
Gunther Gerzso was born June 17, 1915, in Mexico City. His mother, Dore Wendland, a German born in Berlin, was a singer and a pianist. His father Oscar Gerzso, a Hungarian businessman who emigrated to Mexico in the 1890's, died in 1916.

At the age of twelve Gerzso was sent to Lugano, Switzerland to live with his uncle, Dr. Hans Wendland, an art dealer, collector and art historian. Wendland took over the direction of Gerzso's education, with the idea that the young boy would become his heir. They lived on a large estate, filled with valuable paintings, and Gerzso received intensive training in the history of art. He attended Swiss schools and met influential figures in the European art world, among them the painter Paul Klee (although Gerzso was not then aware that this was an important artist) and the Italian set designer, Nando Tamberlani, who inspired Gerzso's later interest in this field. In 1930, due to the Depression, his uncle was forced to sell his estate and art holdings and Gerzso decided to return to Mexico City to live with his mother and sister. He attended the German school there from 1931-33 and received his *abitur* degree. During this period, he drew designs for theater sets and costumes, not imagining that he would ever see them executed.

However, the year after graduation he met Fernando Wagner, an actor, producer, and director, who used Gerzso's stage designs for productions of works by Molière, Lope de Vega, and Shakespeare. In 1935, Gerzso moved to Cleveland, Ohio to study at the Cleveland Playhouse where he soon became staff set designer. Over the next four years he designed sets for more than fifty plays.

In 1940, encouraged by an artist friend, Gerzso began teaching himself to paint. Later that year he

married Gene Rilla Cady, a musician from California who was studying at the Playhouse. They settled in Mexico in 1941 and Gerzso devoted himself to being an artist full-time. However, the uncertain finances which developed from this decision led him to accept an offer in 1942 to design sets for the movies. During the next twenty years he designed sets for about 250 films, working with such important directors as Luis Buñuel, John Ford and Yves Allegret. Painting became a hobby.

His paintings from the 40's and 50's had two primary influences. The first was an appreciation of the Mexican landscape and pre-Columbian art which was awakened by his travels while filming. The second was Surrealism which was fostered by his friendship with the poet Benjamin Péret, and the artists Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Wolfgang Paalen, refugees who made their way to Mexico from war-torn Europe in the 1940's.

A trip to Greece in 1959 inspired his work for the next three years, his so-called Greek period. However, by 1962 pre-Columbian influences had reappeared in his paintings.

Gerzso retired from film set design in 1962 to devote himself to painting full-time

(though in 1983 he was persuaded by John Huston to come out of retirement temporarily and do the art direction for the film of Malcolm Lowry's novel *Under the Volcano*). In 1978 he received the National Prize of Mexico and in 1991 he was named *Academico Honorario* by the Society of Architects of Mexico.

Gunther Gerzso died in Mexico City on April 21, 2000, at the age of eighty-four.



5. **Presence of the Past**, 1953