is one that exemplifies the need for our current revisionist model of art history," said Erika Doss, PhD, professor in the Department of American Studies at the University of Notre Dame. "She was a single woman who didn't have strong connections to the elite art markets of her time, yet throughout her life, she maintained a commitment to honing her abstract paintings, making a significant contribution to the evolution of American modernist painting."

Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist is accompanied by a fully illustrated exhibition catalogue edited by Vicario, the organizing curator of the exhibition. The publication includes contributions from Elizabeth Armstrong, former Director, Palm Springs Museum of Art; Michael Zakian, PhD, Director, Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art, Pepperdine University; Susan Aberth, PhD, Associate Professor of Art History, and Coordinator, Theology, Bard College; and Erika Doss, PhD, Professor, Department of American Studies, University of Notre Dame.

About the Exhibition

Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist will be on view from March 9 – September 8, 2019 in Steele Gallery. The exhibition is organized by Phoenix Art Museum and curated by Gilbert Vicario, the Selig Family Chief Curator. It is presented by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. The exhibition is supported by the National Endowment for the Arts. For more information, please visit phxart.org/exhibition/agnes-pelton.

This special-engagement exhibition is free for Museum Members, veterans and active-duty military and their families, and youth 5 and younger.

General admission:

\$23 — Adults

\$20 — Senior Citizens (Ages 65+)

\$18 — Students (with ID)

\$14 — Children (Ages 6–17)

All special-engagement exhibitions are included with general admission. During voluntary-donation, free-access times when general admission is pay-what-you-wish, admission to Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist is \$5. Voluntary-donation, free-access times include Wednesdays from 3 – 9 pm, the first Fridays of every month from 6 – 10 pm, and the second Sunday of each month from noon – 5 pm. For a full breakdown of general admission prices and hours, please see bit.ly/VisitPhxArt.

To request interviews and high-resolution photography, contact the Marketing and Communications Office of Phoenix Art Museum, at 602.257.2105 or email margaree.bigler@phxart.org.

Related Programs

Circles Opening | Thursday, March 7, 2019, 6 pm

Members of the Circles of Support of Phoenix Art Museum enjoy a reception and remarks from Gilbert Vicario, the Selig Family Chief Curator at Phoenix Art Museum, followed by an exclusive preview of the exhibition. Information available soon at <http://www.phxart.org/events/members>.

First Friday | Friday, April 6, 2019, 6 pm – 10 pm

Join us on First Friday to experience *Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist* and in-gallery programs and performances inspired by the exhibition. This event is open to the public with voluntary-donation admission. See phxart.org/events/calendar for updates as information becomes available.

Discount Tire Family Free Sunday | Sunday, March 10, 2019, noon – 5 pm

Don't miss *Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist* during voluntary-donation times on the second Sunday of each month, courtesy of Discount Tire, when admission to the special exhibition is only \$5 to the general public! Guests will also enjoy exciting activities, scavenger hunts, live performances, story time, free tours, and more. See phxart.org/events/calendar for updates as information becomes available.

About Phoenix Art Museum

Phoenix Art Museum has provided access to visual arts and educational programs in Arizona for nearly 60 years and is the largest art museum in the southwestern United States. Critically acclaimed national and international exhibitions are shown alongside the Museum's permanent collection of more than 19,000 works of American, Asian, European, Latin American, modern and contemporary art, and fashion design. The Museum also presents festivals, a comprehensive film program, live performances, and educational programs designed to enlighten, entertain, and stimulate visitors of all ages. Visitors also enjoy vibrant photography exhibitions through the Museum's landmark partnership with the Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona. To learn more about Phoenix Art Museum, visit phxart.org, or call 602.257.1880.

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