



Helping each other to be brave

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During last October's Museums Association (MA) Conference & Exhibition, I talked about our [Eric Gill](#) exhibition, which asks whether our knowledge of his biography, particularly his sexual abuse of his daughters, affects our appreciation of his art. It was part of the conference's Being Brave strand, and I have lost count of the number of times that people have told me since that we are "being brave".

When I joined [Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft](#) in July 2014, it had recently reopened, and was a finalist for [Art Fund Museum of the Year](#). Shortly afterwards, we won Riba National and Regional Building of the Year. Of course I knew about Gill, and the central importance of him to the museum's collection and the artistic story in the village. I also knew of the revelations in Fiona McCarthy's 1989 biography and had exhibited a Gill carving in my (also somewhat controversial) exhibition on the crucifixion in modern British art. But surely we separated the unquestionable importance of Gill's art from his detestable behaviour? We didn't have anything brave to do here; it was an old story.

But then three things happened. First, I was shown an object in our collection that had never been exhibited: an envelope on which Gill listed the body measurements of two of his daughters, whom he abused, alongside his own body measurements, including those of his penis.

Second, at the MA conference in 2014, I listened to Kim Thomas, the BBC senior editorial adviser, recounting a storyline from BBC television drama *Casualty* about female genital mutilation. She issued a provocation that museums should be places where society could engage with similarly difficult subjects.

Third, we were donated a Gill wood engraving called *Girl in the Bath II*. It is a well-known and widely exhibited print that depicts Gill's daughter Petra around the time he abused her. Now it was in our permanent collection. How would we interpret this? Many have shown it without mentioning the biography, but that felt disingenuous, dishonest and maybe even condescending to visitors.

Thomas had challenged the museum sector to engage with difficult but important social issues; here was ours.

Reflecting on the past two years of working towards this exhibition, I realise now that we have not been brave, rather our colleagues across the country have given us courage.

At every step of the way, someone in another museum or gallery has given us time, knowledge, help and confidence. I wonder how many more museums have objects or works of art in their collections that they would need to "be brave" to display. If so, there will always be someone in another museum who can help.

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