

## Fate of a Watercolor:

### Paul Klee's *Die Zwitscher-Maschine*<sup>1</sup>

Charles Werner Haxthausen

On November 14, 1937, as the Nazis' "Degenerate Art" exhibition neared the end of its four-and-a-half-month run in the galleries of the Archäologisches Institut in Munich's Hofgarten, an ambivalent, surprisingly thoughtful essay on the show, written by the art historian Carl Linfert, appeared in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*:

This exhibition in Munich, which more than a million people saw during the summer . . . merits retrospective consideration. Reason enough is the polemical, condemnatory purpose of this enterprise, something without precedent throughout the long history of viewing art as a loftier, privileged domain of life. But also the *contents* of the exhibition, art rounded up from public museums, reflecting several decades that are also very much a part of the lives of today's visitors, these contents, too, deserve renewed scrutiny. For the artworks that have been brought together in this manner and presented as degenerate have undergone a curious transformation, even if their condition today appears no different than it was ten or so years ago. This transformation is due not merely to the nature of the retrospective view that the exhibition embodies. It is due above all to the "trend of the times," which always disavows a part—albeit this time a large part—of what has come before.<sup>2</sup>

Fifteen of the works that underwent this "curious transformation" were by Paul Klee.<sup>3</sup>

Among the "degenerate" Klees was the 1922 watercolor *Die Zwitscher-Maschine* [*The Twittering Machine*] (1922.151). Looking at this droll work today, probably the best known of the Klees in The Museum of Modern Art, New York, few viewers can imagine the vicissitudes it has endured in its odyssey through time and space, during which it has been an object both of delight and of vilification, inscribed with contradictory meanings both in Germany and in the United States. This trajectory is typical of many works of modern German art, and tracing it in some detail here should offer a trenchant illustration of Linfert's remark on how not only the changing historical context (the "trend of the times"), but also geographical relocation can alter the imputed meaning of an artwork.

*Die Zwitscher-Maschine* was first shown publicly in February 1923 at the Kronprinzenpalais on Unter den Linden in Berlin, as part of a solo exhibition of 267 works. This was Klee's first large exhibition in Berlin, held in the city's most prestigious venue (following the abdication of the Hohenzollerns at the end of the war, the Kronprinzenpalais had been converted to display the Nationalgalerie's expanding holdings of twentieth-century art). In August 1923, after protracted negotiations with Klee, the museum's director Ludwig Justi purchased *Die Zwitscher-Maschine* and three other Klee works from the exhibition—*Der Angler* [*The Angler*], *Mond über der Stadt* [*Moon Over the Town*], and *Das Vokaltuch der Kammersängerin Rosa Silber* [*Vowel Cloth of the Singer Rosa Silber*]—for the price of 40 million grotesquely inflated and highly unstable Reichsmarks.<sup>4</sup> These four were among the first of Klee's works to be acquired by a major German museum.<sup>5</sup> Of the group, *Die Zwitscher-Maschine* would become by far the most cited and reproduced throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, appearing in texts in German, French, and English.<sup>6</sup> As Alfred H. Barr Jr. organized his landmark 1931 exhibition "German Painting and Sculpture" for The Museum of Modern Art, he borrowed *Die Zwitscher-Maschine* and *Der Angler* from the Nationalgalerie.<sup>7</sup> Thanks to these two splendid watercolors, Barr later wrote, Klee began to make inroads among artists and collectors who only a year before had been scandalized by his retrospective, also at the Modern.<sup>8</sup> By 1933 *Die Zwitscher-Maschine* had gained such fame that it was the one work that Richard Hamann chose to represent Klee in his nine-hundred-page history of art.<sup>9</sup>

Barr savored *Die Zwitscher-Maschine* for its "exquisite absurdity," which for him evoked the spirit of Lewis Carroll's "The Jabberwocky."<sup>10</sup> Yet Klee's bizarre contraption was not the product of pure fantasy, as Justi revealed in a handbook to the Kronprinzenpalais collections. It was inspired in fact by a music box made by Frenchman Blaise Bontemps around 1870, a highly naturalistic mechanical apparatus of a tree with animated birds, their lifelike song generated by bellows-driven cams, that was on view in Munich's museum of technology, the Deutsches Museum.<sup>11</sup> Justi wrote: ". . . from the stimulus of this educational institution for technology, an astonishingly unreal machine has come into being: thin wires and birds that are nothing more than singing heads. On the right is a handle if one turns it, there is twittering from all sides, and if one listens closely, one can hear the different pitches and little melodies." Playfully citing, without quotation marks, a line from Friedrich Schiller's "Ode to Joy," Justi concluded: "Whoever has failed in this, let him, weeping, steal away from our midst!"<sup>12</sup>

Clearly many did fail, as not everyone in Germany admired Klee's wit or Justi's urbane joke. But those who failed did not "steal away." By the end of January 1933, they were in control, and the fortunes of *Die Zwitscher-Maschine*, Justi, and Klee changed drastically. On July 1, 1933, five months after Hitler took power, Justi was placed on "indefinite leave, effective immediately," by order of the Reichsminister for education, and the Kronprinzenpalais was ordered closed for reorganization.<sup>13</sup> On April 21 Klee was abruptly placed on leave from his teaching position at the Düsseldorf Academy and was terminated in December. When the Kronprinzenpalais reopened that month under the directorship of Eberhard Hanfstaengel, *Die Zwitscher-Maschine* and four of the other five Klee works in the collection had been removed from view.<sup>14</sup> Not until three years later, in November 1936, would *Die Zwitscher-Maschine* be exhibited once again, but under drastically different circumstances. It was seen not in Berlin but in Munich, at the very institution that housed the elaborate avian music box that had inspired Klee's watercolor—the Deutsches Museum. The occasion was the vast exhibition "Bolshevism—The Great Antibolshevist Exposition." Here *Die Zwitscher-Maschine* and its companion piece from the storage vaults of the Nationalgalerie, *Das Vokaltuch der Kammersängerin Rosa Silber*, were displayed not for their charm or aesthetic merits, but as scurrilous examples of the "cultural Bolshevism" allegedly rampant in the Weimar Republic.<sup>15</sup>

On July 7, 1937, the Nazi painters Adolf Ziegler, president of the Reichskammer of fine arts, and Wolfgang Willrich, author of the recently published *Säuberung des Kunsttempels* [*Cleansing of the Temple of Art*],<sup>16</sup> arrived at the Berlin Kronprinzenpalais to select works to ship to Munich for display in the "Degenerate Art" exhibition, hastily conceived only a week earlier. *Die Zwitscher-Maschine* and four other Klees were among the 141 objects sent to Munich from the Kronprinzenpalais.<sup>17</sup> It hung, unframed, with eight of his other works beside a doorway in the ground floor galleries of the Archäologisches Institut.<sup>18</sup> Mounted directly beneath it, visible in the installation photograph, was a brief text by Klee: "I cannot be grasped in the here and now, for I dwell just as much with the dead as with the unborn."<sup>19</sup> This sentence, first published in 1920, had become a veritable mantra among Klee commentators in Germany during the Weimar Republic, shaping his image as an aloof, otherworldly, "cosmic" artist. Mounted alongside it at Munich was a longer wall text from a 1930 exhibition catalogue by Rudolf Probst that reinforced this image. Probst described Klee as one who worked "in dedicated seclusion," manifesting "Man's progressive loss of contact with his roots—which to those who remain earthbound is a sinister process, a vision of dread."<sup>20</sup> The context of the "Degenerate Art" exhibition crassly altered the implications of both texts: now they exemplified the estrangement of the modern artist from the *Volk*, a separation against which Adolf Hitler had railed, a few days before the opening, in his speech dedicating the Haus der deutschen Kunst on July 18. It was, he declared, the task of German artists "to reach out from the very depths of the German heart to accommodate and to serve our people and its spirit. . . ."