

About the Cover

A Memory of Color

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“A cloth: Enough cloth is plenty and more, more is almost enough for that and besides if there is no more spreading is there plenty of room for it. Any occasion shows the best way.”

—Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons*

We see a veiled woman standing in the warm light of the desert sun. Her emotion is unreadable, hidden despite the steady gaze of her eyes. Our attention slips beyond the woman to the stultifying desert landscape that takes shape in the curtained window behind her. A solitary leaf and a palm tree emerge, followed by two distant hills and, perhaps, a road.

“Arab Song” is an oil-on-burlap piece by the celebrated painter Paul Klee. Though he completed the piece in 1932, Klee was likely painting under the spell of a 1914 trip to Tunisia.

Klee’s mastery of color is the point of reference for most art enthusiasts. Consider his stunning “Red Balloon,” or the depth and vibrancy of “Ad Parnassum.” Indeed, Klee’s Bauhaus lectures on form and design have become classics on color theory (Klee 1999). However, color did not come easily to him. Early in his career, Klee wrote of the “realization that a long struggle [lay] in store for me in this field [of color]” (Klee and Klee 1964). His early paintings lack dramatic impact. That all changed in 1914, when Klee sailed from Marseilles to Tunis with painters August Macke and Louis Moulliet. In the clear light of North Africa, among the brilliant colors of the city and the

millennium-old traditional cloth dyes used on the carpets, blankets, and tunics of the *souk*, Klee experienced the long-desired moment of artistic epiphany. “Color possesses me, I don’t have to pursue it,” Klee wrote. “Color and I are one. I am a painter” (Klee and Klee 1964).

Klee returned from Tunisia with that bright, clear image of the landscape imprinted in his mind. He also returned with the ability to use color beyond physical description; he had achieved abstraction. Many of his following works evoked the dramatic geometry and geography of North Africa, in the form of “shifting horizontals” or “overlapping color squares” (Phillips Collection 2011).

In “Arab Song,” we see a vivid moment at the turning point of his career, the moment of realization that color had arrived. The tonality and shape are more simplistic than in many of Klee’s other works, but the layers shift and flutter like a curtain in a hot desert wind. We simultaneously see distant hills and gazing eyes, a landscape and a woman, so that one cannot exist without the other. This is a portrait and a landscape, a ‘non-portrait’ and a ‘non-landscape’ (Heath 2008). It evokes the mystery and power of women as seen in the mind of the artist. It also reminds us of the crucial part that women play in shaping landscapes and lives in the developing world. They preserve traditional roles as they manage crop-planting and live-stock-raising, yet they act as the most critical agents of effective and sustainable change in local communities.

For Klee, his trip to Tunisia stayed with him throughout his life, stamped into his art with a daring to push color to the limits while maintaining the subtlety of form. In this way, his work mirrors the Tunisian landscapes

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in which it was born. As we look beyond the vibrant image and through the window, we see again a touch of sadness. This is perhaps more *ennui* than solastalgia (Albrecht 2005), but it is nonetheless a longing in Klee's heart for a place now gone, a memory to re-create on canvas or burlap.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Paul Klee (1879–1940) was born in Switzerland to a Swiss mother and German father. His father was a music teacher, and Klee proved to be a talented musician at an early age. While he ultimately chose to pursue the visual arts, many of his paintings contain references to music. Klee's work was influenced by the expressionist and surrealist movements, and he was involved in the Blue Rider (Blaue Reiter) group. While he traveled throughout Europe and North Africa, Klee called Germany home, teaching at the German Bauhaus School and Düsseldorf Academy of Fine Arts. However, in the early 1930s, the Nazi regime targeted Klee and his work. Klee fled to Switzerland, where he died seven years later without being recognized as a Swiss citizen.

ON THE COVER

“Arab Song” by Paul Klee, 1932. Oil on burlap, 91 × 64 cm.

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