

Secondary  
(Grades 6-12)



## Behind the Facade: Abstraction and Lyonel Feininger's *Gables I, Lüneburg*

### Overview

By examining Lyonel Feininger's *Gables I, Lüneburg*, students will come to understand the concept of "abstraction." Using photographs of real buildings and Feininger's ideas, they will create their own abstract artworks.

### Age Group

Secondary (Grades 6-12)

### Lesson length

Two 45-minute lessons

### Rationale

By examining Feininger's work and his approach to abstraction, students will be introduced to how abstraction works and what purpose it serves. Through different activities—analytical discussion and a hands-on project—students will engage with Feininger's work while expanding their critical thinking and creativity.

### Objectives

*Students will be able to:*

- Describe and discuss how Feininger uses abstraction in *Gables I, Lüneburg*
- Identify 4 defining qualities in a given building or structure
- Create an abstract artwork based on a photograph, using Feininger's ideas as a basis

### Massachusetts Curriculum Framework Connection

#### Visual Arts:

- **Standard 5: Critical Response:**  
5.6 (by grade 8): "Demonstrate the ability to describe the kinds of imagery used to represent subject matter and ideas, for example, literal representation, simplification, abstraction, or symbolism."

- **Standard 3: Observation, Abstraction, Invention, and Expression**  
3.9 (grades 9-12): “Create 2D or 3D artwork that explores the abstraction of ideas and representations.”

#### English Language Arts:

- **Standard 2: Questioning, Listening, and Contributing**  
2.4 (by grade 8): “Integrate relevant information gathered from group discussions and interviews for reports.”

#### Materials

- Image of Feininger’s *Gables I* and a way to display it for the class
- A picture from Google Images of the real buildings in Lüneburg and way to display it
- Postcards or color print-outs of iconic buildings, whether local or from around the world. 1 for every 4 students.
- Photographs/postcards of buildings or spaces (parks, rooms), which students have brought from home. (*Note: teacher may want to bring extras, just in case.*)
- Plain construction paper (at least 1 sheet per student)
- Drawing utensils
- Coloring utensils, e.g. colored pencils, pastels, watercolors (or watercolor pencils)
- Rulers

#### Lesson

##### Day 1: Discussion and Brainstorming

1. *Warm up:* Ask students what some of their favorite buildings are. What do they like about them? What do they remember first when they picture it mentally? Color, size, material? Explain that today’s lesson will focus on buildings and abstraction. Come up with a working definition of abstraction, if appropriate.
  - Definition (from Mass Curriculum Framework): *Art that is non-representational, or that converts forms observed in reality to patterns that are read by the viewer as independent relationships.*
2. Display Feininger’s painting for the whole class. Discuss what is going on in this painting. How can you tell these are buildings? How are they not? What jumps out at you? What aspects has the artist chosen to emphasize? How does he do it? What, in your opinion, is “abstract” about this painting? What isn’t?
  - *Note: While Feininger’s painting is abstract in many ways, it is not ‘non-representational,’ since you can still identify buildings and people.*
3. Hand out the pictures of the iconic buildings and divide the class into groups of four. Have each group analyze their image and identify its most striking qualities, e.g. it is

made almost entirely of steel, or its facade is an unusual shape, etc. They should compile a list of at least 4 aspects. Provide, if necessary, guiding questions: What colors do you notice? Shapes? Lines? How would it feel if you could touch it? What is it made of? How might it look at sunset or in floodlights? After 5-10 minutes, have each group present their building and what they noticed.

- *Alternative writing exercise:* Have students write a page describing their perfect building or castle. Instruct them to think carefully about it for two minutes, then write for 15 minutes. Ask them to consider size, shape, color, facades, windows, materials, texture, and decoration. What would be the 3 key features?
4. Compare Feininger's painting to an image of some real gables in Lüneburg. Have students pinpoint exactly what Feininger has changed/how he has reduced the "real" image to simplified shapes, colors and lines. Summarize your ideas with a list on the board. Then use the *About the Art* sheet to explain how Feininger used abstraction in order to highlight the underlying principles of the architecture that appealed to him.
  5. Homework: Ask students to bring a photo or postcard of their favorite building or space to the next class.

## Day 2: Hands-on project

1. Have students each take out the photo they brought from home. Distribute paper, rulers, drawing and coloring utensils. Explain that they are going to make their own abstract artwork based on the photograph, the way that Feininger did. They can draw it however they want, but they must include at least 2 recognizable features, such as color or window shapes. Encourage them to use Feininger's techniques that they listed from last time. Remind them: It's not meant to be realistic. It's meant to use the building as inspiration for exploring things like shapes, color, and line on their own.
2. Display the finished works around the class.
3. Ask a few volunteers to come and explain their work. Why did they choose this building? What did they focus on and why? How did they abstract that quality and make it stand on its own?
4. Divide the class in half and have one half go and stand by their artworks, while the other half goes around to look and ask questions. Switch.

## About the Art

*Gables I, Lüneburg* by Lyonel Feininger. 1925. Oil on canvas. Ca. 3 ft. x 2 ft. 4 in. Gift of Nanette Harrison Meech, class of 1938, in honor of Julia Meech, class of 1963, SC 1985:20. Smith College Museum of Art.

### **The artist: Lyonel Feininger**

Lyonel Feininger's (1871-1956) career was divided between the United States, where he was born, and Europe, where he received his artistic training and later taught at the famous Bauhaus school in Weimar, Germany. Feininger fled Nazism in 1937, returning to New York, his place of birth. He was intrigued by the expressive power of architecture throughout his life—whether the early skyscrapers of New York, quirky houses in Brussels or the medieval architecture of northern Europe.

"War-weary and exhausted, he felt stimulated by the architectural array...by the rhythmical partitioning of beautiful facades on old gabled houses...For days he went around taking in and trying to hold, in sketches, what impressed him so deeply," said his wife, Julia Feininger.

### **The painting**

Feininger painted *Gables I* while he still lived and taught in Germany. This painting shows the facade of the brick Gothic buildings of Lüneburg abstracted into shifting, shallow, insubstantial planes. Feininger uses light, color and abstract form to translate the stone architecture into something ethereal. The walls, light-filled planes of color, extend skyward and gradually dissolve. The doors and windows, some translucent and others shadowed, overlap and move out of alignment as if floating free from architectural function. Feininger described his stylistic use of these delicate, overlapping planes of color as "prism-ism" for their resemblance to the light reflecting and refracting properties of glass prisms.

Feininger drew inspiration from multiple periods and sources, whether Gothic architecture or the Cubist movement. Although highly modern, the principles of the original medieval Gothic architecture of Lüneburg still shine through in *Gables I*. These houses were built in the style of *Backsteingotik*, or "Brick Gothic." The brick buildings lack figural sculptures and instead focus on prominent grid patterns and stepped gables highlighted by sharp contrasts between the red brick and other materials like lime plaster. Feininger's abstraction invites the viewer to focus on those patterns and lines. The 'fact' of the buildings recedes and the play of pure shapes, planes and hues take center stage.



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This work of art may not be currently on display at the Museum.