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Lillian H. Heil

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Leo and Diane Dillon: A Partnership that has Created a “Third Artist”

By Lillian Heil
Professor Emeritus
Brigham Young University

At the 2001 BYU Symposium for Young Readers, illustrators Leo and Diane Dillon showed a slide presentation covering their whole career. The slides evidenced that this couple, after years of work, have been able to trust each other and work together to create a “third artist” who is a “combination of the two of [them] and . . . different from either of [them] individually.”

Leo and Diane, both born in 1933, started life at opposite ends of the United States—she was born in Glendale, California, and he in Brooklyn, New York. Growing up, each developed a love for drawing, so it comes as no surprise that they met a Parson’s School of Design in New York City. Their friendship was initially contentious as they tried to outdo each other, but they soon discovered they were in love. Marriage, however, did not seem a plausible option, and, after graduating from Parson’s in 1956, each went a separate way. They soon realized they were miserable apart from each other, and in 1957, against their parents’ wishes, they were married. For a short time Diane quit her job to be a full-time housewife until Leo told her she was wasting her talents, and she began to paint again. They began doing freelance work together, but it was not always easy. Leo said, “People wonder a lot about how we blend our styles. It was years and years before we could pass a piece of work back and forth between us and not get into a fight.”

Diane humorously commented that they’ve “always known that in some ways the third artist was quite separate from [their] personal lives, because in times of anger, when husband and wife aren’t speaking, the artist continues to communicate and produce . . . It’s easier to stay angry with your mate than it is with the person you work with, especially when the deadline is the next day!”

The Dillons explained that earlier in their partnership, magazines didn’t want work done by women, so they used the Dillon name. They were also told to keep their style consistent so that they would be recognized. Since they liked experimenting with different styles for different books, they began to work under the name “Studio 2,” leading clients to think they were a studio of many different artists. They have used a variety of methods and materials, including the crewel style, stained glass, woodcarving, and wire mesh with clay.

Although they are a bi-racial couple, the Dillons claim that they seldom think about race because their art saves them. Busy creating art, they have no time to waste worrying that people stare at them or hate them simply because they are a bi-racial couple. However, they feel that times have changed since the early years of their career, and now more people accept racially mixed marriages.

The Dillons’ first children’s book was The Ring in the Prairie. They received the Caldecott Award in 1975 for Verna Aardema’s retelling of Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People’s Ears: A West African Tale, as well as in 1976 for Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions by Margaret Musgrove. They were pleased and a bit surprised that people knew of them and admired their work. Winning the awards gave them much needed encouragement and the confidence that their work was making a contribution to the world of art.

When asked how they can produce one unified piece of work, the Dillons replied that all great masters have had to learn to make copies of other people’s work—it’s part of their training. They used to argue, each trying to convince the other that their way was right, but now they explore until they find an idea that sparks both of them. They have learned to trust each other, and emphasize the power of two artists coming together to become a third.