

# Flyaway Fantasy

*Rediscovering the charm and wit--and influence--of Paul Klee*

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The Hayward Gallery in London is having a show of some 100 watercolors and drawings and a few oils by Paul Klee. It is, of course, thronged. Klee is one of the relatively few 20th century artists genuinely liked by the public for something other than gossip or ridiculously high prices. Milder than clover (which his name means in German), more timid and introspective than a vole listening to the hellish racket of the century outside its burrow, Klee (1879-1940) could never have been accused of being one of the more confrontational artists of his time.

He made drawings and watercolors, sometimes six or seven a day--a volubility that worried him because he feared people would think he was thoughtlessly cranking them out. All his working life he also taught students, notably at the famed Bauhaus (in Weimar, and later in Dessau), where he quietly considered some of the other teachers to be nuts, as indeed some were. Teaching was not a sideline for Klee; it was hugely important to him because it enabled him to systematize his thinking about art. He made up whole strings of teaching theory about color and form, and about the relation of theory to practice, embellished with neat little diagrams of fuzzy squares and charging black arrows. The main fruit of his theorizing was the Pedagogical Sketchbook, the foundation of his teaching practice, which has been through numberless editions and translations since it first saw print in 1925.

His home life with his wife Lily (whom he married in 1906) and his son Felix was utterly blameless; no mistresses, outbursts of jealousy, undisclosed boyfriends or bankruptcies lurked under the rug. His one self-indulgence was cooking. He always bore a social grudge against Picasso, having refused to let him in when, like any Spaniard, Picasso arrived two hours late for their one and only appointment. (What they would have said to each other is conjectural. Klee spoke little French and no Spanish, Picasso no German.)

In sum, if you had been giving awards for picturesqueness, Klee would have been a nonstarter. And in all those thousands of works, to which Klee gave code numbers indicating their date and price range and his opinion of their quality, there is hardly one that has any discernible sexual content at all, no

secret genitals or nipples that even the dirtiest-minded brat could ferret out. This has always helped to make him a great favorite with worried modernist parents and ensured that reproductions of his work, such as *They're Biting*, 1920, outnumber even those of Rousseau's jungle scenes in the nurseries of the West as unbudgeable classics of childhood.

The result has been to make Klee look both omnipresent and rather a whimsical bore. He has to be rediscovered every so often to wipe away the resentment the kiddies (now grown up) feel against his charm, wit, flyaway fantasy and all the rest. He is forever going out of style and then being dragged back into it by this or that exhibition. People have to be reminded how important an artist he was in his time, on a level with figures who now seem more formidable (if less loved) presences in the history books, such as the architect Walter Gropius and the painter Wassily Kandinsky, who taught at the Bauhaus with him. But the truth is that for at least half the past century, painters, indeed whole movements (those being the days when you had movements), took stuff from Klee, with or without acknowledgment. He was far from being isolated by his whimsicality.

The first to recognize his value were the Dadaists. "In Klee's beautiful work," declared one of them, Marcel Janco, "we saw the reflection of all our efforts to interpret the soul of primitive man, to plunge into the unconscious and the instinctive power of creation." Even Marcel Duchamp, the least voluble of artists, admired the "extreme fecundity" of Klee--images begetting other images like horny little microbes in a Petri dish. His inspired doodling was morphed by the Surrealists, especially Max Ernst and Andre Masson, into what they called "automatism." His striped landscapes and magic-square paintings connect to Constructivism. His closely controlled but wandering line--"The line likes to go for a walk," he famously remarked--was an inspiration to Joan Miro. His late gestural paintings, with their thick brooding darkness and emphatic signs, such as *Secret Letters*, 1937, meant a great deal to American modernists like Jackson Pollock and Adolf Gottlieb. All in all, a tremendous amount of Klee's DNA was wound into the spiral of modernism, not only from the paintings themselves but also from his teaching theories, in which he obsessed about that most mysterious of subjects, creativity itself.

Small pictures, powerful presence and an output that can't be compressed into a single show. The Hayward's version, "Paul Klee: The Nature of Creation," was curated by a critic, Robert Kudielka, and a painter, the supremely intelligent and responsive Bridget Riley, the grande dame of English art. As Kudielka points out in his catalog introduction, Klee's work was not rooted in any movement. However abstract, it came out of the experience of nature and culture blended. Perhaps the decisive moment in Klee's early career was

a 1914 visit that he and his friend August Macke paid to Tunisia, where the warm, sparse earth colors, the heat and the townscape of Hammamet, a desert construction of white boxes and bubbling domes, affected him so powerfully that he was at last able to tell his diary that "color and I are one. I am a painter." The vision of the cellular-grid forms of Tunis, though he never went back there, would always stay with him, as one sees from later paintings, such as the exquisite *Picture of a City (Red-Green Accents)*, 1921.

Klee liked to make clear what sort of elements each painting was based on, as a composer states what key he is writing in. There were dot paintings, square paintings, crosshatch paintings and linear ones. The grammar of his compositions was always explicit but, at the same time, often surprising. He loved ruins, ideal scenery, viaducts, pyramids and everything that seemed both ancient and vulnerable: the stability of the pyramidal mountain in *Ad Parnassum*, 1932 (which translates as "To Parnassus," the mythical mountain of Apollo and the Muses), is decidedly undermined by being constructed from a faux mosaic of minuscule tiles of color.

There was plenty of room for humor in his work, and none for deadly seriousness or pretension. The little personages of Klee's imagination are now absurd and bathetic, now goblin-like, now intrusive, but never really menacing; they interact beautifully with their titles. (One of many possible favorites was *Hero with a Wing*, a deliciously self-deflating proposition, since no such hero could be expected to fly as heroes should.) Klee found authority absurd; he didn't viscerally hate it, like the Dadaists, but he poked fun at it, as in *The Great Emperor Rides to War*, 1920, an absurd military apparition that seems to be wearing a mosque on its head. Only afterward do you realize how like the spiked helmet of the recently defeated Kaiser Wilhelm this piece of costume is.

Under the sway of Klee's probing, wobbling, sinuous line, everything stable seems to be coming apart, and we are brought into a world that is simultaneously lyrical and absurd. There was something prophetic about this disintegration, but perhaps it was just as well for Klee that he died in 1940, on the edge of the worst war in human history. Could he have been happy in the atrocious second half of the 20th century? One doubts it.