

Orpheus I, 1997

Paul Keene (b. 1920)

collage on paper

H. 24 x W. 29.75 inches

Collection of the Bucks County Intermediate Unit #22



Biography

Paul Keene was born in Philadelphia. He went to his first art class when he was nine years old. He knew that he wanted to be an artist. He joined the army after high school. When he was finished the army, he went to art school in Philadelphia. Mr. Keene traveled to different countries, and he met many other artists. Seeing art in other countries gave him new ideas for his art. His paintings are in many museums. Mr. Keene also made sculptures. One important sculpture that he made is the Martin Luther King Freedom Memorial at the 59th Street Baptist Church in Philadelphia.

What is depicted in this work of art?

In *Orpheus I*, Paul Keene gives the viewers hints about his art. He does not want to tell the viewer exactly what he is thinking. He wants the viewer to guess the meaning of the work. When looking at the patterns, colors and faces in *Orpheus I*, some people may see his interest in Ancient African culture. When looking at the shapes, patterns and groups of people in the work, some may feel this work tells a story of the city and the people who live there. When looking at the mask-like portraits, the overlapping and the sense of clutter in the work, others may see it as a work that shows the hardships of urban America. When looking at the bright colors, the numbers, the children's faces and baseball caps, some may see this work as a calm and happy picture of city life.

According to curator Curlee Raven Holton, "He captures the experiences, reality and spirit of a community in a way that very few artists have been able to do." What do you see?

How did the artist create textures and flat color areas in this work of art?

Paul Keene likes to "speak" with line, shape and color. He is interested in showing different areas of texture and color to create interest in his works of art. In *Orpheus I*, the flat color areas are cut paper shapes. The shadowed, detailed areas he uses for the faces and people are created with printed images and collage materials.

The contrast between color and texture you see in *Orpheus I* is typical of many of Paul Keene's works. He likes to arrange his work in a grid. That means he is interested in dividing parts of his works into geometric shapes like squares and rectangles. He enjoys working with different colors, textures and ideas into each of the geometric, or grid, areas. *Orpheus I* is one version of the grid. Brightly colored geometric shapes are scattered throughout the artwork.



There are many other artists who are interested in using a grid in their artwork. The ancient Egyptians divided the image they were painting into a number of smaller images using a grid. Leonardo da Vinci also used the grid method in his works and in teaching. Contemporary artist Chuck Close uses a grid technique to create large-scale portraits.

Grids can be used in other ways, too. Architects use grids to help design buildings. Some artists use a grid to keep proper proportion and scale in their works of art. Josef Albers used grid compositions to study color in his twentieth century paintings. His wife Anni perfected the use of the grid in her modern textile designs. Andy Warhol used a grid system to add power to several of his photographic images. Sculptor Louise Nevelson used a grid design as a format for many of her sculptural works in bronze, wood and paper. Many Japanese prints rely on a grid to tell a story. Piet Mondrian mastered the grid with its striking black outlines and primary colored shapes.

Looking at the works of other artists, you will learn that there are many ways to incorporate the grid idea in a work to create a variety of artistic effects.

Why are there numbers hidden throughout this piece?

Keene uses numbers and letters in a lot of his work. In *Street Quartet*, view at www.michenermuseum.org, you may notice numbers and letters in the backgrounds of the four figures at the bottom of the canvas. In *Untitled Abstraction*, view at www.michenermuseum.org, there are calligraphic brushstrokes that appear to be numbers or letters floating across the canvas. In his *Orpheus Series*, view at www.michenermuseum.org, there are numbers and number forms hidden throughout the image. There don't appear to be any numbers in *Variations on a Flute Player*, view at www.michenermuseum.org, yet there are many things to count.

Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque incorporated numbers and letters into their early works of abstract art. During this time, they were making papier-collés, or paper collages. Numbers and letters in the form of newspaper type would appear and reappear in these works as well as in their abstract oil paintings.

Stuart Davis incorporated letters and numbers in works such as *Percolator* (1927) and *Owh! in San Pao* (1951). He pasted paper on the surface of his canvases and painted imitations of wallpapers, labels, and signs in his work. In these collages of 1921 he first introduced words and letters, elements that were to become an important part of his images throughout his life.

Artists like Jasper Johns used numbers and letters in his works of art because they were familiar symbols to many people. In using these symbols, he felt free to explore the art materials with which he was working. He also wanted viewers to look at the symbols in an entirely new way.



You can find numbers in the works of Umberto Boccioni, Charles Demuth, and Juan Gris. Look at some of their works at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, www.moma.org. Do the numbers they are using have any meaning?

Paul Keene never mentioned why he used numbers in his images, but they do create interesting patterns. They also give us even more to think about when we study his art.

Does this work of art have anything to do with the artists' life?

Paul Keene's images are directly connected to his life experiences and his ancestry.

Paul Keene was born in 1920 in Philadelphia. He spent his early years at the Philadelphia Museum School of Art (now University of the Arts) and later he learned from the great European masters at the Académie Julien in Paris. While in Paris, he was inspired by the jazz music scene as well as the friendships he made with other Americans he met who were living overseas.

Keene was inspired by fellow artist Romare Bearden, whom he met in about 1950 while studying in Europe. Bearden's collages, watercolors, oil paintings, and prints are filled with memories from time he spent in North Carolina, Pittsburgh and Harlem. Bearden was also inspired by history, music and books.

Keene studied in Haiti in 1953. There, he saw art that included bright colors, a variety of bold patterns, and simple subject matter based on Haitian life.

Keene drew on the oral storytelling tradition of his African forefathers. He created several bodies of work that feature subject matter from legend and mythology. He also created work that represents the people he saw on the streets of Philadelphia.

Keene was part of an important group of Philadelphia painters who helped to tell the stories of African Americans. He used images that combine ancient cultural traditions with a modern point of a view. Along with his fellow artists, Keene explored personal stories as well as the stories of the city and the people who lived there.

Keene's interest in sharing his memories from all his life experiences can be seen in his work.

The title of this work is *Orpheus I*. What is the meaning of the title? Who is Orpheus?

Drawing on the storytelling tradition of his forefathers, Keene created several bodies of work that feature subject matter from legend and mythology. This work of art, *Orpheus I*, is one of them. Orpheus is an important figure in Greek mythology. He was the son of Calliope and Apollo. His music and poetry was so astounding that it was said he could charm wild beasts and entice even rocks and trees into movement. It was Orpheus' music that prevented Jason and the Argonauts from being lured to destruction by the music of the Sirens. Orpheus is



also known as one of the few Greek heroes who traveled to the Underworld and returned to earth. His lyre and his song did not lose their power in Hades. He was married to Eurydice and eventually killed by the Maenads.

Keene may also have chosen the title based on the etymology, or meaning, of the word *orpheus*. The word *orpheus* has several meanings. The Greek work *orphanos* means fatherless orphan. The Greek *orphe* means darkness. The archaic word *orphao* means to be deprived of, or to long for.

When you look at *Orpheus I*, do you sense darkness? Orphans? Longing? Deprivation? Could Keene's title be connected to these things as well?

Learn More

Paul Keene created art that was based on images from his African American ancestors. Who are some of your ancestors? Where are they from? Study artwork from their culture or geographic location, and create an original work of art based on what you learn.

Create a work of art that uses a grid in the activity "Create a Grid Collage." Below.

Create a work of art that uses letters and numbers as the basis of your image in the below activity "Letters and Numbers in Art."

Learn by doing! There are 8 activities related to Paul Keene's art and life to inspire you below in the activity sheet entitled "Paul Keene."

Related Images

View work by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque at the website of the Philadelphia Museum of Art at www.philamuseum.org.

See works by Juan Gris works in the collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art at www.philamuseum.org.

See the works of Stuart Davis online at the websites of the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, both in New York City, at www.whitney.org

View the website of Chuck Close, American Realist, at www.chuckclose.coe.uh.edu.

Learn more about the woodblocks of Ando Hiroshige at www.hiroshige.org.uk.

Learn more about the history of Haitian art at www.discoverhaiti.com.



Related Links

To further your knowledge of mythology, visit Encyclopedia Mythica, the Internet encyclopedic reference for mythology, folklore and religion around the world, www.pantheon.org.

If you are a word buff, visit the complete online etymology dictionary at www.etymonline.com.

Visit the Romare Bearden Foundation in New York City online, which features many of his works at www.beardenfoundation.org.

Paul Keene is discussed at length at the website of the James A. Michener Art Museum / Bucks County Artists' Database at www.michenermuseum.org.

Read an article about Stuart Davis in the *New York Times* at www.query.nytimes.com.

The work of Umberto Boccioni is discussed in detail at the Encyclopedia Britannica online at www.britannica.com.

Grids were used by Egyptians. To learn more, visit the website of Egyptian travel and history at www.egyptvoyager.com.

Visit the website of the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, and read an article about Leonardo da Vinci's use of the grid in his art at www.loc.gov.

Look at the website of the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation in Bethany, Connecticut at www.albersfoundation.org.

Investigate the website of the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania at www.warhol.org.

View the website of the Louise Nevelson Foundation in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania at www.louisenevelsonfoundation.org.

