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KLEE - HIS ASCENT OF PARNASSUS

(an exploration of his Polyphonic Painting)

'by'

Maria O'Shea,

Fine Art/Painting

1994.

THE SUBJECT OF PARNASSUS

(an explanation of his Parnassus painting)

by

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Fine Art Painting:

Klee - His ascent of Parnassus;
(An Exploration of his Polyphonic Painting)

by

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Paul Klee
1879 ~ 1940

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INTRODUCTION

"All art aspires to the condition of music". (Pater, 1967, pg. 129)

The dream of fusing the eye and the ear has been a consistent desire among painters and musicians from one generation to the next. However, it was not until this latest phase of spiritual development that we encounter determined efforts, not simply to find pictorial equivalents for musical elements but to actually translate musical structures into paint.

It was painters like Paul Klee who saw within the forms of music a growing relationship to painting. However, Klee's unique individuality was his growing faith in the ultimate greatness of Mozart, Bach and Beethoven. Klee, like Mozart, shared a passion for all forms of expression. From 1905 to the end of his life Klee produced many drawings recalling musical moments from the opera often with tinges of sarcastic humour. Klee's body of work demonstrates a broad range of styles and interests. However, Mozart's influence carried over into the highest realm of Klee's art. Through the music of the past Klee explored his dream of an equally monumental, universal visual art of the future. He concluded that what would be required to realise such a dream, was a structure, a system and an architecture of colour, resulting in a grand synthesis of expression. Mozart's *Jupiter Symphony* epitomised the perfect work of art for Klee, "the summit of all daring", reflecting its importance for all "subsequent musical history".

My prime concern is to inquire into the specific properties that Klee isolated from the accomplishments of eighteenth century music. To explore how he then set about translating these discoveries into practical, concrete and effective visual terms for painting. Like Goethe, Klee found in music, above any other human endeavour, the essential keys to the mysteries of creation. However, many other influences need to be considered. Klee's encounter with the Expressionists and his subsequent encounter with Delaunay's *pure art* helped also in developing his unique colour sensibility.

CHAPTER 1:

Eighteenth Century Music as a Model for Klee's Art

"What had been accomplished in music by the end of the eighteenth century has only begun in the fine arts. Mathematics and physics have given us a clue in the form of rules to be strictly obeyed or departed from, as the case may be". (Klee, 1964, Pg. 17)

-Paul Klee, 1928

Coming from a long line of musicians, Klee naturally inherited a gift for music. His father, Hans Klee, a native of Bach's homeland was a distinguished organist, conductor and teacher of singing. Klee's mother was also musical having studied piano and singing at the Stuttgart conservatory. Having inherited his parents sensibility for music, Klee was encouraged and aided from an early age. By the age of eleven he excelled in his chosen instrument, the violin, and was performing with the Bern Symphony Orchestra. Music was an integral part of his life and was to remain Klee's prime motivation throughout his artistic development.

Klee was a voracious concert goer and his diaries tell of his "consuming enormous quantities of music". (Klee, 1964, Pg. 32) During his years as a student in Munich he hardly missed any important performance. In 1903, he describes Debussy's *Pelleas et Melisande* as the finest opera composed since Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*. In 1913, having heard Schoberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* he noted in his diary "you can die now, petit bourgeouis your hour has come". (Bousseur 1991, Pg. 138) Although his diaries are filled with ideas about music, direct analogies with painting are rare. He did not believe in parallels between contemporary music and painting perse, instead it was in the classical formal models of eighteenth century music, especially Mozart, that Klee found his main source of inspiration. His ambition was to develop painting at least on the formal plane to something akin to that achieved in music by Mozart. In order to do this he needed to establish structures around which everything else would fall into place. But what sort of principles did Klee wish to create and, more importantly, to what end in practical terms? What exactly had Klee in mind for the pictorial arts and how did eighteenth century music fit in as a source?

In Klee's largest and most ambitious polyphonic painting *"Ad Parnassum"*, (Fig. 1), he alludes to a landmark treatise on harmony, J.H. Fuxs' *"Gradus Ad Parnassum"*. This treatise lies at the very heart of the accomplishments of eighteenth century music. It is also the key to understanding Klee's painting which I will discuss at a later stage.

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[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

Johann Fux (1660-1770), composer and theorist was one of Vienna's leading contrapuntalists. Around the middle of the eighteenth century his *"Gradus Ad Parnassum"* published in 1725, marked a significant turning point in the evolution of music theory. In turn, having a profound effect on the composers of the Classical School, Hadyn, Mozart and Beethoven. His influence was both structural and conceptual, providing a thorough grounding in the principles of counterpoint "in an age when its appreciation was fast waning". (Mann, 1971, Pg. XI)

Being an accomplished musician, Klee developed a thorough knowledge of eighteenth century music theory and was well aware of Fuxs' achievements and significance in the music world. Paul Hindemith, composer, who Klee first met at Schlemmers *Triadic Ballet* in 1923, became an acquaintance. As both artists were exploring questions of pedagogy, Fux undoubtedly must have come up in conversation. Indeed, in the introduction to his treatise on harmony, Hindemith claimed that the art of counterpoint would have gone into decline were it not for Fux.

From 1920 to 1933 Klee, like Fux, was also a teacher of counterpoint and polyphony. In order to establish his ambitions in *Ad Parnassum,* (Fig. 1), it would be necessary to examine the roles of counterpoint and polyphony in Klee's art. At this stage we must understand how eighteenth century polyphony served as a guide for Klee in his struggles to rise from draughtsman to a master of colour painting. *"Ad Parnassum"* can be perceived as the ascent from basic fundamentals to the pinnacles of art.

In 1920, Klee was invited by Walter Gropius to come and join the newly founded Bauhaus in Weimar. Klee, like many of his colleagues, was confronted with the problem of formulating an approach to teaching. As a musician it was only natural that Klee would turn to the pedagogical traditions of music, namely the art of counterpoint and polyphony as a source for his teaching. However, he was not alone, since construction was the order of the day, the advantages of counterpoint were in the air and being considered by many.In Gropius' lecture of 1920 he advises intensive instruction in "the counterpoint of the forms of construction". (Gropuis, 1971, Pg. 246)

In his teaching course on drawing, Klee found counterpoint invaluable as a conceptual tool

in the formulation of his art theories. In several of his Bauhaus lectures he employed contrapuntal pictorial devices. In music, any kind of contrapuntal writing is by definition polyphonic. The term counterpoint denotes basic structural principles and a strictly imitative style as in a *fugue*.[2] On the other hand, Klee used the term polyphony in the eighteenth century sense, where separate voices are fully independent rather than imitative, thus conveying independents thematic material as in *Sonata forms* or certain organisations in depth, while his contrapuntal ideas revolve almost exclusively around linear organisation on a flat plane.

In many of his courses on line, Klee presented examples of what he called "drawings in two voices" linear counterpoint. Demonstrating his basic approach to the use of line as an absolute pictorial element, Klee emphasised the relationship between lines as individual entities. By strongly equating the genesis of line with melody, Klee found a solution to the problem of relating one independent theme to another:- the principles of counterpoint. A drawing in this manner would begin with the invention of a single linear subject equivalent to the main theme or melody. The shape of all additional lines would then be determined by their relationship to this subject. (Figs.2, 3)

Klee also used counterpoint in his theories and lectures on colour. His interest in the dynamics of colour and tonal organisation led him to borrow from music a dynamic conception of form, *the canon*. In music the canon means strict imitative counterpoint, the initial subject is repeated over and over again creating a firm harmonic structure. Klee arrived at a new paradigm of colour relationships which he called the *Canon of Colour Totality*. (Fig. 4)

In the opening of Fux's *Gradus Ad Parnassum*, he emphasises the scientific basis of music. In his teaching experiments Klee also adopted principles of mathematics and physics to arrive at fundamental laws. The establishment of laws for painting comparable to those applied to music was the principle aspect of his pedagogy. By doing so Klee hoped to raise painting beyond the personal and to achieve a universal art. As a teacher of polyphony, he did not wish to impose a style upon his students. Instead, he sought to emphasise the process underlying creation; the genesis of form, the need to concern ourselves with the function and to understand how a painting is actually constructed. Fux seemed to have suggested to Klee that if intimate things are to be achieved in art someone

must begin at the beginning and construct the stairway; the steps to Parnassus where structure and expression meet. Klee, however, was first and foremost a painter, a theorist secondly and a teacher thirdly. It was the aesthetic ideal promoted by Fux that realised its perfection in the music of Mozart that appealed to Klee. It was Fux who disposed Mozart to the style of the *Jupiter Symphony.* Embodying the full synthesis of the architectonic and the lyrical, the gallant and the strict the *Jupiter Symphony* epitomised for Klee the highest attainment in art. In the sublime polyphony of Mozart founded on teachings of Fux, Klee discovered a natural model for his own objectives. The accomplishments of eighteenth century music led to an ultimate ideal realm of art which Klee called "higher polyphony".

It would be important at this stage to consider what Klee regarded as its accomplishments and how it actually did convey the absolute.

The music of the Classical Period was dominated by a principle of composition that first appeared during the earlier part of the eighteenth century; sonata-form. In its earliest form composers largely abandoned the old methods of composition, the free lines of polyphony, in favour of a homophonic texture. The melodic line became stronger and was accompanied by an arpeggiated bass line. The melodies themselves gave up their long flowing lines to become simple, satisfying the demands of the age, as a result counterpoint fell into almost complete neglect. However this music held its appeal for many, it did not go beyond its humanistic elements. As the return of counterpoint became an increasing concern it was in Vienna that major new steps were taken. Fux, who was central to this rediscovery in the 1770's "safeguarded the polyphonic tradition in an age when its appreciation was fast waning", (Mann, 1971, Pg. XI), laying the foundations for a Classical Viennese style. This gave rise to the symphony and solo concerto which were brought to a state of perfection by Hadyn and Mozart. As neither were content with the simple homophonic methods of their predecessors, they turned to the techniques of polyphony and its devices of imitation and fugue. Although their symphonies retained the benefits of homophony they were now shot through with the animated force of polyphonic exchange. This spread the musical interest throughout the texture. The welding together of the individual parts into a unity did not contradict the idea of thematic growth. The staticism of the theme tended to dissolve into the developmental ideas which in turn solidified at a thematic level. Through his "higher polyphony" Mozart more so than any of his contemporaries was able to create emotive themes without wallowing in the mundane.

In the finale of the *Jupiter Symphony* Mozart wove into the contrapuntal web melodies so different from one another, that one hardly conceives it possible that they could stand side by side. The union of imitation and contrast could certainly go no further. "The fugue is no longer the mere abstract expression of emotion, it can become anything it wishes to be, in effect universal". (Sisman, 1993, Pg. 88)

For Klee this "higher polyphony" represents an almost utopian vision of an ultimate synthesis in the pictorial arts. But on a more practical level Klee felt that through the invention of polyphonic formats he might rediscover a route to higher polyphony in painting.

ENDNOTES

Chapter 1:

1. *Ad Parnassum, Steps to Parnassus, Parnassus* was believed to be one of the most sacred Greek mountains. They believed it was the favourite place of Apollo and the Muses, Dionysus and Pan.

2. *Fugue* means *flight* - giving an idea, idea of the voices fleeing away, or chasing each other, as they enter with subject or answer.

   A *fugue* in music is a contrapuntal piece, essentially based on imitation. The texture (polyphonic) is woven from separate strands of melody called parts or voices.

   A *fugue* is structured in three main sections, called *exposition, middle section* and *final section* .

   During the *middle* or *final section* the music may be made more interesting by use of certain devices:

(a)	*Inversion:*	The subject is *turned upside down* intervals rise in pitch now fall by same amount.
(b)	*Augmentation:*	The notes stretched out in longer value.
(c)	*Diminution:*	The notes present in shorter value.
(d)	*Stretto:*	An overlapping of entries of subject and answer. In a close stretto the overlapping occurs very swiftly.

3. *Sonata form*

   This is one of the most important of all musical forms. The name is rather misleading. *Sonata form* does not refer to the structure of a complete work, but to a special form used to build up a single movement of a work. Also, this form is used in other works besides sonatas, such as symphonies and string quartets. In works like these, the first movement is almost always in sonata form, and sometimes one or more of the other movements as well. Overtures, too, are often built up in *sonata form.*

   Sonata form grew, in several stages, from *binary* (two-part) form, but in outline it is *ternary* (three-part) since the overall structure divides into three main sections called **exposition, development** and **recapitulation.** (There may be a slow introduction before the actual sonata form begins).

1. **Exposition:** In this section the composer "exposes", or presents, his musical material. The main ideas are called **subjects** (in the sense of "subjects for a later discussion"). There are two subjects - and each may consist of a *group* of ideas, rather than a single melody. The two subjects are contrasted in key, and usually also in mood or character. The **first subject** is presented in the tonic key. Then follows the **bridge passage**, which modulates (changes key) and leads to the **second subject** in a new key (often the dominant if the tonic is major, or the dominant or the relative major if the tonic is minor). The final part of the second subject is called a *codetta.* This is a small coda, or closing section, rounding off the exposition.

Composers sometimes mark the end of the exposition with repeat signs, so the whole of this section may be played again..

2. **Development**: Here the composer explores new keys while discussing and developing any of the musical ideas he has presented so far. For example, an idea may be treated by imitation, inversion, augmentation or diminution. Different ideas may be combined, or set in opposition against each other - building up dramatic tension. Entirely new ideas (called "episodic" material) may also be introduced.

3. **Recapitulation:** The composer now "recapitulates", or restates in a slightly different form, the music of the exposition section. The first subject returns in the tonic key, as before. But the bridge passage is altered so that the second subject now also returns in the tonic key. The *sonata form* is usually rounded off by a **coda.**

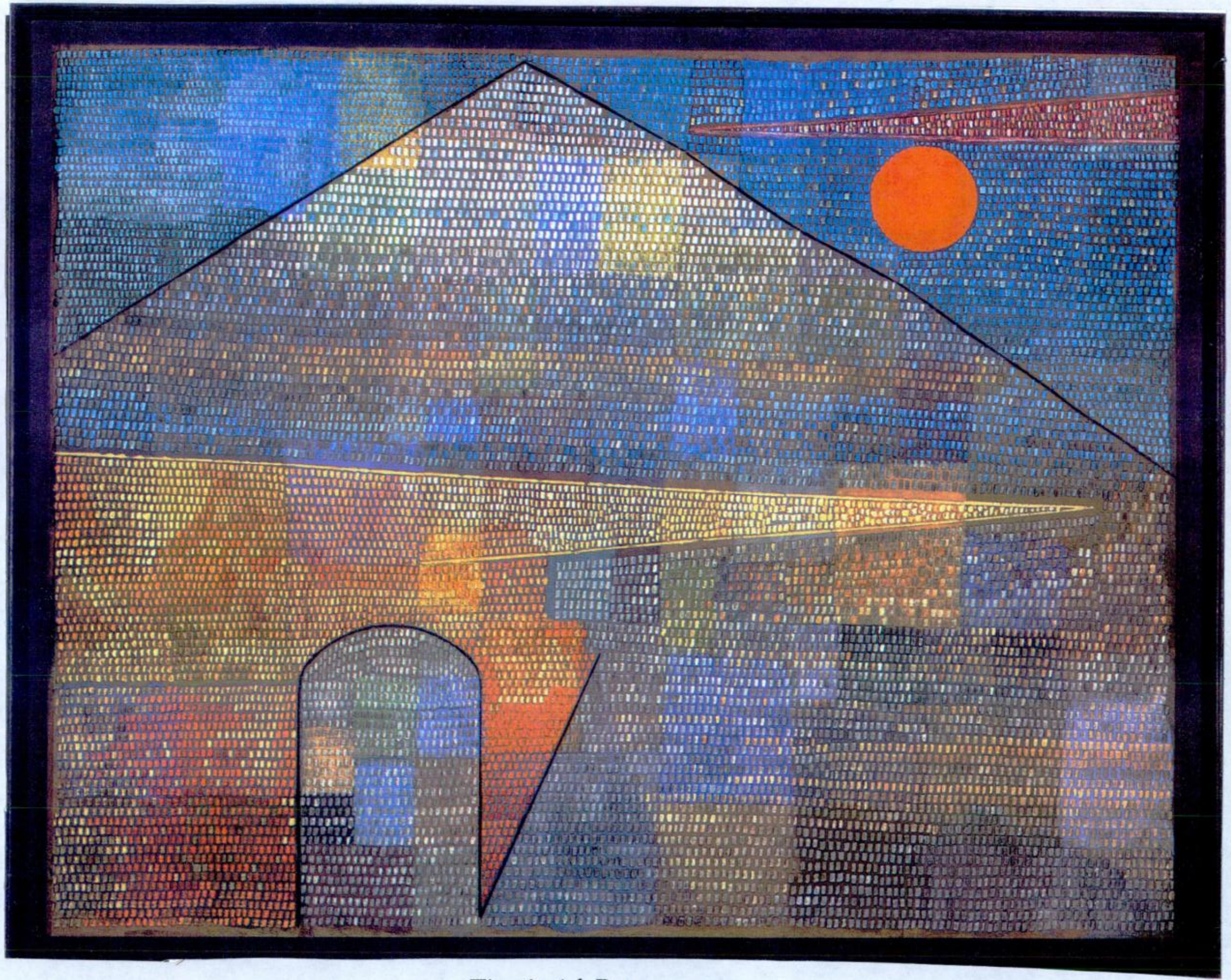


Fig. 1 *Ad Parnassum*
1932/274 (X14)
Oil on Canvas

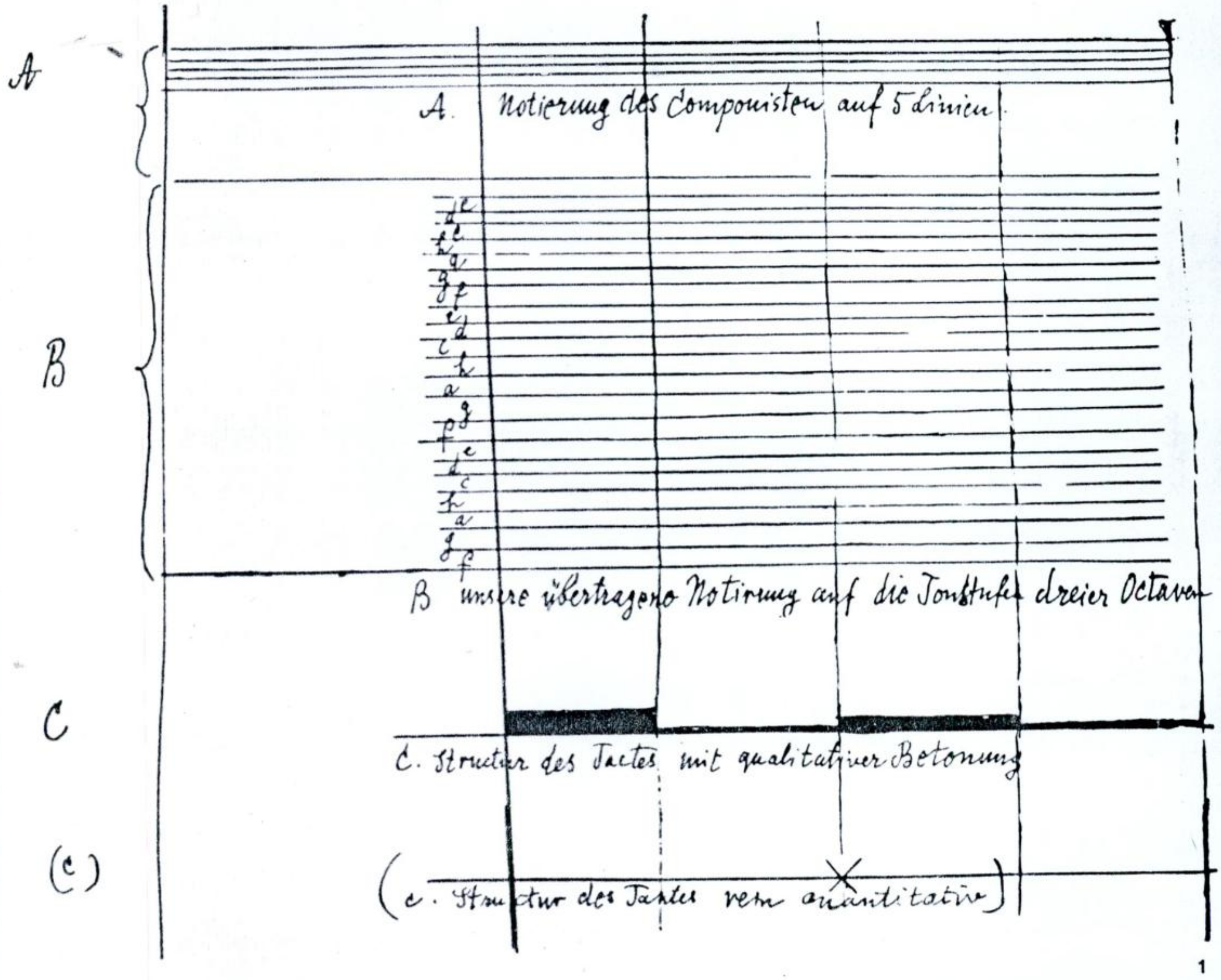

A
B
C
(c)
A. Notierung des Componisten auf 5 Linien
e
d
c
h
a
g
f
e
d
c
h
a
g
f
e
d
c
h
a
g
f
B unsere übertragene Notirung auf die Tonstufen dreier Octaven
C. Structur des Tactes mit qualitativer Betonung
(c. Structur des Tactes vom quantitative)
1

Fig. 2 *Three Part Passage*
by Johann Sebastian Bach

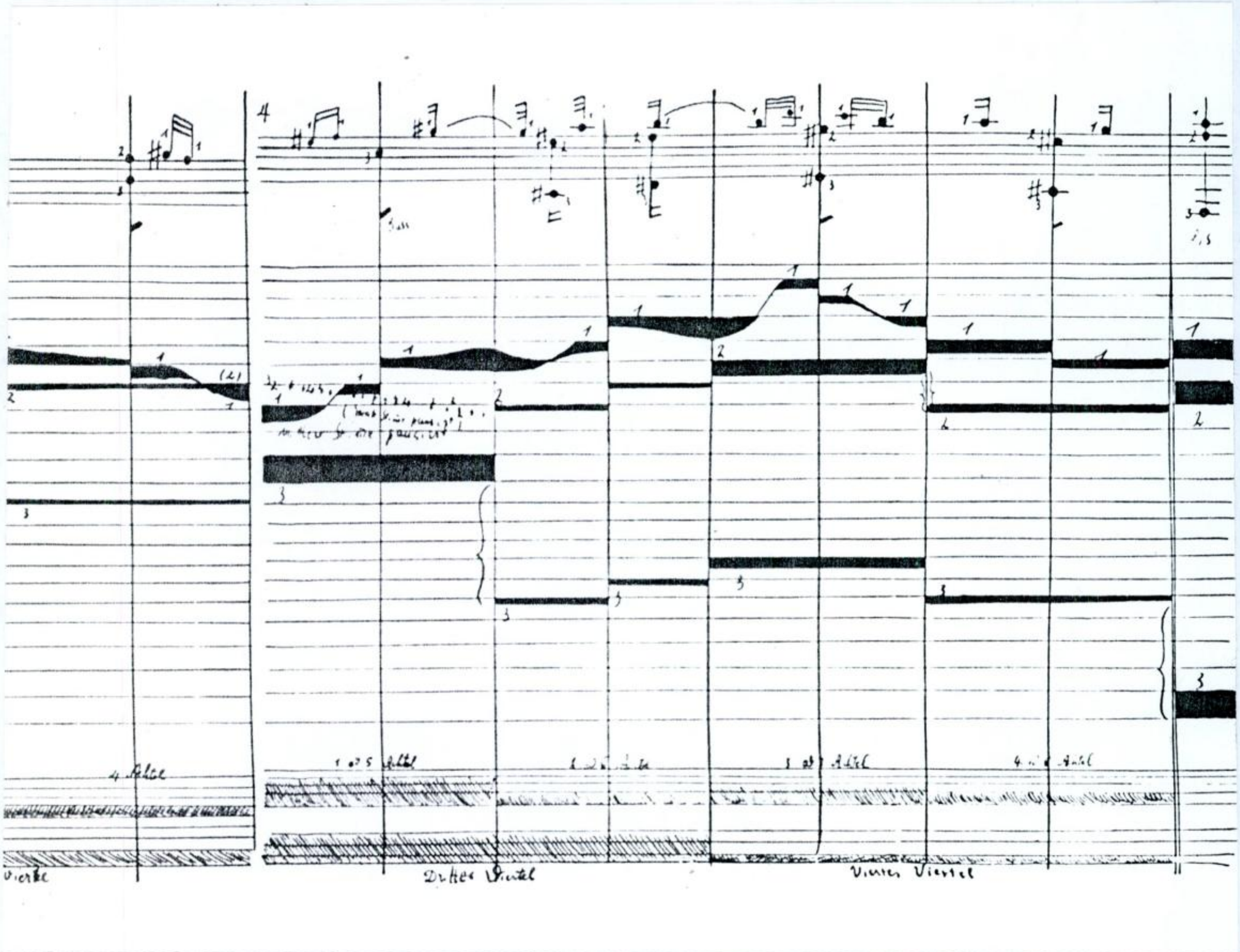

4
Bass
4 Achtel
Vierte
Dritter Viertel
Vierter Viertel

Fig. 3 *Drawing in Two Voices*
(Bauhaus Course Notes)
1921-1922

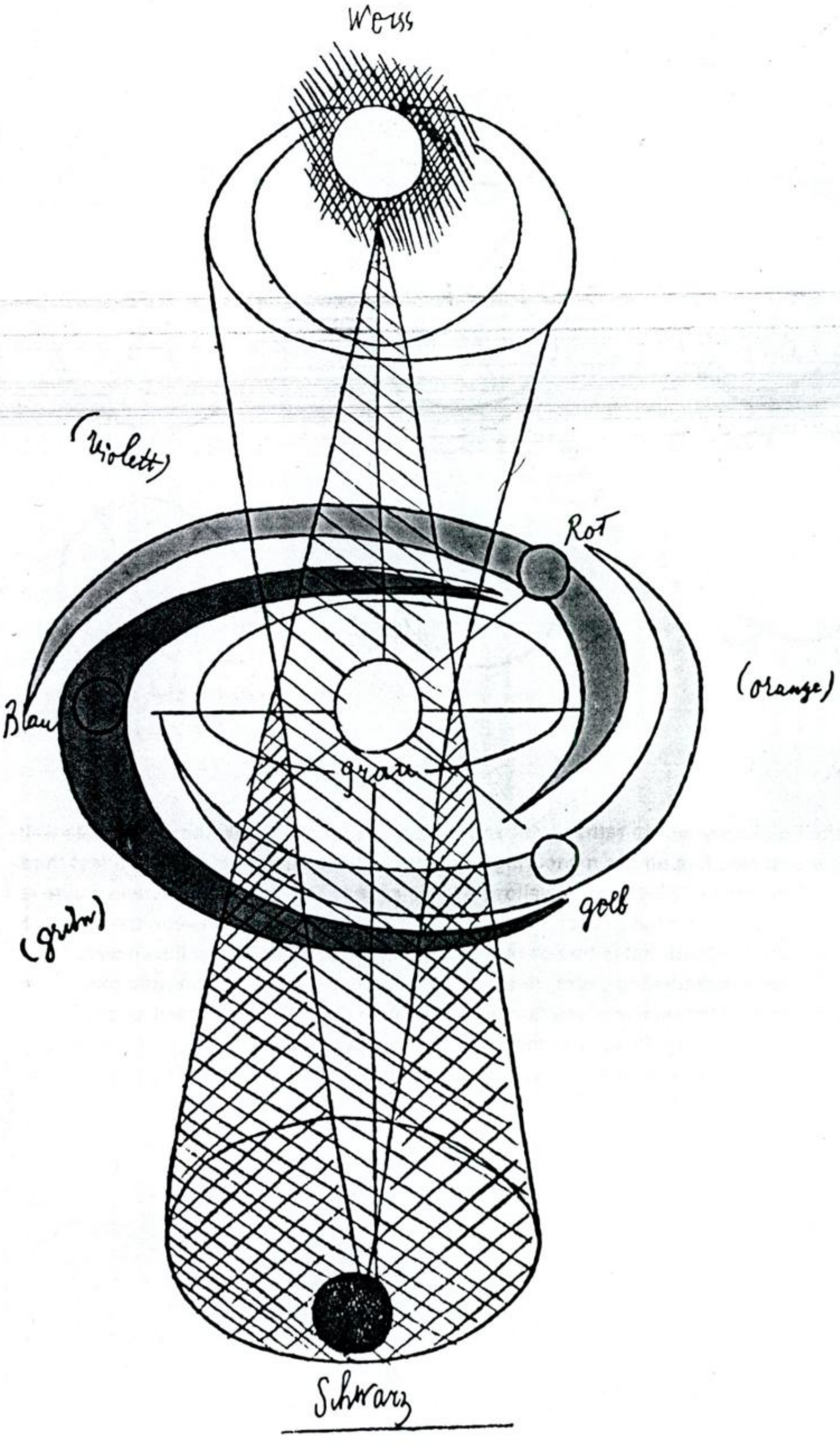

Weiss
(violett)
Rot
(orange)
Blau
grau
gelb
(grün)
Schwarz

Fig. 4 *The Canon of Totality*
(Bauhaus Course Notes)
1921-1922

CHAPTER 2:

Early Artistic Influences

Klee's ideas about polyphony did not purely grow out of an internal dialogue with eighteenth century music, many other sources both literary and artistic also contributed to his earlier development. However, his theories would never have developed were it not for his encounter with Robert Delaunay's work and ideas. It was precisely this French painter who first opened up the door between Klee's struggles with painting and his understanding of classical Viennese polyphony.

Klee was born into an age that strove for integration and wholeness in the various arts and sciences. Since the coming of the Romantic Movement, the questioning of one art by another began to raise doubts about the established rules of academism. As all the arts solicit several senses, a fascination with synaesthesia began to absorb the energies of numerous writers and thinkers. Painters and musicians alike began to long for the original unity, which came before the separation of the senses - *Gesamkunstwerk*.. Wagner, while composing his opera *Tristan and Isolde,* talked of immersing himself only "in the depths of the inner motions of the soul, creating forms out of this most secret kernel of the world that are dependent only on inner movements". (Bousseur, 1991, Pg. 98)

In 1898, Klee arrived in Munich to begin his artistic training firstly at the Knirr School of Art and later at the Academy where he studied under Franz Von Stuck. Munich at this time was one of the main artistic capitals of Europe and was to become the main centre for promoting the new style. Klee, however, discouraged by the teaching methods at the Academy found solace in the stimulating atmosphere of Munich. He became familiar with the Jugendstil Movement (the German equivalent of Art Nouveau) through its periodicals Pan Insel and Simplizissimus. Theodor Lipp's theories on Empathy (the understanding of the perceived form) were also contributing to the climate of artistic freedom, within which, Klee and other Modernists were encouraged to develop. His series of lectures at the university of Munich sought to explain the expressivity of art as the result of a psychic process of identification with a given form. Through its colour, movement or action this process allowed the spectator to enter emotionally into the work of art. Among Lipp's most important disciplines Auguste Endell whose theories were to have a stronger influence on Kandinsky than Klee, claimed that what mattered in art was the totality of effect and this alone could be achieved through a harmony of vision and organisation. As early as 1898 Endell spoke of an entirely new abstract art that "signifies nothing but can stir our souls as only music with its tones is ever able to do". (Franciscono, 1971, Pg. 39) [illegible] theories would never have developed [illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

Hence, the rise of abstract art coincided with a renewed interest in the forms of music, making it possible for artists to inquire into the temporal aspects of both the plastic arts and perception itself. In Kandinsky's view "music carries within itself an immaterial essence which favours access to the inner world". (Bousseur, 1991, Pg. 100) Compared with music that has forged its own language and freed itself from the principle of imitation, painting, he claims, remains too dependent on forms borrowed from nature. Abstract works up until now were only conceivable in music, "for music had long disposed of a theory and solid scientific grounding". (Bousseur,1991, Pg. 100)

Although this intuitive expressive approach held its appeal for many artists it did not fulfil Klee's goal for an absolute synthesis of structure and expression. Like Goethe, his literary and poetic guide during his student years, Klee believed that the aesthetic relationship between colour and melody were separate and could not be directly conceived together. However, both are mutually referential to a universal formula and each derives for itself from this higher law.

In 1901, Klee along with the Swiss sculptor Hermann Haller embarked on a six month journey to Italy. This period served as the final stage in Klee's artistic training, but more significantly, it laid the foundation for his future musical pictorial thinking. Like Brunelleshi, who made a similar journey in 1914, the discovery of the Classical order of architecture was to have a decisive effect on their work. Prior to the Italian experience Klee's work reflected the narrative and poetic tendencies of his Academy Masters. In Italy however, through his experience of antiquity and the Renaissance Klee began to develop an interest in work with a strong formal order. His immediate and yet most distant goal was to harmonise the architectonic with his own sense of poetry. Experiencing nature through Goethe, he began to see the work of art as an organism, with an internal structure analogous to the natural organism. Form was the means by which the complexity of the world and of nature could be mastered and expressed truthfully, form with not too much feeling echoing the "cool Romanticism" of Mozart's style. As Klee's ideas were heading towards absoluteness he began to look to music as the ideal model. Over the next few years of experimentation Klee gradually introduced more references to music in his work. However, his progress was slow but deliberate. In general the first decade of the century presented Klee with great difficulties and few rewards. Towards the end of the decade his spiritual progress was accelerated by a series of positive experiences. In 1911 he met

Hence, [illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

Kandinsky and in 1912 Delaunay.

Klee first encountered Delaunay's work at the *Blaue Reiter* exhibition at the Thannhauser Gallery in 1911. Delaunay's submissions included the *Saint-Severin*, Fig.1 (1909), *The City*, Fig.2, *Eifel Tower* (1910), Fig.3 and *The City* (1911). Sufficiently impressed he arranged a visit to Delaunay's studio in Paris 1912 where he experienced the *Simultaneous Window*, fig.4, paintings. Later that year Klee published a review of the Zurich *Moderne Bund* exhibition, in an attempt to come to terms with Cubism for his own art. The direction of Klee's thinking about painting and music was beginning to emerge. At the beginning of 1913, Klee published in *Der Sturm,* his translation of Delaunay's crucial manifesto entitled *Sur Lumiere*. Although he had a direct influence on a number of Klee's paintings of 1920 it was his theories that influenced Klee the most. Delaunay's emphasis on movement in his window paintings was the initial attractive quality. The painting produces "a formal objectification of utterly subjective experiences and this becomes evident at a single glance'. (Vriesen, 1967, Pg. 38)

Unlike the static geometrical order of Analytic Cubism, Delaunay created a multitude of viewpoints simultaneously like polyphony in music. In his essay *Sur Lumiere* Delaunay proposed that depth was the fundamental feature of visual reality. He writes "the essence of visual depth is the simultaneity of light and the simultaneity of light consists of the harmony of colours that create vision". (Vriesen, 1967, Pg. 38) In these arguments Delaunay proposed that in a painting of pure colour, the colour itself is both form and subject. Colour becomes a function in itself, and all its actions are present at each moment just as in a Bach *fugue*. All this had significance for Klee, in the transparent depths of Delaunay's pure painting he found a realisation of his goal to achieve a synthesis of the architectonic and the lyrical. Klee began to think of the simultaneity of independent colour themes as being analogous to the simultaneity of independent themes in music. Well aware of the prevalent dialectic between music and painting Klee found no analogy successful.

By 1917, through exposure to Delaunay's work and ideas Klee gained enough confidence and clarity of vision to declare "polyphonic painting is superior to music in that here the time element becomes a spatial element. The notion of simultaneity stands out more richly". (Klee, 1964, Pg. 374)

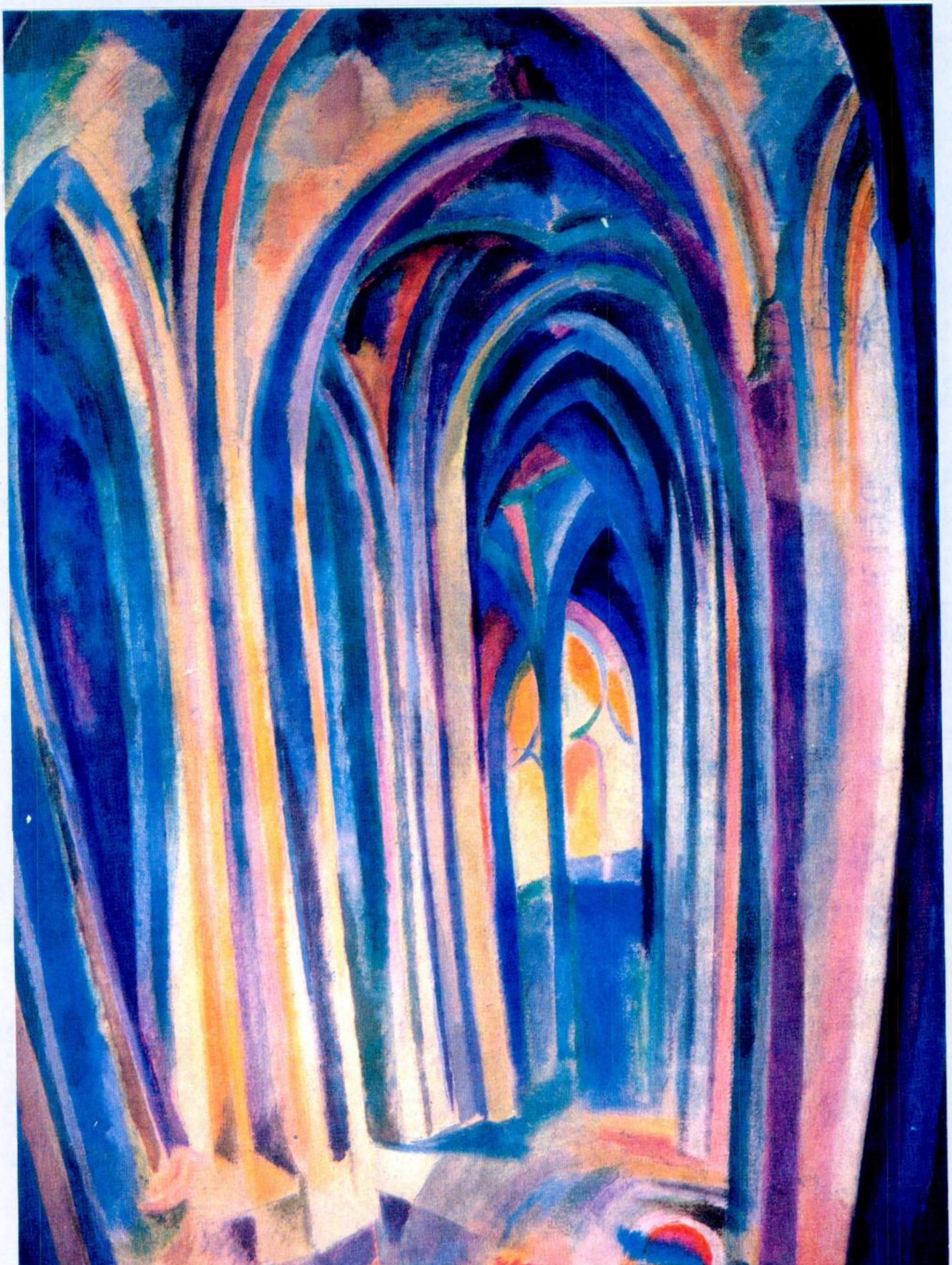
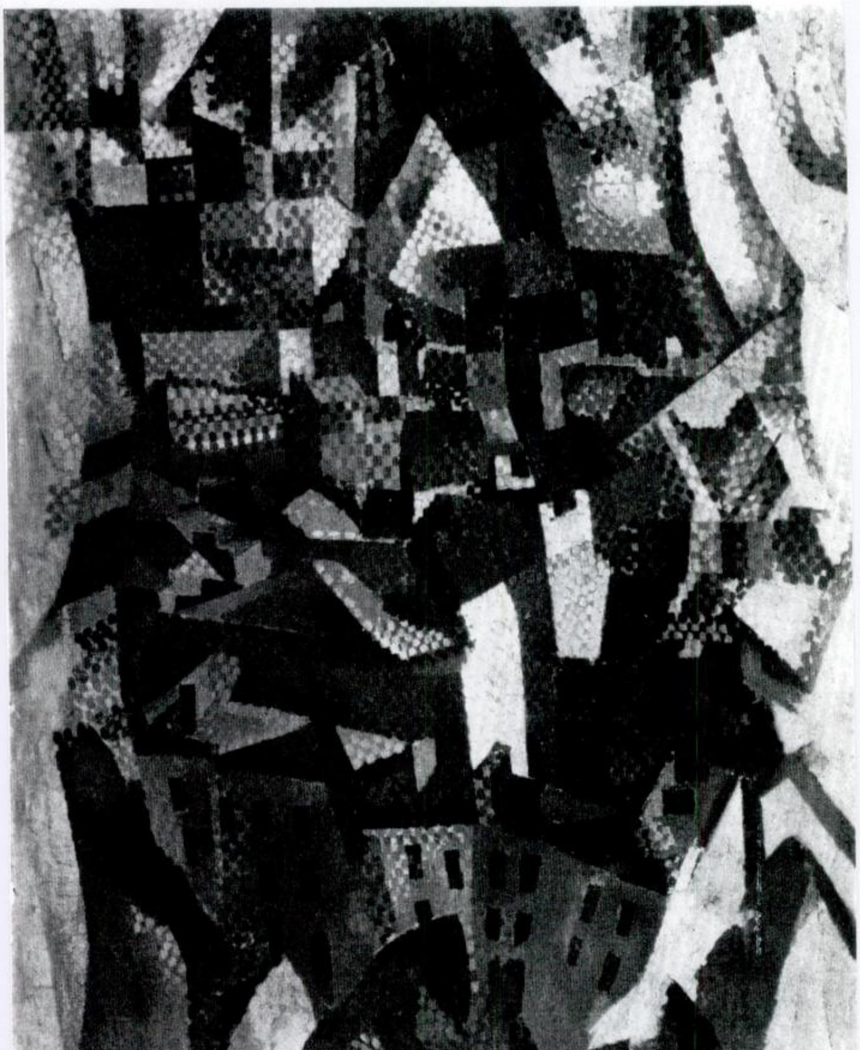
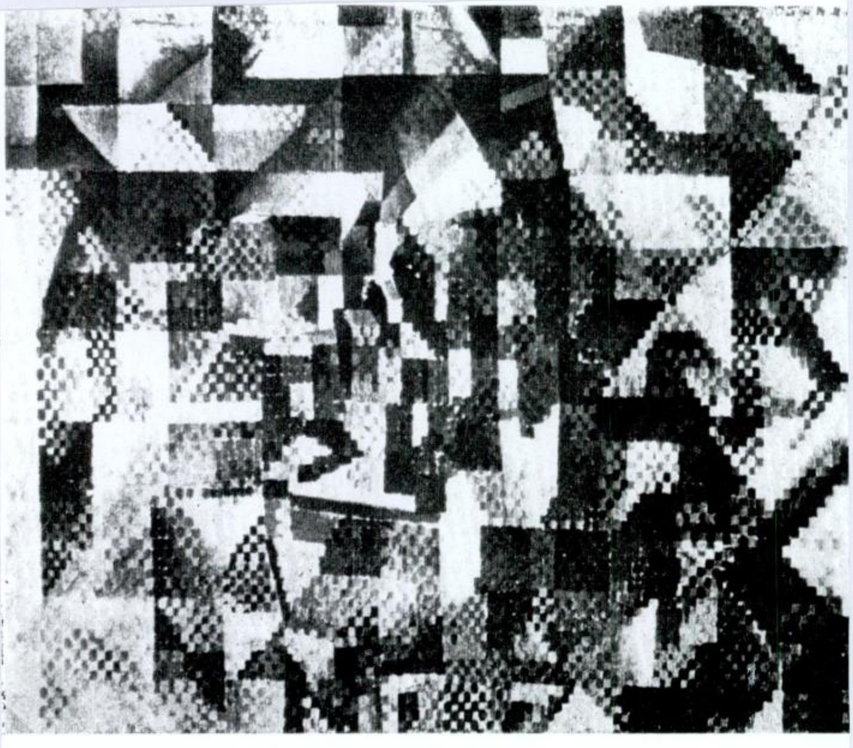


Fig. 1 *Saint Severin*
Delaunay, 1909



16 The City 1911



17 Window on the City No. 4 1910–11

Fig. 2 *The City*
Delaunay, 1910

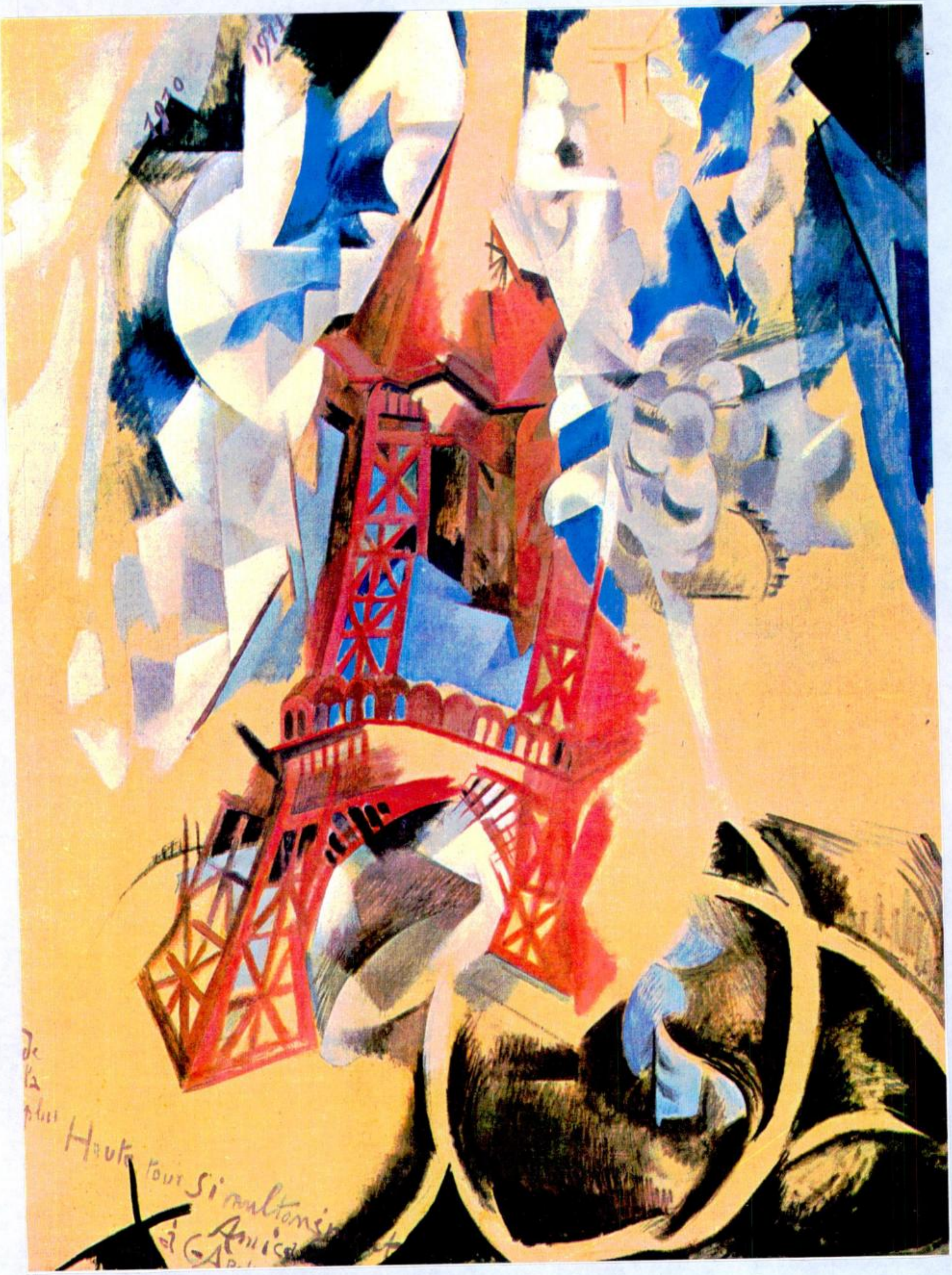

1910
de
la
plus
Haute tour

Fig. 3 *Eifel Tower*
Delaunay, 1910

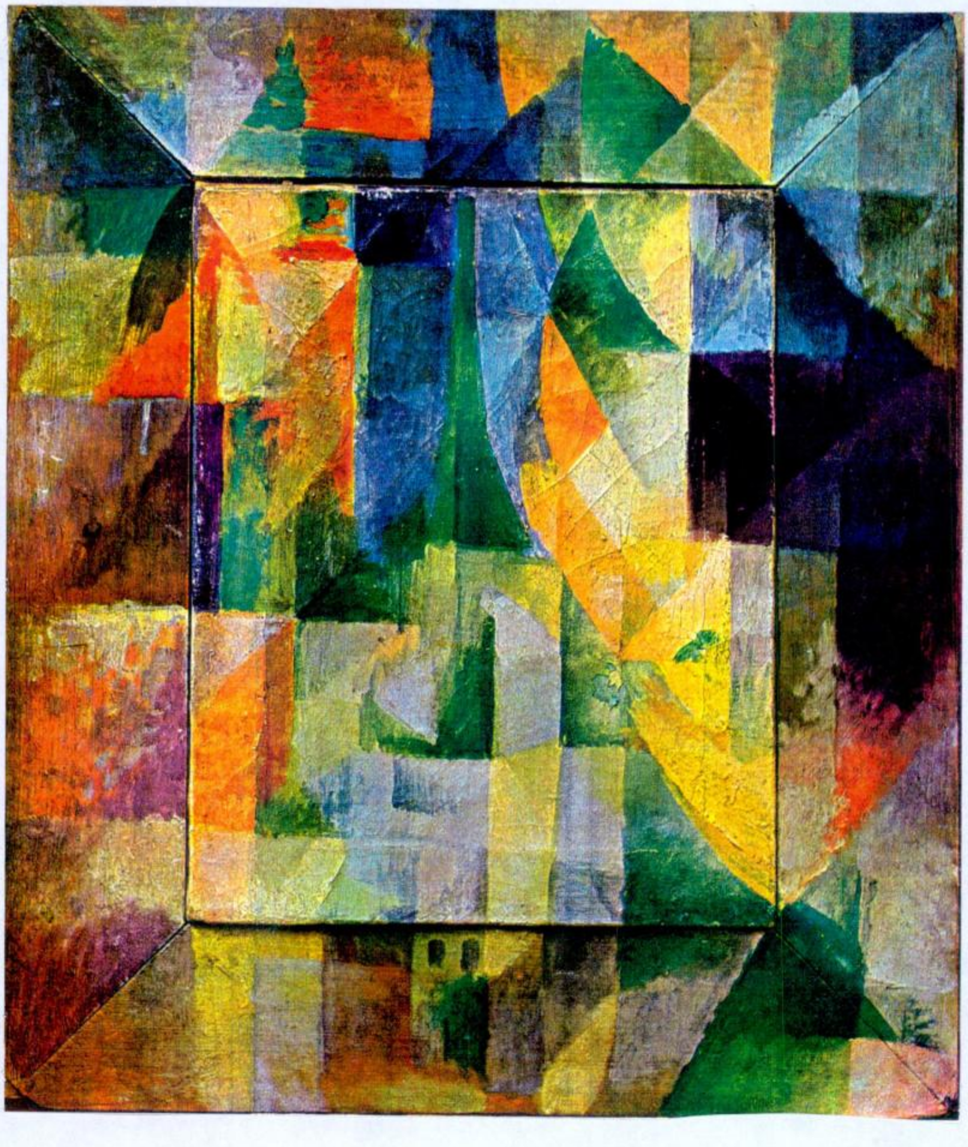


Fig. 4 *Window*
Delaunay, 1910

2b.

CHAPTER 3:

The Discovery of Colour

One of Klee's main concerns for painting was to achieve a true simultaneity of independent themes in depth. His first step was to determine what an independent colour theme might mean. In other words, what could compare to a musical sequence of compositional units in order to convey thematic identity and content. Firstly, Klee needed a neutral building block comparable to the music note, which in itself has no apparent meaning. As soon as this was determined he even needed to arrange these building blocks into forms whose coherence, continuity and identity became self-evident and expressive. By ordering such colour units into a pattern with a significant evocative identity a painting could then transcend mere decorative and intellectual interests. This would enable Klee to develop absolute colour themes as vehicles for expressive content.

Klee's breakthrough to colour however was a slow journey. From 1907 to 1908, encouraged by the Impressionists' treatment of light and colour, he began to increasingly experiment with tone. In his effort to replace tradition he began to explore the techniques of painting behind glass and found the ideal medium for making the transition from his graphic style to a more painterly manner of working. The genesis of effect, achieved by drawing with a needle on a blackened surface, made him suspect parallels between painting and music as well as the temporality of art. The concept of genesis, the process of creation itself, was now beginning to emerge. (Fig.1,2) Towards the end of the decade Klee's progress was accelerated by a number of positive experiences. At exhibitions in Munich from 1908 to 1912 he became well acquainted with the work of Van Gogh, Cezanne and Matisse. Later encounters with Kandinsky and Delaunay convinced him of the need for a rational compositional structure to harness the expressive power of colour. He wanted to go beyond feeling *to give order to movement*. Similar to his Italian trip in 1901, Klee's experience of Tunisia proved to be equally stimulating.

In April of 1914, Klee, along with fellow painters Auguste Macke and Louise Moillet, undertook his most celebrated trip to North Africa. This experience marked a decisive turning point in his colour development. Delaunay had paved the way for this experience when he told him how all pervading light suggests rhythms which obey simultaneous contrasts of colours, how object and form are built up of light and colour while being rhythmic in appearance and poetic in feeling. This was precisely how the *Window* paintings were born on which Delaunay was working when Klee saw him in 1912.

In the Tunisia water colours of *Garden in St. Germain*, (fig.3), *Hammamet with the Mosque* and *Motif from Hammamet,* (fig.4), Klee arrived at a formal approach, which reconciled the dualistic tendencies that were manifest in his development. In *front of the Mosque in Tunisia* Klee begins to simplify his motif and abstract from it to the point where it can translate the spatial layers into colour planes stacked above one another. this process of reduction proceeds even further in *Hammamet with the Mosque* where the abstract motif is almost completely transposed into abstract colour equivalents. The modulation of contrasting colours is pushed to the extreme limit giving rise to rhythmic movement in all directions of the plane foretelling the future Magic Square paintings.

Unlike Delaunay, however, Klee's water colours retain a strong evocative character. As the colours live, breathe and pulsate they make the grid more than abstract. Klee combined his experience with a profounder insight into the creative process and finally began to see the picture as a living organism. "Like people, a picture has a skeleton, muscle and skin. One may speak of an anatomy peculiar to pictures". (Klee, 1964, Pg. 98)

Unlike eighteenth century polyphony, however, Delaunay's pictorial depth had no stable structure. As a musical melody consists of two dimensions pitch and duration Klee's colour themes would now consist of the flat two dimensions of the picture plane. He began to view flatness as fundamental to the flat colour theme. This idea was taking hold at several points in Europe around the middle of the decade. The Russian Casimir Malevich introduced his very flat suprematist compositions in 1913-14. In Holland Piet Mondrian and Theo Van Doesburg also joined in this movement with their *de Stijl* theories and works.

In 1915, following his return from North Africa, Klee began to paint distinctly flatter arrangements of colour. *The Niesen* 1915 epitomised Klee's first "Architectonic Poetic Painting". *The Niesen*, (fig.5), a highly ambitious work, Klee echoes both Fredrich's and Cezanne's visionary mountain scenes. The almost perfectly pyramidal shape of the mountain itself embodied Klee's desire to transcend the material, an important step towards *Parnassus.*

Between 1916 and 1918, Klee was drafted into the auxiliary forces of the German Army. Following a period of deep despair after losing both Auguste Macke and Franz Marc in the

war, Klee's progress as a painter finally began to reap rewards. For the first time his dealers were able to sell enough of his work, enabling him to support his family. Then, following some remarkable experiments in 1916 Klee began to move closer to his own definitive approach of a colour rectangle theme. As he began to set his own poems and other texts to colour, as texts are set to music, as once emerged from *The Grey of Night* (fig.6), Klee's use of flat rectangular colour units showed how strongly he had come to equate such units with musical notes. While beginning to view composing with colour rectangles as being analogous to composing melodies or themes in music, Klee now set out to become a composer of colour.

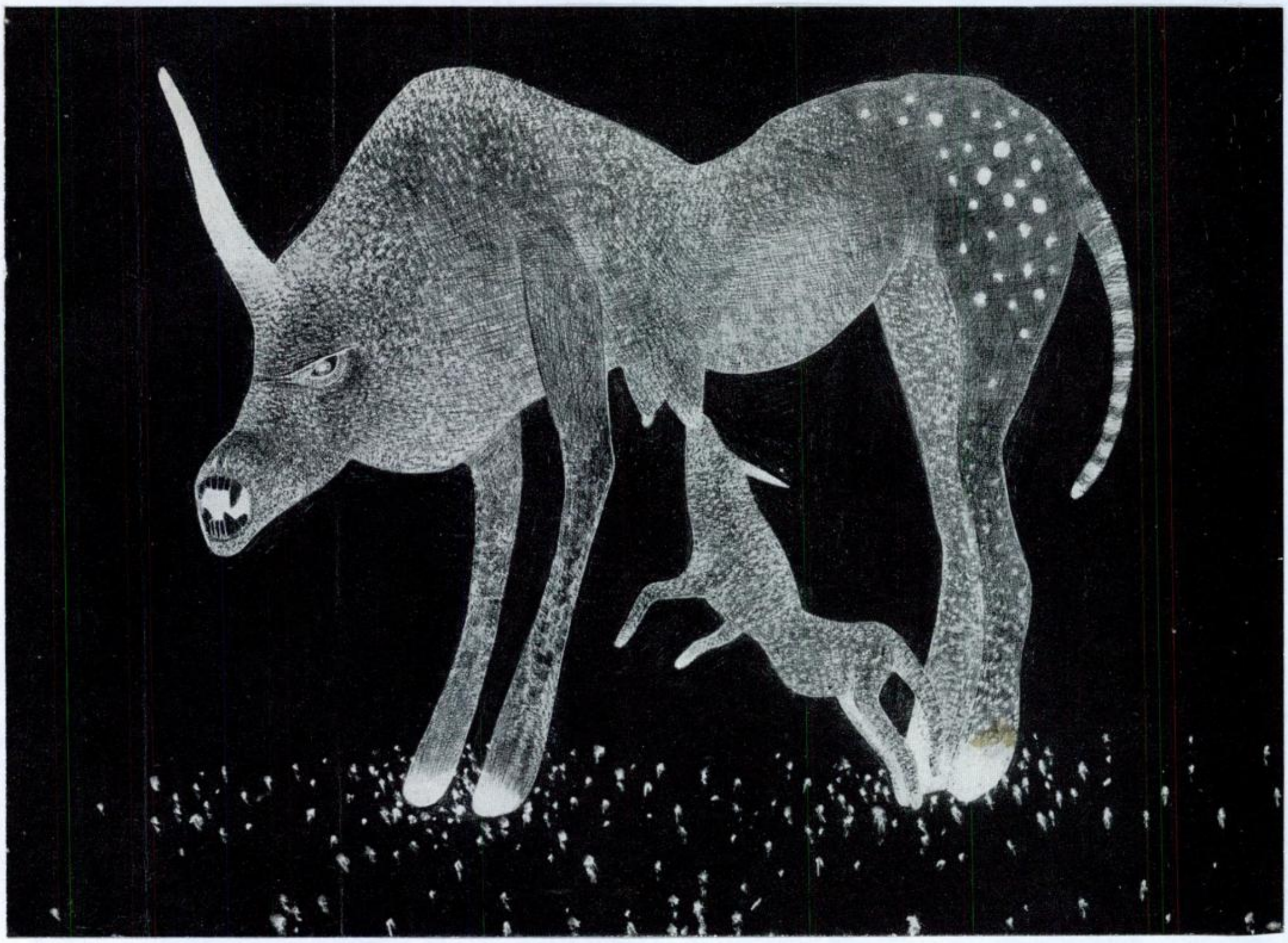


Fig. 1 *Beast Suckling her Young*
(1906)

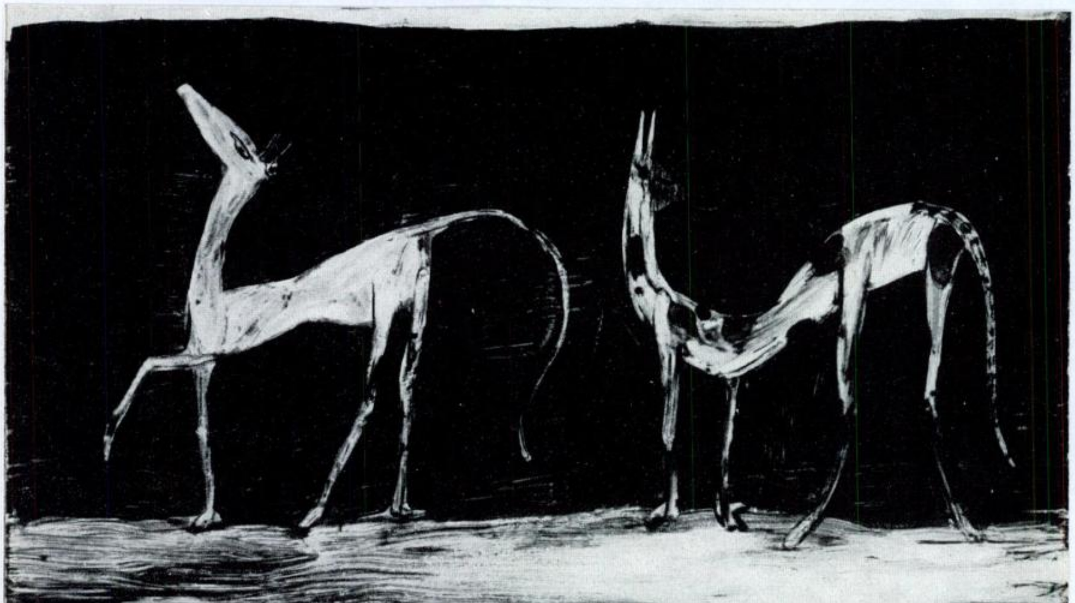


Fig. 2 *"Two Long Necked Dogs*
(1907)

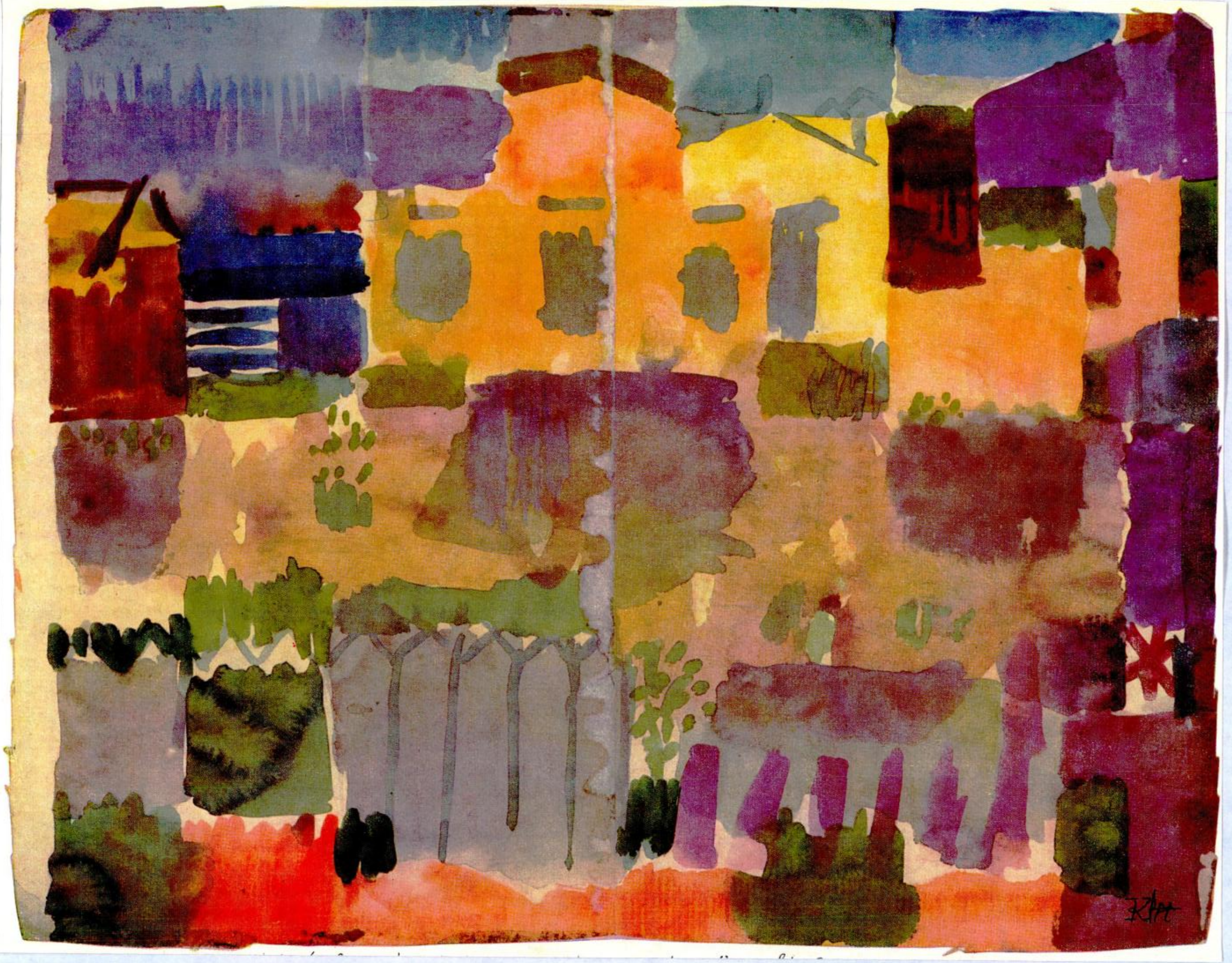


Fig. 3 *Garden in St. Germain* near Tunis
1914

(27) Des Nixen (1915) / The Nixen / [illegible] / [illegible]

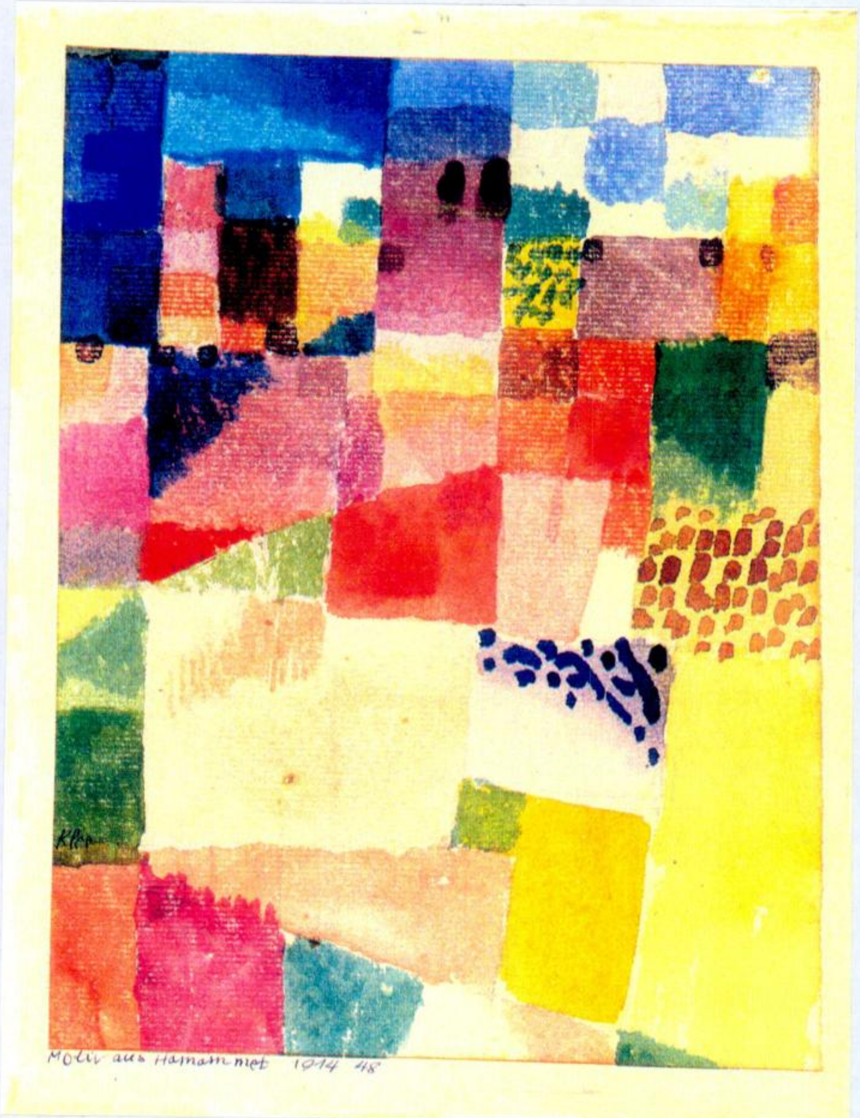

Klee
Motiv aus Hamammet 1914 48

Fig. 4 *Motif from Hammamet*
(1914)

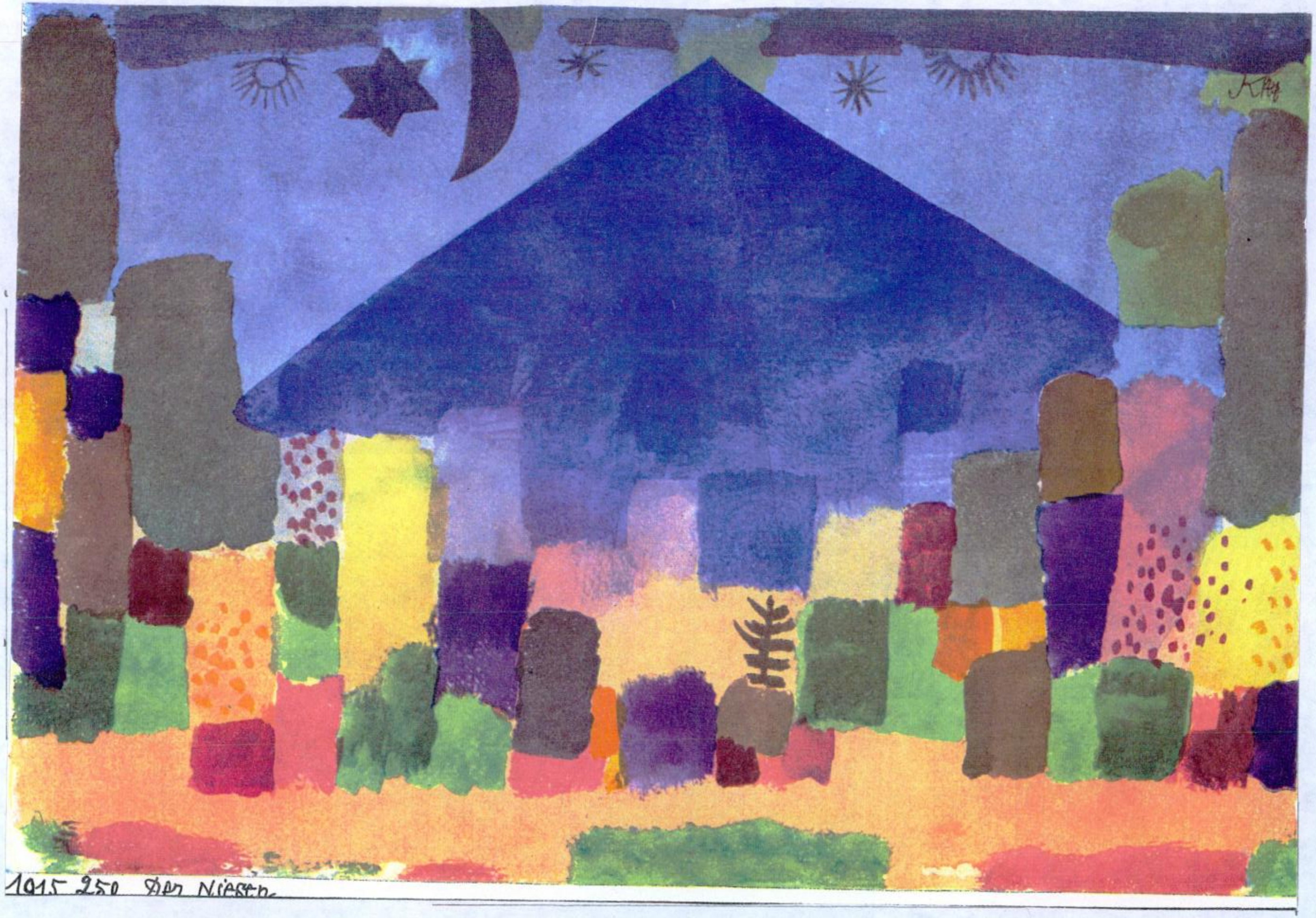
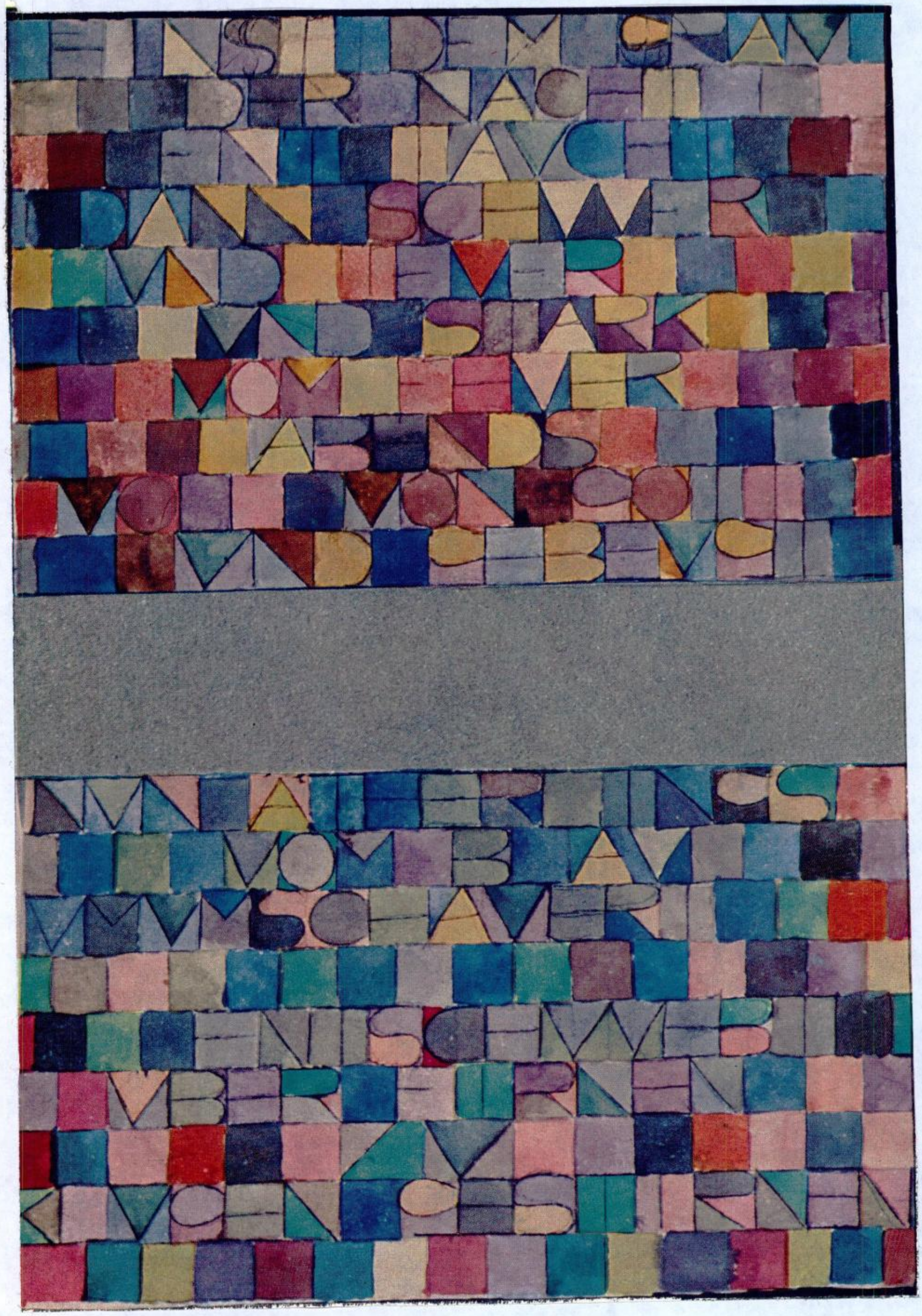

1915 250 Der Niesen

Fig. 5 *The Niesen*
1915


EINST DEM GRAU
DER NACHT
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DANN SCHWER
UND TEUER
UND STARK
VOM FEUER
ABENDS
VOLL VON GOTT
UND GEBEUGT
NUN ÄTHERHINGS
VOM BLAU
UMSCHAUERT
ENTSCHWEBT
ÜBER FIRNEN
ZU KLUGEN GESTIRNEN

Fig. 6, Once Emerged from the Grey of Night, (1918)

Fig. 6 Dice Excavated from the Grave of
Mugh-hs (1412)

CHAPTER 4

The Development of Colour Polyphony

In 1921, Klee began teaching at the Bauhaus, this marked the threshold of his full maturity as a painter. Klee's position as teacher of glass and later of weaving enabled his musical thinking process to advance. Klee's interaction with his colleagues and his contact with other art disciplines helped to strengthen his constructive powers which ultimately led to a preoccupation with abstract and geometrical qualities. As a result, Klee's *oeuvre* of the twenties embraced a truly extraordinary range and diversity of styles. Will Grohmann, biographer, while discussing Klee's Bauhaus paintings, appropriately discerns three distinct groupings; outer, middle and inner. (Grohmann, 1954, pg. 192) Of the innermost group, Klee focused his ambition on the development of the colour rectangle composition which remained closest to his aesthetic intentions. By experimenting constantly in the subtle arrangement of tones and harmonies, Klee's rectangle compositions began to blossom into a new art of absolute colour.

Klee's first logical attempts in applying the musical principles of imitation and polyphony to painting resulted in the series of fugal paintings, examples include *Dream City*, (Fig.1), *Gradation of Crystal*, (Fig.2) and *Fugue in Red*, (Fig.3).

In music a *fugue* is a contrapuntal piece, essentially based on imitative repetition. *Fugue in Red* (1921) might be suggested as to reveal a visual resolution of such a style. While exploiting all fugal principles of subject, counter-subject, development and stretti. Over lapping curvilinear elements create the overall form, expressed in light colours. The answer which in music would be rendered by the transposition of the theme may be found in the various echoes and tonal gradations of the subject. The counter-subject on the other hand, comprises rectilinear, geometric forms which contrast with the curves of the main motif. In music the development of a *fugue* consists of a series of modulations which permit one to hear the subject together with its counter-subject. The curved forms would thus present the development of the subject and an extension of the motif derived from the counter-subject. Klee employs thin transparent washes of watercolour, constantly building up the structure in successive applications. In comparison to a typical Bach *fugue*, however, where the theme maintains its identity throughout, in Klee's painting a square or triangle can turn into a circle or vice versa. The rhythmic structure is related to a movement of chiaroscuro on which elements of various shapes and sizes are superimposed and place done above the other in order tonal gradation.

It was not until 1923, however, that Klee finally isolated the colour theme problem which resulted in the first real fluorescences of his *Magic Square* paintings. *Harmony of Rectangles,* (Fig.4), *Intensification of Colour from the Static to the Dynamic* (Fig.5) and *Altar Klang* (Fig.6). Klee now committed himself to the flat colour grid as a model for his colour themes, at last free from the complications of colour, shape and depth. In the flat colour grid, whether truly rectilinear or with the slight dynamic variations he preferred, Klee now possessed an absolute structure like a musical staff which would allow him to compose freely, "an image of squares like harmony as such a veil, it is meant to be a key that unlocks the truth and makes us aware of the archetype". (Grohmann, 1954, Pg. 214) Johannes Itten, who was in charge of the basic design course in the Bauhaus also used formats of squares within squares for colour exercises.

Klee's procedure in these paintings was no different from that of the composer. He began by setting down note after note and from there going on from motif to theme, introducing multiple themes and so on, the possibilities apparently endless. In this process one or another of his dimensions came to the fore; the tonal value or the colour or the rhythm, the harmony or the counterpoint, Klee finally attained that realm beyond that attitude of positive conviction, the absolute affirmation he had been struggling with for so long. In order to explore what this meant for Klee's art, I would like to take a closer look at his finest colour rectangle compositions. *Alter Klang* (fig.6) and *New Harmony* (Fig.7).

Alter Klang, perhaps his most successful masterpiece in two dimensional homophonic painting, automatically introduces associations with music through its title Ancient sound. It suggests in a very general sense the concepts of melody, harmony and tonality that prevailed in Europe between the Renaissance and the nineteenth century. He appropriated the idiom for this composition, because he was also working with the concepts of colour harmony, tonality value, chiaroscuro and thematic development that prevailed in painting during the same epoch.

In *Alter Klang,* colour and light serve as Klee's subject. Since his translation of Delaunay's essay in 1912 *Sur Lumiere* Klee became deeply involved with the effective powers of light especially light created by the dynamics of colour interaction. Although a broad range of local colours were used the picture is keyed, almost atmospherically, to a dominant green tonality. Klee often achieved such effects of light and atmosphere with

transparent washes of colour.

Johann Itten's elementary exercises in the use of colour also contributed to Klee's development in the use of colour. The tonal scale from white to black of these exercises led to a series of water colours in which the darkest tones were reached by a series of discreet steps, made by layers of water colours over each other. Klee used this tonal scale to create spots of chiaroscuro lighting on a dark ground and for an illusion of depth, without the help of perspective. Thereby enabling him to reduce the formal means of painting to their essential elements.

In the last of Klee's independent colour rectangle compositions *New Harmony* (Fig.7) 1936, he distributed light more evenly across the surface. The development of the individually significant theme was replaced as in much twentieth century music and paintings by a more uniform distribution of compositional interest. His division into twelve degrees in "notes of colour" can be seen as an attempt to respond to the problems raised by Schonberg's twelve-tone conception of musical composition. "I am constantly striving to arouse the sounds that lie dormant within me, a little or a great adventure in colour", was how he put it in 1927. (Klee, 1961, Pg. 59) In comparison to *Alter Klang* (Fig.6) which develops with dramatic intensity from the edges toward the centre *New Harmony* is anchored firmly at each corner, by squares of blue and grey and is lightened all around by a border that rhythmically alternates between medium and dark values. This equal stressing of the image across the frame took the emphasis off temporality and development in time while promoting instantaneously the total immediate view.

The principle of bilateral inverted symmetry governs the order of *New Harmony* and supplants the organising principle of thematic development and continuity. This can be seen in the right half of *New Harmony* which is in effect, an inverted mirror image of the left half. Although Keel recommended this technique of compositional mirroring to his students at the Bauhaus, as an aid in bringing pictorial structures to life. However, his primary illustrative model had been the technique of contrapuntal inversion, as employed in eighteenth century music. In the music of Mozart, Bach, Hadyn and the early Beethoven, polyphonic structures were used (as mentioned earlier) to temper the expressive content of individual themes and to carry thematic continuity through several voices. In *New Harmony*, however, the true musical analogy is to be found in the twentieth century,

[illegible]

[illegible]

In the case of [illegible]

[illegible]

specifically in the compositions of the Schonberg School, the second Viennese School, which in the 1930's was the leading exponent of modern music.

Although Klee's fascination with the magic square cycle of paintings continued for many years he viewed the flat colour theme format more as a means to an end. His ideal goal was to achieve higher polyphony. Between 1920 and 1932, Klee worked with a great variety of pictorial formats that he considered to be polyphonic in one sense or another. In *Chorale and Landscape* (Fig.8) Klee created pictorial space by overlapping and intersecting rectilinear colour planes. Over the next few years his most important polyphonic work was to be constructed in this way, *Architecture of Planes* (Fig.9), *Polyphonic Setting for Whites* (fig.10). While recalling the musical form of the canon this over-lapping created a firm rhythmic and harmonic structure. Although this seemed like a more logical approach of organising colour in depth, Klee was never quite able to compose and combine independent colour themes within the over-lapping plane format. He wanted to believe that no separate layer of depth could exist to sustain the independent development of colour. Like Delaunay, he ran up against the problem of broken discontinuous space layers. By simply layering one colour rectangular theme over another the effects of both themes would diminish. In an attempt to overcome these technical difficulties Klee began to create a more unified and more transparent space layer of colour. In an earlier attempt in 1909 *Seated Girl* (Fig.11) Klee created a surface plane by distributing dabs and splotches of colour. This transparent surface plane acted as a "window" through which we could view the figure. In later works previously alluded to, like motif from Hammamet and the Niesen, Klee used small areas of carefully worked dots to gain effects of space and colour.

In 1931, Klee had recapitulated on this idea in order to arrive at a new solution to the problem of colour polyphony. As we see in his 1932 *Barbarian Sacrifice*. Klee invented a new type of flat colour theme in which he used tiny dots of colour to lay carefully organised, transparent screens across entire pictures. This proved to be a momentous innovation because it soon enabled Klee, for the first time, to develop two fully separate colour themes in the same picture, one in the background and one in the foreground. The result is a simultaneous interaction of truly independent themes. Although Klee's colour dots intensify pictorial light as in Pointillism, their primary purposes are to carry depth and a separate colour voice. In a letter to his wife Klee once referred to this technique as so called pointillism, but because of its polyphonic musical function it could be considered as

[illegible]

Although [illegible]

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counter-pointillism.

In *Polyphony*, (Fig. 12), also of 1932, Klee provided a clear demonstration of how this system works. In the background Klee composed a colour rectangle theme. On top of this he set another colour theme composed of a screen of dots. There now exists two truly independent themes, yet we perceive the picture as a whole atmospheric unity. As in late eighteenth century musical polyphony what impresses us most is the feeling of wholeness and overall tonal organisation which brings the separate identities of individual melodies together in a coherent single identity. And not withstanding the coloristic fluidity and depth of the painting, it remains extremely easy to analyse its component elements of point, line, plane and colour as Klee demanded of any perfect work of art.

Klee's unique insight into music aided by special inspiration from Mozart, Fux and Delaunay enabled him to break down the complex musical pictorial question that had motivated as many leading painters of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. That is, what kind of painting can be completely as free truly as sublime and accessible as the greatest music. For Klee polyphony was the answer that embraced the entire problem, so he set out to establish its fundamental principles for the art of painting just as Fux had done for music two centuries earlier.

As developments in twentieth century painting were rejecting the traditions of pictorial depth and tending towards the flat decorative surface of the picture plane Klee saw the importance of preserving depth in an age when its appreciation was fast waning. As Fux had taken the academicized tradition of counterpoint and forged it into the revitalised polyphony of the eighteenth century Klee sought to deacademise pictorial depth and make it a living legacy.

Klee viewed transparent colour interaction as a part of a tradition in painting harking back to his Paris visit to the Louvre in 1909. Klee was greatly impressed by Leonardo whom he referred to as "the greatest Pioneer in the handling of colour". (Klee, 1964, Pg. 56) Klee understood that any art that aspires to historic stature cannot deny its own history, it must come to terms with it, embrace it and then just transcend it as Mozart had done in music.

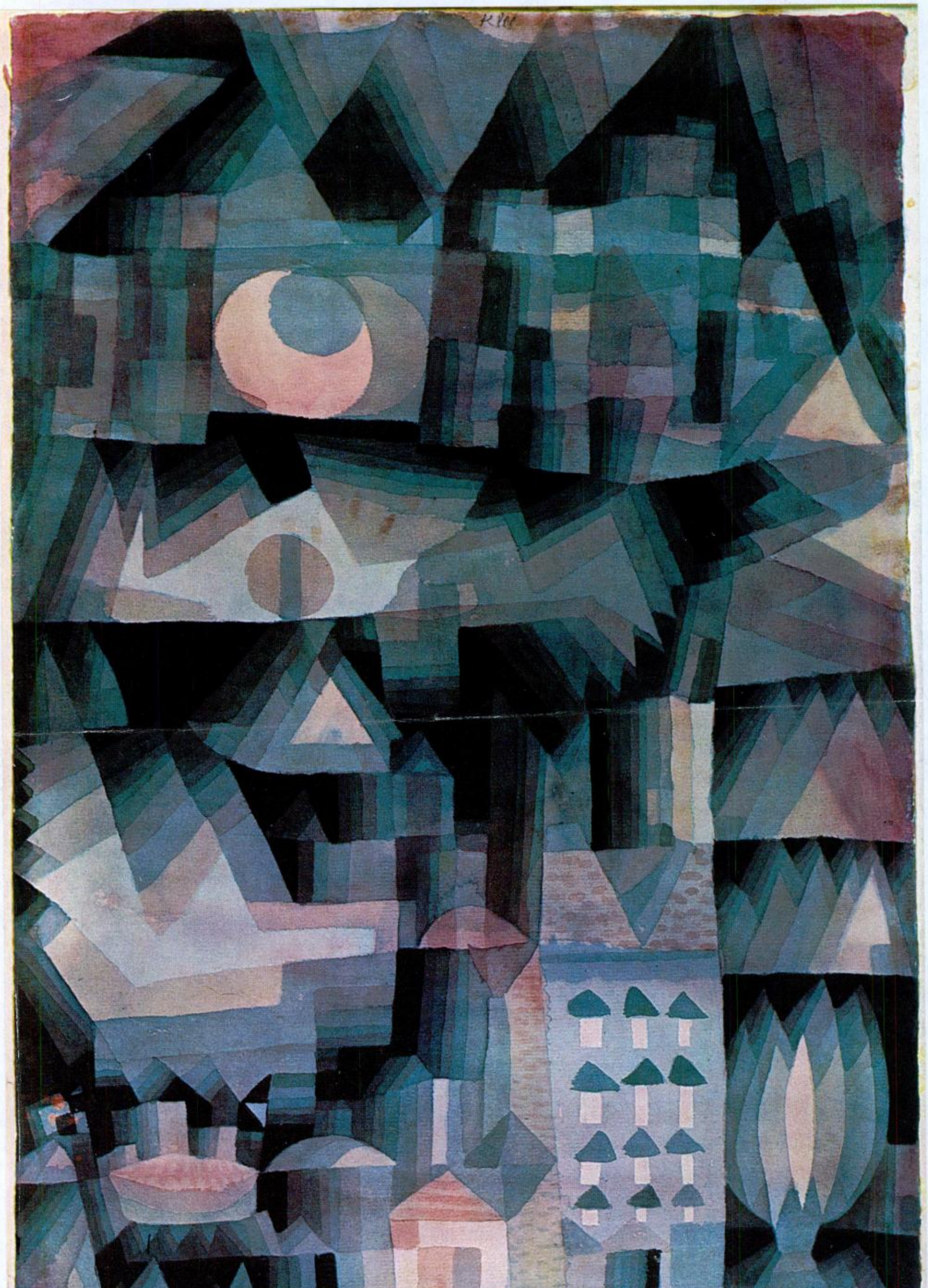
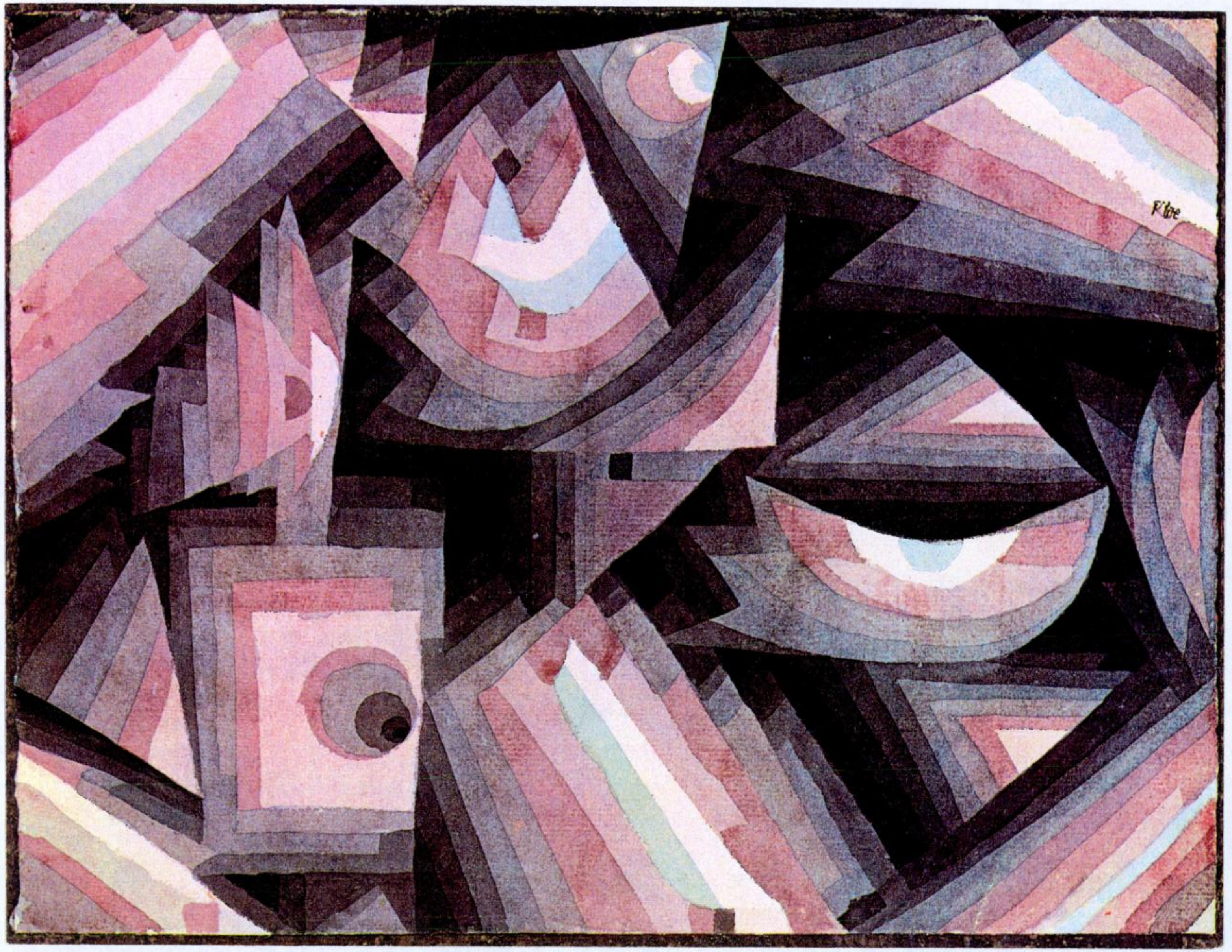

Klee
1921 106 Traum Stadt

Fig. 1 *Dream City*
1921



Gradation of Crystal
1921

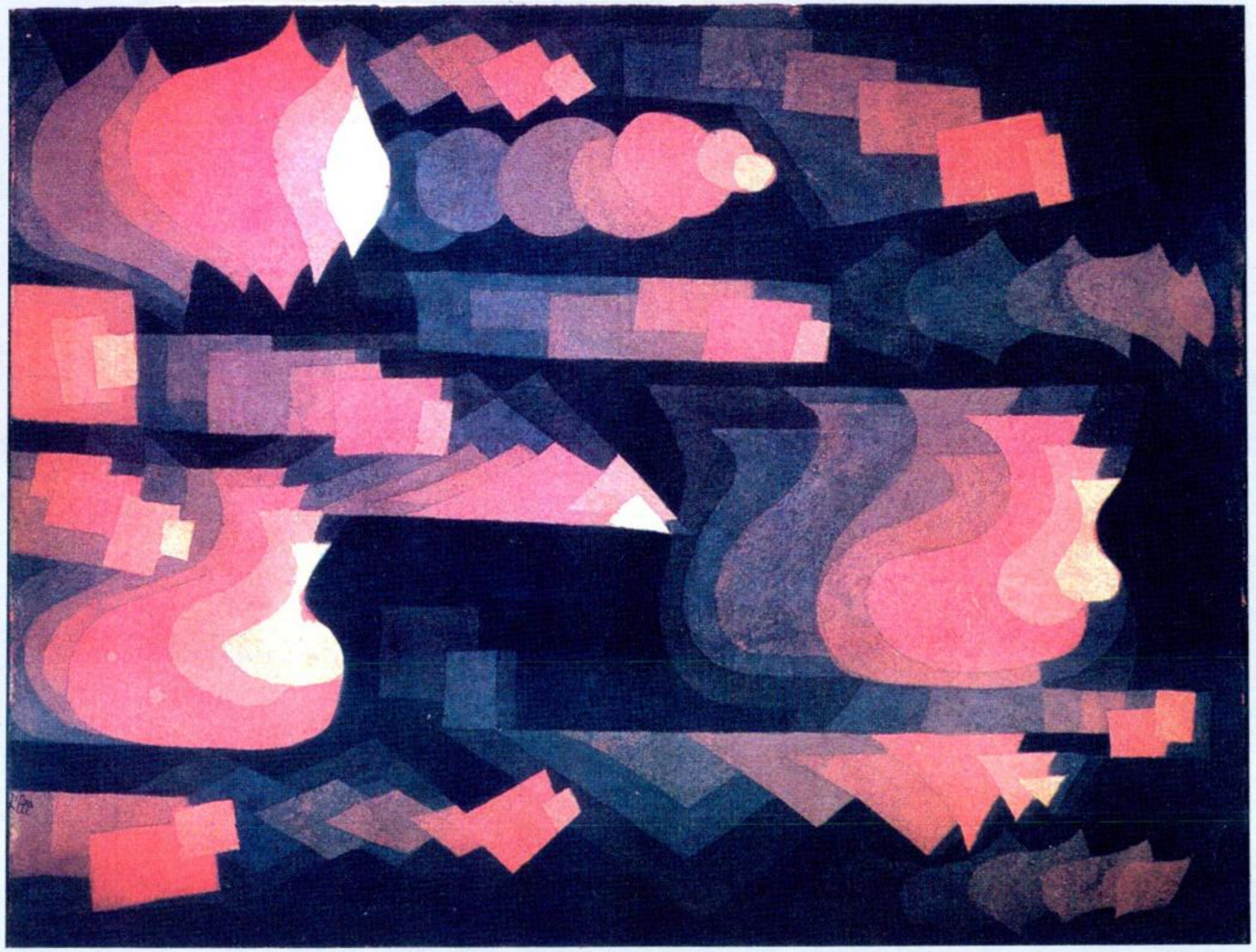
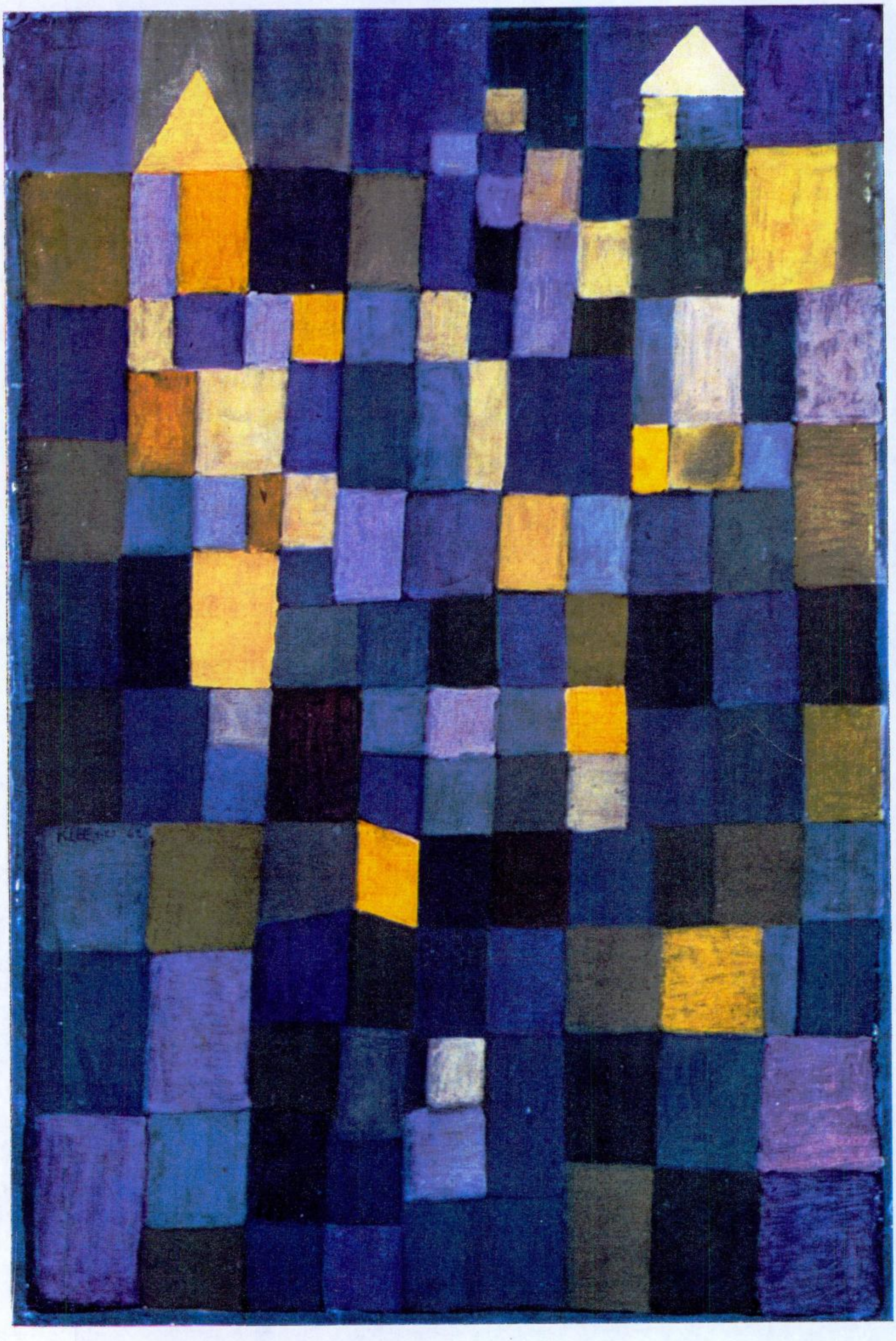


Fig.3 *Fugue in Red*
1921



Architecture (Yellow-Violet Stepped Cubes)
(1923)

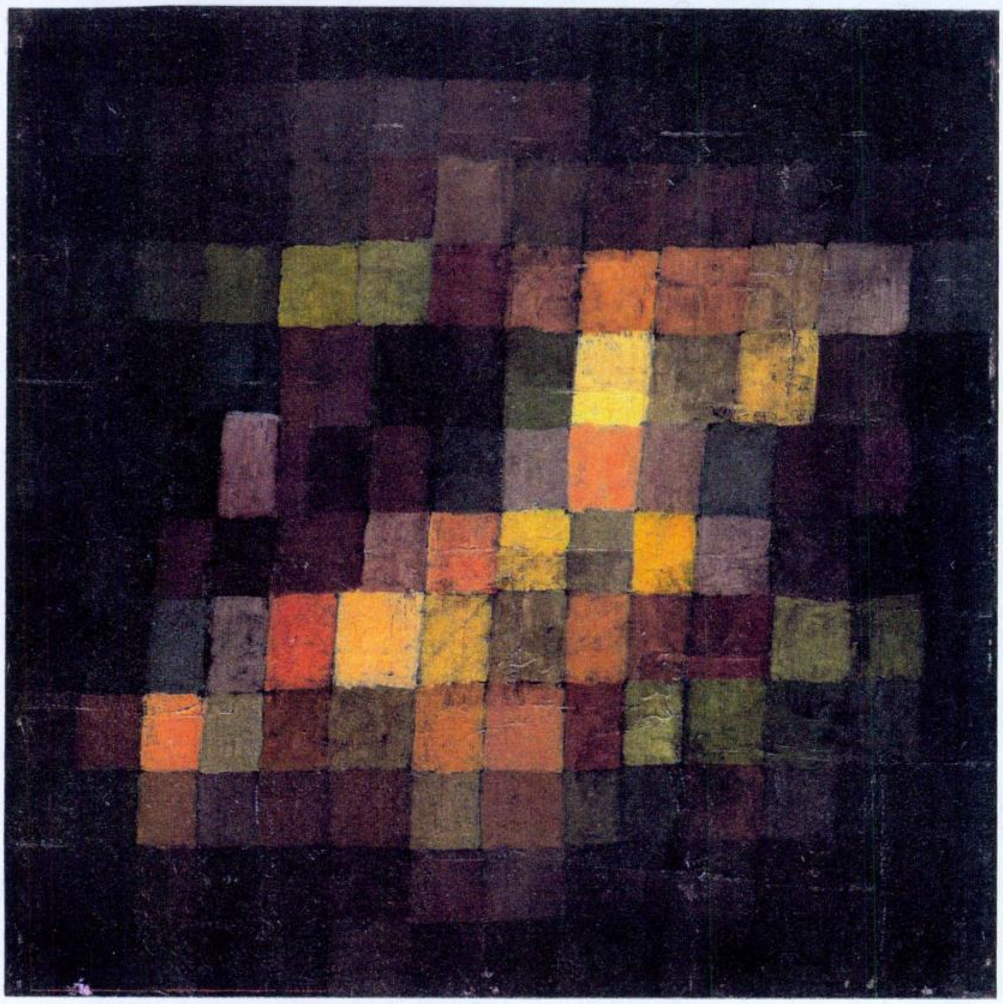


Fig. 6 *Alter Klang*
1925

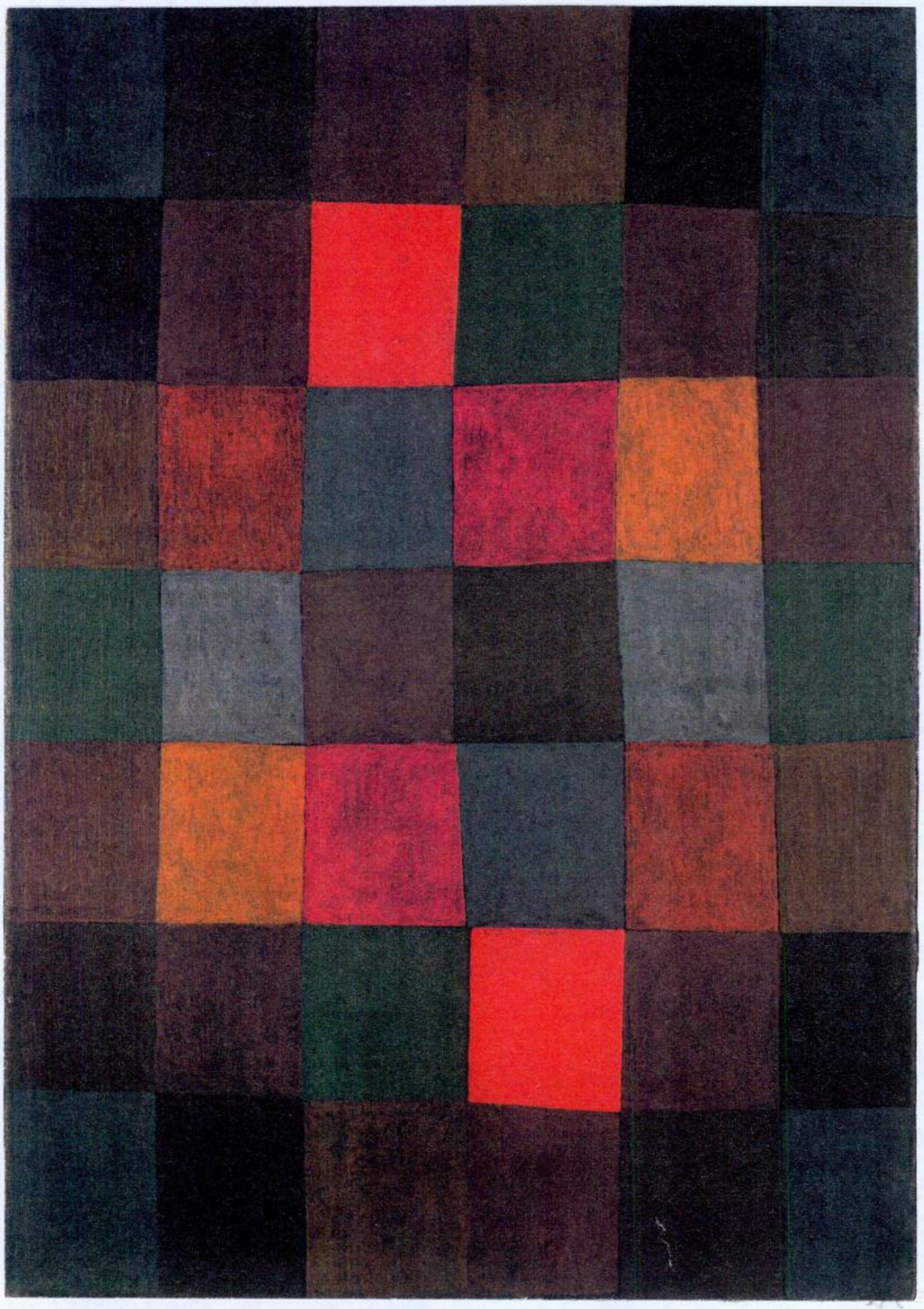


Fig. 7 *New Harmony*
1936

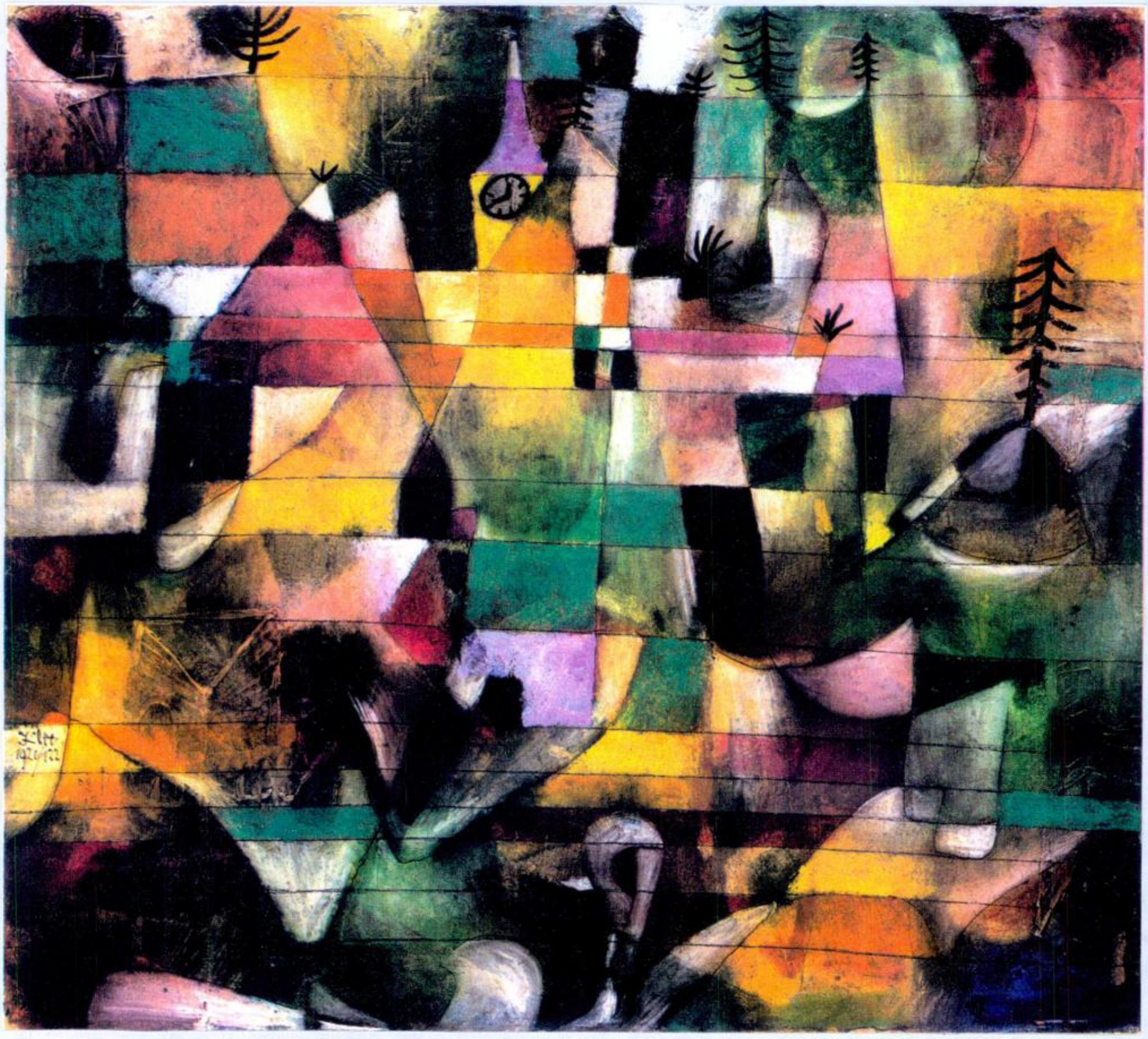


Fig. 8 *Chorale and Landscape*
1921

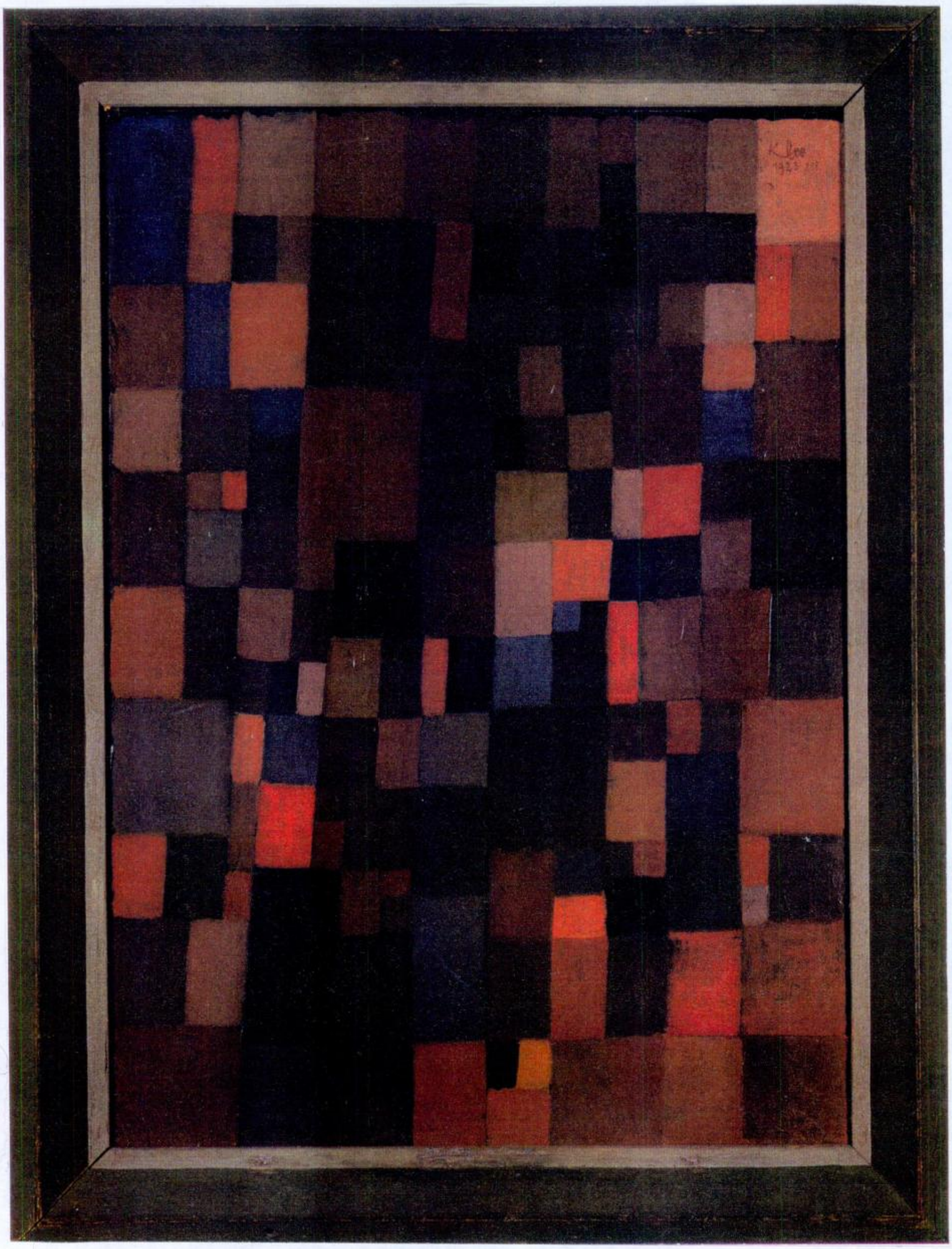


Fig. 9 *Architecture of Planes*
1928

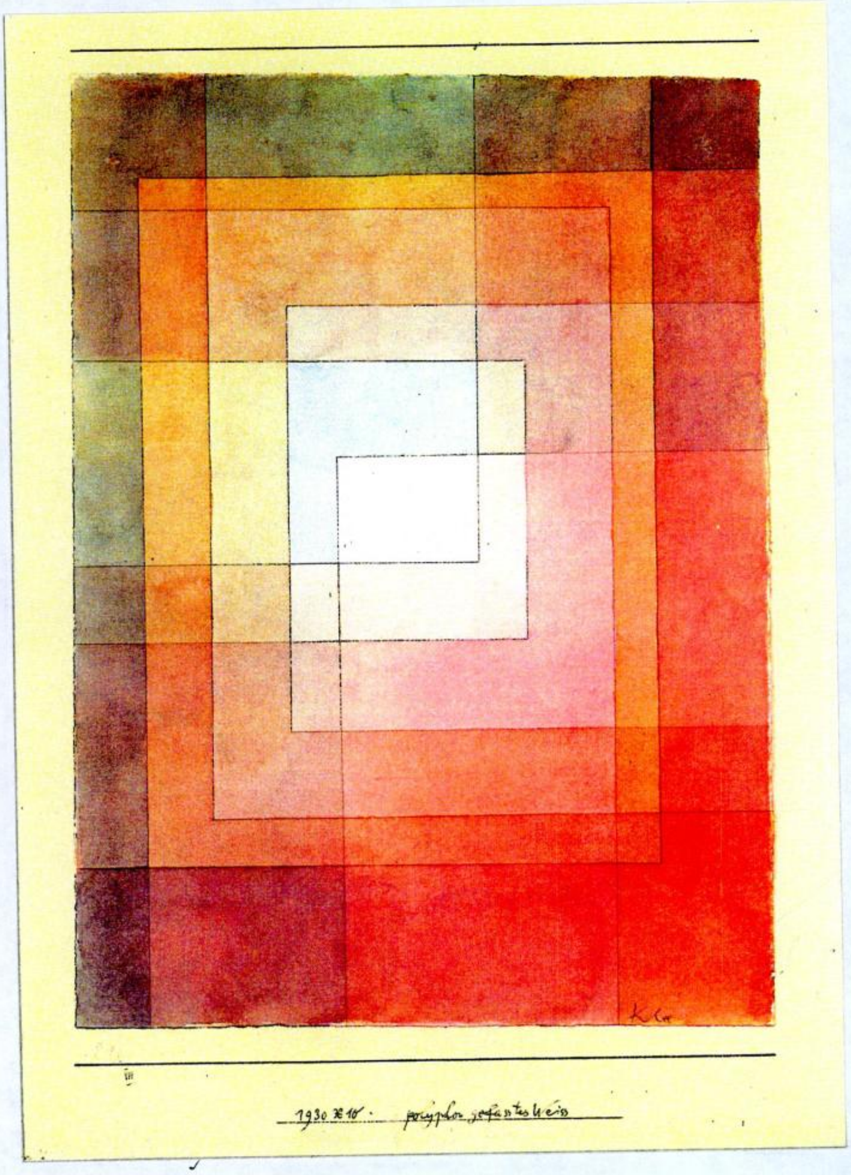

Klee
1930 ※ 10 · polyphon gefasstes Weiss

Fig.10 *Polyphonic Setting for White*
1930

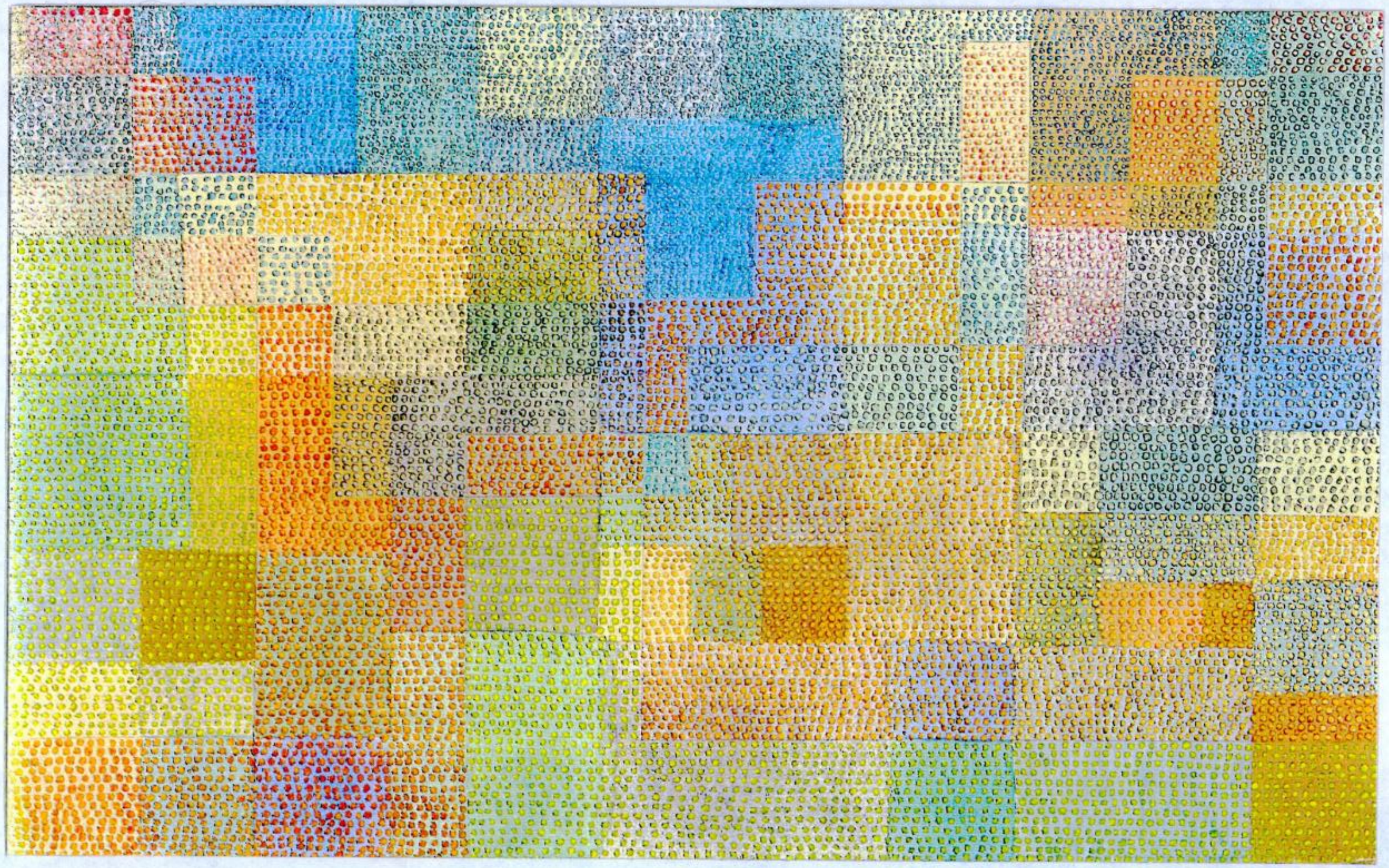
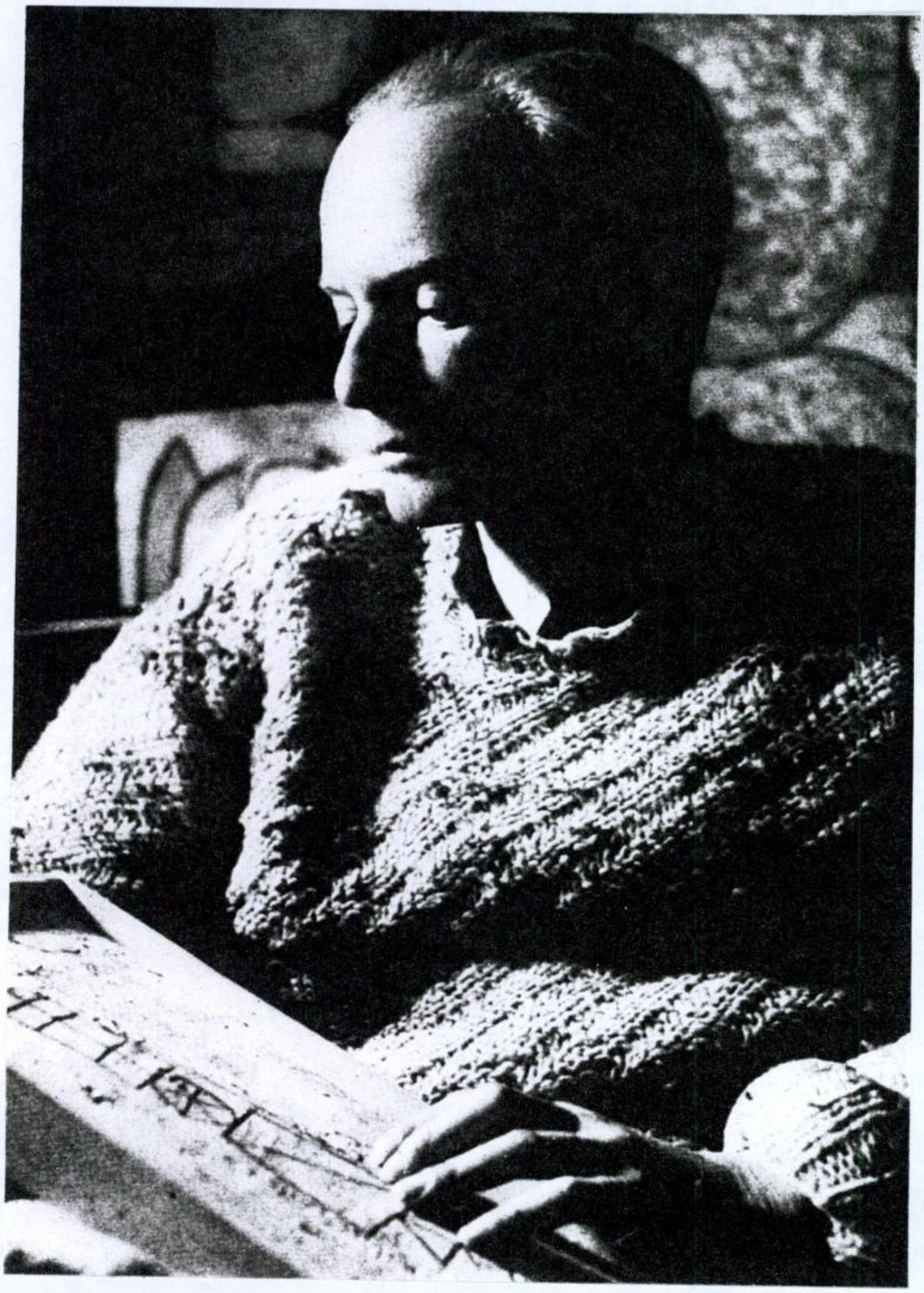


Fig. 11 *Polyphony*
1932



Paul Klee
(1940)

CONCLUSION

Ad Parnassum, 1932 can be considered as Klee's greatest Polyphonic work, serving as a fitting coda to a distinguished academic career at the Bauhaus. The title *Ad Parnassum*, as well as conjuring up mythical associations, alludes specifically to Fux's treatise on counterpoint and polyphony.

Over the course of three decades of teaching Klee had with methodical determination cultivated a remarkable colour sensibility. His singularly unique ability to choose tones and hues helped him to order and create sensitive transitions of colour and vital thematic arrangements. This unique mastery of colour has become clearer to me after experiencing the work of his Bauhaus colleague Josef Albers. At the current exhibition of his work at *Emma*, Albers' *Homage to the Square* illuminates, explains, exploits and explores colour. In *Ad Parnassum* Klee recapitulated his years of exploration and experimentation in colour composition. He also incorporated into the painting the principal iconographic elements of his *ouevre* up to 1932; colour rectangles, counterpointillism and arrow vectors. Klee's unique ability in creating elements forged a definitive polyphonic painting, one of independent formal life.

As Klee's most comprehensive work *Ad Parnassum* is a statement of his highest artistic ambitions and purposes. He subtly and wittingly suggested that the gateway to the *Muses* ' home *Parnassus* is constructed of melody and designed according to the principles of rhythm and counterpoint. Klee once again proposed the unique value of polyphony as a road to the realisation in art of nature's form and creative processes. And again, he re-emphasised the route he believed art must ultimately travel - from the architectonic to that place where architecture and poetry are one, where the symbolic is transmuted into the absolute.

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1.	Klee, 1964, pg. 17	Page 8
2.	Klee, 1964, pg. 32	Page 8
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4.	Mann, 1971, pg.	Page 9
5.	Gropius, 1971, pg. 246	Page 9
6.	Sisman, 1993, pg. 85	Page
7.	Mann, 1971, pg. xi	Page 11
8.	Sisman, 1993, pg. 88	Page 12

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