

OVERLOOKED

ARTISTS IN HISTORY

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This article delves into the complicated histories of influential artists marginalized by a tradition of exclusion, and offers new insights into their contributions to the art world. These creatives were true to their art despite having been overlooked for a combination of factors including racial inequality, gender bias, extreme hardship, or their refusal to adhere to the dominant art movements of their times.

Hilma af Klint (1862–1944)



CLOSEUP OF: THE KEY TO THE WORK UP TO THIS POINT BY HILMA AF KLINT (1907), HILMA AF KLINTS VERK, PUBLIC DOMAIN, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

Hilma af Klint gained international recognition for her art approximately 42 years after her death. If she'd had it her way, it might have only been 20 years after her death, as she requested her paintings remain private until that time. There are several reasons for this privacy. Her paintings were ahead of their time, she precedes Vassily Kandinsky as the first known abstract artist. Not only were her paintings a sharp departure from the typical realist styles of the time, but Klint's work is also steeped in esoteric symbolism and meaning; she often used painting as a way to communicate with spirits. This practice first came about when her younger sister died and Klint attempted to communicate with her through painting.

She continued to explore various spiritual groups throughout her life and eventually landed on what is called "The Five", a group of women that performed seances and practiced automatic drawing. In connection to this group, Klint painted 111 paintings from 1906-1908, called The Paintings for the Temple. When she showed these works to philosopher Rudolf Steiner, he didn't understand them and did not appreciate that Klint was positioning herself as a medium. Klint stopped painting for several years after that.

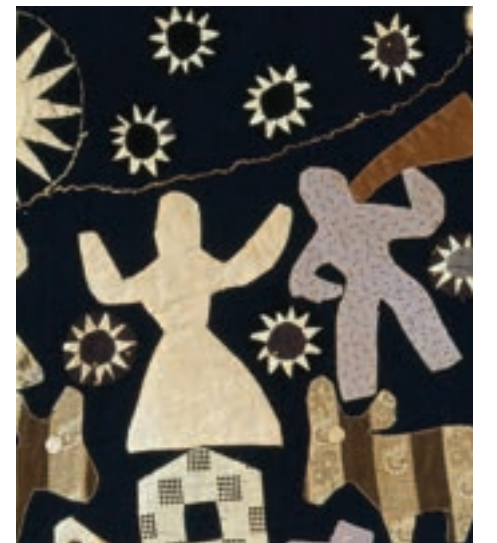
Long after she died in 1944, her nephew offered her paintings to Sweden's Moderna Museet in the 1970s, only for the gift to be rejected because the museum director said that Klint was a medium and not an artist. It wasn't until she was given a show at the Los Angeles County Museum in 1986 that she finally became internationally recognized and praised.

Harriet Powers (1837-1910)

Harriet Powers was a fiber artist who crafted meticulously detailed narratives through her quilts. Her quilts were distinct from others being sewn at the time in the United States, although they shared some key similarities to quilts made in the Kingdom of Benin, current-day Nigeria. She used a similar appliqué method to create detailed scenes from the Bible. The forms used in these scenes are bold and geometric with soft shades of organic colors contrasted with occasional pops of vibrant orange.

It's unknown whether Powers was made aware of African quilting methods or if she pioneered her methods independently. There is a lack of information about her life, likely because she was born into slavery in rural Georgia and very little documentation exists about her. She was legally emancipated after the Civil War ended when she was about 26 years old.

Most of what is known about Powers comes from the account of a woman who was a fan of her Bible Quilt at the 1886 Cotton Fair in Athens (she later purchased that quilt when Powers was in a financially tough spot). This quilt was preserved, along with one other. They are currently on display at the Smithsonian Museum and the Museum of Fine Art in Boston. No other quilts of hers are known to have survived, although Powers had written a letter mentioning other quilts she had made.



CLOSEUP OF: PICTORIAL QUILT BY HARRIET POWERS (1895-1898), MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS BOSTON, PUBLIC DOMAIN, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

Alfred H Maurer (1868-1932)



CLOSEUP OF: FAUVE STILL LIFE BY ALFRED MAURER (1908-1910), PUBLIC DOMAIN, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

Alfred H. Maurer's father, Louis Maurer, was a highly respected lithographer who worked for Currier and Ives. Although Alfred was fortunate to have a father who encouraged his artistic pursuits at a young age, he later faced challenges when attempting to move away from the realist style that his father approved of. While studying art in Paris for over a decade, Alfred began painting in abstract and modernist styles, becoming especially fascinated by Fauvism and its strong colors and brushstrokes.

When he was forced to return to the U.S. at the beginning of WWI, he found that these modernist styles were not yet widely accepted in America. Upon his return, his father withdrew his support and openly opposed Alfred's painting style. Still, Alfred remained committed to his artistic vision and said, "The artist must be free to paint his effects. Nature must not bind him."

As one of the earliest American modernist painters, Alfred faced significant struggles. He could not sell his work to make a living and he did not live to see his work gain widespread recognition, he struggled with his mental health and took his own life about a month after his father died.