

Paul Klee

PAUL KLEE

(1879-1940)

Paul Klee was born near Berne, Switzerland. His Swiss mother was an amateur painter and his Bavarian father was a professor of music. As a child, Klee showed both musical and artistic talent, but finally decided to become an artist and went to Munich to study at the Fine Arts Academy. Klee's first exhibition was held in Berne in 1910. It showed the influence of Cezanne, Matisse and Van Gogh. In 1912, Klee exhibited with the Blaue Reiter. By the following year, he had begun to state, in a series of essays that appeared in Zurich, his own personal, spiritual approach to black and white, pencil or ink, varied occasionally by watercolor. However, in 1914, he made a trip to Tunisia with Macke and the possibilities of working in color became apparent to him. All of his oils, therefore, were painted between 1914 and 1940. Klee was invited to teach at Blauhaus in Weimar in 1920 and continued with that school until 1931. He was made Professor of Fine Arts in Dusseldorf in 1931. The Nazis included nine of his works in the "Degenerate" art exhibition of 1933, invaded his studio and suspended him from his post. Klee was able, luckily, to take his paintings, drawings, and writings with him when he sought refuge in Berne, where he continued to work until his death in 1940.

Klee tried to achieve purely pictorial composition. He wanted to use elementary purity of means to express complex things. In working toward this end, Klee showed himself to be a most subtle master of fantasy. His paintings show strangely real unreal lives of human beings, birds and animals. Even his inanimate objects are shown with wit and charm.

In his work we often find a linear structure that is characteristic of children's drawings. His purpose in such simplicity was to show things as objects while maintaining total purity. Some of his paintings emphasize planar composition and others depth. The lines show his great diversity in drawing. Sometimes they appear fine and swift, at others, drawn out, broad and slow.

Klee's love of color is reflected through his many different palettes. Tones are sometimes muted and delicately shaded or they are applied in flat areas that are clear but not bright. Some of his paintings are bold in color, others have the quality of moonlight.

The style of the artist is a combination of capriciousness and rule, firmness and gracefulness. His great love of symbols is quite obvious in many paintings. After 1930 his works became larger in size and the number of elements included was reduced, but at the same time his vigor seemed to increase. He used hieroglyphics and more vibrant color at this time.

Klee, Paul

1085

*La Belle Jardinière* (1939). This hazily luminous painting, like many others by Klee, is almost incomprehensible without its title. The French word *jardinière* means a female gardener, a plant stand, and also, popularly, a golden beetle, useful in gardens because it eats insects, slugs and snails. The beetle — the humped shape outlined in blue — seems to walk into the painting on his reddish-brown stick legs. Superimposed on the beetle is a line drawing that resembles the numeral four with elongated arms. At the top two-points are a rounded oblong and a triangle, both filled with circles. This is Klee's pictogram for a flower. Fragments of the forms found in the flower are scattered throughout the painting. In the upper left corner is a line drawing of a snail. The entire surface of the painting is the garden, with the areas of red and blue applied so the texture of the canvas shows through. Thus, Klee has transmuted a verbal pun into a visual one.

28 X 22

**P**AUL KLEE (1879-1940) WAS A PROFESSOR OF ART AT THE Düsseldorf Kunstakademie when the Nazi party came to power in 1933. Accused of being a "Galician Jew," whose works were "degenerate," the 54-year-old professor was one of some 1400 artists whose works were confiscated from more than 30 German museums. Some 650 works by these artists were later singled out by the government for inclusion in the notorious *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) exhibition that opened in Munich on July 19, 1937. More than 2 million visitors attended the exhibit in Munich and another million saw it when it traveled throughout Germany and Austria. Seventeen of the works in the show were by Klee.

Born in Münchenbuchsee, near Berne, Switzerland, Klee was the son of a German-born music teacher and a Swiss mother. As a boy he already showed special aptitudes for both drawing and music. Indeed, although he would choose the visual arts as his profession, he continued to practice the violin almost daily for his entire life. In addition, he saw affinities between art and music that were to become a topic of lifelong investigation for him. Klee's formal art studies began in Munich in 1898 at the Munich Academy. In 1901 he traveled in Italy and France and became interested in the work of van Gogh, Matisse, and Cézanne. The following year he returned to live and work in Berne. In 1906 he married the musician Lily Stumpf, whom he had met in Munich during his student years, and the couple returned there to live; a son, Felix, was born in 1907.

In 1911 Klee was invited to join the avant-garde group *Der Blaue Reiter* (Blue Rider); he exhibited with them the following year. At the same time he developed an interest in various types of "primitive art," including tribal art, the art of children, and the art of people labeled insane. In 1912 he visited Robert Delaunay in Paris and was profoundly influenced by his Orphism, a kind of "musical Cubism" executed in bright colors; the movement was named for Orpheus, the Greek poet of music. Klee's true epiphany of color happened, however, only in 1914 on the occasion of a trip to Tunisia: "Color and I are one," he wrote in his diary. "I am a painter." Still, despite the declaration, he did not start painting in oils until 1918. In 1920 Klee was invited by its founder, Walter Gropius, to join the staff of the Bauhaus in Weimar (later in Dessau). There, in this innovative setting that integrated design, technology, and craftsmanship in a single curriculum, Klee taught color theory and investigated the relationships between color and music for nearly a dozen years. He left in 1931 to join the faculty of the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf. Two years later, after his works were confiscated, he and his family returned to Berne where he remained for the rest of his life.

In *the Magic Mirror* (cover) was painted in 1934, not long after Klee's return to Berne. Lyrical, sad, haunting, the work has both poignancy and wit. In its simplest form, the painting depicts the journey of a single line down the center of a canvas. It is, as Klee was fond of saying, "a line taking a walk." But what a walk! Beginning with a knitted brow and end-



Paul Klee (1879-1940), *In the Magic Mirror*, 1934, Swiss. Oil on canvas on board. 66 x 50 cm.

ing in a prominent chin, the single squiggle becomes an eloquent red line that creates three faces: two in opposing profiles, one frontal. The painting is indeed "a magic mirror." But the mirror also reflects a saddened heart, dark with the loss of all that was dear.

In a museum, hanging among the big landscape machines or formal portraits, Klee's works often look insubstantial—little more than cursory sketches that have been framed. Klee's response is decisive: The power of art, he believes, lies not in the completed form, but in the creative powers that were necessary to form that image. Moreover, to Klee the creation recorded in the Book of Genesis is an ongoing, never-ending, eternal process. It is the artist's task to plumb new depths of the ongoing creation in the images received. Klee also insisted on the importance of line as defining not only space, but also time. An artist, he said, can draw a line only in time; the line, like that of a melody, is movement, passage from one place to another; it can be accomplished and thus apprehended only in time.

Shortly after Klee's return to Berne, his health began to fail. Progressive, systemic scleroderma was diagnosed in 1936. Initially, his artistic output dropped—he produced only 25 paintings that year—but then it rose dramatically to exceed several hundred works by the spring of 1940. He died shortly thereafter.

The last word is properly Klee's: The image of nature we see every day is not, as he so often said, "the finished product." The world has not only a present and a past but a process that is called Genesis. It is the *act* of creating that is rightly called the "product." It is the work of art that is the art.

M. Therese Southgate, MD

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The Cover Section Editor: M. Therese Southgate, MD, Senior Contributing Editor.

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## PAUL KLEE

Paul Klee was an introverted Swiss painter who spent most of his adult life in Germany until the Nazis expelled him in 1933. His oil paintings, watercolors, and etchings are impossible to classify as he used both abstract and realistic elements with allusions to dreams, music and poetry. His interest in music was a recurring theme in his work throughout his lifetime.

The artist was born on December 18, 1879 near Berne, Switzerland. His Swiss mother was an amateur painter and Bavarian father was a professor of music. As a child, Klee showed both artistic and musical talent - he played the violin. However, at age 19 in 1898 he decided to become an artist and went to the Munich Fine Arts Academy to study painting. He related painting and music and sought his inspiration in music. His early works before 1912 were mostly pen and ink drawings. Klee developed and harmonized pictorial themes as a composer would music. In 1901-02 Klee toured Italy responding enthusiastically to Early Christian and Byzantine art as well as Matisse. During the years 1903-1906, he produced a number of etchings reflecting expressionism's influence. These works were among the first in which clever titles played an integral part. Also, in 1906 he married pianist, Lily Stumpf. They settled in Munich - an important center for avant-garde art. Between 1908 and 1910, he became aware of Cezanne, Van Gogh, and the beginnings of the modern movement in painting. Klee's first exhibition was held in Berne in 1910. In 1912, he exhibited with the Blau Reiter (The Blue Rider) - an expressionist group that contributed to the development of abstract art and wanted to reflect the artlessness and fantasy of children's drawings. The group included Wassily Kandinsky and August Macke. In 1913 Klee shifted from black and white line drawings and etchings to color and began moving towards his distinctive painting style.

In 1914, Klee visited Tunis with Mackey and Louis Millie. Overwhelmed by the intense light, Delamay, and the new theories of color use he wrote:

"Color has taken possession of me; no longer do I have to chase after it, I know that it has a hold of me forever... Color and I are one. I am a painter."

Klee painted all of his oils between 1914 and 1940. He also did more watercolors and tried a form of semi-abstract color pattern based on cubism. He built up compositions of colored squares reflecting the radiance of the mosaics he saw in Italy. He also incorporated letters and numerals in his paintings using a complex language of symbols and signs.

Between 1916 and 1918, Klee served in the German army. In 1918, he was invited to join the staff of the Bauhaus and taught there with Kandinsky from 1921 to 1931. The school taught art and architecture and established a close relationship between artists and local industry. The Bauhaus style was impersonal, severe and geometrical. Teaching forced Klee to examine the principles of his painting style and clarify creating as an intuitive art. His art was always rooted in nature and used geometric elements - the point, the line, the plane, the solid, and color as energy. He began to draw like a child letting the pencil or brush lead him until the image began to emerge. As he worked, his conscious experience and skills came into play. Finally, an immediate inspiration resulted in the title, which became a part of the total work. He saw painting and the creative act as a magical experience. In 1923, Klee painted Simbad the Sailor. Other well known works include The Twittering Machine (1922) and Fish Magic (1925). Klee was world famous by 1929. In honor of his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1930, a major exhibit of his works was held in Berlin and at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

In 1931, he started teaching at Dusseldorf Academy but the Nazis, who termed his work "degenerate", dismissed him. The Nazis closed the Bauhaus in 1932. Because of the closure, the teachers and students traveled and helped disseminate Bauhaus ideas throughout the world. In 1933, Klee went to Switzerland. There he was diagnosed with scleroderma, a chronic autoimmune disease of the connective tissue. The disease forced him to develop a simpler style and eventually killed him. His late works characterized by heavy black lines are often reflections on death and war as shown in the 1940 Death and Fire. The works are larger with the forms often enclosed by a thick black line and appear full of sorrow and death. However, his last painting, Still Life, is a serene summation of his life's concerns as a creator. He spent the last 10 years of his life in Switzerland and died on June 29, 1940 at the age of 61.

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