Press release
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To the editors

Exhibition opening
From Japonism to Zen. Paul Klee and the Far East
19/01—12/05/2013

Paul Klee's presence in Japan is unlike that of hardly any other Western artist. Across every artistic genre – from music to comics – Japanese artists have for decades drawn inspiration from the works of Paul Klee. His minimalist style as well as the "Far-Eastern mood" of his works have always fascinated a broad audience in Japan. For the first time, the Zentrum Paul Klee will, in the exhibition From Japonism to Zen. Paul Klee and the Far East, present the many and varied influences of Paul Klee on Japanese art and culture that have persisted to our present day. But Klee equally allowed himself to become inspired by Far-Eastern art in just as many ways. Japonism was in vogue during his productive lifetime. Klee was fascinated not only by Far-Eastern motifs and ornamentation, but also by ink-application techniques, by calligraphy and the prevailing Zen-Buddhist mind-set. The exhibition in the Zentrum Paul Klee will present and spotlight the intercultural dialogue between East and West and, in doing so, participate in a debate that currently has tremendous relevance.

Until now, Paul Klee's examination and regard for Far-Eastern art, which inspired him throughout his artistic career, has received scant attention. In the exhibition From Japonism to Zen. Paul Klee and the Far East an attempt is being made for the first time to present the many aspects of Klee's fascination with East-Asian art. Beyond the boundaries of narrow, 'classical' Japonism, the importance of ink painting and calligraphy in Klee's oeuvre can be traced to Zen Buddhism.

As such, Klee shares a common element with the French artists of the second half of the 19th century, that is to say artists from the impressionist era and the Nabis Group who were greatly influenced by Japanese art. Around twenty years later, 'classical' Japonism reached Germany and, here too, it was introduced to a wide audience through exhibitions and publications and discussed in artistic circles.
Klee's standing in present-day Japan will constitute a focal point of the exhibition. Klee's work had already attracted attention in Japan in the 1910s. Since then, visual artists as well as musicians, poets, cartoonists and architects have all drawn inspiration from Klee and his work.

The exhibition was curated by Osamu Okuda and Marie Kakinuma.

The exhibition has been organised in collaboration with the Museum of East Asian Art in Cologne, where the exhibition will be able to be viewed from September 2014 until January 2015.

The opening will be accessible to the public and take place on Fri | 18 January 2013 | 18:00 in the Zentrum Paul Klee. Admission is free.

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From Japonism to Zen
Paul Klee and the Far East

Paul Klee and ‘classical’ Japonism

Japonism was a fashion phenomenon in the second half of the 19th century. This applies particularly to France, where artists of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, as well as the Nabis group, were particularly strongly influenced by it. So-called ‘classical’ Japonism reached Germany some 20 or 30 years later, although it was not as vigorous a presence as it had been in France. Klee was starting his artistic career just as young artists in Germany were gradually discovering their Japanese sources. Against this background, between 1900 and 1908, he created a number of works in which the influences of Japanese woodcuts (Ukiyo-e) are apparent. In 1916 Klee made a cycle of ‘writing pictures’, six watercolours in which he illustrated poems from the volume *Chinese Poetry from the 12th Century BC to the Present Day*. Between 1910 and 1914 Klee turned his attention to East Asian ink painting. In the watercolours of those years he referred to certain motifs that he had seen in Far Eastern paintings, and used a technique comparable to ink painting. The search for the “greatest possible perfection but with the smallest amount of effort” fascinated Klee in calligraphy, which was in the Far East considered on a par with painting. After his return to Switzerland at the end of 1933, Klee became interested in the philosophy of Buddhism. In his ‘exile’ he read the book *The Great Liberation – An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* by Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki. His cycle of drawings about the “Urchse” is a reaction to the “ten ox pictures” illustrated in Suzuki’s book.

Paul Klee’s reception in contemporary Japan

The history of the reception of Paul Klee’s art in Japan began as early as 1913 with a newspaper report on the exhibition *First German Autumn Salon* in the Sturm Gallery in Berlin. Before the Second World War, Klee was seen in Japan as a cultural intermediary between the Japanese tradition and the modern art of the West. Thanks to tireless work by Japanese authors, art collectors and artists, Klee was re-evaluated in the post-war era and attained great fame.

The representatives of different areas of art – music, poetry, literature, architecture, comics, visual arts – continue to engage with Klee’s work. His artistic attitude, his aesthetic and his thought have given some protagonists from different artistic fields important impulses for their own creative activity. The examples presented in the exhibition make this clear: The artist Leiko Ikemura conducts a dialogue with Klee through drawings, paintings and poems in an absorbing installation. In 1998 Kazuya Takahashi published a graphic novel entitled as *Kurē na hito* (Klee man). The composer Tōru Takemitsu made his debut as a writer on music with the essay *Paul Klee and music* in 1951 and was inspired by several works by Klee. Alongside the references to Klee by the poet Shuntaro Tanikawa, the writer Natsuki Ikezawa, the architect Toyo Ito and the artist Yuki Okumura are shown in the exhibition.

Today, Klee is just as popular with a broad Japanese public that feels directly addressed by Klee’s aesthetic. Whether it is Klee’s proximity to the Japanese tradition or his autonomous position in western art that is responsible for this fascination cannot be unambiguously answered.