

# Gifts to the City at the Edge of the World: the Feiningers

By Ricki Morse



"*The Modern Sea, The Modern City* is a quintessential exhibition. It has it all—from the dynamic relationship between early German expressionism and American photographic art, displayed through the works of a father and son—to the rare occasion of work drawn exclusively from our permanent collection, including some exhibited for the first time.

And set against Lyonel and Andreas's departure from Germany to the United States prior to World War II, celebrated in Andreas' famous photographs of New York City."

**Lyonel Feininger** (1871-1956) grew up in New York City, the son of German/American family of classical musicians. He was trained as a violinist and at 26 moved to Germany to further his musical training, but was quickly swept into the dynamism of emerging modernism, from cubism to Italian futurism and abstraction. He learned woodcut

printing, the combining of traditional methods with contemporary ideas, an approach combining the old with the new which came to embody his art philosophy.

He studied painting in Hamburg, Berlin and Paris, where in 1906, working as a cartoonist for German magazines and the Chicago Tribune, he welcomed his first son, Andreas. His paintings, drawings and prints of cities and sea began drawing the enthusiastic attention of avant-garde groups Der Blaue Reiter, The Blue Rider, and Der Brücke, The Bridge, and in 1913 he exhibited with them in Berlin.

In 1919 Lyonel was named as the first faculty appointment by Walter Gropius, the founder of the Bauhaus School in

Weimar, famous for the study of modern architecture and design. As director of the print workshop, he brought not only an affinity for contemporary movements but a now rare academic rigor.

The 1925 Bauhaus School originated and developed the essential elements of Modernist architecture expressed in the building's design.



Lyonel Feininger, *Self Portrait*, 1915, oil on canvas. The Cubist and Expressionist influences combine in breaking the face into geometric, reflective planes framing the intense gaze of the artist. The background arch echoes Lyonel's inclusion of tradition.



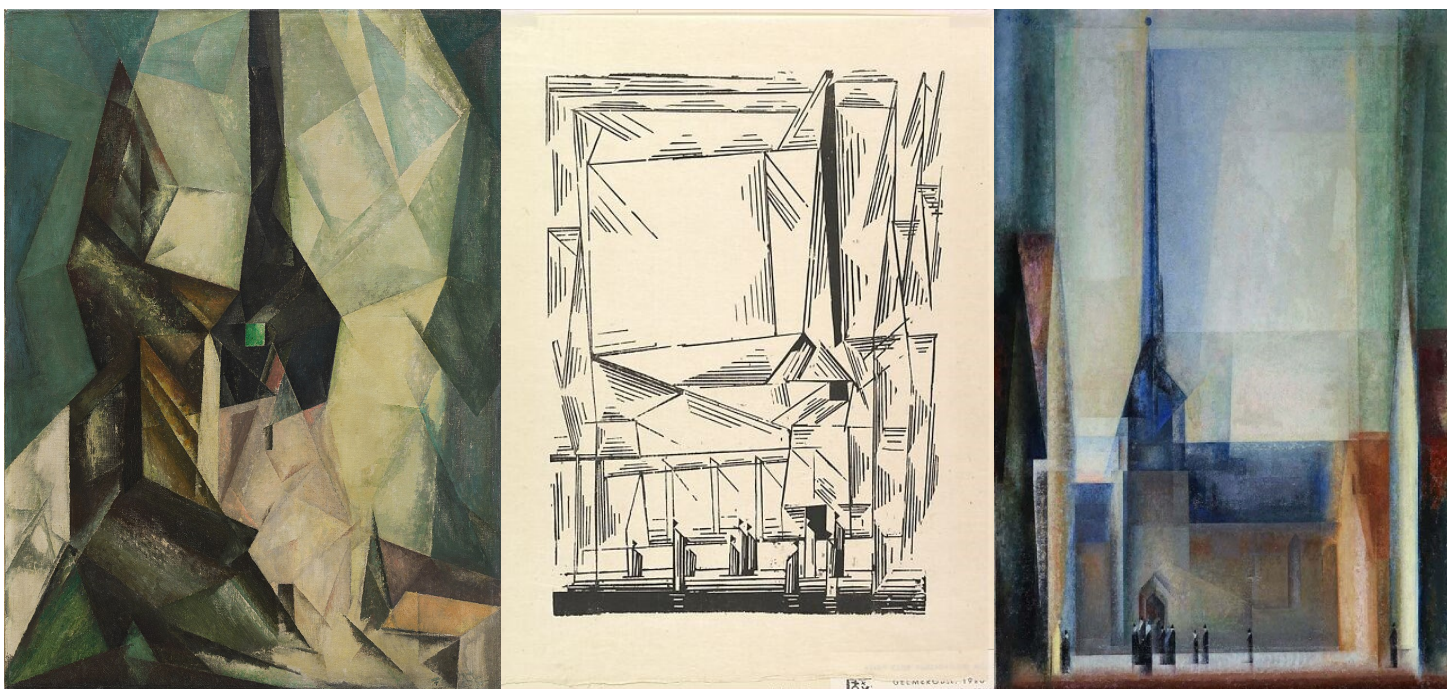
Andreas Feininger, *Portrait of Father*, 1951, gelatin silver print.



When Bauhaus moved to Dessau in 1925 Lyonel followed as an artist in residence, counting two of his sons as Bauhaus students.

In 1924 Lyonel founded Der Blau Vier (the Blue Four) with his long-time friends, Vassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee and Alexej Jawlensky, opening a gallery show in New York City followed by many shows in German galleries.

In 1933 the Bauhaus School was closed in the face of growing Nazi power, and European Jews began an exodus as they were able to find havens elsewhere. In 1937 Lyonel accepted an artist-in-residence position at Mills College in Oakland, California. The Feininger family was among the fortunate. Lyonel was an American citizen; thus they had a ready haven, and in 1938 he brought his family to New York City, which he referred to as "the city at the edge of the world," a very European point of view! In 1945 MOMA heralded Leonard's prominence in the art world. The exhibition was a joint retrospective of Marsden Hartley and Lyonel Feininger, displaying the prominent German contemporary artist with the current American emerging modernist.



The Gothic church of Gelmeroda in Thuringe was a favored subject from 1906 to 1936. By studying and comparing them, we gain a sense of Lyonel's unique use of cubist, abstract and expressionist approaches. Left, *Gelmeroda IV*, 1915, oil on canvas, Guggenheim Museum. The spire is central surrounded by the faceted reflections of surrounding walls and houses, almost huddled around the church, like worshippers. Center, *Gelmeroda* from our exhibition, a 1920 woodcut of the church, explores the contrasting angles of the spire among buildings and church goers. Right, *Gelmeroda IX*, 1926, oil on canvas, Germany, Essen. A critic says of this work, "The painting is streamlined to give a transfigured vision of the building; this is achieved by depicting the light in coloured planes, which seem to form echoes of the building in space. Feininger was a composer and musician who envisaged seriality as a recurrent musical motif, inspired by Bach's fugues."



Lyonel Feininger, *The Green Bridge II (Grüne Brücke II)*, 1916, oil on canvas, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, NC. A working class Parisian street passing under an arch is enlivened by repetitions of the arch shapes throughout the image, from the bodies, to the reflected light on the arch and the tree branches rising above the purple houses, dividing them into rounded roofs. The yellow light of an open door competes for our attention with the figures above the arch—a very lively colorful scene, the segmented figures softened by the moving curves into a cubist dance, overseen by Lyonel’s ubiquitous arch.

organizations, hailed as, “one of the greatest architects who helped create photography as we know it today.”

Andreas Feininger *Self Photograph*, 1974, cover of **Life Magazine**.

**Andreas Feininger** (1906-1999) Born in New York, he moved with his family to Berlin as a child and exercised his musical roots in his high school jazz band. When his father joined the faculty at the Bauhaus School, the family moved to Weimer, and drawn by his interest in design he dropped out of high school at 16 to enter the Bauhaus where he graduated as a cabinet maker in 1925. Following the Bauhaus, the family moved to Dessau where Andreas entered a nearby college, continued architectural studies and became interested in photography, encouraged and tutored by László Moholy-Nagy, a neighbor and Bauhaus faculty member. The new artistic field of photography was not yet taught at the Bauhuas.

Now 30, Andreas struck out on his own to study photography, moved to Sweden, and in 1939 immigrated to the United States where he established himself as a freelance photographer devoted to capturing the architecture, spirit and flow of New York City as well as intense, meticulous shots of nature—leaves, trees, sea-shells, only rarely portraits of people. By 1943 his iconic views of the city were widely published and admired, drawing the attention of editors at *Life Magazine*, and he soon joined the staff, beginning a 20-year association and providing ongoing “gallery space” for his work.

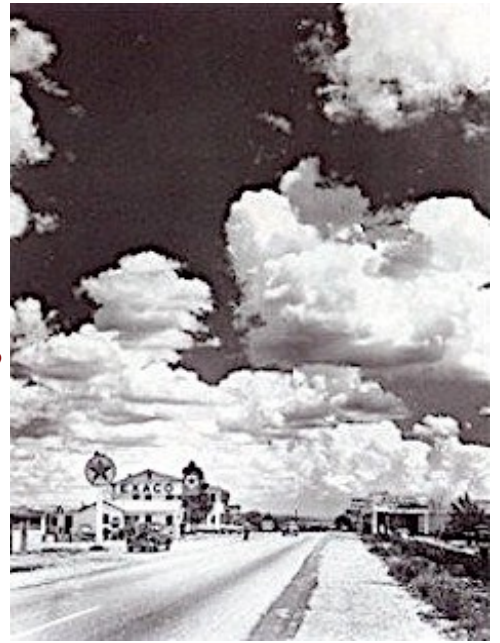
Interestingly Andreas continued another family tradition as an educator. He became the leading scholar of photographic techniques and theories, publishing over 40 manuals and studies of photography. Often honored by professional





An early 1930 Andreas photograph confronts photographic issues most avoid: a poorly lit central figure, a precarious angle and no ground anchor, but it works marvelously. *Gruss von ben*, 1930, silver gelatin print, Metropolitan Museum's "Welcome from above" lives up to its title. The brightly lit horizontal pole places us at its foot, while the welcoming extended arm balances the image providing a personal relevance.

Right: In this 1953 *Life Magazine* cover by Andreas, the im-



age takes a viewpoint similar to "Greeting From Above". Clouds

become our central figure and the highway divider line directs our gaze. In each the fine details are clearly seen, the focus meticulous. Andreas preferred black and white photography for the control it provides over the final image.



Andreas took these two color images as illustrations in his most famous book, *The Complete Photographer*, 1969, Prentice-Hall: New Jersey, pp 240-241. Under them he wrote, (Left): "Significant Color. Removal of red-hot Pyroceram missile nose cones from an electric furnace. (Right:) cast-off skins of stoneflies and mayflies on horsetails. I made both picture in color because color was the most important prop-



erty of these subjects. Although each is virtually a monochrome, in a single color, without this color, in black and white, the rendition would have been meaningless." ◊

#### Bibliography

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