

Paul Klee: Other Possible Worlds

The Jewish Museum

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200. Introduction

JAMES S. SNYDER: Hello, I'm James Snyder, Helen Goldsmith Menschel Director at the Jewish Museum. And I am pleased to welcome you to *Paul Klee: Other Possible Worlds*.

The Swiss-born German artist Paul Klee is unique among artists of the twentieth century, characterized by the spirit of experimentation that informed his work. Klee's exploration of both form and material might explain why he is often associated with playful, almost childlike imagery and a distinctive use of color. Though linked to expressionism, cubism, and surrealism, Klee's work really defies categorization.

The exhibition traverses the arc of Klee's career. He was an artist deeply influenced by his surroundings, often using art to reflect—and reflect upon—what society valued at any given moment. Klee's art was a tool for independent thought and reveals an important aspect of the artist: his enduring creativity despite the formidable challenges to his identity, reputation, and livelihood with the rise of fascism.

In 1933, Klee was forced to flee Germany in the face of Nazi persecution. He and his work were denounced as 'degenerate': a term used by Hitler to stigmatize art and artists that did not conform to the National Socialists' program of classically inspired art.

Our exhibition follows a relatively chronological path. In his early years, Klee's use of wit and parody to criticize society is already apparent and provides context for understanding the later works. As the exhibition moves through his career, as well as the intensifying political atmosphere of Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, we can also see how Klee increasingly rejects formal notions of composition, color, and form. He instead takes a deeply individualistic, poetic, and exploratory approach, underscoring his subtle artistic rebellion against conformity and authoritarian notions of what art was supposed to be.

On this tour, you'll hear from Mason Klein, Senior Curator Emeritus, Serena Feingold, Curatorial Assistant, and art historian Pamela Kort. Along the way, we hope that you will experience for yourself the extraordinary range of Klee's creativity, and the many and varied ways in which he responded to the fascism and autocratic power he saw taking control in the world all around him.

201. *Two Men Meet, Each Believing the Other to Be of Higher Rank, (Zwei Männer, einander in höherer Stellung vermutend, begegnen sich)* from the series *Inventions (Inventionen)*, 1903

NARRATOR: In his early 20s, Klee made a series of eleven etchings that he titled *Inventions*. They reveal the central role of irony and satire early on in his career.

Here, two European leaders bow to each other: on the left is Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany, with his handlebar moustache. On the right, with his distinctive bushy sideburns, is Emperor Franz Josef of Austria and Hungary.

Mason Klein, curator of this exhibition.

MASON KLEIN: *Two Men Meet* depicts both monarchs who are obliged to honor each other despite their political differences. In Klee's parody of performative protocol, he confronts a social world of absurdly false hierarchies and assumptions of superiority. Klee's monarchs are theatrically hunched over, gesticulating as if they are imitating each other.

PAMELA KORT: Klee, though, didn't want to make illustrations.

NARRATOR: Dr. Pamela Kort is an art historian based in Zurich, who specializes in the work of Klee and his German contemporaries.

PAMELA KORT (continuing): He was convinced that his age was one in which artists were faced with a big problem. Namely, they could never not only live up to but surpass the culture of classical antiquity. And his way out of that was to create humorous works that could make a comment on society in a witty, cheeky way, because from the beginning, he was really critical of himself and society.

202. *Harlequin on the Bridge (Arlequin auf der Brücke)*, 1920

NARRATOR: Made at a pivotal moment in Klee's life, *Harlequin on the Bridge* can be seen as a self-portrait. Curator Mason Klein.

MASON KLEIN: The trope of the harlequin was a well-known manifestation of the modern artist's alter ego, which would evolve with Klee into the character of the jester or the fool.

NARRATOR: During the short-lived Munich Revolution of 1919, when left-wing progressives had taken control of the city, Klee had briefly allied himself with these revolutionaries. When, later that year, he was nominated for a professorship at the Stuttgart Art Academy, there was a public outcry.

MASON KLEIN: The nomination ignited this contentious debate, where he was denounced by some of the faculty as a left-wing artist, as well as in the daily press, where a journalist actually referred to him with a racial slur saying, "and now we're considering Paul Klee of all persons, or rather Paul Zion Klee."

This would be the first time he was defamed as a Jew; and many people don't realize how he was truly victimized as such.

NARRATOR: In the social and political climate of the time, to call someone a Jew was almost a code word for the idea of left-wing radicalism. In this painting, Klee, who was not himself Jewish, portrays the harlequin with a Star of David over his head. The two eyes that glare from the ramparts of the bridge suggest that the figure is being watched and judged, just as Klee felt himself to be under public scrutiny. The harlequin, poised in the center of the bridge, reveals the delicate balancing act that Klee now had to achieve between his art and his social conscience.

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

NARRATOR: When Klee painted *Around the Fish* in 1926, he was teaching at the Bauhaus, the famous German school of art, design, and architecture. The painting showcases the ideas Klee was developing—and passing on to his students.

MASON KLEIN: One contemplates a fish rendered in delicious detail on a platter, garnished, and ready to be consumed. But Klee also allows that perception to consider the subject as alive and swimming. Klee, by the way, adored his precious aquarium of exotic fish with its environment of seaweed, reminiscent of the herbs on the platter.

NARRATOR: Klee annotates this image of the fish by surrounding it with hieroglyphic signs and geometric forms.

MASON KLEIN: Klee leads us to see around the fish, even red flagging his subject, and possibly depicting on the left a zygote, the first cell of a new organism formed when a sperm and egg fuse during fertilization. He references both the physical and the temporal, which he indicates above through the phases of the moon.

It was meant to be complex and illustrated how thoroughly bored he was with this notion of a work being about a fixed reality. For him, it had to be about perception, which was constantly in flux.

NARRATOR: The head painted at upper left in both a profile and frontal view provides a key to approaching the painting. A large red arrow points to the eyes, recalling a famous adage by Klee.

MASON KLEIN: For Klee, art did not reproduce the visible. In his famous words, it *makes visible*.

204. *Angelus Novus*, 1920

NARRATOR: This image of an angel from 1920, *Angelus Novus*, is one of Klee's most famous works. Curator Mason Klein.

MASON KLEIN: Throughout his life, he would continue to paint and draw angels of an indescribable variety. The early ones often seem puppet-like, most likely because he was constantly fashioning such figures for his son, Felix.

NARRATOR: The drawing has a remarkable story of its own. In 1921, the noted German-Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin purchased the work, and it became his most treasured possession. Twenty years later, Benjamin wrote about it in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. Mason Klein summarizes Benjamin's reflections:

MASON KLEIN: A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. The angel would like to stay, but a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future, to which his back is turned. This storm is what we call progress.

NARRATOR: Benjamin fled Germany in 1933, taking the work with him into exile in France. When Hitler invaded France, Benjamin entrusted the drawing to the French philosopher Georges Bataille, who hid it in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Benjamin himself died by suicide when he feared capture by the Nazis was inevitable. After the war, the work was passed to Benjamin's lifelong friend, the distinguished scholar of Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem. The drawing is now in the collection of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

MASON KLEIN: With that history, and that lineage of extraordinary philosophers and intellectuals caring for it posthumously, it just makes the whole story one of rescue and preservation of another order.

205. *Clarification (Klaerung)*, 1932

MASON KLEIN: *Clarification* is a kind of carefree painting whose calm is conveyed in its blithe, loosely assembled lines and lulling transparency.

I think that he wanted to create an atmosphere that spoke to someone who had just been suffocating, and all of a sudden was inhaling deeply.

It's playful, it's free, it's loose, as if the color was in the air itself.

NARRATOR: In 1931, Klee resigned from his post at the Bauhaus. His students there regarded him as an iconic, even godlike figure. But it was a highly intense working atmosphere, with a rigorous intellectual and socio-political program. Klee now wanted time and freedom to paint for himself.

This work was painted after he moved to take up a post at the Düsseldorf Academy.

MASON KLEIN: There he began to relish this newfound liberty by developing yet another technique of painting, a kind of pointillism, mostly of squarish dabs of color or paint, for which he made his own square-ended tool.

NARRATOR: Curatorial Assistant Serena Feingold.

SERENA FEINGOLD: This is a new phase for him where he is able to create with more joy. But of course, it's also coming at a moment in history where things are intensifying. The National Socialists and Hitler took over Germany in 1933, so we're leading up to this intense moment of change in Klee's life, in Germany, in Europe, in the world at large. And so he's also deeply considering what's happening around him and trying not to worry and let himself be free in his creation.

206. *Europa (Europa)*, 1933

MASON KLEIN: We're looking at a painting that is really about the continent of Europe disintegrating before our eyes.

NARRATOR: Curator Mason Klein.

MASON KLEIN: In 1932, the National Socialist German Workers' Party first established its dominance. If you look at the painting, you can see that the orange dabs of color no longer form any kind of coherent unity. It's broken like porcelain. And what we have are these figures drowning in this watery ocean that seems to engulf the continent itself.

NARRATOR: The title of the painting suggests a story from classical mythology, the abduction of the Princess Europa by Zeus in the form of a bull. This story is traditionally called "The Rape of Europa," an idea that art historian Pamela Kort explores.

PAMELA KORT: There are at least 250 titles in Klee's oeuvre with classical antiquity references. He used these things as kind of masks: they're about Klee and what happened to him and the world. So, if Europa is being raped, and she's a mythological figure, Europe is also going to be raped by Hitler.

MASON KLEIN: In casting *Europa* as a wan and ghostly figure that you see on the left with one leg casually crossed over the other, she seems oblivious. And that obliviousness is countered by this exclamation point that you see on the right side of the painting. And upon closer examination, one can see the geography of a dismembered continent struck with a cross.

Within months of painting *Europa*, Klee's life would be upended. He and his art would be defamed and deemed degenerate, and all his paintings would be removed from all museums in Germany. And soon afterward, he and his family would be forced into exile in Switzerland, an immigrant in his own country of birth.

207. *Struck from the List (von der Liste gestrichen), 1933*

NARRATOR: Hitler was appointed Chancellor in January 1933. Just days later, a National Socialist newspaper published a piece about the Düsseldorf Academy, where Klee was a teacher. The piece attacked Klee's work as 'crazy' and described him as a "typical Galician Jew," despite the fact that Klee was not Jewish.

In their efforts to root out what they saw as "degenerate" art, the Gestapo, the secret police of Nazi Germany, searched Klee's house in Dessau, and he was promptly dismissed from his job. Curator Mason Klein.

MASON KLEIN: Within months, Klee realized that he had to—along with his family—leave Germany. And it was at this stage that he painted this self-portrait.

NARRATOR: The somber colors reflect the artist's grief; he appears to be crying. In terms of technique, there is a marked contrast with the lighter, freer paintings he had been making while at the Academy.

MASON KLEIN: Here, he's impacted this impasto surface almost sculpturally. He applies the paint in a very deliberate way, with sort of a spatula. And he, on top of it, puts a black barred cross. And he reverts to almost a cubist faceting of the figure. Its closed eyes and tears and hardness convey what I consider to be like the starkness of an African reliquary mask.

He felt that he had been so harshly rejected. It's not just censorship. He knew that he was being banished.

208. National Socialist Revolution Drawings, 1933

NARRATOR: In 1933, the National Socialists branded Klee a degenerate artist, and he was dismissed from his post at the Düsseldorf Art Academy.

The artist's response was to make 200 drawings, which he described as being about the National Socialist Revolution.

A selection of these works is displayed here. As you explore, Curator Mason Klein and Scholar Pamela Kort discuss this extraordinary body of work.

MASON KLEIN: They're so spontaneous that I think for many of them, if there were no title, there would be no way for a viewer to really comprehend the subject of the drawing.

PAMELA KORT: They're not in any sense illustrative. What are they? I would say that the most obvious feature of these drawings, besides the fact that they have these agitated pencil strokes: they are comical.

Klee, in general, always sought to keep separate art and politics. He did not want to be labeled as a political artist. And yet, here he is in a situation where he has no job, no hope for a market, no place to show his work. So, what remains open to him to communicate his reaction? Because he wasn't going to keep it pent up. He was going to give it expression.

MASON KLEIN: And they're so quickly drawn, with an instantaneous or instinctive manner of drawing, that they don't resemble anything Klee otherwise made. But such was his response to what he saw on an everyday basis that he had to record it in a way, notate all kinds of just utter indifference and cruelty that he witnessed everywhere.

[word count: 265]

209. *Prizewinning Apple (prämierter Apfel)*, 1934

NARRATOR: For centuries, artists have made still lifes, paintings of inanimate objects. In *Prizewinning Apple* from 1934, Klee references that history while allowing himself to push the form further. Curatorial Assistant Serena Feingold.

SERENA FEINGOLD: In this period, Klee completes a number of artworks, which center fruit as their main subject. And in a kind of classical Klee manner, he's subverted the traditional idea of a still life with fruit and turned that on its head.

NARRATOR: Curator Mason Klein.

MASON KLEIN: Works such as this not-so-special *Prizewinning Apple*, or the nearby misshapen bulgy pear, ridicule the notion of Aryan racial superiority. He was appalled by the fact that the Nazis would actually delegitimize imperfect people. And so, for him, the fruit in all of its diversity was an apt metaphor for the absurd notion that one was superior to another. But this was something that he was feeling on a daily basis when he saw people degraded and corralled in hospitals.

SERENA FEINGOLD: A huge part of Hitler's belief system was in the kind of ideal human that he imagined was the perfect specimen. And I think that given the way that he's titled this work, we can really look at these fruit subjects as a way of dealing with this pervasive idea of perfection.

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

SERENA FEINGOLD: *Revolution of the Viaduct* is one of the paintings that Klee completed that is viewed as an outwardly anti-authoritarian artwork.

NARRATOR: Curatorial Assistant Serena Feingold.

SERENA FEINGOLD: He has elements of classical architecture involved in this painting that seem to speak to the popular idea of monolithic Nazi architecture, which was popularized by Albert Speer. And so, very immediately, people saw a certain sense of resistance in this artwork. Given the title of this work, we start to imagine that 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.

We see a desire in this piece to not conform and to stay outside of the box and to break free from a line that he, or others, or the world has been pushed into.

NARRATOR: The disorderly arches, with their human feet, make a colorful contrast to the browns, blacks, and gray-greens of the National Socialists' military uniforms. Curator Mason Klein.

MASON KLEIN: You can see it as the need for non-conformism in its color—its bright, acrid, hot, passionate colors: the need to be independent.

What a brilliant parody of fascist military parades and spectacles of force, unity, and discipline.

211. *Angelus Militans*, 1940

NARRATOR: This painting, *Angelus Militans*, or “soldier” angel, from 1940, is an example of the many angels Klee painted towards the end of his life. Mason Klein.

MASON KLEIN: He contracted scleroderma, which was a connective tissue disease, then a fatal disease, in 1935.

MASON KLEIN: His hands became much less dexterous. And he couldn’t hold the brushes or pencils as he had formerly been able to manage. And so his line became heavier and bar-like.

MASON KLEIN: In *Angelus Militans*, the viewer encounters a kind of funereal palette that, despite its iridescent sheen, defines the broad, weighty forms of angel robes. The deathly aura of *Angelus Militans* as an angel of war is further stressed by the configuration of the angel’s head and body, possibly shown in the act of blowing a horn.

NARRATOR: Curatorial Assistant Serena Feingold.

SERENA FEINGOLD: Klee created more than 50 angel-like beings, mostly in the last two years of his life.

Many of Klee’s angels sit at the center of a painting as a main subject, and he very often would name them with one adjective, to give us a sense of the angel who’s ugly and the angel who’s sad.

NARRATOR: ... Or in this case, the angel who’s prepared for battle.

212. *Your Ancestor? (dein Ahn ?), 1933*

NARRATOR: With the rise of the National Socialists in Germany, Klee observed firsthand the dehumanization of Jewish people. He responded with works like this painting, with its biting humorous title: *Your Ancestor*, question mark. Curator Mason Klein.

MASON KLEIN: The line between civilized and barbaric becomes more tenuous in Klee's work. Throughout his final years, the whole question of the human-animal divide became for Klee far more pressing. With the Nazis feeling they could even control eye color or hair color, or by measuring facial dimensions, determine Aryan perfection—this painting, with its tooth-baring apelike human, was clearly intended to rebut such unabashed racism.

Klee embraced all difference as absolutely human. In each and every individual that he ever would depict, there's always a kind of ambiguity.

NARRATOR: This is certainly true of the subject of this painting. Once more, Pamela Kort.

PAMELA KORT: It looks almost like a Halloween character. It, too, is very comical. It's grotesque. That style is subversive.

MASON KLEIN: But there's a certain sense of pride to this figure as well: it very comfortably sits there, looking *down* upon the viewer. (*Chuckle*)

213. *Protected Children (geschützte Kinder), 1939*

MASON KLEIN: *Protected Children* expresses Klee's deep concern about children, about child-rearing, and the National Socialist devaluation of education in favor of aggressive combat or militarized games.

NARRATOR: Curator Mason Klein.

MASON KLEIN: So, you see in this gallery various titles of drawings, such as *Battle Among Children*.

I might add that Klee took his own responsibility as a parent very seriously and, according to his son, he did the cleaning, he did the cooking, he educated and taught and shared and played with his son.

NARRATOR: Here, a group of children is outside during a storm. They are struggling to hold onto their umbrellas, as they are buffeted by a high wind. Klee was acutely sensitive to the vulnerability of children.

MASON KLEIN: This large painting clearly stresses such vulnerability, intimating that, without adequate supervision, there's little hope for their survival. Klee even accentuates the tips of the children's umbrellas, evoking mothers' breasts, and further underscores their helplessness as they lose hold of their umbrellas.

If you look at the upper left-hand corner, for example, you see (*chuckle*) an umbrella just floating around. Klee loved to paint parks and pathways and walkways; and generally speaking, those pathways meander freely. But here they are shambolic, are chaotic. And they really make you feel that these little emoji-like figures are absolutely lost.

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

NARRATOR: *Untitled (Last Still Life)* dates from 1940, the year of Klee's death.

MASON KLEIN: Despite his progressive illness and the prospect of war worsening daily, he was possessed in his creativity. It's remarkable that he notated 366 works in his personal catalog for the year 1940. *Last Still Life* is one of the most striking pieces, which he left behind in his studio, untitled and unsigned, on an easel. It was his son, Felix, who titled the work.

NARRATOR: The painting features mysterious images and symbols against a deep black background. At bottom left, Klee has included one of his own angels.

SERENA FEINGOLD: By painting his angel on a sort of card that separates itself from the rest of the piece, he's making it unclear where we are in space.

MASON KLEIN: It's so ironically, humorously Klee to give the angel this awkward, embarrassed grin, which you also see in the face of the statuette, which is sort of a goofy like expression. And then that almost sausage-like form that floats next to the blue vase: is it some life form emerging? It's just undefinable.

Everything seems to be communicating with each other: the way the statuette waves, and even the teapot has a gesture of a kind. And I find it rather remarkable that he was able to maintain this spontaneity and almost childlike feeling.

SERENA FEINGOLD: As much of Klee's late work did, this painting utilizes color and a clarity of line in such a vibrant, clean, stark way. You know you're somewhere intense and somewhere with passion and feeling, without even going deeper into the painting than that.