Satire – Irony – Grotesque

Daumier
Ensor
Feininger
Klee
Kubin

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Introduction

“I serve beauty by drawing her enemies. (Caricature, satire)”, Paul Klee wrote in 1901, commenting upon his critical view of the world. In Klee’s early work satirical drawings and caricatures are the most defining elements of his work. The exhibition “Satire – Grotesque – Irony” takes as its theme the significance of satirical commentary and the grotesque exaggerations in the work of Klee and his contemporaries at the turn of the 20th century. The exhibition begins with artists – such as Klee’s friends Alfred Kubin and Lyonel Feininger – as well as pioneering models like Honoré Daumier or James Ensor, who provided important stimuli. Klee as satirist and caricaturist only becomes comprehensible if one takes into account his "satirical environment": the Munich magazines of the turn of the century, particularly “Simplicissimus”. A reading area in the middle of the exhibition offers a glimpse of this world. The many facets to Klee’s love of satire and the grotesque and his sense of irony become visible over the rest of the exhibition. Beginning with his marginal drawings in schoolbooks and jotters as well as his earlier satires, grotesques and "Inventions", Klee’s critical and ironic view of the world falls under six thematic headings. These deal with such different questions as relations between the sexes, power and politics, war and militarism, religion and piety or the sly view of an animal world in which human behaviour is reflected.
Citations in the exhibition

"Satire assumes positive traits: out of respect for humanity war against its detractors."
Paul Klee, Autobiographical Texts (with reference to 1902)

“I served beauty by drawing her enemies. (Caricature, satire)."
Paul Klee, Diary, No 142, 1901

“Great perplexity. This is why I am again all on the side of satire. For the time being it is only creed. Perhaps I shall never become positive?"
Paul Klee, Diary, No 294, 1901

“Enough of this bitter laughter about what is and is not as it should be.“
Paul Klee, Diary, No 611, 1905

“No one has to get ironical about me, I see to that myself.“
Paul Klee, Diary, No 744/45, 1906
1 Honoré Daumier – Biography

"I'm also developing a closer relationship with Daumier."
Paul Klee, Autobiographical Texts, No. 798/799, (with reference to 1907)

Honoré Daumier was born in Marseille in 1808. When Daumier was eight years old, the family moved to Paris. After various jobs, Daumier went to the artist Alexandre Lenoir and received drawing lessons. He attended the Académie Suisse and copied the Old Masters in the Louvre. In 1825 Daumier became assistant to the lithographer Zéphirin Bélliard. From 1830 Daumier worked as an illustrator on the magazine "La Silhouette", and started to work as a painter at the same time. In the same year Charles Philipon founded the illustrated satirical magazine "La Caricature", to which Daumier became a regular contributor from 1832. Because of one of his contributions he was imprisoned for six months for insulting his Majesty. In the following year he started working for the magazine "Le Charivari" (the caterwauling). In 1834 Daumier made his first sculptures. One year later "La Caricature" was closed down on the basis of the September Laws. In parallel with his work for magazines, he produced illustrations for works by Balzac, Eugène Sue and other authors. In 1846 he married Marie-Alexandrine Dassy. The figure of "Ratapoil" made its first appearance in Daumier's work in 1850. In 1865 Daumier moved to Valmondois. Failing eyesight led him to abandon his artistic work in 1873. He died in 1879.
Daumier is one of the most significant caricaturists in the history of art. As a young man he began to work for the most important satirical magazines like "La Caricature" and "Le Charivari". He skewered the social and political abuses of his day with acid mockery. This is apparent in the small bronze busts of the "Célébrités du juste milieu", of parliamentarians and politicians which Daumier made as three-dimensional sketches in clay, and at the same time they found their way into the satirical depictions in "La Caricature". These were celebrities of Louis Philippe's government after the July Revolution of 1830. Daumier developed figures such as "Robert Macaire" and "Ratapoil", a shady official of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, the Prince-President who was elected as the head of the Second Republic for four years in 1848. He depicts him in a sculpture like the original plaster (ca. 1850–51) shown here, but also in lithographs for "Le Charivari". In juxtaposition we also show how Klee engaged with certain motifs of Daumier's in his satirical and ironic drawings from 1933 made against the background of National Socialist seizure of power.
2 James Ensor – Biography

“I swing like a pendulum between the sobriety of my recent tonal studies from nature and the fantasticality of Ensor.”
Paul Klee, Diary, No 798, October/November 1907

James Ensor was born in Ostende in 1860. At the age of thirteen he received his first drawing lessons. From 1876 he attended the Academy in Ostende. The following year he enrolled at the Brussels Académie des Beaux-Arts, where he studied until 1880 before returning to his parents' house in Ostende. In 1881 he became a member of the artistic community "La Chrysalide" and had his first exhibitions. He became involved with other artistic groups such as "Les XX", "L'Essor" and "Le Cercle Artistique", and took part in their exhibitions. From the mid-1880s Ensor turned away from his realistic style to make grotesque and fantastical works. In 1886 Ensor fell seriously ill. From 1888 he devoted himself to his large masterpiece "Christ's Entry into Brussels". His works were broadly rejected, although that changed quickly after the turn of the century. In 1917 he moved into his uncle's house and set up a kind of private museum there – now the Ensor House. From this point Ensor returned to earlier motifs and themes. At the same time he cultivated a wide range of styles. In 1926 his works were shown at the Venice Biennale. He died in Ostende in 1949 after a short illness.
In Brussels in 1886 James Ensor saw works by Odilon Redon which deeply impressed him and contributed to a change in his work. This led him towards a subjective approach to reality, in which literature – fantastical tales by Edgar Allan Poe or E.T.A. Hoffmann as well as classical works – acquired great significance. Apart from Redon, it was artists like Goya, Bosch and Brueghel the Elder whose works fascinated him with their satirical or bizarre motifs. Even in his childhood memoirs Ensor gives accounts of fantastical events. In her shop his mother sold curiosities, chinoiserie, masks and carnival articles. Ensor's works have a grotesque, sometimes bitter humour, and his often trivial, irreverent and biting mockery is aimed provocatively at the pillars of society. Motifs such as skeletons, demons and masks increasingly appeared in his works. Ensor depicted himself in many portraits as a skeleton or as Christ on the cross and used his self-portraits as a form of self-questioning.

Klee encountered Ensor's work in 1907, through his friend the Swiss illustrator and draftsman Ernst Sonderegger, and apart from Ensor's subjectivity he particularly admired his drawing techniques.
3 Alfred Kubin – Biography

"Kubin. His mind is not only very agile, but also rich in independence. I admire his richness, he admires my economy."
Paul Klee, Letter to Ernst Sonderegger, 18.6.1912

Kubin was born in Leitmeritz in Northern Bohemia in 1877. He attended Gymnasium in Salzburg, but left without graduating. In Klagenfurt he trained as a photographer. After conflicts with superiors and colleagues he attempted suicide. In later years he would repeatedly be plagued by depressions and crises. In 1898 – in the same year as Klee – he began to study as an artist in Munich. His first exhibition was held in Berlin in 1902. Two years later he married Hedwig Gründler, with whom he bought the little castle of Zwickledt in Upper Austria. In 1908 Kubin wrote his novel "Die andere Seite" (The Other Side), which was to be significant for Expressionist literature. In 1909 he was a founder member of the "New Artist's Association Munich". He engaged in a lively correspondence with Klee from 1910 until the end of the First World War. He joined the artists' group "The Blue Rider" and worked for the satirical journal "Simplicissimus". In 1913 Klee hung an exhibition for Kubin in Galerie Thannhäuser in Munich. Book illustrations (from Dostoyevsky to Poe) were an important part of his work through till the 1950s. During the Second World War Kubin lived in seclusion in Zwickledt. His works were shown at the Venice Biennale in 1950. Kubin died in Zwickledt in 1959.
Kubin is best known for his early work between 1899 and 1904. He engaged intensely with artists such as Ensor, Goya, Max Klinger or Redon. At the same time he drew his scenes and figures from memories of his childhood and youth – such as the death of his mother. He created a fantastical and grotesque pictorial world, dominated by instinct and anxiety, the inscrutable and the bizarre. Kubin's scenes are gloomy and frightening, and often located in barren landscapes. He captures his grim pictorial inventions with pencil or pen, or into water-colours with spray effects. After a creative crisis in 1905, Kubin published his novel "The Other Side", in which he describes a declining dreamlike empire in which the Austrian monarchy is recognisable. He then went on to develop a new and now very linear style closely related to Klee's Candide illustrations. In his choice of motifs, however, he remained independent of Klee, and continued to produce fantastical invented pictures as well as engaging with subjects from his novel.

4 Paul Klee – Biography

Klee was born in Münchenbuchsee near Berne in 1879. After a lengthy vacillation between music and painting, Klee opted to study art in Munich in 1898. In 1901 he spent several months travelling in Italy with the sculptor Hermann Haller, and experienced a creative crisis. Klee spent
the next few years in his parental home in Berne. In 1906 he married Lily Stumpf and moved with her to Munich. A year later their only son Felix was born. He met Kubin in 1910. From 1911 he cultivated friendships with the artists of the "The Blue Rider" group and took part in their exhibitions. In 1914 he travelled to Tunisia with August Macke and Louis Moilliet. Klee was called up for military service in 1916, but was not sent to the front. At the Bauhaus Klee took up a teaching position in 1921. Along with Feininger, he was part of the exhibition society "The Blue Four" with Wassily Kandinsky and Alexej Jawelensky. Klee left the Bauhaus in 1931 and took a professorship at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf. After the seizure of power by the National Socialists he was dismissed without notice from his teaching post in Düsseldorf and moved to Berne at the end of September 1933. Two years later he developed the first signs of an illness that turned out to be scleroderma. Klee died in Locarno-Muralto in 1940.

Klee's "tendency towards the bizarre" is already visible in his school books, whose margins he often decorates with drawings. In 1898, with his friends Hans Bloesch and René Thiessing, Klee wrote satirical texts for the school paper "Die Wanze" (The Bug). Bloesch and Klee prepared two other book projects, "Das Buch" (The Book, 1902–05) and "Die Musterbürger" (The Model Citizens, 1908), for which Klee supplied illustrations while Bloesch wrote texts. Klee's
early work is characterised by a multi-faceted engagement with satire and caricature. When he moved to Munich to study art in 1898, he hoped to win attention with the sarcastic drawings of his youth on the Munich art scene, where satirical newspapers such as "Die Jugend" (The Youth), and above all "Simplicissimus" were enjoying a boom. Klee sent his own drawings in to "Simplicissimus", but unfortunately without success. This milieu continued to shape Klee's artistic work until the 1910s. Daumier's drawings and lithographs and Ensor's prints inspired Klee (and his friend Alfred Kubin) in the development of his style as a draftsman, and shaped his satirical view of the world.

5 Klee and Daumier

Klee encountered the work of Daumier and Ensor through his friend Ernst Sonderegger. As early as 1907 he mentions both artists in his diary. Even though he said in 1939 that while he admired Daumier, the artist had little visible influence on him, some of his ironic drawings from 1933 refer to an intensive engagement with themes and motifs from Daumier's lithographs. They allude to what Klee called the "National Socialist revolution" and contain a hidden criticism of the barbarism of his time.
Lyonel Feininger was born in New York in 1871. When he was sixteen his family moved to Hamburg, where he took drawing lessons at vocational school. In 1888 Feininger went to Berlin and attended the Königliche Akademie. A short time later he received his first commissions as a caricaturist for a weekly newspaper ("Humoristische Blätter"). In 1890 he attended the Collège Saint Servais in Liège, but went back to the Akademie in Berlin. Feininger moved to Paris in 1892, and studied at the Académie Colarossi. A year later he went back to Berlin and worked as a caricaturist for different newspapers. In 1901 he married Clara Fürst, but left her again four years later and married Julia Berg in 1908. In 1906 Feininger – now living in Paris – worked on two comic strips for the Chicago Sunday Tribune. From 1911 Feininger struck up a friendship with Kubin, and an intense correspondence began between the two men. Feininger met the artists of the "Blue Rider", but did not join the group. He was the first artist given a job as a teacher at the Bauhaus in 1919, where he met Klee. In 1924 Emmy Scheyer founded the group "The Blue Four" with Feininger, Jawlensky, Kandinsky and Klee. In 1937 the political situation in Germany led him to move to the USA,
where he had taught at Mills College in Oakland the previous year. Feininger died in New York in 1956.

Lyonel Feininger is usually presented as a representative of "German Cubism". It is less well-known that in the early part of his career he worked successfully as a caricaturist and illustrator for satirical magazines such as "Die lustigen Blätter", "Ulk" and "Das Schnauferl, Blätter für Sporthumor" in Berlin, and was even seen as a major player in the field. Between 1890 and 1900 Feininger published around 2,000 caricatures, satirical commentaries and even simple joke cartoons in Berlin newspapers. His scope was always limited by the boundaries imposed on him by editors and printing techniques, and he was rarely allowed to introduce his own subjects. For the Chicago Sunday Tribune, from 1906 Feininger drew two comic strips: "The Kin-der-Kids" and "Wee Willie Winkie's World". At the same time, and above all on his work for the Paris newspaper "Le Témoin" from 1906, he now had complete freedom as a draftsman and perfected his flat style with unusual perspectives. In 1913 Feininger designed painted wooden trains for a toy manufacturer, although they never went into production. At the same time he carved small, colourfully painted wooden figures and houses as Christmas presents for his children. After his death they were given the title "City at the Edge of the World".
7  Klee and Kubin

Having seen some of Klee's drawings, in the winter of 1910 Kubin approached Klee asking to look at some more. From the selection Kubin purchased one work. Klee told a friend: "I've attracted some interest lately, but there's only one thing that fills me with pure joy, Kubin's interest." In January 1911 Kubin visited Klee, and Klee wrote: "Kubin, the patron has come. He was so enthusiastic that I was delighted." Kubin encouraged Klee in his plan to illustrate Voltaire's satirical novel "Candide or Optimism". Kubin in turn was inspired by Klee's Candide illustrations to develop a new style of drawing marked by nervous lines and elongated figures. By 1920 Kubin had acquired 19 works by Klee for his collection.

8  Paul Klee – Of man and woman

Around 1901 Klee saw some erotic watercolours by Auguste Rodin, which he called "nude caricatures". They had a big effect on him. This preoccupation with themes of sexuality and eroticism reach their first peak in Klee's etching series "Inventions". These contain caricatures of fin-de-siècle social and moral ideas. The works recall Kubin's pictorial language in their style and choice of motif. Woman is – as in Kubin's work – represented as a mischievous seductress,
appealing to man's animal instincts: naked, with a gaunt body and in unambiguous postures. Some reverse glass paintings are closely related to the "Inventions" in this respect. In a series of pen drawings with elongated line figures from 1912 and 1913, sexuality becomes the central theme whose spectrum Klee constantly extends. This process continues into his late work. Klee doesn't simply reduce the relationship between the sexes to the purely sexual, but picks up subjects such as advertising, temptation and fertility, all the way through to the figure of Don Juan.

9 Paul Klee – God and the world

Klee was never a religious person, never a devotee of secret sects or esoteric teachings. He did, however, engage with faith, religions and esoteric teachings that flourished at the beginning of the 20th century. Many works include religious motifs or at least references to religious themes. Using the abstract devices of irony, satire and humour, he fixes his sights on sanctimoniousness, piety and sectarianism. At the same time Klee comments on his somehow unearthly attitude with statements such as "On this side I am not tangible", or the assumption of what he called a "more-creation-original point". Klee was intensely preoccupied with creative powers and their dynamic development in the production – the genesis – of the art work. He refers
to the primal tragedy of human existence, which consists for him in the dichotomy between the earthbound body and man's completely free spirit.

10 Paul Klee – The state and order

In the depiction of state power structures and the exertion of power in general, Klee's works remain ambiguous – unlike Daumier's caricatures. He does not show historical events or specific individuals, but condenses power structures into more universal statements and typical holders of power. For example, he takes up the figure of the policeman or guard, who can, depending on the work, become a comical, burlesque figure, or actually provide protection and security. After the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, themes such as the exercise and abuse of power, training or drills repeatedly find concentrated expression in his drawings. Klee also depicts the shady side of society: manslaughter and murder, robbery and abuse all find expression here, often in a reduced pictorial language.

11 Paul Klee – War – where politics leads

Klee lived through two World Wars: in the First he was called up as a soldier, and he experienced the beginning of the Second. Klee did not share the enthusiasm of many of
his colleagues for the First World War, instead maintaining a certain detachment from it. Klee's paintings contain a few direct statements about war and politics. Works like "The German in the brawl" and "When I was a recruit" dating from the First World War, or "Hail!" from 1939 are therefore exceptions. But Klee was ironic in his reception of the political propaganda pictures of his time. He took aim at militarism in battle scenes, or depicted it with fantastical war machines and airborne monsters that clearly refer to the development of military technology. At the same time these paintings represent violence and menace, which seem to be a part of human and social life.

12 Paul Klee – Play-acting animals

From early childhood Klee was fascinated by the animal world, as we can see from many drawings, paintings and his school exercise books. He always kept cats as pets, and at the Bauhaus he even had an aquarium in his studio. An unusual diversity of animals appears in Klee's work. He did not just paint 'portraits' of animals such as cats, fish and birds, but invented new animals and fantastical creatures. His animal figures often characterise less the animals themselves than – in a satirical, ironic sense – human types, characters and kinds of behaviour. He shows the "Bastard", for example, as a proud beast putting itself centre stage. Individual aspects pass through decades of his work, such
as the relationship between the mother animal and her young. Other themes are concentrated in relation to particular events: thus for example, when the Nazis seize power, the lion becomes Klee's favourite pictorial theme in a parodic allusion to the new holders of power.

13 Paul Klee – Headbirths

Interest in the human physiognomy was central to Klee's work. In numerous works he was occupied – mostly in caricatures – with capturing meaningfully the characteristics of facial features. Klee was however not a portrait painter as such, but only attempted in a very few instances to reproduce a face as authentically and true to life as possible. Klee would happily mock the vanity of his contemporaries and drew and satirised them. He was always greatly amused when in the theatre or in literature he encountered a successful caricature. Klee made about fifty hand puppets for his son Felix. Thirty still exist and they are all in the collection at the Zentrum Paul Klee. The first eight figures date from 1916 when his son was eight years old. Between 1919 and 1925 the remaining puppets were made.
Further information

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Tuesday to Sunday 10 a.m. – 5 p.m.
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