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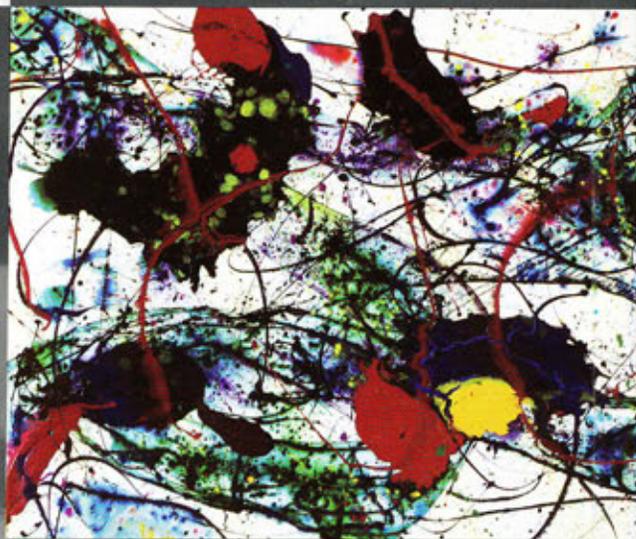
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by Stephen A. Martin

C. G. Jung was a psychologist of the symbolic image. He cared little for whether an image was “artistic” or not. For him, all images were equally valuable expressions of psychological meaning; each revealed something of the mysterious workings of the human psyche. Art historical and formal considerations were secondary, if not extraneous, to the image’s symbolic and psychological import.

Given this distinctly psychological perspective, Jung was always attentive to the inner experience of the artist and to the artist’s creative process. In general, he understood an artist to be one of two types—either “psychological” or “visionary” (CW 15:65-83, 1922; CW 15:84-105, 1930). The domain of the “psychological” artist, he said, is the world of conscious cognition and ordinary awareness. The creations of a psychological artist never transcend the boundaries of consensual reality; they are ultimately explicable in terms of the artists’ personal associations and decipherable intentions.

The creations of a “visionary” artist are of a different order. Where the psychological artist creates in accordance with canons of style or beauty and personal preference, the visionary artist is gripped by a numinous impulsion whose source is the *unconscious*. If resisted, that impulsion can split the artist’s personality. In this sense, the visionary artist does not so much make art as yield to the daemonic force of the artmaking process.

Because the experiences of the psychological artist reflect the prevailing cultural realities of the known world, they enhance his or her sense of identity and well-being. The visionary artist is not so fortunate, but is asked instead to bear the burden of cultural alienation as the vehicle of a new way of being. Such an artist is forced into a painful, fragmenting dialogue with the unconscious depths, whose successful resolution is an

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artistic creation—one that can compensate and heal the one-sidedness of culture, much as a realized dream can heal an imbalance of the individual psyche. To be a conduit for cultural transformation was, for Jung, the artist's highest calling.

This point of view is also present in the work of Erich Neumann, the only one of Jung's students to have written extensively on art and artists. Neumann flatly states that the creative individual is different from other personalities; in such a "life the emphasis is always on the transpersonal."¹ Neumann describes the creative person as being exceptionally open to the unconscious and therefore perilously close to psychological imbalance. By synthesizing the personal and transpersonal elements of the psyche, the artist creates a symbolic image, thereby overcoming the danger of psychological dissolution in the onslaught of the archetypal world. In other words, to maintain psychic equilibrium, the artist makes art.

Neumann's capacity to empathize with the creative struggle does not compensate, however, for his dependence on a kind of Jungian reductionism to such archetypal categories as the Great Mother, the Feminine, Anima, or Self. He describes the creative person as deeply enmeshed, like a child, in a maternal and archetypal world that cannot be escaped, but must be tolerated and creatively transformed in the service of psychological balance. This overemphasis of the Mother, or the Feminine, as the unconscious ground of being and the source of all life and creativity effectively displaces the Father principle into a psychological hinterland, as the dominant stylistic conventions of the prevailing collective consciousness. Moreover, this view all but eclipses the personal equation.

In all fairness, both Neumann and Jung do allude to the importance of the individual personality in the creative process; but their emphasis is clearly on the visionary, compensatory, and healing aspects of the artist's work. Perhaps this emphasis itself compensates the psychoanalytic perspective, which champions the personal constellation to the exclusion of all else. It is clear, however, that a synthetic approach is needed that values both lines of reasoning. That is the purpose of these present reflections.

To find "meaning" in art is, of course, a "felt" experience, in which one's culture, personal history, and the archetypal are interwoven like a braid. In the presence of visionary art, one feels connected to the timeless and universal heritage of human existence, so that one's unique personal identity resounds with the destiny of a greater whole. In that sense, art cannot be reduced to its "symptomatic" character, because it evokes a way of being that has no specific location in the personal conditions of its time and maker. Understanding meaning in art therefore demands that we

intuit as well as explicate.

That being said, I realize that the cultural, the personal, and the archetypal are not separable experientially; my outline of their basic parameters is heuristic and hypothetical, given my overall purpose for distinguishing them at all. This essay recognizes three contexts for locating “meaning” in art: *the collective cultural context*, whose focus is the aesthetic and sociocultural conditions under which the artist works; *the autobiographical context*, whose province is the psychodynamic sphere—the unconscious and semi-conscious phenomena that motivate the artist to create; and *the mythic context*, that is, the archetypal constellation that determines the creative struggle of the artist, whose resolution may compensate or balance the prevailing collective zeitgeist.

The Collective Cultural Context

No artist creates in a cultural vacuum. An artist is born into and comes to maturity in a specific time and place, and his or her psychological and artistic evolution is both focally and tacitly shaped by prevailing assumptions and values. Even if an artist elects to oppose those values, the very response constitutes relationship and ensures membership in the collective cultural context. Any student of art history who has ever attempted to determine the influence of politics, social values, aesthetic conventions, and external events on the artist and his or her art knows the complexity and difficulty of the task. In fact, such analysis is the core and marrow of art history as a field.

The discernment of the specific conditions—the collective realities—that mold a culture, and the exploration of the circumstances of an artist’s life generally yield to solid investigative work. Certain conditions, of course, may be more formative than others—the First World War, Papal patronage in the Renaissance. Of central importance to this developmental line in an artist’s work, however, is the aesthetic and artistic advances of the artist’s given time frame. A piece of art emerges from what has come before and what is currently under experimentation within or against the prevailing stylistic, formal, and theoretical constructs of the time. An artist is in dialogic relationship with the work, and the particulars of this dialogue must be fleshed out.

For example, Cubism did not come about *ex nihilo*, but was the natural evolution of the shifting scientific, social, stylistic, and art historical perspectives of the last century. Nor were Goya’s paintings of war and torment solely the result of his deaf, paranoid state, but also the objective reflections of the zeitgeist of eighteenth-century Spain.

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The Autobiographical Context

In the collective cultural context of an artist's work, the larger social and art historical realities are the autonomous conditioning agents; in the autobiographical context, the unique psychodynamics of the artist come into play—the individual's family, psychology, and personal experience, the “actual life” of the artist. This second line of development focuses on the concrete facts of life that have affected an artist's creative production—an enterprise in which psychoanalysis has excelled. Psychodynamics encompasses the nature of the artist's ego, his or her defensive structure, relationships to important people, life events, and conscious and unconscious trauma. When considering this dimension of a work, an analysis of the artist's style and idiosyncratic content may take precedence over subject matter and formal conventions, which are usually dictated by culture and more properly belong to the collective meaning of art.

Important here are the personal twists, emendations, embellishments, or distortions that enter into the artist's work in response to the pressures of his or her various complexes and conflicts. Although one can ascribe, for example, the Madonnas and Holy Families of Michelangelo to their iconographic importance in the Renaissance, these sculptures and paintings also express the inner struggles of their maker. How did Michelangelo envision his subjects? What do they tell us about who he was as a person? And one may note that Picasso, Kirchner, Munch, and even DeKooning have painted the female form, but how does each artist's experience of women and the Feminine contribute to the way in which he did it?

What we are seeking in the autobiographical context is the unique way in which the artist has assimilated and transformed his or her life history by making art. At its worst, such art is tantamount to sterile neurotic repetition. At its best, it embodies what is quintessentially individual in the artist—paradoxically revealing the larger structural pattern with which the individual psyche is aligned. This level of meaning houses the deepest aspirations and creative potential of the human community.

The Mythic Context

The touchstones of the mythic context are those collective formative patterns that Jung called “archetypes.” He believed that we each inherit a specifically human psychological structure that makes possible quintessentially human experiences and ideas. We are not the first, we are not the last to love, to lose, to give birth, to triumph, to grow wise, to grow old. In this sense, all meaningful experience partakes of the collective, the totality, the transcendent. So far as one can infer from the myths and

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artifacts of known cultures, men and women throughout time have felt about and ritualized these experiences in much the same way. And even when their cultural context is alien to us, we respond to such images and rituals almost instinctually.

Analysis of this level in a work of art depends, quite frankly, on the viewer's reaction to the piece at hand. Archetypal material makes itself known by way of "universal" imagery, but a given image will also have an autobiographical element that gives it an unexpected emotional valence. The viewer experiences a sense of timelessness and truth that are not attributable to a work's subject matter or style, but appear to belong to its very essence, as though it were endowed with a living presence. One feels compelled to look and look again, as if enchanted. This is the felt experience of the numinous, the hallmark of the presence of archetypal meaning in art.

Undoubtedly such an indefinite manner of discernment opens the attribution of "archetypal" to criticism as merely subjective. Nevertheless, masterworks of every time period evoke precisely this kind of intuitive and profound empathy in a viewer. Consider the immensely moving garden studies of the late Monet, or a Rothko in all its preternatural magnificence. In contemplating such works, their sense of deep meaning seems self-evident.

The second component of archetypal meaning requires a more rationally oriented approach. Underlying the content of an archetypally meaningful work is the archetypal pattern, which, as implied earlier, structures a quintessentially human experience in a particular way. Every fully human act is informed by an archetypal pattern, and such patterns can be distinguished among the basic mythemes that illustrate human existence. As Neumann so ably illustrated with the work of Henry Moore,² even an abstract work speaks of the archetypal mythemes that have enabled it to come forth.

Thus, in order to discern the archetypal patterns particular to a given work, one should be familiar with the rich mythologies and symbolic systems, and their complement of images, that have always expressed the eternal in human existence. The process of comparing a symbol with these mythic patterns and images is called "amplification." Amplification can unearth an approximation of archetypal meaning from one's initial undifferentiated response to a work's numinous power.

The final point to be considered here is the potential of an artist's work to heal or balance a culture's one-sidedness by bringing to it those values and meanings that have been excluded because of natural cultural development. Like the individual psyche, the collective psyche screens out

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some things and promotes others along a line of least resistance. Aesthetic, social, and political developments are most encouraged when they seem consistent with already established traditions—not because culture is deliberately rigid, but because culture is essentially a system; and like all systems, it strives to avoid destabilization and to operate at a minimum level of discord. Thus, the symbols that represent a culture's deepest aspirations and meaning eventually lose touch with the living archetypal waters from which they originated.

Under such circumstances, the individual psyche may attempt to compensate by generating dramatically new images of aesthetic or physical reality, or theoretical constructs that challenge old ideas, or renewed spiritual symbols. This kind of archetypal activity often comes by way of those individuals whose work not only allows them to touch the depths of the psyche, but also moves them to bring those new images into collective consciousness—by way of art, science, or creative work of any kind. Such individuals are iconoclasts, whether they desire to be or not. Their creations bring new psychological realities to the surface of life and threaten the precarious collective status quo.

Cultures, like individuals, owe their health to the dynamic relationship between the forces of consensual acceptability (the collective conscious values) and the hidden unconscious potential for renewal that consensus strives to keep at bay, perceiving it as merely destructive. Just as dreams, visions, and unconscious fantasies provide the necessary archetypal material to challenge and eventually rebalance the psychic life of an individual, the artist's work, when it carries meaning from the archetypal level of inner experience, expresses the fundamental imperative in all psychic functioning toward eventual dynamic equilibrium.

Picasso: *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*

With these thoughts in mind, we can appreciate the impact of a work like *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, painted by Pablo Picasso in 1907. As an image, it appalled friends and critics and remained rolled up on Picasso's studio floor for years before being purchased sight-unseen in 1920 by the French collector Jacque Doucet, who realized its artistic importance.³ A scant two generations later, we recognize this painting as the herald of Cubism, one of the single most revitalizing influences in modern art. *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* is a monumental image, whose spatial and volumetric distortions and stylistic innovations expressed, among many cultural, scientific, and social changes, new developments in the medium—including Cezanne's redefinition of space and Matisse's dramatic infusion of emotive color into mundane existence.

These five harpies, symbolizing on a personal level Picasso's own profound fear of women, are the collective Shadow compensations for an

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age that sentimentalized the Feminine and devalued its dark power. One has only to compare Picasso's figures with the rosy-cheeked women of Renoir or the wistful, ethereal princesses of the Pre-Raphaelites to appreciate the difference. By creating *Les Femmes d'Alger*, Picasso broke open the door for a natural compensatory movement toward greater appreciation of the dark side of life. It stands as a companion achievement to Expressionism in every form—Surrealism, the innovative and iconoclastic developments in modern literature and music, and even the great theories of the unconscious.

Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* was probably conceived in late 1906 and completed in the Summer of 1907. This depiction of five prostitutes from the Calle d'Avignon, or red light district, of Barcelona, with its primitive spatial and figural distortions, was a departure from Picasso's more romantic and melancholic Blue and Rose period imagery. As a personal statement, it exposes a central painful complex in Picasso's personality. It is no wonder that he labelled the painting his "first exorcism picture."⁴

What makes *Les Femmes d'Alger* so important as art is its "barbaric, dissonant power,"⁵ rivalled only by some of Matisse's work of this period or by painters such as Munch, Kokoschka, Shiele, and Kirchner. Reflecting on the impact of this painting, Robert Rosenblum states that "*Les Femmes d'Alger* marks...a shrill climax to the 19th century's growing veneration of the primitive...."⁶

The innovative vitality of this work echoes dramatic contemporary developments in other fields. Just two years previously, in 1905, Einstein had altered modern physics with the publication of his *Special Theory of Relativity*. In 1907, the same year as *Les Femmes d'Alger*, Freud published his milestone, *Three Contributions to a Theory of Sex*. Overall, a new age was dawning—an age of electricity, flight, the atom, and plastics—with the work of Marconi, Planck, Rutherford, Curie, the Wright Brothers, and L. H. Bakeland. Traditional conceptions of distance, size, physical reality, and the nature of the psyche were being pulled apart and turned in on themselves—much like Picasso's five masked women. In other words, the spirit of *Les Femmes d'Alger* was no mere evocation of Picasso's artistic imperative, but part of a collective attempt to see beyond surface properties into the basic structure of physical existence.

This tending toward the "basic" was realized artistically as the redemption of the archaic. The turn of the twentieth century had brought tremendous emotional energy into the art of painting. Picasso and his contemporaries were breaking through the stifling barriers of bourgeois propriety and capturing a less sophisticated, more primitive side of life in their work. Certainly, their way had been prepared by predecessors—by

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Gauguin and his Breton peasants and South Sea nymphs, and by the almost hallucinatory style of his erstwhile friend, Van Gogh. Even Toulouse-Lautrec, gentleman that he was, focused on the lower levels of life and experience. These artists penetrated below the surface of culture, revealing, to those who followed, the archaic and more magical infrastructure of ordinary life.

Their work encouraged painters such as Munch to explore an inner world peopled by sepulchral women—seductive, overripe, and dangerous; Kirchner to ennoble his angulated city witches; Schiele to indulge his obsession with pornographic village maidens; and Kokoschka to immortalize his angel of despair, Alma Mahler. With *Les Femmes d'Alger*, Picasso brought together a variety of artistic and cultural trends to create a complex, ambivalent image of feminine power that relates as much to the psychological painters and their prophets as to formalists such as Cezanne and Matisse.

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Prior to 1906, the women that Picasso painted were more victims than victimizers. Frail and enigmatic, they were creatures either childishly seductive or old and careworn. From such ambivalence about women one might infer Picasso's anxiety in the world and his own uncertain masculinity. He had returned from Barcelona to Paris and established permanent residence there in 1905. When filtered through what is known about his psychology at the time,⁷ it is probable that Picasso felt personally and professionally displaced, an outsider. Accordingly, his paintings often show women bonded to all manner of outcasts—beggars, circus performers, and other dejected, lowly types of humanity. Mired in an uncertain sense of his own agency and personal direction, Picasso felt himself to be a victim.

By 1906, Picasso was more settled in Paris. His relationship with Guillaume Apollinaire had solidified, and he became close friends with Gertrude and Leo Stein, soon to be among his most loyal and influential patrons. Moreover, he was profoundly in love, and the relationship brought him some measure of rootedness and emotional comfort. Paralleling these positive developments was a more classical, objective style of painting, in which female figures assumed monumental, goddess-like proportions. Gone were the pathetic figures of the demimonde, and in their stead this self-possessed, mysterious, powerful other sort of woman, rendered in warmer earth tones. A series of self-portraits executed during the same period of time in similar style suggests the concordance of this revised image of the Feminine with his increasing self-confidence. Nourished by his growing success, he was feeling stronger, more substantial.

It is perhaps this very strength as an artist that gave Picasso the

wherewithal to express directly his complex experience of the Feminine. Undoubtedly, the five prostitutes of *Les Femmes d'Alger* were an extremely personal statement of Picasso's ambivalence toward and fear of women, and by extension, of object desire in general. Anecdotal reports indicate that Picasso and his friends, Guillaume Apollinaire and Max Jacob, gave names to three of the figures, calling one Marie, for Marie Laurencin, Apollinaire's love interest; another for Max Jacob's grandmother, who allegedly came from Avignon, France; and a third for "Fernande," the woman Picasso loved.⁸ With regard to the meaning of this action, Mary Gedo writes:

The conscious associations Picasso forged between his *demoiselles* and his closest friends indicates his allegiance to other men who also suffered greatly at the hands of women.⁹

Confirming this supposition is Picasso's inclusion of two male figures in earlier sketches of the composition: a medical student and a sailor. Gedo and others argue quite convincingly that these two male figures are patently self-representative, in fact, references to Picasso's personal history. Picasso wore a sailor suit in his childhood, when he was fussed over and cared for, if not suffocated, by five women: his mother, grandmother, two aunts, and a maid. The medical student probably represents Picasso in Barcelona, where, it is said, he was sexually initiated in a brothel and contracted a venereal disease. Years later, in Paris, he spent time at the St. Lazare Hospital sketching prostitutes who themselves were being treated for venereal disease.¹⁰ Constellated in *Les Femmes d'Alger* was Picasso's decided ambivalence about women—his desire to be nurtured vying with his fear of being emasculated and destroyed. This is clearly the emotional experience of a man unable to make the transition from adolescence to independent adulthood.

Although *Les Femmes d'Alger* has unequivocal personal reference for Picasso, it also has an archetypal resonance that gives the painting its force as visionary art. One can see in the five prostitutes a mythic image of the Eternal Feminine—an indication of the archetype that underlies Picasso's emotional experience of women. Every archetypal pattern contains, if you will, a thesis and an antithesis. If the archetypal Feminine presides over life and love and generation, it also presides over death and indifference and destruction. To weather the storms of an active archetype in one's life is to steer a course toward personalized synthesis. *Les Femmes d'Alger* shares with the icons of many and varied cultures a powerful projection of the dark side of the Feminine principle.

Meaning in Art

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Picasso's childhood experience of women as all-powerful caretakers led him (to put it rather simplistically) from a compensating fantasy of women as weak and victimized (as he felt himself to be) to a larger-than-life projection of women as goddess-like (as he grew in self-confidence) to the latter's dark antithesis: women as demon-like—seductive, dangerous, devouring, emasculating. Consider, for amplification, the explicit aggressiveness of the ancient Medusa, or Kali, seductive goddess of death; consider in Western culture the complex iconography of succubae, witches, sirens, and demon lovers who sap men of goodness, strength, and the will to survive. Goya, one of Picasso's compatriots, was also vulnerable to this aspect of the archetype. He painted the witches' Sabbath several times, as did the Mexican outsider artist Martin Ramirez, who found himself overwhelmed by dark monolithic Madonnas and rapacious, grinning maidens. The imagery of all three men derives from the same archetypal source.

The larger, cultural aspect of Picasso's image bears exploration here. Prostitution, in turn-of-the-century Barcelona and Paris, was not considered a criminal activity; it was an enterprise pursued outside the environs of proper society. Certainly for Picasso, prostitutes were the sole source of sexual solace and emotional acceptance during his years of uncertainty. The sense of prostitute-as-muse enabled Picasso to break through the strictures of conventional morality to confront his own darker—but also more spontaneous and emotionally authentic—Shadow side. The prostitutes, in this respect, compensate a Victorian concept of the Feminine; they carry the sensual and irrational possibility of life for an age in which order, propriety, and control were the highest values. Through such muses—incongruent as they are with the charming, genteel figures of Maurice Denis and the mysterious nymph-muses of Puvis de Chavannes—Picasso was striving to become more consciously integrated and whole, and with him, the larger community.

Les Demoiselles d'Avignon is the recollection, for a decadent culture, of its dependence on the primordial Feminine for renewal—psychological, artistic, personal—via archaic forces.

Les Demoiselles d'Avignon is the recollection, for a decadent culture, of its dependence on the primordial Feminine for renewal—psychological, artistic, personal—via archaic forces. Perhaps this accounts, in part, for the painting's "affinity" to certain tribal artworks that also embody this fundamental energy.¹¹ As "the" proto-Cubist painting, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* introduced the need to step outside of conventional reality with its repressed fears and anxieties in order to touch a more fertile, though frightening, level of personal and cultural expression. After this painting, which symbolizes the turning point, no area of life would be left untransformed.



Paul Klee.
The Niesen, 1915.
 Watercolor,
 7¹/₈ x 9⁷/₈ in.
 Whereabouts
 unknown

Paul Klee: *The Niesen*

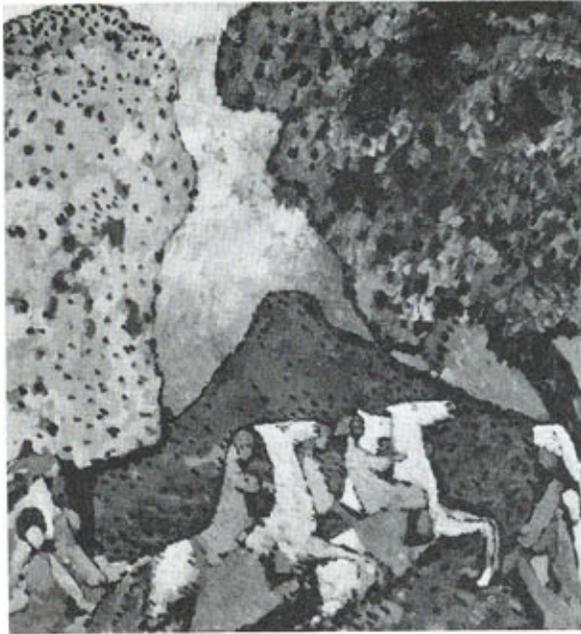
Paul Klee, the poet-painter of the twentieth century, is another artist whose work opens up with this depth analytic approach. To think of Klee is usually to conjure up charming scenes and fable-like creatures—twittering bird machines or dancing monsters out of a child's bestiary. Their gaiety conceals the intense and painful inner exploration and uncompromising artistic self-criticism out of which they emerged during the years preceding and coincident with the First World War.

A watercolor from this period, *The Niesen*, stands out as an important symbolic expression of Klee's inner life and of culture in change at the time. Painted in 1915, the year after his famous Easter trip to Tunisia, and a year before his induction into the German Army, *The Niesen* is a deceptively simple abstraction of a mountain in the Bernese Oberland, famous for its pyramidal shape. That Klee should have chosen to depict a specific peak is in keeping with a trend among other modern painters, exemplified by Cezanne with his *Mont St. Victoire*. Ferdinand Hodler, an older Swiss compatriot, had himself painted the Niesen in 1910, and it is possible that Klee, who was then living in Munich, may have seen the work in reproduction or on exhibit when visiting Switzerland. Apart from any such influence, the Niesen was clearly endowed with a certain personality by a nation so fond of its magical landscape.

It is also true that mountains and landscapes were favorite images of

For them, mountains were part of a greater schema associated with their belief that folk art and folklore express a fundamental relationship of the human spirit to nature.

Vasily Kandinsky.
Blue Mountain,
 1908-09.
 Oil on canvas,
 41 1/4 x 38 in.
 Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum,
 New York
 (gift of Solomon R.
 Guggenheim)



The mountain was an important element in this relationship: Symbolically, it reached out from the earth upward; from this idea the men abstracted spiritual import.

the early Expressionist painters, such as Franz Marc and Vasily Kandinsky, two of Klee's close friends. As an artist associated with their group, the Blue Rider, Klee must have seen their work and spoken with them about the meaning of the mountain image in general. Marc had painted his masterpiece, *The Yellow Cow*, in 1911—a loping bovine framed by blue mountains in the background; and in 1912 had decorated an iron chest with a night scene complete with a triangular mountain. Kandinsky's fascination with mountains is evident as well in several beautiful works from the Blue Rider period including his *Bavarian Mountains with Village* of 1909 and his magnificent *Blue Mountain* of the same year.

Although Klee says nothing about the ideas of Marc and Kandinsky with respect to mountains in general or *The Niesen* in particular, he was familiar with their philosophy, and it is worth our consideration as the currency of their various exchanges. The attraction that mountains held for Marc and Kandinsky shares little with the more formal concerns of Cezanne and the perhaps more “sublime” fascination exerted on the romantic Hodler. For them, mountains were part of a greater schema associated with their belief that folk art and folklore express a fundamental relationship of the human spirit to nature. The mountain was an important element in this relationship: Symbolically, it reached out from the earth upward; from this idea the men abstracted spiritual import. When rendered two-dimensionally, a mountain's triangular shape repre-

sented the “striving soul of the individual and humanity,”¹² or, for Kandinsky, “the finger of God in Michelangelo’s ceiling.”¹³ The color blue was also vitally important to them, because they believed it to represent the spiritual forces of the intellect, conceived as an aspect of the Masculine. These ideas are indicative of the painting’s collective cultural context; they tell us something about the culture’s romantic sense of spiritual awareness and inner wisdom.

For Klee, the Niesen had a specific personal or autobiographic significance, punctuating a critical development in his life. This is clear from one of Klee’s diary entries from July 1905 referring to the landscape of the Niesen:

Around me the wonder of the spectacle. No strong emotions, no intellect, no ethics. An observer above the world, or in the world a child. Gentle depth, the height intimate, the depth gentle . . . Have I found a way home?¹⁴

Here, Klee expresses an inwardness, but also a sense of detached objectivity. This paradoxical standpoint, an almost childlike wonder, would subsequently enable him to translate profound feeling states into expressive visual imagery in a style he called “cool romanticism,” a conjunction of opposites that bridged the gap between “this world and the beyond,”¹⁵ which was the cornerstone of his creative method. This is the same “home,” according to Juergen Glaesemer, the great Klee scholar, that Klee would psychologically return to during his 1914 visit to Kairouan, Tunisia.¹⁶

This unique method of painting was not achieved easily, and its evolution illuminates Klee’s psychology. Prior to 1914 and *The Niesen*, Klee’s artistic focus was on tonality and line, his experiments with color confined to monochromatic watercolors and paintings on glass. Before the transformative Tunisian experience, Klee simply did not have a working relationship to color. He was primarily known as a draughtsman whose satiric etchings poked sharp fun at bourgeois morals with their repressed sexuality. The strength of these images derives from Klee’s marvelous line and biting critical wit, which actually hid his serious discomfort with and poor adaptation to contemporary Swiss and German society. Klee was well aware of this conflict, and it undoubtedly fueled his passionate desire to evolve a stabilizing sense of personal identity. As early as age twenty-three, he wrote:

. . . the main thing now is . . . to become an individual. The art of mastering life is a prerequisite for all further forms of expression.¹⁷

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Meaning in Art

Klee was dealing with persona and Shadow issues. His sharp antipathy for middle class existence reveals a fear of life's responsibilities and an attempt to define himself as an individual.

The combination of an exotic place, confrontation with his own family myth, and artistic preparation made Tunisia a kind of threshold for Klee's comprehension of the role of color in his work.

and

I even dream about it. I dream of myself. I dream that I become my model. Projected self. Upon awakening I realize the truth of it...I am my style.¹⁶

This is the struggle that entered into his pictures. Klee was dealing with persona and Shadow issues. His sharp antipathy for middle class existence reveals a fear of life's responsibilities and an attempt to define himself as an individual. Like any other young adult, Klee was separating himself from his family and trying to carve a workable identity for himself analogous to a personal "style." It was a process punctuated as much by depressive episodes as with creative bursts. His penchant for grotesque and dark sexual and aggressive imagery is typical of this struggle, whose core was rage. He had grown to manhood in a restrictive culture, his father stifling and unempathic, if not hostile; his mother an invalid. He had recently married and was now the father of a son. In later life, Klee's deep introversion would give him an air of quiet ordinariness, as though he had embraced the very values he so dramatically wrestled with in his youth; but this persona actually protected his fierce inner spirit from further attack.

As 1914 approached, Klee's world became far more differentiated. Not unlike Picasso, his self-confidence grew as he deepened his ties to other people and felt a sense of place. A profound friendship with Franz Marc and membership in the Blue Rider group, increasing sales of his work, and a more stable and separate family life all contributed to his sense of solidity. Concurrent was Klee's widening facility with color (representative of the many "values" and "shades" of life). Although not completely in command of the medium, his paintings were becoming coloristically more sophisticated and adventurous. One might speculate that Klee himself was working through his own psychological monochromism and expanding as a consciously feeling person.

The process exploded forward with Klee's above-mentioned trip to Tunisia in 1914. During a relatively short stay of about two weeks, he underwent what can be described only as a profound personality transformation. Art historical opinions generally agree that the combination of an exotic place, confrontation with his own family myth (much has been made of his mother's alleged North African ancestry), and artistic preparation made Tunisia a kind of threshold for Klee's comprehension of the role of color in his work. In addition, Klee was psychologically ready. He was just past thirty-four, entering his mid-life transition period. Clearly, the trip catalyzed a genuine archetypal change in Klee's consciousness. Tunisia was intoxicating, suffused with beauty and mystery

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and heightened reality, where “being and meaning coincide.”¹⁹ Everything around him came to life and he merged with all of it:

The evening is deep inside me forever. Many a blond northern moonrise, like a muted reflection, will softly remind me, and remind me again and again. It will be my bride, my alter ego. An incentive to find myself. I am the moonrise of the South.²⁰

and

At first an overwhelming tumult... no single thing but the total effect. And what a totality it was! The essence of 1001 Nights, with 99% reality content. What an aroma, how penetrating, how intoxicating, and at the same time clarifying. Nourishment, the most real and substantial nourishment and delicious drink. Food and intoxication... Home.²¹

With this experience Klee did indeed come home to himself in that he no longer felt any creative hesitancy with regard to color, or with the direction of his life or art. The breakthrough culminated in his now famous pronouncement:

I now abandon work. It penetrates so deeply and so gently into me, I feel it and it gives me confidence in myself without effort. Color possesses me. I don't have to pursue it. It will possess me always, I know that. That is the meaning of this happy hour: color and I are one. I am a painter.²²

From then on Klee's work reflected the change. His color range dramatically increased along with his imaginative use of it. New, unforgettable images, of which *The Niesen* is but one, flowed freely. With Tunisia, Klee found his sense of inner place and purpose. It was his first encounter with the Anima, that sense of active participation and equal partnership with his inner life. Four months later, the First World War began and ultimately took the life of Marc, which plunged Klee into deep depression. He, too, was eventually conscripted into the German Army. Despite all this, he never lost touch with the transformative effects of his archetypal moment in Tunisia.

Given this history, *The Niesen* was inevitable. As a mythic image of centrality, stability, and spiritual strength, this triangular, pyramidal blue mountain was Klee's symbolic orientation, anchoring him during the traumatic years that ensued. Both personally and collectively, *The Niesen* symbolized the link, the “*axis mundi*” that connects the inner and outer, the upper and lower, conscious and unconscious. In the painting itself, the mountain bridges the patchwork outer world with its conflicting forces.

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Meaning in Art

The cosmos above is dominated by a six-pointed star, a universal image of the conjunction of opposites: a triangle, point down, superimposed on another, point up. Two radiant suns, one dark, the other light, also carries the sense of balanced opposites. And the crescent moon, in this context an image of the Feminine, complements the Masculine spirit of the mountain itself.

The painting is an elegant attempt on Klee's part to bring forth from himself the needed balance and integration during a time of personal isolation and cultural disaster. Collectively speaking, *The Niesen* depicts the immutable center so missing, yet so necessary during a troubled time. In this regard it can be compared to other symbolic representations of the "axis mundi" that have embodied the continuity of their respective cultures. Among them are the Sumerian ziggurat at Ur, a stylized pyramidal representation of the world mountain with a shrine at the top, where the priest communicated with the divinities; Mount Sinai, where God revealed Himself to Moses; Mount Horeb, where Elijah beheld the glory of God; Mount Hermon, where Jesus was transfigured; and Borobudur, earthly mirror of the world mountain in Buddhist cosmology. The sacred mountain is nothing less than an expression of the basic human need to maintain contact with and be anchored by a sense of central purpose and direction, whether it be called God or the Self. From within his own experience, Klee was able to express this for himself and for his conflicted time.

In the end, a work of art is the container in which culture and psyche merge with and are suffused by the archetypal energy that moves through both. A work of art cannot be reduced to the symptomatic conditions of its creation, as though it were merely a cultural artifact, a neurotic distortion, or an archetypal image. A work of art is truly symbolic, conjoining these various dimensions of reality to produce a living experience that is greater and deeper than all component parts. Without the thorough understanding of these three aspects, we cannot hope to appreciate the fullest possible meaning of the artwork, and we risk falling into a bias that compromises the integrity of the work and leaves us all the poorer for it.

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Notes

- 1 Erich Neumann, "Leonardo and the Mother Archetype," in *Art and the Creative Unconscious* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), p. 17.
- 2 Erich Neumann, *The Archetypal World of Henry Moore* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959).
- 3 Roland Penrose, *Picasso: His Life and Work* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), p. 130.
- 4 William Rubin, "Modernist Primitivism: An Introduction," in William Rubin (ed.), *Primitivism in 20th Century Art*, Vol. 1 (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984), p. 73.
- 5 Robert Rosenblum, *Cubism and Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Publishing Co., 1966) p. 12.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Mary Mathews Gedo, *Picasso: Art as Autobiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). Gedo's work is a remarkably balanced and insightful psychological work that was the source of much of the information about Picasso's personal psychology.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 77.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- 11 William Rubin, "Picasso," in *Primitivism in 20th Century Art*, pp. 241-343.
- 12 Mark Rosenthal, *Franz Marc: 1880-1916* (Berkeley: University Art Museum, 1979), pp. 3-36.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- 14 Juergen Glaesemer, *Paul Klee: The Colored Works* (Bern: Kunstmuseum Bern, 1976), p. 34.
- 15 Paul Klee, *The Diaries of Paul Klee: 1898-1918*, ed. Felix Klee (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 313.
- 16 Juergen Glaesemer, *Paul Klee: The Colored Works*, p. 34. Klee's diary entry is translated and quoted by Glaesemer.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 119.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 124.
- 19 Erich Neumann, "Creative Man and Transformation," in *Art and the Creative Unconscious*, p. 175.
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp. 290-291.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 297.
- 22 *Ibid.*