

Gloria Köpnick

A Bright Spot in a Gathering Storm: Lyonel Feininger’s “Dune, Ray of Light I”

“It is good now, in my opinion, that we’re once again free and clear of all ties. And the gravity of the present times forces us to internalize and focus our creative power to the utmost,” Lyonel Feininger wrote in a letter of 9 April 1933 from Deep, a town on the Baltic Sea (quoted from Letters from Lyonel Feininger to Julia Berg (from 1908, Julia Feininger) from 1905–1935, Houghton Library of Rare Books, Harvard University, Cambridge). The Bauhaus master had discovered the

fishing village of Deep on the Pomeranian coast (now in Poland) in 1924, returning repeatedly thereafter for relaxation, seclusion, and creative stimulation. “I see colours here by the sea that are indescribable,” he had reported to his wife already during his first visit (letter dated 7 July 1924, *ibid.*). Now, in the spring of 1933, this would turn out to be one of his longest stays. But what had happened?

As early as in August of 1932, the Nazi-dominated Dessau municipal council had ordered the closure of the Bauhaus School in Dessau. Its last director, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, was able to continue running the innovative art and design school as a private institute in Berlin until April of 1933, when it was raided by the police and its students temporarily were detained. Upon deliberation, the teaching staff decided in July 1933 to cease operations of the school. That previous March, the former Bauhaus building in Dessau had been searched by Nazi SA Stormtroopers, including the “Masters’ House” once occupied by Feininger. Although nothing was destroyed there, unlike in some other Masters’ Houses, this brazen harassment convinced Feininger that Dessau was no longer safe. He initially sought refuge on the Baltic Sea, travelling to Deep in April 1933, earlier in the season than ever before. “The glitter of the afternoon sun over the sea and the surf-washed beach are intoxicatingly beautiful,” he wrote to Julia, who was able to join him only some time later (letter dated 9 April 1933, *ibid.*).

As a follower of Modernism, a Bauhaus artist, and an American citizen, Feininger was a clear target for surveillance by the Nazis. This was nothing new – he had been monitored by the authorities already during World War I. Now, he had to prove his “Aryan” ancestry to the Reich Chamber of Fine Arts in order to be allowed to continue working. His wife Julia found herself in an altogether harsher situation: Since the Nazis considered her Jewish, she faced not only social exclusion – her life was in danger. Yet a deceptive calm seemed to prevail at first: “For now, there is peace here, and we are incredibly far removed from world events!” wrote Feininger from his retreat by the sea. But it was not long until the new political zeitgeist would make itself felt there as well.

During this tranquil lull in 1933 – and with the aforementioned “focus of creative power” – Feininger created *Dune, Ray of Light I*, our top lot on offer. We

see a flash bursting through the dark sky, lighting up a deserted dunescape broken up into crystalline fragments as if to betoken the increasingly gloomy present. From his many visits, Feininger was intimately acquainted with the natural features of Deep, especially the dunes. He had captured them in numerous drawings and finely nuanced watercolours. In fact, he had already used dunes as a motif in some of his very first oil paintings, which show the chalk cliffs near Lobbe on the Island of Rügen. While these works had still been rooted in an impressionistic visual language, the highly expressive *Dune, Ray of Light I* marks the emergence of Feininger’s own distinctive style, his coming into himself. In the spring of 1933, the keen observer described changes in the natural landscape to his wife, “The beach, or rather the dunes, have suffered badly in the winter storms and their shape has changed dramatically. Our access to the beach via the Kiekersteig path now goes over a ridge instead of through a ravine” (letter of 8 April 1933, *ibid.*). A day later, he wrote: “I’ve already taken a few walks westward on the beach for hours, making the return trip across the dunes. This path on the ridge, with a view across the sea, is unique! [...] And not a soul to be seen on the way” (letter dated 9 April 1933, *ibid.*).

Lyonel and Julia Feininger did not return to Dessau but moved instead into a small apartment in Berlin’s Siemensstadt district. The sea, particularly the hamlet of Deep on the shores of the Baltic Sea, would remain an important refuge for the artist until 1935, when he paid his final visit. It was to be one farewell among many.

The impressive painting we are now proud to offer was exhibited in 1936 at Berlin’s Nierendorf Gallery in one of Feininger’s last major shows in Germany, where it was shown under the title *Düne 1933*. As a reviewer for the art journal *Weltkunst* noted, “The colours often have a dreamlike, drifting quality, and their rhythmically coordinated harmonies still reveal the abiding musical nature of the artist who, a late bloomer, never settled for purely superficial effects.” (quoted from: “Lyonel Feininger” in: *Die Weltkunst*, volume 10, 1936, No. 15, 12 April 1936, p. 3). In the summer of that year, Feininger already was teaching at the Summer School of Mills College in the United States, but did return one last time to Germany, his home and place of work for almost half a century.

Feininger and his wife finally emigrated to New York, the artist’s birthplace, in 1937, when the situation in Germany became increasingly dangerous for Julia. The Bauhaus master managed to take a large collection of his drawings and paintings with him. His “Nature Notes,” in particular, would serve as a trove of inspiration during his American exile. In 1944, as the World War was raging, he revisited his striking vision of a flash from the sky illuminating the dunes for *Dunes with Ray of Light, II*, in which two figures are seen walking over the suddenly luminous sands. This work is now in the collection of the Buffalo AKG Art Museum. 1944 was also the year that saw the artist achieve his American breakthrough with a major showcase of his works at the New York’s Museum of Modern Art – a seminal exhibit that also included our featured painting, *Dune, Ray of Light I*.



Lot 38



Lyonel Feininger. Storm clouds over dunes. Photograph. Circa 1932

38^R Lyonel Feininger

1871 – New York – 1956

“Düne im Lichtstrahl I” (“Dune, Ray of Light I”). 1933

Oil on canvas. Relined. 48 × 76,8 cm (18 7⁄8 × 30 1⁄4 in.).

Signed and dated upper right: Feininger 33. On the cardboard backing a label of the Buchholz Gallery, New York, and a label of the exhibition New York 1944/45 (see below). On the decorative frame a label of the Norton Gallery of Art.

Catalogue raisonné: Hess 358. [3163] Framed.

Provenance

Buchholz Gallery/Curt Valentin, New York / Herbert Ralston, New York / formerly Private Collection, New York

EUR 350,000–450,000

USD 412,000–529,000

Exhibition

Lyonel Feininger. Gemälde und Aquarelle. Berlin, Galerie Nierendorf, 1936, cat. no. 2 (“Düne”) / Lyonel Feininger. New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1944/45, no cat. no., p. 47



Lyonel Feininger drawing in the dunes of Deep. Photograph. Circa 1933

