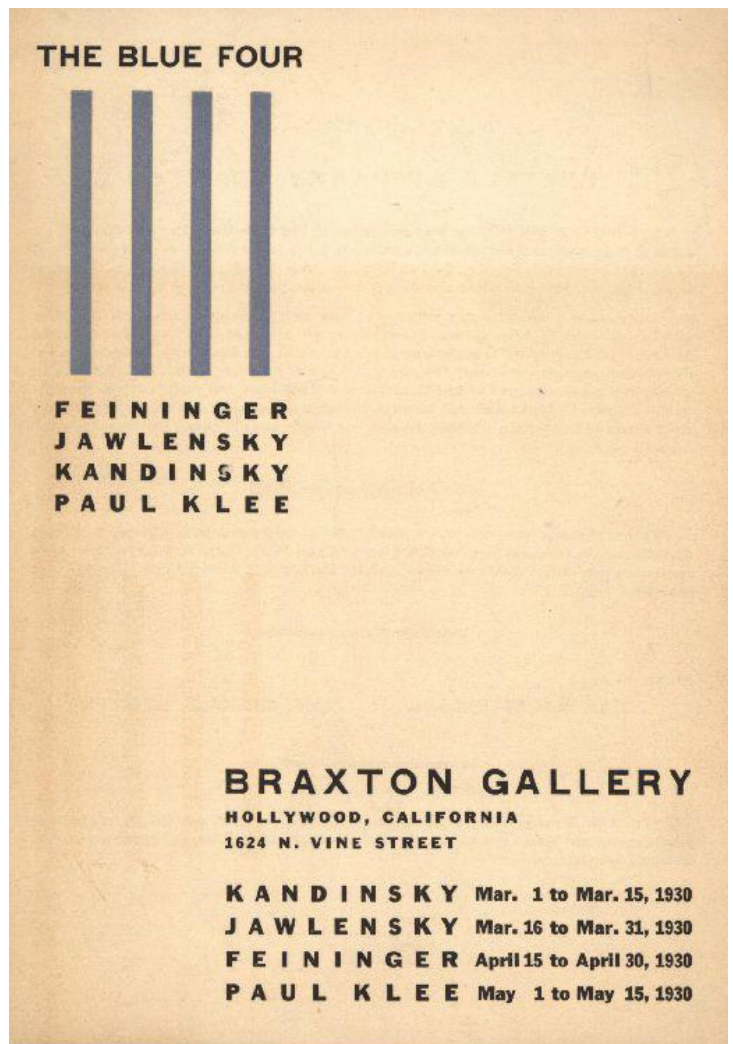


'The Blue Four': Galka Scheyer and the promotion of Feininger, Jawlensky, Kandinsky and Klee in California

Clara Marcellán



Brochure of the Blue Four's exhibition
at Braxton Gallery, 1930, with the group's
distinctive four blue vertical stripes

fig. 1
Cover of the *San Francisco Examiner*,
1 November 1925



1
The Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena houses Galka Scheyer's archives, correspondence, and art collection, and has conducted various projects on them to analyse and disseminate her legacy. This article is based on the following publications: Vivian Endicott Barnett and Josef Helfenstein (eds.), *The Blue Four Feininger, Jawlensky, Kandinsky, and Klee in the New World*. [Exh. cat. Kunstmuseum Bern-Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Dusseldorf, 1997–1998], Cologne, Dumont-New Haven, Yale University Press, 1997; and Vivian Endicott Barnett, *The Blue Four Collection at the Norton Simon Museum*. [Exh. cat.] New Haven–London, Yale University Press, 2002. In 2017, the Norton Simon Museum hosted the exhibition *Maven of Modernism: Galka Scheyer in California*. The accompanying lectures given by Gloria Williams Sander, Victoria Dailey, and Susan Landauer provided a wealth of visual records and new information on Scheyer's role on the Los Angeles art scene (the videos can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/214554546>, <https://vimeo.com/218049459> and <https://vimeo.com/234930680>). New details of the history of the works in our collection have been garnered from Scheyer's letters to Kandinsky in the Bibliothèque Kandinsky, MNAM/CCI, Centre Pompidou, which were accessed via the website <https://archivesetdocumentation.centrepompidou.fr/>

'Have you heard about the Blue Four? If not yet, you are destined to hear much about them soon'.

These are the opening lines of an article entitled 'Prophetess of "The Blue Four" discusses Modern Art. Mme. Scheyer, the Blue Four and their Art', which was published on the cover of the November 1925 issue of the *San Francisco Examiner* [fig. 1]. The German-born art collector and promoter Galka Scheyer (Brunswick, 1889–Los Angeles, 1945) had arrived in the United States in 1924 with a mission, to publicise the work of Jawlensky, Feininger, Klee, and Kandinsky, grouping them together under the name of 'Blue Four' for this purpose. This article traces the fortunes of her endeavour,¹ which involves three of the works now in the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza. It therefore adds a further story to those told in the exhibition *German Expressionism in Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza's Collection*, which celebrates the emergence of this movement in the baron's life and studies the dissemination of Expressionist works throughout the twentieth century, among other episodes.

Blue mania

fig. 2
Emmy E. Scheyer
Self-Portrait, 1915
Private collection,
United States

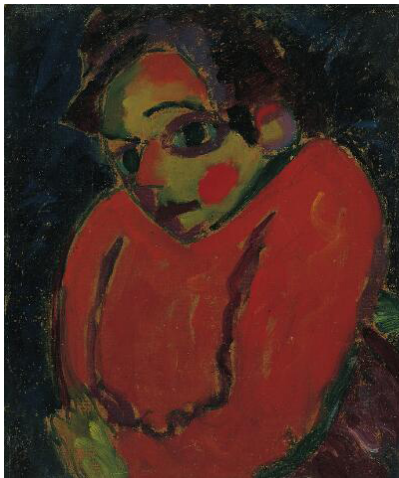
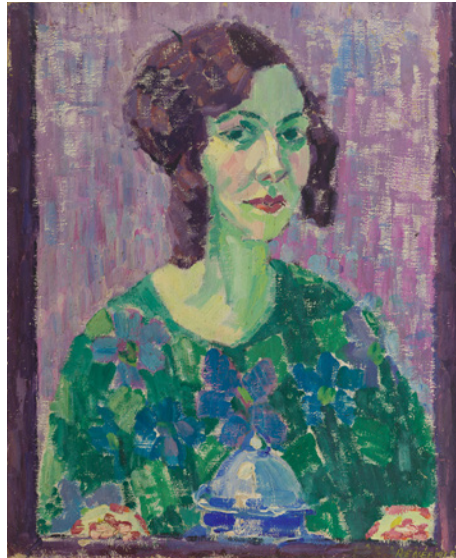


fig. 3
Alexei Jawlensky
Hunchback, 1917
Oil and pencil on textured
cardboard, 24.8 x 21 cm
Norton Simon Museum
The Blue Four Galka Scheyer
Collection
This a version of the work that
made an impression on Galka
when she met Jawlensky.
The artist painted it for her
sometime later.

When she discovered Jawlensky's works in Switzerland in 1916, Emmy Esther Scheyer abandoned her own artistic aspirations [fig. 2] in order to become the painter's promotor. It was Jawlensky who called her Galka, the Russian word for jackdaw, after this bird appeared to him in a dream and reminded him of her: friendly, warm, protective, and possessive. Scheyer ended up adopting it as her first name, and it appears on her American passport in 1932. Through Jawlensky she met Klee, Kandinsky, and Feininger, who were linked to the Blue Rider group before the First World War and played an active role in the Bauhaus school in Weimar after the war. Bound by ties of friendship, the artists nevertheless had very different styles, though this was perceived as an advantage, as Kandinsky states in a letter to Scheyer dated 17 January 1924. Galka not only promoted the Blue Four but became a very early collector of their works: she received many as gifts [fig. 3] and purchased others whenever she could afford to.

Driven by her faith in the value of their work, Scheyer proposed that the four artists team up to make a name for themselves in the United States. On 31 March 1924, they signed an agreement authorising Scheyer to disseminate their work overseas through lectures and exhibitions, and specifying that she would immediately leave for America.



fig. 4
Lyonel Feininger
***The Lady in Mauve*, 1922**
Oil on canvas, 100.5 × 80.5 cm
Museo Nacional Thyssen-
Bornemisza, Madrid
[\[+ info\]](#)

Why the United States? Hyperinflation in Germany was causing the sales and prices of their works to fluctuate and the resulting insecurity had prompted Berlin gallery owners such as Ferdinand Möller and J. B. Neumann to open branches in New York in 1923. Also in 1923, Scheyer had met the female painter Rajah Rubio, who invited her to the United States. Klee, in turn, had put her in contact with Katherine Dreier, a painter, collector, and pioneer in promoting modern art in America, with a view to organising a Jawlensky exhibition in New York in 1924. Scheyer's privileged education – she studied art at the British Museum and English at Oxford from 1906 to 1910, besides training in Brussels and Paris – equipped her to get along easily in the United States.

To carry out her mission she received works on consignment, which were returned to the artists if they were not sold. This is where one of the Museo Thyssen paintings with a key role in this story comes into the picture: Feininger's *The Lady in Mauve* [fig. 4]. Created in 1922, it must have accompanied

Galka on her boat journey, as evidenced by its presence in the first exhibitions she mounted in the United States. According to the agreement signed with the Blue Four, when a work was sold, 50 percent of the proceeds would go to the artist, 30 percent to Galka, and 20 percent to the group's funds. The contract also specified the name, 'freien Gruppe der blauen Vier' [free group of the blue four], most likely a reference to the importance of this colour in its members' creative universe, as it had been part of the title of their previous collaborative project, the Blue Rider Almanac. In some of the interviews she gave on the Blue Four in the United States, Galka had to explain that whereas in English 'blue' has connotations of sadness – which some people hastily attached to their works – for the artists it had a deeply spiritual significance.²

Modern art enjoyed a limited reception in the United States and Scheyer's educational drive, shared with Klee, Kandinsky, and Feininger, who also taught, proved essential. The only precedent was perhaps the Armory Show, the International Exhibition of Modern Art held in New York, Chicago, and Boston in 1913, which introduced the European avant-garde movements to some 300,000 visitors. An important role was likewise played by people such as Alfred Stieglitz and also by Katherine Dreier, who founded the Société Anonyme together with Marcel Duchamp and was a pioneer in organising Kandinsky's and Klee's first solo exhibitions in the United States in 1923 and 1924 respectively.

When Galka arrived in the United States in May 1924 she stayed for a few weeks with Rajah Rubio in Ossining (New York), where she was visited by Dreier and gave interviews announcing her intentions. In June she moved to New York to put together a promotional mailing list. She eventually sent material on the Blue Four to 600 universities and 400 museums, besides offering to stage exhibitions and deliver lectures on them. Galka used the artworks themselves in her lectures, as well as 600 (glass plate) slides of modern art and architecture that she had amassed before leaving Europe. The Blue Four group's first exhibition, of which there is no complete surviving list, took place in February 1925 at The Daniel Gallery in New York. Despite positive reviews from critics, it closed without a single sale.

2
See, for example, 'Expect Furor when Blue Four Exhibit Opens here Today'. In *The Spokesman-Review*, Spokane, Washington, 15 May 1927, p. 27.

Conquering the West

After her work in New York went unrewarded, Scheyer set off for the West on 30 May 1925, motivated by the response received from the Oakland Art Gallery in California – the only institution to reply to her mass mailing. She was accompanied by sculptress Angelica Archipenko – married to Alexander Archipenko – who had lived in New York since 1923. Together they visited Chicago, Denver, and Santa Fe before arriving in Los Angeles on 8 June 1925. Through her contact with Hollywood-based Austrian architects, Galka was introduced to actresses and directors, whom she viewed as potential buyers and ambassadors of her Blue Flour.

She gave her first talks in San Francisco in September and her efforts soon paid off with an exhibition at Stanford University (Palo Alto) and the cover of the *San Francisco Examiner* mentioned earlier. Writing to Feininger on 30 October 1925, Scheyer reported on the success that securing an exhibition and a front-page article in a newspaper with two million readers entailed. In January 1926, an exhibition of graphic work at the Paul Elder Gallery in San Francisco brought her first earnings from the sale of nine works. Shortly afterwards, in February, Evelyn S. Mayer, director of the State Teachers College in San Francisco, became the first West Coast collector of the Blue Four when she purchased graphic works by the group for educational purposes.

The Oakland Art Gallery not only responded to Galka's offer to stage exhibitions and give lectures but hired her as its agent in Europe. Indeed, this municipal museum hosted the first major show of the Blue Four in May 1926 featuring the works she had brought with her in 1924 accompanied by a few from Jerome Eddy's collection (Chicago) and others lent by Katherine Dreier. One of the canvases on display was Feininger's *The Lady in Mauve*. It also travelled with the exhibition to Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland, and Spokane, where the tour, promoted by the Association of the Directors of Western American Museums, ended in May 1927. An article published in connection with its showing at the last venue, entitled 'She can Prove *Red Spot* is Art',³ takes Kandinsky's *Red Spot* to be a symbol of the doubts raised about the artistic merit of some

3

M. B.: 'She can Prove *Red Spot* is Art'. In *The Spokesman-Review*, Spokane, Washington, 20 May 1927, p. 6.



fig. 5
Wassily Kandinsky
In the Bright Oval, 1925
Oil on cardboard, 73 x 59 cm
Museo Nacional Thyssen-
Bornemisza, Madrid
[\[+ info\]](#)

of the works and highlights Scheyer's efforts to cultivate appreciation for the new art: 'to the uninitiated [it] looks like a street corner the morning after the Fourth of July before the street cleaner has got to work [...] Her tremendous enthusiasm and vitality are stimulating and convincing, and before you leave her you will decide that "The Red Spot" is a great picture'.

In June 1928, Scheyer returned to Europe for the first time since leaving the continent in 1924. She was accompanied by Evelyn S. Mayer, who, as we have seen, may be considered the first collector of the Blue Four in western America. Together they delivered a paper at the 6th International Conference for Art Education and Arts and Crafts in Prague on their educational experiences and the exhibition they had organised at the Oakland Art Gallery that May: *Free, Imaginative and Creative Work by Children*. Scheyer's travels around Germany took her to Dessau and Wiesbaden, where she visited Feininger, Kandinsky, Klee, and Jawlensky, returned unsold works to them, and selected new ones. Among the paintings she took back with her to California in October 1928 are two now in the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza: Kandinsky's *In the Bright Oval* (1925) [fig. 5] and Klee's *Omega 5 (Traps)* (1927), as may be deduced from the shows and sales she organised on her return to the United States.

'Adieu San Francisco, Oakland, Berkeley. Guten Tag Hollywood'⁴

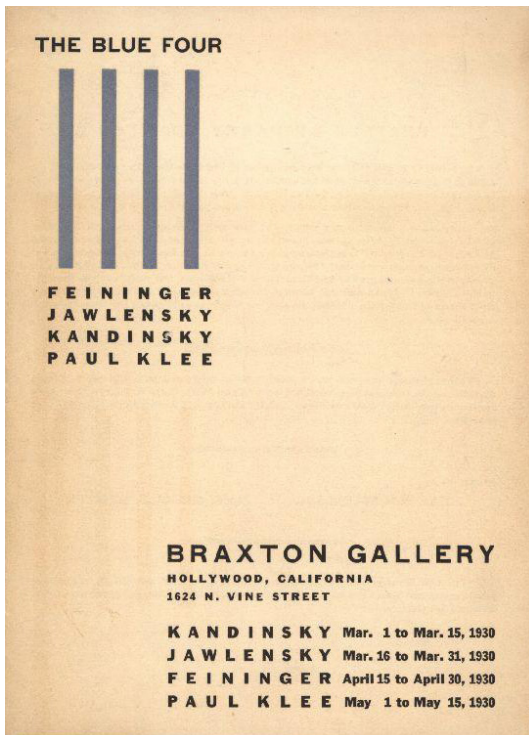


fig. 6
Brochure of the Blue Four's exhibition at Braxton Gallery, 1930, with the group's distinctive four blue vertical stripes

The second stage of Galka's life in the United States began with what she called the golden year, the golden dollar year: in May 1929 Harry Braxton proposed showing the Blue Four at his Hollywood gallery and in August she met one of his clients, Austrian film director Josef von Sternberg, with whom she collaborated for a short but intense period. At the time Sternberg was one of the few people in the Hollywood film industry with a genuine interest in modern art. His collection went on to be displayed at the LACMA in 1935 and 1943 and, by chance, included a painting now in the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza: Egon Schiele's *Houses on the River*. During this first visit to Galka, he purchased 500 dollars' worth of graphic works by the Blue Four. At the end of the year, Sternberg shot *The Blue Angel* in Germany. The film was a stepping-stone to stardom for Marlene Dietrich, who established herself in Hollywood to carry on taking part in Sternberg's films and became friends with Galka.

The Blue Four's exhibition at the Braxton Gallery at last opened in the spring of 1930 [fig. 6]. Its promoter was Sternberg and it was installed in an equally modern space designed by R. M. Schindler, a collaborator of Frank Lloyd Wright and a friend of Galka. Feininger's *The Lady in Mauve* and Kandinsky's *In the Bright Oval* were again shown in this exhibition. Galka's letter to Kandinsky dated 7 March 1931 confirming she had sent copies of the exhibition catalogue to Chaplin and Greta Garbo indicates that she was on the lookout for new clients in the film world.

⁴ Letter from Scheyer to the Blue Four, 4 June 1929.

⁵ Marjorie Eaton had studied with André Lhote in Paris before meeting Scheyer. An active member of the artistic community in Taos and close to Diego Rivera, she finally opted for a career in acting, appearing in blockbusters such as *Mary Poppins* and the fifth episode of *Star Wars*, totally unrecognisable as Emperor Palpatine.

fig. 7

**Paul Klee, *Omega 5 (Traps)*,
1927, 295, 1927****Oil and watercolour on canvas
nailed to cardboard, 57.3 x 43 cm
Museo Nacional Thyssen-
Bornemisza, Madrid**[\[+ info\]](#)

In 1930, Marjorie Eaton, a painter and actress⁵ Galka had met in 1926, purchased another of the works Galka had brought with her: Klee's *Omega 5 (Traps)* [fig. 7]. She had already bought works by Jawlensky, Kandinsky, and Klee from Galka and the two women were close friends. Among other privileges, Galka would lend her works by the Blue Four to keep in her home for a time until she decided whether or not to buy them – a practice Galka repeated with other clients. *Omega 5* remained in her collection until 1957 at least.

Meanwhile, the artists, who had so far only exhibited together in the United States, had their first group show in Europe in 1929. It opened at the Galerie Ferdinand Möller in Berlin under the looming shadow of the Wall Street Crash and Galka's plea that the Blue Four lower their selling prices in an attempt to keep their heads above water.

1930 is also the year Galka met, or at least developed a closer relationship with, Louise and Walter Arensberg, the eminent collectors of modern art, chiefly French, who had moved from New York to Hollywood in 1927. Scheyer managed to arouse their interest in the Blue Four and they became the leading collectors of the group's work in western America, though they did not always buy through her.

Another well-known name first appeared on her lists of buyers in 1931: Diego Rivera. Scheyer met him in San Francisco while he was working on the murals for the city's Stock Exchange Tower and a few months later she involved him in the installation of the Blue Four's next major exhibition at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor from 8 to 22 April. While setting up the show Rivera must have seen Kandinsky's *In the Bright Oval*, which, to Scheyer's immense satisfaction, was sold during or shortly after the exhibition. In a brief handwritten note dated 29 April 1931 Galka conveyed the good news to Kandinsky, whose hopes of success on the West Coast were fading. Two watercolours, eight or ten lithographs, and three oil paintings, among them *In the Bright Oval*, had been acquired: 'In the bright oval (oil) sold. [...] This time the success is yours [underlining by Galka]'. One of the buyers referred to in this note to Kandinsky was Diego Rivera, with whom she agreed to hold a show of the Blue Four in Mexico City, which took place that November.

Writing more calmly and at greater length on the latest events and sales (letter of 26 June 1931 to Kandinsky), Galka included a list specifying the prices and sellers, as established in her representation agreement. It mentions *In the Bright Oval*, together with the sum of 2,000 Deutschmarks and the name Mack. This is probably the first of the many works that Charlotte Mack, a discreet philanthropist, purchased from Galka in the spring and summer of 1931 after they met, possibly through Diego Rivera. Mack assembled the largest collection of works by the Blue Four in San Francisco.⁶

Galka continued to expand her sphere of influence and presented the Blue Four in Chicago in April 1932. The exhibition featured recently sold works lent by their owners: *In the Bright Oval*, from the collection of C. Mack, and *Omega 5 (Traps)* (as 'Still Life'), from the collection of M. Eaton, both now in Madrid. Scheyer also included pieces from her own private collection, as specified in the credits, and Feininger's *The Lady in Mauve*, which, unlike other works on the list, is not accompanied by a reference to a collection and may therefore be assumed to be still owned by the artist.

In October 1932, Galka travelled to Europe again with the support of the Oakland Art Gallery to acquire more works by the Blue Four. During the months she spent there until July 1933, the foundations of her own world and that of the group began to crumble. Hitler rose to power in January 1933, Klee lost his job as a lecturer at the Staatliche Kunstakademie in Dusseldorf, and soon all of them were banned from teaching, exhibiting, and even painting in Germany. In May 1933, she returned to the United States, followed by 250 works. In Hollywood Harry Braxton's gallery, which had hosted the successful shows of 1930, had gone bankrupt.

6

From 17 March to 9 September 2018 the SFMOMA hosted the exhibition *Paul Klee, Galka Scheyer, and the Blue Four* featuring works gifted to the museum by Charlotte Mack.

New strategies

fig. 8

Galka Scheyer on the terrace of her house designed by Richard Neutra, around 1934
Norton Simon Museum, The Blue Four Galka Scheyer Archive, Pasadena



One of Scheyer's disadvantages when competing with gallery owners is that she never had her own commercial premises. Instead she would invite potential buyers to her successive homes. After returning from Europe in 1933, she purchased a plot of land in Hollywood Hills with the money she had earned during the prosperous years and commissioned Richard Neutra, one of the most important practitioners of modern American architecture,⁷ to design a simple, modern house for her [fig. 8]. She moved into it in 1934 and succeeded in turning the access road into a tribute to the Blue Four, as it was named Blue Heights Drive. She also had a guest apartment built for the Blue Four and other great artists in her home-cum-gallery, though she was only visited by Feininger when he was invited to teach at Mills College (Oakland) in 1936.

As competition grew, Scheyer sought to increase the visibility of the Blue Four's works in new spaces, such as the Hollywood studios. She rented out works for film sets, despite the misgivings of Feininger and Kandinsky, and lent them for concerts and other cultural and social events. That is how musician and artist John Cage came to see a Jawlensky

⁷

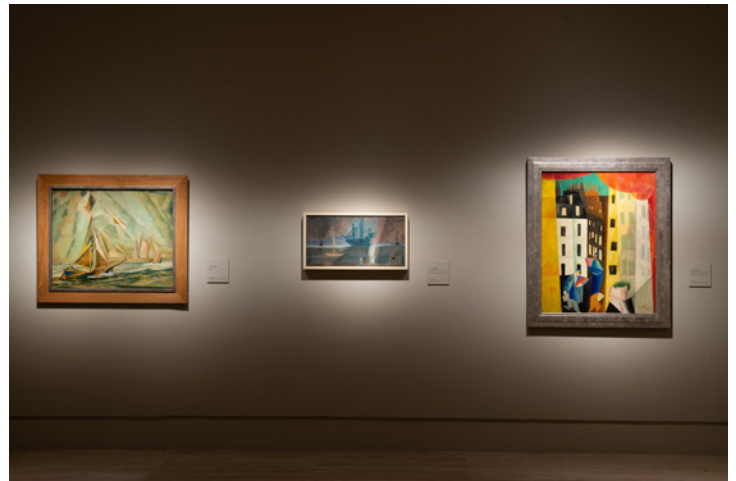
The character in Ayn Rand's novel *The Fountainhead*, published in 1943, is based on him.

fig. 9

View of German Expressionism in Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza's Collection, showing Feininger's *Magic River (Dream across the River)* [centre] and *Architecture II (The Man from Potin)* [to the right]

fig. 10

Mills College label on the back of *Architecture II*



painting at a concert. After he met Galka and expressed his enthusiasm about the artist, she agreed to sell him a recent work by Jawlensky, *Meditation* of 1934, for 25 dollars, in instalments. Scheyer had found herself a new ambassador and in 1939 she helped Cage organise exhibitions of the group's work in Tacoma and Seattle.

The situation in Europe was worsening and Scheyer's family, who had been helping her financially, were no longer able to do so. The group were no better off, as in 1937 many of their works were among German public collections that were confiscated and 45 were featured in the Degenerate Art exhibition that opened in Munich in July. By then Feininger was in the United States, where, as he told one of his children, unlike in Germany, 'imagination in art and abstraction are not an utter crime'.⁸

In America Feininger helped organise a new exhibition at Mills College, where he again taught courses in the summer of 1937. The show included a work he had painted that year, *Magic River (Dream across the River)* (Thyssen-Bornemisza Collections), as well as *Architecture II (The Man from Potin)*, of 1921 (Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza), both of which are displayed on the same wall in the exhibition *German Expressionism in Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza's Collection* [fig. 9]. *Architecture II* still bears the label of Mills College on the reverse [fig. 10] with the name of Nierendorf, the gallery

8

Letter from Feininger to his son Lux, 31 May 1937. Quoted from Peter Vergo: *Twentieth-century German Painting: The Thyssen Bornemisza Collection*. London, Sotheby's Publications, 1992, p. 82.

owner of German descent who began representing Feininger in the United States, putting an end to Galka's exclusive arrangement. In 1938, the Oakland Art Gallery dispensed with Scheyer's services owing to her disagreement with its director and a shift in interest towards Californian artists. Feininger asked Galka to give back the works on consignment, and she also lost her status as exclusive representative of Klee and Kandinsky once her contract expired. She nevertheless carried on corresponding with them frequently and affectionately.

Following these changes, Scheyer devoted her efforts to other causes, such as showing *Guernica* on the West Coast in 1939, designing educational and art programmes for prestigious primary schools, and collaborating with the Walt Disney studios by teaching the employees classes on children's art. Oskar Fischinger, who was then filming *Fantasia*, even proposed she organise a Kandinsky exhibition at the studios as the artist was in tune with the abstract musical accompaniments and colours they were working with.

Klee died in 1940, followed by her beloved Jawlensky in 1941. In 1944, with two members of the group now absent, Galka collaborated with Curt Valentin on organising what would be her last project related to the Blue Four, an exhibition at the Buchholz Gallery in New York that November. Kandinsky passed away on 13 December 1944, and Galka died of cancer exactly a year later. ●