

Biography

1879

Paul Klee is born in Münchenbuchsee near Bern on December 18, the second child of Hans Klee (1849–1940) and Ida Klee, née Frick (1855–1921). His sister Mathilde (1876–1953) was born three years earlier. His father is a music teacher at the Staatliches Lehrerseminar, a training college for teachers in Hofwil near Bern; his mother is a trained singer.

1880

The family moves to Bern.

1898

Klee starts keeping a diary; the first entry is dated April 24. Klee leaves high school, the Städtische Literarschule, with a university entrance qualification. Just one month later, on October 13, he moves into an apartment in Munich, where he attends the private drawing school run by Heinrich Knirr. Starting in the fall of 1900 he will also attend Franz von Stuck's painting class at the Munich Academy.

1899

Klee meets the pianist Lily (Karoline) Stumpf (1876–1946) at a musical soirée, his future wife.

1901

Klee leaves von Stuck's class. On October 22 he and the Bernese sculptor Hermann Haller set off on a six-month study trip to Italy. Klee travels from Genoa and Livorno to Rome, where he rents a room. Overwhelmed by the sheer abundance of Classical art in Rome, he experiences his first major crisis as an artist.

1902

Klee becomes engaged to Lily Stumpf. He returns to Bern and, unable to live from what he earns as an artist, he will continue living with his parents for the next four years. His most important source of income during this period are his engagements as a violinist with the Bernische Musikgesellschaft.

1905

Klee spends two weeks in Paris with Hans Bloesch and Louis Moilliet, two friends of his youth from Bern.

1906

In April Klee travels to Berlin for two weeks. On September 15 he marries Lily Stumpf in Bern. Two weeks later the couple moves to Munich.

1907

Felix (†1990), the only child of Paul and Lily Klee, is born on November 30.

1910

Klee's first solo exhibition takes place in July. Comprising fifty-six works, it is shown first at the Kunstmuseum Bern, then at Kunsthaus Zürich and the Kunsthandlung zum Hohen Haus in Winterthur, and finally at the Kunsthalle Basel.

1911

In February Klee begins to compile a handwritten catalogue of his works, listing everything he has produced to date. His punctilious record-keeping will continue until shortly before his death. That autumn, through the good offices of his friend Louis Moilliet, he meets fellow artist Wassily Kandinsky and so becomes acquainted with Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider) and its aims. His critiques of exhibitions and cultural events in Munich are published in the Swiss monthly Die Alpen (The Alps), edited by his friend Hans Bloesch.

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1912

Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky invite Klee to take part in the second exhibition of Der Blaue Reiter at Hans Goltz's bookstore in Munich, where seventeen of his works are shown. On a second visit to Paris in April of that year, Klee visits the artists Robert Delaunay, Henri Le Fauconnier, and Karl Hofer at their studios.

1914

At Easter Klee sets off for Tunisia together with his artist friends August Macke and Louis Moilliet. His journey takes him from Marseille to Tunis, St. Germain, Hammamet, and Kairouan. On his return, he has a joint exhibition with Marc Chagall at Herwarth Walden's Galerie Der Sturm in Berlin. That October his Tunisian watercolors feature in an exhibition of the Münchener Neue Secession, of which he is a cofounder. Outbreak of World War I. Macke falls at Perthes-lès-Hurlus in the Champagne on September 26.

1915

In Munich Klee has a chance meeting with the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. He spends the summer in Bern and on his way back to Munich stops at Goldach, a Swiss municipality on Lake Constance, to visit Kandinsky, who as a Russian national had to leave Germany at the outbreak of war.

1916

Klee's friend Franz Marc is killed at the front near Verdun on March 4. Still reeling from the news, Klee himself is conscripted as a reservist in the German army less than a week later. He is sent first to a recruiting depot in Landshut, but on July 20 is transferred to the second reservist infantry regiment in Munich. In August he is assigned to an air corps maintenance company based at Schleissheim near Munich.

1917

In January Klee is transferred to the Royal Bavarian Flying School V in Gersthofen, where he serves as a clerk to the treasurer. His joint exhibition with Georg Mücke at the Galerie Der Sturm in February is a commercial success.

1918

Klee is sent on leave until his demobilization in February 1919. He stops keeping a diary and never goes back to it. But in the years to follow, Klee does rework and edit his diaries, turning them into his autobiography.

1919

Having been demobilized in February, Klee rents a studio in Schloss Suresnes on Werneckstrasse in Munich. When Bavaria briefly becomes a Soviet-style republic of workers' councils, Klee joins Munich's artists' council as well as an action committee for revolutionary artists. Oskar Schlemmer and Willi Baumeister try in vain to have Klee appointed to the faculty of the Stuttgart Art Academy. On October 1 Klee signs a general agency agreement with Hans Goltz, proprietor of the Galerie Neue Kunst in Munich.

1920

In May and June Goltz stages a retrospective of 362 works, making it the largest Klee exhibition seen to date. On October 29 Walter Gropius appoints Klee to be a teacher at the Bauhaus in Weimar. Klee's first serious theoretical essay is published in Kasimir Edschmid's anthology *Schöpferische Konfession* (Creative Confession). Leopold Zahn and Hans von Wedderkop publish the first monographs on Klee.

1921

On May 13 Klee launches his academic teaching career with a course in "practical composition" at the Bauhaus in Weimar. As a form master, he is also responsible for the bookbinders' workshop.

1922

Klee takes over from Johannes Itten as head of the gold, silver, and copper workshop, but exchanges it for Oskar Schlemmer's glass-painting workshop that same autumn.

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1924

Klee's first exhibition in the United States is hosted by Katherine S. Dreier at the Société Anonyme in New York from January 7 to February 7. On Emmy (Galka) Scheyer's initiative, a new artists' group called Die Blaue Vier is founded on March 31. "The Blue Four" are Klee, Lyonel Feininger, Wassily Kandinsky, and Alexej Jawlensky, who as a group will exhibit mainly in the US. Klee and his wife spend September and October in Italy, mainly Sicily. Caving in to massive political pressure, the Bauhaus management announces on December 26 that it will close in April of the following year.

1925

In March the municipal council in Dessau decides to take over the Bauhaus from Weimar. Klee terminates his agency agreement with Hans Goltz and thereafter intensifies his ties to Alfred Flechtheim, who runs galleries in both Berlin and Düsseldorf. The Galerie Vavin-Raspail in Paris stages Klee's first show in France from October 21 to November 11. In November, some of his pictures are shown at the first Surrealist exhibition at the Galerie Pierre in Paris.

1926

Klee and his family move to Dessau on July 10, and there live alongside Wassily and Nina Kandinsky in one of the three duplexes built by Gropius to house Bauhaus faculty.

1927

Starting in April, Klee teaches the Bauhaus's Free Workshop Painting, also known as the Free Painting class. From October, he teaches design for weavers.

1928

On December 17 Klee sets off on a fourweek trip to Egypt.

1929

Klee enters into negotiations with the Staatliche Kunstakademie Düsseldorf for a professorship at that institution. He is now at the height of his success and counts among Germany's most internationally acclaimed artists. The Nationalgalerie and Galerie Alfred Flechtheim in Berlin organize major exhibitions of his work in honor of the artist's fiftieth birthday.

1930

Klee receives confirmation of his appointment at the Düsseldorf Academy. A reduced version of the Galerie Flechtheim exhibition is shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

1931

Klee takes up his professorship at the Düsseldorf Academy on July 1. He rents a room in Düsseldorf, but will retain his apartment in Dessau until April 1933. In the summer he and Lily again travel to Sicily.

1933

The Nazis seize power throughout Germany. In mid-March Klee's apartment in Dessau is searched and on April 21 the Düsseldorf Academy suspends him without notice. He will be officially dismissed only following the passage of the law on the "Restoration of a Professional Civil Service" as per January 1, 1934. Klee signs an exclusive agreement with the art dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, proprietor of the Galerie Simon in Paris, on October 24. On December 23, two days after his wife, he emigrates to Switzerland and there moves into his parents' house in Bern.

1934

In January Paul and Lily Klee move into a small apartment at Kollerweg 6, moving again on June 1 into a three-room apartment at Kistlerweg 6. Will Grohmann's monograph Paul Klee: Handzeichnungen 1921–1930, is published in November in Potsdam. It will be seized by the Nazis in April of the following year.

1935

The first signs of serious illness become apparent. Klee retrospective at the Kunst halle Bern.

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1936

Klee is so debilitated that he has to suspend work for about six months, and is scarcely able to work properly even after that. His annual output dwindles to a mere twenty-five works, the lowest it has ever been. The disease afflicting him turns out to be progressive scleroderma.

1937

Kandinsky visits Klee in Bern. Klee's condition stabilizes and he is able to work more intensively again. The exhibition Entartete Kunst (Degenerate Art) opens in Munich on July 19 and by the time it closes in 1941 will have been shown (albeit on a smaller scale) in twelve other cities, too. Seventeen works by Klee are included in the Munich edition. The Nazis seize 102 works by Klee from public collections all over Germany and sell most of them to buyers abroad. On November 27 Klee receives a visit from Pablo Picasso. With 264 works in 1937, Klee is now almost as productive as he was before his illness.

1938

J. B. Neumann and two other German émigré art dealers, Karl Nierendorf and Curt Valentin, organize shows of Klee's works on a regular basis in New York and other cities in the US.

1939

In April Georges Braque twice visits Klee in Bern. Klee applies for Swiss citizenship on April 24, though no decision on the matter will be made during his lifetime. With 1,253 registered works, most of them drawings, 1939 will be the most prolific year of his entire career.

1940

In May Klee begins a spa treatment in Ticino in southern Switzerland. While there, his health suddenly deteriorates, and he dies on June 29 in the Clinica Sant'Agnese in Locarno-Muralto.

This biography was generously supplied by the Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern.