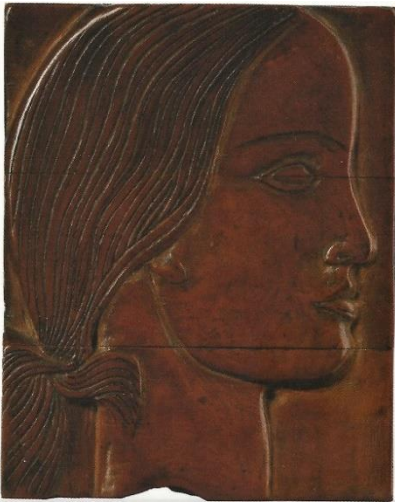


David Jones and Petra Gill

By William Gibbs



Head of Petra
David Jones, wood 1925-26

This article will explore the relationship between the artist David Jones and Petra Gill through the images he created of her and of their shared surroundings, both in Ditchling and Capel-y-ffin. Several of these works are in the collection of Brecknock Museum and Art Gallery, y Gaer, Brecon.

In January 1921, as a recent convert to Catholicism and still struggling with the aftershock of the war, David Jones was introduced to Eric Gill who was living with his

family at Ditchling in East Sussex. They were part of an artistic community of Catholic artists, the Guild of St Joseph and St Dominic and Jones joined them, becoming a postulant of the Order.

The Gill family home was next to the community house in which David Jones had come to live and he became a close family friend of the Gills and their three daughters. Soon he was carving and then painting images of the middle daughter, Petra, with whom he developed a close relationship.

Best known of these is *The Garden Enclosed*, now in the Tate, which Jones painted at the time of his engagement to Petra in 1924, when he was 29 and she was 18. The painting is set in the garden at Ditchling, where distinctive brick paths joined the houses.

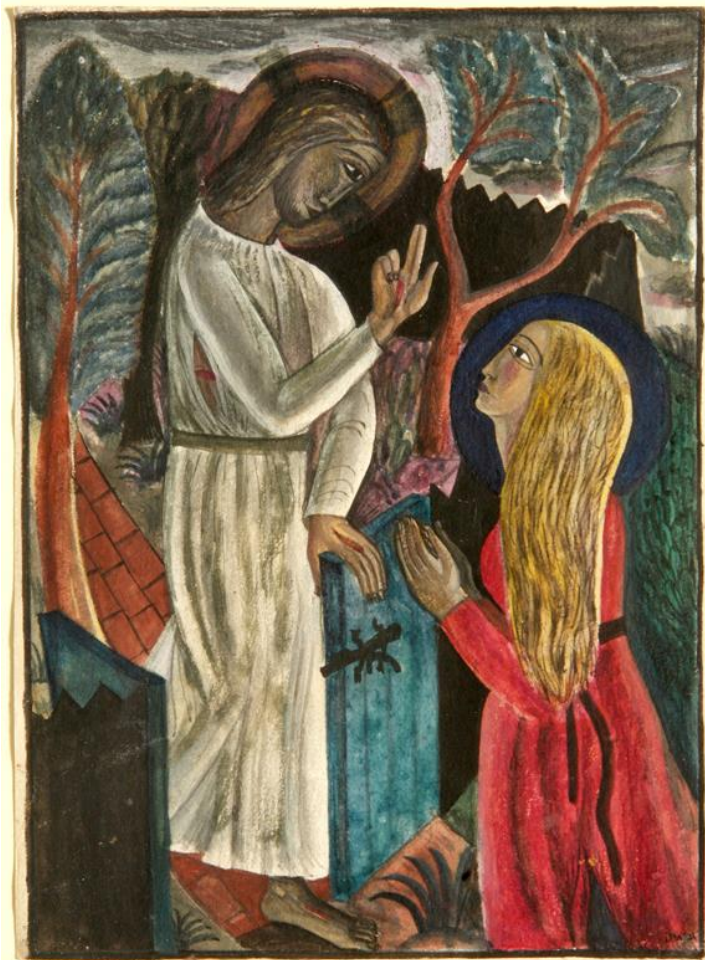
This picture has been much discussed and debated. It is full of tension and unresolved allegory. Is Petra resisting her lover's kisses? What is the meaning of the geese scurrying across the picture and why is there a discarded doll, very similar to the toy that Gill had carved for his daughter, lying on the pathway? Is this a sign of the passing of childhood?



David Jones
by G M Brownlee 1926



The Garden Enclosed, 1924
Tate



Petra before Christ 1924-25
y Gaer, Brecknock Museum

beauty. The adoring figure of Mary (or Petra) is gazing directly into the eyes of Christ who holds his bleeding right hand directly in front of her, in the form of both a blessing and a warning : “Noli me Tangere”. Christ has come along the same brick path that can be seen in *The Garden Enclosed*, to a bright blue gate which he is opening with his left hand. The trunk and curved branches of a tree hold, frame and separate the figures. Petra wears the same red dress as in the *Garden Enclosed* and her golden hair, now longer, streams down from her head. Both pictures show her in profile but there is a complete contrast between the emotion personified by the two images: the first of reluctance, the second of adoration. Perhaps the most striking feature of the painting is Petra’s eye, painted not in profile but “face on”, a trick that Picasso used dramatically in his paintings such as *Les Femmes d’Alger* of 1907 and we also see in Egyptian art. Are we seeing her eye as Christ would have seen it as he looks straight at her? Or is the eye looking at us, the viewer,

By contrast, this picture in the collection at y Gaer, has never before appeared in a public exhibition of David Jones’s work and is not reproduced or discussed in any of the books on him. Entitled both *Christ in the Garden* and *Petra before Christ*, its date is a little uncertain. In the Brecknock Museum records it is given as 1925 but this is unlikely, as the picture is set in Ditchling and the Gills moved from Ditchling to Capel-y-ffin in August 1924. Rupert Otten, who ran the gallery from which this picture was purchased, tells me that it was given by David Jones to Petra and sold by her family after her death. It was shown at an exhibition Rupert organised in 2011 called *To Petra with Love*.

Unlike *The Enclosed Garden*, this picture of the moment when Mary Magdalene first sees the risen Christ has a tranquil



Petra Before Christ Detail

to encourage us to participate in the miraculous resurrection of Christ - which Jones has set in the Gills' back garden to further heighten its immediacy?



The Orchard, Capel y ffin, 1926
y Gaer, Brecknock Museum

inspiration and direction for his art. As he said later it was here that he really began to paint. A view looking down into the orchard below the monastery is in the collection at y Gaer and shows a new confidence in combining abstraction and compilation of landscape. At the bottom of the orchard are bee-hives, for the community did their best to live off the land. Central to the picture is the dominant motif of the Twympa, rising up between the streams of the Afon Honddu and the Nant Bwch .

The Gills were happy to encourage the engagement of Petra and David. When Gill fell out with the members of the Ditchling community and left for new pastures in Capel-y-ffin in the Black Mountains, David Jones soon followed as Petra's fiancé. Gill took over the deserted monastery founded by Father Ignatious at the head of the Honddu valley and Jones spent several periods there between 1925 and 1926. In the local landscape he discovered a new

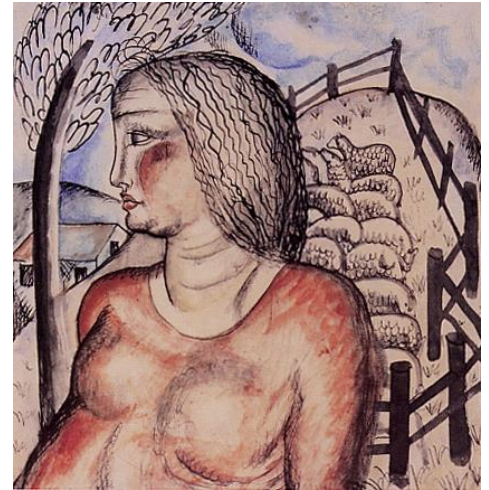


My Hay's Hay Harvest, 1926
Private Collection

A later drawing by David Jones of "Mr Gill's Hay Harvest" shows the community at work gathering hay in the same orchard, this time as seen from below. Behind the hay wagon are the buildings of the monastery and the monastery church.

Because of his ill health, David Jones is not taking part and is the privileged observer. Most prominent in the work force are the women of the Gill family; Mrs Gill and her three daughters, Betty, Petra and Joan, who provided the majority of the domestic support for the daily life of the community.

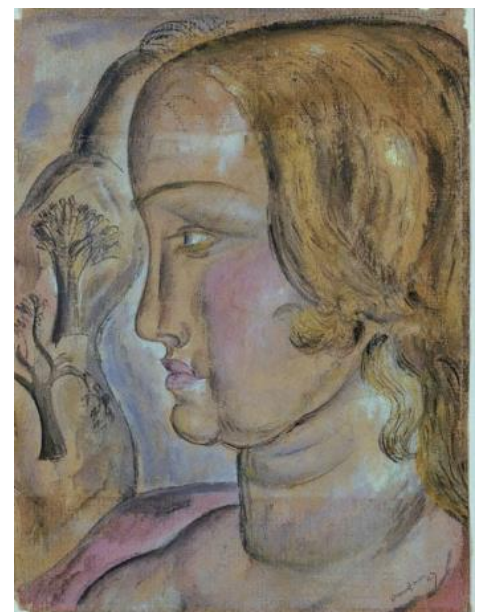
Jones painted two portraits of Petra at this time, both in profile and both set in the context of the valley. *Petra in the Sheepfold*, now in the National Museum of Wales, shows Petra with hillside and farmhouse behind her, looking somewhat plumper and more matronly. The sheep are penned, perhaps for shearing or dipping. The Gills had pigs and goats but no sheep so this is probably set at the farm further up the valley, *Talsarn*, run by the Watkins' family. Petra had completed a weaving course at Ditchling and perhaps she was collecting wool to use on her loom.



Petra in the Sheepfold
NMW, Cardiff

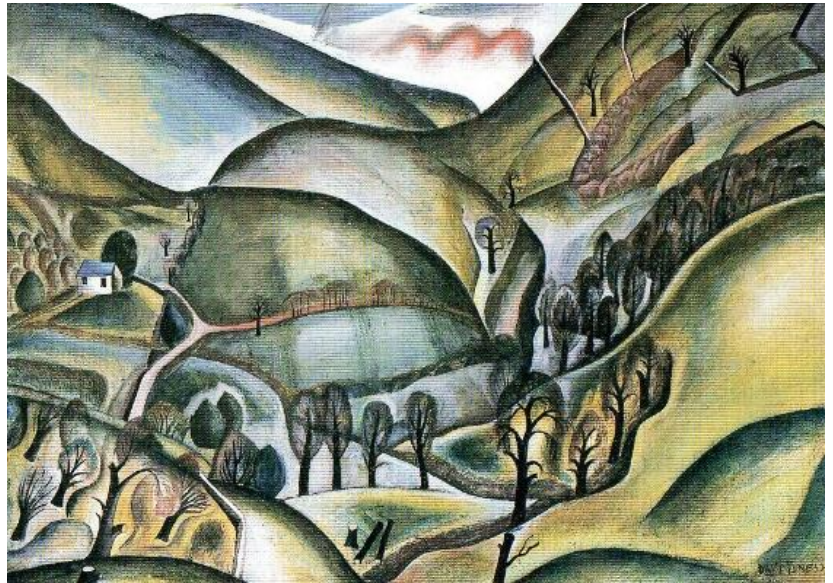
The second portrait is in the collection at y Gaer and sets Petra against the hills of the valley. Two trees stand beside a mountain stream which, with the curve of mountain side, are echoed in the fall of Petra's hair. But most striking is the way her exaggerated forehead mirrors the brow of the mountain. This is a foretaste of the strong relationship that Jones sees between landscape and human forms and which comes out most strongly in his later poem, *The Sleeping Lord*, in which the rise and fall of the hills evoke the body of the sleeping lord beneath.

But although Jones was finding new confidence as an artist and still in love with Petra, he procrastinated over setting a wedding date. By contrast, Petra was longing for marriage and motherhood. In the winter of 1926 they agreed on a time of separation and Jones went to stay and paint on Caldy Island where there was a Catholic Monastery. While there he received a letter from Petra breaking off the engagement and telling him that she was going to marry Denis Tegetmeier, who had been a member of the Capel community from its start. In his detailed analysis of Jones' life Thomas Dilworth records that Petra remembers that she "*felt the time had come to break it off because it obviously wasn't going to work out*". Some accounts suggest that David Jones might have been relieved but Dilworth gives evidence that he was deeply distressed on reading the letter and smashed his hand against the wall of his room.



Petra, 1926
y Gaer, Brecknock Museum

In the event, Petra and Denis Tegetmeier did not marry until 1930 when they moved to live with the Gills at Piggotts, the new settlement near High Wycombe that Gill had created after leaving Capel. Seemingly, Petra was undamaged by the taboo relationship with her father and she and Denis were very happily married, having six children. As a wedding present Jones gave the Tegetmeiers a picture of the Capel Valley, one of his finest, looking up the valley of the Nant Bwch.



Capel Valley , 1926 Gouache ,
Private Collection



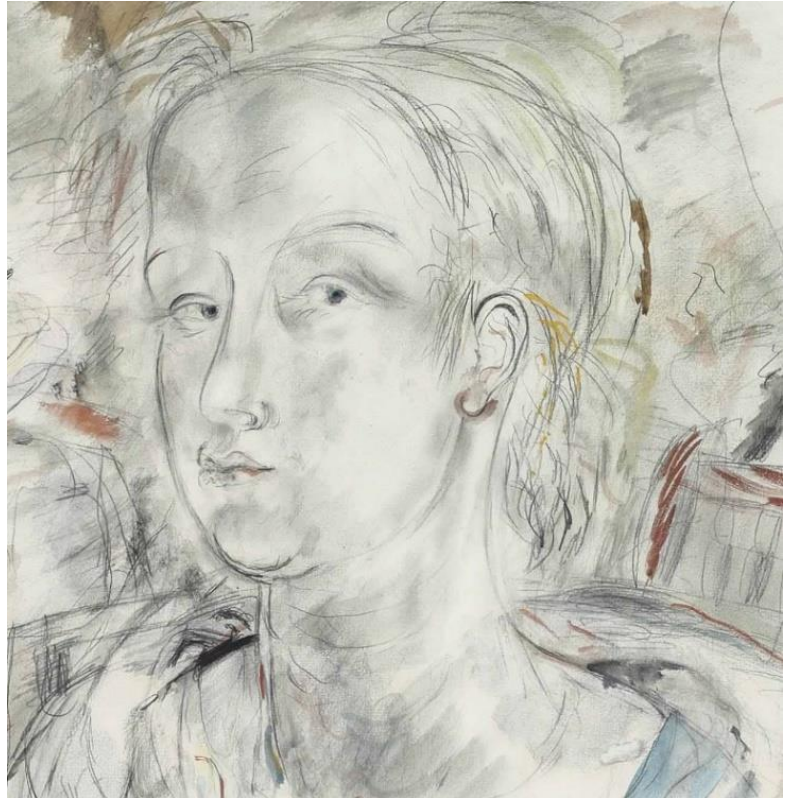
Petra im Rosenhag
NMW, given by CASW

David Jones and Petra remained lifelong friends. In his way he stayed in love with her and saw her as his first muse. There were other women in his life but he continued to paint Petra.

In 1931 David Jones visited Piggotts, staying with the Tegetmeiers and painting Petra again. The picture is a celebration of Petra embedded in the paraphernalia of her life, and the title is a reference to 15th century pictures titled *Maria im Rosenhag* where Mary is set in a rose arbour. For Kenneth Clark this picture has “*more of Jones’ mind in it than almost anything else he did*”. At this time his mind was deeply engaged in the creation of his epic poem *In Parenthesis* in which the pain and horror of his experience of the war is transmuted and, finally, redeemed by the apparition of the Queen of the Wood. Here Petra is perhaps Jones personal vision of that healing force.

In 1932, as Jones was finishing *In Parenthesis*, he painted this portrait of Petra. Called *The Seated Mother* it is a wonderfully dynamic and fluid work, and I have included a detail which allows the freedom of the line and the subtle shading to be seen. Shortly afterwards Jones suffered an overpowering nervous breakdown which later he suspected was bought on by the reliving of his war experiences in his writing. Whatever the cause the result was that he did not paint for years.

This was the last portrait Jones painted of Petra. It was bought by Helen Sutherland, a great patron of the arts and supporter of the “Pitman Painters”, the Nicholsons, Cedric Morris and Piet Mondrian. Her friend Kathleen Raine, the poet, remembered seeing Jones propping this portrait of Petra against a chair in Sutherland's drawing room with a gaze, described by Raine as '*unforgettable... pondering sweetness*'. David Jones kept in contact with Petra until he died in 1974 but he never painted her again. Petra lived till 1999, dying at the age of 92.



The Seated Mother 1932
Bonhams , 2020, detail

Acknowledgements

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