

THE ILLUSTRATIVE ART OF
DINO CAVALLARI

A painter in earth colors on large canvases of landscapes of his native Italy and of his long time home region of Burgundy, France, of political uprisings of workers in Hungary and protesting farmers in France, of the Seine and Yonne valleys, rivers and canals, and of exotic birds and animals both seen and imagined, he is also well known for a series of finely detailed almost miniature illustrations of ancient legends, Biblical stories, and literary works by contemporary authors.

The latter genre was begun in the late 1950s following a meeting with a young American poet living in Paris who recounted for him the ancient Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh. Herbert Mason had encountered the epic as a student of Near Eastern languages and literatures at Harvard and was drawn to write a retelling of what was to him a personally absorbing tale. Cavallari produced for his young friend a series of paintings depicting twelve episodes in the life of Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu and their adventures together and afterwards of Gilgamesh and the elder wise man Utnapishtim who, as the archetype of the Biblical Noah, had survived the great flood. Mason's poetic retelling was published in America with one of Cavallari's illustrations on the cover and was a finalist for that country's 1971 National Book Award.

The Cavallari-Mason collaboration continued with the artist's illustrations of the life and death of the 10th century Muslim mystic and martyr al-Hallaj for Mason's 1979 book *The Death of al-Hallaj* and for the cover art of his 2003 novel *Where the Rivers Meet*. In his 1988 *Memoir of a Friend* (French edition, *Chronique d'une Amitie*, 1990) Mason wrote of Cavallari: "There is a mixture of quiet compulsion and dramatic simplicity in his work." Recalling their first meeting in a gallery on L'Ile de la Cite in 1957, he wrote : "Two small paintings on wood caught my eye. One of a man bent over looking at his hunting dog, the other of a peasant woman walking past a tree: the red of the hunter's coat and the faded red of the woman's apron, the brighter red of a bird's wing barely visible in the tree, the browns of the earth, the humor in the hunter's sinister black hat. Dino finds spiritual resonants in symbol and tones in nature, organically. Animals, trees, rivers, buildings, clay, soil, hats, fingers – everything is animate. He is not an ideologue or message giver. He is in touch with forces moving in things. He is a kind of geologist who works in pigments mixed with water and oil and any other metals or minerals he can get his hands on and applies them to any surface, wood, paper, carton, canvas... He is, I believe, genuinely wise, like a Breton druid out of the dolmen past. He witnesses something rare in contemporary art by his quiet kindredness: the existence of a way of life through reverence for nature."

“One painting of Moses suggests by the strength of his head and upper body, even the arch of the back, the existence and familiarity of the paradise of animals and their natural grace of movement, surrounding him. I feel with Dino that I see the universe of woods and stars and light. One painting of Christ, a small figure standing with birds in a tree and a dog at his feet, is alive with kindredness. The rhythm and simplicity owes much to Giotto perhaps, at least to pre-Renaissance painters, but is clearly his own contemplation. His is a vision, a sensibility, a fathoming of life beneath the surface, not an escape from himself and the times.”

“Dino’s hands are strong; he has a strong build, with quiet forceful features in his face, dark glimmering eyes, a relaxed squinting, crinkling smile like his son’s, and tan skin. He teaches me that to do Gilgamesh I must find and embrace one primary virtue and surrender to it – patience – which is nature’s gift to the artist that assures both longevity and passion.”

“Once, I saw an aged woman on the street pushing a child in a carriage: a blue kerchief on her head, bent ankles, brown shawl, arched forward, looking down at the child. Dino’s people.”

The Cavallari-Mason collaboration extended to the artist’s illustrations and cover art of three books by Jeanine Young-Mason, including the 1996 *The Patient’s Voice*, its 2001 Japanese edition, and her 2002 *Critical Moments*, the first two including accounts of persons writing of their trials and masteries of illness, the latter first-hand accounts of two nurses’ and two doctors’ memoirs of their practices and callings. Further, from this collaboration Cavallari did the cover painting for the Masons’ friend and Iraqi scholar and author Shakir Mustafa’s 2006 book *Contemporary Iraqi Fiction* in translation.

In addition there followed from this initial work on Gilgamesh the artist’s illustrations of books in French by Jean Cocteau, Sacha Guitry, Paul Vaillant, and Jean Larteguy, as well as the cover paintings and the 15 drawings for the 1989 book *Rambouillet Au Debut du XX Siecle*, and other drawings for corporate and municipal commissions. He illustrated the legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus from both the Qur’an and *The Legenda Aurea* of Jacobus di Voragine; depictions of Islam’s Whirling Dervishes and Muhammad’s receiving the visitation of the Angel Gabriel; and several cruciforms of Christ. These and others led to and culminated in the achievement of 170 illustrations of the Bible, completed in 2004.

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Dino Cavallari 1923 - 20013 was born in Bondeno near Ferrare in northern Italy. At age 14 he attended the Dosso Dossi School of Fine Arts, studying drawing, sculpture and architecture, in Ferrare. In the same period, he studied sculpture in the studio of a skilled local sculptor. In 1943 he was deported to Germany as a prisoner of war. The conditions and privations of his incarceration left serious and permanent consequences to his health.

After the war he resumed his artistic studies, attending classes in Rome at the Institut Beato Angelico , under the guidance of the noted sculptor Francesco Nagni. In 1949 he moved to Paris and was inscribed at the Ecole Nationale Superieure des Beaux Arts as a sculptor in the studio of one of the masters of the time Louis Leygue. Regretably he was forced to discontinue his career as a sculptor, save for small pieces, due to ongoing restrictions on his health, and he turned to painting as his life work. In 1953 he married a French artist by whom a son was born. They resided in Paris for many years thereafter before moving finally to their permanent home and studio in a village in Burgundy.

In addition to his abundant book illustrations, Dino Cavallari has had numerous expositions of his work in Paris and other French cities, in Vienna, in Boston and New York, and in Mexico City. His paintings can be found also in both French and foreign private collections.

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“For me art is born out of the grasp of the rich life of the earth in our hands and in our spirits that are kindred to it...”

“I work each day in any medium and on any material available, be it wood, carton, paper or canvas. I am a compulsive painter. I paint on walls. I’ve painted many subjects almost without limit and they are on view here in my studio, my bedroom, the kitchen, on furniture and cabinets. My home is my gallery. In other words, I believe art is both a work and a passion. And it is a passion as strong as love for one’s family and one’s friends. It is a love at the deepest level of creation itself.”

The retelling of the ancient story of GILGAMESH by Herbert Mason was published first in 1970 by Houghton Mifflin & Co. of Boston and continues successfully in its 2002 Mariner Series edition of the same publisher. Dino Cavallari began his illustrations in 1968 in correspondence with Herbert Mason, whom he had met in 1957 in Paris. His illustrations, which numbered over sixty, included pen and ink sketches in preparation for the oil paintings that were finished in 1970 in time for the publication of the book. One of the illustrations served as the original book cover and was widely acclaimed for its vivid and evocative artistry.

The Babylonian (Akkadian) fragmentary version of this second millennium BC text formed the basis of Mason's poetic version and was the inspiration for Cavallari's first major illustrative art.

It is the story of a historic Babylonian king of Uruk, a city situated between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in ancient Iraq. The tablets depicting the life and legends attached to this king were discovered around 1870 by British and Turkish archaeologists and were deciphered and translated subsequently by scholars into several western languages.

Gilgamesh was a powerful youthful king whose city was suffering from neglect and moral abuses. The gods created in the wilderness a creature, Enkidu, part man, part animal, to challenge the king's arrogance of power and to assert their ultimate control. The dramatic confrontation occurs but results in a transforming and profound friendship between the two adversaries. The drama intensifies for the two friends through numerous dangerous adventures as a hubristic challenge to the gods themselves and their power to cause evil, ending tragically in the one's, Enkidu's, sacrifice and death. Gilgamesh in grief undertakes a solitary and desperate journey in search of the secret of eternal life.

There are numerous parallels in both Greek and Biblical epic tales and themes, including Gilgamesh being borne across the river of death by Urshanabi (the Babylonian Charon) and meeting on the other side the builder of the ark for the animals' and humankind's survival after the Great Flood, Utnapishtim (the Biblical Noah), which accounts precede both Homeric and Biblical versions by at least 1500 years. Gilgamesh is given the secret by the old man who though embittered against the gods has been saved, but he loses it (a sacred plant) to a serpent, which devours it and thereby gains new life.

The story of Gilgamesh, though clothed in myth and fantasy, is rooted in real life. It is an organic and naturalistic epic of revolt against death in all its forms, and is ennobled in its tragic sorrow by the intimacy of its

human friendship and its heroic affirmation of life. It is one of the world's oldest accounts of human friendship, loss and quest.

Cavallari has captured in his sequence of intimate paintings the collaborative spirit of Mason's learned and sensitive poem.

Herbert Mason