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Author(s): Marcel Breuer and Ben Shahn
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Aspects of the Art of Paul Klee

On February 2nd, 1950, the first of a series of symposia was presented by a committee of the Junior Council, whose chairman is Mrs. Matthew T. Mellon. This first symposium, held in the Auditorium of the Museum of Modern Art, dealt with the art of Paul Klee, an important exhibition of whose work was then in progress in the Museum.

Marcel Breuer spoke as a friend and associate of Klee; J. B. Neumann as a friend and connoisseur; Ben Shahn as a fellow artist; Edgar Wind as iconographer and amateur of Klee. Andrew C. Ritchie was the moderator of the meeting. Both Mr. Neumann and Mr. Wind spoke extemporaneously and illustrated their remarks with lantern slides. Their talks, therefore, cannot be printed here for reasons of space. Mr. Breuer and Mr. Shahn read prepared papers, which they have kindly permitted us to publish.

In the rather over-simplified imagination of a nineteen-year old, Klee's personality took quite definite shape in my vision. From the lines of his painting I thought of him as a slender, flexible man, expressive, emotional and rhapsodic, and I remember very well my surprise when I met him the first time. He was a perfectly normal, quiet man, somewhat stocky—regular suit, shirt and tie, said very little in his clipped Swiss-German—looked more like a doctor or professor than an artist, or I should say, than the general public's Hollywood-Paris-Budapest version of an artist.

He was forty-two and had a little beard at that time. The next year he shaved it off. There he was, with a regular, somewhat Latin, even calm face: no talk, no expression, no approach, no brilliancy, no aggressiveness—but also no show of modesty or shyness. And again: no talk. Only the eyes were in contrast to his reserve: also calm, but unusually open and undisturbed —undisturbed in following up and scaling an object. Calmly observant eyes, like a horse's eyes looking at a stranger, except that Klee's eyes, knowing and critical too, probably helped him meanwhile to formulate the title of a painting, such as "Woman Devil Domineering the World." The eyes disclosed that with all his remoteness, Klee was an alert man.

Slowly his personality revealed itself, reflecting an amazingly balanced philosophy: a solution for many great and conflicting emotions that distort and tear most men's lives. His few remarks were very much to the point, with direct questions, logical, realistic—complementing the line of surrealism in his work. The paintings, free fluctuating, changing and fantastic, display the strong and constant discipline of the composition: nearly always centric or symmetric. You discovered that the chaos of his studio, filled with many different tools, materials, paints, bottles, easels (he worked on five to eight pictures simultaneously) was in fact in pedantic order—everything in its organized place, neatly clean.

The adventurer of art was a scholarly and regular lecturer. He appeared on the minute in his class, turned to the blackboard with his back to the auditorium and read his prepared notes, drawing his prepared illustrations on the board.

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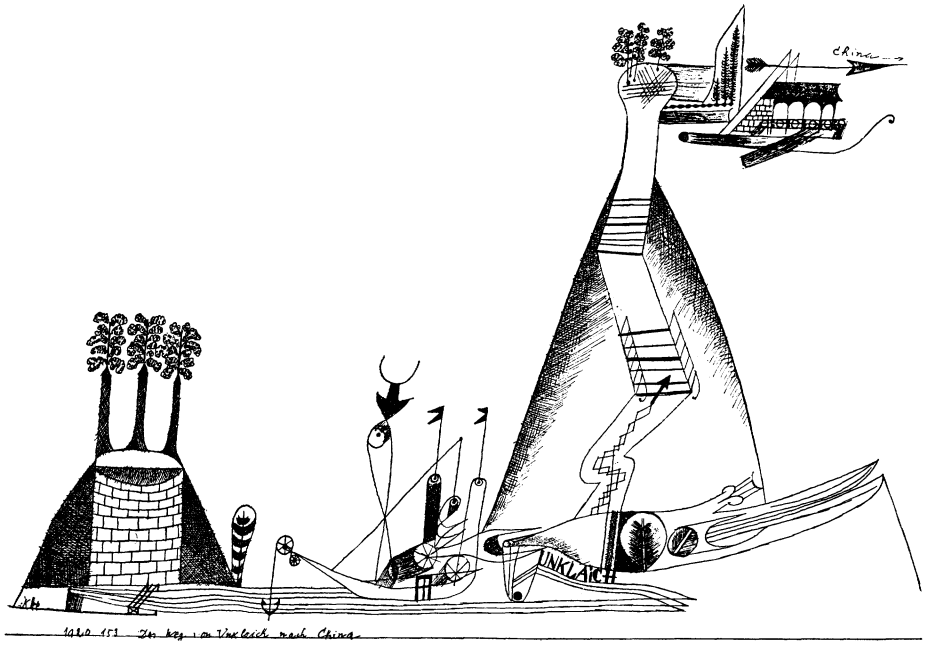

The Road from Unklaich to China, 1920, pen, 7⅜ x 11″.

He stopped and left on the minute. The same adventurer of art came to his studio at regular hours, worked evenly from morning to early evening, went home to play the violin for the rest of the evening—came regularly to the Bauhaus faculty meetings, etc. (though he never said a word), and was a good husband and enthusiastic father.

Only a very good critic suspected behind the somewhat painfully produced staccato lines of his drawings and handwriting, the cleverness and training of his hands. During one of his lecture illustrations on the blackboard, he drew an arrow pointing to the right, wrote over it "Movement," then another one pointing towards the left with the caption "Counter Movement." It took the audience some time to discover that with the second arrow he changed the crayon into his left hand and wrote "Counter Movement" from right to left.

There was not a trace of showiness in Klee, as well as none in his art. Both the man and the paintings are for private use—for intimate discovery. During the opening evening of his present show, I think I observed that the guests really looked at the paintings—somewhat unusual. You have to know his pictures, and the painter, better and better—to know anything about them. However, in this connection it is remarkable that probably no painter's work was so soon and so widely applied in advertising as Klee's. For instance, his stubby, violent and

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simplified heavy arrow appeared in typographical layouts and display works already in the early 20's, and has never disappeared since.

But, the applications of the "motives" are not the real effect of Klee. You know by knowing his work that he never trusted his easy talents, that in search and with purpose he went down and back to zero point, that he succeeded in arranging the various facets of his life and work into one thoroughly genuine integral composition. Again and again he went back to this zero point. Even in his later years, as a successful and recognized artist, he examined and re-examined what he had—the zero point of his departure. The courage to experiment at his own risk was a major force of his influence, especially of course in the Bauhaus, where he lived and worked from 1920 to '32.

This present exhibition at the Museum shows the process very well. We see now the signs of his talent and search, also in his early work. Not many discovered those values in his days. He must have had his crises and desperations. His career was given up by his critics for he was already in his middle thirties, and a painter should have produced something outstanding by then, if he is any good, they thought. The family lived from the piano lessons of Mrs. Klee. In the crowded and noisy apartment, so I have been told, Klee worked in a closet with a window cut in the door. This may have had something to do with the small scale of his pictures, which he later, very gradually, enlarged somewhat.

One knows by his work, and it was confirmed by knowing the man, that he had the strength and the methods to stand it.

MARCEL BREUER

 # 11, 1909, pen and brush drawing, 6¾ x 12⅜".

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A week or so ago I sat with a jury for the Pennsylvania Academy show. There came before us a number of what might have passed for Klee paintings; Klees, except that the hand was heavier; Klees, except that one's face didn't brighten, somehow, when one looked at them; Klees, without the unfaltering innocence of Klee.

Aside from the embarrassment which one must feel at such times, I felt also a deep regret that Klee, the painter who had so much to give to other artists, should have had to be robbed!

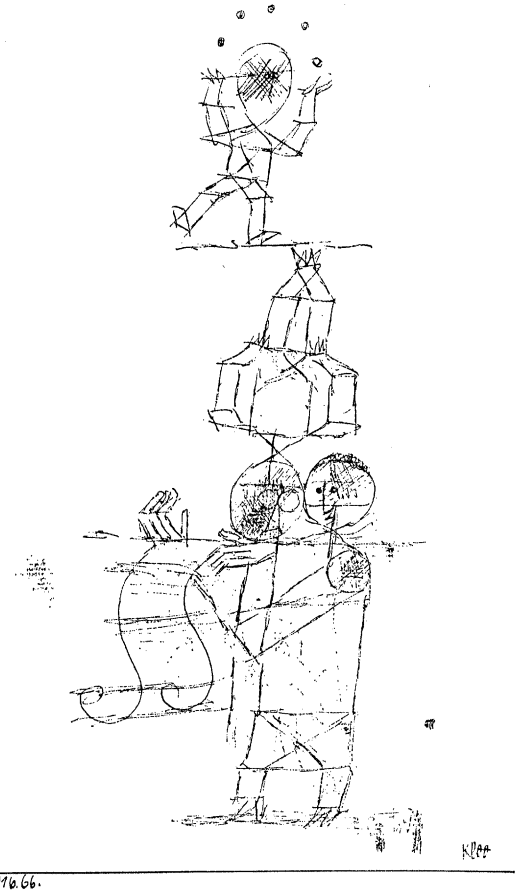
What I should like to accomplish in this discussion is to make clear somehow what the gifts were (or are) that Klee has passed on to us—what he ought to mean to other artists.

Looking at his paintings and drawings should, I think, do more than merely enrich us with *his* images, *his* amusing devices, his gently mischievous interpretations of ponderous classical things; it should serve as a sort of preachment for artists—well, for other people, too—to open the doors upon some of our own inner vistas, that mysterious scenery from which so many of us are shut off by some sense of humbleness, or unimportance, or possibly by the devious workings of our inhibitions.

For Klee, I think, more than any other artist, has given us the depths and reaches of his subjective life. Whoever knows his work well, knows him; knows what he thought and felt about life. Therein, of course, lies the preachment. For every artist, if he has nothing else—not even an Eames chair—has that thing; a wholly separate and individual self with its own dreams and passions, its unique landscape unmapped and unexplored—peopled with shapes and forms unknown to others. And that private, unknown self, wherever it has been realized well—in paint, sculpture, music or words—has been of unceasing value and wonder to others.

The Klee-influenced submissions for the Pennsylvania show did not, unfortunately, reveal new personalities seeking new ways of expression. They were the old personalities who, this year had abandoned Picasso, or Mark Toby, Tamayo or the other great innovators, and had, as you might put it, "gone Klee." There were I guess about thirteen such paintings. Some affected the styles of Klee; some rearranged his characteristic mannerisms; some lifted passages outright from his work.

What kind of miscalculation lies behind such painting I can't guess. But in each case one may know that the artist has rejected his most valuable asset—himself—to ape whatever artist he believes to be man-of-the-hour.



66, 1916, pen drawing, 9½ x 5⅛″.

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He has repudiated the gift that Klee might have given him—that is, a reassurance of the worth of his unique personality. Klee might have told him that style and form are secondary, and that the artist's *first* need is to communicate, or just merely realize, that which moves him.

Nobody ever painted like Klee before, and it seems to me unnecessary that anyone ever paint like him again. His styles of painting grew out of the necessities of mood and imaginative content. More than anyone else he reaffirms an old heresy of my own—that form is merely the shape taken by content. Where content is highly subjective and highly personal *new forms* will emerge. That is the unceasing wonder of really good art. And that (and not a trick of weaving ribbons of color) is what Klee ought to mean to other artists.

Another facet of Klee's work—which, incidentally, must have been part of the development of many painters—has to do with certain unexpected areas of paint which appear during the working of almost all pictures. These areas, although they combine the artist's own color and workmanship are still *unplanned*, and are sometimes almost mysterious to him. When such an area is good the artist is likely to guard it carefully—whatever other changes he may make. If it is a poor, a-tonal spot, he may say to himself, "Now, how the hell did I come to do that?" and quickly obliterate it.

Not many artists give serious thought to such accidental areas. I think that van Gogh, for instance, did. In his earliest works there is little either of light or movement. But as these qualities appeared he retained and developed them —at first slowly and painfully—to achieve finally the tremendous fire of movement and color which was necessary to his intensely emotional nature—and by which we know him.

To Klee, I believe that such unexpected areas —not only the good ones, but also the discomfiting ones—were matters for great exploration. He studied their pattern and their look to find out why they affected him as they did. He was vividly alert to the sense and mood of such forms and shapes, and their meaning never escaped him. Out of such areas he evolved his thousand and one styles, so unlike in texture and yet so unmistakably stamped with his personality. Herein, again I feel that he has much to give to other artists—in that all his styles emerged *out of his own work*. None reflects to the slightest degree a coveting of the eminence or achievement of other artists.

Klee lived at a time when Europe was swept by more "Isms" than most of us could catalogue. A highly sophisticated painter, he was aware of them all. Yet his work bears the stamp of none of them. If they affected him, and I daresay they did, to some extent, it was not to deflect the course of his own feelings. Such art currents were, instead, absorbed in Klee's work, enriching it, giving it a turn here and there, but never rendering it spurious. They say that the invading armies have never succeeded in taking China, but have only themselves been absorbed. I think that the invading art ideas had about that effect upon Klee.

Another preachment that we can make about Klee is his want of pretentiousness. Any survivor of art jurying will tell you that his most desperate moments have been those when he was confronted by one of the outsized oeuvres which dwarf everything else in the room and the emptiness of which is heightened by sheer acreage. I obviously have no quarrel with large paintings, if they have some purpose other than to impress, but imitation is doubly disconcerting the larger the picture becomes, its emptiness increasing with the square of the area. The thing that we aspiring artists ought to note about Klee is that, with all his admitted stature as an artist, his pictures are small, intimate and unpretentious. I believe he once said that he never painted pictures that couldn't be done within the radius of an elbow! Yet there is so much of amazement, surprise and wonder in these small works of his!

Now let's invoke Klee in opposition to the

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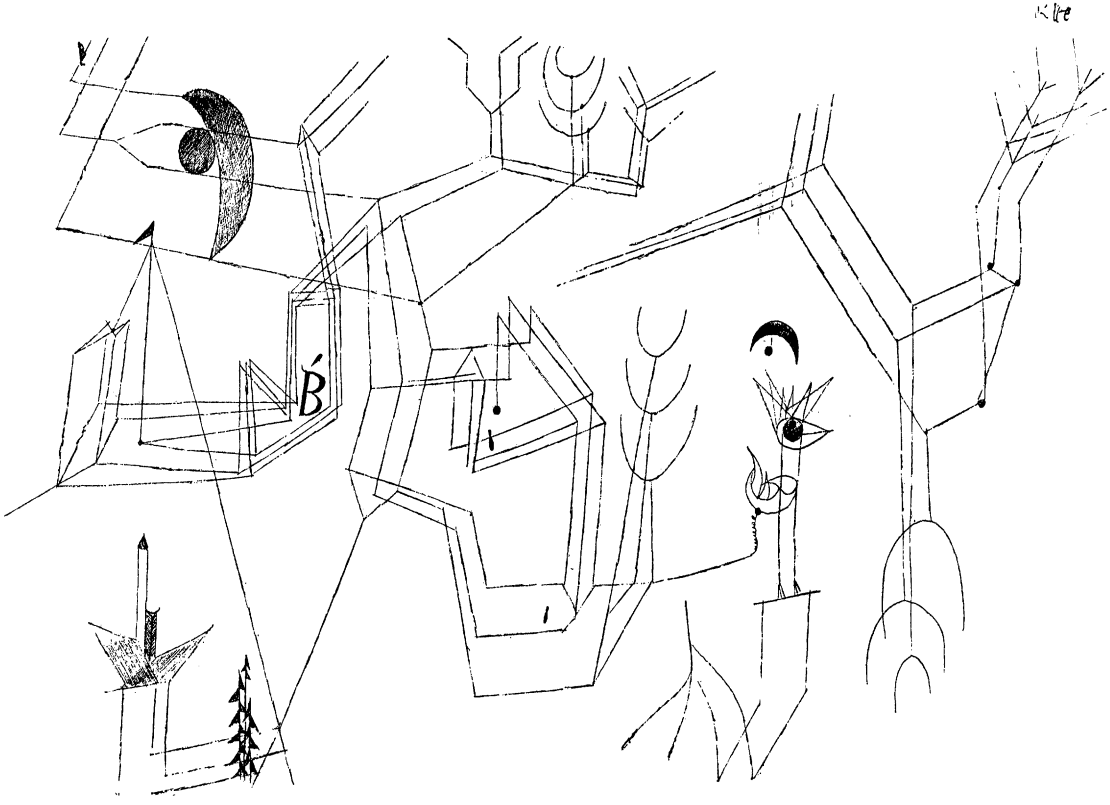

Drawing with a Fermata, 1918, pen, 6¼ x 9½".

great modern search for FORMULA. Artists come to me—as I know they do to other painters—looking for secrets in paint-mixing, secret procedure, secrets of materials and design. This attitude reflects, I know, our present-day belief in technical processes, our abiding faith that American know-how makes us a better people.

I always try to point out, in answer to such queries, that technical processes in art (in life, too, for that matter) must remain subject to intuitive and humanistic ends. That the failure of this principle is the curse of the world today (and that goes for *both* sides of the apocryphal curtain) I won't go into. But wherever technical processes do become paramount, society—or art, since that's what we are talking about—become deranged. Klee was certainly the most intuitive of artists. And the great technical skill

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which he had was solely this: a deft means of realizing his inner visions.

I imagine that Klee must be the bane of the truly professorial mind because he defies classification. His surrealism antedates Surrealism proper while such work of his as might be called "Cubistic" is, at the same time, Surrealist. Precursers of all the "isms" which we spoke of may be found among his early drawings and paintings. The Maze, The Monster and The Order are all there, but *out* of order. Before Futurism exalted the machine, Klee had turned it into a fairy tale. Before the Dada-ists had proclaimed themselves a cult, Klee had exploited such ideas as theirs with a sublety which they never achieved. Although he was allowed to join Kandinsky and Marc as an Expressionist in 1911, he had painted such Expressionist pictures as the "Musical Dinner Party" as early as 1907. Of course it's my private belief that any good art evades classification, and Klee gives particular comfort to that belief.

I want to finish with some emphasis upon still another gift which Klee might pass on to other artists—that is what may be called "innocence of vision."

It's one of the odd contradictions of life that considerable sophistication is necessary to seeing with a truly naïve eye. By that I mean that all of us, though we may have been born with "pure" vision, have, by the time we've reached adulthood, acquired such a confusion of handed-down values, prejudices and visual habits that we have no notion of how we would see things if we could look at them naïvely.

In 1902 Klee wrote: "I want to be as if born again, knowing nothing of Europe . . . . ." and so on. I think he achieved this artistic *summum bonum* as few others have. And whatever we may admire of his wit and poetry, however much we may be delighted by his ingenious images, the one attribute of his we should really seek to acquire is this ability to see with a fresh eye.

BEN SHAHN

Fabulous Island, 1913, pen, 2¼ x 7½″.

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