

Lovis Corinth, *Portrait of Dr Ferdinand Mainzer, with Dr Camilla Smith, University of Birmingham*



Lovis Corinth, *Portrait of Dr Ferdinand Mainzer*, (1899), oil on canvas, 75cm by 58cm. Allocated jointly to the National Gallery, London, and the Henry Barber Trust under the Acceptance in Lieu scheme.

Transcript

Hello and welcome to this week's Tuesday Talk, part of a series of podcasts given by staff and students at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts and at the University of Birmingham. I'm Dr Camilla Smith, a Lecturer in Art History, and I'll be talking today about an exciting new painting to enter the Barber Institute's collection – a portrait by Lovis Corinth of Dr Ferdinand Mainzer, of 1899, a joint acquisition with the National Gallery.

We encounter a confident, dark-haired young man, seated on a red chair, set against a neutral-coloured background. We focus solely on this intriguing sitter – there are no background details that vie for our attention. The sitter is well dressed in a high-collared white shirt with necktie, a dark-coloured waistcoat and suit jacket. He appears learned, yet affable; eyeglasses sit neatly on his nose. A prominent moustache and dark eyebrows frame his face. In this $\frac{3}{4}$ -length portrait, the painting ends just below the sitter's jacket breast pocket and his right arm. The thumb of his right hand appears to rest – somewhat formally – on the lapel of his jacket.

But this painting's execution is far from conventional. The neutral-coloured background gives way to an animated field of broad brush marks, echoed by the vigorous brushstrokes of the sitter's black jacket. The white tones of the shirt collar and cuff provide a diagonal axis that links the face and the hands. While the sitter's face appears calm, the dynamism of the arm and hand are signalled by rapid thickly applied brushstrokes at the edge of the canvas. Light assumes an expressive rather than merely a descriptive function, reinforcing the sitter's poise. The light – strongest on the sitter's face and hand – flickers up again in the reddish upholstery of the chair, which in turn, draws us towards the gentle flush of the sitter's cheeks.

The portrait is of the German-Jewish physician, Dr Ferdinand Mainzer, aged 28 years old.

It was painted by the renowned German modernist artist, Lovis Corinth, in 1899, and whose signature in the left-hand corner, asserts the artist's unmistakable presence.

Fin-de-siècle Berlin – a young capital of the newly united German Empire. It had a buzzing art community and high cultural aspirations – the home of major commercial art dealer Fritz Gurlitt and the Berlin Artist Association (VBK). It had well-organised museums such as the National Gallery, a rich music scene and modern electrically lit theatres. In short, it offered unprecedented

opportunities for artists. And in terms of private commissions – it boasted some of the richest citizens.

Even before Corinth was to settle there permanently in 1901 and forge a successful career, he became a presence in some of Berlin's most important cultural circles. He was 37 years old – had trained in art academies in Munich and Paris – and was determined to gain access to the opportunities Berlin afforded him. In 1899, the year the Mainzer portrait was created, he describe himself in a letter to a friend, as 'swimming like a pike' through the cream of Berlin society. The German art critic, Julius Meier-Graefe, too, noted Corinth's seemingly unabashed presence at cultural events, recalling with disdain:

'Like a polar bear with little red eyes he moved through the ballrooms of Berlin. He looked greedily at many a banker and many a banker's wife [...] at dinner he always had two jugs of wine by his plate.' (Lenman: Artists)

Born the son of a tanner and farmer in East Prussia, Corinth's origins plagued him throughout his life: 'A burning ambition has always tormented me', he claimed. And he felt that everyone considered him 'rather repulsive and crude on account of my ill-bred barbarity'. (Horst: Corinth)

It was nonetheless in such higher echelons of Berlin society that the budding artist undoubtedly encountered Mainzer and his wife.

Corinth quickly became involved with the newly established Berlin Secessionist group of artists. Under the leadership of renowned German artist, Max Liebermann. Franz Skarbina, Hans Baluschek and later, Käthe Kollwitz, and Max Slevogt, were tired of the Emperor Wilhelm II's conservative attitudes towards art, and formed an independent exhibiting society in 1898 – calling themselves the 'Berlin Secessionists'. With strong commitment to modern art trends – artist members keenly explored the spontaneity of impressionism – often painting outdoors, as well as advocating modern subject matter – commitments that Corinth likewise supported.

One of the Secession artists, the landscape painter, Walter Leistikow, knew Corinth well and admired his work. They had first met almost a decade earlier in 1887 and would in fact share a close friendship for over two decades. Leistikow had great connections among Berlin's literati. As Corinth later recalled, it was he who 'showed me the way in that labyrinth capital city' (Corinth: Leistikow Nachruf: Gesammelte Schriften) Leistikow paved the way for Corinth's work to be shown at the Secession exhibition. And it was well received.

One of Leistikow's former art students, Gertrud Sabersky, had married Ferdinand Mainzer in the summer the year before Corinth painted his portrait. Indeed, Mainzer's wedding ring can be seen on

his right hand in the painting. It is likely, then, that the two men made their formal acquaintance through Walter Leistikow.

Mainzer was not an artist, however. He was a successful physician, who worked as a gynaecologist in Berlin's new *Frauenklinik* (Women's Hospital) set up in 1892. It was not just in matters of culture that Berlin was leading the way – in sexual reform politics, the city too was making its mark. Corinth's portrait of Mainzer reveals nothing about his profession, his passions or tastes. But it nonetheless depicts a man clearly in command of his field through his resolute composure and confident gaze. Despite the sitter's seemingly quiet demeanour, Mainzer's gently flushed cheeks signal a rich emotional life with many interests. Beyond medicine, Mainzer was a deeply cultured man, who had amassed a collection of classical antiquities, and to the amazement of the German writer, Carl Zuckmayer, was able to converse in classical Greek and Latin as if it were an everyday language! He also fostered numismatic and zoological interests – and kept a large aviary.

The Jewish liberal middle classes were important patrons of the arts in Germany at this time. The support of the arts propelled them toward the goal of being 'more German'. (Wallach: Jewish Visibility) Mainzer was himself born in southern Germany – as were his parents. Public displays of Jewishness were risky nonetheless – suggesting why, perhaps, there are no references in

Corinth's portrait to any objects typically found in Jewish middle class interiors. Corinth's style began to get him noticed among other important Jewish patrons connected with the Mainzer and Leistikow families. The artist captured some of Berlin's most prominent citizens, including in a portrait of Richard Israel, also in 1899, the same year as Mainzer's portrait. Israel was the owner of one of Berlin's notable department stores – and was also an ardent supporter of the Secession.

The following year, Corinth had an important solo exhibition in Berlin and was branded a leader of 'German impressionism', alongside Max Liebermann. Yet Corinth regarded such an accolade with caution. As he told a group of art students in a lecture some years later – to be a successful artist did not mean *imitating* great artists like Manet, Van Gogh, Gauguin or others – it came from hard graft, practice, originality and passion. It was all down to '*Selbständigkeit und Individualität*' (independence and individuality). (Corinth: Gesammelte)

The connection between Mainzer and Corinth appears to have lasted well beyond an initial portrait. Berlin became Corinth's permanent home in 1901 and he remained there until his death in 1925. In 1912 he would go on to paint Ferdinand Mainzer's son, and in 1914, his daughter (Max: https://www.fineartprintsondemand.com/artists/corinth/max_mainzer_with_a_siberian_greyhound.htm)

The portrait of *Max Mainzer with a Siberian Greyhound* is particularly striking in that it is painted less than a year after Corinth suffered a stroke. Max Mainzer, around 11 years old in the portrait, is shown with his arm around the large dog. The artist never overcame the long-term consequences of his illness; his left hand would not let him undertake intricate tasks and his right hand trembled. While this did not (rather extraordinarily) interfere with his ability to paint, his brushwork becomes much looser, even more dynamic than in the artist's earlier portrait of Mainzer.

In the following years, this dynamic style remained and critics began to talk of Corinth's art as becoming more 'expressionist' as a result of his modelling of paint. Completed so soon after such a traumatic event – Max's portrait, then, might be understood as a type of 'testing ground' for an artist, whose style had begun to evolve. But from a personal perspective, it also signals the potential closeness of Ferdinand Mainzer and Corinth – for it was in a portrait of Mainzer's son that the artist had chosen to explore the aesthetic potential of such expressive forms.

Corinth had been dead nearly eight years before the Nazis came to power in March 1933. Yet this did not stop them branding his artworks 'degenerate'. His works were removed from public collections and displayed in the 1937 'Degenerate Art Exhibition' that defamed modern German art.

Like Corinth, Mainzer himself would later suffer a severe physical blow in his career – injuring his hand, which meant that he was no longer able to work as a physician. However, his passion for literature, history and classics saw him write and publish a biography of Julius Caesar, in 1934, that was translated into French and English and reviewed to some acclaim. Mainzer's publications, like Corinth's artworks, are testaments to his perseverance to overcome physical challenges and learn how to master them supremely.

In preparing Caesar's biography, Mainzer spent time at the house of his good friend, Nazi resistor – and political moderate, Wilhelm Solf. Solf died in 1936, but his wife went on to preside over a group of anti-Nazi intellectuals at her salons in Berlin. This group of intellectuals – known as the 'Solf-Kreis' (Solf Circle), hid Jews and provided documents to smuggle them out of Germany. And it was eventually through Solf, that the Mainzer family were able to gain safe passage as German-Jewish refugees to Britain.

When exactly they arrived is unknown. But Mainzer would set sail to New York from Southampton in May 1939. He would remain in the States until he died in 1943, aged 71. Some of the Mainzer family paintings also found safe passage to Britain.

We see before us the portrait of a recently married, young man, a physician at the top of his career. Painted by an artist who was rapidly establishing his.

Mainzer's unwavering gaze and calm face suggest quiet erudition.

Yet if we look hard enough, we might just *hear* the sound of chatter, laughter and even the clinking of glasses among the cultural elites of fin-de-siècle Berlin.

Thank you very much for joining me here, and thanks to Jack Davies for playing his guitar compositions to accompany these talks. We have another podcast in two weeks' time and look forward to welcoming you back then.

Literature

Charlotte Berend-Corinth, *Lovis* (Munich: Albert Langen, 1958)

Lovis Corinth, *Gesammelte Schriften. Maler Bücher Band I* (Berlin: Fritz Gurlitt Verlag, 1920)

Peter J. Hempenstall & Paula Tanaka Mochida, *The Lost Man: Wilhelm Solf in German History* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005)

Robin Lenman, *Artists and Society in Germany, 1850-1914* (MUP, 1997)

Horst Uhr, *Lovis Corinth* (Berkeley & Oxford: University of California Press, 1990)

Kerry Wallach, *Passing Illusions: Jewish Visibility in Weimar Germany* (University of Michigan Press, 2017)

Carl Zuckmayer, *Als wär's ein Stück von mir – Horen der Freundschaft* (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 1975)

Author biography

Camilla Smith's research into aspects of German modernism is widely published in leading journals in the fields of Art History and German Studies. She has written essays for exhibitions at the Barbican, Belvedere in Vienna and the Berlinische Galerie in Berlin. Her monograph on Weimar artist, Jeanne Mammen, is forthcoming with Bloomsbury later this year. To hear Smith exploring Mammen's work alongside her artist contemporaries to celebrate the centenary of the Weimar Republic, go to BBC

Radio 3's series 'The Essay' – The Weimar Years, broadcast in November 2019, available as a podcast.