



Indiscretion

1935, 93
Watercolour, pen and ink
on cotton on cardboard
26.7 × 33.5

Private collection



Michael Baumgartner

Work Processes and Retrospection

Self-reflection

The ability to revisit his own work and to re-engage with its visual potential was central to Paul Klee's artistic self-reflection. This capacity for self-reflection coloured his approach to the handwritten catalogue of his works that he had started to compile in Munich in 1911 and continued writing until the end of his life. Against the backdrop of the ground-breaking thinking of the Blaue Reiter group, the then thirty-one-year old subjected his pictorial compositions to a rigorous selection process. He only listed those works that he deemed to have been of importance in the discovery of his creative self and in his artistic development. Although Klee subsequently listed his compositions with a year date and a running number for that year, his *oeuvre catalogue* is not so much an objective, chronological sequence of works as a history of an artist's creative life, conceived by the artist himself. In the case of compositions that preoccupied Klee for years – some of which he completely reworked – rather than listing these under the year when they were finished, he would enter them under the year when he first started to work on them. A typical instance of this is the oil painting *Akt* (*Nude* 1910, 124), which Klee probably began around 1910; although he later repainted it twice and only finished it in 1923 or 1924, it remains the last entry for 1910 in the *oeuvre catalogue*.¹ In this way Klee's system can easily lead the unwary to the wrong conclusions.

The self-reflective nature of Klee's art is also seen in his frequent references to his own earlier works, which are noted in subtitles such as 'after the drawing ...' or 'in the style of ...'² This process of retrospection is seen in its most enduring form in Klee's long-term preoccupation

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with the pictures that he made in Tunisia in 1914 and led to paintings such as *Scene aus Kairuan (Episode from Kairouan 1920, 35; p. 60)*. This was also the context that saw him develop his 'oil-transfer' technique, which allowed him to exploit his own fund of drawings more readily. By applying black oil paint to a sheet of paper and retracing an original drawing laid on top of it, he was able to reproduce selectively elements of his own pictorial vocabulary and enhance them by using watercolours to create an atmospheric sense of space (see, for instance, p. 69). Revisiting earlier works kindled new pictorial ideas and laid the foundations for innovation. His oil-transfer method, for example, paved the way for techniques of pictorial deconstruction, such as when Klee cut his source materials into sections and rotated the pieces by 90 or 180 degrees before transferring them to a new mount.³

Looking back in 1934

While the productive re-examination of earlier pictorial and compositional ideas always played an important part in Klee's work, this reconsideration took on a particular significance after his involuntary return to Switzerland in 1933. At that moment, more than at any other time in his artistic career, it became the mainstay of his creative work. Following the National Socialists' rise to power, in April 1933 Klee was suspended from his teaching post at the art academy in Düsseldorf. By late 1933 he realised that he had no future in Germany. His only option was to return to Switzerland. In exile, with no contact to the artistic circles in which he had moved hitherto, and thrown back on the constrained circumstances of his own living conditions in Bern, the

re-evaluation of earlier works provided him with a source of inspiration and artistic affirmation. In this context, however, there was also a darker undertone. This may be seen in Klee's return to his 'pointillist' technique, which had marked a highpoint in his artistic career in the early 1930s with paintings such as *Ad Parnassum (1932, 274; pp. 188–9)*. Whereas light materialised as colour in the dots of paint in those earlier works, in *Angst (Fear 1934, 202; p. 197)* made in 1934 – following his enforced departure from Germany – the rough surface of paint creates a diffuse realm, in which uncertainty and fear proliferate.

A pressing reason for retrospection came with the prospect of a major overview exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bern in February 1935, on which Klee, Max Huggler (Director of the Kunsthalle) and the collector Hanni Bürgi started work shortly after his return to Switzerland (see pp. 166–9). Klee returned to subjects, techniques and compositional structures that he had developed over the previous ten years, as though – with this show in mind – he wanted to work through his artistic repertoire once again on a different basis. With some paintings he produced a new larger-format version that was otherwise almost identical to the original work.

The oil painting *Blühendes (Flowering 1934, 199; p. 194)* was made specifically with the proposed retrospective at the Kunsthalle Bern in mind. In its eventual installation Klee placed it at the centre of a group of dynamic 'square paintings' made between 1926 and 1930 (p. 166). The painting of 1934 was a new version – rotated by 90 degrees – of the painting *Blühender Baum (Blossoming Tree 1925, 119)*.⁴ The later version, apart from some very slight differences, has the same structure as the painting of 1925; the colour spectrum is also largely the same, just a little

Way to the Ship

Gang zum Schiff

1935, 114
Oil, scratched drawing
and pen on primed cardboard
30 × 50

Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern.
Livia Klee Donation



cooler and with a greater luminescence. There is a significant difference in the format of the two paintings, with the 1935 version four times the size of the 1925 painting. From the outset that it should occupy a larger format was clear in the 1935 exhibition.

As a re-assessment of an earlier work, the 1935 painting marks the beginning of a lengthy phase during which Klee developed his colour-field paintings from his early years. In 1936, using a red-green spectrum of colours (as opposed to the brown and ochre spectrum), he painted *Blühendes (Flowering 1936, 24; p. 213)*. The colours, the composition, and the overall work all point to numerous earlier paintings. The use of the word 'New' in the title indicates a break with the past. In his first paintings on colour harmony such as *Harmonie (Harmony of White and Black 1923, 238; p. 118)*, Klee explored the subject and searching for new pictorial forms. In his 'square paintings', he added forms to the geometric grid and took inspiration from the architecture of the 1920s – as in *Bildarchitektur (Architecture Red, Yellow, Blue 1923, 80; p. 118)*. In his more comprehensible pictorial architecture (Städtebild) (*The Way to the Citadel [Pictorial Architecture] 1925, 119*) paintings he combined colour-field painting with the pointillist technique. In the process he divided the

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cooler and with a greater luminescence. However, there is a significant difference in the format of the two paintings: the 1934 version is almost four times the size of the 1925 painting. Clearly, Klee had intended from the outset that it should occupy a prominent position in the 1935 exhibition.

As a re-assessment of an earlier work, *Flowering* marked the beginning of a lengthy phase during which Klee revisited the geometric colour-field paintings from his early years at the Bauhaus in Weimar. In 1936, using a red-green spectrum of oils (complementing an earlier brown and ochre spectrum), he painted *Neue Harmonie* (*New Harmony* 1936, 24; p. 213). The colours, the composition and the title of this work all point to numerous earlier paintings on the subject of colour harmony, generally in association with musical acoustics. The inclusion of the word 'New' in the title indicates that, thirteen years after his first paintings on colour harmony such as *Harmonie aus Vierecken mit rot, gelb, blau, weiss und schwarz* (*Harmony of Rectangles with Red, Yellow, Blue, White and Black* 1923, 238; p. 118), Klee was still preoccupied with this subject and searching for new pictorial solutions. Elsewhere, looking back to his 'square paintings', he added triangular and trapezoid forms to the geometric grid and took the abstract pictorial and urban architecture of the 1920s – as in *Bildarchitektur rot, gelb, blau* (*Pictorial Architecture Red, Yellow, Blue* 1923, 80; p. 111) – and turned it into a spatially comprehensible pictorial architecture, as in *Der Weg zur Stadtbürg* (*Städtebild*) (*The Way to the Citadel [Picture of a City]* 1937, 137). In yet other paintings he combined colour-field painting with his own 'pointillist' technique. In the process he divided the grid of his 'square paintings'

into a small-scale, modular spatial structure with a flexible skin that seemed able to adapt to even the very slightest vibrations or atmospheric changes (e.g. *Künstliche Symbiose* [*Artificial Symbiosis*] 1934, 7).

The paintings *Ruhende Sphinx* (*Sphinx Resting* 1934, 210) and *Dame Daemon* (*Lady Demon* 1935, 115; p. 208) are enlargements of earlier subjects. Unlike *Flowering*, they were not made for the Bern exhibition but for the major retrospective presented at the Kunsthalle Basel towards the end of that same year.⁵ *Sphinx Resting* derives from the smaller *Siesta der Sphinx* (*Siesta of the Sphinx* 1932, 329). While the compositional structure of the two versions is almost identical, there are considerable differences in the use of colour, with restrained (earthy) browns and reds in the first version and a saturated blue-grey, red, grey-green and brown in the second.

Opinions are divided as to what may have prompted Klee to make larger-format versions of some of his motifs. Otto Karl Werckmeister interpreted it as a consequence of Klee's efforts to meet the demands of the art market, which was hungry for large, representative paintings of the kind that Picasso was producing.⁶ The fact that the experience of Picasso's major exhibition at Kunsthaus Zürich in 1932 made a deep impression on Klee and played an important part in his thinking has been fully documented.⁷ Meanwhile Jürgen Glaesemer deliberated as to whether the process of duplication in a larger format did not come at the potential cost of the motif 'descending into bland docility', and whether the mutation of drawing-based works into larger versions did not in fact detract from their artistic quality.⁸ However, it could also be said, in view of Klee's re-engagement with earlier motifs and

re-evaluation of earlier works provided him with a source of inspiration and artistic affirmation. In this context, however, there was also a darker undertone. This may be seen in Klee's return to his 'pointillist' technique, which had marked a highpoint in his artistic career in the early 1930s with paintings such as *Ad Parnassum* (1932, 274; pp. 188–9). Whereas light materialised as colour in the dots of paint in those earlier works, in *Angst* (*Fear* 1934, 202; p. 197) made in 1934 – following his enforced departure from Germany – the rough surface of paint creates a diffuse realm, in which uncertainty and fear proliferate.

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**Lady Demon**

Dame Daemon

1935, 115

Oil and watercolour on
primed burlap on cardboard
150 × 100

Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern

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Botanical Theatre

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compositions, that a change in the format was simply one of a number of options and a perfectly logical outcome of his active self-reflection.

Botanical Theatre

The process of reconsideration embodied in the painting *Botanisches Theater* (*Botanical Theatre* 1934, 219; p. 201) lasted for over ten years. In 1924 Klee listed a painting in his *oeuvre catalogue* with the number 198 and the title *Tropische Landschaft* (*Tropical Landscape*), which appears to be an early version of *Botanical Theatre*. This is one of the very rare exceptions for which he made a second entry for a reworked painting (in this case a decade later) and gave it a different title. Many of the formal and stylistic features of *Botanical Theatre* are still in keeping with Klee's work as it was in 1923 and 1924. Other features, such as the star-shaped flower motifs, emerged later and recall his floral paintings of 1925, which he himself later called 'Dynamoradiolaren'.⁹

Klee continued to work on his 1924 painting for some years. In May 1934 it arrived in Bern along with the other works from Dessau. It was clearly in need of repair: the colour of the unconventional under-painting – consisting of thick paint, applied directly from the tube, with a white ground and a thin, yellowish-brown glaze – had partially disintegrated. Klee did not attempt to return the painting to its earlier condition, but instead developed the pictorial idea by using greenish and brownish shading in watercolours to reinforce existing motifs or to create new ones. The painting contains a wealth of plant-like forms, which become actors or staffage on a mysterious stage shrouded in wan, nocturnal darkness. The painting's ultimate completion crowned

a process that had lasted a good decade and that was then reflected in the work's asking price of 5,000 Swiss francs at the Kunsthalle Bern exhibition – more than twice the price of other considerably larger paintings.¹⁰

Not unlike *Botanical Theatre*, the painting *Der Schöpfer* (*The Creator* 1934, 213), was also 'put aside for years' in his studio, as Klee noted in his *oeuvre catalogue*. The starting point for it had been the drawing *Schöpfer I* of 1930, which he initially copied using his oil-transfer process (*Schöpfer II* 1930, 35) and then reworked on canvas.¹¹ Evidently, he searched for a considerable length of time for a way of working in oils on the 'transferred' lines, until he came up with a method that satisfied him in 1934: instead of applying the paint with a brush, he used a palette knife to press the contours on the pink ground. This became a coloured space in its own right, on which the contours of the figure seemed to float like a separate entity. The delicate pink of the ground gives the composition a sunny air that matches the finely delineated figure of the Creator. At the same time, in a typical example of Klee's deliberate ambiguities, the awkward arm movements of the figure seem reminiscent of a bird with clipped wings and its clumsy feet are hardly divine. Nonetheless, the lightness of the figure's lines seems to make it hover in the air, so that it appears weightless and transcendental.

Return to 'fundamental research' at the Bauhaus

It may well have been Klee's re-engagement with the painting *Botanical Theatre* that prompted his return to the 'fundamental research' he had carried out for his 'Bildnerische Gestaltungslehre' (Notes on Pictorial

Walpurgis Night

Walpurgis nacht

1935, 121

Gouache on fabric on plywood

50.8 × 47

Tate, Purchased 1964

Headdress

Kopftracht

1935, 122

Watercolour on plaster-primed

burlap on cardboard

46.5 × 30

private collection

Creation) in connection with his teaching at the Bauhaus from 1926 to 1930. This body of material – which is today preserved at the Zentrum Paul Klee – consists of over 3,000 sheets.¹² Klee had already sorted these sheets into a particular order at the Bauhaus in Dessau and took them with him to Bern in folders when he left Germany. The motif of the plant-like *Dynamoradiolaren* in *Botanical Theatre* goes back to the chapter on the dynamisation – through rotation – of geometric and planimetric elements. The original series of *Dynamoradiolaren* drawings, made in 1926 at the Bauhaus, had been the first productive realisation of one of his theoretically grounded principles of artistic formation. Twelve years later Klee once again took advantage of his fundamental research, this time in the formation of schematic stick figures, whose ‘patterns of movement’ are based on the principle of rotation schemas. Works such as *Nach rechts, nach links* (*To the Left to the Right* 1938, 51) and *Tänze vor Angst* (*Dances Caused by Fear* 1938, 90) point to the central importance of this renewed, almost playful return in his late work to the principles he had taught his students at the Bauhaus.

Elements from the ‘Notes on Pictorial Creation’ appear in many other paintings in all kinds of variations. From 1937 onwards they feature regularly in Klee’s pictorial vocabulary, as, for instance, in *Reicher Hafen* (*Rich Harbour* 1938, 147; pp. 226–7). The same can be said of his renewed interest in the possibilities of the pictorial ‘polyphony’, which he had explored in the section in the Notes on structure. His concern in that section had been to discover ways of portraying simultaneous processes in a visual composition that could compare with the use of polyphony in music. One method was to superimpose



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50.8 × 47

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Kopftracht

1935, 122

Watercolour on plaster-primed

burlap on cardboard

46.5 × 30

Private collection



dynamic webs of lines tracing the movements of a conductor's baton. In 1931 he made two drawings according to this principle. Following his return to Bern, Klee seamlessly reconnected with this linear, 'polyphonic' compositional method, but now transposed it into representations of imaginary physiognomies or natural events.

Places of remembrance

The examples cited here contain references to earlier pictures or principles of composition worked out in the past, and indeed Klee's late work as a whole seems to be imbued with an aura of remembrance. As though in antithesis to the cramped quarters of the small three-room apartment on Kistlerweg in Bern, which served as both Klee's home and his studio (p. 236), he created realms of memory that were boundless, both geographically and temporally. Part of this was found in his notion of the Orient as an imaginary place, which was now inspired by thoughts of Egypt, rather than of Tunisia.¹³ In 1928 Klee's last major trip abroad had taken him to Egypt, where he mainly made sketches and barely any of the sort of coloured works that he had produced in Tunisia. However, in the years to come he worked all the more intensely on his impressions of Egypt, exploring the geometry of the architecture and the landscape as well as the mysterious history of that country, in works such as *Nekropolis* (*Necropolis* 1929, 91) and *In der Strömung sechs Schwellen* (*In the Current Six Thresholds* 1929, 92; pp. 144, 145). Even after his involuntary return to Switzerland, Egypt still resonated in Klee's work, albeit in a less rigorous, enigmatic form; instead, it seems both more fanciful and more down to earth. It is as though images of Egypt

were coming to the surface in a steadily flowing current of memories, often with an ironic undertone, as in the case of *Ruhende Sphinx* (*Sphinx Resting* 1934, 210), or in the form of imaginary places and fictionalised memories, as in *Legende vom Nil* (*Legend of the Nile* 1937, 215).

In the last years of his life Klee's own childhood became another locus of memory. His earliest drawings, which his sister had kept, had already been an important discovery for him in the early 1900s, and he had carefully preserved them ever since as his first artistic works. In Bern, once Klee had gone into exile, they again became an important source of inspiration. A touching outcome of this is the group of angel paintings, as they are generally known, which arose from the pictures of the Christ Child with wings that he had drawn at the age of four or five.¹⁴ Although now, in later life, his health was seriously impaired, the angels opened up a path for Klee to his childhood self, giving him a renewed self-confidence that fired his artistic productivity. Shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War, by which time he had already addressed the Nazis' militarisation and brutalisation of the youth of Germany in drawings such as *Schlacht unter Kindern* (*Battle among Children* 1938, 435) and *Kinder spielen Angriff* (*Children Playing Attack* 1940, 13), he now engaged with an ideal vision of childhood as an artistic utopia of unregulated spontaneity, a realm of play and high spirits, dreams and fantasies. In terms of artistic formation, this 'return to the past' was very much in keeping with his determination to 'forget' his own formal and technical skills, which he had done so effectively in the 1920s and 1930s. Many of the works Klee produced at that time have a spontaneity of gesture and haptic materiality that call to mind

children's scribbles or finger painting. This technical 'simplification' went hand in hand with a childlike delight in phantasmagorias and the grotesque.

Reminiscences of the past

During the three last years of his life Klee sustained a barely credible level of productivity. In the year 1939 alone he added over one thousand works to his *oeuvre catalogue*. Klee was working unstopably against time and, until very shortly before his death, he felt a continuously increasing urge to produce ever more work. He described his own output as little short of an uncontrollable automatism in a letter to his son Felix: 'I don't even have enough time for my main business ... Productivity is accelerating in range and at a highly accelerated tempo; I can no longer keep up with these children of mine. They run away with me.'¹⁵

By this time Klee's artistic production was entirely focused on the here and now. As he prepared for an exhibition planned for February 1940 at Kunsthaus Zürich, he therefore decided – very much against the wishes of the Kunsthaus – to show only works that he had made since 1935 (see pp. 216–21). He pitted the abundance of his current artistic creativity against his debilitated physical condition, and he was determined that these last works should be seen not as a conclusion but rather as a new departure leading into a future beyond death. Even in this phase of incessant production there are still numerous reminiscences and references to earlier works. However, these now have little to do with the 'methodical' artistic retrospection

of 1934. Instead, they seem more like isolated traces of memories, forming moments of calm within a torrent of creativity that the artist himself was barely able to control.

Among these scattered memories of the past, certain works stand out. They seem almost like retrospective summations and include compositions such as *Glas-Fassade* (*Glass Façade* 1940, 288; p. 234), Klee's last 'square painting'. Executed in an experimental technique – wax colours and pastels on burlap – that he had only perfected in recent years, the immaterial sphere of light materialises in the translucence of the colours on the distinctive texture of the picture surface. As both solid matter and a transparent window, this work seems to embody the miracle of painting.

One of the most remarkable creations from the last year of Klee's life is a still life that was in his studio on Kistlerweg at the time of his death; his son Felix Klee gave it the title *Das letzte Stilleben* (*The Last Still Life*, p. 235). Klee had all but finished this painting in 1939, but continued to work on it and to add to it. With a poetic undertone, it recalls the figures that had inhabited his compositions in recent years: in the lower left *Engel, noch hässlich* (*Angel Still Ugly* 1940, 26) gazes out of the picture, while the wooden sculpture appears to be grinning and waving to the viewer. Meanwhile, the delicate still life of flowers in the upper-left corner is literally ambiguous: turned upside down, it proves to be a picture of the two stick figures riding unicycles from the drawing *Fliehen auf Rädern* (*Fleeing on Wheels* 1939, 653). With these references to works from 1939 and 1940 in his last painting Paul Klee paid his respects to his own drawings. For in Klee's oeuvre drawings

New Harmony

Neue Harmonie

1936, 24

Oil on canvas

93,6 × 66,3

Solomon R.

Guggenheim Museum,

New York



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are never subservient and they are rarely mere sketches or studies; they are, almost always, fully fledged expressions of his artistic intent and pictorial thought processes.

The last paintings that Klee entered into his handwritten *oeuvre catalogue*, in May 1940, were two versions of *Gelbes Haus* (*Yellow House*) numbered 365 and 366. Following this, he left Bern to take a cure in Locarno-Muralto, where he died not long afterwards on 29 June. The catalogue numbers of these paintings were far from a matter of chance: 1940 was a leap year. With the completion of 366 compositions Klee had thus lived up to his maxim of 'nulla dies sine linea' ('no day without a line') and had symbolically finished his work for that year. With the subject of these two last entries in his catalogue recalling the artistic friendship of Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin in the *Yellow House* in Arles, Klee also paid homage one last time to his own artist friends, with whom he had only been spiritually connected since his return to Switzerland: Wassily Kandinsky, Lyonel Feininger, Josef and Anni Albers, Alexei von Jawlensky and others. He had painted his first version of this motif, *Das gelbe Haus* (*The Yellow House* 1914, 26), in 1914 and had given it to Alexei von Jawlensky, marking the beginning of a lifetime's exchange of pictures between the two artists.¹⁶ Twenty-six years later Klee, by then seriously ill, recalled this symbolic beginning of a community of like-minded artists that had had the greatest significance for his own artistic development.