

LYONEL FEININGER RETROSPECTIVE

OCTOBER 27, 2023 – FEBRUARY 18, 2024

WALL PANELS OF THE EXHIBITION

Lyonel Feininger (1871–1956)

As a painter, graphic artist, and renowned Bauhaus master, Feininger is today considered a particularly typical protagonist of the art movements in Germany before and during World War I. Like most modern artists, he too was defamed by the National Socialists as “degenerate” and a large number of his works were removed from museums. Most widely known to this day are his crystalline architectural paintings and seascapes, which are held in many international collections. There are however quite a few more aspects to Feininger’s art, such as his recently rediscovered photographs and his later paintings in New York.

With some 160 paintings, drawings, woodcuts, etchings, lithographs, toys, photographs, and slides, the exhibition aims to provide the first comprehensive overview of Feininger’s entire work and highlight how the various motifs and artistic techniques Feininger used over a period of some sixty years consistently refer to one another while remaining surprising to this day.

Caricatures

Already in his early caricatures Feininger developed a distinctive style that he would later consolidate and refine in his painting. His first career as a caricaturist began around 1889 in Berlin, at that time the largest newspaper city in the world, with publishers such as Rudolf Mosse, Otto Eysler and Leopold Ullstein. Feininger worked very successfully for numerous and very different papers such as *Das Schnaufferl*, *Blätter für Sporthumor*, *Ulk*, *Das Narrenschiff*, *Lustige Blätter*, *Le Témoin* and others. He published a total of about 2000 caricatures.

Feininger produced a lot of humorous drawings, but also political ones: among them the U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, the English politician Joseph Chamberlain with a monocle, the voluminous King Edward VII with a pipe, and repeatedly the Imperial Chancellor Otto von Bismarck. He gradually developed a distinctive style, “modern and at the same time original“, as he personally put it. Exaggeratedly long figures with extended strides became his trademark. Feininger continually sought greater artistic freedom than was generally granted by magazine editors. In view of the exceptional quality of his caricatures, one critic called him the “first of the Berlin draughtsmen“.

Early Figuration

Feininger’s figurative period in painting, the so-called carnival or “masquerade” pictures that he began painting during his stay in Paris, lasted from about 1907 to 1911. In this group of works, the proportions contradict the positioning of the figures. Rather than imitating reality, these are scenes seemingly lifted from dramatic dreams. Many of Feininger’s depictions appear as if from a different era – some figures wear top hats, still common among the bankers on Wall Street in New York he observed as a teenager on a job as a messenger.

The depicted figures are also not specific individuals, but rather “types” such as workers, clergymen, women in extravagant attire, children, and hurried men in old-fashioned waisted jackets with their collars turned up. These styles of fashion did not correspond to the time when he painted the scenes, but to a romantically perceived yet bygone nineteenth-century world, as portrayed in the novels by Honoré de Balzac, Stendhal, or Victor Hugo, which Feininger held in high esteem. Silhouettes and target figures from shooting galleries were an important inspiration

for the two-dimensional compositions of the figure paintings. Feininger was also influenced by Japanese woodblock prints and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's poster art, which he became familiar with in Paris.

Cubism and Architecture

During a visit to Paris in 1911, Feininger saw works by French cubist painter Robert Delaunay and was deeply impressed by the bright and animated series. Delaunay had depicted the Eiffel Tower in Paris as a modern hallmark of human engineering: dynamic, colorful, and worldly – while Feininger would in the following years mostly choose medieval churches as models and starting points for a crystalline counterworld painted in predominantly cool hues.

Rather than the dissection of an object and multiple views, as seen in the works by the French Cubists, Feininger was interested in a concentration of the objects that went to the absolute extreme. This approach saw him compare his art to the “synthesis of the fugue“, where harmony and dissonance were just as valid as formal austerity and rhythmicity. The prismatic overlapping of the surfaces introduces an element of temporality into the images, as if the migration of light over the course of the day had been captured in the picture. Transparency signifies mental clarity and penetration, a spirituality, although Feininger, like many of his artist colleagues, was not religious in the strictest sense. His encounter with Cubism ultimately helped him to break away from the representational quality of objects, and to only paint his “inner vision“.

Gelmeroda

More than any other series in Feininger's oeuvre, the *Gelmeroda* series reflects his approach and the evolution of his work. Beginning with an early drawing, one of the first large paintings in 1913, a number of woodcuts, and ending with a lithograph from 1955 that he made from memory while in exile in America, this series allows us to practically watch Feininger in the process of contemplation and composition.

The artist discovered the small village church in 1906 in a suburb of Weimar during a visit to his future wife Julia Berg; he saw something rather magical and “mystical“ in the inconspicuous building. While he initially rendered the setting, the church, the tall fir tree next to the tower, and other details in a quite naturalistic manner, the motif changed dramatically and turned into the image of a mighty cathedral, the kind that might be found in Rouen or Reims. In many works, tiny schematically depicted figures stand in awe before the crystalline broken, light-filled and “vertically exaggerated“ architecture, much like people of the Middle Ages must presumably have felt about the first Gothic cathedrals.

The *Gelmeroda* series demonstrates that Feininger's painterly development was not linear. Since he rarely painted directly after a motif, instead first making preliminary drawings and sketches, his so-called “nature notes“, none of his paintings were ever created spontaneously. He felt his way toward the motifs and only once they had adopted the right form in his mind could he paint them. Some stylistic “leaps“ and regressions can therefore be observed in the series.

The Halle Pictures

From 1929–1931 Feininger had a studio in the gate tower of the Moritzburg in Halle (Saale). He had been invited by the director of the museum, art historian Alois J. Schardt, a friend who had already supported Feininger's work in Berlin. The city had commissioned Feininger to paint only one painting with a motif of Halle, but he ultimately produced eleven paintings as well as numerous charcoal drawings, sketches, and photographs. It was here that Feininger first used the medium of photography to document his excursions through Halle and to collect motifs for his later paintings.

Feininger was fascinated by the narrow streets and the medieval and renaissance buildings of the old town; of particular interest to him, however, were the Stiftskirche, known as the “Cathedral” and the St. Mary’s Church, also known as the Market Church. In both (principal) works the painter succeeded in creating a distinct atmosphere of light by overlapping and cropping, using prismatic superimposition, and by working in layers of paint. Feininger worked extensively and over a particularly long period of time on the final piece in his series, the monumental *The Cathedral in Halle (Saale)*. The vertically towering *St. Mary’s Church with the Arrow* meanwhile is an experiment where Feininger departed furthest from the actual model. The abstract symbol next to the tower reminds us that this is above all a vision on the part of the artist.

Photography

Lyonel Feininger initially took a critical view of photography and was concerned about the increasing mechanization of the arts. His criticism was directed above all against the motto proclaimed by Walter Gropius at the Bauhaus: “Art and technology: a new unity”. Feininger nevertheless left behind around 20,000 photographic objects, including many negatives and slides. This group of works has remained little known to this day.

Feininger’s photographic phase began around 1928 at the Bauhaus in Dessau, motivated by his sons Andreas, Laurence, and T. Lux, who were avid photographers. He enjoyed going on nocturnal forays in snow, rain, or fog, and thus developed a highly idiosyncratic photographic language. Illuminated windows and other light sources emerge in rich contrast in the darkness. At night, he could take pictures virtually unnoticed – an aspect he greatly valued, since he still considered photography to be a private matter.

In other works, Feininger opted for extreme perspectives of top view, bottom view, and close-up. These were characteristics of a school of „Neues Sehen“ (New Vision) as advocated, for instance, by Lucia Moholy and her husband László Moholy-Nagy, who had been appointed Bauhaus master in 1923. In addition, Feininger at times deliberately tolerated “mistakes” in his photographic prints, because he was interested in the resulting random patterns and structures and was thus able to use the medium of photography to open up a further experimental field.

Feininger as a Graphic Artist

Feininger considered “drawing to be the soul of art“. Rather than using sketchbooks, he worked with pencil, charcoal, colored pencil, and colored crayons on loose sheets of paper. The roughly 20,000 so-called “nature notes“ were executed very rapidly, most are marked with a date and even the place where they were made. A considerable number of drawings served as preparatory sketches for Feininger’s paintings, which were not created en plein air in front of the motifs, but rather in his studio, often several months later. Feininger never aimed for a lifelike image, but instead aimed for a spiritual ideal or “image of longing“ of the respective building or place.

Almost all of his approx. 320 woodcut motifs date from between 1918 and 1920. During a phase in which he was unable to paint, and presumably inspired by his friend the Brücke artist Karl Schmitt-Rottluff, Feininger discovered the ideal graphic form for his artistic goals in working with wooden printing blocks. He initially only used the lids of cigar boxes as printing blocks; it was not until later that he had professional tools and materials at his disposal.

Feininger ultimately pursued always the same goals across all media: direction of light, rhythm, monumentalization, and concentration. The important phase of the woodcuts, his temporary “departure into the surface“, would help him to continue his later path as a painter and Bauhaus master in an even more consistent manner, and henceforth also as a proficient graphic artist.

Toys

In 1919 Feininger began making small hand-carved and painted wooden figures as toys for his three sons Andreas, Laurence, and T. Lux: village houses and churches arranged in a semicircle around a square, in front of them colorful figures with top hats much like in his early paintings. These were preceded by the locomotives the locomotives he intended to have mass-produced by the Munich toy manufacturer Otto Löwenstein in 1913. This plan, which above all was meant to earn Feininger money, was however thwarted by the outbreak of World War I.

The idea for *The Town at the End of the World* refers directly to Alfred Kubin's novel *The Other Side*, which Feininger had read soon after its publication. Feininger's rendering of ancient houses under a gloomy sky, as in the etching of the same name, appears to be a depiction of the city described in Kubin's "dream realm", where the sun likewise never shines and the population consists not of individuals but of similar "types" as in Feininger's "masquerade" paintings. The toy town was continually expanded, even after the sons had outgrown their playing age. Even in his late work in New York Feininger returned to work on it. Although the toys were actually intended to be played with by children, they are quite melancholy rather than merely humorous and find many parallels in Feininger's artistic world.

Beach and Ships

Feininger's annual stay at the Baltic Sea, either alone or at times with his family, was the stimulus for countless themes and motifs: from 1892 he visited the island of Rügen, in 1905 he was drawing together with Julia at the Baltic resort of Graal and, from 1908, Heringsdorf became the preferred destination for his summer excursions. But it was not until 1924, in Deep where the Rega River flows into the Baltic Sea (today Mrzezyno in Poland), that Feininger found the long lonely stretch of beach that served as a model for his deserted, transparent seascapes that, along with the crystalline architectures, became his second most famous group of works.

The series of deserted beach scenes with low horizon, dunes and clouds, occasionally with a tiny, schematically depicted figure in the foreground, is reminiscent of Romanticism and the work of Caspar David Friedrich, although Feininger stated that it was not until some time later that he became aware of the latter's famous painting *The Monk by the Sea*. According to Feininger, it was the works by English painter William Turner in particular that became influential for his "understanding of light and shadow" and the "reflections on the water and in the atmosphere". Nature as a metaphor for spiritual experiences of emptiness and solitude was Feininger's consistent theme in the seascapes from the 1920s until his late work in the United States.

Late Oeuvre in the USA

"New York is a wonderful place, but nearly everything that I have seen so far with respect to motifs in painting is lifeless and hackneyed . . . it must be possible to paint if one can liberate oneself from the overabundance of materials."

In the U.S., Feininger went on to translate earlier themes and motifs into a new style and focused on the new environment in a striking series: in *Manhattan I* and subsequent paintings from 1940 onward, Feininger applied compositional principles from earlier church paintings – towering "canyons" between buildings – in compositions depicting skyscrapers. The focus now is no longer on the buildings themselves, but rather the large empty space between them. New York's landmarks appear by no means impressive and monumental but, quite the opposite, extremely fragile and precarious, like ruins. Again, these are visions, not realities. Architecture again became a pretext for the depiction of structures and an increasingly "inner" view of the artist, resulting in a distinct dematerialization in his late oeuvre.

Almost Abstract Works

“I have been just as unable as you to take up the purely abstract form—since all progress then comes to an end”, Feininger wrote to artist friend Alfred Kubin as early as 1913. Unlike Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee, who were fellow Bauhaus masters, Feininger never took the final step into abstraction. Although quite early on, around 1912, he drew numerous landscapes with only a few strokes in his so-called “nature notes“, there always remained a remnant of real experience – clouds, dunes, horizon – which was important to Feininger. Feininger’s late work in New York then showed an in-depth examination of the current abstract tendencies in American post-war art. He increasingly avoided color, scraped it off, and reduced the motifs in some paintings and drawings to such an extent that the linear structures in turn verged on abstraction. He called this “ballast that was cast off in order to fly“. Yet, he never entirely abandoned the world of his preferred motifs, as the exploration of his surroundings and the creation of an “inner image“ remained essential to him.

Ghosties

During the last six years before his death in 1956, Feininger began to produce small linear drawings for friends and for his family, occasionally adding watercolors. The humorous scenes with these „friendly ghosts“ are reminiscent of the carved figures of the toy town. Like them, they are multicolored, frequently wear hats, and interact with each other in small groups. During Feininger’s lifetime, the Ghosties were barely acknowledged, nor were they considered remarkable by the artist himself. Yet, from today’s perspective, they encompass much of what has always defined Feininger – caricature, wry humor, individuality, melancholy, confident mark making in his drawings, and the ability to react spontaneously to his surroundings and the mood of the moment.

Slides

Once he had arrived in New York, his native city that he was no longer familiar with, Feininger turned his attention ever more to diapositives, which he photographed anew, and also created from old negatives and paper prints. Julia and Lyonel would sometimes use light projectors to transform their new home into a place where they could revive the Europe they had lost. In 1948, Feininger wrote, “... the eye learns a new, wonderful way of seeing based on these things.“ These slides, of which 2453 are in color, often cite motifs from Feininger’s paintings, such as architecture or almost abstract structures. Feininger had already previously experimented in his studio with different variations of colorful, broken glass fragments. In his late work from the 1940s onward, he revisited his particular interest in the superimposition and interpenetration of transparent forms and the resulting light phenomena. This last chapter in Feininger’s oeuvre demonstrates that, while he stayed curious and open to experimentation and new media, he remained true to his preferred subjects in art to the very end.