

Extended essay

Title:

Paul Klee, CoBrA and children's art

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Visual Arts

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What are the unique features of children's art that inspired Paul Klee and the CoBrA artists, and how did they apply them to their own art?

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Introduction

Paul Klee and some of those in the CoBrA movement were inspired by children's drawings. This essay explores the features of children's art and what it was in this art that inspired the artists. People have a general view that children's art is not much more than 'primitive', whereas there is much more to read from one drawing. A child's drawing may say so much about the well-being of the child or their thoughts. Modern artists have adapted these techniques and incorporated this into their own work. The guiding research question, "What are the unique features of children's art that inspired Paul Klee and the CoBrA artists, and how did they apply them to their own art?" is worthy to study because everyone has been a child, and gone through the developmental stages of life, and we can relate to these drawings and to a certain extent understand the artists who use these drawings as a source for their own work. This essay addresses how and why artists have done so.

Different art styles stir people's perception and appeal to their 'sense of beauty'. When we observe art, we expect it to come from an artist, someone whose income depends on it; however there may be alternative ways to define an artist. For example, children's art is sometimes seen as an exclusive style. Others disagree, and believe that children's art is primitive, and merely a sign of a developing mind and brain. The similarities and differences of a true artist their art and children's art will be analyzed and how this adds to the originality of the artist's, such as Paul Klee and also the CoBrA artists' style.

Introducing children's art

For children, drawing and being creative is a natural skill. We aren't taught how to make primitive scribbles on paper or how to express ourselves, but it is a human instinct, and we use it as a method to reflect our thoughts and feelings, even at the very first stages of life. Much research has been done by therapists on children's art and its underlying meanings. Cathy A. Malchiodi states "In all my encounters with children, I have been repeatedly fascinated and surprised by what they communicate through their drawings and have learned a great deal about them through their art expressions."¹

Throughout our lives we undergo a metamorphosis from child to adult, and this counts for our art as well. We also undergo changes from being very young children to older children, where our scope of knowledge broadens. We notice this by looking at the art of children from different age groups. A very young child will have a different outcome than that of an older child. "Children...are compelled to make scribbles at young ages, are eventually capable of combining these elements in drawings with themes and personal meaning."² Looking at children's art is extremely interesting, but it remains a challenge, since children often express their thoughts and feelings through their art rather than verbally, and therefore we can usually only get to know details about an individual child by looking at one of their drawings. For example, a 10-year-old girl, Sasha, was asked to carry out an exercise. She was given an outline of a body and asked to fill it in by colouring and drawing how she was feeling. The result (figure 2) shows happiness due to the use of bright colours, the depiction of rainbows, flowers, a sun, smiley faces etc.³

Reading children through their art is also used in therapy, "Those who work with children realize that drawing is a child-appropriate form of communication, that it allows a level of comfort and a sense of safety sometimes not found through talk therapy alone, and can provide an alternative way of interacting with children in treatment."⁴

Figure 1 shows the drawing of a 6-year-old girl with leukemia, who drew images

¹Malchiodi, Cathy A. *Understanding Children's Drawings*. New York: Guilford, 1998. Print. (page xi)

² Malchiodi, Cathy A. *Understanding Children's Drawings*. New York: Guilford, 1998. Print. (page 64)

³ Experiment carried out by author

⁴Malchiodi, Cathy A. *Understanding Children's Drawings*. New York: Guilford, 1998. Print. (page xiii)

reflecting her feelings. This one shows all the red apples falling out of an apple tree, and a red spotted sun, this is a common depiction for children with leukemia.⁵

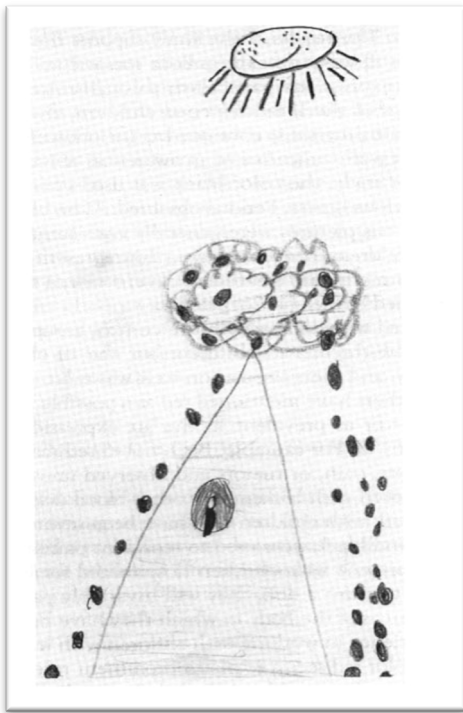
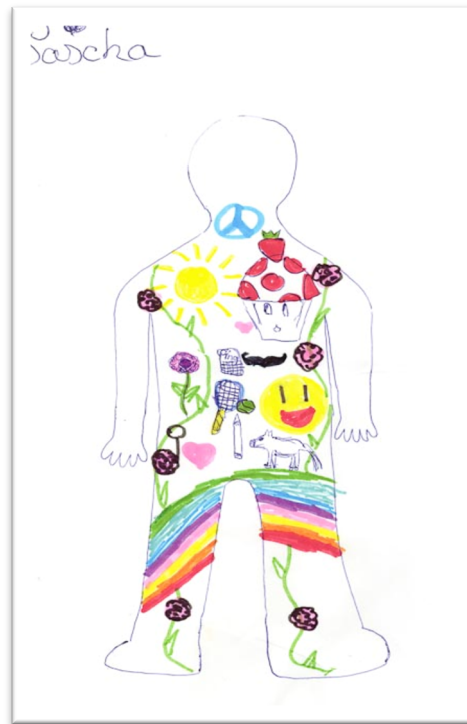


Figure 1 - Drawing from 6-year-old girl with leukemia



⁶ Figure 2 - Drawing from a 10-year-old-girl (2012)

⁵ Malchiodi, Cathy A. Understanding Children's Drawings. New York: Guilford, 1998. Print. (page 199-120)

⁶ Malchiodi, Cathy A. Understanding Children's Drawings. New York: Guilford, 1998. Print. (page 199-120)

Paul Klee

The German/ Swiss artist Paul Klee who lived, worked and struggled through the late 19th century to the early 20th century adopted some features of children's art. Life was different for an artist then compared to now, especially since he had endured the First World War and was still able to create astounding works of art, which remain influential. Klee was influenced by expressionism, cubism and surrealism⁷ and with these three styles he created a change in art for that time period, especially since he was living in an age where there was much conflict and grievance. Klee created new and unique works of art with much colour and abstractness and is now classified as a 'modern artist'. Klee's work was influenced by children's art and this allowed for him to move away from the oppressive society and create his own exclusive style (see figure 3). Much of his work was based on his own drawings as a child, and later his son's drawings which can be recognized in his works of art (figures 7 & 8, page 13). He was so influenced and inspired by children's art more generally that "after Klee's breakthrough in the art market at the end of WWI art critics ... saw the 'apparent awkwardness' as a special quality in his art and they considered Klee to be an artist with the view of a child but the age of a man."⁸

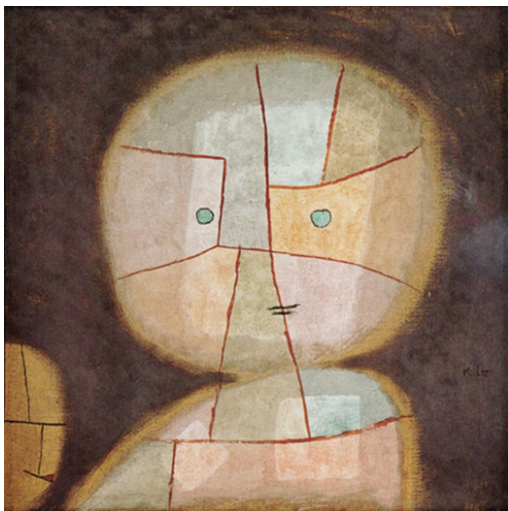


Figure 3 – *Child's Bust* by Paul Klee (1933)

⁷ "Paul Klee." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, 20 Oct. 2012. Web. 20 Oct. 2012.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Klee>.

⁸ Baumgartner, Michael, Kirsten Degel, Katja Weitering, Els Drummen, and Lieke Feijen. *Klee En Cobra: Het Begint Als Kind*. [Antwerpen]: Ludion, 2012. Print. (Page 14)

CoBrA art

Like Paul Klee, the CoBrA artists strived to achieve something different, in difficult times. The CoBrA movement came together after the Second World War. Some of the Dutch participants of the movement were already working as a group before that but it was only in 1948 that the movement was founded. The main members came from Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam, hence the letters in the word 'CoBrA' and included Asger Jorn (from Copenhagen), Joseph Noiret (from Brussels), Corneille and Karel Appel (from Amsterdam)⁹. Besides the usage of letters in the word 'CoBrA' to represent the country names, the literal connotation also relates to the actual movement. The dangerous snake 'cobra' referred to the meaning of the movement because it symbolized a new, unique and rebellious age in art. The members were taking a risk in starting something with spontaneity in such an oppressive time. CoBrA art also derived from the 'Naïve art', and shared many similarities, yet there was something fresh and different about CoBrA. CoBrA artists wanted to be spontaneous and to express themselves instead of painting and creating what the audience wanted, instead they did it for themselves, and again this showed signs for a new beginning. "The CoBrA artists painted directly and spontaneously. Just like children, they wanted to work expressively without a preconceived plan, using their fantasy and much colour."¹⁰ When a young painter starts his career, he is nervous and tries his best to compete with other young artists, whereas older artists paint mostly for themselves, and at that stage have developed their own style, CoBrA art was being the 'old artist' for the participants of the movement. The new movement allowed the artists to express themselves in a contemporary manner which nobody had seen before since they worked 'spontaneously with much colour'. One of the main features which allowed CoBrA art to be different was that their inspiration mainly came from children's art, which had never been done before except by Paul Klee (see Figures 4&5).

The reason for bringing both Klee and the CoBrA artists together is because they share their influences and worked similarly. "Just like Klee, Jorn and Corneille collected children's drawings, which were an important source of inspiration for them."¹¹ They

⁹ "Schools." CoBrA. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Oct. 2012. <<http://www.cobra-museum.nl/en/cobra.html>>.

¹⁰ "Schools." CoBrA. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Oct. 2012. <<http://www.cobra-museum.nl/en/cobra.html>>.

¹¹ Baumgartner, Michael, Kirsten Degel, Katja Weitering, Els Drummen, and Lieke Feijen. Klee En Cobra: Het Begint Als Kind. [Antwerpen]: Ludion, 2012. (Page 8)

both worked through times of struggle although Klee had developed himself and his art before the CoBrA movement was established.



¹² Figure 4 - *Fête Nocturne* by Guillaume Corneille (1950)

¹² "Collection." Collection. N.p., n.d. Web. 05 Dec. 2012.

Unique features of children's art used as inspiration

The originality of children's art often allows for it to be seen as an individual art style, even though some people may disagree. Children think and express in different manners than adults since they are not fully developed yet, which means their art is also very different to that of any adult artist, and this makes it more interesting for artists to use as a source for their inspiration. Language, communication, expression of inner feelings, and entertainment are some of the reasons why and how children create art. "Studies have shown that art created by children is a direct reflection of their inner worlds."¹³ Children's art often allows subconscious communication between us as the viewer and the child. We are given information about the child's feelings and emotions and they often don't realize that they are presenting this through their art (see figures 1 & 2). Some artists have been captivated by children's art because of its unique style. They are fascinated by it because children create with other purposes than adult artists; and because it varies from their own work. Artists create art with so much intention and so much thought, whereas a child creates merely for their own purposes yet still presents a scope of their inner thoughts and feelings. "Children bring their own unique thoughts, perceptions and feelings into their creative work"¹⁴

Many Modern artists, including Paul Klee and some of the CoBrA artists such as Karel Appel, Corneille and Constant, took their art to a new level and wanted to create and achieve something different than the art of their time. Paul Klee and some of the CoBrA artists shared something in common even though they had contrasting styles and ambitions. They both used the unique aspects of children's art as their inspiration, but often also directly adopted them in their art which is repeatedly visible when observing their work. Spontaneity is one of the features both Klee and the CoBrA artist were seeking to achieve through their work and it is also part of what children use in their own art. "Klee strived for a synthesis, in which spontaneous creativity and controlled technique were not opposed but rather stimulated a creative process in which the artist did not abandon the simplicity of his childhood"¹⁵ (see figures 3 & 8). In the art that children create, being spontaneous is not a purposeful act but rather more subconscious,

¹³ Saylor, Donn. "The Psychology of Children's Art." EHow. Demand Media, 04 Sept. 2009. Web. 20 Oct. 2012. <http://www.ehow.com/about_5378055_psychology-childrens-art.html>.

¹⁴ Malchiodi, Cathy A. *Understanding Children's Drawings*. New York: Guilford, 1998. Print. (page 40)

¹⁵ Baumgartner, Michael, Kirsten Degel, Katja Weitering, Els Drummen, and Lieke Feijen. *Klee En Cobra: Het Begint Als Kind*. [Antwerpen]: Ludion, 2012. Print. (Page 14)

since children create what is in their minds and this is one of the aspects which the artists would thrive to achieve in their own work. Yet the difference was a purposeful act from the artist and a non-purposeful act from the child. Klee stated “Don’t relate my work to that of children. These are two different worlds.... Don’t forget that the child knows nothing of art.”¹⁶ Even Klee acknowledges that children create subconsciously. ‘Spontaneity’ was not the only feature of children’s art that artists such as Klee and some of the CoBrA artists used as inspiration for their own work. They were also intrigued by the freedom that children exploited in their art. Spontaneity and freedom are used in a complementary manner: they come together. Children also use spontaneity and freedom similarly. Children aren’t assigned and have no duty to create anything in particular and so they have the liberty to create whatever their mind cries out, and they use their freedom in a unique manner. It is again used subconsciously, since children are not aware that they have the liberty to create what they want and it allows the child to express themselves extensively, whereas an artist strives to have freedom. Klee and the CoBrA artists used the freedom that the child naturally obtains and expresses it in their art, and delivered that through their own work allowing the piece to be much more open, interactive and easier for the audience to look at, but it also portrayed a calm feeling since the artist wasn’t pressured to create something that society might or might not like. These aspects were the ones that created the unique styles of Klee and CoBrA. If an artist can use freedom in their work, they can also apply the spontaneity. “In the obituary for Klee and Helhesten in 1941 Carl-Henning Pederson describes Klee as a bridge-builder between the primitive past and a new, experimental art, but also as someone announcing a future in which art is free and artists (and non-artists) can create art as unchained spirits.”¹⁷

Other techniques that children use which further inspired Klee and the CoBrA artists are the colours, the style, the angles, the abstractness (sense of perception) and the composition (see figures 3 & 6). Children are not always aware of what and how they create, however what they are creating reflects their inner thoughts and feelings, which means that often the colours or composition of their art reflects on their emotions and

¹⁶ Baumgartner, Michael, Kirsten Degel, Katja Weitering, Els Drummen, and Lieke Feijen. *Klee En Cobra: Het Begint Als Kind*. [Antwerpen]: Ludion, 2012. Print. (page 15)

¹⁷ Baumgartner, Michael, Kirsten Degel, Katja Weitering, Els Drummen, and Lieke Feijen. *Klee En Cobra: Het Begint Als Kind*. [Antwerpen]: Ludion, 2012. Print. (page 42)

well-being. “There are usually three ways that children arrive at the images they draw: memory, imagination and life.”¹⁸ What the child creates often gives a direct insight into how the child is feeling. As people mature and develop their mind and brain they begin to view things differently, and as a child the undeveloped mind does not view life as adults do, and artists want to adapt that trait because it’s different. Upon looking at a child’s works of art we notice that their sense of perception seems distorted, but this is how they view life. Furthermore they are not able to correctly note reality as directly as an adult or an artist would. That is what makes the distinction between primitive and non-primitive art. Klee and other modern artists are perfectly able to sketch and draw accurately and realistically. However since they were influenced by children’s art, they started distorting the perception of their own art purposefully, to make it different and interesting, and that is exactly what art should be. The artists who used children’s art as their inspiration did not want to be naïve. Rather they wanted to show the expression and emotion that a child shows through their art. “The CoBrA artists did not want to be naïve, but were fascinated by children’s affinity with the living emotions of the unconscious mind.”¹⁹ The naïve side of children’s art is what makes it unique because they don’t know the complicated aspects of reality and will only grow to learn this; however the child’s naïve character allows for their art to remain pure. Children also often use many vibrant colours, thick lines defining each individual shape, and very often don’t incorporate shades or highlights which creates a more unrealistic image. These are only some of the unique traits that artists like Klee and Appel have used to base their own work on (see figure 5).

¹⁸ Malchiodi, Cathy A. *Understanding Children's Drawings*. New York: Guilford, 1998. Print. (page 20)

¹⁹ Baumgartner, Michael, Kirsten Degel, Katja Weitering, Els Drummen, and Lieke Feijen. *Klee En Cobra: Het Begint Als Kind*. [Antwerpen]: Ludion, 2012. Print. (page 28)



²⁰ Figure 5 - *Man and Animals* by Karel Appel (1949)

Figure 5 shows one of Karel Appel's famous paintings, which is displayed in the CoBrA museum in Amsterdam and titled 'Man and Animals'. It was created on canvas with oil paint. We are now aware that various modern artists used children's art as their inspiration; however it is difficult to visualize how they applied it to their own art, unless observing one of the artist's pieces, such as the one above. Some of the characteristics from children's art, such as the use of vibrant colours, have been used in the modern artists' work which is clear in 'man and animals'. Appel has used a vibrant shade of blue for many parts of the animal's body, and around the man's eyes. Appel used varying colours just like a child. The vibrant blue contrasts with the bright yellow dramatically. These colours reflect emotions or feelings which he tried to portray, children similarly do so when creating art. In this painting Appel has also created many distorted figures. Although we recognize what the shapes are, they don't add up to reality. As established earlier, children also tend to create distorted drawings, since they aren't fully aware of the proportions of reality. Apple created evident separating lines

²⁰ Cobra museum of modern art Amstelveen (Amsterdam)

between each figure, just as children do and this allows for it to seem primitive, or naïve. Another feature which Appel has adapted from children's art is the lack of highlights or shadows in the painting, which have purposefully been avoided, again creating a primitive-like feeling, which adds onto the paintings abstractness, since it doesn't allow for there to be any realistic or three dimensional shapes looking shape.

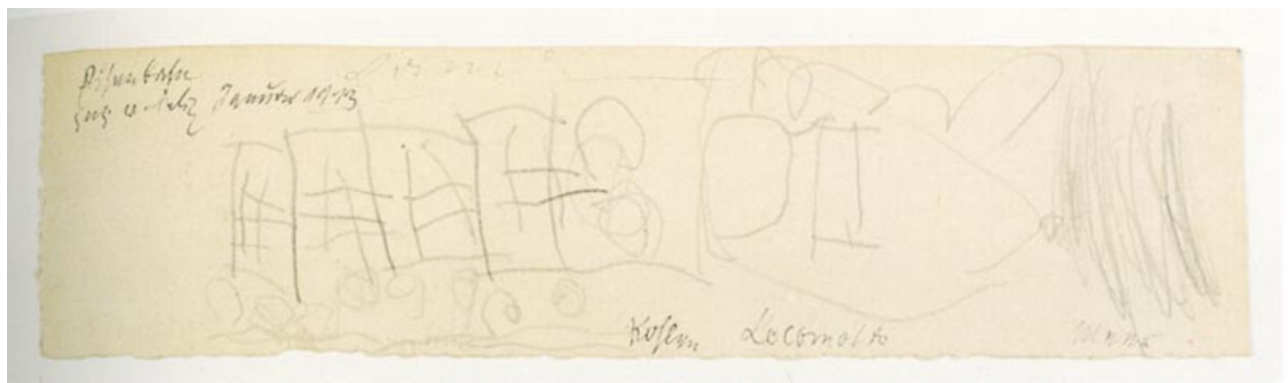
The psychology of a child is one of the most influential features of a child's art because a child is not aware of the insight they are delivering to their audience into their well-being. The modern artists using children's art as their inspiration found many techniques and features which would be adapted in their own work, and the whole psychology behind children's art allows the topic to be more intense and allows the artist to use their art in different forms. Klee discovered this later "During his Bauhaus period the child theme in Klee's work is usually in a symbolic or poetic context; only at the end of the 1920s is there an increased interest in the psychology of childlike behavioral and relational patters."²¹ Paul Klee used children's drawings to his full advantage and incorporated them into his work as well as using them for his inspiration, since he first used his own drawings from when he was a child, and later got inspired from his son, Felix's work (see figs 7 & 8). This allowed him to have a psychological and emotional connection to his work, because it was personal. Some of the members in the CoBrA movement such as Karel Appel, likewise used children's art in a personal manner. Appel portrayed this through his project 'Questioning Children' which was a series of works inspired by the homeless children he had seen by the roadside in Germany after the Second World War (see figure 6). He had taken an aspect which affected him and applied it to his art. Appel literally used children for his work, and used their art as an influence for his own art. A child's psychology is interesting even on its own, however when the child includes that into its art it makes it even more interesting, because we can see what the child is thinking and experiencing. Therapists, like some artists take advantage of this, since sometimes it's easier to read a child's art than to question him and allow them to express themselves verbally. Klee and the CoBrA artists used the child's psychology as a large part of what they were influenced by. Some of the artists also incorporated their own thoughts, feelings, emotions and memories into their art.

²¹ Baumgartner, Michael, Kirsten Degel, Katja Weitering, Els Drummen, and Lieke Feijen. *Klee En Cobra: Het Begint Als Kind*. [Antwerpen]: Ludion, 2012. Print. (page 15)

This allowed for their work to be much more interesting, because it contains a deeper underlying meaning, which the artist's audience can interpret in any way they want to.



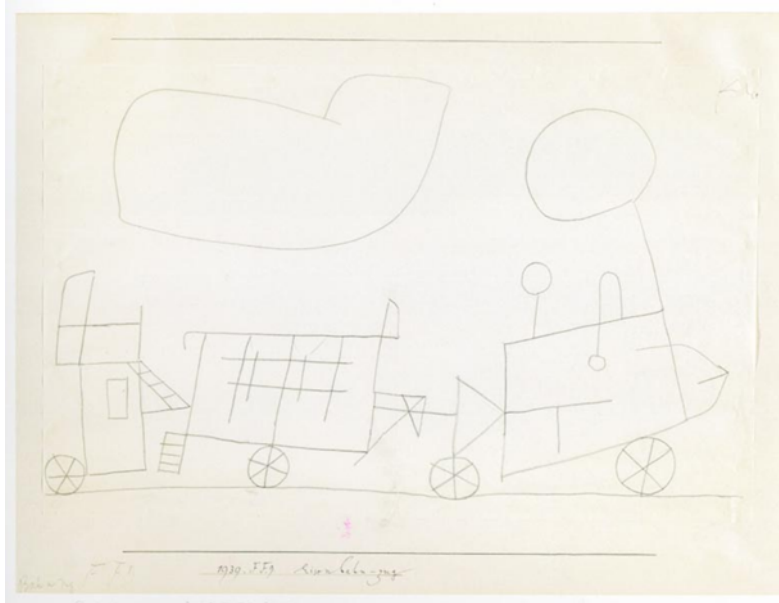
²² Figure 6 - *Questioning Children* by Karel Appel



²³ Figure 7 - *Landscape, train and sea* by Felix Klee (1913)

²² "Google Afbeeldingen." Google Afbeeldingen. N.p., n.d. Web. 05 Dec. 2012. (Het stedelijk museum Amsterdam)

²³ Baumgartner, Michael, Kirsten Degel, Katja Weitering, Els Drummen, and Lieke Feijen. *Klee En Cobra: Het Begint Als Kind*. [Antwerpen]: Ludion, 2012. Print. (page 19)



²⁴ Figure 8 - *Railroad train* by Paul Klee (1939)

²⁴ Baumgartner, Michael, Kirsten Degel, Katja Weitering, Els Drummen, and Lieke Feijen. *Klee En Cobra: Het Begint Als Kind*. [Antwerpen]: Ludion, 2012. Print. (page 19)

Conclusion

In the past children's art has never been explored by artists as much as it was in the period when Klee and some of the modern artists from the CoBrA movement had done so. It is evident that the influence of children's art had something to do with the rebellious period of time during and after the First and Second World Wars because that is when it was introduced and intensely applied to some of the work the modern artists had created. Children think differently to the adults and this made it more interesting for the artists to use the children's art as inspiration. Klee and the other modern artists applied the features of children's art to their own by collecting many children's drawings and studying them. "Just like Klee, Jorn and Corneille collected children's drawings, which were an important source of inspiration for them."²⁵ To conclude, Klee and some of the CoBrA artists were inspired by the unique features of children's art, such as the vibrant colours, composition, style, and the perception; however the freedom, spontaneity and the expression and emotion was what attracted the artists the most. The artist's applied these unique features to their own art by embodying the character and mind set of the child to create art with similar intentions which would allow for a new, unique and diverse art style, also allowing for these artists to move away from their oppressed society.

²⁵ Baumgartner, Michael, Kirsten Degel, Katja Weitering, Els Drummen, and Lieke Feijen. *Klee En Cobra: Het Begint Als Kind*. [Antwerpen]: Ludion, 2012. Print. (page 8)

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