

THE PHILLIPS COLLECTION

AMERICA'S FIRST MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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KLEE AND AMERICA, THE FIRST MAJOR AMERICAN EXHIBITION OF KLEE'S WORK IN ALMOST TWO DECADES, TO OPEN AT THE PHILLIPS COLLECTION, WASHINGTON, D.C., JUNE 17, 2006



Paul Klee (1879–1940)
Actor's Mask [Schauspielermaske], 1924
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection.
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Bild-Kunst, Bonn

Washington, D.C.— German artist Paul Klee (1879-1940) was one of Europe's most internationally esteemed artists when the Nazi regime condemned his art in the early 1930s. At the same time, admiration for Klee swelled in America as his works increasingly entered the collections of major museums and private collectors. From June 17 to Sept. 10, 2006 at The Phillips Collection, America's first museum of modern art, *Klee and America* will explore the rise of Klee's American success and artistic legacy from the 1910s through the 1950s. It will seek to reveal why the United States adopted Klee, providing not only his most attentive audience, but also a safe haven for his theories of artistic freedom, self-invention, and authenticity.

Unlike other European modern artists, Klee was never enraptured with American popular culture. By the same token, Americans remained largely dispassionate about the Swiss-born Klee's work when it was first introduced to America in the 1920s. By the end of the decade, only two major private Klee collectors existed in the country, Galka Scheyer in California and Katherine Dreier in New York. In 1924, critic Henry McBride underscored the enigmatic nature of Klee's work, describing him as "that strange meteor from Switzerland" on the pages of the *New York Herald*.

By 1930, when his art was being purged from the Schlossmuseum in Weimar, Germany, Klee's reputation in America had already started to spread. His work was celebrated in Alfred Barr's 1930 retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the first one-person exhibition MoMA had ever given to a living European artist. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, American collectors increasingly pursued Klee's art, seeking works in greater quantities and of major significance. Today, more than ten percent of Klee's entire output (approximately 1,150 works) resides in U.S. collections.

Klee and America will investigate the long and complex history of Klee's reception in the U.S. from 1920 to 1950, and the lasting influence of his work on American artists of the mid-20th century. Comprising some 80 works, the exhibition will explore why American collectors—including The Phillips Collection's founder, Duncan Phillips—were attracted to Klee's work, and how it came to be championed by the Abstract Expressionists of the 1940s and 1950s. It will open in conjunction with the focus exhibition *When We Were Young: New Perspectives on the Art of the Child*, which will feature contemporary, self-initiated children's drawings alongside several historical childhood drawings by Klee and Pablo Picasso.

“Duncan Phillips was a major believer in and collector of Klee's works, even dedicating a room of the museum to the thirteen that he owned—all of which will be on view during the exhibition,” said Jay Gates, director. “Phillips recognized Klee as ‘a dreamer, a poet, and a brooding rebel... No art can be more personal than the art of Klee.’ Today, The Phillips Collection continues its commitment to his artistic genius.”

Klee and America is organized by The Menil Collection, Houston, Texas, where it received significant support from Altria Group, Inc.

KLEE AND AMERICA

In the 1920s, Klee was well known throughout Germany and France as a leading figure of the European modernist movement. Whereas the American media barely mentioned him, in Paris the pages of *Broom* and *Vanity Fair* heralded him as one of the fathers of Dada and Surrealism. By 1921, Klee was the subject of numerous publications and exhibitions throughout Germany, including a major retrospective at the Galerie Hans Goltz in Munich in 1920. He was also appointed to a teaching position at the Bauhaus school in Germany in 1921.

Although a few years earlier he was considered one of Germany's most highly respected artists, by 1933 Klee had been censured by Hitler's Nazi regime as part of its campaign to stop the so-called “corruption of art,” and the market for his work collapsed in Europe. The National Socialist Society for German Culture dismissed Klee from the teaching position he had held at Düsseldorf Academy since 1931. He fled to Switzerland in 1933, but the Nazis still included 17 of his works in their “Degenerate Art” exhibition of 1937.

Nazi Germany may have undermined Klee's career and uprooted him from his job and home, but it did not distance him from his artistic values. One reason why Klee appealed to American collectors and creators is that his life and works largely mirror American ideals. He was considered a revolutionary artist rebelling against a domineering nation, insisting on preserving his freedom of expression even in an increasingly oppressive environment. Though created on small canvases, Klee's works shattered artistic conventions.

Klee liberated artists from the grid of Cubist space, infusing his work with a highly lyrical form of expression. Over time, he developed a powerful abstract language of signs that drew upon ancient sources as well as the energetic line drawings of children, as seen in the concurrent exhibition *When We Were Young: New Perspectives on the Art of the Child*. The first Klee work acquired by the Phillips, *Tree Nursery* (1929), is divided into horizontal bands of color within a textured field of paint. By interweaving circles, triangles, and tree forms, Klee creates a lively inscribed text that resembles both a series of pictograms as well as the structure of musical polyphony.

Drawing upon aesthetic design principles associated with the Bauhaus—and his own background as an accomplished violinist—Klee added to the emotional intensity in his work by expressing the visual analogies between art, architecture, and music. In *Cathedral* (1924), Klee uses delicate white lines to map the cathedral's bays, windows, and crenellations onto a grid-like field, suggesting an architectural plan or elevation. At the far right edge of the panel, the lines become musical notations, evoking the harmonies of a choral song rising from a house of worship.

Young Moe (1938) represents not only Klee's love of music, but also his fascination with unusual materials. Rendered with colored paste applied to newspaper on burlap, the work pays homage to Albert "Moe" Moeschinger, professor of music theory at the conservatory of Bern from 1937 to 1943, who had dedicated three compositions to Klee in 1935. In this abstract composition, swirling black lines flow on top of shifting fields of color, implying a sense of rhythm and melody.

Klee's vast thematic and stylistic range appealed to American artists of the 1930s, 40s, and 50s wanting to escape the limitations of geometric abstraction and surrealism. A central figure in America's embrace of the European avant-garde, Klee contributed significantly to what is now considered the essence of American art. In particular, Klee's work was a major source of inspiration to the Abstract Expressionists, including Mark Tobey, Adolph Gottlieb, and Kenneth Noland. Other second-generation American modernists, such as Richard Diebenkorn and Alexander Calder, also cited Klee as having had a profound impact on their art.

Increasing interest in and collection of Klee's works in the United States during the first half of the 20th century may explain his assimilation into American culture that continues today. At the latest Klee retrospective, held in 1987 at New York's Museum of Modern Art, critic John Russell asserted that Klee's influence was so pervasive that it would be difficult to pass a day in the city and not be reminded of his manner of signifying bodies and faces, his floating arrows and initials, and his shorthand architectures. "The legacy of Klee is everywhere," he said.

THE EXHIBITION

Klee and America will comprise approximately 80 works by Klee, including drawings, watercolors, and paintings spanning his entire career that were collected in America from the 1920s to the 1950s. The works are drawn from public and private collections throughout the United States and include those once owned by artists Mark Tobey and Alexander Calder, and authors Clifford Odets and Ernest Hemingway, among others.

This special exhibition and *When We Were Young: New Perspectives on the Art of the Child* will be the first to reside in The Phillips Collection's newly expanded building and gallery spaces, opening in April 2006. The installation of *Klee and America* will include a separate room dedicated to the Phillips' 13 works by Klee, reestablishing the intimate enclosure originally created in Duncan Phillips' Klee Room. One of the cornerstones of The Phillips Collection, the Klee Room was in existence for more than 30 years between 1948 and 1982 and was an abiding source of inspiration to the artists of the post-war generation. Kenneth Noland in particular spent many hours in the Klee Room after he moved to D.C. in 1950, viewing such works as *Picture Album*, *Arab Song*, and *Young Moe*.

THE CATALOGUE

Published by Hatje Cantz in collaboration with The Menil Collection, *Paul Klee and America* (forthcoming February 2006) will include seven essays that chart Klee's rise in America from his first transatlantic exchanges in the 1910s and 20s, to his breakthrough in the mid-1930s, and finally to his impact in the 1940s and 1950s. The book also features more than 90 color plates as well as catalogue entries, a chronology of events, and an index of selected American collectors. It is co-edited by Josef Helfenstein and Elizabeth Hutton Turner, who also contributed essays.

WHEN WE WERE YOUNG: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE ART OF THE CHILD

Klee held a deep interest in children's art, which he considered a rich resource for his own creativity and inspiration. This accompanying exhibition to *Klee and America* features 25 contemporary children's drawings alongside examples of childhood drawings by Klee and Picasso juxtaposed with their mature work. By bringing these works together, *When We Were Young* seeks to re-examine conventional notions of what it means to be artistically gifted and shed new light on the relationship of drawing to creative thinking in children. Conventional views of prodigious talent in art—usually referencing the early adolescent works of Picasso—have typically focused on skills of mastering perspective and rendering three-dimensional form. This exhibition expands our understanding of the aesthetic merits of children's drawings, and explores the genesis of two great artistic prodigies: Klee and Picasso.

When We Were Young: New Perspectives on the Art of the Child, the first project of The Phillips Collection Center for the Study of Modern Art, is curated by Jonathan Fineberg, Gutgsell Professor of Art History at the University of Illinois. The coordinating curator at the Phillips is Elizabeth Hutton Turner, senior curator. The exhibition is supplemented by a book, which includes an introduction and essay by Professor Fineberg on child's play and the origins of art, an essay by Rudolf Arnheim on child styles, an essay by Elizabeth Hutton Turner on aspects of drawing and play in the early work of Alexander Calder, and essays by experts on contemporary child art.

THE PAUL KLEE SUMMER TEACHER INSTITUTE

In June 2006, The Phillips Collection invites teachers to participate in a Summer Teacher Institute in conjunction with *Klee and America*. This national five-day interdisciplinary initiative will enable K-12 educators to study Klee's life, subject matter, style, and process in depth. Through interactive workshops, art programs, and other activities, the 50 educators selected to participate in the Institute will explore how Klee's extraordinary art, revolutionary style, and fascinating history can inspire students. Within the Phillips' brand-new educational facilities and exhibition galleries, teachers will also explore cross-curriculum connections between Klee's work and social studies, foreign language studies, music, and the performing arts. For more information or to apply, contact (202) 387-2151 x214 or pruther@phillipscollection.org

ABOUT THE PHILLIPS COLLECTION

The Phillips Collection is home to one of the most exquisite collections of impressionist and modern American and European art in the world with nearly 2,500 works by such artists including Daumier, Renoir, Bonnard, Matisse, Monet, Degas, van Gogh, Cézanne, Picasso, Braque, Klee, O'Keeffe, Lawrence, Dove, Avery, Diebenkorn, and Rothko. America's first museum of modern art, it was founded by visionary collector Duncan Phillips and opened in 1921. The museum comprises Phillips' 1897 Georgian Revival home and similarly scaled additions, retaining the intimacy of a private residence.

The Phillips maintains an active collecting program and regularly organizes acclaimed special exhibitions in addition to maintaining a program of traveling exhibitions and an extensive lending program, making its works available to audiences throughout the world. The museum also produces some of the most effective and in-depth education programs, with an active schedule of programs for K-12 teachers and students, as well as programs for adults. Since the 1940s, the Phillips has also hosted weekly concerts in its wood-paneled, acoustically fine Music Room hung with modern masterpieces.

VISITOR INFORMATION

The Phillips Collection is located in the heart of Washington's historic Dupont Circle neighborhood, at 1600 21st Street, NW, near the Dupont Circle Metro (Q Street exit). Museum hours are Tuesday through Saturday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Thursday Artful Evenings until 8:30 p.m.; Sunday from 12 to 7 p.m. (12 to 5 p.m. June through September). Closed Monday.

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