



Eric Gill & St Dominic's Press Conference

a proposal for the
Henkels Visiting Scholars Series

submitted by

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in consultation with

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Introduction

This proposal is the result of collaborative efforts of a number of Notre Dame faculty to create a conference examining the continuing influence of Eric Gill, a British artist, writer, social activist, and Catholic thinker. The conference will be one part of a number of activities planned for the 2000 fall semester. Already scheduled are an exhibition of Gill's artwork at The Snite Museum of Art and an exhibition of books of the St Dominic Press at the Hesburgh Library Special Collections. The exhibitions will include work from the Eric Gill Collection housed in Special Collections as well as selected sculptural works from The Humanities Research Center at The University of Texas, Austin (see attached for a description of the collection).

Eric Gill (1882-1940) was an English wood engraver, sculptor, designer, and writer who lived and worked in and near London. What makes Eric Gill compelling is that he wove together into his daily lifestyle his Catholic faith, artistic efforts both sacred and secular, and considerable writing on various social issues of the day. One need not agree with Gill's interpretation of social and economic issues or accept his lifestyle choices to recognize the appeal of an integrated life. Nor was Gill the only advocate and model of the integrated life; Frank Lloyd Wright provides yet another model of such an approach. But as a Catholic thinker, Gill has particular relevance to Notre Dame.

The theme of the integrated life is, potentially, one of the most significant topics for discussion in a conference. The yearning for an integrated life, understood as an alternative to the alienation and compartmentalization characteristic of modern culture, remains deeply felt by many. It is a yearning and a quest that a Catholic university should nurture and support in every way possible. An Eric Gill conference is one such way. Speakers could review the experience of Gill (and other contemporary figures), explore the obstacles to the successful realization of an integrated life, and address different aspects of this ideal today.

Notre Dame is the best place for this discussion, for Gill provides an alternative to mainstream Catholic action. His ideas can neither be categorized as left nor right and his art was both medieval and contemporary in form. He lead a flawed private life but produced creative work of tremendous spirituality. During the weekend of November 17th, we intend to examine the continuing influence of Eric Gill and his colleagues of the Guild of St Dominic. Conference attendees will also participate in several Notre Dame classes whose themes will relate to various aspects of Gill's works. An exhibition and conference devoted to the life and career of Eric Gill is a worthwhile project which will appeal to various university and community constituencies.

We are requesting \$10,000 from the Henkels Visiting Speakers Fund and the Institute of Scholarship in the Liberal Arts to bring speakers to Notre Dame for this conference. We respectfully ask for the award a year early primarily to give us the needed lead time to coordinate and plan the conference, secure commitments from our speakers, and plan the associated exhibitions. Since several of the desired speakers reside in England, advanced planning is essential. We would not disburse the funds until the fall of 2000.

Impact on the University and Student Involvement

The most exciting aspect of having a conference and exhibitions on Eric Gill and his colleagues is the involvement of students from a wide range of departments on campus. Courses in the Departments of Art, Art History & Design, Theology, Architecture, and others on campus can adjust their offerings to tie into the November conference and exhibitions. Students who are not normally attracted to attend the same lecture or class will find common ground.

The Department of Art, Art History & Design

Gill found success as both an artist and a designer. Many faculty will tailor their courses during the fall of 2000 to take advantage of the conference and exhibitions. Students from studio and art history will be involved in the design of publicity and assisting in preparing the exhibitions.

Students might be brought together in connection with the project in a class (or classes) that focus on the research and organization of exhibitions, the selection of materials and their display. Perhaps they could research catalogue entries, and assist in the practical stages of setting up a show. This would give them a “hands-on” museological perspective while also giving them an opportunity to study original, unexplored aspects of Gill’s life and work.

As an artist, Gill pursued the ideals of the Arts and Crafts Movement, and his work in the arts constitutes an important chapter in the history of this critical twentieth-century cultural movement. Students especially in the areas of Professor Jim Flanigan’s figure sculpture and Professor Jean Dibble’s printmaking will draw most from the conference and speakers.

As a designer, Gill made significant contributions to the history of twentieth-century design. An exhibit of his work would provide an opportunity to discuss the nature and role of type and the experience of reading in this age of digitalization and screen-based (rather than page-based) reading — issues with which the department’s graphic design students are actively engaged. Professor Sherman’s Multimedia Design class will design and produce a CD-ROM documenting the various activities of the conference and exhibitions. This course can truly be an interdisciplinary experience bringing together students from various departments to both develop the content and design of the CD-ROM.

The Theology Department

As a Catholic social activist, Gill’s interpretation of Catholic social and economic theory remains a provocative challenge to the values of Modernist culture. The exhibitions and conference will be utilized by Professor Baxter’s course on Catholic Radicalism and the new Catholic Social Teaching program.

Eric Gill serves as a paradigm of the integrated life in which private life, professional work, and spiritual concerns are inextricably linked. In contrast to the modern tendency to compartmentalize life so as to

separate (both physically, in terms of location and emotionally in terms of personal conduct) one's domestic routine from professional work, and work from religious activity, Gill sought to weave the various strands of life and work together.

London Program

There is a natural connection to students of the London Program. Gill conducted the majority of his work in and around London. There are many places in London where students of the program can visit to see Gill's work. There are collections of Gill's work at the Victoria and Albert Museum, Tate Gallery, St Bride's Printing Library, and south of London in the Ditchling Museum. Gill's sculptures are on BBC Headquarters and the St James Underground Station. His most well-known commissions are the Stations of the Cross and other sculptures in Westminster Cathedral.

The London Program is planning to tailor their Art History offerings to include the work of Gill during the semester of the conference. Students planning to attend the London Program and those returning from London will be encouraged to attend the conference and exhibitions.

By taking advantage of the new London facilities, Debartolo or McKenna Hall facilities, and the internet or satellite, students at the London campus could attend the conference. It may also be arranged for a scholar in London to give a lecture to the students in London and to the conference participants here. This is an experiment that can be a model for other London Program collaborations. It is possible right now to send via the internet a reasonable television signal to London. Using satellite technology a higher quality signal can be made. With planning and the support of OIT it may be possible to have a two-way broadcast to facilitate dialogue.

Architecture

Professor Dennis Doordan will offer History of Design in the fall of 2000. This course is taken by students of Architecture and is cross-listed with Arts & Letters for the students of the Department of Art, Art History & Design and the Science, Technology & Values concentration. Professor Doordan plans to integrate the work of Gill into that semester's syllabus and use the exhibitions in The Snite Museum and Special Collections.

The Conference

The combined artistic and literary legacy of Eric Gill, which has never been brought together as a coherent whole, prompts critical questions about the place of art and the philosophy of art in our time: the relationship between art and social action, in general, and, in particular, the social role of a populist political philosophy that centers around a polemical revival of artistic styles. How do we define an "avant garde" when we look at his mission and accomplishments? These themes are especially timely at the turn of our

century. Gill had many opinions on the role of the artist and the role of religion. For him prayer, work, art, and politics were woven together into an integrated lifestyle. In this conference, we plan to explore these themes and issues sixty years after Gill's death. We would like to learn more precisely about the mechanisms of Gill's selection of certain historical materials and vocabularies over others in his art and about his interpretation of them. Possible issues to be explored in the conference can be found from a sampling of Gill's writing:

The relationship of art and faith

All the best art is religious. Religious means according to the rule of God. All art that is godly, that is, made without concern for worldly advantage, is religious. The great religions of the world have always resulted in great artistic creation because they have helped to set man free from himself — have provided a discipline under which men can work and in which commerce is subordinated.

Eric Gill from *Art Nonsense and other Essays*, 1929

The role of art in the world

Art which is not propaganda is simply aesthetics and is consequently entirely the affair of cultured connoisseurs. It is a studio affair, nothing to do with the common life of men and women, a means of 'escape.' Art in the studio becomes simply 'self-expression,' and that becomes simply self-worship. Charity, the love of God and your neighbour, which, here below, every work of man must exhibit, is lost. If you say art is nothing to do with propaganda, you are saying that it has nothing to do with religion — that it is simply a psychological dope, a sort of cultured drug traffic. I, at any rate, have no use for it. For me, all art is propaganda; and it is high time that modern art became propaganda for social justice instead of propaganda for the flatulent and decadent ideals of bourgeois Capitalism.

Eric Gill excerpt from a letter to *The Catholic Herald*, 28 October 1934

Gill's social and economic ideas

On the one hand is the world of mechanised industry claiming to be able to give happiness to men and all the delights of human life — provided we are content to have them in our spare time and do not demand such things in the work by which we earn our livings; a world regulated by the factory whistle and the mechanical time-keeper; a world wherein no man makes the whole of anything, wherein the product is standardised and the man simply a tool, a tooth on a wheel. On the other is the languishing but indestructible world of the small shopkeeper, the small workshop, the studio and the consulting room — a world in which the notion of spare time hardly exists, for the thing is hardly known and very little desired; a world wherein the work is the life & love accompanies it.

Eric Gill from *An Essay on Typography*, 1931

Gill on war

Gill justified the theme of Christ and the Money-Changers as the subject for the Leeds University War Memorial by writing that Christ throwing out the money-changers from the temple was

... the most just of all wars — a war of Justice against Cupidity — a war waged by Christ himself. ... There are "money-changers" in all civilised countries, and modern war, in spite of the patriotism of millions of conscripts and their officers, is mainly the "white man's burden" consists chiefly in the effort to bestow the advantages of 'civilization' upon "those unenlightened 'natives' who happen to be living where gold or oil is available."

On the sculpture Gill inscribed in Latin from James: "Now listen, you rich men, weep and wail because of its misery upon you. Your wealth has rotted."

Eric Gill from *Welfare Handbook*, No. 10, 1923

Gill's depiction of Christ and the Church as lovers



Nuptials of God, 1922



Divine Lovers, 1923

The engraving *Nuptials of God* was first used in the 1923 issue of *The Game*. The engraving was also used again for the 11 June 1929 ordination card of Gerald Vann, O.P. The small sculpture *Divine Lovers* was a theme Gill returned to several times in sculpture and wood engraving.

Speakers

We propose to invite authorities on the life and work of Eric Gill to our conference. Several on our proposed list can speak about the lives of members of the Guild of St Dominic as well. All invited speakers will be asked to arrange their travel in such a way that they will have an opportunity to meet with students.

In addition to invited speakers, we plan to announce a general call for papers to encourage scholars from a wide variety of disciplines whose area of study in some way relates to Eric Gill and the Guild of St Dominic to submit abstracts of papers for consideration.

One speaker has committed to the conference.

Judith Collins is curator of twentieth-century British art at the Tate Gallery, London. She is the author of the recent *Eric Gill: The Sculpture*, the first complete survey of Gill's figural sculpture. Dr. Collins curated an exhibition of Gill's sculpture at the Barbican in London and wrote the companion catalog in 1992. At the Tate Gallery she curated shows of the works of Winifred Nicholson, Cecil Collins, and Stanley Spencer.