When I was ten years old, I found myself captivated by the elegant hands on the cover of a small paperback novel called *Wise Child*, written by Monica Furlong. The hands belonged to two figures – a woman with intense eyes, one arm cradling a bouquet of spindly, dried-out wildflowers, the other resting protectively on the shoulder of a dark-haired girl, whose own hands open to reveal what appears to be a piece of a mask. I read and enjoyed the book, but what stayed with me most was not its characters or plot, but the cover which I found hauntingly beautiful.

A year or two later, another paperback volume caught my eye while browsing the local library – *Sabriel*, by Garth Nix. Again, a woman on the cover caused me to linger over the volume. She, too, had dark, wild hair and powerful hands, which held a sword and a bell as she faced off against a shadowy creature that lurked behind her left shoulder. I knew those hands, just as I recognized the otherworldly grace at play in the picture’s muted colors and intricate patterns. As I would later come to learn, both were trademarks of illustrator duo Leo and Diane Dillon.

This early fascination with the Dillons’ work, coupled with the fact that their art graced the covers of many of my favorite books, eventually evolved into the desire to collect their work. I knew the Dillons’ art primarily from fantasy novels for young readers, but it didn’t take me long to learn that their body of work was far more extensive. Just as many lovers of science fiction and fantasy know the Dillons from their work on iconic book covers, children’s book aficionados know them from their illustrations in classics like Verna Aardema’s *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People’s Ears* and Margaret Musgrove’s *Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions*, for which the pair won consecutive Caldecott medals in 1976 and 1977 (and are still the only illustrators ever to have done so).
As I continued to delve into the Dillon archive, I learned that they were also regularly employed to produce covers for literary bigwigs like James Baldwin, Virginia Hamilton, and Isabelle Allende – and that’s not to mention their work in the 1960s and 70s creating covers for pulpy paperback editions of Chaucer and Shakespeare. In all, their published output comprises more than forty picture books and countless books for which they have provided cover or interior illustrations. And “countless” is barely an exaggeration; if there exists anywhere a comprehensive list of the Dillons’ work, it must be in a personal artists’ archive, and has not been made public.

Some might find the idea of collecting without knowing exactly what you’re looking for daunting, but, for me, it’s actually one of the things that makes collecting their work so much fun. I often scout book sales for Dillon titles without having any idea what I’m looking for. A hardcover? A paperback? A picture book? Of course, I sometimes come across titles that I’m already familiar with, but the real shot of adrenaline comes with the shock of recognition that floods through me when I identify the Dillons’ work on a book I have never heard of before. This is just what occurred when I stumbled onto a hardcover book club edition of John Brunner’s *The Jagged Orbit* from 1969 at a convention booth giving away old science fiction books. The Dillons were contracted by Ace – the publisher of *The Jagged Orbit* – from 1967-1971 to create covers for their Science Fiction Special Series, but until stumbling onto my copy, I had seen no record of these illustrations being used for any hardcover editions, book club or otherwise. There is a feeling serendipity that accompanies every new Dillon discovery I make; collecting their work perfectly epitomizes that old book-hunting adage, “You never know what you might find.”
The thrill of the hunt is heightened by the fact that the Dillons’ work is unsigned on many of their early book covers – meaning that the burden of identification is left solely to my own abilities – and because the Dillons’ style evolved drastically over the course of their career. In the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, the Dillons were known for an innovative technique that allowed their paintings to appear as though they were produced using woodblock printing. This method, while striking, is a long way from the elegant lines I so admired in *Wise Child* and *Sabriel*: the images tend to be more monochromatic, though they still possess a dark palette, and render their subjects using stylized geometric shapes. Over the past three or four years, as I have grown my collection, I have also been training my eye to see what others don’t, and nothing else puts a spring in a book collector’s step quite like that feeling.

While my interest in the Dillons grew from work produced to accompany fantastic fiction – like their 1969 cover for Ursula K. LeGuin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (another Ace Science Fiction Special) and their now-iconic cover for the 1979 hardcover reissue of Madeline L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time* – learning more about their lives and work has interested me in another aspect of their oeuvre: its engagement with race and the African and African American literary traditions.

Leo and Diane met at Parson’s School for Design in New York City in the early 1950s. According to interviews given by the artists later in life, their attraction to each other’s work was instant; romance was slower to follow, as the pair found themselves competing to be at the top of their class. By 1957, the couple was married, though their early years were not without their share of challenges. Mostly, the pair was working out a system that would allow them to successfully collaborate for over fifty years, until Leo’s death in
2012 – a system that would eventually become their concept of the “third artist,” who was neither Leo nor Diane but emerged from them both. But the young artists also had to navigate the challenges of being an interracial couple pre-Civil Rights Movement America.

Though the couple is notoriously private, generally sharing information only about their work rather than their personal lives, a 1981 book celebrating the Dillons’ work give a small glimpse into the difficulties the pair faced. In Byron Preiss’s *The Art of Leo & Diane Dillon*, Leo shares, “I always had the feeling that unless [clients] knew I was black we would be getting work under false pretense. If Diane went, I made it a point to show up…It raised a number of eyebrows, but we were still given work.” Rather than speak about their own experiences, the Dillons channeled them into their work; in 2002 joint interview, Diane stated, “We’re an interracial couple, and we decided early in our career that we wanted to represent all races and show people that were rarely seen in children’s books at the time.” This commitment is evident not only in their two Caldecott Award-winning picture books, but titles like Virginia Hamilton’s *The People Could Fly* (1985), Leontyne Price’s *Aïda* (1990), and their own works *Jazz on a Saturday Night* (2007) and *Rap a Tap Tap: Here's Bojangles—Think of That* (2002), as well as several others.

Lately, I’ve also become interested in the paperback covers they produced for writers like James Baldwin (*Nobody Knows My Name*, 1978 and *Going to Meet the Man*, 1976) and Chinua Achebe (*No Longer At Ease* and *Things Fall Apart*, both 1969). I’ve also read that some of their work was taken up and used by the Black Power movement in the 1960s, though I have not been able to find any record of which of their works was used, or in what manner. As my collection grows, I hope to discover more works which speak to the Dillons’ dedication to inclusion in picture books and on book covers.
I began collecting the Dillons because I find their artwork unparalleled – even today, I still find myself enchanted looking through their illustrations for works like Ray Bradbury’s *Switch on the Night* (1992) and Claire Martin’s *The Race of the Golden Apples* (1991). My interest in this collection has grown ever stronger as I have learned how influential and groundbreaking their career has been both for the field of illustration and the young readers who saw themselves for the first time on a Dillon book cover. In the future, I hope not only to discover more hidden treasures during my book scouting expeditions, but also locate prints of their work (now scarce) that were produced in the 1980s and 90s. After all, I can think of nothing more lovely than filling my walls with the art of Leo and Diane Dillon – but I can’t bring myself to cut up copies of their picture books in order to do it!
Bibliography

Picture Books:


Interior of *The Goblin and the Empty Chair*


Other:


“Never Come Midnight” by Christopher Grimm
“Bridle Shower” by Lloyd Biggle Jr.
“The Last Letter” by Fritz Leiber

“The Back of Our Heads” by Stephen Barr
“Bullet with his Name” by Fritz Leiber


Wish List:


   This is the first book cover commission the Dillons received. Since this is where it all began, I would be thrilled to locate a copy.


   *The Ring in the Prairie* is the first picture book that Leo and Diane Dillon illustrated. Like their cover for *The Canterbury Tales*, this is a landmark text for the duo, marking the beginning of their foray into a long and storied career illustrating children’s books.


   While I know the Dillons began work on this series in 1963, I don’t know which plays they created covers for, or how many covers were created in all. This is one of the fun “scavenger hunt” goals collecting the Dillons allows. While I do sometimes buy items online to add to my collection, Googling random paperback editions of Shakespeare plays from the early 1960s is unlikely to yield the results I want. I look forward to the day when I come across one of these titles at a library sale or used book shop.