

## THE GENESIS OF A WORLD

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(1) Paul Klee was fascinated by the art of children largely because he recognized that their creativity had not been stifled by the belief that the world was supposed to appear in any one particular way. He envied them the possession of a consciousness in which reality and imagination had not yet become contradictory. Child on the Steps represents Klee's attempt to enter the mind of the child through an intellectualizing experience. In the painting, the artist captures and synthesizes the outward situation and the emotional state of the child who has newly escaped into a vast and startling world. The pictorial world, in which so much is intriguing, frightening and puzzling, and in which the figure's spindly legs seem unable to provide adequate support, in a very real sense belongs to the child. Klee continually reminds the viewer that this world has resulted from the action of the child's imagination on the world around him through a masterful use of the means of pictorial representation.

(2) Child on the Steps is a pictorial composition made up of discrete geometrical shapes distributed on a solid black background. All of these forms are very simple and regular, including primarily rectangles, triangles, diamonds, and circles. Colors in the painting, which range from greens in the lower half to reds and oranges nearer the top, are low in saturation or purity and seem to have been dulled by an uneven brown which has been applied to the entire surface. The upper third of the pictorial space is occupied by a tectonic structure of which only portions are visible. The viewer is able to identify a roof, some stairs, a clock, and several windows, but Klee does not indicate how these architectural elements are connected, nor does he reveal any visible means of support for the building. Featured in the lower third of the painting are the figure of a child and a fence-like structure, constructed from a series of diamond shapes and extending to either side of him. The child's circular head is slightly off-center to the right of the picture and is approximately as large as the rest of his body. The steps mentioned in the title appear as three long, narrow trapezoids connecting the upper and lower realms of the picture. Although they are composed of basic planar elements, these steps are represented in conformity with the rules of linear perspective. They become more narrow and closer together toward the top of the picture, much as the

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railroad tracks seen frontally in Klee's Pedagogical Sketchbook (Fig. 33). Thus the steps serve to separate as well as to link the upper and lower regions of the composition by locating the architecture in the background and the child in the foreground.

(3) There is a great deal in Child on the Steps to disturb a viewer engaged in such a preliminary inspection. Further study soon indicates, however, that the very features which first make the painting most unsettling have been carefully calculated by Klee to reflect the way in which a child regards the world around him. For Klee, the optical-physical view of one's surroundings is not sufficient, and this painting proves very rewarding for a viewer who considers it as a stride toward the union of outward seeing and inward perception which Klee continually sought to achieve in his work. In light of this realization, it is clear that the luminescent colored forms which originally seem eerie and disjointed against the very dark background contribute toward the artist's intimation that the world he has pictured is one illuminated from within rather than from without. The separation of these forms also reminds the viewer of the way in which a child (or any human being) perceives the natural world, not as an organized whole but as a complex combination of elements where one and then another successively attract his eye and capture his attention. Klee will not allow a spectator to observe all the different parts of his composition simultaneously, thereby reminding the viewer of the creative and temporal nature of the processes involved in regarding any facet of the external world. Although the spectator becomes involved in this way in the creative process represented in the painting, Klee makes it clear that the mental processes which resulted in this particular pictorial composition are uniquely those of the child. Not only are all the forms in the picture identified as belonging to the child's microcosm because they are of the same tone value and geometric character as the figure, but the brown wash over the child's circular head connotes the topography of a globe, suggesting that the child's mind is the source from which the entire pictorial world has sprung.

(4) Ambiguous motion, one initially disturbing aspect of this composition, becomes extremely important in understanding Klee's rendition of the child's universe. Children tend to draw figures having extremely large heads in relation to the rest of their bodies, but this is not the only significance of the strange proportions and the unsteady stance of the child in Klee's painting. The figure's feet seem to have been swept out from under him, indicating perhaps that he fell down the stairs because he had difficulty negotiating the external world. At the same time, however, there is a suggestion that the child is kicking up his heels in delight at the vast expanse of possibilities opening up before him. Leaving the viewer to puzzle over these various interpretations, Klee captures pictorially the sense that the external world beyond the confines of one's home is both frightening and exhilarating for the child whose developing mind draws him into a realm

which his more fragile body may not yet be prepared to explore. In this painting the child struggles valiantly, holding his head erect and his arms out in an attempt to regain his balance and to get his bearings in a world where his interest and his fear pull him in a number of different directions all at once.

(5) The title of the composition, Child on the Steps, suggests a potential for action which is instructive for a viewer attempting to understand the various forces which Klee envisions at work on the child. The entire pictorial structure seems poised and capable of tilting in either direction, both because the individual pictorial forms are not visibly connected to one another and because Klee has positioned them in a delicate asymmetrical balance. Two legs of a large diagonal cross, one extending from the house form in the upper left-hand corner to the fence structure at the lower right and the other connecting the triangle at the upper right of the picture to the fence structure at the lower left, seem to meet in the square with a cross directly above the child's head, providing a loose structure in the composition. Not all of the pictorial elements are included in this structure, however, and the viewer feels that if a single form were moved or omitted the entire composition would shift either to the right or to the left and begin to rotate around the central square. It is significant that the very stable verticals and horizontals characterizing the rectangles and crosses in the upper part of the picture are echoed somewhat weakly nearer the bottom by the single "T" pattern in the child's face. By juxtaposing frequent repetition in the upper realm and an isolated instance in the lower region, Klee indicates that the child is not very successful in applying the laws of organization which operate in his familiar world to a less stable realm dominated by jagged diamond-shaped forms. In this way Klee indicates that the child's uncertainty and his indecision regarding which way to turn are the products of mixed feelings of fascination and apprehension, engendered by the novel but somewhat hostile environment which he is about to confront.

(6) Klee communicates the mixed emotions experienced by a child on the verge of discovery by using pictorial elements to pull the viewer's eye in a number of different directions at the same time. Attention initially centers on the figure of the child, whose large circular head and human features in combination with his lower central position distinguish him from other less readily identifiable pictorial forms. One almost immediately senses that the figure is being drawn both to the right and to the left, as the child's outstretched arms direct the viewer's eyes toward the fence-like structures on either side of him. Here the rhythmic diamond patterns perpetuate this motion, carrying the viewer's eyes to the edges of the pictorial space. Another strong impetus toward movement is created by the suggestion of a large triangle at the right of the picture, defined by the two fence patterns at the bottom of the picture and by the roof-like triangle at the upper right. The diagonal lines and the peaks of the diamonds in the fence direct the viewer's eyes upward

along the slanted edges of the central steps until they come to rest at last on the triangle form in the upper right-hand corner of the picture. This is not the only upward movement elicited by the painting, however, since the viewer's eyes are also drawn toward the upper left. Here the circular clock form repeats the circle of the child's head, and with the help of the very bright square to the lower right of the clock which attracts the viewer's attention, this geometric repetition conducts the observer's eyes toward the highest point in the picture--the house form at the upper left. In contrast to these upward pulls, the impulse toward downward motion is noticeably weak. Although the green of the figure is repeated in a band of color at the edge of the frame, directing the eye downward, the empty space below the child is very small and uninviting in comparison to that occupied by the complex structure above him.

(7) Klee enhances the continual movement between the upper and lower pictorial realms by employing color and some simple perspective devices which make this motion intelligible for the viewer. Red and green, the two basic colors utilized in Child on the Steps, lie diagonally across from one another on the color wheel. Movement back and forth between the reddish upper realm and the green lower region is facilitated by a grayish zone in the central steps where these two complementary colors merge. While red is a warm color, green is very cool; and thus, as their strong horizontal lines suggest, the steps serve to divide as well as to join the two realms. In choosing the warm red and orange tones for the upper familiar world, Klee contrasts its comfort and security to the foreboding chill of the bottom region. In addition, the artist emphasizes the attractive character of the upper realm by giving it a three-dimensional reality which is completely lacking in the flat lower region. He achieves the effect of depth in the reddish world by placing layers of color on top of one another in some of the individual forms, such as in the triangle at the upper right of the picture and in the rectangle directly below it. Klee's very deliberate methods of construction, then, create a definite crescendo in energy as the colors become warmer and as the forms crowd closer together toward the top of the composition. Using color and perspective, Klee indicates that although the child is drawn to the newness and freedom of the lower world, he is understandably reluctant to leave behind the reassuring familiarity of the warm upper realm.

(8) Klee's interest in motion reflects his belief that the phenomenal world is "accidentally caught in time and space," and consequently that it is "absurdly limited compared to the more profound, more mobile world of his vision and feeling" (On Modern Art, p. 93). Klee sought to introduce a temporal dimension into his work, concerning himself with the process of forming rather than with finished forms themselves. In Child on the Steps motion is indeed paramount, providing the key to the content as well as to the significance of the pictorial work. Klee renders the sense of time so masterfully in this painting that a viewer is able to trace the progress of the

figure down the steps in the distant background and then down the central stairs, watching the child's confidence fade as the cool green of the rapidly expanding world replaces the comforting reddish hues of his safe familiar environment. The sense that the luminous pictorial forms arise from nothingness as the child makes his way toward the lower region of the canvas is conveyed by Klee's use of positive, active planes (analogous to those constituting the body of the child himself) on a negative ground. Various horizontal lines in the painting serve as the horizon line or line of actuality for the viewer as his eyes follow the child's descent, coming to rest ultimately on the horizontal line in the face of the child himself. Here some of the few active lines in the painting form the child's features, including his eyes flung wide open in an attempt to take in the world which, Klee would paradoxically claim, he creates by means of his response.

(9) In his reflection of Nature Klee sought to achieve the lyrical equivalent of a human mood, and he realizes this ambition in Child on the Steps by enabling the viewer to assume a child's perspective on the external world. Conceiving of art as something which "does not reproduce the visible but makes visible" ("Ways of Nature Study," p. 76), Klee wanted his viewers to recognize the creative role each of them, like the child in this picture, unavoidably plays in responding to the phenomenal world. The artist also wanted the individuals who looked at his creations to realize that the only limits in his creative process were those erected by their own minds. This limitation as well as the human desire to grasp the infinite is suggested in Child on the Steps by the fact that red and green establish an infinite back and forth motion between the upper and lower regions, yet this motion can never extend beyond the borders of the pictorial space. These borders, like the forms they enclose and whose colors they echo, arise from the mind of the child. For Klee, however, the circle is the purest of mobile forms, and, by emphasizing the roundness of the child's head in contrast to the straight-edged shapes which dominate the rest of the picture, he intimates that in time the child's mind will grow to encompass more and more of the natural world. In 1923 when Klee painted Child on the Steps, he had not yet developed to the point where his own mind could carry him beyond the limits of the pictorial space, but the painting nonetheless indicates his masterful use of the means of pictorial representation to the end of synthesizing outward sight and inward vision as the two would meet in the eye of a child.