

# THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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## LARGE RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION OF WORKS OF PAUL KLEE TO OPEN AT MUSEUM

The largest exhibition of the works of Paul Klee ever held in this country will go on view at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, on December 21 and will remain in the third floor galleries through February 19, 1950. This retrospective show, assembled by James Thrall Soby and Margaret Miller of the Museum, is drawn largely from the collection of the Paul Klee Foundation of Berne, Switzerland, and contains more than 150 works which have never before been seen in this country. Supplementing the Swiss loans is a small group of American-owned pictures of exceptional quality.

The Paul Klee Foundation was established by a group of Swiss collectors shortly after the death of the artist in 1940, for the purpose of assuring Switzerland of a public collection of this artist's work. Eventually this collection will be permanently installed in the Berne Museum. In 1948 it was exhibited in Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam and Zurich. During the past year it was circulated by the Museum of Modern Art to 4 American cities, and it will continue to 2 other cities after closing in New York. Purchased from the artist's widow, it contains many works which the artist withheld from sale during his lifetime. It is particularly rich in drawings which comprise half the collection and range in date from carefully pencilled student sketches to the boldly brushed calligraphy of his last work. Klee rarely sold any of his drawings of the '20s and '30s, holding them as a capital reserve of ideas and themes upon which he drew for his watercolors, oils and prints. The collection contains many master watercolors of all periods, and several major oils of the larger format characteristic of his later work.

Klee was born in 1879 in a small village near Berne, Switzerland, and grew up in a musical atmosphere created by his Bavarian father and French mother. At 19 after choosing between his gifts as a musician, poet and artist, he went to Munich to study painting, though he continued to play the violin skilfully for the rest of his life. One painting and several sketch book pages done as a student in Munich

will be included in this exhibition. Trips to Italy in 1901, Paris in 1905 and again to Paris in 1912 interspersed his continuous painting in Munich and Berne. It was in 1912 that Der Blaue Reiter, a group of artists including Klee, held its first exhibitions in Munich and in Berlin. From 1906 to 1920 he lived in Munich; a number of works produced during this time will be shown. In 1914 Klee went with the painter Macke to northern Africa, and the forms and colors of semi-oriental Tunis were clearly incorporated into his paintings of that year and later. In 1920 he began teaching at the Bauhaus in Wiemar and then moved to Dessau when the school moved there in 1926. Here he formed with his fellow painter-teachers, Feininger, Javlensky and Kandinsky, the group known as the Blue Four whose works were exhibited throughout Germany and America. After the Nazi rise to power he returned to Berne and died in Switzerland in 1940, having achieved a uniquely distinctive position in twentieth-century art.

Among the revealing remarks about his work made by Paul Klee himself is the following:

"[The artist] does not attach such intense importance to natural form as do so many realist critics, because, for him, these final forms are not the real stuff of the process of natural creation. For he places more value on the powers which do the forming than on the final forms themselves.

"He is, perhaps unintentionally, a philosopher, and if he does not, with the optimists, hold this world to be the best of all possible worlds, nor to be so bad that it is unfit to serve as a model, yet he says:

"'In its present shape it is not the only possible world.'"

In the exhibition catalog designed by Paul Rand and containing reproductions in black and white and in color, Mr. James Thrall Soby makes the following statements about the art of Paul Klee:

"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....

"Klee's drawings in the present exhibition...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.... 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....

"Klee is seldom discussed as a pure colorist.... 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.... 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...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....

"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 [Early Sorrow in the present exhibition, one of] the many images in which Klee portrayed the torments of childhood. His subjects' grief is shown as both real and absurd.... Klee treated adult dilemma with comparable acuteness and compassion: [in The Mocker Mocked] the mocker is incredulous at being mocked;...the sensation of fear is symbolized [in Mask of Fear] as a swollen, narrow-eyed 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....

"Indeed, perhaps only Picasso among our modern painters has rivaled Klee in the ability to translate into new visual terms what is primarily a psychological or even a moral point.... 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."