

Paul Klee

The Abstract Dimension

ROOM GUIDE

FONDATION **BEYELER**



INTRODUCTION

This exhibition presents the first-ever detailed exploration of Paul Klee's relationship to abstraction, one of the most crucial achievements of modern art. In the first half of the twentieth century, renunciation of the figurative and the emergence of abstract visual worlds became a key theme for many protagonists of classic Modernism. Paul Klee was among the artists who took up this challenge. Throughout his oeuvre, comprising a total of 9,800 works, from his early beginnings to his late period, we find fascinating examples of the creation of abstract pictorial forms and processes of abstraction in painting. Nature, architecture, music, and written signs—key elements in Klee's work as a whole—also have a central importance for his abstract pictures.

The groups of works in the exhibition, structured according to stylistic elements or motifs, demonstrate how easily and playfully Klee moves between the seemingly incommensurate worlds of abstraction and figuration. In the process, he investigates the basic means of image-making—picture space, plane and surface, material, color, and construction—and addresses the questions of ornamental abstraction and the depiction of the human figure. Klee responds to the abstract painting of his contemporaries, but develops highly original ideas that would be taken up by artists of future generations.

The exhibition comprises 110 works from twelve countries and provides insights into the decisive stages of Klee's artistic development, from the productive exchanges of the years before World War I with his contemporaries in Paris and Munich, the celebrated journey to Tunisia in 1914 and the subsequent period of military service, to the Bauhaus decade from 1921 to 1931 and his travels in Egypt and Italy, culminating in the visually sumptuous late works of the 1930s.

The exhibition is curated by Dr. Anna Szech.

CAUTION: Please do not touch the works of art!



Whenever this symbol appears on the exhibit labels, it means you will find the work of art discussed in detail under the corresponding number in this guide.

ROOM 1

- 1 • *Kairuan, vor den Thoren (nach einer Scizze von 1914)*, 1921, 4**
Kairouan, Before the Gates (After a Sketch of 1914)

In the spring of 1914, Paul Klee traveled with his fellow artists Louis Moilliet and August Macke to Tunisia, visiting Tunis, Kairouan and Hammamet over a period of two weeks. The three painters immersed themselves in a country replete with mysteries and marvels. In Kairouan, under the influence of North Africa's shimmering landscapes, culture and architecture, Klee discovered a new intensity of light and color. In his diary, he wrote: "Color possesses me. I don't have to pursue it. It will possess me always, I know it. That is the meaning of this happy hour: Color and I are one. I am a painter." In a further diary entry, the artist exclaims: "The essence of *A Thousand and One Nights*, with a ninety-nine percent reality content. What an aroma, how penetrating, how intoxicating, and at the same time clarifying."

Seven years after the journey to Tunisia, Klee painted the watercolor *Kairouan, Before the Gates (After a Sketch of 1914)*, a pictorial construction of glittering blocks in which landscape motifs play only a secondary role. For Klee, the journey to Tunisia was a definitive experience on the path toward abstraction, and remained an important source of inspiration until well into the 1930s.

ROOM 1

- 2 • *in der Einöde*, 1914, 43**
In the Desert

The watercolor *In the Desert* is another of the many works inspired by the journey to Tunisia. Klee displays great confidence here in combining atmospheric elements with the form of artistic expression that he developed in the years preceding World War I. In 1912 Klee traveled to Paris, where he studied works by Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso and Robert Delaunay. He was fascinated by the Cubist method of composition and by Delaunay's abstract pictures. Delaunay, in turn, expressed enthusiasm for Klee, and asked him to translate his celebrated essay "La lumière" into German. Klee accepted the task; the translation, published the following year, was clearly shaped by Klee's own ideas about light and color. A new formal language is apparent in Klee's 1914 watercolors. The artist builds layered structures of squares, triangles and rectangles, allowing the individual colors to establish relationships with one another.

The work was originally titled *Camel in the Desert*. By the deletion of the word "camel," the viewer is freed from the compulsion to look for a specific motif, and can focus instead on pure painting.

ROOM 1

3 • *Teppich der Erinnerung*, 1914, 193 *Carpet of Memory*

Carpet of Memory is one of Klee's earliest abstract works. The first version dates from 1914, and was repeatedly overpainted until 1921. The picture has a unique material character. With its deliberately muddied surface and frayed edges, the canvas takes on a shabby appearance. The colors, too, are applied in a way that seems haphazard and careless. The effect is that of a well-worn carpet, a familiar household item marked by years of use, yet still regarded with affection. The signs of aging evoke memories and thoughts of the past. Klee began work on the picture immediately after the outbreak of World War I. The following year, he noted in his diary: "I have long had this war inside me. This is why, inwardly, it means nothing to me. And to work my way out of my ruins, I had to fly. And I flew. I remain in this ruined world only in memory, as one occasionally does in retrospect. Thus, I am 'abstract with memories'."

To the viewer, the formal elements of the carpet appear like indecipherable runes. Klee was fascinated by written signs and forms of all kinds, legible and illegible, which for him held an inexhaustible creative potential. He continued to use this vocabulary for the rest of his life, reaching the pinnacle of refinement in his "sign" pictures of the late 1930s.

ROOM 2

4 • *Die Kapelle*, 1917, 127 *The Chapel*

The unfolding of Klee's art occurred during a period bounded by the two great wars of the twentieth century. World War I broke out just three months after Klee's legendary journey to Tunisia, and World War II began less than a year before his death, in Muralto, in 1940. When he painted *The Chapel*, Klee was himself a soldier, though not in a combat role. Fortunately for him, he was assigned to a post as a payroll clerk at a German training school for pilots. As an artist, he was already in full flight.

This work demonstrates Klee's fully developed style, inscribing a new spatial depth in the traditional pictorial rectangle through a seemingly dreamlike composition, with precise yet profoundly soulful gradations of color. From a brownish ground, mountains rear up to embrace architectural structures that appear transparent and three-dimensional. Like playing card motifs, Klee's magical constructions can be read from below or above—as the moons indicate.

ROOM 2

5 • *Invention (mit dem Taubenschlagmotiv)*, 1917, 143
Invention (With the Dovecote Motif)

Klee was surrounded by music from an early age: his father was a music teacher and his mother a singer. While still at school, Klee himself was a violinist with the Bern Music Society. Throughout his life, he harbored a great admiration for Johann Sebastian Bach, in whose work we also encounter the term “invention,” to which this picture refers. Bach’s *Inventions* are piano pieces developing a musical idea in two or three parts. They serve as models and exercises in contrapuntal composition. As a musician, Klee was familiar with this technique, bringing together voice and counter-voice, question and answer, form and counter-form, and sought to transpose it into painting.

In Klee’s *Invention*, the powerful colors form an exceptionally animated pattern in which forms and motifs are separately repeated and varied. Mirroring effects and shifts of direction also play an important part: for example, the slightly tilted “Y” shape in the center of the picture is echoed in a formation on the right, which is similar but rotated by 180 degrees.

ROOM 3

6 • *Feigenbaum*, 1929, 240 (X 10)
Fig Tree

In *Fig Tree*, Klee experiments, as if in a didactic exercise, with different tonalities of color, from grayish yellow to dark green. The Mediterranean tree is put together from colored pieces, like a jigsaw puzzle, which initially gives the motif a two-dimensional appearance. At the same time, the individual chromatic accents create a play of light and shadow in the treetop and on the ground. The subtle deployment of a nuanced palette adds spatial depth, enhancing the three-dimensionality of the composition.

The picture of the fig tree illustrates the specific approach to form and color that played such an important role in Klee’s teaching activities at the Bauhaus in Weimar (from 1921 to 1925) and in Dessau (from 1926 to 1931). Here, he uses the technique of layered watercolor applied in a succession of overlapping, transparent washes to achieve fine gradations in the intensity of tone. Whereas oil paint, with its pasty opacity, can have a somewhat static effect, layered watercolors create an impression of movement, vibration or ephemerality—as if caught in a snapshot as they rush past our gaze.

7 • *Fuge in Rot*, 1921, 69
Fugue in Red

In the watercolor *Fugue in Red*, a formation of geometric shapes strives toward the right-hand edge of the picture. Each form is repeated several times, simultaneously shifting from a dark to a lighter shade in the spectrum of red and pink, growing larger and then shrinking. The title is informative: in music, the fugue is a compositional form governed by repetition and polyphony. In the course of a fugue, melodic lines are imitated several times at different pitches—when the second line begins at another pitch, the first line has already changed. Although both parts can also function autonomously, they form a harmonious combination.

The word “fugue” derives from the Latin *fuga*, which combines the meanings of *fugere* (to flee) and *fugare* (to chase away). The two Latin words suggest an accelerating movement, a quickening of pace, with time slipping away and sense of place evaporating. Thus, Klee adds an abstract dimension to his picture, in which the volatile medium of music can be represented in visual terms.

8 • *Haus am Wasser*, 1930, 142 (Y 2)
House by the Water

In this watercolor, rectangular blocks of ochre, pink, green, and blue intersect and overlap, but are imbued with a transparency that allows the underlying layers of color to shimmer forth. Seen in conventional terms, the blue sections at the lower edge and on the right of the picture could be interpreted as stretches of water, with the earth-colored areas seen as strips of land or an architectural structure—a reading confirmed by the work’s title, *House by the Water*. The work belongs to a series of seven watercolors that Klee painted in 1930 in connection with a lesson on design at the Bauhaus in Dessau, which addressed the themes of spatial orientation and the means of conveying an impression of depth on a two-dimensional surface. What the artist sets down on paper is a mere construction of lines, surfaces, and color values. Klee documented these reflections in his lecture notes: “The depth of our surface is imaginary,” he wrote. The things we think we see or understand are products of our own imagination.

ROOM 3

9 • *Klang der südlichen Flora*, 1927, 227 (W 7)
Harmony of Southern Flora

During the 1920s, when Klee was working at the Bauhaus as an instructor in the theory of form and composition, he devoted an extensive series of pictures to the exploration of color. This gave rise to his so-called square paintings—abstract pictures that prepared the way for the Color Field painting of the mid-twentieth century.

In *Harmony of Southern Flora*, we encounter juxtaposed blocks of color in varying shades of red, blue, and yellow together with their complements, violet, orange, and green, as well as several gray tones. The picture's overall structure is supplied by vertical and horizontal rows of squares, painted freehand. The squares in the column on the far right are somewhat narrower, which poses the question whether the pattern continues beyond the edge of the picture.

The work's title can be helpful in “reading” the abstract watercolor, if not in determining the exact content of the picture. The reference to “harmony” evokes the “pitch” of the color, while “Southern flora” hints at a light-bathed world of plant life that may be present in the picture.

ROOM 4

10 • *Harmonie E zwei*, 1926, 142 (E 2)
Harmony E Two

Music is the most fleeting and abstract medium of all, which can tell stories but depicts nothing. Nevertheless, it has its own form of representation, a familiar system of notation, using graphic marks and symbols, whose origins lie in classical antiquity. Art, in turn, has adopted the constructional principles of music by translating the concepts of rhythm (in sequences of points, lines and forms), intensity and pitch (in color values), and harmony (coordinating simultaneous or parallel items of visual information) into visual images.

In a significant number of works, Klee addressed the challenge of rendering musical notes and sounds in terms of lines and shapes, or conversely, of transposing graphic forms into a harmonious interplay of musical elements. In *Harmony E Two*, he concerns himself with the visual “harmony” of square fields of color in varying sizes. Klee referred to this principle of form, combining different musical textures, as “polyphonic painting,” which he deemed “superior to music in that, here, the time element becomes a spatial element. The notion of simultaneity stands out even more richly.” (Diary entry, 1917).

- 11 • *Städtebild (rot/grün gestuft) mit der roten Kuppel*, 1923, 90**
Picture of a Town (Red-Green Graded) [With the Red Dome]

Smaller and larger rectangles are shown here in a dense huddle with no apparent order or governing principle. However, there is a distinction between front and rear, as the rectangles grow smaller towards the top edge of the picture, suggesting spatial depth. The eye is caught by two half-moon shaped areas rising bulbously above a cluster of small rectangles, which the beholder interprets as domes, in what appears to be a townscape. The domes are remnants of an architecture that remains at least partly recognizable, and prevents the image of the town from appearing entirely nonfigurative. They function like visual abbreviations or reading aids, triggering associations with architecture. The red-green town presents itself as a closely packed structure with no intermediate spaces, no open squares, streets or entrances—an almost abstract place, devoid of human life.

- 12 • *Verspannte Flächen*, 1930, 125 (W 5)**
Braced Surfaces

During the Bauhaus years, Klee, in addition to his systematic investigations of color, increasingly concerned himself with the geometric and constructivist tendencies in contemporary painting. In parallel to the experiments at the Bauhaus in Dessau, the Russian Constructivists and the Dutch group De Stijl, including Theo van Doesburg and Piet Mondrian, followed a similar path, propagating an especially rigorous form of abstraction. Klee responded to these developments with a series of works. The geometric tendency already apparent in his layered watercolors and square paintings moves to the forefront in pictures such as *Braced Surfaces*, which emphasizes logic and precision. The individual geometric figures appear detached from the paint surface and left to revolve freely in the picture space, as if liberated from the laws of gravity. However, they remain connected with each other, and with the picture surface. In an ironic and playful spirit, Klee addresses one of his main internal conflicts: rendering three-dimensional segments of the world in the two-dimensional picture.

- 13 • *Klaerung*, 1932, 66 (M 6)**
Clarification

In addition to North Africa, Italy was an important source of inspiration for Klee, who paid several visits to the country and showed a strong enthusiasm for its art and culture. His main interest was in the early Christian and Byzantine mosaics that he encountered in Ravenna, Palermo, and Monreale. Mosaics may have provided Klee with inspiration for the unique painting technique that he employed in a number of works, including *Clarification*.

Klee applied color in a way that is often termed Pointillist but has nothing to do with the work of the French Post-Impressionists, whose method of painting served to construct and define the picture space. The background of *Clarification* is created from delicate rectangular fields of color, applied with short brushstrokes that are not immediately adjacent to one another—as in the Pointillist style—but kept a certain distance apart. Above this semitransparent veil, he introduces linear geometric structures, which, though inherently abstract, order the colored surfaces into landscapes or nonfigurative situations.

14 • *boote in der Überflutung*, 1937, 222 (V 2)
Boats in the Flood Waters

Klee's *Boats in the Flood Waters* is a truly impressive masterpiece. With only a few brushstrokes and a single color, the artist evokes the flood, conveying both the movement of the water and the boats, and the swirling eddies caused by the trees in the foreground. Blue lines suggest the surface of the water, but the boats and oarsmen are also blue. Astonishingly, the volume of water bursting over the floodplain is not rendered, in the first place, by blue brushstrokes, but with the help of the white ground, which flows into the drawing and fills up all the intermediate spaces. In the upper section of the picture, the water becomes calmer; the boats and their occupants appear to be safe and sound. Look carefully at the short horizontal lines that Klee places at the left and right edges of the picture, as if to indicate the water level. The first unbroken blue line is near the boats. The second and final line appears at the top edge as a seemingly pristine form: the crest of a wave, the horizon, or the outline of the shore where rescue is at hand.

15 • *welthafen*, 1933, 393 (E 13)
World Harbor

In his late works, Klee took a strong interest in signs and writing, which became a pictorial subject in their own right. He also borrowed from writing systems based on graphic symbols, such as Egyptian hieroglyphs and the cuneiform script of the ancient Near East. Klee was fascinated by the intermediate state between abstract forms and the imagery and linguistic dimension of signs, generating a complex play of ideas. His pictures speak a language of their own—a kind of secret code—which we gradually learn to read. In his Bauhaus lecture notes, Klee observed: “The word and the picture—word-making and form-building—are intrinsically the same.”

World Harbor, with its gray and white picture surface traversed by horizontal and vertical black lines, is a good example of this conception. The structure spreads out like a mesh of lines and establishes a strong rhythmic tension. The resulting impression is as if Klee were trying to blot out black signs with white paint. Or are we looking at an assembly of small boats densely populating a large harbor, as the work's title suggests? The titles of Klee's works open up a second level of interpretation. However, the construction of the concrete relationship between word and image is entirely at the discretion of the beholder.

16 • *Berggrücken*, 1930, 53 (O 3)
Mountain Ridge

Mountain Ridge belongs to a small group of works, including *Grave Message*, 1938, 119, *Storm through the Plain*, 1930, 54, and *Deserted Quarry*, 1930, 43, with a pictorial language that is unusual in Klee's oeuvre. It is chiefly characterized by untypically dark or pale colors, and by the strongly gestural application of the paint.

The small-format painting on paper shows the bare mountain ridge as a gently sloping surface, resting peacefully in a setting that remains indeterminate. The artist's method appears simple: placing one line over another, he piles up masses of earth like layers of sediment, and shapes the mountain, or models it, in the manner of a sculptor. This corresponds to the principle formulated by Klee in 1924: "Forming is good. Form is bad; form is the end; it is death. Forming is movement; it is action. Forming is life." Klee emphasizes the aspect of process in artistic work: the artist must consciously strive to grasp the form—in this case, that of a mountain ridge—and gradually develop it.

17 • *prämierter Apfel*, 1934, 215 (U 15)
Prizewinning Apple

The eponymous apple is only recognizable as such by the stalk and the remnants of the calyx. What we notice, instead, is the round shape that almost completely occupies the square picture space. The contours of the apple, like all the elements of the picture, are drawn in a dark shade of brown. An added line of light purple makes the form appear to leap forward, and at the same time push out toward the edges of the picture. The surrounding space is suggested by a horizontal line that can be identified as the edge of a floor or a tabletop. In the background, a ladder extends beyond the edge of the picture—we cannot see where it ends. Through its vast dimensions, the apple pushes the ladder back into the picture space: the discrepancy in size between the two elements creates a striking effect of spatial depth. Klee, here, plays a sophisticated game with optical processes and laws of geometry.

18 • *Wald-Hexen*, 1938, 145 (K 5)
Forest Witches

Ernst Beyeler was especially interested in Klee's late work, and *Forest Witches* is a characteristic example of this time period. The cipher-like linear bands form a network that spreads across the entire picture plane and even seems to penetrate its edges. On the right stands a nude figure; we can discern legs, belly, breasts and a head with a face. On the left is another figure revealing its face and legs as they protrude from a dress while performing a dance step. Although a few of the glowing red zones between the dark lines help us to identify the mysterious female figures, they soon vanish again in the forest of lines. The figures appear to be in constant flux, embodying the interplay of revealing and concealing that is so typical of Klee.

19 • Ohne Titel [Gitter und Schlangenlinien um "T"],

ca. 1939

*Untitled [Grids and Wavy Lines around "T"]***Ohne Titel [Gefangen, Diesseits – Jenseits/Figur],**

ca. 1940

Untitled [Captive, Figure of This World/Next World]

In *Untitled [Grids and Wavy Lines around "T"]*, earth tones are combined with red and orange accents. Four thick lines snake upward, while a dense grid of black bars threatens to drop down from above like a portcullis. The form in the center is mysterious. Could it perhaps be a human face? Or is it merely the letter "T" enclosed in a rounded shape? The contrasting colors and the unusually elongated format scene imbue the work with a sense of gloom. *Untitled [Captive, Figure of This World/Next World]* conveys a quite different impression: the blue coloring creates an air of coolness and tranquility.

Klee's late work has often been interpreted with reference to his prevailing state of mind. In the final years of his life, he was distressed not only by the defamation of his work in Nazi Germany, but also by his worsening scleroderma, an incurable autoimmune disease. However, it was precisely in these last works that his artistic powers reached a unique pinnacle.

20 • Felsenlandschaft (improvisatorisch; vielleicht Kreidefelsen), 1937, 148 (R 8)*Rocky Landscape (Improvisatory; Perhaps Chalk Cliffs)***Park bei Lu.,** 1938, 129 (J 9)*Park near Lu.*

The comparison between *Rocky Landscape (Improvisatory; Perhaps Chalk Cliffs)*, and *Park near Lu.*, provides a good example of Klee's pictorial thinking, showing how he conceived and planned his pictures, and finally transformed an idea into a landscape. The two works are similarly constructed: in both cases, the first step is to distribute dynamic black signs across the canvas. In *Park near Lu.*, the signs are set back slightly from the edge of the picture and allowed to sweep back and forth without restriction. In *Rocky Landscape*, by contrast, the signs extend all over the picture surface and continually collide with one another at sharp or blunt angles. The picture has no obvious center. In the park picture, however, the center is clearly marked by the small tree. Here, everything appears playful, animated, and very carefully tended. Each of the black lines is framed in shimmering white and in a delicate individual color. All the picture elements are meticulously demarcated and enclosed—like flowerbeds in a park. The situation in *Rocky Landscape* is quite different. The colors rub against each other and push their way, as it were, through the labyrinth of harsh-looking signs. At the same time, the patches of orange, yellow, and green create a fascinating rhythm. The effect is as if Klee had painted an abstract version of Paul Cézanne's famous depictions of Bibémus Quarry and the Mont Sainte-Victoire.

- 21 • **Zeichen in Gelb**, 1937, 210 (U 10)
Signs in Yellow
Iudus Martis, 1938, 141 (K 1)
Iudus Martis

Ernst Beyeler described *Signs in Yellow* as “a carpet of life.” The luminous composition, interspersed with black signs, does indeed seem infused with *joie de vivre*. Reminiscent of a woven carpet, the light ground is composed of irregular rectangles. The black marks and symbols, in some cases emerging from the edge of the picture and moving inward, serve to demarcate the individual areas of color.

Iudus Martis (“the game of Mars,” a circumlocution for war, coined by the Latin poet Horace) is quite different. Here, there is no visible order. Exceptionally thick and dominant signs and fragments hang in the air above a blue ground, as if they were fighting over the limited free space that remains open to them. They shape themselves into arrows, a face, and even into phallic symbols. The yellow outlines make them stand out, and the red border around the picture re-emphasizes the composition as a whole.

The year 1937 ushered in the final phase of Klee’s development: working with intense fervor, he devised a style characterized by extreme simplification. His basic vocabulary, evoking a variety of effects, was supplied by black bars or lines freely distributed over luminous fields of color.

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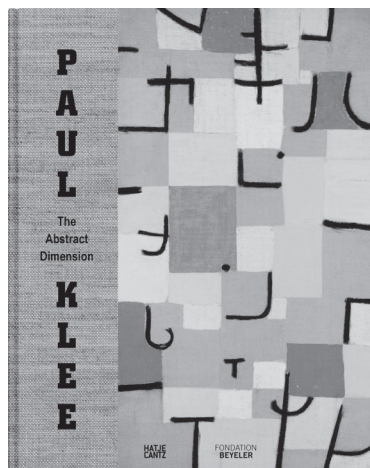
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