

*Paul Klee: Other Possible Worlds*

The Jewish Museum

Audio Description Guide

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901. *Around the Fish (Um den Fisch), 1926*

**NARRATOR:** *Around The Fish, 1926.*

In the first gallery of this exhibition, we encounter a work by Paul Klee called *Around the Fish*. He made it in 1926 using oil and tempera on canvas mounted on cardboard. The canvas is mounted in the artist's original simple dark wooden frame, which has been placed inside a larger white frame, and hung on a white wall. Slightly smaller than a standard-sized pillow, the work is about 18 inches wide and 25 inches high. In metric units, it's 47 centimeters wide and 64 centimeters high.

This mysterious work shows an assortment of abstract and figurative forms floating within a soft black expanse, as if gently suspended in water or air. At the center of the composition, a whole fish stretches horizontally atop a royal blue circular platter. A jaunty tail splays to the left, and to the right, a textured eye leads down to a lank, partially open mouth. The fish is covered with rows of scales that sit beside one another like cobblestones on a street. Each is outlined with thin dark lines and filled with muted shades of red, orange, and earthy brown.

A smaller and less detailed fish silhouette rests underneath, but this one faces the opposite direction. Green garnish is sprinkled along the bottom side of the platter, suggesting it as both a ready-to-eat delicacy and an animate creature prepared to swim away into the depths of the ocean.

A wreath of painted forms orbits around the fish like planets in a solar system. They are rendered with a mix of vivid primary colors and diluted muted shades. At the top of the painting is a celestial yellow circle and crescent shape. Then, moving clockwise, we find a thin green cross and a translucent blue cylinder along the right-hand side. In the bottom right corner, a series of interlocking red strands creates a

rectangular endless knot. A thin blue stick emerges from the bottom, with a blade of grass extending from one end like the blade of a scythe.

Moving toward the left, we first encounter a tiny yellow trident floating next to a grey diamond shape. Then, in the bottom left corner, a pale green circle tucks beneath a vibrant yellow orb with a geometric flower inside. A second translucent cylinder traces the painting's left edge—this one a pale yellow. Two thin green sprigs sprout from the bottom, like stems in a vase. And a red double-pointed flag pokes out at a diagonal from the top.

As we return to the top of the painting, the last form we encounter is an elongated head shown in profile with maze-like, white lines diagramming its interior. The head has two large red dots for eyes. To its right, a large red arrow points at them, and beneath it hovers a pale green exclamation point.

For Curator Mason Klein, this detail is key to understanding Klee's approach to art.

**MASON KLEIN:** Klee was interdisciplinary. He loved science, he loved philosophy, he loved poetry, he loved music. So what we see here is a constellation of the kind of figurative hieroglyphic and geometric forms that Klee often employed to rouse subjective interpretations. For him, it had to be about perception, which was constantly in flux.

902. *Angelus Novus*, 1920

**NARRATOR:** *Angelus Novus*, 1920.

There is only one artwork in this small gallery: *Angelus Novus*, created by Paul Klee in 1920. The work is an oil transfer with watercolor on paper. It is installed inside a white, rectangular niche recessed into a red wall on one side of the gallery. A little larger than a sheet of office paper, it is 12.5 inches high and 9.5 inches wide. In metric units, that's about 32 centimeters high and 24 centimeters wide.

The work resembles an old page from a worn book, with a yellowing surface and dark, stained edges. A thick black border frames the page, and faint black smudges dot across the surface. A puppet-like angel hovers in the center. It is outlined with thin, wavering black lines that Klee achieved using an oil transfer technique he invented. It involved coating a paper with oil paint and placing it face down on a blank surface. Then, Klee would use a needle to draw on the back of the paper, forcing oily lines onto the blank surface.

The angel's head is long and broad, nearly the same size as the rest of its body. Curly hair, taking the form of paper scrolls, ripples out from the top of the head. Beneath, its almond-shaped eyes are widely spaced and askew, a pair of dark pupils rolling to the right. The bridge of the nose is narrow with small pea-shaped nostrils leading down to softly opened lips that curve around sharp, crooked teeth.

Two great wings emerge from the angel's narrow torso, expanding up and out into a powerful flap. Upper feathers morph into stylized hands with three merged fingers at the center, thumbs and pinkies spread wide. A small triangle skirt flutters above the figure's stubby legs and large chicken-toe feet. Klee has used thin washes of

paint to color inside the outlines. Brown and yellow stains ooze across the angel's body, and a lick of bright orange dots the chest.

On the lower right, the artist signs his last name, spelled K-L-E-E, followed by the date 1920 and the number 32, which might represent a number in Klee's catalogue of works for the year.

**MASON KLEIN:** Throughout his life, he would paint and draw angels of an indescribable variety. Angels became a vehicle for him to resist the oppression he felt. They illustrate the imagination and how it became aligned with the pursuit of freedom. *Angelus Novus*, in a way, resembles a marionette hovering in space—but no more than an angel whose arms flap like feathery wings.

903. *Clarification (Klaerung)*, 1932

**NARRATOR:** *Clarification*, 1932.

Made in 1932 using oil paint on canvas, Paul Klee's *Clarification* is one of the largest works in this gallery. It is enveloped by a thin, simple light wood frame and hung on a white wall. A little larger than a bathmat, the painting is about 28 inches high and 38 inches wide. Or, in metric units: 70 centimeters high, and 96 centimeters wide.

From a distance, the painting resembles a soft, worn quilt made from a jigsaw of irregularly shaped patches joined together by stitched lines. But as we get closer, the illusion dissolves, leaving us with a grid-like arrangement of colorful marks.

The background is a vast expanse of diffused colors with washes of grey and beige. Tiny saturated dabs of paint skitter and dance across this surface, alternating between red, brown, blue, yellow, orange, and green. The painted dots are packed together closely and evenly spaced, creating a visual rhythm that makes the painting hum and vibrate. A few brown lines dissect the work vertically and horizontally at different points. These sprawling lines connect and intersect like wires on a circuit board, reaching out toward the painting's edges. All except for one: a short, thick line that hovers horizontally in the air about two-thirds of the way down the canvas's left side.

The left side of the painting is also dominated by two inverted forms resembling three steps. The forms graze one another, corners meeting to form a diagonal row of squares that lead down to a checkerboard in the bottom right corner. The resulting effect is an uneven, interlocking stack of rectangles, squares, and other angular shapes.

Though precise, Klee's lines are also imperfect, showing the start and stop of his brushstrokes and the crooked angle of a hand-drawn line. At the top of the work—just right of center—Klee has added one figurative element to the primarily abstract composition. It is the small sliver of a green crescent moon, its curve facing left. The painting feels both systematic and spontaneous, as if Klee worked intuitively.

For Curator Mason Klein and Curatorial Assistant Serena Feingold, this seems to mirror the circumstances of the artist's life.

**SERENA FEINGOLD:** We find him at a moment where he's started a new job where he has more space and more time and freedom, and he's really delighting in that.

**MASON KLEIN:** *Clarification* is a kind of carefree painting whose calm is conveyed in its loosely assembled lines and lulling transparency. It was as if Klee had been set free, alighting on a new technique that allowed both him and his work to relax and breathe easily again. Yet despite this relief, his new technique is also a labor-intensive process built up over time of countless fragments.

904. *Europa (Europa)*, 1933

**NARRATOR:** *Europa*, 1933.

Paul Klee made *Europa* in 1933 using watercolor on paper on cardboard. It is displayed within a white mat in a medium-thick, ornate, rectangular frame. The piece is hung on a deep red wall. Similar in size to a large, unfolded newspaper, the painting is about 19 inches high and 15 inches wide. In metric units, that's 49 centimeters high and 38 centimeters wide.

Featuring abstracted figures and symbols atop a dappled background, this painting depicts what Curator Mason Klein describes as:

**MASON KLEIN:** A work that is really about the continent of Europe disintegrating before our eyes.

**NARRATOR:** The page is covered by a pale sea of watery turquoise that pools and recedes like waves. Smudges of thinned burnt orange paint dapple and bloom across the surface like hazy clouds. The warm and cool tones mingle to form a faded, marbled background, leaving us with the impression of an ancient scroll.

Small, squarish dabs of paint swim loosely atop the mottled background, recalling the scales of a wriggling snake. Rendered in translucent shades of red, copper, and brown, these scales also alternate in size, creating an undulating pattern. The scales spread across the page, disrupted only at the center of the painting. Here, we find a tall, empty rectangle outlined by a smattering of minuscule white squares. The rectangle seems to hover over the mottled and scaly surface like a ghostly form.

**MASON KLEIN:** You feel that these little dabs of color no longer form any kind of coherent unity. It's broken like porcelain. And then we have these figures that seem to be emerging through this haze or drowning in this watery ocean.

**NARRATOR:** Fine dark lines run across the painting like cracks. They form the outline of a simple human figure resembling the paintings found in ancient caves. The figure has an oval-shaped head with two circles for eyes, a long skinny rectangle for the nose, and two rounded triangles stacked to form lips.

A slender neck leads down to narrow shoulders, thin arms, and breasts indicated by a simple curve. Her right arm is tucked behind her back, and her left arm hangs down her side. A horizontal blot of bright red paint borders the hem of her dress, and her two skinny legs poke out from beneath, rendered plainly with thick, bold lines. The figure casually lifts her left leg and crosses its ankle atop her right knee. In the middle, a snake-like form slinks along the bottom edge of the painting.

Directly above it, an X shape floats in the open space beside the figure's torso. Closer to the right side of the painting, a bold red exclamation point—about a third of the size of the feminine figure—slices through the background. Then, hovering above, we find the outline of a plus-sign form with a smudge of black in the middle, perfectly at eye level with the female figure.

**905. *Revolution of the Viaduct (Revolution des Viaductes), 1937***

**NARRATOR:** *Revolution of the Viaduct, 1937.*

This painting, *Revolution of the Viaduct*, was made by Paul Klee in 1937 using oil paint on linen. It hangs alone near the corner of the gallery, on a white wall. Nearly the size of a standard-sized pillow, the painting is about 24 inches high and 20 inches wide. In metric units, that's 70 centimeters high and 51 centimeters wide.

This bold abstract painting depicts an army of 12 architectural structures posed against a warm grey background. Curator Mason Klein sees them as:

**MASON KLEIN:** Defiant, human-footed arches, which have fallen out of line into a breakaway composition.

**NARRATOR:** The work's title identifies these structures as parts of a viaduct, a type of long bridge that is supported by multiple columns or arches. Here, the viaduct is divided into individual arches with flat tops and tall columns on either side. The space between the columns curves to form an upside-down U-shape. The arches are outlined by thick black brushstrokes and filled with warm, singular hues of brick red, dark orange, peach, and mustard yellow. Klee has also traced the contours of each figure using a bold yellow line. It seems to emanate light like a neon sign, giving the arches an ominous feeling.

In the bottom right corner of the canvas, Klee has printed his name in black letters: K-L-E-E.

The arches are not affixed to anything, nor are they arranged in a line. Rather, they cluster together like a small crowd. The arches are shown at different sizes, creating

the illusion that some are farther away than others. And the spacing between them seems to suggest motion rather than uniformity. Some of the columns take on the lean or tilt of forward motion, so that the forms appear to march toward us.

The repetition of simple shapes creates a visual rhythm that is enhanced by the variety of sizes and colors. The painting hums with a steady, determined beat—not unlike a procession in which everyone moves at a slightly different pace to arrive at a shared destination. There is a curious tension to the scene, for these arches, which should signal permanence and order, have been uprooted. They are organic, alive, and on the move.

Here's Curatorial Assistant Serena Feingold:

**SERENA FEINGOLD:** And given the title of this work, we start to imagine that the viaducts, the pieces of the architecture, are in revolt. So they've moved out of line from where they were standing in their correct place, and they're marching all around, shifting away from where they were told to be.

906. *Untitled (Last Still Life) (Ohne Titel [Letztes Stilleben])*, 1940

**NARRATOR:** *Untitled (Last Still Life)*, 1940.

Paul Klee's *Untitled (Last Still Life)* is installed on a red accent wall among other paintings that depict important symbols often featured in his work, like angels and images of spirits. He made this work using oil paint on canvas in 1940, the final year of his life. This window-sized work is about 39 inches high and 32 inches wide. In metric units, that's 100 centimeters high and 81 centimeters wide.

Klee's painting depicts an assortment of clustered and solitary objects floating atop a black background. The painting can be divided roughly into two vertical halves. Let's begin by describing the right half, where a circular orange placemat anchors the bottom right. It is adorned with stick figures and flowers rendered in a hieroglyphic style with flat, simple black outlines enveloped in auras of green, blue, purple, and red. An elongated green teapot with a tilted base sits atop the placemat, its spout pointing toward the painting's center.

On the right side of the painting, a grey statuette towers over the teapot. It has an oval head with a simple curved line for the smile. A long neck leads down to a twisted torso, and a drooping U that suggests a breast. The statuette raises its right arm high, as if in a greeting, but the hand is noticeably missing. To the left of its arm, an orange-yellow orb hovers in the black expanse, recalling a full moon.

Next, I'll describe the left half of the painting, beginning in the upper-left area. Here, we find a row of four vertical objects set atop a red placemat. An ochre bottle with a triangular orange label borders the painting's left edge. Directly above, a berry-colored flower pokes out from the painting's top left corner. Hot pink petals radiate out like rays of sunlight.

Moving right and toward the painting's center, we encounter a green candlestick, a tall brown tubular shape, and a blue vase. The vase has a round, grey opening at the top from which emerge two stick-like flowers with dark black outlines and glowing red halos. Then, to the right of the vase, a curious pink form seems to lower itself from the painting's top edge. It has a tapered tail and a bulbous head, like a prawn or sausage.

Finally, in the bottom left corner of the painting, Klee has included a representation of his own artwork. It appears to be a drawing of a winged creature, rendered with bold black lines and pink accents on a brushy white surface.

Curatorial Assistant, Serena Feingold:

**SERENA FEINGOLD:** This really reflects another work that Klee had created called *Angel Still Ugly*. And so it's almost a replica of that painting, but set on a much smaller stage.

**NARRATOR:** For Curator Mason Klein, this detail also reveals something about Klee's state of mind during the painting's making.

**MASON KLEIN:** A picture within a picture. The cross on his robe probably alludes to the angel of death. The figure, however, is flushed and befuddled. His hands clasp as he looks out of the painting with a faint or embarrassed grin, as does the clay or wood statuette to the right, who waves goodbye. And it's so ironically, humorously Klee, to give him this awkward, embarrassed grin, a sort of goofy-like expression. It really is another expression on Klee's part that he doesn't know if he's up to the task of death.