**Klee, Paul**

A Swiss-born painter and graphic artist whose personal, often gently humorous works are replete with allusions to dreams, music, and poetry, **Paul Klee**, b. Dec. 18, 1879, d. June 29, 1940, is difficult to classify.

Primitive art, surrealism, cubism, and children's art all seem blended into his small-scale, delicate paintings, watercolors, and drawings. Klee grew up in a musical family and was himself a violinist. After much hesitation he chose to study art, not music, and he attended the Munich Academy in 1900. There his teacher was the popular symbolist and society painter Franz von STUCK. Klee later toured Italy (1901-02), responding enthusiastically to Early Christian and Byzantine art.

Klee's early works are mostly etchings and pen-and-ink drawings. These combine satirical, grotesque, and surreal elements and reveal the influence of Francisco de Goya and James Ensor, both of whom Klee admired. Two of his best-known etchings, dating from 1903, are Virgin in a Tree and Two Men Meet, Each Believing the Other to Be of Higher Rank. Such peculiar, evocative titles are characteristic of Klee and give his works an added dimension of meaning.

After his marriage in 1906 to the pianist Lili Stumpf, Klee settled in Munich, then an important center for avant-garde art. That same year he exhibited his etchings for the first time. His friendship with the painters Wassily Kandinsky and August Macke prompted him to join Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider), an expressionist group that contributed much to the development of abstract art.

A turning point in Klee's career was his visit to Tunisia with Macke and Louis Molliet in 1914. He was so overwhelmed by the intense light there that he wrote: Color has taken possession of me; no longer do I have to chase after it, I know that it has hold of me forever. That is the significance of this blessed moment. Color and I are one. I am a painter. He now built up compositions of colored squares that have the radiance of the mosaics he saw on his Italian sojourn. The watercolor Red and White Domes (1914; Collection of Clifford Odets, New York City) is distinctive of this period.

Klee often incorporated letters and numerals into his paintings, as in Once Emerged from the Gray of Night (1917-18; Klee Foundation, Berlin). These, part of Klee's complex language of symbols and signs, are drawn from the unconscious and used to obtain a poetic amalgam of abstraction and reality. He wrote that "Art does not reproduce the visible, it makes visible," and he pursued this goal in a wide range of media using an amazingly inventive battery of techniques. Line and color predominate with Klee, but he also produced series of works that explore mosaic and other effects.

Klee taught at the BAUHAUS school after World War I, where his friend Kandinsky was also a faculty member. In Pedagogical Sketchbook (1925), one of his several important essays on art theory, Klee tried to define and analyze the primary visual elements and the ways in which they could be applied. In 1931 he began teaching at Dusseldorf Academy, but he was dismissed by the Nazis, who termed his work "degenerate." In 1933, Klee went to Switzerland. There he came down with the crippling collagen disease scleroderma, which forced him to develop a simpler style and eventually killed him. The late works, characterized by heavy black lines, are often reflections on death and war, but his last painting, Still Life (1940; Felix Klee collection, Bern), is a serene summation of his life's concerns as a creator.

Access to Paul Klee's artwork is restricted to jurisdictions where it is in the Public Domain

Due to variations in copyright laws around the world, access to reproductions of Paul Klee's artwork is only allowed in countries or jurisdictions where such artwork is in the public domain.

A capital point of the WebMuseum License Agreement is that it is the responsibility of the visitor to ensure copyright compliance with local laws of the country or jurisdiction where the visitor is downloading information to. To access reproductions of Paul Klee's artwork, you must certify that you meet the copyright compliance criteria. **If you are unsure, do not certify**, as you risk infringing your local copyright legislation. JavaScript must be enabled in your web browser.

Note: please ignore the very first picture in the next page, entitled 1914, as the Klee Estate reported in July 2002 that it wasn't an authentic work by Paul Klee.

Klee's studies in the related fields of natural history, comparative anatomy and anthropology had brought Klee to the belief that nature was characterized by the permutation and movement of fundamental units of construction. He wanted to achieve an equivalent way of working in painting. In addition to his interest in the natural world. Klee also turned to theories of both color and music. As he worked on the basis of units of construction taken from nature, Klee tried to create linear improvisations which he likened to the melody of the work. Klee evolved a system of color organization in which all the colors of the spectrum were conceived of as moving around a central axis dominated by the three pigmentary colors - red, yellow and blue.

From 1923 Klee created a series of imaginative color constructions which he called 'magic squares' in which he applied his theories. This series came to a conclusion in 1932 with Ad Parnassum. Klee likened each element in the painting to a theme in a polyphonic composition. He defined polyphony as 'the simultaneity of several independent themes'. In addition. each artistic element in Ad Parnassum is itself a distillation of several ideas and personal experiences. For example. the graphic element illustrates the gate to Mount Parnassus, the home of Apollo and the Muses, and also may refer to the Pyramids which Klee saw in 1928, and to a mountain near Klee's home.

Paul Klee was an introverted Swiss painter who spent most of his adult life in Germany until he was expelled by the Nazis in 1933. His work is impossible to clarify, except to say that it is hardly ever wholly abstract, but equally, never truly realistic. He had a natural sensitivity to music, the least material of the arts, and it runs through all his work, clarifying his spellbinding color and dematerializing his images.

Paul Klee was one of the greatest colorists in the story of painting, and a skilled deployer of line. His gravest pictures may have an undercurrent of humor, and his powers of formal invention seem infinite. After making an early choice whether to pursue painting or music as a career, he became one of the most poetic and inventive of modern artists. He taught at the Bauhaus in Weimar and Dessau and then at the Dьsseldorf Academy. Until his expulsion from Dьsseldorf by the Nazis, Klee painted and drew on a very small scale, yet the small size of his pictures does not affect their internal greatness.

The Golden Fish glides through the kingdom of its underwater freedom, all lesser fish leaving a clear space for its gleaming body. This is a magical fish with runic signs upon his body, scarlet fins, and a great pink flower of an eye. He hangs majestically in the deep, dark blue magic of the sea, which is luminous with secret images of fertility. The great fish draws the mysteriousness of his secret world into significance. We may not understand the significance, but it is there. The sea and its creatures are arranged in glorious homage, belittled but also magnified by this bright presence. This quiet nobility, the brightness, the solitude, the general respect: all are true of Klee himself. Whether the art world knew it or not, he was their golden fish.

**Images of death and fear**

Klee painted with intense rapidity and sureness and it is impossible to indicate the full breadth of his range, his unfailing magic, and his poetry. Diana in the Autumn Wind (1934; 63 x 58 cm (24 3/4 x 19 in)) gives a hint of his sense of movement. Leaves flying in a moist breeze are, at the same time, the Virgin goddess on the hunt, and yet also a fashionably dressed woman from Klee's social circle. The eeriness of the dying year takes shape before our eyes and beyond all this are lovely balancing forms that exist in their own right. This work is strangely pale for Klee, yet the gentle pallor is demanded by the theme: he hints that Diana is disintegrating under the force of autumnal fruitfulness.

Klee died relatively young of a slow and wasting disease, his death horribly mimicked by the death of peace that signified World War II. his last paintings are unlike any of his others. They are larger, with the forms often enclosed by a thick black line, as if Klee were protecting them against a violent outrage. The wit is gone and there is a huge sorrow, not personal, but for foolish and wilful humanity.

Death and Fire (1940; 46 x 44 cm (18 x 17 1/3 in)) is one of Klee's last paintings. A white, gleaming skull occupies the center, with the German word for death, Tod, forming the features of its face. A minimal man walks towards death, his breast stripped of his heart, his face featureless, his body without substance. Death is his only reality, his facial features waiting there in the grave for him. But there is fire in this picture too: the sun, not yet set, rests on the earth's rim, which is also the hand of death. The upper air is luminous with fire, presenting not an alternative to death, but a deeper understanding of it. The man walks forward bravely, into the radiance, into the light. The cool, grey-green domain of death accepts the fire and offers wry comfort.

Three mysterious black stakes jag down vertically from above, and the man strikes the skull with another. If fate forces him down into the earth, he does not go passively or reluctantly: he cooperates. Death's head is only a half-circle, but the sun that it balances in its hand is a perfect globe. The sun is what endures the longest, what rises highest, what matters most, even to death itself. Klee understood his death as a movement into the deepest reality, because, as he said, ``the objective world surrounding us is not the only one possible; there are others, latent''. He reveals a little of that latent otherness here.