

Jim M. Jordan, *Paul Klee and Cubism*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984. xxiv + 233 pp., 81 illus., \$77.00 (cloth)

Andrew Kagan, *Paul Klee/Art & Music*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1983. 176 pp., 82 illus., \$34,50 (cloth)

Mark A. Cheetham

Volume 12, Number 1, 1985

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1073702ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073702ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Cheetham, M. A. (1985). Review of [Jim M. Jordan, *Paul Klee and Cubism*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984. xxiv + 233 pp., 81 illus., \$77.00 (cloth) / Andrew Kagan, *Paul Klee/Art & Music*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1983. 176 pp., 82 illus., \$34,50 (cloth)]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 12(1), 83–84. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073702ar>

Werenskiöld notes that earlier within the same year, Aby Warburg, in *Kunst Und Künstler*, had referred to the graphic art of the Late Middle Ages as 'expressionistisch.' She adds as well that, in the 19th century, the 'Expressionist School of modern painters' is employed in the *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* to describe the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. None the less, Werenskiöld fails to draw attention to the problematical nature of a term that can be used so broadly.

Werenskiöld's methodology operates on a 'first come, first serve' basis. Thus an artist is a 20th-century Expressionist if so labeled by contemporary critics experimenting with a new term. Equally of importance is the artist's stated commitment to expression, even though this idea had been bandied about by artists throughout the 19th century. Within this framework, Werenskiöld is able to trace an international Expressionist movement that is dependent upon Matisse as its star performer.

A section of the first chapter is given over to the examination of Matisse's 'Notes d'un peintre,' published in 1908. Matisse's belief in the expressive and therapeutic qualities of art is given much prominence. Werenskiöld differentiates between Matisse and his teacher Gustave Moreau, also an aficionado of expression, by drawing attention to Matisse's precision of the term. It is quite remarkable that the author confuses the fact that the term being discussed here is *expression* and not *Expressionism*.

In the same chapter, the author reveals that the term Expressionism employed in the British press in 1910 is 'naturally associated with Matisse's concept of expression' by the European mainland, especially in Scandinavia where the foreign students of Matisse had disseminated the term. This is corroborated by the fact that in March 1911, the Scandinavian art historian Carl David Moselius employed the term Expressionism in his discussion of the young school of French and Scandinavian painting emanating from Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh and Matisse. He saw this work as being in opposition to the sensibilities associated with Impressionism.

In view of this knowledge, one can then assume rightly that the term is implicitly a synonym for Post-

Impressionism. Werenskiöld does not refute this fact. However, she props her argument for Expressionism – in fact an international Expressionism – by calling attention to certain stylistic similarities, whether expressed in words or in actual images, that constitute for her an artistic movement.

Even in the face of her abundant documentation one recognises that it is the call for the rejection of Impressionism that binds the divergent artists and critics. In essence, they are perpetuating and expanding upon the theories expounded by Rousseau, Kant, the Schlegels and Bergson. What we witness is the exaltation of the emotional and instinctual aspects of humankind. There is no set program for this movement other than the refusal to take part in an art that represents the world without paying close attention to the psychological nature of its human filter.

Werenskiöld's text, flawed by its lack of attention to philosophical issues, is, none the less, an important addition to the literature devoted to Expressionism. It is extremely well-researched, revealing many 20th-century sources for the dissemination of the term. Werenskiöld's final and longest chapter dedicated to the Scandinavian artists involved in this new art, be it Post-Impressionism, is an important reminder of the myriad of artists that are often overlooked in a star system. Werenskiöld arouses our interest in this body of artists and critics whose sensitivity to concepts born on foreign soil resulted in their enthusiastic acceptance and promulgation.

R. BELLA RABINOVITCH
Montreal

JIM M. JORDAN *Paul Klee and Cubism*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984. xxiv + 233 pp., 81 illus., \$77.00 (cloth).

ANDREW KAGAN *Paul Klee/Art & Music*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1983. 176 pp., 82 illus., \$34.50 (cloth).

One sign of an artist's critical acceptance is the publication of book-length studies on particular aspects of his or her work. Even though Paul Klee's art has exercised writers

since the 1920s, his status as a leading twentieth-century artist, at least according to this measure, has only recently become secure through studies like these by Jordan and Kagan, which build on the standard Klee criticism of the 1950s and 1960s. The specificity and sophistication of these new books demonstrate the maturity that Klee scholarship has attained.

Klee was part of mainstream European modernism for most of his life, but – with the exception of a brief affiliation with the Blaue Reiter group – he was not one to join artists' movements. Perhaps because his art defies easy categorization, historians have frequently tried to understand Klee through his relation to movements like Symbolism, Expressionism and Surrealism or to an institution like the Bauhaus. *Paul Klee and Cubism* follows this method: Jordan's detailed account of Cubism's importance to Klee from 1912 to 1926 (the middle third of his career) provides numerous insights into individual works, Klee's stylistic development and his methodical assimilation of sources.

The first chapters survey the young Klee's reactions to Impressionism (which interested him mostly for its tonal range) and Symbolism (whose Neo-Romantic mysticism he always retained) and thus put down a foundation for our understanding of Klee's first serious flirtation with Cubism in 1912. These opening chapters are somewhat slow – as were Klee's beginnings – but significant claims follow. Jordan shows that Klee 'understood Cubism progressively as a new kind of shape, a new relationship between shapes, and finally as a new way of composition,' in short, that Cubism was much more important to Klee's art than most critics have allowed. We are told what Cubist paintings Klee knew through exhibits, dealers and through his famous visit to Robert Delaunay in 1912, and, more importantly, just how he absorbed this new art. Jordan then examines Klee's 1913 output, his use of Picasso and Braque's highly analytic style and his inklings of the synthetic phase just before World War I severed artistic contact between France and Germany. Klee was fluent in the new Cubist form language by 1913, and since his military duty did not come until 1917-18, he was able to experiment immediately. Klee used

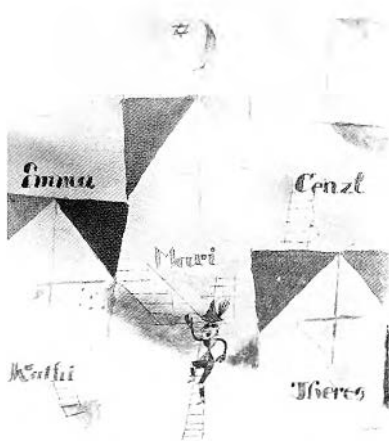


FIGURE 4. Paul Klee, *The Bavarian Don Giovanni*, 1919. Watercolour, 22.5 × 21.3 cm. Kagan, fig. 40.

typically Cubist shapes and the *passage* technique of joining spatial planes in his famous Tunisian watercolours of 1914. What Jordan makes clear is that the artist had been preparing for these 'break-throughs' for years by studying French Cubism. After detailing Klee's focus on colour in Cubism during and after the war, Jordan provides a consideration of how this 'independent, Cubist-related manner' was gradually replaced after 1926 by Bauhaus Constructivism. The result is a very complete picture of the vital connection between Paul Klee and Cubism.

According to Jordan, Klee was most interested in the formal aspects of this style, and his analysis of the artist's very individual version of Cubist composition relies heavily on a distinction between 'form' and 'content.' While this approach balances the preponderance of iconographic interpretation in Klee studies, it also forces the author to make some questionable statements about Cubism and Klee. We are told, for example, that the Cubists had 'an exclusive fascination with structure.' Do we then discount the lettered puns in many Cubist pictures by Picasso and Braque and the historical references found in their use of newspaper clippings? Certainly, Klee did not miss the potential for textual/visual interaction in an overtly Cubist piece like *The Bavarian Don Giovanni* (Fig. 4) of 1919, where the names of Klee's

former sweethearts sit in a grid of Delaunay-like windows while waiting, it seems, for the Don Giovanni figure who we take to be the artist himself. While Jordan is right to point out the inattention to the formal side of Klee's accomplishments, I think he leans too hard on what is ultimately an untenable separation of form and content. His main justifications for dividing these elements are the formalist view of Cubism and Klee's own propensity for analysis, 'for the rational breakdown of art into its factors.' This approach yields a clear vision of Klee's relation to Cubism, but it also largely ignores Klee's remarkable ability to synthesize seemingly disparate formal, social, personal, and theoretical factors in individual works. A case in point is *Old Sound*, the 'magic square' painting of 1925. Jordan states that these squares are 'cubistically composed by the familiar stepwise transitions,' and he is certainly correct. But it is Kagan who radically illuminates this and many other works by uncovering their references to music theory and showing how Klee engaged his profound knowledge of music to create 'polyphonic' compositions which irradiate the bifurcation of form and content.

Paul Klee: Art & Music is one of those rare books that completely revise the way we understand an artist's work. Because music was so central to Klee's creativity, Kagan's analyses lend new dimensions of understanding to the whole of this artist's complex *oeuvre*. The interest in music was, of course, common to many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century artists, particularly those interested in 'abstraction.' Kagan acknowledges this trend, but demonstrates Klee's uniquely knowledgeable and intense relation to musical composition. Klee was a semi-professional violinist before reaching his teens and actually taught counterpoint and polyphony during and after his Bauhaus period. Eighteenth-century music, and especially Mozart, provided him with nothing less than a model for what modern art could be. Kagan's book climaxes with a discussion of this goal's attainment in Klee's *magnum opus*, *Ad Parnassum* of 1932.

This large canvas was the result of twenty-five years of aesthetic experimentation and was the largest

work Klee had executed to date; as Kagan puts it, *Ad Parnassum* was the realisation of 'pictorial polyphony [as] a systematic means of controlling depth and color interaction.' The picture is a masterly synthesis of a colour movement, perhaps symbolic, from earth tones in the lower left to the blues surrounding the mountain top, a strong linear element that articulates the door, sun and mountain, and the metaphorical notion of an artistic journey up Parnassus. Cubist structure is clearly evident in the 'magic squares,' but it cannot be separated properly from 'content.' Kagan demonstrates convincingly that an eighteenth-century treatise on counterpoint, the *Gradus ad Parnassum*, by the Austrian theorist Johann Josef Fux, was Klee's inspiration for this and related paintings such as the *Old Sound* mentioned above. Like Mozart, Klee used Fux's ideas to develop a rigorous and teachable system of artistic composition. Klee's 'notes' were colour, line and tone, his 'staff' was the two-dimensional canvas; his goal, however, was the eye.

The second Chapter, 'Operatic Paintings: The Roles of Line and Poetry in Klee's Mature Art,' focuses on Klee's musical integration of line, colour and word. Before he mastered colour, Klee was a draughtsman, and the linear element always remained important in his art. Opera is an artform that must smoothly combine (at least) two elements, often disparate, text and score; as such it provided Klee with ideas about how to bring line and colour together with words into a pictorial whole. *The Bavarian Don Giovanni* exemplifies his 'operatic' solution. The image is a complex pun on the German colloquialism *zu fenstern* (to woo). Klee forms the requisite windows with his characteristically scratchy line. The coloured triangles suggest curtains and at the same time allude to Robert Delaunay's window series. Finally, the characters from Mozart's opera are replaced by printed names from Klee's love life and a fanciful drawing of the artist himself. Klee acknowledges his art-historical and musical debts – his reliance on Cubism and Mozart. But as both Kagan and Jordan ultimately show, he remains the quintessential sorcerer.

MARK A. CHEETHAM
University of Western Ontario