



# Signs of a Struggle: Process, Technique, and Materials in the Early Work of Mark Gertler, 1911–18

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## Abstract

This paper describes a collaborative technical and art-historical study by a conservation scientist and an art historian of paintings by Mark Gertler (1891–1939) produced between 1911 and 1918, sparked by the discovery through X-radiography of a painted sketch for his masterwork *Merry-Go-Round* (1916).<sup>1</sup> Paintings were chosen to demonstrate Gertler's experiments with diverse painting styles and influences ranging from Renaissance art through post-Impressionism to early European modernism; these were investigated in a technical study together with comparative contemporaneous written sources that provide commentary on the artist's painting practices. Technical examination has shown how Gertler frequently reused his supports and has revealed changes to his paintings, sometimes supported by commentary. The study highlights the relationship between intention and practice in this period of critical change in Gertler's work, providing insights into his stylistic and technical development.

## Introduction

This technical and art-historical study of nine early paintings by the British artist Mark Gertler (1891–1939) made between 1911 and 1918 has led to new discoveries of the artist's working practices during a period of profound stylistic development in his painted works. *Talmudic Discussion* (fig. 1), *Rabbi and Grandchild* (fig. 2), *Family Group* (fig. 3), *Fruit Sorters* (fig. 4), *The Creation of Eve* (fig. 5), *The Pond, Garsington* (fig. 6), *The Pond at Garsington, Oxford* (fig. 7), *Gilbert Cannan and his Mill* (fig. 8), and *Still Life with Self-portrait* (fig. 9) have all been chosen both to illustrate Gertler's most fluid and intense period of artistic development and to highlight his exploration of the different painting styles and processes that chart his journey into the modern. In the first part of this paper, a number of paintings are discussed in detail in relation to these findings, while in the latter, a number of technical observations have been grouped together to give an overview of Gertler's "making" in this period.



Figure 1

Mark Gertler, *Talmudic Discussion*, 1911, oil on canvas, 76.2 × 92.5 cm. Private Collection, on long-term loan to Ben Uri Collection. Digital image courtesy of Ben Uri Gallery and Museum, with kind permission of the owner (all rights reserved).



Figure 2

Mark Gertler, *The Rabbi and his Grandchild*, 1913, oil on canvas, 50.8 × 45.9 cm. Collection of Southampton City Art Gallery (SOTAG: 1968/6). Digital image courtesy of Southampton City Art Gallery (all rights reserved).



Figure 3

Mark Gertler, *Family Group*, 1913, oil on canvas, 92.4 × 61 cm. Collection of Southampton City Art Gallery. Digital image courtesy of Southampton City Art Gallery (all rights reserved).



Figure 4

Mark Gertler, *The Fruit Sorters*, 1914, oil on canvas, 76.2 × 63.5 cm. Collection of New Walk Museum & Art Gallery, Leicester Arts and Museums (L.F3.1924.0.0). Digital image courtesy of Leicester Arts and Museums Service (all rights reserved).



Figure 5

Mark Gertler, *The Creation of Eve*, 1914, oil on canvas, 75 × 60 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Ben Uri Gallery and Museum, with kind permission of the owner (all rights reserved).



Figure 6

Mark Gertler, *The Pond, Garsington*, 1916, oil on panel, 32 × 42 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Piano Nobile Robert Travers (Works of Art) Limited (all rights reserved).



Figure 7

Mark Gertler, *The Pond at Garsington, Oxford*, 1916, oil on canvas, 63.3 x 63.3 cm. Collection of Leeds Museums and Galleries (Leeds Art Gallery) (LEEAG.PA.1941.0004). Digital image courtesy of Leeds Museums and Galleries / Bridgeman Images.



Figure 8

Mark Gertler, *Gilbert Cannan and his Mill*, 1916, oil on canvas, 99.5 x 70 cm. Collection of Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford (WA1968.24). Digital image courtesy of Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford / Bridgeman Images (all rights reserved).



Figure 9

Mark Gertler, *Still Life with Self-portrait*, 1916, oil on canvas, Collection of Leeds Museums and Galleries, Given by Miss H. G. Thompson in memory of T. E. Harvey, 1956 (Leeds Art Gallery) (LEEAG.PA.1956.0001.0003). Digital image courtesy of Leeds Museums and Galleries / Bridgeman Images.

This project was initiated several years ago by a request from Matthew Travers, director of Piano Nobile Gallery, to X-ray Gertler's *The Pond, Garsington* (1916), a landscape on panel recently acquired at auction. Even prior to technical examination, a series of radial deformations resembling the spokes of an opened umbrella were clearly visible to the naked eye on the surface of the painting, suggesting that there might be another image beneath. With the panel turned portrait-wise, the resulting X-ray revealed an underpainting of a carousel with rudimentary horses running around its base (fig. 10). This was identified by the authors as a previously unknown preparatory oil study for Gertler's masterpiece, *Merry-Go-Round*, painted at the height of the First World War and considered his most outstanding contribution to early British modernism (fig. 11). As the only preliminary study of the carousel, this discovery is of particular importance. The reverse of the panel also contains a third image: a preparatory study of the writer Gilbert Cannan for the celebrated painting *Gilbert Cannan and his Mill* (1916); both discoveries are discussed in greater detail later in this paper.





Figure 10  
X-radiograph (rotated), Mark Gertler, *The Pond, Garsington*, Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Aviva Burnstock (all rights reserved).

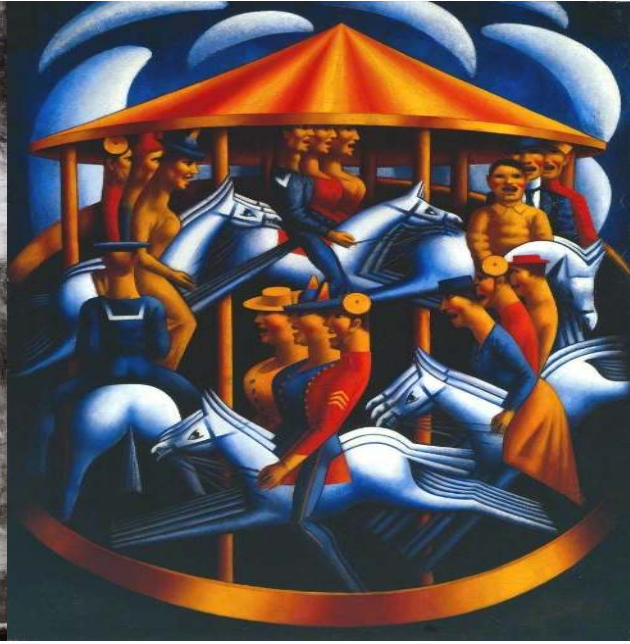


Figure 11  
Mark Gertler, *Merry-Go-Round*, 1916, oil on canvas, 189.2 × 142.2 cm. Collection of Tate (T03846). Digital image courtesy of Tate (CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0).

Given the size and complexity of the final *Merry-Go-Round* painting and the fact that X-radiography revealed only minimal changes to the finished canvas, it seemed highly likely to the authors that Gertler would have made further interim studies.<sup>2</sup> An initial investigation of works completed in the period of the painting's gestation (1915–1916) followed, including *Gilbert Cannan and his Mill* and *Daffodils* (1916).<sup>3</sup> Although no further *Merry-Go-Round* compositions were discovered, the investigation of *Gilbert Cannan and his Mill* did reveal an underpainting showing changes in both composition and reuse of the painting support. This led to the current research project in which a study of written sources (primarily letters) between Gertler and his artist contemporaries exploring Gertler's compositional development and working methods was made alongside first-hand technical study including X-radiography, infrared imaging, and pigment analysis to uncover his painting processes and materials. The technical themes discussed here address the question of whether changes in Gertler's painting style were paralleled by changes in his painting materials and techniques. Personal circumstances including his poverty, ethnicity, and class are also considered together with the influence of past and contemporaneous art. By examining aspects of the underlying compositions, reuse of the painting support, and the changes made during the painting process, this study aims to deepen the understanding of Gertler's wider modernist practice.

## A Career in Formation

Mark Gertler was born in 1891 in a slum lodging house in Spitalfields in London's East End to Jewish immigrant parents, economic migrants who had left their native Galicia (then a province within the Austro-Hungarian Empire boasting the highest death rate and lowest life expectancy in Europe), in search of a better life in England. Like the other so-called "Whitechapel Boys" of

his generation (including primarily, David Bomberg, Isaac Rosenberg, and by association, Jacob Kramer and Bernard Meninsky), Gertler was the direct descendant of a shared Eastern-European Jewish heritage, part of a larger wave of mass Jewish migration that between 1880 and 1910 brought some 120,000 newcomers to Britain, where they joined established Jewish communities in the cities of London, Leeds, Liverpool, and Birmingham. Less than a year after his birth, however, during an economic downturn, the Gertler family was repatriated by the Jewish Board of Guardians to Przemyśl, “with only me, as it were,” the artist later wrote, “to show for it.”<sup>4</sup> After his father left to seek work in America, the family lived on the edge of starvation for four years until they returned to England and were reunited in Spitalfields, less than a mile from where he had been born.

Gertler was old enough to recall the return journey, travelling steerage, the emigrants packed like cargo in the dark, airless hold of the ship on a voyage lasting several weeks. He claimed to remember nothing of his time in Austria, and upon arrival identified strongly with England and subsequently, the Jewish East End, describing himself as “Essentially [...] a child of the ghetto.”<sup>5</sup> His struggles to assimilate into the middle- and upper-class society into which his talent and profession propelled him led to a conflict over his identity and a lingering sense of displacement that runs like a thread through his life and work, informing both his portraits of his own family and the Jewish community and his highly personal, and sometimes ambivalent, engagement with modernism. As Juliet Steyn has suggested, Gertler’s early Jewish paintings can be “Understood perhaps, as a sign of a struggle between identification with Jewish selfhood and alienation from it.”<sup>6</sup>

Gertler nurtured artistic ambitions from an early age. He trained first at the Regent Street Polytechnic (1906–1908), attending lectures on the Old Masters and “haunting” the rooms of the National Gallery, crafting his earliest paintings in their image. In the second year, he took evening classes, while unhappily apprenticed by day to Clayton & Bell, stained-glass makers next door in Regent Street.<sup>7</sup> Between 1908 and 1911, upon the recommendation of William Rothenstein, and initially with a loan from the Jewish Education Aid Society, he attended the Slade School of Fine Art, the youngest Jewish, working-class student of his generation to do so.<sup>8</sup> Although largely isolated from the other Whitechapel Boys who followed him, he was part of the notable “crisis of brilliance” generation which also included C.R.W. Nevinson, Stanley Spencer, Paul Nash, and (Dora) Carrington.<sup>9</sup> He twice won the Slade scholarship, gained a number of prizes for drawing and painting, and left with a British Institution scholarship in 1912. At the Slade, Gertler’s style was honed by the famous teaching triumvirate of Fred Brown, Henry Tonks, and Philip Wilson Steer. Tonks, the dominant personality, was profoundly influenced by the art of the Italian Renaissance and “encouraged a style that drew on the great European tradition of drawing of meticulous observation and flawless line work”, urging his students to frequent the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum print rooms and to make copies at the National Gallery.<sup>10</sup> After 1910, Gertler was encouraged by his tutors to attend part-time and to concentrate on Jewish subjects, such as *Talmudic Discussion*, also completing a student portfolio of accomplished family portraits, occasionally of both parents, often of his siblings (Deborah, Harry, Sophie, and Jack), but always centred on his mother, Golda. *The Artist’s Mother* (1911) represents the culmination of the traditional, naturalistic style developed at the Slade. After exhibition at the New English Art Club (NEAC), the portrait was purchased in December 1912 by the rising collector Michael Sadler, educationalist and vice-chancellor of Leeds University (1911–1923) and loaned to the Tate.<sup>11</sup>



Sadler, whose enthusiasm for modern art dated back to 1909, had begun during this period to amass “one of the largest and most progressive private collections of contemporary paintings of any British collector”.<sup>12</sup> In addition to a wide selection of works by British artists including Steer, Augustus John, and other NEAC members, in 1911, he purchased *The Abandoned House* (1878–1879), the first Cézanne painting to enter a British collection, as well as five important Gauguins including *The Vision after the Sermon* (1888) and works by Kandinsky and Picasso. In November 1911, he sponsored the exhibition *Cézanne and Gauguin* at the Stafford Gallery, managed by John Neville, showcasing many of his recently acquired works.<sup>13</sup> Sadler became a key patron of young British modernists (including Kramer) and an important promoter of modernism in Leeds. Upon his death in 1943, his collection numbered over 1,200 pieces.<sup>14</sup> When Gertler wrote to thank Sadler for his purchase in November 1911, he admitted that what pleased him most was that his own work would “actually ‘rub shoulders’ with those wonderful pictures I saw at your house.”<sup>15</sup>

The effect of this exposure, combined with the impact of Roger Fry’s two groundbreaking post-Impressionist exhibitions in 1910 and 1912, caused a radical new direction in Gertler’s art. Looking back in 1932, he recalled “the entry of Cézanne, Gauguin and Matisse upon my horizon as equivalent to the impact of the scientists of this age upon a simple student of Sir Isaac Newton.”<sup>16</sup> By 1912, Gertler had abandoned the earlier earth-toned palette favoured by the Old Masters, particularly, Rembrandt,<sup>17</sup> and his youthful mentor, William Rothenstein, whose *Reading the Book of Esther* (1907)<sup>18</sup> had directly inspired Gertler’s early Jewish picture, *Talmudic Discussion* (1911),<sup>19</sup> but as late as February 1912, in an interview, he reiterated his adherence to the Old Masters with Augustus John, the only “modern” whose influence he allowed.<sup>20</sup>

By September 1912, as his much-quoted letter to fellow artist and muse Dora Carrington suggests, Gertler’s awareness of the competing demands of modernism had also increased his own ambivalence towards it:

*So I went out and saw more unfortunate artists. I looked at them talking art, Ancient art, Modern art, Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Neo-Impressionism, Cubists, Spottists, Futurists, Cave-dwelling, Wyndham Lewis, Duncan Grant, Etchells, Roger Fry! I looked on and laughed to myself saying, “Give me the Baker, the Baker,” and I walked home disgusted with them all, was glad to find my dear simple mother waiting for me with a nice roll, that she knows I like, and a cup of hot coffee. [...] You, dear mother, I thought, are the only modern artist.*<sup>21</sup>

## The Transition to Modernism

Gertler’s transition to modernism is evidenced by the transformation of his mother, Golda, from a respectable, elaborately dressed matron in the 1911 *Artist’s Mother* into a coarse-aproned, tightly headscarfed peasant in *The Artist’s Mother* (1913).<sup>22</sup> In the latter, Golda’s hands, huge and workmanlike, dominate the picture. Gertler wrote to his upper-class English friend, Dorothy Brett, that “The whole suggests suffering and a life that has known hardship. It is barbaric and symbolic.”<sup>23</sup> As Juliet Steyn has observed, Golda’s simplified, flattened black form, offset by reds and greens, is also reminiscent of Van Gogh’s *La Berceuse* (shown at the first post-Impressionist exhibition), in which the artist intended to “represent not just a woman but someone to comfort and alleviate the pain and sorrow of mankind”.<sup>24</sup> Similar notions inform Gertler’s paintings of Jewish subjects throughout 1913.

Lisa Tickner suggests that in the 1913 portrait, Gertler equates his mother with “‘the *Baker*, the *Baker*’, as a labourer producing the simple necessities of life”.<sup>25</sup> Certainly, the powerful “peasant” paintings, for which she and other members of his family provided the focus, articulate the artistic tensions surrounding his conflicting ethnic, social, and political identities in this period, sharpened by his contact with middle- and upper-class patrons, his unhappy love affair with the middle-class Carrington, and his introduction to the elite Bloomsbury circle.<sup>26</sup> Emma Chambers, however, warns of the problematical nature of simply equating his use of “primitivist source material as a search for a more ‘authentic’ visual language with which to depict everyday Jewish subject matter”, since:

*it not only aligns Gertler’s work with nineteenth-century stereotypes of working class Jewish culture as archaic and uncivilised, but also ignores the complex ways in which subject matter and aesthetics were intertwined in Gertler’s work, and the impact on his work of his negotiation of two very different social environments.*<sup>27</sup>

She also notes that since “Primitivism was a primary source of inspiration for post-impressionism and explored by the Bloomsbury artists and other modernist groups in London”, Gertler’s “use of the idiom also explicitly aligned him with developments in avant-garde British art.”<sup>28</sup>

For the purposes of this study, Gertler’s journey towards the modern can be traced in greater detail through a series of three group paintings of Jewish sitters, all completed in 1913: *Rabbi and Grandchild* (May), *Family Group* (begun in July, but possibly finished after *Jewish Family*), and *Jewish Family* (September). Each work is concerned with inter-generational relationships within the family; two of them specifically cite Jewishness in their titles.

Gertler’s letters show that his National Gallery visits continued regularly until at least the end of 1912.<sup>29</sup> A *Quattrocento* influence also informed the short-lived Neo-Primitive movement, which Gertler co-founded in 1911 with contemporaries including Nevinson, Adrian Allinson, Edward Wadsworth, and John Currie. Together they had visited the “Primitive” room at the Louvre, Paris in 1910 and Currie depicted them in his own tempera painting *Some Later Primitives and Madame Tisceron* (1912). Kenneth McConkey suggests that “the disciplined use of tempera and the conceptual demands” of a contemporaneous revival in mural painting were both part of a concerted pull in a new direction by younger painters, with Gertler’s *Apple Woman and her Husband* (1912) combining an “enthusiasm for Cézanne [...] with that of the Italian Primitives”.<sup>30</sup> Gertler briefly experimented with aqueous media he described as tempera in 1912, encouraged by Augustus John, as evidenced by his portrait of Carrington, *Portrait of a Girl Wearing a Blue Jersey* (1912).<sup>31</sup> Touches of tempera can also be found in his work in *The Artist’s Brother Harry Holding an Apple* (1913), painted on panel. Although Gertler quickly tired of this medium, preferring the fluidity of oil, the bright, plain backgrounds and concentration on the head-and-shoulders format employed in these works were easily identified by contemporary critics as a “Florentine” element. In January 1913, the *Observer*’s critic, P.G. Konody, observed of the Neo-Primitives that they sought:

*for salvation in a return to more or less archaic forms of art, their object being the attainment of a maximum of expressiveness in terms of decorative art, [...]. Pure colour in large, clearly defined masses and elimination of chiaroscuro.*<sup>32</sup>

*Rabbi and Grandchild* demonstrates the lingering influence of Renaissance painting on Gertler’s style at the point of its fusion with modernism, as he closed his brief “Neo-Primitive” period. Stylistically, it owes more to the Northern Renaissance with similarities to *Portrait of a Woman* (ca. 1460) from Van der Weyden’s workshop, particularly in the modelling of the grandchild’s

face (especially the shape of the eyes and lips, and the elongated head of the Rabbi in his skullcap).<sup>33</sup> This is supported by Gertler's letter to his Slade contemporary (Dorothy) Brett, in August 1913, praising the "most emotional" Rogier Van der Weyden pictures in a small book that he had recently sent her.<sup>34</sup> Yet, in the same letter, Gertler reveals his enduring admiration for the Italian primitives, urging her to study Giotto "and at once—He is tremendous!!", and also "Dürer—the draughtsman. These men," he explained, "are a constant cause of inspiration to me. It will never do, unless we too, express ourselves with such knowledge and emotion."<sup>35</sup> The letter makes it clear that his influences at this juncture remain stylistically diverse. "Newness doesn't concern me," he would write to Carrington in December 1913, when at work on the portrait of his mother, "I just want to express myself and be personal."<sup>36</sup> And yet the compression of the figures squeezed up against the boundaries of the canvas, their exaggerated features and expressions emphasised by the elongated fingers of the Rabbi's enlarged hand, made *Rabbi and Grandchild* too unacceptably modern for his Jewish patrons, one of whom suggested "that I would do her a great favour if I would—at her expense—see an oculist!", thus severing Gertler's relations with his early Jewish supporters.<sup>37</sup>

Gertler began *Rabbi and Grandchild* in March 1913 after securing the services of a model simply referred to as an "old Jew" (the same elderly model had sat previously for *Talmudic Discussion* and would also be included six months later in *Jewish Family*).<sup>38</sup> The young girl model must already have been sitting some eight months, according to her own account. Separate drawings of both models date to 1913. In early April, Gertler wrote to Carrington:

*I am still working on my little picture, I have now added another head—a girl—so there is the Jew and two girls. I am working very hard indeed on it and there is still a great deal to do in it.*<sup>39</sup>

Although there is some confusion over the exact sequence of his letters on the picture's progress, the trajectory of the final composition seems clear, for in a further (undated) letter, he detailed: "an alteration in my picture of the Old Jew, I am going to put another girl's head in the place of the profile one! I think it is too ordinary. I think you will approve."<sup>40</sup> Then, finally, he explained that he had:

*turned my "Jew" picture into a different thing altogether. It suddenly occurred to me how wonderful it would be to have my little girl's head near to his. So now the scheme is just two heads together: his very old, pale and wrinkled head near that healthy, fresh, young face of my little girl. The old man will be with one hand most delicately touching the girl's face, the other will be round her shoulder. I am terribly inspired with the idea and feel sure it will be one of the best things I've done.*<sup>41</sup>

An X-radiograph of *Rabbi and Grandchild* supports this documentary evidence, revealing a fully worked-up face of a child on the left of the composition that was later painted out (fig. 12).

Gertler's signature and the date the work was finished, "May 1913", painted in red and unusually prominent, appear in this over-painted area possibly to disguise the alterations. In addition, both the X-ray and infrared images show that Gertler initially painted the Rabbi's left hand around the child's shoulder, and elements of flowers, and perhaps fruit, are also evident in the lower left, although these too have been painted over in the final version, in favour of a more dramatic, simplified composition. Technical examination also shows that the canvas has been cut at the bottom edge. This supports the suggestion by Gertler's patron, the publisher Thomas Balston, that the canvas was much larger at one stage and had been cut down. Balston had visited Mrs Doris Silver (née Dora Plaskowsky), the daughter of Gertler's butcher, who as an eight-year-old child had posed for the figure of the grandchild in 1949, and observed:

*She had to sit many times and got very tired of it, especially as Mark was very stern and never spoke to her except to give directions. [...] Once, when he was not in the room, she got a peep at the canvas. At that time, it was larger and extended below the Rabbi's knees, on which she was sitting. She never saw the Rabbi, but always sat alone. Before the picture was finished, she refused to go any more. Before the picture was finished, she ceased to go to the studio. Even now she greatly resembles the child.*<sup>42</sup>

Thirty years on, Dora left her own account of her sittings, confirming that the two models had never met and supporting the suggestion of a larger painting:

*He did several pencil drawings of me. I never actually saw him use paints. I think I went to the studio to sit for him for a period of about a year. However, I do remember seeing a very large painting of myself sitting on the knee of a rabbi. It was a full[-]length picture. I remember particularly my socks! I also recall running home and asking my mother how Mark Gertler could possibly have painted this picture—I had never met or seen the old man.*<sup>43</sup>

This revelation would have astonished contemporary viewers, who understood the painting to be a portrait of youth and old age, painstakingly and sympathetically observed.<sup>44</sup>



Figure 12

X-radiograph, Mark Gertler, *The Rabbi and his Grandchild*, Collection of Southampton City Art Gallery. Digital image courtesy of Aviva Burnstock (all rights reserved).

By June, Gertler's letters show that he had begun to prefer the "simple, childish expression" of the Post-Impressionists to the "perhaps too dramatic, and sometimes theatrical expression of the early Italians".<sup>45</sup> His aim was still to produce work that was "genuine" rather than specifically "modern". His next painting, *Family Group*, in which the composition is reminiscent of Van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Portrait* (1434), depicted his brother Harry, Harry's wife, Anne, and their nine-month-old baby, Renée (Irene), dressed as peasants in startling primary colours, their bold, angular forms placed like cut-outs against the bare floorboards of his studio. The baby at the

centre (like the Rabbi's hand in *Rabbi and Grandchild*) both unites and divides her parents, focusing the viewer's attention on the joining of the figures through the linking of Harry's hand to hers in an unbroken chain; in his other outstretched hand, he holds an apple. Reduced to simple geometric forms, the figure of the baby suggests an awareness of Cubism, and of Picasso's early work. The bold colour scheme may have been inspired by the Gauguins Gertler had seen in Sadler's collection, but the work also marks the beginning of a more expressionistic style that has been linked to folk art. Harry's clothes and pose also relate closely to *The Artist's Brother Harry Holding an Apple*, his curious, emphatic gesture, possibly relates to an untraced painting of Adam and Eve.<sup>46</sup> Gertler's experimental work of this period, however, also begins to move "closer in sympathy" to German expressionism, as Frances Spalding has observed, placing him within a wider context of European painting and influences which culminated in 1916 in *Merry-Go-Round*.<sup>47</sup>

An X-radiograph of *Family Group* reveals a number of changes in the composition including, most notably, a full-length figure of another girl, originally painted to the right of Gertler's sister-in-law, Anne (fig. 13). The red of the girl's dress can be seen through drying cracks in the background paint used to erase her, while the infrared image shows that she was fully worked up in paint and stood facing Anne. Judging by her height, the girl may have been seven or eight years old; she has not been identified. *Family Group* is not referred to specifically in Gertler's letters, but is likely to have been the painting Gertler was referring to when he complained to Dorothy Brett in July that "simplification is terribly difficult in art",<sup>48</sup> with the overpainting of the second girl very likely part of this move towards greater simplification. The completion date of *Family Group* is not certain, but the bold colouring and severely simplified figures suggest that it may have been completed after *Jewish Family*, possibly prior to its exhibition in November 1913.



Figure 13

X-radiograph, Mark Gertler, *Family Group*, Collection of Southampton City Art Gallery. Digital image courtesy of Aviva Burnstock (all rights reserved).



*Family Group* also has a clearly painted black border which is found consistently in Gertler's work of this period including *The Artist's Mother* (1911), *The Violinist* (1912), *Portrait of a Girl Wearing a Blue Jersey* (1912), and *The Artist's Brother Harry Holding an Apple* (ca. 1913). The painted border may point to a lingering interest in the *Quattrocento* but was also perhaps intended as a frame in a period when he is unlikely to have been able to afford framing (later on he used the services of the dealer and framer Bourlet exclusively for this purpose. Gertler certainly cared about the presentation of his works, asking his patron Edward Marsh (ca. 1913), "to leave the entire framing of my drawing to me," stating, "I would feel happier about it. I usually include a frame and mount."<sup>49</sup>

This same pictorial device is also apparent in *Jewish Family* (1913), which shows four generations of the same family gathered together and arranged in descending order of height. Golda, the matriarch, again dressed in plain working clothes, faces outward at the edge of this intimate family group, her back towards the young woman at its centre, who is presumably her daughter or daughter-in-law, standing patiently with folded hands. Next to her, the seated old man (the model for the Rabbi in *Rabbi and Grandchild*), leans heavily on his stick, his granddaughter at his knee on the end of the picture, is unfinished, denoted only by one broad, vertical brushstroke.<sup>50</sup> The blocky treatment of the figures has been compared to the work of Stanley Spencer.<sup>51</sup> With no specific setting, the mood of the picture is determined by the subdued palette, evoking both the poverty of the ghetto and the weary resilience of its inhabitants, while the family's apparent displacement hints at the wider Jewish diaspora. Lisa Tickner, in a long discussion of the painting, suggests that Gertler's title:

*"Jewish family" was richly connotative. Probably the figures stood to Gertler primarily for his own relations. [...] But they are by design not portraits. There is too little specificity and too much pathos. It is a small painting but its figures are monumental, carved, full of an eloquent stillness, as though it aimed to be a little Piero della Francesca from the ghetto.*<sup>52</sup>

The painting encapsulates Gertler's own dilemma: on the one hand, drawing "implicitly on positive endorsements of immigrant family life", but, on the other hand, underlining the stark poverty and alienisation that such a life offered.<sup>53</sup>

Between 1914 and 1916, Gertler began his most intense engagement with modernism, in bold, imaginative works such as *The Creation of Eve* (1914) and *The Fruit Sorters* (1914). The latter, his first major work painted outdoors, emerged from studies from nature that Gertler had made in spring 1914 at home of his friend, the writer Gilbert Cannan, in Cholesbury in Buckinghamshire. The composition with its decorative group of figures shows the legacy of Puvis de Chavannes via Augustus John, as Gertler resolutely transposes a frieze of urban East End costermongers to a rural setting in a journey that very much echoes his own from Spitalfields to Hampstead, where he moved to in January 1915. "There," he wrote, "I shall be free and detached—shall belong to no parents. I shall be neither Jew nor Christian and shall belong to no class. I shall be just myself."<sup>54</sup>

The reverse of the support of *Fruit Sorters* carries a stamp by Percy Young, who ran an artists' supply store in Gower Street during Gertler's Slade years. This was a popular destination for Gertler and his contemporaries including Gwen Raverat, Stanley Spencer, and Dora Carrington.<sup>55</sup> Gertler probably swapped to the Chenil Gallery, King's Road, Chelsea, after being invited to exhibit there by the dealer Jack Knewstub, possibly as early as 1910 and certainly by December 1912, when he and John Currie held a joint show. Knewstub continued to represent Gertler until October 1914, when the artist left after a row about payments. In a letter to his

patron, Eddie Marsh, Gertler requested £5 to settle an outstanding debt with Percy Young so that he could return there for further materials.<sup>56</sup>

Gertler purchased a range of products from London artists' materials suppliers. His painting supports for the early works were commercially primed canvases, with the exception of *The Artist's Brother Harry Holding an Apple* (1913) and *The Pond, Garsington* (1916), for which he chose wooden panels. Canvas-suppliers' stamps, including the palette-shaped "Chenil London", can be found on the reverse of the unlined, commercially primed canvases used for *Talmudic Discussion* and *Gilbert Cannan and his Mill*, suggesting that Gertler was consistent in his preference for such medium-weight, white canvases throughout this period. They are mostly primed with lead white and chalk; however, the canvas used for *Pond at Garsington, Oxford* is unprimed. For this and later works, for example, *Seated Nude* (1924), Gertler painted on both sides of commercially primed canvases.

There are several examples of paintings by Gertler's contemporaries where the commercially primed canvas was reversed, and the artist painted another composition on the unprimed side (for example, a female nude attributed to Carrington shows a Spanish landscape on the unprimed side). This may have been done for either economic or artistic purposes, such as taking advantage of the textured canvas support, although there is no evidence that this was of particular concern for Gertler with his preference for smooth, commercially primed surfaces. Evidence of his habit of wiping his brushes on the reverse of a canvas can be seen on the verso of *Gilbert Cannan and his Mill* and *Merry-Go-Round*, which is extensively covered in multicoloured brush marks in the upper half of the canvas. Gertler always stacked his paintings with their faces to the wall so may have used the reverse to clean his brushes in this manner prior to applying the white painted rectangle on which he supplied the title, his signature, and the date, perhaps at the point of display or sale. *The Pond, Garsington* is also signed, dated, and titled on the reverse; and, in addition, displays a rapidly executed sketch of Cannan, a preparatory study for the writer's figure in the mill painting, beneath the signature.

## Painting Techniques

There is evidence that Gertler had a systematic method of painting that involved making a drawing and transferring it to the canvas before working up the image in paint. Although few extant drawings show this specifically, one example is *Rabbi and Rabbitzin* (1914), a worked-up drawing on paper that has been squared for transfer. This traditional method was common practice at the Slade and can also be found in the work of contemporaries including Bomberg, Nash, Spencer, and William Roberts. While few of the paintings examined show clear evidence of under-drawing of the composition in a carbon-based medium, such as charcoal or graphite, it is possible that Gertler used red or brown chalk for laying out his compositions, such as those used for drawing on paper, but not visible using the methods in this study. The infrared image of *Fruit Sorters*, however, shows the artist's use of charcoal to outline the figures and to indicate drapery folds, whereas an infrared image of *Gilbert Cannan and his Mill* indicates a transfer of the under-drawing through a series of black grid lines in black.

An X-ray of the same painting strongly suggests a direct relationship between grid and image: it shows that *Gilbert Cannan* was painted over an underlying double portrait that closely resembles the drawing of the couple in *Rabbi and Rabbitzin* (fig. 14). The outline of the Rabbitzin's head is clearly discernible beneath the sky paint in the upper image and the paint of her flesh can be seen through cracks in the upper layer. Elements of the still life including a loaf and a large fish in the foreground of the double portrait are suggested in the X-ray (the fish relates to Gertler's

companion drawing, *Rabbi and Rabbitzin with Fish* (fig. 15, 1913–1914).<sup>57</sup> It is possible, therefore, that the squared-up image on paper was transferred to the canvas and worked up to some extent, before being later painted over.



Figure 14

Mark Gertler, *Rabbi and Rabbitzin*, 1914, watercolour and pencil on paper, 50 × 39 cm. Ben Uri Collection (BU 2002–104). Digital image courtesy of Ben Uri Gallery and Museum (all rights reserved).



Figure 15

X-radiograph. Mark Gertler, *Rabbi and Rabbitzin with Fish*, circa 1914, drawing, 66.2 × 46.2 cm. Collection of British Museum (1987,0516.86). Digital image courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

This theory is supported by a letter from the artist to Carrington in February 1915, explaining that he was working on “a small colour study, perhaps for a large picture, of my *Rabbi and Rabbitzin*.”<sup>58</sup> The reserve suggests that the artist had planned for the Rabbi to be wearing a bowler style hat (as in both drawn versions of the composition). Since there is no surviving painted version of these compositions, however, it is likely that Gertler abandoned the painting, possibly believing he had exhausted this motif and also perhaps because his move to Hampstead deliberately distanced him from his Jewish subject matter. Rebecca Abrams suggests that the surface and over-painted compositions together “provide a palimpsest work that is emblematic of the artist’s lifelong struggle to reconcile his drive to become a successful English artist with his deep attachment to his Jewish roots and identity.”<sup>59</sup> Gertler then reused the canvas for his painting of *Gilbert Cannan and his Mill*, begun in 1915 and completed in spring 1916, while he worked simultaneously on *Merry-Go-Round*.

Both compositions are carefully structured and painted using a series of complex and repeated patterns.<sup>60</sup> Cannan’s spindly figure, flanked by his two enormous dogs, is almost overwhelmed by what John Rothenstein called the “upright converging gothic forms” of the trees and mill. The careful structure relies on the repetition of a series of triangles and inverted triangles throughout (anticipating *Bathers*), combined with an element of fantasy identified as a “folk-art overtone”.<sup>61</sup> John Woodeson argues that the complex structure conveys “something of the rather gothic nature of Cannan’s personality and continues the strain of naïve primitivism already apparent” in

Gertler's work, as well as reflecting "the narrative, literary, almost mystical quality" of the earlier controversial, Blakean *Creation of Eve*.<sup>62</sup> The stylised treatment of the tree also shows the influence of Jean Marchand and particularly André Derain's *Window at Vers* (1912), which Gertler would have seen at Roger Fry's second post-Impressionist exhibition.

As technical examination revealed, several of the paintings were painted on reused supports, presumably as a matter of economy (this practice is also common in Bomberg's work and in Carrington's). In most cases, the X-ray images show elements of the underlying compositions together with the final image. For example, *The Creation of Eve* is painted over a male portrait, possibly of the artist's brother, Harry — part of his head and face can be clearly discerned in the upper part of the background and may conceivably relate to the *Portrait of the Artist's Brother Harry Holding an Apple*, although there are no documentary sources to support this (fig. 16).



Figure 16

X-radiograph, Mark Gertler, *Creation of Eve*, Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Aviva Burnstock (all rights reserved).

While we have seen that there is evidence that Gertler planned some of his compositions by making preliminary sketches or transfer by grid, the known preparatory sketches for his major work, *Merry-Go-Round*, have (until now) been limited to four figurative works on paper (all in private collections): Gertler practised the heads and necks of his riders in two drawings (figs. 17 and 18) and a further pair of sketches show the three-quarter length figures of two straw-hatted women in profile.<sup>63</sup> This is surprising as such a large, complex work — his largest and most ambitious painting to that date — must have necessitated significant planning. However, an X-radiograph of *The Pond, Garsington* (1916) resulted in the significant discovery of an underlying painted version of the *Merry-Go-Round*'s carousel, best viewed by turning the X-radiograph clockwise 90 degrees to reveal a striped canopy, crowned by a flag, with a troop of horses beneath. Their sharp-edged, rudimentary forms with criss-crossed legs, more linear than in the final version, are reminiscent of Bomberg's *Racehorses* (1913) (fig. 19), an ambitious "Cubist" composition that Gertler would certainly have seen when it was exhibited in May 1914 as part of



the so-called “Jewish Section” at the Whitechapel Art Gallery’s exhibition *Twentieth Century Art: A Review of Modern Movements*, in which seven of his own paintings including *Jewish Family* were shown.<sup>64</sup>



Figure 17

Mark Gertler, *Study of Heads for 'Merry-Go-Round'*, 1915, red chalk on paper, 56 × 38 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Ben Uri Gallery and Museum, with kind permission of the owner (all rights reserved).



Figure 18

Mark Gertler, *Studies for Merry-Go-Rounds*, 1916, red chalk on paper, 56 × 38 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Ben Uri Gallery and Museum, with kind permission of the owner (all rights reserved).



Figure 19

David Bomberg, *Racehorses*, 1914, black chalk and wash on paper, 41.5 × 66.2 cm. Ben Uri Collection (BU 2004–8). Digital image courtesy of Ben Uri Gallery and Museum © Ben Uri Gallery and Museum (all rights reserved).

The fairground horses in Gertler’s finished *Merry-Go-Round* canvas bear little relation to those in this preliminary study. In the final painting, the flag is omitted, the canopy reduced, and the horses—now much larger—are fully realized: joined nose to tail, they plunge forwards, their hind legs kicking out like rifle butts, and their teeth bared. The whirling horses frozen in motion and the mouths of their riders opened in a never-ending scream offer a pacifist vision of cultural disintegration with one of personal despair at Gertler’s unhappy affair with Carrington. The interest in machinery shows an awareness of Futurism and Vorticism, possibly influenced by Bomberg, whose large-scale work it approached in size and ambition, but also Nevinson’s insistent rhythms in his military paintings including *Returning to the Trenches* (1914–1915), which was prominently displayed at the London Group in March 1915, and the terse, concentrated image of modern trench warfare, *La Mitrailleuse* (1915), first exhibited in March 1916. The striking palette of orange, yellow, red, and blue hues contributes to the painting’s violent energy. Andrew Causey has pointed out that the intensity of the colours in Gertler’s palette are “unlike those [...] found in most British painting of the period”, with the possible exception of Wyndham Lewis.<sup>65</sup>

Surface examination and elemental analysis have confirmed that the underlying painting was also strongly coloured: the carousel’s top was painted in stripes of cadmium yellow and vermilion. The flag—not present in the final Tate version—is also painted with vermilion and has a texture suggesting a motif that can no longer be read. Prussian and cobalt blues have been used for the



sky together with iron oxide yellow ochre and sienna-coloured paints; bone black was used to outline the features in the composition.

The overlying landscape is painted using viridian and iron oxide pigments mixed with lead white. The paint is applied quickly and blended wet-in-wet in many areas. There is red showing through from the underlying composition in the same mid-ground area of the sienna-coloured tree stump on the landing or island present in the better-known Leeds Art Gallery version of the composition. The largest tree has been broadened to cover the underlining sky paint that was part of the composition below. Both the red stump and broad tree are replicated in the Leeds picture, *The Pond at Garsington, Oxford* (1916), though, in the larger work, red is applied over the green paint. On the panel, the same effect is achieved using a different technique, by allowing red to show through from the underlying paint of the carousel below.

The conception of the Leeds version is documented in the artist's letters, which shows that it was begun in mid-July 1916.<sup>66</sup> Letters among Gertler's friends discuss the planned purchase of the picture by the artist's patron, the barrister and collector Sir Montague Shearman (1885–1940), who deeply admired it.<sup>67</sup>

On the reverse of *The Pond, Garsington* is a rapidly executed sketch of the figure of Gertler's friend, Gilbert Cannan, the writer whose *roman à clef*, *Mendel*, based on Gertler's early life, caused a storm upon publication in 1916.<sup>68</sup> The paint contains a mixture of Prussian blue and lead white for his jacket and bow tie, iron oxide red and lead white for his flesh, and lead white alone for the trousers. The placement of the figure conforms to Cannan's posture and positioning within the final finished painting. The panel support for *The Pond, Garsington* is an unprimed piece of wood that was not specially prepared for artists' use and may instead have been taken from a piece of old furniture. It is possible that this panel was used to plan elements of Gertler's larger paintings, as is the case with both *Merry-Go-Round* and *Gilbert Cannan and his Mill*. *The Pond, Garsington* may also be a study for the very large Cézannesque painting *Bathers* (1917–1918), which after *Merry-Go-Round*, was, in terms of scale, Gertler's most ambitious painting of the decade. The "Vorticist"-style treatment of the sky in *The Pond* on small panel also mirrors exactly the pattern of the clouds and sky in the later painting. Marks in the paint along the long edges of the panel may indicate that it was clamped during the painting out of doors of the uppermost composition, and then later trimmed for neatness. It is clear that Gertler made the painted sketch in preparation for the larger *Merry-Go-Round*, which shows many changes from this preparatory version, then later reused the panel and overpainted it with the view of Garsington. This finding raises the question of whether there are other preparatory works or versions that are now overpainted with later compositions.

Gertler began his portrait of *Gilbert Cannan and his Mill* in 1915, put it aside temporarily to concentrate on a commissioned portrait of Michael Sadler (1915), and then carried out separate studies of the chestnut tree (now lost) for *Gilbert Cannan and his Mill*, before finally completing the portrait in April 1916. As in *Family Group* and *Rabbi and Grandchild*, Gertler sometimes extended his canvas supports while overpainting or altering an image, and also added a strip of canvas to the lower edge of the canvas of the Cannan painting presumably to accommodate the extension of the mill, the figure of Cannan and his dogs in the foreground.

## Unresolved Investigations

*Still Life with Self-Portrait* (ca. 1918) has traditionally been dated to April 1918, based on a series of letters written by the artist between the spring and autumn of that year. It is, therefore, assumed to have been painted in Penn Studio, 13a Rudall Crescent, Hampstead, where the artist

worked from January 1915 to 1932. On 2 April 1918, Gertler wrote to fellow artist Richard Carline that he had:

*started a plan of a large self-portrait, seen in my big mirror, with many reflections behind, and my revolving bookcase, supporting a cerulean vase in front of the mirror. It is an interesting though complex subject, and in spite of it being so pleasant here [at Garsington], I am longing to get back to get on with it.*<sup>69</sup>

The Leeds work, however, although it does show “many reflections behind”, contradicts this account in a number of ways: it is not a large- but a standard-sized work; it was observed in a small, convex mirror, not a large one; and there is a glass flask or jug but no cerulean-coloured vase.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, no mention is made of either the other still-life objects (apples in a bag and a candlestick) in the foreground of the composition, nor of the Japanese print prominently displayed on the wall behind the mirror. Unlike the majority of Gertler’s still-life props, which recur consistently in his paintings, this print appears uniquely in this work.<sup>71</sup> However, the other still-life elements can be found in works both before and after this date, for example, a similar glass flask can be found in *Talmudic Discussion* (1911) and a similar arrangement of apples in *Apples in a Bag* (1921).

Compositionally, *Still Life with Self-Portrait* shares the device of using a convex mirror to show the artist at work with William Orpen’s *Mirror* (1900) and both reference Van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434), which also uses a convex mirror to reveal the artist at work.<sup>72</sup> The artist’s own appearance with short hair and a thick fringe is consistent with his appearance from circa 1914 onwards. A portrait of a single female figure in black, such as found in Gertler’s early Slade work, can just be glimpsed on the easel behind.

Gertler’s letter to Dorothy Brett three weeks later, reporting on the progress of *Still Life with Self-Portrait*, raises further questions:

*It goes well so far. It is a very complex subject and very interesting and unusual. If this comes off at all well, I shall treat it as but a study for a much larger—in fact, huge canvas, which I want to do of the same subject, since in this canvas I had to sacrifice much background which is most important to the whole character of the subject. The canvas I am working on is the same size as my Fruit Stall.*<sup>73</sup>

The *Fruit Stall* (now lost), a work painted in 1915, and praised by the artist’s contemporaries Wadsworth, Duncan Grant and Clive Bell, presumably for its modernist qualities, has been variously described as “big” and “vast” in scale.<sup>74</sup> However, the complex but traditional *Still Life with Self-Portrait* measures only 50.8 x 40.6 cm, further casting doubt on the likelihood that the letter quoted above refers to this particular work.

Another unresolved question in *Still Life with Self-Portrait* is which of the artist’s studios is depicted? The interior in the painting, seen in reflection in the convex mirror, has large, floor-to-ceiling windows (their reflection can also be seen in the round-bellied glass flask in the foregrounded still-life arrangement), cream-painted panelled walls, a naked light bulb and bare floorboards. The windows conform to those seen in the background of a photograph of Gertler’s former model, Mrs Dora Venn, taken many years later in Gertler’s Elder Street studio in Spitalfields, which Gertler occupied from 1912–1914. Although many works were painted there, few reveal much of the interior, for example, *Penn Studio* (1915) shows only a corner of Gertler’s studio bedroom (in the upper gallery) lit by sky lights. A visit by the authors to Penn Studio (now privately occupied and therefore not photographed or discussed in detail) in 2018, confirmed that it does not have floor-to-ceiling windows. This discrepancy, therefore, also the

possibility of an earlier date and that the above correspondence relates in fact to a later self-portrait also painted in Penn Studio.

Further correspondence, however, makes it clear that Gertler continued to work on a version of “the mirror picture” throughout May,<sup>75</sup> and again in October, when he recorded “a big change in the composition and thoroughly exhausted myself. Today I am too tired and nervous to work. I may rest some days. God knows when it will be finished now.”<sup>76</sup> At the end of the month, he put “my *self-portrait* aside, whether permanently or only for a time, I don’t know [...]”<sup>77</sup> In November, he observed:

*I have not yet returned to my Self-Portrait. I don’t know if ever I shall again. I am in quite a different mood now, but I have done a charcoal study [not traced] for it, and may commence a painting any moment, but the idea is so vague in my mind that I hardly have hopes of it as yet.*<sup>78</sup>

An X-radiograph suggests that the standard-sized commercially primed canvas, which carries the artist’s supplier’s “Reeves and Sons” stamp on the reverse, was reused for the current composition (fig. 20).<sup>79</sup> The canvas was probably turned at 90 degrees to the initial composition, which is characterised by horizontal brush marks and spherical shapes, perhaps indicative of fruit in a still life. It is not clear which way up the underlying composition would have been orientated. Paint cross sections showed that the uppermost composition is relatively thinly painted, directly over the first image after it had fully dried and without another ground preparation in between. The paint in the underlying composition contains emerald green and lead white pigments. Upper paint layers include vermilion and lead white for the pink of the clothing and the flesh of the Japanese Warrior depicted in the print on the studio wall, with black paint beneath and for the Warrior’s hair that contains bone black. The dark paint of the curtain in the background is painted using bone black and emerald green and the fruit using barium chromate yellow and yellow ochre. These results, while adding to our technical knowledge, do not allow us to firmly date or situate the painting. Thus, for the time being, we have to accept the original date of 1918, although it remains unproven, and we hope that further investigations including further technical analysis on other contemporaneous work, may help to resolve this at a later date.



Figure 20

X-radiograph, Mark Gertler, *Still-life with Self-portrait*, [turned at 90 degrees]. Collection of Leeds Museums and Galleries. Digital image courtesy of Aviva Burnstock (all rights reserved).

## Props

As mentioned above, Gertler had a set of preferred studio props that recur in his paintings. These include a red headscarf with white spots that Golda wears, for example, in *The Artist's Mother* (1913); a similar headscarf, this time white with red spots, was depicted in the double-portrait of his parents *The Apple Woman and her Husband* (1912). One of these two scarves is worn by Golda in *Jewish Family* and by Anne in *Family Group*, although in both later paintings the white spots have been touched out in solid red; they appear in an X-ray image of the painting. This compositional change together with the over-painted figure may have derived from a desire to simplify the image and focus on contrasting planes of colour—a clear development away from the decorated and textured surfaces and brown palette of earlier paintings like *Talmudic Discussion*.

Other props include apples, the most traditional of still-life elements, but also a recurring motif probably of personal significance to Gertler, who lived near Spitalfields market. Paintings of apples punctuate his oeuvre and can be found in several key works, particularly those for which members of his family modelled, including *Family Group* and *The Artist's Brother Harry Holding an Apple*. Although his father was a furrier and was joined in this business by Gertler's two older brothers, there is only one portrait of his father by this title (now lost); and an early portrait of his mother wearing fur, but many including *The Apple Woman and her Husband* (1912), in which they are painted with apples. Other still-life elements include a necklace with red beads worn by Dora Plaskowsky in *Rabbi and Grandchild* and by his sister Sophie in *Portrait of a Girl* (1912); a shorter string of red beads worn by his mother, Golda, in the above-mentioned double-portrait of his parents, appears alongside two sets of apples.

Examination of the paint used for this group of works shows that Gertler was surprisingly consistent in his choice of coloured pigments throughout this period. His palette included viridian and emerald greens, cobalt and Prussian and French ultramarine blues, chrome and

cadmium yellows, vermillion and a range of red, brown, and yellow iron containing pigments. He used lead white exclusively—in preference to zinc white—and bone black. Many coloured pigments are used in *Talmudic Discussion* for details of the cloth and the embroidered fabric, while the overall brown palette, characteristic of his early paintings, was dropped in some compositions in later works, where pure colour was used unmixed or mixed only with white to give a more vivid effect. Planes of colour are juxtaposed with minimum texture and flat application in *Family Group* to vibrant visual effect. Similarly, colour contrasts and flat planes are used in the *Fruit Sorters*. Close examination and study of the paint layer structure for both these paintings suggests that a traditional painting technique was used for drapery painting, with laying in an opaque underlayer followed by a transparent glaze. The technique of dead colouring was learned by most British painters in the eighteenth century and may still have been taught at the Slade in the early twentieth century or may alternatively have derived from Gertler's admiration of *quattrocento* Italian painting and the techniques used by these masters from direct observation in the National Gallery. For biblical subjects, such as *The Creation of Eve*, Gertler used a more subdued palette, and his views of the gardens at Garsington, in the works chosen for study, are similarly simplified, subdued in tone, and utilise a narrow range of pigments. Contrastingly, for *Gilbert Cannan*, the paint is applied more freely. The final surface of this work and others that were painted over underlying compositions varies in texture (it is unlikely that Gertler intended the underlying composition to be visible in the final composition). Gertler's use of unprimed supports presented a more textured surface than in either his works on panel or primed canvas for landscape, still life, or figure painting, suggesting that this aspect was less important to him in this period than other painterly goals.

In conclusion, this combined approach of technical and art-historical analysis has served a dual purpose: first, in uncovering hitherto unknown underpaintings which provide visual evidence to support written sources and/or reveal further clues on Gertler's journey towards the modern; and second, in allowing a greater understanding of the methods employed upon this journey. The underpaintings show not only how frequently Gertler reused his supports but also point to a rapid aesthetic development within this period, particularly in the key years of 1913 and 1916, supporting the commentary in his letters. The overpainting in 1913 points to an intention towards greater simplification, also apparent in his compositions, in line with post-Impressionist influences. In 1915–1916, however, it indicates a deeper engagement with contemporaneous modernism commensurate with both personal, wider political, and artistic concerns. Although we still cannot map all the stages leading to *Merry-Go-Round*, the hidden oil sketch supports the idea of a long period of gestation in which initial ideas were worked out preparatory to the final painting. Gertler's materials are also consistent with these developments—his earlier earthy palette brightening under the influence of post-Impressionism as his technique became increasingly experimental.

In the years immediately following those explored in this study, Gertler was influenced particularly by Cézanne and Renoir, and then, in the late 1930s by Picasso and Juan Gris, demonstrating that his engagement with modernism, while neither immediate nor linear in his early works, was nonetheless significant and ongoing. Gertler's surviving notebooks for his last decade discuss his experimentation with materials and technique,<sup>80</sup> also citing his discussions with the influential German art restorer Helmut Ruhemann (1891–1973), a refugee from Nazism who settled in England in 1934 and later set up a studio in St John's Wood.<sup>81</sup> A photograph from Lady Ottoline Morrell's album (ca. 1934), showing Gertler, his wife Marjorie, Ruhemann, and Philip Hendy (later director of the National Gallery) taking tea together in the garden, is further



proof of this relationship. This points to a deepening interest in experimental techniques in Gertler's later years, following the general *rappel à l'ordre* in the 1920s, and a second engagement with the modern in Gertler's final period, worthy of greater study but outside the scope of the current paper.

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Sarah MacDougall (MA, University of Reading) is Head of Collections and the Ben Uri Research Unit for the Study of the Jewish and Immigrant Contribution to the Visual Arts in Britain since 1900. Her exhibitions include *Alfred Cohen: An American Artist in Europe* (upcoming, 2020); *Jankel Adler: A "Degenerate" Artist in Britain, 1940–1949* (2019), *Bomberg* (2017–2018), *"Uproar!": The First 50 Years of The London Group* (2013), and *Forced Journeys: Artists in Exile, 1933–45* (2009–2010). Sarah is author of a biography of Mark Gertler (London: John Murray, 2002), a Gertler catalogue raisonné in progress (Yale University Press), and she guest curated the Gertler room at Tate Britain (2019).

## Footnotes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all the technical analysis was carried out by Aviva Burnstock, in consultation with Sarah MacDougall. The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of a small grant from the British Academy.

2. *Merry-Go-Round* has been the subject of previous technical studies at Tate; it is, therefore, referred to, where relevant in this paper, but is not one of the subjects of separate technical analysis or detailed discussion for the purposes of this study.
3. X-radiograph and paint analysis by Aviva Burnstock, 26 September 2013 using paint cross sections prepared and supplied by Jevon Thistlewood (Conservator, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford).
4. Mark Gertler, "First Memories", in Noel Carrington (ed.), *Mark Gertler: Selected Letters* (London: Rupert Hart-Davies, 1965), 15–27.
5. Mark Gertler, "A Triumph of Education Aid", *Jewish Chronicle*, 9 February 1912.
6. Juliet Steyn, "Mythical Edges of Assimilation: An Essay on the Early Works of Mark Gertler", in *Mark Gertler: Paintings & Drawings* (London: Camden Arts Centre, 1992), 9–22.
7. His job was to produce charcoal cherubim traced from a larger cartoon. He wrote to Carrington that the experience "nearly broke my heart", see 24 September 1912, *Mark Gertler: Selected Letters*, 47; and, in 1932, told an interviewer that he had "longed to be free of its restrictions and to get forward with my own real work", see M. Gertler, *Studio*, no. 104 (1932), 163.
8. For an account of his relationship with Rothenstein, see Samuel Shaw, "Equivocal Positions: The Influence of William Rothenstein, c.1890–1910", PhD thesis, The University of York, History of Art, August 2010.
9. See David Boyd Haycock, "'A Crisis of Brilliance': C.R.W. Nevinson, Henry Tonks, and the Slade School of Art, 1909–12", in Michael Walsh (ed.), *A Dilemma of English Modernism: Visual and Verbal Politics in the Life and Work of C.R.W. Nevinson (1889–1946)* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2007), 36–46.
10. Boyd Haycock, "A Crisis of Brilliance".
11. It was later purchased under the terms of the Chantrey Bequest in 1944.
12. Anna Gruetzner Robins, *Modern Art in Britain 1910–1914* (London: Merrell Holberton in association with Barbican Art Gallery, 1997), 9.
13. Gruetzner Robins, *Modern Art in Britain 1910–1914*, 52–55. Sadler also advised Gertler to show his work to Neville, although nothing came of the introduction, see Michael Sadler, typescript of diary entry, 27 September 1911, Tate Gallery Archive, 8221.
14. See "Papers regarding the acquisition, administration and dissolution of Sir Michael Ernest Sadler's art collection", TGA 8221.
15. Mark Gertler to Michael Sadler, 30 November 1911, Tate Archive.
16. Gertler, interview in the *Studio*, 163. Cézanne, Derain, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Manet, Matisse, and Picasso were among the artists shown at *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* (Grafton Galleries, London, 5 November 1910–January 1911). Gertler is known to have visited the exhibition with Nevinson, Nevinson's father, and the critic Lewis Hind on 26 November 1910, see Michael Walsh, *C.R.W. Nevinson: This Cult of Violence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 18. The *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition* in July 1912 included work by Cézanne, Derain, Matisse, and Picasso, among others; see Gruetzner Robins, *Modern Art in Britain 1910–1914*, Appendix, 186–192.
17. Works on Jewish subjects by Rothenstein and the Jewish artist Alfred Wolmark, who was also directly influenced by Rembrandt, were included in the Whitechapel Art Gallery's extensive exhibition *Jewish Art and Antiquities* (1906), see Samuel Shaw, "'The Ideal Behind the Real': William Rothenstein, Alfred Wolmark and the Representation of the Whitechapel Jew,

c.1905”, in S. MacDougall (ed.), *William Rothenstein and his Circle* (London: Ben Uri, 2016), 22–31. Rothenstein described the scene inside the synagogue as “subjects Rembrandt would have painted”, cited in John Rothenstein “Mark Gertler”, *Modern English Painters, Vol. II: Nash to Bawden* (London: MacDonald & Co., 1984); Gertler also recognised the same quality in the worshippers he saw when returning to his boyhood synagogue in later life, though noting that he no longer wished to paint them; cited in Lisa Tickner, *Modern Life and Modern Subjects: British Art in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 293, n. 115. Gertler named Rembrandt’s *Two Scholars Disputing* (1628) among his favourite works when interviewed by the *Jewish Chronicle* (“A Triumph of Education Aid”) and Randolph Schwabe noted in his diary Gertler’s admiration for this work when it was shown at the National Gallery, London, prior to journeying to Melbourne, in June 1933, see *The Diaries of Randolph Schwabe, British Art 1930–48*, edited by Gill Clarke (Bristol: Sansom & Company, 2016), 140. Lisa Tickner suggests that Gertler’s *Rabbi and Grandchild* — “intimate, domestic and profoundly humanist” is “a way of doing Rembrandt over in modern terms without resorting to the ‘Rembrandtesque’”, see Tickner, *Modern Life and Modern Subjects*, 168.

18. One of eight major works on Jewish themes carried out by Rothenstein in the East End between 1904 and 1906.
19. X-radiographed by Aviva Burnstock at the Courtauld in 2016.
20. Gertler, “A Triumph of Education Aid”. John was a considerable influence on Gertler’s generation at the Slade and he would have seen the exhibition *Provençal Studies and Other Works by Aug. E. John* at the Chenil Galleries in November–December 1910, see Gruetzner Robins, *Modern Art in Britain 1910–1914*, 46–49. So too was Puvis de Chavannes, see also David Fraser Jenkins, “Slade School Symbolism”, in John Christian (ed.), *The Last Romantics: The Romantic Tradition in British Art: Burne Jones to Stanley Spencer* (London: Lund Humphries in association with the Barbican Art Gallery, 1989), 71–76. John Currie and Gertler held a joint exhibition of their works at the Chenil in December 1912 with works by Augustus John in the next room. John promoted Gertler’s early work to the American collector John Quinn, but in 1916 declared that Gertler’s work had “gone to buggery and I can’t stand it. Not that he hasn’t ability of a sort and all the cheek of a Yid, but the spirit of the work is false and affected”, see Michael Holroyd, *Augustus John: The New Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), 660, n. 41.
21. Mark Gertler to Carrington, 12 September 1912, *Mark Gertler: Selected Letters*, 47.
22. This work was viewed on the easel in the Glynn Vivian’s conservation studio in 2016 but was not available for further technical study.
23. Mark Gertler to the Hon. Dorothy Brett, July 1913, *Mark Gertler: Selected Letters*, 54–55.
24. Steyn, “Mythical Edges of Assimilation”, 12.
25. Tickner, *Modern Life and Modern Subjects*, 295.
26. For a fuller discussion, see Janet Wolff, “The Failure of a Hard Sponge: Class, Ethnicity and the Art of Mark Gertler”, in Judith Squires (ed.), “Conservative Modernity”, *New Formations: A Journal of Culture, Theory, Politics* 28 (spring 1996): 46–64.
27. Emma Chambers, “Jewish Artists and Jewish Art”, in Lizzie Carey-Thomas (ed.), *Migrations: Journeys into British Art* (London: Tate Publishing, 2012), 55.
28. Chambers, “Jewish Artists and Jewish Art”, 55.
29. “What more does one want but a room, materials, and the National Gallery?”, he wrote to Rothenstein [ca. May–June 1910], *Mark Gertler: Selected Letters*, 33.

30. Kenneth McConkey, *The New English: A History of the New English Art Club* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2006), 117–118.
31. John gave him “useful tips on tempera”, Mark Gertler to Carrington (August 1912), *Mark Gertler: Selected Letters*, 43–44.
32. P.G. Konody, *The Observer*, January 1913.
33. Another version of *Portrait of a Woman* (generally accepted to be the superior version) is in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.
34. The exact book is hard to trace but published books available on the artist at the time include: Louis Maeterlinck, *Rogier van der Weyden* (Gent, 1902); *Rogier van der Weyden (Rogier de la Pasture) 1400?–1464 / Musée royal d’Anvers, Galerie nationale de Londres, Louvre, Musée royal de La Haye, Galerie royale des Uffizi à Florence* (Harlem: H. Kleinmann, 1906); and Friedrich Winkler, *Der meister von Flémalle und Rogier van der Weyden: Studien zu ihren Werken und zur Kunst ihren Zeit mit mehreren Katalogen zu Rogier* (Strasbourg: Heitz & Mündel, 1913).
35. Mark Gertler to the Hon. Dorothy Brett, August 1913, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.
36. Mark Gertler to Carrington, Sunday [December 1913], *Mark Gertler: Selected Letters*, 59–60.
37. Mark Gertler to Dorothy Brett, July 1913, *Mark Gertler: Selected Letters*, 54–55.
38. Mark Gertler to Carrington, March 1913, HRHRC.
39. Mark Gertler to Dora Carrington, 9 April 1913, *Mark Gertler: Selected Letters*, 52.
40. *Mark Gertler: Selected Letters*, 52.
41. Mark Gertler to Dora Carrington, [c. end March 1913], *Mark Gertler: Selected Letters*, 50–51.
42. Thomas Balston, 1949, HRHRC.
43. Cited John Woodeson, *Mark Gertler: Biography of a Painter 1891–1939* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1972), 401.
44. Anthony M. Ludowici, *The New Age* 13, no. 8, 19 June 1913, 212.
45. Mark Gertler to Brett, [ca. June 1913], HRHRC.
46. A similar gesture occurs in *The Apple Gatherers*.
47. Frances Spalding, “Mark Gertler: The Early Years”, in *Mark Gertler: The Early and the Late Years* (London: Ben Uri Gallery, 1982), 8.
48. Mark Gertler to Dorothy Brett [July 1913], HRHRC.
49. Mark Gertler to Edward Marsh, not dated [ca. December 1913], Berg Collection, New York.
50. When it was displayed at the Whitechapel in 1914, the reviewer of *The Star* noted: “So much emphasis is placed upon certain characteristics of the sitters that representation is occasionally pushed to caricature. The seated old man in this picture is as monstrously grotesque as a gargoyle, or some of the figures in medieval wood carvings” but admired it for “stir[ring] our imagination and our sympathies”, cited Woodeson, *Mark Gertler*, 362.
51. Woodeson, *Mark Gertler*, 342.
52. Tickner, *Modern Life and Modern Subjects*, 169.
53. Tickner, *Modern Life and Modern Subjects*, 171.
54. Mark Gertler to Dora Carrington, January 1915, *Mark Gertler: Selected Letters*, 80.
55. David Garnett (ed.), *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from her Diaries*, 1970 (reprinted 1990), 38, 74.
56. Mark Gertler to Edward Marsh, October 1914, Berg Collection, New York.

57. Both compositions are influenced by Egyptian art viewed by Gertler in the British Museum and Picasso's etching *The Frugal Repast* (1904), exhibited at the 1912 Picasso exhibition at the Stafford Gallery, is another likely source, see Gruetzner Robins, *Modern Art*, 128.
58. Mark Gertler to Dora Carrington, Sunday, [28] February 1915, *Mark Gertler: Selected Letters*, 84–85.
59. Rebecca Abrams, "Gilbert Cannan and his Mill, Mark Gertler", in *The Jewish Journey: 4000 Years in 22 Objects* (Oxford: Ashmolean, 2017), 181–190.
60. For a fuller discussion of the conception and genesis of *Merry-Go-Round*, see Sarah MacDougall, *Mark Gertler* (London: John Murray, 2002), 106–167.
61. John Rothenstein, *Modern English Painters, Vol. II*, 134.
62. Woodeson, *Mark Gertler*, 339 and 340.
63. The drawings were recently brought together with a copy of the X-ray alongside the finished canvas for the first time in the "Gertler Spotlight Display" at Tate Britain (12 February–31 October 2018).
64. This section was co-curated by Bomberg and the sculptor Jacob Epstein and showcased the work of the Whitechapel Boys, as well as Jewish artists based in Paris. See Juliet Steyn "Inside-Out: Assumptions of 'English' Modernism in the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London 1914", in Marcia Pointon (ed.), *Art Apart* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 212–230; and for a discussion of its significance, see Tickner, *Modern Life and Modern Subjects*, 154–163. Gertler and Bomberg grew up streets apart. They lent each other their studios and Gertler wrote to his patron Edward Marsh to engage his support for Bomberg's work.
65. Andrew Causey, "Formalism and the Figurative Tradition in British Painting", in Susan Compton (ed.), *British Art in the Twentieth Century* (Munich: Prestel, 1987), 19.
66. Mark Gertler to S.S. Koteliensky, 20 July 1916 [misdated 20 June], *Mark Gertler: Selected Letters*, 114–115.
67. Montague Shearman to Mark Gertler, 7 September 1916, Luke Gertler Estate.
68. Gilbert Cannan, *Mendel: A Story of Youth* (London: T. Fisher Unwin Ltd, 1916).
69. Mark Gertler to Richard Carline, 2 April 1918, *Mark Gertler: Selected Letters*, 159.
70. A cerulean vase does appear amid the still-life arrangement in the background of Gertler's Cézannesque *Nude Figure Study* (1918) and in later works such as *Still Life* (1920). Two further self-portraits: a head and shoulders (Government Art Collection) and a full figure (Private Collection), both painted in Penn studio, documented in the artist's letters, date to 1920.
71. Although Gertler's warrior figure resembles Kunisada's *Kabuki Actor with Sword*, it has not been possible to identify the exact print and how and when he acquired it. He is known to have frequented the British Museum Print Room (signing the Visitors Book with Nevinson, for example, on 3 February 1911; and Prints and Drawings Visitors Books May 1910–September 1911), but this print is not among its extensive collection of Japanese prints catalogued online. Gertler's interest in Japanese prints is not discussed in his letters, although their cultural influence on Western art, particularly French post-Impressionist painting, has been well documented and is a likely conduit to Gertler's own interest, perhaps via Van Gogh. The absence of the print in any further paintings also suggests a short-lived influence.
72. Orpen's *Mirror* was presented to the Tate by Mrs Coutts Michie through the Art Fund in memory of the George McCulloch Collection in 1913, so could conceivably have been seen by Gertler around this date, although there is no documentary evidence to support this. Both



Orpen's *Mirror* and Gertler's *Still Life with Self-Portrait* were included in the National Gallery's exhibition *Reflections: Van Eyck and the Pre-Raphaelites* (2 October 2017–2 April 2018) exploring the impact of the *Arnolfini Portrait* and its "re-imaginings" by later artists. In the accompanying catalogue, Alison Smith suggests that in Gertler's "seemingly everyday scene, the real and reflected parts of the image draw on earlier iconographic and representational models to both question and affirm existence." She reads the presence of the Samurai warrior as "evok[ing] the *memento mori* theme traditionally associated with still life", see Alison Smith, "The Pre-Raphaelites and the *Arnolfini Portrait*: A New Visual World", in *Reflections: Van Eyck and the Pre-Raphaelites* (London: National Gallery Company, distributed by Yale University Press, 2017), 75.

73. Mark Gertler to [Dorothy] Brett, 24 April 1918, HRHRC.
74. Duncan Grant to Mark Gertler, December 1915 and Clive Bell to Mark Gertler, "Friday", *Mark Gertler: Selected Letters*, 106.
75. Juliette Baillot to Mark Gertler, 17 May 1918, Luke Gertler Collection; Mark Gertler to Richard Carline, 22 May 1918, TGA.
76. Mark Gertler to Brett, 6 October 1918, HRHRC.
77. Mark Gertler to Brett, 6 October 1918.
78. Mark Gertler to Brett, November 1918, HRHRC.
79. According to Jacob Simon, Reeves & Sons Ltd, 1890–1950 was then run by the great-great-grandsons of the original Thomas Reeves and had a factory at Dalston [building extant] devoted to manufacturing artists' and students' colours, pastels, artists' brushes, prepared canvases, and other painting grounds; a leasehold factory at Belsham St, Hackney, used as a woodworking shop for the manufacture of colour boxes, drawing boards, T-squares, easels, palettes, etc; and another leasehold factory at Wayland Avenue, Hackney used to produce sketchbooks, portfolios and other bookbinding work, see Jacob Simon, "British Artists' Suppliers, 1650–1950", <https://www.npg.org.uk/research/programmes/directory-of-suppliers/y>. Accessed 16 November 2018.
80. Mark Gertler, Notebook inscribed "Notes", and further inscribed "[Notebook A]" in pencil on flyleaf, Luke Gertler Estate.
81. Although we would like to know more, this is all the evidence uncovered to date of this relationship. For more on Ruhemann, see Morwenna Blewett, "Refugee Picture Restorers in the United Kingdom", in Monica Bohm-Duchen (ed.), *Insiders/Outsiders: Refugees from Nazi Europe and their Contribution to British Visual Culture* (London: Lund Humphries, 2019), 105–111.

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