

Agnes Pelton, Poet of Nature 1911-1961

Janice Lyle, Ph.D.

Katherine Plake Hough, Director of Collections/Exhibitions

Dr. Michael Zakian, curator

1995

Archives at the Huntington Library provide background information

Agnes Pelton papers are at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

Overview

- Imaginative Paintings from the 1910s produced in Brooklyn, New York
- Abstractions first developed while living in isolation at a windmill near Southampton, Long Island in the 1920s
- Bold desert landscapes and abstractions that interpret the region's arid beauty from 1932 to her death

- Pelton was interested in mysteries of nature. From imaginative paintings to transcendental abstractions she developed personal images that expressed her own deep spiritual feelings.

- "In the trend away from materialism in general, and from literalism in art in particular, Miss Pelton is a child of a new age. She is harbinger of the future for other painter poets." American Art News, 1931: Pelton viewed abstraction as a poetic alternative to realism that heightens our understanding of the world. She believed that modern painting should be a visual poem that reveals the beauty and mystery of nature.

- Pelton's ideal never developed into a widespread movement. Mainstream modernism in the US followed a path of theory and geometry, preferring self-reference to revelation.

- While she was aware of other styles, her imagery was highly personal and came from within: from dreams, meditation and waking visions – not from conscious attempts to emulate the work of either predecessors or peers.

Timeline

1881 and birth: Born to American parents in Stuttgart, Germany

- Grew to adulthood in Brooklyn, NY
- Family tragedies and scandal left her a melancholy, introspective young woman
- Learned to play the piano at her mother's school of music

1895-1900: Studied painting with Arthur Wesley Dow at Pratt Institute

1911-1914: Studied painting with Hamilton Easter Field at his summer art school in Ogunquit, Maine

1911 and First Works: Pelton's first works were imaginative paintings and symbolist compositions reminiscent of Arthur B. Davies (specialized in fantasy world paintings, organized the famous New York Armory show of 1913 and advised the Rockefeller family on art purchases that eventually became the New York MOMA)

1921-1931 – Pelton Leaves New York: Pelton abandoned imaginative paintings, left New York City and moved to Southampton and lived in a wind mill; here she supported herself by painting portraits of summer residents and documenting nature

1926 and First Abstractions: Pelton started translating her interest in organic energy into her first abstractions, focusing on movement of air and water, the unfolding of a flower's petals and the gentle glow of a distant star

1932 Pelton Moves to the California Desert: At 50, Pelton moved to the desert; for 30 years she painted desert landscapes and abstractions inspired by local scenery; brilliant light, dramatic mountains and open space. These desert abstractions became more spiritual as Pelton studied various occult philosophies that stressed the unity of all life and that complemented her belief in Christian doctrine.

Lifestyle & purpose: Pelton lived in seclusion but was social and enjoyed being part of a community of artists; art was a means of communications; art nourished the soul and was meaningless unless shared. Painting was a transcendental act, a way to return beauty to the world.

1938 and the Transcendental Painting Group: Pelton became founding member of the Transcendental Painting Group organized by C. Raymond Jonson; chronic health problems prevented her from participating and traveling much with this group, but she produced a lot of paintings, shipping them to exhibitions.

Inspiration: Poetry in Pelton's work refers to romantic poets of the past, such as Keats, Shelley and Wordsworth. For Wordsworth, poetry was not an object but a presence and a power; a motion and a spirit; not something to be worshipped and consumed but always a guide leading beyond itself. Pelton wasn't interested in the physical forms of nature as much as the larger processes they represent, especially the eternal cycle of birth, death and renewal. Pelton also believed that poetry involved the exercise of one of humanity's greatest faculties: imagination. She agreed with Shelley that "imagination lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar." She also believed William Blake, who wrote "Imagination is not a state: it is human existence itself."

Pelton Abstractions: Pelton emphasized the imaginative element by interpreting material objects as fanciful forms. She stressed relations invisible to the eye, using curvilinear biomorphic shapes to give solid matter a feeling of internal movement.

Color: Pelton applied color in glazes to produce delicate gradations of light to increase the sense of a spirit animating physical substance.

Personality: Pelton was small and quiet. She seemed to be more of a 19th century than 20th century person. Her favorite words were "felicity" and "beneficence." Like Aldous Huxley, she believed the world was a place of kindness and grace. Huxley noted that mystical experience is often accompanied by the sense of intense gratitude for the privilege of being alive in a universe as extraordinary as this. Pelton devoted her art to honoring and celebrating these wonders.

Agnes Pelton vs. Georgia O'Keefe: Many parallels: they were contemporaries; both studied with Arthur Wesley Dow; both painted abstractions in nature; both were introduced to the desert by Mabel Dodge Luhan in Taos in 1919 (O'Keefe came in 1929). O'Keefe stayed in New Mexico but in 1932 Pelton moved to Cathedral City and lapsed into obscurity. O'Keefe had Alfred Stieglitz to introduce her to and compete with male artists; a big advantage.

Pelton and Obscurity: Why obscurity? Her gentle demeanor was an impediment to promoting herself. She lived a passive life, believing that destiny was governed by forces beyond one's control. Although she had several one-person museum exhibitions in the 1930s and 40s, she never capitalized on the exposure. Pelton was content to receive the praise of a small group of friends and neighbors who appreciated her work.

Background in Brooklyn, New York

A Poet Painter: Pelton wrote, "My abstract pictures are just as real to me as nature they are not material, they are 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 a form and color and the poet sees it in sounds and words." As a painter, Pelton worked not with physical objects, but rather with dream-like impressions. She allowed images to come to her in meditative states. This process is a form of enlightenment that involves a self-transforming perception of one's total union with the infinite. Her spiritual art is very personal and reflects the facts of her life.

1870s and Family Scandal: The Tilton-Beecher affair: Pelton's grandfather on her mother's side, Theodore Tilton, was a prominent editor and abolitionist. Tilton married Elizabeth Richards, another prominent abolitionist. In 1870 Henry Ward Beecher, one of America's most respected clergymen, and Elizabeth had an affair. In 1875, to cover up the affair, Tilton unsuccessfully sued Henry Ward Beecher, of adultery. Tilton brought the suit to keep the affair quiet. To make matters worse, Beecher had performed the marriage ceremony between Tilton and Elizabeth. The sensational trial was front page news in New York from January through June 1875. The failure of the

suit and subsequent humiliation left deep wounds on Pelton's mother and on herself. The family collapsed. The scandal was important throughout the country because both men were famous and had supporters and detractors. The scandal exposed the hypocrisy of Victorian marriage. After the scandal, Tilton moved to Europe and wrote but died in 1907 in obscurity in France. Elizabeth lived in seclusion at her home in Brooklyn with her daughter, Florence, and Agnes, her granddaughter. Agnes was born after the trial, but remembered hearing stories about it from her mother, who at 17 years old was forced to testify in court. Children of Agnes' generation were taught to suppress all knowledge or speak about traumatic events such as this, which may be one reason Pelton retreated into silence. As an artist, she internalized this prohibition and silence would become an important theme in her work.

Later Childhood: Agnes' mother, Frances, married a rich but troubled man who took the family to Europe (Switzerland from 1884-1888). Agnes' was suffering from bronchitis and whooping cough and needed to live in a more benign climate. Her father brought the family back to America and descended into depression, drug addiction and early death in 1891. Her mother taught piano in Brooklyn for the next 30 years.

Upshot and Impact of Scandal: Shaken by the tragedies of her grandparents and her father, Agnes turned inward. She wrote, "From the time of puberty at age 13 I was much inclined to melancholy and tears which was probably aggravated by being the only child in a household of deeply religious and perhaps unnecessarily serious people."

Youth: Pelton had very delicate health, including constant back aches. She practiced piano in the morning, saw her tutor in the early afternoon and went to the Pratt Institute from 1-4:00 pm to practice her painting in a regular art course. The Pratt Institute had started in 1888. Pelton studied with Arthur Wesley Dow, one of America's foremost art educators, who had started with the institute in 1895. Dow favored creative exercises that emphasized a dynamic, decorative arrangement of composition, rather than teaching drawing as a means to imitate reality. Dow emphasized the Japanese idea of *notan* (light-dark) as a method of balancing large asymmetrical areas of black and white and had a lasting influence on Pelton's work. Dow published "Composition" (1899), which had an enormous impact on American art instruction. Dow advocated an analysis of abstract relationships, such as transition, opposition and repetition, rather than copying historic styles. He emphasized creative synthesis and encouraged students to look for common motifs shared by art from different cultures and periods. Dynamic pictorial relations such as these would later appear as the core of Pelton's abstractions.

1900-1907 Training and Graduation: Pelton graduates from Pratt Institute and spends the summer at Dow's Ipswich Summer School of Art in Massachusetts. Since he was familiar with and trusted her he made her his assistant, which was

uncomfortable for her. At the end of the summer, Pelton returned to Brooklyn but was seriously ill from exhaustion/neurotic fever (apparently life-threatening) for 6 months in the fall. She stopped painting, went back to working with her mother teaching piano.

1902 and Awakenings: At 21, Pelton developed a romantic attachment with a young woman student of her mother, but it was unrequited

1907 Pelton Resumes Painting: She studied with W. L. Lathrop, a tonalist and impressionist painter in Old Lyme, Connecticut. She made outdoor studies of nature from memory and studied the natural effects and significance of lights. With renewed enthusiasm for art, she spent the next several summers at the Tilton family farm in Connecticut practicing her painting outside. At this time Pelton was heavily influenced by Arthur B. Davies (specialized in fantasy world paintings, organized the famous New York Armory show of 1913 and advised the Rockefeller family on art purchases that eventually became the New York MOMA). She was entranced by his pastoral images of people in harmony with nature. She produced many pastel studies of young girls in nature, celebrating their innocence. At the farm was a dense, wild and overgrown area that frightened her; later she used this place in her imaginative paintings as a metaphor for deep mysteries.

1910 Pelton Travels and Studies Abroad: At 29, Pelton traveled to Italy to study art at the British Academy in Rome. This was a turning point in her career. She was enamored by the Renaissance, especially as interpreted by Walter Pater, whose book "The Renaissance". Pater wrote that the ability to take vague perceptions and creatively refine them into a crystal clear image involved the purest energy possible in life. Pelton was fascinated by this imagery and later based numerous abstractions on flames and fire. As a withdrawn young woman who had shriveled by family trauma and the death of her father, Pelton found solace in Pater, who validated her contemplative existence. She drew strength from Pater, which allowed her to function productively in her private world and use introspection as a creative tool.

1910-1920: With renewed confidence, Pelton developed her outdoor genre studies into what she called imaginative paintings. Based on Arthur Davies' pastoral fantasies, these symbolic images of figures in nature occupied her attention through the late 1910s.

Imaginative Paintings ***Interpretations of moods of nature symbolically expressed***

Some Imaginative Paintings of this time address specific natural phenomena, while others focus on psychological states. For Pelton, nature and mind were synonymous since she believed imagination to be a fundamental part of nature's order. Thought was organic and when utilized creatively and with sensitivity could bring forth the same gentle beauty found in a blossoming tree.

1911 Pelton Returns to America: Pelton met Hamilton Easter Field, a fellow New Yorker, in Rome at the British Academy. He encouraged her early Imaginative Paintings, and that summer she returned to America with him to participate in the inaugural season of his summer art school, Summer School of Graphic Arts (1911-1921) in Ogunquit, Maine. She spent every summer there until 1914. Field was a painter, collector, educator and gallery owner. Field had a major impact in spreading the ideals of modernism in America. While he painted in a conventional style, he enjoyed innovation and encouraged his students to experiment with the latest art from Europe. Field was from a wealthy Quaker family and maintained a studio in Brooklyn. He gave Pelton one-person exhibitions at Ogunquit in 1911, 1912 and at his main house, Ardsley House, in 1913.

1911-1914 Pelton in Ogunquit, Maine: Field's influence on Pelton was significant. Ogunquit offered a varied landscape of rocky shore, low-lying marsh and gently rolling hills with forests beyond. Pelton responded to the setting and began a very fertile and productive period. Pelton's close observation of nature and Field's constructive criticism changed and deepened her color sense. To ensure her imagery was convincing, Pelton made detailed drawings of various elements of her compositions, almost botanical studies. Although she practiced detailed drawings, she avoided details in her final compositions; she equated incidental details with physical matter and considered them crass materialism. At this time her rule was "no finish in anything but figure." Pelton struck a delicate balance between reality and artifice. She wanted her subjects to be recognizable – nominally real – but at the same time fanciful, belonging to a realm separate from the everyday world.

- **1913:** Pelton accepted a commission to provide paintings for a book of children's stories by Zona Gale.

Inspiration & Goal: Critics noted that Pelton's art was inspired by Arthur B. Davie's poetic symbolist paintings. Symbolist painters commonly used mythology and dream imagery in their paintings. Symbols aren't mainstream symbols but rather intensely private, obscure and sometimes ambiguous symbols. Symbolism was a significant influence on the Art Nouveau. Pelton was drawn to Davies' vision of pastoral ideal, she didn't agree with the way he portrayed the female form; it was a male interpretation of the female form; and while his paintings were dream-like the dreams belonged to the artist, not the women, and were based on a patriarchal ideal, and the desire of the male to control the female. Pelton showed greater respect for the female form. In her first Ogunquit sketchbook she listed these 7 terms that defined her personal credo: "calm, Aspiration, Tranquility, Abstraction, Folded Wings, Sleep, Vision." Her goal was to capture with great sensitivity the feel of a living spirit beneath a motionless exterior.

1912-1913 Pelton's Second Exhibition at Ogunquit and Participation in the New York Armory Show: Pelton's second exhibition at Field's Ogunquit studio was attended by Walt Kuhn, who was the recently appointed executive secretary of the

new Association of American Painters and Sculptors. Kuhn had also studied under Arthur B. Davies; the project for which he's most famous for was organizing the Association's exhibit of modern art to be held in New York. This famous exhibition is referred to today as the Armory Show. Marcel Du Champ's famous "Nude Descending a Staircase" was also at the show. This exhibition was the first comprehensive display of European modernism in America and introduced Americans to modernism. Pelton's contributions were "VineWood" and "Stone Age".

- **Armory Show and Pelton's "VineWood":** This work shows a female figure in archaic "Greek" dress in a forest with monkeys swinging from trees. The monkeys are thought to represent animal physicality and the brute force of nature, while the frail female figure is thought to represent high ideals of mind and culture, art and poetry.
- **Armory Show and Pelton's "Stone Age":** This work shows nude human figures on the shore of a lake. The figures blend almost seamlessly with the stones. Pelton was intrigued by the mystery of the soul, by the philosophical problem of the human spirit: what is it that makes a living being different from inanimate matter? She explored this question by blurring the line between the people and the rocks around them.
- **Pelton and the Upshot of the Armory Show:** The show was a landmark event for many artists, but Pelton's reactions were more modest. She was excited to participate but didn't show great interest in the new art. She opposed literal reality and academic realism and saw modern art as a new way to articulate human creativity. The Armory Show introduced not only new images, but also a new vocabulary. Like many artists of the time, Pelton used the terms Modern, Abstract and Post-Impressionism uncritically and interchangeably to refer to any image that departed from a factual rendering of reality. Often she applied the word Abstract in a Platonic sense. For her, Abstract was the essence or ultimate state behind appearance; abstractions didn't strip away reference to reality but was a way to concentrate on reality's essential core. Pelton didn't embrace the Fauves, Cubists, Expressionists; her work was forward looking, exploring an aesthetic of the imagination.

1913 Pelton's Exhibition at Ardsley House: Immediately after the Armory Show Pelton had another one-person exhibition at Hamilton Field's Ardsley House. A critic praised her belonging to the "honest bad of progressives in art," who represented a direction sincerer than that reflected in the recent exhibition of the futurists.

1917 Pelton and Introspectives and the Knoedler Exhibition of 1917: Pelton's romantic, imaginative paintings belong to larger tradition of American symbolism that flourished from 1885-1917. This movement reached its height during World War I when young artists turned to imagination as a way to combat the ills of a misguided

society. This group, including Pelton, called themselves "Introspectives" and first exhibited their paintings at the Knoedler Galleries.

Introspective painting: The spokesman for the Introspectives wrote:

Introspective painting shall suggest more than relate, for suggestion is the depth beyond the depth – the gauntlet to the imagination of the observer, that disturbs and quickens his sensibilities...It shall surprise and inspire, it shall soothe and exalt, and life the beholder from the dust of the earth, even if only for a moment. For such moments are the perfect life, the life beautiful and sublime.

(This statement is very similar to Walter Pater's ideas in *The Renaissance*)

Introspectives wanted an art that used traditional, classical forms to convey romantic, mystical ideas. Their imagery and themes were often literary, taken from such sources as the Bible, Wagner, Shakespeare and Edgar Allan Poe. Pelton had 12 paintings in the exhibition, more than any other artist. By this time, she was defining painting as follows:

Pelton Defines Painting

- **Painting is Visualization:** Painting is NOT an art of imitation; it's the art of visualization and color is its essential means of expression. All its other elements – form, space, and those less tangible are produced by illusion. For Pelton, visualization implies a power greater than sense perception. Visualization doesn't record appearance; it's a creative act that expands on what the eyes apprehend. Pelton used many modes for creative seeing - dreams, daydreams, conscious projections – to generate new images.
- **Painting is Theater:** For Pelton, art is a form of illusion. She saw painting as a form of theater; the painted image is an orchestrated illusion, an alternative reality conjured by the artist's craft. Paintings were like miniature stages where fictional characters acted out real life roles. Pelton had a passive approach to painting; it was her job to get the characters "on the stage" and let them arrange themselves without the burden of her moods; she thought of herself as an author only.
- **Color is the Language of Painting:** Color may be considered the language of painting, by which it demonstrates itself to the world of the spectator. Color gives visions weight and credibility. As color is primarily a sense perception, it is apprehended emotionally – whether somber or gay, serene or turbulent. Painting should convey through its language of color, and by harmonious relation of its

other elements, the interpretation of the higher possibilities of vision – the without seen from within, enriched and beautified to significance....

- **Pelton and the Importance of Music in Painting:** As with many modernists, including Kandinsky, Pelton drew parallels between the timbre of certain musical notes and the resonance of particular colors. Music was an important component of Pelton's life; many of the images she uses she took from music.

1910s Pelton and Political and Social Causes: While social and political activism were happening all around her in New York, Pelton didn't participate. While she had several studios in Greenwich Village in these years and was surrounded by leading radicals such as John Reed, Emma Goldman and Max Eastman (patron of the Harlem Renaissance). Pelton wasn't disinterested in social and economic injustice, but she was following a pattern set by her grandfather and mother; abolition and human freedom were worth fighting for, but economic injustice was problem for other people. Pelton preferred to focus on the grandeur of the human spirit. Pelton made a few feeble attempts to portray economic injustice but they fell flat and were criticized.

1910s and Friendship with Mabel Dodge Luhan: During the 1910s Pelton was befriended by Mrs. Alice Brisbane Thursbay, a New York collector who became her patron. Alice Thursby was from an important and influential in 19th and 20th century America. Her father was Albert Brisbane, a follower of Charles Fourier, a French sociologist who believed American should restructure its society based on small self-sustaining communities (utopian socialism). Alice Thursby was Pelton's contact to New York's cultural elite. Through Thursby, Pelton met Mabel Dodge and John Quinn (a lawyer who assembled one of the earliest and finest collections of European modernism in America). Thursby tirelessly promoted Pelton by holding private exhibitions of her work at her home and clubs, encouraging gallery owners to consider her paintings, commissioning works and buying other works.

Agnes Pelton & Mabel Dodge: Pelton and Dodge were very close in age. Dodge was wealthier, more worldly and of a higher social standing. She was married 4 times throughout her life, but in her own memoir "Intimate Memories" from 1933, Dodge acknowledged being bisexual in her early years. A friendship grew between them that lasted through the 1930s. Dodge routinely had salons at her 5th Avenue home, but Pelton attended a few times in the 1910s; she didn't enjoy large groups of people and had an intense aversion to personal scrutiny common in New York art circles.

1917 Pelton Experiments with Murals: Around 1917 Pelton became interested in murals and produced a few small projects for domestic interiors, including a series for Alice Thursby and a more important one for Arthur Brisbane, "Room Decoration in Purple and Gray." These murals were all Imaginative paintings. In them Pelton was able to more successfully make a clear distinction between the real and the abstract. In March 1917 Pelton created and distributed a flyer advertising her specialty in

domestic murals. She hoped the murals would give her art more of an epic quality and undermine criticism that here Imaginative paintings were only charming trifles lacking real substance. This effort wasn't successful and no commissions materialized.

1917-1919: The World War I years: During these years Pelton stopped painting. She spent much time working in the garden at her family's Connecticut farm, marveling at the wonders of nature. Pelton was at a crossroads – she wanted to make robust, vital statements with her art - but realized Imaginative paintings as she had made them in the past lacked the spirit of pioneering individualism of New England, made famous by Ralph Waldo Emerson, and were only artifice. With humility she acknowledged that the real experience of the spirit was embodied more fully in the farmhouse than in the New England landscape than in her art.

1919-1921: Taos, New Mexico: Pelton began painting again in 1919 when she and Alice Thursby spent the winter in Taos as guests of Mabel Dodge Sterne. Pelton's interest in art was rekindled by the New Mexico landscape but also, and more important, by her contact with local Indians. She made brief pastel studies of winter landscapes but also of Indians in their bright blankets and discovered that she had the gift of portraiture or, as she put it, "the presentation of what may be called the life or living spirit of a person." She felt that Indians were the perfect models because they lacked self-consciousness. She believed she captured more than simple likeness and found the animating force behind the human face. She became enthralled with this new discovery of her abilities and abandoned the artifice of her earlier Imaginative paintings and began to focus on the natural beauty and dignity real human beings. She decided to commit herself to portraiture. In 1921, at the advice of friends, she moved to the resort town of Southampton, where she hoped to find enough commissions to support herself.

1921 Pelton Moves to Southampton, New York: Pelton arrived in Southampton in June and immediately started painting portraits of local residents, summer visitors and friends of friends from Brooklyn. Demand for her work quickly grew and she decided to make Southampton her home. In October she moved to Hayground Windmill, a permanent residence in Water Mill, just outside Southampton. The mill was the last working windmill on Long Island. It had no insulation and was cold in the winter; it needed structural repairs and was cramped; but it was picturesque and embodied all that Pelton found important in a home. In 1923 she wrote to Mabel Dodge, "I love it here and feel happier and more contented than I have anywhere before."

1921-1931 Southampton and Long Island: Pelton was very comfortable and at ease with herself in her new surroundings; these were her most social years, and her notebooks are filled with photograph of visiting friends. Pelton found personal peace by fitting into the fabric of a social order larger than herself. She used Portraiture to capture the positive values she sensed in other people. She saw in faces a

manifestation of a unique spirit. Pelton augmented her work by painting portraits from photographs. Her goal was to improve upon what the camera recorded, to breathe life into photographic representations. She chose to paint "Portrait of Tony Luhan" (1921) based on a photograph taken in 1919 when she was with Mabel Dodge Sterne. Luhan was an Indian from Taos whom Mabel married in 1923. Pelton gave this portrait to Mabel and Tony as a wedding present. A steady demand for portraits kept her busy and provided enough money for some luxuries. She was able to travel and took two trips during this period, spending the winter of 1923-24 in Hawaii and visiting Syria in 1926.

1923-25 Pelton Travels to Hawaii and Syria

1923-24 Pelton in Hawaii: Hawaii made a big impact on Pelton. Fascinated by the beauty of Asians, she produced sensitive oil and pastel portraits of Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, Hawaiians and Philipinos, often focusing on children. The Hawaiian Islands also allowed access to a new form of nature – a tropical paradise. The foliage was unlike anything she had seen; a revelation of a new and magnificent world. She was particularly taken by the region's exotic native flowers. In response, she created a small group of paintings exploring their strange and wondrous forms. She was also very impressed by Kilauea, the world's largest volcanic mass. She saw volcanic fire as a symbol of earth's latent energy, of a great force that lies silent beneath the surface, waiting to be released. (While Pelton visited Syria, apparently she didn't do any painting there.)

1926 Pelton & Wassily Kandinsky: A major change in Pelton's art occurred in the winter of 1926 & "Being": Living alone in the windmill gave her time to look inward and meditate on the essence behind physical nature. As she explained, her work towards abstraction was a gradual development of ideas already present in her work of the 1910s. As she explained it, "This tendency toward the beauty and direct expression of abstract form in color was discernable at intervals from the beginning of my imaginative work, and finally, during the winter of 1926, in the quiet of my windmill studio, I began work on some pure abstractions." The earliest is "The Ray Serene" (1925); she called this her first abstraction. While this painting is clearly indebted to Wassily Kandinsky (abstract expressionist), it already shows an independent vision. The title itself speaks of tranquility, the very opposite of Kandinsky's apocalyptic imagery. Kandinsky's abstract expressionist style – the first example of modern abstraction – sought to break with academic realism and create art based on the human spirit. He saw "inner necessity," the human will for self-expression, to involve a struggle against material forces. Although Pelton shared Kandinsky's belief that art should reflect an inner spirit, she didn't feel that struggle was necessary or inevitable. The world spoke to her in gentler tones. It was governed by love, conceived in Shelley's definition of the word as a "going out of our own nature, an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action or person, not our own."

Pelton's "Being": Pelton's "Being" was her first original abstraction. She identified the central ovoid shape as an "egg mass – primitive," a form suggesting genesis. The real subject isn't egg but air (why?). The structure of Being is best explained by Theodor Schwenk, an anthroposophist, engineer and pioneering water researcher. Schwenk was a follower of Rudolph Steiner, an early proponent of Theosophy (basically, the purpose of human life is the spiritual emancipation of the soul). Most relevant to Pelton's image is Schwenk's finding that two chief characteristics of air are its elasticity and compressibility. The swirling egg shape in Being appears to arise from currents of air that coalesce into circling bands or ribbons of intertwining color. In 1929 Pelton looked back on Being and concluded that the key element was vibration. The dynamism of this image resulted from the "interplay of different color vibrations – colors catching the eye successively as a sequence of sounds in music." As with music, the image had to resonate through a room. She understood that a painting was fully realized only when made part of a living environment; it had to live well in the presence of other real things.

1928 and Pelton's Place in the History of Abstraction: Considering Pelton's early abstractions, partial abstractions and Imaginative painting from her 1914-17 period, she didn't emphasize the importance of these paintings to the history of art; however, their place can't be overlooked since they coincide with the beginning of a seminal period in American modernism.

1928 Pelton, Flowers & Georgia O'Keeffe: Pelton was interested in organic life, especially flowers, which embodied the benevolence of nature. It's difficult not to compare Pelton's flower paintings with those of her contemporary, Georgia O'Keeffe. Pelton noted that O'Keeffe was too concerned with surface appearance. Pelton praised O'Keeffe for painting "enlarged flowers – this way the soul of a flower can possess the whole heart of one gazing at it" but then faulted her for merely stylizing external reality: "She sees first outside...then with charming effort makes a decorative canvas of it."

1929 & "Incarnation": In this painting, another abstraction based on a flower, Pelton conceived the image as a form of theater; the image is seen through parted curtains. For Pelton, the reference to the theater enlivens depicted objects by presenting them as living actors. Theater curtains create a window looking onto an alternate space. Mainstream modernism sought to negate the picture plane (theater curtains?) but Pelton wanted to retain this quality. Looking into other worlds was the ultimate power of the imagination and the definitive achievement of the human mind. She wrote, "These pictures are like little windows, opening to the view of a region not yet much visited consciously or by intention – an inner real, rather than an outer landscape."

1929 Heavenly Bodies & Stars: In order to increase the sense of power in her painting, in 1929 Pelton looked beyond the earth and began a series of works based

on heavenly bodies, particularly stars. An example of these paintings is "Star Gazer." Pelton found special peace in gazing at stars and years after Star Gazer was completed, she wrote of looking into the night sky and being reminded of this painting. She perceived that "a star ray seemed focused on me – for me a little beam from a distant beautiful white star." What was important was her understanding that the star shone for her. By focusing on a distant point of light, claiming it as her own, she was able to possess a small but mighty aspect of the universe. It allowed her to see the cosmos as responsive to her personal desires.

1930 Pelton & Images from the Biological World: As with many of her contemporaries, Pelton was intrigued by primitive life forms. An example is "Fire Sounds" (1930), which depicts a number of elongated shafts that resemble simple marine invertebrates, possibly members of the phylum cnidaria, the simplest animals. They are communal and grow in clusters or colonies. If Pelton had wanted merely to symbolize primal life she could have used a single-cell organism, but she found little interest in such creatures. She chose instead a more highly developed lifeform; cnidaria lived together as a vital mass, providing a model for social harmony. The setting for Fire Sounds is actually the ocean. We can see cnidaria rising up from a dark mound of fire on the ocean floor. (The image of fire could also be a memory of her experience with Kilauea a few years earlier.) Fire was more than just a physical flame; it symbolized the energy of life.

1930 Pelton & "The Voice": This painting also depicts fire/flame energy and a shape that could be both a white flame and a sea anemone. Pelton interpreted the image as an utterance reaching out into space. The hybrid plant/animal shape embodies its title in the way it radiates prehensile arms that attempt to touch and embrace on sympathetic to its message.

1931 Pelton & "The Ray": This painting shows a sacred location sanctified by divine light. The central motif is a glowing vertical shaft connecting heaven and earth. The image can be read metaphorically as the Light of God or the light of truth. Responding to this sudden burst of light, the ground sends forth a single white flower. This painting is a modern version of biblical genesis. Pelton's reworking of the subject offers a microcosm of Eden.

1926-1932 Poverty & Time for Change: Beginning around 1926 Pelton began to experience financial problems. Portrait commissions, which had sustained her during those first years in Southampton, were declining in number. She and a friend developed the idea of "hostess afternoons" during which she could serve tea and sell paintings from the windmill studio. Pelton wrote of the windmill, "it is a mystical house, reaching into heaven & radiating from its center, distributing sustenance."

1928 California & Moving: In 1928 Pelton's friend Emma Newton, who had moved to Los Angeles, invited her to visit. Pelton jumped at the opportunity for a break from her routine life. She arrived in October and after staying with Emma for a month, took

a place of her own in South Pasadena in area where writers lived. She stayed for over half a year before returning to Southampton in 1929. While in Southern California she had a one-person show at the Grace Nicholson Gallery in Pasadena, which was well received. The positive response her abstractions received in Los Angeles inspired Pelton to seek a New York exhibition. She arranged for a one-person show at the Montross Gallery in 1929 and wrote to Mabel Dodge Luhan, "These pictures are, I am sure my special little message to the world. They created considerable interest in California, so I decided it was now or never in New York and want to get those people who might be interested in them and what they stand for to come and see them." One person who came was Dane Rudhyar. He was so taken with the Montross Gallery exhibition that he traveled to the windmill to meet Pelton in March, 1930. A musician, composer, critic and astrologer, Rudhyar pioneered "humanistic astrology", which integrated aspects of this ancient discipline with insights from 20th century psychology, particularly from the work of Carl Jung. He became a good friend and important figure in Pelton's life who often served as an advisor in spiritual matters. While she had read some occult texts in the 1910s and had dabbled in astrology upon first moving to Southampton, Rudhyar became her guide to occult philosophies and eastern religions.

1931 and Pelton's Last Exhibit in New York: When Pelton had an exhibition of abstractions at the Argent Galleries in 1931, Rudhyar wrote a short catalog introduction in which he claimed that Pelton was one of the rare individuals "able to experience so-called 'abstractions' as living reality." He saw this approach as opposing the cubist/constructivist tradition: "I do not mean by abstractions the results of intellectual analysis and reconstruction (as exemplified in cubism), but forms having both actual being as entities of a semi-subjective world and universal significance as impersonal symbols of human experience." Rudhyar saw Pelton's art as a natural language of the spirit, express in color, that had the ability to combat materialism.

1929-1931 Productivity During Pelton's Final Years in New York: These were probably the most productive in Pelton's career. She produced more drawings for paintings and completed more canvases than at any other time. Ironically, this period was also the most unsettled. The owner of the windmill wanted to sell it and Pelton knew she had to leave. Although she enjoyed aspects of the structure, she began to realize that its charm was little compensation for its shortcoming. In 1931 the windmill was sold, and Pelton was forced to leave. She moved into a friend's home until she decided where to go. She considered New York City but decided against it. Her first list of options involved 3 locations: Hawaii, Pasadena and Portland. Each offered its own advantages and disadvantages. In the end she found "the Higher Light" by moving to the California desert near Palm Springs.

January 1932 Pelton in the California Desert: Pelton arrived in Palm Springs in January 1932. As we know, the town is located in the Coachella Valley, approximately one hundred miles east of Los Angeles, at the eastern base of picturesque Mt. San

Jacinto. The steepest mountain in North America, it rises from near sea level to its 10,800-foot summit within only 7 lateral miles. To the north lies Mt. San Geronimo, 11,400 feet high. These 2 peaks, the tallest in Southern California, act as shields from coastal rains and create the Colorado Desert, which opens onto the Great American Desert. By 1932 Palm Springs was an internationally known resort frequented by Hollywood Movie stars. Since Pelton had a limited income and needed to live inexpensively, she settled in Cathedral City, a relatively new and less affluent community 6 miles to the east. When she arrived the town was barely 5 years old; growth was slow and by 1935 there were just over 100 residents. Throughout Pelton's life it retained the small-town intimacy she craved. She planned to stay only 1 season but the area agreed with her and she chose to stay longer – ultimately for the rest of her life. In June 1932 she arranged to rent a small green cottage ("green cabin") on a yearly basis. Once settled in, she felt a oneness with her new environment: "I'm here in California. A sense of it as though the spirit of this region has taken me in, accepted me." The voice of the desert spoke clearly to her and she responded to the region's rare beauty. From her home she could survey the full height of San Jacinto to the west and look northwest to San Geronimo. This majestic view was further heightened by striking atmospheric effects around the mountains. Clouds would hug their peaks and in the winter, when rains fell along the coast, fingers of clouds curled over the top of San Jacinto. Desert air remained clear, free from Los Angeles smog, and offered breathtaking views of the night sky.

Inspirations in the Desert; Landscapes & Abstractions: The paradoxes and dualities Pelton explored in her abstractions – contrasts between air and matter, wet and dry, hot and cold – appeared regularly in the desert. Effects of light and atmosphere on craggy mountain surfaces were delicate and ephemeral. Summer brought temperatures often surpassing 110 degrees, yet snow remained on mountain tops well into August. Great mysteries lay in the flora, which seem dull and lifeless most of the year but burst into flower after winter rains. Pelton's painting "California Landscape Near Pasadena," painted after her 1929 visit, depicts what her east coast sensibilities considered an extraordinary sight – a field of yuccas in bloom. The yucca received the nickname "Our Lord's Candle" because their creamy white flowers on tall stalks resemble candles on a church altar. Californians were familiar with this common plant, but to Pelton they were strange and beautifully exotic. The desert glowed with the delicate tones she was exploring in her abstractions. She wrote, "In the bloom of the desert I found a natural expression of that color radiance I have tried to develop in my abstract painting." For the next 3 decades she painted landscapes concurrent with abstractions. To her, they were equivalent means of expression.

1932 Creations in the Desert: "San Geronimo in Spring" (1932) was painted immediately after arriving in the desert. Pelton probably used a commercial photograph to help recall the scene, but she didn't produce a literal copy. Photography

was an inferior medium, according to her, because “the camera has no power of involvement.” Pelton believed that an artist had to probe the depths of a scene, even venture back into time to grasp its essential nature: “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.” Although the composition appears to be a straightforward representational work, Pelton conceived of the image in terms of fourth-dimensional space, a concept that had a profound effect on avant-garde movements from Cubism to Surrealism. This concept has been interpreted in numerous ways, but all explanations agree that there is a realm beyond the three dimensions known through the senses. To hint at the metaphysical dimension of space in “San Gorgonio in Spring,” Pelton emphasized depth cues, heightening the spatial definition of every element. Every object appears more distinct than it would in nature. The image invites a meditation on the deeper meaning of physical distance.

1932 “Sandstorm”: Pelton was also drawn to signs of the desert’s great power, as seen in one of her first desert abstractions, “Sand Storm” (1932). The image captures the region’s sand storms, as described decades earlier by pioneer California naturalist George Wharton James, who wrote: “During the sand storms the mountains that shut in the northwestern end of the desert undergo marvelous transformations. The atmosphere becomes charged with fine dust particles upon which the sun reflects and plays as the clouds that intervene between it and the dust allow. Late in the afternoon this dust becomes luminous with a half-transparent color-light that glows and shines and makes the whole mountainside appear as a veritable mountain of transfiguration....” Pelton depicted the drama of a sand storm swirling around the sun or moon and juxtaposed against a rainbow. Her compositional drawing is accompanied by notes charting the work’s genesis. She explained that her image consisted of a center circle ringed with serrated tips to represent “sharp teeth of sand.” There is a “pale, clear blue sky” visible in the very center, an allusion to the calm at the eye of the storm. The entire ensemble is ringed by clouds “seen through sand.”

1934: “Orbits”: Pelton was equally impressed by the serene majesty of Mt. San Jacinto and often invoked the “Great Spirit” of the mountain to bless her work. In “Orbits” the mountain is depicted as an imposing by lyric shape floating in space. Below it, at the horizon, lies a low and symmetrical pyramid that symbolizes a “dark, sharp mountain of striving.” Seeing human aspiration as misplaced mental energy, Pelton contrasted people’s desperate agitation with the harmonious movements of the stars above. The “stars of various sizes, colors & luminosities,” which spin gracefully around the snowcapped peak, move according to invisible laws. The stars were of different colors because they represented distinct forces, each with a unique capacity to affect the human soul. Pelton wrote to Dane Rudhyar:

"Lately the stars have been nearer again, such nights! Such relationships, such qualities – movements – sounds? I apprehend them dimly – receiving apparatus being so rudimentary, at least consciously. The lovely resonances or whatever they are make the stars seem personal like real beings – as no doubt they are."

Identifying personally with the stars, Pelton used them as metaphors for her own quiet passion. Their steady and distant glow reminded her of the small but constant flame she sensed burning within her.

1930s Pelton and Agni Yoga: In the 1930s Pelton became interested in Agni Yoga, an eastern philosophy based on fire, which developed in the 1920s out of schisms within theosophy. (Agni Yoga doesn't appear to be an active yoga as we think of it today.) Its doctrines combine the concepts of "agni" the Hindu god of fire, and "yoga", which refers to spiritual work or discipline. "Agniyoga", published in 1929, was read avidly by Pelton and shared with her friends. It was a "Yoga of life" in which the vital flame served as a metaphor for all life energies. The book explained that "It is precisely the element of fire which gives to this Yoga of self-sacrifice its name.... Because fire, as an all-binding element, manifests itself everywhere and thereby admits realization of the subtlest energies. The fire will not lead away from life; it will act as a trustworthy guide into the far-off worlds." Pelton was drawn to Agni Yoga partially because of her belief in selflessness and self-sacrifice. She was also drawn to fire's seductive and powerful image and once noted her long interest in "pictures of fire and nature reflecting or radiating latent fire." (We can recall her fascination with Kilauea.) Pelton seized upon fire for its ability to embody opposing tendencies. Despite its great power, a flame is insubstantial and dissolves into the air. To embrace the spirit of fire, Pelton used it as the basis of a personal emblem. In May 1932 she decided to make a symbol for herself; she settled on a "green flame over a white triangle above darkness," against a background of "heavy blue grey," which she considered to be her personal color.

Mid-1930s Pelton and the Conflict Between Passivity & Activity: "Intimation" (1933) depicts a spiritual leader or guru, perhaps a personification of Agni Yoga. The figure seems to illustrate Agni Yoga's teachings that "desire, striving and devotion" are seen in the fire of the eyes. Another aspect of Pelton's character is seen in "Barna Dilae" (1935), an image of a woman in meditative repose. While Pelton hoped to tap the raw energy of fire, she understood her natural inclination to be passive. She looked to spiritual texts for models of quiet introspection. This painting reflects a popular tenet in occult philosophy that human action is an obstacle to spiritual growth, that striving for material goals is a sign of human imperfection and a source of the world's strife. Pelton once copied a passage from Gottfried de Purucker's "Golden Precepts of Esotericism" that emphasized passive knowledge: "Go into silent places of your heart,

quiet & still. Intuition will come to you. You will have knowledge immediately; you will know truth instantly. That is the way." She embraced Purucker's message that "it is indeed the way of heaven not to strive." (I include this quote since it's so very different from the way most of us live today.) Meditative inaction proved impractical in daily affairs and Pelton frequently struggled between conflicting tendencies. Although she felt a need to take charge of her life, her inclination was to let matters run their course and idleness often had a negative effect on her art.

Pelton & Spiritualism: Pelton constantly looked for guidance outside herself. Although she was involved with Agni Yoga through the 1930s, she wasn't an exclusive devotee of this or any other spiritual program. She read a wide variety of occult writings and self-help books. In the 1940s she shifted allegiance to Krishnamurti. It is typical of her approach that while she read works by Madame Blavatsky (Theosophy) she wasn't particularly interested in Blavatsky's work "Isis Unveiled"; she preferred and copied extensive passages from "The Key to Theosophy." In this shorter text the basic teachings were presented in a question and answer format, which appealed to her because it read like advice from a concerned friend. Counsel didn't need to come from a spiritual source. Other artists could offer useful wisdom. Pelton read many books on art but wasn't interested in volumes of illustrations. She preferred texts about artists' lives, especially those with suggestions for fellow artists. Her favorites were Van Gogh's letters to his brother Theo and Joachim Gasquet's recollections of Cezanne's statements on art (which she translated herself). She highlighted key points from an early article on Hans Hoffmann's (German-born abstract expressionist painter) teaching method and even copied passages from an interview Marcel Duchamp. Pelton didn't need other works of art to spark her creative vision. She needed help in mastering the art of living as an artist.

1933 Pelton and Spiritual Guides: Pelton created a spiritual guide in "Mother of Silence" (1933). Beginning in 1928 she had shown an interest in icons and santos (saint figurines) because of their great spiritual power. Mother of Silence is an icon of Florence Pelton, a spiritual portrait of her mother. Agnes represented her as a looming Buddha-like figure, centered and implacable. A cord circling her body and connecting her head to her womb may symbolize the bond Agnes still felt between them. Traditionally icons are believed to embody the person represented. In troubled times, Pelton looked to this image for direction. She asked it questions and it answered her. For example, in 1939 she was having trouble completing an abstraction ("Pluto") and looked to Mother of Silence. She wrote, "This evening the Mother looked on with warmth while I studied Pluto and found much to be done. She directed, "Work on it once a week (or so) without haste, but do not let it lapse." The Mother helped me finish the Old Willow when it seemed too much for me. And asking her how to proceed with Pluto whether by invocation, prayer or fasting as an approach, she conveyed, "By

silence before it. It will come through you, convey itself through you" when you are in receptive silence.

Mid-1930s Resolution and Transcendence: In the mid-1930s Pelton sought symbols of resolution and transcendence, images that would help her resolve her life's conflicts (what could those be?). "Even Song" is an image of personal enlightenment. The title refers to vespers, a prayer or religious service held in early evening. In this painting the central image is a "translucent golden jar," which was really an "earthen, terracotta-like jar that has become illuminated." The fire of understanding transformed a ceramic urn into a vibrant glowing vessel. Pelton's first title for this painting, "Attainment," makes clear it is supposed to represent a higher spiritual state. Pelton saw the vessel as a feminine procreative force, as a womb-like shape giving birth to flowing waters. To emphasize this symbolism, she included the planet Venus shining in the evening sky. The outpouring waters symbolized fullness, plenty, abundance. It's a magnanimous image of generosity towards the world. Water functions in Jungian and alchemical sense, as a medium of transformation. The vessel was also an analog for her own body. In talking about a similar chalice shape in another composition, she wrote of the need to create a "shell of resistance that must be thin but strong to resist disintegrating forces." This "soft envelope" had to absorb influences "like a sponge." The image was a model for establishing her own psychic boundaries: "Develop an exterior strong, thin, absorbent or open to light only – so dark forces cannot enter and corrupt interior."

Mid-1930s Orbs & Wings: "Winged Peace" (1933) and "Beatitude" (1935) are both based on orbs supported by wings. Pelton conceived the wings as "contribution shapes or sections converging & feeding" the floating oval. They supported the center, allowing it to float, and nourished it, allowing it to thrive. She wanted a luminous effect consisting of a delicate "white glow" that could be neither cold nor noticeably yellow. To produce this delicate tone, she juxtaposed it against a background of pearly, warm gray. Pelton had long associated horizontal ovals with peace and repose. Earlier we noted that Pelton's comments on an earlier composition "Sleep" included the idea that "active light" is a pure circle; passive or non-active a flattened oval. While the circle signaled energetic radiation, moving with equal strength in all directions, in the oval this force waned. Lacking such vigor, the circle must collapse into a more passive ellipse. For centuries, wings were considered metaphorical objects that supported the inner life force. The ancient Greeks portrayed love and victory as winged figures, and Plato associated wings with intelligence. Describing the wing-like shapes in *Beatitude*, she wrote "wings as though moving, vibrating – softly on sustaining center." She identified this center as her heart. Pelton also used multiple wings as a metaphor for social cooperation. She believed in mutual aid and trusted that her direct appeals for help would be answered through special people, if necessary.

Mother of Silence, Winged Peace & Beatitude: A Summary: Although all three paintings are gray and dull in tone, Pelton felt that they emitted an inner light more profound than bright color. As in traditional icons, the spiritual glow of these images arose from the artist's devotion, not from the image's brightness: "Some of the old Russian ikons emit radiance quite perceptible to the sensitive. That it was not brilliant makes no difference.... The divine light of a halo reverently executed by a painter consecrated to his work emitted a radiance, no matter how dim."

Desert Images - Fruit: While Pelton explored abstract images of transcendence, she couldn't ignore the world around her. She obtained spiritual benefit from the abstractions, but also found solace in rendering the natural beauty of the desert. In a number of her realistic desert paintings she focused on symbols of nature's vitality: plants flowering or giving fruit and warm light falling on the landscape. In "Seeds of Date" (1935), Pelton depicted the fruit of the date palm, an important agricultural crop in the Coachella Valley. While this image may seem like a common postcard image, it had deeper meaning for Pelton. She saw the ripening dates as a celebration of life, embodying the same cycle of growth and decline seen in the previous decade. It was miraculous to see sweet fruit emerging from such an arid region, and Pelton was fascinated by plants that could thrive and bear fruit in the desert. Some sketches for abstractions were based on figs, palm and pomegranates. She maintained a fig tree at her home and proudly served freshly picked fruit to visitors.

Desert Images – Landscape: Pelton was equally intrigued by the way native desert plants underwent stunning annual transformation. "Old Palo Verde" (1940) depicts an aged specimen of a desert tree named for its uniform green bark. In the spring, after winter rains, it bursts into a colorful mass of delicate bright yellow blossoms. Palo verdes generally grow in washes where there is ample underground water. Serving as barometers of water supply, the desert's most precious resource, they symbolize life's ability to thrive in a seemingly inhospitable climate. Wondrous sights existed in the land itself, which included open desert, gentle hills, deep canyons and craggy peaks. The region's dramatic topography was formed through faulting and folding. The famous San Andreas fault, which runs along the northern edge of the valley, makes the region geologically unstable but breathtakingly beautiful. "Late Afternoon, June" (1936) offers a lyric view of the desert. Pelton chose the end of the day when the setting sun casts a reddish glow. She was interested in finding ways to unite her abstractions and landscapes. One vehicle was color. She reminded herself that "the color timbre and power used in abstractions can come into [play in desert paintings.... Open up the inner springs of color sound vibration and use them on the landscapes as well as the abstractions." The overall golden tonality makes the rounded hills in the distance seem especially tranquil and inviting.

Abstract or Landscape? A Conflict, Struggle & a Solution: Although Pelton found a creative outlet in her depictions of the desert, she struggled to reconcile the

landscapes with her abstractions. The abstracts were more personal, more intimate and she referred to them as “essential work” or simply “my work.” Because she was forced to earn a living by painting desert landscapes for tourists, she often lost objectivity about their importance. At times she saw the landscapes and abstractions as complementary forms of expression that informed one another. Other times she acknowledged that they required different skills, different modes of concentration and concluded that one distracted from the other. In 1933 she advised herself to accept the landscapes in stride: “Do not feel so much separateness & take work from nature more lightly. It should be a refreshment to you.” In 1939, after a period devoted exclusively to landscapes, she felt “as if my work so steadily on landscape was covering over the inner urge” and experienced a need to return to abstractions. Her greater goal was to balance both alternatives and adopt the best qualities of one mode to the other: “Can landscape be developed...to carry the abstract power? Fuse both in one.”

Success in Southern California: During the 1930s Pelton’s work was featured in 1-person exhibitions in the desert and at the San Diego Fine Arts Gallery (now the San Diego Museum of Art) in 1934 and at the Laguna Beach Art Association (now the Laguna Art Museum) in 1936. They received high praise from California critics who proved sympathetic with her goals. One critic understood these works as “painted poems” that express “sound and rhythm and graceful movement. For her, color takes on a radiance and vibration, and glow seen in modern lighting and stage effects, with colored lights, but seldom on canvas.” (While Pelton’s abstracts and landscapes were in the show together, I don’t know if any of them were the “hybrid” landscape/abstract that became a later trademark.) Pelton was pleased with this response but didn’t see the usual exhibition as ideal, always envisioning more intimate ways to present her art. For her San Diego exhibition, she wrote poems to accompany and explain her abstractions (she had done this before). They were meant to serve as introductions, providing the viewer with a context to better appreciate her message. She also revived an idea she had in the windmill and talked about establishing a tea house gallery, a “house of refreshment where delicate food only would be served.” There would be a tea garden outside. Inside the paintings would be set in alcoves, out of direct view but available for those who wished to see them.” This plan appealed to because it involved “stages of approach” so that guests would gradually be introduced to pleasant experiences, leading to an appreciation of her paintings. She thought of her ideal audience as initiates who receive the truth of her images through desire and effort on their part. The idea of having to work to obtain enlightenment by proceeding through distinct levels of understanding was common to a number of spiritual disciplines.

1936 Building a Home in Cathedral City: One great joy in her life was the purchase of land and the building of a house and studio. She made a down payment on a lot at 677 E Street in 1936. She wrote, “the house as it is now is private –

intimate, withdrawn, but the drive will open the affinity to the studio." She celebrated the completion of her house in November 1939 with a house-warming tea.

1938: Pelton & the New Mexico Transcendental Painting Group: In the mid-1930s Pelton made a new friend – New Mexico modernist Raymond Jonson, an energetic advocate for advanced art. They learned of each other in 1933 through their mutual friend, Dane Rudhyar, who was living in Santa Fe. Jonson and Pelton began corresponding and a cordial relationship developed between them. After they exchanged paintings, this friendship deepened into a profound respect for each other's work. (Jonson was about 10 years younger than Pelton; he didn't participate in the Armory Show of 1913, but he was deeply affected by it and was a follower of Wassily Kandinsky.) In 1938 Jonson and a number of other abstract painters formed the New **1938 Pelton and the New Mexico Transcendental Painting Group:** They unanimously chose Pelton as their first honorary president. She was the oldest member of the group. They looked up to her as a model of an individual who independently pursued a spiritual mode of abstraction isolated from the mainstream art world. Her poor health caused her to make only 1 trip to New Mexico. She shipped paintings for their exhibitions and wrote to Jonson often, requesting floor plans of installations, news clippings and updates about the various members. The group shared Pelton's vision in an abstract art that was creative, idealistic and spiritual. Their aim was to "present and promote a type of painting non-representational in character and dealing with forms transcending the static, concrete objects of everyday sensorial experience." In a statement of their goals, they wrote: "It is 'transcendental painting' in the sense that it reaches beyond the reproduction or interpretation of familiar objects and into the realm of a mental and spiritual awareness of the more individual elements of creative life...." Pelton and Jonson remained friends long after the group disbanded with the arrival of WWII.

1938 Pelton Abandons Strict Symmetrical Composition: Beginning in the late 1930s Pelton abandoned strict symmetrical composition and experimented with more dynamic arrangements of abstract form. "Resurgence" (1938) shows a triangular shape thrusting up from an icy environment. She wanted the form to be "denser & darker at the top – leaving earth's atmosphere below." The lower part was to be "like a mirage." This image of a frozen world was probably inspired by Caspar David Friedrich's "Polar Sea" (1824). An early German romantic painter, Friedrich is known for his images of people dwarfed by the forces of nature. He was drawn to natural signs of infinity – the endless expanse of ocean, the measureless distance of the moon and the final infinity of a cemetery. "Polar Sea" uses treacherous ice floes to represent destructive forces indifferent to man's presence. Pelton borrowed the idea of a cold, rugged environment but created a message more uplifting. For her the triangle pointing to a bright star signaled positive spiritual movement. This composition was initially titled "Flight". It symbolized human aspiration, an emotional warmth that could

rise above a frigid environment. Although living in the desert, she used ice as a metaphor for frozen or repressed emotions that could only be broken by the heat of human desire. (But earlier didn't we learn that Pelton disparaged aspiration?).

1940 Nurture and the Sublime: While "Resurgence" symbolizes human aspiration reaching for a star, "Nurture" (1940) shows heavenly bodies descending to earth. Pelton thought of the central mass as a "benign presence...looming, stooping, with great gentleness." The light is "not real daylight" but radiates from within the glowing spheres. Before them float flowers but they are "not real either – not substantial." Pelton considered them "souls rather than flowers." Of all her paintings, Nurture probably comes closest to realizing the sublime, an aesthetic category developed in the late 18th century to explain feelings more profound than mere beauty. Edmund Burke, a major theorist of the sublime, noted that one important element was vastness. Nurture is sublime in the way it unites 2 radically different forces: the cosmic power of planets and the delicate grace of flowers. While celestial bodies are considered to be remote from our daily lives, Pelton shows them descending humbly from their orbits. Their presence is compassionate, a sign that the physical world – even a distant world – responds to human need.

Pelton & Helen Lundeberg: The iconography of Nurture is similar to "Cosmicide" (1935) by Helen Lundeberg, a Los Angeles artist who played a vital role in the development of modernism in Southern California. While the 2 painters never met and probably didn't know each other's work, they shared a common outlook, an interest in quiet, meditative images that reveal the psychic depths of everyday objects. Lundeberg is probably best known for her role as a founder in 1934 of a movement known as "New Classicism" or "Post-Surrealism." She was interested in associative groupings of mundane things that reflected the personal but often illogical meandering of the mind. While her aesthetic is close to Pelton's, there is an important difference between the two. Pelton sought simple iconic images to reflect the boundless expanse of charitable nature. As one critic noted, "Nurture has the depth and fullness of an all-encompassing love." In comparison, Lundeberg's Cosmicide has the cold objectivity of a scientific display.

1941 "Future": "Future" offers a utopian image, a picture of a hopeful tomorrow, but attaining it required both physical struggle and spiritual growth. She conceived of the image as "a kind of 'Pilgrim's Progress' through darkness and oppression, across a stony desert...Through a symbolic arch is seen a mountain of vision, above which open by degrees, windows of illumination." In this painting Pelton drew upon metaphor of tranquil domestic life to add poignancy to her symbolism. The 4 glowing rectangles were meant to be a series of "opening rooms with light on," a peaceful refuge offering solace and comfort to the weary traveler. The number of rooms was a conscious reference to Christ's statement that God's house has many mansions. For Pelton, utopia was not one domain but involved a number of possible realms to meet the

different spiritual needs of individuals. To enter these beatific rooms one first had to pass through “pillars not heavy but solid, built up of stone-like forms.” These architectural elements allude to an ancient culture but also to brute physicality that must be surpassed before one can enter paradise. As in earlier works, the “distant mountain of aspiration” on the horizon symbolizes human striving, which may scale earthly summits but can go no further. In “Future” and other works of this period, Pelton attained the highest degree of pictorial illusion seen in her art. Later in the decade she wrote that in her abstractions “perfection of their technique makes entry into them by the spectator an experience. A less complete manner or method would be suggestive only.” While in her Imaginative paintings she felt it important to avoid a high degree of finish in order to underscore the fact that she was painting an idea and not a real event, in abstractions she wanted to offer a convincing vision. To win over a skeptical spectator, the illusion had to be complete. Pelton knew she had to create a total environment with its own atmosphere, its own lighting and its own sense of space if she expected the viewer to enter and dwell in that world. A sketchy, suggestive or impressionistic method would not have the strength of conviction needed to invoke an alternative to mundane reality.

1940 “Challenge” and Aging: “Challenge” (1940) is probably the most abstract of Pelton’s paintings. While she used her standard repertoire of subjects – stars, clouds and waves – she reduced them to flat 2-dimensional shapes and denied them the sense of space seen in her other works. The decorative treatment is further reinforced by a pattern of dots added to the arrow shape (?). When working with purely abstract shapes, Pelton tried to find parallels with other objects and activities in order to give them meaning. She once noted that the serpentine line in the lower right – also seen in “Future” – was a reference to weaving. For her, an abstract line was nothing but a self-referential and meaningless mark unless it pointed to another lived experience. Most of the lines and shapes in “Challenge” are doubled, repeated in a lighter ghost or astral image. Repetition draws upon a basic element in primitive magic – the imitative power of conjuring doubles. While there’s no central object in this composition, there’s a central theme – light. As she once explained, “All my abstractions have to do with light, for light is really all life, you know.”

1941 Pelton’s 60th Birthday: On August 22nd, Pelton celebrated her 60th birthday, marking the occasion by taking a walk outdoors. Earlier that year she had purchased a small cabin on Thomas Mountain in the San Jacinto range. At sunset she took a new trail into the hills behind the cabin and soon found herself beneath “two ancient ribbon-woods incredibly lovely in myriad bloom of tiny cream flowers.” She climbed to the top of a rock and found the mountainsides foaming with bloom – rich and exquisite forms of mountain maturity all fringed in the tiny flowers... How exquisite and full is the bloom of age!” With increasing age, she discovered a new inner peace based on a greater feeling of oneness with the natural world. This experience of nature’s divinity –

and of her divine place within nature – led to a renewed interest in traditional religious themes. While she had periodically addressed religious subjects from the time of imaginative paintings, they now appeared in greater number and with richer personal meaning.

“The Blest” (1941): was based on a composition sketched eight years earlier when she had a “feeling of blessedness all day.” The painting reflected her belief in a heavenly presence that could serve as a spiritual guide. The image, which depicts a higher plane of spiritual intelligence, consists of 5 abstract figures that have transcended their physical form and appear as pure disembodied energy. Pelton wanted them to be luminous and interblending to show that people could achieve a sacred unity once they surpassed earthly discord. Their heads and heart were lighter than their bodies because the spirits were driven by thought and compassion. Rather than maintaining personalities, they had sacrificed individual identity to attain a lofty state of spiritual grace.

“Awakening” (1943): also depicts a highly charged religious event. In one explanation, written to accompany a gallery exhibition, she explained the subject in earthly terms: “The ‘trump’ (trumpet) is sounding, stars come out, and the form buried below the purple mountain responds to the light of a new day.” In her personal notebooks, however, she used the subtitle “Memory of Father,” and revealed that the image represented a resurrection, her father’s rebirth. The dominant motif, a golden trumpet flower, was emitting light and sound, summoning the dead to awaken. The dark, horizontal shape at the bottom was the sleeper – her father. Behind him, the far mountain with its jagged, irregular profile, symbolized tragedies past. From around the back of the mountain emerges a biomorphic stream of light – a soothing, comforting force. In this secular version of a sacred event, she used nature – the mystery of a flower’s bloom – to interpret Gabriel’s trumpet call to awaken the dead.

Mid-1940s: Landscapes vs. Abstractions: While the imagery of her abstractions became more personal and resonant in the 1940s, Pelton found that she often had less time to devote to them. Increasing age took its toll on her physical strength, and she began to tire easily. She had to curtail painting to maintain her health, which had always been fragile. At the same time she still faced the problem of having to paint saleable landscapes to support herself. Feeling pressured by economic need to produce more “deserts,” she abandoned work on abstractions in the mid-1940s for 2 years. Focusing so much time and energy on landscapes, Pelton soon realized their shortcomings. They were too literal. She sought ways to avoid losing herself in details. Wanting a more poetic image, she tried a new approach: she used “realism only at key points where accent speaks.” She brought only key features to completion and left some areas unfinished and spots of canvas bare. This technique is best seen in “Big Dune at Sundown” (1945), which depicts Edom Hill at the northern edge of the Coachella Valley.

1946: New Techniques, New Efficiencies: In 1946 Pelton emerged from this period of landscapes feeling starved for “the intervals of timeless work with weightless substances or forms, pure immaterial color.” Working in an abstract manner had a healing effect; it lightened “the physical weight” that exhausted her. She began making a concerted effort to spend more time with her spiritual paintings (but what about abstracts?!). In 1950 she affirmed, “Abstractions are my work. This house is their home. Spend no more than 1/3 of your time on desert paintings and when at work on them, consider them like a little trip out in the desert, but your home as a place of abstract art expression.”

1950s: New Abstractions, New Landscapes: The 1950s were largely uneventful years for Pelton. During the early part of the decade she began a new series of abstracts based on circles, including “Interval” (1950). For Pelton, the circle was a supreme symbol of integration and unity. Because it has no beginning and no end, it has been employed by numerous cultures to express the idea of infinity. Pelton saw the circle as an ultimate image of transcendence. By the 1950s the Palm Springs area had grown significantly in population, and with a larger population came a number of new desert art clubs. She supported these fledgling associations by participating in their group exhibitions and donating landscapes to be used in raffles. Contemporaries of Pelton’s remembered that even though they painted in different styles, Pelton always showed an interest in their work. As always, Pelton had to create landscapes to support herself. “Blooming Smoke Tree” and “Smoke Tree with San Gorgonio in Distance” (both early 1950s) depict her favorite desert subject. This small desert tree is named for its compact mass of leafless ash grey branches that resemble a puff of smoke. When they bloom in early summer, they transform into a mass of bright indigo flowers. For many people a smoke tree in bloom is one of the most beautiful sights in the Colorado Desert. Pelton began painting smoke trees soon after arriving in the desert and earned a local reputation for her ability to capture their delicate appearance. These images of smoke trees and other landscapes of the early 1950s, such as “Chuperosa”, “Palm Canyon Road”, and “Rocky Desert” are marked by a new breadth of handling that makes them appear both airy and dense. Although they were painted with a light touch – she gently dragged a thin layer of paint across the canvas, leaving just a breath of color – the even handling makes everything seem solemn and weighty. By treating all parts of the composition in a uniform manner, she gave these works a quiet depth and resonance lacking in earlier landscapes.

1957 and Decline: By 1957 Pelton’s health no longer allowed her to work directly from nature. In 1957 she wrote, “I have not painted outdoors at all for about 3 years, as it is too strenuous for me, and it was time to stop trying to work out in the bright desert glare.” At this time, Edward Ainsworth, a staff writer for the Los Angeles Times, and a desert enthusiast, interviewed Pelton for an article that was published in the Palm Springs Villager. When Pelton saw the published article she was surprised to find

she was considered an artist of the Western scene, but pleased nonetheless. She appreciated his warm and sensitive discussion of her work. She still considered abstraction to be her essential work and did not want to be known as just a desert painter. With advancing age, however, she rarely had the strength to work on them. In 1957 she wrote that abstractions "have always been my deepest impulse. Unfortunately, these take the finest kind of inner energy, which as I grow older I cannot always command; but I have made a slight beginning, even in heat & hope soon to really be able to work again."

1961 Last Paintings and Death: In winter of 1960 Pelton decided to sell the home on E Street where she had lived for over 20 years. As part of the terms of sale, the buyer agreed to erect a new, smaller house on nearby B Street where Pelton would live the remainder of her days. With money from the sale, she could pay her own bills and retain her most cherished possession – her independence. While this new building was small and modest – one person remembered it being a "shack" – Pelton maintained her optimism, and felt happy about having "a new little room for painting only." All Pelton's last paintings addressed religious themes. "Light Center" (1960-61) is possibly one of Pelton's last paintings and was left unfinished at her death. An orb or oval mandala floats in space, taking on a new resonance through its simplicity. Space in Pelton's mind was not an empty void but a living expanse inseparable from time. The suspended mandala symbolizes not just centering but time suspended in space. The composition resembles "Beatitude" of 1935 except the wings are absent. In 1952 Pelton had turned back to her notebook sketch of Beatitude and added: "God is where we summon him when we make a center of receptivity – a culmination. Apotheosis." "Light Center" reflects such a "center of receptivity." As a true apotheosis, this orb did not need physical wings for support. The filigree border around the outer edge of the oval may allude to Victorian lace and points to Pelton's continued attachment to the ideals of the 19th century. Reviving the past in this manner implies that the present may also be revived at a later date. The decorative addition in this work transcends time and forestalls death. At one point, possibly realizing that she didn't have the strength to complete this work, Pelton marked the canvas for cropping. She intended to discard the perimeter and keep an area 16 x 12", featuring the central oval. The center was the perfect place for rebirth. Unfortunately, Pelton's material body could not meet the wishes of her spirit. Her chronic intestinal pains worsened and in the winter of 1960 her doctor diagnosed terminal liver cancer. Her few relatives debated about the best course of care and although they considered placing her in a home, they ultimately decided against it. They all agreed that she would be happiest in her own house surrounded by her cats and paintings. Many close friends in Cathedral City came to her assistance during the last months of her life. Pelton died of liver cancer on March 13, 1961, 5 months before her 80th birthday. Although she didn't ascribe to an organized religion, a memorial service was held at the new Cathedral City Community

Church. Alice Kennedy, a relative and close friend who organized the service, selected "scriptures which spoke of the wonders of the heavens & the stars, which Agnes & I had so often discussed." Believing that the abstractions were not "abstractions at all, but spiritual parables," she chose to display "The Blest" at the ceremony. Pelton left the physical world by way of fire. Her body was cremated and 2 close friends buried her ashes under a rock on her beloved Mt. San Jacinto.

Summary: Pelton's turn to traditional religious themes in her last years culminated a life-long interest in using painting to convey higher themes of the spirit. Philosopher William James in "The Varieties of Religious Experience" identified the essence of religious thought as "the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves" to it. While James, the founder of American Psychology and of Pragmatism (an approach to philosophy that holds that the truth or meaning of a statement is to be measured by its practical consequences), was not especially sympathetic to mysticism, he noted that at their most profound, mystical states point to grand themes shared by even non-mystics: "They tell of the supremacy of the ideal, of vastness, of union, of safety, and of rest." His characterization of 2 modes of religious feeling – one conventional, the other unorthodox – provide possibly the best summary of Pelton's goals in art. Her imagery derived from her faith in a great unseen order, in a power that coordinated the marvels of the organic world. She used painting to look beyond everyday existence and picture the correspondences that give meaning to daily life. Her constant goal was to give form to the greater good that lies within our reach.