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Drawings and Watercolors

from the William S. Lieberman Bequest
to the Busch-Reisinger Museum

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Peter Nisbet

Harvard Art Museums
Cambridge, Massachusetts

HATJE CANTZ Harvard / Busch-Reisinger Art Museums

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The Busch-Reisinger Museum's collection of works by Lyonel Feininger has long been a source of pride to us and a resource of great value to scholars, students, and other viewers worldwide. The recent William S. Lieberman bequest augments our holdings with more than four hundred drawings and watercolors, and we are pleased to present this selection from the bequest in an exhibition for European audiences.

As Peter Nisbet points out in his essay, Lieberman was particularly attuned to the ways in which Feininger's drawings afford us an intimate glimpse of his personality and creative development, enriching the context for consideration of the larger, more "public" paintings. Nisbet, who served as curator of the Busch-Reisinger from 1983 to 2009, is perfectly placed to offer perspective on Feininger's reception and suggest directions for a more fruitful assessment of his oeuvre, and we thank him for his insights in the essay and entries on individual works.

The Harvard Art Museums, which comprise the Fogg Museum and the Arthur M. Sackler Museum as well as the Busch-Reisinger, are undergoing massive renovation and transformation at the time of this exhibition, so we are all the more grateful to our partners at the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin and the Staatliche Graphische Sammlung München for making the presentations at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and the Pinakothek der Moderne possible. We especially thank the German Friends of the Busch-Reisinger Museum, the Terra Foundation for American Art, and the Dedalus Foundation, Inc., for generous funding that made both the exhibition and this catalogue possible. And we are pleased to be partnering with Hatje Cantz Verlag on the catalogue, also issued in a German edition.

Departments throughout the Harvard Art Museums facilitated production of the exhibition and publication. Our thanks go not only to the staff of the Busch-Reisinger, but also to Collections Management; Design and Publications, including Digital Imaging and Visual Resources; and the Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies.

It is our hope that this exhibition and catalogue will expand our notions of Feininger's voluminous body of work, and will deepen our understanding of his contribution to the history of twentieth-century art.

Thomas W. Lentz
Elizabeth and John Moors Cabot Director
Harvard Art Museums

Feininger/Lieberman/Harvard: An Essay on Reputation and Response

Lyonel Feininger (1871–1956)

> *Twenty thousand . . . by the time these lines appear, this figure will surely have been greatly exceeded. That's the number of people who have visited Lyonel Feininger's exhibition in the Kronprinzenpalais in the first couple of weeks. On Sundays, the rooms are jam-packed with a public that consists of the most varied classes, professional and social strata. You can see workers, petit bourgeois types, intellectuals, and the smart set, all deeply immersed with the same level of concentration in viewing these visions of architecture and landscape. A public made up of a good mix of "the people," of a kind you otherwise see only at the movies, at sporting events, and at best at the Volksbuehne theater—such a public is of one mind and heart in front of pictures that belong to the purest spiritual phenomena of German art.*[1]

The opening of Ernst Kállai's commentary on Lyonel Feininger's 1931 retrospective exhibition at the Berlin National Gallery conjures a quintessentially modernist fantasy: the advanced artist who speaks to all audiences, across barriers of economic, financial, and educational status. Could Feininger be the practitioner of the universal language promised by avant-garde aesthetics, transcending all such categories? At a time of enormous political and economic stress and dislocation in the Weimar Republic, which was suffering the effects of the Wall Street crash and extreme ideological polarization, Kállai evoked a utopian scenario of harmony and unanimity, generated by the aesthetic effects of one of the "purest spiritual phenomena" in German art.

Feininger's path to a position within the European art world that made such an encomium even thinkable had been a long and indirect one.

The Berlin exhibition was staged in honor of his sixtieth birthday. Feininger had evolved from a popular and successful illustrator and cartoonist into a leading painter who exhibited with the German Expressionists in the years before and during World War I, and was Walter Gropius's first appointment to the teaching staff of the Weimar Bauhaus in 1919. The key break in his career had come not when he decided, in 1907, to relinquish his commercial work and become an independent artist, but with his epochal exposure in 1911 to cubist art in Paris. It was this experience that led directly to Feininger's characteristic "prismatic" style of intersecting transparent planes rendering primarily architecture, but also figural scenes and seascapes.

These prismatic works had attracted the first concentrated burst of critical attention for Feininger around the end of the war. With a solo exhibition at Herwarth Walden's Der Sturm Gallery in 1917 and a number of subsequent shows, Feininger earned the notice of critics who saw in him the ecstatic visionary penetrating the structure of nature and appearances to make visible essential truths, whether personal or transcendental. Consider, for example, the following remarks by Rudolf Probst, opening an article on the artist in 1919:

> *Rhythmic world theater is what one might call the ultimate goal of Feininger's artistic intentions. Props are the great opposites of appearance, the polar incommensurabilities of being and not being, of movement's death and becoming in color, light, and line. With some magic formula, the inspired director repeatedly forces this chaos into a new, musically suggestive interplay. In a flash, the scene is illuminated and reveals in the shimmering light of the moment the eternal constant of all movement, of all relationships—the great rhythmic balance. Every moment creates new configurations, new constellations in the fullest sense of the word. For these houses, these bridge supports, these ship masts and mountainous waves become, through and with each other, transcendental spatial figures, which find their meaning in the ever more intensively experienced wonder of the cosmic law.*[2]

While such language may not be helpful for the modern reader trying to apprehend Feininger's qualities, it does signal the stakes at play in at least the German reception of Feininger at that moment. To some extent the soaring claims reflect the mood of the times as much as the achievement of the work, but this tradition of rapturous praise finds an echo in Kállai's bathos-filled evocation of a public unified in the face of what he called in his review Feininger's "magical transfiguration of reality."[3]

But, while the unsustainability of appreciations like that of Probst in 1919 might have quickly become clear in the increasingly sober cultural climate of the 1920s, what if Kállai's estimate was also too optimistic? What if the dream of a cohesive public audience for an avant-garde

artist was little more than simple popularity for an artist who combined advanced formal techniques with easily consumable subject matter (the seascapes and idiosyncratic buildings of romanticism)? What if Feininger's art was a superficial or limited achievement? It was doubts such as these that came to dominate the critical response to the US-born Feininger soon after his permanent move back to the United States in 1937. In the formation and development of Feininger's reputation, the New York collector/curator William S. Lieberman and Harvard's Busch-Reisinger Museum played significant roles. This essay celebrates and explores these dual influences.

William S. Lieberman (1924–2005)

William S. Lieberman's legendary career at the Museum of Modern Art began in 1943, the year before the museum opened its highly influential solo survey of Feininger's art. As a volunteer in the department of exhibitions and publications, Lieberman may even have had something to do with the preparations for that exhibition. If so, he would have been aware that Feininger's reputation in the United States did not quite match the exalted, universalizing aspirations that some German critics had articulated.

In November 1943 Clement Greenberg reviewed the artist's exhibition of work from 1911 to 1938 at the Nierendorf Gallery in New York in terms that would often be echoed: respect, maybe even some (faint) praise, but often with an essential reservation or qualification:

> *What began as a German marriage of expressionism with cubism evolved after 1915 into a province of Paul Klee's art. Until then Feininger's heavy and obtuse color oppressed his more genuine talent as a draftsman. Klee's influence seems to have lightened and thinned his color and perhaps made him realize that his eyes—like [John] Marin's—conceived instinctively in darks and lights. The best pictures are those altogether in black and white and gray. . . . Feininger always paints with honesty and grace. He is not important in a larger sense, but he has a definite and secure place in contemporary painting.*[4]

"Not important in a larger sense, but. . . ." Compare two further critical reactions, taken almost at random from subsequent American critiques. In the *New Yorker* magazine's notice of the 1944 Museum of Modern Art exhibition, we read: "What he lacks is inventiveness; that is to say, his inventiveness rarely rises above the level of the purely decorative, and too often the 'abstract' quality of his work seems more like sheer distortion than anything intrinsic. There are handsome canvases in his show, certainly . . . [b]ut their charm . . . lies only in pattern. The trouble is that in any deeper sense—of painting as a philosophic expression, for example—they just don't mean much."[5] Six years later, Stuart Preston could write in the *New York Times:* "An artist of wide imagination

Feininger certainly is not, but, as far as that takes him, he is an exquisite one."[6] Such examples could be multiplied.[7]

Despite this critical hesitation, Feininger did not lack for exhibition opportunities after his arrival in the United States. In the years before the Museum of Modern Art retrospective, dealers such as Marion Willard and Curt Valentin, as well as museums in New York and across the country, presented Feininger's work on many occasions and in many settings. Lieberman's work on behalf of Feininger and his reputation was undertaken in this context.

After some time spent studying at Harvard, Lieberman returned to the Museum of Modern Art in 1945 as assistant to Alfred H. Barr Jr., then chair of Modern Painting and Sculpture. Ten years later, as curator of prints, a position to which he was appointed in 1949, Lieberman performed his first public service on behalf of Feininger's art. It marked the beginning of two decades of influential engagement in that cause. Lieberman's 1955 article in *Art News* magazine, "One Classic, One Newcomer: Feininger, Baskin," designated Feininger "one of our foremost artists," praising his woodcuts as "an impressive and perhaps necessary reaffirmation of the importance of black and white" in the face of a vogue for color prints, and concluded that "his work displays its greatest intensity of emotion in his woodcuts rather than in his more contemplative paintings."[8] It was around this time that Julia Feininger donated a large number of prints by her husband to the Museum of Modern Art.

Lieberman engaged with Feininger's work most fully in the early 1960s. As a close friend and informal advisor to the widow of the artist (who had died in 1956), he played a key role in placing the estate's holdings of Feininger's prints with the dealer Sylvan Cole. His introduction of Julia to the dealer resulted in Cole's inventorying the prints in the estate and then mounting the first retrospective of the artist's work in the medium in a 1964 exhibition, *Lyonel Feininger: Ships and Seas*. Lieberman came up with both theme and title, and he wrote the catalogue foreword, which ended with the sentence "Humanity, the wonderful and marvelous truth of Feininger's art, is always present."[9]

As a curator at the museum Lieberman organized the major traveling exhibition *The Intimate World of Lyonel Feininger,* which was shown in New York and at no fewer than thirteen other venues in the years 1962–65.[10] The exhibition was designed to highlight a Feininger different from the well-known painter of seascapes and visionary architectural scenes. In the words of the unsigned review by *Time* magazine in early 1963:

> *Lyonel Feininger is so well known for his prismatic paintings of land, sea and city scenes that his earlier career as a major caricaturist is all but*

Fig. 1 Lyonel Feininger, *Gross Kromsdorf III*, 1921. Oil on canvas, 100.2 × 80.7 cm. Harvard Art Museums/Busch-Reisinger Museum, Gift of Julia Feininger, BR64.12.

forgotten. . . . He had a gift for whimsy and fantasy that stayed with him right up to 1956, when he died at 84. . . . Most of the exhibit's watercolors, drawings, prints and toys still belong to [the family]. The museum's print curator, William Lieberman, persuaded the family to let them be shown for the first time. . . .[11] *At first sight, all of this [cartoons, nature notes, images of locomotives] seems far removed from Feininger's great work, his architectural paintings, in which subtly shaded planes of color seem to reach back into endless space. But even in the little wooden sculptures that he gave away to friends, there is the sense that only through distortion can one see reality, and that since reality changes constantly, distortion of some sort must imply that change. The comic and the cosmic artist were not so far apart. . . .*[12]

Lieberman was not only revealing an "intimate" side of the artist, but he was using his own closeness to the family to do so. It is a closeness that reveals itself also in the extensive series of gifts of works by Feininger that Julia made to the Museum of Modern Art through Lieberman in the mid-1960s. She clearly entrusted him with large quantities of her late husband's work, some of which was then transferred to the museum as the Gift of Julia Feininger (principally in 1966). Much else remained on deposit at the museum as loans from Lieberman, and the bulk of these drawings surely form the bequest to Harvard from which the works in the present exhibition have been chosen.[13]

It was personal aspects of the artist himself that Lieberman brought forward in his introductions to two commercial exhibitions held ten years apart. In a foreword to the slim catalogue for a 1964 exhibition at the Willard Gallery, Lieberman wrote, "As an innovator [Feininger] had no followers. His legacy is the work itself, an achievement as distinguished by consistent quality as was his life by personal integrity." Lieberman continued to regard him as "one of America's greatest painters."[14] And, in his brief essay for a 1974 gallery presentation of drawings and watercolors at the Berggruen Gallery in Paris, Lieberman alluded to personal difficulties between artist and wife around 1930, an anecdotal revelation that angered their son T. Lux.[15] Lieberman's reply underlines again that his commitment to the artist and his work was as much personal as professional: "Naturally, I intended no offense to either of their memories. Julia was someone I loved very much. Indeed, it was chiefly because of her that I consented to do the short text. . . . In my small way, I tried to make Feininger and Julia come alive. So seldom does anything written about them reveal them as human beings."[16]

As drawings have always been considered the most personal of all media, the site of a viewing public's most intimate connection with the artist's creative thought processes, there is some rightness about the link between Feininger's drawing practice, as exemplified in part by the works in the Lieberman bequest, and our benefactor's declared