Paintings, drawings, and prints by Paul Klee : from the Klee Foundation, Berne, Switzerland with additions from American collections

Author

Klee, Paul, 1879-1940

Date 1949

Publisher

The Museum of Modern Art

Exhibition URL

www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2817

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The Klee Foundation, Berne, Switzerland

Paux Rand







Puppet Theatre, 1923 gouache, 201/2 x 145/8"



Paintings, drawings,

and prints

^{by} Paul Klee

from the Klee Foundation, Berne, Switzerland

with additions from American collections

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

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The present exhibition of Klee's art consists of works lent

by the Paul Klee Foundation at Berne, supplemented by a small group of paintings owned in America. The latter have been chosen to bridge a few chronological gaps in the Foundation's extensive collection, and the Museum is deeply indebted to the American lenders who have made their pictures available for tour.

We owe a still greater debt, of course, to the Foundation, a non-profit organization whose function is to assure Switzerland, where Klee was born and spent much of his life, a representative collection of works by one of the absolute masters of twentieth-century art. Most of the Foundation's pictures have never before been exhibited in this country. Their arrival is awaited more eagerly than might be the case if unfamiliar paintings by almost any other established modern artist

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were on their way to us. For Klee was the master par excellence of unpredictable variety. He died in 1940, known and revered by admirers throughout the civilized world. Yet yearly since then his stature has grown more impressive, as additional pictures have come to light, extending a visual range whose limits might reasonably have been settled ten or even twenty years ago.

How to account for Klee's inspired prolificacy? Perhaps we may begin by noting that it was more nearly the result of sensibility than of plan. By this I mean that Klee did not usually renew his art by abrupt stylistic departures, but rather led us quietly through the multiple chambers of his awareness, his personality resembling a Chinese puzzle-box, its outer shape holding compartment after compartment within. It is true that his painting sometimes responded to the persuasion of cycles: it became more abstract or less so; it developed certain themes at intervals. But it cannot be assigned to relatively fixed stages, as can the art of a Picasso. On the contrary, Klee's imagery often explored many directions simultaneously, under the sway of a compulsive spontaneity.

Look, for example, at Klee's drawings in the present exhibition. They do not announce or certify a formal program, as did the drawings of the cubists. Their vitality springs primarily from an immediacy of unexpected response. Indeed, a great number of them are free improvisations

suggested by fugitive experience or emotion. But behind them lies strong discipline, and their technical ingenuity falls customarily between two skilled limits - the use of massed cross-hatching and of cobweb line. We should remember that Klee's earliest graphic work was partially nourished by late fifteenth and early sixteenth-century traditions; he learned from his Northern and Italian models how to shade density into depth, how to by-pass when necessary the tonal strictures of black and white. Quite early in his career he also developed that thin, incalculably spry line which is so often his signature. This line sometimes skitters over the picture surface. Its mystery then is that it achieves solidity out of apparent indecision; its tremulous contours are as implacable in space as rigid topographical designs. But the same basic line, bolder or reinforced with hatching, occasionally becomes an instrument of miniature precision, as figures and objects are presented in microscopic isolation against a large area of white ground. In either case, we always know in Klee's art how far it is from here to there. His spatial control allowed him liberties which less gifted hands would have muddled or abused. He was always believable, however remote from accepted fact.

Klee is seldom discussed as a pure colorist, at least not in the exhaustive way that a Bonnard or a Braque is discussed. I imagine this is because he did not often give his color an autonomous role, but

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preferred to subordinate it to a deeper plan. If we except certain works, perhaps especially those abstractions in which banded orchestrations of tone are the principal theme, we find that Klee was seldom content to let color speak for itself alone. One of the most beguiling of modern painters, he was not essentially a hedonistic artist. He was above all a painter of ideas and visions, intensely philosophical, concerned with what may be revealed rather than what can be displayed. (His humor, to which we will come presently, has tended to obscure the spiritual nature of his art, owing to the debatable assumption that great comedy is less profound than great tragedy.) Klee's palette, like his pen, was the obsequious servant of his transcendental intention.

A study of Klee's color nevertheless reveals its remarkable range and freshness, its capacity to change substance according to the demands of a given work. In many of his watercolors-I think in particular of the superb works of the early 1920's - the function of color is mainly atmospheric, and subtle washes are used to create a backdrop to surface linear action. On the whole his oils take color into more equal partnership with drawing, while complex textural manipulation and hieroglyphic placing make an important contribution. Yet his purpose was seldom merely sensual. The image itself remains dominant in a conceptual sense, and nearly always proposes a unique and

idiosyncratic meaning. One cannot imagine Klee planning a long series of pictures on a narrow, familiar theme, as Matisse has done in his interiors with figures. Instead, for the most part, Klee produced themes on variation, in breathtaking profusion. It would have been impossible for him to "pose the model," for then what might not instantly have diverted his attention? The wing of an insect, a chord from Bach, the grimace of a child, the festive tableware of a banquet long past? His imagination swarmed with the minutiae of memory, constantly refreshed by new observation and response.

The core of Klee's vision was his humor: a tender, instantaneous laughter evoked by unforeseeable stimuli. His wit enjoyed. It also mocked, but during his mature career it rarely accused. Consider, for example, the many images in which Klee portrayed the torments of childhood. His subjects' grief is shown as both real and absurd. He accepted the child's estimate of its oppression and promptly offered a palliative exaggeration, like parents outwailing their young as a means of breaking slight injury's spell. Klee treated adult dilemma with comparable acuteness and compassion: the mocker is incredulous at being mocked; the shepherd, with his large heart, tries to keep watch in every direction at once; the sensation of fear is symbolized as a swollen, narroweved mask on inadequate legs. And for animals Klee reserved a special fantasy,

showing them grouped in ludicrous conclave, or treating us to the unforgettable close-up of a cat whose anticipated prey is embedded, terrified, in its lustful brain. Even flowers and plants play an active part in Klee's comedy. Often they are shown in the grip of superior forces-bent by strange magnets, sprouting or drooping helplessly, struggling against the weighty appetite of a giant aphis. No form of life was too insignificant for Klee to consider in metaphysical terms. If we compare his plants with the bouquets of a Renoir, an immense difference in spirit is apparent: the former are portrayed from an animistic viewpoint; the latter are treated as delectable ornaments of human existence

The titles of Klee's pictures are extremely important, and the artist himself made every effort to have them preserved. (They are given here in the catalog in the original German as well as in English, on the assumption that their choice was sometimes affected by phonetic considerations.) Unlike the titles of many surrealist paintings, which were planned either to suggest a parallelism of mood or to gain from the observer an added concentration on the doubly unlikely, Klee's titles are descriptive and accurate. They open the door to our full enjoyment of the image. Yet the image itself holds our attention long after we have ceased to savor its name. Indeed, perhaps only Picasso among modern painters has rivaled Klee in the ability to translate into

new visual terms what is primarily a psychological or even a moral point. This is not to say that either artist can be summarized through the esthetic of "pure form" which our epoch has defined so redundantly. But both men have consistently invented values of color, shape and line which transcend, without obliterating, a strong allusive content. Within its smaller scale, and allowing for its deliberate humility, Klee's art seems as rich in plastic discovery as Picasso's. He worked as a virtuoso, but with the conscience of a master and a philosopher's exaltation.

Perhaps that is why Klee's paintings and drawings are more and more influential among younger artists. His influence is rising now even in Paris, where previously attention had focused mostly on native, Spanish and Baltic tendencies in contemporary art. In America, on the contrary, Klee has for some time been appreciated by artists and laymen, though never in such measure as now. Today there are probably more first-quality Klees in this country than anywhere except Switzerland. Only a few of them have been included in this exhibition, since its principal purpose is to show a selection from the great collection at Berne.

We in America can rightly be proud of our long-standing recognition of Klee. We should be just as gratified that he is so fully known as a prophet at home.

James Thrall Soby

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The Artist's Sister, 1903 oil on cardboard, 11 x 125/8"

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Hero with a Wing, 1905 *etching*, $9\frac{1}{8} \times 5\frac{3}{4}$ " (image)

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opposite: #49, 1908 pencil, 111/2 x 77/8"







From Berne, 1909 *pen and brush*, 8½ x 10¹/8" 14 opposite: #153, 1914 pen, 71/4 x 53/8"









Seascape with a Heavenly Body, 1920 pen, 5 x 111/8" opposite: Ceramic, Erotic, Religious, 1921 watercolor, 181/8 x 12"





Magic Theatre, 1923 watercolor, 13¹/₄ x 87/8"

opposite: Fire Wind, 1923 gouache, 167/8 x 117/8"













Daemonie, 1925 pen, 111/2 x 217/8"

She Howls, We Play, 1928 oil on canvas, 17 x 221/8"




opposite: A Gay Repast, 1928 oil on wood, 33¹/₄ x 26³/₄". Collection Mrs. Gabriel Hauge, New York 28





opposite: Monument in the Orchard, 1929 watercolor, 18 x 12"











Family Promenade, 1930 pen and ink with watercolor, 153/4 x 225/8"

opposite: Classic Coast, 1931 oil on canvas, 313/8 x 267/8". Private collection





Country Dwarf, 1933 gouache, 19 x 111/2"

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color plate: North Room, 1932 watercolor, 145/8 x 2114"

opposite: Mask of Fear, 1932 oil on burlap, 391/2 x 221/2". Collection Dr. Allan Roos, New York





Departing Spirit, 1933 oil on composition board, 12 x 1938"







Landscape with Accents, 1934 gonache, 131/4 x 203/4"

opposite: Arab Song, 1932 oil on burlap, 36 x 251/4". The Phillips Gallery, Washington, D.C.

opposite: Lady Demon, 1935 tempera on burlap, 59¹/₄ x 39⁷/₈"



Firmly Confined (in festen Grenzen), 1935 oil on paper, 13^{1/2} x 18³/₈" 44





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St. George, 1936 oil on composition board, 121/2 x 167/8"



Early Sorrow, 1938 gouache and gesso on burlap, 13¹/₄ x 17³/₄"



Insula Dulcamara, 1938 oil on burlap, 345/8 x 691/4"

opposite: Daemonie, 1939 gouache, 13 x 81/4"



opposite: A Look from Egypt, 1937 charcoal and tempera, 107% x 65%"

Cerulean-Fruit (Coelin-Frucht), 1938 gouache, 14 x 101/2"









Saint at a Window, 1940 *gouache*, 11½ x 81/8"

opposite: Torso and Kin in Full Moon, 1939 tempera on burlap, 255% x 1934"



Catalog of the Exhibition

Unless otherwise noted, all works listed below are from the collection of the Klee Foundation.

In dimensions height precedes width.

Media may not always be correctly identified since the artist's handling of the materials of painting is unconventional and cannot with certainty be reconstructed.

An asterisk preceding the catalog number indicates that the work is illustrated.

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- *3 The Artist's Sister (*Die Schwester des Künstlers*) 1903 oil on cardboard, 113% x 125%", ill. p. 11
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- 5 Flower Pots (Blumenstöcke) 1906 oil on canvas, 171/2 x 131/8"
- 6 Stone Quarry (Steinbruch) 1907 watercolor, 24¹/₂ x 19"
- 7 Seated Girl (sitzendes Mädchen) 1909 oil on cloth, 13¹/₄ x 8⁵/₈"
- 8 Before the Gates of Kairouan (vor den Toren von Kairouan) 1914 watercolor, 8 x 123%"
- 9 #218, 1914 watercolor, 45% x 634"
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- 13 #157, 1919 oil on paper, 18% x 15%"
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15 #191, 1919 gouache, 117% x 5"

- 16 Tropical Blossoms (Tropische Blüten) 1920 oil on paper, 10¹/₈ x 11³/₈"
 - 17 Enchainment (Fesselung) 1920 watercolor, 12¹/₄ x 9¹/₂"
- *18 Ceramic, Erotic, Religious (Keramisch, Erotisch, Religiös) 1921 watercolor, 18½ x 12", ill. p. 19
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- -24 Harmony (Harmonie) 1923 oil on wood, 27½ x 19%"
- 25 Chinese, 1923 oil on wood, 12³/₄ x 65%" Lent anonymously
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- *27 Fire Wind (Feuerwind) 1923 gouache, 167% x 117%", ill. p. 21
- =*28 Puppet Theatre (Puppen-Theater) 1923 gouache, 20¹/₂ x 14⁵/₈", reproduced in color p. 4
 - 29 Tightrope Walker (Seiltänzer) 1923 watercolor, 19 x 1234"
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 - 32 Carnival in the Mountains (Karneval im Gebirge) 1924 watercolor, 1038 x 13"
 - 33 Wall Picture (Wandbild) 1924 oil on cloth, 10 x 21¾"
- *34 The Nursemaid (das Kinderfräulein) 1924 watercolor, 20¹/₈ x 13¹/₂", ill. p. 23
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- *39 Little Dune Picture (Kleines Dünenbild) 1926 oil, 12½ x 9½" Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Clifford Odets, New York, ill. p. 25
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- 194 Shopgirl and Customer (Ladnerin und Kundin) 1937 brush, 10 x 1958"
- 195 Angel from the Star (Engel vom Stern) 1939 brush and watercolor, 24¹/₈ x 18¹/₈"
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- 198 Virgin in a Tree (Jungfrau im Baum) 1903 etching, 9¹/₄ x 11³/₄" (image)
- Two Men Meet, Each Believing the Other to be of a Higher Rank (Zwei Männer, einander in böherer Stellung vermutend, begegnen sich) 1903 etching, 43% x 7½" (image)
- 200 Head of Menace (Drobendes Haupt) 1905 etching, 7 x 5" (image)
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This book has been printed in March, 1949, for the Trustees of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, by The John B. Watkins Company, New York

Cover, typography, and format by Paul Rand






















































