

New Ways of Seeing: Re-interpreting Annunciation by Eric Gill

The following paper includes content you may find difficult to read, the approach and text has been led and approved by members of the Methodist Survivors Advisory Group.

Introduction

This co-curation project has been developed as part of a larger area of work regarding 'contested heritage'.

In recent years, there has been a growing understanding of how objects, memorials or buildings may represent painful chapters in world or personal (individual) history. Our heritage may be emotionally charged and the items that represent these painful stories become 'contested' – seemingly neutral or inoffensive for some and for others, painful and representative of wrongdoing. For some, the retention of these objects alone is interpreted as excusing or making acceptable this history.

Objects of contested heritage may represent shameful chapters in history such as the transatlantic slave trade or in this case, a painting by an artist who is a known abuser and paedophile.

There will be more information available via the Methodist Church website in coming months to resource churches navigating issues of contested heritage aligned with our theology.

This paper was prepared to demonstrate the history of engagement with this painting, how the next steps for this work were determined and how the Church has been led by the Methodist Survivors Advisory Group.

This project was a collaboration between the Methodist Modern Art Committee and the Methodist Survivors Advisory Group. The reinterpretation of this work will be showcased at Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft as part of a display in the summer of 2025 and new research revealed. The co-curation consultation has been led over the past three years on the Methodist Modern Art Collection side by Professor Ann Sumner, Chair of the Management Committee.

Context and approach

Annunciation, c.1912 by Eric Gill is a watercolour painting that was accepted in 1991 as a gift given to Methodist Modern Art Collection (MMAC) by a great supporter of the collection who identified a gap in the collection regarding this part of the Bible story. The MMAC includes many artists who have connections with Wales and Ditchling, Eric Gill is no exception.



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In 1989 Gill's sexually abusive behaviour towards his young daughters, Betty and Petra, his incestuous relationship with his sisters and his sexual experiments with his dog all came to light with the publication of a controversial biography by Fiona MacCarthy. This publication drew directly from Gill's personal diaries. Previous biographers had ignored his paedophilia and, despite these revelations, the first ever retrospective of Gill's art still opened at the Barbican in 1992.

The presence of the *Annunciation* is now recognised as 'contested' reflecting the debate about Eric Gill's dark private life, raising issues about how we approach the work. The Committee recognises that this artwork cannot be detached from knowledge about the artist's behaviour. Following a pioneering exhibition at the Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft in 2017 entitled *The Body*, which explored how Gill's biography impacted modern audience's appreciation of his work, the Methodist Modern Art Collection Management Committee (MMACMC) withdrew the work from public view, placing it in the Reserve Collection, no longer loaning it and removing it from the website. Following disturbing revelations about high-profile members of society, growing public acknowledgement of and outrage at paedophilia has resulted in a new scrutiny of Gill's behaviour in recent years. In January 2022 an activist climbed up the façade of BBC Broadcasting House in London and attacked the statue of *Prospero and Ariel* by Eric Gill. At that time, in light of growing public controversy surrounding works by Gill, it was decided that the status of the artwork should be reviewed.

Considering the future of this work, a decision was made by the MMACMC to consult initially with the Methodist Survivors Advisory Group (MSAG), to take on board their responses to the work and to be led by their reactions to it, co-curating a new approach to this watercolour. At two workshops in May and October 2022 the Chair of the Management Committee facilitated discussions about the painting which resulted in a conclusion that contested histories, such as this, should be acknowledged publicly and a general understanding that the opinions of survivors should be prioritised and become central to decision making. The MSAG felt that there should be a deep commitment in the Methodist Church to 'truth telling'. The temptation may be to hide difficult subjects away – to sweep them under the carpet - but through a process of consultation which is entirely transparent we are able to acknowledge openly the issues this particular work presents.

Therefore, rather than removing this work from the public domain and appearing to conceal the problem, as sexual abuse of children is so often hidden, we should expose Gill's abusive behaviour. By returning *Annunciation* to the MMAC section of the Methodist Church website alongside a fuller biography we acknowledge the abuse and give space for insightful comments made by the survivor's group. These comments reflect how the work spoke to them and their request to consider the theology of the subject anew.

After a further period of consultation with a smaller focused sub-group of MSAG in 2023 and 2024, the decision was made to give this clear explanation of our



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reasoning for returning the work to our website, with the comments of the survivors included, helping us all to look at the work in a new light.

It was agreed that the MMAC website should feature biographies of all the artists represented in the Collection to accompany information about the artworks. It is important that in acknowledging and providing more information about Gill that he is not singled out for particular attention, with more focus or information about him than others have received and in no way, should his behaviour give him special extended coverage.

This emphasis on the context of artists lives and their lived experience has created more opportunity to co-curate with other groups in the future. The approach chimes with current art history and curation developments; the biography of an artist can no longer be seen in isolation from their artwork and co-curating artworks with relevant groups is considered best practice.

The survivors were consulted about the overall approach to returning the Gill to the website and details of how the interpretation would appear for the wider public. The MSAG continue to inform decision making with regard to the artwork, including working to re-display the *Annunciation* in the context potentially of partnership with a suitable institution, or for use in safeguarding training. Though now available to view on the website, it was decided that (unlike the rest of the collection) the artwork should not be available for exhibition loan but instead available to facilitate conversation and learning regarding safeguarding and related issues.

Since March 2024, the Methodist Survivors Advisory Group and the Methodist Modern Art Collection Management Committee have been working with Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft. The result will be a collections display that will open in July 2025, including *Annunciation*, that will reinterpret this work from the perspective of survivors.

The process of developing this display included site visits to learn more about family life for the Gills, particularly at Ditchling and to give context to Gill's abuse of his daughters in this village. The museum collections include relevant material providing the opportunity to explore the lives of Gill and his daughters including photographs, drawings and textiles. A visit to view the microfiche films of Gill's diaries was also undertaken, with one of the survivors volunteering to look directly at relevant entries about Gill's abuse and *Annunciation*.

Considerable discussion ensued while the group was in Ditchling, as key works were considered in detail, with monthly follow up Zoom meetings offering a place to continue the discussion and reflections, each one taking a different subject to explore, such as family life at Ditchling, Gill's daughters and religion. Relevant specialists joined including Lottie Hoare who has written about Gill's daughter Petra.

The survivors led the choice of exhibits in consultation with the curators, as key themes gradually emerged for the final display to be titled *It Takes a Village*.



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This co-curation at Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft of their upcoming exhibition in July 2025 marks the culmination of this work reinterpreting *Annunciation* by Eric Gill.

The Methodist Church acknowledges the significant contribution made by the members of both the MSAG and the chair of the MMACMC, Professor Ann Sumner, in navigating the reinterpretation of this artwork and its future use in alignment with the theology and priorities of the Methodist Church.

The Methodist Church is committed to safeguarding as an integral part of its life and ministry. Safeguarding is about the action the Church takes to promote a safer culture. This means we will promote the welfare of children, young people and adults, work to prevent abuse from occurring and seek to protect and respond well to those that have been abused.

If you have been affected in any way to abuse connected to the Methodist Church and would like to speak with someone, please make contact with the Safeguarding team who work with victims and survivors of abuse. If you wish to remain anonymous this will be respected.

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