



Today's Masterpiece: Agnes Pelton, [*The Primal Wing*](#), 1933. Oil on canvas. Gift of the artist, 1934.12.



Welcome back to Masterpiece Minute on Virtual SDMA. I'm your host, Rachel Jans, Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the San Diego Museum of Art. Drop in the first Friday of each month for a new mini talk led by SDMA curators and special guests spotlighting works of art from the Museum's collection.

The Primal Wing, painted by the American artist Agnes Pelton in 1933, captures the delicate whisper of the morning sky, when all is still and on the cusp of awakening. Floating in the enchanting purple and blue heavens is a wing, whose pink curves echo the mountains below. Pelton (born in 1881) is best known for her symbolic paintings that hover between identifiable images of the desert landscape and symbols inspired by the artist's inner spiritual vision.

She made this glowing work — which seems to be lit from within — in the desert community of Cathedral City, a stone's throw from Palm Springs. Pelton was attracted to Southern California and the many spiritual communities found there, having dedicated herself to alternative spiritual traditions, including the occult and Theosophy. Indeed, the West Coast headquarters of the Theosophical Society — known as Lomaland — was located on the cliffs above the Pacific Ocean in Point Loma, San Diego.

Pelton led an independent and solitary life in the desert, where she moved in 1932 and stayed until her death in 1961, and filled the pages of her journals with inspiration from her readings of philosophers, poets, and mystics. Yet the refuge she sought was as much a choice as it was a circumstance of her family's past. Pelton was born in Germany and lived in Europe for the first years of her life. Her grandmother had been at the center of a public scandal — she had an affair with the well-known abolitionist pastor Henry Ward Beecher. To escape the glare of the spotlight, they sent their daughter, Florence, to Europe. It was there that Pelton was born before returning with her parents to Brooklyn. Pelton's father died of a morphine overdose at the age of 10. Given these difficult circumstances and her mother's withdrawal from society, Pelton was long accustomed to leading an unconventional life on the periphery.

Painting, for Pelton, was an integrated part of her multifaceted spiritual practice, which included meditation, prayer and poetry.

Pelton wrote this poem for *The Primal Wing*



In a dim world before its day / Above the silent waters / Self propelling, radiating /
Behold the swift wing / Of Life awakening— / As the first blunt mountains rise.

This has been Rachel Jans, thank you for listening here at Virtual SDMA.



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