



Six Decades of Leo and Diane Dillon

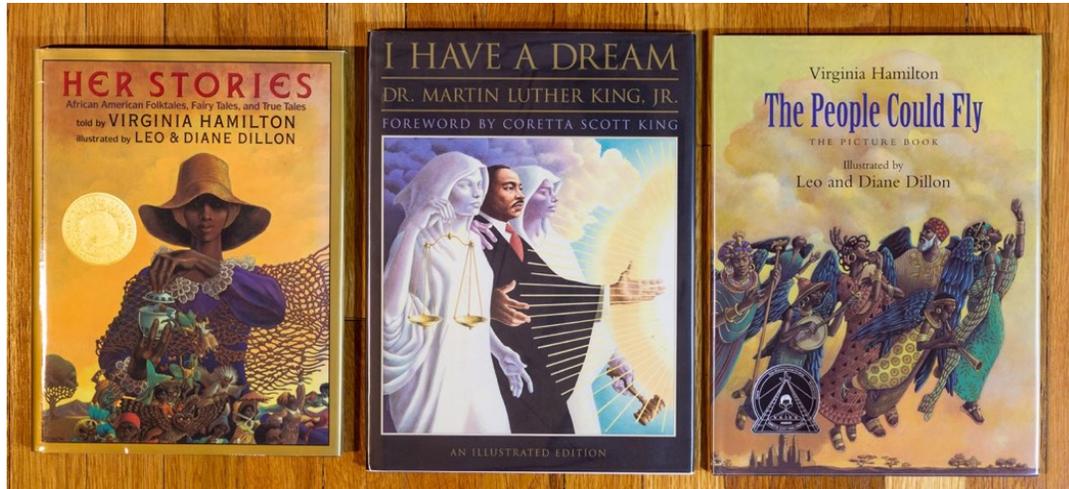
My first acquaintance with the art of Leo and Diane Dillon came through the beloved fantasy novels of my childhood, books like *Sabriel* by Garth Nix, *Wise Child* by Monica Furlong, and *Enchantress from the Stars* by Sylvia Louise Engdahl. Specifically, I was captivated by the elegant, long-fingered hands the heroines on all three covers shared – what I know now is a dead giveaway for identifying even unsigned Dillon works. The hands they paint are always beautiful, a fitting trademark for two artists legendary for their career in illustration and graphic design. It wasn't until several years later that I began collecting the Dillons' work in earnest, after recognizing those same graceful hands on picture books I'd encounter at library book sales. And it took me even longer to learn how trail-blazing and prolific their career has been.

Leo and Diane met at Parson's School for Design in New York City in the 1950s, where they started out as artistic rivals, competing to be at the top of their class, and ended up married. The early years of their partnership were marked by a struggle to establish a system which would allow them to successfully collaborate, a negotiation that eventually resulted in their concept of the "third artist," a creator who was neither Leo nor Diane but emerged from them both. It was this third artist who enabled the pair to work together (and remain married) for almost six decades, from 1957 to Leo's death in 2012.

These early creative challenges were accompanied by the difficulties of being an interracial couple married a full ten years before *Loving vs. Virginia* made marriages like theirs legal in all fifty states. Though not something the couple spoke often about, it was a factor in how the Dillons approached commissions. Leo shared in 1981 that early in their career, "I always had the feeling that unless [clients] knew I was black we would be getting work under false pretense. If Diane went [to meet a client], I made it a point to show up...It raised a number of eyebrows, but we were still given work."¹ The duo channeled their experiences into their art, especially the

¹ Preiss, Byron, ed. *The Art of Leo & Diane Dillon*. Ballantine Books, New York, 1981. n.p.

illustrations they created for children's books. In a 2003 joint interview, Diane stated, "We're an interracial couple, and we decided early in our career that we wanted to represent all races and show people that were rarely seen in children's books at the time."²



This commitment to visibility in children's literature is evident in art produced for works of African American history (*The People Could Fly* by Virginia Hamilton, an illustrated edition of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech), books uplifting the stories of Native cultures (*The Ring in the Prairie* edited by John Bierhorst, *The Girl Who Dreamed Only Geese* told by Howard Norman), and, perhaps most famously, books celebrating African culture and making its varied stories and traditions accessible to young readers. The latter includes both Verna Aardema's *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears* (1975) and Margaret Musgrove's *Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions* (1976), both winners of the Caldecott Award; the Dillons remain the only illustrators ever to win the award in consecutive years. The Dillons also didn't limit their vision of inclusivity to these culturally demarcated texts, always peopling the worlds they illustrated with diverse depictions of queens, sorcerers, and normal, everyday kids.

Besides their storied career as picture book illustrators, Leo and Diane are best known for their long history of illustrating science fiction and fantasy stories, beginning with commissions for *Galaxy* magazine in the late 1950s. Their association with the genre blossomed during a robust partnership with Ace Books in the 1960s and 1970s, which resulted in uncounted pulpy paperbacks which bear signs of the Dillons' unmatched eye for color and form. The pair also developed friendships and long working relationships with authors in this field, perhaps most notably Harlan Ellison, for whom they illustrated several book jackets. Their popularity in these genres remained unflagging in the last decades of the twentieth century as they became a familiar hallmark of young adult fantasy book covers, their hyper-recognizable style gracing the works of Madeleine L'Engle, C.S. Lewis, and others. (While they also provided jacket art for many historical and contemporary young adult and middle grade books, it is for their SFF contributions

² "Leo and Diane Dillon Interview Transcript." *Scholastic*, 2003, www.scholastic.com/teachers/articles/teaching-content/leo-and-diane-dillon-interview-transcript/.

that they are most often recognized – including as Guests of Honor at the 1999 World Fantasy Convention.)



Though my collection – which is now comprised of over 500 books as well as several LPs, magazines, and art prints – began with the picture books and science fiction novels for which the Dillons are best known, I have become increasingly interested in filling in the gaps between these two fields. The Dillons were freelance artists-for-hire, and the scope of their work is vast, appearing in textbooks, cookbooks, memoirs, literary fiction, and history books (not to mention record sleeves, advertising campaigns, comics, and ephemera). The range of their work mirrors their oft-commented-upon versatility in working in different mediums, deploying unexpected combinations like plastic and liquid steel, graphite and wax, embroidery, and watercolors with



bleach, in addition to their expert mastery of acrylics and pastels in any number of surprising combinations.

It is this range, too, which makes collecting their work such a joy; it is no exaggeration to say that I never know where I might find a book that bears their art, deepening the pleasure of hunting through a used bookstore's shelves or stack of old paperbacks at a yard sale. Some of my most treasured volumes come from just such circumstances. While sorting through my grandmother's possessions after she passed away, I found a 1983 volume of *Reader's Digest Condensed Books* which contains breathtaking illustrations by Leo and Diane for Rosalind Laker's *Jewelled Path*. These *Reader's Digest* volumes are worlds away from what we often think of as rare or collectible books: mass produced, cheaply made, and (god forbid), abridged. But for my grandmother, who loved to read but had only a sixth-grade education, and who was bed-ridden for the last fifteen years of her life, they were as valuable as any incunabula. It is because she treasured it, keeping what others discarded, that we are able to recover *Jewelled Path* as part of the Dillons' pioneering career. (While it would be presumptuous – and likely wrong – to say that no one knew about this book before I stumbled across it, it is definitely not a regular part of the conversation about their art.)

Lending an added urgency to my collecting is the fact that there is no complete bibliography (or even a comprehensive one) of the Dillons' work. As much as I love the serendipity of discovering that the Dillons illustrated the cover of an edition of *The Odyssey* I've never seen before, their contributions are too important to remain scattered and unrecorded. My long-term goal is to produce one which is as complete as possible. I feel this is especially important for their work which confronts racism in a different way from their books for children and young readers.



Much less well-known than their picture books are the covers they provided for paperback editions of James Baldwin and Chinua Achebe, for transgressive stories of interracial love (*Fire and the Night* by Philip José Farmer, 1962; *A White Romance* by Virginia Hamilton, 1987), and for works critical of South African apartheid (*The Goddam White Man* by David Lytton, 1960; *Let My People Go* by Albert Luthuli, 1962). These commissions and others suggest a radical politics that needs to be made more legible as part of the Dillons' legacy, as well as a compelling portrait of how book illustrators and designers can leverage their position within a commercial market to critique the American book industry's overwhelming whiteness, all without ever writing a word. A more complete account of their many contributions is needed to fully appreciate their impact on twentieth-century print culture.



It was my love for the Dillons' art which first prompted me to begin collecting, and that same love remains undiminished years later, now partnered with my desire to make sure the scope of their work is recognized and preserved for the future. Though COVID-19 has sadly cut me off from my usual book scouting habits, it has also yielded new and unexpected possibilities for my collection. A webinar with Diane in June 2020 gave me a chance to hear from the artist herself about the Dillons' process and career, in addition to alerting me to lesser-known projects on which they worked, like a 1984 Budweiser "Great Kings of Africa" campaign (a poster series featuring the work of Black artists) to which they contributed two paintings. My desperate scouring of eBay as a replacement for book shops and thrift stores led to the acquisition of my first original piece of Dillon art, a painting for an unknown Avon paperback from the 1960s. Beyond that it appears to be a Western, I have been unable to ascertain the book for which it was commissioned – but rest assured my full energies are intent upon finding out. Until it is again safe to visit my beloved haunts, that will have to do.

Collection Bibliography

*Items have been grouped according to type/genre. Within these sections they are listed chronologically.

Picture Books

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2. Aardema, Verna. *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears*. Illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon. Signed & inscribed by the illustrators: "Best Wishes, Diane Dillon/Leo Dillon 1980." Ownership Inscription: "To Bryan - Your First Book - All Our Love, Mom & Dad - 5/21/83." Hardcover. Dial Press, New York, 1975.
3. Graham, Lorenz. *Song of the Boat*. Illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon. Contains book plate of the author, "Ex Libris Lorenz Graham." Hardcover. Second printing. Thomas Y. Crowell, New York, 1975.
4. Musgrove, Margaret. *Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions*. Illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon. Signed & inscribed by the illustrators: "To Linda, Best Wishes, Diane Dillon Leo Dillon/77." Hardcover. Second Printing. Dial Press, New York, 1976.
5. Hamilton, Virginia. *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales*. Illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon. Signed and inscribed by the author: "For Carol, very best wishes, Virginia Hamilton." Hardcover. Sixth Printing. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1985.
6. Willard, Nancy. *Pish, Posh, said Hieronymus Bosch*. Illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon. Hardcover. First printing. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1991.
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8. Dillon, Leo and Diane. *Love and the Rocking Chair*. Illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon. Signed by Diane Dillon. Hardcover. First printing. Scholastic, New York, 2019.

Novels

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10. Lytton, David. *The Goddam White Man*. Cover art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Mass market paperback. Avon, New York, 1960.

11. Farmer, Philip José. *Fire and the Night*. Cover art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Mass market paperback. Regency, Evanston, IL, 1962.
12. Cooper, James Fenimore. *The Pathfinder*. Cover art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Mass market paperback. Washington Square Press, New York, 1963.
13. Dickens, Charles. *A Tale of Two Cities*. Cover art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Mass market paperback. Washington Square Press, New York, 1963.
14. Tomlinson, H.M. *The Sea and the Jungle*. Cover art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Trade paperback. Time Life Books, New York, 1964.
15. Hardy, Thomas. *The Return of the Native*. Cover art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Mass market paperback. Washington Square Press, New York, 1965.
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19. McCullers, Carson. *The Member of the Wedding*. Cover art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Trade paperback. Time Life Books, New York, 1968.
20. Achebe, Chinua. *No Longer at Ease*. Cover art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Mass market paperback. Fawcett World Library, New York, 1969.
21. Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. Cover art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Mass market paperback. Fawcett World Library, New York, 1969.
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29. Nix, Garth. *Sabriel*. Jacket art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Signed by the Author. Hardcover. Thirteenth Printing. Harper Collins, New York, 1995.

Verse

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31. Alighieri, Dante. *The Purgatorio*. Translated by John Ciardi. Cover art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Mass market paperback. First printing. Mentor, New York, 1961.
32. Anon. *Beowulf*. Translated by Burton Raffel. Cover art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Mass market paperback. Seventh printing. Mentor, New York, 1963.
33. Homer. *The Iliad*. Translated by Samuel Butler, revised by Malcolm M. Willcock. Cover art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Mass market paperback. First printing. Washington Square Press, New York, 1969.
34. Homer. *The Odyssey*. Translated by Samuel Butler, revised by Malcolm M. Willcock. Cover art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Mass market paperback. First printing. Washington Square Press, New York, 1969.

Nonfiction

35. Daniels, Jonathan. *The Devil's Backbone: The Story of the Natchez Trace*. Illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon. Hardcover. Fourth printing. McGraw-Hill, New York, 1962.
36. Luthuli, Albert. *Let My People Go*. Jacket art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Hardcover. McGraw-Hill, New York, 1962.
37. Augustine. *The Confessions of St. Augustine*. Translated by Rex Warner. Cover art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Mass market paperback. Seventh Printing. Signet, New York, 1963.
38. Chou, Eric. *The Dragon and the Phoenix*. Jacket art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Hardcover. Arbor House, New York, 1971.

39. Sterling, Dorothy. *The Making of an Afro-American: Martin Robison Delaney 1812-1885*. Jacket art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Hardcover (ex-library). First printing. Doubleday & Company, Garden City, NY, 1971.
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Other

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“Bridle Shower” by Lloyd Biggle Jr., pp. 84-103.
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