

# From the Baltic Sea to the East River in Manhattan

LYONEL FEININGER'S MARINE PICTURES FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE ARCHITECT WALTER BRUNE

*"[...] I was passionate about the sea from a young age and always wanted to be a marine painter,"* so explained the German-American painter Lionel Feininger (1871-1956) to his wife Julia about his recent marine paintings in March 1926 (exhib.cat. Berlin/Munich 1998, p. 311). Hardly any other statement summarised his lifelong, manifold occupation with ships – mostly historical boats and steamships – so concisely. It is not known whether Feininger himself sailed – but it is certain that the architect and urban planner Walter Brune (1926–2021), prominent far beyond Düsseldorf alone, was an enthusiastic sailor, and through this passion, compiled a magnificent collection of works by Feininger, primarily high-quality marine pictures.

Born in New York in 1871 and growing up close to the East River, the passing ships and lively riverbanks were among Feininger's earliest childhood memories. Years later, he reminisced about his former impressions: *"The shores of Manhattan were a wonderful spectacle, huge ships, forests of masts and yards [...] towering high above the fantastic prows [...]. The Hudson and the East River were also full of ships, schooners and paddle steamers"* (ibid, p. 311). His enthusiasm for maritime topics also included the construction of his own model sailing boats which he at first tested out on the lake in Central Park, and later with his sons Andreas and Theodore Lux on the Pomeranian River Rega. Later, Feininger and his sons met at real races which they watched and photographed from rowing boats: *"[...] we later took the model yachts to the Rega, and Andreas rowed us for almost two hours across and back with tireless patience behind the boats; they looked delightful and the banks of the Rega were soon full of elated spectators [...],* Feininger wrote from Deep on 15th June 1926. As Werner Timm wrote in the catalogue of the Feininger Retrospective in 1998, the artist created "some of the artistically most important ship paintings of the 20th century,



Walter Brune (1926–2021)



Lyonel Feininger and T. Lux Feininger with model yachts in Central Park, New York, 1951. Photograph by Andreas Feininger

although he was not a ship painter in the traditional sense – but rather a poet dealing with a metaphor.” (ibid. p. 308).

#### FROM EARLY SKETCHES IN NATURE OF SMALL FISHING BOATS TO WATERCOLOURS OF TALL SHIPS – FEININGER’S MARINE PICTURES UP UNTIL HIS MOVE TO NEW YORK IN 1937

Feininger spent the summer months of 1909 to 1912 on the island of Usedom, where his artistic interest in ships found their beginning. At that time, he drew and painted watercolours of the traditional fishing boats, yachts and tourist steamers, rendered in his abstracting crystalline language of form. The watercolour ‘Stadt’ from the Brune Collection belonged to these early marine pictures. Before a backdrop of towering houses and church turrets, a red sailing boat sails directly towards the viewer. Two smaller, neutral-coloured ships enhance the riverbank. Although the ship stands at the centre of the composition, Feininger’s main interest was in the various architectural buildings behind it – in contrast to the later seascapes.

The most important period for Feininger’s marine paintings encompassed the eleven years from 1924 to 1925 in Deep, a seaside resort directly on the mouth of the Rega near Köslin in Pomerania. It was in this region that Feininger came across a long, unspoiled stretch of coastline that would have fostered his portrayal of the sea. On a seemingly endless beach, the hilly dune scenery, and further west, the rugged cliffs, were the ideal conditions for his altered conception of beach and sea. In Deep, he first created pictures purely of the beach and clouds, still without boats, and only occasionally with individual figures. In works such as ‘Wolken überm Meer II’ (1923, private property) and ‘Wolke nach dem Sturm’ (1926, Cambridge, Busch-Reisinger Museum Harvard), Feininger was concerned with the highly abstracted representation of the mood of the clouds and – in the spirit of the Romantic Caspar David Friedrich – the depiction of the small human in relation to the infinity of the sky and sea. “*That is why I sit probably for hours on the beach*”, wrote Feininger to his wife in 1926: “*These thoughts, and how the sea, spread out before one with the immeasurable sky above, is capable of conjuring thoughts from the hidden depths, [...]*.” According to Timm, Feininger sought with these pictures to rise into the cosmic, to achieve harmony with the universe. Occasionally he even spoke of “*devotional, religiously felt works*” (ibid., p. 306).

During these years, he created numerous paintings and watercolours with stately sailing boats or small fishing boats which enlivened his seascapes

and also served to counter the dominating horizontal surfaces with vertical lines. ‘Die kleine Schonerbarke’ from 1923, also from the Brune Collection, is a splendid example of this. In the well-thought-out composition, he has placed the three-masted barque in the centre of the picture. Sailing slowly past the viewer, it is echoed to the left and right with further, but clearly smaller ships. Sky and sea occupy spaces of almost equal size which Feininger has marked with parallel, mostly wash lines. The most important artistic means here are the precise pen strokes and the subtle colouring of blue, black and grey with orange as an accent.

From the mid-1920s at the latest, Feininger sketched, watercoloured, carved and painted all kinds of ships – sailing ships with one, two or three masts, galleons, schooners, fishing cutters, sloops, and barques with square sails, but also motor-driven paddle and cargo steamers. Aside from his interest in the construction of the ships, they unfailingly stood as a metaphor for him as a symbol for the journey through life.

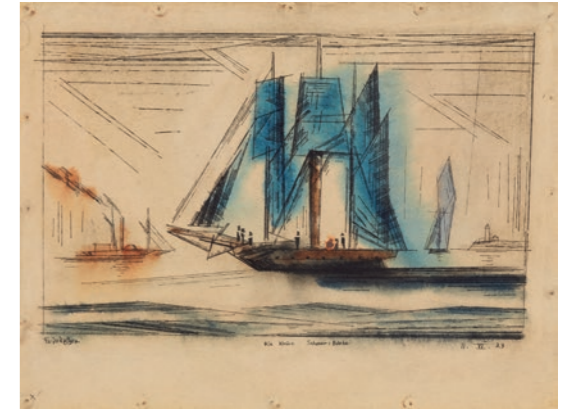
#### FEININGER’S RETURN TO AMERICA AND THE CONTRACT FOR THE ‘MARINE TRANSPORTATION BUILDING’

After almost fifty years in Europe, chiefly in Paris, Weimar and Berlin, the political conditions in Germany – the closing of the Bauhaus, exhibition ban and ultimately his wife Julia’s Jewish roots – compelled him to leave Germany and to return to the United States. On 11<sup>th</sup> June 1937, they left the mainland at Bremen in the passenger ship ‘Europa’ and travelled to New York. Despite the newly won freedom and beauty of the landscape, Feininger found the acclimatisation so difficult that he didn’t paint a new work for almost two years. “*Coming back after so many years was a strange experience. I left as a musician and came back as a painter. [...] I had to readapt in every respect and sometimes had the impression that my whole personality was wasting away inside me. [...] and so it took a while for me to sprout new shoots*” (quoted in Andreas Platthaus, Lyonel Feininger, Berlin 2021, p. 346).

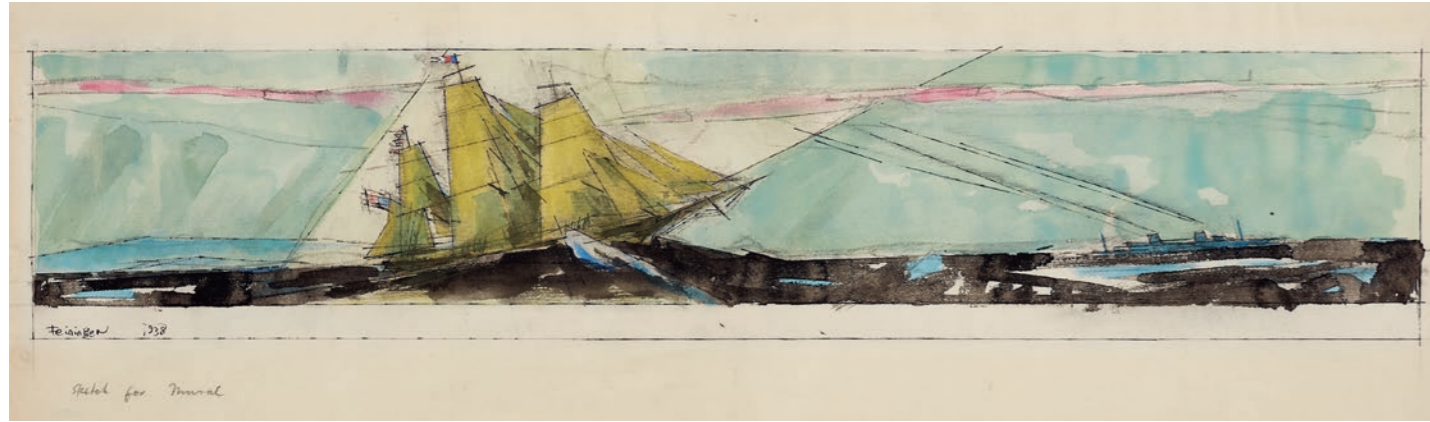
Having initially lived from the sale of the works the Feiningers had brought with them, an opportune contract for the economic development programme initiated by President Roosevelt came in 1938, for which Feininger was commissioned to design two monumental murals for the ‘Marine Transportation Building’ in New York. These were wide, flat buildings for the World’s Fair due to take place the following year, the façades of which inspired Feininger to depict maritime history. Even though only a few designs were eventually realised, his preferred maritime themes made him the perfect choice for this state commission.



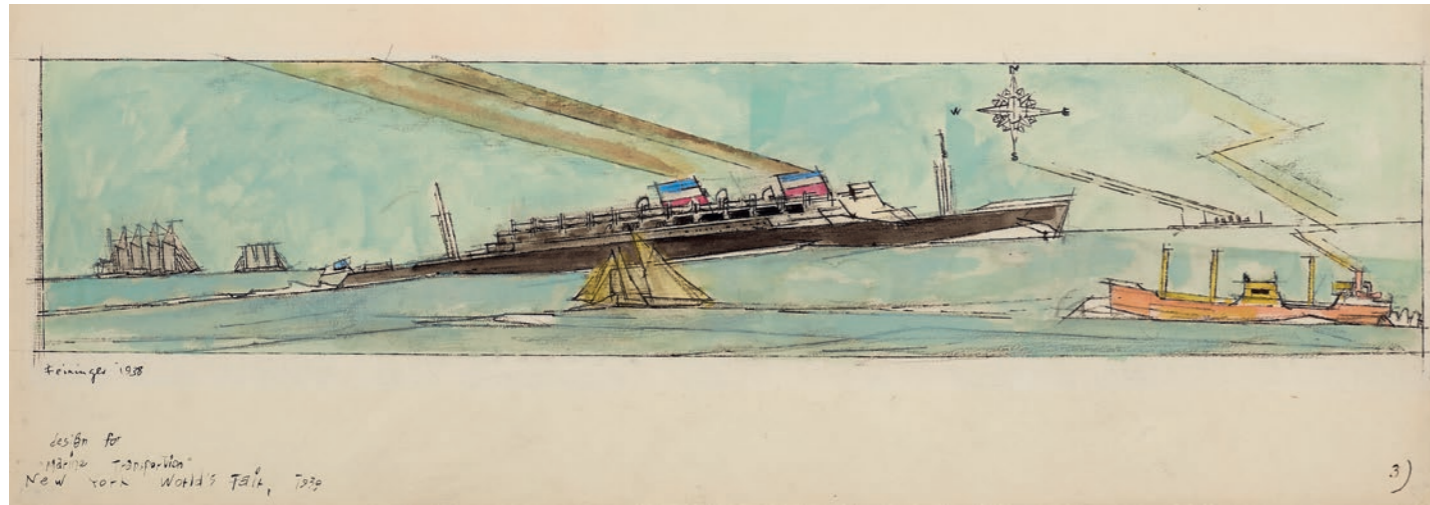
Lyonel Feininger. Stadt, 1921  
Watercolour and India ink on paper, 23.5 x 31.5 cm  
Signed, inscribed and dated below *Feininger Stadt Freit. d. 15.IV.1921*



Lyonel Feininger. Die kleine Schoner-Barke, 1923  
India ink, charcoal and pastel chalks on paper, 27.8 x 37.5 cm  
Signed, inscribed and dated below *Feininger Die kleine Schoner = Barke 11.VI.23*



Lyonel Feininger. Dreimaster auf See, 1938  
Watercolour, charcoal and India ink on paper, 18.3 x 62.8 cm  
Signed and dated left *Feininger 1938*



Lyonel Feininger. Passagierdampfer auf See mit Windrose, 1938  
Watercolour, charcoal and India ink on paper, 23.8 x 62.7 cm  
Signed and dated lower left *Feininger 1938* below a design design for Marine Transportation New York World's Fair, 1939

In preparation for these monumental murals, in 1938 he painted the landscape format watercolours 'Dreimaster auf See' and 'Passagierdampfer auf See mit Windrose', from the Brune Collection. In both panoramas, Feininger's repertoire of ships was created in a very particular format. The study of the three-master shows a mighty sailing ship on a dark, shimmering sea, carried aloft by a wave and propelled by flare-like red strips of light. In the second watercolour, a passenger steamer with two prominent funnels in blue-white-red occupies the centre, framed by fishing cutters and small sailing ships, with a four-master in the background on the left. The upward movement of the hull and the diagonally streaming smoke dynamise the watercolour of various blue and green tones; according to a photograph from 1939, the image was faithfully transferred to the wall. As the pavilions were dismantled or fell apart after the end of the World's

Fair, his largest works were not preserved, and the two watercolours are thus of particular importance to Feininger connoisseurs.

Feininger's oeuvre in New York was characterised by the development of new motifs, such as for the high-rise architecture of Manhattan – a sight particularly impressive for European eyes. The American period was, however, also determined by the revival of familiar subjects, including seascapes as well as marine and cloud pictures. Even after twenty years as a recognised and meanwhile much honoured painter in the USA, he wrote to his son T. Lux in 1953 of his love for the Baltic Sea and its motifs: "What I really miss, is to draw from nature and to make 'notes', like at the Baltic Sea, in Deep [...]. Somehow the motifs here are not enough for me, they hold too little of my inner desires [...]" (quoted from Hess 1959, p. 162). Feininger's 'inner desires' are also seen in the watercolour 'Dreimaster und Segelboote vor der Küste' from 1943. Here, Feininger drew on the marine paintings from Deep in terms of motif, but found a new way of looking at his repertoire in which he clearly distinguished the colours of the three sailing ships, rendering the scene with a new atmospheric transparency. Without the usual linearity – apart from the riverbank and ridge of hills – it is the delicately transparent colours, the lilac tones and the various shades of grey, with which Feininger built up the watercolour. With such works, he finally broke with his crystalline style of design in order to allow the ship's hulls to seemingly float 'dematerialised' over the mirror-smooth water.



Lyonel Feininger. Dreimaster und Segelboote vor der Küste, 1943  
Watercolour, charcoal and India ink on paper, 27.5 x 46.5 cm  
Signed left and dated lower right *Feininger 30.8.43*

## THE URBAN PLANNER WALTER BRUNE, THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE BAUHAUS, AND LYONEL FEININGER

All five marine pictures by Feininger presented here are from the comprehensive collection of the Düsseldorf architect, Walter Brune. Aside from those mentioned, he owned five further works by Feininger, including the early watercolour 'Gelbe Straße' (1908) and the two pencil drawings 'Hinter der Badestube' and 'Gelmeroda', both from 1906. Who was Walter Brune and what was the reason for collecting precisely works by Feininger?

Born into an architect family in Bremen in 1926 and apprenticed to Gustav A. Munzer in Düsseldorf, as a young architect, Brune worked in particular for the Schwerin industry in the Ruhr Valley and built the Prosper-Haniel colliery in Bottrop and several power plants in the early 1950s. When Brune came to the attention of the Karstadt department store group in 1958, this marked the end of his previous project interests and the simultaneous beginning as a leading architect of modern shopping architecture. From then on, Walter Brune designed first and foremost large department stores, shopping centres and their headquarters. Of note are the Rhine-Ruhr Center (1969-1973), planned on the basis of an American model on industrial wasteland in Mülheim, and since the 1980s, the inner-city shopping malls of the Kö-Galerie (1983-1986) and the Schadow-Arkaden (1988-1994), both in Düsseldorf, as well as the Heuvel-Galerie in neighbouring Netherlands (1992). When Brune recognised that shopping centres away from the actual core of the city have grave consequences for the city centres, he campaigned as an 'urban fighter' for the preservation of vibrant and multi-use city centre zones. In one of his many interviews, he explained that *"when shopping, the people [want] the familiar and homely atmosphere of the city centre which offers a variety of additional consumer and also cultural possibilities."* (DAB-regional 7/2016, p. 19).

During his most successful period in the 1980s and 1990s, Walter Brune conducted one of the largest architectural companies in Germany with offices in New York, Tehran and the Netherlands. He wasn't only involved in the design planning but also made a name for himself as a theorist of urban planning and published numerous writings and books.

Brune also became known for the construction of spectacular private villas, including 'Haus Engler', the villa for the Berg family of physicians (1961-1964), finalised in 1965, and the residence of Helmut Horten, the department store founder, which were presented in architectural journals by virtue of their forward-thinking designs. For himself and his family, he built a villa on the outskirts of Düsseldorf from 1951-1954 named 'Barbarahof' in which he broke with all conventional concepts of living. With flowing spaces and their extension into the surrounding landscape, he designed an avant-garde spatial programme which was comparable at best to the residential buildings of Frank Lloyd Wright. From 1994 onwards, he acquired watercolours by Fei-

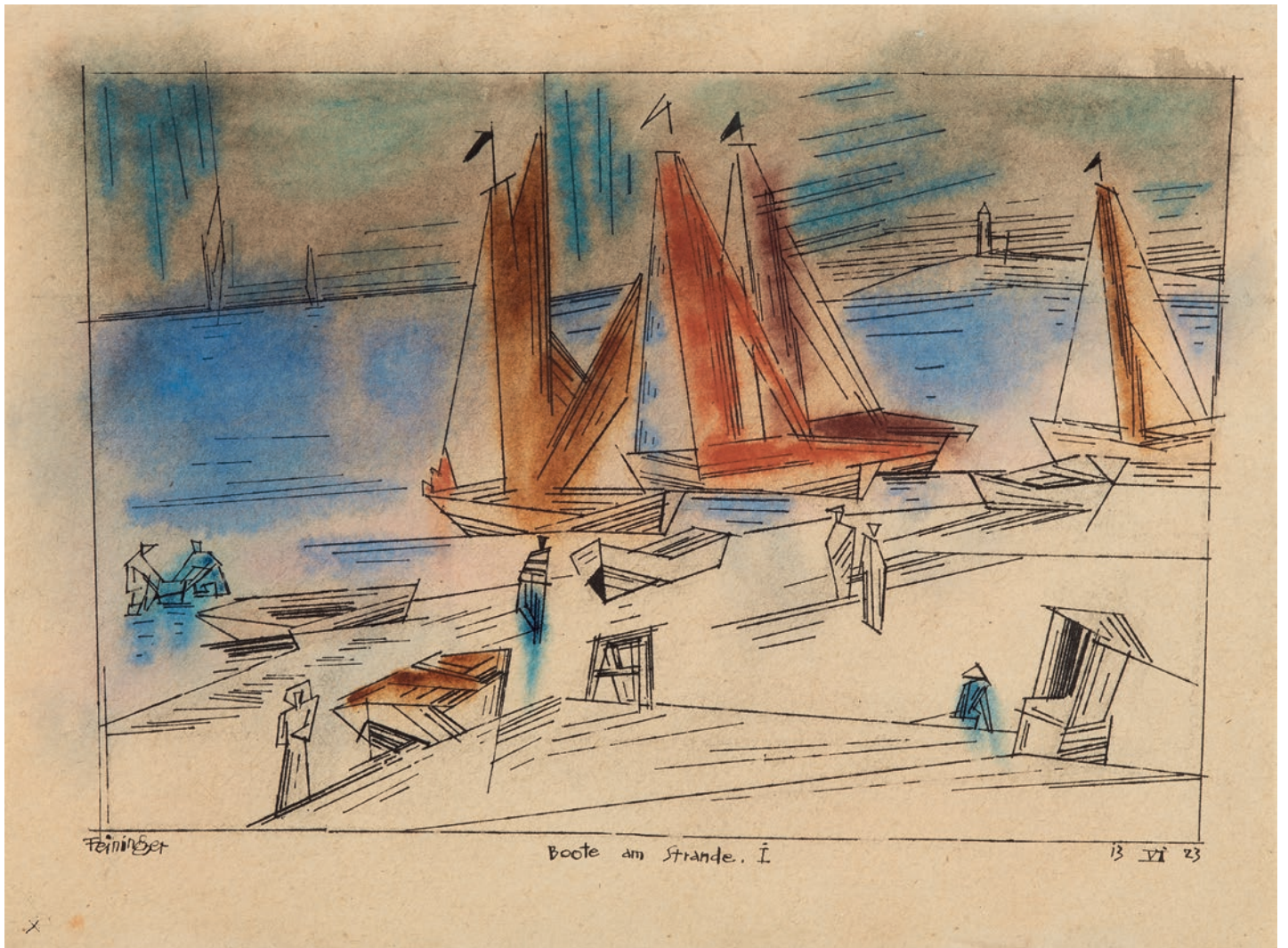


Photograph of the interior of the Brune residence

ninger in the leading galleries of the time, Marlborough (London) and Gmurzynska (Cologne), for the decoration of his own house. Attracted by their linear design, their reduced colouring perfectly suited the bright and reduced elegance of the architecture of the house. Of decisive importance, however, was Feininger's role at the Bauhaus as a 'Meister der Formlehre' (Master of Instruction of Form) from 1919 to 1932 and together with Walter Gropius, as leading head of the new theory. The extent to which Brune was committed to these principles of form throughout his life is documented above all in his private bungalows.

Walter Brune was not the only architect with a preference for Feininger – the Berlin construction theorist Hans Scharoun (1893-1972) also appreciated Feininger's watercolours and staged them in his spaces. Just as Scharoun applied Feininger's aesthetic experiences of Cubism into his designs, Brune may have profited from Feininger's architectural visions, the mirror-like shaded pictorial spaces, and light effects. 'Barbarahof', the glass architecture of the Prinzenpark in Düsseldorf and the glass tower of the Schadow Arkaden still bear witness to this today.

*Nicole Hartje-Grave*



**LYONEL FEININGER**

Boote am Strande I, 1923  
Ink pen drawing with pastel crayon  
and watercolour on paper, 27.9 x 37.6 cm,  
signed, titled and dated *Feininger Boote am Strande. I 13 VI 23*

**LEMPERTZ**

1845