

Oliver Jahn Echo chamber of emotions – Lyonel Feininger's "Trompetenbläser im Dorf"

"Almost everybody," Karl Lagerfeld once wrote, "knows of Lyonel Feininger, the Bauhaus master, and of his famous paintings of ships and cathedrals. Yet for some unknown reason, his early oil paintings, which he based mostly on his own caricatures that had been so famous around the *fin de siècle*, are much less well known." (Karl Lagerfeld: *Hommage à Feininger*, Göttingen 2005, p. 4). Lagerfeld goes on to recount how he himself first got to know Feininger's works only as caricatures reproduced in magazines such as *Das Narrenschiff* or *Die Lustigen Blätter*; they included *Zeitungsleser II* from 1909 (Moeller 49), *Kanalisationsloch* from 1908 (Moeller 41), and of course the celebrated *Der Weisse Mann* (Moeller 31), now in the Thyssen-Bornemisza collection, adding that he encountered them in their painted version only as an adult. "But as a child, I already had intensively studied all the bound issues of popular satirical magazines that I had discovered in the attic of our country house in Schleswig-Holstein." (Ibid.).

It is hardly possible to overestimate the impression that these attic finds made on the young Lagerfeld, as he himself wrote: "In those days, I also wanted to become a draftsman and illustrator. Most of the political and cultural events to which these cartoons referred were incomprehensible to me at the time. I was only interested in the form, technique, and stylistic aesthetic of these works." (Ibid.) Perhaps this experience of keenly paging through the books laid the ground for this one-in-a-million career as a fashion designer, which would take him far beyond drawing and illustrating? In the 1990s, Lagerfeld would pay a memorable tribute to his childhood idol with his "*Hommage à Feininger*," a series of original surrealist photos.

It would be interesting to know what sort of homage Karl Lagerfeld would be inspired to pay to Lyonel Feininger's oil painting *Trompetenbläser im Dorf* from 1915, if he could see it today. Let us briefly follow its creator's evolution from caricaturist to an artist who completed his very first painting only in 1907 at the age of 36 "as a light-hearted old man" (as he put it in a letter to Julia Feininger). Feininger would go on to paint a series of brightly coloured, carnivalesque compositions between 1908 and 1911. In these vibrant visual spaces, he captured processions of musicians, harlequin figures, diabolical jugglers, masked persons, and shady characters mingling with townsfolk in prim Biedermeier outfits, all set against the backdrop of what he called the "city at the end of the world," a title he later gave to his work *Stadt am Ende der Welt* from 1910. It is a place of grotesque goings-on, where spooky figures roam freely to play all sorts of mischievous tricks. And whatever these figures are doing – running, hopping, prancing, striding – their intent remains inscrutable. They are isolated; nothing connects them to one other; they have no logical backstory. If their aim is to launch an uprising, as suggested in the artist's *Uprising* from 1910 (Moeller 61) (see illustration), then merely in the context of a masquerade. Feininger called these works his "*Mummenschanz-Gemälde*".

These are works that evoke a strange sense of surreality, of dream-like fantasy. The figures are so lean, elongated, and angular as to verge on the grotesque, their dimensions are wholly disproportionate to their architectural environment, which is itself stylized and distended in all directions much like in a cartoon. Feininger himself incisively described his approach to proportions in a well-known letter to his wife



Lyonel Feininger. Circa 1907

Julia dated February 9th, 1906, "... the slightest difference in relative proportions creates enormous differences with regard to the monumentality and intensity of the composition. Monumentality is not attained by making things larger – how childish! – but by contrasting large and small in the same composition. On the size of a postage stamp, one can represent something gigantic, while yards of canvas may be used in a smallish way and squandered." (quoted from the exhibition catalogue for Lyonel Feininger and Marsden Hartley, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1944, p. 18).

With Feininger, the painted architecture, usually the squares and alleyways of well-preserved medieval towns like Gelmeroda in Thuringia, evolves into more than just a scenic backdrop, serving as an echo chamber of emotions. Without it, the human figures in Feininger's image would be cast adrift. Whereby the impulses motivating them are never quite revealed. Are they in a state of inner turmoil, or do they know of happenings which are still hidden from us? In an article for the 1910/11 issue of the journal *Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst*, Hermann Struck acknowledged the sense of anxiety and nightmarish abyss with which Feininger adumbrated in his images: "A work of this sort reminds one of sleep terrors and troubled dreams after nights of heavy drinking. His manner of drawing is clunky and comical, yet there is also something very serious about this comedy." (Hermann Struck: *Die Schwarz-Weiss-Ausstellung der Berliner Secession 1909/10*, in: *Zeitschrift für Bildende Kunst*, vol. 21, 1910/11, p. 178). Thus, the tone had been set: he was leaving mere caricature behind and facing the storm clouds dramatically gathering over a world beset by social and political disintegration.

Between 1912 and the start of World War I – after exhibiting six paintings at the *Salon des Indépendants* in Paris in 1911 and gaining his first exposure to the work of the Cubists and Futurists – Feininger shifted his artistic focus from the surreal world of masquerade to a new exploration of colour, volume, and space. He began to break up forms in faceted fashion, and to replace his rather flat style of caricature by imbuing the image surface with overlapping, mutually interpenetrating layers of prismatic, crystalline forms that created a visual space while implying depth.

With the outbreak of World War I in 1914, with the primal catastrophe of the 20th century, with men experiencing life in the trenches and with the subsequent social upheavals on the home front, painters were compelled to find new forms of expression. Many of them were to die on the battlefield, such as August Macke, Franz Marc, Hermann Stenner, and Albert Weisgerber. Those who survived, like Otto Dix, Max Ernst, Max Beckmann or Carl Lohse, returned home traumatized. In Feininger's work, the masquerade motifs which had given his earlier works such an uncanny undertone began to creep back in. Although his status as a foreigner exempted him from compulsory military service, he could not help being deeply affected by the war and its aftermath. Initially, he had been supportive of the German war effort, defending Berlin's policies in letters to his father and mocking the Allied Powers' reactions in political cartoons. But his mood soon darkened. As the United States' entry into the war began to loom, Feininger's position as an American citizen living in Germany became parlous. Classified as an "enemy

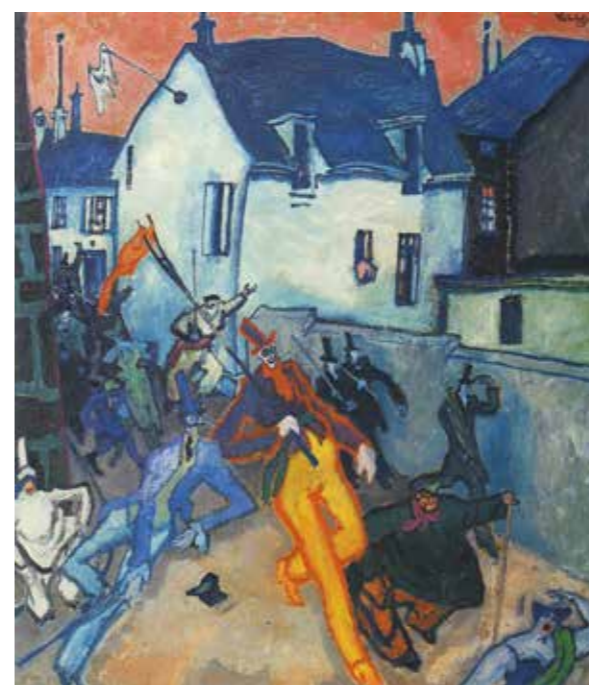
alien," he was forced to report daily to the local police.

Although Feininger continued to paint Thuringia's houses and churches during the war years, these motifs would alternate with phantasmagorical figure-centered compositions, some of which harked back to his earlier grotesques and caricatures. Feininger described this chequered dynamic in 1917 to a friend, the poet Adolf Knoblauch, "God save us from the 'sensitive' artists. They must have seen the malice in my work – I always follow up a deeply felt, devotionally reverent work with an out-and-out romp involving bizarre compositions. [...] What is art: self-revelation. 'Involuntary' is something I don't want to be. Besides, sarcasm is the carapace that saves the sensitive artist from the outside world." (quoted from the exhibition catalogue for *Lyonel Feininger: Menschenbilder. Eine unbekannte Welt*, Hamburg, Hamburger Kunsthalle, 2003, p. 136).

There's not a lot of devotional reverence to be detected when we turn to *Trompetenbläser im Dorf* from September 1915. But what about bizarreness, sarcasm, and that protective carapace? We see a row of figures in front of the timber-framed houses of a small town, clustering around a musician in the middle of the scene, who is actually playing a tuba rather than the trumpet featuring in the title. The painting seems to tie in with Feininger's earlier carnival scenes. The five figures, some of whom have skull-like faces, are angular and distorted, with blotchy outlines making them look like a collage of scraps of coloured paper. They seem to be fleeing pell-mell from either side of the musician in a state of disoriented excitation, their arms and legs moving frantically. The female figure holds a hand to her wan face in apparent shock. They take no notice of one another, much less of the tuba player, who remains rooted to the spot like a statue, blowing forcefully into his instrument as if it were a sentry's bugle delivering an urgent warning.

With its garish colours, with the bodies and buildings distorted as if in agony, the overall image hardly conveys the sense of fun that a carnival scene at first would imply, even if the procession and the instrument are reminiscent of the mysterious strangeness of earlier works featuring musicians. No, the world arising in front of our eyes, only to promptly fall apart again, is one in which everything is off kilter, where "flesh and stone" – as sociologist Richard Sennett referred to Western civilization's fundamental connection between bodies and cities – are at risk of being torn asunder.

This is hardly surprising, considering that the Great War was in its second year when Feininger, working in his home studio in Berlin Zehlendorf, committed a situation to his canvas reflecting the volatile circumstances of an artist, as a foreigner far from home standing on the shifting sands of a world engaged in brutal combat. More than this, the image symbolically distills the unhinged existential reality that was by then confronting the peoples of Europe in those nightmarish years, who were being dragged ever deeper into a war from which no one could possibly emerge the victor. These



Lyonel Feininger. Uprising. 1910. Oil/canvas. Museum of Modern Art, New York

are the thoughts arising when looking at this veritable danse macabre in which the stiff, antiquated hats so typical of Feininger's oeuvre since long have begun to flop about the figures' heads. One is inevitably reminded of the famous Expressionist poem *Weltende* from 1911, in which Jakob van Hoddis presciently foresaw the impending forces of doom right from the first stanza: "The hat flies off the Burgher's pointed head / The air resounds from every side as if with screaming. / Roof tilers plummet down / And break in two / And along the coastlines – or so one reads – / The floodtides rise." (Jakob van Hoddis: *Dichtungen und Briefe*, edited by Regina Nörtemann, Zurich 1987, p. 15).

"There is an anguish hovering over these pictures, the anguish of a man who, seized by a certain feeling, no longer can find the words to make himself understood in perfect clarity," wrote the art critic Paul Westheim in a 1917 issue of the journal *Das Kunstblatt*. "And all his longing really is nothing but the search for the functions that would give him the possibility to transfer this emotional involvement out of the work into others. One could well call him a 'Spitzweg of Cubism.'" (quoted from: Lyonel Feininger: *Menschenbilder*, *ibid.*, p. 136 et seq.) Although one momentarily can appreciate the wit behind this bon mot, it is not hard to understand why Feininger – who disdained being compared to any other painter, and all the more so to a traditionalist like Spitzweg – resolutely rejected this association.

What strikes us immediately about the painting is its primary palette of bold orange, yellow, and greenish hues. Particularly distinctive are the closely spaced hatch lines, a potent painterly gesture which Feininger uses to clearly accentuate the ground, the roofs of the houses, the attire, and even the faces of all the figures, thus adding a synesthetic "vibrato" that seems to make the entire visual space oscillate wildly, creating a gaily coloured counterpoint – perceptible to the, yes: listening ear of the viewer – to the three azure bursts of sound that shoot out across the glaringly bright backdrop straight out of the tuba's blood-red maw.

Writing in the journal *Der Deutsche* in 1905 – before Feininger had created any of his oil paintings – Ludwig Brehm outlined incisive insights into Feininger's technique and the evolution of his style from caricature; these hold all the more true for *Trompetenbläser*

from 1915: "You have to refer to Bruno Paul's experiments with colour to appreciate the purity of Feininger's style. There, desolate chaos; here, the law of colourful multiplicity. And in his kaleidoscope, the linear figures nevertheless converge with such firm contours. But they are creations of the colours that rhythmically collide, not coloured surfaces. This creative approach, it seems to me, has more of a future than the graphic symbol-writing of, say, Heine, which is becoming an ossified practice in our own times already." (quoted from: *Lyonel Feininger: Menschenbilder*, *ibid.*, p. 133). As it happened, Feininger would prove to be the only great carica-



Lot 10

turist of the Wilhelmine period later to achieve world renown as an artist. (The only exception being the aforementioned Bruno Paul, who subsequently found success as an architect and designer).

Ulrich Luckhardt, perhaps the leading expert in Feininger's oeuvre, also has drawn attention to the key role that precisely the *Trompetenbläser* was to play in the artist's subsequent evolution in terms of form. "Nothing in this painting recalls the large, clearly articulated architectures, the beach paintings, or the variations of earlier figural representations. What surprises is this style of immediate spontaneity, whose painted linearity – almost reminiscent of children's drawings – displaces the composed surface. In its stead, there is the austerity of dense coloured lines, which do not so much structure and hold together the background as they seem to explode it. *Trompetenbläser im Dorf* embodies the renouncement, which can be observed time and again, even in Feininger's later works, of strict, constructed form in order to embrace formal independence. It was a counter-image from which he drew strength for something new." (Ulrich Luckhardt: *Lyonel Feininger*. Munich, 1989, p. 94).

With his aesthetic vision, particularly of architecture, that initially was informed by French Cubism and subsequently was honed based on his own explorations, Feininger gradually gained increasing recognition as a painter from 1917 onwards, when Herwarth Walden, owner of the gallery *Der Sturm* in Berlin, gave him his first major solo exhibition. As a logical consequence, Walter Gropius asked Feininger to take charge of the printmaking workshop as head teacher two years later at the Weimar State Bauhaus school of design and architecture that he had established. This means that with *Trompetenbläser im Dorf* from 1915, we are a mere brushstroke away from the creative period in which the former caricaturist Lyonel Feininger – whose musician parents would have preferred to see him pursue a career in music – began to assume his stature as a painter of world rank. Of course it would be some time yet before a bright young man named Karl Lagerfeld would stumble upon this once-in-a-century artist while rummaging through his parents' attic.



Lyonel Feininger. Self-Portrait. 1915. Oil/canvas. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

10^N Lyonel Feininger

1871 – New York – 1956

“Trompetenbläser im Dorf (Trumpeter in the Village)”. 1915

Oil on canvas. 60 × 75 cm (23 5/8 × 29 1/2 in.). Signed and dated lower right: Feininger 15. On the reverse upper left dated in pen and black ink: Sept. 1915. On the stretcher labels of the exhibitions Chemnitz 1926, San Francisco and Oakland 1937, New York and Detroit 1941 and New York 1944/45 (see below). Catalogue raisonné: Moeller 158 (<http://www.feiningerproject.org>; query date 31.3.2023). [3274]

Provenance

Estate of the artist (thence by descent to the present owner)

EUR 2,000,000–3,000,000

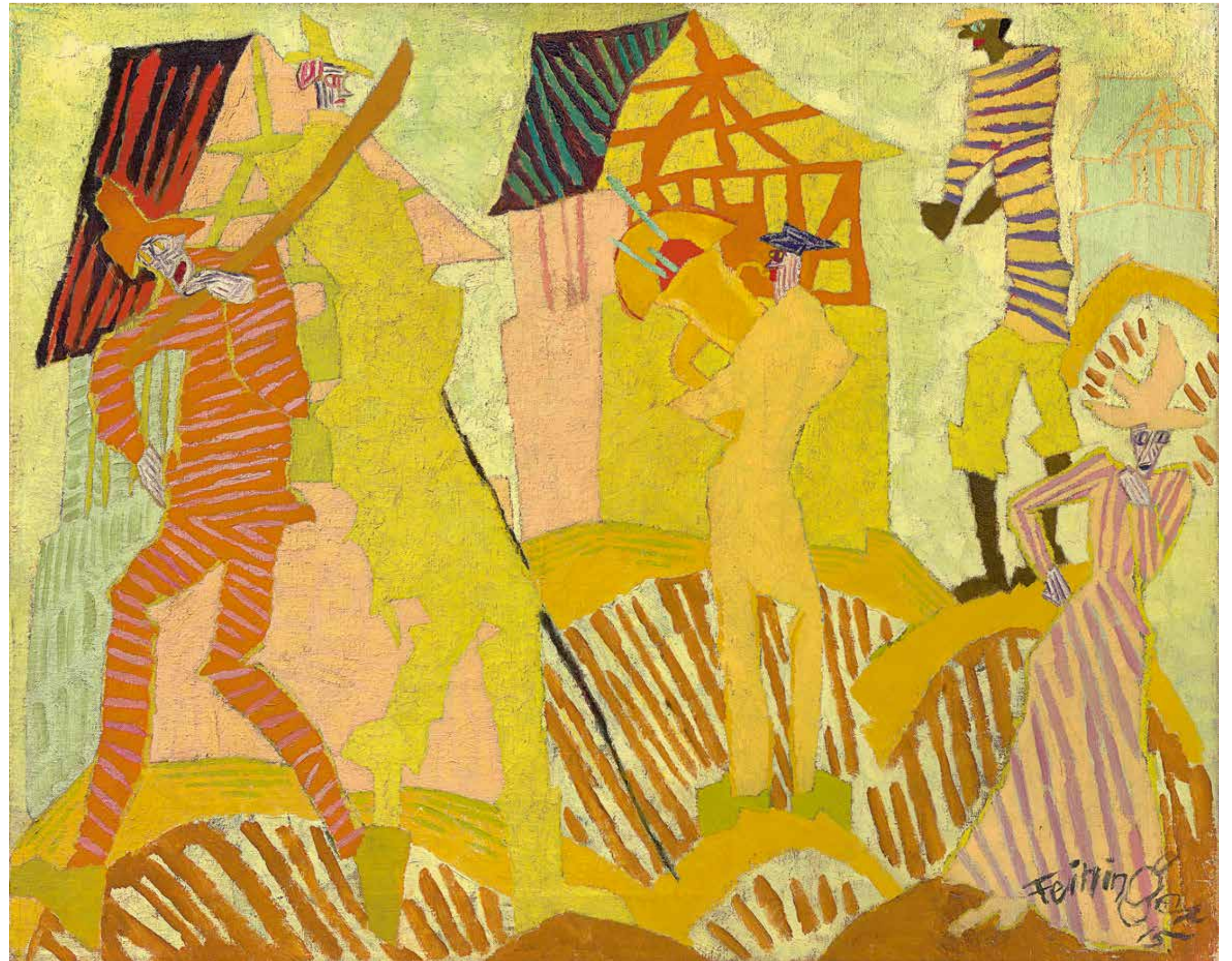
USD 2,170,000–3,260,000

Exhibition

Lyonel Feininger und O. Th. W. Stein. Chemnitz, Kunststätte, 1926, cat. no. 19 / Lyonel Feininger, Erich Heckel: Gemälde, Aquarelle, Zeichnungen. Ewald Mataré: Plastik. Breslau, Schlesisches Museum der Bildenden Künste, 1929, cat. no. 10 / Second Feininger Exhibition: 35 New Paintings, 130 Drawings and Prints. Oakland, Mills College Art Gallery; San Francisco, Museum of Art; Los Angeles, Art Association, University Gallery; Andover, Addison Gallery of American Art, und Seattle, Art Museum, 1937 / Lyonel Feininger. Exhibition of Paintings and Watercolors from 1919 to 1938. New York, Mrs. Cornelius J. Sullivan Gallery; Milwaukee, Art Institute; Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University, und Berea, Art College, 1938/39 / Exhibition of Paintings by Lyonel Feininger. Wellesley, The Art Museum of Wellesley College, 1940, cat. no. 25 / Lyonel Feininger. New York, Buchholz Gallery, and Detroit, Institute of Arts, 1941, cat. no. 4 / Feininger – Hartley. New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1944/45, p. 46 / Lyonel Feininger. Poughkeepsie, Vassar College Art Gallery; Boston, Symphony Orchestra Hall; Arnherst, College Art Gallery; San Francisco, Museum of Art; St. Louis, City Art Museum; St. Paul, Gallery and Art School; Fort Worth, Museum of Art Association; Buffalo, Albright Art Gallery; Tula, Philbrook Art Center, and Louisville, J. B. Speed Memorial Museum, 1945/46 / Expressionism, 1900–1955. Minneapolis, Walker Art Center; Boston, The Institute of Contemporary Art; San Francisco, Museum of Art; Cincinnati, Art Museum and Contemporary Arts Center; Baltimore, Museum of Art, and Buffalo, The Albright Art Gallery, 1956, ill. p. 18 / Lyonel Feininger. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, 1968, cat. no. 4 / Lyonel Feininger. New York, Marlborough-Gerson Gallery Inc., 1969, cat. no. 12, w. ill. / Masterpieces of German Expressionism at the Detroit Institute of Arts. Detroit, Institute of Arts, 1982 / Lyonel Feininger. Menschenbilder. Eine unbekannte Welt. Hamburg, Kunsthalle, 2003/04, cat. no. 98, w. ill. / Lyonel Feininger. At the Edge of the World. New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, and Montreal, Museum of Fine Arts, 2011/12, p. 252 and p. 78, ill. 85

Literature and illustration

Julia Feininger: Œuvrekatalog (der Ölgemälde). In: Hans Hess (ed.): Lyonel Feininger. Stuttgart, Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1959, cat. no. 147, ill. / Ulrich Luckhardt: Lyonel Feininger. Munich, Prestel-Verlag, 1989, p. 94, no. 23, ill. p. 95



Learn more!