Jim Dine

The Picture of
Dorian Gray.

A Working
Script for the Stage
from the Novel by
Oscar Wilde

with
Original Images and Notes
on the Text

by
Jim Dine

Presentation by Elise Meyers
Fig. 1. Front and back cover: Jim Dine, *The Picture of Dorian Gray: A Working Script for the Stage from the Novel by Oscar Wilde*, 1968
Weingrow Collection
“Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril.

Those who read the symbol do so at their peril. It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors. Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital. When critics disagree, the artist is in accord with himself. We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely.

All art is quite useless.”¹

—Oscar Wilde
In an interview in 1979, which included a
discussion of publishers who had paired well-
known writers and artists to create new
projects, Jim Dine said, “I collaborated with
Oscar Wilde, as it were, with The Picture of
Dorian Gray. I thought it was quite
successful, but it was secondary; it came out
of something natural, which was that I was
designing the play. The play was not
produced, so we salvaged something and
made some prints out of the costume
designs.” In a previous interview/statement
published in Studio International in 1968,
Dine discussed the intriguing, limited-edition
deluxe book that he (along with Paul
Cornwall-Jones) had created based on this
material: The Picture of Dorian Gray: A
Working Script for the Stage from the Novel by
Oscar Wilde with Original Images and Notes
on the Text by Jim Dine. Dine said that “after
three months of work with these drawings
and things” publishing them as a book was
“the logical thing to do.” That book is the
subject of this presentation.
In the 1968 interview, Dine added, “I feel very schizophrenic about what I do. I mean I can do a lot of things—not necessarily in different styles, but in different ways, and things demand different ways. For instance, a production of *Dorian Gray* done now demands a different content than a piece of sculpture that I make and that I’m going to show now. I feel at a certain level it’s just a costume book; this is a valid thing to make—a book of costumes.”

In 1981, David Shapiro wrote that Dine’s various elaborations on Wilde’s novel did not imply that Dine agreed with Walter Pater’s aestheticism of art for art’s sake, leaving aside all moral concerns; instead, Dine “delighted in the fable of such a sensibility *in extremis*. Never has Basil worn such an outrageously black leather suit, nor has Sybil Vane ever been pictured in contemporary underclothing more explicitly than in the lithograph of *Sybil in her Dressing Room.*”

Fig. 4. Jim Dine, *Basil in Black Leather Suit (Basil at the Theatre)*, 1968
Dine’s interest in literature as a frequent inspiration for his art is clear; his primary engagement with the biographic representation of authors and the visual exploration of literature through characters and their appearance has been highlighted by Marco Livingstone. In fact, Livingstone cites Dine’s reading disability—described by Dine as *Dyslexia*—as a factor that drew him more in the direction of poetry and its methodology in collage than to fiction’s lengthy, dense narratives. Like Shapiro, Livingstone cites Dine’s inventive costume design as his way of emphasizing and elaborating upon the characters in novels, plays, and adaptations as is evident in the *Dorian Gray* publication. In addition, Dine recalls using cutout figures from a fashion magazine—probably British *Vogue*—as templates for his costume designs for *Dorian Gray*.  

Fig. 5. Jim Dine, *Sybil in Her Dressing Room (Sybil Vane in Her Dressing Room)*, 1968
In elaborating on the publication’s form, Dine remarked, “On another level it’s a book of some highly articulated colour lithographs.”

Fig. 6. Jim Dine, *Red Design for Satin Heart*, 1968
Weingrow Collection
Describing the project further, Dine said, “It’s in certain ways a tour de force, the velvet cover and that sort of thing—although I do like it as a total object. I think one of the things about making it was that it fulfilled a need in me. There aren’t many places today where you can still use your hands and still talk straight about something that’s contemporary. Here was this opportunity to scribble again, and to stool-smear again and to get your old thumb in there and really I’d jump at any opportunity to do that. As an object itself the book’s quite pretty, I think, and it’s one of the most indulged things I ever made. In a certain way that’s how Dorian Gray was—completely indulged—and that’s why I felt it was in keeping. There’s no point in giving it a cool plastic look if it’s something like Dorian Gray.”
Although the play is set in the Victorian era, Dine’s costume designs are clearly indicative of the time and place in which he created them. The modernist or “mod” style of dress grew out of a youth subculture of the same name in 1960s London. A reaction to the oppressiveness of post-World War II culture, the mods and other members of subcultures like theirs (bohemians, beatniks and punks) rebelled against mainstream society. Mods inherited much of their style from the “teddy boys,” or “teds,” who sought to revive the 18th-century “dandy” look in 1960s London. Drape jackets and drainpipe pants became the preferred look. Dine’s affection for the mod style is most apparent in his costume designs for the title character, Dorian Gray. The pointed “winkle picker” boots, elongated jacket, and scarf pictured here, as well as the bold use of colors, are all typical of the mod look. Even Dorian’s hair style is mod—short and neat, like that worn by French Film stars of the period.

Fig. 9. Winkle Picker (Men’s Boot), ca. 1965

Fig. 10. Jim Dine, Dorian Gray with a Rainbow Scarf, 1968
Weingrow Collection
Fig. 11. Jim Dine, *Dorian Gray at the Opium Den*, 1968
Weingrow Collection

Fig. 12. Tedd (Maker), Men’s Suit, ca. 1969, Worn by John Lennon as he appeared on the cover of the Beatles’ album *Abbey Road*.
In one reading of the project, “Dorian Gray reminds us that one of the central concerns for Dine has been to escape from the hedonism of the New York School of poets and young painters toward something more capacious and more fully human.” In fact, vanity and hedonism are central themes of Dorian Gray and Dine’s early biographical experiences informed his relationship to Wilde’s novel. Egocentrism and excesses are vital elements of Dine’s life and art—and, sometimes, he has not distinguished life from art. In developing a working script of a play based on a novel, the transformative interplay of a person and his portrait is fitting subject matter for him. Still, Dine’s decision to channel his artistic energies into creating the working script and then turning it into a publication must be considered against a cultural backdrop in which he felt a lack of vital dialogue in art making beyond New York. Further, the argument has been made that Dine’s deluxe limited-edition publication “provides an early indication of the shifts that took place in his work during his London stay from 1967 to 1971: a gradual distancing from the avant-garde in favor of a return to the figure, and consequently to the handmade image and to earlier traditions within European art.”

Fig 13. Jim Dine, Lord Henry at the Theater (Lord Henry in a Yellow Suit), 1968
Dine went on to design sets and costumes for a number of plays, including *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1966), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1968), and *Salome* (1986).

Dine achieved early acclaim for his art through his performances or “happenings” of 1960, which could be broadly viewed as containing themes that might have drawn him toward *Dorian Gray*, including obsession, mortality, and transformation. For *Smiling Workman*, Dine set up a large sheet of paper to look like a canvas. “He rapidly scrawled in paint the phrase, ‘I love what I’m doing’; just as he finished, he drank a bucket of red paint (actually tomato juice), poured two other buckets of paint over his head, and finally jumped through the ‘painting.’”

He describes this piece as being about “obsessions, obsessive working, about being an artist and becoming famous through the theater.” In *Car Crash*, he donned an aluminum-foil costume and silver body paint and wrote with chalk on a blackboard so hard that the chalk broke, connoting physical and psychological damage and linking to the theme of mortality. *The Shining Bed*, another happening, could be described as a meditation on the themes of embodiment and transformation.

![Fig. 14. Jim Dine, Smiling Workman, 1960](image-url)
The working script is bound in green velvet with the title applied to its surface in an erratic scrawl of thick silver material. This wild and frenzied holographic form could be interpreted as alluding to the mental state of the play’s pleasure-seeking protagonist, Dorian Gray, as he struggles with the moral implications of his actions, which his youthful and vital form seems to elude, but which plague his painted portrait with the visible gruesome ramifications of age and the anguish and wear of his debauchery.

Interestingly, Dine continued to use a similar calligraphic style in the book’s interior for the titles of the full- and partial-color full-page costume sketches. In fact, the style of handwriting might be more reflective of Dine’s own hand and psychology. The handwritten form appears again both on the cover and throughout Dine’s *This Goofy Life of Constant Mourning* (2004), which is also an artists book that references lived experience, death, and irony, and which is comprised of photographs of Dine’s poems, objects, and images that he has arranged in real space. The two books are examples of multilayered artists books in which the conception, visual elements, text, and form join to create a unified whole—without editorial comment.
Traditional working scripts are created and used by directors or stage managers to keep notes on ideas pertaining to a production they are currently working on. Working scripts tend to be written in a mixture of an accepted industrial shorthand and the creator’s own personal scrawl. Occasionally a working script, also called a “prompt book,” is used by someone other than its creator—for example, when a director becomes ill or otherwise engaged and the stage manager has to run a rehearsal—but for the most part a working script is used only by the person who created it. These are not public works, and they are not intended for publication. The only practical reason for saving a working script is for re-use in the event that the director decides to remount the same production.

Dine’s handwritten notes appear on every page of this script, along with rough sketches and even photocopies of pages taken directly from the original novel, including the preface. Ideas and phrases that Dine felt were important are circled or underlined. While he takes the time to correct mistakes involving the dramatic personae at the beginning, changing characters’ names and even adding a missing character, he seems completely unconcerned about typographical errors, leaving several uncorrected.

Fig. 17. Jim Dine, Page 1 (Act 1, Scene I), The Picture of Dorian Gray, 1968
Weingrow Collection
With *The Picture of Dorian Gray: A Working Script for the Stage from the Novel by Oscar Wilde*, Dine seems to challenge the concept of what is considered to be art. Although the color lithographs included in the publication are considered by some to be stand-alone artistic creations, Dine undoubtedly felt that the real art was the script as a whole—including the lithographs, handwritten notes, and typed script pages that he has left untouched—not just his costume and conceptual designs. This work stands separately from the many other sketches, collages, and other works on the theme of Dorian Gray.

Dine once said, “I don’t deal exclusively with the popular image. I’m more concerned with it as a part of my landscape. Pop Art is only one facet of my work. More than popular images, I’m interested in personal images.”

With this publication, he created a work of art out of a personal notebook.
By aestheticizing and publishing the working script, Dine subverts its function, rendering it useless. Echoing the quote by Oscar Wilde at the beginning of this presentation, which evokes the philosophy of art for art’s sake, Dine has created something to be admired and not actually used.

This book would be of particular interest to anyone studying theater or art history. Since it is a working script, it clearly reveals Jim Dine’s creative process. Aspiring directors and actors might benefit from his insights. The costume designs are colorful and detailed, and would be appreciated by anyone with an interest in fashion history or fashion design.

Fig. 19 Jim Dine, Dorian Gray (The Costume Dorian Gray Dies In), 1968
Notes:

4. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 56n45.
8. Ibid., 56.
9. Ibid., 54.
12. Ibid.
17. Ibid.

Illustrations:

Illustrations (continued)


