

Exhibition Guide



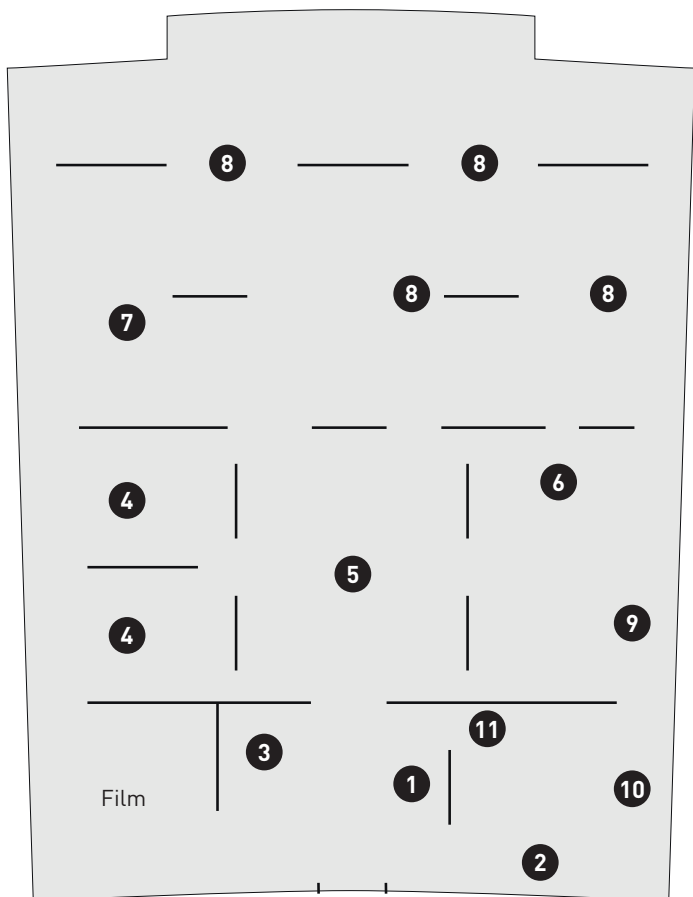
Founded by
Maurice E. and Martha Müller
and the heirs of Paul Klee

Zentrum Paul Klee
Bern

Lee Krasner. Living Colour

07.02. – 10.05.20

Floorplan



1 Introduction

Caustic, combative, unique, honest, brilliant – these are some of the words that friends, family, and colleagues have used to describe Lee Krasner. Without a doubt she was one of the most important painters of postwar modernism in the United States. Over a period of more than 50 years, she developed a unique body of work that she constantly questioned and reinvented.

At fourteen, Krasner decided that she wanted to be an artist. She applied to Washington Irving High School, then the only school in New York to offer an art class for girls. She did not have any art-related, life-changing experiences in her childhood to inspire her choice of profession – only her single-minded conviction. This was helpful during her training at the Women's Art School of Cooper Union and the National Academy of Design, and it later propelled her to the center of a new artistic movement in the US: Abstract Expressionism. Also known as the New York School, this art movement developed in the 1940s, primarily in Manhattan, and brought together artists as diverse as Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Krasner's husband Jackson Pollock, who each sought their own individual style. This new pictorial language tried to contend with the catastrophe of World War II and the political exploitation of art for propaganda purposes. Many Abstract Expressionists were initially studying European avant-garde artists, including Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse or Paul Klee, transforming these insights into a new, contemporary imagery.

Unlike many of her peers, Krasner never developed a signature style which she felt would be “rigid” and “alarming.” Instead, she always worked in cycles and often referred back to her own work and to themes she had explored earlier as a way of continually revitalizing

her work. This exhibition of Lee Krasner's paintings and drawings from the 1920s to the 1970s shows her incredible versatility and is her first retrospective in Europe in more than 50 years.

The exhibition is curated and organised by Barbican Centre, London, in collaboration with Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern and The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao.

2 Life Drawing

The stock market crash on October 24, 1929 and the following Great Depression left Lee Krasner financially unable to continue her studies, and she was forced to leave the National Academy of Design. She enrolled in a free class at City College and took life drawing lessons at Greenwich House led by Job Goodman, who practiced a classical teaching method and aesthetic based on Renaissance art.

In 1937, Krasner received a scholarship to study at the Hans Hofmann School of Fine Arts. Hofmann was from Germany and had lived in Paris for several years, where he had gotten to know artists including Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso, Fernand Léger, and Robert and Sonia Delaunay. Hofmann's art and teachings were shaped by ideas from French Cubism. He developed his own method to express depth and movement in abstract painting. The so-called "push and pull" method consists of expanding and contracting forces which move planes in the image and thus create tension and depth. His approach to life drawing was radically different from Krasner's previous training: instead of focusing on individual parts of the body, he arranged objects around the model and created dramatic lighting to emphasize the relationship between the figure and the surrounding space. The drawings displayed here clearly show Krasner's move towards abstraction, which was unusual amid her contemporaries in emerging before the start of World War II.

3 **Becoming Lee**

Lee Krasner began her art education at the Women's Art School at Cooper Union in 1926 and later attended the National Academy of Design. She acquired the reputation of being a "difficult" student. Her file at the National Academy said: "This student is always a bother, insists upon having her own way despite school rules." Krasner rebelled not only against the school's strict regulations, but also their traditional methods of teaching. Most of her teachers preferred an academic, realistic style. European avant-garde art was not part of the curriculum at all; only rarely was it featured in American cultural institutions at this time. This changed suddenly when the Museum of Modern Art opened in 1929. For its inaugural exhibition, it showed works by Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Georges Seurat, and Vincent van Gogh, and in 1930 it organized the first solo show of Paul Klee.

During her years at the Cooper Union and the National Academy of Design, Krasner was trying to find her own way. Her early self-portraits displayed here illustrate her search for her own identity as a woman and as an artist. Around 1922, she stopped using her given name Lena and began to call herself Lenore, which later evolved into the more androgynous name Lee.

4 Little Images

After their marriage in 1945, Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock moved to the town of Springs on Long Island, where they bought a 19th century farm house. In this new environment, Krasner was able to overcome a recent painter's block and develop a new pictorial language. This series, which she later called "Little Images," marked Krasner's overcoming of Cubism and the European tradition to begin a new, very personal artistic style. The "Little Images" were made in an upstairs bedroom of the farm house, which Krasner had turned into a makeshift studio. She placed the canvas flat on a table or laid it on the floor, working with a steady rhythm directly on the support. For some paintings, she would layer the paint thickly with a palette knife and then work into it with a stiff paint brush. For others, she covered the canvas with a lace overlay of paint that she had thinned down with turpentine in a can.

The "Little Images" were created between 1946 and 1950 and can be divided into two phases. The early compositions are freer in style and are more similar to Pollock's all-over technique – a style of painting in which the paint covers the entire surface and often goes over the edges of the painting. Unlike Pollock, Krasner applied the paint evenly and in a more controlled manner, using oil paint, instead of enamel and industrial paint. The later "Little Images" follow a strict grid composition. Krasner described these as "hieroglyphic," and painted these works from right to left. This working method may have been inspired by the Hebrew language, which Krasner was taught to write as a child of orthodox Jewish parents, but never learned to read.

5 Collage Paintings

In 1951, Lee Krasner had her first solo exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York. While the critical reception of the show was predominately positive, she did not sell any of the works, which left her with feelings of self-doubt. In the hope of starting a new creative phase, she embarked on a series of black-and-white drawings, which she attached to the walls of her studio, from the floor to the ceiling. When she came back to the room after a few days, she felt she despised the drawings and so ripped them off the walls and tore them up, leaving the pieces strewn on the floor. After a few weeks, she returned to her studio and was surprised to find “a lot of things there that began to interest me. I began picking up torn pieces of my own drawings and re-gluing them.” Krasner used the paintings she had not sold at Betty Parsons as support for these new collages. She took the remains of her own works, as well as pieces of sackcloth, newspaper, and heavy black photo paper and glued them on top of each other, mixing bits of drawings Pollock had discarded in-between.

Krasner worked on these “collage paintings” from 1953 to 1956, during which their character changed. While the early collages consisted of very small elements and are dominated by organic colours, the later works feature larger, more brightly colored forms. Krasner presented her “collage paintings” for the first time at the Stable Gallery in New York in 1955 and they were later described by Clement Greenberg as a “major addition to the American art scene of the era”.

6 Prophecy

In the summer of 1956, Lee Krasner painted a work that was unlike anything she had made before. Fleshy forms with sharp, black contours dominate the canvas and create the impression of entwined bodies. *Prophecy* was painted at a time when Pollock's alcoholism was worsening and was beginning to put a strain on their relationship. Krasner recalled that her new work "disturbed me enormously." It was still on her easel when she traveled to France in July on a trip the couple had intended to take together. Her stay was abruptly cut short, however, when she received news of Pollock's death on August 12. He had crashed his car the night before, killing himself and Edith Metzger, a friend of his lover, Ruth Kligman, who had survived. At the age of just 47, Krasner found herself a widow. She flew back to New York the same evening and a few weeks after Pollock's funeral, she began to paint again. *Prophecy* marked the beginning of a series in which she returned to a figurative style that referred to Cubism and Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1911). The dense mass of limbs and bodiless eyes that inhabit the canvas appear simultaneously both threatening and erotic and allude to such universal themes as death, birth, and rebirth. When asked how she could paint in such a time of deep mourning, Krasner answered, "Painting is not separate from life. It is one. It is like asking – do I want to live? My answer is yes – and I paint."

7 Night Journeys

In 1957, Lee Krasner decided to take over Pollock's studio in the barn. It was the largest working space on the property and had the best natural light. The new studio offered her the opportunity to work with larger formats as she could attach lengths of unstretched canvas directly to the walls.

Around 1959, she began a new series of large works. The loss of her mother was a hard blow, especially so shortly after Pollock's death; she suffered from chronic insomnia, which meant she could only work at night and so reduced her palette to white and umber, since she refused to use colors when working under artificial light. The resulting series was called "Night Journeys" by her friend, the poet Richard Howard. Although the paintings were created during a difficult time, the "Night Journeys" do not represent a yearning for the past or a wallowing in grief. Instead, they rank among her most expressive works. Krasner applied the paint to the canvas in wide, rhythmic movements, which was both mentally and physically exhausting. Some of the "Night Journeys" are more than eight feet high; because Krasner was only 5 feet 3 inches tall, this meant she had to paint using her entire body, sometimes jumping up with a long-handled brush to reach the farthest corners – each movement of the hand a "gesture of thrust."

8 Primary Series

In the early 1960s, Lee Krasner continued the gestural experiments of the “Night Journeys,” while allowing color to burst back into her paintings. When she broke her right arm in a fall in East Hampton in 1963, she taught herself to paint left-handed, squeezing paint directly from the tube and using the fingertips of her right hand to guide the movement. In the following years, her gestures became freer and more calligraphic. The colors in the works Krasner referred to as the “Primary Series” appear almost exuberant and are comparable to the palette of Henri Matisse. Krasner’s confidence was perhaps boosted by a survey of her works that was organized by Bryan Robertson at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in 1965. This was her first museum show, and it received very positive reviews. Krasner never made sketches or preliminary studies. Instead, each work had to be created from within: “There’s a blank, and something begins to happen, and the hope is that it comes through.”

In 1968, she rediscovered a pile of paper, handmade by the Long Island artist Douglass Morse Howell, that had accumulated in her studio over the years. She decided to use it to create four series of works called “Seed,” “Earth,” “Water,” and “Hieroglyphs” – titles expressing her interest in organicist process and calligraphy. She experimented with the simplicity of using only one or two pure colors of gouache and the reaction of the pigments with the textured paper.

9 Palingenesis

In 1973, Lee Krasner presented twelve new paintings at the Marlborough Gallery in New York. Unlike the gestural, biomorphic compositions of the “Primary Series,” in her new works, she employed sharp-edged, abstract forms with starkly contrasting colors. Krasner had already used similar forms in her photo collages for the War Services Project and in the collage works she made in the 1950s. In this later series of works, Krasner’s ceaseless experimentation in her studio and her reluctance to establish a signature style can clearly be seen. She fittingly titled one of the main works *Palingenesis*, which is Greek for “rebirth.” She said in an interview in 1972 that “evolution, growth and change go on. Change is life.” Since Lee Krasner constantly questioned, revised and developed further the existing, she achieved a liveliness in her art.

Her works from the early 1970s played a major role in the exhibition *Lee Krasner. Large Paintings*, which took place at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in 1973. This was Krasner’s first solo exhibition at a major museum in New York.

10 Eleven Ways

During a visit to Krasner's studio in Springs in 1972, the curator Bryan Robertson came across an old portfolio of drawings. Inside was a trove of charcoal life drawings from when Krasner had studied with Hans Hofmann. She selected several to be framed and took the others to her apartment in Manhattan with the intent of destroying them. When she rediscovered the drawings in 1975, she decided to use them as materials for a new series of collages. This time, instead of tearing them up as she had in 1953, she took to them with scissors. The result was a series of exceptional collages with sharp-edged forms that echo the dynamic lines of the original life drawings. Krasner left some areas of the canvas empty, echoing the impression of empty space around the nude model.

The collages were shown at Pace Gallery in New York in 1977 under the title *Eleven Ways to Use the Words to See*. Each is named after a different verb form, such as *Imperative* ("See!"), *Imperfect Indicative* ("Were you seeing?") and *Future Indicative* ("I will see."). As in her early collages, in *Eleven Ways* Krasner explores her own work critically, while also addressing her artistic legacy. She described the references to her earlier works as a moment of clarification, saying, "If I'm going back on myself, I'd like to think it's a form of growth."

11 Biography

- 1908** Lee Krasner is born in Brooklyn, New York, on October 27. Her family had emigrated to the US from a small village near Odessa, Russia (now Ukraine), fleeing brutal pogroms and the Russo-Japanese War.
- 1920** Women gain the right to vote in the USA.
- 1922** Krasner applies to Washington Irving High School in Manhattan, the only public school in the New York metropolitan area offering an art class for girls.
- 1926** In February, Krasner begins studying at the Women's Art School at Cooper Union in Manhattan.
- 1928** Krasner leaves the Cooper Union after the spring semester and works as a nude model. In July, she enrolls at the Art Students League. That summer, she shares her first studio with friends.
- Krasner spends time at her parents' home, nailing a mirror to a tree in the garden and painting a self-portrait in oil with which she successfully uses to apply for a course in life drawing at the National Academy of Design. For the first time, she is studying art in mixed-gender classes.
- 1930** In January, the exhibition *Painting in Paris* opens at the Museum of Modern Art. Krasner visits the exhibition and her encounter with "live Matisses and Picassos" leaves a lasting impression on her. In the same year, a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art is dedicated to Paul Klee.

1932 In April, Krasner is forced to leave the National Academy of Design for financial reasons. She enrolls in free classes at the City College of New York.

She works part-time as a waitress in the nightclub Sam Johnson's in Greenwich Village, which is a meeting place for artists and writers. There, she gets to know many people, including the writer Harold Rosenberg.

1933 The Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) is founded in December to fight the effects of the Great Depression. More than 3,700 artists are commissioned to create works for public buildings. Krasner is also employed by the PWAP, which becomes an important network of artists from the so-called New York School.

1937 Krasner enrolls in the Hans Hofmann School of Fine Arts in New York, a private institution founded by the German painter Hans Hofmann in 1934. She applies his theories of Cubist abstraction, and he comments on the results: "This is so good you would not know it was painted by a woman."

Her works are shown to the public for the first time in the exhibition *Pink Slips Over Culture* at the ACA Galleries, New York. The exhibition criticizes the precarious working conditions of the PWAP artists, which also leads to Krasner's repeated dismissal and re-employment.

The artist and theorist John Graham publishes *System and Dialectics of Art*, influencing several young Abstract Expressionist artists, including Krasner. He encourages

her interest in subjects such as tribal art, the origin of artistic creativity, the method of automatic drawing and the primacy of the process over the result.

- 1938** Harold Rosenberg introduces Krasner to the art critic Clement Greenberg.
- 1939** Krasner sees Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) for the first time and is overwhelmed by the work: "It knocked me right out of the room. I circled the block four or five times, and then went back and took another look at it."
- On 1 September Germany invades Poland, marking the start of the Second World War. European artists, including many Surrealists but also Fernand Léger and Piet Mondrian, flee to New York in the ensuing years.
- 1940** In April, as a member of the American Abstract Artists association, Krasner demonstrates in front of the Museum of Modern Art against the exclusion of abstract art from its exhibition program.
- 1941** John Graham asks Krasner to participate in the show *American and French Painting* at the McMillen Gallery. Krasner later recalled that the only American painter in the exhibition that she had never heard of before was Jackson Pollock. Soon after, she visits him in his studio, which was only one block away from hers. She is hugely impressed by his work: "I was overwhelmed, bowled over, that's all. I saw all those marvelous paintings. I felt as if the floor was sinking ..."

Krasner meets Piet Mondrian at a party. They discover their shared love of jazz and go out dancing together.

In February, Krasner participates in the Fifth Annual Exhibition of the American Abstract Artists alongside new AAA members Léger and Mondrian. On seeing Krasner's painting in the exhibition, Mondrian tells her, "You have a very strong inner rhythm. You must never lose it".

1942 In May, Krasner is commissioned by the War Services Project to overlook the design and production of large-scale displays for department-store windows throughout New York, which promotes war training courses being made available at municipal colleges. Her team of assistants included Pollock.

Peggy Guggenheim opens the gallery Art of This Century. There she exhibits European Surrealist art (including works by Paul Klee), as well as work by emerging American artists such as Pollock, de Kooning, Ad Reinhardt and Robert Motherwell.

1945 In the exhibition *A Problem for Critics*, Krasner is the only female participant, showing her work alongside Pollock, Mark Rothko, Pablo Picasso, Hans Arp, Joan Miró and others.

Krasner and Pollock are married in New York on October 25. In November, they buy an old clapboard farmhouse in the town of Springs on Long Island.

- 1946** After a long and difficult phase in which she produced nothing but “gray slabs”, Krasner achieves a breakthrough with a new series of works, which she calls her “Little Images”. Krasner remembers Clement Greenberg seeing an early work in the series and telling her, “That’s hot. It’s cooking!”.
- 1950** A group of artists, nicknamed “The Irascibles”, write an open letter to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, to oppose the conservative slant of the exhibition *American Painting Today – 1950*. The politically active Krasner is not invited to participate: “Barney Newman called and when I answered the phone, he asked for Jackson. He didn’t even bother to inform me of the protest.”
- 1951** In October, Krasner’s first solo exhibition *Paintings 1951. Lee Krasner* opens at the Betty Parsons Gallery. She shows 14 works, but none of them are sold. She later reuses many of these paintings for her collages.
- Pollock decides to leave the Betty Parsons Gallery because he is not selling enough work. As a result, Parsons asks Krasner to leave as well. Remembering her disappointment, Krasner said: “It took me almost a year to recover from that shock before I could work again ... I was kicked out of the gallery because I was Mrs Jackson Pollock.”
- 1956** Pollock’s alcoholism is worsening. In July, Krasner gives him an ultimatum before leaving by herself on a journey to Europe, which they had originally planned together.

On August 12, Krasner receives news of Pollock's death while in Paris.

1957 In the summer, Krasner begins using Pollock's studio in the barn. However, she decides she no longer wants to live by herself at the house in Springs, and she moves back to Manhattan in the Autumn. From then on, she splits her time between the countryside and the city.

1959 Krasner's mother dies. Her mother's passing so soon after Pollock's death plunges her into a deep depression.

She begins a series of works that become known as the "Umber Series" or "Night Journeys". Because she is suffering from insomnia, she paints these pictures at night.

1965 Lee Krasner's first retrospective in Europe opens at London's Whitechapel Gallery.

1969 Krasner makes four series of small calligraphic color experiments in gouache on paper called *Earth, Water, Seed* and *Hieroglyphs*.

The same year, Krasner is the only female artist to take part in the exhibition *The New American Painting and Sculpture. The First Generation* at the Museum of Modern Art.

1972 In the 1970s, the feminist wave begins to spread into art. Linda Nochlin writes the groundbreaking essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" and points out that women artists are missing from the art-historical

canon and are rarely exhibited in museums. Krasner joins the group Women in the Arts in 1972 and demonstrates in front of the Museum of Modern Art in protest of its failure to acknowledge female artists.

Krasner hands over Pollock's estate and archives to the collector and dealer Eugene Victor Thaw. Relieved, she states: "Now I can once again concentrate on being Lee Krasner the painter."

In an interview, "American Great: Lee Krasner", in Vogue magazine, Krasner counters the popular stereotype of Pollock as a dominating, overbearing figure, discussing the admiration and respect they had for one another during their relationship. She states: "I'm an artist – not a 'woman artist'; not an 'American artist'."

- 1973** In November, the Whitney Museum of American Art presents the show *Lee Krasner. Large Paintings* curated by Maria Tucker. It is Krasner's first solo exhibition at a major museum in New York.
- 1976** Krasner participates in the exhibition *Women Artists. 1550–1950* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
- 1977** In February, her show *Eleven Ways to Use the Words to See* opens at Pace Gallery. For the eleven large-scale collages, Krasner cut up and reused charcoal drawings she had made between 1937 and 1940 while studying at Hofmann's school.

1978 The major overview show *Abstract Expressionism. The Formative Years* at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, recognizes Lee Krasner's role as one of the first Abstract Expressionists.

1984 Krasner dies in the New York Hospital in Manhattan on June 19.

On 19 December *Lee Krasner: A Retrospective* opens at the Museum of Modern Art. Krasner becomes one of the few female artists to be given a solo exhibition at the museum.

Begleitprogramm

Freitag **21. Februar 2020** 16:00

SRF zu Besuch im ZPK

Jazz Collection live in der Ausstellung mit Jodok Hess

Samstag **22. Februar 2020** 13:30

Lee Krasner: Jewish and a damn good painter

Renée Levi, Künstlerin, Naomi Lubrich, Kuratorin, und Karen Roth-Krauthammer, Kunstvermittlerin, zur Frage: Gibt es «jüdische Kunst»? Moderation Sylvia Battegay, Jüdisches Museum der Schweiz, Basel

In deutscher Sprache

Samstag **07. März 2020** 13:30

The Unknown Factor: Literary Echoes in the Work of Lee Krasner

Studierende vom English Department der Universität Bern lesen aus Texten, die Lee Krasner prägten, und geben einen Einblick in die Literaturszene jener Zeit.

In deutscher und englischer Sprache

Sonntag **08. März 2020** 11:00

Frauentag im ZPK

Kanon-Korrektur: Frauen in der Kunst

Gabrielle Schaad, Kunsthistorikerin, ZHdK/TU München, im Gespräch mit Claudia Amsler, Interdisziplinäres Zentrum für Geschlechterforschung

Sonntag **08. März 2020** 15:00

Nicht schlecht, für eine Frau!

Satirische Intervention von Lisa Christ, Slam Poetin und Kabarettistin

Samstag **28. März 2020** 20:30

BEswingt – Hommage an Lee Krasner

Die legendäre Lindy Hop Party würdigt mit Visuals von Optickle Künstlerin Lee Krasner, die mit Vorliebe in den New Yorker Clubs Boogie Woogie tanzte.

Veranstaltungsort: Aula Progr

Dienstag **21. April 2020** 18:00

Women Artists on the Move

Zu Werdegang und Kontext von Lee Krasner und Teruko Yokoi in den USA der 50er-Jahre. Mit Journalistin Anuschka Roshani und den Kuratorinnen Fabienne Eggelhöfer, Marta Dziawańska sowie Anke Kempkes.

In englischer Sprache

Veranstaltungsort: Kunstmuseum Bern

Sonntag **05. April 2020** 15:00

Sonntag **03. Mai 2020** 15:00

Nicht schlecht, für eine Frau!

Satirische Intervention in der Ausstellung von Lisa Christ, Slam Poetin und Kabarettistin

Sonntag **10. Mai 2020** 11:00

Bob Barton Trio – Jazz aus Lee Krasners Plattensammlung

Live-Konzert in der Ausstellung mit

Anekdoten zu Krasners Lieblingsmusik mit Mittags-Brunch im Café Zentrum Paul Klee

Reservation: Tel 031 359 02 90

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SonntagsZeitung

The Zentrum Paul Klee is open to all and
offers inclusive events.



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Opening hours

Tuesday – Sunday 10:00 – 17:00

Open on all Easter holidays

Find us on:



Zentrum Paul Klee
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Founded by
Maurice E. and Martha Müller
and the heirs of Paul Klee