

## **Paul Klee: Battle Scene from the Comic Fantastic Opera 'The Seafarer'**

Hello, welcome to Art and English with David. The place to be to improve your English with interesting podcasts about art and artists. I'm David, an English tutor and art lover.

Now, some people criticise modern art by saying 'a kid could have done it.'  
But they don't look at children's paintings and say: 'An adult couldn't have done it!'

The Swiss-German painter Paul Klee believed children are great artists.  
And he aimed to capture a sense of their freedom and imagination in his work.

Admired for his ability to balance simplicity and complexity, Klee made a huge impact on modern art. He offered a different way of making abstract art, that was more playful, flexible and full of joy.

In today's episode, we'll discover how Klee rewrote the rules of abstract art.  
How he played with fish as a professor at the Bauhaus.  
And how he painted symphonies of colour in the darkest of times.

Klee made some interesting titles for his artworks. 'Battle Scene from the comic Fantastic Opera: The Seafarer' Is a painting from 1923. We'll call it just 'the Seafarer', which means the sailor.

It's a painting that combines Klees philosophy and musical understanding of life, and shows us how abstract art doesn't have to be so serious.

If you like the podcast, please give it five stars in your podcast app to keep me motivated.  
There is a link to a transcript of the show in the episode description and that important link to an image of the painting, the seafarer, there as well.

Ok, let's go!

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'A line is just a dot that went for a walk.'

These are the famous words of The Swiss-German artist Paul Klee.

He devoted a lot of time to studying the basic elements of artwork:

Line, tone, colour, shape.

But he began with the dot.

The moment your pen touches the page, you have a dot.

But the dot is still and dead

It needs movement to come alive.

As you move the pen across the page, you move the dot along its walk.

And it leaves a trail of everywhere it's been, that gives it energy and character.

Now the line is still too, but when our eyes follow its path, they follow a journey in time and space. Klee saw that artworks exist in time, like music.

Imagine we put our pen on the page and start to draw a spiral going outwards from the centre point. Mathematically, a spiral is a curve that gets further and further away from its centre point.

But Klee realised that we see a spiral as something different. If we perceive its movement from the outside into the centre, we see it as an increase in tension, like a screw getting tighter.

If we perceive its movement from the inside out, as we drew it, we feel it as a release of tension growing outwards and more free.

Now, imagine we draw a line from left to right.

And imagine we can put our finger on the middle of that line and push it up so that we now have an arrow pointing up, like an upside down letter V.

If we draw another line across the bottom of the arrow, we make a triangle.

Mathematically, a triangle is just three points connected by three lines.

But Klee believed that triangles contain the idea of a forwards force, like our finger pushing up.

A triangle seems to be pointing somewhere.

Just like a line shows the movement of a dot around the page, and a spiral seems to turn inwards or outwards, a triangle, according to Klee, seems to be driving forward.

They are all expressions of movement.

Movement was the most elemental part for Klee.

In life, movement is the life force that unites time and space, gives things shape and changes their shape.

Nature is in constant movement. It's there in the growth of plants, the currents of wind and water and the mountains pushing upwards into the sky.

Klee believed the artist should connect to this force at the heart of nature, and let it flow through them, into their work.

In this way, nature uses the artist to reveal itself to us.

But the artist needs to know the basics first.

As a musician composes a piece of music using melody, harmony and rhythm, a painter composes using line, shape and colour.

They are the tools of the painter, and the better they understand them, the more prepared they are to channel this mysterious life force.

Klee prepared his students for such a noble task at the Bauhaus, the legendary school of design begun in Dessau in Germany, where he was a professor. The Bauhaus aimed to unite art and design in a radical new way, and bring modernism to the masses.

While teaching, he literally wrote the book on how to make art. His Pedagogical Sketchbook is a collection of his lectures, writing and diagrams that he taught to students as the Master of Form in Dessau.

It's like an instruction manual that guides students through the stages of his art-making philosophy. It's called a sketchbook because it's full of his own sketches, which he used to illustrate his ideas.

In it, he uses a wonderful way of combining abstract theory with practical examples. Like how he compares composing a painting to playing chess. Just as a player must consider the consequences of every move, a painter must calculate how each decision interacts with the painting as a whole.

His methods were unorthodox. He once encouraged his students to think beyond gravity, by observing fish floating freely in his huge aquarium. He did playful things like turn the lights on and off to make them hide and reappear.

The experiment illustrated ideas from chapter four of the sketchbook, which was about how lines can communicate physical forces. Klee believed water was a place between the real world and the spiritual world, where we begin to break free from the forces of gravity.

He goes into great detail about his theories of line, colour and shape and his personal philosophy which lies behind them. The Pedagogical Sketchbook has been described as 'an adventure in seeing' and it, along with Klee's other writings, was deeply influential on the Bauhaus and modern art of the 20th century.

The art historian Herbert Read even wrote that, in art theory : 'Klee occupies a position comparable to [Isaac] Newton's in the realm of physics'.

But those who knew him remember his spiritual side the most.  
It's not for nothing that he earned the nickname 'The Buddha of the Bauhaus'  
For his students, like the textile designer Annie Albers, he was a God.

So why did an artist who inspired such respect, who had such an incomparable understanding of visual design, and who spent much of his time in deep spiritual meditation, paint paintings that were so... childish?

If you look at almost any painting by the master Paul Klee, it could have come out of a children's picture book. They are full of fun characters made of abstract shapes, blocks of colour and spontaneity. They are remarkable for their variety and endless charm.

The critics at the time moaned that his work was decorative, not serious enough to be considered true art. They said, more or less, that 'a kid could have done it'

Before the Bauhaus, he was denied a job as a professor in Stuttgart, because his work was, in their words, too playful and feminine, which they considered a bad thing. They thought it was good for a child's bedroom wall, not for the gallery.

When the Nazis came to power, this childish quality put Klee in danger. They would show 33 of Klee's paintings in their famous 'degenerate art exhibition', which aimed to humiliate modern art. Degenerate means in decline or corrupted. Klee's childish works were seen by the Nazis as evidence of a sickness in the culture that they wanted to eliminate.

But the playful quality of Klee's work is what his admirers love. He's not the only modern artist who was inspired by children's artworks, but he was the most successful at recovering their sense of imagination and freedom.

Enjoyers of Klee's paintings know that they are not really childish, meaning silly and immature, but child-like in their innocence and simplicity.

In 1923, while teaching at the Bauhaus, Klee produced 'Battle Scene from the Comic Fantastic Opera 'The Seafarer'', which we'll call 'The Seafarer' for short.

It shows a column of moonlight coming down to illuminate a sparkling ocean and a group of characters engaged in battle.

To the right we have a trio of sea monsters, painted like easter eggs and not giving much of a fight. The fish at the back is staring blankly like he's on drugs. The heavy seal-like creature at the bottom can barely lift his pointy head. And the sea-snake in the middle is twisted in pain. It's just been poked in the mouth by our hero's spear, bleeding two perfect drops of orange blood.

A seafarer is someone who travels across the sea. The Seafarer from the title doesn't look too tough either. He's using his spear to balance on top of his tiny boat, like a circus performer, and his helmet looks like the top of a pineapple. He's not dressed to kill, but to star in a school play.

Klee imagined this scene and the opera entirely, although some people believe it may have been inspired by Sinbad the Sailor from the Arabian Nights. Klee was a wide reader of fiction, particularly the classics. He was also a lover of opera, and many of his paintings make little references to the stage, like stage curtains painted at the side of the canvas.

There is something stage-like in particular about this scene. There is a sense of depth. The s-shaped line of the sea cuts through the composition, dividing it into a sparkling ocean in the foreground, and a background that fades into darkness. The colours of our fighters too, lavender purple, warm reds and oranges stand out from the cool blue ocean.

It's a simple stage arrangement that lets our imagination fill in the gaps. There's something dreamlike as the figures emerge out of the darkness. Are we in the deep sea or outer space? And like every good play, the action takes centre stage. The larger drop of blood from the snake's mouth is positioned exactly in the middle of the picture.

It's a cartoon, but it's visually powerful. The action is unbelievable but it delights our eyes as the colours and shapes seem to dance and sing. Like all of Klee's works. It feels alive.

Klee's appreciation for the child-like in art goes back to his years as a struggling artist. Ten years before he was hired by the Bauhaus, he was living in a small flat in Munich with his wife Lily and young son Felix.

Unusually for the time, Klee was a househusband, cooking and cleaning for the family and caring for his son. He even kept a Felix log that documented all of his developments.

Like Paul, Lily Klee was a talented musician and she was busy giving piano lessons to provide a small income for the family.

There were the inevitable tensions. Klee wrote to Lily from Switzerland where he had taken Felix to visit his parents. 'Who's to do the housework - just me? That's not fair. Half a day, yes, but I can't give the whole day'

But they made it work. And he continued developing his art at the kitchen table. Back then, Klee thought he could make some money drawing satirical cartoons for political magazines.

His early talent was for line drawing, and, already in his thirties, he had been making slow progress in learning to paint in colour. He doubted his ability to make great art, so maybe illustration was the way to go.

But even the magazines didn't want him. And he was left with no choice but to continue with his artistic ambitions. Perhaps, rejected and frustrated in his miserable flat, and with a head full of worries, Klee watched his son drawing without a care in the world, and thought he would do the same.

Children naturally experiment with line and colour. At least until a certain age, they don't seem to be bothered about the real appearance of things. They create it for the fun of it.

A circle becomes an orange or the sun or a smiley face. A drawing that begins as a house can become a car or sky castle. Nothing is fixed and the meaning of shapes is constantly changing.

As Klee finally mastered colour and made some progress in his career, he also developed his ideas about the role of art and artists. He became convinced that children were closer to the source of creation and therefore better channel the mysterious life force that he believed runs through nature and through the hands of the artist.

He would write that 'The more helpless the child, the more instructive the artwork.' Suggesting that knowledge of the world and education corrupt this wonderful connection we have to creativity as children. The future of modern art, Klee believed, depended on recovering a childlike innocence.

Klee's idea of abstract art inspired by childhood play set him apart from the avant garde who were racing to produce pure paintings with no reference to the visible world.

Klee recognised that all art is abstract in a sense. Artists of the past had begun with a subject and combined abstract elements like colour and shape to produce an image.

Klee just reversed the process. He began playing with abstract elements, like a child, and if they started to look like something, so what?

For artists like Kandinsky, Klee's friend and eventual colleague at the Bauhaus, representation was holding back art from reaching its spiritual freedom. Other modernists believed purely abstract art would bring in a new age of political freedom.

The trouble is, as soon as you make a mark on the canvas, it starts to look like something. Avoiding representation at all costs can be very limiting.

True freedom for Klee, was to combine abstraction and representation as you like. He believed artists shouldn't follow some strict rules or ideology. An artist's focus should be on the deeper forces that create life and art, and they should aim to bring those forces to the surface in the most direct way.

It led him to his most famous realisation: 'Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible.'

If we look back at 'The Seafarer', we can see how these figures are just an excuse for Klee to experiment with line and colour. The characters are charming, but their charm is just part of the visual symphony Klee lays before us.

The seafarer is one of Klee's famous oil-transfer works that he started making at the Bauhaus. He first made the drawing in pencil on paper, then laid it on top of another piece of paper that was covered in oil paint.

When he drew over the lines of the drawing once more, it transferred the image in oil paint to a third piece of paper.

The result was an ink drawing with a very characteristic line that he was able to colour in with watercolours. The process allowed him to reproduce his free and spontaneous pencil drawings in a more permanent form.

It also gave a purer, less personal line. It's thin and precise. There is also a little bit of texture added by the paper where it rubs against the paper. Klee thought this integrated the drawing better with the paper behind it.

Although he admired spontaneity, Klee also valued precision. The oil transfer method gave him the best of both worlds. Freedom and control. Line drawing was Klee's most direct and natural way of expressing himself - over one third of his entire oeuvre is line drawings. He could now join his love of line with colour in a way that no other painter has been able to match.

Most of his paintings were small, not unlike drawings, which allowed for tighter control of the composition, and 'The Seafarer' is no exception.

His precision is on display in the delicately painted grid of coloured squares. Tone, how dark or light the colour, was another way Klee captured a sense of movement. The delicate transition of one square to the next forms a wave of colour in parallel to the wave of the ocean it overlaps.

The grid that our eyes glide along so effortlessly unifies the sea and sky but it also creates a great sense of depth. Not only are the characters floating on top of the sea, they are also floating on top of the background on which they are drawn.

You might recognise it as the strange feeling of looking into a fish tank, when the fish look flat and two dimensional in the three dimensional tank. Depth was just another artistic element for Klee to play with.

Another feature of grids is they are repetitive.

They produce a visual rhythm as we move from square to square.

This parallel was not lost on Klee, who as we mentioned was a talented musician.

In fact, he was one of the few artists to achieve mastery in more than one art, being able to play violin to a professional level.

Above all else he admired the music of Bach and Mozart. With Lily on the piano, the Klees would delight their guests in the evenings with their duets.

Felix Klee recalled that his father was so sensitive to music, that he once became almost hypnotised by a passing marching band, and started walking to the rhythm in a kind of trance.

Klee developed detailed theories about how the visual elements of artwork shared similarities with musical notes and rhythms. In this way he shared a lot in common with Kandinsky, whose goal was to paint visual music.

We can see evidence of Klee's musicality in the Seafarer. The grid, as we mentioned, creates a kind of rhythm. Against this rhythm, we more easily notice the variations in the squares, as they narrow or widen, as their colours deepen or lighten.

The grid is a structure, like a musical stave, on which the notes are placed. We can think of the seafarer and monsters like short melodies, with the triangular patterns along their bodies suggesting an energetic counter rhythm.

Yet if you look at the sea monsters, you see the coloured bands along their bodies sometimes align with the blue squares of the sea behind them. Unlike the seafarer, whose body and boat are quite separate, the monsters are visually more unified with the sea in which they live.

In our orchestra, we might represent the Seafarer with a heroic trumpet melody that cuts through the many layers of harmonies. With his warm orange legs and blood red spear set against the dark ocean, he clearly comes from the land of the living.

Some of these musical metaphors are more persuasive than others, and Klee never suggested one art form could be translated directly into the other.

Music was held by many abstract artists as the purest art form because it is the least representational. But as we've seen, Klee saw pure abstraction as a false standard.

For Klee, the comparison with music revealed how both music and visual art were motivated by the same underlying forces, in different but complementary ways, and how these forces could be expressed to their fullest.

Klee taught at the Bauhaus for over ten years, where he shared his ideas and outlook with staff and students.

At first he was a nervous professor, which could be why he prepared his teaching materials and theories so carefully.

He also gave talks and wrote for publications throughout his career that brought his ideas to a wider public.

To those who admired him, He offered an approach to art making that was more playful, questioning and sceptical of the high seriousness that surrounded the art of the time.

No doubt, the popularity of the Bauhaus Buddha was helped by his unorthodox approach to teaching: he was the only professor not to give grades.

After Klee left the Bauhaus, he taught for a short time in Dusseldorf.

But his appreciation for childlike art, not to mention that of non-european cultures and the mentally ill, made him a target for the Nazis as they came to power. The work of Klee, and his whole artistic circle, was called degenerate.

They spread rumours that Klee was a 'Gallician Jew' and questioned his German ancestry. In 1933, he was forced to return to Switzerland for his family's safety.

His art wasn't always welcome in his native city Bern either.

Critics said it was too intellectual and not suitable for local people.

After one exhibition, a local politician complained that Klee had painted a picture of cows, but he hadn't painted enough space for the number of cows in the field.

However, Klee's name was highly regarded outside of Switzerland. In Bern he received visits from Picasso and his old friend Kandinsky, among many others, who recognised his position as one of the leading lights of modern art.

Despite his reduced position and cultural isolation, Klee's remaining years were extremely productive. In 1939, he produced over 1,200 works, a new record for an artist who carefully catalogued every work he ever made.

Bigger, sadder and more urgent. Many of his paintings in his last years reflect his struggle with poor health and a confrontation with death. But many of them are still as joyful and spontaneous as earlier works like the Seafarer. In paying attention to the basic elements of art, Klee had discovered a source of joy that lasted throughout the worst periods of his life.

Theories are all very interesting, but the ultimate test for art is how it makes us feel. Klee's paintings are so popular because they make us happy. They bring us back to the present moment and share with us some of their timeless charm. Something is still being transmitted through those colours, lines and shapes.

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'The Seafarer' is currently at the Kunstmuseum Basel, Basel Switzerland, where many of Klee's works are. I believe the largest collection is the Paul Klee Foundation in Bern Switzerland, where Klee grew up, and there are Klees in big museums around the world.

