



Orbits
1934
Oakland Museum of California

Agnes Pelton

California is famous for magical, mystical thinking, and there's a healthy dose of it in the work of one of SoCal's visionary mid-century artists, Agnes Pelton. Once exhibited with Georgia O'Keeffe and Agnes Martin, Pelton had disappeared from view until the Whitney Museum exhibited her work in "Desert Transcendentalist" in 2020. Pelton was on her own wavelength—but she should be on everyone's.

Born in 1881, Pelton had a bohemian upbringing in New York. She sought new, less restrictive forms of spirituality, such as Theosophy, which attracted early century artists from Wassily Kandinsky to Piet Mondrian. Like them, Pelton sought to use form and color to depict a spiritual realm. By 1925, her image vocabulary was established, and her abstractions were structured around more or less recognizable objects.

In 1932, Pelton found solace and inspiration in Palm Springs' gritty neighbor, Cathedral City. The California desert harbored the "abstract beauty of the inner vision, which would be kindled by the inspiration of these rare and solitary places," Pelton wrote. She painted portraits and touristy landscapes, waiting for inspiration to produce the 100 or so examples of her "real work"—her loopy, dreamy, almost Disneyesque abstractions. In 1934's *Orbits*, energy and calm, geometric and organic shapes, dark and light are held in a curious tension. Everything tends upward, from the triangle at the bottom (or does it point inward?) to the snow-covered peak of Palm Springs' Mt. San Jacinto at the top.

Despite her desert isolation, Pelton reacted to the second of two world wars of her lifetime. Works from the 1940s include mechanistic forms for the first time—gears, towers, electricity. She didn't go as far as Charles Howard, another non-naturalistic midcentury artist, who included an airplane in one of his war-era works. But by the early 1950s, Pelton's work reflects calm once more.

Pelton kept painting until her death in 1961. Without gallery representation, few works were sold. In fact, OMCA curator George Neubert bought *Orbits*—which had been shown at the 1939 Golden Gate International Exhibition on Treasure Island where Diego Rivera painted his Pan American Unity mural—in a thrift store in Santa Monica.

The Agnes Pelton Society is now headquartered in the Cathedral City home she built and lived in, where exhibits and readings keep her desert dreams alive.



To Learn More:

Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist, Gilbert Vicario, editor. Hirmer Verlag GmbH, Munich, 2019

Illumination, the Paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe, Agnes Pelton, Agnes Martin and Florence Miller Pierce, Karen Moss, Orange County Museum of Art, 2009

Agnes Pelton, Poet of Nature, Michael Zakian, University of Washington Press, 1995

To See More:

Oakland Museum of California, Palm Springs Art Museum, San Diego Museum of Art, LACMA, de Young Museum, Whitney Museum of American Art, Crystal Bridges Museum