

About the Artwork



Agnes Pelton, *San Gorgonio in Spring*, 1932, Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in.
The Buck Collection at UCI Institute and Museum of California Art

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Painted only months after Agnes Pelton settled in California, *San Gorgonio in Spring* (1932) captures the artist's profound engagement with the place where she would spend the rest of her life. Snow-capped mountain peaks rise in the distance, growing deeper blue in shadow as they approach the middle of the landscape's expanse. In the foreground, desert flora burst with life and color while cactus bloom rose pink. Pelton sought to intensify light, color, and detail in landscape painting. She accentuated visual and tactile elements to heighten the sensory experience of commonly overlooked features.

From her new town of Cathedral City, Pelton had views to the east of Mount San Jacinto, the steepest mountain in North America, and to the northwest, Mount San Gorgonio depicted in this painting, which rises 11,400 feet. These mountains shield the valley from rain for most of the year, creating desert conditions. The town itself was named for a canyon that resembled a cathedral. A sensitive observer of nature, Pelton was fascinated by the desert plants and how they flourished after winter rains, typically in April and May. For her, the blooming plants captured a "color radiance which I have tried to develop in my abstract painting."¹ In fact, her interest in desert plants dates to the 1910s, many years before she moved to California.

San Gorgonio in Spring

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Pelton likely referenced a photograph to paint this landscape, though did not copy the photograph directly. She believed her paintings of nature had to reach a more immersive level, revealing the historical essence of the place, and even what she thought of as the fourth dimension beyond what human senses could immediately access. To convey this metaphysical dimension, this landscape emphasizes “depth cues, heightening the spatial definition of every element. Every object appears more distinct than it would in nature,” writes art historian Michael Zakian. “The image invites a meditation on the deeper meaning of physical distance.”²





Agnes Pelton photographed in 1932 in Cathedral City, CA. Mount San Jacinto in the background.
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“To paint a landscape well, first lay bare its geological layers. Think how the history of this world dates from the day when 2 atoms came together or 2 chemical dances combined.”

—Agnes Pelton³

Agnes Pelton (1881–1961) was born to American parents in Stuttgart, Germany. When she was eight years old, Pelton moved with her mother to Brooklyn, New York to live with her maternal grandmother. Early in her life, Pelton experienced two family hardships. Her father died of a drug overdose when she was only nine and her family faced public shaming due to a scandal that had occurred a decade before she was born.⁴

Pelton turned to the arts as an emotional and intellectual outlet. Her mother ran a music school where Pelton learned to play piano, and she took art lessons from Arthur Wesley Dow (1857–1922), who was a painter, photographer, and influential art educator. Dow did not teach students to copy historic styles as was common at the time. Rather, he taught Pelton, and later Georgia O’Keeffe (1887–1986, an influential painter of the American modernism movement), about art as a mode of self-expression that didn’t need to simply copy nature.⁵ Pelton enjoyed early success with her paintings. Two of her works were included in the landmark Armory Show of 1913.⁶ They were **Symbolist** paintings of human figures immersed in imaginary landscapes, influenced by, among other things, the artwork of modern art proponent Arthur B. Davies (1862–1928).

In 1921, Pelton left New York City for Southampton, Long Island where she lived in an historic windmill for the next decade. There she earned money by making portraits of summer residents while studying and painting the natural world around her. In 1926, she began making her first abstractions inspired by natural phenomena like the movement of air, water, and flower petals.

In 1932, Pelton left New York for the desert near Palm Springs, California where for the next 30 years she painted both landscapes and abstractions. She was drawn to certain elements of the local environment, such as the desert, the mountains, and the effects of light and atmosphere.

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Agnes Pelton

During these years, she also became interested in **occult** and **esoteric** religions, specifically **Theosophy**, founded by Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891). With its emphasis on tuning into unseen forces and energies, Theosophy offered Pelton a way of thinking about the metaphysical dimensions of her art and the role of the artist in conveying the spiritual realm through art. Theosophy also provided its female adherents an alternative to the restrictive social and political attitudes of the time.⁷

Unlike O’Keeffe, to whom she is most often compared, Pelton never became well-known in her lifetime. She lived in California until she died at the age of 80 in 1961.



View and Discuss

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Look together at Agnes Pelton's *San Geronio in Spring* (1932). Ask students to describe the landscape, starting with the background and then moving toward the middle ground. Finally, describe the foreground moving toward the surface of the painting. What do students notice about color, light, depth, subject matter, and mood?

Tell students that Pelton painted this work only months after she moved to Southern California to a town where this was her view of the San Geronio mountains. Pelton believed every place had “the voice of locality,” or a unique aura.⁸ Ask students what they think Pelton considered “the voice” of this place sounded like. Why?

The landscape details some elements that captured Pelton's eye, including the atmospheric effects of clouds, the blooming of desert flora, and a type of “color radiance” she explored in her abstract paintings. It also captures **dualities**—or opposites—that she was interested in examining: hot and cold, wet and dry, air and matter.⁹ Ask students if they see these dualities in the painting and where. Ask them to identify other dualities the painting might express.

Tell students that Pelton likely referenced a photograph while painting this landscape, but she didn't copy the scene exactly. She believed painting should depict more than what human senses can detect at an historical, geological, or spiritual level. Ask students what they think she might have altered or exaggerated about the landscape and why.

Pelton was simultaneously painting fully abstract art while making landscapes like these. She believed both forms of art had equal value. Search for an example of Pelton's abstract paintings from around this time (such as, *Sand Storm* <https://crystalbridges.org/blog/womens-history-month-agnes-pelton/> from 1932). Ask students which form of art they prefer and why.

Activities

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Color Correspondences

Like many other modern California painters influenced by Theosophy, Agnes Pelton was interested in how artists could perceive and translate the metaphysical world beyond human senses. Many of these artists thought the spiritual could be conveyed by revealing connections between sound and color, as well as emotion. In her sketchbook, Pelton indicated how color corresponded to various psychic states: “Red = creation; orange = passion; yellow = life; blue = beauty; green = nature; purple = pain; white = death.”¹⁰ Ask students what they think of Pelton’s equations. Do they believe that colors have universal meanings? Why or why not? Ask them to create their own personal correspondences with color. What associations do certain colors have for them? What images, emotions, or sounds come to mind? Then challenge them to make a sketchbook entry with colored pencil to visually represent their own personal color beliefs. What form does each drawing take and why?

Poetry

Agnes Pelton loved poetry and sometimes wrote poems to accompany and help explain her abstract paintings. She said, “My abstract pictures are just as real to me as nature, but they are not material, but mental images. They are a culmination of impressions which come to me at a quiet time just exactly as a line of verse comes to a poet’s mind; the only difference being that I see it in form and color, and the poet sees it in sound and words.”¹¹

For her painting *Alchemy* <https://imca.uci.edu/alchemy/>, Pelton wrote:

The golden glow of earth transcending
the cloudy barrier in white response
to the diamond light, in revelation.¹²

Ask students to compare the poem to the painting. Then challenge students to write a poem to accompany *San Geronio in Spring*. How can words help viewers understand what Pelton sought to convey?

“Voice of Locality”

Pelton believed that every place had its own aura, which she referred to as “the voice of locality.” Ask students, What do you think is the “the voice of locality” where you live? Encourage them to make paintings that capture that voice, whether in the form of realistic landscapes or total abstractions. Share what they create. What do the class’s paintings have in common, if anything? Do they capture a certain “voice” for your locality or do students perceive this “voice” in varied ways? As an extension to this activity, invite students to create a soundscape to accompany their landscape. They could either record these or perform them live.

Vocabulary

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Source: adapted from Merriam-Webster (unless otherwise noted)

Automatic processes: procedures that suspend the conscious mind to release subconscious images

Avant-garde: an intelligentsia that develops new or experimental concepts, especially in the arts

Calligraphy: artistic, stylized, or elegant handwriting or lettering

Duality: the quality or state of having two different or opposite parts or elements

Esoteric: designed for or understood by a limited circle of people with special knowledge or interest

Occult: of or related to matters regarded as involving the action or influence of supernatural or supernormal powers or some secret knowledge of them

Olmec: an ancient people of the southern east coast of Mexico who flourished about 1200 to 400 BC

Mayan: a member of the peoples speaking Mayan languages, a language family of Central America and Mexico

Patronage: the support or influence of a wealthy or influential champion of an artist or writer

Shamanism: a religion practiced by Indigenous peoples of far northern Europe and Siberia that is characterized by belief in an unseen world of gods, demons, and ancestral spirits responsive only to the priests or priestesses who use magic for the purpose of curing the sick, divining the hidden, and controlling events

Surrealist: member of a movement of European poets, painters, and filmmakers founded in 1924 called *Surrealism*. Their central idea was that the unconscious mind was the source of all imagination, and that art should try to express its contents. The unconscious, they believed, revealed itself most clearly in dreams.

Symbolist: one of a group of writers and artists in France after 1880 reacting against realism, concerning themselves with general truths instead of actualities, exalting the metaphysical and the mysterious, and aiming to unify and blend the arts and the functions of the senses

Synchromist (*adapted from Britannica.com*): member of an art movement begun by American painters Morgan Russell and Stanton Macdonald-Wright in 1913–14 that focused on color

Theosophy: the teachings of a modern movement originating in the US in 1875 and following chiefly Buddhist and Brahmanic theories—<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/theories>—specially of pantheistic evolution and reincarnation

Notes

- 1 Zakian, Michael. Agnes Pelton: Poet of Nature, Palm Springs Desert Museum, 1995, p. 70.
- 2 Ibid., p. 70.
- 3 Ibid., p. 70.
- 4 Ibid., p. 15.
- 5 Ibid., p. 18.
- 6 Ibid., p. 11.
- 7 Middleman, Rachel, "Outlying Modernism: Agnes Pelton, Theosophy and Gender." *Enchanted Modernities: Theosophy, the Arts and the American West*. Christopher M. Scheer, Sarah Victoria Turner, and James G. Mansell, eds. Fulgur Press, 2019, p. 66.
- 8 Ibid., p. 67.
- 9 Ibid., p. 67.
- 10 Gawboy, Anna. "Agnes Pelton and the Musicalization of Colour." *Enchanted Modernities: Theosophy, the Arts and the American West*. Christopher M. Scheer, Sarah Victoria Turner, and James G. Mansell, eds. Fulgur Press, 2019, p. 72.
- 11 Middleman, p. 63.
- 12 Ibid., p. 66.
- 13 Didactic text for *The Resonant Surface: Movement, Image, and Sound in California Painting*, University of California, Irvine, Institute and Museum of California Art.
- 14 Capkova, Helena, "The Dynaton." *Enchanted Modernities: Theosophy, the Arts and the American West*. Christopher M. Scheer, Sarah Victoria Turner, and James G. Mansell, eds. Fulgur Press, 2019, p. 103.
- 15 Wenger, Michael and Kaz Tanahashi. "Creation in the Instant: An Interview with Painter Gordon Onslow-Ford." May 1991. <http://www.cuke.com/pdf-wb2/91-2-fall-onslow-ford.pdf>, p. 39.
- 16 "Gordon Onslow Ford." *Guggenheim Museum Collection Online*. <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/gordon-onslow-ford>. Accessed Apr 2021.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Capkova, pp. 95, 98, 100.
- 19 "Gordon Onslow Ford." *Guggenheim Museum Collection Online*. <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/gordon-onslow-ford>. Accessed Apr 2021.
- 20 Wenger and Tanahashi, p. 39.
- 21 Wenger and Tanahashi, p. 38.
- 22 Kushner, Marilyn. *Morgan Russell*. Hudson Hills Press in association with The Montclair Art Museum, 1990, p. 132.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Kushner, p. 131–2.
- 25 "Morgan Russell Collection in the Museum of Modern Art Archives." 1999. *Museum of Modern Art*. <https://www.moma.org/research-and-learning/archives/finding-aids/Russellb.html>. Accessed April 2021.
- 26 Didactic text for *The Resonant Surface: Movement, Image, and Sound in California Painting*, University of California, Irvine, Institute and Museum of California Art.
- 27 "Morgan Russell Collection in the Museum of Modern Art Archives." 1999. *Museum of Modern Art*. <https://www.moma.org/research-and-learning/archives/finding-aids/Russellb.html>. Accessed Apr 2021.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 "Morgan Russell. *Synchromy in Orange to Form, 1914*." *MoMA's Inventing Abstraction 1910-1925*. 10 Apr 2013. <https://inventingabstraction.tumblr.com/post/47625842703/morgan-russell-synchromy-in-orange-to-form-1914>. Accessed Apr 2021.
- 30 "Synchromy in Orange: To Form." Audio Stop. *Albright-Knox Art Gallery*. <https://www.albrightknox.org/artworks/k195816-synchromy-orange-form>. Accessed Apr 2021.