

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

THE FIRST AUSTRIAN EXPRESSIONIST

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New York

PABLO PICASSO and Jackson Pollock are synonymous with radically innovative art. Others, such as Vincent van Gogh or Caravaggio, are eponyms for extreme behavior. As the illuminating exhibition “Richard Gerstl” at the Ronald S. Lauder Neue Galerie makes clear, this pioneering Austrian modernist painter (1883-1908) should be acclaimed on both counts: for his daring, ahead-of-the-curve expressionist paintings and for his highly colored personal history. Yet though he is hailed by admirers as “the first Austrian Expressionist,” Gerstl, unlike his celebrated compatriots Gustave Klimt, Egon Schiele and Oskar Kokoschka, remains obscure on this side of the Atlantic.

In part, this is because of the brevity of his working life, despite a precocious early start. (The exhibition’s first harbinger of future directions is a semi-nude self-portrait painted around 1902-1904, before the artist was 21.) But Gerstl committed suicide soon after his 25th birthday, in the wake of a scandal, so there are few extant works, most of which are in Austrian collections. More important, because of the circumstances of his death, Gerstl’s correct bourgeois family hid most of his art from view for more than 20 years; other works are believed lost. His first exhibition was not held until 1931, when his brother brought the surviving paintings to the attention of a prestigious Viennese gallery. The show was hailed as a revelation.

Gerstl fans have long been tantalized by the Neue Galerie’s energetic “Portrait of a Man (Green Background),” painted in 1908, the last summer of the artist’s life, with its fluent, ribbon brushstrokes, casual pose, and summarily indicated outdoor set-

ting. “Richard Gerstl,” organized by independent curator Jill Lloyd for the Neue Galerie, in partnership with the Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, sets this fine picture in context and allows us to gauge some of the excitement generated by that 1931 exhibition. We follow Gerstl’s evolution over a startlingly brief six years, from prodigiously gifted maker of naturalistic portraits to fearless creator of fiercely scrawled landscapes and figures so elusive that they verge on abstraction. Through the shifts in his approach, we can follow his discovery of artists such as Vincent van Gogh, Ferdinand Hodler, Edvard Munch and perhaps Edouard Vuillard.

The exhibition’s center gallery concentrates on portraits made between 1906 and 1908, the earliest constructed with large, rhythmic, broken marks, like over-scaled Impressionist touches, the latest with exuberant, uninhibited swipes and stabs of a loaded brush. Gerstl, we are told, can be seen

woman in a fabulous hat emphasizes, by contrast, the greater freedom and sensuality of the younger man’s paint handling. An agitated, rapidly scribbled Kokoschka portrait of a man underscores the prescience of Gerstl’s approach.

That pivotal early self-portrait, with the nude Gerstl swathed in a white sheet from the waist down, is on view in the first gallery. With its rough strokes, confrontational pose and symbolist overtones, it looks remarkably progressive for the first years of the 20th century, but it’s completely overwhelmed by Gerstl’s last—1908—self-portrait, in the final room. A tour de force of slashing brushwork, pale flesh and full frontal nudity, it seems to show the painter at work, with the dark mass of his easel and large canvas an ominous vertical band that forces the figure to the left.

A more ambiguous, minimally suggested standing nude, possibly in an interior with watchful witnesses, also from 1908, suggests that Gerstl, had he lived longer, might have painted figures as bold and economical as those of the marvelous Bay Area artist David Park. Light-struck, outdoor group portraits, with features and details of clothing implied by slashes and sweeps of sunny color, seem to bear witness to summer pleasures and a more relaxed mood, despite the urgency of Gerstl’s brushwork.

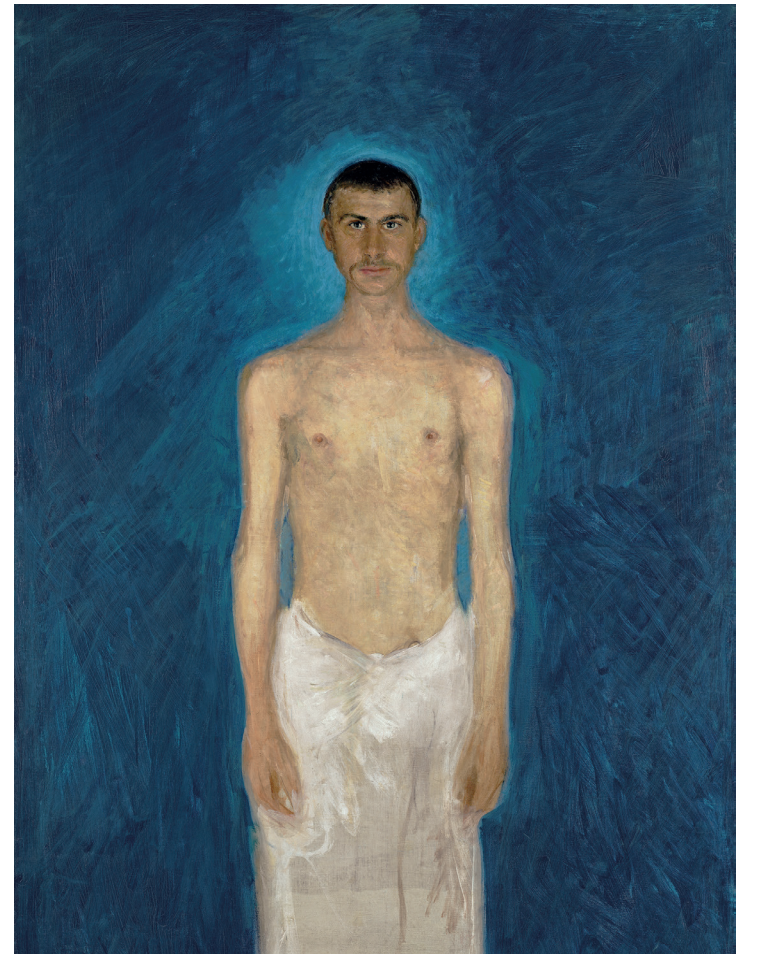
The subtext of the exhibition is Gerstl’s close, complicated friendship with the composer Arnold Schönberg, his family, his musician colleagues and, above all,

Schönberg’s wife, Mathilde, with whom the painter had a brief, disastrous affair. Gerstl’s portraits of these protagonists, executed with varying degrees of intensity, bring these connections to life. (That Gerstl’s suicide was triggered by Schönberg’s discovery of the couple in flagrante and the aftermath of that revelation was suppressed by the composer’s circle until 1967; a carefully researched catalog essay by the Gerstl scholar Raymond Coffer clarifies the tragic story.)

Some of Schönberg’s own self-portraits and paintings are included, along with photographs and portraits by various artists of all the players in this highly charged drama. The most vivid is Gerstl’s unfinished, life-size nude of Mathilde, painted in the autumn of 1908, before the affair was discovered and she returned to her husband. It was Gerstl’s last painting.

Richard Gerstl
Ronald S. Lauder Neue Galerie
Through September 25

—Ms. Wilkin is an independent curator and critic.



Gerstl’s ‘Semi-Nude Self-Portrait’ (1902-04)
PHOTO: LEOPOLD MUSEUM, VIENNA



Gerstl’s ‘Mathilde Schönberg’ (summer 1907)
PHOTO: BELVEDERE MUSEUM, VIENNA

as a bridge between Klimt and Kokoschka. Yet while his loosely patterned backgrounds may faintly echo Klimt’s “mosaic” society portraits, the presence of one of the older artist’s typically stylized, crisply delineated depictions of a