



Gloria Köpnick With “Vollersroda III,” Feininger had settled comfortably into his own skin and into his unique, cubo-futuristic style

An early admirer of Lyonel Feininger’s *Vollersroda III* was Ludwig Justi. Having recognized this “darkly magnificent” painting as a programmatic image for a new epoch, Justi included it in the new modern art wing (*Galerie der Lebenden*) he was setting up at Berlin’s National Gallery in 1919 (Ludwig Justi. *Werden – Wirken – Wissen. Lebenserinnerungen aus fünf Jahrzehnten* edited by Thomas W. Gaehtgens and Kurt Winkler, vol. I, Berlin 2000, p. 444). An early masterpiece of museum quality, *Vollersroda III* is an incunabulum for Feininger’s later output as Bauhaus Master. Its fascinating backstory, which begins several years before its creation in 1916, gives us an unusually focused insight – as through a burning glass – into the artist’s multifaceted biography and into the turbulent 20th century in which he lived.

In 1906, the New York-born artist, who had first come to Germany at the age of sixteen, was spending time in and around the town of Weimar, where the love of his life, Julia Berg, was attending the Grand Ducal Saxon Art Academy. It was there that Feininger discovered the romantic Thuringian countryside on extended outings, embarking upon what would become a lifelong artistic exploration of this picturesque region of quaint villages and striking churches. Feininger would return again and again, finally making his home here from 1919 onward, after being appointed a “master teacher” at *Staatliches Bauhaus Weimar*. Even during his later exile in America, he would continue to draw upon impressions and memories from this happy time. While the series of vistas he painted of the village of Gelmeroda, with its pointed church tower, contain some of his best-known motifs from the Weimar region, *Vollersroda* was another local hamlet that repeatedly caught his eye.

Built in the 18th century, the village church of *Vollersroda* is located some five kilometers south of Weimar, the town forever associated with Goethe, Schiller and German Classicism. This meant Feininger could easily reach it in about half an hour by bicycle, his preferred mode of transport. The church’s fortified, compact structure – a squat nave adjoined by an only slightly taller tower – still dominates the surrounding hamlet today. Feininger discovered the church and first began painting it already during his first explorations of Weimar’s environs in the spring of 1906.

Working with confident strokes, the experienced draftsman captured what he saw in a matter of minutes. Feininger himself likened this way of working en plein air to taking “nature notes,” and described its advantages in a letter to his future wife: “I think much more highly of notes than of finished studies, at least when it comes to reproducing an impression which one wants to elaborate later. A study never provides quite the same stimulus afterwards [...] the image lies within the note itself [...] it is so very necessary to exercise the memory [...] to record without hesitation, as quickly and accurately as possible.” (Lyonel Feininger to Julia Berg, letter of 17th January 1906, Lyonel Feininger Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts). The visual treasure trove of drawings that resulted, most of them dated to the exact day, would go on to serve Feininger as a creative repository for the next 50 years.

Feininger would be drawn time and again to *Vollersroda* in the years to come. The collection of the Busch-Reisinger Museum, which preserves the artist’s estate, contains enchanting “nature notes” of the village, some of them in

colour. They highlight how much the motif appealed to the artist and how intent he was on capturing and penetrating its essence. Feininger saved his studies carefully, without knowing at first which nature note would prove suitable for

further elaboration. "I'm not sure whether there will ever be a picture, but most certainly the inspiration for many a picture!" is how he described this process to Julia Feininger on 13th September 1913 (ibid.) And in another letter: "I was up there again this morning, just like yesterday, there on the heights of Vollersroda, and sat in the sun from 8:45 to 11:00 A.M. thinking, composing, and pondering; I had a pile of good notes with me from last year and realized what some of them should eventually become." (Lyonel Feininger to Julia Feininger, 19th April 1914, ibid.).

Feininger's years-long struggle to get this particular subject right is impressively documented in Alois Schardt's detailed discussion of our work and of the turning point in its motivic evolution: "One of the toughest conundrums he wrestled with was the painting 'Vollersroda.' [...] When he returned there in 1914, a small gabled structure had been

erected to the left of the church's nave. All at once the idea for the image came to him, as if this structure was what he had been missing. This sketch [from 1914] actually already reveals the later painting." (Alois J. Schardt: *Natur und Kunst in der neueren Malerei*, in: *Das Kunstblatt*, volume 6, 1922, p. 3, citation on p. 108).

The cubistically structured charcoal drawing *Vollersroda III* was created in the course of this complex working process in November 1914, when World War I had already broken out and Feininger's status as an American in Germany was no longer secure. Derived from the artist's previous nature notes, the drawing became the direct model for our painting and is now in the Nelson-Atkins Museum

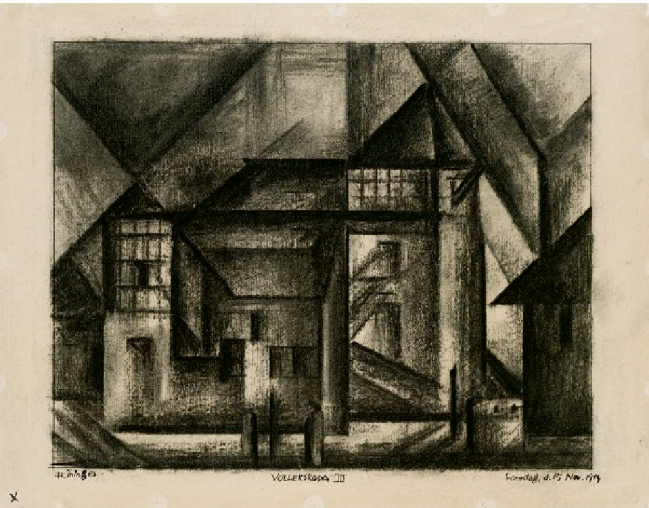


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in Kansas City, Missouri.

Ten years had passed after his first visit to Vollersroda when Feininger painted our work, "Vollersroda III," in 1916. His formative years, in which he had worked as a caricaturist and embraced French Cubism, were now behind him and he had found his own unmistakable style. The searching artist so evident in the early paintings belongs to the past: With "Vollersroda III," Feininger had settled comfortably into his own skin and into his unique, cubo-futuristic style. The subtle nuances of the painting are aptly described by Alois Schardt: "The shapes are dull-edged and squat, as if compressed inward. The bright tile-red of the roof is transformed into a dense, lead-infused grey. The blue of the sky becomes a greenish blue, pale in places, almost ghostly. But a ponderous green lies opaquely over the whole as a sort of mid-tone. The viewer's gaze wants to rise along the edges of the tower, but these edges are blunt. It is a laborious ascent, entailing many obstructions and wrong turns." (Schardt, p. 112).

That our painting must have seemed a milestone work for a new, mature style to both the artist and his contemporaries is demonstrated by its early exhibition history. Thus, *Vollersroda III* (cat. no. 21) was included in the first extensive solo exhibition devoted to Feininger, organized in 1919 by Herwarth Walden at his Berlin gallery *Der Sturm*. The exhibition catalogue records that two variations of the same subject entitled *Vollersroda II* and *Vollersroda V* (cat. nos. 20 and 24) – which are not documented in Hess' catalog raisonné – were displayed as well. *Vollersroda I* (now in the Lyonel Feininger Museum in Quedlinburg) was not included in the exhibition, perhaps because the artist believed that this first version, more akin to the colourfully grotesque paintings of his early period, was not yet fully fledged. Roughly a year later, in October 1918, Feininger's uncompromisingly modern work was again featured in a solo exhibition at Hans Goltz' Galerie *Neue Kunst*, Munich's hotspot for the artistic avant-garde. The exhibition traveled on to Hagen, where it was shown from February to early March 1919 at the private Folkwang Museum of Karl Ernst Osthaus, who acquired the painting



Lyonel Feininger. "Vollersroda III". 1914. Charcoal/paper. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri



View into the domed hall at Moritzburg Castle with Lyonel Feininger's painting *Vollersroda III*, between 1928 and 1933

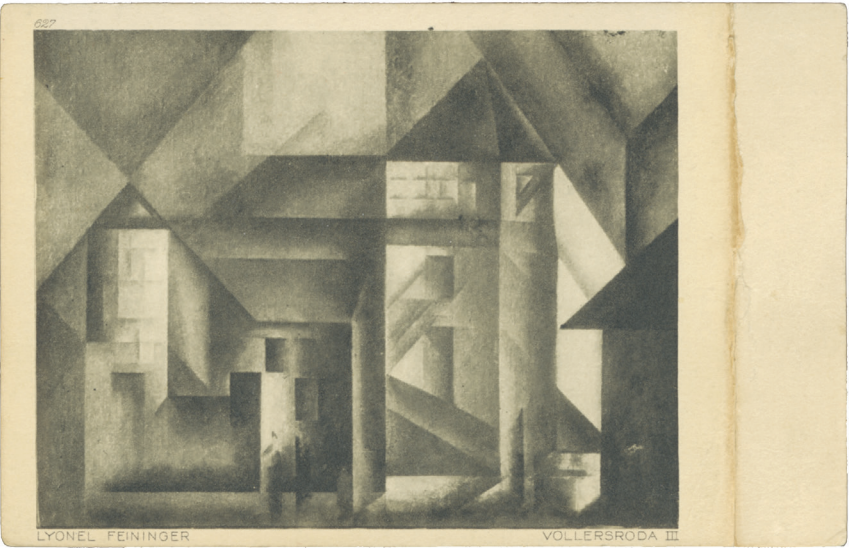
Scheunenstrasse (1914) for his own collection. The remaining unsold works were returned to Feininger after this exhibition tour, as he reported to his artist friend Karl Schmidt-Rottluff.

Later in 1919, Feininger was appointed by Walter Gropius as the first “master teacher” at Weimar’s groundbreaking Staatliches Bauhaus art school, which Gropius had established in April of that year. Feininger was already working in Weimar when he received a stunning message from his wife: “And as I casually got round to reading your letter, and got to where it says that the National Gallery had acquired ‘Vollersroda III’ for the Galerie der Lebenden, I blurted the news out loud and it hit like a bomb ... I was almost ashamed of myself.” (Lyonel Feininger to Julia Feininger, letter of 22nd June 1919, *ibid.*)

The acquisition of a work by Lyonel Feininger for the *Galerie der Lebenden* was a sensation, for this was neither an avant-garde gallery like those of Walden or Goltz, nor a private museum like that of the collector in Hagen. But times were changing: The monarchy had fallen and the (public) art arena was open to new trends. “After months of stumbling blocks, [...]”, Ludwig Justi recalled, “I was able to show a small collection of Expressionist works at the opening of the *Kronprinzen-Palais* in July 1919 [...]; the few works that had been purchased were supplemented by works on loan, so that the lot of them was at least able to make a self-contained impression,” (Ludwig Justi, *op. cit.*).

Feininger’s masterpiece now hung in Berlin’s *Kronprinzenpalais*, the Weimar Republic’s first museum of contemporary art, in the direct vicinity of Franz

Marc’s *Turm der Blauen Pferde* – another iconic work of modern art – as well as of paintings by Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, Max Pechstein, and Heinrich Nauen. “Most of the members of the new Board stood staring at it perplexed,” according to Justi, who discussed Lyonel Feininger and our painting in his 1921 guide to the contemporary paintings in the National Gallery: “The strict tonal structure of Bach’s music perfuses him as he works. Vollersroda, as a grouping of buildings, reveals the logic behind a will to form, which at the same time serves to express inner feeling. [...] Whoever [...] does not close his mind to the intention of this artist so seriously grappling with his subject will discover a captivating charm in the play of lines and surfaces, in the choice and order of colours, in the extremely careful

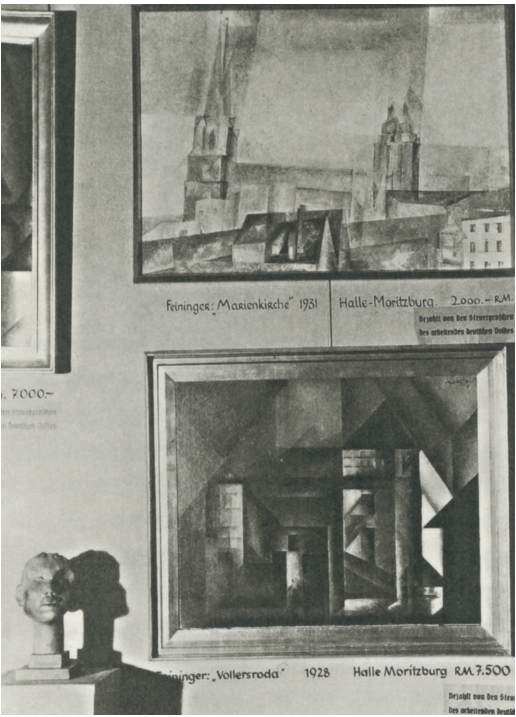


Postcard of the National Gallery, Berlin. Circa 1920

rendering, and will perceive a curious sound, a solemn mood, in this stringent music of form.” (Ludwig Justi: *Neue Kunst. Ein Führer zu den Gemälden der sogenannten Expressionisten in der National-Galerie*, Berlin 1921, p. 20).

Our painting, which was mentioned in art journals and press publications of the time while also being distributed as an art postcard by the *Nationalgalerie*, was exchanged with the artist in 1921 for his more recent *Teltow II*. It remained at the *Kronprinzenpalais*, however, now on loan from the artist, until 1926. In 1928, Alois Schardt, who had become Director of the *Städtisches Museum für Kunst und Kunstgewerbe* at Moritzburg Castle in Halle two years prior, seized the opportunity to acquire the painting, along with its preparatory charcoal drawing, for his arts and crafts museum.

The Nazi’s seizure of power brought about a sea change in the cultural and political environment, so that Feininger’s once celebrated works became derided as “degenerate” in Germany after 1933. Starting in late 1935, *Vollersroda III* was shown in a “chamber of horrors” at Moritzburg Castle, along with the work of other ostracized artists. This “show of shame” soon was followed by the Nazi’s outright seizure of all “degenerate art.” Thus, 400 of Feininger’s works were confiscated from German museums in 1937. Some of these, including *Vollersroda III*, were then featured in the Nazi’s “Degenerate Art” propaganda exhibition in Munich, which later toured to Berlin, Leipzig, Düsseldorf, and Salzburg. Given the work’s importance and prominence, the Nazis considered it “internationally marketable,” and it was sold abroad some time after 1940, ending up in New York after World War II. As did Lyonel Feininger himself, who left Germany in 1937 and emigrated to the United States, where he had been born and would spend the rest of his creative and natural life. All things considered, *Vollersroda III* is not just an iconic Feininger creation that marks his breakthrough to a personal, unmistakable style; it is also an intriguingly enigmatic work that epitomizes the German Avant-Garde’s halcyon days and eventual oppression.



Exhibition "Degenerate Art" 1937 in Munich with our painting