

## Eric Gill and his legacy

Last month a Guardian newspaper article described how a group of survivors of abuse are working with Ditchling Museum of Art and Craft in Sussex to tackle the complex issue of how Eric Gill's work as an artist should be presented. Gill lived in Ditchling for six years and he founded an artistic community there. But in 1989 the author of a biography about him got sight of his diaries, in which he regularly disclosed he had been sexually abusing his daughters and sister throughout their childhood. This led to the museum addressing the evident tension between Gill the talented artist and the abuser by posting condemning statements about him on their website whilst acknowledging his contribution to art and design history in the UK.

The Methodist Modern Art Collection owns one of Gill's works. It is a representation of the Annunciation, but closer examination suggests that it has echoes of the abuse inflicted on his family. Since 2024 and after careful thought and planning, a sub group of the Methodist Survivors Advisory Group (MSAG) has entered a partnership with the Ditchling Museum to agree a fresh way to show his work and how to interpret it. So, a new exhibition at Ditchling, called 'It takes a Village' curated by staff at the museum other organisation in the area and four abuse survivors, from the MSAG, will be launched later this summer. The group has taken the view that it is important to exhibit this work and not hide it away, as this would replicate the culture of secrecy that abuse creates. It also puts the daughters at the centre, and acknowledges their achievements in the face of adversity.

One of the survivors working on the project is Vivien Almond who sits on the Lincolnshire District Safeguarding Group. In the newspaper article, she recounted her own experience of abuse as a child and then related this to the imagery of the picture of the Annunciation. She describes what she sees as a scared little girl in a space she should feel safe in. The angel towers over her whilst she kneels in front of him, with no obvious way out. Here is a link to the article, where you can read the full article and view the picture, which also references recent controversy about a Gill sculpture outside the BBC headquarters in London.

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/apr/18/eric-gill-abuse-survivors-ditchling-exhibition>

You might like to compare that image with this one painted in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century by Simone Martini and currently on show at the Siena exhibition at the National Gallery. In a further sketch by the artist Lorinzetti, a contemporary of Martini, the

artist portrays Mary clinging to the pole you see on her left in this picture, seemingly for dear life, but this was not the finally chosen version in Lorinzetti's case. She looks anxious enough as it is in thus one.

<http://www.travelingintuscany.com/art/simonemartini/annunciations.htm>

It's often the case that we need to re-evaluate what we think we know about people who have shown great talent in the past, but also in current times. It harkens back to the debate between 'show and explain' or 'remove'. As one survivor said in the article, 'There are lots of very difficult and emotive issues. But if survivors can do it, then the rest of us certainly can.'