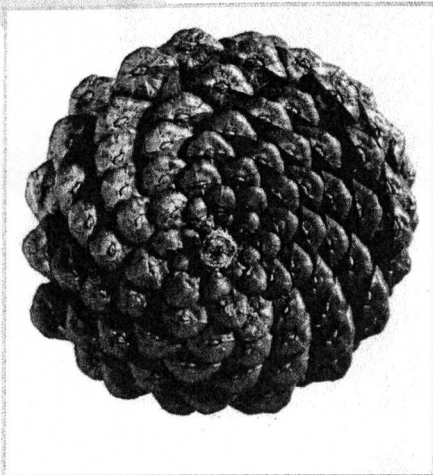
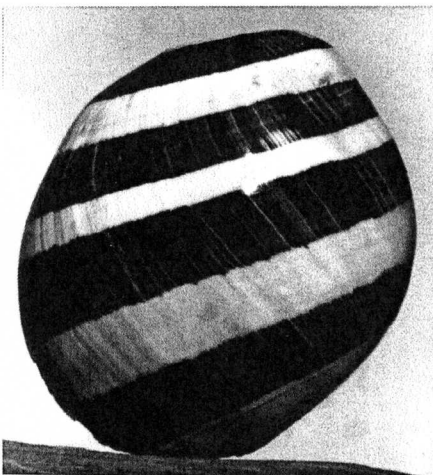


ESSAY

Andreas Feininger, 1906-1999

Elizabeth Schlatter

*Pine Cone with Overlay, n.d.**Hydatina albocincta van der Hoeven, n.d.*

In preparation for an exhibition of Andreas Feininger's nature photographs, I found myself rummaging through boxes at the home of the photographer's widow, Wyss, in Manhattan. In one stuffed yet organized closet, Feininger had left more than a thousand photographs, all sorted according to subject matter (e.g., shells, trees, etc.). Each image was either signed or stamped by the artist with orientation and exposure notes on the back. He even saved a few of his nature specimens in a small box that held feathers, rocks, and seashells—objects used throughout Feininger's

*Ginkgo biloba leaf, n.d.*

many nature-themed books.

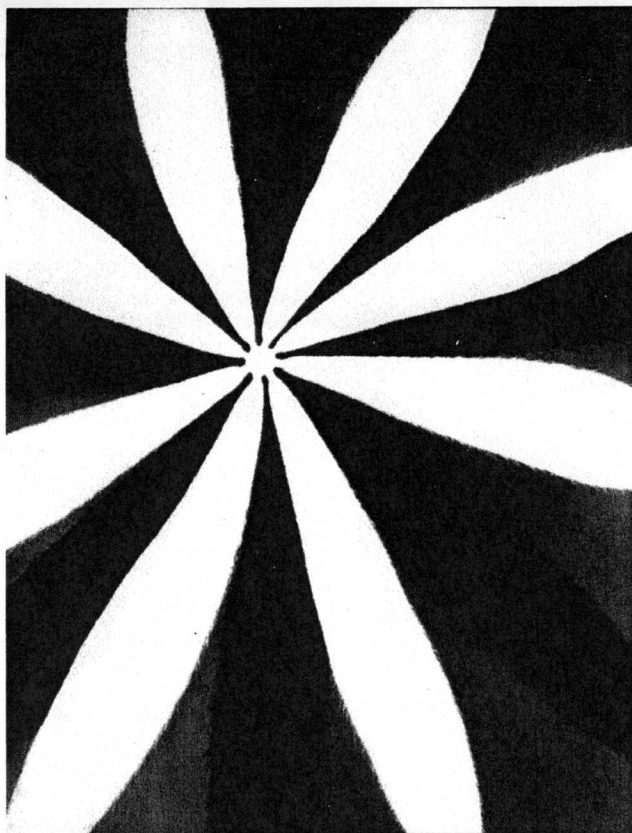
Such meticulous storage and authentication was typical of Feininger (1906-1999), a man who once presented an interviewer a list of eighteen topics to discuss for her article and who also left a short compendium of what he considered his best photographs in his archives at the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson. While the word "perfectionist" comes to mind, Feininger's manner is perhaps better described as tenacity to do things correctly not only for posterity but also for his audience. One could argue that Feininger constantly aimed to set a good example for the amateurs and professionals alike who admired his images.

Feininger's life's work—thousands of photographs, his *Life* magazine photographic essays (which depending on the source numbered around 350 or 450), his articles on technology and technique, and his numerous publications—reveal this sense of an artist immensely devoted to articulating the "best" way to take a photograph. For

example, he often expounded on his list of qualities necessary for a good photographic subject "simplicity, clarity, order and organization; well-defined outline and form; contrast that is strong but not excessive; texture that can be brought out through use of surface-skimming light; pattern, rhythm, and repetition of forms."

He also repeatedly published several photographs that he must have found unusually striking. For example an image of beautifully curled gaboon viper skeleton appeared first in a *Life* magazine photo essay about bones in 1952. It appeared again, in a somewhat altered viewpoint, in his books *The Anatomy of Nature* (1956) and *Forms of Nature and Life* (1966), both of which relate similar formal designs in natural subjects, such as the shape of a spiral.

This is not to suggest Feininger was an unoriginal photographer. On the contrary, his unique perspective has given us stunning images that are a part of the lexicon of the twentieth century, such as his photograph of



Leaf (Pinwheel), 1935.



Feather, circa 1956.

Coney Island on Independence Day (1949), which shows a dense mass of holiday celebrants compressed into a single plane to suggest the heat and chaos of the day. Or his portrait of photojournalist Dennis Stock from a 1951 *Life* magazine article, in which the camera in Stock's hand becomes the photographer's "face"—the lens and viewfinder act as his eyes.

Feininger's insatiable drive to perfect and define his medium stemmed from his early years growing up in Germany, as the son of artist Lyonel Feininger, who in 1919 became head of the printmaking workshop at the innovative German school of art, architecture, and design, the Bauhaus in Weimar. The younger Feininger received a diploma in cabinetmaking at the Bauhaus as well as a degree in architecture from the Anhaltische Bauschule zu Zerbst. His only formal training in photography consisted of a few apparently unsatisfactory lectures by Walter Peterhans at the Bauhaus after finishing his previous degrees. Feininger essentially taught himself

photographic technique, although he was surrounded by students, teachers, and artists working with the medium, such as radically experimental photographer László Moholy-Nagy who happened to share a house with the Feininger family and his brother, T. Lux Feininger, who studied under Moholy-Nagy and exhibited and published his own work regularly in Germany.

Early on, Feininger experimented with techniques such as solarization, reticulation, negative prints, and bas-relief printing. For his subject matter, he was originally inclined towards friends, family, his car (an Opel), women, and a few objects such as flowers, petals and seeds. His negative image of a tugboat on the Elbe River (1928) was included in the landmark exhibition *Film und Foto* in Stuttgart in 1929.

FiFo, as it was nicknamed, also presented works by several contemporary artists who influenced Feininger such as the Germans Karl Blossfeldt (known for his published images of plant



Leaf, 1934.

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