

THE TEXT OF AN ADDRESS ON THE OCCASION OF THE OFFICIAL
OPENING OF THE PAUL KLEE EXHIBITION, GIVEN TO INVITED
GUESTS, BY PROFESSOR H.J. SIMPSON, HEAD OF THE UNIVERSITY
OF CANTERBURY SCHOOL OF FINE ARTS TUESDAY 29TH NOVEMBER 1983.

Your Worship, or if I may, Sir Hamish (Sir Hamish Hay, Mayor of Christchurch), Councillor Arbuckle (Chairman of the Cultural and Public Relations Committee City Council of Christchurch), Mr. Coley (Director of the Robert McDougall Art Gallery Christchurch City Council), Friends of the Robert McDougall Art Gallery. By your presence here tonight you salute the genius of Paul Klee and pay him homage. May I add to the 'thank you's' by saying "Thank you Paul Klee" for giving us, and I pray succeeding generations, a share in your vision; your understanding of Nature, of what it is to be alive - alive in a bewildering diverse, brutal yet fragile world "red in tooth and claw". Thank you Paul Klee for bringing together words of great beauty and images of brilliant imagination, thank you for showing us how greatness may reside in small, quiet, meditative works made from everyday inexpensive materials - the things you and I throw away each week, such things as wrapping paper, the cardboard from shoe boxes.

When during my last visit to Basel I had the good fortune to unexpectedly come across the Great Retrospective Exhibition of Paul Klee I was astonished both by the variety and the unity evident in the well over seven-hundred works presented, including some of the marginalia from school exercise books and the so-called 'horrid drawings' that so offended his mother. Spending many hours at the Gallery I had the opportunity, during those very necessary rests we all need to 'recharge our batteries', of overhearing the chance remarks of some other visitors I was amazed to discover in the overwhelming majority of cases, these reflected a sense of disappointment! The works were, so it was said, "small - rather rough - even tatty - faded - little more than doodles - childish - lacking variety - and certainly not 'painter's painting'"! I became aware the vast majority of English-speaking tourists were ill-equipped to scale the heights of the exhibition and given their 'production-line itineraries' most visitors would have been unable to mount a second assault on it.

Could it be some of us may experience similar difficulties when we are confronted by the works of this great twentieth century master - if so we at least have the advantage of being able to go away, do our homework and return again and again? This exhibition represents for us a unique opportunity; for unless we can spend weeks as a guest in the fair city of Düsseldorf we are unlikely ever again to see so many works by Paul Klee so conveniently and so powerfully concentrated in one place at one time.

Paul Klee's reputation as musician preceds him but do we still underestimate the importance of his consuming passion for music as a fountain of inspiration and influence in his lifework? It was Klee who said "Mozart and Bach [J.S.] are my real mentors - or if you must Bach and Mozart".

But allowing this are we even more likely to underestimate Klee's concern for words? By early middle-age he seems to have read everything including contemporary writings - his concern for the perfect embodiment of idea in words, especially when inventing titles for his own works, is I believe especially important. In this his banner was "streaming against the wind"; the great care and the sometimes considerable time taken by Paul Klee to find exactly the right words for a title or an idea has, in my opinion, not been given proper attention by commentators and biographers. It seems appropriate then that I should step aside and allow Paul Klee's own words to be heard?

"What characterizes the art of 'yesterday' is the laborously detailed examination of appearances. The artist and his subject attempted to establish a relationship by the 'optico-physical path [of light] through the intervening air which lies between the 'I' and the 'you'. It has given us excellent records of the surface of things. But the artist is more than an official photographer, the artist is a creature living on the earth - at the centre of the universe - a creature on a star among myriads of other stars - There is the non-optical path of roots in the earth, of cosmic unity which reaches down to us from above and which helps us bring into being images which transcend dull

mechanical imprisoning influences - images which add to and thus extend the legacy of the past"

"But even the most imaginative plastic polyphony is not art in its most exalted state . . . there is a last mystery beyond ambiguity, at that very point the intellect dies away miserably. It is thanks to this very element of mystery that art can have such powerful effects upon us - it is symbols that can comfort the spirit and offer us the opportunity to change our point of view", "Art does not reproduce the visible, it renders visible".

Paul Klee with Wassily Kandinsky and Pablo Picasso are by common consent regarded as three great painters of this century. While Picasso was working on his Guernica he was asked his opinion of Paul Klee (a small exhibition of Klee drawings and prints was then on show in Paris). Picasso replied with noble simplicity "Pascal - Napoleon".

I now end with the words with which I began -

"Thank you Paul Klee for all your gifts to us: for everything you continue to do for us".

If he were here tonight he would very likely open the exhibition and invite you to view the works with one of his playful, witty, profound cautions, "Careful - the pictures are looking at us"!

27th November, 1983.

H.J.S.

(i.e. Prof. John Simpson)