Klee & Kandinsky - the most significant Zentrum Paul Klee exhibition

Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky are the dream pair of art history and yet there has never been a comprehensive exhibition confronting the works of the two founding fathers of abstract art. The Zentrum Paul Klee in Bern and the Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus and the Kunstbau in Munich now close this gap by showing from the world’s most renowned museums the finest selection of works by the two master painters who were Bauhaus neighbours.

When in 1929 Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee pose for a photo in imitation of the Goethe-Schiller Memorial in Weimar, it testifies to the high degree of self-confidence of both artists during their Dessauer Bauhaus period, a high point in both careers. The photo reveals much about the complexity of one of the most remarkable and prolific creative friendships in art history. Their names are a reference today, synonymous with « classical modernism ». They are considered since the 1950’s to be the founding fathers of abstract art. The association of both artists was certainly intense, but was also idealized, for it obscured the artistic and human aspect of two very dissimilar characters whose careers progressed quite differently at all tangential points.

The Zentrum Paul Klee and the Lenbachhaus Municipal Gallery who are prominent international competence centres for research into the life and work of Klee and Kandinsky, set themselves a mutual goal to portray this pivotal artistic friendship in a comprehensive way and to trace for the first time the contours of its eventful history. Primarily it is to accentuate the similarities between the two painters and their mutual « influence » on each other, yet at the same time their difference and delimitation. Thus Klee and Kandinsky were also competitors in the race for exhibitions and galleries in Germany as well as in France, with Klee enjoying a distinct advantage over Kandinsky in terms of reception since the 1920’s.
Thanks to the thirty yearlong therefore almost lifelong friendship of both artists this exhibition with more than 180 exhibits also gives a valid overview of the entire oeuvres of Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky. In order to accomplish this, the support of important museums and collections was solicited. Thus not only the magnificent core works of Kandinsky from the Blaue Reiter period travel from Lenbachhaus to Bern but also key works from the Bauhaus period and from the late works of both artists from the Guggenheim in New York, the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris, the Nordrhein-Westfallen art collection in Dusseldorf, the Berlin National Gallery, the Moderna Museet in Stockholm and the Israel Museum in Jerusalem to name just a few.

« Klee & Kandinsky » concerns by far the most elaborate and ambitious project undertaken by the 2005 inaugurated Zentrum Paul Klee. In the framework of the Centre’s research activity, it is the continuation of earlier exhibitions which dealt with Paul Klee and his time: « Klee meets Picasso » (2010), « Franz Marc – Paul Klee » (2011), and « Klee and Jawlensky – an Artist Friendship » (2013).

The concepts for the exhibition and the catalogue are based on the extensive preliminary work of Christine Hopfengart who, while still curator of the Paul Klee, developed the project since 2010 and who, today, acts as co-curator and joint editor of the catalogue. In the Zentrum Paul Klee Michael Baumgartner as the head of Collections, Exhibitions and Research is the responsible curator. In the Lenbachhaus Municipal Gallery of Munich the exhibition will be curated by Annegret Hoberg head of the collection for the « Blaue Reiter » and the Lenbachhaus Kubin-Archive.

Exhibition dates in the Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus and the Kunstbau Munich:

The realization in Bern is sponsored by:
Kultur Kanton Bern (Swisslos)
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PATRONAT

Alain Berset, Federal Councillor
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Alexander Tschäppät, Stadtpräsident Bern
Set-up and contents of the exhibition

The exhibition «Klee & Kandinsky» traces the often changing history of the artistic affinity between the two «inventors» of abstract art, Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky, stretching from 1900 to beyond 1940. The top-class mounting of the presentation is done in such a way that its visitors immediately become witnesses to one of the most significant development steps of modern art - from representational imagery to abstract compositions of colours and shapes.

Accompanying this «lesson» in art history, the exhibition permits a deep insight into the lives of two artists during the turbulent period of the first half of the twentieth century. They were interested in music, in nature, became committed to artistic training, and explored the fundamental theories of art. They attempted with varied success to gain the interest of the public and the art market. At the same time their works also mirrored their opposition to the threatening existential political events which forced both artists to go into exile in 1933. As a result their late works, independent of each other, culminate in undreamt of artistic flight and are proof of a creative power unhindered by adverse life circumstances.

Layout

The exhibition brings to light the parallels and common ground of both artists as well as the differences and distinctions. The main emphasis is placed on the periods when Klee and Kandinsky personally occupied themselves with each other (???) during the Blaue Reiter and at the Bauhaus, particularly during the Dessau years. But apart from this, the intermediate time cuts are also shown, namely the years from about 1900-1911 and 1933-1940 when Klee and Kandinsky followed separate paths.

The exhibition is structured into eight theme areas which essentially follow the work chronology.

The early highly different artistic development of the two artists at the beginning of the 20th century is made comprehensible by the key words «Around 1900» as well as «Painter and draughtsman». Kandinsky’s self-understanding as a painter was from the beginning emphatically characterized by idealism and an artistic mission whereas Klee was a seeker who explored the possibilities of his art by self-instruction and viewed the world through satirical eyes. For Kandinsky, the central articulateness of artistic willpower was placed on colour, its «vibration», its «tone» as he expressed it. In the exhibition one comprehends how in Kandinsky’s painting the line increasingly gathers its own powerful expression freeing itself from its descriptive object-oriented function. This development cumulates in the splendid paintings, the large format abstract «Compositions» and «Improvisations» from the «Blaue Reiter» years (1911/12) which, thanks to the co-operation with the Lenbachhaus Municipal Gallery are represented in the exhibition with outstanding works.
The third theme entitled « Colour! » illustrates how Klee was inspired by Kandinsky to experiment with colour and painterly forms of expression. Kandinsky’s expressive coloured representations of the Murnau landscape and Munich’s town periphery served in particular as models for him. In numerous watercolours from 1913 Klee varies Kandinsky’s colourful transposition of reality.

The hinge which, so to speak, attaches both painters in their early creative years to the main part of the exhibition is their common years at the Bauhaus in Weimar and especially in Dessau. It forms the « Music » theme in the exhibition. Throughout their lifetime, for both painters, there was a close connection between painting and music. It is well known that Kandinsky, impressed by an Arnold Schoenberg concert, painted his « Impression III (Concert) » which is considered an outstanding example for the synaesthetic transformation of an acoustic experience. On Kandinsky’s initiative the Almanach « Der Blaue Reiter » integrated several writings on modern music. He himself published here the text for his stage composition « Der Gelbe Klang ». Again in 1928 he conceived for Modest Mussorgsky’s theatre production « Pictures at an Exhibition » the set designs, five of which can be seen in the exhibition. The music significance for Paul Klee’s work does not need to be particularly emphasized here, given that the Zentrum Paul Klee has already dedicated an exhibition to Klee’s affinity to music.

The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 was the year of the sudden caesura concerning the relation of the two artists: Kandinsky had to leave Germany as an « enemy alien » and first travelled to Switzerland where he contacted Klee before returning in November to his home city Moscow.

After an eight year break the two artists met again at the Bauhaus in Weimar. Klee was appointed there in 1921 and Kandinsky the following year. During the next eight years they became distinguished painter and teacher figures of the Bauhaus. A main part of the exhibition is dedicated to their artistic exchange during these years. Firstly in Weimar where Klee had, since the end of the First World War, developed into an important artistic figure in the Weimar Republic while Kandinsky had to start over again. From an artistic point of view Klee’s work during the Weimar period is pluralistic and stretches from narrative scenes to almost abstract compositions while Kandinsky strived for a « basso continuo » in painting, based on a solid colour and form ratio. Klee’s openness and individual creative approach contrasts with Kandinsky’s strict normative rigour.

The Dessau Bauhaus years constitute the high point and originality of the exhibition and show the mutual convergence of the works of Klee and Kandinsky in the years 1925-1931/33 which went even so far as to confuse many of their contemporaries who mixed up their works. Whereas with Klee a geometric formalising can be observed, with Kandinsky a loosening of his strict painting vocabulary sets in. And while with Klee the narrative element declines, Kandinsky conversely tends in his paintings to give figurative allusions an additional dimension. In some cases a real dialogue takes place in which both painters use the same motives or techniques and transpose them into their individual graphic languages. This pictorial dialogue from the Dessau years is structured in 6 themes, beginning with the « Quadratbilder » which Klee and Kandinsky created in reaction to Theo van Doesberg’s radical geometrical abstraction.

But doubtlessly the clearest is the convergence of both painters in the theme rooms « Constructive-Figurative » and « Balance and Firmness ». During the second half of the 1920’s, Klee, under the effect of constructivism, increasingly used geometrical forms in his repertoire and thus approached Kandinsky. This turnaround opened Kandinsky’s abstract compositions in the figurative direction. Sometimes he adds only tiny accents, then again he launches into a whole scenery with little figures who move weightlessly in the space - one might think looking at a work of Klee. In Klee’s art the condition of dynamic equilibrium and the constant balance of forces is a leitmotif. In Kandinsky opposed tensions were at the midpoint of pictorial thought, just as he had proclaimed in his writing « Über das Geistige in der Kunst »: « Differences and Contradictions – that is our Harmony ». 
The relationship between art and nature – a central discussion field between Klee and Kandinsky – will be the theme in the room « On the Edge of Nature ». For Klee the study of nature was the basis of his art work. Kandinsky’s attitude to nature changed in the course of years. Only in the later Bauhaus period did nature find an increasing portal into Kandinsky’s motivation resources.

Following the Bauhaus dialogue is the painful interruption of the « Fatal year 1933 » when the Nazis seize power. Klee who had changed for a professorship in Dusseldorf in 1931 was exempted and then dismissed, Kandinsky found himself confronted by the imminent closing down of the Bauhaus. Both artists reacted to the Nazi power seizure by their art: numerous works are characterized by a gloomy tendency towards brown colour tones.

The final bouquet of the exhibition forms – under the title « New Beginning » – the late works of both artists. After their definitive dismissal, both artists left Germany in December 1933. Klee returned to his home town Berne, Kandinsky emigrated to Paris. While Klee discovered the large format for his painting and set into motion an almost obsessive creative energy for drawing, Kandinsky operated a swift change of style. The geometry of the Bauhaus period retreated and gave place to organic figures. Their light colouring conveyed optimism and an orientation to the future. In the exhibition this fascinating work phase can be seen in a sequence of master works loaned by the Guggenheim Museum.
Zentrum Paul Klee
Bern

Catalogue

KLEE & KANDINSKY
Neighbors, Friends, Rivals

Vivian Endicott Barnett, Michael Baumgartner, Annegret Hoberg, Christine Hopfengart, Peter Vergo, Wolfgang Thöner, Fabienne Eggelhöfer, Angelika Weissbach, Charles Haxthausen

336 pages with 380 color illustrations
Publishing House: Prestel


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Paul Klee – Biography

1879–85 Paul Klee is born on 18 December 1879 in Münchenbuchsee near Bern. His father Hans is a music teacher, his mother Ida a trained singer. The family moves to Bern in 1880.

1886–97 Attends school in Bern. Practices copying printed images of landscapes and townscapes, but draws from nature as well. Fills school exercise books with satirical imagery. Learns to play the violin and is permitted to perform as an extraordinary member of the orchestra of the Bern Music Society.

1898–99 Attends Heinrich Knirr’s private drawing school in Munich.

1900 Is admitted to the class of the Franz von Stuck at the Munich Art Academy, here he meets Kandinsky for the first time, albeit without getting to know him personally.

1901 Attends the Art Academy only until March. Undertakes an educational journey to Italy for six months with the sculptor Hermann Haller.

1902–06 Becomes engaged to the pianist Lily Stumpf. Moves back into his parents’ house in order to develop his personality and his unique artistic form of expression.

1906 Takes part for the first time in an exhibition at the Munich Secession. Marriage with Lily Stumpf. Moves with his wife to Munich at Ainmillerstrasse 32, in the artist’s quarter Schwabing.

1907–08 Birth of his son Felix in November. Lives a reclusive life as artist and house husband while Lily supports the family by giving piano lessons.

1910 First solo exhibition takes place in Switzerland, with stops in Bern, Zurich, Winterthur, and Basel.

1911 Exhibition of a selection of thirty works at the Galerie Thannhauser in Munich. In October, he meets Kandinsky. Gets to know other artists from the Blaue Reiter group: Gabriele Münter, Franz Marc, Alexej Jawlensky, and Marianne von Werefkin. Writes reviews on exhibitions and other cultural events for the Swiss monthly « Die Alpen ».

1912 Is represented at the second exhibition of « Der Blaue Reiter » with seventeen works on paper. Visits the studios of Henri Le Fauconnier, Karl Hofer and Robert Delauney, whose text « La Lumière » he translates into German.

1913 Klee’s son Felix visits Kandinsky regularly in order to paint according to his example. Travels with August Macke and Louis Moillet to Tunisia, where he experiences an artistic breakthrough. Visits Kandinsky, who had to leave Germany, in his temporary lodging in Goldach at Lake Constance in Switzerland.

1916–18 Is drafted into military service. He is not deployed to the front, and is able to pursue his artistic activities during his free time.

1919 Rents a studio in Suresnes Castle in Munich, after having returned to civilian life. At the Stuttgart Art Academy, Oskar Schlemmer and Willi Baumeister – unsuccessfully – campaign for his appointment as professor. With Hans Goltz, bearer of the Galerie Neue Kunst, he contracts a sole agency.
1920–21 The Galerie Neue Kunst in Munich organizes a major retrospective with 362 works. In a brief period, three monographs appear, by Leopold Zahn, Hermann Wedderkopf, and Wilhelm Hausenstein. Klee is appointed by Walter Gropius to teach at the Bauhaus in Weimar, and starts teaching in May 1921.

1923 First museum exhibition in Germany held at the Nationalgalerie in Berlin, including 270 works. Publishes the essay « Ways of Nature Study », in a publication released in occasion to the Bauhaus week. Beginning of a regular exchange of artistic gifts between the Klee and Kandinsky.

1924 Only public lecture of his career, which is published in 1945 with the title « On Modern Art », at the Kunstverein Jena. Klee’s first exhibition in the US is held at the Société Anonyme in New York; later, his works are seen alongside those of Kandinsky, Feininger and Jawlensky at presentations by the collective Die Blaue Vier (The Blue Four), founded by Emmy « Galka » Scheyer.

1925 The Weimar Bauhaus closes. Klee arrives in Dessau in June and rents a room from Kandinsky. Publication of Klee’s « Pedagogical Sketchbook » as vol. 2 of the newly founded series of bauhausbücher (Bauhaus Books). Dissolving of the sole agency contract with the art dealer Goltz. Enters into particularly close business contacts with Alfred Flechtheim, gallery owner in Berlin and Düsseldorf. Founding of the Klee Society by Otto Ralfs.

1926 Klee moves with his family into the master’s house in Dessau, built for himself and Kandinsky.

1928 Publishing of the essay « Exact Experiments in the Realm of Art » in the magazine Bauhaus. Undertakes a four-week trip to Egypt.

1929 Receives an offer from the Düsseldorf Art Academy to direct a class in painting. Klee turns fifty in December. A number of galleries organize exhibitions, in occasion of his anniversary.

1930 Will Grohmann publishes the article « Une école d’art modern » in « Cahiers d’art » on the teaching activities of Klee and Kandinsky at the Bauhaus.

1931 Leaves the Bauhaus and transfers in the winter term to the Düsseldorf Art Academy.

1933 Klee is first suspended by the National Socialists, and then in October, dismissed officially from his teaching position. On Christmas, he leaves Germany and returns with Lily to his hometown Bern.

1934–35 Occupies a small apartment on Kistlerweg in Bern, where he lives until his death. Will Grohmann’s book « Paul Klee: Handzeichnungen 1921–1930 » (The Drawings of Paul Klee 1921–1930), the first volume of a planned catalogue raisonné, appears in Germany in November. After a few months, however, it is seized by the National Socialists.

1935 The Kunsthalle Bern organizes a major Klee retrospective with 273 works. The first signs of serious illness become noticeable.

1936 As a consequence of his illness, Klee’s annual production reaches an absolute low point, with just 25 works.

1937 Klee’s health has stabilized; he is able to work again with renewed intensity. In Munich, the defamatory « DegenerateArt » exhibition opens, and includes seventeen works by Klee. A total of 102 works by Klee are confiscated from public collections by the National Socialists. On November 27, he receives a visit from Picasso, whom he had visited in his Parisian studio in 1933.

1939 His artistic productivity reaches a high point. In December, he celebrates his sixtieth birthday. The Kunsthau Zürich organizes a jubilee exhibition. Klee applies for Swiss citizenship, but does not live long enough to learn of its approval.

1940 In May, he begins a stay at a health spa in Ticino. Klee dies on June 29 at the Sant’Agnese Clinic in Locarno.