

KUNKEL FINE ART

Zeichnungen, Gemälde und Skulpturen
des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts



Lyonel Feininger (1871 - New York - 1956)

The Towers of Notre-Dame in Paris, 1907

Oil on panel

17.9 : 13.7 cm

Provenance:

- Alois J. Schardt (1889-1955), Halle/Berlin/Los Angeles
- By descent to a private collection, USA
- Private collection, USA (acquired from the above in 1985)

Catalogue Raisonné:

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The painting is registered in the archives of The Lyonel Feininger Project LLC, New York. It has been allocated the registration number 1507-10-08-18.

Exhibition:

- R. März (ed.), *Lyonel Feininger - Von Gelmeroda nach Manhattan. Retrospektive der Gemälde*, Berlin, Nationalgalerie and Munich, Haus der Kunst, 1998-9
- G. Finckh et al. (eds.), *Feininger - Frühe Werke und Freunde*, Wuppertal, Von der Heydt-Museum, 2006

Early one morning in late April 1907 Lyonel Feininger set out from his Paris studio to roam the city in search of a distinctive motif for his next work. But that day he had a different plan – he intended not just to make sketches in pencil and coloured chalk but to work with oil paint. The medium of oil was a new discovery – he had only recently been introduced to it by his life partner Julia Berg, a student at the Weimar Art School. Until then his reputation had rested on the virtuoso caricatures he produced for the Berlin-based satirical and humorous magazines *ULK* and *Lustige Blätter*. But at the age of thirty-seven he found himself at a turning point in his artistic development. The present oil sketch titled *The Towers of Notre-Dame de Paris* represents one of the earliest and most striking testimonies to this watershed moment in his career.

Feininger's exploratory route that morning took him along the Rive Droite over the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville. Reaching its south-eastern edge, he caught sight of the view across the Seine towards the historical heart of Paris, the Île de la Cité. The Île de la Cité is a natural island in the river Seine. Its most famous landmark is the magnificent cathedral of Notre-Dame, a widely recognized symbol of the city and the French nation. Notre-Dame's origins date back to the twelfth century. The cathedral is commonly regarded as one of the finest examples of French Gothic architecture – a perfect motif for Feininger who was something of an aficionado of historic architecture and churches.

Before placing his small panel in a vertical position on his sketching easel, he made a preliminary drawing in pencil outlining the basic elements of the diorama-like composition. He then began to work from his paint-box using shades of brown, ochre, green, violet and blue, adding white to create tonal gradations. Selecting a series of short-bristled brushes he repeatedly stabbed some areas of the image in staccato touches while applying wide bands of colour to others, using broad, block-like strokes.

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The *bouquiniste* stands depicted in the lower part of the image are a quintessentially Parisian feature. In Feininger's day the stands were simple, brown wooden boxes. They lined the banks of the Seine, permanently attached to the quayside and serving as second-hand bookshops for the *bouquinistes*, the local booksellers. In the present oil sketch the stands act as a repoussoir, leading the eye across the river towards the middle distance where the narrow blue line of the *quai* (stone embankment) borders the Île de la Cité. Feininger uses the *quai* as a compositional device to separate the foreground from the middle ground. It serves as a visual anchor to create a sense of order in the rather disparate row of buildings on the Quai aux Fleurs. Most of the buildings date from the early nineteenth century. The style of architecture is plain and the buildings differ in height and number of storeys. Feininger had a penchant for the French Romantic era and was an avid reader of Victor Hugo.¹ He found charm in the picturesque arrangement of the facades set back from the building line and this is reflected in his lavishly detailed handling of the ensemble, although his brushwork is swift and summary. The iconic towers of Notre-Dame dominate the left background, their powerful presence counterbalanced by the limpid blue of the early morning sky. The cool, diffuse lighting evokes a sense of calm before the hurly-burly of the day's events.

It was during this stay in Paris that Feininger finally realized that painting directly from nature was a precondition to achieving his longed-for change of artistic direction. In the months that followed he produced a large body of oil sketches which laid the groundwork for his future career as an independent, self-supporting artist.² It is hardly surprising that he visited Paris so often between 1906 and 1908 – his stay there in the early 1890s had helped him out of a creative impasse experienced while he was a student at the Berlin Academy.

In the early years of the twentieth century Paris was the cradle of modernism and a magnet for artists from all over Europe. Feininger frequented the popular brasserie Le Dôme in Montparnasse, one of the principal meeting places in Paris for German-speaking painters, writers, intellectuals, art critics and dealers. Here he came into regular contact with Jules Pascin and Albert Weisgerber, two well-known magazine illustrators and caricaturists who also aspired to be independent, self-supporting artists. He befriended Hans Purrmann and Oskar Moll, who were pupils of Matisse, and was also in contact with Amedeo Modigliani and Robert Delaunay. His engagement with the work of Monet, Van Gogh and Cézanne widened his vision and significantly influenced his artistic development.

¹ See Ulrich Luckhardt in *Lyonel Feininger*, Munich/Berlin/ London/New York 2004, p. 28.

² See Luckhardt, op. cit., p. 22.

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The present oil sketch offers a vibrant, highly original interpretation of an iconic motif. It is a refined, dexterously composed work with subtly modulated tonal qualities executed in rapid, confident strokes. Both colouristically and compositionally it prefigures the direction his work was to take, as exemplified by a painting titled *The White Man* (Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid) executed in Paris only a few months later, in the autumn of 1907. *The White Man* represents a major turning point in Feininger's oeuvre as it is one of the earliest paintings in which he took the human figure as his theme.³ He went on to produce crystalline depictions of architecture and the sea which were to establish his reputation as one of the foremost figures in classic modern art.

The distinguished provenance of *The Towers of Notre-Dame de Paris* further underlines its importance within Feininger's oeuvre. It was formerly in the collection of Alois Schardt, the director of the Kunstmuseum Moritzburg in Halle. Schardt played an important role in promoting Feininger's work in the early 1930s. Later, in his role as Director of the Nationalgalerie in Berlin, he fought to protect it from denigration under the NS regime.

³ Id., p. 50.