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LYONEL FEININGER'S LOCOMOTIVES AND TRAINS

Experiencing Materials and Colors Through Toys
as Learning Materials at the Bauhaus

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the "Block-Eisenbahn" (block train), a particular work by Lyonel Feininger, one of the first masters appointed to the Bauhaus in 1919. The block train's main characteristics are internationality, model consistency and unbreakability – and it is one example of how material and color experiences through toys were discussed in different frames of reference in the context of the Bauhaus. These works were developed, discussed and commercialized in various situations and taken seriously as learning material, but above all, they represented a design task in teaching. Feininger used the term 'model' when explaining his work. A model is a representation of an object and all of its physical properties, but not an exact reproduction. Through models, central features of an object are represented abstractly and perhaps even highlighted. This negotiation and upheaval of the original exemplifies how toys, if they are taken seriously and if their innovative strength is acknowledged, can serve as a starting point for educational and didactic figures of thought.

Keywords: games, play, art, education, Bauhaus

1. TOYS AS A DESIGN TASK

> "I could imagine that adults could like my
> railroads, or did like them when they were
> children, might buy my models and use
> them for decoration."
>
> (Feininger/Feininger 1965, 28)

This is how Lyonel Feininger commented on his block train in a conversation with Julie Feininger on May 13, 1913. As early as 1913, on commission from a toy manufacturer, he was concerned with the form, colorfulness, functionality and design of toys. He designed railways made of hardwood (ibid.). In the introductory quote above, he uses the term 'models,' which encompasses the object-like representation of an object and all its physical characteristics, but at the same time does not represent an exact reproduction, but rather abstracts and, under certain circumstances, highlights central characteristics. In this way, the original fades into the background and its qualities, deficits or particularly outstanding features come to the fore. Models can be over-sized or miniature versions of the original. In play, the immense size of the world is made tangible and explored (Hartung 2014, 66). One variation of this game is the play with proportions and the reversal of habits of seeing and touching. Here, the scale is reversed: houses become miniatures and mice are greatly enlarged as stuffed toys. Role changes are also possible through playing with models. This kind of play allows the child to become a world leader and inventor, to combine and to create, but also to dismantle what it has willingly created. It can happen within a fixed framework, following rules like those of Josef Hartwig's chess game,[1] but also in free play with its infinite possibilities of addition, maximization and reduction, combination, concretization and abstraction. Like any other toy, the miniatures have the potential to captivate the players, thus immersing them in play on a small scale, making them forget everything around them. One aspect of this potential is

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1   Josef Hartwig's chess game exemplifies the cooperation between the various workshops; Heinz Nösselt constructed a chess table in the joinery, while the student Joost Schmidt designed posters, printed matter and an advertising poster (Droste 1990, 95).

that toys in other formats, with other color schemes or material changes, play a game with similarity logics through unusual scales.
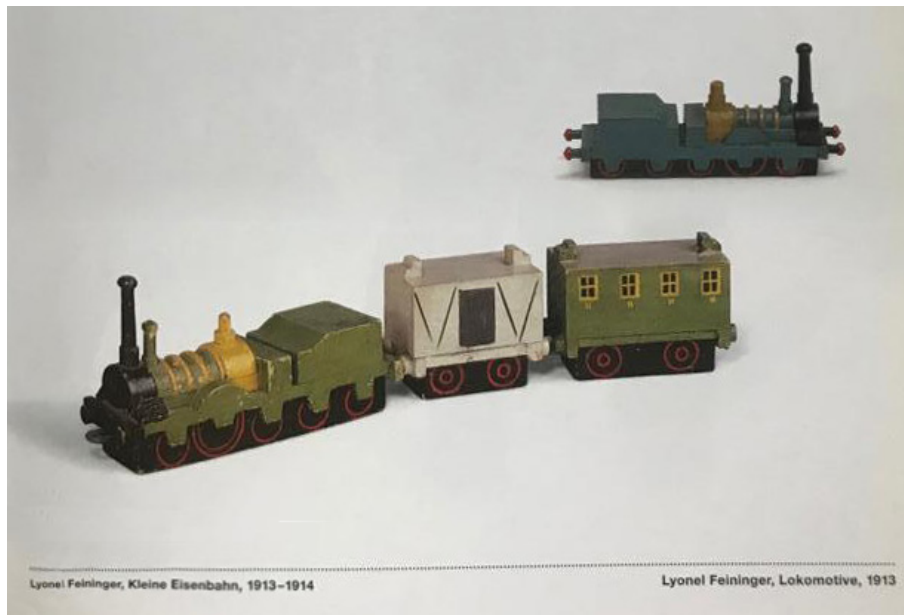

Fig. 1: Lyonel Feininger: "Kleine Eisenbahn", 1913-1914 (bottom left); Lyonel Feininger: "Lokomotive", 1913 (top right).

Toy trains are as old as railways themselves, and they were already popular and widespread in the mid-19th century (Baecker/Wagner 1985, 4). Literature unanimously regards them as a typical product of the Industrial Revolution. Here, toy trains became mass-produced and obtaining them became easier as they were available in many places and comparatively low in price. The railway movement, the smooth glide of the long chain of carriages, was also an innovation that only became possible in the phase of industrialization through technical innovations such as the rail. Toy trains imitated a typical means of transport of industrialization.

As early as 1911, Lyonel Feininger had begun to develop construction drawings for wooden toy trains on behalf of the Munich toy manufacturer *Löwenstein*. These drawings already show an important detail that Feininger created: instead of movable wheels, he developed a sliding block with wheels that were painted on. This not only made the miniature easier and cheaper to produce, but also provided an interesting way to imitate

the sliding of the trains' rollers on smooth surfaces. This innovation was very important to Feininger and he patented the idea. According to letters he wrote, he planned on developing mass-produced items for the toy industry by designing model trains. In a letter to his wife Julie from April 7, 1913, he noted:

> "I see in the idea of model trains an inexhaustible source of the most piquan, most charming possibilities. I am now at work, as if I were caring for the future in material terms; My [sic!] idea is also to design an article for world trade."
>
> (Mesinovic 2004, 216, author's own translation)

In the same letter, Feininger also explained "I even want to make some of the original trains [...] And the things are to be labeled, and called by the name of the old railway company, this is the main hit with them. Models should have seasons, and names like Rocket, Lady of the Lake, John, etc." (ibid., author's own translation). Modern was the design and the idea of the products, but they were to be assembled and painted by hand. The beginning of the First World War, however, destroyed this idea, and after Löwenstein's death in the 1920s, the box of prototypes was sent back to Feininger.

In Germany, the first toy train made of simple tin plate entered the market in 1835. The production of the *Märklin* company became commercially important when it presented a wind-up railway with a complete track system at the Leipzig Toy Fair in 1891 (ibid., 215-218). When the railway was invented in 1801, this also marked the beginning of the creation of models that were as faithful to the original as possible. These models focused particularly on technology and function, and were neither intended for children nor for play; they used methylated spirits to run the steam engines, exactly like the large models, and served as entertainment for adults. It was not until 1912 that engineer Karl Moritz advocated for the use of transformers that could regulate the power now needed for propulsion down to a harmless voltage (Feininger/Feininger 1965, 28).

2. TOYS IN RELATION TO PEDAGOGICAL AND DIDACTIC FIGURES OF THOUGHT

With his trains, Lyonel Feininger, who was one of the first masters to be appointed to the Bauhaus in 1919 (Fromm 2009), pursued the ambitious goal of developing a classic toy comparable in its significance and innovative power to the *Anker* brick building set, which was to become commercially successful at the same time as Feininger's model train. Building blocks in *Anker* boxes are molded parts, pressed and baked from sand, whiting (powdered and washed white chalk), and linseed oil. Like the three traditional materials used in construction – brick, sandstone and slate – they are produced in the colors red, yellow and blue. Unlike *Lego* bricks, for example, they are completely smooth. Building with the *Anker* bricks is all about statics. In contrast to *Lego*, the idea of the combinable building set is based on an educational concept. The educationalist Friedrich Fröbel developed the didactic figure

 of the 'play gifts' (*Spielgaben*). Due to the system of supplementary boxes that build on each other with enclosed building instructions, the architecture and model game, invented in Rudolstadt in 1882 by the brothers Gustav and Otto Lilienthal, is considered the prototype of the system toy (Werner 2016, 302-303).

Feininger's toys were not that developed and didactically sound. While Feininger did not refer to didactic or pedagogical literature, he did observe didactic and general pedagogical issues in his personal environment – and he used these observations when developing his projects. His target groups were "[...] every real boy and most grown-ups" (Feininger/Feininger 1965, 28). When the First World War put an end to these plans, Feininger had already registered his name as a trademark for the manufacture and sale of toys and had developed packaging labels with the inscription *Feininger* (Tietze 2001, 114). Furthermore, the packaging labels with the inscription "Lyonel Feininger's Block Railway, International. True to model. Unbreakable" (in German: "Lyonel Feiningers Block-Eisenbahn, International. Modellgetreu. Unzerbrechlich") had already been

printed (ibid.). The sliding block of the railways was an invention of Feininger, who had it patented. As a child, Florian Karsch, the nephew of the gallery brothers Karl and Josef Nierendorf, first from Cologne and later from Berlin, played with Feininger's trains. He grew up surrounded by the artists represented by the gallery and their works. These included Expressionists such as Erich Heckel, Emil Nolde and Karl Schmitt-Rottluff. Initially unknown artists such as the art teacher and painter Lorenz Humburg, the photographer Karl Blossfeldt, and the New Objectivity painter Ernst Thoms were part of the Berlin environment (Walter-Ris 2003). Karsch was disappointed by Feininger's train as a child: "It didn't move!" (Luyken 2004, 36, author's own translation).

As creative works that adapted to the conditions of industrial production, Feininger's model trains anticipated a central Bauhaus founding idea. It is therefore surprising that Feininger, once appointed to the Bauhaus, continued to design toys for children, but now primarily individual pieces. They were developed and manufactured for his own three sons or for friends' children and Bauhaus colleagues. They were houses, bridges, trees and figures made of spruce wood and painted in bright colors. Twisted medieval buildings and village churches based on real models from small Thuringian towns such as Gelmeroda were the models for the houses. Feininger's deployable little houses were reminiscent of Dagobert Peche's city construction kit (ibid., 35-36).

Peche was initially a member of the *Wiener Werkstätten* (Vienna Workshop). In 1916, after successfully organizing the Vienna Fashion Exhibition of 1915/16, Peche became the director of its Zurich branch. The Vienna Workshop had also been producing artistic toys since it was established in 1903. These were characterized by very individual approaches. Its stylistically confident range can be demonstrated very well by the example of two city construction kits designed by Josef Hoffmann and Dagobert Peche. Peche chose angular medieval gabled houses as models for his town toys created around 1918. No two houses were alike, each of the pastel-colored buildings was elaborately decorated with patterns. As packaging, the artist designed a box divided into compartments and lined with mirrors. While the mirrors set off the buildings already in the box, the

sophistication of the packaging also meant that the city building set was at best suitable for older children and/or those who can sit still for longer periods of time. Interestingly, Hoffmann, who was otherwise rather critical of Peche's toys, thought the construction set was exemplary. Two years later, however, Hoffmann himself arrived at a radically different solution: an ultra-modern play city with factory chimneys and skyscrapers. His building blocks, reduced to a few basic shapes, are extremely sparing, with lines symbolizing the endless window fronts of skyscrapers (Luyken 2004, 35-36). Bruno Taut formulates the examination of the phenomenon of play very freely in a newsletter of the artist community *Gläserne Kette* (The Crystal Chain):

> "In the style, the game is the goal,
>
> In the game, the goal is the style,
>
> At the goal, the style is the game."
>
> (Döhl 1988, 122)

In this context, play is understood without function or pedagogical intentions, ulterior motives, effects or programs. This open attitude is also reflected in the miniature houses of Peche, Hoffmann and Feininger. The artists worked with building templates and did not pursue any pedagogical intentions. But while Peche's houses remained decorated elements based on medieval models and components of a construction kit, Feininger's wayward buildings can also be seen individually as sculptures in miniature format that deviated from real or historical models, developing into their own interpretations. Here, experimentation with size and its significance for the work become artistic themes alongside form and materiality: "If you got it, you can be monumental – even on a stamp" (Bellini 2012, 35, author's own translation).

While Feininger's designs would have been suitable for other groups of people, they remained in the Bauhaus environment (Luyken 2004, 35-36). Their thematic spectrum was wide and could also have been used in an industrial-commercial context, as there were flexible and infinitely combinable elements, such as houses, bridges, trees and figures made of

spruce wood, painted in bright colors. Their simplicity, combinability and colorful design is comparable to early *Lego* designs. Through the idea of historical reference and the resulting similarities and references, Feininger resumed an approach that he had already pursued in the context of his railways. Another means of designing miniatures, especially in areas such as architecture, model making and urban planning, is the maxim of exact, albeit abstracted and/or reduced representation. In contemporary and historical toy worlds, a spectrum of similarities is depicted in different materials, forms, scales, combinations and degrees of abstraction. These observations give reason to assume that the design task for toys and play materials arises directly from the task of thematizing life in all its forms of design as formulated by Gropius, especially in the context of the Bauhaus (Gropius 1926, cited from Conrads 2011, 47). The toys reveal a series of design tasks and assignments that relate to form, function and materiality. Thus, Lyonel Feininger's works also show a preoccupation with scale and fidelity to scale, but an artistic will to design is in the foreground. This is particularly clearly formulated in his letters. In these, he states that the consequence of working on the design task and with the object of the toy was a reflection on his own artistic work. Far from model railway landscapes, as an artist Feininger formulated and experimented with a free form of design without prioritizing feasibility or realism.

References to reality can also be seen in Claude Lévi-Strauss' *The Savage Mind*. Here, Lévi-Strauss (1968, 92) deals with hobbyist and engineer models and contrasts them. He describes that the hobbyist model, in contrast to the engineer model, tries to bring larger dimensions and references back to a manageable scale in order to make reality manageable, or to appropriate it in the first place. Engineering models, on the other hand, refer to the model-like, resilient and realistic recording and representation of technical data. For example, stress, dimensions, properties and materiality can be recorded and summarized in the model. In contrast to these claims of resilience, the German art critic and art sociologist Walter Grasskamp (1980, 62-71) sees the hobbyist model as a built figure with a 'tendency toward cuteness'. Gaston Bachelard (1975, 191) recognizes the miniature as a metaphysical balancing exercise that makes it possible to

be value-creating with little risk (ibid.). Like the architectural model, this is also an exploration of scale.

3. ARTISTS' TOYS AS PART OF TEACHING AT THE BAU-HAUS

Unlike in Feininger's artistic work, the market and marketing remained important components of the design processes at the Bauhaus. In the preliminary teaching of the Bauhaus, perception and handling of design elements such as form, color and material were trained. This can be seen in toys and children's furniture that reflect techniques such as woodworking, weaving, typography and photography. Many of the designs by Alma Siedhoff- Buscher, Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack or Marcel Breuer went into serial production and were successfully marketed (Tietze 2001, 113). In the direct and indirect contemporary environment of the Bauhaus, there was also an intensive examination of artistic designs by and for children. An important aspect of this – also for the art education of the 1950s, which took up many figures of thought from reform pedagogy and the pedagogy of the 1920s in general – was the examination of children's drawings. Important names in this context are Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee, Max Ernst, Gabriele Münter and Wassily Kandinsky. Through an intensive examination of children's drawings through observation, collection and reflection, new materials and forms to work with were found – and the resulting toys were made of stone, metal or wood. These were often intensively received and collaboratively created in the Bauhaus environment. For example, in 1923, teaching aids and educational toys were discussed in the work drawing class (Luyken 2004, 35-36). This is particularly interesting as alleged boundaries between particular subjects and field of works were overcome in the process, for example in relation to drawings with artistic ambition and children's drawings, which follow completely different demands and functions. In this context, the traditional role attribution of artists was abolished and expanded to include a preoccupation with children's drawings. This expansion is already indicated in the ideas of the artists who can be attributed to Viennese Art Nouveau. Here,

all areas of daily life culminated in the idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* ("synthesis of the arts"). The Viennese artists tried to think themselves into the world of the child and added creative elements into this world. These elements were, for example, old forms of folk customs, forgotten techniques and materials that were rediscovered and adapted for the production of children's toys. Something new was therefore created in Vienna by drawing on tradition. Objects for children were created with the awareness that art is created through play, that artistic forms can be traced back to mental playfulness: "There is a piece of artistry in every child – what would the game be other than a kind of art instinct?" (Luyken 2004, 35-36, author's own translation). Art became a principle of life that was supposed to enable adults and children alike to experience new, spiritual freedoms. In *Kind und Kunst*, Konrad Lange describes art and play as complements to life. For him, they become substitutes for a missing or 'lying reality' (Lange 1904, 7-8). Joseph August Lux expressed this in a similar way: " The toy relates to the things of everyday life like the fairy tale to reality" (Lux 1903, 5, author's own translation). The properties, the shape and the colorfulness of things, their characteristics as objects that are to be played with, thus became the occasion for artistic and pedagogical reflections. As Alma Siedhoff-Buscher put it: "Our play toys: the form – simple, unambiguously clear and exact; diversity and attraction is created by the child itself through putting together and building" (Buscher 1924, 189-190, author's own translation). As a representative of the Bauhaus, Siedhoff-Buscher took up concepts and thoughts from the Vienna workshops and expanded them. Many placed emphasis on artistic design and a knowledge of craft skills with a conscious search for further development and expansion. This can be seen in relation to the reflection of scaling and the play with scale relationships and model functions, as with Peche and Hoffmann (Hartung 2014, 25-26).

4. MEASURE AS A MEANS OF DESIGN AND EXPRESSION

The play with scale and measurements and its potential for perception and design was intensively pursued in art history even after the Bauhaus.

Thus, in the art context, at the latest with the emergence of American Minimal Art and Conceptual Art, the question of the model, of the conception of an object as a model, of its functions and potentials becomes relevant. These questions feed artistic models of thought and scaling games on the rationally developed object. On the basis of such works, the variety of attribution possibilities with which something is described as a model becomes clear in the art scene. The concept of a model was originally used in architecture, mediated by the Italian *modello*, and derived from the Latin *modellus* or *modulus*, which means 'small measure' (Oechslin 1995). Furthermore, the Middle High German term model, via the Old High German module with the same Latin etymology, also came to mean pattern or form, which still resonates today in job titles in the fashion industry; it also continues to be used in the field of art in study and design contexts (Mahr 2003). The strategy of shifting scale, exemplified in the monumental sculptures of everyday things that Claes Oldenburg has been designing since the 1960s on the basis of smaller models, is already inherent in the concept of the model itself. In the context of the development of models of thought into actual models, another becomes interesting. Model theorist Bernd Mahr has developed a 'model of being a model':

> "The context in which the object of an object understood as a model stands by the model judgment can be determined in general in its quality and structure. When understanding an object as a model, that object is related by considering it both as a MODEL of something and as a model for something. This dual orientation exists only in the conception of model existence generated by the model judgment."

> (Mahr 2008, 202, author's own translation)

This alternation between model character and model-like quality is also evident in Feininger's train, which does not roll, but glides, and which shows wheels, but does not have them. However, the model also shows how the relationship between the creators of the model and the model itself, as well as between the creators and the recipients, changes. The relationship between the viewer and the model is shown in a design on the cover of the reformist educational magazine *Kind und Kunst*. The picture

shows a child with a model. The child, in the pose of the thinker and immersed in the model, becomes the creator of their own world, and seems to be reflecting, planning or designing (see Fig. 2). In this reflection of childhood, markers of the modernization of society as a whole, but subsequently also of the realities of children's lives, become apparent. The large, childlike head and hand are reminiscent of models and miniatures, the double game with scale shows the examination of the question of what role children have and play. If we look into children's rooms a hundred years later, we see an unbroken fascination for the model as well as the recurring questions about the role of children, about the shaping of childhood as well as about toys. The boundless possibilities and themes are depicted in an infinite spectrum.

Fig. 2: Cover of the "Kind und Kunst" magazine (1901).
Fig. 3: Postcard with pictures of young Wilhelm II, German Emperor (1900).

Another child of his time is shown on a postcard from around 1900 (see Fig. 3): it depicts young Wilhelm II, German Emperor-to-be, in four situations. This depiction also shows the interpretation of a child and its role in relation to enlargement and minimization. In each picture, he is dressed like an adult, and it becomes clear how this boy is stylized into an 'adult miniature' through clothing, facial expression and pose. The imperial era also plays a role as a prehistory, as a time from which the *Bauhäusler* (Bauhaus members) emerged, because it forms a kind of foil for the Bauhaus through its political, social and aesthetic circumstances and transformations. Eclecticism and historicism are both an expression of their time and a target for innovation and change. The image of childhood and the ideas of childrens' worlds of experience are also subject to these movements.

Works of different materialities designed by artists for children have so far received limited attention, even though they display an exceptionally high degree of imagination, originality and creativity. However, projects like the exhibition *Art – a Child's Play* (Berlin, 1901) in particular give an initial overview of the work of artists for children. Another aspect that is reflected in historical as well as contemporary discourses is the question of space for individuality and the personal, hence creative freedom of children. This question can be exemplified by *Lego*, especially in relation to the promise that is expressed in *Lego*'s name: "Leg godt," which means "Play well". In additive modular parts – comparable to the *Anker* building set or combinable railways – the early building sets made it possible to transfer basic elements into infinite, free combinations that could be individually filled with content. Currently, however, this potential infinity is in fact being deconstructed through digitalization as well as through strong specifications by the manufacturers and the play worlds developed by them with precise building instructions. Sociologist Harald Welzer (2019, 85) addresses this transition of play and its structures by theorizing it as an allegory of 'dreams of reality' disappearing from the real world. Through the usage of exact construction plans, he sees the emergence of a world of infinite redundancy. This shows that game worlds create spaces

for reality, but also allow them to be shaped, reshaped and further developed. Both restriction and freedom of design will continue to be central pedagogical and artistic aspects of the means, worlds and tasks of play.

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