

A Case of Mistaken Identity? The Jalowetz Portrait by Richard Gerstl

by Francis Mallett and Simon Obert

On 20 June 1962 Johanna Jalowetz, the widow of the conductor and Schoenberg pupil Heinrich Jalowetz (d. 1946), wrote a letter to the art historian Otto Breicha. In those years Breicha was conducting research into the painter Richard Gerstl, in particular gathering information for a catalogue of his works. In this connection he turned to Johanna Jalowetz, knowing that she owned “a painting by the artist.”¹ Johanna Jalowetz responded to his questions by noting that she possessed a Gerstl self-portrait, a “pointillist drawing” in ink on paper that probably “dates from the year 1906/7.” It bore, she continued, an “extraordinary resemblance” to the artist and was “a gift from him.”² But she then added a paragraph whose contents can only have taken Breicha by surprise:

At the same time, Gerstl painted to order a life-size three-quarter-length oil portrait of my husband in a pointillist technique. When we moved away from Vienna we left the said portrait for safekeeping with a relative, Alois Kurzweil. Our many changes of residence (at that time an opera conductor’s lot) made it impossible for us to look after the painting. And by the time we became more settled, after the First World War, we had lost all contact with and trace of Alois Kurzweil.³

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- 1 Otto Breicha, letter of 4 June 1962 to Johanna Jalowetz, carbon copy in the Otto Breicha Archive, Leopold Museum, Vienna. We wish to thank Dominik Papst of the Leopold Museum for making available to us this and the following letter (see note 3).
 - 2 This refers to *Self-Portrait*, no. 28 in Raymond Coffey’s “Werkverzeichnis,” in *Richard Gerstl: Retrospektive* (exhibition catalogue Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, 24 February to 14 May 2017, and Neue Galerie, New York, 29 June to 25 September 2017), ed. Ingrid Pfeiffer and Jill Lloyd in collaboration with Raymond Coffey (Munich: Hirmer, 2017), pp. 53–175, esp. 96.
 - 3 “Ich besitze ein Selbstportraet von Richard Gerstl, ein Geschenk von ihm. [...] Eine pointillistische [sic] Zeichnung in India Ink, auf Papier [...]. Das Bild duerfte aus dem Jahre 1906/7 stammen. Es war ausserordentlich aehnlich. [...] Zur selben Zeit hat Gerstl ein Oel-Portraet meines Mannes auf Bestellung in pointillistischer Technik gemalt, ein lebensgrosses Kniestueck. Bei unserem Wegzug aus Wien haben wir besagtes Portraet in Verwahrung eines Verwandten – Alois Kurzweil – gelassen. Unsere vielen Domizilwechsel (zu jener Zeit der Weg eines Operndirigenten) haben es uns unmoeglich gemacht, uns um das Bild zu kuemmern. Und bis wir etwas sesshafter wurden, nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg, hatten wir alle Kontakte und Spuren von Alois Kurzweil verloren.” Johanna Jalowetz, letter of 20 June 1962 to Otto Breicha, in the Otto Breicha Archive, Leopold Museum, Vienna. The Jalowetz portrait was omitted

This letter is the only written document that provides information on Gerstl's Jalowetz portrait. Besides that, it allows us to draw at least two conclusions: first, the gift of a drawing offers further proof of Gerstl's familiarity with members of the Schoenberg circle; and second, the portrait "to order" may have derived from Schoenberg's efforts to obtain commissions for Gerstl. But the letter mainly informs us about the conditions under which the Jalowetzes were in possession of and then lost track of the painting. These conditions will be briefly discussed below, as they have, until now, been somewhat misrepresented.⁴

After marrying on 16 December 1908, Heinrich and Johanna Jalowetz relocated in September 1909 from Vienna to Regensburg, where Jalowetz took up a position as conductor at the City Theater. This was followed by positions in Gdansk (1910–12) and Szczecin (1912–16), after which he was appointed first conductor at the German Theater in Prague (1916–23). After a year spent as a freelance conductor, primarily in Berlin, he returned to Vienna for the 1924–25 season, when he was employed at the Volksoper. According to Johanna Jalowetz's letter, the couple left the portrait behind in Vienna in late summer and autumn of 1909 and "lost trace of Alois Kurzweil" during their years in Prague, when they "became more settled," or at the latest by 1924.⁵

As far as Jalowetz's description of her husband's portrait is concerned, we might leave matters as they stand, except for one thing: there exists a Gerstl painting that uncannily fits this description. It is *Self-Portrait Against Blue-Green Background* (see *Plate 1*), an "oil portrait" and "three-quarter-length" painting ("Kniestück") that can well be described as executed "in a pointillist technique." Not only that, it can hardly be denied that there exists a strong similarity between the figure in the painting and photographs we have of Jalowetz. Moreover, the posture, with hands on hips, is a typical Jalowetz pose, captured in several photographs (see *Plates 2 and 4*), even towards the end of his life.⁶ Looking more closely, however, we note some crucial physical differences between him and Gerstl, despite the obvious superficial similarity. Jalowetz was more heavy-set, with a squarer face and

from the "Werkverzeichnis" (see note 2) although Gerstl's lost works are otherwise listed there. However, it functions as no. "RG88" in Coffey's online catalogue at www.richardgerstl.com/chronology-of-gerstls-works/1906-1907 (accessed on 6 March 2020).

4 See Raymond Coffey, *Richard Gerstl and Arnold Schönberg: A Reassessment of their Relationship (1906–1908) and its Impact on their Artistic Works* (Ph.D. diss. University of London, 2011), p. 115: "Johanna reported in the same letter that Gerstl's portrait of her husband had disappeared from safe custody in Vienna after their 1938 emigration." See also p. 94 in the exhibition catalogue *Gerstl: Retrospektive* (see note 2).

5 The identity of Alois Kurzweil could not be determined.

6 The Heinrich Jalowetz Collection (Paul Sacher Foundation, PSS) contains additional photographs showing Jalowetz in this posture. Other pictures can be found in the picture database of the Arnold Schönberg Center, Vienna (www.schoenberg.at/index.php/de/archiv/bildarchiv), including one of 1944 (PH2042).

a slightly different, fuller, swept-back hairstyle. However, the painting does not look much like the few existing photographs of Gerstl (see *Plate 3*). There is also something about the portrait and pose that does not equate with what we know of Gerstl's character.⁷ In addition, nothing about the painting or its execution cries out "self-portrait": it seems, in its composition, far more similar to Gerstl's portraits of Alexander Zemlinsky and Ernst Diez. There is no easel, brush, palette, or studio background. In fact, the background of the painting suggests an outdoor location – unsuitable for a mirror.⁸

The fact that Gerstl painted this portrait on cardboard strongly suggests that it originated in summer 1907 when he was staying at Lake Traun together with Schoenberg's family and circle, which at various times included Irene Bien, Henryka Cohn, Jalowetz, Viktor Krüger, Erwin Stein, Anton Webern, and the Zemlinskys. Several of the paintings he created there were painted on cardboard for the first time in his output.⁹ Moreover, they have several stylistic techniques in common with *Self-Portrait Against Blue-Green Background*, such as the "pointillist" style (i.e. distinct dots of color, as in *Portrait of Johann Georg Prillinger*) and the inclusion of the light-brown color of the cardboard by leaving areas unpainted (as in *Fruit Tree with Wooden Supports*).¹⁰

If the painting in question did originate in summer 1907 – and Jalowetz's presence at Lake Traun supports this assumption¹¹ –, then we must consider another item of evidence: in summer 1907 Gerstl had a different appearance from the figure in the painting, with a relatively short hairstyle, moustache, and goatee. We can see this in the portrait of him by William Clark Rice or in *Self-Portrait, Laughing*, both of which originated at this time. Finally, attention should be drawn to another detail that argues against Gerstl as the portrayed figure: Gerstl painted the figure with blue eyes, a color which, as far as we know, he never gave to his eyes in his self-portraits.¹²

But how did the "self-portrait" attribution come about at all? After Gerstl's death by suicide on 4 November 1908, his family kept his paintings

7 This has occasionally been noticed, but interpreted for the picture in question as showing Gerstl in the "role" of a "dandy." See Ingrid Pfeiffer, "Richard Gerstl – ein Überblick," in *Gerstl: Retrospektive* (see note 2), pp. 14–22, esp. 18.

8 See also Hans-Peter Wipplinger's comment on the picture, which validates our assumption, in *Richard Gerstl: Inspiration – Vermächtnis / Inspiration – Legacy* (exhibition catalogue Leopold Museum, Vienna, 27 September 2019 to 20 January 2020, and Kunsthaus Zug, 11 September 2020 to 14 February 2021), ed. Hans-Peter Wipplinger and Matthias Haldemann (Cologne: Walther König, 2019), p. 260.

9 See the list of Gerstl paintings on cardboard in Coffey, *Gerstl and Schönberg* (see note 4), p. 337.

10 See also Coffey's "Werkverzeichnis" (see note 2), p. 110.

11 The summer of 1908, which Gerstl again spent with the Schoenberg circle on Lake Traun, can be dismissed from consideration, not only for stylistic reasons, but because Jalowetz was elsewhere at the time, as is proved by his correspondence with Schoenberg.

12 We wish to thank Therese Muxeneder (Arnold Schönberg Center) for pointing this out to us.

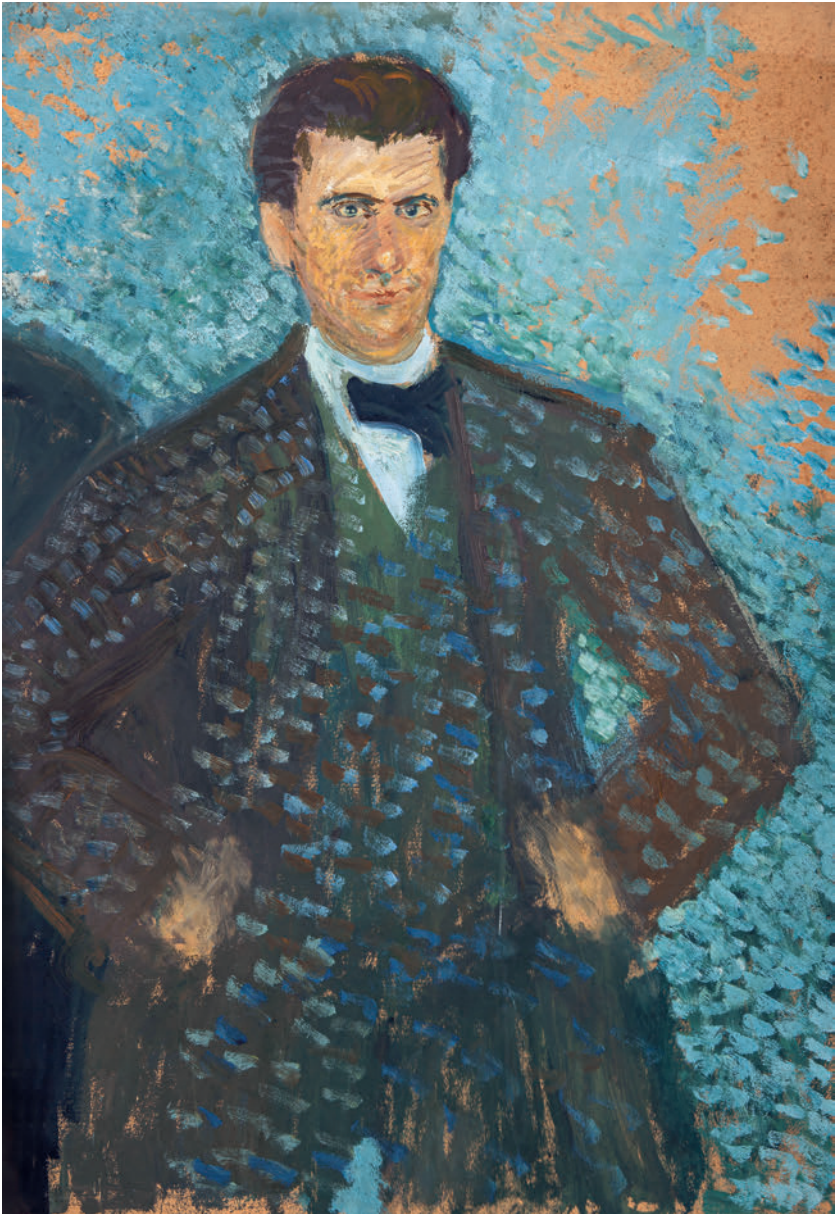


Plate 1: Richard Gerstl (1883–1908), Self-Portrait Against Blue-Green Background, 1907, oil on cardboard, 100 × 72 cm (Tyrolean State Museum Ferdinandeum, Innsbruck, Modern Collections: Gem 3112; photograph: Tyrolean State Museum).

in storage with a removal company. In 1931 his brother Alois Gerstl approached the Viennese art dealer Otto Kallir (known then as Nirenstein), who purchased the bulk of the paintings and exhibited them in his Neue Galerie. To this end, Kallir drew up an “estate inventory,” for which Alois



Plate 2



Plate 3



Plate 4

Plate 2: Portrait photograph of Heinrich Jalowetz, Gdansk, 1912. Photo studio of Gottheil & Sohn (Heinrich Jalowetz Collection, PSS).

Plate 3: Portrait photograph of Richard Gerstl, c. 1904 (Otto Breicha Archive at the Leopold Museum, Vienna).

Plate 4: Group photograph of Heinrich Jalowetz, Johanna Jalowetz, and Anton Webern (from left to right), Gdansk, 1911. Photo studio of Gebr. Freymann (Heinrich Jalowetz Collection, PSS).

Gerstl supplied information.¹³ Alois would obviously have recognized family portraits or family friends such as Waldemar Unger, but it would have been harder for him to identify those in Gerstl's circle of bohemian acquaintances since he never associated with them and was often absent for long periods of military service. Kallir would have known some others: Schoenberg and Zemlinsky had very distinctive features, and he knew Ernst Diez personally. Nevertheless, a few sitters remained unidentified. Most of the self-portraits depict either just Gerstl's head and shoulders or the artist in his studio, brush or palette in hand. But one self-portrait clearly does not conform to this description: *Self-Portrait Against Blue-Green Background*.

The orthodox attribution seems to rest upon the belief that it must be a self-portrait simply because Kallir, with Alois Gerstl's help, catalogued it as such.¹⁴ Since then nobody has ever questioned it. Taking into account the number of Gerstl self-portraits and the superficial similarity between him and Jalowetz, it would have been an easy assumption for Kallir and Alois Gerstl to make. As far as we know, neither of them was acquainted with Jalowetz, who was first conductor at the Cologne Opera from 1925 to 1933. But if we compare the photos of Jalowetz, the original assumption about the painting begins to look questionable.

What is indisputable is that hard facts in the Gerstl story are thin on the ground. Much has changed over the years in Gerstl scholarship,¹⁵ but even if we know far more than we once did, largely thanks to a handful of researchers,¹⁶ much is still speculation awaiting further evidence.¹⁷ In the case of the painting under discussion, however, several questions remain unanswered, assuming that it is not a self-portrait but a portrait of Jalowetz. If it was placed in Kurzweil's hands for safekeeping in 1909, how did it wind up in Gerstl's posthumous estate, and from there in Kallir's 1931 exhibition? Where was it located from 1931 until 1966, when the Tyrolean State Mu-

13 Kallir published the "Nachlassverzeichnis" in "Richard Gerstl (1883–1908): Beiträge zur Dokumentation seines Lebens und Werkes," *Mitteilungen der Österreichischen Galerie*, 18 (1974), pp. 125–93, esp. 145–67. These events are discussed in Jane Kallir, "The Remarkable Discovery and Re-Discovery of Richard Gerstl," in *Gerstl: Inspiration* (see note 8), pp. 67–73.

14 See no. 35 in Kallir's "Nachlassverzeichnis" (see note 13), p. 156, where the picture bears the title *Selbstbildnis (Kniestück)*. The almost identical size (100 × 71.5 cm) and the technique ("Öl. Karton") imply that we are dealing with the same painting.

15 Until recently the opinion was that Gerstl never exhibited his work during his lifetime. This opinion derived from statements by Alois Gerstl and Gerstl's fellow student Viktor Hammer; Kallir, "Richard Gerstl" (see note 13), pp. 139 and 143. However, Leo A. Lensing was able to point to at least one exhibition in which Gerstl took part: "Es 'klimtelt' an der Akademie: Richard Gerstl stellt aus," in *Zwischenräume, Zwischentöne: Wiener Moderne, Gegenwartskunst, Sammlungspraxis: Festschrift für Patrick Werkner*, ed. Bernadette Reinhold and Eva Kernbauer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), pp. 114–19.

16 Among them are Otto Kallir, Otto Breicha, Klaus Albrecht Schröder, and Raymond Coffey.

17 See Hans-Peter Wipplinger, "The Myth of Richard Gerstl," and Jane Kallir, "Dating Richard Gerstl: Toward a More Accurate Chronology of the Work," in *Gerstl: Inspiration* (see note 8), pp. 33–55 and 111–22.

seum purchased it from private possession? Whether the reverse side of the painting bore the estate stamp with which Kallir identified the paintings he purchased and exhibited can no longer be determined. By the time it arrived in Innsbruck in 1966, the reverse side had already been laid on fiberboard.¹⁸

Finally, another point should be borne in mind: Johanna Jalowetz's statements to Breicha about the painting – fifty-three years later when in her seventies – are obviously relevant; all the more it's necessary to judge them correctly. They can only be taken for what they are: not a contemporaneous description, but the memory of a painting that she had last seen fifty-three years earlier. That being said, her memory is astonishingly objective, especially regarding its materials, technique and composition; and given the time lapse, it is surprising that only one detail – her claim that the painting is “life-size” (at a height of 100 cm) – proves inaccurate. Thus, all doubts concerning her statements must square with two facts. First, she must have been personally acquainted with Gerstl (how else could she have claimed that the self-portrait drawing bore an “extraordinary resemblance” to him?). Johanna and Heinrich Jalowetz had a love affair at least from 1907,¹⁹ at which time Gerstl already frequented the Schoenberg circle and had another year to live. Moreover, the couple are said, in later years, to have spoken appreciatively of Gerstl.²⁰ Second, Johanna Jalowetz was *au fait* with the art world and knew exactly what she was saying when she described the painting to Breicha. This is evident not only from the technical terms she used in her letter, but also from the surroundings in which she lived. It was not just from 1939, when she and her husband arrived at Black Mountain College, that she had personal contact with visual artists. Both of the Jalowetz's daughters took up artistic careers, Trude Guermonprez as a textile artist, Lisa Aronson as a set designer.²¹

There is an old adage among art dealers about trusting your eyes, not your ears. Every picture may tell a story, but that story frequently changes. We understand that challenging standard assumptions can be a controversial process taking years, and is often heavily resisted. However, the indisputable evidence remains the painting itself, and we believe the answer is literally staring us in the face.

18 E-mail of 24 February 2020 from Claudia Bachlechner, restorer at the Tyrolean State Museums, to Simon Obert. We are grateful to Claudia Bachlechner for this information.

19 The two had known each other since childhood, being first cousins. Evidence for their intimacy is provided by Jalowetz's song *Der Ungenannten* (on a poem by Ludwig Uhland), which he dedicated to Johanna (fair copy manuscript in the Heinrich Jalowetz Collection, PSS). The song was performed at a concert of Schoenberg pupils on 7 November 1907.

20 Their younger daughter, Lisa Aronson, made a statement to this effect to Raymond Coffey. See Coffey, *Gerstl and Schönberg* (see note 4), p. 115.

21 See Albrecht Pohlmann, *Modell, Künstlerin und "wahre Eva": Das abenteuerliche Leben der Trude Guermonprez* (Halle an der Saale: Stekovics, 2003), and Frank Rich and Lisa Aronson, *The Theatre Art of Boris Aronson* (New York: Knopf, 1987).