

Best Books of 2023 > Top 10 Book Covers Thrillers Sci-Fi and Fantasy Crime Romance Historical Fiction

Critics' Picks

The artist and teacher Hans Hofmann identified that quest as the search for the artist's very "nature," which, he said, is always art's true subject. "How can one paint anything else?" While Hofmann's conclusion might be a given for men, it has not been for many women artists. Ignored, discouraged and at times even forbidden

from painting, women throughout history who craved artistic

her intriguing book, "The Other Side."

expression were often forced to sublimate their powerful nature

into something deemed less dangerous: the spirit world. That is

one of the subjects the Australian critic Jennifer Higgie ponders in

The New York Times Cooking Easy recipes for every night of the week. Discover simple dishes that work for even the busiest weeknights. 1 of 5 **EXPLORE RECIPES** The author of "The Mirror and the Palette," a nuanced and idiosyncratic take on female self-portraiture, Higgie explores her subjects through a series of miniature biographies. One she includes here is that of Georgiana Houghton. The 19th-century



"The Spiritual Crown of Mrs. Oliphant," 1867. Georgiana Houghton

Houghton and Howitt may have been engaged in just that type of subterfuge when, in order not to be seen as expressing themselves directly, they pointed to the unseen as the source of their inspiration. Or, perhaps, they truly did believe that their minds and hands were guided by forces outside themselves. Higgie respectfully entertains the possibility that the spirits these artists channeled were real — as real as the religious beliefs that have inspired male artists for centuries.

Consider Houghton's contemporary Anna Mary Howitt, whose

in 1856 when she dared to paint the ancient queen Boadicea

career as a celebrated artist and illustrator came to a crashing halt

woman" by one critic and told to "leave such subjects alone" by the

powerful John Ruskin, she destroyed her work and began drawing

images she claimed to receive from spirits on "the other side."

Art and literature are filled with women who have circumvented

from the beyond. (Harriet Beecher Stowe said she was merely

novel, "Uncle Tom's Cabin.")

patriarchal obstacles by claiming to be mere conduits for messages

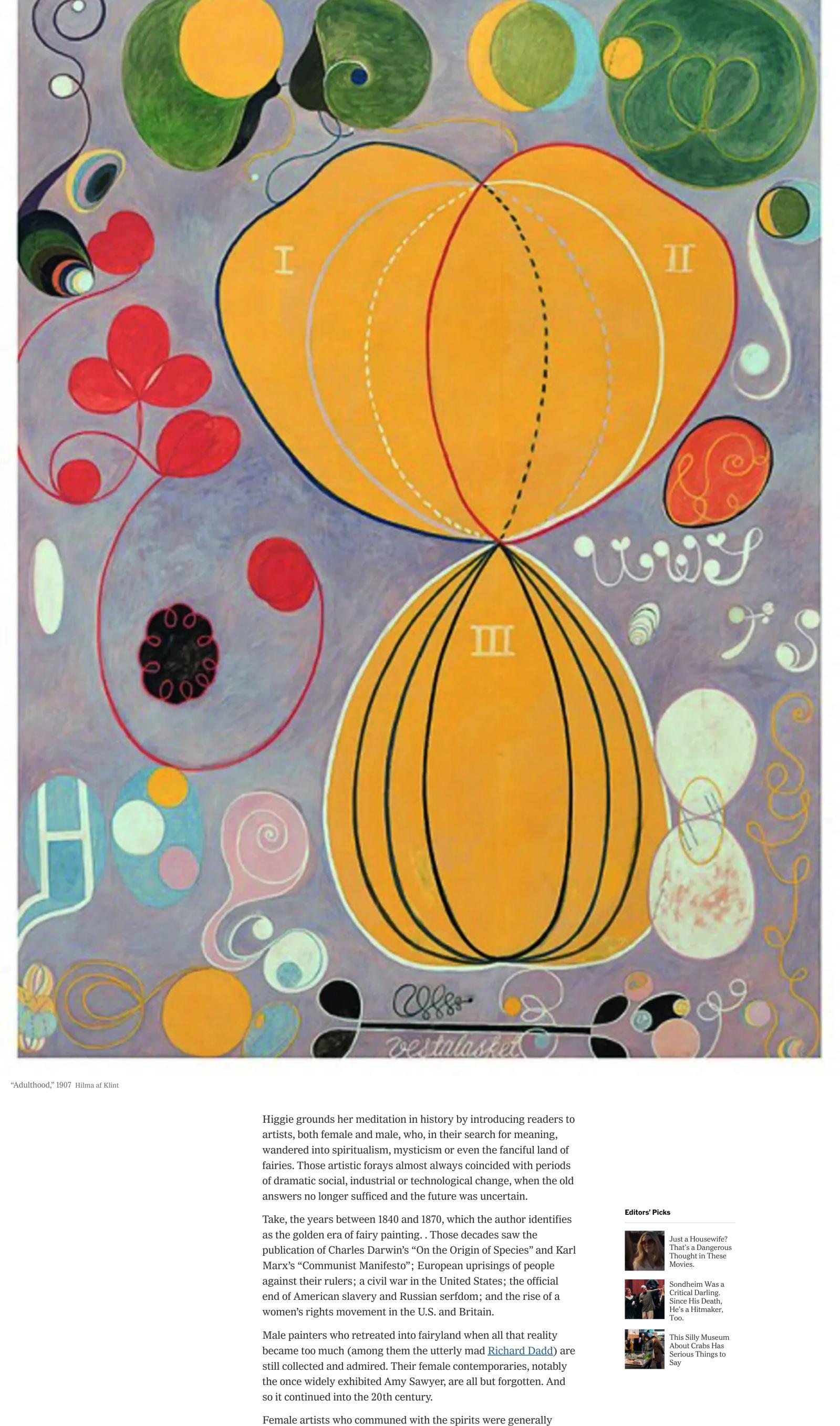
taking dictation from God when she wrote her seminal abolitionist

The New York Times

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avenging the rape of her daughters. Accused of being an "angry



The spiritualist and artist Hilma af Klint, photographed in her studio, circa 1895. Science History Images/Alamy

The strength of Higgie's book, however, is that it is not merely

throughout history. This tale is about something much larger than

through the text. The women whom Higgie profiles created, and

The spiritual movements that inspired generations of artists were

in large part the offspring of women like Madame Helena Petrovna

Blavatsky and Annie Besant. If these powerful figures felt rejected

Throughout the book, the author describes her own artistic journey

as a painter and a writer. It is a bold decision to position oneself

alongside women of such historical importance and I'm not

by the physical world, perhaps they found shelter in the

metaphysical, among like-minded renegades.

another treatise on the wrongs suffered by women artists

grievance. There is a vein of optimism and wonder running

they did so despite cultural scorn.

Mary Gabriel

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that was all too easy to dismiss.

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dismissed as kooks (think Hilma af Klint), while their male

as geniuses.

Spendy superfans

counterparts (in af Klint's case, Wassily Kandinsky) were heralded

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convinced it always works. But that might be my bias as a writer who likes to remain outside a story. No doubt Higgie's exploits will resonate with many readers as she personalizes the female artist's continued struggle to find a home in the art world — and shows that the other world, which exists beyond our consciousness at the point of creation, is welcoming still. THE OTHER SIDE: A Story of Women in Art and the Spirit World | By Jennifer Higgie | Pegasus | 312 pp. | \$29.95

Mary Gabriel is the author of "Ninth Street Women: Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning,

Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, and Helen Frankenthaler, Five Painters and the Movement That Changed Modern Art" and the forthcoming "Madonna: A Rebel Life." More about

A version of this article appears in print on Jan. 7, 2024, Page 9 of the Sunday Book Review with the headline: Spirited

 Memoirs by the rich have always been major publishing events. We looked back at 2023's biggest contributions to the genre. • In an interview, the Nobel Prize-winning author Jon Fosse said that a brush with death during childhood influenced_all_his_literary_work: fiction, plays and poetry.

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