

Lyonel Feininger. Back in America. 1937 - 1956

17 May to 23 August 2009

Feininger and the Moritzburg

The Moritzburg in Halle – once an archbishop's residence, now the art museum of Saxony-Anhalt – has unique links to Lyonel Feininger. The artist used the top floor of the gate tower as his studio from 1929 to 1931. This was where the world famous series of Halle pictures, one of the pinnacles of Feininger's creative period in Germany, was started, and where he stored part of his work until 1935 following the closure of Bauhaus in Dessau.

Feininger's late work

From Halle, we are now turning our gaze to Feininger's late work, which has gained little attention to date in Europe. Painted after 1937 when he returned to the USA, this work has astoundingly never been subjected to independent, differentiated study. For many years, it was regarded entirely unjustly as a mere insignificant epilogue to his artistic oeuvre. This exhibition aims to revise this opinion, presenting Feininger's last creative period in all its complexity with over 100 works, and thus enabling a new perception of his art as a whole.

Back to America

For Lyonel Feininger, 1937 was a decisive turning point. Like so many other artists, writers and creative individuals, the pressure of Nazi cultural policy forced him to leave Germany, his beloved country of choice that had deeply affected his art and brought him recognition as a leading representative of modernism. However, unlike most of those who shared his fate, he did not go to a foreign, unknown land, but returned to the country of his youth, which he had left behind 50 years previously. Feininger spent another almost 20 years working in New York.

New Beginning with the Manhattan Pictures

It was not easy for Feininger to start anew in America, as he was as good as unknown to American audiences and seen as a German painter. The New York he arrived in was very different to the city he had left in 1887. Nearly two years passed before Feininger settled down and started painting in oils again. Yet watercolours he painted straight away in 1937 show that he had not lost his artistic potential. While the first paintings he completed in New York in 1939 were memories of Deep and the Baltic, in 1940 he created a new and significant series with his Manhattan pictures of New York's tall buildings and hemmed-in streets. This very diverse series of paintings, in which Feininger captured his experience of the city's skyscrapers, created a forceful image of America's contribution to modernist architecture. Artistically transforming the clear, geometrically defined works of engineering into atmospheric and visionary pictorial tectonics, Feininger played a very original role in twentieth-century American painting.

Manna-Hata, 1952, private collection, Switzerland

Untitled (Manhattan at Night), 1937, private collection, USA

Thuringian Village (Mellingen), 1949, private collection, Germany

Memories of the Baltic and Thuringia

The most remarkable aspect of Feininger's new beginning is the logic with which he continued his previous artistic work, with no real fracture occurring. Artistic processes that began before he left Germany are resumed in his late work, extending their European roots. Alongside the series of Manhattan compositions, it is the memories of the coasts of the Baltic and the villages of Thuringia that determine the themes of his late work. Yet he did not paint these motifs as a nostalgic reversion to the past, but out of a lack of suitable motifs from his new surroundings that harboured the fantastic potential he needed for his visions. As if to assure himself of his artistic origins, he returned to old compositions and yet took them into new dimensions.

Benz, 1955, private collection, USA

Continuity and Renewal

Up to an old age, Feininger's work showed impressive continuity and above an incessant search for new ways of artistic expression. There was only ever a single instance for him, his own "wanting", his unconditional striving for the "final form". The moment of recollection, turning back to older compositions or completed creative phases, guarantees the constant renewal of artistic solutions, which also existed alongside one another in differing forms of expression. Feininger's nature notes kept the motifs he had discovered for his work in Germany constantly up to date in the USA as well.

Black Sun, 1951, private collection

Out of Place

Feininger wrote about his feelings after returning to America in a 1939 letter to his son T. Lux: "In the beginning I suffered a great deal from the feeling of being out of place. But now all I feel is a huge advantage in the fact that I was in Europe for so long. That is where my work sources its impulse." In Germany, Feininger was always seen as an American; back in America, he was a European and an outsider. This was what defined his exceptional position. He was equally at home in the two cultures, and could thus use each one's achievements for his artwork. In both places, Feininger observed contemporary developments with interest and benefit for his own work. Yet he was neither a German nor an American painter. Lyonel Feininger created an oeuvre that lays claim to a special position on both sides of the Atlantic, precisely because it arose with no regard for national or cultural boundaries.

Lyonel Feininger, New York, 1951,
Photograph: Andreas Feininger

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Opening hours

Tues 10 am – 8.30 pm
Wed – Sun and public holidays
10 am – 6 pm

Prices

Lyonel Feininger. Back in America
€ 8 / € 6 reduced rate
Permanent exhibition € 5 / €3 reduced rate

Combined ticket with permanent exhibition
€ 12 / € 8 reduced rate
Group ticket for 10+ persons:
Reduced rate per person

Free entry

Children and young people up to 18

Public tours

Tues 6 pm, Sun 11 am

Information and registration

Tel: +49 (0)345 212 59 40/48
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