

The Color of Sound

Paul Klee's belief that color combinations could transport viewers as though by song drove his radical experimentation in watercolor.

The art critic Walter Pater once wrote, "All art constantly aspires to the condition of music." Whether or not this is true for all art, it's an uncannily apt assessment of the lifelong creative pursuit of Paul Klee, who devoted his career



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Paul Klee (German and Swiss, 1879–1940)

to finding visual equivalents of musical forms.

Klee believed that color and sound were such similar phenomena that the colors in a painting could be arranged to express the same "ancient harmonies" as notes in a symphony. But it would take years of painstaking research into color before he would conceive its capacity to express sonorous movement.

Klee's rigorous color experiments were mostly in watercolor, which he favored for its unique luminosity and for the dynamic interplay of individual and overlapping color washes.

Musical Synthesis

Without Klee's musical passion and knowledge, it's unlikely that he would have made the particular breakthroughs in color theory that established him as one of the most influential figures in modern art.

Klee was raised by musical parents, and himself began studying music at the age of seven.

Though he decided, late in youth, that his talents were more suited to visual art, he would play violin for the rest of his life; and until his last few years when he was too weak to do so, began each day of painting with an hour of violin practice, believing the exercise sharpened his visual imagination.

For Klee, the experience of music represented the ideal experience of art: immediate, kinetic, a medium in which the form was both the process and the subject, where interrelated states of being were called up simultaneously in a synthesis of physical sensation, memory, emotion and motif.

Seized by Color

Klee's work did not begin to really build upon his musical

1879

December 18, 1879

Paul Klee is born in Munchenbuchsee, Switzerland

1898

Moves to Germany to study art at Munich Academy of Fine Art

1906

Marries pianist Lily Stumpf and settles in Munich

1911

First major exhibitions in Switzerland; meets Wassily Kandinsky, lifelong friend and influence

1914

Visits Tunisia and has breakthrough color epiphany

1916-1918

Inscripted as a clerk in the German army

1919

Major exhibition brings immediate international fame

understanding until the struggle with color was resolved. His early forays into painting were frustrated by his sense that the secrets of color eluded him. For the first few years of his career, Klee focused instead on manipulations of light and dark, in fantastical black-and-white etchings and pen-and-ink drawings.

From 1908 to 1911, he worked almost exclusively in monochrome watercolor, perfecting his understanding of value structure.



Chasing Sonic Color In multi-media watercolor paintings such as, *Tale à la Hoffmann* (watercolor, ink, and pencil on paper, 12 1/5x9 1/2), Paul Klee sought visual equivalents for musical forms.

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1940

1920–1931	1925	1931	1933	1935	1939	June 29, 1940
Teaches art at the famous Bauhaus school and paints prolifically	<i>Pedagogical Sketchbook</i> is published	Accepts a professorship at Dusseldorf Academy of Fine Arts	Declared a "degenerate artist" by the Nazis; returns to Switzerland	Afflicted with the wasting disease scleroderma	Produces more than 1,200 paintings and drawings	Dies in Locarno, Switzerland

Then in 1914, during a three-week trip to Tunisia, Klee was overcome by the limpid light and landscapes of Northern Africa. He wrote in his diary, "Color has seized me. I no longer need to pursue it: it has seized me forever, I know... Color and I are one—I am a painter."

In his subsequent experiments, Klee studied the rhythmic effects of color gradations, obsessed with the luminous, visually caloric transmissions of energy between colors along a scale. He based his work with color squares on the chromatic scale in music, intent on translating primal rhythms into visual forms.

Renewed Perceptions

Klee's belief that certain visual combinations, like musical arrangements, could correspond to distinct emotional and spiritual states, meant that he was constantly developing new techniques for exploring the possibilities of color and texture in his compositions.

The resulting innovations in the medium of watercolor were remarkable: catalog descriptions include watercolor on egg-grounded paper; watercolor on muslin on wood; watercolor and egg emulsion on oil-grounded canvas; watercolor on plaster-grounded burlap; waxed

watercolor on cardboard; watercolor with plaster on chalk-grounded paper; watercolor and pen-and-ink on cotton; watercolor and wax pigment on cotton on wood; watercolor and ink on gauze. The list goes on like a love poem to haptic nouns.

A poet's eye—and a musician's ear—helped Klee the painter to synthesize such disparate materials into organic forms whose energetic harmonies renew our perceptions. □

ASHLEY CAPPS is an award-winning poet and writer.