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Paul Klee (1879-1940)

Five Hand Puppets, 1916-1925

IN 1913, 6-YEAR-OLD FELIX KLEE LIVED IN Munich, Germany, as the only child of Paul and Lily Klee. Lily earned enough money teaching piano lessons to cover their expenses, while Paul was a stay-at-home dad trying to build a career as an artist. Whenever Paul needed to leave home to shop or run errands, Felix came with him. About twice a year, father and son visited a flea market in town where Paul could buy old picture frames for his paintings. While his father shopped, Felix got to watch the Kasperl and Gretl puppet shows—the German version of Punch and Judy. Felix loved the playful farces and told his parents how much he wanted to work the puppets himself.

On Felix's ninth birthday, his father gave him a set of 8 hand puppets that he had made mostly using leftover materials from around the home. They were characters from the Kasperl and Gretl shows. He also made a little theater out of one of the larger picture frames, complete with dark curtains and a hand-painted landscape backdrop. Soon Felix was amusing family and friends with shows in his own puppet theater hung in a doorway between rooms in their small apartment.

Felix's love of puppets and the theater continued for many years. Except while Paul was in army service during World War I, he gave his son a few new puppets each year for his birthday. By the time Felix was a teenager, the family had moved to Weimar, Germany, where Paul taught at the prestigious Bauhaus school of art and architecture. There Felix entertained staff and students with puppet skits on more grown-up themes, often poking fun at school politics or national current affairs.

The 5 puppets on the cover of this issue of the *Archives* are as follows, from left to right:

- The *Big-eared Clown* (1925) probably represents someone on the Bauhaus faculty—possibly theater producer Oskar Schlemmer, who occasionally did clown performances there. The clown's face is reminiscent of the simple geometry of faces often seen in Paul Klee's graphic works.

- The *Crowned Poet* (1919), wearing a laurel wreath and a printed handkerchief as a cloak, may represent the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, a neighbor in Munich whom Paul Klee much admired.

- Paul Klee's own *Self-portrait* (1922), with very large eyes as befit a professional visual artist, sports his favorite black cap and a robe made from one of his own worn-out suits. A head computed tomographic scan of this puppet has shown that it was formed over a beef bone, probably scavenged from the dinner table.

- Mr Death* (1916) is one of the original 8 puppets. He was one of Kasperl's traditional enemies over whom Kasperl always triumphed, sometimes by hanging *Mr Death* from his own gallows.

- The *Barber of Bagdad* (1921) is both a character from *The Thousand and One Nights* and the title figure from an opera that the Klee family knew well. The opera character was a shameless self-promoter, claiming expertise in everything from mathematics to medicine.

When Felix left home in 1925, he and his father divided the puppets between them. Paul kept most of those from the Bauhaus years; Felix kept most of the earlier ones that he had played with as a child. Felix went on to become a prominent theater designer and director of the municipal theater of Basel, Switzerland. Of the original 50 or so puppets, the surviving 30 are now in the Zentrum Paul Klee in Bern, Switzerland.¹ While Felix was living in Wurzburg, Germany, during World War II, all but one of his puppets were destroyed when the city was bombed. The sole survivor was *Mr Death*.

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1. Hopfengart C. *Paul Klee: Hand Puppets*. Bern, Switzerland: Hatje Cantz Publishers; 2006.