

# THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

## HISTORY



Agnes Pelton with several of her desert landscape paintings. COURTESY HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PALM DESERT, SHADOW MOUNTAIN COLLECTION

## History: Artist Agnes Pelton and her spiritual awakening in Cathedral City

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In the depths of the Great Depression, at a time of physical insecurity and want, a small group of avant-garde artists tried to create something truly new. Called Transcendental Painting by its adherents, the form was striving to develop non-representational paintings sourced in pure imagination, attending to the spiritual in a time of deprivation.

A brochure for a group exhibition in 1939 explained, "The word Transcendental has been chosen as a name for the group because it best expresses its aim, which is to carry painting beyond the appearance of the physical world, through new concepts of space, color, light and design, to imaginative realms that are idealistic and spiritual. The work does not concern itself with political, economic and other social problems."

The 1939 brochure continued, "The Transcendental Painting Group is no coterie, no accidental group of friends. The members are convinced that focal points in terms of group activity are necessary to present an art transcending the objective and expressing the cultural development of our time."

"Methods may vary. Some approach their plastic problems by a scientific balancing of the elements involved; others rely upon the initial emotion produced by the creative urge itself; still others are impelled by a metaphysical motivation."

The group assembled a variety of paintings and organized exhibitions to promote understanding of the new form. In 1939, a show in San Francisco enumerated the offerings and included a painting by female artist from Cathedral City, California.

"Agnes Pelton's Orbits is a mastery work that presents a serious of dotted orbits with occasional stars. There is no hint of esoteric symbolism. One section of the canvas, the lower, is a startling achievement of purely flesh-like forms, and the rising to the more spiritual elements is a logical culmination to an arrangement of a definite transcendental view of plastic problems."

Perhaps art could escape earthly concerns, but the artists themselves certainly could not. Pelton's life, not just her art, embodied the movement.

Born in Stuttgart, Germany in 1881, Pelton emigrated to New York as a child and subsequently traveled to Paris, London, Hawaii, Beirut, Syria, Georgia, New Mexico and California. She had arrived on the desert in 1932 intending a short visit to the unlikely spot. Writing in an application for a Guggenheim grant she posited the desert reflected the "abstract beauty of the inner vision, which would be kindled by the inspiration of these rare and solitary places."

Cathedral City had been named by the US Army Corps of Engineers for the steep canyons that resembled the interior of a great cathedral, and Pelton found it a place for her own spiritual awakening and worship. Pelton observed, "The vibration of this light, the spaciousness of these skies enthralled me. I knew there was a spirit in nature as in everything else, but here in the desert it was an especially bright spirit."

Elizabeth Armstrong writing for the Phoenix Art Museum's 2019 "Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist" exhibition catalog noted, "In the tiny village of Cathedral City, (Pelton) found an affordable cabin with some of the valley's most sweeping views of the two majestic peaks of San Jacinto and San Geronimo. Thinking she would stay for only a year, she found herself lulled by the quiet, slow pace of the place, and the intense beauty of its desert landscapes...It was her strong belief that by living away from the distractions of the modern world and in harmony with what she believed to be an ancient land, she would be able to practice her art of spiritual awareness..."

Pelton would remain in Cathedral City for the rest of her life. She scratched out a meager living painting desert landscapes for sale to tourists, while working on her "Abstractions," delicate dreamscapes in the Transcendental tradition.

While recognized in the 1930s, Pelton toiled quietly until her death in 1961. Unappreciated and lost to obscurity, Pelton was resurrected by Michael Zakian's 1995 seminal show of her work entitled, "Agnes Pelton, Poet

of Nature." Pelton's artistic stature since is reflected in the six-figure prices her canvases now routinely fetch.

Zakian wrote, "Pelton's works were poetic celebration of nature that explored the vital forces animating the physical world. Interested in themes of creation, growth, and radiance, Pelton translated favorite subjects – a glowing star, an opening flower – into life-affirming images of rare beauty and resonance. In many ways, her paintings resemble the art of her contemporary Georgia O'Keeffe, only more colorful, more spiritual and more imaginative."

Peter Palladino and Simeon Den have lovingly preserved her F Street house in Cathedral City and founded the Agnes Pelton Society widening appreciation and her local recognition. (The house awaits proper historic designation when Cathedral City finally adopts an historic preservation ordinance.)

A new show of the work of the Transcendental Painting Group entitled "Another World" is showing through June 19 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and features Pelton's Abstractions. It continues the tradition of the earlier exhibitions and is a moment of quiet repose in a hectic world.

Described online, "In 1938 in New Mexico, a loose configuration of artists came together to form the Transcendental Painting Group. Led by New Mexico painters Raymond Jonson and Emil Bistram, and joined by painters such as Agnes Pelton and Lawren Harris, the members of the group sought to explore spiritually heightened abstraction by employing free-wheeling symbols and imagery drawn from the collective unconscious. According to their manifesto they strove to carry painting beyond the appearance of the physical world, through new concepts of space, color, light and design to imaginative realms that are idealistic and spiritual." Due to the onset of World War II the group was short-lived. However, their paintings continue to emphasize how abstraction can be used in service of the spiritual."

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