Further information

Kandinsky, Arp, Picasso ...
Klee & Friends
19.03. – 01.09.19

1  Paul Klee in Training

Upon his completion of secondary school, Klee (1879–1940) moves to Munich in October 1898. Since he exhibits little skill in rendering the human figure, he is denied admission to the art academy. After that, he studies at Heinrich Knirr’s private art school. There Klee learns the fundamentals of drawing and studies the human figure from the model, among other methods. While training under the painter Walter Ziegler, he first picks up a brush and practices oil painting. Mostly, he paints on cardboard or on canvas that he mounts to cardboard.

In 1900, he is accepted to the academy as a student of Franz von Stuck, the star of the Munich art scene. Overall, he does not yet feel confident in oil painting. After a journey to Italy in 1901/02, Klee returns to Bern. Here he attends anatomical lectures for painters and makes detailed drawings of body parts.

Franz Marc (1880–1916)
Franz Marc and Paul Klee meet in Munich in 1912 during the preparations for the second Blue Rider (Blauer Reiter) exhibition. In the years that follow, an affectionate relationship develops between the Klees and the Marcas. It lasts until Marc’s death in 1916. Numerous letters and postcards (often with sketches) are sent back and forth. Marc supports Klee in his search for opportunities to exhibit and sell his work. He also helps him find a publisher for his illustrations of Voltaire’s novel Candide. In turn, Klee is an important advisor and conversational partner for Marc. They are kindred spirits, especially in their profound engagement with and exploration of nature and its creatures.

2  Loner in Munich

Klee marries Lily Stumpf in 1906. Together they move to Munich, and it is not entirely by chance that they settle in the artist’s quarter of Schwabing. Klee tries to connect to the artist’s scene and is only somewhat successful. In the fall of 1911, Klee meets Wassily Kandinsky. Along with Franz Marc, Kandinsky founds the Blue Rider, an artist’s collective that opposes prevailing art world politics. At first, Klee remains on the margins of the Blue Rider. He earns respect as a draftsman, however, and begins showing his work in exhibitions and publications.

Alexej Jawlensky (1864–1941)
The Russians Alexej Jawlensky and his partner Marianne Werefkin are also part of the Munich circle. They hold regular salons that are attended by everyone who is anyone in the art world. For the Klees, being accepted into this circle is a highlight of their social life. From then on, they remain in contact, even after Jawlensky and Werefkin leave Germany. Between 1914 and 1935, Klee and Jawlensky give each other 33 works as tokens of their mutual respect. For Klee, these images are «the most valuable and personal gifts» of all. Kandinsky and Lyonel Feinger join Klee and Jawlensky to form the group the Blue Four, which is founded by Emmy Scheyer in 1924.

3  Light and Color

By grappling with Robert Delaunay’s work, Klee finally begins an intensive engagement with colour. Before, for about ten years, he is not confident in handling colour. Instead, he devotes himself to chiaroscuro and line. In the early 1910s, he paints his first chromatic watercolours.

Klee, Louis Moilliet and August Macke travel to Tunisia in the spring of 1914. The trip spurs his artistic development, especially in terms of colour and abstraction. If one believes his diary entries, it is during the Tunisian journey that Klee first masters the «colour scale»: «Colour possesses me. I don’t have to pursue it. It will possess me always, I know it. That is the meaning
of this happy hour: Colour and I are one. I am a painter." Yet a glimpse at some of the watercolours from the period before the journey shows that his use of colour was already highly developed. In the works from this time, we recognize the evolution toward pure abstraction: buildings and landscapes dissolve into fields of colour. The initial Parisian impetus toward abstraction, be it in the use of colour or with fields of colour, is reinforced and intensified in Tunisia.

4 The Cubist Stimulus

During a stay in Paris in 1912, Klee visits Robert Delaunay. It is in his work that Klee first encounters an attempt to combine colour with surface that is not bound to representation. Additionally, he discovers the cubist work of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque in the Paris galleries. Following the example of Cubism, Klee is able to represent the world from different viewpoints at the same time. After these encounters, Klee relinquishes the use of linear and perspectival representation in his work. From now on, he emphasizes the two-dimensionality of the picture plane by organizing it into rhythmic fields of colour.

Pablo Picasso (1881–1973)
Klee and Picasso meet twice: at Picasso’s studio in Paris in 1933 and at Klee’s home in Bern in 1937. However, Klee’s repeated engagement with Picasso’s work through exhibitions, publications and in conversation with artists and collectors is more important than their two face-to-face meetings. Klee is challenged and inspired by Picasso’s oeuvre. In character completely different, the two artists grapple with the same modes of representation again and again. They span the cubist fragmentation of the world and a new form of spatial representation as well as the stark simplification and the distortion of the human figure in the 1930s.

5 Parisian Impulses

Paul Klee visits Paris several times. A thorough information gathering tour of 1912 is decisive. During his two-week stay, Klee wants to learn about current artistic movements. He meets with artists like Delaunay and the Cubist Henri Le Fauconnier. In the Paris museums and galleries, he sees works by Braque, Henri Rousseau and Picasso.

Robert Delaunay (1885–1941)
For Klee, the encounter with Delaunay and his «window paintings» is pivotal. Klee translates Delaunay’s programmatic text La lumière – On Light – in 1912. Thanks to Delaunay’s work and theories, he discovers a new approach to colour and abstraction. In 1912, Delaunay develops Orphism, an abstract style that builds upon the achievements of Cubism, developing it further with simultaneous colour contrasts and light-suffused fields of colour. In the years following this meeting, Klee translates his impressions of landscape and light into images that appear to be constructed from coloured blocks. Similar to the work of Robert and Sonia Delaunay, the underlying composition is based on a grid that is subdivided into horizontals and verticals. If Klee questions the cubist fragmentation of the world at this time, he also remarks that Delaunay «created the kind of autonomous image that in the absence of motifs from nature leads to a wholly abstract formal existence. A picture that is almost as distant from the three-dimensional world, nota bene, as a Bach fugue from a carpet.»

Sonia Delaunay (1885–1979)
Hailing from Ukraine, Sonia Delaunay-Terk studies in St. Petersburg and at art academies in Germany. She marries Robert Delaunay in 1910. Both experiment with simultaneous colour contrasts and Cubism. At the beginning of the 1910s, she designs furnishings such as blankets and book bindings that forgo representational elements, thereby entering the realm of pure abstraction. Unlike her husband, Sonia Delaunay remains true to abstraction. In 1942, she works in the South of France with Hans Arp and Sophie Taeuber-Arp. Little is known about her relationship with Klee.

6 Louis Moilliet (1880–1962)

Paul Klee meets Louis Moilliet during his school days in Bern; both play violin. After an apprenticeship as a decorative painter, Moilliet attends trade school and then spends time in the artists’ colonies in Worpswede, Düsseldorf and Weimar. By 1903, Moilliet has returned to Bern, where he and Klee work together. He travels with Klee and their boyhood friend Hans Bloesch to Paris in 1905. In 1908 he visits for the first time Tunisia. A year later, he makes the acquaintance of August Macke, with whom he remains in close contact. In the following years, he travels to Tunisia. Beginning in 1911, he discovers the art of the Blue Rider, as well as that of the Fauves and Delaunay. In April 1914, he travels with Klee and Macke to Tunisia. Moilliet makes additional journeys to Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. He also meets Hermann Hesse. From 1923, he concentrates on watercolour painting.

Klee primarily benefits from Moilliet’s network. It is through him that Klee meets Kandinsky and Macke. Nevertheless, the artists remain stylistically independent of one another.
7 August Macke (1887–1914)

August Macke attends the art academy Düsseldorf and takes evening courses at the applied arts school. In addition to stage design, he busies himself with decorative works. Dissatisfied, he breaks off his studies at the traditional art academy in 1906. He travels to Paris and lives intermittently in Berlin. In 1909, he marries Elisabeth Gerhardt. She introduces him to Moilliet the same year. Macke travels to Paris again with Moilliet. At first, Macke focuses solely on painting, studying the work of the Fauves, especially that of Matisse, and of Franz Marc. In 1912, Macke meets Delaunay in Paris, whose work excites him. He participates in numerous exhibitions and is a member of the Blue Rider. In 1913, he stays in Hilterfingen on Lake Thun. There he cultivates a close relationship with Moilliet, who lives in nearby Gunten. Macke and Moilliet travel to Tunisia with Klee in 1914. When the First World War breaks out, Macke enlists as a soldier in the infantry and falls in France that September.

Even before the Tunisian journey, Macke is a superb watercolour painter. By contrast, Klee struggles with colour before 1914 and is still making his first attempts at painting in colour. Macke’s glowing colours, his mode of composing with abstract planes and his reductive style inspire Klee.

8 Expressionist Period

From 1915 to 1918, Klee’s work exhibits numerous expressionist characteristics. Unlike the artists of the Bridge (Die Brücke), his technique is not gestural, but he does employ the severity and sharpness of form and the rich glowing colour that are inherent to Expressionism. However, during this period, the strongest ties to the Expressionists lie in Klee’s directness and in the intensity of his feeling and thinking. The First World War is taking place and Klee sees contradiction and conflict everywhere. Time and again, he describes the tension between the physical and the metaphysical, the earthly-realistic and the spiritual principles in his diary.

Marianne Werefkin (1860–1938)

Klee meets Alexej Jawlensky and Marianne Werefkin – the baroness – in 1912. Lily Klee reminisces in a letter: «On an evening with the Russian dancer Alexander Sacharoff, we met Jawlensky and Marianne v. Werefkin. We would remain friends for life. I will never forget the first impression made by M. v. Werefkin’s appearance, character, her immense, enthused, intellectual and spiritual vitality. Just like her painting, highly personal, colourful, individual and full of wit.»

The wealthy Werefkin’s salon enables Klee to expand his circle of friends and acquaintances. Musicians, dancers, painters and aristocrats from many countries come and go. From time to time, Werefkin participates in the lively exchange of work that unfolds between Klee and Jawlensky.

9 Bauhaus

Between 1921 and 1931, Klee teaches at the Bauhaus in Weimar and Dessau. At the design school, which Walter Gropius founded in 1919, Klee teaches the theory of form in the preliminary course. He works alongside Johannes Itten, Lyonel Feininger and Oskar Schlemmer, and from 1922, Kandinsky as well.

Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

Klee and Kandinsky are both colleagues as well as competitors on the art market, but they remain friends and later become neighbours. During the Weimar period, Klee’s art is highly varied, ranging from narrative scenes and to almost abstract pieces. By contrast, Kandinsky reduces his vocabulary of form and colour, which is grounded in basic forms and the primary colours. Klee’s immediacy and individual approach to artistic creation stands in contrast to Kandinsky’s severity.

Due to right-leaning forces in Weimar, the Bauhaus moves to Dessau in 1925. Gropius conceives a modern school building and houses with studios for the instructors. The so-called «Masters’ Houses» are duplexes, the Klee’s share a house with the Kandinskys. Whereas Klee formalizes and geometricizes his work, Kandinsky begins to relax his strict formal vocabulary. As the narrative element begins to recede in Klee’s work, Kandinsky increasingly alludes to figuration and suggests content. They often engage in a purely visual dialogue in which both artists take up the same motif or technique and translate it into their respective languages.

In 1931, Klee leaves the Bauhaus and accepts a position at the art academy in Düsseldorf. When the Bauhaus moves to Berlin, Kandinsky follows, departing only when it is shut down in 1931.

10 The National Socialist Threat

Since 1931, Klee has been teaching at the art academy in Düsseldorf. With the National Socialist takeover, the political situation in Germany changes. He comments on the «National Socialist Revolution» in a series of 250 figurative drawings. Otherwise, Klee is known to have made very few political statements. However, his repudiation of National Socialism is clear. In 1933, he notes: «Thus far I have neglected doing something about the question of blood [...] If an official request is made, then I must do it. But from my perspective, responding to such blundering slanders seems disgraceful. Because: even if it were true that I am a Jew and hail from Galicia, it
would not change the value of my person and my achievements one iota. In my opinion, I may not abandon my personal viewpoint that he who is a Jew and a foreigner is not inherently inferior to a German and a native, because otherwise I would be erecting a strange and everlasting monument. I would rather invite adversity than play the tragic-comic character who tries to gain the favour of the ruler.» After Klee is attacked in the press and his house is searched, he is placed on immediate leave in April 1933. The same year he and his wife Lily emigrate to Bern.

Although he has a social life in Bern, the emigration leaves Klee feeling uprooted. It pains him that the network of artists and intellectuals that he had known not only at the Bauhaus, but also in Munich and Düsseldorf, no longer exists. He responds to these new life circumstances in his art. Although they take covert forms, mourning and separation pervade his work from 1934 to 1935.

11 Highlights from the Late Period

Klee falls ill in 1935. However, it is only at the end of 1938 that he is diagnosed with scleroderma, a rare autoimmune disease in which the connective tissue, skin and some of the inner organs harden over time. Since the disease progresses intermittently, he goes through alternating phases of rest and productivity: whereas Klee completes only 25 pieces in 1936, he creates over 1,300 works in 1939. Klee’s health continues to decline. He dies on June 29, 1940 while staying at a health resort in Tessin.

Above all, it is Picasso’s work that motivates Klee to work on a larger scale, to intensify his palette and to engage intensively with the representation of the human figure. Klee’s grotesque physiognomies are likewise indebted to this dialogue with Picasso. However, Klee masterfully transforms these impressions into a highly individual artistic style, as with his earlier painted fields of colour that verge on abstraction and resemble glass painting. When Klee explores questions about the meaning of life in paintings such as «Insula dulcamara», his works attain an existential profundity. At the same time, when addressing society, they brim with irony, satire and ulterior meanings, just like the beautiful gardener in «La belle jardinière.»

12 Archaic Reduction

During his Italian journey of 1901/02, Klee realizes that both in Italy as well as during his studies in Munich he has only become acquainted with ancient forms and themes. The following years and decades are characterized by a search for a contemporary visual language and for the essential. The art of other cultures, folk art and children’s drawings inspire Klee to develop a simplified and distilled style.

Beginning in the mid-1910s, he introduces symbols and signs to his compositions. They recall prehistoric symbols, Egyptian hieroglyphics and characters from other written languages, such as Arabic. His library includes various books on ethnographic artefacts. Additionally, Klee is able to study original objects in the ethnographic collection at the Museum of History in Bern. Likewise, children’s drawings inspire Klee in the development of his own visual language. As early as 1911, he puts down his childhood drawings as the first entries in his catalogue of works. At the same time, he points out that his art is not to be confused with children’s drawings. In contrast to children, he simplifies form consciously and purposefully.

Klee incorporates these sources of inspiration into his artistic process, thereby developing distinctive pictorial elements with great associative powers and a directness that allows for manifold interpretations.

13 The First Surrealist

For the first Surrealist artists like Max Ernst and Joan Miró, as well as for writers such as Louis Aragon and Paul Éluard, the encounter with Klee’s dream-like pictorial world at the beginning of the 1920s is an artistic revelation. At the same time, Klee draws inspiration from the surrealist ideas and from mutual predecessors like Giorgio de Chirico. The surrealists are interested in Klee’s peculiar machines, his fantastic world of plants and animals, his representations of masks and mysterious objects as well as his illusory spaces and imaginary architecture.

André Masson (1896–1987)

Klee’s attempt to free line from its representational function is similar to the surrealist practice of automatic drawing. Whereas Klee unifies spontaneity and deliberate drawing, surrealists like André Masson prefer to practice automatic drawing. The unconscious should flow directly onto the paper or canvas, without being filtered through the intellect. Masson and Klee were not friends and they never met in person. However, in 1922, Masson happened upon a book with reproductions of Klee’s work and excitedly shared it with Joan Miró, who worked in a neighbouring studio. In 1946, Masson writes his «Éloge de Paul Klee» – in praise of Klee – and observes in retrospect: «it is a singular occurrence in history, when there were only two paths. For me it was the one forged by Klee. The other? De Chirico.»
14 Constructivist Formations

Since 1927, Klee has addressed planimetric configurations in his Bauhaus teachings; slightly later he also explores stereometric compositions. He successfully applies these insights to his own work as well. In 1931, he creates several series of drawings of geometric constructions, which he carefully mounts to cardboard and registers in his work catalogue. He constructs a series of models from sticks, rubber bands and thread to serve as the bases for these drawings. Klee then alters the models by tightening and overlapping the threads or adding new ones. He also plays with the forms by mirroring, projecting, contorting or turning them.

Sophie Taeuber-Arp (1889–1943)

It is likely that Klee met Sophie Taeuber-Arp through his long-time friend Hans Arp. Little is known about their relationship. Sophie Taeuber-Arp has been a member of the avant-garde since the mid-1910s, when she meets Arp. Through him, she enters the circle of the Dada artists. In this context, she certainly encounters work by Klee or comes into contact with the artist himself.

She studies textile design Ecole des arts décoratifs in St. Gallen, and then attends the Debschitz School in Munich and Hamburg from 1910 to 1914. Klee teaches briefly at the Debschitz School in 1908. Later, in 1916, she takes over the textile program at the applied arts school in Zurich. Even in her early work, Taeuber used abstract geometric forms, be it in her woven or needlepoint textiles or in drawings, watercolours and oil paintings. Her simplified formal language is based upon rectangles and circles as well as a restrained palette consisting of black, white, grey and only a few colours. She endlessly combines these elements to form new variations.

15 Biomorphic Forms

In several essays, Klee addresses the artist’s relationship to nature. His intensive and foundational inquiry goes far beyond issues of representation and the analysis of nature’s exterior forms. Klee is interested in the underlying structure of plants and natural processes of growth. For Klee, these themes are closely tied to the work of the designer and the creative artist: the interior of a form determines its outer appearance, just as the ribs of a leaf shape its exterior or the skeleton of an animal or a person defines its outward form. Thus, in Klee’s oeuvre, numerous works are constructed in layers that gradually form a whole. His use of materials and techniques makes the artistic process visible. Klee’s artistic thought is grounded in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s teachings on metamorphosis, the Romantic philosophy of nature and the 19th-century “philosophy of life”.

Hans Arp (1886–1966)

The connection between Klee and Hans Arp spans several decades and is linked to different artistic currents. At the beginning of the 1910s, Arp organizes exhibitions for the artists’ association Moderne Bund. It holds a show in Zurich in 1912, where Klee sees works by Henri Matisse, Delaunay, Marc, Wassily Kandinsky and Gabriele Munter and writes a review for the journal «Die Alpen» [the alps]. Of Arp he observes: «In Hans Arp’s work, there is the sense of a specific relationship to the things of this world, objects please him, and art spares this devoted love.» Later, Arp participates in the Dada movement in Zurich and in the 1920s, he is affiliated with the surrealists, for whom Klee is an important forerunner. Above all, Klee and Arp are bound by their interest in nature, in movement and transformation – and with it the aversion to static forms.