

As Choice as Could Be: Eric Gill, Harry Graf Kessler, and The Cranach Press's *Canticum canticorum Salomonis* Tracy C. Bergstrom

The Cranach Press's *Canticum canticorum Salomonis* represents a highlight in the history of modern book design and fine press printing; the volume's unusual format, combined with Eric Gill's illustrations and the use of Jenson antiqua type, create a striking and memorable work. The publication of *Canticum canticorum Salomonis* also marked a turning point in the working relationship between Gill and the publisher of the Cranach Press, Harry Graf Kessler. Although Kessler has been previously portrayed in scholarly publication as the dominating force behind *Canticum canticorum Salomonis*, a close examination of their personal correspondence and interactions reveals that Gill increasingly began to assert artistic independence in their collaboration and determined many significant aspects of the volume's style. Gill's long-standing interest in the text of the "Song of Songs" and its mixture of eroticism and spirituality, combined with his desire to experiment with method and technique, resulted in a project for which Gill guided the selection of text, illustration program, and salient aspects of the book's production.

The perception that Kessler firmly directed all creative production of his Press artists and coaxed them into producing superior work originates with Weimar-era publications—most notably, Rudolph Alexander Schröder's influential 1931 assessment of the Press's output, "Die Cranach-Press in Weimar."¹ Schröder claims that Kessler's varied intellectual ventures prepared him to guide the work of individual artists toward his desired ends. In an examination of the typefaces designed for the Cranach Press by Emery Walker and Edward Johnston, for instance, Schröder mentions Kessler's work as a student of William Morris and as the publisher of the Art Nouveau journal, *Pan*, as experiences that provided him with the artistic vision and clarity to direct the activities of Walker and Johnston. The success of these typefaces can thus be attributed to Kessler's oversight, in that "their rich diversity provides a suitable foundation for the freedom and wealth of expression that are the distinguishing characteristics of all of Kessler's prints."² In

1 Rudolph Alexander Schröder, "Die Cranach-Press in Weimar," *Imprimatur: Ein Jahrbuch für Bücherfreunde*, (1931) 91-112.

2 *Ibid.*, 94.

Schröder's narrative, this relationship exists not only with Walker, Johnson, and Gill, but with all artists Kessler employed to work on Cranach Press publications. He claims about Aristide Maillol that:

One need only remember that Maillol, the sculptor, would probably never have emerged as the erudite and satisfying illustrator and graphic artist whom we know from his magnificent prints of Virgil's Eclogues if the founder of the Cranach Press had not encouraged him and provided him with both a goal and clarification of what the occasion demanded.³

Schröder's assessment of Kessler as a master manipulator permeates scholarship to the present day, as seen in Laird M. Easton's recent biography, *The Red Count: the life and times of Harry Kessler*.⁴ Regarding the Cranach Press's 1926 publication, *The Eclogues of Virgil*, Easton writes:

Years of patient, tenacious prodding on the part of Kessler, gently but firmly shepherding such temperamental egos as Maillol, Gill, the calligrapher Edward Johnston, the letter-cutter Edward Prince, the printer Emery Walker, and others toward the goal he had in mind, resulted in one of the most striking printed books of the twentieth century.⁵

The first major book-length survey of the Cranach Press, published by Renate Müller-Krumbach in 1969, reinforced the notion that Kessler maintained tight control over salient artistic decisions pertaining to successful publications of the press but added explicit criticism of Gill's involvement.⁶ In her analysis of *Canticum canticorum Salomonis*, Müller-Krumbach compliments the aspects of the publication overseen by Kessler, writing that the "dimensions, binding, typeface and layout of the *Song of Songs* give the impression of an exquisite bibliophile treasure."⁷ Her assessment of Gill's contributions to the volume is not so charitable, however: "Gill's ornamented initials and his illustrations seem a poor fit in this context."⁸ The argument centers on the assertion that Gill's illustrations failed within the volume because they deviated from Kessler's specifications:

[The illustrations] are, in contrast to all previous principles of the Cranach Press, neither linear nor flat, but plastic and three-dimensional, and thus serve as opposition and counterpoint to the typography rather than as its complement. Velvety black areas in which the color white is largely absent have been printed above a dark brown ground. White is used only to trace the contours which, since they are composed of very fine cross hatching, do not mark continuous lines but rather produce a luminous iridescence.

3 Ibid., 102-3.

4 Laird M. Easton, *The Red Count: The life and times of Harry Kessler* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2002).

5 Ibid., 371.

6 Renate Müller-Krumbach, *Harry Graf Kessler und die Cranach-Pressen in Weimar* (Hamburg: Maximilian-Gesellschaft, 1969).

7 Ibid., 63.

8 Ibid.

This technique, which imitates ones more properly found in engravings, does not meet Kessler's original demands for woodcut illustrations.... It remains surprising that Kessler had these illustrations printed at such great expense...⁹

More recently, John Dieter Brinks's essay, "In search of sensuality: Kessler's and Gill's Songs of Songs," is effusive in its praise of the volume but seeks to establish that Kessler dictated all aspects of Gill's work and was thereby responsible for its success.¹⁰ Brinks establishes the theme early on in the essay, writing:

When Eric Gill later looked back on his life he would attest to what he had already known at the age of forty-three: that the course of his life, both aesthetically and materially, was in many ways connected to Kessler's and that it was he who had given him a vital impetus.¹¹

In the section of the essay titled "Kessler's Conception of the Book," Brinks lays out five specifications that Kessler purportedly dictated to Gill to guide him in his work: the book's physical dimensions, the use of color in the illustrations, the gilding of the illustrations, the dramatization of the text, and the shading of the illustrations.¹² All of these characteristics are present in correspondence between the two, and all except the physical dimensions would evolve through Gill's independent work from Kessler's original conception of the volume, as preserved in his working notes.¹³

This present essay seeks to reexamine these perceptions concerning Kessler and Gill's relationship and working processes. Their correspondence and individual diary entries document that Kessler was quick to accept Gill's changes in direction for the project and that their relationship was a much more egalitarian one than is suggested by previous critics. While their correspondence does show that Gill's illustrations did not follow Kessler's initial specifications for the project, it also records that Kessler was extremely pleased with the images and their context within the publication. A review of archival evidence also demonstrates that Gill exerted substantial control over many aspects of the publication, including its textual contents, and that his decisions outside Kessler's recommendations led to the book's critical acclaim.

The story of how Gill and Kessler decided on the "Song of Songs" for a Cranach Press publication is frequently recounted. Kessler records in his diary that the two were together at Goupil Gallery in March 1925 to view Gill's statue of a sleeping Christ when Kessler asked if Gill would be interested in illustrating a Cranach Press volume. Gill replied that he would be pleased to create a set of illustrations for a Latin edition of the "Song of Songs" or, alternately, illustrations to "Ananga-Ranga," whose text he described to Kessler as "well, in reality: thirty-four ways of doing it."¹⁴ Kessler wisely

9 Ibid., 64.

10 John Dieter Brinks, "In Search of Sensuality: Kessler's and Gill's *Song of Songs*," *The Book as a Work of Art: The Cranach Press of Count Harry Kessler* (Laubach: Triton, 2005), 146-67.

11 Ibid., 148.

12 Ibid., 152-4.

13 See the page from Kessler's notebook reproduced in Brinks, "In Search of Sensuality: Kessler's and Gill's *Song of Songs*," 153.

14 Harry Graf Kessler, *Tagebuch*, March 13, 1925, Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Schiller-Nationalmuseum.

chose to pursue the first option. The informality of this exchange, however, belies the pragmatic nature of their long relationship leading up to the project. The two were introduced in the spring of 1904, and their first meeting occurred on September 7, 1904, according to Gill's diary.¹⁵ Their initial correspondence established a relationship of Gill as contract worker and Kessler as artistic and financial advisor. As early as 1908, Gill was advanced money from Insel-Verlag zu Leipzig at Kessler's request, in the hope that "your ancient pleasure for working will return and that this will induce you to fill our orders before others."¹⁶ Their relationship took a preliminary turn in January 1910 when Kessler arranged for Gill to work as an apprentice to Aristide Maillol in Marly-le-Roi; Gill, however, was uncomfortable with the idea of apprenticing to someone with whom he spoke no common language and who was located far from his residence in Ditchling, and he backed out at the last minute.¹⁷ Kessler's response to Gill regarding the incident was cool, as he reiterated his belief that Gill would have benefitted from Maillol's experience, but Kessler nonetheless also had to recognize Gill as a more independent and willful artist than he had previously perceived.¹⁸ The overall tone of their correspondence evolved to show a more equitable relationship after this incident, with Kessler's inclusion of Gill on major projects in the next few years, such as his proposed Nietzsche memorial.

By the time of their joint work for the Cranach Press, Gill had developed into a mature artist of great experience, including previous publications and illustrations of the "Song of Songs." Gill's interest in the "Song of Songs" bridged several decades. He first published his thoughts on the text in an essay titled, "The Song of Solomon and Such-like Songs," which spanned several issues of *The Game* in 1921. This essay was revised and published at St. Dominic's Press as an independent publication in 1921, under the title, *Songs Without Clothes: Being a Dissertation on the Song of Solomon and Such-like Songs*; it was further revised and published under the same title in *Art-nonsense and Other Essays* in 1929. In the essay's introduction, Gill claims that, "the Song of Solomon is a love song, and one of a very outspoken kind, and in modern England such things are not considered polite."¹⁹ Thus, Gill's attraction to the eroticism of the text and its interpretive potential was manifest, and makes his 1925 offer to Kessler of illustrating either the "Song of Songs" or "Anangara" less incongruent than it initially appeared. The essay continues with Gill's thoughts on the intrinsically religious nature of the "Song of Songs," providing Gill with a platform to develop his beliefs on the symbiotic nature of sexuality and spirituality:

But everything is religious by which God is praised, and in this sense the Song of Solomon is a religious poem indeed. Not only is God praised in it, and by it, but His praises are

15 Eric Gill, Diary, September 7, 1904, M. S. Gill, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California at Los Angeles.

16 Insel-Verlag zu Leipzig to Eric Gill, March 30, 1908, typescript letter with second page missing, box 93, folder 9, M. S. Gill, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California at Los Angeles.

17 Eric Gill, *Autobiography* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1941), 178-82.

18 Harry Graf Kessler to Eric Gill, January 24, 1910, box 93, folder 9, M. S. Gill, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California at Los Angeles.

19 Eric Gill, *Songs Without Clothes: Being a Dissertation on the Song of Solomon and Such-like Songs* (Ditchling: St. Dominic's Press, 1921).

20 *Ibid.*, 3.

Then up early to the vineyard,
to see if the vine-stocks be in bud,
if the tendrils be unfolding,
if the pomegranate flower:



there will I give my breasts to thee.
The love-apple smells sweet, every fruit
is at our gate; both new and old, dear love,
I have laid up for thee.

Oh! that thou wert given me for brother,
suckled at my mother's breast, so that
finding thee without I could kiss thee
and none make scorn of me therefor!

Figure 1

Page 39: "Ibi dabo tibi." Eric Gill, *The Song of Songs: Called by Many the Canticle of Canticles*. Waltham St. Lawrence, (Berkshire: Golden Cockerel Press, 1925.) Reproduced from the original held by the Department of Special Collections of the University Libraries of Notre Dame.

sung in the strongest of all symbolic terms. The love of man and woman is made the symbol of God's love for man, and of Christ's love for the Church.²⁰

These principles, expressed in numerous other writings by Gill, had been in formation for some time and also manifested themselves visually in the 1925 Golden Cockerel Press publication, *The Song of Songs: Called by many the Canticle of canticles*. [see Figure 1] One source for Gill's initial artistic interest in the "Song of Songs" may be a manuscript prepared by Edward Johnston. This vellum model contains portions of the "Song of Songs" text, arranged and hand-lettered by Johnston.²¹ Of the five passages from the "Song of Songs" selected by Johnston, portions of three were later included and illustrated by Gill in either his Golden Cockerel Press or his Cranach Press treatments of the text. Johnson and Gill had enjoyed a close relationship since their time as roommates in 1902-03, and their influence on one another continued throughout the next two decades.²²

Critics have argued that Gill wished to illustrate the "Song of Songs" to redeem himself from the failure of the 1925 Golden Cockerel Press edition, but this perception is not supported by contemporary evidence.²³ Reviews of the Golden Cockerel Press's *The Song of Songs: Called by many the Canticle of Canticles* expressed admiration of Gill's contributions to the volume. The Times Literary Supplement stated:

And Mr. Eric Gill's woodcuts, seventeen in all, perform the triple function of being beautiful in themselves, of forming a part, not an interruption, of the page, and of helping the reader's imagination into the heart of this love-story.²⁴

Subsequent assessments of the Golden Cockerel Press's publication recognize it as a "definite advance in style" within Gill's oeuvre.²⁵ Reviews contemporary to the publication of the Golden Cockerel's *The Song of Songs* demonstrate that Gill's experiments with woodcutting and engraving techniques were also noted and valued. In an article titled "On the appreciation of the modern woodcut," Herbert Furst cites Gill's output as demonstrating the zenith of modern wood engraving techniques:

... to crown it all, Mr. Eric Gill uses the block of hard wood and engraves it in *black-line* as if it were a steel engraving—with the result that such cuts of his as "The Shepherdess" recently shown at the Redfern Gallery, look like, and are in fact outline engravings—*intaglio* prints, but from wood instead of metal.²⁶

21 Edward Johnston, [Canticum canticorum], England, Wing MS ZW 945.J654, Newberry Library. Pencil on Johnston's manuscript is "3 Hammersmith Terrace," which dates the manuscript to the time-frame between 1905 and 1912, when Johnston resided at this address.

22 Eric Gill, *Autobiography*, 130.

23 See Brinks, "In Search of Sensuality: Kessler's and Gill's *Song of Songs*" (150) for this argument.

24 Harold Hannyngton Child, "Prints and pictures," *Times Literary Supplement*, November 26, 1925, 793.

25 R. A. Walker, "Engravings of Eric Gill," *The Print-Collector's Quarterly*, 15:2 (April 1928), 162.

26 Herbert Furst, "On the appreciation of the modern woodcut," *Artwork*, 2:6, January to March 1926, 91. Reproduced in the article is an unused print produced for Golden Cockerel Press's *The Song of Songs: "Swineherd,"* 1925; see J. F. Physick, *The Engraved Work of Eric Gill* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1963), catalog number 337.

mez/retirent les hōmes champe-
 fitez avecques eulx pour le fortifier.
 Toutefois ce pendant Orgetorix
 mourut. Et disoyent les louyces,
 que luy mesmes felloit occis. afin
 de nestre puny par iustice



Le Roy demande.
 La mort de Orgetorix fut elle
 cause de garder les louyces

Figure 2

F. 9v. Swiss burning their villages. François du Moulin and Albert Pigge, *Commentaires de la guerre gallique*, France, Central, 1519. London, British Library, Harley MS 6205, saec. xvi1. Image © The British Library Board, Harley MS 6205.

27 François du Moulin and Albert Pigge, *Commentaires de la guerre gallique*, (France, Central, 1519). London, British Library, Harley MS 6205, saec. xvi1; details recorded in Kessler, *Tagebuch*, Wednesday, September 21, 1927, Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Schiller-Nationalmuseum, as: "Ich gieng mit beiden [Gill and Douglas Cockerell] dann ins British Museum u. besah mit Gill das schöne Manuscript eines Dialogs zwischen Caesar und Franz I von Frankreich, das für diesen von Albert Pigge geschrieben und mit Miniaturen geschmückt worden ist."

28 Harry Graf Kessler to Eric Gill, October 23, 1927, Wing Modern M. S. Kess, Newberry Library.

29 Eric Gill, *Canticum Cantorum Album*, 1930, 92.1.2799, Eric Gill Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

These reviews and knowledge of Gill's longstanding interest in the text provide explanation as to why Gill would wish to illustrate the "Song of Songs" twice in less than a decade and also offer insight into factors that contributed to the design of the Cranach Press publication. His previous work with the "Song of Songs" allowed Gill to enter into conversations with Kessler with firmly established views about the content of the text and its interpretative potential. The reviews demonstrate that Gill was being praised both for his treatment of the text and for his willingness to experiment in technique and output—the latter of which would come to fruition in the Cranach Press publication.

Kessler and Gill began focused discussions of the design of the Cranach Press volume in September 1927. Both recorded in their personal diaries a visit to the British Museum on September 21, 1927, during which they looked at several objects, including what I believe can be identified as *Les Commentaires de la guerre gallique*, Harley MS 6205, illuminated by Godefroy le Batave and dated to 1519.²⁷ [see Figure 2] This manuscript is illuminated in semi-grisaille, using a palette of grays and blues, with added highlights of gold. Subsequent correspondence confirms that Kessler took note of both the unusual dimensions (240 x 120mm) and the coloring of the manuscript. He wrote to Gill on October 23, 1927:

I also enclose proofs of the "Song of Songs." There are three different proofs. No 1. exactly the size of the British Museum manuscript, No. 2. one line longer and No. 3 two lines longer... If you could cut one illustration in three blocks to be printed in black, grey and blue, I could have a number of different trial proofs printed and that would give us something to start from.²⁸

Despite these instructions, sketches record that Gill explored the use of a more liberal color palette as he began to work on initial designs for the project. An early sketch for "Nigra sum sed Formosa," preserved in an album labeled "orig. designs & first proofs of engravings," reveals one of Gill's first attempts at the visualization of this pivotal text.²⁹ [see Figure 3] While the sketch is undated, its characteristically elongated format, which mimics the proportions of the Harley manuscript, strongly suggests that it was executed after their visit. It uses a subdued and judicious palette of pink and green and includes several additional figures that are peripheral to the central figural grouping, all of which would subsequently be dropped by Gill. Another early sketch perhaps illustrates portions of the "Song of Songs" included by Gill in his 1925 Golden Cockerel Press treatment of the text: "Come, love, let us fare forth into the fields, and in the hamlet lodge. Then up early to the vineyard, to see if the vine-stocks be in bud, if the tendrils be unfolding, if the pomegranate flower: there I will give my breasts to thee."³⁰ It uses the same color palette as the design for "Nigra sum sed Formosa,"



Figure 3 (above)

"Nigra sum sed Formosa." Eric Gill, *Canticum Canticorum Album*, 1930, 92.1.2799.

Eric Gill Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Photo reproduced courtesy of the Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

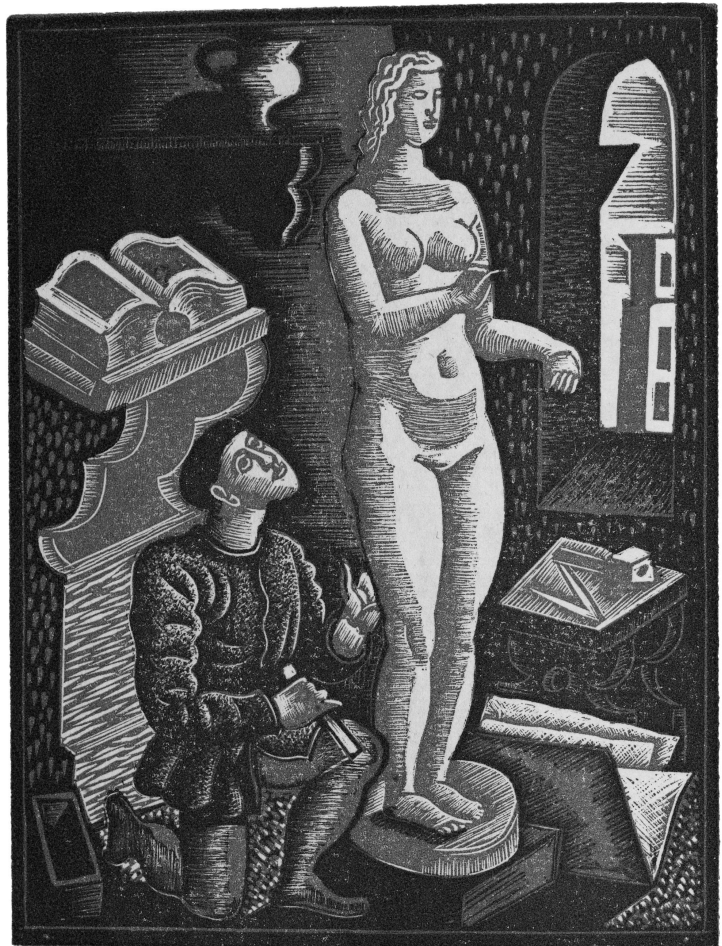
Figure 4 (right)

Frontispiece. John Marston, illustrated by Rene Ben Sussan, *The Metamorphosis of Pigmilions Image*. Waltham St. Lawrence, Berkshire: Golden Cockerel Press, 1926.

Reproduced from the original held by the Department of Special Collections of the University Libraries of Notre Dame.

but integrates figures into a stylized landscape that would come to be distinctive in all of the finished prints for the volume.³¹ Although Gill did not develop either of these sketches for inclusion in the final publication, his variation in approach and palette demonstrate that, with the exception of the size parameters Kessler had provided, Gill experimented profusely in his initial designs. Gill's independent thinking about the volume's design would not ultimately result in the use of color, but it did engender designs much more radical than Kessler envisioned.

Kessler's letter to Gill on October 23, 1927, also addressed the potential technique of the prints to be used by Gill in the Cranach Press publication. In the time between their visit to the British Museum in September and the date of the letter, Gill had sent Kessler a copy of Golden Cockerel Press's *The Metamorphosis of Pigmilions Image*, with engravings by Rene Ben Sussan—presumably as an example of a contemporary volume using a muted color palette. However, Kessler was not impressed with Ben Sussan's technique or use of color, describing the prints as "barbarous."³² Kessler's only exception to this assessment was the doublet of Pigmalion found in the frontispiece of the volume, which he describes as "stippled (not



30 A comparison of the Golden Cockerel Press and Cranach Press editions shows that eight of the same verses were used in both editions, so Gill's choosing to experiment with a text that he had treated in the past would not have been unlikely; the verses used in common are 1:12, 1:14, 2:8, 4:12, 5:2, 5:7, 7:12, and 8:2 as numbered in the Douay-Rhims edition.

Figure 5

"Tu pulchra es." Enclosed with manuscript letter from Eric Gill to Harry Graf Kessler, July 26, 1929, Wing Modern M. S. Kess, Newberry Library. Photo courtesy of The Newberry Library, Chicago. Wing MMS Kess.



shaded by little strokes or lines.” [see Figure 4] From this evaluation Kessler offers a recommendation that Gill consider the stippling effect for the surface of the prints, “employed judiciously to break up blocks of colours.” As to the treatment of figures, which Kessler describes as consisting of “mainly of nudes,” he writes:

Possibly black, a delicate and bold black outline, such as you have used in the first “Song of Songs” and the “Procreant Hymn” might be the simplest and most satisfactory solution.³⁵

In the remaining portions of the letter, Kessler reiterates his judgment that the combination of a stippled surface, combined with the sparing use of gray, blue, and gold, will produce a “a rich, harmonious effect.” This letter thus lays out several specifications for Gill to follow in preparing designs for the project—namely, the use of stippling in conjunction with color to variegate the surface of the prints and the use of strong black outlines to differentiate figures from other elements of the design. However, Gill would adopt neither of these stipulations in the final prints for *Canticum canticorum Salomonis*.

Various projects between the fall of 1927 and the summer of 1929, including the production of the Golden Cockerel Press’s *Canterbury Tales*, intervened and kept Gill from serious work on Kessler’s volume. Kessler records in his diary that the two spoke in person about the Cranach Press project in October 1928 and then again in May 1929 and, at this latter time, discussed again the use of gray, blue, and black in the illustrations.³⁴ Gill’s diary entries indicate

31 Eric Gill, [Unidentified scene], 1927, UF00077976, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida. See <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00077976/00001> (accessed June 15, 2011).

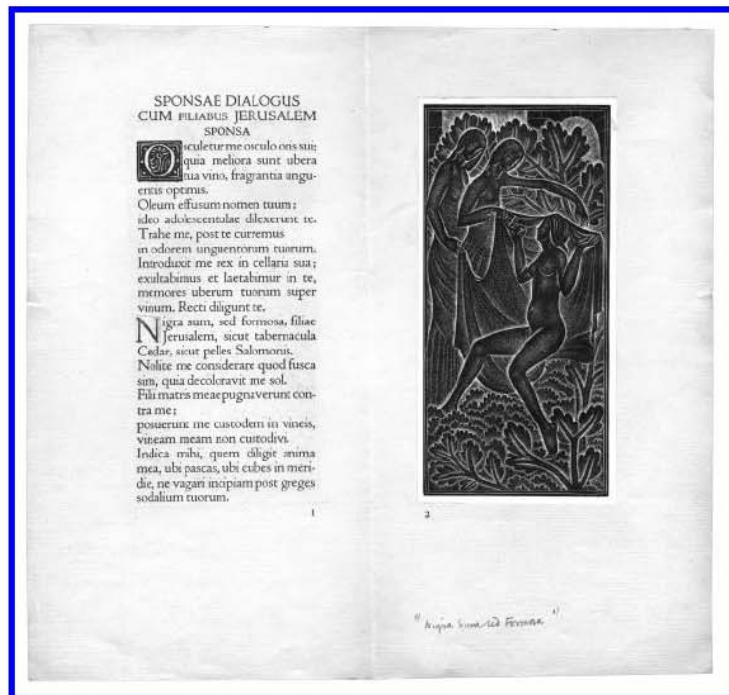
32 Harry Graf Kessler to Eric Gill, October 23, 1927, Wing Modern M. S. Kess, Newberry Library.

33 Ibid.

34 Harry Graf Kessler, Tagebuch, Thursday, May 16, 1929, Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Schiller-Nationalmuseum.

Figure 6

"Nigra sum sed Formosa." Enclosed with manuscript letter from Eric Gill to Harry Graf Kessler, July 26, 1929, Wing Modern MS Kess, Newberry Library. Photo courtesy of The Newberry Library, Chicago. Wing MMS Kess.



that he began work on preliminary designs for the project on June 29, 1929; he then sent his initial proofs in a letter to Kessler dated July 26. Enclosed with the letter were three prints: two versions of "Tu pulchra es" using two and four blocks, respectively, and one print of "Nigra sum sed Formosa."³⁵ One of the "Tu pulchra es" prints uses blue and gray color blocks, as the two had previously discussed would be appropriate, but Gill writes of this one that "it is not at all the kind of refined & delicate and subtle and rather solemn & somber thing I had in mind." [see Figure 5] He refers to "Nigra sum sed Formosa" as "in someways a more successful affair," although he offers the following assessment:

But—when I got going upon it I discovered I was doing a thing which did not lend itself to colour at all—so it seems to me. I don't see how a colour block would work in with it—the sort of luminous edges can't be anything but white and mere spots or lines of colour wouldn't belong to the same scheme of things.³⁶ [see Figure 6]

While the rest of the letter concludes with apologies to Kessler that the proofs probably will not meet with his liking, Gill's diary entries indicate that his printing activities for much of the month of July had been occupied by experimenting with just such a variegated aesthetic that was contrary to his traditional engraving style. Other prints from this immediate time period include "Belle Sauvage II" for the large paper edition of *Art-nonsense and other essays* and three designs for a publication of *Leda* by Aldous Huxley.³⁷ Gill had

35 Eric Gill to Harry Graf Kessler, July 26, 1929, Wing Modern MS Kess, Newberry Library. The prints of "Tu pulchra es" are catalog number 614 and a variant and the print of "Nigra sum sed Formosa" is catalog number 618 in J. F. Physick, *The Engraved Work of Eric Gill* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1963).

36 Eric Gill to Harry Graf Kessler, July 26, 1929, Wing Modern M. S. Kess, Newberry Library.

37 See catalog numbers 606, 615, 616 and 617 in J.F. Physick, *The Engraved Work of Eric Gill* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1963).

adopted Kessler's suggestion to convey depth through stippling but ultimately decided that such a technique and the use of color were not compatible.

Although Kessler's response to these initial prints has not been located, Gill sent a letter to Kessler on August 2, 1929, that states, "I was very glad to get your letter last evening ... I am very glad indeed that you like the prints I sent."³⁸ The two discussed the project intermittently throughout the months of August and September, and both recorded a meeting on September 25, 1929, at Gill's home at Pigotts near High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire. At this meeting, they decided on a November delivery date for the initial designs. Gill wrote to Kessler on October 26 that he was "now about to begin designs for the S of Songs," and his diary entries indicate that he worked on the project throughout the early part of November.³⁹ Efforts stalled as both individuals worked on other projects during the following months, but they resumed efforts on this project in March 1930. Gill worked throughout much of the spring on prints and paste-ups; on June 4, he sent Kessler a note that read, "I have now finished all the Engravings for the S. of S. except the initials and am now starting on these. I enclose some rough proofs which I hope you will like."⁴⁰ Gill and Kessler began making plans for Gill to travel to Weimar for the printing of text proofs soon after. Gill wrote on June 9:

I am most glad that you are pleased with the Engravings, and that Maillol also thinks well of them. I will bring the blocks when I come which will be towards the end of next week if that will be convenient to you.⁴¹

Gill's time in Weimar, while successful for the objectives at hand, can also be read as a prelude to the difficult times ahead. Gill records in his diary that he arrived at Weimar on June 30, 1930, with the sentiment, "Count Kessler met me at train station - most kind."⁴² Kessler describes the arrival somewhat differently: "Gill was immediately visible in the station in his odd garb: knee stockings, a short black cassock, and brightly colored scarf. He said that all of Cologne was looking at his legs—was this perhaps because his stockings were so thin? I think he likes the attention as an eccentric."⁴³ Regardless, the two began work in the press almost immediately. Gill's diary entries reveal that they spent the first few days of his 11-day visit engaged in printing trials at the press and the remaining time experimenting with gilding.⁴⁴ Although the two had exchanged detailed letters and proofs by mail throughout the previous year, Gill had only recently begun the engraving of initial letters and other detail work. Early proofs of the first page of the Latin version of the text, for example, use initial letters that Gill had created in 1926 for the Cranach Press's *The Eclogues of Virgil*.⁴⁵ Their time together in Weimar thus represented their only chance to combine all of their individual contributions.

38 Eric Gill to Harry Graf Kessler, August 2, 1929, Wing Modern M. S. Kess, Newberry Library.

39 Eric Gill to Harry Graf Kessler, October 26, 1929, Wing Modern M. S. Kess, Newberry Library.

40 Eric Gill to Harry Graf Kessler, June 4, 1930, Wing Modern M. S. Kess, Newberry Library.

41 Eric Gill to Harry Graf Kessler, June 9, 1930, Wing Modern M. S. Kess, Newberry Library.

42 Eric Gill, Diary, June 30, 1930, M. S. Gill, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California at Los Angeles.

43 Harry Graf Kessler, Tagebuch, Monday, June 30, 1930, Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Schiller-Nationalmuseum.

44 Eric Gill, Diary, June 30, 1930 to July 10, 1930, M. S. Gill, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California at Los Angeles.

45 See the proof belonging to the St. Bride Printing Library, London, reproduced in Brinks, "In Search of Sensuality: Kessler's and Gill's *Song of Songs*," 155. The initial letters are catalog number 314 in J. F. Physick, *The Engraved Work of Eric Gill* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1963).

However, Kessler and Gill's diverging aesthetic visions kept them at odds about the finished product. Two issues in particular concerning the production of the volume remained to be resolved during Gill's stay in Weimar: the use of colored inks for the running title heads and initial letters and the gilding of engravings and initials. Gill had written to Kessler that before his departure he would go to London and procure colored inks to experiment with while in Weimar.⁴⁶ Their correspondence that took place immediately after Gill's visit continued the discussions; on July 27, 1930, Gill wrote: "I think Green (a bluish green) would look very well with the blue & black but fear it might destroy the rather delicate somberness we are aiming at."⁴⁷ Kessler continued his attempts to integrate blue into the volume in the manner of the Harley *Les Commentaires de la guerre gallique* manuscript, writing on December 30, 1930, of "... the letter C itself being printed in pure Lapislazuli ultramarine. The effect I think magnificent."⁴⁸ Kessler also favored the use of slender golden frames around the illustrations, in addition to the other gilding.⁴⁹ Kessler's position both on the use of color and on gilding imply that he wished for the finished volume to possess an antiquated aesthetic, including rubricated and gilded initials set off from the text frame. Gill, on the other hand, clearly had a more avant-garde effect in mind. His written comments always remained noncommittal about both color and gilding; for instance, he writes at one point that, "[w]ith regard to the question of gilding, I will keep this in mind and we will make experiments when the engravings are done."⁵⁰ In the end, however, the changing state of finances both for Kessler and for the Cranach Press did not allow either of these luxuries to be carried out in production. Initial letters were gilded in many of the deluxe copies, but no additional gilding or supplemental ink colors, other than for the running titles, were used.

By the time the book was printed the following spring, the distribution and sale of such luxury items was becoming increasingly difficult. Announcements were printed specifying that the Latin edition would be sold in England at 3½ guineas each for copies on handmade paper, of which 200 were produced; at 7 guineas each for morocco-bound copies on Japanese paper, of which 60 were produced; and at 30 guineas each for morocco-bound, hand-gilded copies, of which 8 were produced.⁵¹ The prices for the first two categories were lowered almost immediately to 3 and 6 guineas, respectively; a letter to Gill from the Cranach Press, dated June 2, 1931, clarified that, "[t]he price has for certain reasons appurtenant [sic] to continental sale been reduced."⁵² An agreement to handle sales was struck with Douglas Cleverdon, who had worked extensively with Gill to publish and distribute *The Engravings of Eric Gill*. Although disagreements surfaced as to the conditions of rebate that would be offered to Cleverdon, his initial sales looked promising; he sold three copies on vellum in advance of the month of October alone.⁵³

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- 46 Eric Gill to Harry Graf Kessler, June 9, 1930, Wing Modern M. S. Kess, Newberry Library.
- 47 Dated manuscript reply, in Gill's hand, written on Harry Graf Kessler to Eric Gill, July 19, 1930, box 93, folder 9, M. S. Gill, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California at Los Angeles.
- 48 Harry Graf Kessler to Eric Gill, December 30, 1930, box 93, folder 9, M. S. Gill, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California at Los Angeles.
- 49 Undated page from Kessler's notebook, published in Brinks, "In Search of Sensuality: Kessler's and Gill's *Song of Songs*," 153.
- 50 Eric Gill to Harry Graf Kessler, March 31, 1930, Wing Modern M. S. Kess, Newberry Library.
- 51 *The Song of Songs in Latin* publication announcement, box 26, folder 15, M. S. Gill, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California at Los Angeles.
- 52 Cranach Press to Eric Gill, June 2, 1931, box 93, folder 9, M. S. Gill, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California at Los Angeles.
- 53 Harry Graf Kessler to Eric Gill, October 5, 1931, box 93, folder 9, M. S. Gill, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California at Los Angeles.

As a result of both this encouraging start and the worsening financial conditions in Germany, Kessler dispatched the whole Latin edition to Gill on November 2. Their arrangement specified that Gill would then provide copies to Cleverdon, upon Kessler's direction, as they were sold. Included in the agreement letter is Kessler's assessment of the volume and the situation as a whole:

I think it is one of the most beautiful series of illustrations produced in modern times and that the book will appeal to everybody and all interested in fine illustration and book making. Of course, times are hard and difficult, but still one must hope that a sufficient number of people and fortunes have survived the crisis and will continue to buy fine books and thus make their production possible.⁵⁴

The books themselves were received by Gill at High Wycombe on November 13, essentially removing Kessler from further control of the sale.⁵⁵ Thus, Kessler, who had at one time effectively dictated every financial operation of the press, now depended on others for the success of the publication.

The initially promising purchasing figures proved misleading, and sales of the book were dismal. Douglas Cleverdon halted all communications with Kessler after November 1931 and sold only a small number of the copies he had initially received. Sales were so poor that Kessler was unable to pay Gill the sum of £55 for work completed on the project. In a letter dated July 6, 1932, Kessler explained that, "[i]t is practically impossible for me to send them [£55] from Germany, and unfortunately, the way in which Cleverdon has handled the "Song of Songs" business, has not made it possible for me to pay you in England."⁵⁶ In addition, correspondence documents that Kessler tried to redeem the book's reputation and sales over the next year by commissioning other booksellers to take over all transactions in England.⁵⁷ However, the damage had already been done, and the publication did not receive the widespread acclaim and distribution that Kessler and Gill desired for it. Kessler continued to promote the volume, writing to Gill from exile in Palma de Mallorca in May 1935 that Gill should send "a few copies of this most beautiful book" to be displayed in an exhibition there.⁵⁸ The letter makes clear that, while Kessler was forced to occupy himself in Spain in reminiscence, mounting an exhibition of Cranach Press books and working on his memoirs, Gill had moved on to other work and new commissions. Kessler begins the letter:

I have not heard from you for so long, that I am beginning to feel rather anxious, lest you should have entirely forgotten me. I think of you often, and am glad sometimes to hear about you through the papers.⁵⁹

54 Harry Graf Kessler to Eric Gill, November 2, 1931, box 93, folder 10, M. S. Gill, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California at Los Angeles.

55 Shipping receipt, dated November 13, 1931, box 93, folder 10, M. S. Gill, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California at Los Angeles.

56 Harry Graf Kessler to Eric Gill, July 6, 1932, box 93, folder 10, M. S. Gill, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California at Los Angeles.

57 Harry Graf Kessler to Eric Gill, September 20, 1932, box 93, folder 10, M. S. Gill, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California at Los Angeles.

58 Harry Graf Kessler to Eric Gill, May 6, 1935, box 93, folder 10, M. S. Gill, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California at Los Angeles.

59 Ibid.

Figure 7

Pages 26-27: "Ibi dabo tibi." Harry Graf Kessler and Eric Gill, *Das hohe Lied Salomo*. Weimar: Cranach Press, 1931. Reproduced from the original held by the Department of Special Collections of the University Libraries of Notre Dame.



No additional correspondence about the project exists until Kessler's death in 1937, which left at Gill's disposal 120 copies on handmade paper and 3 on vellum.⁶⁰ As Kessler had kept 44 copies on Japanese paper in 1931 for his own distribution, remarkably few copies of the Latin edition had been disseminated.⁶¹ Gill tried to negotiate with various entities, including Faber & Faber Publishers, to sell the remaining books for the £55 owed to him by Kessler, and he eventually reached this agreement with Kessler's sister, the Marquise de Brion, in July 1939.⁶² Thus concluded the ignoble state of affairs that befell one of the final Cranach Press publications.

Reviews of *Canticum canticorum Salomonis* nonetheless expressed admiration for the volume, and Gill's independent contributions to the project were noted and respected. The *Times Literary Supplement* called it "as choice as could be."⁶³ In particular, the review complimented Gill's illustrations for the volume and noted his development as an artist between the 1925 Golden Cockerel Press edition and the new Cranach Press edition of the text:

And in Mr. Gill's work there is no loss of the old passion; but there is a great increase in depth and in spirituality. An example of peculiar interest is the contrast between the two engravings... The similarity and the difference between the rhythms of the two might be taken as an epitome of the growth of Mr. Gill's conception of his whole subject.⁶⁴ [See Figure 7]

60 Eric Gill to Faber & Faber, June 27, 1939, box 93, folder 10, M. S. Gill, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California at Los Angeles.

61 Harry Graf Kessler to Eric Gill, November 2, 1931, box 93, folder 10, M. S. Gill, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California at Los Angeles.

62 Eric Gill to the Marquise de Brion, July 19, 1939, box 93, folder 10, M. S. Gill, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California at Los Angeles.

63 Short review, "Reprints," *Times Literary Supplement*, March 10, 1932, 173.

64 *Ibid.*

Gill's own bookkeeping records indicate that individual prints sold well; in fact, all prints except for "Invenerunt me custodes" and "Dilecti mei pulsantis" sold out.⁶⁵ Reviews outside of England also praised Gill's efforts. Rudolph Alexander Schröder, who previewed the volume before it was available for general sale, wrote:

Gill will present himself as an illustrator and illuminator who here, in his very first attempt, reaches an inventiveness and technical mastery that is absolutely incomparable. His prints will combine the hieratic splendor of the most opulent works by Morris with a totally new sensuous life and with a unique style that, in my opinion, raise this unfinished book into an example of the spiritual essence and the conceptual freedom that make the products of the Cranach Press, which in so many ways seem directed against the taste and tendency of their times, in truth works that speak to the highest needs of their age.⁶⁶

More modern assessments of the volume also express admiration but frequently overlook *Canticum canticorum Salomonis* in favor of Gill's *Four Gospels* among his illustration cycles.⁶⁷ The former's prints are often described as "luminous" or "sensuous," but little of depth has been written about the shift in style in their technique and their avant-garde appearance in relation to Gill's earlier prints. This essay aims to promote Gill's innovations and contextualize them within the final product of *Canticum canticorum Salomonis*. The technique and content of the illustrations, which in the past have been tied to Kessler's oversight, instead rest firmly with Gill, as do the selection of the text and the volume's production details. Although Kessler held the upper hand throughout much of their long, collaborative working relationship, Gill's emotional connection to the text of the "Song of Songs" and his confidence in his technique and artistic vision for the text provided him with the maturity and authority to guide the production of *Canticum canticorum Salomonis*.

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65 Eric Gill, List of work, 1910-1940, series 7.1, M. S. Gill, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California at Los Angeles. These are catalog numbers 665 and 668 in J. F. Physick, *The Engraved Work of Eric Gill* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1963).

66 Rudolph Alexander Schröder, "Die Cranach-Presse in Weimar," *Imprimatur: Ein Jahrbuch für Bücherfreunde*, 1931, 103.

67 See, for example, John Harthan, *The History of the Illustrated Book: the Western tradition* (London: Thames and Hudson), 269.

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