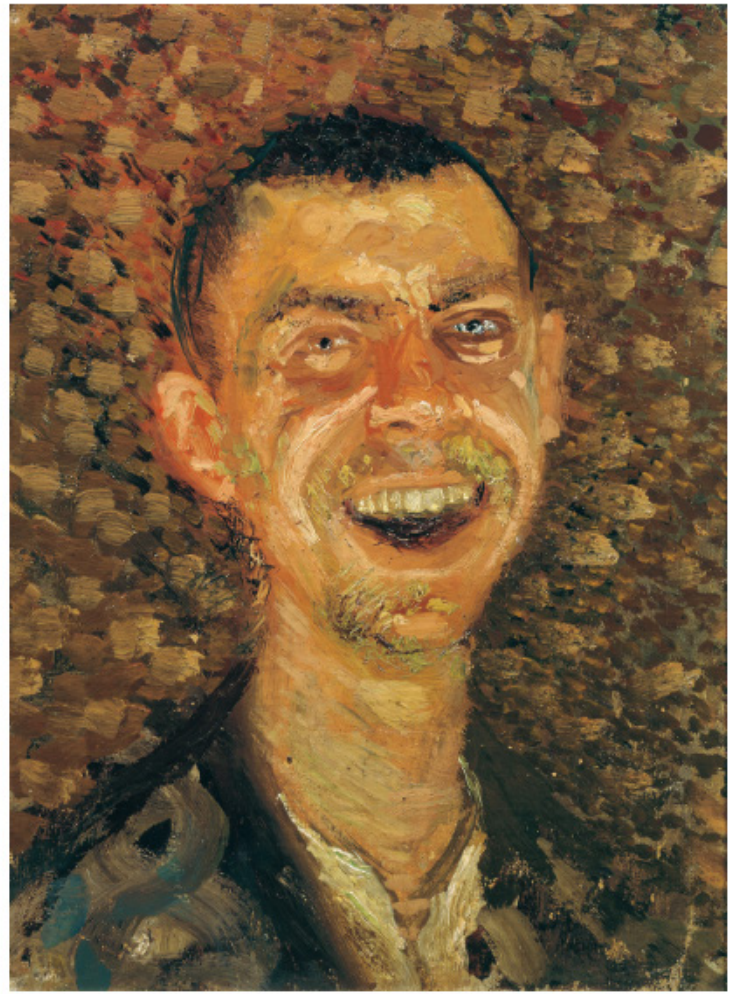


The Short, Scandalous Life of Austria's Most Tortured Artist

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Gerstl, *Semi-Nude Self-Portrait*, 1902-04. Courtesy of the Leopold Museum, Vienna.



Gerstl, *Self-Portrait, Laughing*.

It's seldom that an artist receives a first solo U.S. museum show decades after death. But then again, few artists have the haunting magnetism and drama of Richard Gerstl, whose rarely exhibited work is currently on view at Neue Galerie in New York City.

A lesser-known contemporary of Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele, Gerstl was a bona fide rebel whose short life ended tragically in suicide. He was a man at odds with Austria's fin-de-siècle society, rejecting anything that smacked of tradition or discipline. For Gerstl, even Klimt's controversial Vienna Secession movement—which sought to break the mould and move away from Austrian conservatism in the arts—was too haughty and bourgeois. (He



Gerstl, *Grinzing*, 1906. Courtesy of Galerie St. Etienne, New York.

refused any association with the group, and once declined participating in a show alongside Klimt.)

Some might argue that Gerstl's proto-Expressionist style evolved in diametric opposition to his peers, but it's not quite that simple. His amalgamated aesthetic was born out of a commitment to experimentation and irresolution.

The artist's earliest self-portrait, *Semi-Nude Self-Portrait* (1902-1904), suggests the divergent influences that surfaced in his work. He indexes the diamond torsos of Greek Archaic and Egyptian sculpture, ordering his painting with rational proportions and anatomical perfection, but renders himself androgynous and flat. The young Gerstl is portrayed against an

aquamarine background, with a bright halo around his head.

Is it a nod to Byzantine mosaics depicting Christ and Lazarus? And does this imply that Gerstl sees himself as a savior? Not necessarily. The halo also highlights Gerstl's buzz cut—a conspicuously anachronistic hairstyle that was associated in his time with psychiatric patients. Mad or divine? Gerstl's painting evokes the tortured genius trope of our greatest artistic masters.

And like so many great masters, Gerstl has a traumatic life story, one that culminated in a torrid love affair with Mathilde, the wife of his close friend and famous composer Arnold Schönberg, in 1908, and the artist ultimately taking his own life. After being caught in flagrante, the young painter slumped back home, destroyed his papers, tied a rope around his neck, and plunged a knife into his heart.

It's not like unstable men were a rare find in Vienna, however. After all, this era contained a number of tortured eccentrics who were well-versed in Sigmund Freud's seminal psychological tomes. Schiele comes to mind: a man so driven by his erotic inclinations that the small Austro-Hungarian village of Krumau (now part of the Czech Republic) literally ran him out of town for painting undressed, nubile teens. Yet Schiele's scandals are mere postscript compared to Gerstl's provocations.

A young virtuoso, Gerstl chafed under the strict conservative tutelage of Christian Griepenkerl at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. When Gerstl left the academy in 1901, he went without formal instruction for three years. That isolation magnified his dueling traits of narcissistic self-assuredness and shy insecurity. Years later, he would completely alienate himself from Viennese society by refusing to participate in the honorary procession of Emperor Franz Joseph I of Austria.

Unsurprisingly, Gerstl was intensely lonely, and his solitude took a toll on the artist's work. The most unsettling example is Gerstl's *Full-Length Self-Portrait, Laughing* (1904). Undone by negative comments from a viewer who visited his studio, the artist tore into his self-portrait, defacing it with blue paint and cutting the canvas into two unequal halves.

What remains is an awkward, tragically duplicitous image of the artist. Gerstl looks handsome in his three-piece suit and nonchalant pose, but his face betrays him. There is something forced about his smile and an uneasy quality



Gerstl, *Portrait of a Man (Green background)*, 1908.



Gerstl, *Mathilde Schönerberg*. Courtesy of Belvedere, Vienna.

in his eyes. The dark void behind Gerstl reverberates with this looming sense of dread; a depressive cloud preparing to swallow him whole.

Gerstl's destructive tendencies became a hallmark of his expressive style. The ripping of paintings would later evolve into the scarring of the canvases' surfaces, the faint trace of a brush stem interrupting his impasto layering of pigments. He was known as a full-blooded painter, often foregoing any sketches or planning. And without much official instruction, he looked to the work of painters outside of Vienna.

He became enamored with a more international style of painting, including the French Pointillism of Georges Seurat and the often gloomy compositions of artists like Edvard Munch and Vincent van Gogh.

The influence of Seurat is palpable in Gerstl's various portraits from 1906. *Portrait of the Artist's Father, Emil* (1906) is unabashedly French-inspired. The artist positions his father directly in the sun, creating a makeshift spotlight. The extreme contrast between light and shadow frees Gerstl to experiment with his pigments. Here, his eye for color truly shines, as he mixes deep yellows, reds, and blues to create a strikingly sullen image of his elderly father.

Mathilde Schönerberg, however, was Gerstl's most infamous muse. After Gerstl's alienation from Vienna's artistic community, he found a quick friend in Arnold Schönberg, whose experimentations in atonal music equally made him an avant-garde outcast. Schönberg hired Gerstl to teach Mathilde how to paint, hoping she could earn the couple some extra money through commissions. Despite Gerstl's infatuation with Mathilde, he and Arnold maintained a healthy and productive friendship—each inspired the other's art form.

With the Schönerbergs, Gerstl explored the rougher effects of his paintbrush. *Mathilde Schönerberg* (1907) is one of the artist's best-known works. The composition is hastily painted, eschewing any sense of depth or proportion. Mathilde vibrates off the picture-plane, her solemn face and crossed hands dramatizing the withdrawn impression she apparently made on men.

Naturally, Gerstl saved his most terrifying, daring experiments for himself. He translated the freehand method of Pointillism into daunting acts of auto-aggression, contorting his face into rabid caricature. *Self-Portrait, Laughing* (1907) unmask the artist's mercurial nature that he concealed in earlier work. Here, too, laughter signifies annihilation. The artist fades into smudges, with his shoulders barely receiving any definition.

Oddly enough, the artist's final self-portrait retreats from this abstract style. *Nude Self-Portrait with Palette* (1908) looks like Vienna's reaction to Pablo Picasso's "Blue Period." Gerstl's figure

is sharp, defined, and geometric. The painting is washed in blue hues—possibly a reference to his earliest self-portrait. Here, however, he is nude, suggesting his transition from boy to man. Gerstl has cropped the painting at the calf to emphasize and center his sex. Yet the artist looks pale, emaciated, and distant.



Gerstl, *The Schönberg Family*, 1908. Courtesy of MoMOK, Vienna.

The artist's final painting was a nude portrait, not of himself but of his forbidden lover, Mathilde. More so than his first portrait of her, *Seated Female Nude* (1908) suggests a hurried rendering of Mathilde's likeness. Gerstl has intentionally obscured his subject's face, leaving her purposefully unfinished or willfully destroyed. What remains is a hazy outline of her body, drawn with a puerile emphasis on her breasts and sex.

The result is a seemingly post-coital image with a nefarious quality. The mirror behind Mathilde indicates that this dalliance took place in the artist's studio. It was the same mirror that Gerstl would later hang himself in front of.

Dead at the age of 25, Gerstl is outlived by only 60 of his paintings. Most of these are currently on view at Neue Galerie, providing a glimpse into Gerstl's sprint toward destruction. But while he lived, Gerstl found more in painting than many of his contemporaries could imagine, transfusing emotion into pigment.

Whereas Klimt and Schiele cage their subjects in gilded patterns and disfiguring perspectives, Gerstl is interested in freedom. He pries emotional reality from the canvas above all else, allowing intimate portraits to vibrate with instability, conflict, and self-loathing.

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