

“Lyonel Feininger’s Watercolor *Eutin I*: Reflections on the Origins, Composition, and Vision” (in English) in *Festschrift for Ernst Dick*, edited by Winder McConnel. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 2009. Publisher’s official version: <http://www2.ku.edu/~germanic/eutinfeininger.shtml>, Open Access version: <http://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/dspace/>.

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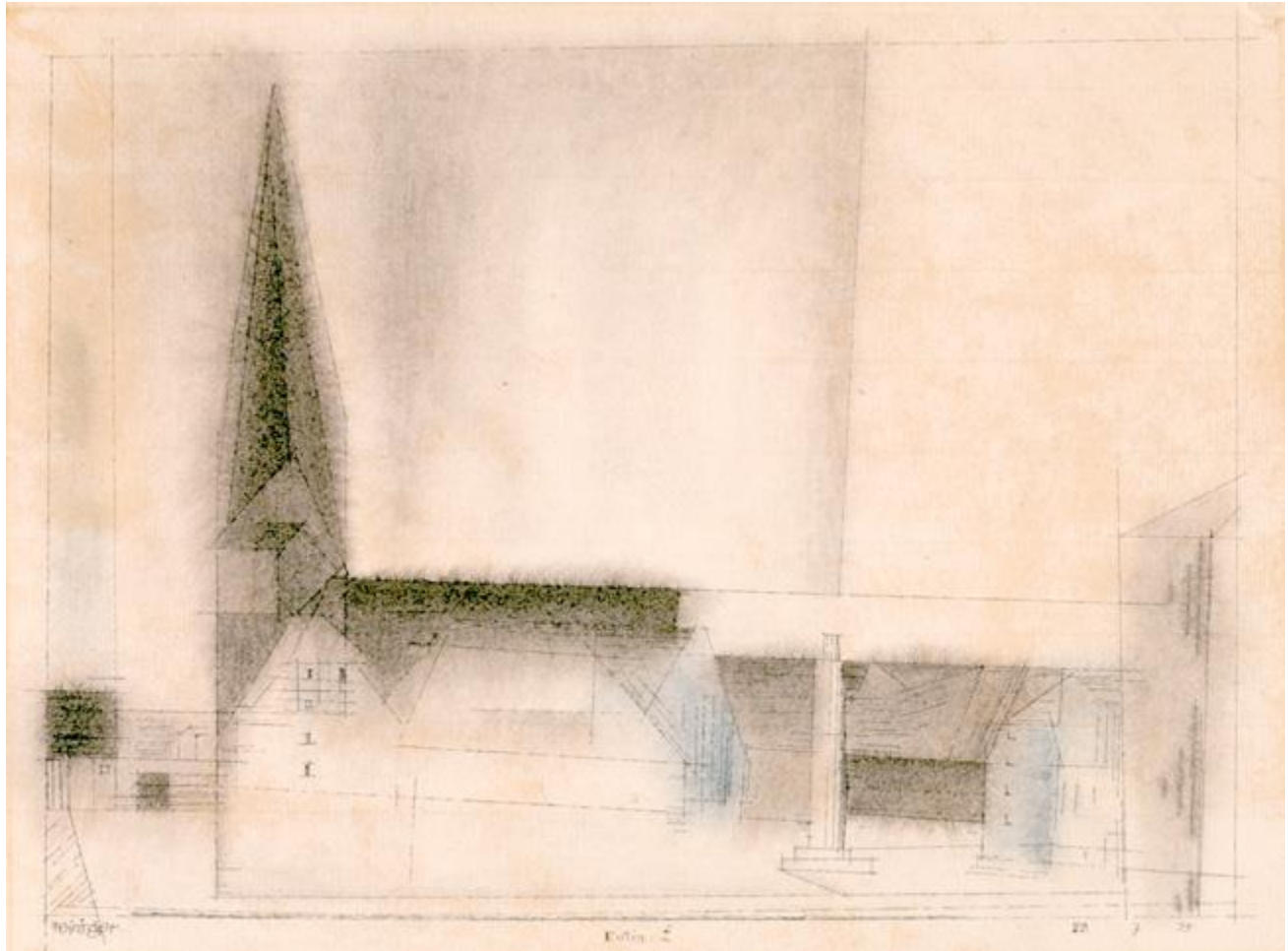
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Lyonel Feininger's Water Color of Eutin



The art gallery of Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin, is the proud owner of Lyonel Feininger's original water color of 1925. Feininger (1871-1956) lived and worked in Germany for most of his career as an artist. He participated in the exhibitions of expressionistic artists and was referred to as one of the "Blue Four," (together with Javlenky, Kandinsky, and Klee). One of the teachers of the Bauhaus, after 1933 he was labeled as a "degenerate artist" by the Nazis. He returned to the United States in 1937, where he became a friend of Lawrence artist Albert Bloch.

The art museum of Eutin, previously unaware of this work of art, is tentatively planning an exhibition of Feininger's works some time in the coming years to feature Feininger's abstract view of St. Michael's church and surrounding buildings.

Lyonel Feininger’s Watercolor *Eutin I*: Reflection on the Origins, Composition, and Vision

Hier im Atelier bemühe ich mich ganz stark, auf die Höhe wieder zu gelangen, und bei wenigstens einem der vielen angefangenen Bildern das Stadium der Verklärung zu erreichen. Einstweilen ist es eben hartes Arbeiten; kaum, dass hier und dort ein Stellchen ein bisschen durchleuchtet in der Entmaterialization.¹

These words, which Feininger addressed to his wife in 1925, during which he created his watercolor *Eutin I*. The difficulties described are at the heart of the artist’s unique contribution. An understanding of the high goals Feininger set for himself and of how he tried to meet the challenges may hold the key to his world of abstract lines and spaces. A painting by Feininger is instantly recognizable. What was his secret? Feininger struggled to articulate his aims, and he complained about the painful work that the completion of a particular painting demanded. Ultimately, much remains a mystery, but we can at least reflect on the background and factors that played a role in the creation of a particular picture.

A series of coincidences connects and reunites the artist of *Eutin I*, the present location of the painting in the United States, and the object of the painting, Eutin’s central square, its marketplace, and the St. Michaelis church. Although there have been many connections between Americans and Eutinians in recent years, especially since the establishment of a sister city relationship between Lawrence, Kansas and Eutin in 1989, the picture of Eutin by a prominent representative of early modern art has gone unnoticed. There is an occasion, therefore, to make up for this omission (Es besteht also ein Nachholungsbedarf und ein Anlass) and to reflect upon a legacy that began in Germany with the famous artists of the *Blaue Reiter*, above all, Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc.

The Ostholstein Museum in Eutin possesses and exhibits a number of paintings by Albert Bloch and thereby a link to the expressionistic era. Feininger and Bloch both Americans, participated in the history of modern art in the early twentieth century. Bloch had exhibited with the *Blaue Reiter* from the beginning; Feininger, invited by Franz Marc, took part in the *Blaue Reiter* exhibition of 1913 at the Herwarth Walden Gallery in Berlin.² Feininger and Bloch became acquaintances in an exciting period of innovation in art and later formed a friendship in the United States. Their correspondence sheds light on the creative process behind pictures such as *Eutin I*. Although Feininger’s and Bloch’s styles of painting were different, in many respects they held on to the visionary innovations of the *Blaue Reiter* years.

Both Feininger and Bloch were Americans by birth (Bloch born in St. Louis, Feininger in New York). Bloch returned to the United States after World War I, and from 1923 to 1947 taught art and art history at the University of Kansas. Feininger remained in Germany in the twenties

and early thirties, and, along with Walter Gropius, Paul Klee, and Vassily Kandinsky, became a prominent artist and teacher at the Bauhaus. The infamous Nazi “Degenerate Art” exhibition included Feininger’s art and held up his work, along with the works of other Expressionist artists, to ridicule. Feininger abandoned Germany. In 1938, soon after his return to the United States, he and Bloch renewed their acquaintance. Feininger wrote to Bloch: “As for Germany, the country and *das Volk* are no longer the same and there remains not a corner of the land which has not become penetrated and destroyed forever by the Nazis.”³ In response to an invitation by Feininger, Bloch began to spend his summers in a peaceful retreat in Falls Village, Connecticut, where the two artists rented cottages near each other. They often met and shared views.

At the University of Kansas in 1939, Bloch organized an exhibition of works by Feininger. Bloch purchased three woodcuts and donated them to the university’s art museum.

As youngsters, both Bloch and Feininger received musical training on the violin. Following his father’s footsteps, Feininger seriously considered a musical career—he engaged in public performance and in composition-- but when the time came to think in earnest about earning a living, both young artists began working for newspapers in the United States and Germany. Caricatures and the newly discovered form of comics were in demand, and both responded. Around the turn of the twentieth century, Feininger’s comics for the *Chicago Tribune* and Bloch’s for the *St. Louis Star* were at the earliest period of this new form. In Germany, both artists contributed caricatures to such journals as the *Lustige Blätter*. After World War I, both exhibited briefly at the Munich gallery of Hans Goltz.⁴ Such diversions, primarily undertaken for monetary gain, did not force them, however, to stray from their primary interest, which was painting.

Both Bloch and Feininger were sensitive to the possibilities of applying in their artwork compositional insights evident in great music. In this sense, neither could deny being influenced by Kandinsky, who explored such possibilities profoundly. Kandinsky investigated music as a means of opening new possibilities for the visual arts. In a letter dated April 9, 1911, Kandinsky wrote to Arnold Schönberg:

. . . Kunst, die das Glück besitzt, auf rein praktische Zwecke vollkommen zu verzichten. Wie lange wird wohl die Malerei darauf warten müssen? Und das Recht dazu (=Pflicht) hat sie auch: Farbe, Linie an und für sich — was grenzenlose Schönheit und Macht besitzen diese malerische Mittel. Und doch ist schon heute der klarere Ausgang dieses Weges zu sehen. Man darf heute von einer “Harmonielehre” auch hier träumen. Ich träume schon und hoffe, daß ich wenigstens die ersten Sätze zu diesem großen kommenden Buch aufstellen werde.⁵

Kandinsky was evidently thinking in terms of his own book, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, in which he formulated ideas about the abandonment of a materialistic view in favor of an inner vision.⁶ He proposed a dematerialization of objects for the sake of inner harmony and beauty. Bloch’s early work reflect Kandinsky’s influence: for example, his St. Louis *Mirror*

cover of April 11, 1913, displaying a dancing figure in harmony with Beethoven’s C-Minor Symphony and his 1915 *Frieze für ein Musikzimmer*.⁷ Even later in his life Bloch retained the vocabulary that emerged in the *Blaue Reiter* years. He maintained that he sought to express on his canvas “eine vollkommene Vergeistigung des Dargestellten.”⁸ Feininger’s aim was achieving a spiritualization and dematerialization, analogous to a musical composition. Even more so than Bloch, he saw paintings as mysteries (“Rätsel”), behind which music was the spiritual force (“beseelende Kraft”).⁹

Eutin I found its way from Germany to the Wriston Art Galleries of Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin. It is surprising to see Eutin linked again to the name of Lawrence, though this time in a totally different location. The name Lawrence, both of the university in Wisconsin and the city in Kansas, have their origins in the 1850s, in the contentious time of pre-Civil War days, during which the struggle against slavery put the Midwest, but especially Kansas, in the center of national attention. The name “bloody Kansas” originated at this time. Amos Lawrence, a wealthy and idealistic businessman in Boston, a famous benefactor and advocate of education and a country free of slavery, generously supported the creation of a university that now bears his name in Wisconsin. He helped, at the same time, to make the city, which is also named after him, a fortress against an expansion of slavery into Kansas. Thus, a web of connections exists among diverse locations: the Eutin of Feininger’s picture, Lawrence in Wisconsin, and the city of Lawrence, which was for many years (1923–1961) the home of Albert Bloch.

Completed on July 22, 1925, Feininger’s *Eutin I* shows details of the city’s marketplace, surrounding buildings, and the prominent St. Michael’s church. The precise lines of the structures leave no doubt that the vantage point was in front of the city hall. *Eutin II*, which undoubtedly existed, appears to be lost. It is not found in the existing catalogues of Feininger’s works. Information about the precise date of Feininger’s visit to Eutin took place is also lacking. On the one hand, the record at Lawrence University contains the information that the artwork was acquired in 1950 from the Galerie Vömel in Düsseldorf. Because further documentation is lacking, it is impossible to determine with when this visit took. Such a visit could have taken place as early as 1922, when Feininger is known to have been close to Eutin, in Lübeck.¹⁰ Another possibility is 1923, before Feininger settled at the Baltic sea resort Deep (today Mrzeżyno in Poland).¹¹ A trip to Eutin might have taken place as late as 1924, when Feininger and his wife traveled together and visited a number of older cities.¹²

The Feininger correspondence, preserved in the Houghton Library manuscript collection; the drawings at the Busch-Reisinger Museum at Harvard University; and images from other collections allow us to reconstruct the unique features in the creation of *Eutin I*. When Feininger completed this picture in his Bauhaus studio in Weimar, he was engaged, as usual, in work on numerous seascapes, views of churches, old towns, marketplaces, and city halls. His image of Eutin is not unique; similar views of Ballstedt near Weimar,¹³ and Treptow an der Rega (today Trzebiatow in Poland, adjoining Deep),¹⁴ and Greifenberg in Pommern, also near Treptow) emerged at the same time.¹⁵

The work on *Eutin I* bears a most striking resemblance to *Marktplatz II* (which the Armin Moeller Gallery catalogue has identified as “Town Hall, Treptow on the Rega”), completed on July 19, 1925, just three days before *Eutin I*.¹⁶ The similarities and differences deserve closer examination. A drawing of the Treptow marketplace and church show how Feininger moved from a drawing to the more abstract final watercolor. In the following days Feininger abandoned this particular position in favor of one to the far right, looking toward the church with the town hall blocking all but the tower of the church. This particular position became his primary interest and focus.¹⁷ The result was *Marktplatz II*, which shows the marketplace extending to the entire foreground—considerable transformation between the initial drawing and the final picture. The main structure of Marienkirche appears to hide behind the city hall; in a sense, the city hall has become part of the church, and the tower is a natural part of the whole.

A similar transformation occurred in the process of creating *Eutin I*. The Michaeliskirche dominates the picture. The fountain that normally has the commanding position on the marketplace has shifted to the right to provide for an extensive open foreground. The buildings in front of the church and the fountain have become suggested spaces within hardly visible thin lines, subservient to the church structure. A broad stream of uniform light moves from the market through the buildings, from the fountain, and the church into the sky. This upward stream of brightness also confers on *Marktplatz II* a spiritual quality. The two works demonstrate the abandonment of the materialistic view and the creation of space, color, and lines with spiritual potential. There is no distinction between secular and religious entities; the two spheres join together to form a unity. The transition from drawing to painting and the attainment of unity and harmony reflect perhaps features of a musical composition, Feininger’s favorite analogy for the creative process in his art.

In a letter to Bloch, Feininger described the transformation from drawing to painting:

In my drawings, thank goodness, I have an immediate pleasure; they make it all the harder for me to paint. There are times when I hate painting; it causes me a lot of suffering. . . In the summer I do a great many sketches after Nature; my works are almost always composed after “*Notizen*,” but expurgated to the point of abstraction, of all naturalism.¹⁸

To provide a better sense of Feininger’s sense of his painful struggle to transform the seen objects into paintings, Feininger turned again to the analogy of music. He wrote to Bloch about his plans for the summer in Connecticut:

I shall bring along my violin [and] practice; I had given up playing for many years, but find taking up the practice wonderfully interesting and conducive to concentration. Repeating a musical exercise, a passage, a bar, correcting a fault in intonation, drawing forth a clear tone—all these, practiced in my early youth, have been duplicated in my methods of correcting and disciplining in my painting. I destroy [and] re-build time and

again, a picture, until it satisfies me as a unity—it is the same in violin-practice until I have mastered the difficulties of a composition.¹⁹

Feininger’s pain in moving from drawing to painting reflects the challenging legacy of the *Blaue Reiter* and of Expressionism in general. Each painting was an experiment to resolve the apparently irresolvable competition between the sensual world and its elusive spiritual forms. The process of creating an abstracted images was necessarily moving away from the naturalistic portrayal of the drawing. It involved a radical simplification (*Vereinfachung*), and the frugal use of lightly drawn lines to suggest objects or spaces. Paradoxically, Feininger insisted on remaining true to the essence of the objects and spaces under scrutiny. The difficult search for a spiritual center of gravity and unity remained his compositional focus and guiding principle, just as in music. The move to abstraction did not entail the abandonment the object. *Eutin I*, though presenting a dematerialized and mythical old town square, still remains remarkably precise, and thus loyal to its original source and inspiration.

Notes

¹ „In my studio I am making a great effort to reach artistic excellence and, at least in one of the many pictures, which I had previously started, experience a stage of transfiguration. This is difficult work. Only infrequently do I get a glimpse of a spiritualization of matter.“ Brief vom 11. Dezember 1925 im Lyonel-Feininger-Archiv der Harvard Universität, Houghton Library, bMS Ger 146.1 (1959–2103) Box 14.

² Albert Bloch had six paintings in the first exhibition of the Blue Rider in Munich. Feininger’s response to Marc’s invitation (“Ihre freundliche Einladung hat mir eine große Freude gemacht”) is found in the National Germanic Museum of Nuremberg.

³ A copy of Feininger’s letter of December 18, 1938, to Bloch is found in the Bloch collection of the Max Kade Center for German-American Studies at the University of Kansas.

⁴ A Feininger exhibition, often overlooked, took place in December 1918 in the gallery of Hans Goltz in Munich. <http://www.bad-bad.de/hansgoltz/feininger.htm>. Cf. *Albert Bloch. Der amerikanische Blaue Reiter*, hg. von Henry Adams, Margaret C. Conrads und Annegret Hoberg (Munich: Prestel, 1997), p. 12.

⁵ [Music is the] art that has the good fortune to abstain totally from practical goals. How long does painting have to wait for that? Actually, it has the right, even duty, for just that.: color and the line, taken on its own terms, have a limitless potential for beauty and power. And yet the clear [. . .] beginnings of this path are visible today. One may be permitted to dream about a „theory of harmony.“ I am dreaming now and hope that I will at least formulate the first sentences for the plan of this ambitious book.“ *Wassily Kandinsky und Arnold Schönberg. Der Briefwechsel*, cf. Jelena Hahl-Koch (Stuttgart, 1993), p. 22.

⁶ Cf. Kandinsky’s comment of December 1911 about the futuristic, purely spiritual music of Schoenberg. Wassily Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kuns*, (Bern, 1973. tenth edition), S. 49.

⁷ *Albert Bloch: Künstlerische und literarische Perspektiven*, hg. von Frank Baron, Helmut Arntzen und David Cateforis (Munich: Prestel, 1997), illustrations nos. 7 und 13.

⁸ *Albert Bloch: German Poetry in War and Peace. A Dual-Language Anthology*, hg. von Frank Baron, (Lawrence, Kansas, 1995), p. xvi.

⁹ Quoted on the basis of a newspaper article of January 27, 1961. Lyonel-Feininger collection of Harvard University; Houghton Library, Clippings (Box 9), bMS Ger 146 (1447).

¹⁰ Ulrich Luckhardt, *Lyonel Feininger* (Munich, 1989), p. 177.

¹¹ Erika Esau, *German Expressionism at Lawrence University. The La Vera Pohl Collection* (Appleton, Wisconsin, 1988), p. 46.

¹² Feininger wrote to his wife from Deep on August 25, 1926: “Das Schönste wäre, etwas herumzukommen, in die alten Städte, wie voriges Jahr.” („The best would be to travel around in the old cities, as we did last year.“) Lyonel-

Feininger collection of Harvard University; Houghton Library, bMS Ger 146.1 (1959–2103) Box 14. The gallery Vömel has no record for the sale of *Eutin I*.

¹³ *Lyonel Feininger. Drawings and Watercolors*, ed. by Serge Sabarsky Gallery (New York, 1979), pp. 60–61.

¹⁴ *Lyonel Feininger: Visions of City and Sea II. A Small Retrospective Exhibition of Drawings and Watercolors*, ed. by Achim Moeller (New York: Winter, 1985–1986).

¹⁵ *Lyonel Feininger: Erlebnis und Vision. Die Reisen an die Ostsee (1892–1936)*, ed. by Werner Timm (Regensburg, 1992), pp. 150–151.

¹⁶ *Lyonel Feininger: Visions of City and Sea II*. The picture is found on the back side of the cover.

¹⁷ Werner Timm shows Feininger’s Treptow drawings of July 9 and August 12, 1925 (in the vicinity of Feininger’s summer residence). *Lyonel Feininger: Erlebnis und Vision*, S. 150–151. Cf. *Rathaus von Treptow a. Rega im Jahre 1930* and Hans Hess, *Feininger* (Stuttgart, 1959), p. 278, no. 323.

¹⁸ March 7, 1939. Max Kade Center.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, April 17, 1939.