

Press release

Paul Klee and the Secrets of Nature

21 October 2022 - 12 February 2023

An exhibition organised and produced by the Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona, in collaboration with the Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, and sponsored exclusively by the Fundación BBVA.

Curated by Martina Millà, head of exhibitions at the Fundació Joan Miró, in collaboration with Fabienne Eggelhöfer, chief curator at the Zentrum Paul Klee.

The Fundació Joan Miró and the Fundación BBVA present *Paul Klee and the Secrets of Nature*, a show about the importance of the study of the natural world in the artist's work

Curated by Martina Millà, head of exhibitions at the Fundació Joan Miró, in collaboration with Fabienne Eggelhöfer, chief curator at the Zentrum Paul Klee, the exhibition highlights the undying fascination that the Swiss-born German artist felt for the exploration of natural phenomena and his desire to embrace and become one with their internal laws.

Sponsored exclusively by the Fundación BBVA, *Paul Klee and the Secrets of Nature* plots a chronological journey – divided into four areas – through his development as an artist and pedagogue, from his formative period to the synthesis of his theoretical approaches in his mature stage, while also examining the impact of the First World War and the definition of a theoretical framework during his years of teaching at the Bauhaus.

Visitors will be able to learn about this aspect of Klee's work from more than 200 pieces, among which are paintings, drawings, pedagogical documentation and natural objects mainly from the Zentrum Paul Klee's holdings. Within the context of the current revision of the canon of modern art, the monographic account is interrupted by incorporating a number of works by women artists that were either contemporaneous with Klee or had similar sensitivities to his, such as Gabriele Münter, Emma Kunz and Maruja Mallo. Finally, Sandra Knecht is the artist charged with creating an installation to close the show.

The project is completed by a broad public and social programme of activities for different educational stages, families and the general public, as well as a catalogue that reproduces a conversation with Knecht and also contains essays by Millà and Eggelhöfer, and one of Klee's fundamental texts about the study of nature.

*For the artist, dialogue with nature remains a conditio sine qua non.
The artist is a man, himself nature and a part of nature in natural space.*

Paul Klee.
Ways to Study Nature, 1923

Barcelona, 19 October 2022. Throughout his life, the Swiss-born German artist Paul Klee (1879-1940) felt an undying fascination for the observation of nature. For him, the contemplation of natural phenomena was an art in its own right, which allowed him to go beyond the world of the apparent in order to understand their intrinsic dynamics and to create works based on them.

Curated by Martina Millà, head of exhibitions at the Fundació Joan Miró, the exhibition *Paul Klee and the Secrets of Nature* examines the link the artist had with the natural environment, in which he found not only a field of study and a pedagogical model, but also a source of inspiration and a vital refuge. In collaboration with the Zentrum Paul Klee in Bern and with advice from its chief curator, Fabienne Eggelhöfer, the show also aims to demonstrate just how important the exploration of natural phenomena was for the formation and development of an artist like Klee, one of the most outstanding artists of the European avant-garde and perhaps one of the most surprising ones to rediscover through the lens of nature itself.

Sponsored exclusively by the Fundación BBVA, the exhibition unfolds into four areas that propose a chronological journey through Klee's holistic view of nature, from his formative stage right up to his final artistic one. The Zentrum Paul Klee's collection is the most important archive of the artist's drawings and pictorial works. The Zentrum Paul Klee also conserves his library and the natural objects that interested him and accompanied his research. The bulk of the more than 200 pieces on display in the exhibition are from these collection, while the rest are contributions from other outstanding international private collections and institutions. Within the context of the current revision of the canon and as part of the effort to recover the names and careers of artists silenced by the official account of the history of art, each section includes a work by a woman artist, of whom some were contemporaneous with Klee, such as Gabriele Münter (1877-1962), Emma Kunz (1892-1963) and Maruja Mallo (1902-1995), while others were or are aligned with some of his artistic approaches, such as Sandra Knecht (Switzerland, 1968).

This project falls within the framework of a line of exhibitions organised in collaboration with other monographic museums of major artists of the avant-gardes. Based on the Fundació Joan Miró's collection, the links between the two institutions will also result in a Miró exhibition focusing mainly on the large format works that were made possible by the artist's new studio in Palma de Mallorca from 1956, which the Zentrum Paul Klee in Bern will host from January to May 2023.

Four stages to achieve a natural way of seeing

In his formative years, Paul Klee's curiosity for the origin of form and of artistic expression led him to meticulously study his most immediate environments: the outskirts of Bern and the family garden. The plants, animals, landscapes, geological formations and atmospheric and physical phenomena that he examined in his various places of residence and also while on excursions and trips strengthened his relationship with nature and had an impact on his unique poetics. The first area of the show presents the importance of the study of nature to the discovery of this artistic personality based on early drawings done between 1883 and 1911, among which is his first documented drawing, done when he was just four years old. In this selection, Klee dialogues with two major artistic legacies: naturalist drawing, which he was taught during his school years and which shaped his ability to pay attention to the visible; and classical culture and its internal order, which he discovered during his trip to Italy in 1901, filtered by the reading of J. W. von Goethe, and which encouraged him to disentangle the even more complex order inherent to the natural world.

Paul Klee's interest in discovering the dynamics of nature, and the grammar of art that he began to elaborate from his observations, gradually developed in the years between the First World War and his arrival at the Bauhaus as a teacher. 'Trip to Tunisia, and the First World War. Nature as an Enigma and an Escape (1912-1920)' is the title of the second area of the show, which brings together oil paintings, watercolours and drawings, in which the contemplation of nature became a visionary instrument for coping with the tough moments that he had the misfortune to endure. Standing out in this room are works like *Glühende Landschaft* (Glowing Landscape, 1919), an example of Klee's total landscape, where the artist aimed to represent not only the motif, but also the connectivity of organic, atmospheric and geological elements. Belonging to the same historical context as these is another oil painting included in this area: *Abstrakt* (Abstract, 1914) by the German artist Gabriele Münter, a member of the avant-garde group *Der blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider) of which Paul Klee also formed part during his time in Munich, until the outbreak of the First World War.

This baggage and his careful reading of books like *The Metamorphosis of Plants* by J. W. von Goethe together served as the basis for his courses at the Bauhaus, during the years of theoretical consolidation of the first avant-gardes. Entitled 'Teaching at the Bauhaus. The Analysis of Natural Phenomena (1921-1931)', the third area of the show presents around 70 pieces, among which are works, pedagogical materials and collections of natural objects such as preserved plant specimens and seashells, which provided him with a field of study. His works from this period and his theoretical compendium both manifest his reflections stemming from his contemplation of the internal laws of nature – movement, growth, recurrence, conformation, which he turned into the basis of his creative process and teaching programme. When Klee taught these notions at home, he would often invite students to spend time observing fish in his aquarium, just as he would do. To evoke the philosophy of these teachings, the design of this exhibition space reconstructs Klee's aquarium by displaying works containing fish. The works brought together in this area have

already transcended the apparent aspects of nature in order to compose themselves according to their internal principles, and that is what he encouraged his students to look for. Obeying these laws are titles like *Vor dem Blitz* (Before the Blitz, 1923), *Klang der südlichen Flora* (Harmony of Southern Flora, 1927) and *Gemischtes Wetter* (Unsettled Weather, 1929), where nature is represented by its constituent forces. These works dialogue with one of the characteristic geometric drawings by the Swiss artist and healer Emma Kunz, whose practices precisely flowed from using the energy underlying matter.

Finally, in his last stage, Paul Klee carried on working on these topics in a mature synthesis. They also became an artistic refuge when faced with the challenge of living the latter years of his life with a degenerative disease. So, the area 'Synthesis and Identification. The Last Period (1932-1940)' shows how, in the final stretch of Klee's life, which was highly productive despite his fragile state of health, his understanding of the principles of nature and his communion with it reached the peak of their expression. All of this is clear to see in works like *Der Winter kommt* (Winter is Coming, 1939), where he uses his fingers to paint, arriving at his so sought-after transcendence of the dualism between subject and object: is body becoming one with nature through the pictorial medium.

The artist of today is more than an improved camera; he is more complex, richer and wider. He is a creature on the Earth and a creature within the whole, that is to say, a creature on a star among stars.

Paul Klee.
Ways to Study Nature, 1923

Also presented in this last room is *Protozoarios* (Protozoans, 1981), a later work by the Spanish surrealist painter Maruja Mallo, who was interested in portraying the potentiality of natural shapes – flowers, shells, fruit or fantastical hybridisations of living organisms – and, like Klee, continued painting them right to the very end. The exhibition concludes with an installation by the contemporary Swiss artist Sandra Knecht. She was born in the same canton as Klee and advocates rural life as part of her practice. To establish a dialogue with Klee, Knecht makes a reflection on the disease that the artist suffered from, understood as a natural process. The resulting installation is entitled *Dark Night (Home is a Foreign Place)* and includes photographs, sculptures and an audiovisual piece referring to the natural world and rural tradition, as well as drawings by Klee, and photographs by Francesc Català-Roca of the natural objects that abounded in Joan Miró's studio. Pro Helvetia has participated in Knecht's project as a collaborating institution.

The show beyond the exhibition rooms

The project is accompanied by a catalogue that reproduces a broad selection of the show's works and includes a curatorial text by Martina Millà and an essay signed by Fabienne Eggelhöfer. The catalogue is completed by a conversation between Myriam Dössenger, a researcher at the Zentrum Paul Klee, and the artist Sandra Knecht, as well as a pedagogical manifesto written by Paul Klee in 1923 entitled *Ways to Study Nature*.

The starting point for the public and social programme linked to the exhibition is Paul Klee's interest in, and curiosity for, different artistic disciplines (painting, drawing, music, architecture, etc.) as well as natural and physical phenomena. The programme has activities for different educational stages, families and the general public, with proposals inside and outside the Fundació offered in collaboration with other academic and cultural institutions. Among other activities, this programme includes a naturalist drawing course by Marta Chirino, Gemma París and Katerin Carballares in collaboration with the Jardí Botànic de Barcelona, a family workshop for capturing natural sounds, and an ecopoetry cycle in which the Argentinian artist Flor Braier will present poetry by Marosa di Giorgio and Mary Oliver, two authors whose works revolve around the world of nature. Functioning as a living, growing organism that is nourished by diverse contributions, this show also has a collaborative digital magazine and a physical participatory space that comes alive through entertaining offerings and a documentation hub with referents, curiosities and echoes of the imaginary of Paul Klee.

By examining the artist's special experience of natural phenomena, the exhibition *Paul Klee and the Secrets of Nature* – open to the public until 12 February 2023 – also offers visitors an insight into how contemporary society has constructed its view of the natural world. In the words of its curator, Martina Millà: 'at a time when, facing imminent planetary collapse, there is speculation about survival strategies [...] we would like to see this project as an exercise that can help us reposition ourselves by revisiting that period which marked the start of the problematisation of our gaze and of our current understanding of the phenomena of nature. Visitors can find a great opportunity to rethink their relationship with artistic practices connected with the agenda of modernity and with a planet subjected to an unstoppable process of ecosystem and biodiversity destruction; a planet that has nevertheless been the sounding board and a canvas on which human creativity has been unleashed.'

Images and digital dossier in our virtual Press Office www.fmirobcn.org/press and via this link [Paul Klee and the Secrets of Nature](#)

Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona, Communication and Press Office: press@fmirobcn.org (34) 934 439 070