

“Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible”

Paul Klee at the Jewish Museum in New York: “Other Possible Worlds”

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“Other Possible Worlds,” a recent exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York City, featured the work of the 20th century Swiss-born German artist Paul Klee (1879-1940). Though it spanned his career, it highlighted his work of the 1930s, much of which responded to the rise of the Nazis. These works alternately convey outrage, lacerating criticism, horror and deep pathos. Klee’s scenes of violence and demagoguery are inescapably contemporary.

Klee drew inspiration from, and was claimed by, many artistic movements, but his highly individual, syncretic style is hard to classify. His work often delights with its childlike ebullience but also stimulates the mind with its idiosyncratic but methodical formal organization. A single canvas may combine advanced, modernist approaches with evocations of folklore or mythology. Klee’s artistic responses to the Nazis notwithstanding, his primary focus was not the social world, but rather the interior world of emotions, dreams and introspection. This orientation is a limitation that resulted in part from objective historical difficulties. Despite this historically determined shortcoming, Klee was a serious artist who made lasting contributions to painting.

The apotheosis of color

Klee was born in Switzerland in 1879 to a German father and a Swiss mother. His parents were musicians who encouraged him to develop his own musical skills, and he became an accomplished violinist by the early age of 11. But because he was not enamored of modern music (and partly out of rebellion), Klee turned toward the visual arts as a teenager.

As Klee embarked on his artistic career, Europe was undergoing rapid transformation. Scientific and technological advances were fueling the Second Industrial Revolution. The population was concentrating in large cities that were becoming more interconnected, thanks to the railroads and the telegraph. International travel and communication were growing easier and more common, which fostered not only a fertile exchange of ideas but also a new wave of colonialism. Related to the latter, imperialist rivalries were intensifying and would ultimately explode into the cataclysm of World War I.

This rapid urbanization and technological change were contributing to a crisis of bourgeois culture, and many artists concluded that the naturalism that had prevailed in the 19th century was no longer appropriate to modern life. Others were becoming dissatisfied with industrial bourgeois civilization. They sometimes sought inspiration in folk art, children’s art and non-Western art. Expressionism, Fauvism and Cubism—all of which would influence Klee—were born of artists’ efforts to capture the new reality.

Klee’s early work included etchings (such as a series of Symbolist-inspired “Inventions”) and drawings (such as illustrations that he was invited to provide for an edition of Voltaire’s *Candide* [1759]). He worked mainly in black and white and at first showed little natural sense of color.

While in Munich in 1911, Klee became involved with Der Blaue Reiter, an Expressionist group founded by artists Vasily Kandinsky and Franz Marc. His friendship with these artists and his admiration for their work may have helped open Klee’s mind to modern color theory. It also gave him an international range of artistic influences.

Equally important for the artist’s development was his trip to Paris in the following year. There he met the painters Robert Delaunay and Maurice de Vlaminck. Their dazzling palettes suggested that color could be an autonomous structural element in a painting, and this conception affected Klee’s thinking. Yet he did not want to copy these artists, preferring to experiment on his own.

The turning point in Klee’s development was his trip to Tunisia in 1914. The intense light, the geometric forms of North African architecture and the relationships between color and space gave Klee new conceptions and sudden inspiration. “Color has taken possession of me,” he wrote in his diary. “I know that it has hold of me forever... Color and I are one. I am a painter.”

The noncombatant at war

But World War I broke out not long afterward. Though the artist considered it none of his concern, he was drafted in March 1916. When his friends and fellow painters Marc and August Macke were killed, Klee was deeply affected. Fortunately, Klee was transferred to an office job that allowed him to paint, and even to exhibit his work, throughout the war.

Having returned to Munich, Klee witnessed the German Revolution of 1918-19 at close range. Workers’ and soldiers’ councils ultimately seized power across Bavaria and established a socialist republic. But the lack of a mature revolutionary party had disastrous consequences; Freikorps troops murdered revolutionary leaders Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht in January 1919, and crushed the revolutionary uprisings.

Though Klee was not actively involved in the revolution, and his political sympathies were diffuse, the defeat had a major effect on him. The foreclosure of any immediate prospect for the socialist transformation of society reinforced Klee’s already evident inward orientation. Broadly speaking, he continuously developed a highly individual, fantastical cosmology in his work, although, as the exhibition demonstrated, the artist was at times obliged to confront social reality.

“Young Proletarian” (1919), for example, is a childlike depiction of a round-headed, broad-shouldered, sooty-faced youth against a coal-black background. His wide eyes and mouth droop in melancholy perseverance. Already, Klee skillfully balances dark and warm tones with cool blue and

whites.

Klee's mature style emerged after the war, shaped by his travels, the artists he had befriended and the movements he had encountered. His paintings often give a sense of growth and organic development, partly because of his draftsmanship, which he called "taking a line for a walk." He usually worked at a small scale, and his work tends to have a fragile quality.

Klee also demonstrated an unusual ability to combine representation and abstraction successfully. He developed a visual counterpart to music by using colored rectangles as musical notes and palettes as keys. His titles are alternately musical, dryly satirical, poetic and mystical. Taken together, his work combines apparent spontaneity with intellect.

The individualist supports the new society

During the Weimar Republic, Klee taught at the Bauhaus. This school of fine art, design and crafts was founded in the aftermath of the German Revolution and directly inspired by the October Revolution. Its founding manifesto described it as a "cathedral of socialism" that would unite the arts, crafts and architecture in the service of a new collective society. As the Hungarian artist and teacher László Moholy-Nagy told students, this new society had begun under Lenin and Trotsky. (It is coincidental but not entirely without significance that the years of Klee's birth and death were the same as Trotsky's).

Klee was neither a militant nor a member of any party. Nonetheless, his decade-long association with the Bauhaus demonstrated his sympathy with the school's aim of laying the new foundations for a socialist future. The faculty encouraged a lively theoretical debate in the service of this goal. "I also approve of these forces competing one with the other if the result is achievement," Klee said.

He gave courses in bookbinding, stained glass and murals. More than a style, Klee imparted a method to his students. He cultivated attention to balance, rhythm, color relationships, line and the use of symbols.

Klee's "Angelus Novus" (1920) dates from approximately this period. The oil transfer and watercolor work depicts a curly-headed angel with hands aloft as if in benediction or proclamation. This seemingly naïve drawing shows great control of line, symmetry and subtle attention to color. The ground and the palette of light browns evoke papyrus. Deeply moved by the work (but also deeply pessimistic in his outlook), art critic Walter Benjamin interpreted this "angel of history" as a witness to a catastrophe that he is powerless to reverse.*

During Klee's tenure at the Bauhaus, the threat of fascism gathered force. Outside the Soviet Union, Germany had the largest, most concentrated and most politically organized working class in the world. Together, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Communist Party (KPD) received about 13 million votes against the Nazis' 11.7 million in the last parliamentary election before Hitler took power. From exile in Turkey, Trotsky fought for a united front of German workers' parties against the Nazis. But, following Stalin's "Third Period" policy, the KPD refused to cooperate with the "social fascist" SPD, thus dividing the working class and allowing Hitler to assume power in 1933 without a shot being fired.

The "Galician Jew"

Before 1933, Klee generally ignored political developments in his work.

"Arab Song" (1932) harks back to his trip to Tunisia and subsequent journey to Egypt in 1929. The childlike, rectilinear image is two-dimensional and dispenses with naturalism. Its thin lines depict a veiled woman who looks intently at the viewer while holding a small tree and heart-shaped leaf. Its pale colors recall sand dunes and sea, and the burlap on which it is painted imparts a rough, authentic feeling. Innocence and exoticism are united.

"Mask of Fear" (1932), however, provides a sharp contrast. Inspired by a carving of a Zuni war god, the oil painting on burlap depicts a huge oval mask with staring eyes, a long nose and a grim mouth. Two pairs of thin legs peek out from behind it. The palette is minimal, and the draftsmanship economical; the focus is the mask itself (with an incongruous black arrow and dandelion-like antenna rising from its crown) and the nameless dread it conveys.

At the time of these paintings, Klee was teaching at the Düsseldorf Academy, having resigned from the Bauhaus amid the deepening political crisis. In Düsseldorf, he was singled out by a Nazi newspaper, which wrote, "Then that great fellow Klee comes onto the scene, already famed as a Bauhaus teacher in Dessau. He tells everyone he's a thoroughbred Arab, but he's a typical Galician Jew." Klee was not Jewish, but his association with the Bauhaus made him anathema to the Nazis. Under the Nazi regime, the Gestapo soon searched his home, and he was fired from his job.

The somber "Struck from the List" (1933) records this attack. Using colored paste, which gives the work a rough surface, Klee created a self-portrait from patches of brown, slate and peach. It shows a skull-like head with tightly shut eyes and an emphatically downturned mouth. A big, implacable "X" covers the back half of the head like a mark of stigma. This solitary outcast seems condemned to wander in sorrow.

In 1933, Klee also made a series of chalk and pencil drawings on paper that provide searing images of Nazi terror. These striking works unite considered composition with seemingly spontaneous, emotionally charged execution. Full of tension, they writhe with nervous strokes, emphatic slashes and falling squiggles. The titles themselves land with force: "Barbarian Mercenary," "Manhunt," "Accusation in the Street," "Crawling Man," "Penitent on Display" and "Child Murder." "Fools' Party" shows a demagogue declaiming from a soapbox, arm raised in a Nazi salute, as the rabble look on. These drawings were among the most powerful works in the exhibition.

In late 1933, Klee emigrated to Switzerland. But even as he passed beyond the Nazis' reach and found the peak of his creativity, he began experiencing the symptoms of scleroderma, the rare autoimmune disease that was to take his life. As the artist's stiffness and fatigue advanced, he developed simpler and larger compositions that allowed him to keep working.

One such example is "Revolution of the Viaduct" (1937), which shows a group of arches that have broken formation and seem to march toward the viewer. The repeated arch shape gives the painting rhythm and motion—and even harmony, despite the asymmetrical composition. The arches' disunity and bright colors mock Hitler's military parades and spectacles of discipline. During the year this work was painted, the Nazis included Klee in an exhibition of "degenerate art."

"Forest Witches" (1938) is a fine example of Klee's late work. Heavy, wandering black lines trace two dancing witches who are perhaps giving praise or thanks. The black lines recall hieroglyphics or ideograms. The predominating olive and brown tones are offset by patches of luminous peach and pink. The work illustrates Klee's persistent fascination with legends and magic. It suggests a desire to escape into the forest, leaving both fascism but also industrial modernity behind.

Angels, too, often appear in Klee's late work. For Klee, these beings occupy a liminal space and are neither constrained nor free. They may be stand-ins for Klee himself, who was in exile and in transition between life

and death. A picture of an angel lies at the bottom of Klee's last painting, an untitled still life that also includes a statuette that seems to wave goodbye. Klee died in June 1940.

A singular talent at a time of crisis

The Jewish Museum's exhibition provided a welcome and broad-ranging overview of Klee's career. Its accent on the 1930s and Klee's response to the Nazis emphasized work with unmistakable contemporary relevance as the US government supports genocide in Gaza, wages war in Europe and the Middle East, carries out mass deportations, tortures detainees, and hurtles toward dictatorship.

Yet the exhibition underscored that social engagement was not the main thrust of Klee's work, as powerful and bitingly satirical as his anti-Nazi drawings and paintings were. Rather, a strong focus on subjective feelings, childlike innocence and private mythology predominates. "Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible," Klee wrote. His chosen quest was to make inner experience manifest, not to grasp the objective world.

This turn away from realism was not Klee's alone, nor was it rooted in artists' psyches. The carnage of World War I, rapid technological and social change, financial crisis and the rise of fascism created a crisis of bourgeois culture. The growing and baleful influence of Stalinism made it even more difficult for artists to orient themselves. This was the context in which not only Klee but also Expressionism, Dada and Surrealism arose.

Nevertheless, Klee made real contributions to painting. Perhaps foremost is his use of color harmonies and dissonances to develop a visual analogue to music. He also was a natural draftsman who combined composition with spontaneity. These formal skills unite with Klee's great sensitivity, fertile imagination and sense of play to create delightful and moving work that conveys human experience and emotion. Had Stalinism been defeated and the socialist revolution extended internationally, Klee might have reached still greater heights. As it is, Klee forged a unique style that reflects the artistic ferment, and the artistic crisis, of the 20th century.

* "Benjamin called attention to the artist Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*. In this work, the real nature of the historical process was depicted: 'His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage, and hurls it at his feet.' Benjamin's despair led him to cynicism, which he directed against the perspective of socialist revolution."



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