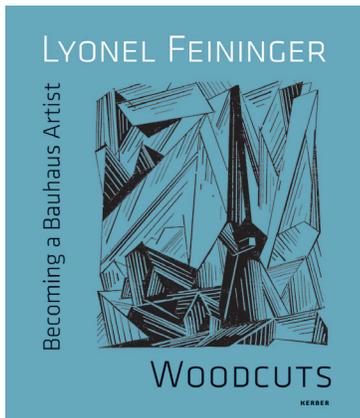


BOOK REVIEW



*Lyonel Feininger: Woodcuts:
Becoming a Bauhaus Artist*

By Björn Egging, translated by Steven Lindberg

272 pages, 233 color and 19 black-and-white illustrations

Kerber Verlag, Bielefeld, Germany, 2014
\$70

Cut to the Quick: What Feininger Learned from Woodcut

By Brian D. Cohen

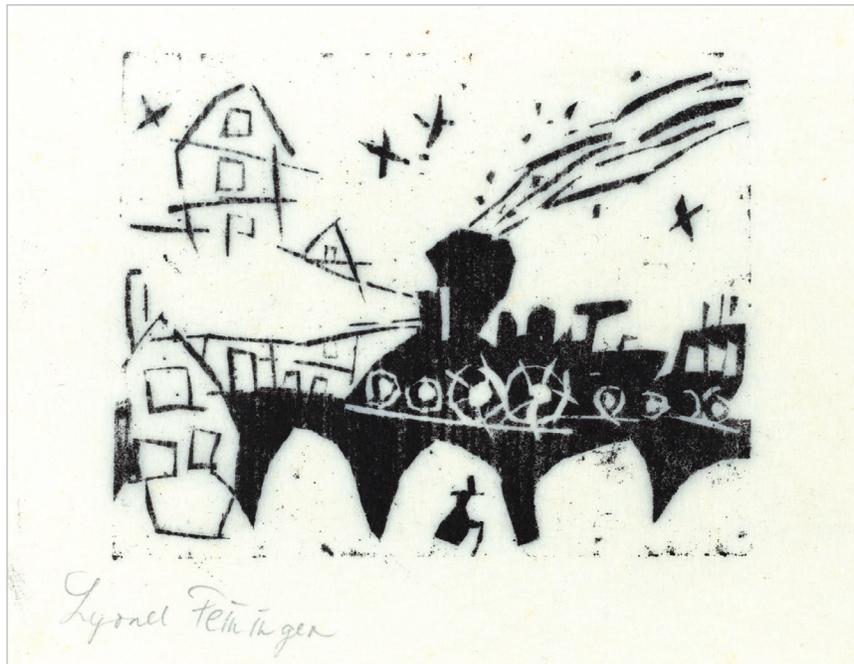
Painters attracted by printmaking often find that the medium offers them new opportunities for artistic expression, even when they use it to address existing themes in their work. For Lyonel Feininger (1871–1956), however, his work in woodcut not only developed alongside his painting but also allowed a radical re-envisioning of his visual syntax after a fallow period during World War I. He clearly found woodcut to be a powerfully compelling medium; indeed, he created most of the 320 woodcuts in his oeuvre within a three-year period between the spring of 1918, when he was living in Paris, and the winter of 1920, when he was teaching at the Bauhaus in Weimar (where he had been appointed first Master of Form by Walter Gropius in 1919). During this period of frenzied work, Feininger completed some 237 woodcuts in which he reduced form to an idiom of shifting planes and abrupt reversals, intermingling figure and ground as he began to explore avant-garde forms, if not themes. [On Feininger, see also *Art in Print* Sep-Oct 2014].

The exhibition “Lyonel Feininger: Woodcuts: Becoming a Bauhaus Artist” drew on the collection of Dr. Hermann Klumpp, a family friend who stored some of Feininger’s work in Quedlinburg when the artist fled Nazi Germany in 1937. The catalogue reproduces 169 prints, including nearly all the woodcuts published in Leona E. Prasse’s catalogue raisonné, *Lyonel Feininger: A Definitive Catalogue of his Graphic Work* (Cleveland Museum of Art, 1972). The preface and essay by curator Björn Egging is divided broadly into two sections, the first concentrating on the woodcuts of 1918–20 and the second on those made between 1921 and 1937, with illustrations of the artist’s related lithographs, etchings, paintings and drawings. The texts are punctuated by brief insets on Feininger’s biography and his role at the Bauhaus, and include Gropius’s original curriculum as well as a selection of letters and quotations from the artist (many on his own woodcut-printed letterhead).

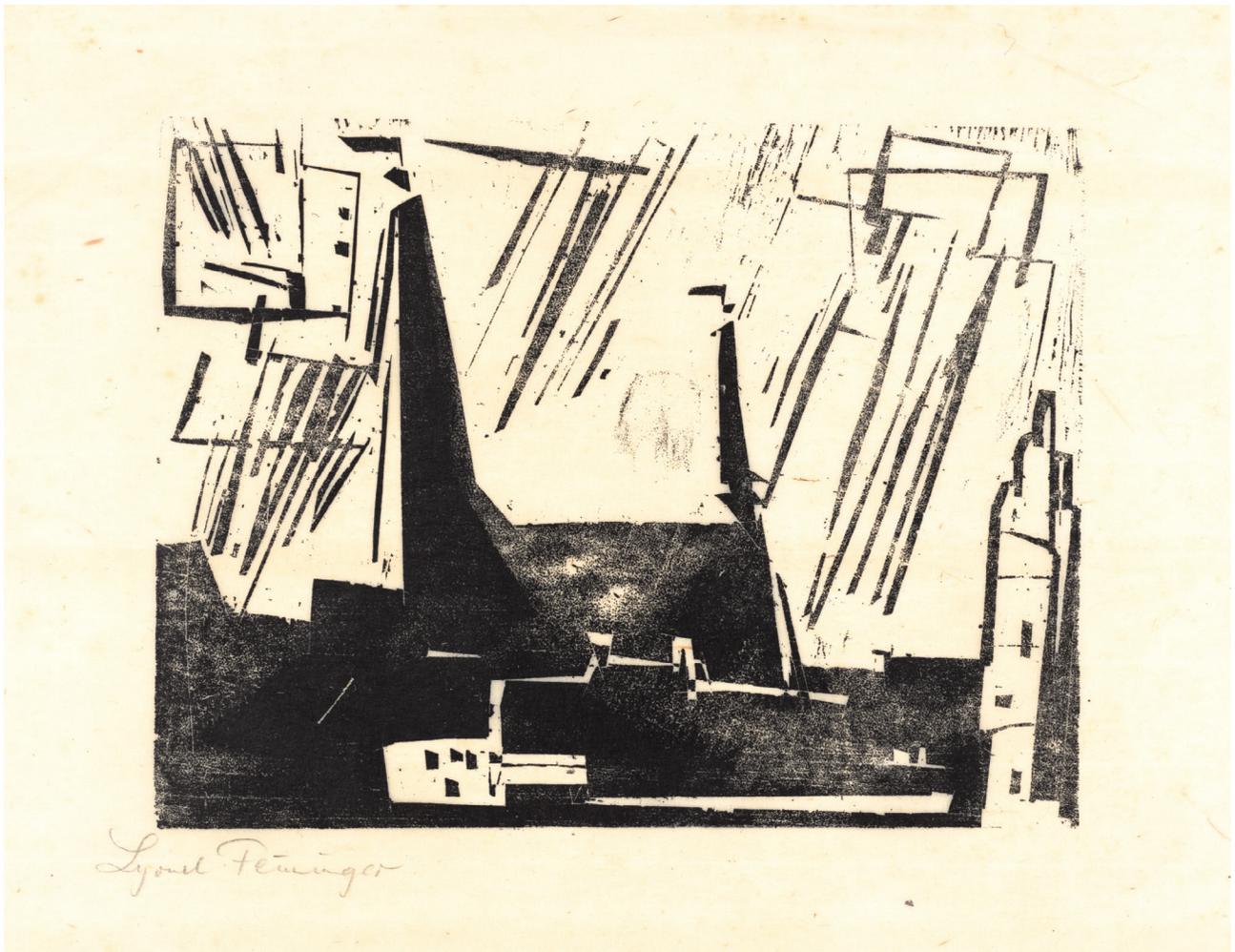
The craftsmanship involved in carving images from woodblocks and the challenge of working in black and white seems to have driven Feininger’s reductive analysis in these small, extraordinarily vibrant sheets, works that became a testing ground for the radical economy of means and investigation of new

artistic forms evidenced in much of his subsequent work. Feininger’s favored subjects—fir trees, churches, villages and the architecture of northern Germany, as well as the ships and harbors of the Baltic coast—were nonetheless, like his chosen print medium, highly traditional, even folkloric. The Gothic church in *Gelmeroda*, located southwest of Weimar, for example, seems to have been a particularly fruitful subject for him. Feininger first drew it in 1906 and it became a recurrent motif in his work; in addition to numerous drawings and prints, he produced 13 oil paintings of the church between 1913 and 1936 in which he incorporated Cubist and Futurist idioms. In woodcuts such as *Gelmeroda* from 1920 (cat. 154) and *Gelmeroda* (small block, 1921; cat. no. 103), Feininger translates the silhouette of the church and its immediate environs into bold Cubist geometries of craggy, intersecting black and white lines. The woodcuts of this period remind us, too, of Feininger’s early career as a cartoonist and illustrator, reflected in the playfulness of prints like *Zug auf der Brücke* (Locomotive on the Bridge, 1918; cat. 65) and *Die Eisenbahnbrücke* (Railroad Viaduct, 1919; cat. 123), both of which suggest children’s book illustrations.

Egging, in his essay “Becoming a Bauhaus Artist: Lyonel Feininger’s



Lyonel Feininger, *Zug auf der Brücke* (Locomotive on the Bridge) (1918), woodcut, image 9.2 x 11.6 cm, sheet 15.1 x 24.4 cm. (Prasse W81 State II). ©Lyonel-Feininger-Galerie, Quedlinburg and ©VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.



Lyonel Feininger, *Stadtkirche (Town Church)* (1919), woodcut, image 20.0 x 26.0 cm, sheet 32.5 x 38.4 cm. (Prasse W147). ©Lyonel-Feininger-Galerie, Quedlinburg and ©VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

Woodcuts and their Significance as Sources of Artistic Inspiration,” provides a chronological outline of the parallel development of Feininger’s ideas in his paintings, prints and drawings during the course of his career, paying close attention to his longstanding relationship to specific motifs and to the villages in the Weimar region. He also situates Feininger’s work in the context of the woodcut revival in Germany during this period, acknowledging the influence of artists associated with Die Brücke, such as Karl Schmidt-Rottluff and Erich Heckel, and with Der Blaue Reiter, with whom Feininger showed at Der Sturm gallery in Berlin in 1913.

The elegant reproductions of the woodcuts in the catalogue are generally printed one to a page with a catalogue entry below. The vivid colors of the many special papers used by Feininger,

especially the brilliant yellow of Japanese Kozo paper of *Die Eisenbahnbrücke* and *Auf dem Quai Mauer* (On the Sea Wall, 1921; cat. 159) are beautifully represented here too. Curiously, given its title, though the book provides background information about the Bauhaus, Egging barely touches on Feininger’s artistic connection to it. Instead, he focuses on the remarkable accomplishment represented by Feininger’s woodcuts, especially those made between 1918 and 1920, arguing convincingly that the artist’s entire subsequent career as a painter emerged from the discoveries made in woodcut, where he achieved his goal of “the simplest form for a pictorial expression of enduring validity.”² ■

Brian D. Cohen is an educator, writer, printmaker and painter. His essays on arts education are a regular feature of the Arts and Culture section of the Huffington Post.

Notes:

1. Published to accompany the exhibition “Auf dem Weg zum Bauhaus-Künstler. Lyonel Feininger. Holzschnitte,” Lyonel-Feininger-Galerie, Quedlinburg, 6 Sept 2013–6 Jan 2014 and Kunsthalle Emden, 25 Jan–11 May 2014.
2. Egging, 31.