

**'Gilbert Cannan and his Mill', c 1916
by Mark Gertler (1891-1935)**

oil on canvas, 99.5 x 70 cm

A zoomable image of this painting is available on our website to use in the classroom with an interactive whiteboard or projector.

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Background information

The painting

Gilbert Cannan (1884-1955) was a writer and dramatic critic and he lived in a converted windmill at Cholesbury in Hertfordshire. This painting by Mark Gertler is a full length portrait of Gilbert Cannan standing in front of his mill with his two dogs.

This is a traditional subject but here it is also an ironic comment on traditional 18th century portraits of English gentlemen with their faithful hounds.

The large black dog on the right hand side of Cannan is a Newfoundland dog called Luath and the large black and white dog to his left hand side is a St Bernard dog called Porthos. Porthos originally belonged to JM Barrie and was used as the model for the dog Nana who looked after the children in Peter Pan.

When you look carefully at this picture you can see how it can be broken down into geometric shapes. Can you see the repetition of cones and triangles throughout the picture?

- in the windmill itself
- in the foliage of the chestnut tree
- Gilbert Cannan and his dogs on either side of him make a pyramid shape
- the space between their legs are truncated triangles
- in the verticals of the spindly poplars trees make triangles with the side of the picture

The artist

In 1914 Gertler went to stay with Gilbert Cannan and his wife in their converted windmill at Cholesbury, Hertfordshire. Over the next two years, he became a regular visitor and introduced Cannan to the music-hall life of the East End, where he had been brought up. He must have begun this painting during his first visit.



The historical context

Gilbert Cannan and his Mill is a radical reworking of a traditional theme and reflects Gertler's interests in contemporary art of the period. Gertler has hardened the figures into geometrical shapes so that Gilbert Cannan almost has the appearance of a doll.

Mark Gertler was strongly influenced by the work he saw at the Post-Impressionist Exhibition organised by Roger Fry in London in 1912. In Gilbert Cannan and his Mill he has deliberately adopted an anti-naturalistic modern style as can be seen in his use of strong vibrant colours and black outlines. We have to remember that earlier in his life Gertler was apprenticed to Clayton and Bell who were makers of stained glass in the East End. This too may have influenced his painting style.

Gilbert Cannan and his Mill was painted at the height of the First World War. Gertler was a pacifist and refused to support Britain's involvement in the war. After the Battle of the Somme Gertler painted Merry-Go-round (1916). It shows a group of military and civilian figures caught on the vicious circle of the roundabout and is considered by many art critics as the most important British painting of the First World War. You can see this on the Tate website, www.tate.org.uk.

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