

A WORLD OF FORMS

“How am I to begin my work, how am I to find the courage to execute such an enormous task as to try to give an explanation of the ground’s vegetation?” af Klint asked on January 7, 1917. Her toolkit by then included the detailed draftsmanship of scientific illustration, the delicate conjuring of place of a landscape artist, and her own distinctive approach to abstraction. Two days later, she took a first step, beginning *The Atom Series*, an effort to represent the most fundamental component of natural phenomena. But what methods would she use to describe this impossible-to-see-element?

Echoing the visual language of science—charts, graphs, and tables—af Klint deployed a repeating geometric module to represent the atom’s structure and energy. Each of these diagrams, a square divided into four equal squares, is distinguished through color and varied ornamentation. Af Klint also aspired to reveal the atom’s moral conditions. In handwritten inscriptions, she posits the way atomic action reflects human circumstances and character. In *No. 1*, she wrote, “The center of the universe consists of innocence.” And in *No. 18*, “The atom finds within itself Truth and Justice.” Af Klint continued to exploit the diagram’s potential, developing an increasingly complex and intricate vocabulary. Her recognition of the “spiritual knowledge” that resulted from a “close consideration of the world of forms” was a crucial step toward her *Nature Studies*.