



Zentrum Paul Klee
Bern

LOUISIANA MUSEUM
OF MODERN
ART

cobra museum
voor moderne kunst
museum of modern art
amstelveen

Klee and Cobra – a child's play

The exhibition ***Klee and Cobra – a child's play*** was conceptualized by Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern in cooperation with LOUISIANA Museum of Modern Art, Humblebaek and Cobra Museum of Modern Art, Amstelveen.

The exhibition ***Klee and Cobra – a child's play*** is focused on the topic of the discovery of children's creativity for artistic expression in the work of Paul Klee and the Cobra artists. The show will also highlight the importance of Paul Klee's work and artistic thinking for Cobra in the 1940ies. The Exhibition will comprise approximately 120 works by Paul Klee and 100 works by Cobra artists as well as a great quantity of documents.

The discovery of children's potential for artistic expression provided an important impulse to the early 20th-century avant-garde, and to this day has remained a source of inspiration to artists. Both Kandinsky and Klee gained important artistic impulses from the debate, and from exploring their own childhood drawings. Almost forty years later – under different historic circumstances – immersing themselves into the imagery of children inspired the Cobra group of artists to venture into new artistic and political territory.

“Ur-beginnings” of art

“In every children's drawing without exception the object's inner sound reveals itself,” Kandinsky wrote in his 1912 essay, “On the Question of Form”. In that same year Paul Klee called for a return to the “ur-beginnings of art one is more likely to find in a museum of ethnography or in the nursery at home. (...) The more helpless these children, the more instructive their art.” Thirty-six years later, Constant's Cobra manifesto for the journal *Reflex* followed seamlessly on: “The child knows no other law than that of his awareness of being alive, and only wants to express that feeling.”

The exhibition ***Klee and Cobra – a child's play*** presents the return of artists to their childhood “ur-beginnings” as an elemental visual experience; it also places the relevance of this act in terms of art and cultural history in the historical and political context of the time.

Paul Klee and children's art

At the start of the exhibition, we will present Paul Klee's own children's drawings. He rediscovered them as a 23-year-old during a visit to his parents' home in Bern. Having

recognised in them the origins of his own creative impulse, he placed them at the beginning of his œuvre catalogue while excluding as “un-artistic” various technically accomplished drawings from his adolescent years. His fascination with children’s powers of creative and artistic expression runs through Klee’s entire œuvre, from his explorations of the iconography of his own and his son Felix’ children’s drawings, to experiments with “blind” drawing in the 1920s, and ending in the 1930s in his radical denial of any formal constraints and return to the immediacy of childhood emotions. Klee’s focus on children’s art in the last and most productive stage of his life is reflected in the materialness of his paintings, in which haptic surfaces are reminiscent of, yet anything but children’s finger paintings, scratching techniques reveal underlying strata and free-flowing lines evoke children’s scribbles.

In the context of political upheavals in Germany, Klee’s concern with childhood images also provides glimpses into the abyss. His works entitled *Kinder spielen Angriff (Children play attack)*, *Das Spielartet aus (The game degenerates)*, *Schlacht unter Kindern (Embattled children)* show the raw violence engendered when unfettered infantile drives are exploited by those in power.

Cobra

The Cobra artists are akin to Paul Klee insofar as they welcomed any kind of experience, and were willing to disregard any formal constraints. However, while such had been part of Klee’s individual, artistic experience, it gained a political dimension in the Cobra artists’ post-war lives. Their immediate, physical reference to reality, and spontaneous, sensuous use of colours and materials as elementary means of expression signified a radical rejection of artistic and social norms and conventions of their day.

Two shows organised in 1948 by Willem Sandberg at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam were to inspire the Cobra artists’ revolutionary departure. There was *Kunst en kind* (Art and child), presenting children’s drawings in a museum for the first time ever, and there was the monograph exhibition of more than 300 of Klee’s works, many of them from his latter years. The two exhibitions provided impulses to the Cobra artists, confirming their new artistic approach. In the fourth issue of the *cobra* journal, which in 1949 was to serve as catalogue to the group’s great anniversary exhibition, Corneille staged the juxtaposition of children’s drawings and works by himself as well as by Appel and Constant as an artistic revelation. As Paul Klee had done, Asger Jorn and Corneille collected children’s drawings that were to become an important source of inspiration to them.

Their concern with children’s art and direct cooperation with children resulted, for example, in the legendary paintings on the walls and ceilings of the farmhouse at Bregnerød near Copenhagen. They were cornerstones in the rise of Cobra. In their works Constant and Corneille, Karel Appel, Asger Jorn, Pierre Alechinsky and Eugène Brands attempted to tap directly into children’s creative expression. A large number of their paintings and sculptures evoking children’s art are among the most impressive examples of their art.

The exhibition ***Klee and Cobra – a child's play*** intends to highlight differences as well as similarities in the way these artists dealt with their subject. There will be

1. galleries in which the various artists' approaches to children's art and its integration into their own works will be highlighted in their specific art-historical and socio-cultural contexts.
2. areas whose thematic foci will juxtapose Klee's and Cobra artists' childhood drawings as well as childhood drawings they collected.
3. areas in which the Paul Klee reception by the Cobra artists will be visualized.
4. areas in which the following topics will be displayed juxtaposing Klee's and the Cobra artists:
 - Grotesque faces, physiognomies, portraits and masks
 - Human interaction, emotion, rebellion, aggression
 - Remembering childhood
 - Acrobats, playgrounds
 - An imaginary bestiary

Bern, Humlebæk, Amstelveen
May 2011