The Other Klee, the One Who's Not on Postcards

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Klee, Bird Drama, 1920

LONDON -- ARTISTS who earn a permanent place in the public imagination usually do so through the instant recognizability of their work. Familiarity is reassuring. Originality becomes mundane. In that sense, Paul Klee is no different from a dozen other leading 20th-century artists.

Early in his career, he produced the semiabstract patchwork paintings - colored squares with hints at figuration – for which he is best remembered. Today, they are sold as postcards and posters.

But as illustrated by "Paul Klee: The Nature of Creation," a new exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in London through April 1, there were many Klees. The "square paintings," as they are known, were just one step in his quest for perfect spatial equilibrium. Here was a man whose intellectual fervor matched his artistic energy. When he died in 1940 at age 60, he left no fewer than 4,000 pages of analytical texts along with some 10,000 paintings, drawings and etchings.

Unavoidably, with just 90 works on display, the Hayward show is fiercely selective. Yet its two curators, the British painter Bridget Riley and the Berlin-based art historian Robert Kudielka, succeed in conveying the variety and complexity of Klee's oeuvre. The catalog, with an introduction by Ms. Riley and seven essays by Mr. Kudielka, then goes beyond the images to underscore how, for all its multiple expressions, Klee's vision of art was unchanging.

Indeed, if Klee skirted several 20th-century art movements but fitted into none, it was because his work was neither abstract nor figurative but contained elements of both. In fact, he found the distinction uninteresting. He did not start with an idea and see how it could be translated into art. For him, the idea should be born of the act of creation. Logically, therefore, his works often acquired titles only after they were completed.

"Visual art never begins with a poetic mood or idea," he once explained, "but with building one or several figures, with harmonizing a few colors or tones, or with calculating spatial relationships. Whether an idea then joins in is completely irrelevant; it may do, it doesn't have to."

Klee was not shy about discussing his work. Both the exhibition and the catalog quote a good many of his more pithy remarks about his art and art in general, although some need further explaining: he was interested in the mechanics of painting, but his theoretical reflections can be a tad obscure to a layman. Happily, Mr. Kudielka provides one essential key to understanding the artist: Klee viewed art through the prism of music.

Klee was born in 1879 in Bern, Switzerland, and his upbringing and early adulthood were dominated equally by art and music. His German father was a music teacher, and Klee became a proficient violinist, but in 1899 he moved to Munich to study art, not music. Returning to Bern in 1902, he kept himself alive as a violinist in an orchestra and as a music critic for a local newspaper, but he also continued to etch and

draw. In 1906, he moved back to Munich with his new wife, Lily Stumpf, a concert pianist. In 1912, he joined the Blue Rider group of artists founded by Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, but he had still not found his vocation.

The turning point came in 1914 - he was already 35 – when he traveled to Tunisia and discovered color.

"Color has taken hold of me," he declared upon his return to Munich. "I don't have to try to capture it. It will possess me always. That is the meaning of this happy hour. I know it. Color and I are one. I am a painter."

The outcome was his "square paintings," which began literally as squares of sun-splashed colors. Some were then accompanied by triangles that suggest roofs (as with "Picture of a City") and by semicircles that hint at the cupolas of Moorish homes or mosques ("Red and White Domes"). But these images were not, he insisted, abstractions of what he saw or imagined, because "art does not reproduce the visible, but makes visible." Ms. Riley notes that Klee's "seminal importance" to her was that through him she came to understand abstraction.

"Klee was the first artist to point out that for the painter the meaning of abstraction lay in the opposite direction to the intellectual effort of abstracting," she writes in the catalog. "It is not an end, but the beginning. Every painter starts with elements - lines, colors, forms - which are essentially abstract in relation to the pictorial experience that can be created with them."

This becomes clearer in the line drawings that followed, starting around 1920. Some of them, like "Bird Drama," appear figurative in a satirical, cartoonish or enchanted way; others resemble what the Surrealists were beginning to do through "automatic drawing." (Klee called his process "psychic transformation.") Yet while Klee was a humorous and irreverent sort, his approach remained intellectual.

His interest was the line itself.

Klee, The Broken Key, 1938

"The original movement, the agent, is a point that sets itself in motion (genesis of form)," he wrote. "A line comes into being. It goes out for a walk, so to speak, aimlessly for the sake of the walk."

In early 1921, Klee joined the Bauhaus, the new State School of Art and Design in Weimar, Germany, which was founded by the architect Walter Gropius and would soon include Kandinsky among its teachers. Klee's courses covered all the arts and crafts, from painting and drawing to bookbinding, stained glass and textile design. It was a period of extraordinary fertility for him, one in which he could test his theories through both his art and his teaching.

"Here in the studio, I work on half a dozen paintings and I am drawing and thinking about my course, everything together," he wrote. "For it has to go together, otherwise it wouldn't work at all."

His "square paintings" became more complex, with little geometric forms repeated across canvases to the point of resembling hieroglyphs. He also played endlessly with tones of color, as in his abstract rainbow-colored "Architecture of the Plain" and in his versions of pointillism. At the same time, as he sought what he called "visual rhythm," his line drawings became more and more experimental, sometimes against a

white background, other times against a colored canvas. The lines, complex and repetitive as musical scores, might then suggest a title, like "View of a Mountain Sanctuary" or "Forest Architecture," "Rock-Cut Temple" or "Fishes in a Torrent."

As Klee's international reputation grew (in 1930, he became the first living European artist to be given a one-man show at the new Museum of Modern Art in New York), the rise of Nazism began to disrupt the Bauhaus. In 1925, the school was forced to move to Dessau. Seven years later it closed in Dessau and, after reopening briefly in Berlin, it was definitively shut down when Hitler was elected chancellor in March 1933. By then, Klee had taken a teaching post in Düsseldorf, but he was dismissed in April 1933. (Four years later, 17 of his works were featured in the Nazis' "Degenerate Art" exhibition in Munich.) In December 1933, he and his family fled Germany for his Swiss birthplace, Bern.

The years that followed were difficult. In 1935, he contracted measles, which led to a painful and ultimately fatal skin disease called scleroderma. In 1936, this ever-prolific artist produced just 25 works. Yet by 1937, perhaps sensing the approach of death, he resumed work at a feverish pace: in 1939, he produced 1,253 pieces, in the main drawings.

In his paintings, the novelty was the thickening of his line, as in "The Broken Key," so that the paintbrush stroke now spoke for itself. Some of these works seem childish or primitive, anticipating the Art Brut movement that Dubuffet would later champion. "Wandering Artist (A Poster)," painted in 1940, the year of his death, is poignant in its simplicity: against a red background inside a black frame, a matchstick figure waves goodbye.

Klee even wrote his own valediction. Or at least the words engraved on his tomb are his:

> I cannot be pinned down here and now,
> because I live as well with the dead as with the unborn.
> Somewhat closer to the heart of creation than usual,
> And still not close enough.

Certainly, as the explanatory title of the Hayward show implies, Klee's interest was creation rather than production. Thus, while he gained renown for his early, accessible, even decorative "square paintings," they were merely first steps toward exploring the timeless process of
artistic creation.

"Do not define today," he told his Bauhaus students. "Define backward and forward, spatial and many-sided. A defined today is over and done for."