

EESTI KUNSTIMUUSEUM

KUMU

*Exhibition at the Kumu Art Museum*  
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# BALTIC GERMAN MODERNIST ERNA KREISCHMANN: A ROOM OF HER OWN



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On the cover: Erna Kreischmann. *Still Life in Gazes*. 1927. Pärnu Museum

On the inside of the front cover: Erna Kreischmann. *A sketch on the back of a work of art*. Undated. Colour pencil. Pärnu Museum

On the back cover: Erna Kreischmann. *Self-Portrait*. 1915. Oil. Pärnu Museum

When looking at the signature image of the exhibition, our eyes meet the artist's: with a slight smile on her lips, Erna Kreischmann peeks at us from under her swim cap. Behind her, outside the changing cabin, her husband Max Kreischmann is shading his eyes from the sun, gazing out to sea. The image shows the conjunction of the private and the public sphere, the spouses Max and Erna, Pärnu beach and the sea: all of which are common themes in the artist's oeuvre.

The Baltic-German Erna Elisabeth Kreischmann, née Montiner, was born on 5 December (or 17 December according to the Gregorian calendar) 1885 in Riga. Her father, Carl August Montiner (1862–1907) was the son of a weaver and a resident of Riga. Her mother's, Catharina Wilhelmine Montiner's (1862–1919), father was employed as a *Wachtmeister* by the Pärnu police.



*Erna Kreischmann with a dog*. 1904. Pärnu Museum

Kreischmann's parents were married on 13 October 1885 in Riga. Erna Kreischmann grew up as the only child, as her younger brother Johann Erich died of dysentery at the age of five months. Kreischmann's family moved to Pärnu around 1889. Erna's father, who had worked as a barkeeper and a chef, found employment at the café of the Pärnu Residents' Club (Pernauer Bürger-Club). Erna Kreischmann's origins were thus bourgeois, setting her apart from many other Baltic German women artists of the 19th century, who tended to have noble roots. The resulting distance from the conservativeness associated with the higher classes is also reflected in her work.



Erna Kreischmann. *Portrait of Grandmother*. 1914. Oil. Pärnu Museum

*Kreischmann's maternal grandmother Anna Natalie (née Metzner) was born in 1836 in Pärnu and lived to a ripe old age, dying in 1920 in Viljandi. As far as we know, the grandmother was the only family member besides her husband Max that Kreischmann depicted.*

In 1902, Kreischmann graduated from the Pärnu Young Ladies' Gymnasium. Three years later, she began her art studies. Kreischmann's independent and varied art studies shaped her into an artist who was open to artistic innovation and stood out among her contemporaries. The artist's oeuvre reflects her modernist approach to life, which was rare among the Baltic German artists of the early 20th century, who often favoured a more conservative style of depiction. During her studies, Kreischmann came into contact with a number of Baltic German women artists. Her first art teacher, from 1905 to 1910, was the well-known Baltic German artist and art teacher Marie Dücker. Kreischmann's other art teacher is not as well known. Meta Sprengholz (née Arneman) was

from Pärnu, had studied at the State Stroganov Academy of Industrial and Applied Arts in Moscow and worked as a stage and costume designer in Berlin. She was Kreischmann's instructor from 1915 to 1920. In 1922, Kreischmann moved to the Tõnismäe district of Tallinn and studied at the studios of August Jansen, Nikolai Root, Andrei Jegorov and Ants Laikmaa. Right before her demise, the artist attended correspondence courses at the Press Art School in London, where she learned the art of illustration and ink drawing. Kreischmann's plan was to continue her studies in London and Paris, but this dream was not fulfilled. Erna Kreischmann died of pneumonia, which developed as a complication of the flu she had contracted in 1929.

Erna Kreischmann was not a well-known artist in her lifetime. The first time she took part in a group exhibition of Estonian artists was in 1927. Her commemorative exhibition, opened on 21 April 1929 in the Tallinn Exchange building, evoked a generally positive response. Reviews were published in local Estonian, Russian and German newspapers. Kreischmann's own works were supplemented by those of her art teachers and artist friends, including several Baltic German women artists. Nikolai Root stressed in his review that Kreischmann had good connections with the artists from the previous generation and described her as a strict and modest artistic type, who often went unnoticed in her lifetime.<sup>1</sup> In another review published in the daily *Postimees*, the author wrote: "Although her name was not widely known as an artist, she was valued in small art circles as an artistic soul of great perseverance and aspiration, whose quests led to results that deserve recognition."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> N. Root, "Выставка картин памяти Эрны Крейшмань," *Вести дня: с приложением газеты «Сегодня»* [Рига], 21.04.1929, no. 107.

<sup>2</sup> "Erna Kreischmanni mälestusnäitus Tallinnas," *Postimees*, 24.04.1929, no. 109.





*Ants Laikmaa with his students.  
1925–1926.  
Art Museum of Estonia*

*In the photo (from the left):  
1st row:  
Helene Shcherbina,  
Erna Brinkmann, Ants Laikmaa,  
Lilly Walther, Erna Kreischmann  
and Voldemar Eller.  
2nd row:  
Ludvig Soilts, Jüri Kolumbus,  
Hilja Laasi, Johannes Lustberg,  
Linda Piilberg, Voldemar Tauk  
and Voldemar Kaasik.  
3rd row:  
Karl Kreek, Priidu Aavik,  
unknown, Harald Miikman (aka  
Aarne Miikma) and Willem  
Neuendorff*

*At Ants Laikmaa's  
studio, Kreischmann  
came into contact  
with new Estonian  
art, which was at that  
time processing the  
influences of Symbolism,  
while the general taste  
in art leaned towards  
descriptiveness. As an  
artist, she chose the  
expressive approach, in  
which reality competed  
with fantasy.*

*Erna Kreischmann. Self-Portrait  
with Lilly Walther's Portrait.  
1926. Charcoal.  
Tartu Art Museum*

*Lilly Walther. Two Female  
Figures. 1926. Pencil.  
Tartu Art Museum*



*Erna Kreischmann was  
apparently friends with  
the Baltic German artist  
Lilly Walther. We see the  
two of them sitting side  
by side in the photo taken  
in Laikmaa's studio. The  
collection of the Tartu  
Art Museum also holds  
two portraits of women  
sitting next to each  
other, one was made by  
Walther, and the other  
one by Kreischmann.*



*Husband Max in the Kreischmanns' home. 1908. Pärnu Museum*

*Margaretha Glabe and Erna Montiner (the future Mrs Kreischmanns). 1902. Pärnu Museum*

On 7 November 1908, Erna Montiner married Max Kreischmann (1876–1946), the son of a Pärnu merchant. She depicted her husband often in her works. He later played a vital role in preserving her legacy. After his wife's death, Max Kreischmann organised a commemorative exhibition in the Tallinn Exchange building and sent her works to a travelling exhibition organised by the German Cultural Board. Max Kreischmann also donated his wife's legacy to the Pärnu Museum shortly before World

War II began, which probably saved her works from destruction.

The marriage to Erna was Max's second. His first marriage to Margaretha Alide (née Glabe) was a tragic one: both his wife and their only child, the two-month-old Hans Jörgen Carl, died within a month of each other. Margaretha was probably Erna's friend from her school years, as there are many photos of them together in Kreischmann's personal photo album.





Erna Kreischmann. Dining Room. Oil. 1922. Pärnu Museum

Leo Kügelgen described the Kreischmanns' marriage as follows: "Her childless, yet happy marriage created an atmosphere in which her artistic nature could fully develop and manifest itself in different ways. Her sensitive taste in collecting art was in accord with her own work. The widower's deep affection for his wife has found wonderful expression in this commemorative exhibition of the work of the artist, who has left us too soon."<sup>3</sup>

The couple's relationship occupies a central place in Kreischmann's oeuvre. The artist dealt with both herself and Max within the context of a variety of interactions and emotions. Besides closeness, she also depicted discord and her husband's breakdowns, such as in the image of a man with his face buried in his hands, sitting in a circle of lamplight. In order to convey her husband's nature, the artist borrowed means and ideas from Expressionism, which left a deep impression on the Estonian art scene of the 1920s.

<sup>3</sup> L. Kügelgen, "Erna Kreischmann," *Revaler Bote: Einzige grosse deutsch-baltische Zeitung in den Grenzen der Estnischen Republik*, 23.04.1929, no. 92.



*Photos from Erna Kreischmann's album. Pärnu Museum*



Kreischmann's legacy includes two photo albums. One of them is full of collages of friends, dogs and relatives, interiors of Erna's family homes in Pärnu and Riga, and her first home with her husband Max. The photos in the second album, taken by Kreischmann, go outside the domestic boundaries and capture

glimpses of the notably different lifestyles of Baltic Germans and Estonian peasants. Kreischmann's photos also show emptiness and wind-blown expanses. Empty spaces and landscapes are interspersed with cluttered environments, just like in her paintings, with a lone observer here and there.



As mentioned above, empty spaces and locations are a leitmotif in Kreischmann's paintings. A bench in a garden nook invites the viewer to imagine the self-absorbed artist reading a book there. Kreischmann's oeuvre includes two works of art depicting the same boat landing, one without a living soul, and the other with Max in deep thought. The artist was in the habit of depicting Max from behind or from a distance, and she acted as the sole witness of his sadness and contemplativeness.



*Photo from Erna Kreischmann's album. Pärnu Museum*



*Erna Kreischmann. A Garden Nook. Undated. Oil. Pärnu Museum*





*Erna Kreischmann. The Coast. Undated. Oil. Pärnu Museum*



*Erna Kreischmann. A Man on the Coast. 1927. Oil. Pärnu Museum*



*Erna Kreischmann. Interior. Undated. Oil. Pärnu Museum*



*Erna Kreischmann. Interior. Undated. Oil. Pärnu Museum*

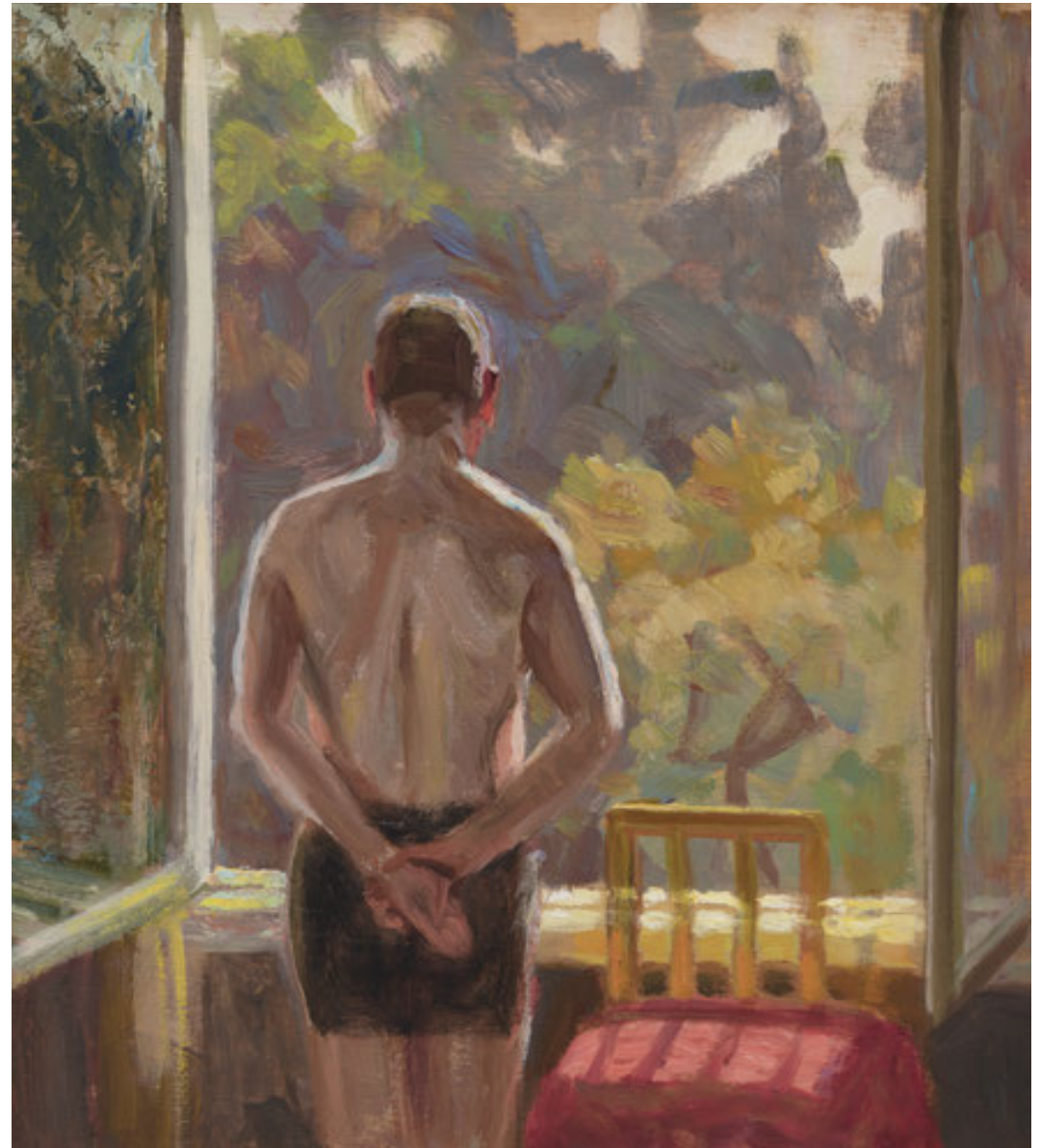
Kreischmann's oeuvre is closely linked to a closed bourgeois space, the private house of a single family. Her paintings demonstrate social change, with salons in manor houses, which the Baltic German artist Klara

Zeidler depicted in delicate detail at the turn of the 20th century, having been replaced by drawing rooms, which fulfilled the hospitality function in a much more practical way.



Kreischmann's intimate interiors and garden views serve as the artist's journal, since most of these works of art were labelled with the exact dates and locations of completion. Domestic walls and a garden were used as the backdrop against which the artist depicted the married couple's moods, as well as the changing seasons, with ripening berries and yellowing leaves.

Erna Kreischmann's portraits also have stories to tell. The artist became particularly interested in portraiture and in the creation of fictitious characters towards the end of her life. She used the same types of people and models in different situations and roles. She painted quite a few self-portraits as well, recording her own evolution. The artist placed herself in the centre of her spaces, gazing directly at the viewer, who is offered a chance to take a peek into Erna Kreischmann's internal world nearly a century after it was painted.



*Erna Kreischmann. Max Kreischmann at an Open Window. 1928. Oil. Pärnu Museum*



*Erna Kreischmann. Man's Portrait. 1919. Watercolour. Pärnu Museum*

*Erna Kreischmann. Interior. 1916. Oil. Pärnu Museum*



