

## 7.2 Analysis of a masterpiece: the power of centre in Paul Klee's paintings

### Objective

The goal of this exercise is to discover how a central element helps us organize and make sense of our visual experience.

### Background

The Impressionists had already shown that the world offers itself to our visual perception through an incessant stream of luminous sensations. The paintings of Monet and Renoir provide us with the pleasure of being immersed in a stream of coloured light. The gaze is immersed in them with voluptuousness and joy, without barriers or restraint.

Paul Klee learned from the Impressionists that sensations are the starting point of any experience. However, he did not stop there. From the Cubists, he learned that he had to move beyond the immediacy of sensations; that every representation of reality is also an expression of the observers' internal subjective reality. Klee realized that the way we see the world arises from our mental order.

Through hundreds of paintings, drawings, sketches, and notes, Klee's research was about how the mind constructs the world's forms and reveals its order and meaning. It is research on the mystery of creativity, the perceptual and cognitive genesis of forms, and how we transform the chaos of the experience into an understandable and ordered internal reality.

Paul Klee had a special gift for visualizing the fundamental elements of nature in images of disarming simplicity and depth. He revealed deep aspects of our mental life while we set out to create order and attribute meaning to the flow of experience.

In his research, Klee often lingered on the organizing force of visual centres. He repeatedly experimented with how a single element assumes a dominant function becoming a centre and assuming the role of an organizer of the entire visual experience.

The two paintings in Figure 7.2a and 7.2b are variants of the same idea. The centre of the painting is a single circular element perfectly distinguished by colour and shape from all the other elements of the image. A set of additional elements of regular shapes, similar in colour, are woven into a geometric structure based on an orthogonal grid creating a playful tessellation.



Fig. 7.2a - The messenger of autumn, Paul Klee (1922)



Fig. 7.2b - Red Balloon, Paul Klee (1922)

For the observer, it is impossible to escape the power of the centre. The eye starts from the centre and continuously returns to it after wandering on the surface of the painting. The centre has its individuality, which the other elements do not have. It has the stature of a solitary leader, not subject to the regulatory laws of the grid. We also notice the centre's presence when we gaze at another part of the image. It is its reassuring presence that gives the centre an organizing power.

The visual centre is a kind of leader, which, like any leader, has followers. The followers are the elements in the grid: They play an essential role by absorbing and channeling the structuring energy emanating from the centre. Consequently, the centre sets the visual experience in motion, transforming a static visual entity into a dynamic one, which moves harmoniously.

Let us wrap it up:

- The centre is a singular element that attracts attention.
- The centre has its own specificity.
- The centre is a source of structuring energy.

- Other secondary elements absorb the energy of the centre and play an active role within the constraints allowed by the geometric order to which they are subordinated.
- The centre involves all the elements in a harmonious movement.

We can easily generalize the visual experience of the centre. Indeed, Klee unraveled one of the deep processes with which our minds build order. A centre is any focal element (not just visual) that we take as a guide to make sense of the other details and input extracted from our experience. It can be a metaphor: a future goal, idea, and foundational value are all centres around building the present and the future. The centre is any source of meaning.

### Instructions

Observe Degas' painting (fig. 7.2c), then answer the following questions.

1. What is the centre of the composition?
2. What function does the centre play in organizing the elements of the painting?
3. Does the relationship between the centre and the other elements suggest an interpretation of the painting?



Figure 7.2.c: Edgar Degas, Violinist with Young Woman, 187

You can consider comparing your answer with the analysis of the painting by Rudolf Arnheim (1982, p. 90-91)

## **References**

Arnheim, R. (1982), *The Power of the Center. A Study of Composition in the Visual Arts*, University of California Press, Berkeley (CA).