

# Exhibition guide



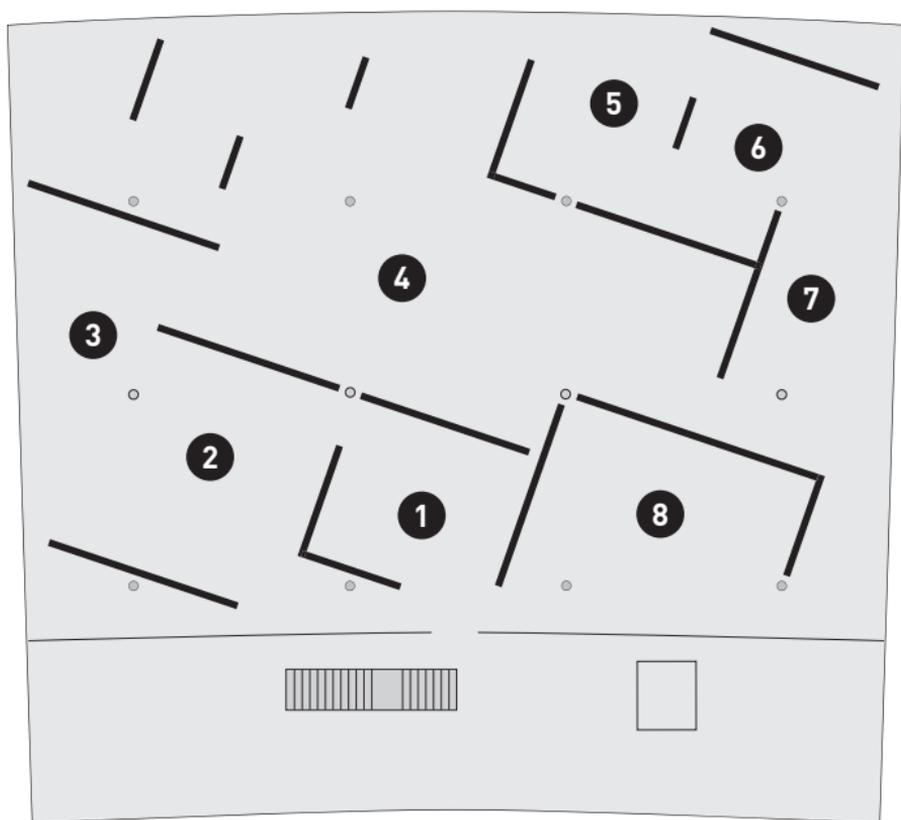
Founded by  
Maurice E. and Martha Müller  
and the heirs of Paul Klee

Zentrum Paul Klee  
Bern

## Etel Adnan

15.06. – 07.10.18

# Floorplan



## Introduction

Etel Adnan is a Lebanese-American poet, painter, journalist and philosopher considered to be one of the major figures of Arab modernity. Paul Klee's famous claim that art does not reproduce the visible, it makes visible could have been made by Etel Adnan. Adnan's work is impossible to classify – Klee and Adnan share a passionate taste for different means of artistic expression, including poetry, music and painting.

For Etel Adnan, abstract painting is a means to express ideas, thought, and emotion – or simply explore the beauty of colour. Her early works are abstract compositions of colourful geometric forms – primarily squares and rectangles – in which she searches for a delicate balance. Later, Adnan began to create folded Leporello books as a way to bring together drawing, painting and poetry.

Adnan's relationship to art and language is shaped by her culturally mixed upbringing as well as her experience of living in Lebanon, France and the United States. Her writing often responds to the destructions of war across the Arab world and beyond. For example, the French suppression of the Algerian struggle for independence prompted her to seek refuge in painting:

*I no longer needed to write in French, I was going to paint in Arabic.*

*I felt part of an immense movement  
of American poets at a time when  
poetry seemed to grow in that  
country like music and grass.*

*I don't believe that an artist necessarily becomes better  
with time. And besides, I think that the first works are  
like the first notes of a musical composition in that they  
hold the seeds of everything that comes thereafter.*

*I think that Paul Klee is the first painter with whom I  
fell in love. I was obsessed with him. By "obsessed,"  
I mean that his paintings made me ecstatic.*

*Nietzsche wrote: "With heroes everything becomes  
tragedy, with demigods everything becomes dance."  
We might add: with painting everything becomes light.*

*My writing was the same as my breathing...*

# 1

*Although I had no formal background in art history and its theories, I could discern a terrible anxiety in several paintings, even in bright ones. [Paul Klee] was a man of the inter-war period. This, I learned later but saw instinctively. When there were characters in his works, they were reminiscent of clowns and puppets; they were the dead of 1914–1918 or those of 1939–1940.*

Etel Adnan, 2018

Etel Adnan's biography is defined by multiculturalism. She was born in Beirut in French-occupied Lebanon in 1925. Her father was a Muslim Syrian and a high-ranking officer in the Ottoman army, who lost everything following the defeat in the First World War. He met her mother, a Greek Christian, in the city of Smyrna in her native Turkey. Together they fled the Greco-Turkish War to Beirut. Etel Adnan spoke Turkish and Greek at home, and French at school – but not Arabic. Her heritage, her family, and the history of the Middle East are most prominent in her literary oeuvre. This history is also present in works of visual art, including leporellos like *Family Memoirs on the End of the Ottoman Empire*, which she created for the Istanbul Biennale in 2015. Here, her family history is the starting point for a kind of history lesson that spans the downfall of the Ottoman Empire to its ongoing consequences in the present. In the leporello *War Poems*, Etel Adnan transcribed poems by various Arab authors and augmented them with painterly elements. These narratives resurface again at the end of the exhibition in the film *Ismyrne* by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige.

By contrast, in her paintings and drawings, Etel Adnan does not address historical or personal narratives. These are largely abstract colour field paintings or lively rhythmic drawings in

which she searches for a delicate balance. Although these works are abstract, at the same time they convey the gestures of the soul and the mind, and life's equilibrium: they are declarations of love to the universe.

## 2

*Living in its environment [Mount Tamalpais] and studying it, the mountain became my house, a mystical experience. I believe that in that respect my work resembles that of Cézanne, for whom Mount Sainte-Victoire was not a mountain but an absolute [...]*  
*Experiencing the mountain in canvas after canvas, Cézanne climbed towards painting.*  
Etel Adnan, 2012

In her prose and poetry, Etel Adnan addresses political and social issues, especially those of the Middle East. Conversely, in her painting, she emphasizes abstraction and natural phenomena. One of her longtime companions is the 800-meter-high Mount Tamalpais north of San Francisco, near Sausalito, where she lived from 1958 to 1972 and from 1977 to 2012. The mountain became both a motif and a projection field for her own state of mind and that of all of humanity, which places her squarely with the tradition of artists like Cézanne and Hokusai, each of whom were likewise preoccupied with a mountain. In dozens of paintings and hundreds of watercolour and ink drawings, she explored “her” mountain. In 1986, Etel Adnan dedicated her book *Journey to Mount Tamalpais* to the mountain. Originally published in English, the text addresses the relationship between nature and art. It was translated into Arabic for a leporello of 2008, in which the panorama of the triangular black form of the mountain unfurls across the writing and bands of colour.

For Paul Klee, the observation of nature and its processes was the “sine qua non,” or the prerequisite for any artistic endeavour. Again and again, looking at nature and discovering its structures and processes led him down new and fruitful paths in his search for a contemporary abstract visual language.

### 3

Etel Adnan never lived in New York, but in her work it nevertheless appears to represent a contrast to her abstract works and images of nature. When she visited New York in the 1970s, she stayed at a friend’s apartment. In the city, her view was of the East River with its multiple bridges and shipping traffic instead of Mount Tamalpais. Many of her drawings represent this contrast between her idyllic mountain vista and the traffic and pollution of the metropolis. Two leporellos of 1977 and 1979, which are displayed in this space, likewise address this subject. In the earlier work, the cityscape and the bridges of the East River are clearly recognizable. When unfolded, the leporello *East River Pollution* of 1979 resembles a musical score. Some forms evoke architecture or clouds, but rhythm and abstraction dominate the overarching composition. In the 1990s, she devoted two further leporellos to the view of New York.

In 2012, Etel Adnan created her only film to date: *Motion*. However, she had already shot the material for the Super-8 film about twenty years before. In short sequences, she shows unremarkable everyday moments filmed in Manhattan, Sausalito, San Francisco, and Yosemite National Park. These impressions of movement are like the two New York leporellos in that they visualize a choreography and an awareness of rhythm and change. Furthermore, the film is also a testimony to Etel Adnan’s

keen observation of the small things that remain constant only in that they are ever-changing, which also comes to the fore in the way she chronicles nature in books like *Seasons* and *Journey to Mount Tamalpais*.

## 4

In 1958, Etel Adnan moved from Berkeley, California to Sausalito, which is north of San Francisco. She began teaching the philosophy of art at Dominican College in San Rafael. It was there that she met Ann O'Hanlon, then the head of the art department, who inspired her to paint. It was not long before Etel Adnan developed her own technique and style, both of which she draws upon to this day. Each painting is made in a single sitting. She lays out the canvas in front of her like a piece of paper, and holds the support for small-scale works in her hand. For the most part, she applies paint directly from the tube to the canvas with a spatula or a palette knife. Layering and modifications are nowhere to be found.

Her early works are abstract compositions of colourful geometric forms – primarily squares and rectangles. A red square appears regularly, as she often used it as the work's starting point. The early paintings therefore resemble works by Nicolas de Staël, George Mathieu, and Hans Hoffmann. Early on, painters like Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, and Paul Klee became important to her. Subsequently, her compositions became clearer, with more sharply defined planes and even bolder colour. The interlocking planes establish a precise balance. In these abstract compositions, triangles resembling a mountain pyramid – Mount Tamalpais – allude to the visible world.

During a trip through North Africa in 1966, Etel Adnan learned about the art of weaving at the studio of the Egyptian architect Ramses Wissa Wassef. Afterwards, in the 1960s and 1970s, she designed patterns for tapestries, although she only began to have most of them produced in collaboration with the French workshop Pinton in 2015. It was this very “art of collaboration” that the artist valued. Her tapestries combine long-standing weaving traditions with a contemporary visual language. The glowing colour and execution of the lines stems from her designs, which she created using colourful felt-tipped pens. The designs themselves recall the rich colours and flatness of Turkish and Persian kilims (rather coarse flat-woven carpets). In contrast to Etel Adnan’s paintings and tapestry designs, the tapestries themselves are large in format. Moreover, it was not Etel Adnan who titled each tapestry, but rather the individual who wove it. Adnan’s notes on weaving are published under the title *Life is a Weaving*.

In this context, Klee’s engagement with techniques and materials is fascinating. Although he did not weave tapestries, he painted on coarse jute and tattered fabric, or he tries to paint an ancient carpet that bears the remembrances and traces of time gone by.

## 5

*I had this vague conviction that every human being was born an artist, but that his gift could be brought out only if artistic creation were encouraged by the practicing of a craft, from the early childhood.*

Ramses Wissa Wassef

The Egyptian architect Ramses Wissa Wassef and his wife Sophia founded a workshop in Harrania near Giza in 1952. It offered children and youth in the region the chance to learn weaving, a handicraft with a long tradition in Egyptian culture. It spanned the kingdoms of ancient Egypt, the Christian Coptics who flourished from the 3rd through the 5th centuries, to today. Sophia Wissa Wassef introduced the children to the techniques of weaving, but afterwards they were to make weavings based on their own ideas. Working without sketches and plans, they developed compositions with the loom and the materials. Designing on the loom means that the compositions were not determined by other media such as drawing or painting. At the same time, the motifs and depictions stemmed directly from the children's environment.

Due to this unconventional practice, it was not long before Wissa Wassef's workshop became well-known. Tapestries from the workshop were also exhibited in Switzerland: in 1958 and 1959 the Museum of Applied Arts in Basel, the Helmhaus in Zürich, and the Gewerbemuseum in Winterthur exhibited a selection of tapestries under the title of *Egyptian Children Weave Tapestries*.

## 6

The leporello *War Poems* has already shown that poetry, text, and handwriting all find a place in Etel Adnan's visual art. Her writing and interest in poetry intersect boldly with her paintings and drawings in the leporellos. Sometimes she transformed and adapted her own writings, such as her book about Mount Tamalpais, but she also used other writers' texts. Arabic poetry has continuously impressed and interested her, in part because her own biography is rooted in the Arab world. However, she was also fascinated by the distinctive relationship between text and

image, and writing and drawing in the Arab world, because they are not distinctive spheres as they are in the West. Furthermore, many Arab painters also wrote poetry. This space features the poems of the Basra-born Iraqi poet Shakir al-Sayyab (1926–1964) and the American writer Wendell Barry (b. 1934).

Paul Klee wrote poetry as well. He, too, was convinced that writing and drawing are closely related.

## 7

In the film *Ismyrne* by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, the former holds a conversation with Etel Adnan in her Paris apartment. The filmmakers have brought together the history of the Ottoman Empire and the city of Smyrna, which is today Izmir in Turkey, with the family histories of Etel Adnan and Joana Hadjithomas. In Smyrna, Joana Hadjithomas searches for traces of their families' oral histories. The film explores both the women's multi-cultural and multi-lingual heritages as well as the ramifications of the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Greco-Turkish war. It therefore highlights the ways this history influenced and continues to influence lives and work of both artists.

## 8

*Year after year, I worked on these long papers [...], with my imperfect writing, aware that it was the opposite of classical calligraphy that was at stake; it was reading through the art of a poet's work.*

Etel Adnan, 2012

The fusion of writing and painting and of text and image is evident in many of Etel Adnan's works, especially in the leporellos. Like Paul Klee, she harboured a great interest in the relationship between writing and drawing. Klee's assertion that they were "rooted as one" stems from the notion that both originated in Far Eastern calligraphy. For Etel Adnan, the connection to Arabic calligraphy was also important, because it does not differentiate between writing and painting. Her engagement with Arabic poetry began with the symbolic quality of the script: in protest of the Algerian War, she stopped writing in French and wrote in Arabic instead. Although she barely understood the language, she transliterated poems by Arab authors in her leporellos. Arabic letters became symbols, which then transformed into pictorial elements rife with meaning.

Paul Klee used poems to create entire compositions of pictorial writing. However, over the course of his career, he remained preoccupied with individual letters, and employed their symbolic potential and associative power to the fullest. Beginning in the 1910s, he also used invented symbolic, mysterious signs.



# Chronology

## 1925

Etel Adnan is born February 24, 1925, in Beirut, to a Greek mother from Smyrna and a Syrian father from Damascus, a former officer in the Ottoman army. Her parents met and were married in Smyrna (now Izmir) in 1913, then moved to Beirut when the Ottoman Empire fell.

*I was born in a world totally different from the one my parents knew. The Allies had occupied the Arab East and had divided it; the French kept for themselves a region they sub-divided into Syria and Lebanon.*

## 1925–1939

Etel Adnan lives with a family whose language is Turkish – although her mother, of course, speaks Greek to her – but grows up in a world where French is spoken at school. Encouraged by her father, at home she begins to learn the Arabic that she already hears every day in the street, tirelessly recopying lines of calligraphy that will remain mysterious until finally, later, they reemerge.

## 1939

*When World War II erupted I was in secondary school. I saw the city of Beirut become an internationally important city. [...] It did not see real war, but the armies which were tearing the world apart.*

## 1945

Etel Adnan is among the twelve students forming the first class of the École Supérieure des Lettres, newly created under the aegis of the French Embassy by the writer Gabriel Bounoure.

This is the time of her first poems: *I started writing poetry at the age of twenty: it was a long poem that I called "Le Livre de la Mer," "The Book of the Sea," a poem which sees the interrelation between the sun and the sea as a kind of cosmic eroticism.*

### **1949**

Etel Adnan wins a scholarship and leaves Beirut for Paris and the Sorbonne, where she studies philosophy, notably with Étienne Souriau and Gaston Bachelard. She meets many American students involved in Jazz and music in general. Among them are several young American women who convince her to continue her studies in Berkeley.

### **1955**

Etel Adnan leaves for Berkeley to prepare a doctoral thesis in aesthetics and settles in the Bay Area. She arrives when the Bay Area is buzzing with artistic and political activity, a stimulating mixture of poetic renaissance, Beat Generation and student movements.

*It was a total subversion of one's own thinking, a little earthquake in a student's life. Going from the Sorbonne to the University of California in Berkeley, in 1955, was like changing planet.*

### **1957**

Founding of the magazine *Shi'r*, which played a decisive role in the revolution of Arab poetic language. Etel Adnan publishes her first poems, translated into Arabic.

Etel Adnan spend a few months in Mexico "to think", critical journey full of discoveries.

*I went on to Mexico City, where the enormous mosaic murals of the University initiated my eyes into the importance of public art.*

## 1958

Etel Adnan becomes an instructor at the Dominican College of San Rafael (1958–1972) and moves to Sausalito, a small town north of San Francisco. There, her budding pictorial research is directed especially toward a single subject, soon to be familiar, yet inherently elusive Mount Tamalpais.

As a quest for an absolute that she cannot grasp, Mount Tamalpais represents more than an artistic subject for her; indeed, she once described it, in a television interview, as the most important encounter of her life. The mystical experience of her relationship to the mountain plumbs the depths of her being. But, finally, her obsession takes the form of painting.

## 1959

*The morning paper was regularly bringing news [to California] of Algerians being killed in the war, or news of the atrocities that always seem to accompany large scale violence. I became suddenly, and rather violently, conscious that I had naturally and spontaneously taken sides, that I was emotionally a participant in the war, and I resented having to express myself in French.*

At the same time, Etel Adnan meets an art professor at her college who leads her toward painting: *I didn't need to write in French anymore, I was going to paint in Arabic.*

It is a total epiphany. *Furiously, I became a painter. I immersed myself in that new language. Abstract art was the equivalence of poetic expression [...]. I didn't need to belong to a language-oriented culture but to an open form of expression.*

## 1961

*Poetry and painting stayed separate, but one day when I decided to write, or, to be precise, copy poetry in Arabic with the intent to integrate ordinary writing into a style of working with watercolors and*

*inks which was contemporary, I engaged myself along a path that still lies before me. I found Japanese folded papers, like the old books of Japanese woodcuts where each double page was an image tied, or not tied, to the following ones [...]. Year after year I worked on these long papers, like horizontal scrolls, with my imperfect writing, aware that this was the opposite of classical calligraphy that was at stake.* First solo exhibition, O'Hanlon Gallery, Mill Valley, California.

## **1964**

In 1964, *The Diaries of Paul Klee* is published in English by the University of California Press. Etel Adnan quickly buys a copy, which she still keeps as a treasure, and this discovery plunges her into a state of extreme, overwhelming fascination.

## **1965**

For twenty years (1955–1975), the Vietnam War renders the United States' social climate explosive. The powder keg is touched off when, on November 23, 1963, John F. Kennedy is assassinated. It is the end of a golden age, rapidly followed by sweeping countercultural movements.

*I came home, put a piece of paper in my typewriter and, almost as if not paying attention to what I was doing, wrote a poem: "The ballad of the lonely knight in present-day America" and sent it to the S.-B. Gazette [...]. I was an American Poet!*

## **1966**

Etel Adnan takes a semester's sabbatical and visits Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Jordan, and Egypt, where she discovers the Wassef Art Center of Harrania, founded 1951, where weaving is taught to the young villagers of the region. Woven without preliminary designs, the tapestries are freeform, with simple, repetitive patterns and bold colors.

## **1967**

During her travels in North Africa, Etel Adnan meets a master weaver from southern Tunisia. After her return home, she sends him two designs that he executes, creating the artist's first tapestries. At the same time, in San Francisco, Etel Adnan meets Hal Painter, one of the few weavers in the city, who does not yet make tapestries. She introduces him to the form and he soon begins weaving from her designs.

## **1968**

The Dominican College of San Rafael hires Ida Grae, known for her research on new forms of weaving and plant-based dyes. Etel Adnan takes her classes with great interest and shares this new passion with her friend Claire Paget through letters, which were published in 1972 in *Les Cahiers de l'Oronte*, then reprinted in 2016 in *Life is a Weaving*.

## **1972**

Having returned to Beirut in 1972 subsequent to health problems, Etel Adnan is approached by the editor-in-chief of the new French-language daily paper *Al-Safa* to take charge of its culture section, with complete freedom. In 1974 the paper's owner is assassinated in Libya; that is the end of *Al-Safa*.

## **1975**

*A tragic and nasty war erupted in Beirut in 1975. People's lives exploded with the buildings and, like the pieces of the destroyed buildings, they went in all directions.*

Arising out of a complex political context, set off by a clash between Palestinians and Lebanese Phalangists, the war lasts fifteen years and results in an estimated 130,000 to 250,000 casualties.

## **1978**

Written in 1977 in Paris after one of those tragic deaths mourned daily in the Lebanon of that time, *Sitt Marie Rose* is Etel Adnan's most read and translated work (10 languages), a classic of war literature, even adapted for the stage and produced in 2009 at Dusseldorf's Forum Freies Theater. Written in French, the text is immediately translated into Arabic and published in Beirut. The Association de Solidarité Franco-Arabe awards it the Amitié Franco-Arabe Prize. Her novel makes her the target of numerous death threats; she leaves Lebanon for good.

## **1980**

Publication of *L'Apocalypse arabe*, a passionate, violent work, in which Etel Adnan combines signs and text.

## **1984**

At the request of Bob Wilson, a longtime friend whom she first met in Lebanon in 1972, Etel Adnan writes the French section of *The Civil Wars: A Tree Is Best Measured When It Is Down*, a multilingual opera devoted to the War of Secession.

## **1985–2010**

Etel Adnan publishes many books and has more and more exhibitions. She becomes a major feminist figure.

## **2010**

The Al-Madina Theatre of Beirut organizes a major tribute to Etel Adnan, an impressive event that attracts wide media coverage. On this occasion the founding is announced of the Etel Adnan Award for Women Playwrights, whose purpose is to support women writers in the Arab world. That same year, the

artist receives a Lifetime Achievement Award from Radius of Arab-American Writers (RAWI).

## **2012**

Etel Adnan's participation in dOCUMENTA (13) marks the beginning of international recognition of her painting. Etel Adnan moves permanently to Paris.

## **2017**

First edition of the Etel Adnan Poetry Prize, established by the University of Arkansas Press and RAWI.



# Führungen und Begleitprogramm

Sonntags 12:00

## **Öffentliche Führungen**

Dienstags 12:30 – 13:00

## **Kunst am Mittag**

Fremdsprachige Führungen. Siehe [www.zpk.org](http://www.zpk.org)

## **Audioguide**

In Deutsch, Französisch, Italienisch und Englisch erhältlich

Mittwoch **20. Juni 2018** 14:00 – 15:30

## **Einführung für Lehrpersonen**

Einführung in die Ausstellungen «Etel Adnan» und «Kosmos Klee».

Mit Dominik Imhof, Leiter Kunstvermittlung ZPK

Sonntags 15:00

**24. Juni / 26. August / 09. September**

**07. Oktober 2018**

## **Literarische Führung «Bilder schreiben»**

Texte von Etel Adnan und weiteren Autorinnen und Autoren gelesen  
von Michaela Wendt

Donnerstag **28. Juni 2018** 18:00

## **Freunde ZPK**

Führung mit dem Kuratorinnenteam und Experten des Hauses.

Ausschliesslich für Freunde ZPK

Samstag **22. September 2018** 13:00

## **Sinn-Reich**

Eine alle Sinne ansprechende inklusive Führung für Gäste mit und ohne  
Behinderung. Mit Gebärdendolmetscherin und induktiver Höranlage

Donnerstag **27. September 2018**

Freitag **28. September 2018**

### **Symposium Etel Adnan**

In Zusammenarbeit mit Nadia Radwan, Universität Bern, Institut für Kunstgeschichte

## **Kunstvermittlung für Familien**

15.06. – 14.10.18

### **Interaktive Ausstellung «Berge schreiben»**

Kreativer Brückenschlag von den Ateliers des Kindermuseum Creaviva in die Ausstellungen des ZPK

Täglich ausser montags 12:00 / 14:00 / 16:00

### **Offenes Atelier im Kindermuseum Creaviva**

Workshop zu einem monatlich wechselnden Thema in Verbindung zu den Ausstellungen im ZPK.

01.07. – 30.09.18

Sonntags 10:30 – 11:45

### **Familienmorgen**

In der Ausstellung und im Atelier des Kindermuseum Creaviva für die ganze Familie

Samstags 09:30 – 12:00

### **Junge Kunst im Zentrum**

Das Kinderforum im Kindermuseum Creaviva  
Kurs, ab 7 Jahren

Änderungen vorbehalten

# With the support of:



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Bern



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## Opening hours

Tuesday – Sunday 10:00 – 17:00

You find us on:



Zentrum Paul Klee  
Bern

Founded by  
Maurice E. and Martha Müller  
and the heirs of Paul Klee