

Paul Klee

Swiss, 1879–1940

*Agricultural
Experimental Plan for
Late Fall, 1922*

Watercolor with ink on paper, 7 1/4 x 12 1/4 in.

(18.7 x 30.9 cm)

Gift of Jane Abbott, 1970.016

Agricultural Experimental Plan for Late Fall is like a primer in Paul Klee's dense visual grammar; nearly every stylistic flourish in the artist's repertoire is deployed in its modest seven-by-twelve-inch, notebook-size dimensions. Bands of complementary color gradations, a cornerstone of his highly articulated pedagogy of color: *check* (notice the strips that constitute the background of the work); energetically expanding spirals: *check* (one can be found in the work's top-central portion); points vectored into dynamically converging lines: *check* (note the cluster that crops up directly below the spiral). Lastly, the arrow, a signature motif, is silhouetted prominently against the topmost white semicircle.

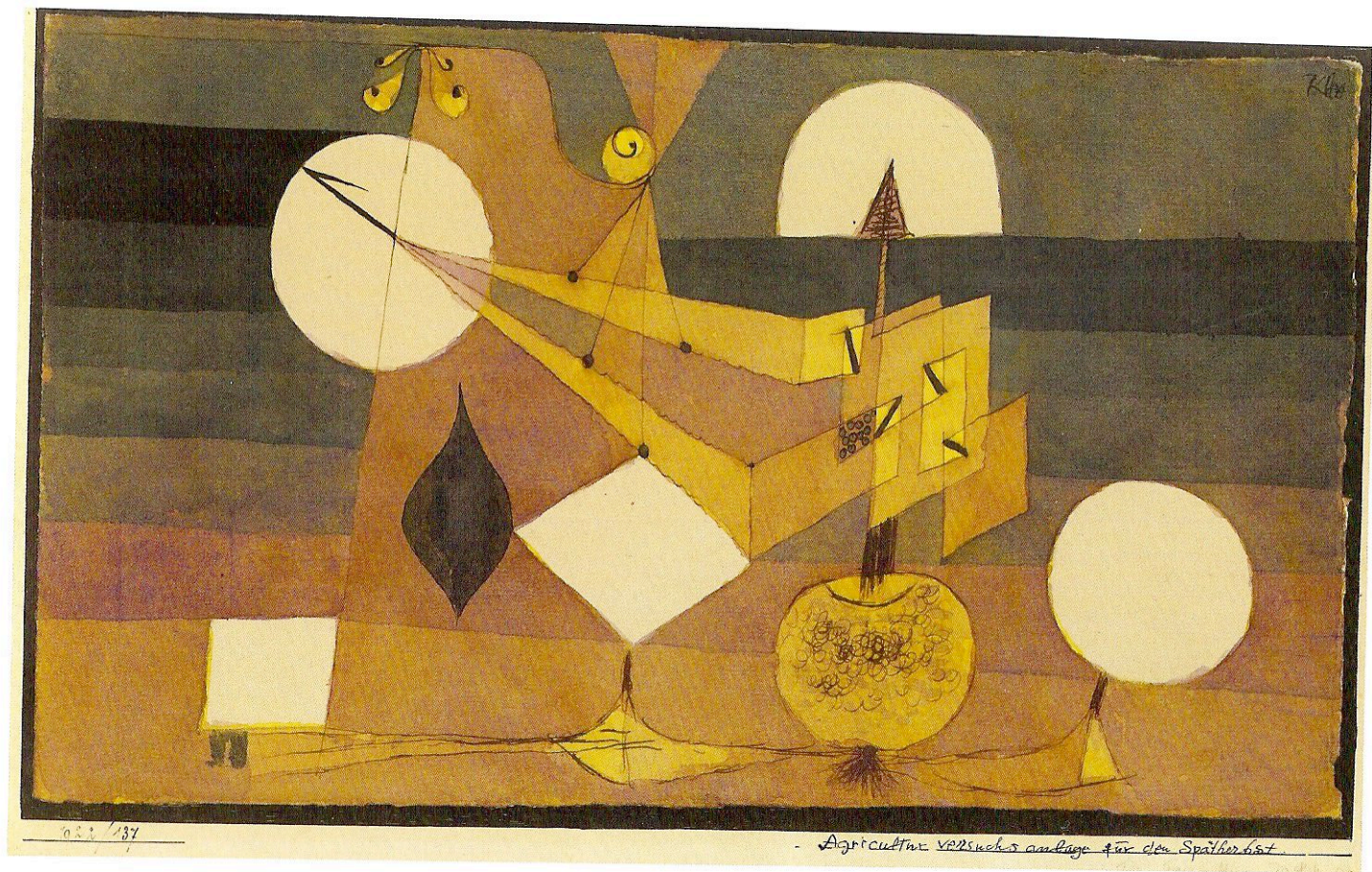
Explaining how these abstract elements correspond to the deadpan, almost bureaucratic title is more challenging. The work's play with figurative interpretation seems to abet associations with land and season. Are those sand-colored strips receding into a blue-green horizon rows of crops meeting the distant sky? Is the central form a complicated farming contraption, or are its lozenge-shaped vanes a hackneyed wind measurement device buoyed by white meteorological balloons? Could the two small black vertical posts peeking behind the lower-left white square be read as tiny legs, perhaps those of some diminutive farmer? Is the work's upper central disk a grossly enlarged setting sun? And most confounding, is the bulblike form in the lower portion a massive onion?

You might get caught heading down paths of fanciful speculation, for the ambiguity of Klee's insistently simplified geometry stymies a simple decoding. After all, the scaly loops on that would-be onion are rather more like the scrawl of some latter-day graffiti than the cellular structure of an improbably giant vegetable. The heavy horizontal belts of backdrop could be the bars of a musical score, or perhaps they form the lines of a ruled sheet of paper punctuated by distracted doodles.

The vacillation between the literal and the emblematic is a trope of Klee's work; the painting may in fact depict the equivocal relationship of language to the visual sign. The title, a designation of particularly prosaic character, is a cue. Klee often assigned his works elusive names, employing "literary" or evocative titles when portraying cityscapes of dystopian doom or nature scenes of childlike sparseness. In this case, though, the narrowness of the title reads like a government publication or informational manual.

That may have to do with when the painting was made. Nineteen twenty-two was a crisis year for the Bauhaus, where Klee had recently joined the faculty. The school had been founded in Weimar, Germany, in 1919 by the architect Walter Gropius as a "cathedral of art," in which many disciplines (wall painting, stained glass, architecture, tapestry design, and metalwork) would come together in the creation of a total work of art, much like the church of the Middle Ages. By 1922 Theo van Doesburg, a founder of the Dutch De Stijl movement, had moved to Weimar and proceeded to heckle Bauhaus participants in their own backyard, criticizing their retrograde interest in medieval guilds and general ignorance about efficient, mass-produced design. Klee, the painter Wassily Kandinsky, and the eccentric color theorist Johannes Itten were targets of van Doesburg's ire; their works and teachings rarely ventured into the realm of applied design. Klee's *Agricultural Experimental Plan for Late Fall* taunts van Doesburg's demands for an art of explicit functionality: *You want art to solve practical problems? Well, here you go, this is an experimental agricultural plan for fall, more specifically, late fall. See what you can make of it.* In this sense, Klee keeps open a space of interpretive indeterminacy in art, working in the zone between inscription and legibility.

EVA DÍAZ



Art at Colby

Celebrating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the
Colby College Museum of Art

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