

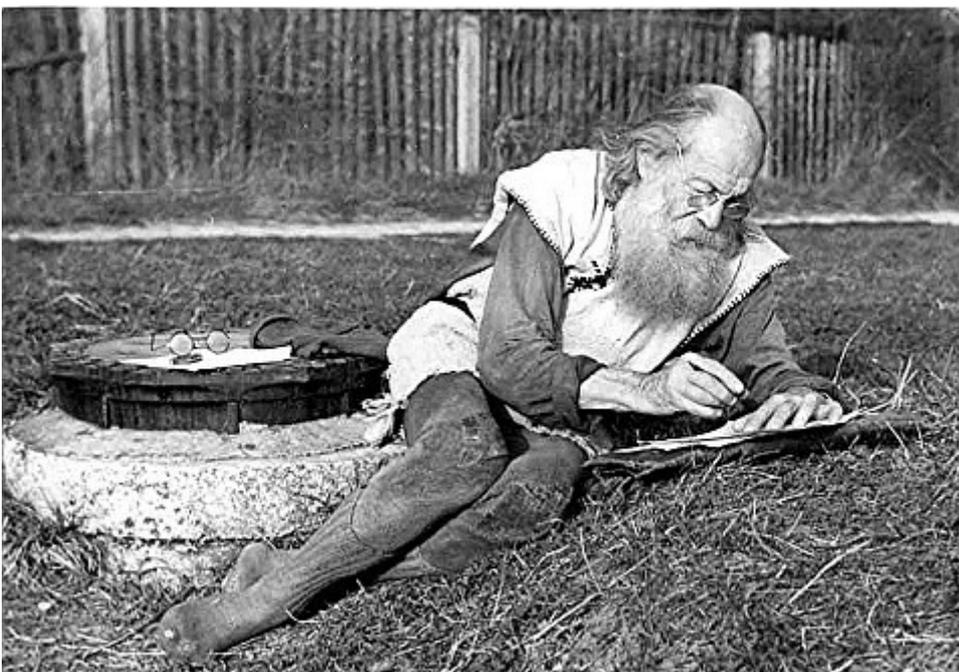
Dress-down Friday: Gusto Gräser

By [James Conway](#) / [October 12, 2012](#) / [Dress-down Friday](#), [Munich](#), [Mystics](#), [Outriders](#)



The extraordinary photograph above shows Gustav “**Gusto**” **Gräser**, artist, poet and hugely influential lifestyle reformer, in 1945. He steps through the ruins of Munich at the end of the Second World War like the last man on Earth, his idiosyncratic wandering prophet costume and the spires of the Marienkirche intact, but little else.

Born in 1879, Gräser had barely emerged from a rebellious adolescence when he came into contact with [Karl Wilhelm Diefenbach](#). He was attracted by the German artist’s revolutionary ideas but repelled by his despotic manner. Shortly after, Gräser formed a group in Munich to promote his own version of



Diefenbach’s message of pacifism, communal living, nearness to nature and nonconformity.

Gusto and his brother Karl marked the start of the new century by establishing a community, Monte Verità, above the Swiss lakeside town of Ascona. It was in fact the first of several utopian colonies on the spot which would have a huge influence on the development of countercultural currents. Initially, at least, it functioned more or less as an exclave of Schwabing,

with Fanny zu Reventlow (who died nearby), Stefan George (ditto), Erich Mühsam and dozens of other Munich bohemians spending time there.

Even before he had a chance to lecture or recite his poetry, Gräser's new creed was telegraphed by his appearance; photos show him with long hair and beard, eccentrically robed – equal parts oracle, jester, magus, shaman and holy fool. Writer Johannes Schlaf recalled his impression of this “tall, slim, handsome form” in 1909:

Long, chestnut hair falls over his shoulders, and a chestnut beard frames a fine, regular face of clear complexion, red-cheeked, with a lightly curved nose and a pair of magnificent clear brown eyes under unusually finely shaped brows and a smooth forehead.



The upper body of this form is wrapped in a kind of chiton made of yellowy-brown coarse sacking fabric with the bare, lean, strong arms and slim veiny hands exposed. His legs are clad in tight trousers from the same material and his feet wrapped in sandals fastened up the shins with straps. A meshed wanderer's sack hangs over his shoulders.

It was a year-round costume to accompany him on his travels throughout the seasons and across Europe as he spread his poetry and his vision. His idealism, ascetic lifestyle and incessant wanderings bring to mind a Herman Hesse character. And little wonder; Hesse was one of Gräser's followers and worked both the personality and teachings of his guru through several of his books.

But Gräser's highly unorthodox appearance and inflammatory views met with mockery from the media and absolute rejection from the authorities, and his peripatetic lifestyle was partly explained by his frequent disbarment from cities and countries. His pacifism was particularly unwelcome during the First World War, part of which he spent in an insane asylum. He was equally unpopular when he preached non-violence to the revolutionaries who briefly turned Bavaria into a Communist republic.

In the 1920s, Gräser worked at an anti-war museum in Berlin (which, by a grotesque irony, was later used as a torture chamber by the Nazis but is against all odds [still going](#)). Leaving his houseboat on a Berlin lake he returned to Munich, where he lived out the Second World War in circumstances which exceeded even his own standards of self-denial. Living in obscurity, he continued to write poetry until his death in October 1958. But a decade after Gusto Gräser was lowered into a pauper's grave, his teachings were resurrected in every sandal-wearing, *Steppenwolf*-reading, wholefood-eating, war-protesting, free-loving, commune-dwelling, out-dropping defector from the mainstream.

For German speakers there is a lot more information on Gusto Gräser and Monte Verità [here](#).

