

Rachel Wright
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Paul Klee: the Meaning Behind the Form

“The most accessible forms of Klee’s pictorial writings are his monograms, which are distinguishable by their inventive variety”, writes K. Porter Aichele in her book “Paul Klee’s Pictorial Writing”. Aichele explores the symbolism contained in Klee’s many different types of lettering and monograms, dividing them into two different categories: “hybrid forms”, wherein letters replace parts of the human anatomy, and “letters as narrative agents”, wherein letters in figurative alphabets take on human qualities or characteristics. Aichele asserts that both of these types of letters can be classified as anthromorphic, because they combine qualities of the human form with those of the alphabet.

Traditionally, alphabets and letters are associated with narrative, so it comes as no surprise that Klee used anthromorphic letters to reinforce this theme in many of his works. One example that Aichele explores is the watercolor *Constructed in Color with Black Graphic Elements*, which Klee painted in 1919. It is not known why Klee chose to use the initials R,K, and A, but Aichele asserts that they “serve as signs of discursivity and as one category of the structural elements named in the title” (Aichele 169). The painting communicates a narrative about the act of making a painting, which is further emphasized by the fact that the artist cut the painting in half, then glued it to

another sheet of paper, “thus emphasizing the discontinuous, episodic nature of his narrative of process” (Aichele 169).

Aichele continues to explore Klee’s progression from more literal alphabetic symbols to stylized “secret writing”. Claude Gandelman proposed that Klee based some of his later figurative alphabets on Hebraic letters, which, according to Aichele, allowed the cabalists to portray human figures under the guise of alphabets, because actual drawings of humans were prohibited by their religion. This type of writing became known as “Cloud Writing” due to a myth that claimed it emerged from the clouds as “heavenly signs of the twenty-two works of creation catalogued in Genesis” (Aichele 171-172). This coincides with Klee’s interest in Mysticism, as this system of secret writing “embraces Babylonian astrology, Druidic divination practices, and celestial alphabets devised by occultists of every stripe” (Aichele 172).

Klee’s 1924 painting *Heavenly Signs over the Fields* is a prime example of his interest in cloud writing, wherein the symbols are “visible but not legible...and semantically multivalent”, and the horizon line gives the appearance that the letters are physically in the sky. Klee made visual references to the Hebrew alphabet without actually using distinguishable letters.

Mirror writing was another type of lettering that Klee employed in some of his works. An obvious influence was Leonardo da Vinci, who famously often wrote in this fashion. In Aichele’s words, Klee discovered that he could “give poetic resonance to an ordinary word by reversing it” in his poetry, so he began

to include mirror writing in some of his drawings. Klee didn't limit himself to preexisting ways of writing, however. He often created his own secret alphabets and symbols, utilizing characters that resembled alphabetic symbols, but did not match up with any sort of lexicon or language. Aichele references the 1935 painting *Novel in Secret Writing*, which she asserts could be linked to Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, in which the protagonist endlessly searches for the meaning behind a blue flower, but the meaning is never revealed.

It is well known that Paul Klee had an intense interest in the history of writing itself, in terms of both time and culture. He was influenced by many ancient cultures and the ways in which they communicated the written word, which is evident in his work.