

Who was Max

Andrew Johnston

Abstract

This is a personal account of my discovery of the uncle I never knew, as he died only months after I was born. My only source of information was my aunt Priscilla, Max Gill's second wife. When she died in 1984, I inherited the cottage she had shared with Max and discovered a large collection of his work, tucked away in cupboards and drawers. This material formed the core of the Brighton University exhibition 'Out of the Shadows'. My aunt's diaries also came to light, which told the whole story of her relationship with Max. Gradually, a picture began to emerge of this fascinating, enigmatic and highly skilled artist.



MacDonald Gill 1884 - 1947

Max Gill was a graphic artist of extraordinary ability and versatility. He was also my uncle, but he was an uncle I never knew as he died only months after I was born in 1946. Well known in his day, he quickly slipped into obscurity after his death and the few shreds of information that I had about him came from my aunt Priscilla.



Priscilla Johnston 1910 - 1984

She was the youngest daughter of the calligrapher Edward Johnston and had known Max since childhood, having been his Goddaughter. Her affair with Max and their eventual marriage were controversial, but theirs was a loving and enduring partnership, which transcended the conventions of the day.



Priscilla's cottage in Sussex as it looks today.

For me, childhood holidays meant glorious visits to Priscilla's tiny cottage in West Sussex, which is now our home. She and Max had found it in a derelict condition in 1939 and even in the 1950s it was still fairly basic, with no drains or running water. But the place had a magical quality - a fairytale cottage hidden deep in the woods and far from civilisation. It was a secret world, which I never tired of exploring. The single story room on the left was always known as Max's studio.



Atlantic Charter map 1942 (detail)

Pinned to the wall was a torn and faded copy of Max's Time and Tide Map of the Atlantic Charter from 1942. I had no idea what an 'Atlantic Charter' was of course, but I was fascinated by the detail, particularly the man bottom left who is 'beating swords into ploughshares' by smashing-up an assortment of modern weapons with a sledgehammer – an image guaranteed to appeal to any small boy.



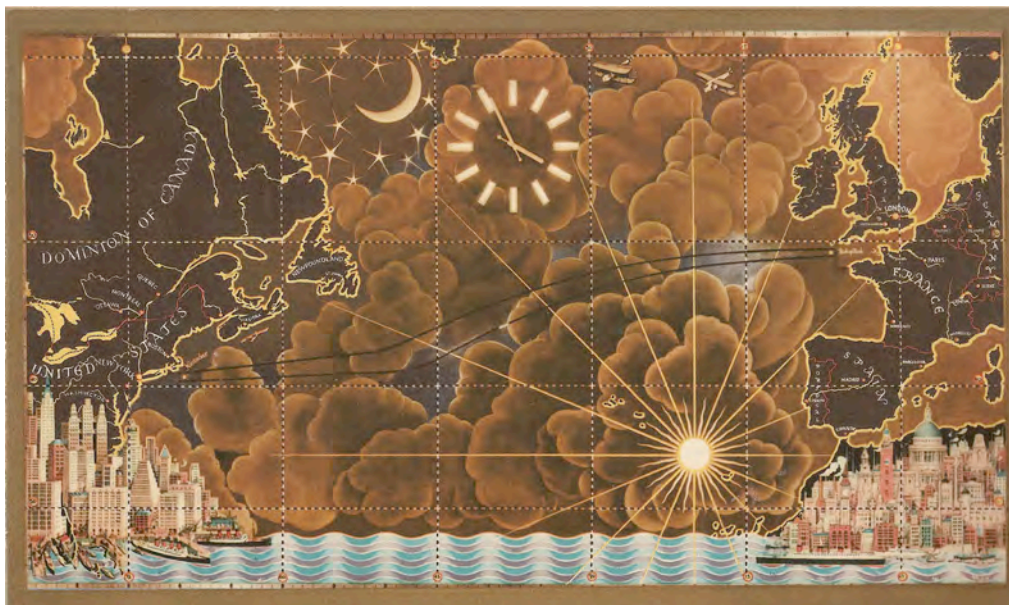
Max wearing his working smock, embroidered by Priscilla.

When Priscilla mentioned Max, it would always be with regret that I never knew him. She said how I would have loved his sense of humour and what fun he was to be with. She would talk of his fondness for outlandish practical jokes and I do remember, even as a child, feeling that I would not enjoy being on the receiving end of some of them. Priscilla also had her own, more gentle sense of humour. Although childless herself, she had a wonderfully tolerant attitude towards other people's children, which made her the ideal aunt. She could remain calm and serene under the most trying circumstances.



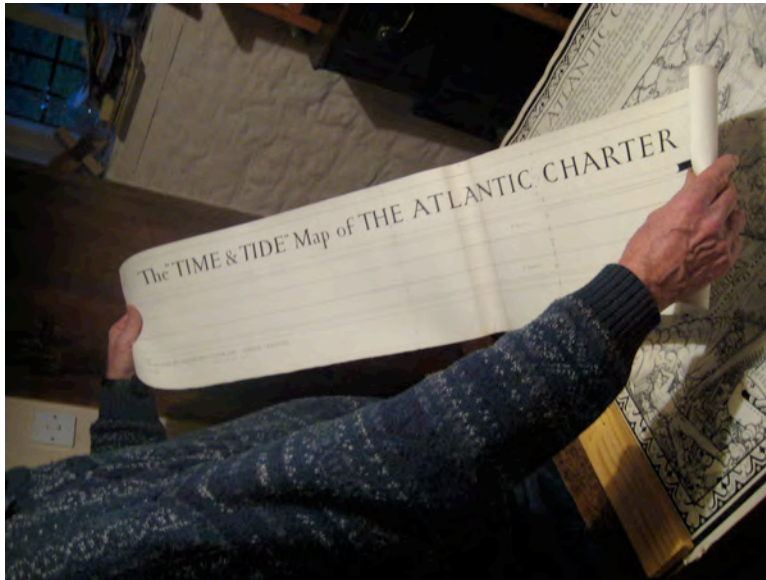
Priscilla on a camping holiday in Wales in 1961 with her cat Rufus.

This is an image of her in later life, which I'm particularly fond of. When she died in 1984, my wife and I inherited her cottage and began to discover a wealth of Max's material, mostly tightly rolled maps. They were stuffed into drawers, tucked away on top of wardrobes and hidden in dusty cupboards under the eaves. Along with the maps were sketchbooks, architectural plans, book illustrations, inscriptions and a host of other items. Daunted by the sheer quantity of material, we had no sense of what to do with it all. We did wonder about a modest exhibition to help to revive interest in Max's work, but had no idea where or how this might happen.



Map of the North Atlantic in the first class dining room of the Cunard liner Queen Mary.

In 2003, I made a television programme about the liner Queen Mary, which involved visiting the preserved ship in California. There was Max's gigantic map of the North Atlantic, still in its original setting in the first class dining room, signed and dated 1936. On my return, a search through various cupboards at home produced the original draft for the artwork and photographs of the work in progress.



Original artwork for the Atlantic Charter map.

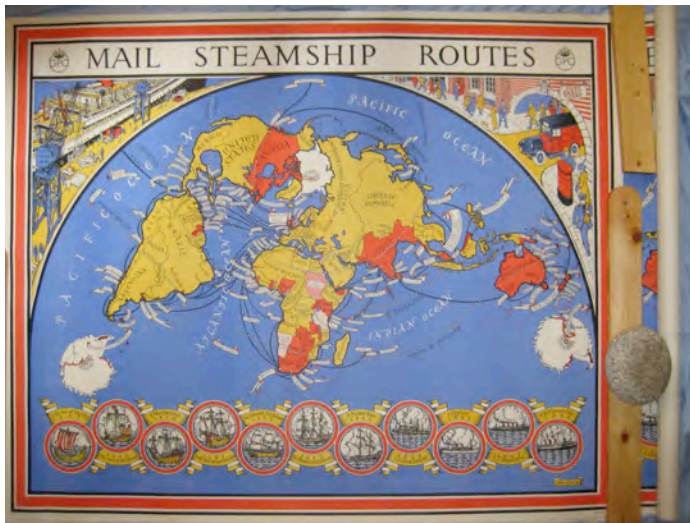
In a roll marked 'valuable', we also found the original pen-and-ink artwork for the Atlantic Charter Map, which I remembered from childhood. When we showed it to our friend, the celebrated illustrator John Vernon Lord, he at once saw the skill and planning that had gone into its creation. When we explained that this was just one example of the dozens of works we had discovered, he at once suggested contacting Bruce Brown, his colleague at Brighton University, about the possibility of mounting an exhibition.

Bruce was already aware of Max's work and his response to the proposal was an enthusiastic 'yes'. The result was 'Out of the Shadows', a detailed account of the life of Max Gill and the first-ever retrospective exhibition of his wide-ranging talents.



Max working on the Queen Mary map panels 1936.

But there's another key player in the story. Caroline Walker is Max Gill's great niece. While we were pondering the possibility of an exhibition, she was busy researching a biography of her great uncle. When Ditchling museum put her in touch with us and she came to see what material we had, it was like uncovering a hoard of buried treasure!



GPO map of Mail Steamship Routes revealed for the first time, having been tightly rolled for over 60 years. The stone weight and wooden batten are to keep it from springing back.

Out came roll after roll of maps, plans, sketches, book covers, etc, all of which were carefully photographed by Caroline, and catalogued by my wife Angela. Most of the maps had not seen the light of day for more than sixty years and the colours were as fresh as the day they had been printed. Out came my aunt's diaries, filled with vivid descriptions of her life with Max and of his character. The intervening years rolled away and my mysterious uncle began to take on a definite form at last.



Max newly arrived in London at the start of his career. This was the view from his studio in Lincoln's Inn.

Born in a gas-lit Victorian world of horse-drawn traffic, he lived through two world wars and saw the coming of the electronic age, the jet age and the atomic age. He witnessed the decline and fall of the British Empire and the emergence of America as the new world superpower. Much of the work that we discovered reflected and documented this period of dramatic change with an immediacy rarely found in the history books. We finally began to realise the importance of what we had been living with for more than twenty years. The record of Max that my aunt had so carefully preserved had become a valuable 'archive' documenting the life and work of a remarkable artist.