



A Singular Case - Report in Art

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Case Report

Richard Gerstl (1883 - 1908) painted “ Semi Nude Self-Portrait in 1905; he painted “ Nude Self - Portrait with Palette” on 12th September 1908, two days before his 25th birthday and two months before his suicide on the 4th of November. Only three years and a whole world apart. In the first painting, the artist’s body seems to convey an important message to the world, the blue colour bordering the painter’s upper torso is lightened and produces an aura, not portraying himself in his studio but instead elevate himself to the status of a near messianic figure. Art as replacement of religion, where the artist can be regarded as the creator of an independent world. The painter seems to be looking through the observer and losing himself esoterically in the distance. The unrealistic appearance and the suggestion of aura can be classified as a symbolist work. The same body is image of desperation and isolation in the second portrait. The fact both paintings were created by the same artist is surprising and create the case. Gerstl’s artistic work, soon developing his own Expressionist style, spanned only four years from 1904 to 1908, showing a rapid artistic development. In 1906, the 22 year-old Academy student met the composer Arnold Schonberg, who was nine years senior. Gerstl, a young man with so many interests, running to read best contemporary literature (Ibsen, Weininger, Freud) as to follow music scenes and the advangardes, was introduced in Schonberg’s family to do some portraits, entering into a circle of young people who admired the composer and remained unconditionally loyal to

him, especially during the years when performances of his works caused regular scandals and wide rejection. An in-depth artistic exchange ensued between the artist and the composer who was already a father-figure and highly gifted teacher. Schonberg, who painted on the side, was influenced by the young Gerstl and Gerstl, in turn, evolved a more and more abstracted painting style, perhaps influenced by the then just beginning atonality of the composer.

He repeatedly painted portraits of Mathilde (1881-1923), Schonberg’s wife. In the summer of 1907 Gerstl’s friendship with Mathilde developed into a love affair. Schonberg suspected the liaison, which presumably lasted for two years. In 1907 and 1908, Gerstl accompanied the Schonberg family on their summer vacations. The situation came to a climax when the lovers were caught “ in flagrante “ by Schonberg in the summer of 1908. Mathilde briefly left her husband and their children, six year old daughter Trudi and two years old son Georg. Friends persuaded Mathilde to return to her family out of regards for society and her children after a few days. Gerstl was subsequently cut from Schonberg circle and was not invited to a concert performing works by Schonberg students on the evening of the 4th November 1908. The same night Richard Gerstl committed suicide. Mathilde Schonberg had great difficulties coming to terms with these events. She became taciturn and shunned her husband’s company. Arnold Schonberg also found it hard to cope with the shock, and it was during this time that he wrote some of his most emotional compositions.



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