

## A CRYSTALLINE HAMMAMET

By the year 2000 Hammamet had become one of the most popular seaside resorts on the entire Mediterranean seaboard. Its suburb of Hammamet-Yasmina boasts dozens of luxury hotels and resorts that, before the disruptions of the Arab Spring, were particularly favored by German and Scandinavian tourists.<sup>1</sup> In 1914, however, it was a sleepy fishing village and an agricultural entrepôt huddled in and around the four walls of a medieval battlement with a perimeter just eight hundred meters long—Hammamet’s monumental *bordj*, or fort. Completed in 1474 to counter the Spanish threat, it abuts the pale blue waters of the Gulf of Hammamet.

The town that Klee, Macke, and Moilliet visited was largely undiscovered by tourists. Scholars like Henri Saladin had visited in the early 1880s; Maupassant had passed through briefly; and in the late 1890s a few travel writers gave an account of the township of Hammamet.<sup>2</sup> The Frenchwoman from the Auvergne known pseudonymously as Yasmina, who had lived nearby at Nabeul for twenty years, had arrived there on horseback. On entering Hammamet, this “gracious” little town, “so pretty from afar in its greenery, bathed by blue waves, sparkling with light,” she was struck by the medina’s physical dilapidation and the “misery” of its populace. (According to her account, far too many inhabitants of Hammamet suffered blindness, caused either by the constant blowing of fine sand or by smallpox.)<sup>3</sup> The more appreciative response of the painter and travel writer Gaston Vuillier presaged the rapture of Klee more than a decade later: “The day I spent among [Hammamet’s] crumbling walls, on the dunes by the sea, and

FIGURE 89  
Aerial View of the Medina of Hammamet, ca. 1980, from Tunisia: Hammamet, Nabeul, Tunisian government tourist brochure, DORA Collection, Sydney.

even among the tombs that surround it in a veil of mourning, will count among the best I have spent in Tunisia.”<sup>4</sup>

In a hinterland dotted with ruined Punic and Roman settlements (the closest was the ancient town of Pupput), Hammamet sits at the southern end of the geographically and culturally distinct Cap Bon (Ra’s al-Dar) peninsula, which was settled in the sixteenth century by Muslim and Jewish refugees from Andalusia. Cap Bon had a long-standing Mediterranean trade in contraband that the French had had little success in stemming.<sup>5</sup> During the French annexation of Tunisia in 1881, Hammamet had joined the more southerly city of Sfax in a rare instance of military resistance that cost the French forces dearly. Today the Hammametois are still proud of their defiance of the invader, as their local museum attests, but it is seldom mentioned in French accounts of the city.<sup>6</sup>

One exception, the memoirs of the former mayor, François Quintard, offer a valuable guide to the life of Hammamet early in the past century and a remarkably vivid and witty account of the tiny “city of pigeons.”<sup>7</sup> Quintard’s father, Albert, and uncle had arrived in 1902. The moneyed Quintard family, among the earliest French colonists, had arrived from the Franche-Comté and had bought up cheap land, installing irrigation to grow citrus fruits. In Quintard’s memory, “Hammamet was a small Arab town, all white and blue, enclosed by a thick crenelated rampart made of brown and golden stones. A circular path ran around this rampart from one tower to the other. The sole monument was the mosque with green and red doors. One entered the medina by the big gate with fortified ramps, protected by machicolations. . . . What struck one the most was the tidiness, everything being daubed with limewash whose whiteness

covered the walls. The streets were perfectly clean, everyone sweeping in front of his own place.”<sup>8</sup>

Few Europeans lived in Hammamet and its hinterland—only two hundred in a population of six thousand:<sup>9</sup> “A school master, a postman, a policeman, a few officials, the owner of one or two cafés, and a handful of farmers always sheltered by colonial helmets. You also found a few Italians (contraband fishermen for the most part), a sizable colony of very Catholic Maltese, a curé without a church, . . . [and] two or three Jews.” The latter were tradesmen who commuted from the large Jewish community at Nabeul, the town seventeen kilometers to the north.<sup>10</sup>

The reason Klee, Moilliet, and Macke descended from the “very primitive” train (as Klee described it) at the tiny station of Hammamet is best explained by Louis Moilliet’s presence. Kandinsky and Münter had stayed fleetingly in the town (Kandinsky left a single drawing, showing the coastline at sunset) and may have mentioned the town.<sup>11</sup> But given how little Baedeker or Joanne says about the place, my guess is that Moilliet had visited Hammamet during his six-month Tunisian sojourn of 1909–10. Klee comments in his diary: “But Louis says that there is, there *exists* so much more to see” than the sight that captivated Klee and his friends on the quarter-hour’s walk into town: “Arrived at Hammamet. But it was still a little way to the town. What a day! Birds sang in every hedge. We looked into a garden where a dromedary was working at the cistern. Downright biblical. The setup certainly hasn’t changed. One could watch for hours how the camel, led by a girl, sullenly paces up and down, thereby accomplishing the operation of lowering, drawing, hoisting, and emptying the leather bucket.”<sup>12</sup>

Klee is describing the operations of a *dalou*, a system, powered by an animal, for raising water from a well. The technology, thought to be imported from Andalusia, uses a large flexible leather bucket (the *dalou*) to feed a cistern and a network of shallow channels, or *saquia*.<sup>13</sup> The Quintards themselves had a more elaborate well, using ceramic jars attached to a wooden wheel called a *noria*, on the grounds of their large house near Hammamet station. Purchased from a Maltese family, their mansion (in the Andalusian style popular on Cap Bon) was named Dar Zemzema, after the miraculous well in Mecca.<sup>14</sup> Quintard detailed this “marvel” of a well, with its camel and its mechanism of wooden gears, “sheltered by a mulberry tree like all the wells in the region.” He explained that the shade tree protected both the dromedary and the water at the bottom of the well’s thirty-two-meter depth, “crystal-clear water that was absolutely inexhaustible and sprang from a rock fissure three inches from the bottom.”<sup>15</sup>

An echo of the tethered dromedary survives in the sole detailed drawing of an animal that Klee made in Tunisia. He entitled it *Study of an Aged Dromedary*, writing near the left-hand margin “sketched in Hammamet” along with his “sign” for a dromedary, drawn in a few lines with a great triangular hump. Klee provides a touching characterization of the shaggy head of the long-suffering yet patient beast. The odd set of straight lines running between the dromedary’s legs and across its torso are less a concession to Cubist drawing than a reference to the hobbles and harness worn by the camels that



FIGURE 90  
Anon., *Kairouan: A Well*, postcard,  
ca. 1904, DORA Collection, Sydney.

FIGURE 91  
Paul Klee, *Study of an Aged  
Dromedary*, 1914.208, pen and  
watercolor on paper on cardboard,  
21.8/21.2 × 27.5/28.2 cm, private  
collection, Switzerland, on loan at  
the Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern.

worked the *dalou* wells of Cap Bon, with their system of ropes (*jir*), one heavy to haul the bucket, and one light to tip it out.

Klee recorded the following impressions of his day in Hammamet: “The city is magnificent [*fabelhaft*], right by the sea, full of bends and sharp corners [*winklig und rechtwinklig und wieder winklig*]. Now and then I get a look at the ramparts! In the streets more women are to be seen than in Tunis. Little girls without veils, as at home. Then too, one is allowed to enter the cemeteries here. There is one splendidly situated by the

FIGURE 92  
Abdelhamid Kahia, *Hammamet:  
Great Mosque in the Medina*,  
postcard, ca. 1960, DORA  
Collection, Sydney.

sea. A few animals graze in it. This is fine. I try to paint. The reeds and bushes provide a beautiful rhythm of patches [*ein schöner Fleckrhythmus*].<sup>16</sup> Although no particular artwork emerged at once from Klee's interest in the remarkable *cimetière marin* (as the French called it),<sup>17</sup> the artist saw the opportunity for pictorial invention provided by the scrubby Mediterranean vegetation, as at St. Germain. Quintard corroborates Klee's view of the "very sandy Muslim cemetery," where one saw "the dressed and sculpted stones that the Arabs put at the head and the feet of tombs. . . . Most of these tombs barely emerged from the white sand and were invaded by agaves, salsolacées [goosefoots], and ficoids when not by a fig bush feasting on the cadaver itself."<sup>18</sup>

The major motif Klee found at Hammamet, however, was the minaret of the Great Mosque. In many postcard views of the medina, shot from the southwest parapet of the *bordj*, the mosque emerges to the northeast across the low-lying rooftops, with the level *cimetière marin* and the waters of the Gulf of Hammamet beyond. Apart from the clutter of satellite dishes and the much more extensive functioning cemetery, this view is little changed today.

The minaret of the Great Mosque of Hammamet is the key to Klee's famous watercolor, *Hammamet with the Mosque*.<sup>19</sup> The Hafsid Sultan Abu Zakaria completed this mosque, a place of great sanctity, in A.D. 1236. Its minaret was completed only in A.D. 1463 by the Hafsid Sultan Abu Amr Othman, "who ordered the construction of the 'bordj,' the restoration of the ramparts, and the erection of the minaret that the Great Mosque lacked."<sup>20</sup> The square minaret is decorated by a wide band of burnt-orange faience tiles. Set in the band of tiles (which Klee rendered in blue) on each face is a small double window; behind the crenellated parapet is the balcony from which the muezzin issues the call to prayer, a ceremonial flagpole set at the regulation forty-five degrees, and the *jammour*, or mast, with three bronze balls symbolizing Faith, Peace, and Victory.

The evidence is that Klee painted this view from the ground, inland from the medina,

FIGURE 93  
Paul Klee, *Hammamet with the Mosque*, 1914.199, watercolor and pencil on paper on cardboard,  
20.6 × 19.4 cm, 1984.315.4, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Berggruen Klee Collection,  
1984.315.4. Image © MMA, Image source: Art Resource, NY.

looking toward the sea, so that he was able to include both the minaret and the tower of the Poste Optique on the right.<sup>21</sup> This was a modern French military building formerly on the southwest wall of the *bordj* but now demolished. In 1881, when the French took Hammamet after a four-day battle, they redirected the income from the *habous* (community charity) that had been used to fund the upkeep of the medina walls, and as a result those walls fell rapidly into disrepair.

Following a damning report issued by the French military commander of the fort, funding was again provided, and the battlements (except the north wall facing the seaside cemetery) were all restored in 1900.<sup>22</sup> The Poste Optique was built after the

FIGURE 94  
Lieutenant Klipffel, Third  
Tirailleurs, *Poste Optique*,  
Hammamet, FR ANOM 8Fi279,  
1908–10, Archives Nationales  
d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence.

FIGURE 95  
*States of the Poste Optique*, west  
tower of the Hammamet Bordj,  
postcards (left to right) from ca.  
1895, ca. 1910, and ca. 1950; Klee  
painted the middle state; DORA  
Collection, Sydney.

Ministry of War approved funding in 1902,<sup>23</sup> as part of a telegraphic network to link the entire Tunisian coast using Morse code flashed by powerful lanterns.<sup>24</sup> A sequence of three postcard photos shot from the same spot at the end of the covered market street tracks the stages of the tower's construction. The tallish white building with rectangular windows and a lighthouse, visible in postcards until about 1960, had been demolished by the time Güse took his photographs in 1982. Advances in radio communications would have made the optical telegraph obsolete by World War II (when Tunisia was embroiled in the campaigns of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's Afrikakorps against the Allied armies, a campaign best known for the Siege of Tobruk in neighboring Libya).

Klee's *Hammamet with the Mosque* reserves the upper third of the composition for the blue-white sky and the silhouettes of the two towers. Instead of representing the

crenellated wall that would have been visible from every perspective, Klee has softened the horizon line with dotted green vegetation. The lower third of the work describes a monumental X formed by planes of brick red and pale pink washes. Yellow forms a minor chord in star-shaped plants and in the upper skyline of the picture. There Klee added an antinaturalist touch, cutting a sharp-edged strip of reddish paint from the bottom of the original sheet, as scholars have shown, reversing it and gluing it onto the backing paper.<sup>25</sup>

On the southern side of the *bordj* was the "pretty bathing beach" praised by Baedeker. Throughout the twentieth century, images of Hammamet stressed the presence of colorful fishing boats drawn up on the white sand of this beach; indeed, the local industry of fishing continues today (but at a lesser pace due to overfishing). For the most part these vessels were the wooden rowing boats and small sailboats used by Sicilian net fisherman. Early in the century, however, there had also been bigger *tartanes* (gaff-rigged, oceangoing wooden boats common in the western Mediterranean). Quintard testifies to the unorthodox use of these vessels: "There were large *tartanes* hauled out onto the shore for winter, which in summer did the shuttle to Sicily . . . that permitted a fruitful trafficking in grappa, gunpowder, fabrics, and so forth. The *tartanes* arrived from Sicily under sail and had rendezvous with the village boats at the edge of territorial waters. People transhipped the contraband and arrived back at the port with the air of young choristers on vacation."<sup>26</sup>

Moilliet drew a *tartane* propped up on a beach for repairs, almost certainly at Hammamet; his drawing is a stable and exact description of the boat, seen in foreshortening.<sup>27</sup> In the only work by Macke that can be identified with the town, *Landscape near Hammamet*, the artist focused on just such boats. Three tall *tartane* masts and one sloping boom cut the horizon. The knotty central image is framed on the left by what I assume is the massive inclined wall of the *bordj*'s central bastion overlooking the beach, and on the right by the painted prow of a large boat. Macke's almost Cubist agglomeration of goods is partly clarified by his preparatory drawing: big commercial amphorae, bundles of cane (a local product used as a lightweight support for plaster walls), a loaded camel, a donkey lying down, and two or three people. All these things bespeak the workings of a small but active port like Hammamet's. Moilliet asserted in 1958, and some scholars agree, that Macke had painted a harbor near Tunis with the Bou Kornine in the background.<sup>28</sup> But the lack of mountains in Macke's pen study shows they were an afterthought—that Macke has used an artificial décor of mountains (which are visible from a greater distance at Hammamet) to furnish his picture.<sup>29</sup> Macke's image gains its vitality from the artist's use of watercolor—heavier than that used by Klee—to give the work structural and chromatic intensity. Looking out onto the beach from the shelter of the sandstone bastion, the artist produced an image of abundance and of the port as a focus for human activity.

Klee's image of the harbor could not be more different. One of the seminal pictures from the Tunisreise, *View toward the Harbor of Hammamet* is a miracle of pictorial

FIGURE 96

August Macke, *Landscape near Hammamet*, 1914, watercolor on paper, 21 × 26.5 cm, LWL-Museum für Kunst und Kultur (Westfälisches Landesmuseum), Münster.

refinement and understatement. This work is like a visual haiku, an image so denuded that it is structured by mere evanescent planes of color, the rarest pink somehow melding with the rarest pale blue at the horizon. In its improbable central tower shape, square and conical forms abut a rooftop terrace, with the hint of a blossoming bush and the blue fronds of two hanging aloes. A glimpse of the beach, two fragments of boat at the water's pink edge, a pearlescent horizon, and that is all. The work is a deft synthesis of certain fragmentary motifs seen at Hammamet.

In many ways *View toward the Harbor of Hammamet* is a Cubist composition, if one remembers how Cubists would take the “normal” outlines used to describe objects (such as the violin in Braque's *Pitcher and Violin*), break their continuity, and reattach the outlines nearby in the picture. This compositional strategy allows recognition of the object at a symbolic level but is inadequate as a mimetic description of it. Klee has done something similar in *View toward the Harbor of Hammamet*, shifting and recombining profiles of the *bordj*. His own “decoupage” of his completed watercolors (to be detailed in the discussion of the Kairouan pictures, in Chapter 17) works as a variant of Cubist composition. One can see parallels here in the role of straight edges (like those he

FIGURE 97

Paul Klee, *View toward the Harbor of Hammamet*, 1914-35, watercolor on paper, 21.5/21.7 × 27.0/26.6 cm, private collection, Bern.

scissored into his *zerschnittene Bilder*) to define forms like the four-sided and five-sided planes in the lower part of the picture. The Hammamet “tower” itself is like a montage of cut-out pieces, but they are pieces that are hand painted and topologically continuous: such were Klee's powers of “making visible.”<sup>30</sup>

Haxthausen says of this “exquisitely nuanced, glowingly lyrical work” by Klee that it makes it easier “to grasp the significance of Tunisia in his evolution. Here he could spontaneously apprehend things through color alone. Linear form was now easily excluded; it was not an essential ingredient of the experience. . . . As he had learned in his drawings of 1912–1914, the richest poetic effects were achieved by suggestion rather than by precise elaboration.”<sup>31</sup>

Klee's third work from the village, his watercolor *Hammamet*, corresponds to his diary entry on painting from the terrace by the beach, looking back to the *Hôtel de la Plage*: “The little terrace on the way up to the ‘hotel’ was fine. I did a watercolor here transposing a great deal but remaining completely faithful to nature.”<sup>32</sup> This important last phrase is more than a contradiction; it is the expression of a paradox that is nonetheless true: that Klee could “transpose a great deal” and yet remain “faithful to nature.”

The presence of a vintage postcard of the Hôtel de la Plage, the sole hotel listed for the town in the Baedeker of 1911, helps in an assessment of Klee's claimed "faithfulness" to nature. The Hôtel de la Plage, "ancêtre du tourisme hammametois," was opened for business in 1899.<sup>33</sup> Situated about two hundred meters along the beachfront from the southwest corner of the medina, it stood behind a footpath and low masonry wall with white parapets. Early postcards show greenery on the dunes leading up to the front wall. The hotel façade was refashioned about 1920; in 1942 the then-named Hôtel de France became the Hammamet Town Hall, which was replaced in 1999 by the larger public building that stands on the same site today.<sup>34</sup>

François Quintard, who knew the place, gives an amusing picture of the events held in this modest establishment, such as impromptu welcomes for French naval officers whose ships would anchor briefly off Hammamet or the meetings of the local colonial association "at the Hôtel de France and de la Plage, a hotel made from the quarried flint of Hammamet and kept in Stone Age style by a couple, the woman being baptized Pélagie by the colonists because she ran the Hôtel de la Plage."<sup>35</sup> Klee, Macke, and Moilliet also poked fun at this woman (a Mme. Caron, according to a business guide, presumably seen standing in her white apron in front of the hotel).<sup>36</sup> Klee wrote: "Spent the night in a place run by a nasty old Frenchwoman. Louis and Macke, wearing only their nightshirts, had a pillow fight. She gave us a constipating beef liver and tea. The cooking at Jäggi's was better!"<sup>37</sup>

Despite the constipating meal it appears Pélagie's Hôtel de la Plage provided the one building visible in Klee's watercolor, which I presume is the work made looking inland, with the beach behind him, on the "little terrace on the way up to the 'hotel.'" Painted in the manner he had perfected two days before in works such as *St. Germain near Tunis (Inland)*, it is a cuboid composition arranging the primal elements of land, vegetation, buildings, and sky. Plates of sandy color populate the foreground, patches of green and blue (or red) stand for vegetation, and the hotel, made artificially distant (here he is "transposing a great deal"), is a yellow building with a terra-cotta roof just below a patch of blue sky.

Klee's cubic module diminishes in size to give a clever approximation of perspective running up to the unusually flat horizon. A tall aloe plant dominates the composition. (Two such bushes are visible in the hotel photograph.) Rendered in green, blue, and purple, the aloe's bladelike leaves are indicated both by color washes and simple outlining with a fine brush. A single flimsy palm tree punctures the horizon near clouds of pink watercolor.

The reader of Klee's *Diaries* may be disappointed by how little time he spends in aesthetic reflection, and how very much he devotes to recounting the trio's picaresque adventures. His pages on the train journey from Hammamet to Kairouan are a case in point. In his guise as a writer (if not as a painter), Klee was drawn to human activity and was much affected by his younger companions' spirit of hilarity. He was also clearly

FIGURE 98  
Vues Gillant, *Hammamet (Tunisia)*  
*Hôtel de la Plage—View of the Sea*,  
postcard, ca. 1910, DORA Collection,  
Sydney.

FIGURE 99  
Paul Klee, *Hammamet*, 1914-33,  
watercolor and pencil on paper  
on cardboard, 22 x 24 cm, private  
collection.

FIGURE 100  
August Macke, *Klee, Who Has Taken  
Off His Sock*, photo album of August  
Macke, 1914, p. 6, LWL-Museum  
für Kunst und Kultur (Westfälisches  
Landesmuseum), Macke-Archiv,  
Münster.

fascinated by ethnic and cultural difference, more alert to its political implications than most travel writers.

Wanting to reduce their reliance on the train, the three young men, on the morning of Wednesday April 15, decided to walk from Hammamet as far as the train station at Bir Bou Regba, a hamlet of a hundred inhabitants with a sizable base for the Fourth Tirailleurs of the French army, about ten kilometers inland. Sited “at the foot of bare hills,” Bir Bou Regba was also very close to the ruins of ancient Siagu, with its “early-Christian basilica, Byzantine fort, etc.”<sup>38</sup> Klee was aware of his group’s alien status, “livening up the scenery of the country road with our European appearance—as incongruously as possible. The scene . . . was so uniquely timeless that it was a shame to intrude on it with our anachronistic early twentieth-century costumes.”<sup>39</sup> The group’s struggle with the “deep, dry sand, the kind that makes progress difficult,” is evoked by Macke’s well-known photograph of the bearded Klee, seated on what could be a large piece of worked stone and dressed in jacket, trousers, necktie, sun hat, and fine leather boots, brushing sand from his bare foot.<sup>40</sup>

Klee follows with his narrative of being harassed by a group of “blind” beggars, seemingly the musicians he had listened to in Hammamet the evening before. He generously recounts the encounter as a farce, “we as comedians and a group of blind singers as . . . tragicomedians.” Klee himself was physically accosted by the youths: he gave them what was in his pocket but was “appraised higher,” and so he broke out at a run, only to be

FIGURE 101  
Lieutenant Klipffel, Third  
Tirailleurs, *Soldiers and Civilians at  
the Train Station of Bir Bou Regba,  
Tunisia*, FR ANOM 8Fi279, 1908–10,  
Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer,  
Aix-en-Provence.

pursued along the train tracks. Gaining the safety of Bir Bou Regba station, the trio arrived well before a delayed train. A French ticket clerk who reproached them “for being ten minutes late according to the schedule,” gave their adventure a new comic twist. Klee remarks drily, “This was French pedantry *in folio*.”<sup>41</sup>

It is not known why Klee, Macke, and Moilliet did not travel the ninety kilometers direct to Sousse, the ancient city on the coast that had so impressed Münter and Kandinsky. Instead they changed just inland at Kalâa Sghira, where the track bifurcated, and after a stop for lunch, they made straight for Kairouan, arriving at two in the afternoon. Although no artworks from Kalâa Sghira survive, Klee gave two pages of his diary to describing the trio’s antics at the expense of an elderly café owner they dubbed Don Quixote. (The artists frustrated his efforts to chase some chickens from the floor of his café by surreptitiously feeding them bits of bread.) I quote just the first lines: “Magnificent trip through more and more desertlike country. In Kalaa-srira [*sic*] we changed trains and had lunch at an ‘Inn by the Station’ run by a curiously excited innkeeper. A Negro did the cooking and serving; he wasn’t clean, but he knew his business.”<sup>42</sup> If one combines this remark with Klee’s observations on a pungent-smelling olive oil merchant the trio sat opposite on the return trip from Kairouan, one can see that not even Klee was immune to the sensory prejudices of his Swiss upbringing when on tour overseas.<sup>43</sup>