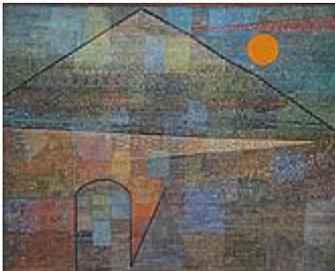




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Klee, Paul Ernst, *Ad Parnassum*, 1932, Ölfarbe, auf Kaseinfarbe auf Leinwand, 100 x 126 cm (Bildmass), Kunstmuseum Bern, G 1427

#### Documentation level



#### Name

**Klee, Paul Ernst**

#### Dates of birth and death

\* 18.12.1879 Münchenbuchsee, † 29.6.1940 Muralto

#### Nationality

D

#### Brief biography

Maler, Zeichner und Kunstpädagoge. 1921-1931 Professur am Staatlichen Bauhaus in Weimar und Dessau. 1931-33 Professur an der Staatlichen Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf. 1933 Emigration in die Schweiz

#### Fields of activity

Malerei, Zeichnung, Ölmalerei, Aquarell, Bleistiftzeichnung, Tuschezeichnung, Druckgrafik, Plastik, Architektur

#### Lexicon article

Paul Klee grew up in Berne from 1880–1898 as the second child of the German music teacher Hans Klee and the singer Ida Klee, née Frick, of Basel. He received his first instruction in drawing and colouring between the ages of three and five from his grandmother. As a pupil at the Gymnasium, he did a great deal of drawing in Berne and its environs, and displayed prodigious talent as a violinist as well as a profound interest in literature, music and drama. He recorded his personal and artistic development in a diary between 1898 and 1918. Following his studies in Munich (October 1898 to June 1901), he embarked on a six-month study trip to Italy with his childhood friend [Hermann Haller](#). Thereafter he lived in seclusion at his parents' house in Berne until 1906. He travelled to Paris for the first time in 1905.

Klee married Lily Stumpf, a pianist from Munich, in 1906

and moved with her to Munich, where their son Felix was born in 1907. Paul took care of the household and bringing up their son, while for just over a decade Lily supported the family by giving piano lessons. 1910–11, first solo exhibitions in Berne, Zurich, Winterthur and Basel. After years of working in artistic isolation, Klee came into contact with the avant-garde before the First World War. In 1911 he became friends with Alfred Kubin, [August Macke](#) and Wassily Kandinsky, in 1912 with Franz Marc and [Alexej von Jawlensky](#), visited Robert Delaunay and Henri Le Fauconnier in Paris in 1912, and joined the following artists' associations: Die Walze, 1907; Sema, 1911; Der Blaue Reiter, 1912; Der Moderne Bund, 1912; Neue Münchner Secession, 1914. In April 1914, he went on a study trip to Tunisia with August Macke and [Louis Moilliet](#). In 1916 he was conscripted into the German army and deployed at flying schools behind the front. 1917–19, successful breakthrough on the German art market. Once discharged from the army, from 1919–1925 Klee entrusted the sole representation of his works to the Munich gallery-owner Hans Goltz, who organised two comprehensive retrospectives (1920, 1925). In 1920–21, Klee was the subject of the first monographs, written by Hermann von Wedderkop, Leopold Zahn and Wilhelm Hausenstein.

At the end of 1920, Klee accepted the invitation to join the Bauhaus in Weimar, where he was initially artistic director of the bookbinding workshop from 1921–22, and from 1922 head of the glass painting studio. In 1921, he moved with his family to Weimar, and in 1926 to the City of Dessau, which had taken over the Bauhaus after it had been forced to close in Weimar for political reasons. In Dessau, Klee taught a free painting class as of 1926, and from 1927 also design theory for weaving. In the stimulating company of his Bauhaus colleagues he experienced his most productive period. First individual exhibitions in the United States in 1924, in France in 1925, Belgium in 1928 and Great Britain in 1934 bear witness to the growing artistic and economic success Klee was enjoying in Europe with the support of art dealers Alfred Flechtheim in Berlin and Rudolf Probst, Galerie Neue Kunst Fides, Dresden, and in the United States as a member of the exhibition group Die Blaue Vier (Klee, Lyonel Feininger, Jawlensky and Kandinsky). He reached the zenith of his career in 1929–1930 with the jubilee exhibitions staged for his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday in Dresden, Berlin, Düsseldorf and Saarbrücken, a solo show at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and two more monographs by Will Grohmann und René Crevel.

In 1931, Klee left the Bauhaus and took up a professorship at the State Academy of Art in Düsseldorf, where he taught painting technique. Suspended as a «degenerate artist» on April 21, 1933, and dismissed on January 1, 1934, he

emigrated with Lily from Düsseldorf to Berne at the end of 1933. 1935 saw the first comprehensive retrospective in Switzerland at the Kunsthalle in Berne and Basel. Despite several stays at health resorts in Switzerland, Klee would not recover from the serious illness – posthumously diagnosed as scleroderma – that broke out the same year: from now on he lived, as a recluse, for his work alone. In 1937, the National Socialists confiscated more than 100 of his works from German museums, showing a selection of them at the travelling exhibition entitled *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art, 1937–1941) and selling others abroad in exchange for foreign currency. As of 1938, Klee was represented at all the important shows staged against this vilifying exhibition in Europe and the United States. In 1939, at the earliest possible date, he applied for Swiss citizenship, but died in 1940 during a cure before his application could be approved.

Private collectors in Germany and Switzerland acquired works by Klee as of 1905; the most important of them joined the Klee Society established by the Brunswick collector Otto Ralfs in 1925. From the mid-1920s, American and French collectors also began to display an interest in Klee. German museums made their first notable acquisitions in the early 1920s; museums in Switzerland in the early 1930s, and in the United States and France at the end of the 1930s. After 1945, extensive private and public collections of Klee's works were also assembled in Italy and Japan. In 1946, shortly before Lily Klee's death, four Bernese collectors bought her late husband's artistic estate of about 6,000 works for 120,000 Swiss francs in order to protect his legacy from the threat of liquidation in favour of the Allies in accordance with the Washington Agreement. In 1947, with half of the works, they established the Paul Klee Foundation, which was domiciled at the Kunstmuseum Bern from 1952 – the year in Paul Klee's sole heir, Felix Klee, recognised the Paul Klee Foundation – until 2004. The same year, the Paul Klee Foundation merged with the newly established Stiftung Zentrum Paul Klee and transferred the Foundation's property to the Zentrum Paul Klee in Berne, which opened in 2005. Enriched with the endowment of Livia Klee-Meyer and loans from the Klee family and other private collectors, with approximately 4,000 of Paul Klee's works, the Zentrum Paul Klee holds the world's most comprehensive collection of works by this artist.

Klee is one of the most outstanding artistic personalities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although he followed the Cubist, Orphist, Constructivist and Surrealist movements with interest, his work is not associated with any of the predominant styles. As an extreme individualist, he created an œuvre that is extremely varied in terms of form, content and iconography and which, together with his writings on art education, had a decisive influence not only on the production of his contemporaries, but also on artists of the present. His guiding principle that «Art does not reproduce the visible, but renders visible», attained epochal significance. With what is probably unique consistency, he spent the years up to 1914 systematically acquiring the basic artistic elements of line, chiaroscuro and colour. He found a personal style for the first time in eleven satirically allegorical designs for etchings (1903–05). Of the works created previously, in the catalogue he kept between 1911 and 1940 he included only a few drawings from his childhood, but not the meticulous landscapes and Art Nouveau-influenced caricatures of his early years, nor the academic sketches dating from his years

as a student. Until 1906, he processed stimuli from Rodin's sketches of nudes in his drawings of figures «without nature» and experimented with reverse glass painting between 1905 and 1912. Motifs drawn from nature in an impressionist style inspired by van Gogh and Ensor in the years 1907–1910 bear witness to his quest for abstraction from the natural model, which was further consolidated by Klee's exploration of the work of Cézanne and the Cubism of Picasso. Tonal black watercolours (from 1908) are a preparation for the use of colour. In 1911–12, Klee illustrated Voltaire's satirical masterpiece, *Candide*. Stimulated by impressionist compositions reminiscent of cut-outs and East Asian art, Klee completed more than 200 compositions with scissors (selecting, separating and rearranging the sections of the cut-outs) between 1911 and 1940.

In search of the inspiration of his work, Klee developed the concept of art in a childlike style based on drawings he had produced as a child (reduction of the human figure to a puppet-like creature) and the ideas of the Blaue Reiter. From 1912, he used mostly poetic and literary rather than descriptive picture titles. The study trip to Tunisia gave Klee, who had mainly worked as a draughtsman until 1912, a decisive impulse as a colourist and helped him to achieve the breakthrough to abstraction: from 1914–18, watercolours (with abstract characters such as letters, numbers, arrows and pictorial symbols such as stars, eyes within representations of mystical landscapes and animals) dominate rather than the drawings; yet as most compositions in colour feature a graphic component, the linear remains the main focus of Klee's œuvre. From 1919, Klee devoted himself intensively to oil painting and developed the technique of watercolour oil drawing (producing a copy of a drawing using tracing paper coated in oil paint). His lasting interest in experimenting with picture carriers, painting and drawing techniques is also apparent in the few sculptural works he produced: the hand puppets, plaster and stone figures (1915–1925), and low reliefs (1929–1932). Parallel to his incipient invention of a large-scale, whimsical world theatre at the Bauhaus (apparatus, mechanical creatures, puppets in front of fictional scenery depicting architecture or landscapes), Klee searched specifically for stimuli to achieve the artistic synthesis of «Art Nature I», which until 1915 he found in Berne and the surrounding area, and from 1914 to 1933 on trips to Mediterranean countries.

Klee's lectureship at the Bauhaus required that he elaborate an art-educational doctrine, for which he was able to refer to his own experiences in his artistic work and the theoretical reflections noted in his diary. In response to the Bauhaus's official slogan («Art and Craftsmanship» or «Art and Technology in Unity»), he also made use of the insights he had gained from his teaching activities for his independent work – as his perspective, progression and square pictures (pictures with colour gradations), geometric constructions (1931) and divisionist pictures in which the paint is applied in a pointillist technique (1930–32) demonstrate.

From 1933–36, emigration and illness plunged Klee into an artistic crisis, from which emerged the radical change of style that, after a state of complete exhaustion (1936: 25 works) he then implemented in his late work, marked by a ceaselessly growing production (1939: 1,253 works). Using minimal pictorial devices – boldly drawn bars on glowing colour fields consisting of few tones – he developed a language of

characters and symbols reminiscent of hieroglyphs, which he presented in new techniques (such as wallpaper glue on newspaper and jute) and larger formats. In the last years of his life, besides the central themes of his entire oeuvre, in view of tragic personal and political developments he explored ideological issues and mythological subject matter with particular urgency, as exemplified in his portrayals of angels or the Eidola series of drawings. After Klee's death, his highly expressive, but enigmatic late work was to have a lasting impact (ranging from Abstract Expressionism to current figurative painting), ensuring him a distinguished place among the late works of Classical Modernism.

Works: Basel, Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Kupferstichkabinett; Bergen, Kode 2; Berlin, Museum Berggruen; Berlin, Nationalgalerie, Scharf-Gerstenberg Collection; Berne, Zentrum Paul Klee; Kunstmuseum Bern; Düsseldorf, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, K20; Hannover, Sprengel Museum; Houston, The Menil Collection; Lucerne, Museum Sammlung Rosengart; Kochel am See, Franz Marc Museum; Munich, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus; Munich, Pinakothek der Moderne; New York, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Berggruen Klee Collection; New York, The Museum of Modern Art; Paris, Centre Pompidou; Pasadena, Norton Simon Museum; Riehen, Fondation Beyeler; Sendai, The Miyagi Museum of Art; Stockholm, Moderna Museet; Vienna, Albertina; Kunsthaus Zürich.

Stefan Frey, 1998, updated 2015  
Translation: Toby Alleyne-Gee

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### Website

<http://www.zpk.org>  
<http://www.kleegestaltungslehre.zpk.org>

### Archive

SIK-ISEA, Schweizerisches Kunstarchiv, HNA 026

### Direct link

<http://www.sikart.ch/kuenstlerinnen.aspx?id=4000058&lng=en>

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