

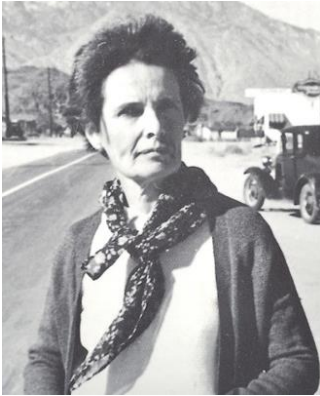
# PEYTON WRIGHT

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## Agnes Pelton (American, 1881-1961)

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Agnes Pelton (1881-1961) was born to American parents in Stuttgart, Germany. After her father died in 1890, she and her mother moved to Brooklyn, New York, where her mother taught piano lessons, as well as German and French. Young Agnes learned piano from her mother, and at age 14 began taking art classes at Pratt Institute. After graduating at age 19, she continued studying with two of her instructors, Arthur Wesley Dow and Hamilton Easter Field. She studied landscape painting with Dow, who emphasized structure, spirit, imagination, creation, and the non-naturalistic use of color, a technique he taught using Japanese prints to demonstrate space relations and the appropriate use of light and dark masses. Dow believed that the Japanese and the Chinese had already found the essence of the painting ideals that Modernism was still striving to achieve. Dow's influence was critical to Pelton's development of abstractions based on interior, spiritual values.

Pelton traveled to Italy for a year in 1910, where Field, also an enthusiast of oriental art, was residing. Under his guidance she studied Italian painters and did daily life drawing at the British Academy in Rome. Liberated by her studies, in 1911 she began what she called "Imaginative Paintings," which were influenced by outdoor explorations of the effects of natural light, and continued through 1917. At a 1912 exhibition of Pelton's recent paintings at Field's studio in Ogunquit, Maine, Walt Kuhn was introduced to her work. Kuhn, the organizer of the Armory Show of 1913, invited her to exhibit two of her "Imaginative Paintings" in that landmark exhibition: *Vine Wood* and *Stone Age*.

Pelton made New York City her home until 1921, but her need for solitude finally prompted her to find a rural environment, and she moved to Long Island. It was here in the winter of 1926 that she created her first original abstractions. She also began, during this time, to use notebooks to record her most personal thoughts on life and spiritual issues. From 1921 to 1932 Pelton traveled to Hawaii, New Hampshire, Beirut, Syria, Georgia, and Pasadena, finally relocating in Cathedral City outside of Palm Springs, California, where she remained for the rest of her life.

In the mid-1930s, Pelton became a founding member of a group of artists based in Taos, New Mexico, known as the Transcendental Painting Group (TPG). The TPG manifesto stated that their purpose was “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 manifesto included the statement that “the work does not concern itself with political, economic, or other social problems.” Arranging exhibitions of transcendental work that would “serve to widen the horizon of art” became the focus of the TPG’s activity.

Pelton was also deeply influenced by literature, and especially the Romantic poetry of Keats, Shelley, and Wordsworth. Many of her paintings, in fact, have an accompanying poem that Pelton wrote herself, revealing elements of her inspiration for the images. She also read the esoteric and spiritualist writings of Madame Blavatsky on Theosophy and Occultism. A deeply spiritual person, Pelton’s life revolved around William Blake’s belief that “the Imagination is not a State: it is Human Existence itself.” As a person, Pelton was small, quiet, and described as “someone special” and having a “beautiful soul.” She believed that despite its many conflicts, the world was a place of kindness and grace.

Although Pelton's art had received some recognition, she remained relatively obscure on the national level until the 1995-1996 tour of a retrospective exhibition of her work, entitled "Agnes Pelton, Poet of Nature," which was curated by Michael Zakian. Pelton died just before she turned eighty and was cremated, leaving this world through the element of fire. Throughout her painting career, she had continued to express the spiritual in art and the possibilities within human reach.

Her work is found in numerous museums around the country, including the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Honolulu Museum of Art; University of New Mexico Art Museum; Oakland Museum of California; Palm Springs Art Museum; Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, New York; San Diego Museum of Art; Santa Barbara Museum of Art; New Mexico Museum of Art; Whitney Museum of American Art.