



PAUL KLEE

The Visible and the Legible

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The fact that Paul Klee (1879–1940) consistently intertwined the visual and the verbal in his art has long fascinated commentators from Walter Benjamin to Michel Foucault. However, the questions it prompts have never been satisfactorily answered—until now. In *Paul Klee*, Annie Bourneuf offers the first full account of the interplay between the visible and the legible in Klee’s works from the 1910s and 1920s.

Bourneuf argues that Klee joined these elements to invite a manner of viewing that would unfold in time, a process analogous to reading. From his elaborate titles to the small scale he favored to his metaphoric play with materials, Klee created forms that hover between the pictorial and the written. Through his unique approach, he subverted forms of modernist painting that were generally seen to threaten slow, contemplative viewing. Tracing the fraught relations among seeing, reading, and imagining in the early twentieth century, Bourneuf shows how Klee reconceptualized abstraction at a key moment in its development.

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Figure 1.3 Paul Klee, *Landscape Hieroglyph with Emphasis on Sky-Blue* (*Landschaftliches Hieroglyph mit Betonung des Himmelblau*), 1917, 104. Watercolor on primed linen on cardboard, 16.5 × 17 cm. Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, Livia Klee Donation. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

February 1917 that marked Klee’s critical and commercial breakthrough. This exhibition—Klee’s second solo show at Herwarth Walden’s Sturm Gallery in Berlin, then the central point for the promotion of international modern art in Germany—suddenly established him as a major artist.³ In his review of the exhibition in the *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, the critic Theodor Däubler called Klee “the most important painter of the expressionist tendency”: “His exhibition is really staggering; it is unbelievable how much he has deepened and developed just recently.”⁴



Figure 1.7 Paul Klee, Flower Bed (Blumenbeet), 1913, 193. Oil on cardboard, 28.2 × 33.7 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Estate of Karl Nierendorf, by purchase, 48.1172.109. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Figure 1.8 Paul Klee, Creative Handwritten (Schöpferisch handschriftlich), 1914, 194. Oil on cardboard, 25 × 30 cm. Private Collection / The Bridgeman Art Library. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.



Figure 1.9 Paul Klee, *Presentation of the Miracle (Vorführung des Wunders)*, 1916, 54. Gouache, pen, and ink on plastered fabric, mounted on board, 29.2 × 23.6 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Allan Roos, MD, and B. Mathieu Roos. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

to the catwalk, which do no such thing.) The function of the X-marks in *Flower Bed* is very different—they signal the work of adjusting at once to the painting and to visual experience.

The scale of these paintings signals the exceptional nature of this series as well; they are considerably larger than the usual minuteness of Klee's work in the 1910s—close in size, in fact, to the smaller paintings of Delaunay's *Windows* series. Unusual, too, is the very fact that Klee registers the size of two of the paintings (*Kakteen hinter Butzenscheiben* and *Blumensteg*) in his oeuvre-



Figure 1.13 Paul Klee, *Carpet of Memory* (*Teppich der Erinnerung*), 1914, 1913. Oil on primed linen on cardboard, 37.8/37.5 × 49.3/50.3 cm. Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

for these days I must play the puritan. Everywhere I see only architecture, line rhythms, surface rhythms.”¹⁵⁹

But sometime after 1916, Klee altered the entry, crossing out the original title and writing the new one, reversing the dimensions of height and width, and adding the following note: “cloth with (oil primer) glued on white cardboard.”¹⁶⁰ *Interior Architecture*, one of six oils Klee registered consecutively in his catalogue in 1914, appears to have been a vertically oriented oil painting stretched on stretcher bars in the usual manner. But at some point after 1916, Klee took the canvas off the stretchers, rotated it, mounted it on board, and inscribed the board with its present title, retaining the date and work number of *Interior Architecture*.

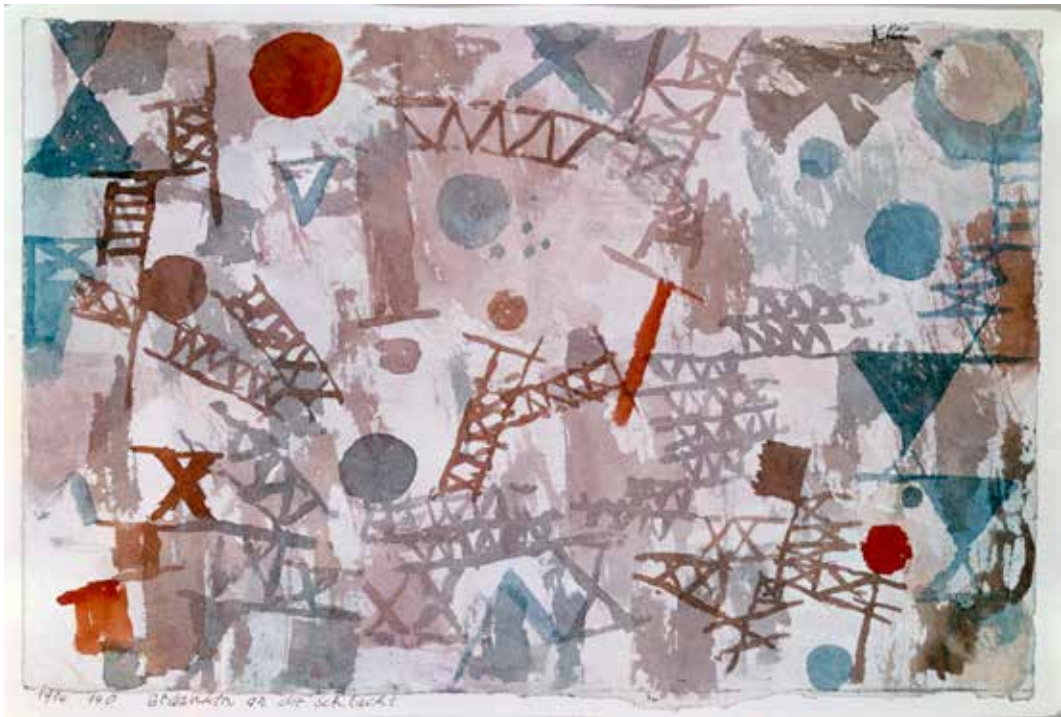


Figure 1.14 Paul Klee, Thoughts about the Battle (Gedanken an die Schlacht), 1914, 140. Watercolor on paper on cardboard, 15.5 × 24.3 cm. Private collection, Germany. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Figure 1.15 Paul Klee, View from a Forest (Ausblick aus e. Wald), 1914, 137. Watercolor on paper on cardboard, 17.5 × 20 cm. Location unknown. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Figure 2.1 Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus*, 1920, 32. Oil transfer and watercolor on paper on cardboard, 31.8 × 24.2 cm. The Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Gift of Fania and Gershom Scholem, Jerusalem; John Herring, Marlene and Paul Herring, Jo Carole and Ronald Lauder, New York, Accession number: B87.0994. Photo © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem by Elie Posner. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Nevertheless, I will seek to gloss this strange phrase, “radically *uncolorful* painting,” and suggest why Klee’s work might have touched Benjamin “in this sense.” About a year after writing this letter to Scholem, Benjamin *did* arrive at a theory of the uncolorful as a particular relation between a picture and its description. However, the concept of a radically uncolorful *painting* was for him

a compound of extreme volatility; he could pursue his idea of uncolorfulness only by disjoining it from art.

Scholem's letter to Benjamin about cubism is, unfortunately, lost. However, the diary pages in which Scholem wrote about his visit to the Sturm gallery have been preserved and seem to have served either as a draft for or a record of the letter; they are the basis my construction of his argument. Reading them, it is clear that the painting that provoked Scholem most was Picasso's *Woman Playing the Violin* of spring 1911, an austere work of what is often called hermetic cubism, marked by emphatic verticals (fig. 2.2)—he even sketched it in his diary (fig. 2.3).¹⁴ The painting provokes Scholem both in that it suggests to him cubism's potential to become a new "symbolism," which would, like mathematics and Judaism, obey the "ban on the 'image,'" and in that it fails to fulfill this potential, which Scholem calls "colorlessness."¹⁵ For Scholem, the presence of chiaroscuro makes the painting a betrayal of itself, and thus "*kitsch*."¹⁶



Figure 2.2 Pablo Picasso, *Woman Playing the Violin*, 1911. 92 × 65 cm. Private collection. Photo Credit: bpk, Berlin / Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin / Jörg P. Anders / Art Resource, NY. © 2014 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Figure 2.15 Paul Klee, *The Vocal Fabric of the Singer Rosa Silber* (*Das Vokaltuch der Kammersängerin Rosa Silber*), 1922, 126. Watercolor and ink on plastered fabric mounted on board, with watercolor and ink borders, 62.3 × 52.1 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Resor. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Figure 2.16 Paul Klee, Ship-star-festival (Schiffsternenfest), 1916, 62. Watercolor, pen, and pencil on primed linen on cardboard, 24.6 × 16.9 cm. Private collection, Germany. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Figure 2.17 Paul Klee, Stars above evil houses (Gestirne über bösen Häusern), 1916, 79. Watercolor on primed linen on cardboard, 19/20 × 21.2/22.2 cm. Merzbacher Kunststiftung, Küsnacht. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Figure 2.18 “Berthalda. After the oil painting by Hans Makart.” (“Berthalda. Nach dem Oelgemälde von Hans Makart.”) Die Gartenlaube: Illustriertes Familienblatt, no. 25 (1887): 777.



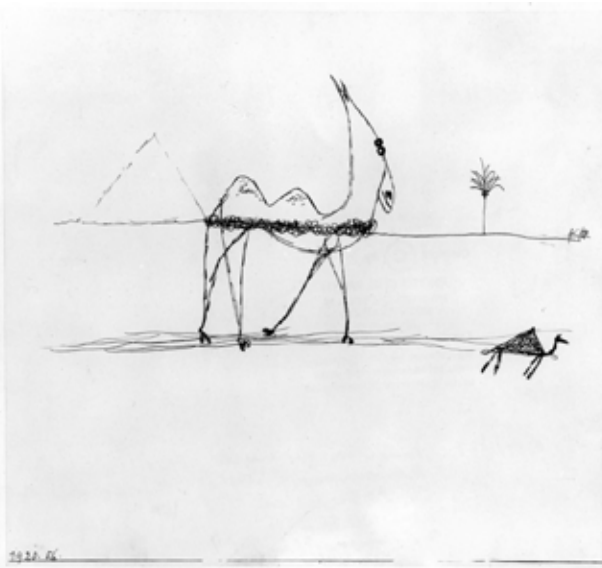


Figure 2.29 Paul Klee, Camel (and Camel-Schema) (Kamel [und Kamel-Schema]), 1920, 56. Pen on paper on cardboard, 20.5 × 23 cm. Private collection, Germany. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Figure 2.30 Paul Klee, ↓, 1915, 39. Watercolor on paper on cardboard, 20.0 × 23.0 cm. Kunstmuseum Bern. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.





Figure 2.31 Pablo Picasso, Maquette for Guitar (variation), Paris, October 1912. Cardboard, string, and wire (restored), 65.1 × 33 × 19 cm. Gift of the artist. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY. © 2014 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Figure 2.32 Grebo mask, from Ivory Coast or Liberia. Wood, paint, vegetable fibers. MP 1983.7, Musée Picasso, Paris. Photo: Beatrice Hatala. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.

then again, perhaps not—as Hausenstein writes regarding the similarities between Picasso’s work and Klee’s, “Here are, at the most, confirmations, elective affinities; not origins.”¹⁹² One might in any case say that Kahnweiler’s interpretation of cubism—including the ways in which it is *not* structuralist—can help us to see how Klee played with what one might call the scriptural character of his understanding of graphic art.

But there is another aspect of how Klee relates his art to that of children that needs to be brought out here, besides his revaluing of the schematic quality of the drawings of young children as described by Kerscheneister. We can begin by examining how Klee speaks of his own early childhood drawing in his Decem-



Figure 2.33 Paul Klee in his studio at the Weimar Bauhaus, 1924, possibly photographed by Felix Klee. 6.4 × 8.2 cm. Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, Schenkung Familie Klee. © Klee-Nachlassverwaltung, Bern.

illustrations for Däubler's own poem *Mit silberner Sichel*, to the illustrations commissioned for Curt Corrinth's novel *Potsdamer Platz* (1919).¹⁹⁶ But it is not only, or even chiefly, in these projects that we find Klee creating a connection between inscription and image that recalls that of illustration.¹⁹⁷ In fact, in the vast majority of Klee's *Blätter* of the late 1910s—and there are parallels here with what I argued earlier regarding what Klee's art does with "l'art philosophique"—no particular narrative is illustrated; rather, what is important for Klee appears to be the structure of such illustrations, and the impression that the title, nonsensical as it might appear, might seem so because it is a fragment of a story.

If Klee writes for Hausenstein a sort of origin story for his art in this reminiscence of childhood drawing and coloring after mid-nineteenth-century il-



Figure 2.34 Mimi et Azor. Épinal broadsheet, 29 × 18.6 cm. Private collection, Switzerland.

illustrated broadsheets, inspired by a grandmother whose own artistic activities he describes as typical of “Biedermeier women,” this seems in part to echo and displace elements of a discussion of the situation of modern art in the *Blaue Reiter* almanac, which had been published by Kandinsky and Marc in 1912 (not long after Klee joined the group—he had one small ink drawing of 1910 included in the almanac) and went into a second edition in 1914. The discussion in question is Marc’s short text “Two Pictures,” in which Marc compares a page from a Biedermeier children’s picture book with Kandinsky’s painting *Lyrisches* (1911), which are laid out on facing pages of the almanac (fig. 2.35).¹⁹⁸ The text as a whole is a justification of the principle underlying the almanac’s heterogeneous mixture of reproductions of works of artists associated with the *Blaue Reiter*



Figure 3.2 Paul Klee, Friendly look (*freundlicher Blick*), 1923, 54 (detail). Oil on paper on cardboard, 31.7 × 22.2 cm. Private collection. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

gives overarching shape to the products of the Bauhaus.”⁶⁹ Moreover, the grid was something of an emblem for the changes in the school’s direction that the 1923 exhibition announced to the public—the emulation of De Stijl and constructivism, the aspiration of designing for mass production, the reimagining of the artist as engineer. The proliferation of grids and squares in the objects on



Figure 3.3 Paul Klee, *Picture-architecture red yellow blue* (*Bildarchitektur rot gelb blau*), 1923, 80. Oil on primed cardboard, original frame, 44.3 × 34 cm. Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

display was so marked that it became a target of mockery. In a *Kunstblatt* item on the 1923 exhibition, Paul Westheim complained: “Three days in Weimar and one can never look at a square again for the rest of one’s life.”⁷⁰

Might Klee’s series of “square pictures,” begun in 1923, have something to do with the realignment that Westheim ridiculed as the “squaring” of the Bauhaus? One of Klee’s early grids of 1923 implies that the grid is at least in part and at times a reference to the work of others around him: the oil painting that Klee called *Picture-architecture red yellow blue* (*Bildarchitektur rot gelb blau*) (fig. 3.3) must be seen as relating itself somehow to the grids of De Stijl painting, a