

Carving a Legacy: The Identity of Jacob Epstein (1880-1959)

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the efforts which were made during the life of Jacob Epstein and at the time his death to fix a particular identity that has thus shaped his legacy. The question that this thesis wishes to address is: how was Jacob Epstein's legacy carved?

The first part of this thesis, entitled 'Remembering Epstein', seeks to unpack and examine the written discourse surrounding his death. This will be done by assessing the themes, debates and considerations of Epstein's position in the history of art and will focus on four case studies: the obituaries and memorial pieces that were written immediately after Epstein's death; a memorial service that was held at St. Paul's Cathedral; a failed proposal to turn Epstein's home studio into a museum; and the organisation and critical reception of the Epstein Memorial Exhibition held in Edinburgh in 1961. The second part of this thesis, entitled 'Writing a Legacy', attends to the analysis of texts which were written about or by Epstein throughout his career. This will be done through a close examination of those texts which have come to shape our understanding of Epstein's place in the history of art and will focus on five case studies: the writings of T. E. Hulme; *Epstein* by Bernard Van Dieren; a series of interviews with Epstein by Arnold Haskell, entitled *The Sculptor Speaks*; Epstein's role in protesting against repairs to ancient sculpture in the British Museum; and a chapter entitled 'My Place in Sculpture' from the 1954 edition of Epstein's autobiography. The final part of the thesis, entitled 'Selected Works', will focus on six separate sculptures as case studies for assessing different aspects of Epstein's artistic output. The works which will be examined: *The Rock Drill* (1913), *The Risen Christ* (1917-19), *Madonna and Child* (1926-27), *Genesis* (1929), *Albert Einstein* (1933), and *Madonna and Child* (1950-52).

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Carving a Legacy: The Identity of Jacob Epstein

Prologue: Biographical Sketch

Jacob Epstein was born of Russian-Polish Jewish immigrant parents in Hester Street on New York's Lower East Side on November 10th 1880. Epstein recalled fondly his memories of childhood in his autobiography:

My earliest recollections are of the teeming East Side where I was born.

This Hester Street and its surrounding streets were the most densely populated of any city on earth, and looking back at it, I realise what I owe to its unique and crowded humanity. Its swarms of Russians, Poles, Italians, Greeks, and Chinese lived as much on the street as in the crowded tenements, and the sights, sounds, and smells had the vividness and sharp impact of an Oriental city.¹

Epstein's family had prospered in America; his father had owned a number of tenements.

Epstein wrote that 'we had Polish Christian servants' who lived in the household 'who still retained peasant habits'.² He wrote that, as a child, he spent many years sick at home, and during that time, spent hours alone reading and drawing, as he recalled:

My reading and drawing drew me away from ordinary interests, and I lived a great deal in the world of imagination feeding upon any book that fell into my hands. When I got hold of a really thick book like Hugo's *Les Misérables* I was happy, and would go off into a corner and devour it.³

At school, Epstein was interested in Literature and History, but found Mathematics and Grammar to be a bore. Epstein enrolled in the Art Students' League in New York, and took evening classes in life-drawing and began to learn how to sculpt under the instruction of George Gray Barnard, but noted that his 'main studies remained in the quarter where [he] was born and brought up',⁴ explaining that: 'Every type could be found here, and for the purpose of drawing, I would follow a character until his appearance sufficiently impressed itself upon my mind for me to make a drawing.'⁵

¹ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, (Hulton Press, 1955), p.1

² Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.1

³ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.2

⁴ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.2

⁵ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.2

By 1901, Epstein had decided to become a sculptor and set his sights on Paris under the romantic notion that Paris was the centre of the art world. Epstein turned down the offer of an apprenticeship with Thomas Eakins and accepted a commission to illustrate Hutchins Hapgood's book, *The Spirit of the Ghetto*. Epstein's illustrations cover what he perceived to be the everyday life of the Jewish quarter in the Lower East Side of New York. Epstein later wrote that:

The money I earned enabled me to get to Paris, but I went to Paris as a sculptor, and not as an illustrator or painter. What turned me from drawing to sculpture was the desire to see things in the round, and to study form in its different aspects from varying angles, and also the love of the purely physical side of sculpture. I felt here a full outlet for my energy, both physical and mental, that was far more satisfying to me than drawing.⁶

With the money he raised from this commission, Epstein set sail for Paris in 1902 where he enrolled at the *École des Beaux-Arts* only four days after his arrival. He remarked that he did not enjoy his time at the *École des Beaux-Arts*, explaining that he was treated with suspicion by other students because he was a foreigner. Epstein noted that: 'The "foreigners" were few and unpopular, and it was not unusual for a French student to turn on a foreigner and ask him why he didn't stay in his own country.'⁷ As well as the hostilities and occasional fights he would get into with his fellow students, Epstein found the teaching at the *École des Beaux-Arts* incredibly limiting. He remarked that most of his studies were spent modelling from life, drawing from casts of Michelangelo sculptures and carving copies of Italian Renaissance sculptures. Epstein felt that he was not being taught any new skills in his classes, stating that: 'there was practically no instruction, and we were pretty well left alone to do what we pleased.'⁸ After six months at the *École des Beaux-Arts*, Epstein grew weary of the academic style of teaching and hierarchical nature of the institution, and after finding his work destroyed by a fellow student, he gathered up his clay and looked for another school with a less academic approach. Epstein remarked of the experience of academic art teaching, that it

⁶ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, (William Heinemann Limited, 1931), p.13

⁷ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.13

⁸ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.14

‘was good training, although one learnt more from capable students than from the masters’, but he disliked the expressive limitations the academy placed upon an artist, writing that: ‘There are infinite modes of expression in the world of art, and to insist that only by one road can the artist attain his ends is to limit him. The academic mind violates this freedom of the artist to express himself as he knows best.’⁹ Soon after quitting the *École des Beaux-Arts*, Epstein enrolled into the *Académie Julian* which had fewer students than the *École des Beaux-Arts*. At first Epstein found the school to be an improvement in comparison with the rigid style of the *École des Beaux-Arts*. However, Epstein again grew weary of their style of teaching, especially the aspect where tutors would provide criticisms of each student’s work. Epstein wrote that:

After one or two criticisms from the master at Julian’s, I gave up taking criticism, and in my impatience always covered my figure when the master came in. He noticed me doing this one day and referred in an audible tone to “ce sauvage Américain”.¹⁰

In 1904, Epstein visited Florence and London and after seeing the British Museum decided to move to London. Epstein remarked that:

When thinking of leaving Paris, I determined to go to London, and see if I could settle down and work there. First impressions of the English were of a people with easy and natural manners, and great courtesy, and a visit to the British Museum settled the matter for me, as I felt like I would like to have a very good look round at leisure.¹¹

It was also around this time that Epstein began to collect African art, with many of the works in his personal collection being purchased by the British Museum after his death.

It was on his first visit to London that Epstein met Margaret Dunlop, the woman he would soon marry and who would be Epstein’s wife and manager until her death in March, 1947. On his arrival to London, Epstein settled for a short time at 219 Stanhope Street in Camden

⁹ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.14

¹⁰ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.16

¹¹ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.18

Town. On impulse, he returned to New York, leaving after only a fortnight to return permanently to London.

Epstein set up studio in Fulham and worked over the next few years on honing his skills as a carver and modeller. Epstein wrote of the problems he faced while living in Fulham:

In these tumble-down studios in Fulham I was first made aware of the ludicrous snobbishness that artists were supposed to be free of. The other occupants of the studios were artists who were beginning their careers. [...] One day I heard that the landlady, who lived on the premises, had been requested by the artists to have me removed from the studios, as my clothes were somewhat too Bohemian for the place, not, in fact, respectable enough. [...] had it not been for the women artists in this beehive, who were all in my favour, I would have been given notice to quit "The Railway Accident", as it was called.¹²

During this period Epstein acquainted himself with painter August John, draughtsman Muirhead Bone, painter Francis Dodd and the members of the New English Art Club. He produced the relief *Mother and Child* (1905-07), and portrait busts *Italian Peasant Woman with a Shawl* (1907) and *Romily John* (1907)

In 1907, Epstein was commissioned, through the suggestion of Francis Dodd, by architect Charles Holden to carve a series of eighteen over-life-size allegorical figures for the new British Medical Association headquarters, to be built on The Strand, London. It was working on these carvings that catapulted Epstein into the fray of controversy. From being known only to a close circle of friends, Epstein became the most famous sculptor in Britain, and remained so until his death in 1959.

On accepting the commission, Epstein moved to a larger studio on Cheyne Walk and set to work on the eighteen sculptures. His excitement and enthusiasm for the project led him later to say that: 'I had been like a hound on a leash, and now I was suddenly set free'.¹³ Epstein

¹² Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.19

¹³ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.21

worked on the figures for fourteen months. He described the series to Arnold Haskell in *The Sculptor Speaks*, a recollection of conversations between Haskell and Epstein in 1931:

The figures Represent:

1. (At the East End of Strand front.) “Primal Energy”—man blowing the breath of life into an atom.
2. “Form Emerging from Chaos”—a man holding a mass of rock in the midst of which is vaguely shown the form of a child.
3. “Hygenia” [*sic*]¹⁴ —the Goddess of Health, with a cup and a serpent.
4. “Chemical Research”—a man holding a retort.
5. “Academic Research”—a figure examining a scroll.
6. “The Brain”—a figure with a winged skull.
7. “Infancy”—an old woman holding an infant.
8. “Youth”—the figure of a young man with arms raised.
9. “Manliness”—a virile figure.
10. “Maternity”—a mother and child.

The other eight figures represent youth and maidenhood.¹⁵

As soon as the fourth statue was erected upon the building, the media storm began. Unluckily, or perhaps luckily for Epstein, housed directly opposite the British Medical Association Building was the National Vigilance Association, a group of self-styled moral guardians. It was the arrival of *Maternity* (1908) which sparked hostilities. Offended by the frank nudity of *Maternity*, the National Vigilance Association called in the Press and the police in an effort to get the work removed or censored. *The Evening Standard* began a campaign against the series, criticising *Maternity* for its indecency. Richard Cork, probably rightly, pointed out that: ‘Without *The Evening Standard*’s prompting, the probability is that nobody would have considered Epstein’s statues indecent at all.’¹⁶ A multitude of letters and articles were written, and protests were mounted from either side of the debate. Suffice to say, the sculptures remained in place until the building was sold to the Rhodesian government in 1934. The sculptures were subsequently mutilated on ‘safety grounds’ in 1937.

¹⁴ The name should be spelt ‘Hygieia’

¹⁵ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, pp.17-18

¹⁶ Cork, Richard, ‘The British Medical Association Building’ in, Silber, Evelyn, and Friedman, Terry, *Jacob Epstein Sculpture and Drawings*, (The Henry Moore Centre for the Study of Sculpture, 1989), p.106

It was off the back of the controversy surrounding the British Medical Association Building statues that commissions for portraits started to be requested. His portraits, *Euphemia Lamb* (1908), *Romily John* (1909), *Mrs Ambrose McEvoy* (1909-10), *Lady Gregory* (1910) and *Nan – The Dreamer* (1911), were completed. *Mrs Ambrose McEvoy* was sold to Johannesburg art Gallery (the first of Epstein's works to be purchased by a public collection) in 1911. *Nan* was purchased by the Tate Gallery a year later. During this same period, Epstein produced a number of uncommissioned allegorical carvings including *Maternity* (1910), *Sun God* (1910), *Sun Goddess Crouching* (1910) and *Sun Worshipper* (1910).

In 1910, Epstein was naturalised as a British citizen. During this year, he exhibited his work at the Allied Artists Association and at the Whitechapel Gallery. He became close friends with mason and stone carver Eric Gill, who was beginning to experiment with sculpture. During this period, Epstein and Gill made plans for an artists' commune. The scheme would incorporate a temple and herald a new age of religious worship. Eric Gill wrote of the plan that: 'Epstein & I have got a great scheme of doing some colossal figures together (as a contribution to the world), a sort of twentieth-century Stonehenge'.¹⁷ This 'great scheme' never came to fruition due to the fact that Epstein and Gill lacked the funds for such a project.

During this period, Charles Holden commissioned Epstein for another grand work; this time, to carve the tomb for Oscar Wilde. Epstein wrote in his autobiography that:

I had only just finished the British Medical Association figures, and this important commission, following immediately after, was a matter of some excitement. It took some time to get started on the work. I made sketches and carried them out, I was dissatisfied and scrapped quite completed work. Finally I determined on the present design and I went to Derbyshire to the Hopton Wood stone quarries where I saw an immense block which had just been quarried preparatory to the cutting it up into thin slabs for wall-facings. I bought this monolith, weighing twenty tons, on the spot, and had it transported to my studio. I began work immediately and without hesitation continued to labour at it for

¹⁷ Eric Gill to William Rothenstein, September 25th, 1910. In, Shewing, Walter, (ed.), *The Letters of Eric Gill*, (London, 1947), pp.32-33

nine months. I carved a flying demon-angel across the face, a symbolic work of combined simplicity and ornate decoration, and no doubt influenced by antique carving.¹⁸

It was during this period that Epstein's relationship with Gill disintegrated and he became acquainted with poet and painter Wyndham Lewis, sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, and with the poets and critics Thomas Hulme and Ezra Pound. In 1912, the *Tomb for Oscar Wilde* was shipped to France to be placed in Père Lachaise cemetery, Paris. Epstein arrived in Paris shortly after the tomb's arrival to find it covered with tarpaulin and kept under twenty-four hour guard. Although well received by the British Press, controversy had arisen in the French Press; the letter writers and protests began in earnest. The supporters of Epstein were again successful and the work was eventually unveiled in 1914 to a hostile reception. During the six months that Epstein spent in Paris, he met Picasso and Brancusi, and spent some time trying to find a studio to share with Modigliani. On his return to Britain, in November, he moved out of his London studio and moved to Pett Level, Sussex.

During 1913, Epstein worked between Pett Level and London on some of his most radical and forward-looking works: including *Doves* (1912-15), statues of *Venus* (1912-15), *Mother and Child* (1912-15), *The Rock Drill* (1913), and his figures in 'Flenite'. Epstein also became involved in The London Group of artists.

In 1914, Epstein's work featured in the Jewish section of the *Twentieth Century Art: A Review of Modern Movements* exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery. During the same year, Epstein contributed drawings to the first issue of Wyndham Lewis's Vorticist publication, *BLAST*. Included within *BLAST* was the Vorticist manifesto, which was signed by a number of artists, many of them members of The London Group, with the notable exceptions of Jacob Epstein and painter David Bomberg.

¹⁸ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.51

With the outbreak of the First World War, Epstein continued working. In 1915, his friend and fellow sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska was killed in the trenches. Ezra Pound published a memorial to Gaudier. Epstein harboured resentment towards the way in which the merits of Gaudier's work had been exaggerated after his death, later remarking that:

Lately, he has become a legend and when that happens, although a man's work may increase in value from the sales-room point of view, its artistic importance is apt to be mis-stated. [...] Gaudier [is] beginning to be celebrated as the hero of an extraordinary romance, and known to thousands who have never seen his drawing or a piece of sculpture. I would not compare him as an artist either with Van Gogh or Gauguin, but the parallel of the legend exists. Gaudier did some very remarkable work in the short time allowed him, and would have certainly achieved something really big if he had not been killed. A great part of his life was spent finding himself artistically, and he was greatly influenced by all he saw. Chinese art in particular. He took to carving after admiring a work he saw in my studio one day and did some of his finest work in that medium. I knew him very well; the legend that has been created around him is a distorted one that does not show the man well.¹⁹

In the following year, Epstein produced portraits of *T. E. Hulme* (1915), *Admiral Lord Fisher* (1915), *Mrs. Jacob Epstein with Earrings* (1915), *James Muirhead Bone* (1915) and *The Tin Hat* (1915). It could be argued that his works the *Tin Hat* and *Admiral Lord Fisher* were an effort to lay the groundwork for Epstein to become an official war artist if he was ever enlisted.

In 1917, Epstein exhibited at the Leicester Galleries for the first time. The Leicester Galleries would remain Epstein's primary dealer until after his death. During this year, Epstein began modelling *The Risen Christ*, work on which had to be postponed as he was enlisted to the 38th Jewish Battalion. Campaigns to keep Epstein out of the army altogether on the grounds of 'national importance' and campaigns for Epstein to be appointed as Official War Artist were both unsuccessful. The same year also saw the death of Epstein's close friend and intellectual ally Thomas Hulme, who was killed in the trenches. It was at this point that Epstein turned his

¹⁹ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, pp.133-134

back on the abstraction and radicalism of the previous years, never creating abstract work again.

During this period, Epstein had an affair with actress Meum Lindsell, who became pregnant and bore his first child, Peggy Jean who was subsequently raised in the Epstein household, with Margaret acting as the child's mother. During this year, Epstein produced his first modelled self-portrait *Self-Portrait with a Storm Cap*.

The following year, Epstein was stationed in Plymouth with the Army. The night before his regiment was to be shipped off to Palestine, Epstein went absent without leave. According to the reports, he was found wandering aimlessly around Dartmoor. Epstein was placed in a secure hospital and discharged in the July. During his time incarcerated, Epstein produced a number of portraits in clay and on paper of other soldiers and nurses at the facility. Upon being discharged from the Army, Epstein went back to work producing portraits of Meum Lindsell (*Mask of Meum* (1918) and *Meum with a Fan* (1918)). He also spent many hours producing portraits of Peggy Jean.

Epstein returned to public life in 1920 when he exhibited his completed *The Risen Christ* at the Leicester Galleries to much hostility and controversy. Epstein described the work as a complex war memorial:

It stands and accuses the world for its grossness, inhumanity, cruelty and beastliness, for the First World War. [...] The Jew – the Galilean – condemns our wars, and warns us that “Shalom, Shalom”, must still be the watchword between man and man.²⁰

Epstein also produced his second and final self-portrait, *Self-Portrait with a Beard* (1920). The work was in stark contrast to his *Self-Portrait with a Storm Cap* produced only three

²⁰ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.102

years previously. This year also saw the publication of the first monograph on Epstein's work by musician and composer Bernard van Dieren.

The following year, Epstein was featured in Kington Parkes's book *The Sculpture of To-Day* and in Lorado Taft's *Modern Tendencies in Sculpture*. Epstein began an affair with a young music student, Kathleen Garman, who after the death of Margaret Epstein in 1947 became Epstein's second wife. Epstein and Kathleen remained in a relationship until Epstein's death in 1959. In the same year, Epstein also met Henry Moore for the first time. During this period Epstein produced portraits of painter *Jacob Kramer* (1921), his *First Portrait of Kathleen* (1921) and continued to make portraits of his daughter Peggy Jean.

In 1922, Epstein was commissioned to produce a memorial in Hyde Park to the late naturalist W. H. Hudson. Over the next year, Epstein worked on a number of ideas for the project, finally settling on a depiction of Rima from Hudson's book *Green Mansions*. Epstein was particularly interested in the moment of Rima's death. Talking to Arnold Haskell he explained that:

The particular passage that appealed to me was the description of how Rima met her death:

"What a distance to fall, through burning leaves and smoke, like a white bird shot dead with a poisoned arrow, swift and straight into that sea of flame below."

Although I read it and was moved by what I read, it is obviously impossible to give an illustration of the book in sculpture that would be generally pleasing to all its readers and at the same time good as sculpture.²¹

Rima was unveiled in 1925 by the Prime Minister and was the subject of the most hostile reception of any of Epstein's works. Anti-Semitic letters were published in the Press and questions were raised in Parliament. An unsuccessful campaign was launched to have the work removed.

²¹ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, pp.28-29

In 1924, Epstein produced a portrait of the author *Joseph Conrad* (1924) and was rejected as a candidate for the Chair of Sculpture at the Royal College of Art. On July 1st, Kathleen Garman bore Epstein's first son, Theodore.

In the following year, Epstein was introduced by painter Matthew Smith to the model Sunita. Epstein saw Sunita as 'of that eternal Oriental type'²² upon whom he would base a number of works including *Madonna and Child* (1926-27) and *Lucifer* (1944-45). Epstein also produced a number of portrait busts and drawings of her.

In 1926, Epstein exhibited his work *The Visitation* (1926-27) under the rather ambiguous title of *A Study* in an effort to avoid any controversy. Epstein explained that: 'When I exhibited the work at the Leicester Galleries, wishing to avoid controversy, I called it "A Study". By this disguise I succeeded for once in evading the critics, always ready to bay and snap at a work.'²³ His tactic was successful and the work was purchased by public subscription for the Tate Gallery. On August 25th, Kathleen gave birth to their second child, Kitty. It was during this year that Epstein produced his first *Madonna and Child* (1926-27), a work which he would exhibit in America a year later.

In 1927, Epstein visited New York for four months. During this time he exhibited a number of works including the aforementioned *Madonna and Child* (1926-27) at the Ferargil Gallery. The *Madonna and Child* was purchased by sculptor Sally Ryan and loaned to the Museum of Modern Art until it was donated to the Riverside Church in New York in 1959. During Epstein's stay in New York, he executed a number of portraits including the musician *Paul Robeson* (1927). At the time of Epstein's visit, he was called as an expert witness at the trial

²² Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.123

²³ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.112

actioned by US customs to ascertain whether Brancusi's *Bird in Space* was a work of art or whether it should be charged a customs charge on the basis that it was considered to be manufactured metal. The case was won by Brancusi.

Epstein returned to England in January 1928 and moved to a new studio at Hyde Park Gate, London, where he remained for the rest of his life. Shortly after returning to London, Epstein received news from Margaret, who had remained in New York to tie up any loose ends and clear out their rented apartment, that Peggy Jean had been temporarily blinded by some steel debris. On their return to England, Epstein produced another portrait of Peggy Jean, this time in her state of illness: *The Sick Child* (1928). Reginald Wilenski remarked in his book *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture* that: 'The modern sculptors regard *The Sick Child* as a masterpiece but not as a work of sculpture. They regard it as a pictorial masterpiece of the character of a genre portrait by Rembrandt.'²⁴ That year Epstein's work was featured in Stanley Casson's book, *Some Modern Sculptors*. Epstein was also commissioned by Charles Holden for a third time, this time to carve *Night and Day* as part of the 'Temple of the Winds' project on Holden's London Underground Headquarters at St. James's Park underground station.

In 1929, Epstein completed carving *Genesis* (1929) a work which Epstein described thus:

I felt the necessity for giving expression to the profoundly elemental in motherhood, the deep down instinctive female, without the trappings and charm of what is known as feminine; *my* feminine would be the eternal primeval feminine, the mother of the race. [...] She is serene and majestic, an elemental force of nature. How a figure like this contrasts with our coquetries and fanciful erotic nudes of modern sculpture. At one blow generations of sculptors and sculpture are shattered and sent flying into the limbo of triviality, and my "Genesis", with her fruitful womb, confronts our enfeebled generation. Within her, Man takes on new hope for the future. The generous earth gives herself up to us, meets of masculine desires, and says: "Rejoice, I am Fruitfulness, I am Plentitude."²⁵

²⁴ Wilenski, Reginald H., *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture*, (Faber and Faber, 1932), p.112

²⁵ Epstein, *An Autobiography*, p.139



The Sick Child, (1928)

Night and Day was unveiled to a mixed reception. Epstein's drawings of his various models including Sunita were published with an introduction by Hubert Wellington in *Jacob Epstein: Seventy-Five Drawings*. Epstein also began a series of illustrations for the Old Testament which he completed in 1931.

During 1930, Epstein produced a number of portraits including his *First Portrait of Lydia* (1930), *Betty* (1930) and *Israfel* (Sunita) (1930). Epstein at this time agreed to Arnold Haskell chronicling their conversations for his forthcoming book on Epstein, *The Sculptor Speaks*.

In 1931, *Genesis* was exhibited at the Leicester Galleries to a hostile reception, making *Genesis* the most controversial of his non-commissioned carvings to date. *Genesis* was toured around the country by Alfred Bossom, M.P., to raise money for various charitable causes, much to the displeasure of Epstein who declared that: 'I am not interested in being regarded

as a benefactor of mankind. I am an artist, [...] The reference to charities does not concern me in the least.'²⁶ Epstein returned to carving his relief *Sun God* (1910) and carved *Primeval Gods* (1931) on the reverse side of the panel. Epstein was discussed in Kington Parkes's book, *The Art of Carved Sculpture*, with a chapter dedicated to the Temple of the Winds project. Arnold Haskell's *The Sculptor Speaks* was also published that year.

The following year, Epstein exhibited his series of illustrations for the Old Testament at the Redfern gallery, London to a mixed reception. L. B. Powell's monograph *Jacob Epstein* was published and Epstein was featured throughout Reginald Wilenski's *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture*. During the same year, Epstein carved *Woman Possessed* (1932) and *Elemental* (1932), and modelled two portraits of the aspiring artist Isobel Nicholas.

1933 saw Epstein return to his role as book illustrator, producing drawings for Muysheh Oyved's *The Book of Affinity*. Epstein also modelled a portrait of Albert Einstein, which was exhibited along with over a hundred watercolours of Epping Forest at Tooth's Gallery in London. *Albert Einstein* (1933), which was universally praised in the Press, was purchased for the Tate Gallery and featured in the 166th Royal Academy summer exhibition a year later. The critic of *The Times* remarked that:

We are inclined to think that this is one of his most successful heads, for reasons which bear upon the nature of his genius. Odd as it may sound, Mr. Epstein is not at his best with subjects who are naturally "sculptural" in type. He needs complete translation into forms of bronze. With its radiating halo of hair from off the forehead, and response between the upcurved mouth and forehead lines, the head is alive with expression and yet properly "stilled" as a work in sculpture.²⁷

A critic writing in *The Manchester Guardian* noted that it was a work of 'extraordinary vitality and vision, at once realistic and imaginative'.²⁸

²⁶ Anon., 'Epstein Unappeased' in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (16th December, 1931), p.9

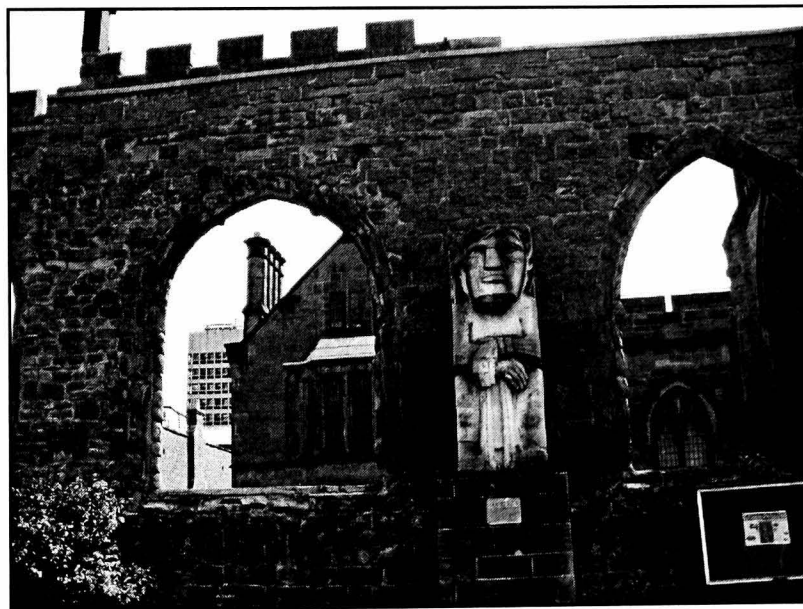
²⁷ Anon., 'Art Exhibition: Mr. Jacob Epstein' in, *The Times*, (December 8th, 1933), p.12

²⁸ Anon., 'Our London Correspondent' in, *The Manchester Guardian* (January 12, 1934), p.8

The following year, on January 24th, Isobel Nicholas gave birth to Epstein's second son Jackie, who was raised, along with Peggy Jean, by the Epsteins as their own child (Theodore and Kitty remained with their mother, Kathleen). During Isobel's pregnancy, Margaret wore a pillow underneath her clothes to give the illusion of pregnancy and lied about her age on Jackie's birth certificate to give the impression that she was the child's biological mother. That same year, Epstein began carving *Ecce Homo*, a large statue of Christ in white marble. Epstein described how challenging this carving was to produce:

This Subiaco block of marble, when I carved it, I found the toughest, most difficult piece of stone I had ever tackled. [...] Because of the hardness of the material I treated the work in a large way, with a juxtaposition of flat planes, always with a view to retaining the impression of the original block.²⁹

In 1935, *Ecce Homo* was exhibited to a mixed reception; the work was praised by the art critics and slammed by the religious Right. The statue remained unsold and stood in his studio until after his death; *Ecce Homo* now stands in the ruins of Coventry Cathedral.



Ecce Homo, (1934)

Epstein's statues for the British Medical Association Building again featured in the press after the Rhodesian government purchased the building and saw fit to mutilate the sculptures. Epstein protested to the Rhodesian High Commissioner, recalling the affair in his autobiography:

²⁹ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.145

An acrimonious discussion broke out and the High Commissioner aggressively declared that as they had paid for the building, they could do as they pleased with the statues. This gentleman expressed surprise that I should object to this, as I had been paid for my work and the statues no longer belonged to me. I had pointed out the vandalism of removing from a building a decoration which was a part of its fabric and which would mean the ruin of the statues.³⁰

By 1937, amid much public protest, the statues were all mutilated beyond repair. That same year, Epstein was featured, alongside Adolf Hitler and Winston Churchill, in a collection of essays by various authors, *Great Contemporaries*.

The following year Epstein carved *Consummatum Est* and produced a series of illustrations for Charles Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*.

In 1938, Epstein began work on his monumental *Adam* (1938-39). He was awarded an honorary degree at Aberdeen University alongside Henry Moore. The exhibition of illustrations for *Fleurs du Mal* at Tooth's Gallery in London was unsuccessful, producing very few sales.

In 1939, Epstein exhibited *Adam* along with a number of drawings of children in the Leicester Galleries. *Adam* was purchased by gold miner Charles Stafford and leased out to Lawrence Wright, a Blackpool showman. *Adam* was exhibited as a sideshow and was later sold to Louis Tussaud's waxworks as a permanent exhibit, to be joined later by *Consummatum Est*, *Jacob and the Angel* and *Genesis*.

A year later, Epstein began carving *Jacob and the Angel* (1940), which he exhibited at the Leicester Galleries in 1942. During 1940, Epstein also published his autobiography, the arrogantly titled *Let there be Sculpture!*

³⁰ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.30



The Leicester Galleries, (1939)

In 1942, Epstein was part of a two-man show at Temple Newsam House, Leeds, along with painter Matthew Smith. Robert Black's monograph on Epstein, *The Art of Jacob Epstein* was also published.

In 1944, Epstein began work on *Lucifer* (1944-45). Exhibited a year later at the Leicester Galleries, the work was refused as a gift by the Tate Gallery, the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. The work was eventually accepted by Birmingham City Art Gallery in 1947. Epstein remarked that, as regards 'the large winged figure in bronze which I called "Lucifer". I had worked on this with great concentration for the greater part of a year and showed it at an exhibition of my work at the Leicester Galleries where it remained unsold.'³¹

In 1946, Epstein modelled his portrait of *Winston Churchill* (1946), a work about which he later wrote: 'Unfortunately it was winter and the light was far from ideal and I felt that I had made no more than an interesting character study, but still hope to develop it should the

³¹ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.231

opportunity arise.³² In the following year, his wife Margaret died and he began carving *Lazarus*.

In 1949, Epstein was commissioned to produce *Youth Advancing* for the Festival of Britain. Epstein discussed the work's conception in his autobiography, writing that: 'I conceived the idea of making a figure that would embody youthful courage and resolution and the result was the over life-size bronze entitled "Youth Advancing". The figure was gilded and placed over a sheet of water.'³³ He also produced one of his most vivid and well-received portrait busts, the composer *Ralph Vaughan Williams* (1949).

In 1950, Epstein was commissioned by architect Louis Osman to produce a *Madonna and Child* for the Convent of the Holy Child Jesus in Cavendish Square, London. Unveiled in 1953, Epstein said of the work:

No work of mine has brought so many tributes from so many diverse quarters. One which particularly pleased me by reason of its spontaneity was from a bus driver. Halting his bus as he passed the statue he suddenly saw me standing by and called out across the road, "Hi Governor, you've made a good job of it."³⁴

In 1951, Epstein modelled a portrait of poet T. S. Eliot and his completed *Lazarus* was exhibited in Battersea Park. Epstein also travelled to Philadelphia to make plans for the commission *Social Consciousness* in Fairmount Park, Philadelphia. Completed in 1953, *Social Consciousness* was described by Richard Buckle as 'Epstein's answer to the Statue of Liberty'.³⁵ Epstein remarked on the commission in his autobiography:

I was asked by Fairmount Park Art Association of Philadelphia to make a work with the somewhat baffling title of "Social Consciousness". In 1951, I went to Philadelphia to see the site and was greatly impressed by the fine natural surroundings of rocks and trees and river, and I realised that something on a heroic scale was called for. I planned a group of five figures, two of them thirteen feet in height, flanking a central figure with outstretched arms and upward glance "seated in the adamant of time". The theme of the group of two figures on the

³² Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.230

³³ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.234

³⁴ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.236

³⁵ Buckle, Richard, *Jacob Epstein: Sculptor*. (The World Publishing Company, 1963), p.368

right is the Healer succouring the down-fallen and on the left is the eternal Mother supporting future humanity.³⁶

1952 saw a major retrospective of Epstein's work at the Tate Gallery. The editor of *The Times* noted that in bringing together such an array of work it was possible to see that Epstein was not the most original or innovative of artists, and that there were other sculptors doing much finer work, and arguing that:

it is not only the passage of time, though this has certainly had its usual effect, which will make it difficult for many who visit the Tate Gallery to understand why he should have become such a focus of controversy. What he has done [...] is to remove the injustice often done to MR. EPSTEIN'S best work by his awkward reputation which had been thrust upon him.³⁷

In the same year, *Lazarus* was also unveiled in New College Chapel at Oxford University, where a year later Epstein received an honorary doctorate.

In 1953, Epstein was commissioned to produce *Christ in Majesty* for Llandaff cathedral and a full-length portrait of *Field Marshal Smuts* in Parliament Square, a work which was criticised for appearing awkward and ungainly. In the same year, Epstein also turned down membership of the Royal Society of British Sculptors citing their indifference to his statues of the British Medical Association Building being mutilated as the reason for rejecting the invite.

In 1954, Epstein was knighted at the request of Winston Churchill. During the same year Epstein began work on *Liverpool Resurgent* for Lewis's Store, a department store in Liverpool.

A year later, Epstein married his mistress Kathleen Garman, who would become Lady Epstein. *Social Consciousness* was unveiled in Philadelphia and Epstein received further public commissions for *St. Michael and the Devil* to be placed on the outer-wall of Basil

³⁶ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.237

³⁷ Anon., 'Mr. Epstein To-day' in, *The Times*, (September 25th, 1952), p.7

Spence's new Coventry Cathedral, and for the *Trade Union's Congress War Memorial*. The same year, Epstein re-issued his autobiography, under the less arrogant title of *An Autobiography*. The contents of the book are exactly the same as in *Let there be Sculpture!* with added notes, a chapter called 'My Place in Sculpture' and a postscript summarising some major events since the first edition.

In 1956, Epstein was commissioned to produce a portrait of *William Blake* for Westminster Abbey to mark the centenary of Blake's birth. The same year, *Liverpool Resurgent* and *Field Marshal Smuts* were unveiled.

A year later, *Christ in Majesty* was unveiled at Llandaff Cathedral to universal praise. The same year Epstein and his studio became the subject of a book of photographs by Geoffrey Ireland, with an introduction by Laurie Lee, *Jacob Epstein: A Camera Study of the Sculptor at Work*.

In 1958, Epstein was commissioned to produce a portrait of *H. R. H. Princess Margaret*; he also began work on his final group, *The Bowater House Group*.

On August 19th, 1959, Epstein completed *The Bowater House Group* and died in his home later that day. He was buried at Putney Vale Cemetery, with a memorial service held at St. Paul's Cathedral on 10th November.

* * *

Carving a Legacy:

Introduction

Over fifty years have now passed since the death of Jacob Epstein. At the time of his death in 1959, Epstein was one of the most well-known sculptors in Britain; today Epstein's position in the history of art is unclear. The question that this thesis wishes to address is: how was Jacob Epstein's legacy carved?

A legacy is a gift that a person or group leaves to future generations; the importance of that legacy can only be considered by the generations that follow. In this thesis we shall see the ways in which writers and critics related Epstein's work and identity to the drift of tradition. As the terms 'legacy' and 'tradition' are conceptually linked, much of the analysis that follows will be dedicated to Epstein's relationship to these terms. The purpose of this thesis is to examine the efforts which were made during his lifetime and at the time of his death to fix a particular identity of Epstein that has thus shaped his legacy.

This thesis is divided into three distinct, but related areas of enquiry. The first part of this thesis, entitled 'Remembering Epstein', seeks to unpack and examine the written discourse surrounding his death. This will be done by assessing the themes, debates and considerations of Epstein's position in the history of art and will focus on four case studies: the obituaries and memorial pieces that were written immediately after Epstein's death; a memorial service that was held at St. Paul's Cathedral; a failed proposal to turn Epstein's home studio into a museum; and the organisation and critical reception of the Epstein Memorial Exhibition held in Edinburgh in 1961. The second part of this thesis, entitled 'Writing a Legacy', attends to the analysis of texts which were written about or by Epstein throughout his career. This will be done through a close examination of those texts which have come to shape our

understanding of Epstein's place in the history of art and will focus on five case studies: the writings of T. E. Hulme; *Epstein* by Bernard Van Dieren; a series of interviews with Epstein by Arnold Haskell, entitled *The Sculptor Speaks*; Epstein's role in protesting against repairs to ancient sculpture in the British Museum; and a chapter entitled 'My Place in Sculpture' from the 1954 edition of Epstein's autobiography. The third part of the thesis, entitled 'Selected Works', will focus on six separate sculptures as case studies for assessing different aspects of Epstein's artistic output. The works which will be examined: *The Rock Drill* (1913), *The Risen Christ* (1917-19), *Madonna and Child* (1926-27), *Genesis* (1929), *Albert Einstein* (1933), and *Madonna and Child* (1950-52). As one can see, the works chosen for the third part of this thesis are presented chronologically with the intention of providing a variety of periods and styles of Epstein's work as a representative, but by no means exhaustive, account of Epstein's oeuvre. Where appropriate, this thesis will attend to a historically informed symbolic analysis of art works. An analysis of imagery and iconography can only go so far to explaining the meaning or intended meaning of a work of art. This will be done by analysing historical evidence, including, but not limited to: the statements (both public and private) that were made by the artist about a work; the contemporary critical reception of the work; and the meaning of the work as articulated by later scholars.

The approach adopted in this thesis is first and foremost a historical one.³⁸ A historical approach is interested in examining historical evidence, such as documents, interviews and works of art, to determine those moments when an attempt is made to construct the artist's legacy, or assert their identity in relation to tradition. Conclusions about such things as identity must be drawn from public records that are freely available to anyone who is interested in verifying and examining the claims and conclusions made by the historian.

³⁸ A theoretical approach may be useful to some scholars who are assessing identity in conceptual terms, but this broader approach is not sufficient for those with historical interests. Moreover, this historical approach does not call for a rejection of a broader theoretical approach, only that they are put to one side so as not to influence our historical conclusions.

This is why all of the materials referred to within this thesis are freely available to other scholars. These include, but are not limited to: articles from periodicals such as newspapers, magazines and academic journals; monographs or broader scholarly texts on related subjects; autobiographies and interviews which have been published or are publicly available; and private letters and documents which are accessible in public archives.

It is the job of a historian, primarily, to consider the evidence of the past - without evidence it is misleading to make claims about history. Those scholars who have made claims about Epstein which cannot be verified by historical evidence are confusing empirical reasoning with assumption, or are being purposefully misleading. The fact is that verifiable and reliable evidence is the only way that a scholar who did not know Epstein personally can get close to knowing what Epstein did or said; what beliefs and values were held by him; and what his intentions were when producing a work of art. However, the task of working through evidence can never be a fully objective one. Unlike in science where the experimental method calls for an isolation of variables and the repetition of an experimental process in order to observe and understand a phenomenon, the same method cannot be applied to historical events. Thus, the historian must select those sources which he or she considers to be reliable, and be wary of those documents which are not. As will become evident during this thesis, it has been possible to some extent to alleviate such problems by employing a methodology of horizontal reading. This method involves gathering all of the available or known sources which relate to a particular case study and carefully examining them using their own internal logic and language to work through them. The conclusions of which can be verified by other scholars approaching the materials in a similar way. Much of this thesis deals with the statements that are made about Epstein's life and works and their relationship to the history and development of art and sculptural tradition. Though attempts

will be made to observe trends and correlations, it is not in the remit of this thesis to resolve apparent inconsistencies in the discourse, unless correcting historical inaccuracies.

It is necessary in this thesis to work with and around previous scholarship. This means that many apparent gaps in this thesis have been sufficiently covered elsewhere.³⁹ There are a number of major works and case studies which will not be explored in this thesis as many of the case studies in question have been dealt with sufficiently elsewhere. These include: *Sculptures for the British Medical Association building (1908)*⁴⁰; *Tomb for Oscar Wilde (1909-12)*⁴¹; *The W. H. Hudson Memorial (1923-25)*⁴² and *Adam (1939)*⁴³.

The aim of this thesis, then, is to provide a framework for considering of the legacy of Epstein. With our main focus being an examination of how Epstein's legacy has been shaped through not only his works of art and writings, but through the interventions of others to carve his legacy.

* * *

³⁹ See for example: Black, Robert, *The Art of Jacob Epstein*, (The World Publishing Company, 1942); Buckle, Richard, *Jacob Epstein Sculpture*, (Faber and Faber, 1963); Cork, Richard, *Jacob Epstein*, (Tate Publishing, 1999); Cork, Richard, *Vorticism: Abstract Art in the First Machine Age: Volumes 1 and 2*, (California University Press, 1976); Gardner, Stephen, *Epstein*, (Flamingo Press, 1993); Harrison, Charles, *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939*, (Indiana University Press, 1981); McLeod, Malcolm, and Bassani, Ezio, *Jacob Epstein Collector*, (Self-published, 1989); Rose, June, *Demons and Angels: A Life of Jacob Epstein*, (Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2002); Silber, Evelyn, *Rebel Angel: Sculpture and Watercolours by Sir Jacob Epstein 1880-1959*, (Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, 1980); Silber, Evelyn, *The Sculpture of Epstein with Complete Catalogue*, (Phaidon, 1986); Silber, Evelyn and Friedman, Terry, *Jacob Epstein Sculpture and Drawings*, (Leeds Art Galleries, 1987)

⁴⁰ See for example: Middleton Wagner, Anne, 'The Matter of Sculpture' in, *Motherstone*, (Yale University Press, 2005), pp.29-73; Cork, Richard, 'The British Medical Association Building' in, Silber, Evelyn, and Friedman, Terry, *Jacob Epstein Sculpture and Drawings*, (The Henry Moore Centre for the Study of Sculpture, 1989), pp.103-111; Buckle, Richard, 'Strand Statues' in, *Jacob Epstein: Sculptor*, (The World Publishing Company, 1963), pp.24-37

⁴¹ See for example: Pennington, Michael, *An Angel for a Martyr: Jacob Epstein's Tomb for Oscar Wilde*, (Whiteknights Press, 1987); Silber, Evelyn, 'The Tomb for Oscar Wilde' in, Silber, Evelyn, and Friedman, Terry, *Jacob Epstein Sculpture and Drawings*, (The Henry Moore Centre for the Study of Sculpture, 1989), pp.124-131

⁴² See for example: Friedman, Terry, 'The Hyde Park Atrocity' *Jacob Epstein's Rima: Creation and Controversy*, (The Henry Moore Centre for the Study of Sculpture, 1988).

⁴³ See for example: Cronshaw, Jonathan, *The Sideshow and the Problems of History: Jacob Epstein's Adam (1939)*, (Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Leeds, 2005); Jackson, Simon, *Jacob Epstein at Blackpool – A test Case in Creators' Moral Rights*, (Unpublished MA dissertation, The University of Melbourne, 1992)

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Carving a Legacy: Part One
Remembering Epstein: Introduction

The closure of an artist's body of work represents a moment of completion: there is nothing left to come; we can only assess what has been. Before we can begin to fully understand the legacy of Jacob Epstein, it is vital to consider how he and his work were articulated after his death. It is the efforts made by others after the death of an artist that inevitably shape our understanding of the artist's life and thus secure that artist's legacy. After all, the artist can only be spoken of in the past tense – we can no longer consult with Epstein directly; there are no new works to be created and no new statements to be made. Those who wrote the obituaries, the biographies and organised memorial exhibitions have all had a stake in shaping the legacy of Epstein – they have shaped Epstein's identity.

The obituaries, news reports and memorials that immediately followed the death of Jacob Epstein were to whittle the legacy and identity of a complex artist down to a series of broad generalisations, key events and crude stereotypes, which, to a large extent, have formed our understanding of Epstein today. The purpose of this chapter is to unpack and examine the discourse which surrounded Epstein's death, and consider how Epstein's place within the history of art was considered by contemporary commentators.

It seems appropriate that to begin to understand an artist's legacy, one must first examine how that artist's identity and legacy were articulated in the immediate years after his or her death. The first part of this thesis, then, is dedicated to examining the death of Jacob Epstein, with the intention to analyse, in detail, the efforts that were made to define and memorialise Epstein. This will be conducted in four chapters, each concerned with a particular case study. Firstly, in order to understand how Epstein's legacy was perceived at his death, it will be

necessary to unpack and analyse a number of obituaries written which made some efforts to consider Epstein's place in the history of art and success as an artist. Secondly, it will be necessary to survey the statements which were made during his memorial service held at St. Paul's Cathedral on November 10th 1959, which coincided with what would have been Epstein's 79th birthday. Thirdly, this thesis will examine further efforts which were made to remember Epstein, which never came to fruition, in the form of a proposed Epstein memorial at his former studio and home at Hyde Park Gate in London. Finally, we will examine the critical reception of the Epstein Memorial Exhibition held at the Edinburgh Festival in 1961.

By piecing together these different areas of discourse, one hopes to gain a clearer perspective as to how Epstein's legacy was understood in the immediate years following his death.

* * *

Carving a Legacy: Part One
Remembering Epstein: Obituaries

From the unveiling of the disputed sculptures for Charles Holden's British Medical Association building in 1908, Epstein had become part of the fabric of reported artistic life in Britain. From the reporting of his public sculptures and criticism of exhibitions, to reports of his private life and opinions, Epstein's presence in the British press was a common fixture for over half a century.

Following his death, Epstein was the subject of a number of editorials, articles and obituaries which encapsulated a sense of his identity. An obituary is an odd thing; a peculiar document that its subject will never get to read. The purpose of an obituary is to identify and highlight those moments and achievements in a person's life which are considered necessary for defining and identifying that person and their legacy: the events and complexities of a lifetime of existence, captured in a few hundred words of copy.

When looking through the various obituaries and articles written after the death of Epstein, one is struck by the immediate characterisation of Epstein as a controversial artist. Over and above the achievements and relative merits of his oeuvre, it is Epstein's place at the centre of the media spotlight which dominates most accounts. For example, the first paragraph of *The Manchester Guardian's* headline piece on Epstein's death, featured on the front page, read: 'Sir Jacob Epstein, at one time known as the world's most controversial sculptor, died on Wednesday night at his home at Hyde Park Gate, London, at the age of 78.'⁴⁴ Epstein, even in the simplest of descriptions, was defined not merely as a 'sculptor', but rather as a 'controversial sculptor'. The term 'controversial' as utilised in this quotation is the only word

⁴⁴ Anon., 'Epstein Dies, Aged 78' in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (November 22nd, 1959), p.1

which has a value judgement attached to it. Every other word in the statement is part of an objective description of Epstein's death, yet the word 'controversial' opens up the sense of debate, rather than sticking to the simple description of events. This representation of Epstein was also reflected within *The Times*' obituary, which was subtitled: 'A Controversial Sculptor'.⁴⁵ It seemed widely accepted that the key to defining Epstein's identity was by means of referring to the heightened critical debate that some of his work and views attracted. Even American newspapers emphasised the fact that Epstein courted controversy. For example, the front page of *The New York Times* included an article which stressed that 'Sir Jacob had one of the stormiest careers in the annals of modern art.'⁴⁶

The general feeling, at the time of Epstein's death, was that it was almost impossible to give a fair assessment of the relative merits of his work. This was due, according to many commentators, to the fact that when many of Epstein's works were exhibited or unveiled, there was a tendency for emotive over-reaction from supporters and opponents. An obituary in *The Times* encapsulated this sentiment:

So many battles have raged round him that it has often been difficult to give a just estimate of his rank and powers as an artist. That most of the controversies have been irrelevant, on religious, moral or political grounds, does not make the task easier, because whether an artist is over-blamed or over-praised on the wrong grounds, the effort in the cause of truth is likely to be strained in either case. So many silly things were said in denunciation of Epstein that it became almost a duty to say more in his defence than was really believed.⁴⁷

There are a number of important points to consider in this passage. Firstly, we have what is essentially an admission by the author that much criticism of Epstein's work was exaggerated to create a sense of balance with regards to the extremity of the more negative criticism; a sense of 'critical justice', if you will. The same sentiments of critical justice are

⁴⁵ Anon., 'Sir Jacob Epstein: A Controversial Sculptor' in, *The Times* (August 22nd, 1959), p.10

⁴⁶ Anon., 'Sir Jacob Epstein, 78, is Dead After Stormy Career as Sculptor' in, *The New York Times*, (August 22nd, 1959), p.1

⁴⁷ Anon., 'Sir Jacob Epstein: A Controversial Sculptor' in, *The Times* (August 22nd, 1959), p.10

echoed elsewhere. For example, the first paragraph of a thorough and probing article on Epstein in *The Monumental Journal* echoed the line of argument as posited *The Times*, that:

For fifty years the work of Sir Jacob Epstein has been the subject of heated controversy, more so probably than that of any artist of the twentieth century. Many of his works have provoked violent hostility and abuse, and have sometimes prompted a championship of his work that has led to exaggerated praise and adulation. In the midst of these storms it has not been easy to evaluate his work dispassionately and to see its place in the history of art.⁴⁸

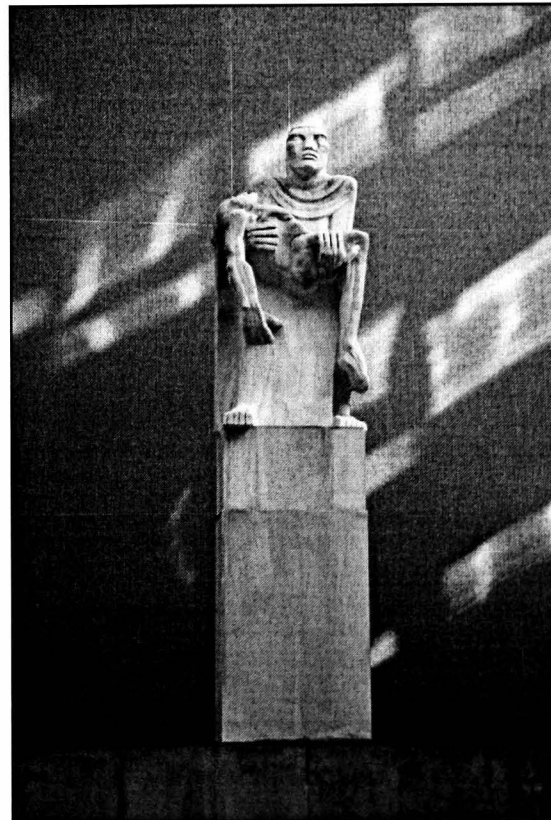
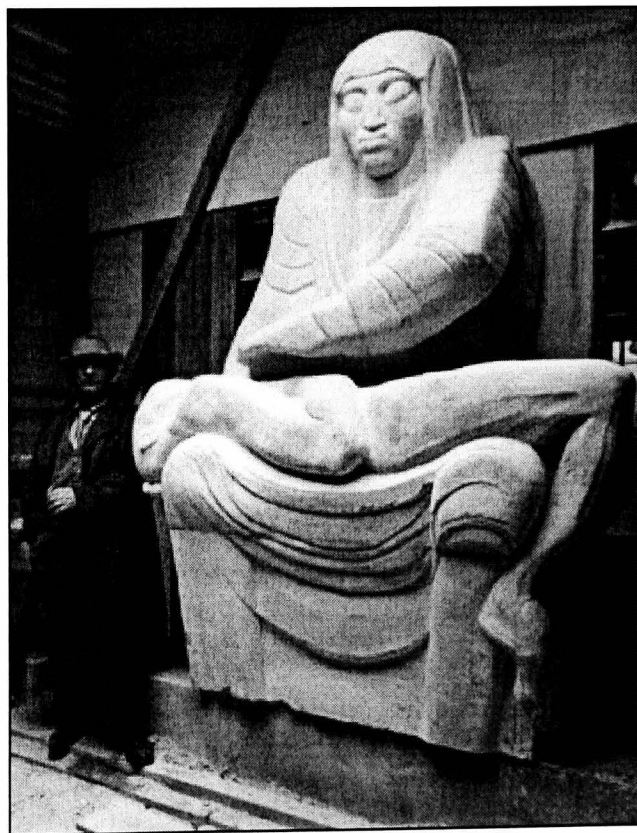
Again, we see prior attempts at espousing critical justice to be called into question. The author noted that much of the criticism surrounding Epstein's work was exaggerated by both sides of the numerous debates in an attempt to tip the balance of the dispute's consensus. This did not have the desired effect, and instead led to further exaggeration and confusion, which in turn did a disservice to both the artist and all interested parties alike.

There are a number of reasons cited throughout the obituaries which try to suggest why Epstein's work was so contentious. *The Times'* obituary does not attempt to fathom the reasons why Epstein, in particular, attracted controversy, but remarked: 'That he sometimes lent himself to controversy is probable, but the truth is that he was the kind of artist who is easily "badgered" into saying foolish things.'⁴⁹ It is argued that much of the blame can be pinned on Epstein. It is perhaps a fairer assessment to suggest that a storm over the Strand Statues catapulted Epstein into the public eye. Though Epstein may have been "'badgered" into saying foolish things', which would have no doubt exasperated the issue, and further fuelled the debate, the controversies were usually ignited by the Press themselves. As soon as the potential for another contentious issue arose, the Press would drum up controversy and the pattern would start again.

⁴⁸ Anon., 'Sir Jacob Epstein 1880-1959' in, *The Monumental Journal*, (October, 1959), p.245

⁴⁹ Anon., 'Sir Jacob Epstein: A Controversial Sculptor' in, *The Times* (August 22nd, 1959), p.10

There is a line of argument in the obituary featured in *The Evening News* which seems to suggest that the controversy surrounding many of Epstein's works was significantly affected by the period in which the work was produced, arguing that if works such as *Night* and *Day* and *Rima* were produced thirty years later than they were, there would have been very little outcry, if any. Citing, as an example, the lack of hostility towards the *TUC Memorial*, a work which is similar in conception and design as *Night*, the author wrote that: 'When this grandiose conception of a mother with her dead son in her arms was unveiled in 1958, it aroused little of the derision that it would have done 30 years earlier.'⁵⁰ We have to take a step back from arguments along these lines, and ask: was it because Epstein had already produced similar work 30 years earlier that the later works did not cause the same sense of shock? Had the public become desensitized to Epstein's idiosyncratic carvings? Of course, we can never substantiate or dismiss such arguments in any meaningful way, but it does seem like a more reasonable explanation.



Left: Jacob Epstein, *Night*, (1928)
Right: Jacob Epstein, *TUC War Memorial*, (1955)

⁵⁰ Wainwright, David, 'Epstein the Man' in, *The Evening News*, (August 21st, 1959)

A tribute to Epstein, published in *Arts* magazine, suggested that the reason why his work was so contentious was due to the simple fact that his work offended sensibilities:

Every few years between the two wars, Epstein would produce a new work of unquestionable power and provocation, the howls would go up from the Philistines, a storm would break out in the press, and modern sculpture would again be brought to everyone's notice.

The sculptures themselves, especially the big carvings [...] often embarrassed the art pundits (Roger Fry never quite knew what to say about Epstein). They still embarrass us today...⁵¹

The idea that 'howls would go up from the Philistines' does not stand up to even the most cursory of scrutiny. The assumption that a Philistine would protest against something to which they would be indifferent does not make sense. Why would someone indifferent to art be offended by it? The word 'Philistine' was often directed as an insult towards those who did not like Epstein. This is a purposely incorrect use of the term. The accusation of Philistinism has been used by Epstein's supporters as a means to bypass any serious debate by denying their opponents the capacity to appreciate art, and thus render their opinions invalid or improper. Of course, this still does not explain why some of Epstein's works were controversial. What was it about Epstein's work that caused the critics and public alike to be embarrassed? The editor of *The Burlington Magazine* noted that the embarrassment came from a misunderstanding of Epstein's intentions and visual language:

Epstein set out to express themes of deep significance in language which no one who was not in the habit of paying regular visits to the ethnographic collection in the British Museum could be expected to read. It was the clash in his monumental work between the familiar theme and the unfamiliar idiom, which provoked all the indignation.⁵²

This is a fair assessment, but it is necessary argue further that the spectators viewed sculpture with a sense of expectation which was much more conservative than they would bring to a painting. This point is expanded in Eric Newton's tribute to Epstein:

It was not that he was too "modern" or that his meanings were too obscure. On the contrary, he was, it seemed, too forthright. The religions complained that

⁵¹ Anon., 'Epstein as Battler for Modern Sculpture' in, *Arts*, (February, 1960), p.16

⁵² Anon., 'Epstein's Critics' in, *The Burlington Magazine*, (Volume 1, Number 680, November, 1959), p.369

he had no reverence when, in fact, his whole purpose was to make vivid and meaningful some the greatest religious themes a sculptor could tackle. The academic eye, on the other hand, which took little account of vividness or meaning found him offensively lacking in grace and elegance. They were right, since elegance had no part in the message.⁵³

There are a few points to make about this quotation. The first highlights some major aesthetic issues in much of Epstein's work. Newton suggested that Epstein's work was often too obscure, whilst simultaneously lacking subtlety. Secondly, there is the suggestion that as well as lacking subtlety, they also lacked elegance. Thirdly, there were a number of artists working at the same time as Epstein who were concerned with distorting human characteristics or with abstraction who did not attract such attention. Works such as *The Risen Christ* (1917-19), or *Madonna and Child* (1926-27) (which are explored in detail later in this thesis), Epstein did not produce generalised or beautiful depictions of iconic figures, but rather presented sacred characters as real people. As they were realistically portrayed, it made it easier to empathise with the subjects. If we briefly compare *The Risen Christ* and *Christ in Majesty* (1954-5), we see that the latter was universally praised: the work was generalised in form and created the illusion of supernatural qualities and the inclusion of a traditional halo only served to add to the work's sense of holiness. In the former, the work is all too realistic: there is nothing supernatural; the Christ is in pain and he is staring accusingly at the spectator. In this instance, it seems that the level of controversy relating to these works directly correlates to a sense of empathy experienced by the spectator when beholding them.

Many of the obituaries and articles which were written immediately after Epstein's death can arguably be seen as an effort by their authors to define and fix Epstein's artistic legacy, often favouring his modelled bronzes at the expense of his carvings in stone. After discussions relating to the controversial nature of Epstein's work, this is the most frequently

⁵³ Newton, Eric, 'Essence of Epstein's Greatness' in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (August 29th, 1959), p.3

articulated issue. There was a sense that Epstein would be remembered by future generations for his portraits over and above all other work. For example, in an obituary written in religious journal *Common Ground*, we are told that:

Epstein was a great portraitist, and will probably be best remembered from that angle. [...] If nothing of the work of Epstein was to survive except a few bronze portraits, the world of the future would have some glimpse of the living force of our times.⁵⁴

The staging of Epstein as a great portraitist was not an attitude which simply emerged after his death, but had been pointed to again and again throughout his career. Even before the age of 40, Epstein was considered by many art critics to be the greatest portrait sculptor of his generation. In a review published in 1917, for example, we are already beginning to see Epstein's legacy as a portraitist beginning to emerge:

He is the master of the portrait because the human being means so much to him. [...] The delicate modelling of the sculptor reveals the indebtedness of their emotions in the very texture of their faces. He shows them to us as animals of the town, as creatures made by the pressure of their surroundings rather than in the play of their own thoughts. [...] And in his male heads also Mr. Epstein shows himself a master of portraiture. The likeness is striking, but it is not a likeness of a moment, not a snapshot; it is the likeness of a whole character. We see Lord Fisher as a public man, one used to express himself to other men, and he to be thinking in opposition, as if he imagined an enemy before him. The head of an English soldier in a steel helmet is more typical; but it strikes one instantly by its truth. That is the English fighting man in this war; that is the power of England; and yes it is a living human being, not merely a platitude or a boast.⁵⁵

In *The Times*' obituary, it was noted, without hesitation, that: 'Epstein was the most important portrait sculptor of his time'.⁵⁶ There was, however, hesitation in praising his carved work, as the critic explained: 'Making every allowance for the merits of the monumental works, their dignity and their force in execution, it is possible that Epstein's fame will rest upon his bronzes, his portrait bronzes in particular, works of often astonishing virtuosity.'⁵⁷ In this passage we have the subtle distinction between technical

⁵⁴ Burland, Cottie A., 'Sir Jacob Epstein—a Retrospective Comment' in, *Common Ground* (Winter, 1959), p.16

⁵⁵ Anon., 'A Master of Portraiture.' In, *The Times* (February 26th, 1917), p.11

⁵⁶ Anon., 'Sir Jacob Epstein: A Controversial Sculptor' in, *The Times*, (August 22nd, 1959), p.10

⁵⁷ Anon., 'Sir Jacob Epstein: A Controversial Sculptor', p.10

proficiency and talent in play, the suggestion being that Epstein was not a talented sculptor when it came to works of imagination. However, when we consider Epstein's modelled work we are left in no doubt of his talents. This sentiment was continued elsewhere. For example, the obituary in *Arts* magazine noted that Epstein was a great portraitist, but that his carved works were somehow deficient in comparison:

He has a remarkable natural facility for catching a likeness, and the rough, broken surface gives vividness and character to heads which almost invariably have a larger-than-life quality. This was sometimes exaggerated, but then Epstein's most successful heads were always of sitters who were larger than life themselves, and he was (it seems to me) quite without equal as a portraitist of the great men of our time.

His claim to posterity's attention as an imaginative sculptor is not so sure.⁵⁸

The author of this passage made the same distinction between technical proficiency and talent as noted above, but articulated the distinction with different terminology. In this quotation, academic ability and vividness are placed in opposition to each other. Academic ability requiring an ability by the artist to reproduce what is in front of them to the letter. Whilst vividness comes about through imagination and insight. The author reiterated the argument that Epstein's work lacks subtlety, but inverted the argument to suggest that this is a positive thing. Indeed it is the lack of subtlety which gave Epstein's sculptures their 'larger-than-life' quality, which the author was keen to emphasise as Epstein's strength. The privilege given to Epstein's portraits was similarly echoed in *The Manchester Guardian*. The writer emphasised the dualistic nature of Epstein's oeuvre, remarking that:

Epstein's sculpture is sharply divided into two kinds. There is the long series of busts and heads modelled in clay and cast in bronze, and there are the monumental carvings in stone or marble [...] The busts with their strong characterisation and the startling vitality of their modelling have almost invariably achieved instant popularity.

These busts include some leading personalities. The best of them are both penetrating and sympathetic. [...] These busts alone would have assured Epstein's reputation as a vigorous romantic and may be that posterity will so regard him.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Anon., 'Epstein as Battler for Modern Sculpture' in, *Arts*, (February, 1960), p.16

⁵⁹ Anon., 'Violent Outcries that Stemmed from Misunderstanding' in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (August 22nd, 1959), p.3

Nevill Wallis also raised similar points, emphasising Epstein's dual nature and noting that future generations would still find issue with his carved work, but would hold his modelled works in high regard. He wrote that: 'Posterity may well share the doubts of his contemporaries about his monumental carving, and endorse the view that temperamentally, Epstein was a modeller, endowed with the greatest vitality in his bronze portraiture.'⁶⁰

What emerges from these obituaries is a sense of fissure between different aspects of Epstein's oeuvre, and by extension and implication, Epstein's identity. There exists in sculpture an illusionary dialectical relationship between modelling and carving which has come to have a direct influence upon the line of argument taken by many critics in relation to discussing Epstein's work. The attitudes and prejudices which have historically been associated with the relationship between carving and modelling were inevitably going to influence the legacy and identity of an artist who partook in both disciplines and saw neither method of sculpting as being superior to the other.

The oeuvre of Epstein contains a number of disparate and seemingly unrelated works; apparent contradictions in style and conception which critics and scholars alike have been, unsuccessfully, at pains to resolve. Throughout Epstein's career, critics often attempted to resolve these apparent contradictions by dealing with Epstein as though he were two distinct artists: the carver of strange things in stone and the Romantic modeller of personalities. There has been a tendency for critics and scholars to praise Epstein's modelled work and to simultaneously censure his carved work, and vice-versa. This was not something which emerged when critics were considering Epstein's legacy at the time of his death, but was something which had been said of the artist throughout his career. In 1929, for example, the critic for *The Times* highlighted this issue, declaring that: 'There are two Mr. Jacob Epsteins:

⁶⁰ Wallis, Nevill, 'Epstein v. The Philistines', (Unsourced press cutting in HMI Archive. 2002/76/2)

one is a powerful and expressive modeller for reproductions in bronze, and the other is, or behaves like, the sculptor hero of a bad novel.⁶¹ *The Times* critic continued, describing Epstein's skill as a modeller as 'masterly' and maintained that 'the extraordinary vitality of his work as a modeller' makes one 'reluctant to see him attempting any other form of sculpture.' The notion of 'the two Epsteins' is something that has come to characterise the peculiarity of Epstein's identity as an artist since his early career. On this issue, Epstein scholar Evelyn Silber perceptively noted that:

One of the difficulties experienced by public and critics alike is the apparent contradiction between his work as a carver of monumental figures in stone and as a modeller of vividly realistic portraits in bronze, a dichotomy which existed throughout his career and which tempted people to see him as some sort of Jekyll and Hyde.⁶²

This perceived dualism has caused a number of problems for critics and scholars as they desire to neatly divide Epstein's work into two categories. The carved work is presented as the radical and progressive side of Epstein's oeuvre, whilst the modelled work is considered to be a continuation of the Romantic tradition, and by some critics as a cynical money-making exercise on Epstein's part. Such is the desire to fit Epstein's work neatly into these distinct categories that commentators have found it necessary to bend and contort their own definitions and conceptual boundaries by making strange concessions to keep this distinction in play. For example, *The Rock Drill* (1913) (examined in greater detail later in this thesis) presented such a problem for art historian Charles Harrison. *The Rock Drill* was modelled in clay, with some elements later being carved into the plaster cast. Conceptually, the work did not fit into the simplistic opposition that had been outlined by Harrison. Rather than directly addressing this problem, Harrison classified *The Rock Drill* as being of the same class as the carvings, pointing out that: 'The most progressive of his pre-war works had all been carvings (the *Rock Drill* though made in plaster and ultimately cast in bronze, shares the

⁶¹ Anon., 'Art Exhibitions: Leicester Galleries' in, *The Times*, (February 7th, 1931), p.10

⁶² Silber, Evelyn, 'Foreword' in, Silber, Evelyn, and Friedman, Terry, *Jacob Epstein Sculpture and Drawings*, (The Henry Moore Centre for the Study of Sculpture, 1989), p.1

geometricizing tendency of the carvings and can thus be classified with them).⁶³ This line of argument is incredibly problematic: although *The Rock Drill* may share similar theoretical and conceptual concerns with the carvings of this period, to dismiss this work simply as an anomaly is a little short-sighted and begs further scrutiny.

When we pursue the apparent dual nature of Epstein's work we quickly run into many more examples where this dualistic approach cannot account for many of his idiosyncrasies and thus limits our understanding of his work. If we take Epstein's portraits as a case in point, we immediately realise that they must all be considered differently. Factors that must be considered include: the personality, status and look of the sitter; whether the work was a commission; whether Epstein chose the person off the street⁶⁴; whether it was a person he deeply cared about; and finally whether or not he enjoyed modelling the portrait. We also have to consider that not all of Epstein's portraits were modelled. For example, *Romily John* (1910) was carved directly into stone. Should we take a similar step to Harrison and classify this work as a modelled work for sake of simplistic categorisation? The answer is no. We must also take into account the monumental and thematic bronzes such as *The Risen Christ* (1920), *Madonna and Child* (1927) and *Lucifer* (1946), which express often spiritual or religious themes. These works, though expressive of wider concerns, can also be considered portraits, though not in the same sense as those works which are labelled as such. For example, *The Risen Christ's* face is a mask of composer Bernard Van Dieren, its hands modelled from painter Jacob Kramer and its feet from musician Cecil Gray. *Madonna and Child* and *Lucifer* were modelled from one of Epstein's models and alleged lovers Sunita. Of course, if we class the monumental modelled work in the same category as the portraits, how do we then categorise works such as *Christ in Majesty* (1954-55), which reputedly had no model? There is an urgent need to reject such simplistic divisions in Epstein's work and

⁶³ Harrison, Charles, *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939*, (Indiana University Press, 1981), p.205

⁶⁴ As he reputedly did with *Old Pinager* (1923), an old match seller whom Epstein considered a fascinating model.

remember that they were all produced by the same artist with a multitude of motives and considerations for which an understanding can only be clouded by simplistic categorisation. The solution to this problem is to take a monist approach: there is only one Jacob Epstein and he produced a variety of works in a variety of styles, materials and media, and thus each work should be considered on its own merits.



Jacob Epstein, *Romily John*, (1910)

Away from issues of the categorisation of works in Epstein's oeuvre, there were a number of arguments within some of the obituaries which attempted to deny Epstein's position as a 'great' sculptor. Eric Newton articulated such a point in the first paragraph of his tribute to Epstein in *The Manchester Guardian*:

No one to-day would deny that Sir Jacob Epstein, whose death was reported on page 1, was a "great" artist, yet the fact that one instinctively encloses the words in quotation marks—as though he were great in some rather unusual sense of the word—is, in itself, significant.⁶⁵

The arguments posited against Epstein's 'greatness' are essentially two-fold. Firstly, there is the argument from medium, which suggests that modelling is not the same as sculpture, that sculpture requires carving to be defined as such and therefore, Epstein cannot be considered a great sculptor, but rather a great modeller. Secondly, there is the argument from form, which suggests that sculpture's primary concern is with the relationship of forms in three-dimensional space and not with human expression. As Epstein emphasised vital aspects over formal ones, the argument, therefore, is that he cannot be considered a great sculptor. The suggestions seem to stem from a prejudice articulated by Eric Gill in 1918. Firstly, Gill argued that: 'Representations can and may, undoubtedly, be made by cutting and modelling, but such is not primarily the sculptor's job. The sculptor's job is primarily that of making *things*, not representations or criticisms of things.'⁶⁶ After erasing the need of sculpture to 'represent' or express ideas, Gill turns his attention to placing modelling subordinate to carving, noting that: 'modelling in clay must be kept on a wholly subordinate position and be the means, merely, of making such preliminary and experimental sketches as cannot be done on paper.'⁶⁷ This is an interesting argument which Gill does not fully explain. Though Gill presented carving as the superior art form to modelling, he gave no real explanation as to why this is so. Epstein raised objections to this line of argument in *The Sculptor Speaks*:

⁶⁵ Newton, Eric, 'Essence of Epstein's Greatness' in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (August 22nd, 1959), p.3

⁶⁶ Gill, Eric, 'Sculpture: An Essay' in, Wood, Jon, *et al.* (eds.), *Modern Sculpture Reader*, (Henry Moore Institute, 2007), p.57

⁶⁷ Gill, Eric, 'Sculpture: An Essay', p.59

According to the modern view Rodin stands nowhere. He is patronised as a modeller of talent, even of genius, but merely as a modeller. As a matter of fact nearly all the great sculptors of the Renaissance were modellers as well Verrocchio is almost certainly a modeller, Donatello modelled many of his most important works. Personally I find the whole discussion entirely futile and beside the point. It is the result that matters after all. Of the two, modelling, it could be argued logically, and this is said as a logical argument only, seems to me the most genuinely creative. It is the creating of something out of nothing. An actual building up and getting to grips with the material. In carving the suggestion for the form of the work often comes from the shape of the block. In fact inspiration is always modified by the material, there is no complete freedom, while in modelling the artist is entirely unfettered by anything save the technical difficulties of his own chosen subject. As I see sculpture it must not be rigid. It must quiver with life, while carving often leads a man to neglect the flow and rhythm of life.⁶⁸

There are two key arguments within this passage. The first is that the denial of modelling's status is, not so much to artistic hierarchies, but is in actual fact linked to fashion. In the second argument, Epstein makes the case for the imaginative qualities of working with clay, noting that a carving is influenced by the shape of the stone, whereas the modeller has to build from nothing.

The denial of Epstein's greatness as a sculptor tends to come more from those who had supported him in the past, than those who had not. For example, in Henry Moore's tribute to Epstein, printed in *The Times*, Moore proposed two key arguments about the nature of Epstein's work: firstly, that Epstein was not an innovative or experimental artist; and secondly, that he was concerned with the subject and vitality of his works rather than their formal or sculptural qualities. Moore did not go as far as some critics in denying Epstein's sculptural credentials, but a definite sense of sculptural hierarchy is certainly present:

He was a modeller, rather than a carver. To put it in other terms, his was a visual rather than a mental art, and with him the emphasis was on subject rather than on form. He was an intensely warm man, who in his work transmitted that warmth, that vitality, that feeling for human beings immediately. His master was Donatello, rather than Michelangelo: and in Rembrandt, whom he also studied most carefully, it was the direct and personal warmth that affected him perhaps more than the formal side.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, (William Heinemann Limited, 1931), p.61

⁶⁹ Moore, Henry, 'Jacob Epstein: An Appreciation' in, *The Times*, (August 23rd, 1959), Press cutting from New Art Gallery, Walsall archive.

In this passage two distinctions are made: firstly, Moore distinguished between what he defined as ‘visual’ and ‘mental’ qualities of art; secondly, he distinguishes between the ‘formal’ and ‘emotional’ qualities. He noted that Epstein’s work was visual and emotional, but not formal or mental. The distinction between emotional and mental art is comparable to the distinction between rational and irrational, or emotional and intellectual. Epstein was concerned with what Moore called ‘that warmth, that vitality, that feeling for human beings’ – this is simple enough to grasp. Moore’s other distinction, between ‘formal’ and ‘visual’ requires a little more puzzling. It would seem that, for Moore, formal qualities in sculpture are tactile. To Moore, Epstein did not seem to be concerned with exploring form as an end in itself, but was more interested in how feelings could be expressed through form. Moore continued:

It was this quality of Epstein's, I think, that produced his greatest work, which I believe to have been his portraits (particularly his portraits of men, whom he saw with a greater objectivity than that which a man of his direct and personal vision could turn upon women) and also such pieces of sculpture as his *Madonna and Child*, one of his best and last works, that is now in Cavendish Square. Of the sculptor's media, his was surely clay.⁷⁰

There is an interesting tension within this passage which, perhaps, sheds more light on Moore than it does Epstein. Firstly, Moore praised Epstein for his ‘personal vision’, emphasising the subjective aspects of Epstein’s work were what gave it its unique quality. But then Moore states that Epstein’s strongest works were his portraits of men, ‘whom he saw with the greatest of objectivity’. So, Moore essentially presents a dualistic view of Epstein, in which those things which Moore sees as being Epstein’s strongest qualities are quickly denigrated and seen as a weakness.

⁷⁰ Moore, Henry, ‘Jacob Epstein: An Appreciation’

It was not unusual for contemporaries of Epstein to view him primarily as a portraitist and modeller. For example, William Rothenstein, writing in 1932, used the example of Epstein to show that the hierarchy which exists between carving and modelling is an illusion:

Epstein seems to me essentially a great portraitist. [He is] by nature a modeller, rather than a stone carver. There is no magic in carving; makers of tomb-stones have never cease [*sic*] to carve. Nor is there anything derogatory in modelling in clay. Yet for the moment it would seem as though modelling were something inferior, and only carving were worthy of sculptors.⁷¹

Five years later, in 1937, Wyndham Lewis echoed similar views when he wrote of his association with Epstein before the First World War. Lewis wrote that: 'Epstein, is, I need not tell you, a very fine artist. His superb busts are amongst the real achievements in art of our time. But I (as an abstractionist) prefer his lifelike busts to his other less lifelike work.'⁷² This sentiment was further echoed in an obituary in *The Monumental Journal*. After praising a number of Epstein's monumental works, noting that *Night* and *Day* were to be considered superb examples of architectural sculpture, the writer denied Epstein's place in history as a great sculptor, concluding that:

Most of the architectural and monumental sculpture is of a symbolic character, and it is this symbolism that, to many, gives the work a literary character. [...]

Few will deny that such works are powerfully expressive of ideas, and as such they must occupy a high place among sculptural works: but, to many, sculpture is primarily an art of form, it must succeed or fail chiefly as an art of shapes in three dimensions, and in the sequences and relations of these shapes. Another way of saying this is that sculpture is firstly a decorative art, and literary meanings, symbolical expression and suggestion of life, although important, come after the formal qualities. It has been questioned, therefore, whether Epstein can occupy the supreme place among sculptors in the sense of a creator of form and formal relations. It must be admitted that he was not an originator of form in the sense that Henry Moore is, he has not created form with a new character in the same way; he was, as he admitted, essentially a traditionalist, and he derives his sense of form from ancient and primitive sources, [...] In the use of the sculptural medium to express idea, character and life it is difficult to think of a greater sculptor since Michelangelo.⁷³

The author used similar distinctions as Moore to describe Epstein's work bringing into play the distinction between 'literary character' and 'formalism'. This argument rests on the

⁷¹ Rothenstein, William, *Men and Memories*, (Faber and Faber, 1932), p.129

⁷² Lewis, Wyndham, *Blasting and Bombarding*, (Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1937), p.128-129

⁷³ Anon., 'Sir Jacob Epstein 1880-1959' in, *The Monumental Journal*, (October, 1959), p.256-57

distinction between ‘vision’ and ‘form’ as articulated by Moore. Essentially, Epstein was praised for his ability to express emotions and ideas through his work, but this praise is quickly withdrawn as it was seen that Epstein was not concerned with what were deemed the proper concerns of sculpture: that is to say, form. A subtle distinction is apparent in the last few lines of this passage. Note that the author emphasised Epstein’s ‘use of the sculptural medium to express idea, character and life’; the author does not say ‘Epstein’s sculpture expressed idea, character and life’, the suggestion being that, though Epstein’s work resembles sculpture, and exhibits sculptural forms, his work is not quite sculpture in the strict sense. Epstein’s work is considered ‘sculpturesque’ – a bastardised form of sculpture which lacks a certain indefinable property which is specific to ‘sculpture proper’.

A similar point was articulated in the religious journal, *Common Ground*:

Epstein was not a versatile artist [...] one can see that bronze was the natural medium for Epstein. He put great concepts into masses of stone, but in bronze he made living beings. Modelling in clay has its freedom, in speed of execution and in possibilities of expressionism, which exactly suited Epstein’s genius.⁷⁴

The denial of Epstein’s originality, versatility and greatness assured that in the decades following Epstein’s death, his reputation as a great artist dwindled, meaning that by the end of the 1970s Epstein had drifted into relative obscurity.

Epstein’s relationship to the canon of art in the 20th century is incredibly problematic. Though Epstein was often involved with avant-garde movements throughout his early career, such as The London Group and the Vorticists, he often refused to be labelled with a particular movement. This is evident in the fact that though a contributor to Wyndham Lewis’s Vorticist publication *Blast*, he refused to sign the Vorticist manifesto. Epstein’s relationship to modernism and the avant-garde is an incredibly complex one; at the same time as producing his series of semi-abstract *Doves* (1914-16) and his various carvings entitled *Venus* (1914-16),

⁷⁴ Burland, Cottie A., ‘Sir Jacob Epstein—a Retrospective Comment’ in, *Common Ground* (Winter, 1959), pp.13-14

he produced a number of portrait bronzes, such as *The Countess of Drogheda* (1915), *Admiral Lord Fisher* (1915) and *T. E. Hulme* (1916). What caused immense confusion for critics was that many of Epstein's experimental works would often be exhibited alongside his bronzes. For example, Epstein's exhibition at the Leicester Galleries in 1939 included his monumental carving *Adam* (1939) as well as many portraits of children. Much of the confusion relating to Epstein stems from the critics' desire to categorise and divide his oeuvre. The popular notion of an artist such as Pablo Picasso is to label him as a Cubist. Though much of his work is not Cubist, a recognisable caricature has developed to help historians and critics to place Picasso and his work in a particular place in the development of art. Epstein makes it difficult to create this sort of categorisation. For instance, between 1910 and 1915, Epstein was engaged in radical modernism. It is this period that many critics see as Epstein's main contribution to the development of art (often defined in terms of his contribution to the development of modernism and direct carving). For many, Epstein's contribution to artistic development symbolically ends with Epstein breaking up and casting *The Rock Drill* in bronze in 1915. Charles Harrison articulated this sentiment, writing that: 'Epstein's position was unquestionable as the major surviving figure from the pre-war avant-garde, although in fact, the truncation of the *Rock Drill* seems to have marked a turning point in his career.'⁷⁵ This of course dismisses the last 45 years of Epstein's career as being irrelevant and derivative, which is of course not exactly true. If the scholarship relating to Epstein between the mid-1970s and late-1980s can be characterised as an effort to assert Epstein's importance between 1910-1915 to the development of the avant-garde, then the scholarship of the 1990s and early-2000s can be characterised by a shift which highlights Epstein's carvings of the late-1920s to the mid-1940s (such as *Genesis* (1929), *Elemental* (1932), *Ecce Homo* (1934-35), *Adam* (1939) and *Jacob and the Angel* (1940-41) as his key contributions to the development of sculpture.

⁷⁵ Harrison, Charles, *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939*, (Indiana University Press, 1981), p.205

Turning our attention back to the obituaries, there also exists another area of discourse which relates to Epstein's Jewish identity and its direct bearing upon his work and its reception. There are three main streams of argument which can be observed in the obituaries. The first suggests that much of the controversy surrounding Epstein's work was actually as a result of his Judaism, the second alludes to the influence of Judaism upon Epstein's work, and the third highlights the issue of Epstein producing Christian themed works as a Jewish artist. Many of these assertions are not necessarily anti-Semitic, but they articulate a Semitic fatalism, in the sense that they present Epstein's Judaism as a necessary factor in conceiving and comprehending his work. Epstein's Judaism, then, has been used by critics and scholars on numerous occasions to explain away certain issues. For example, in an editorial piece in *The Burlington Magazine*, the author suggested that the primary reason that Epstein's work created controversy was actually a symptom of wider anti-Semitism in British society:

It is not at all difficult to understand why Epstein, more than any other artist in Great Britain during the first half of the twentieth century, was chosen to represent all that was most perverse in the modern movement. In the first—one hates to admit it—anti-Semitism raised its Caliban face. To have a name like Epstein, suspiciously like Einstein's, and to be born of Russian-Polish parents—this was an initial disadvantage.⁷⁶

This is an incredibly simplistic conclusion and does not take into account the multitude of variables. At times there were certain critics and commentators who displayed signs of anti-Semitism, but this does not tell the whole story.

As regards the second line of argument, we should turn our attention back to the obituary printed in the *The Times* which suggested a necessary connexion between Epstein's Judaism and the style of his work, noting in particular that his Judaism somehow linked to a preference for different 'racial types':

⁷⁶ Anon., 'Epstein's Critics' in, *The Burlington Magazine*, (Volume 1, Number 680, November, 1959), p.369

[T]he artistically relevant fact in his ancestry is that he was a Jew. It is impossible to judge his work fairly without reference to its racial flavour. Not only was he at his best and most sympathetic in dealing with compatriots but he tended to give a Semitic character to Gentile subjects, and a good deal of what aroused hostility in his work was due to his racial preferences in physical types – his large-eyed and heavy-lipped young women, for example.⁷⁷

There is firstly a major issue which needs addressing with this passage. The author argued that Epstein was ‘at his best and most sympathetic in dealing with compatriots’. Critical evidence suggests no such thing; some of Epstein’s most well-received works were ‘Gentiles’: portraits of *Winston Churchill*, *Admiral Lord Fisher* and *Lord Rothermere* were universally praised by critics.⁷⁸ Another problem is that the author makes the mistake of confusing correlation and causality: Epstein may have been Jewish, and he may have had ‘racial preferences in physical types’, but just because these factors are both perceived together in Epstein, it does not mean that there is a necessary connexion, after all, this preference could just as easily be ascribed to Epstein’s New York upbringing, for example. It seems that when dealing with religious heritage and race, certain stereotypes and assumptions become justified and used carelessly.

In terms of the influence of Judaism upon Epstein’s stylistic choices, the editorial of *The Burlington Magazine* made the strange observation that:

Had he continued in the 1920’s along the lines of his short-lived Vorticist phase by investigating geometrical forms, rather as Ben Nicholson investigated them as a painter, the general public would never have paid him the slightest attention. His fate would have been neglect, not abuse. (By being a victim of the latter he was more fortunate: for derision is so much closer to appreciation than indifference is.) But it was not in his Jewish nature to develop his *Venus* (1912) or his *Rock Drill* (1913) further along abstract lines.⁷⁹

This seems an odd statement, as many Jewish artists had been engaged in exploring abstraction for many years before this editorial was published. The influence of Epstein’s

⁷⁷ Anon., ‘Sir Jacob Epstein: A Controversial Sculptor’ in, *The Times* (August 22nd, 1959), p.10

⁷⁸ I have not found one review which suggests that ‘he tended to give a Semitic character to Gentile subjects’ in these works.

⁷⁹ Anon., ‘Epstein’s Critics’ in, *The Burlington Magazine*, (Volume 1, Number 680, November, 1959), p.369

Judaism upon his work led a number of commentators to try and explain why Epstein, as a Jewish artist, would choose to portray Christian themes in his work. In an editorial in *The Times*, the author remarked:

That EPSTEIN, a Jew, should have attempted and achieved great Christian art may seem strange to the unthinking. But to those who know him there was no anomaly. For his intellect, which enlarged its range as he grew older, could not ignore the central story in man's history; and who can deny that he spoke plain truth when he said to MR. HASKELL: "My Christ is unpopular because he is accusing"?⁸⁰

There is a tendency to overstate the importance of Epstein's Judaism within his work; perhaps none more so than in Cottie Burland's tribute to Epstein in the religious journal *Common Ground*. Burland exaggerated Epstein's religious powers to such an extent that she concludes that Epstein was a Jewish prophet, arguing that:

Somehow this man got at us, and if that is not the function of a prophet, what is?

One of the strangest things about the art of Jacob Epstein was that, as a Jew, he could give us such a magnificent statement of Christian faith. At Llandaff his *Christ in Majesty* stands floating before its curved background. His *Lazarus* is no sentimental resurrection, but the victim of a miracle, bursting grimly from the bonds of death—one who is raised by the power of God is a frightening being. Or go to Cavendish Square and look around until you see his bronze Virgin and Child, and look in that Child's eyes. This Jewish prophet indeed had things to tell us Christians.⁸¹

As with much writing on Epstein, it is almost impossible to find a dispassionate middle-ground. We have Epstein presented as being predetermined to follow a particular path of artistic interests because of his religion. But, the only explanation that can be given for Epstein's interest in another religion gets attributed to him being a prophet.

It is now necessary to illustrate a peculiar legacy which was sketched out in a number of articles, which point to Epstein's legacy as being related, not to the integrity or product of his own artistic output, but rather, to the fact that, through his controversial episodes in the Press,

⁸⁰ Anon., 'Epstein' in, *The Times*, (August 22nd, 1959), p.7

⁸¹ Burland, Cottie A., 'Sir Jacob Epstein—a Retrospective Comment' in, *Common Ground* (Winter, 1959), pp.12-13

he had laid the groundwork for the acceptance of 'modern' sculpture. As Henry Moore pointed out in his tribute to Epstein:

He took the brickbats, he took the insults, he faced the howls of derision with which artists since Rembrandt have learned to become familiar. And as far as sculpture in this century is concerned, he took them first.

We of the generation that succeeded him were spared a great deal, simply because his sturdy personality and determination had taken so much. Sculpture always arouses more violent emotions than, say, painting, simply because it is three-dimensional. It cannot be ignored. It is there. And I believe that the sculptors who followed Epstein in this country would have been more insulted than they have been had the popular fury not partially spent itself on him, and had not the folly of that fury been revealed.⁸²

The argument here is essentially that Epstein helped to desensitize the public to the reception of Modernist ideas. These views were echoed elsewhere. For example, a commentator in *Arts* magazine highlighted some of Epstein's sculptural achievements, but noted that Epstein's legacy was assured:

not because of these particular works, but because Epstein singlehanded [*sic*] won the battle for a modern sculpture in England and made today's flourishing school possible, that he remains a figure of exceptional importance in the history of British art.⁸³

It is interesting that the author of this passage goes further than Moore in emphasizing the importance of Epstein's role in softening up the public for the reception of more radical art. Indeed, the author goes as far as to reject the importance of Epstein's sculptures when considered purely as works of art, but posits the notion that it important because it made the work of better artists more palatable.

The death of Epstein prompted an assessment of his legacy as a controversial artist whose portraits and monumental bronzes will be remembered for years to come, but with his carvings being regarded as an odd diversion. His work, however, although considered great examples of expressive Romantic modelled work, cannot be considered 'great' sculpture. The

⁸² Moore, Henry, 'Jacob Epstein: An Appreciation' in, *The Times*, (August 23rd, 1959), Press cutting from New Art Gallery, Walsall archive.

⁸³ Anon., 'Epstein as Battler for Modern Sculpture' in, *Arts*, (February, 1960), p.16

assessment of the controversy surrounding Epstein's work stems not from the fact that he was too modern, but that he presented familiar themes in unfamiliar ways which prompted both empathy and confusion in spectators. There was also an element of suspicion attached to Epstein's foreignness and Judaism. Finally, the assessment of Epstein's legacy rests not in the merits of his own work, but the fact that his work was so unusual that the controversy surrounding his works allowed later artists room to produce revolutionary work without receiving that same hostility.

In our next chapter, we will examine the views which were espoused about Epstein during a memorial service held at St. Paul's Cathedral, London, to further consider the efforts made in the aftermath of his death to fix the identity and artistic legacy of a complex artist.



Jacob Epstein's headstone, Putney Cemetery, London.

Carving a Legacy: Part One

Remember Epstein: The Memorial Service

At 12 noon, on Tuesday November 10th 1959, a memorial service was held for Epstein at St. Paul's Cathedral, London, to coincide with what would have been his 79th birthday. The purpose of the short to chapter is to outline the recorded statements that were made at this memorial service in an effort to gain further insights into the discourse surrounding Epstein's death. As we have seen in our last chapter, the assessment of Epstein examined three major aspects of Epstein's artistic output, namely: why it was controversial, whether he was a great artist, and whether his religious background profoundly influenced his work. As we shall see, the identity espoused in the memorial service was not one which had been articulated by the obituary writers as highlighted in our previous chapter.

The memorial service was conducted by Canon C. B. Mortlock, who spoke of Epstein's sincerity and fortitude in the face of relentless hostility. Physical, spiritual and emotional strength are central themes in this short passage, with Canon Mortlock also emphasising Epstein's strong work ethic, noting that:

lesser men often marvelled at the gusto and exuberance with which such a man as Sir Jacob Epstein attacked even the smallest task to which he set his hand. Was it not because deep in the consciousness of the artist, there was a tearful sense of responsibility for the right use for his gift? It certainly was so with Epstein. Even on the day of his death, although already seized with illness he returned to his studio to complete his last great work.⁸⁴

The service included tributes from Sir Charles Wheeler, then President of the Royal Academy, and sculptor Henry Moore. The tributes were full of unanimous praise for Epstein and his work. A reporter for *The Guardian* reflected upon this, remarking that:

This unanimity made a strange contrast to the passions that were aroused by Sir Jacob's sculpture during his lifetime. But, if any such prejudices still existed in

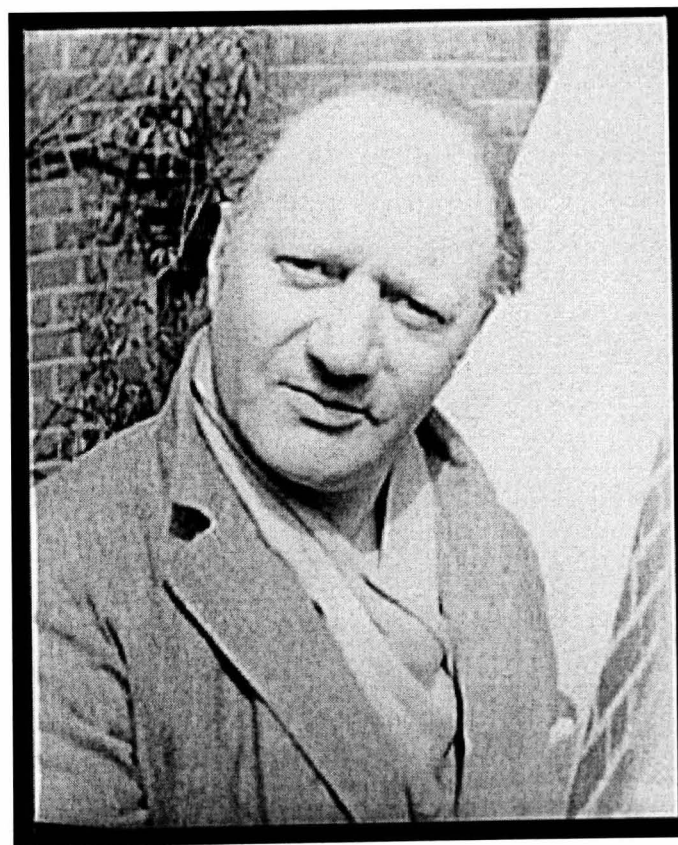
⁸⁴ Anon., 'Memorial Service for Epstein' in, *The Times*, (November 11th, 1959), p.14

the face of death, the sight of the huge Christ on the bare wall should have been sufficient to quench them.⁸⁵

Upon the temporary wall of the war-damaged cathedral hung the original plaster cast of Epstein's *Christ in Majesty*.

There is little else in the archive which points to this memorial, but it is clear from the small scraps of documentary evidence that Epstein was roundly praised during this memorial service. Many of the points which were made about Epstein at the memorial service somewhat differ from those that we have seen in the previous chapter; this is of course unsurprising. What is of interest to this thesis is where the praise is levelled, not on the output of Epstein's labours, but on the labours themselves.

In our next chapter, we will examine an unsuccessful attempt to create a memorial to Epstein, this time in the form of an Epstein museum.



Photograph of Jacob Epstein (c.1930)

⁸⁵ Anon., 'Remembering Epstein' in, *The Guardian*, (November 11th, 1959), p.8

Carving a Legacy: Part One

Remember Epstein: A Practical Memorial

As we have seen in the previous chapters, efforts were made in writing to define the meaning of Epstein's life. From the obituaries which considered Epstein's place within the history of art, to the memorial service which emphasised his strength of character against unbelievable hostility. We will examine a little-known episode in the wake of Epstein's death: an attempt by Lady Epstein to turn his studio into a permanent memorial. With the support of long-time friend, Arnold Haskell, a proposal was put forward that Epstein's studio should be transformed into a 'practical memorial, not a museum'⁸⁶ displaying many of Epstein's works and pieces from his own collection 'for the benefit of students'.⁸⁷

The proposal for a studio memorial was reported in *The Sphere* in the November following Epstein's death, with the author noting that: 'It is proposed that the casts of many of the sculptor's finest works should be kept permanently in the London studio in which he worked for the last twenty-eight years of his life.'⁸⁸ The article was a double-page spread which was accompanied by six photographs which showed Epstein's studio crammed with art and various piles of books. One of the photographs depicted Epstein's monumental sculpture of Christ, *Ecce Homo*, almost luminous, surrounded by dozens of portrait busts, with works spread out on tables and shelves, and scattered across the studio floor. According to an unsourced article found in The New Art Gallery, Walsall, archive: 'In Sir Jacob Epstein's London studio, nothing has been moved since the sculptor died in 1959. The chubby hands of children, the athletic limbs of prophets lie around in profusion.'⁸⁹ Next to each photograph there is a short piece of text which elaborates on the image's

⁸⁶ Anon., 'An Epstein Memorial' in, *The Sphere*, (November 28th, 1959), p.359

⁸⁷ Anon., 'An Epstein Memorial', p.358

⁸⁸ Anon., 'An Epstein Memorial', p.358

⁸⁹ Anon., 'Epstein's Legacy', (Unsourced magazine clipping, in New Art Gallery Walsall archive)

contents. The feeling of chaotic energy which comes out of these photographs is undeniable.

From the beginning, there were a number of obstacles to prevent the memorial from proceeding, the most pressing and vital obstacle being that of securing funding. In order for 19 Hyde Park Gate to be transformed into a memorial to Epstein, a source of funding was sought, with the writer in *The Sphere* remarking that: 'There seems little doubt that financial support should be forthcoming from the very large public which for so many years admired the genius of Epstein, despite the numerous controversies his work engendered.'⁹⁰ As we shall see, this was not the case.

On November 10th 1959, an article in *The Daily Mail* set the groundwork for the appeal for funding that would come less than a week later. Lady Epstein gave journalist Paul Tanfield an exclusive tour of Epstein's studio on the same day as the Epstein memorial service (as outlined in the previous chapter) was held at St. Paul's Cathedral. The subject of the article was focused on the 'the final works of the country's most violent and controversial sculptor'.⁹¹ Tanfield wrote that many of Epstein's works were reported in the Press to be half-finished: 'It is not so', he urged, detailing that Epstein's busts of *Princess Margaret* and the Archbishop of Canterbury, *Dr. Fisher* and the *Bowater House Group*, had been completed before his death.

Lady Epstein and Arnold Haskell made an appeal for donations in *The Times* on November 16th. Haskell was quoted as saying that, at that point, 'Nothing definite had been decided so far' with Lady Epstein adding that:

⁹⁰ Anon., 'An Epstein Memorial', p.358

⁹¹ Tanfield, Paul, 'Epstein and the Works he Left Behind' in, *The Daily Mail*, (November 10th, 1969), p.12

It is just an idea that I had immediately after my husband's death last August. I thought how nice it would be to keep his studio, because so much creative work has been done there which would be of enormous interest to students and foreign visitors. I have discussed with several friends, who agree wholeheartedly, but the difficulty would be to form a fund which would make it possible.⁹²

Lady Epstein remarked that she had been in discussions with a number of potential benefactors about making the memorial work as a viable business. The plan was to hand over Epstein's garden studio to a trust, with the house being sold separately. However, at this time, Haskell commented that they had 'not yet reached the stage of forming a body or committee.'⁹³ In all probability, the proposal was little more than an idea at this stage.

The proposal was met with a mixed reception. In the days that followed the article in *The Times*, a number of letters were printed discussing the merits of the proposal. Clive Gardiner, then Past-Principal at Goldsmiths' College School of Art, wrote of his support for the memorial:

Sir,--I was glad to read in *The Times* this morning of the generous offer of Lady Epstein and the late Sir Jacob Epstein's family to hand over the sculptor's studio and works to the nation as a permanent memorial provided that a suitable trust fund for its upkeep can be established.

May I, as one who has for some 50 years has had much to do with art students and on whose behalf I may, perhaps, claim some title to speak, say how warmly I support this magnificent project?⁹⁴

R. Gainsborough, editor of *Art News and Review* countered such enthusiastic sentiments in his letter, printed the following day:

Sir,--Your article to-day on the proposal to turn Epstein's studio into an Epstein museum raises a little disquiet in my mind. Do we really want to create a personal shrine to an artist before the erosion of time has confirmed our judgement? The museums to Bourdelle, Leger, Ensor, Rodin, and Watts add nothing to their stature as artists. Works of art are best seen in the position for which they were created, or when detached, in a public gallery where their importance can be judged with better sense of perspective.

⁹² Anon., 'Sir J. Epstein's Studio as Memorial' in, *The Times*, (November 16th, 1959), p.7

⁹³ Anon., 'Sir J. Epstein's Studio as Memorial', p.7

⁹⁴ Gardiner, Clive, 'Epstein Memorial' in, *The Times*, (November 19th, 1959), p.13

As an admirer of the works of Epstein—I proudly possess three—I still think his memorial lies best in Cavendish Square, New College, Oxford, Hyde Park, and the hundreds of public and private places which his art adorns.⁹⁵

The memorial at Hyde Park Gate never did come to fruition. The details are unclear, but what is certain is that Lady Epstein did not manage to secure the funds required. Five years later it was announced that the works were to be donated to Israel. In an unsourced press cutting found in The New Art Gallery, Walsall archive, the details of the fate of Epstein's works were revealed:

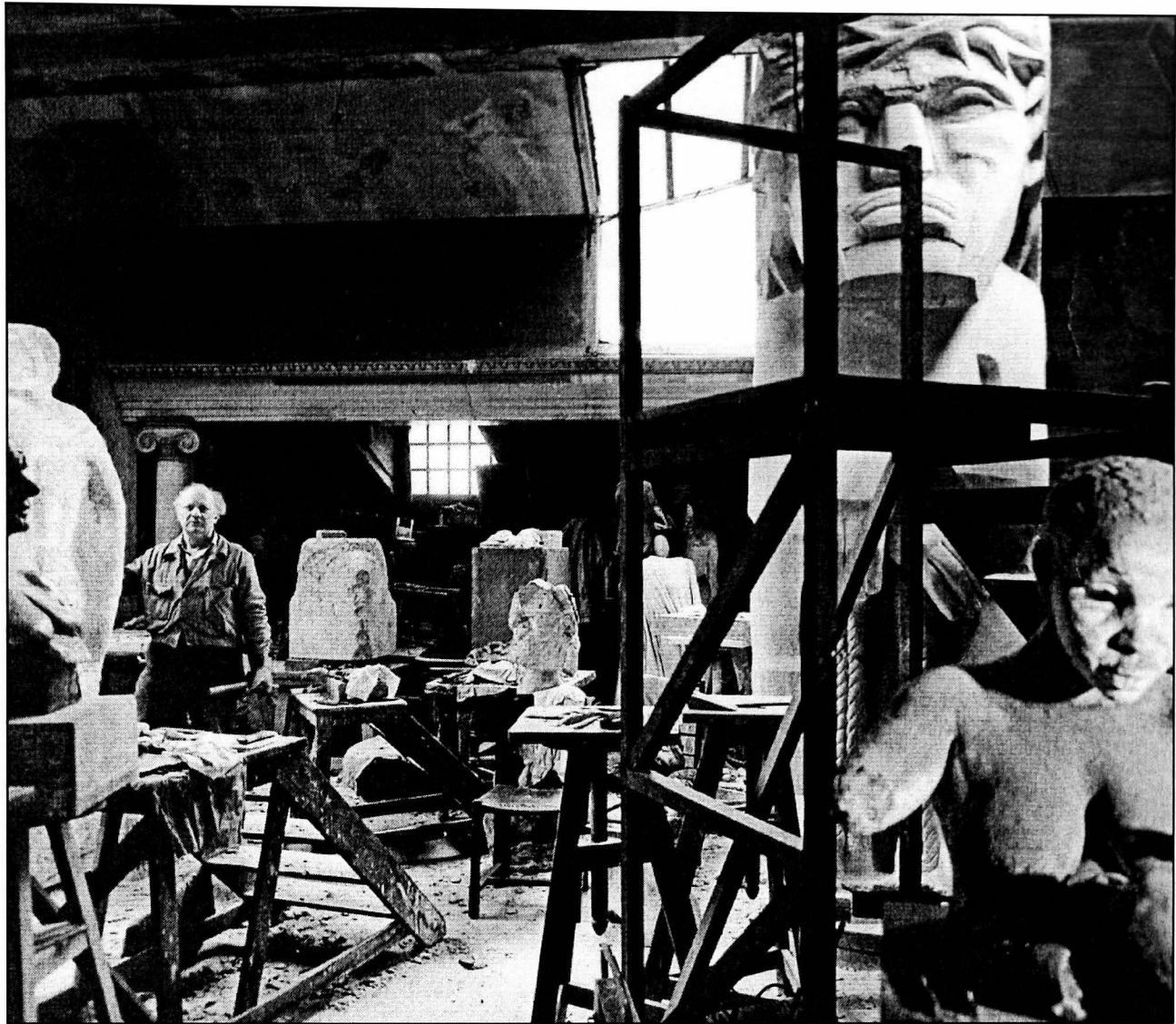
When Epstein died, five years ago, Lady Epstein at first hoped to keep the studio intact as a permanent memorial. "This studio has a wonderful atmosphere," she explains. "One really feels that here is a place where things have been created."

But the money to make this possible could not be raised. Instead, the 200 plaster originals from which all of Epstein's bronzes were cast, are to be sent to Israel to be housed in a new pavilion on a 40-acre hilltop in Jerusalem financed by American impresario Billy Rose.⁹⁶

As the details of this case are vague, it is difficult to make a firm assessment of the situation. What is clear is that for some reason, Lady Epstein was unable to fund this project. What was it about the proposal that meant that a generous benefactor, or group, were unwilling to fund it? Was it, as Gainsborough posited, that it was simply too soon to fairly assess Epstein's legacy? Was it, perhaps, that Epstein's legacy lay not in the works that he produced, but that he made 'modern' sculpture acceptable, as an obituary in *Arts* magazine earlier remarked? There are few definite conclusions which can be drawn from this episode. With Epstein's works scattered across the globe in a number of public and private collections, it is unfortunate that a dedicated Epstein memorial does not exist.

⁹⁵ Gainsborough, R., 'Epstein Memorial' in, *The Times*, (November 20th, 1959), p.12

⁹⁶ Anon., 'Epstein's Legacy', (Unsourced magazine clipping, in New Art Gallery Walsall archive)



Two photographs of Jacob Epstein in his studio at Hyde Park Gate, London.

Carving a Legacy: Part One

Remembering Epstein: The Epstein Memorial Exhibition

Over the previous chapters we have seen the efforts that were made to both consider the life and work of Jacob Epstein, and to create a suitable setting where a just consideration of his merits could be made. In this chapter we will expand our analysis of efforts made to shape Epstein's legacy by unpacking the critical reception of the Edinburgh Festival Memorial Exhibition of 1961. This could arguably be the most important exhibition of Epstein's work both during his life and since his death, as it presented an almost complete overview of Epstein's life's work, the scale of which had not been seen before or since.

From August 19th to September 18th 1961, Edinburgh's Waverly Market was divided into twenty four rooms to house Epstein's first, and largest, posthumous retrospective exhibition. Displaying 230 works, both inside and outside of the building, the Edinburgh Festival Memorial exhibition was arranged both chronologically and thematically.⁹⁷ Of the twenty four rooms, six were set aside to allow the exhibition of single large carvings. As David Baxendall noted in *The Sunday Telegraph*:

The visitor to the exhibition walks through a chain of 24 rooms that have been built inside the large box of the Waverley Market. Because the rooms vary in shape, size, colour and lighting, a feeling of freshness and variety is maintained through all the 230 items shown. One follows the sculptor's development from a self-portrait drawn in 1900 to the Bowater House group that he finished on the night of his death two years ago.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ The rooms were set out as follows: Room 1: Early Works, 1904-1912. Room 2: The 'Strand Statues', Photographs and Fragments. Room 3: Photographs of Monumental Commissions: 1910-1929. Room 4: Vorticism, 1913-1916. Room 5: Portrait Bronzes, 1916-1922 and the first 'Christ'. Room 6: The Visitation and Other Sacred Works, 1923-1927. Room 7: Portrait Bronzes, 1923-1927. Room 8: Genesis and Other Carvings. Room 9: Portrait Bronzes of the 1930s. Room 10: Ecce Homo, 1934-1935. Room 11: Youth. Room 12: Public Men. Room 13: Drawings. Room 14: Consummatum Est, 1936-1937. Room 15: Adam, 1938-1939. Room 16, Jacob and the Angel, 1940-1941. Room 17: Drawings and Giant Torso. Room 18: Lucifer. Room 19: Portrait Bronzes of the 1940s. Room 20: Photographs of Late Monumental Works. Room 21: Lazarus, 1947-1948. Room 22: Artists and Thinkers. Room 23: Plaster Casts of Cathedral Commissions. Room 24: Portrait Bronzes of the 1950s.

⁹⁸ Baxandall, David, 'Epstein and Aspiration' in, *Sunday Telegraph*, (August 19th, 1961)

Organised by Richard Buckle,⁹⁹ the exhibition was intended to be ‘the biggest show of the sculptor’s work ever put on’.¹⁰⁰ A complete catalogue of works included in the exhibition, which was available for purchase at the show, included descriptions and assessments of many of the works on display provided by Richard Buckle and Lady Epstein. Also included, was a brief biographical chronology of Epstein’s life and a foreword by Lord Harewood. There was also the inclusion of 30 black and white photographs from various sources, most of them detailing various portraits.

The foreword to the exhibition catalogue began by relaying the details of Epstein’s death and noted that the Memorial Exhibition: ‘is, of course, the biggest show of the sculptor’s work ever put on; never before has so large a collection of portrait bronzes been assembled; and never before have so many of Epstein’s monumental works been gathered under one roof.’¹⁰¹

There were, of course, a number of monumental works which were not on display; these works were, however, represented by the inclusion of fragments, plaster casts, preparatory drawings, maquettes and photographs.

Of the curation of the exhibition, Lord Harewood wrote that:

In planning the Exhibition Mr Buckle has aimed at extreme simplicity, renouncing all the theatrical effects which were so appropriate to his Diaghilev show for the Festival in 1954. From the start he was determined to isolate the monumental carvings and give them space, planning that big ‘empty’ rooms alternate with smaller, intimate, ones for the portrait bronzes.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ The complete committee was as follows: Lady Epstein, The Earl of Harewood, I. J. Lyons, Graham Law, James Dunbar-Nasmith and Terence Edmondson (architects), Lord Primrose (Lighting), and Richard Buckle (Director of the Exhibition).

¹⁰⁰ Buckle, Richard, *Epstein: Edinburgh Festival Society Memorial Exhibition*, (Edinburgh Festival Society, 1961), p.2

¹⁰¹ Lord Harewood, ‘Foreword’ in, Buckle, Richard, *Epstein: Edinburgh Festival Society Memorial Exhibition*, (Edinburgh Festival Society, 1961), p.2

¹⁰² Lord Harewood, ‘Foreword’ in, Buckle, Richard, *Epstein: Edinburgh Festival Society Memorial Exhibition*, (Edinburgh Festival Society, 1961), p.2

Interestingly, this emphasis on simplicity and the absence of theatricality is at odds with how the layout was received by some critics. One critic, for example, remarked that: ‘The lay-out of the show is rather theatrical and the lighting, whilst adding drama to some of the works, tends to distract. The work of Epstein, especially the monumental carvings and bronzes, require little artificial assistance to impress.’¹⁰³ Lord Harewood’s foreword concluded by acknowledging the help of a number of lenders, financiers and builders who enabled the exhibition to take place. We are left with a sense of the sheer magnitude of the task of putting together such an exhibition and are reminded of the uniqueness and scale of such an ambitious show.

On the whole, the show was well received, with many compliments in the Press applauding the vast range of work on display in one place. As well as the compliments to Epstein’s work and legacy, praise was directed towards the curator, Richard Buckle, for his effort in putting together such a show and producing the catalogue. The uniqueness and unrepeatability of the exhibition was emphasised, with many commentators noting that the Memorial Exhibition was the highlight of the Edinburgh Festival calendar, and perhaps of the year. John Russell of *The Times* captured much of the sentiment by writing:

If Edinburgh this year had done nothing else of consequence it would still be memorable for the massive and full-hearted act of homage which has been paid to Jacob Epstein. In intention, in scope and in scale this is all that a Festival Exhibition should be: for once the words “unique” and “unrepeatable” can be used quite strictly.¹⁰⁴

When this exhibition was opened on the second anniversary of Epstein’s death, a few years had passed since the immediate consideration of Epstein’s legacy had taken place. The opening of this exhibition allowed critics to reassess Epstein’s position with fresh eyes, with one critic poignantly noting that:

¹⁰³ M’Cullough, F. M. O., ‘Consummate Alchemy in Clay and Bronze.’, (Un-sourced press cutting found in New Art Gallery, Walsall archive)

¹⁰⁴ Russell, John, ‘Massive Homage to Epstein’ in, *The Times*. (August 21st, 1961)

It is time for a revaluation of this sculptor, who suffered so much from the hostility of the philistines and the neglect of the cognoscenti. In his lifetime, even those who most admired his portrait heads often regarded his imaginative carvings as an aberration. In Edinburgh they are seen to take their place as part of the astonishingly rich outpouring of sculpture produced by a man who for many years modelled portraits in the mornings and carved great blocks of stone in the afternoons. For the first time it is made clear for us all that both came from the same creative personality.¹⁰⁵

Indeed, the sense of revaluation comes through when considering the critical reception of the show, with a number of commentators using their writing on the exhibition as an opportunity to, once again, consider Epstein's merits. It is argued in a number of articles that the completeness of the exhibition gave the critics a unique opportunity to assess Epstein's work in all its range, and that the exhibition was an opportunity that is unlikely to occur ever again; as David Baxandall pointed out in *The Sunday Telegraph*:

The Edinburgh festival's vast exhibition of Epstein's work provides a better opportunity than there has ever been for assessing his achievements. It is unlikely that such an opportunity can ever occur again; once the enormous carvings that form an essential part of the exhibition leave Edinburgh, it will be for dispersal to their permanent homes.¹⁰⁶

Whereas the obituaries were chiefly concerned with Epstein's identity as a controversial artist, a great portraitist and a Jewish prophet, the reviews of the Memorial Exhibition tended to present Epstein as a victim of misunderstanding and malicious gossip. For example, in John Russell's revaluation of Epstein in *The Times*, he remarked that:

We should have to go back, almost, to Captain Dreyfus to find a man as consistently wronged by society as was Epstein in this country. Hatred of art and hatred of the Jews have rarely gone more unpleasantly together than in the attacks to which this big man was subjected.¹⁰⁷

As noted in the first chapter of this thesis, we have to be careful not to attach too much weight to the influence of Judaism on the artist, and as argued here, on the reception of his work. We have to be careful with statements such as this and not take them as historical fact. It is true that some of the criticism of Epstein's work was directly influenced by the fact that he was Jewish, but this does not mean that all of the negative criticism which was

¹⁰⁵ Baxandall, David, 'Epstein and Aspiration' in, *Sunday Telegraph*, (August 19th, 1961)

¹⁰⁶ Baxandall, David, 'Epstein and Aspiration'

¹⁰⁷ Russell, John, 'Massive Homage to Epstein' in, *The Times*. (August 21st, 1961)

levelled at Epstein was because of this. There is a trend which runs through much criticism and scholarship which calls for a revaluation of Epstein, citing his mistreatment during his lifetime as justification. Indeed, the portrayal of Epstein as being wronged by the world is still plays a very large role in the Epstein narrative.

It is perhaps the consideration of Epstein's legacy by art critic John Berger which is most striking. The article began by declaring victory to Epstein against 'the philistines', the first line reading: 'Epstein has won.' But, as Berger explained, this victory was to the detriment of Epstein's work and artistic legacy:

The huge retrospective exhibition at Edinburgh (excellently designed and catalogued by Richard Buckle) is like a triumphal arch through which 5,000 people a day pass to pay their mute respects.

The battle lasted fifty years. But now the mob leaders are forgotten and the philistines defeated. No one declares any longer that it is the nation's duty to protect women and children from his monstrous blasphemies and obscenities. There are no more sarcastic jokes about artistic Relativity; jokes based on coupling two Jewish names. Retired commanders now mutter acknowledgment of his genius. Churchmen find it in their hearts to suffer his passion gladly. Schoolgirls walk unabashed round his "Adam" and gaze up at the great swinging alabaster penis. The press that used to harry him mercilessly is now proud of his fame.¹⁰⁸

What is interesting about the article is the fact that it was actually very critical of Epstein, declaring that 'Epstein was not an important sculptor'. What makes Berger's arguments so compelling, however, is by virtue of the fact he criticised Epstein on Epstein's terms. Berger bypassed the arguments which hitherto had relied on sculptural hierarchies or narrow evaluations derived from a consideration of form. Instead, he noted that Epstein 'began to think of his work as a kind of branch of moral philosophy', and because of this, Epstein became more concerned with expressing ideas than developing his artistic imagination. Berger asked: 'Why did Epstein fail as a sculptor?' In response, he pointed to

¹⁰⁸ Berger, John, 'Epstein's Pyrrhic Victory over the Philistines' in, *The Observer, Weekend Review* (September 3rd, 1961), p.21

the inconsistency of Epstein's work, not only in terms of Epstein's oeuvre, but within the design of works themselves:

A work of art, when compared with life, is always bound to come off badly unless it has, in some way, been made more consistent than a slice of life can ever be. This consistency then governs all the work's references to life, in the same way the nervous system governs all the actions of the body. Epstein's works are scarcely ever consistent. The head of "Genesis" is carved like a wooden mask whilst the buttocks are an academic imitation of flesh. The wings in "Jacob and the Angel" are as heavy and formalised as headstones, yet the Angel's thumbnails are so literal that they could be manicured. The hands of "Christ in Majesty" are almost like casts from life—you could read their palms—yet the body is as rigid as metal casing. When the nervous system fails there is no coordination. When there is no consistency in a work of art the references to life become, in every meaning of the word, sensational.¹⁰⁹

These inconsistencies are indeed present in many of Epstein's works. It could be argued, however, that in some works (for example *Genesis*) the inconsistency in imagery and style actually forms part of the artistic message. Inconsistency should not be seen as a necessarily negative quality, in and of itself, but must instead be considered in the wider context of what is being communicated through each isolated work. Berger continued:

I believe that Epstein's inability to be consistent was due to his weakness of visual imagination. Having formalised, say, a head in a particular way, he was unable to visualise how to formalise a foot or hand in the same way. He constantly had to fall back on a readymade solution, which was in fact the answer to a different problem. He was rather like a man trying to write an Odyssey with a haphazard vocabulary of a few hundred words.¹¹⁰

This 'weakness of visual imagination' is perhaps a little unfair. Though we can agree with these statements when considering some of Epstein's carvings, the same certainly cannot be said of his modelled works, for which Epstein would adapt his style depending on the personality of his sitter. Berger continued, complaining that there was often a great disparity between the titles of works and their imagery:

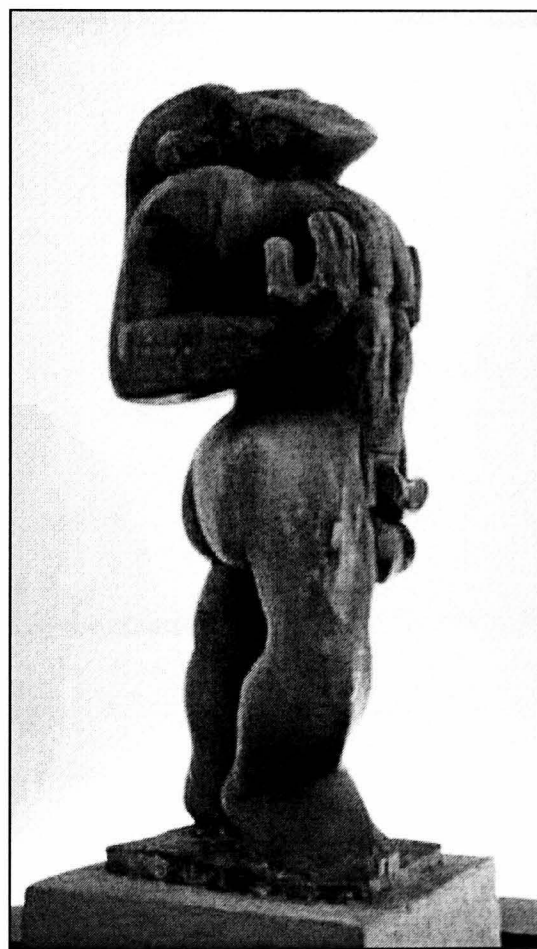
I am the last person to argue that art has nothing to do with communication, but the ideas must be inherent in the work, not imposed. And for Epstein, the moral feeling became all-important. [...] The idea came to stand in the way of observation and visual inquiry. Even when he embraced the *idea* of the finished sculpture retaining the quality of the block from which it was carved, it

¹⁰⁹ Berger, John, 'Epstein's Pyrrhic Victory over the Philistines', p.21

¹¹⁰ Berger, John, 'Epstein's Pyrrhic Victory over the Philistines', p.21

remained an idea and never organically affected the way he carved an ankle bone or a thumb.¹¹¹

This is a key point when considering some of Epstein's works, and is an accusation which was often repeated throughout Epstein's career. In works such as *Venus* (1914-16), *Madonna and Child* (1926-27) and *Adam* (1939), one could argue that there is nothing inherent within the visual language or imagery which would necessarily suggest such subject matter. This cannot be said, however, for works such as *Maternity* (1910), *Jacob and the Angel* (1941) and *Christ in Majesty* (1954-55), were produced in a visual language or contained imagery which corresponded quite obviously to their titles of the works.



Left: *Jacob and the Angel*, (1941)

Right: *Adam*, (1939)

¹¹¹ Berger, John, 'Epstein's Pyrrhic Victory over the Philistines', p.21 (*Berger's emphasis.*)

Berger believed that Epstein's lack of imagination was actually as a result of him feeling that he was at constant war with critics. Berger cited Epstein's paranoia and lack of self-criticism as the principal contributors to his failure, and noted that in a sense the philistines won, because Epstein fought them on their terms, and lost sight of his own artistic development. Essentially, Berger saw Epstein as an artist who was trying to make bold and articulate statements, but simply did not possess the artistic 'vocabulary' to express them clearly. Berger remarked that it was Epstein's reaction to hostility which inevitably led to his failure:

Reproved and morally condemned by his inferiors, Epstein reacted by becoming a preacher himself. He also become paranoic [*sic*]. His autobiography makes petty and pathetic reading. His paranoia prevented him from learning from others, silenced all self-criticism and made him believe that his works were inevitably consistent by virtue of the simple fact that every part had been made by Epstein.¹¹²

With Berger's scathing critique of Epstein's legacy, we have to remember that although this assessment was perhaps the most lucid and honest revaluation of Epstein, Berger by no means represented the consensus. The identity of Epstein was characterised chiefly by an effort to readdress the injustices of past criticism, but it seemed, on the whole, to be at the expense of an objective and dispassionate consideration.

In this chapter we have seen how an almost complete overview of Epstein's work gave the public and critics the opportunity to evaluate Epstein's work in a hitherto unseen way. In the critical reception of the work, we have writers making serious efforts to redress the balance of, sometimes undue or exaggerated, negative criticism that Epstein received throughout his career. Though many critics were appreciative of the efforts of the organisers of the exhibition, others took to criticising Epstein's failings. In our next chapter, we will consider the conclusions drawn from the first part of this thesis in greater detail.

¹¹² Berger, John, 'Epstein's Pyrrhic Victory over the p.21

Carving a Legacy: Part Two

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Carving a Legacy: Part Two

Writing a Legacy: Introduction

In the first part of this thesis we have seen four case studies which shed some light onto the perception of Jacob Epstein's artistic legacy in the immediate years after his death. From the reflections of Epstein's life as outlined in the obituaries, to the Memorial Exhibition which displayed an almost comprehensive overview of his life's work, we have seen many interventions which outline the relative merits of Epstein's life and work.

In collaboration with Lady Epstein, Richard Buckle spent the immediate years after Epstein's death cataloguing his works, organising the Epstein Memorial Exhibition, and producing a new foreword for Epstein's autobiography. Without the efforts of Richard Buckle, the field of Epstein scholarship would probably be unrecognisable. It may then come as a surprise to realise that a man who was privy to so many intimate details of Epstein's life had only met him once. Writing to Penelope Marcus in 1974, Buckle stated that: 'I only shook Epstein's hand once and never discussed his work with him. For matters of fact I relied on Lady Epstein who asked me to do the book after her husband's death.'¹¹³ We have to consider, then, that many of the details about Epstein's life and works, which were not gleaned from his autobiography or *The Sculptor Speaks*, were likely to have been provided by Lady Epstein, who had her own subjective views on the legacy of her late husband. It is perhaps for this reason that Epstein's first wife, Margaret Dunlop, who was not only an major part of Epstein's life, but also Epstein's business manager for almost 50 years, was barely mentioned in any of the biographical information provided by Buckle. Indeed, her importance is practically erased from Buckle's account of Epstein's life, with only a passing reference

¹¹³ Letter from Richard Buckle to Penelope Marcus dated 20th February, 1974. In HMI Archive (2000/47)

made to her throughout Buckle's writings. Though Richard Buckle's writings are one of the best sources for Epstein scholars, they are not without their problems. When we examine historical sources, we have to ask ourselves some very simple questions: is the evidence contemporary? Was the evidence written by an eye-witness? Where did they get their sources from? Are they consistent with other sources? What is being ignored or exaggerated? Once we start applying these kinds of criteria to Buckle's writings, problems quickly begin to emerge. Though the writings of Richard Buckle have merit and can be used as evidence, so long as the sources of this evidence are verified, the problem is that they have had a profound influence upon the work of later scholars who have used Buckle's work uncritically. This means that certain prejudices and revisions of Epstein's history have been taken up by later writers as an unproblematic part of the Epstein narrative. This is why it will be necessary to reassess and reassert the importance of our earliest historical sources: those which are closest to the case studies in question.

In the second part of this thesis we will turn our attention to unpacking and examining some of these earliest sources, with one simple question in mind: to what extent is Epstein's artistic legacy being asserted? As we shall see, the question and the answers will be formulated in a number of different ways.

In the first chapter we will work through the writings of T. E. Hulme, who, for a few years, was Epstein's chief apologist. Not only did he assert the importance of Epstein's work, he considered the work in the context of wider developments in philosophy and intellectual history. It is believed that at the time of his death, Hulme had completed a manuscript for a monograph on Epstein – this manuscript has unfortunately been lost.

The first monograph on Epstein's work will be examined in our second chapter: *Epstein* by Bernard Van Dieren. As our first book on Epstein, it seems quite surprising that it has seldom been mentioned by other Epstein scholars. The purpose of the chapter will be to examine the claims made by this text about Epstein's place in the history of art.

In our third chapter we will examine a book of 'conversations on art' between Jacob Epstein and Arnold Haskell. This can be seen as the most useful text for scholars to consider Epstein's early career, for in the book he discussed a number of his most high-profile works to date, he articulated his views on the history of art and contemporary practise, and provided some autobiographical information for the reader. We will see, however, that this book is a carefully considered document which is used to cement Epstein's position as a traditional artist.

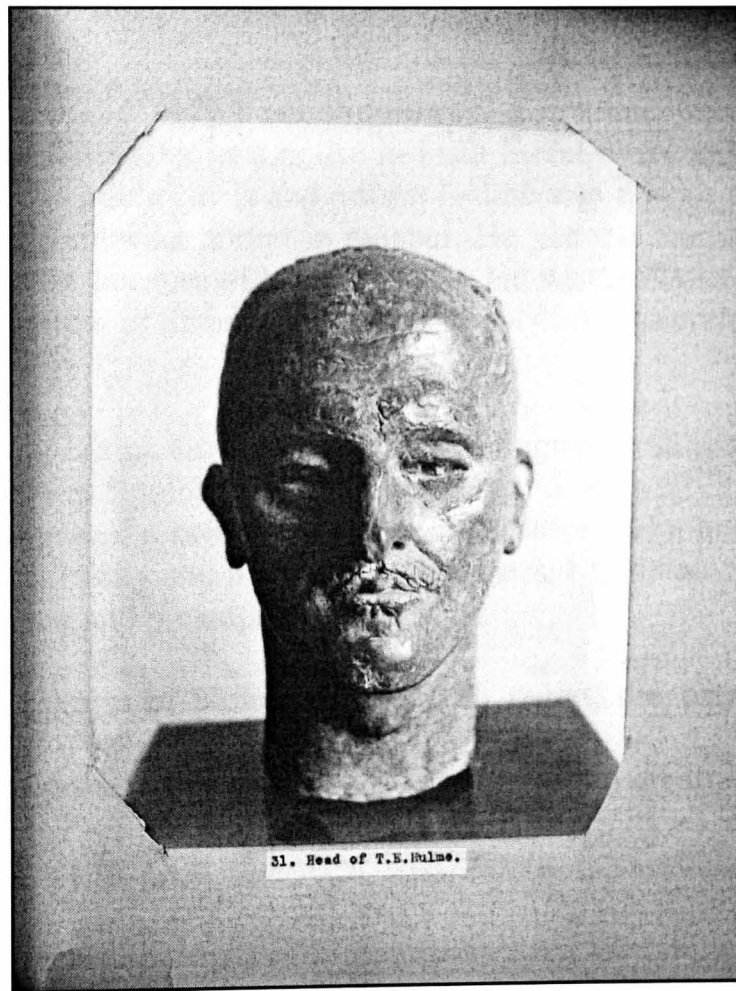
In chapter four, we will unpack and examine Epstein's involvement in the controversy surrounding the cleaning and restoration of the Parthenon Sculptures in the British Museum. Epstein's part in the wider debate has been largely ignored, and though Epstein's position has since been problematised by later scholars, it is useful to examine how Epstein used this episode to position himself in relation to the development of artistic tradition.

Finally, chapter five is concerned with the way in which Epstein saw his place in sculpture by close-reading the conveniently titled chapter, 'My Place in Sculpture', from his autobiography.

Carving a Legacy: Part Two

Writing a Legacy: T. E. Hulme

As a key contributor to the understanding of Epstein's work between 1912 and 1917, Thomas Ernest Hulme (1883-1917) both theorised and defended Epstein's artistic output. The purpose of this chapter is to unpack and examine the theories of art as articulated by Hulme, and assess how these writings relate to, or are directed by, Jacob Epstein's artistic output and how they position Epstein in relation to the development of artistic tradition. For the purposes of understanding Hulme's theories of art, we will be paying particular attention to two key essays: 'Modern Art and Its Philosophy'¹¹⁴ and 'Mr. Epstein and the Critics'¹¹⁵.



*T.E Hulme (1916). From Hulme's photograph album.*¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Hulme, T. E., 'Modern Art and Its Philosophy' in, Karen Csengeri (ed.), *The Collected Writings of T. E. Hulme*, (Clarendon Press, 1994)

¹¹⁵ Hulme, T. E., 'Mr. Epstein and the Critics' in, Karen Csengeri (ed.), *The Collected Writings of T. E. Hulme*, (Clarendon Press, 1994)

¹¹⁶ *Hulme Papers* in, Hull University Archive,

Hulme's admiration for Epstein was no secret, they were very close friends and Hulme used many opportunities within his writings to highlight the greatness of Epstein. To illustrate Hulme's attitude to Epstein, we shall briefly examine an unpublished review of Epstein's work when it was exhibited at the 21 Gallery in December 1913. In the article, Hulme wrote that: 'Mr Epstein is certainly the most interesting and remarkable sculptor of this generation. I have seen no work in Paris or Berlin which I can so unreservedly admire.'¹¹⁷

The appreciation of Epstein's work was echoed by Epstein's admiration of Hulme's intellectual and personal qualities. It is obvious that Epstein and Hulme developed a close intellectual relationship during this period. This was stated quite clearly by Epstein in his autobiography:

At this period (1912) I got to know T. E. Hulme very well. His evenings, always on Tuesdays, at a house in Frith Street, were gatherings that attracted many of the intellectuals and artists. Hulme was a large man in bulk, and also large and somewhat abrupt in manner. He had the reputation of being a bully and arrogant, because of his abruptness. He was really of a candid and original nature like that of Samuel Johnson, and only his intolerance of sham made him feared.

Personally I think he was a genuine and singularly likeable character, and with artists he was humble and always willing to learn. [...] Hulme, to attract so large and varied a company of men, must have had a quality, I should say, of his great urbanity and his broad-mindedness, I maintain, only ceased when he met humbug and pretentiousness.¹¹⁸

Epstein continued his praise of Hulme noting, with regret, the untapped and unfulfilled potential which Hulme possessed. Epstein believed him to be a great philosopher and wrote: 'although he never lived to fulfil the great promise his remarkable mind and character foreshadowed, yet has aroused tremendous interest by what are really only fragments of his projected works.'¹¹⁹ Although their relationship was relatively short-lived, it is in this

¹¹⁷ Hulme, T. E., 'Jacob Epstein at the 21 Gallery' (Unpublished, 1913) in, *Tate Gallery Archive*, TGA 3135/35

¹¹⁸ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, (Hulton Press, 1955), pp.59-60

¹¹⁹ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.61

context of friendship and mutual admiration that Hulme developed his theory of art and Epstein found an intellectual ally and champion of some of his more radical works. Never again would Epstein align himself so closely with a theorist of his work.

Epstein's respect for Hulme evidently continued in the subsequent decades after Hulme's death in the trenches in 1917. In a collection of Hulme's writings published in 1924, entitled *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*,¹²⁰ Epstein was asked by the editor Herbert Read to contribute a foreword to the text. Though concise, it illustrates Epstein's respect for Hulme and the importance of his writings and ideas to Epstein. He began the foreword by writing that 'Hulme was my very great friend'.¹²¹ He continued: 'What appealed to me particularly in him was the vigour and sincerity of his thought.'¹²² Epstein continued to illustrate how he felt Hulme was his 'chief bulwark against malicious criticism.'¹²³ The respect between Hulme and Epstein was a mutual one. As Epstein noted, their relationship was a dialogue of ideas going backwards and forwards between them. He wrote that: 'I recall particularly our first meeting. I was at work on the Wilde monument. Hulme immediately put his own construction on my work – turned it into some theory of projectiles. My sculpture only served to start the train of his thought.'¹²⁴ It is in the context of this friendship that Epstein created some of his most forward-looking and Modernist works.

The form of Modernism being championed in Britain during this period was marked by a set of values that were to be re-evaluated in light of the horrors of trench warfare. It was not only the style of artistic and theoretical output that changed, but with the deaths of Henri

¹²⁰ Read, Herbert (ed.), *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, (Regen Paul, Trench, Trubner & co., Ltd., 1936)

¹²¹ Read, Herbert (ed.), *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, p.vii

¹²² Read, Herbert (ed.), *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, p.vii

¹²³ Read, Herbert (ed.), *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, p.vii

¹²⁴ Read, Herbert (ed.), *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, p.viii

Gaudier-Brzeska in 1915 and Hulme in 1917, the particular form of Modernism being espoused in the first half of the decade had lost some of its key contributors. It was after the death of Hulme that Epstein turned his back on the pursuits of abstract art and radical Modernism.

Hulme expressed his theories on emerging art in the essay 'Modern Art and Its Philosophy' which was given as a lecture to the Quest Society in January 1914.¹²⁵ In this essay, Hulme made clear the distinction between the 'vital' tendencies of Greek and Renaissance art and the 'geometrical' art of ancient Egypt and Byzantine.¹²⁶ He contrasted the naturalism of Greek statuary and Renaissance painting, with the abstract qualities of the Egyptian pyramids and Byzantine mosaics, and made a clear oppositional distinction between these two 'kinds' of art, arguing that:

There are now two kinds of art, geometrical and vital, absolutely distinct from one another. These two arts are not modifications of one and the same art, but pursue different aims and are created for the satisfaction of different necessities of the mind.¹²⁷

Hulme explained that art of the ancient Greek and the Renaissance are characterised by a tendency towards a naturalistic form of expression. This is presented as an antithesis to the art of ancient Egypt and Byzantine, which he characterised by relating their forms to geometrical abstraction. As Hulme continued, he posited that geometric art: 'obviously exhibits no delight in nature and no striving after vitality. Its forms are always what can be described as stiff and lifeless. [...] This is what Worringer¹²⁸ calls *the tendency to*

¹²⁵ The Quest Society (founded in 1909) was an offshoot of the Theosophical Society. They published a quarterly comparative journal *The Quest* (1909-30), which focused on the consideration of aesthetic concerns through philosophy, science and religion.

¹²⁶ The term 'Vital' here is used by Hulme to mean 'classical' – essentially as the copying of natural forms of life as opposed to our modern definition.

¹²⁷ Hulme, T. E., 'Modern Art and Its Philosophy' in, Karen Csengeri (ed.), *The Collected Writings of T. E. Hulme*, p.269

¹²⁸ See: Worringer, Wilhelm, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, (Ivan and Dee, 1907, 2007)

*abstraction.*¹²⁹ The abstraction *contra* naturalism opposition noted here does not, according to Hulme, suggest any necessary connexion between the tendency and technical proficiency required in producing such work. In Hulme's conception there is no suggestion of a link between style and proficiency. This is an important distinction as the traditional tendency in European art was to equate technical proficiency with closeness to nature. Hulme aligned the European tradition in art with that of the ancient Greeks, arguing that our appreciation of the aesthetic is essentially ideological in nature. The traditional European ideal of beauty is thus derived from its correspondence to the natural forms that we are familiar with.

Hulme continued:

we can say that any work of art we find beautiful is an objectification of our own pleasure in activity and our own vitality. The worth of a line or form consists in the value of the life which it contains for us. Putting the matter more simply we may say that on this art there is always a feeling of liking for, and pleasure in, the forms and movements to be found in nature.¹³⁰

The crux of Hulme's argument rests on the notion that the will to express though art in a particular style stems from a culture's specific relationship to nature. Those cultures that Hulme assumed to have seen themselves as masters of nature would choose a naturalistic approach to art, whereas cultures which regarded themselves as being a part of nature do not reproduce its forms. As Hulme argued

The art of a people, then, will run parallel to its philosophy and general world outlook. It is a register of the nature of the opposition between man and the world. Each race is in consequence of its situation and character inclined to one of these two tendencies, and its art would give you a key to its psychology.¹³¹

It is culture, then, which was most deterministic, in Hulme's view, to the type of art which is produced at an given place and time. Hulme believed that artistic creations were a reflection of a particular culture's philosophical and psychological character. Hulme also denied the influence of materials available to an artist in a given location, thus denying any materialistic conceptions of the history of art. He argued that:

¹²⁹ Hulme, T. E., 'Modern Art and Its Philosophy', p.273 (*Hulme's emphasis.*)

¹³⁰ Hulme, T. E., 'Modern Art and Its Philosophy', p.273

¹³¹ Hulme, T. E., 'Modern Art and Its Philosophy', p.274

the material did not produce the style. If Egypt had been inhabited by people of the Greek race, the fact that the material was granite, would not have made them produce anything like Egyptian sculpture. The technical qualities of a material can thus never create a style. A feeling for form of a certain kind must always be the source of an art.¹³²

Hulme's appeal to innate racial characteristics and the drives of a particular culture, over a more materialistic approach, is at the same time coupled with a notion that these drives are in flux and unstable. It is a little odd that Hulme made an appeal to racial determinism, whilst simultaneously he expounded the idea that what is being determined is only relative to the current paradigm.

Hulme argued that the emerging art marked a change, not only in artistic style, but also in the general philosophical outlook of British culture. He posited that emerging art signified a move from the vital to the abstract; a move which Hulme saw as so important that he saw it as having the potential to lead to a shift in paradigm of the dominant ideology in European culture. Hulme explained:

I stand committed to two statements:-

(1)...that a new geometrical art is emerging which may be considered as different in kind from the art which preceded it, it being much more akin to the geometrical arts of the past, and

(2)...that this change from a vital to a geometrical form is the product of and will be accompanied by a certain change of sensibility, a certain change of general attitude, and that this new attitude will differ in kind from the humanism which has prevailed from the Renaissance, and will have certain analogies to the attitude of which geometrical art was the expression in the past.¹³³

[...] It seems to me beyond doubt that this, whether you like it or not is the character of art that is coming. I speak of it myself with enthusiasm, not only because I appreciate it myself, but because I believe it to be the precursor of a much wider change in philosophy and general outlook on the world.¹³⁴

In this quite forceful tone, Hulme argued that the emerging art was merely a symptom of wider radical social change. In essence, Hulme believed that the European tradition of

¹³² Hulme, T. E., 'Modern Art and Its Philosophy', p.284

¹³³ Hulme, T. E., 'Modern Art and Its Philosophy', p.276

¹³⁴ Hulme, T. E., 'Modern Art and Its Philosophy', p.285

appreciating naturalistic art was on the verge of being superseded by an appreciation of abstraction. He suggested that this new epoch in human understanding would be similar in nature to a distant (and it must be said, mythologized) past. Hulme referred to the notion of 'the primitive' that was articulated by many critics and artists during this period. The concept of primitivism is understood by Hulme, not as a lack of intelligence or an underdeveloped human state, but as a more fundamental and innocent understanding of the world. The identity of Epstein as a 'primitive' artist during this period perhaps led to the distinction between 'vital' and 'abstract' art and Hulme's assertion that: 'I think that the new art differs, not in degree, but in kind, from the art that we are accustomed to'.¹³⁵ Indeed, Hulme cited Epstein as his inspiration for his arguments about the emergence of 'geometrical' art, writing that: 'I recognised this geometrical character re-emerging in modern art. I am thinking particularly of certain pieces of sculpture I saw some years ago, of Mr. Epstein's.'¹³⁶ It would seem that Hulme championed Epstein according to his own philosophical tenets; he did so in such a way that both exemplified and justified his own particular theories on aesthetics and creativity. Interestingly, Epstein was the only artist mentioned by name in the essay; all other art referred to was through broad references to style and era, no specific works of art were cited. Hulme, then, placed Epstein in a teleology of sculpture which sought to link the geometric planes of the pyramids to the style of Epstein's work, a style which needed to be seen as both new and ancient simultaneously. Ancient in the sense of style and feeling, but modern in the sense that what was being expressed by Epstein could not have been done at an earlier period. For example, Epstein's *The Rock Drill* (1913) seemed to illustrate Hulme's assertions. As Hulme explained, referring to a preparatory drawing of *The Rock Drill* (Hulme did not refer to the actual sculpture in any of his writings): 'People will admire the 'Rock Drill', because they have no

¹³⁵ Hulme, T. E., 'Modern Art and Its Philosophy', p.269

¹³⁶ Hulme, T. E., 'Modern Art and Its Philosophy', p.271

preconceived notions as to how the thing expressed by it should be expressed.’¹³⁷ Indeed, when Hulme first published ‘Mr. Epstein and the Critics’ in the December, 1913 issue of *The New Age*, a drawing of *The Rock Drill* was reproduced at the end of the article.

To Hulme, Epstein’s more radical work seemed to mark both a break-up of the old traditions and a return to ancient methods. It is this ‘return’ to geometric abstraction that Hulme stressed as being key to defining and, moreover, understanding the emerging trends in art. Hulme argued that: ‘there is a danger that the understanding of the new may be hindered by a way of looking on art which is only appropriate to the art that has preceded it.’¹³⁸ It must be said that Hulme was treading on incredibly shaky ground at this point: he stressed the need for the new art to be viewed in a new way, a new way which was dictated by the shift in philosophical paradigm, or as Hulme sees it: ‘the break-up of the Renaissance humanist attitude’.¹³⁹ Hulme did not make it clear whether the apparent shift in artistic style was caused by a shift in philosophical paradigm, or whether the change in philosophical paradigm would bring about a new artistic style. There is even the suggestion that there is no causal link and that external, even unknown factors, have led to the emergence of both the change in philosophical paradigm and the change in artistic style in the sense that they are both symptomatic of something anterior to both. In fact, Hulme expressed all three of these ideas at various points within his writing which casts serious doubts over the soundness of Hulme’s arguments. Much of the essay can be seen as an attempt to articulate what can only be described as a manifesto for Epstein. The tone suggests that not only is Epstein’s work new, but also marks the heralding of radical social and philosophical change. The art which had historically been held in such high regard in Europe had been called into question and was deemed to be no longer relevant and would remain static in the

¹³⁷ Hulme, T. E., ‘Mr. Epstein and the Critics’ in, Karen Csengeri (ed.), *The Collected Writings of T. E. Hulme*, p.258

¹³⁸ Hulme, T. E., ‘Modern Art and Its Philosophy’, p.269

¹³⁹ Hulme, T. E., ‘Modern Art and Its Philosophy’, p.269

face of such a new means of expression. Hulme suggested that the 'vital' art is limited by nature, but that abstraction has limitless potential. Hulme refers to this as the break-up of progress.

In an article entitled 'Mr. Epstein and the Critics',¹⁴⁰ Hulme pointed specifically to this break-up of progress as being directly related to artistic genius, and to the artist's ability to express emotions that are 'not of their time'; Hulme believed that much of the critics' misunderstanding of Epstein's work stemmed from them not acknowledging this 'fact'. In relation to the criticism of Epstein's carvings in Flenite, Hulme asserted that: 'This, I think, is the real root of the objection to these statues, that they express emotions which are, as a matter of fact, alien and unnatural to the critic. But that is a very different thing from their being unnatural to the artist.'¹⁴¹ Hulme argued that the critics 'cannot understand that the genius and sincerity of an artist lies in extracting afresh, from outside reality, a new means of expression.'¹⁴² This would seem to be inconsistent with his earlier position. Firstly, he asserted that it is through artistic genius that an artist perceives reality and expresses it in a unique way. Secondly, he argued that the artist's perception somehow transcends reality and expresses that also. It is unclear what Hulme actually meant when he spoke of 'reality'. Is reality only what is physical and that which is outside of reality abstract? Of course with this logic we are led down the path which would suggest that reality itself is an abstract concept, therefore, everything must be outside of reality, including reality itself, which in itself is problematic. After all, how can something be outside of itself and be that which allows that which can be defined as 'outside' to exist in the first place? As we can see the logic Hulme's arguments are quite problematic. It seems quite odd, then, that Epstein held this particular essay in such high regard. The essay was reprinted as an appendix of *The Sculptor Speaks* and in all editions of his autobiography, meaning that Epstein considered

¹⁴⁰ Hulme, T. E., 'Mr. Epstein and the Critics', pp.255-262

¹⁴¹ Hulme, T. E., 'Mr. Epstein and the Critics', p.258

¹⁴² Hulme, T. E., 'Mr. Epstein and the Critics', pp.258-259

the essay to be a valid defence of his work throughout his life. In *The Sculptor Speaks* Epstein insisted that:

Although written seventeen years ago this article is remarkably fresh and with the substitution of a name here and there might apply to the discussions that I have to face after all my exhibitions [...] I always remember it as the sanest article written about me.¹⁴³

The tone and content of Hulme's article is actually very strange and does not read at all like a conventional work art criticism of the period. Hulme began by expressing some of the tenets that he held in relation to the experience of beholding art. Indeed, the first eight paragraphs of the essay are dedicated to outlining his philosophy of art as illustrated above and to pointing out the 'category mistakes' made by critics who had tried to understand Epstein's art in relation to 'vital' formulae. To illustrate his point Hulme used the following example: 'If I or the King of the Zulus want to walk, we both put one leg before the other, that is the universal formula, but there the resemblance ends.'¹⁴⁴ This strange analogy seems to be another way of reiterating his point that the emerging art requires a new means of understanding. Although one can see that the work of Epstein was still recognisable as sculpture and contained a certain amount of consistencies with what Hulme dubbed 'vital' sculpture, it was the end result which was expressed differently.

Although the first part of the text focused on defending general criticisms of Epstein's work of this period, the rest of the essay was dedicated to the venomous belittlement of *New Age* critic (and champion of Rodin), Anthony Ludovici (1882-1971). Hulme wrote of Ludovici that:

I come now to the stupidest criticism of all, that of Mr. Ludovici. It would probably occur to anyone who read Mr. Ludovici's article that he was a charlatan, but I think it worthwhile confirming this impression with further evidence. His activities are not confined to art. I remember coming across his name some years ago as the author of a very comical little book on Nietzsche, which was sent me for review.

¹⁴³ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, (William Heinmann Limited, 1931), p.151

¹⁴⁴ Hulme, T. E., 'Mr. Epstein and the Critics', p.256

I shall devote some space here to him then, not because I consider him of slightest importance, but because I consider it a delight, a very pleasant and one very much neglected in this country, to expose charlatans when one sees them.¹⁴⁵

Hulme was of course basing his assertions on the idea that if a person can write something which is poor on one subject, then it follows that everything else that that person writes will hold little merit. This argument is of course without foundation. The logic of the article is of further interest by virtue of the fact that it highlighted the notion that all those who criticised Epstein do so based on a flawed understanding of his work (all apart from Hulme, of course). By aligning those who negatively criticised Epstein's work with a person Hulme considered a charlatan, without subtlety he placed these other critics in the same intellectual league. The opposition between those who praised and therefore possessed the intellectual capacity to understand Epstein's work, and those who criticised and therefore did not possess the intellectual capacity to understand Epstein's work, is an argument that seemed to crop up again and again throughout Epstein's career. It is of no surprise, then, that Epstein praised a critic who so vehemently defended him. Indeed, Epstein was no stranger to the belittlement of rival artists and critics. Indeed, he spent most of his autobiography addressing old critics and showing them why they were wrong. It would seem that the alliance between Epstein and Hulme, then, was twofold: firstly, they allowed each other to articulate their views on art; secondly, we can see that Hulme gave Epstein an intellectual justification to belittle his critics.

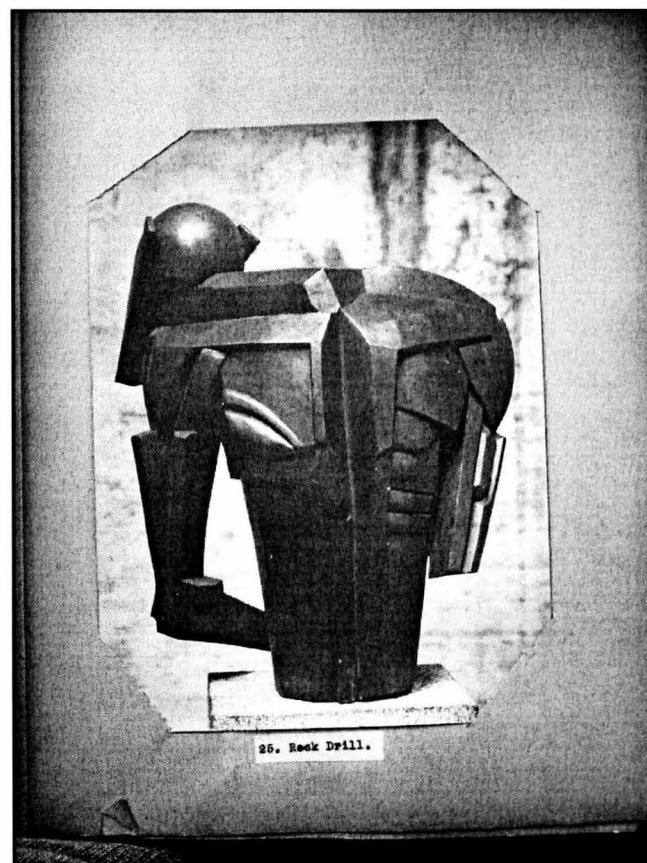
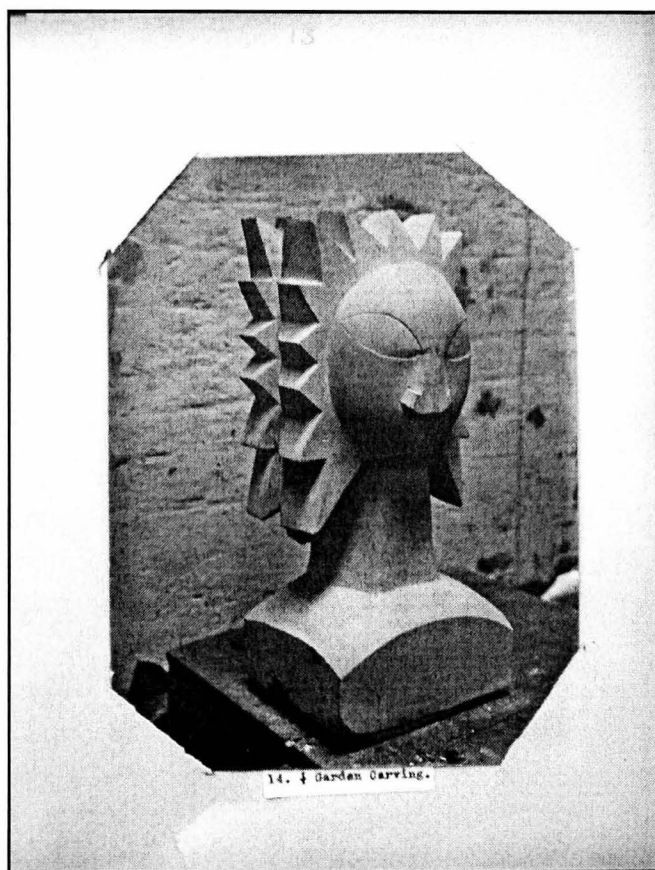
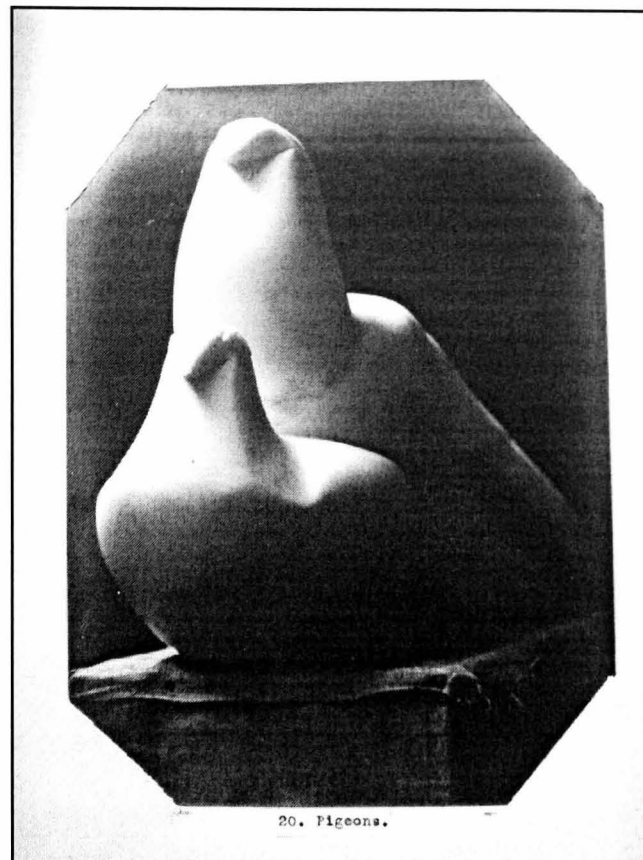
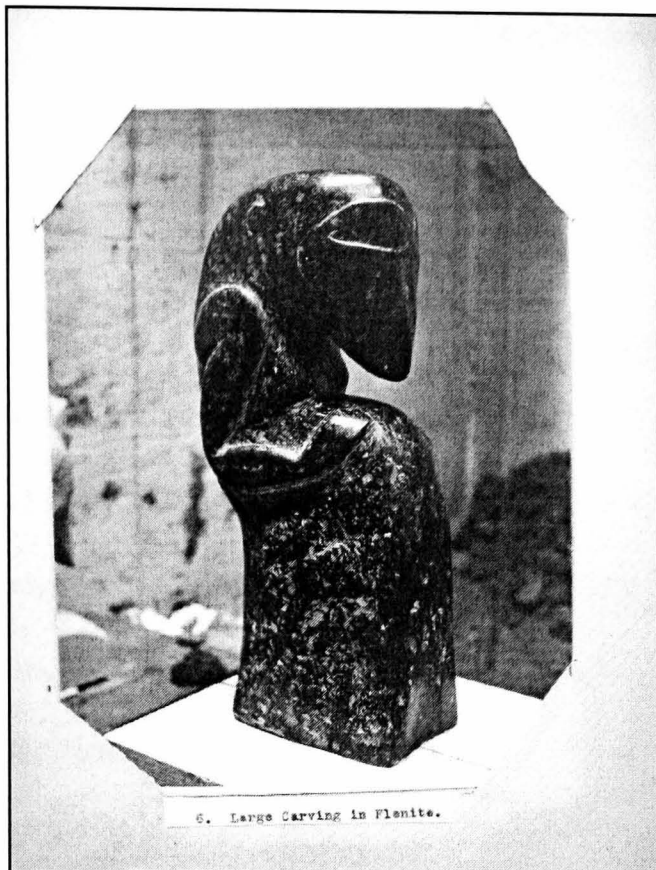
It has been suggested by Epstein that before his death in 1917, Hulme was working on a book about Epstein. It is not known if this was ever completed - the original manuscript has been lost. Epstein wrote of the book in his autobiography: 'A book he had written on my sculpture, and which he had with him in manuscript, disappeared from his personal effects,

¹⁴⁵ Hulme, T. E., 'Mr. Epstein and the Critics', p.259

and has never turned up.’¹⁴⁶ In the archive at Hull University, one can find, in the Hulme papers, an album of photographs put together by Hulme, complete with labels and the odd annotation, with the selection of works represented within the album are biased towards Epstein’s so-called Vorticist phase. Most works were represented by a single photograph. However, works such as Epstein’s sets of *Doves* (or *Pigeons* as Hulme referred to them) and his *Large Figure in Flenite* (then owned by Hulme) are represented by a number of photographs taken from various angles, possibly implying that these works in particular were of a greater importance to Hulme than some of the others. This is not absolute certainty, but we can probably argue that the photograph album illustrates for us the works that would most likely have been discussed in Hulme’s manuscript. Although we will probably never know what was in this manuscript, the fact remains that it points to an important relationship between Epstein and Hulme, which, though short-lived, paved the way for the next generation of critics to articulate the complex concerns of Epstein’s work and the work of other modern sculptors in a language that was seen to be justified in both a philosophical sense, and in the sense that it was to the satisfaction of the emerging artists.

The theories about Epstein’s art which were asserted by Hulme remained with him in one form or another throughout his career. In our next chapter we will examine the book that would be the first monograph on Epstein’s work: *Epstein* by Bernard Van Dieren, another close friend of Epstein who provided intellectual justification for his work.

¹⁴⁶ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.61



Images from Hulme's photograph album.¹⁴⁷

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¹⁴⁷ *Hulme Papers* in, Hull University Archive, *Figure in Flenite* (Top-Left), *Doves* (Top-Right), *Sunflower* (Bottom- Left), *Torso in Metal from 'The Rock Drill'* (Bottom-Right).

Carving a Legacy: Part Two

Writing a Legacy: Bernard Van Dieren: Epstein (1920)

Epstein, published in 1920 and written by Bernard Van Dieren (1887-1936), was the first monograph on Epstein to come into print. Van Dieren was a Dutch composer who was based in England; he was not an art historian or critic, but rather a friend of Epstein's. In Epstein's autobiography, we see very little trace of Van Dieren, except in reference to his posing for the head of *The Risen Christ*. In the unpublished manuscript for Epstein's autobiography in the archive of the New Art Gallery, Walsall, one can find a chapter dedicated to Van Dieren which, for reasons unknown, was left out of the published edition. What is striking about this chapter is that the text actually says nothing about their relationship; Epstein made no comment at all about *Epstein* and instead discussed Van Dieren's music. This is not surprising, after all, in his autobiography Epstein made no reference to Hubert Wellington, L. B. Powell, Robert Black, or Reginald Wilenski, and only mentioned Arnold Haskell in passing.

Epstein makes for strange reading, as the book says almost nothing about Epstein's biography, and very little about Epstein's work. Instead, the book deals with the broader issues concerning the ethics of artistic creation and appreciation. At times, the book is an incredibly frustrating read; the text is full of pretensions and was often written in a convoluted language. In the preface of the book, Van Dieren informed the reader that *Epstein* was 'not intended to be more than introductory in nature.'¹⁴⁸ Much of the discussion in *Epstein* is related to Epstein's relationship to what he considered to be sculptural tradition, and to how the critics and public alike have misunderstood his intentions. Van Dieren also tried to resolve the accusation of dualism which had dogged Epstein throughout his career. Van Dieren also tried to place Epstein within, what he termed, the 'unbroken

¹⁴⁸ Van Dieren, Bernard, *Epstein*, (John Lane, 1920), p.v

chain of tradition'. Though the book was clearly intended to bolster Epstein's position in the history of art, Van Dieren probably did not help Epstein's reputation with his book, which assumed that the reader would share his enthusiasm for Epstein without reservation.

Van Dieren used *Epstein* to prove that the reader should consider Epstein to be a 'living master' and noted that Epstein was 'also a man of extraordinary potentialities, the nature of which could not be foretold by speculations based on that of his past achievements.'¹⁴⁹ It is through Van Dieren's use of phrases such 'living master' and 'extraordinary potentialities' that we begin to demark Epstein's position in the history of art. The idea of the 'living master' and Epstein as a 'genius' is a theme which is constantly reiterated throughout the text. For example, much of the second chapter of *Epstein* is dedicated to explaining exactly what a genius was and showing, beyond any doubt, that Epstein correspond with this definition. He wrote that:

These powers which we call genius enable him to grasp with axiomatic directness the complexities that are the essential nature of things. It is in this respect that the mind of genius distinguishes itself from the less gifted that must reduce everything to the few simple propositions that it can recognize "a priori".¹⁵⁰

It is slightly unclear what Van Dieren was actually arguing at this point in the text; as any philosopher knows, an axiom is a self-evident truth and self-evident truths are considered *a priori* knowledge. Indeed, this tension continued as Van Dieren articulated a sense of 'genius' which he considered to be an 'instinctively perceived truth', in other words: *a priori* knowledge. Van Dieren explained:

Genius [...] is the capacity for conviction by instinctively perceived truth. The most powerful mind has the widest possible range of this perception, and every new fact apprehended enables it to grasp directly a more complex truth as a single entity.'¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Van Dieren, Bernard, *Epstein*, pp.v-vi

¹⁵⁰ Van Dieren, Bernard, *Epstein*, pp.5-6

¹⁵¹ Van Dieren, Bernard, *Epstein*, p.6

Again, Van Dieren's arguments are vague. After linking genius with a form of *a priori* knowledge which is not actually what the 'less gifted' perceive as *a priori* knowledge, but is somehow different in kind, Van Dieren linked this knowledge to an advanced form of perception. A perception which would allow a genius to 'grasp directly a more complex truth', whatever that truth may be. He continued, explaining that a genius:

while perceiving and understanding through what I call inspiration, thus gathers unlimited knowledge which enables it to construct works by reflection and deliberation from the constituent elements which it handles by the exercise of its creative faculties after the manner of Him that invested it with these powers.¹⁵²

A genius, then, as well as being able to 'grasp complex truth', has access to 'unlimited knowledge'. If one were not convinced by a genius's omniscience, then Van Dieren, linking the potential of a genius with God (Him), leaves us in no doubt of the colossal power of Epstein. Of course, during these passages, Van Dieren did not mention Epstein by name, though later in the text we are left with no doubt, when he wrote: 'It is to this order of original and creative minds that Jacob Epstein belongs.'¹⁵³ And it is because of this genius that the quality of Epstein's work will continue to improve over time. Van Dieren explained:

If the steady increase of mastery and constant development of new aspects in the manifestation of his creative powers continue one may confidently predict that his future works will reveal his significance and genius even more overwhelming than those he has already achieved.¹⁵⁴

As with much of Van Dieren's writing, statements like this are based on little more than speculation and actually add very little to our understanding of the artist in any direct way.

The misunderstanding of Epstein's work by the 'less gifted' is the subject of much discussion throughout *Epstein*. Van Dieren began the first chapter of *Epstein*, seemingly as

¹⁵² Van Dieren, Bernard, *Epstein*, p.7

¹⁵³ Van Dieren, Bernard, *Epstein*, p.12

¹⁵⁴ Van Dieren, Bernard, *Epstein*, p.vi

he meant to go on, by venting his frustration at a world which did not seem to care for the genius of Epstein as much as was due to him:

The world does not forgive talent. Consequently those that possess it have to pass through a struggle which permits only the strongest minds to come through the ordeal with sufficient energy left to achieve their mission of enriching humanity, their most implacable antagonists included.¹⁵⁵

Already, from the first line of the first chapter, Epstein is damned. From the start we are forced to concede that talent has become synonymous with struggle, misunderstanding and victimisation. This struggle is combined with strength and selflessness, essentially echoing the Van Gogh myth, or the story of Jesus. Van Dieren's key argument in this chapter rests on the notion that the 'great artists' are often those which are misunderstood by their generation, but are consequently taken by later generations as 'genius'. But of course, the suggestion is never raised that an artist might be misunderstood because he is not a very good communicator, or his aims are too vague or the results too obscure. Van Dieren wrote:

When the critics and aesthetes of the later generation in unison with the *vox populi*, reverse the judgements of their predecessors they include their confreres of the lapsed period in the condemnation of the abandoned idols – but they do not learn the lesson of history, and they are themselves ready to join in the chorus of adulation with which their contemporaries acclaim the successful mediocrities of their own time.

Jacob Epstein, to-day, is as much the victim of this treatment as was Rembrandt three centuries ago, and just as was the latter then, the former now is being penalized during his lifetime for the superiority of his talents, only to obscure afterwards by his renown the reputations of contemporary objects of idolatry. These, moreover, will pay the penalty of their ephemeral successes by being cast into oblivion as deep as the pedestal on which their own generation placed them so high.¹⁵⁶

The irony here, of course, is that after his death, Epstein's fame and reputation soon began to wane and within a decade of his death, had pretty much drifted into obscurity. What is perhaps the most striking thing about *Epstein*, and in particular passages like these, is Van Dieren's explicit effort to pre-figure Epstein's legacy. Van Dieren made some incredibly

¹⁵⁵ Van Dieren, Bernard, *Epstein*, p.1

¹⁵⁶ Van Dieren, Bernard, *Epstein*, pp.2-3

bold claims about Epstein's importance in the history of art, and bestowed upon him the highest position available to an artist: a misunderstood genius of Van Goghian proportions.

Throughout *Epstein*, Van Dieren constantly drew parallels between Epstein and Rembrandt. Van Dieren explained that: 'It is not by accident that I coupled Epstein's name with Rembrandt's. How much connection there is between these two figures the most superficial examination will reveal.'¹⁵⁷ The reason for paralleling Epstein with Rembrandt was, due to the fact, according to Van Dieren, that: 'In the work of both we meet a force of individuality'¹⁵⁸ Van Dieren appeared to believe that this 'force of individuality' would be sufficient in itself to explain to the reader what he meant by this. By 'force of individuality', Van Dieren was probably referring to one of two things. Either, that both Epstein and Rembrandt possessed a keen sense of individuality, in the sense that they followed their own paths and were not swayed by the whims of fashion, or that, perhaps, he was expressing the vitalistic nature of their work: it is not clear. However, Van Dieren continued his discourse which would give more weight to the latter. Van Dieren explained that:

The work of both is characterized by a humanity as simple as it is profound, and by an intense interest in the plastic and pictural [*sic*] aspect of surrounding life. [...] In either case there is a force of vitality that seems brutal to sentimental natures, and a certain aloofness from contemporary ideas and fashions that cannot but create and preserve widespread prejudice and aversion.¹⁵⁹

This passage goes some way towards explaining Van Dieren's use of the phrase 'force of individuality', but, again, nothing is made explicit. We are still left with an ambiguous sense of the term which seems to encompass both the artists' relationship to fashion and the vitalistic aspects of their work. Indeed, the links between these artists and fashion is further emphasised when Van Dieren considers the 'universality of meaning' which inhabits their works. He explained:

¹⁵⁷ Van Dieren, Bernard, *Epstein*, p.4

¹⁵⁸ Van Dieren, Bernard, *Epstein*, p.4

¹⁵⁹ Van Dieren, Bernard, *Epstein*, p.4

Finally, we find in Epstein again as in Rembrandt a constant preoccupation with the elemental motives of life that finds expression in the most dramatic presentation of the simplest moments and happenings which for both of them, from identical view-points, assume an Old-Testamentarian universality of meaning.¹⁶⁰

We come to an interesting tension in this passage: Van Dieren has both emphasised the ‘force of individuality’ of Epstein and Rembrandt, but stated that they possessed ‘identical view-points’. This idea of individuality is further complicated when Van Dieren stressed the notion of universality. The terms individual, identical and universal present an awkward triad which would suggest a real uncertainty on Van Dieren’s part regarding what it was he was trying to argue.

The notion of the ‘universality of meaning’ is raised by Van Dieren, who, during a later chapter, sees this as being somewhat synonymous with ‘primitivism’, in the sense that he saw them both as relating to a fundamental sense of expression and emotion. He explained: ‘in Epstein’s work we observe that its basic motives are always the great primitive human affections and forces, but expressed in their entirety and fullest compass.’¹⁶¹ Van Dieren continued: ‘Such elemental motives as grief, exultation, love, maternity, toil, fecundity, are the subjects of his greatest works.’¹⁶² Van Dieren saw in Epstein, then, an expression of what he saw as the essential qualities of human existence. These ‘elemental’ themes of birth, death and love are present in even the most ancient of art. One could argue that an artist could cynically portray these themes and be seen as depicting ‘great primitive human affections’ and ‘universality of meaning’. This is not so according to Van Dieren, however, who argued that ‘universality of meaning’ can only qualify as such if it has been done through an ‘original’ expression, and he later went on to explain why Epstein fits into his criteria:

¹⁶⁰ Van Dieren, Bernard, *Epstein*, p.4

¹⁶¹ Van Dieren, Bernard, *Epstein*, p.34

¹⁶² Van Dieren, Bernard, *Epstein*, p.34

There is hardly a work of Epstein that is not for its masterful utterance of an original conception a valuable addition to, and in which do not at the same time reappear, the great and glorious traditions of the work of the best of antique or Renaissance masters from Polykleitos to Donatello or Michel Angelo.¹⁶³

In this passage, Van Dieren did not shy away from placing Epstein with some of the greatest sculptors of all time. Indeed, ‘hardly a work of Epstein’ did not meet the lofty standards of the greatest works of the past.

Van Dieren spent over forty pages of *Epstein* detailing Epstein’s unique genius. The discussion moved on from this to discuss Epstein’s place in sculptural tradition. As noted above, Van Dieren saw Epstein’s work as being equal in quality to the best of sculpture past. Van Dieren devoted a few pages in *Epstein* to differentiating between what he saw as ‘tradition’ and ‘convention’. Van Dieren articulated a sense of tradition which he saw as being opposed to convention, he wrote that:

The unbroken chain of tradition is formed by the identity of essential aims after which the creative mind is striving and of the means he employs to realize them. One should be careful not to confound traditional and conventional. The mistake is as frequently committed as the virtuosity—which is the shining case of the intentions’ realization—which is the frivolous flippancy that pleases itself in showing off dexterity without the meaning that should direct it being presented. Artistic tradition is not as convention is, concerned with outward mannerisms, but with inward ideals and just recognition of the highest summits reached by human effort. It cannot be ignored by the most powerful and original talent any more than the truth of which it is the revelation. Convention, on the other hand, enslaves the less independently active imagination.¹⁶⁴

Van Dieren saw the difference between ‘convention’ and ‘tradition’ as being similar in kind to the distinction between ‘virtuosity’ and ‘talent’. Van Dieren explained that both ‘virtuosity’ and ‘convention’ lack in originality, both repeating what has come before. Though there is much skill in virtuosity, there is often little beyond the sense of impressiveness of the skill of the artist to appreciate, whereas ‘talent’ and ‘tradition’ imply a sense of originality and development. What is interesting is that Van Dieren considered the

¹⁶³ Van Dieren, Bernard, *Epstein*, p.43

¹⁶⁴ Van Dieren, Bernard, *Epstein*, p.45

words ‘convention’ and ‘tradition’ in relation to ‘man’ and ‘God’ respectively. As Van Dieren explained, the ‘lesser talents’ or ‘conventional artists’ became:

stunted in its development by the man-made law of convention which is by the petrified pontifical souls of its upholders dispensed in pharisaical block-headedness of formal stiffness and ceremonial sluggishness as sinister and insane as its effect is fatal.¹⁶⁵

In opposition to this we see the ‘talented’ and traditional artists’ as possessing the ability to, as Van Dieren wrote: ‘recognize the grace of divine reflection that constitutes his own power.’¹⁶⁶ Like most arguments which make an appeal to divine forces, there is no physical evidence or experience which can support or deny such claims. We are left in the realm of the agnostic where questions only raise more questions and definite answers are never forthcoming. What we can take from Van Dieren’s discourse, however, is the sense that neither tradition nor convention would exist were it not for originality. After all, tradition and convention develop over time and only become such through hindsight.

Van Dieren turned his attention to tackling those critics who saw a ‘dualism’ in Epstein’s work. In terms of this discussion, it quickly becomes apparent that Van Dieren was incredibly frustrated at the notion of dualism within Epstein. He wrote:

I must deal with the alleged “dualism” that seems to puzzle a great many benevolently intentioned commentators on his art. It has been thought necessary by them to make a distinction between a “realistic” and an “abstract” mode of rendering to which his sculpture alternately [*sic*] should conform. The *bona fides* of some of those who have forwarded these contentions justifies at least their discussion, however erroneous they seem.¹⁶⁷

As suggested elsewhere in this thesis, the apparent ‘dual’ nature of Epstein is something which plagued Epstein throughout his career. Once we begin to unpack and examine the ‘two sides’ to Epstein we quickly run into categorization problems. The construction of Epstein’s ‘dual’ nature is but a mere illusion and must be replaced by a monist attitude

¹⁶⁵ Van Dieren, Bernard, *Epstein*, p.45

¹⁶⁶ Van Dieren, Bernard, *Epstein*, p.45

¹⁶⁷ Van Dieren, Bernard, *Epstein*, p.46

which deals with each work on its own terms, but with the realisation that they were all produced by the same artist. This is a point similarly echoed by Van Dieren. He wrote that:

I do not propose to assert that Epstein's portraits and his works of an obviously imaginative character have come into existence in an exactly identical manner. No work of any independent value is ever conceived or executed precisely as another was. Every subject, moreover, defines its treatment as such as the ultimate form of a grown organism is predetermined in its seed. A work of art, as a living organism or a structure of crystals or any natural formation, varies in the ways of its growth and final appearance with the conditions attendant on its originating, gestation and development exactly as do two subjects of the same species.¹⁶⁸

Reading between the metaphors, we are left with the impression that the creative process is as varied as nature. Van Dieren realised that all works of art are produced with different aims and inspirations, no matter how subtle this may be. Van Dieren continued:

Now the only way to understand artistic creation is, as I have repeatedly emphasized, to recognize it as only another manifestation of the principal creative power which instead of acting directly, immediately, establishes an independent agency to act as intermediary, viz. the artist's intelligence.¹⁶⁹

At first glance, this seems like a compelling argument, but is far too reliant on a principal creative power. The issue arises because Van Dieren articulated this 'principle creative power' as a kind of universal entity, which has an almost God-like omnipresence. In Van Dieren's view, this 'power' is channelled through an original artist and somehow translated through the artist's intelligence. There is one constant with Epstein's work, and it is not some magical abstract force of 'creative power'. The constant and originator of Epstein's work is Epstein.

As we have seen, Van Dieren set out to locate Epstein alongside the greatest artists in history. His intention was seemingly to leave the reader in little doubt that Epstein was an artistic genius who was driven by divine forces. In our next chapter we will turn our attention to a series of conversations between Epstein and Arnold Haskell which were

¹⁶⁸ Van Dieren, Bernard, *Epstein*, p.46

¹⁶⁹ Van Dieren, Bernard, *Epstein*, p.46

published in the book *The Sculptor Speaks*, in which the themes of Epstein's place in the history of art, and his relationship to tradition, will continue to hold prominence.



Photograph of Bernard Van Dieren

* * *

Carving a Legacy: Part Two

Writing a Legacy: The Sculptor Speaks (1931)

The Sculptor Speaks is presented as ‘a series of conversations on art’ between Jacob Epstein and Arnold Haskell (1903-1980). Published November 5th, 1931, *The Sculptor Speaks* can be described as both a tool to promote Epstein as a personality and as a space to enable Epstein to vent his frustrations at what he saw as the intentional misunderstanding of his work. In essence, Epstein used *The Sculptor Speaks* as an opportunity to address his critics. According to an announcement printed in *The Manchester Guardian* a fortnight before *The Sculptor Speaks* was published, the book was described as a work which ‘consists of a series of discussions on all the controversial art questions of the day, [and] is the result of over 100 conversations, extended of a period of two years.’¹⁷⁰

The Sculptor Speaks has become one of the key texts for Epstein scholars. Extreme caution when approaching this text is required; for rather than being a testament to Epstein’s work and opinions, it is actually a set of carefully figured interventions which serve to shape the perceived identity of Epstein and continue with the work of the aforementioned *Epstein* in laying the groundwork to cementing Epstein’s legacy as a great artistic genius. The title *The Sculptor Speaks* suggests that it was Epstein’s turn to have his say after many years of silence. In her biography on Epstein, *Demons and Angels*, June Rose suggested that: ‘In 1932 [*sic*]¹⁷¹ Arnold Haskell, a young critic, was visiting Epstein regularly, faithfully recording his views and collating the work in a book *The Sculptor Speaks*, which was highly sympathetic to Epstein.’¹⁷² Indeed, this sympathetic treatment of Epstein by Haskell was characterised by Dorothy Grafly, writing in *The American Magazine of Art*:

¹⁷⁰ Anon., ‘Forthcoming Books’ in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (October 22nd, 1931), p.5

¹⁷¹ Haskell conducted his conversations with Epstein between 1930 and 1931. Indeed, one of the final chapters of the book ‘Private view days’ focuses on the press view of *Genesis* (1930-31) in April 1931. *The Sculptor Speaks* was published later that same year.

¹⁷² Rose, June, *Demons and Angels: A Life of Jacob Epstein*, (Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2002), p.184

Arnold L. Haskell, playing an art Plato to Epstein's Socrates, develops through conversations a book which gives much sculptural wisdom from a man, who through public revolt against his creative idea, has become a sensation in the art centers of the Western World.¹⁷³

The parallel drawn here between Epstein and Socrates is an unusual one. After all, historians of philosophy will note that Plato wrote down the ideas of Socrates, but there is no suggestion that there was any dialogue between them as to how the text should be presented. Epstein was not just an interviewee; he also had editing and censorship privileges. Meaning that, whereas our understanding of Socrates comes through Plato's writings, the identity of Epstein presented in *The Sculptor Speaks* comes through collaboration between Epstein and Haskell.

Haskell stated that his appreciation of Epstein was as a result of a careful study of Epstein which hinted at both meditative reflection and logical reasoning: 'I have reached my conclusion after very many years and close study of all the work, and I am therefore unwilling to state it in a more subtle and roundabout manner, were that possible.'¹⁷⁴ Haskell made sure that the reader understood that he was not a casual observer of Epstein's work; his appreciation was the result of 'close study', thus placing his authority over and above those he dismisses later on as 'the casual critic'.¹⁷⁵ He stated that his studies of Epstein led him to conclude that not all of Epstein's works are masterpieces 'just because it is signed "Epstein"'.¹⁷⁶ He therefore dismisses the notion of the fetishism associated with a particular artist's name and shows that he has arrived at his conclusions based on the integrity and quality of the work rather than the name of its creator.

¹⁷³ Grafty, Dorothy, 'New Books on Art' in, *The American Magazine of Art*, (June, 1932), pp.466-467

¹⁷⁴ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, (William Heinemann Limited, 1931), pp.i-ii

¹⁷⁵ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.iii

¹⁷⁶ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.ii

Epstein did not discuss *The Sculptor Speaks* in his autobiography *Let there be Sculpture!*, published less than a decade later. We only have Haskell's own description of the writing of *The Sculptor Speaks*, and he himself highlights the peculiar nature of the text:

It must be remembered that these conversations were spread over a considerable period. Epstein was not plied with questions in the manner of an expert witness. To have done so would have been to have lost sight of the man entirely. We talked of many things, of theatres, of cinemas, and books. We gossiped and talked nonsense too. We laughed a great deal. There were constant interruptions from friends in his hospitable house, and particularly pleasing ones from Peggy Jean. The thread of our conversations would thus be continually broken. [...] I have purposely made a continuous narrative from the chips of talk, and to that [*sic*] have misrepresented him, and made an egoist of a modest man.¹⁷⁷

The Sculptor Speaks, though presented as a narrative, is on the contrary, fragmented and arranged in relation to the theme of the discussion, and is presented in a roughly chronological order. *The Sculptor Speaks* does not stand as a testament to a particular moment in time, but can only be considered in the most general of terms. Indeed, the conversations were written by Haskell from memory; they were edited, censored and reviewed by the artist. As Andrew Alden Jewell remarked in *The New York Times*:

Epstein, though we are assured that he has gone over every line of the manuscript, eliding what did not please him and presumably sanctioning all that went off to the printers—Epstein himself, viewed in the light of his own sculptural work, cannot be really as wooden and platitudinous as in this book he is made to appear. One cannot help feeling that he has been indifferently boswelled.¹⁷⁸

Because of editing and censorship, it is almost as if Epstein's identity has been erased from *The Sculptor Speaks*.

It is difficult to find a balanced and dispassionate review of *The Sculptor Speaks*. Edward Alden Jewell's review of the work, in *The New York Times*, provided the most balanced of criticism. Away from the controversies surrounding Epstein's work and the partisan approach characteristic of criticism in Britain, the author highlighted many of *The Sculptor*

¹⁷⁷ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, pp.x-xi

¹⁷⁸ Jewell, Andrew Alden, 'Mr. Epstein Expounds his Views' in, *The New York Times* (May 22nd, 1933), p BR11

Speaks' strengths and weaknesses. In relation to fixing the meaning of Epstein's works, Jewell remarked that:

We quickly perceive that Mr. Haskell's book can be of no real help. Though unfailingly earnest, he writes in a dull and humorless fashion. His style is devoid of anything like imagination, while a thinly—very, very thinly—disguised hero worship wearies the reader after a few pages. It is all pretty one-sided and pedestrian, serving to keep Epstein in the limelight without ever making him a convincing protagonist.¹⁷⁹

The Sculptor Speaks is also poorly written, with a number of grammatical and syntactical errors making for clumsy and ambiguous reading in places. With these points taken into consideration, we have to remember that nonetheless the nature of *The Sculptor Speaks* is still very important to consider in understanding Epstein's identity and perceived legacy. After all, this was the first book published which presented Epstein as a personality, and focused on his various opinions rather than just discussing his art. We must also keep in mind the fact that *The Sculptor Speaks* was published at a time when his avant-garde credentials were beginning to wane.

It is difficult to assess the intention of *The Sculptor Speaks*, but Haskell noted that such a work was not intended to influence the audience's appreciation of Epstein's work, but rather to influence their understanding of Epstein's identity:

I can perhaps by this portrait of Jacob Epstein, and through his own recorded conversations, show what manner of man he is, and at any rate do something to break down the illusion, that even a cursory study of his work should dispel immediately, that Epstein is an isolated rebel, a bitter and avowed enemy of all that is past.¹⁸⁰

The use of visual metaphors here is very important. When we consider, for example, the word 'portrait' as used by Haskell, we should do so in relation to Epstein's notion of portraiture. Epstein wrote in his autobiography that: 'It is said that the sculptor as an artist always depicts himself in his work, even in his portraits. In only one sense is this true, that

¹⁷⁹ Jewell, Andrew Alden, 'Mr. Epstein Expounds his Views', p BR11

¹⁸⁰ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.ii

is in the sense in which the artist's own nature colours his outlook.'¹⁸¹ To Epstein, a portrait was not an exact reproduction or likeness, but was as a result of a dialogue between sculptor and sitter, or in the case of *The Sculptor Speaks*, between writer and subject. The use of the word 'portrait' in this sense provides us with an impression of Epstein in which 'the mental and physiological characteristics of the sitter impose themselves upon the clay'¹⁸² or, in the case of *The Sculptor Speaks*, mental and physiological of the sitter impose themselves upon the text. The visual metaphor is used once again when Haskell wished 'to break down the illusion' that Epstein 'is an isolated rebel, a bitter and avowed enemy of all that is past.'¹⁸³ It is interesting that Haskell used the word 'illusion' instead of words such as 'misconception,' 'myth' or 'lie'. The word illusion suggests something beyond a mere warping of the facts, but something distinct which relates to an error in our perception. An illusion is a more powerful metaphor precisely because it allows for a complete unproblematic negation. Whereas myths may have some foundations in truth, the word 'illusion' suggests a conscious effort to deceive. These key passages all suggest that the intention of *The Sculptor Speaks* was to provide a revision of Epstein's identity. Where the tension lies is in the fact that Haskell used the word illusion in a particularly negative sense, but saw no problem with his use of the term portraiture as a metaphor for his text, which in itself can be considered a form of illusion.

Although Haskell wanted 'to prove how wrong they are',¹⁸⁴ he also stated that he did not expect *The Sculptor Speaks* to convert anyone to appreciating Epstein's work, adding weight to the theory that the intention of *The Sculptor Speaks* was more about promoting a revision of Epstein's identity and laying the groundwork for Epstein's legacy, rather than promoting his work. As Haskell suggested:

¹⁸¹ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, (Hulton Press, 1955), p.70

¹⁸² Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.69

¹⁸³ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.ii

¹⁸⁴ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.3

It is extremely unlikely that this book will convert anyone to the view held by the writer of this introduction that Jacob Epstein, almost alone in the world to-day, holds the secret of true beauty, and that his work like all things truly beautiful will endure without relying in any way upon fashion for its appreciation.¹⁸⁵

The allusion here to fashion is incredibly telling. By the 1930s, Epstein's position at the forefront of avant-garde sculpture in Britain had been superseded by a new generation of artists. An appeal to the timeless beauty of Epstein's work can be seen as an attempt to cement and affirm Epstein's importance and eternal relevance. Perhaps, because Epstein's time had obviously passed, Haskell found it necessary to remove temporal concerns from Epstein's work. Indeed, within the first few paragraphs of *The Sculptor Speaks*, artistic meaning which derives from linguistic explanation and from temporal context has been altogether removed. With Epstein's work being unhooked from the realms of time and meaning, it is perhaps surprising that a book was seen as necessary at all.

Haskell's introduction to *The Sculptor Speaks* is particularly significant in understanding the motivations for producing such a text. Haskell used the introduction to debunk many myths relating to Epstein, and attempted to articulate a particular sense of Epstein's identity. This introduction, unlike the subsequent chapters, is not presented as a conversation with Epstein, but is written as an introductory essay in praise of Epstein.

In the first line of *The Sculptor Speaks*, Arnold Haskell highlights one of the recurring themes of the text and begins by telling the reader that Epstein and his work transcend explanation: 'I cannot in this introduction explain Epstein, and in his own conversation Epstein cannot and does not attempt to explain himself.'¹⁸⁶ For a person purchasing the book, wanting to know more about Epstein's work, this must have struck them as incredibly disappointing. This notion of being unable to explain Epstein's work is an important one

¹⁸⁵ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.i

¹⁸⁶ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.i

which is picked up in the first of the series of conversations. In the first chapter, entitled ‘On Art Criticism and the Writing of Books’, Epstein and Haskell discussed the criticism of his work and the nature of art writing in general. The chapter begins with Haskell laying out the scene as if it were a theatrical play. Haskell described the details of where the conversations between Epstein and himself took place. It reads:

(The scene is laid in the large living room. It is Sunday afternoon and the table is fully laid for the friends who will come in. On the walls and round the room are the many art treasures Epstein has accumulated. The only pictures on the walls are vigorous series of paintings, flower pieces and nudes, by Matthew Smith. They are rich and glowing in colour, painting of a quality in what Epstein calls “this anæmic age.” There are a few Epsteins, a head of his wife, some baby heads of Peggy Jean and the mask of Meum. Through the glass doors can be seen two large Marquesan idols. This is the scene of nearly all our conversations, though occasionally we may wander into the next room or across the corridor into the vast glass-covered studio, full of shrouded figures, to discuss some particular work.)¹⁸⁷

More than simply ‘setting the scene’, this description creates a sense of realism, thus adding weight to what follows in the conversations.

Haskell began his first interview by asking Epstein ‘What is Art?’, perhaps the most crucial and elusive question an artist can be expected to answer. Instead of presenting a conversation between Haskell and Epstein which spontaneously explored the idea of what art is, we are instead presented (under the guise of spontaneous conversation) the transcript of Brancusi’s trial in New York in 1927, in which US Customs wanted to charge customs tax on the basis that *Bird in Space* was considered to be ‘manufactured metal’ rather than a work of art. Epstein answers Haskell’s ‘What is art?’ question by noting that: ‘I was once asked very much the same question by a judge in a New York court’. He then proceeded to relay a transcript from the case:

District Attorney: Are you prepared to call this a bird?
Epstein: If the sculptor calls it a bird I am quite satisfied.
Judge: If you saw it in the forest would you shoot it?
Epstein: That is not the only way to identify a bird.

¹⁸⁷ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.1

Judge: Why is this a work of art?
 Epstein: Because it satisfied my sense of beauty. I find it a beautiful object.
 Judge: So a highly polished, harmoniously curved brass rail could be a work of art?
 Epstein: Yes, it could become so.
 Customs Officer: Then a mechanic could have done this thing?
 Epstein: No, he could have polished it, but he could never have conceived it.
 We finally won the case.¹⁸⁸

Artistic explanation in Epstein's formulation is actually incredibly vague, but there are a few things which Epstein says which could lead to a preliminary grounding in such an explanation. Firstly, in understanding the meaning of a work of art, the title is all important: 'If the sculptor calls it a bird I am quite satisfied.' This, of course, can be related directly to the work of Epstein who would often impose a meaning onto a work through a title (for example, *Adam* (1938-39), *Madonna and Child* (1926-27) and *Lucifer* (1942-43)) which did not necessarily reflect the expected imagery and iconography of a work bearing such a title. The conclusion we can draw from this statement is that the artist's authority is crucial in beholding art. Secondly, a work of art is allowed to take on forms which are not necessarily reflected by nature: 'That is not the only way to identify a bird.' Again, this can be related to many of Epstein's own works, from the distorted and abstract forms of *Venus* (1914-16), to the subtle exaggerations often present in his portrait busts. Thirdly, a work of art must exhibit both a sense of beauty and artistic intention.

Although the case was incredibly complex, and lots of other witnesses were called, we get the impression that it was Epstein's testimony that finally won the case. The ins and outs of the case are not of interest to this inquiry, however. What is interesting is the way in which Epstein used the relaying of this court transcript to legitimise his views. After all, as presented, it is Epstein's definition of art which set legal precedent. It therefore follows that Epstein's views stand up to even the most stringent of scrutiny.

¹⁸⁸ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.2



Constantin Brancusi, *Bird in Space*, (1928)

Epstein returned to the question of defining art again in the tenth chapter, providing a very different account to his appeal to the Brancusi case. Haskell asked Epstein ‘What is the dividing line between true art and “art pompier”?’ Epstein answered by denying that there can ever be a single definition of art. Epstein noted that Haskell’s question was ‘a trap’, adding: ‘You are merely asking me in a thinly disguised manner the old question, “What is art?”’ The question that no one can ever answer. How much easier to say what art is not.’¹⁸⁹ Haskell listed some examples of artists whose expression is seemingly contradictory, but

¹⁸⁹ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, pp.138-139

are all undoubtedly great artists. Haskell asked what it is that makes a great work of art.

Epstein replied that there are:

certain fundamental points in common between your seemingly contradictory examples, points that all great works of art possess. They do not answer the question, What is Art? but at any rate they show a vital part of the truth. To start with, all the works you mention are the productions of an interesting mind with something very real to express. However much technique an artist has, nothing can make up for lack of individuality and originality of vision.¹⁹⁰

Epstein placed the expression of ideas over and above the exploration of form or development of technique. Through this statement, Epstein placed himself under the umbrella of what he considered to be great art. To Epstein, it was sincerity which was the key to recognising 'true art'. He continued:

In the works of men such as Brancusi or Picasso, even when they are difficult to understand, the sincerity is evident. The work finds its logical place in the sequence of their artistic development. The spectator often finds it obscure because he has not followed this development, it is a missing link in his experience. For this reason he will either dismiss it as rubbish, or will be deceived by the imitators, because they are "à la mode." At no time has there ever been such a flood of bad art, turned by artists, to meet the demands of the dealers. Sincerity in art may be sneered at by some, but it is an all important point.¹⁹¹

Epstein does not clarify what he meant by 'sincerity', or how it manifests within a work of art. Does it, for example, come from an artist's statements? Is there something within a work which only comes through if the artist is 'sincere'? What if an artist is insincere, but is very good at faking sincerity? Or an insincere artist who is sincere about their insincerity? Epstein's statement posits an arbitrary criterion for verifying great art which is loosely defined and deployed capriciously. It cannot be verified by experience and gives Epstein the capacity to point to an elusive factor in defining 'true art', which, if missed by others, can be ascribed to 'a missing link in his [the spectator's] experience'. The only hints we get from Epstein as to his definition of sincerity, comes from two points within *The Sculptor Speaks*. Firstly, Epstein used 'sincerity' as a word synonymous with consistency, noting that

¹⁹⁰ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.139

¹⁹¹ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.141

a work is sincere when it ‘finds its logical place in the sequence of their [an artist’s] artistic development’. The way Epstein articulates the word ‘sincerity’ allows him, to a large extent, to slot into this definition, thus allowing Epstein’s creations to fall under the remit ‘true art’. However, a tension emerges when we consider Epstein’s work in relation to this metonymic coupling; after all, ‘consistency’ is not a word which sits well with Epstein’s oeuvre. Essentially, through his own arguments, Epstein has denied his own stake as a ‘true artist’. Secondly, Epstein drew attention to the purpose of a great artist. In a discussion centred on the idea of avoiding prettiness, Epstein stated that:

The artist’s province is everywhere and everything. It is part of the artist’s function to interpret our common human experiences. It cannot be confined to a section of society, not to what is pretty alone. Life is made up of much more than pretty faces, and an artist of any depth cannot only be concerned with pretty things. It is a pretty and singularly stupid idea of the function of the artist to imagine he should only represent pretty faces, pretty landscapes or pretty ideas.¹⁹²

This may be the key to sincerity: the artist’s capacity to ‘interpret our common human experiences’. It would also seem that in order to be sincere, an artist must avoid the expression of prettiness. However, it is not quite as clear cut as this; on a previous page, Epstein discussed the possibility of ‘great prettiness’, and suggested that this was something that was present in some of his own work:

A. L. H. Ugliness and beauty seem very near at times. Only the pretty is fatal. EPSTEIN. Even the pretty is safe with a great artist. There is such a thing as great prettiness, distinct from great beauty. [...] I have undertaken the pretty in my child studies, small heads of Peggy Jean, the Joan Greenwood.¹⁹³

It seems that even when Epstein produced work which was pretty, he was still being sincere and can still fall within his own definition of a ‘true artist’. Again we reach a bizarre impasse; Epstein was unable to isolate a further quality which would exclude an artist from being defined as a ‘true artist’. Indeed, even when Haskell pushed Epstein for a definition of beauty, Epstein responded by saying:

¹⁹² Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.27

¹⁹³ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.26

The difference of our feelings towards an object, as we look on it in life or in art, is caused by accidents, circumstances entirely outside the object itself. [...] It is only the accidental circumstances of life that conceal the beauty from some people at some times, and from some people always.¹⁹⁴

Beauty is now entangled in a complex web. If beauty does not reside in the object, then it must reside in the subject. If beauty is entirely subjective, then the presence of an object to behold would no longer be necessary. But if beauty is entirely objective, then the need for the subject is rendered unnecessary. What Epstein failed to grasp, is that the perception of beauty is essentially a balancing act between object and subject, and can perhaps be more firmly defined by the necessary connexion between subject and object rather than residing entirely in one or the other. A lack of objective beauty could not account for the constant levels of agreement which occur when discussing things of beauty; but, a lack of subjective beauty would mean that all perceptions of the same object would result in exactly the same valuation of beauty.

Following on from the discussion attending to defining great art and artists, we reach a discussion relating to the explanation of artworks. Epstein's arguments are two-fold: firstly, he noted that an artwork is sufficient in itself for explanation and does not require a linguistic translation. Secondly, he rejected the role of the art critic as an explainer of art works. In the first instance, Epstein cautioned Haskell about artistic explanation, exclaiming: 'don't think that a work of art can be explained.'¹⁹⁵ It seems that, for Epstein, a work of art transmits its meaning through a strange form of psychic osmosis. A keen observer should be able to stand in front of a work of art and be able to behold and comprehend the message that the work is communicating, but without any form of explanation anterior to the work itself. Indeed, Epstein stated that an art critic, 'when he writes of art, seeks to explain what cannot possibly be explained in words, or to put it more clearly, what is already self-explanatory without the slightest need of aid.'¹⁹⁶ This tension

¹⁹⁴ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.25

¹⁹⁵ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, (William Heinemann Limited, 1931), p.4

¹⁹⁶ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, (William Heinemann Limited, 1931), p.4

places Epstein's work in a state of ambiguity, especially when we consider that many of Epstein's works rely upon the written word for their comprehension. Works such as *Venus* (1912-15), *The Visitation* (1925), *Genesis* (1929-30), *Adam* (1938-39), *Lucifer* (1942-43) are works in which their subject matter cannot be appreciated by an appeal to imagery alone, and must be considered in reference to their alluded references as suggested by their titles. Our understanding of these works is necessarily connected to the textual supplement provided by the artist and is further reliant upon its literary reference for explanation; without this explanation the title and therefore the artworks are rendered meaningless. In a discussion relating to the naming of works, Epstein remarked that:

The name of a work does not interest me particularly, it is only useful for catalogue purposes. In spite of the fact that I have to look for names for my works, it must not be imagined that I have not consciously created them as they are. A work such as this (*Genesis*) is the result of years of experiment. In this case, the literary and the plastic ideas came at the same time. It is now only a question of finding an appropriate name to an idea that is already expressed in the work. [...] I purposely avoid giving fancy names to works in order to stir up artificial interest. That belongs to the academicians, and to the painters of 'the picture of the year'. I mean to express by this work the feeling of "In the Beginning," the commencement of things.¹⁹⁷

The absolute refusal by Epstein, or those close to him, to provide an explanation of his work suggests a particular attitude to art which implies that works of art are not necessarily beyond explanation, but that they are sufficient in themselves in providing explanation. This attitude is of course complicated by Epstein's rejection of Formalism. This tactic, which Epstein used again and again throughout his career, allowed him to provide a meaning and explanation of his work, but simultaneously allowed him to evade explanation and resist fixing meaning. Haskell described Epstein's attitude perfectly: 'We can only hint. His work is there for all to see.'¹⁹⁸ This refusal to fix and explain an art work's meaning is seen as a virtue by Haskell, and it is an attitude which is repeated in an introduction to Epstein's 1967 exhibition of bronzes in Detroit:

¹⁹⁷ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.75

¹⁹⁸ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.i

“Don’t make the mistake of thinking that a work of art can be explained. My sculpture is a sufficient explanation in itself.”

The above statement by Jacob Epstein shows his strong disapproval of any attempt to explain either his or any artist’s work and I am only too conscious of his feelings.¹⁹⁹

Following from this, the conversation turned to a discussion of the role of critics. Epstein divided what he saw as ‘critics’ into two distinct categories, namely: ‘the art critics’ and ‘the man in the street’. Epstein saw ‘the art critics’ as professional commentators on art, and ‘the man in the street’ as the ignorant general population. In relation to ‘the art critics’, Epstein placed strict limits upon what can and cannot be spoken about in what he saw as legitimate criticism. He argued that:

An art critic can only throw out hints. At best he can say something about the medium under discussion and the circumstances under which the work was created. He has his place also as a historian of art. That is all. These are the limits of his activities. Within these limits they can be exceedingly valuable. If he attempts more he becomes misleading.²⁰⁰

As well as rejecting explanation, Epstein also rejected judgement. Within Epstein’s narrow terms, an art critic would be able to speak of titles and dates, and the medium of which the artwork is made; but as soon as the critic makes a judgement or engages with what the work is trying to communicate, that critic is being, in Epstein’s opinion, ‘misleading’. As mentioned above, the other critic Epstein referred to was ‘the man in the street’. ‘The man in the street’ in Epstein’s view should not even be allowed to talk about art at all. Epstein explained:

It is no good paying any attention to the opinions of the man in the street. A man who knew nothing about surgery would not be allowed to criticise a surgical operation. A man who knows nothing about sculpture should not criticise sculpture.²⁰¹

This is, of course, a stupid analogy which fails under even the slightest of scrutiny. It is quite obvious that the purpose and desired results of sculpture and surgery are completely

¹⁹⁹ Haskell, Arnold, ‘Jacob Epstein’ in, *Sir Jacob Epstein: Bronzes*, (ex.cat. Garelick’s Gallery, Detroit, 1967), p.5

²⁰⁰ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.4

²⁰¹ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.2

different. Epstein essentially tries to deny the general public a stake in any discussions related to art. This of course leaves us with a distinct sense of critical nihilism: you cannot talk about art if you are not an expert, and if you are an expert then do not try and explain or make judgements! Haskell also wrote in his introduction that it is improper for a person to criticise sculpture without the required level of training, adding that Epstein's work was misunderstood because people did not have sufficient education in sculpture to understand it. Haskell continued:

Epstein has had constantly to suffer the criticism of the totally incompetent, and yet this does not seem to have struck people as being in any way incongruous. Even a judge noted for his humour, which to some might seem in doubtful taste at times, and for his slight verse, has dared to indulge in a little mild art criticism. Yet it is safe to say that if Epstein criticised one of his judgements, or even a piece of that very minor verse, astonishment and indignation would have been universal. [...] Indeed, for every quarter-column in the papers devoted to art gossip, there are at least five or six columns devoted to highly critical matter about some sport or other, written by an expert. The public would not tolerate anything amateurish here.²⁰²

Though these arguments deny the 'true' experience of art to the general public,²⁰³ Haskell was, to some extent correct in his assertions: art does receive poor criticism from people who are not experts. The elitist attitude held by Epstein and Haskell is perhaps summarised best by novelist, Ethel Mannin, who knew Epstein. Mannin wrote in her memoirs that:

Being understood by the wrong people is most distressing. The applause of the unenlightened is an insult. Art is esoteric, for the enlightened few; it has its own chosen people. The people who have "no patience with this Epstein stuff" are no worse than those who See No Harm in It [*sic*], or pretend to admire something which obviously has no meaning for them. It is better to be a fool than dishonest.²⁰⁴

Epstein's views of the subordinate role of the critic were crystallized in the statement: 'He must realise that he is like a spectator; the third party in this artistic experience and not

²⁰² Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.iv

²⁰³ There is a trend relating to British art's relationship to the media which, it must be said, continues today. It seems that every few years a debate in the media rages about a controversial work of art; works of art which are often controversial because they question the very definition of what art can be. For example, when Carl Andre's *Equivalent VIII* (1966) was purchased by the Tate in 1976, or when Martin Creed won the Turner Prize in 1998, the British Press allowed commentary from anyone with an opinion.

²⁰⁴ Mannin, Ethel, *Confessions and Impression*, (Hutchingson and co., 1936), p.155

some rare new element.²⁰⁵ Haskell presented Epstein as though in a battle against critics, explaining that Epstein resented the ‘abuse’ he received at the hands of ‘persons ignorant of the work or the man.’²⁰⁶ It is in relation to Epstein’s public reception that he is portrayed as the innocent victim. In relation to *Genesis* (1929), for example, Haskell remarked that the ‘abuse reached libellous lengths’²⁰⁷ during its exhibition and wrote that Epstein ‘would do anything to avoid sensation’,²⁰⁸ but it is to a large extent this sensation which kept Epstein with a constant flow of commissions throughout his life. Haskell attributes the unpopularity of Epstein’s works in the Press, as well as the works of ‘all progressive artists’, to what he termed the ‘old master cult.’²⁰⁹ The ‘old master cult’ was seen by Haskell to represent an attitude which gave privilege to the name and historical place of an artist over and above the aesthetic value of the work itself. He perceives it as a type of prejudice which limits our ability to discriminate between works of art which have genuine integral value and those works which only have value because they have been associated with a particular name or period:

Many pictures in the great museums of the world owe their place to no artistic merit, but merely because they are of historical interest, and many inferior works are praised and discussed when attributed to well-known masters [...] The worship of a picture merely on account of its date, and the fact that it has been praised by professors, has robbed the public of any real discrimination, and has prejudiced people against their contemporaries, where they are forced to grant their own certificates of merit.²¹⁰

We can see that, not only did Haskell equate the work of Epstein to the greatest works of the past, but there is also a conflict lurking between Epstein and ‘professors’. This is an odd conflict: Haskell and Epstein, as noted above, took to task critics who were not experts, but were simultaneously critical of those who were experts. The reasons for this are unclear, but it may relate to Epstein’s desire to be accepted by the academic establishment in Britain. By

²⁰⁵ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.iv

²⁰⁶ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.118

²⁰⁷ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.v

²⁰⁸ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.v

²⁰⁹ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.v

²¹⁰ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.v-vi

the time *The Sculptor Speaks* was published, a number of Epstein's works had been refused admission into a number of national institutions including the Tate Gallery and the Royal Academy. Haskell's strange logic relating to the word 'expert' is perhaps more of a reflection of Epstein's bitterness than he would probably care to admit. The word 'expert', in *The Sculptor Speaks*, is a slippery concept which contains within it two distinct and opposing uses of the term. It seems that Epstein desired for experts to criticise his work, so long as the criticism matched his criteria and so long as they did not have anything negative to say about his work.

In terms of Epstein's legacy within the history of art, Haskell turned his attention to placing Epstein within what he called 'the straight line of real tradition':

In truth, Epstein almost alone is in the straight line of real tradition, not the confectioners of those depressing rows of frozen mutton that yearly disfigure Academy and Salon. They have dropped behind and are still coquetting with fifth century Greece, oblivious to the birth of Donatello and Michael Angelo or of the discoveries in Egypt and Africa, while Epstein, sincere student and even worshipper of the past, goes on to create the future.²¹¹

It is of great interest that Haskell attempted to superimpose what he considers 'real tradition' over the notion of tradition which is expounded by 'Academy and Salon'. Sculptural tradition in the accepted sense is portrayed as comprising sculptors who imitate fifth century Greek art, whereas 'real tradition', in Haskell's view, developed from the art of Egypt and Africa, through Donatello to Rodin, with the torch being passed on to Epstein. Indeed, Haskell also challenged the notion that the greatness of art is directly related to period. He argued that: 'It is an error to imagine that an arbitrary line can be drawn at any period in history, a boundary between great art and mediocrity. Certain periods have been more fertile than others, but the masters have always been with us.'²¹² Citing Cézanne, Renoir and Van Gogh, Haskell argued that these artists were largely misunderstood during

²¹¹ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.ii

²¹² Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.vi-vii

their lifetimes and remarked that they were ‘as great as any of their predecessors’ and, like Epstein, were ‘cursed by the ignorant.’²¹³ The reasons for these parallels are quite obvious; those who dislike Epstein can be seen as ignorant and to have committed the same mistakes as those who criticised Van Gogh and Cézanne, even though hindsight has revealed the importance of these artists. In Haskell’s view, Epstein was not recognised as the great artist that he was. But if Epstein was such a great artist, why does this lack of recognition persist at that time? Haskell relates this specifically to the profundity of his work, arguing that Epstein’s work:

imprints itself vividly on the imagination and refuses to be ignored. It causes the artistically lazy, whose sense of beauty has become atrophied by the banal, to readjust their values, which naturally they resent. They are moved, they must be moved deeply to feel and to act as they do, but they prefer their former placid state, where ‘they knew very definitely what they liked’ or what they should like.²¹⁴

By the end of the introduction we learn that Epstein was an artist ‘who holds the secret to true beauty’, transcends temporal specificity, notions of context or fashion. He was not a rebel and had great respect for the art of the past.

The second chapter opens with Haskell asking Epstein: ‘How do you account for the fact that in the whole history of art there are so few sculptors compared to the vast company of painters?’²¹⁵ Epstein’s argument was an economic one: he saw painting as easier to produce and more saleable than sculpture. Epstein explained:

A painter may take a few days or weeks over a painting, and can do many drawings in one day. I myself have done as many as twenty, while with the sculptor it is a question of months or years with a very heavy outlay in materials, and far less chance of ultimate sales. [...] At the present day, this economic question has become aggravated. People have not the space, or will not try to find it, to place a piece of sculpture, while there is always room for just another picture. It is for this reason that so many dealers have suggested to me to do small ‘bric-a-brac’ nudes, but I am not interested.²¹⁶

²¹³ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.vii

²¹⁴ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.vii

²¹⁵ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.10

²¹⁶ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, pp.10-11

What I find particularly interesting about this passage is that it highlights Epstein's relationship to the market. The impression we get at this point is that Epstein is a man of integrity who would refuse to compromise over his work to appease the demands of the market, but this is simultaneously coupled with a sense that it is the art-buyers' fault for not making room in their homes for his work. There is an arrogance underpinning this statement. Essentially, Epstein felt entitled to a sale whenever he produced a piece of sculpture, but his refusal to appease the demands of the market led him to blame the collectors and the dealers, rather than the drift of fashion and changing tastes. Masked by an argument from economics, the statement also points to an artistic hierarchy which sees painting as superior to drawing, and (carved) sculpture as superior to painting. Epstein noted a necessary connexion between labour and quality, which he does not fully explore, but makes explicit in the following passage:

Intellectually it [sculpture] requires a far greater effort of concentration to visualise a work in the round. I find it difficult to work on more than two busts in the same period. Also in carving there is absolute finality about every movement. It is impossible to rub out and begin again. This fight with the material imposes a constant strain. A sudden flaw or weakness may upset a year's work.²¹⁷

The sheer mental and physical labour involved in the production of sculpture, for Epstein, made it superior to painting. It seems somewhat ironic that Epstein was so resistant to hierarchies within sculpture, dismissing the hierarchy between modelling and carving as unjustified.

The Sculptor Speaks should be read as a continuation of Bernard Van Dieren's *Epstein* in the sense that the book can be seen as an attempt by Epstein and his friends to prefigure his legacy. Throughout the book, there are a number of interventions which give privilege to Epstein and his work in a number of spheres relating to art and criticism. It is possible to read *The Sculptor Speaks* as a kind of instruction manual for beholding Epstein's works.

²¹⁷ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.11

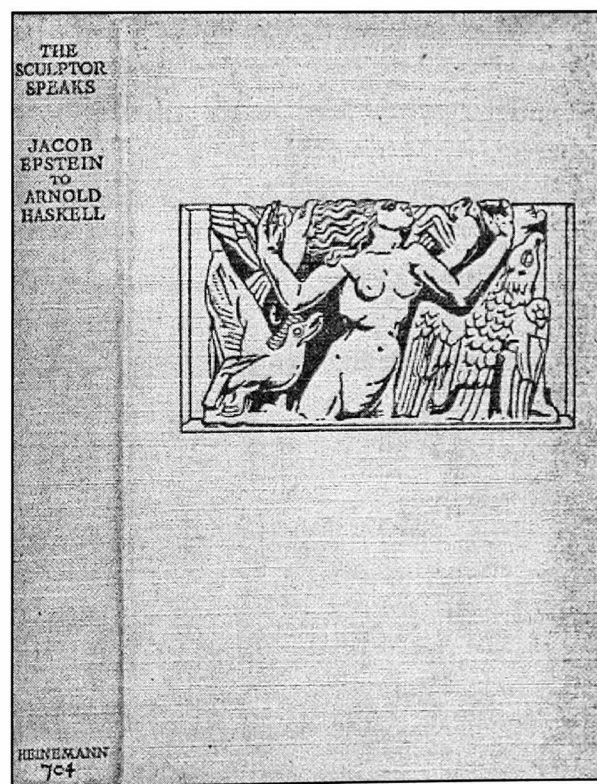
Indeed, in his concluding remarks Epstein tells the reader ‘*never be a slave to labels*’.²¹⁸

Epstein concluded *The Sculptor Speaks*, thus:

The amateur then who approaches art in this spirit, and builds himself a framework into which he can fit every one of his artistic experiences, so that every visit to the museum will be “lived,” has a right to express his own opinion. It may be wrong, but he can justify it instead of relying on hysterical praise or vulgar abuse, which is far more usual.²¹⁹

And in these lines Epstein has encapsulated his main argument, namely that, one can only have opinions on art so long as they are ones own and they come from a place of knowledge and experience rather than relying on the words of others.

In our next chapter we will consider how, for almost two decades, Epstein was involved in a protest against the British Museum. We will see how aligning himself with the protection of ancient sculpture, a more subtle series of interventions were in play which sought to reposition Epstein’s identity in line with the conception of sculptural tradition as outlined in the above chapter.



The Sculptor Speaks

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²¹⁸ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.149 (*Epstein's emphasis.*)

²¹⁹ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.150

Carving a Legacy: Part Two

Writing a Legacy: Epstein and the British Museum (1921-39)

The cleaning and restoration of the Parthenon Sculptures in the 1920s and 30s is arguably one of the most controversial episodes in the history of the British Museum. Questionable cleaning methods and plaster modifications to ancient marbles in the Museum collection were the source of public debate for over a decade. The issue was reignited in the mid-1990s with an inquiry into the cleaning practices of the 1930s, culminating in Ian Jenkins' 2001 publication *Cleaning and Controversy: The Parthenon Sculptures 1811-1939*.²²⁰ The book provides an overview of the debates prompted by the cleaning of the marbles, and includes in its appendices press articles and previously unpublished internal correspondences regarding the debate.

Between 1921 and 1939, Epstein was involved in a protest against the British Museum's decision to clean and restore the Parthenon sculptures, as well as number of other ancient Greek sculptures within its collection. What follows is an assessment of, not only the extent of Epstein's perception and presentation of his role in the protests, but also to unpack and examine how the controversy was used by Epstein as an attempt to reposition his public identity away from his image as a rebellious, avant-garde artist, as was constructed by the media during the previous decades.²²¹

²²⁰ Jenkins, Ian, *Cleaning and Controversy: The Parthenon Sculptures 1811-1939*, (The Trustees of the British Museum, 2001)

²²¹ It is worth noting from the outset that the broader issues of this debate and the actual history have been somewhat overlooked in favour of a narrative which deals directly with Epstein's own perception of his part in the protest. This chapter is not meant to be read as scholarship on the controversy, but rather on the identity of Epstein.



*Unsourced cutting in The British Museum,
Greek and Roman Department Scrapbook*

In his introduction to *The Sculptor Speaks*, Arnold Haskell wrote that Epstein had publicly protested against the ‘shameful restoration’ of the ancient marbles at the British Museum. In doing so, Haskell linked Epstein to the development of sculptural tradition:

Yet how many people see him as the caricaturist Low has depicted him as a figure with a paint-brush smearing the statues of Greece, like the vandals who have so treated his own work. Epstein was the first to protest against the shameful restoration of works in the British Museum, against the official theory that Demeter would be better with any old nose rather than no nose at all.²²²

It would seem that Haskell was trying to articulate a sense that Epstein’s relation to ‘tradition’ was one which was not only ripe for examination, but demanded a complete reassessment. Indeed, this short passage set up both the moral and artistic authority of Epstein in relation to both the mainstream media and the custodians of tradition; namely,

²²² Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, (William Heinmann Limited, 1931), p.iii

the British Museum. We are directed from this short passage to page 145 of *The Sculptor Speaks*, in the midst of a chapter where the topic of conversation related to the topics of tradition and rebellion. Over the previous pages (141-144), Epstein discussed the policy of restoration at the British Museum and reproduced two letters that were printed in *The Times* in May 1921 and February 1923. He noted that: ‘As a so-called rebel I was the only person to protest against the disfigurement of ancient sculptures by the museum authorities. Whose sole function is to safeguard tradition.’²²³ This is a radical step, but one which has, until now, eluded any close examination. It must be noted that the emphasis that was placed by Epstein onto this affair has been seriously underestimated by other scholars. For example, Ian Jenkins dismissed the contents of Epstein’s autobiography and *The Sculptor Speaks* in a bibliographical survey of the controversy, describing them as ‘principally a collection of Epstein’s acrimonious correspondence carried on in *The Times* with Museum officials, here spiced with bitter asides.’²²⁴ To a scholar of ancient history, this may indeed be the case, however, for the scholar interested in Epstein we can argue that this severely underestimates and undermines Epstein’s perceived role in the debate, which was seen by the Press, and therefore the wider public, as being a cause championed by Epstein.

The crux of this chapter in *The Sculptor Speaks* can be seen as an attempt by Epstein to realign his position as an artist within the teleology of sculptural tradition and to shake off the label of ‘rebel’ that has dogged him since his early career; by doing this Epstein located himself firmly as a key contemporary contributor to both sculptural tradition and British cultural history. When Epstein spoke about sculptural tradition, he did so succinctly:

No one has a greater respect for tradition, or for great works of the past, than I have. [...] Tradition does not mean a surrender of originality. On the contrary all the great innovators in art were in the great tradition, you cannot quote one

²²³ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.142

²²⁴ Jenkins, Ian, *Cleaning and Controversy: The Parthenon Sculptures 1811-1939*, (The Trustees of the British Museum, 2001), p.13

exception, however much they have been considered rebels by their contemporaries.²²⁵

Epstein expressed a very specific definition of tradition which implied notions of innovation and originality. By definition, however, tradition implies the handing down of a specific knowledge or doctrine, and thus runs contrary to the development of new means of expression. Indeed, tradition only becomes tradition through naturalisation over time. Epstein was most likely arguing that if an artist's particular idiosyncrasies and innovations are adopted by subsequent generations of artists, then these innovations become naturalised and therefore become part of tradition. It is only through hindsight that we can see this development. We have seen in our previous chapter that Epstein tried to influence how he would be perceived by future generations by situating himself within the sphere of 'tradition' before enough time had passed for his artistic legacy to be properly considered. In other words, Epstein made a pre-emptive strike at hindsight itself.

On April 29th 1921, Epstein wrote to the Editor of *The Times* to protest against the policies of cleaning and restoration at the British Museum. Printed on May 2nd, the letter focused on the cleaning and restoration with plaster of ancient Greek sculpture in the Museum collection. He paid particular attention to the restoration of the *Demeter of Cnidus*, which, for a short time, was fitted with a nose made from plaster:

ANCIENT MARBLES
POLICY OF RESTORATION.
TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES.

Sir, - All those who care for antique sculpture will view with astonishment and dismay the present policy followed by the British Museum authorities in restoring the marbles – that is, working them up with new plaster nose, &c.

I have remarked with growing alarm marble after marble so treated during the last year. I felt the futility of protesting, and so held my peace, but now that the incredible crime of "restoring" the head of the Demeter of Cnidus has at last been committed, the atrocity calls for immediate protest.

²²⁵ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.144

No doubt the Museum authorities do not like the Greek marbles in their possession, but why they should translate the masterpieces into something more nearly approaching the Albert Moore ideal of Greek passes my understanding. The Demeter is not only “improved” with a new plaster nose, but to bring the rest of the head into consistency with this nose, the whole face has been scraped and cleaned, thus destroying the mellow golden patina of centuries. Other important pieces “improved” are the marble boy extracting a thorn from his foot, and the very fine priestess from Cnidus, so altered as to give an entirely different effect from that it originally had. How long are these vandals to have in their “care” the golden treasury of sculpture which at least they might leave untouched?

I remain, yours very respectfully,
JACOB EPSTEIN
23 Guildford-street, Holborn, April 29.²²⁶

The letter began with Epstein claiming that he was someone who cared deeply about the fate of antique sculpture. Epstein applied the word ‘care’ within the letter in two distinct and opposing ways. We have Epstein, alongside ‘those who care for antique sculpture’, being contrasted to the ‘care’ given to the sculptures by the British Museum; a form of care which Epstein sarcastically equated with vandalism: ‘How long are these vandals to have in their “care” the golden treasury of sculpture[?]’. The effects of this technique are quite obvious, and were clearly and carefully deplored in an effort to undermine the ‘experts’ whose job it was to oversee the custody and conservation of objects held within the Museum. Indeed, the opposition becomes a rhetorical device used by Epstein to make those who did not agree with his viewpoint on restoration appear in the same bracket as those he had earlier described as vandals. It is an interesting point to note that Epstein used the same language to describe the authorities of the British Museum that had been used many times over the preceding decades by other critics to describe his own work. The terms ‘vandalism’ and ‘care’, expressed in this way, became shifted and interchangeable, altering in meaning depending on the source and target of their utterance.

²²⁶ Epstein, Jacob, ‘Ancient Marbles. Policy of Restoration’ in, *The Times*, (May 2nd, 1921), p.12

It is significant to note that Epstein complained about ‘the futility of protesting’ against this ‘incredible crime’ of restoration, but, as yet, there is no evidence in the archive to suggest that Epstein actually raised the issue directly with the British Museum. On the contrary, he chose a very public and widely-read forum to make his point. It could thus be conceivably argued that it was not solely the issue of cleaning and restoration which Epstein was concerned about, but rather the way in which the issue could be used to articulate his own public image.



The Demeter of Cnidus

Epstein wrote again to *The Times* almost two years later in a letter dated February 19th 1923, and printed on February 21st, declaring victory against the Museum. He spoke of this in *The Sculptor Speaks*, noting that '[the Museum authorities] evidently took my advice, for two years later I was able to write.'²²⁷

BRITISH MUSEUM "DEMETER"
TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES

Sir – It may be a matter of great satisfaction to those interested in sculpture to know that the British Museum authorities have seen fit to remove the "restorations" from the head of the Demeter against which *The Times* published a protest some two years ago. Unfortunately, the scraping which the head underwent at the same time is not so easily remedied. Are we to hope that in the future works which it is not in our power to rival will be left untouched by the hand of the "restorer," however ambitious and well-meaning he may be.

JACOB EPSTEIN
23, Guilford Street, Feb 19²²⁸

Epstein noted, rather vaguely, that in 1921 '*The Times* published a protest' against the restoration of the Demeter. This is true; *The Times* did indeed publish 'a protest': Epstein's protest. What is interesting, and perhaps not immediately apparent if we take Epstein's version of events at face value, is that the debate regarding this issue went beyond Epstein's letter. On May 3rd 1921, a day after Epstein's original letter was published, a correspondent from *The Times* took to defending the position of the British Museum. The author began the piece by outlining the reasons why Epstein's protests would not receive a response from the British Museum authorities and continued to defend what the author described as the 'slight restorations' of Demeter:

The guardians of public institutions are forbidden to enter into controversies in print concerning their stewardship. Therefore, though Mr. Epstein may protest in the columns of *The Times* [...] it is not for Sir Frederic Kenyon to prepare an answer for Mr. Epstein's protests or even refute the charge of vandalism. [...] As to the restoration, it is of the slightest. The end of the nose of the statue was broken off longer ago than anybody can remember. It has been restored with a piece of plaster [...] a nose, though it be modern and not marble, is better than no nose at all. [...] But the restoration of statuary has been a general practice for centuries.²²⁹

²²⁷ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.143

²²⁸ Epstein, Jacob, 'British Museum Demeter' in, *The Times*, (February 23rd, 1923), p.12

²²⁹ Anon., 'The False Nose Of Demeter. Slight Restoration Of Statue' in, *The Times*, (May 3rd, 1921), p.9

As an anonymous 'editorial' piece, it is difficult to assess to what extent, if any, the British Museum authorities were involved in producing or informing this response. It must be noted that alongside *The Times*' official stance, the paper also published a number of letters which also took Epstein's arguments to task. The extracts that follow are from a letter published May 4th and penned by archaeologist and Oxford Professor, Percy Gardner (1846-1937) as a direct response to Epstein's complaints about the addition of a plaster nose to the statue of *Demeter*. Gardner wrote that:

[A] restoration in plaster is innocuous, as the plaster can easily be removed at any time; and if done with care often justifiable. Theoretically the best plan would be to leave the marbles as they are found, and to place beside each a plaster cast carefully completed. But this in practice would be awkward and even impossible.

No doubt a trained eye learns to see in a mutilated statue what is preserved, and not to trouble about the rest. But in England not one person in a hundred has trained eyes; and to the 99 a statue with a broken nose or a gash through the eyes is an object of aversion, whether they be educated or ignorant, aesthetic or unaesthetic. And the 99 also have their rights; to them a little plaster will be a great help to appreciation. [...] To restore the *Demeter* of Cnidus is no doubt venturesome. I should have preferred to leave the figure as it was found and to place beside it a cast of the head restored and tinted. But in such matters the verdict of the authorities of the British Museum deserves respect.²³⁰

Within the letter, Gardner emphasised the democratic and utilitarian principles which would have informed such restorations by the British Museum. Epstein's response to this letter was not forthcoming within *The Times*. Indeed, neither Gardner's nor *The Times*' responses were mentioned by Epstein in *The Sculptor Speaks* and they were only briefly mentioned within Epstein's autobiography. Epstein wrote that:

For my letter I was severely taken to task. Professor Gardiner [*sic*] wrote a letter in defence of the Museum and said it was only a matter of difference of opinion between two schools of thought, in fact, merely an academic question. Any damage to the statues was scouted, and the discussion ended by *The Times* itself awarding the Museum officials 100 per cent marks, the maximum, for their custodianship, I suppose.²³¹

²³⁰ Gardner, Percy, 'Ancient Marbles. Restoration in Plaster' in, *The Times*, (May 4th, 1921), p.6

²³¹ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, (Hulton Press, 1955), p.181

The arguments contained within the editorial and Gardner's letter were not the only issues at stake; what is also apparent, is that Epstein's treatment of these arguments (or lack thereof) raises some serious questions about Epstein's integrity. It is a fair assessment that throughout his career, Epstein had a habit of glossing over or ignoring those areas of debates and arguments which did not agree with his own way of thinking, often dismissing them out of hand. It would appear that Epstein was willing to champion an issue, but would seldom be prepared to engage with counter-arguments, thus stifling the progression of open debate and dialogue. Epstein did not reproduce the letter from Gardner, nor the article by the editor of *The Times*. After all, if they were reproduced it would have been quite apparent to the reader that Epstein was being somewhat disingenuous. When we examine the letter from Gardner, it is fair to suggest that, on the whole, Gardner did side with Epstein regarding most of the arguments, but at the same time showed a keen awareness of both the practical issues and the Museum's duty to the 'untrained' public. Both Gardner and Epstein agree that they would prefer to leave the Demeter 'as it was found', but the point where Epstein and Gardner differ is related more specifically to their attitude towards the authorities of the British Museum. On one side of the debate, we have Gardner telling us that: 'the verdict of the authorities of the British Museum deserves respect.' On the other, we have Epstein asking the reader: 'How long are these vandals to have in their "care" the golden treasury of sculpture which at least they might leave untouched?' It is quite odd that Epstein would single out Gardner, whose response was more reserved and more in agreement with Epstein than he would probably care to admit. Indeed, the main argument presented in *The Times* editorial piece was that 'a nose, though it be modern and not marble, is better than no nose at all'. Epstein, however, was correct to point out in his autobiography that Gardner somewhat missed the point of his letter and ignored Epstein's calls for the cessation of the cleaning of the marbles and instead focused most attention upon Epstein's complaints about the plaster restorations of the Demeter. It would seem that Epstein's main

complaint against *The Times* stemmed specifically from the fact that they did not take his side. As Epstein bitterly remarked: ‘the discussion ended by *The Times* itself awarding the Museum officials 100 per cent marks.’

It was not until 1923, when Epstein wrote his second letter to *The Times*, that the issue of the ‘scraping’ was addressed in the pages of *The Times*. Yates Professor of Archaeology at University College, London, and younger brother of the aforementioned Percy Gardner, Ernest Gardner (1862-1939), acknowledged that there was an obvious difference between the colour of the marble on the head and body of the Demeter: ‘The contrast in appearance between the head and the body of the Demeter of Cnidus, and especially the better preservation of the surface of the face, must have struck any observant visitor.’²³² He denied that any ‘scraping’ had occurred, arguing that the disparity in the appearance of the marbles derives partially from the fact ‘that the head was found separately to the body’, noting that: ‘The head, and probably the arms, hands, and feet, were made of the finest Parian marble, while the rest of the figure is in an inferior and softer local marble. The contrast is probably more conspicuous now than when the marble was newly worked.’²³³ As we shall see, this is not strictly the case, and somewhat evades the core issue. Although there is probably much truth that the artist used varying qualities of marble for different effects, it still does not detract from the fact that during this period there was a well-documented program of unsanctioned cleaning of ancient marbles within the British Museum.

After Epstein’s self-declared moral victory against the British Museum with the removal of the plaster nose from the *Demeter*, the issue of cleaning the *Parthenon Sculptures*, or Elgin Marbles, was reignited in March 1939. On March 21st 1939, articles appeared in a cross-

²³² Gardner, Ernest, ‘British Museum “Demeter.”’ In, *The Times*, (February 27th, 1923), p.13

²³³ Gardner, Ernest, ‘British Museum “Demeter.”’, p.13

section of the daily newspapers informing their readers that the *Parthenon Sculptures* had been damaged through cleaning. The issue was taken up by *The Telegraph*:

Archaeologists, I hear, are anxious about the state of the Elgin marbles in the British Museum. [...] It is being said by those qualified to express an opinion that as the result of their recent cleaning the metopes and frieze have lost the warmth of their patina.

The Elgin marbles are more than a national possession. Successive Greek Governments have been anxious to see them restored to their places on the Parthenon. It has been an argument against this that their preservation was better assured in the Museum.²³⁴

What makes this article particularly interesting is that the writer in *The Telegraph* used this case to make a point, not so much about the aesthetic issues of restoration and cleaning of the sculptures, but rather to the issues relating to who should have authority over them. One of the main defences for keeping the *Parthenon Sculptures* in the British Museum rests on the assertion that the sculptures were safer in the British Museum than on the Parthenon itself. With the surface damage to the marbles that had occurred, this argument was taken by the writer to be somewhat redundant. Interestingly then, *The Star* used the issue as an opportunity to mock the artistic community:

Hypersensitive fellows are complaining that certain of the Elgin Marbles have lost their patina. [...] This is a British Museum business, and a certain amount of mystery surrounds these famous marble sculptures (part-worn) brought back by the 7th Earl of Elgin from Athens more than 100 years ago.

Recently somebody (his name is never mentioned now) started giving these B.M. marbles a wash and brush up, thus jeopardising, in the opinion of some, the exquisite patina - the accumulation of grime caused by long exposure to atmosphere.

Like the mouldy bits of gorgonzola, this patina is much admired by artistic epicures.²³⁵

By drawing a comparison between the appreciations of the 'grime' on sculpture and 'mouldy bits of gorgonzola', the writer, it could be argued, was making a claim that aims to belittle the protest itself. When considered in the context of the social and political climate

²³⁴ Anon., 'Elgin Marbles Too Clean' in, *The Daily Telegraph*, (March 21st, 1939)

²³⁵ Thornton, A. G., "'Patina" Was Just Dirt to This Cleaner' in, *The Star*, (21st March, 1939)

of the late-1930s, the cleaning of ancient sculptures does seem comparatively insignificant. The point is that on some level the issues were being articulated by a wide cross-section of the media, not just by a select few 'sensitive types' writing in the letters pages of the broadsheets.

On May 19th 1939, after the issue had been discussed at length in the Press, the *Daily Express* printed an interview with the man responsible for the cleaning of the *Parthenon Sculptures* who had, shortly before talking to the *Daily Express*, been forced to retire as a direct consequence of the controversy. The *Daily Express* boldly claimed that 'The Great Elgin Marbles mystery was partially solved last night'. What follows are extracts from the interview with the former Head Cleaner, Arthur Holcombe:

"We were given a solution of soap and water and ammonia. First we brushed the dirt off the marbles with a soft brush. Then we applied the solution with the same brush. After that we sponged them dry, then wiped them over with distilled water.

"That was all we were told to do. To get off some of the dirtier spots I rubbed the Marbles with a blunt copper tool. Some of them were as black with dirt as that grate" said Mr. Holcombe pointing to his hearth.

"As far as I know, all that had been done for years to clean them was to blow them with bellows.

"The other men borrowed my copper tools and rubbed the Marbles with them as I did. I knew it would not do them any harm, because the copper is softer than the stone. I have used the same tools for cleaning marble at the Museum under four directors." [...]

"I am sure the work we did on the Marbles did them no harm"²³⁶

Epstein reprinted extracts from this interview in his autobiography, but did not reproduce a particularly significant section of the article: a statement from authorities of the British Museum which came at the end of the article:

Yesterday the Trustees of the British Museum issued a statement that they found unauthorised methods were being introduced in some instances, and that

²³⁶ Anon., 'I Am the Man Who Cleaned the Elgin Marbles' in, *Daily Express*, (May 19th, 1939), pp.1-2

this was done without the knowledge of the officers of the Museum who were responsible for the cleaning.²³⁷

The author of this statement added that the effects of the methods used were imperceptible to anyone but an expert, and concluded that: 'The Trustees do not allow any departure from their approved methods, and at once took the necessary steps to ensure that no such innovations should be adopted in the Museum.'²³⁸ As a direct response to this article, on May 19th 1939, Epstein wrote to *The Times* (rather than the *Daily Express*) to express his dismay about these latest developments. The letter was published on May 20th:

CLEANING OF MARBLES
TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES

Sir,-In your issue of May 2, 1921, I protested against the "cleaning" and restoring of the Greek marbles at the British Museum, particularly Demeter of Cnidus. My protest went unheeded and I was jeered at for concerning myself with what I was told was no business of mine. Eighteen years have passed, and now the cleaning and restoration of the Elgin marbles are causing uneasiness and questions are asked as to whether the famous marbles have been damaged in the process. The British Museum authorities have admitted that any change in the marbles is only to be distinguished by the practiced eye "of an expert," wherever that resides! An interview published in the Press with the head cleaner of the marbles has elicited the information that a copper tool "softer than marble" (how incredible) was used. Why a cleaner and six hefty men should be allowed for 15 months to tamper with the Elgin marbles as revealed by the head cleaner passes the comprehension of sculptor. When will the British Museum authorities understand that they are only the custodians and never the creators of these masterpieces?

Faithfully yours, JACOB EPSTEIN
18, Hyde Park Gate, S.W.7, May 19.²³⁹

Epstein's tone was much more subdued within this letter than when declaring victory over the Museum authorities in *The Sculptor Speaks* almost a decade earlier. In simplistic terms, *The Sculptor Speaks* was used by Epstein to show himself to be a serious artist in the long line of tradition as he saw it. By 1939 (the year that Epstein had finished his autobiography), Epstein then considered himself to be an innocent victim of ignorance and misunderstanding. From Epstein's boast in *The Sculptor Speaks* that the British Museum

²³⁷ Anon., 'I Am the Man Who Cleaned the Elgin Marbles', pp.1-2

²³⁸ Anon., 'I Am the Man Who Cleaned the Elgin Marbles', p.2

²³⁹ Epstein, Jacob, 'Cleaning of Marbles' in, *The Times*, (May 20th, 1939), p.13

‘evidently took my advice,’²⁴⁰ we have Epstein admitting that his ‘protest went unheeded’ added that he ‘was jeered at.’ Perhaps the fact that there was an admission of wrongdoing by a member of staff at the British Museum meant that Epstein felt that he could legitimately offer his criticism with supporting evidence on his side. With this evidence in mind, it does come as some surprise to see a response from Sir George Hill (1867-1948), former Director of the British Museum, that appeared in *The Times* on May 22nd 1939:

The Demeter has never had a "mellow golden patina" within living memory. (My own memory of her goes back to the eighties). But the plaster cast which, for safety's sake, filled her place during the War was of a nice yellow colour. Mr. Epstein must have become accustomed to the cast, which less expert critics than himself may well have taken for an original. [...] I may be allowed to add that no such thing as "restoration" of the Parthenon marbles has been or will be undertaken as long as the authorities of the British Museum have them in their keeping: and no "cleaning" other than simple washing with neutral soap and distilled water is authorized in the Museum.²⁴¹

In Epstein’s final letter to *The Times* on the subject, he portrayed himself as a victim of ignorance and misunderstanding. He used the letter as an opportunity to strike out at those who did not take his side during the debate:

CLEANING OF MARBLES TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES

Sir,-With regard to the Elgin Marbles and the Demeter of Cnidus, Sir George Hill in his letter in your issue of to-day imagines that I took no cognizance of the letters and statements following my letter of May 2, 1921. He mentions Professor Percy Gardner's letter of May 4, 1921, in which as I recall the professor indulged himself in what was to my mind merely a scholastic discussion and ignored the vital issues at stake.

All these letters and statements, as I pointed out in my letter of your last issue, were directed towards one purpose, which was to point out how wrong I was in criticizing the British Museum authorities, and I summed them all up there by saying simply, "My protest went unheeded." The proof of this statement is that there is now a very grave question about the cleaning of the Elgin Marbles.

Sir George Hill was a keeper at the British Museum during the years 1921-30, he will doubtless be able to recall that far from the Demeter's restorations being removed immediately, they were only removed in February, 1923, about two years later, when Dr. Bernard Smith, exasperated beyond endurance by the

²⁴⁰ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.143

²⁴¹ Hill, George, ‘Cleaning of Marbles’ in, *The Times*, (May 22nd, 1939), p.13

obduracy of the museum authorities, had squirted coloured juice on to the head of the Demeter, thereby forcing the museum to take action.

Sir George is at circumstantial pains to prove that I was unacquainted with the original marble and that, as he disingenuously suggests, I may have mistaken a plaster cast shown during the War for the Demeter. My memory of the Demeter goes back to 1904, not very much later than that of Sir George's. I am not mistaken when I assert that the head of the Demeter of Cnidus was drastically treated in 1921.

It is not a question of only "a mellow golden patina" but of what is far more important the scraping of the surfaces, and the effect of that scraping on the planes of the marble.

I have myself seen the workmen at the museum at work on the marbles and have been horrified by the methods employed.

Sir George ignores the statement of the chief cleaner, Mr. Arthur Holcombe, three days ago, in the Press, that he had been in the habit at the museum, under all of the last four directors, of cleaning all the marbles with "a blunt copper tool" and that he started on the Elgin marbles about two years ago and used this tool. "Copper is softer than stone" he says. The absurdity of "the softer than marble theory" is manifest. Has Sir George never heard of the bronze toe of the statue of St. Peter in Rome kissed away by the worshippers' soft lips?

"Putting me in my place" seems to be of greater importance to the museum officials than the proper care and protection of the Greek marbles.

The whole thing boils down not to an academic discussion on cleaning and patination, but to the grave question as to whether the Elgin marbles and the other Greek marbles are to be kept intact, or to be in the jeopardy of being periodically treated, and perhaps, in the end, being permanently ruined by the museum officials through their lack of sculptural science.

The public is dissatisfied with the present state of affairs, and clearly uneasy about the present condition of the Elgin marbles, and must consider the answer for the Treasury in Parliament by Captain Crookshank to a question about them, as both equivocal and misleading. It was an admission of damage with an attempt to minimise the responsibility of the Trustees of the British Museum.

Faithfully yours, JACOB EPSTEIN
18, Hyde Park Gate, S.W.7. May 22.²⁴²

It is in this letter that Epstein made his most direct attack upon those who disagreed with him, arguing that, not only are the other contributors to the debate missing the point, but that they are victimising him by engaging in what he dismisses as a 'merely a scholastic discussion.' Epstein presented himself as being in the same situation as the *Parthenon*

²⁴² Epstein, Jacob, 'Cleaning of Marbles' in, *The Times* (25th May, 1939), p.12

Sculptures: in that they are both victims of ill treatment by what he saw as an authoritarian museum.

At this we have to ask ourselves: what was so specific about the *Parthenon Sculptures* that interested Epstein so greatly? To answer this, it is useful to look at how the sculptures were valued at the time. In *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture*, published in 1932,²⁴³ Reginald Wilenski (1887-1975) argued that the acceptance of the *Parthenon Sculptures*' incomplete state and rough finish helped to pave the way for the acceptance of Romantic sculpture.

Wilenski wrote that:

propaganda in the nineteenth-century exalted the Elgin Marbles as objects of sculptural perfection in their *incomplete* condition. [...] By accepting the rough surface (on the *Ilissus* for example) and the jagged broken edges of the drapery on the other figures, the spectators were admitting a new sculptural experience, because the surface of all antique figures, hitherto considered 'good' by the prejudice, had always been worked all over to an even smoothness by the restorers and the edges of all the drapery had always been made sharp, neat, and even. When the rough and varied surface of the Elgin Marbles became included in the Greek prejudice the door was open to the acceptance of the emotive handling of Romantic sculpture – the thumbbed clay and uneven texture reproduced in bronze, and the passages in marbles that were not finished with fine chiselling and smoothing processes but left quite roughly pointed out [...] by extolling the Elgin Marbles as sculptural perfection in their actual state they were helping the appreciation of the sculpture produced by the hated Romantic movement.²⁴⁴

A large section of *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture* was dedicated to addressing the institutionalised fetishism associated with antique Greek sculpture and further dismissed the work of many of their scholars and champions as efforts in propaganda. He called this fetishism the 'Greek prejudice' and noted that it had inhibited our appreciation of sculpture from other times and locations, and that it has led to a form of conservatism which saw this period of Greek sculpture as the pinnacle of sculptural creation which has never, and will never be equalled.

²⁴³ Wilenski, Reginald H., *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture*, (Faber and Faber, 1932)

²⁴⁴ Wilenski, Reginald H., *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture*, p.25-6

Wilenski noted how ironic it was that the 'propagandists', who were at such pains to promote the perfection of the Parthenon sculptures in their incomplete and unrestored state, have essentially made it acceptable, through the same aesthetic logic, to appreciate Romantic sculpture. He noted in particular reference to Epstein that:

The propagandists for the Elgin Marbles would have been still more horrified if they had realised that the taste they were creating for a rough and varied surface was opening the door to the appreciation of the bronze portraits of Jacob Epstein in our day. [...] The student to-day finds no difficulty in accepting Epstein's technique in these bronzes. He accepts the rough surface because he has already accepted it in the works of Rodin which in turn he had accepted because he had been taught to accept such surface in the Elgin Marbles.²⁴⁵

It is not difficult to see why Epstein held such an appreciation for the *Parthenon Sculptures*. One could be inclined to argue that, in these sculptures, Epstein saw the power of an unnatural and uneven surface in producing emotive effects upon the spectator. His defence of the integrity of ancient sculptures' original form can also be seen as defence of the integrity of his own work, as well as a defence of the integrity of 'sculptural science' in general.²⁴⁶ It is because of Epstein's aesthetic sympathy with the *Parthenon Sculptures* that he became involved with the controversy surrounding the restoration and cleaning of ancient sculptures within the British Museum. By emphasising the importance of such a group as the *Parthenon Sculptures* in the history of sculpture, Epstein was essentially highlighting the aesthetic importance of his own works. Wilenski echoed this point when he wrote that:

Epstein has studied the Elgin Marbles as an original artist; he has studied them that is to say for his own purposes. He experienced, I fancy, an aesthetic pleasure from their surface [...] This aesthetic element should, I think, be taken into account in contemplating the rough surface of Epstein's portrait bronzes²⁴⁷

Wilenski observed a conceptual link between the appreciation of the *Parthenon Sculptures* and Epstein's modelled work. It is important to point out that this connection, however, is not as apparent with regard to Epstein carved work. Indeed, most of Epstein's carvings have

²⁴⁵ Wilenski, Reginald H., *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture*, p.27

²⁴⁶ Epstein, Jacob, 'Cleaning of Marbles' in, *The Times* (25th May, 1939), p.12

²⁴⁷ Wilenski, Reginald H., *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture*, p.28

very smooth and definite planes. The aesthetic links between the surface of Epstein's carvings and the *Parthenon Sculptures* can only be found in a few examples. When we consider for example the clothing of the figure in *Maternity* (1910), a virtue is made of the chisel marks and the roughness of the surface in relation to the smooth curves of the figure itself. This is also true of the emergence from the untouched marble in *Genesis* (1929).



Left: Jacob Epstein with *Maternity*, (1910)

Right: *Genesis*, (1929)

There was something else quite specific about Epstein protesting against the restoration of these particular sculptures which should be considered parallel to the aesthetic sympathy discussed above. The *Parthenon Sculptures* can be seen to represent a victory in British cultural history. The marbles were successfully brought to England much to the dissatisfaction of Napoleon and French archaeologist Comte de Choiseul-Gouffier who

were simultaneously trying to acquire the marbles for the Louvre.²⁴⁸ It was during this time that war was declared against France, so the acquisition of the marbles for Britain was seen as a small victory against the French.

When we consider these facts parallel to Epstein aims, a picture begins to emerge: we observe an artist, labelled a rebel and existing as the perpetual outsider, trying to associate and align his own identity with works of art that he considers to be the most important works of art in terms of both sculptural tradition and British cultural history. When we consider this in the light of the Press treatment of Epstein during the preceding decades, it is difficult not to see how questions about Epstein's national identity could have lead to his attempts to forcefully align himself with British cultural history. When we look at Epstein's autobiography we see clear evidence to support this claim, when he wrote that:

I have repeatedly pointed out the danger to our national heritage from officials who have no expert or technical knowledge of sculpture, and I have insisted that sculptors - men who are brought up with sculpture - should be on the board of trustees. My advice was ignored and one would imagine from the attitude of official bodies that I was, ironically enough, the enemy of the antique work, instead of, as it happens, its most sincere protector.²⁴⁹

We can see from the above passage that Epstein explicitly made reference to 'our national heritage'. It would seem at this point that one of two things could be happening: we can see that Epstein was either trying to consciously express that he considered himself to be British, or that he did indeed, simply consider himself to be a British subject. This leads to the conclusion that, as well as aligning himself with sculptural tradition, Epstein also wore his Britishness on his sleeve by standing up for a work of art which embodied British cultural history. What comes through in this passage is Epstein's desire at this time to be taken seriously as a legitimate authority on sculptural tradition. His view that a sculptor should be on the board of Trustees of the British Museum can easily be translated as a

²⁴⁸ Cf.. King, Dorothy, *The Elgin Marbles*, (Hutchinson,2006), pp.274-294

²⁴⁹ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.182

desire by Epstein himself to be that sculptor. After all, he was sculpture's 'most sincere protector'.

It is impossible to say with certainty whether Epstein's involvement in these debates served to directly change how Epstein was perceived by the public, and was probably one of a number of factors which helped to transform Epstein from an avant-garde rebel and outsider to become the acceptable face of British sculpture in the last decade of his life. What is clear is that over the decades which followed this debate, Epstein received a number of high profile commissions for portrait busts of personalities including Albert Einstein, Winston Churchill and Princess Margaret, as well as a number of high-profile public sculptures. It is safe to say that Epstein's acceptance by the British establishment came to a head in 1954, when he received his knighthood and his identity crystallised as a highly regarded member of the British cultural elite.

In our next chapter, we shall examine a short chapter within Epstein's autobiography entitled: 'My Place in Sculpture' with an effort to further understand how Epstein saw himself in relation to the history of sculpture.

* * *

Carving a Legacy: Part Two

Writing a Legacy: My Place in Sculpture (1954)

In 1954, after being out of print for over a decade, the rights to Epstein's autobiography were returned to him. Epstein decided to republish his autobiography with the addition of a final chapter 'My Place in Sculpture' and a postscript which outlined some of his major achievements since his autobiography was first published in 1940.

In order to further understand the legacy of Jacob Epstein, it is worth spending some time unpacking and examining the content of the chapter 'My Place in Sculpture'. Though only three pages long, it is very rare in the history of art to find an artist, at the end of their career, who puts into words a summary of where they see their place in 'the canon'.

When one turns to the chapter, one is struck, at the end of the first page, at just how misleading the title appears to be. When reading through the first few paragraphs, there is not a consideration of his greatest works, thoughts on how he would be remembered, or memories of life as an artist; instead, he began by bitterly discussing the younger generation of sculptors, whom Epstein considered as owing a great debt to him, both directly and indirectly. In the direct sense, Epstein remarked that young sculptors had used him in the past to further their own careers, only to ignore him once they became recognised. He wrote that:

I have often been asked by aspiring sculptors to help them to get on their feet, and not very long after this have had the ironical pleasure of watching them getting large commissions and all sort of decorative work from sources that would never come near me; nor have the aspiration, when safely in the saddle, taken the same interest in my work that they formerly professed.²⁵⁰

²⁵⁰ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, (Hulton Press, 1955), p.225

This sense of indebtedness comes across as rather bitter. Epstein looked on at younger sculptors overtaking him in terms of gaining work. Ironically, one of the issues Epstein raised in *The Sculptor Speaks* was how difficult it was for sculptors to gain commissions and blamed it on architects who commissioned more established names. There is a real sense of entitlement and arrogance which comes out this passage, which some might argue as being undue. Epstein expanded upon his discussion of the young sculptors, and focused, in broad terms, upon the nature of their work. He wrote that:

From the Cubists onwards, sculpture has tended to become more and more abstract, whether the shape it took was the cleanness and hardness of machinery, or soft and spongy forms as in Hans Arp, or a combination of both. I fail to see also how the use of novel materials helps, such as, glass, tin, strips of lead, stainless steel and aluminium. The use of these materials might add novel and pleasing effects in connection with architecture, but add nothing to the essential meaning of sculpture, which remains fundamental. The spirit is neglected for detail, for ways and means.²⁵¹

Throughout his career Epstein made no secret of his dislike of abstract sculpture. For example, Arnold Haskell, writing in *The Sculptor Speaks*, recalled that:

I once heard him apply the term “modernist art” to the vacuum cleaner standing in the corner. Epstein is in the direct tradition far more of a conservative than the casual critic, with his set ideas and his customary misunderstandings of the Greeks could ever realise.²⁵²

In 1952, Epstein was interviewed for the BBC Home Service by long-time friend Hubert Wellington. Some of Epstein’s attacks on the modern trends in sculpture were reported in *The Manchester Guardian*. The author wrote that: ‘The abstract art of to-day is “downright bad,” said Mr. Epstein; you could call modern sculpture “construction or welding” but not sculpture. “Ugliness is what is sought, and by Jove, found!”’²⁵³ Also, in April 1953, Epstein wrote to the National Sculpture Society in New York to withdraw from, and protest against, a sculpture competition in commemoration of “The Unknown Political Prisoner”. Epstein wrote:

²⁵¹ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.225

²⁵² Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, (William Heinemann Limited, 1931), p.iii-

iv

²⁵³ Anon., ‘Epstein on Sculpture’ in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (October 12th 1952), p.3

I was asked to compete, but when I saw the composition of the judging committee for Britain and the United States, I declined to have anything to do with it, and I declared prophetically enough that the competition was 'prejudged.'

Naturally a committee that emanated from the Museum of Modern Art and the I.C.A. of London could have only one purpose in view: this is the encouragement of abstract (so-called) sculpture. [...] It is extremely difficult for sculptors working in the tradition of sculpture to combat a tendency to aberration and eccentricity, as most of the key posts in art to-day are held by abstractionists or critics who propagate those ideas.²⁵⁴

Epstein's frustration at the new generation of sculptors strikes one as being somewhat ironic and hypocritical on Epstein's part. After all, in his early days, it was Epstein's work which was being dismissed by the older generation of sculptors. One would think that Epstein would have remembered this and defended the innovations of young artists, but alas, he did not. Epstein continued his attack on abstraction by noting that:

I have not been led astray by experiments in abstraction, or by the new tendencies to a tame architectural formula for positive qualities, the deeply intimate and human were always enough for me, and so wrought, that they became classic and enduring. The main charge against my work is the it has no "formal relations"—by "formal relations" the critic meaning my forms and their juxtaposition were just accidental. This I consider sheer nonsense. Because an artist chooses to put certain abstract forms together does not mean that he has succeeded in creating a better design than mine, whose forms are taken from a study of nature. To construct and relate natural forms may call for a greater sensibility and more subtle understanding of design than the use of abstract formula.²⁵⁵

Epstein here offered a complete antithesis of the earlier writings of Hulme, which had provided so much theoretic input into Epstein's work. Indeed, the opposition of 'natural' and 'abstract' forms was one which, as discussed earlier, interested Hulme deeply. Hulme wrote that:

There are now two kinds of art, geometrical and vital, absolutely distinct from one another. These two arts are not modifications of one and the same art, but pursue different aims and are created for the satisfaction of different necessities of the mind.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁴ Anon., 'Wild Amateurs' in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (April 18th 1953), p.1

²⁵⁵ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, pp.226-227

²⁵⁶ Hulme, T. E., 'Modern Art and Its Philosophy' in, Hulme, T. E. and Karen Csengeri (ed.), *The Collected Writings of T. E. Hulme*, (Clarendon Press, 1994), p.269

Though Hulme championed abstract art as having the ability to cause sweeping social and philosophical change, it is quite obvious that in his twilight years Epstein had altogether rejected this notion.

After venting some of his frustrations towards the younger generation of artists, Epstein turned his attention to those who had failed to commission him or purchase his work. Epstein wrote that: 'I can quite justly complain of neglect by architects of my work.'²⁵⁷ Epstein explained that this neglect had been caused by the media sensation surrounding many of his public sculptures, arguing that 'newspapers and critics had instilled fear into them [the architects].'²⁵⁸ This is probably a fair assessment by Epstein, and is also a fair reaction by architects. After all, it makes sense that an architect would try and avoid controversy, even if that controversy was engineered by a hostile media. In relation to those works which remained unsold, he wrote that: 'Most of my larger works remain my property' and that: 'All of my larger works will easily fit into any architectural ensemble not totally out of harmony with their character.' One can detect a real feeling of bitterness in these lines. Indeed, this led Epstein to repeat the sentiments of a discussion he had 25 years previously with Arnold Haskell, in which he had said:

A painter may take a few days or weeks over a painting, and can do many drawings in one day. I myself have done as many as twenty, while with the sculptor it is a question of months or years with a very heavy outlay in materials, and far less chance of ultimate sales. [...] At the present day, this economic question has become aggravated. People have not the space, or will not try to find it, to place a piece of sculpture, while there is always room for just another picture. It is for this reason that so many dealers have suggested to me to do small 'bric-a-brac' nudes, but I am not interested.²⁵⁹

Epstein remarked that 'It takes some courage to remain a sculptor',²⁶⁰ and noted how some artists did not share the intestinal fortitude and integrity of Epstein to remain committed to producing sculpture. Indeed, in the final paragraph, Epstein presented himself as a victim,

²⁵⁷ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.227

²⁵⁸ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.227

²⁵⁹ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, pp.10-11

²⁶⁰ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.227

who through all of his troubles had still continued his work undeterred, writing that: 'I have, despite every obstacle of organised hostility, on the part of the Press, art critics, art cliques, and personal vendettas, gone my own way and have never truckled to the demands of popularity or pot-boiled.'²⁶¹

Epstein's summary of his place in sculpture began with a small discussion relating to the difficulty in assessing 'one's place in the period one lives in' and wrote that it is an almost impossible task. Of course, Epstein was undeterred from such impossibilities and confidently declared that: 'My outstanding merit in my own eyes is that I believe myself to be a return in sculpture to the human outlook, without in any way sinking back into the flabby sentimentalising, or merely decorative, that went before.'²⁶² In the final lines of the chapter Epstein wrote that: 'I have enjoyed myself at work. Sculpture, drawing, and painting, I have felt a natural call to do, and I have had the opportunity to create a body of work which, taking in all, I am not ashamed of.'²⁶³

It is strange that in a chapter entitled 'My Place in Sculpture' Epstein would dedicate so few lines to the consideration of his place in sculpture. What comes through instead is a man who is self-righteous, paranoid and bitter. If one were to judge Epstein's place in sculpture based on his writings in this chapter, it would be fair to suggest that Epstein was his own worst enemy.

In the final part to this thesis, we will turn our attention to examining some of the sculptures produced by Epstein in an effort to further assess Epstein's identity, the reception of his work, and his place in the history of art.

* * *

²⁶¹ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.228

²⁶² Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.226

²⁶³ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.228

Carving a Legacy: Part Three

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Carving a Legacy: Part Three:

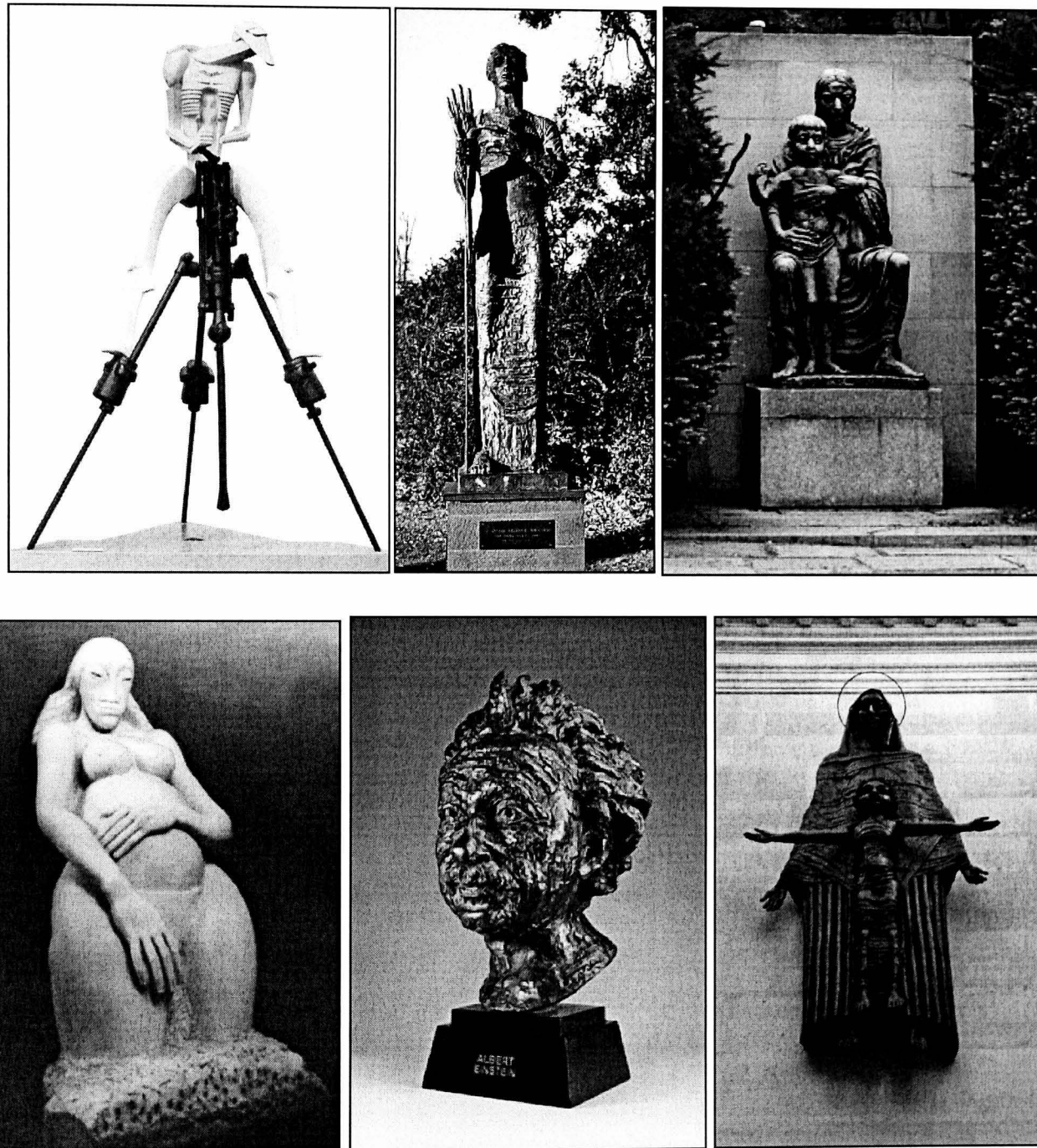
Selected Works: Introduction

Over the previous chapters of this thesis, we have examined a number of writings which have considered Epstein's position within the history of art. In this final part, we will look at six works within his oeuvre as a means to further examine Epstein's artistic legacy. This will be done by outlining the ideas which Epstein intended to communicate with his sculptures in relation to how these works were received by the earliest commentators and in more recent scholarship.

All of the works examined in this thesis have been chosen with specific aims in mind. In *The Rock Drill* (1913) we find a work which has received much critical and scholarly attention; it is considered the most radical of Epstein's works and, for this reason alone, deserves to be included in any consideration of his legacy. It is the intention of this thesis to survey the critical discourse surrounding this work; to explore and rethink the reasoning behind casting *The Rock Drill* in 1915; and to provide a re-reading of *The Rock Drill* which has been overlooked by other scholars. After casting *The Rock Drill* in metal, Epstein turned his back on abstraction and Modernist ideas for the rest of his career. The first major work which Epstein produced after this turn from abstraction was *The Risen Christ* (1917-19). This work has received very little scholarly attention, even though it marked a very important point in Epstein's artistic development. This chapter will outline the conception and critical reception of *The Risen Christ* and consider the work's meaning in light of its socio-political context. *The Risen Christ* remained one of Epstein's most controversial non-commissioned bronzes, and, for that reason, deserves close analysis in relation to its bearing upon Epstein's legacy. The next case study we will examine relates

to Epstein exhibiting his *Madonna and Child* in New York in 1928. Not only has this *Madonna and Child* received very little scholarly attention, but the communications between Epstein and his mistress Kathleen Garman are very telling of his attitudes towards his work and the art world, which were kept from his buyers, the Press, and the gallery-going public. The main reason for choosing this case study is because this was the only major work which Epstein made efforts to exhibit internationally in a private gallery. On his return from New York, Epstein began work on the focus of the next case study in this thesis: *Genesis* (1929). *Genesis* is perhaps one of Epstein's most controversial non-commissioned carvings. In this chapter we will trace *Genesis* from its conception and exhibition, to it being toured around the country to raise money for charitable causes. Throughout its various exhibitions, *Genesis* was subject, in the letters pages of newspapers, to much discussion as to its meaning. The main purpose of this chapter is to unpack the various ways in which this work's meaning has been articulated. We will then examine how the work has continued to attract debate by examining some key recent scholarship relating to it. The next chapter is concerned with the events surrounding the conception and exhibition of *Albert Einstein* (1933). This is a work which has received very little attention by scholars, but is a work which is considered one of Epstein's most successful portraits. It is for this reason that this thesis will fill in the gap of scholarship and explore the work's conception and critical reception. We will also highlight a strange perceived relationship between Epstein and Einstein which was suggested by some members of the Press. Finally, we will examine Epstein's second *Madonna and Child* (1950-52). This was the least controversial of Epstein's public sculptures and was almost universally praised by the critics. It was also the first of Epstein's architectural works to be modelled and not carved. The purpose of this chapter is to outline the unique conception of this work and explore the work's reception by the religious community. We

will focus our analysis of those works produced after *The Rock Drill* because, at the time of casting this work, Epstein's focus moved away from artistic experimentation to positioning his identity in relation to artistic tradition, thus setting the groundwork to influence his legacy.



Top from left: *The Rock Drill*, (1913); *The Risen Christ*, (1917-19); *Madonna and Child*, (1926-27);
Bottom from left: *Genesis*, (1929); *Albert Einstein*, (1933); *Madonna and Child*, (1950-52).

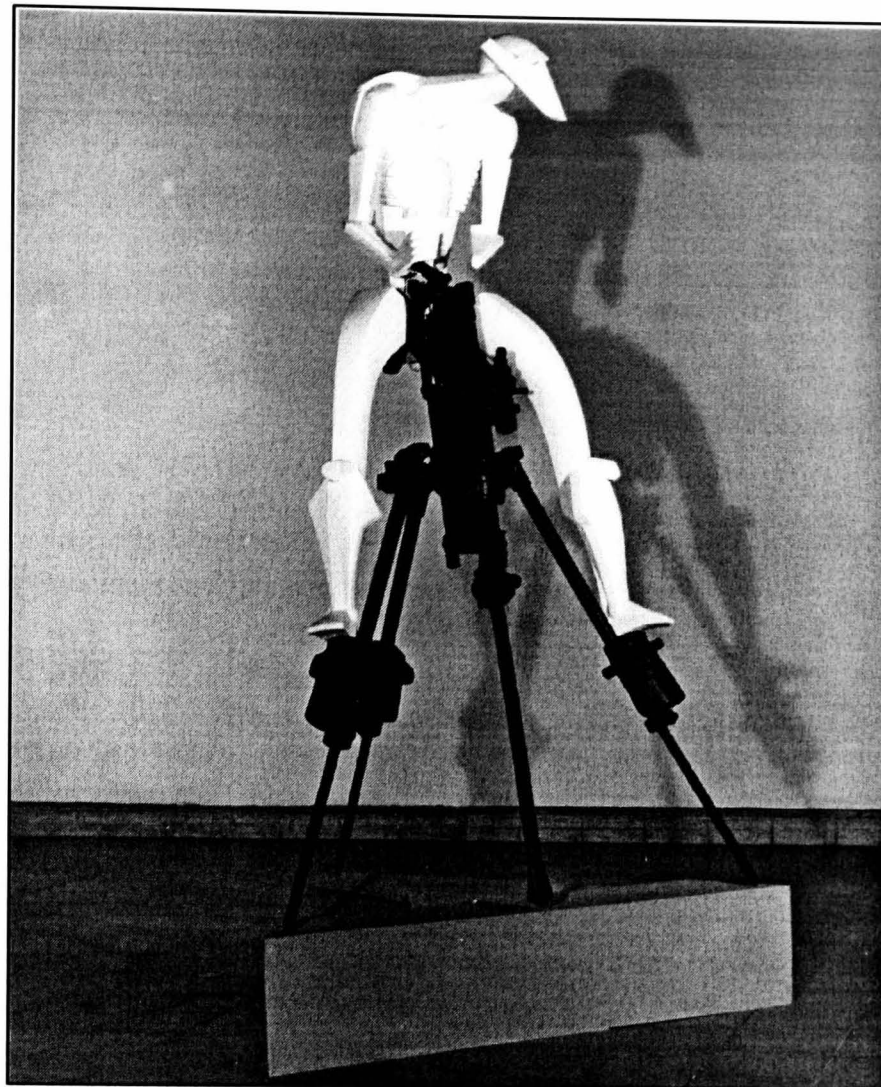
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Carving a Legacy: Part Three:
Selected Works: The Rock Drill (1913)

No other work by Jacob Epstein has generated such intrigue for scholars and critics as *The Rock Drill*. The assemblage of plaster model and readymade rock drill has been applauded as Epstein's most radical and original work. The critical and conceptual terrain of this work can be characterised by a series of seeming oppositions: Modernism versus Primitivism, mechanical versus organic, Vorticism versus Futurism, manufacture versus art, and object versus sculpture. These oppositions have formed much of the debate surrounding *The Rock Drill* for almost a century.

The intention of this chapter is to unpack and present a survey of the scholarly and critical discourse relating to *The Rock Drill* and illustrate that correlations exist between the ambivalent and ambiguous nature of the work's imagery and Epstein's personal biography. For a work which has been written about so widely, there has been little effort made to actually deconstruct and fathom *The Rock Drill's* meaning.

There has been so much written about *The Rock Drill* that one could argue that we are at a point where there is nothing else we could know about this work. Indeed, unless new evidence emerges, we have the biographical information provided by Epstein, the archive material that provides us with a chronology of events and the scholarship and criticism which has related and relayed these pieces of information. It is perhaps because of this apparent 'completion' that we can begin to examine what has been written and ask why certain themes have been conveniently ignored or sidestepped.



Jacob Epstein, *The Rock Drill*, (1913)

Epstein discussed the meaning of *The Rock Drill* within short passages in *The Sculptor Speaks*, a series of interviews with Arnold Haskell published in 1931, and in his autobiography published in 1940. Within *The Sculptor Speaks* Epstein explained that:

The Rock Drill is not entirely abstract. It is a conception of a thing I knew well in New York and in my feeling of that thing as a living entity, translated in terms of sculpture. It is a thing prophetic of much in the great war and as such within the experience of nearly all, and it has therefore very definite human associations.²⁶⁴

It is somewhat ambiguous what Epstein when he wrote that *The Rock Drill* is ‘a conception of a thing I knew well in New York and in my feeling of that thing as a living entity’. When he referred to *The Rock Drill*, was he referring to just the actual drill or the figure as well? Though this is unclear, the reference to New York could be referring to his time working as a farmhand in 1900-1901 where he would cut and crush stones. As Hubert Wellington

²⁶⁴ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, (William Heinmann Limited, 1931), p.45

(1879-1967) explained in *The Sculpture of Jacob Epstein*: 'Epstein was familiar with the powerful drills used for quarrying rock foundations in New York, and he works on this image'²⁶⁵ Another interpretation of the influence of New York upon *The Rock Drill*'s conception, was put forward by L. B. Powell in his book *Jacob Epstein*. He explained:

We may suppose that the artificiality of New York life, its mammoth buildings dwarfing the teeming multitudes of its people to seemingly tiny stature, wrought significantly upon an acutely impressionable mind, which was later to break forth with powerful and unrelenting insistence upon the dignity of human form and the sublimity of those fundamental motives of life which in the machine-age have been tragically bruised and warped.²⁶⁶

We are no closer, then, to a firm understanding of what Epstein meant when he wrote that *The Rock Drill* was 'a conception of a thing I knew well in New York'. Perhaps it was linked to a number of things, or perhaps Epstein was trying to show that the radical strain of his thought pre-dated his association with other Modernists.

Epstein went on to explain the meaning of *The Rock Drill* further, almost a decade later, in his autobiography:

It was in the experimental pre-war days of 1913 that I was fired to do the rock drill and my ardour for machinery (short-lived) expended itself upon the purchase of an actual drill, second-hand, and upon this I made and mounted a machine-like robot, visored, menacing, and carrying within itself its progeny, protectively ensconced. Here is the armed, sinister figure of to-day and to-morrow. No humanity, only the terrible Frankenstein's monster we have made ourselves into.²⁶⁷

These short passages from *The Sculptor Speaks* and his autobiography are the only statements that Epstein made regarding the intended meaning of *The Rock Drill*. What we have to consider is that these statements were written by Epstein decades after the event and provided a revision of the work's intended meaning. These descriptions have formed the very core of later readings of the reading of the work. When we look, for example, at

²⁶⁵ Wellington, Hubert, *The Sculpture of Jacob Epstein*, (Ernest Benn Ltd., 1925), p.18

²⁶⁶ Powell, L. B., *Jacob Epstein*, (Chapman and Hall Ltd., 1932), pp.6-7

²⁶⁷ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, (Hulton Press, 1955), p.56

Richard Buckle's writing on *The Rock Drill*, Epstein's statements form a fundamental part of his discussion:

Why had 'we' made ourselves into a 'terrible Frankenstein's monster'? By inventing cars, guns, machinery and rock-drills? Was it wrong to drill into rock, and was a man who did it a monster to be depicted in horror, as Caravaggio painted Medusa's head on a shield? And if so, where did Epstein's 'ardour for machinery' come from? Was the driller of rock portrayed as an angular robot because he was a monster or because straight lines and African simplifications were the fashion in art?²⁶⁸

The frustration and sarcasm expressed in this passage is undeniable. Although Buckle asked whether *The Rock Drill* was made 'because straight lines and African simplifications were the fashion in art', this still does not explain the work's intended meaning, or move much beyond Epstein's own statements.

Completed in the latter half of 1913 in London, *The Rock Drill* was first exhibited in the Goupil Gallery in March 1915 as part of the London Group's second exhibition. In 1916, a truncated version of *The Rock Drill* was cast in gunmetal. The clumsily titled *Torso in Metal from 'The Rock Drill'* was exhibited as part of the London Group's summer exhibition in 1916. The removal of the drill, legs, and hands of the driller has been considered to be a symbolic gesture on Epstein's part by scholars, and for many, marked the end of Epstein's experimental period. This was seen as a direct response by Epstein to the horrors of the First World War, in which he lost fellow sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and intellectual ally, Thomas Hulme. As Richard Cork argued in *Jacob Epstein*:

It was inevitable, then, that the war's apocalyptic course would prompt Epstein to make radical changes to *Rock Drill*. He may have wrestled with his own doubts about the aesthetic desirability of placing a ready-made object in a work of art. But the principal reason why his sculpture suffered such drastic alterations lay in Epstein's increasingly mortified response to the war. He discarded the drill, and along with the legs of the man who had controlled his violent invention. Deprived of his phallic weapon, the truncated driller was cast in metal. But the transformation from plaster to stronger material did not bolster his strength.²⁶⁹

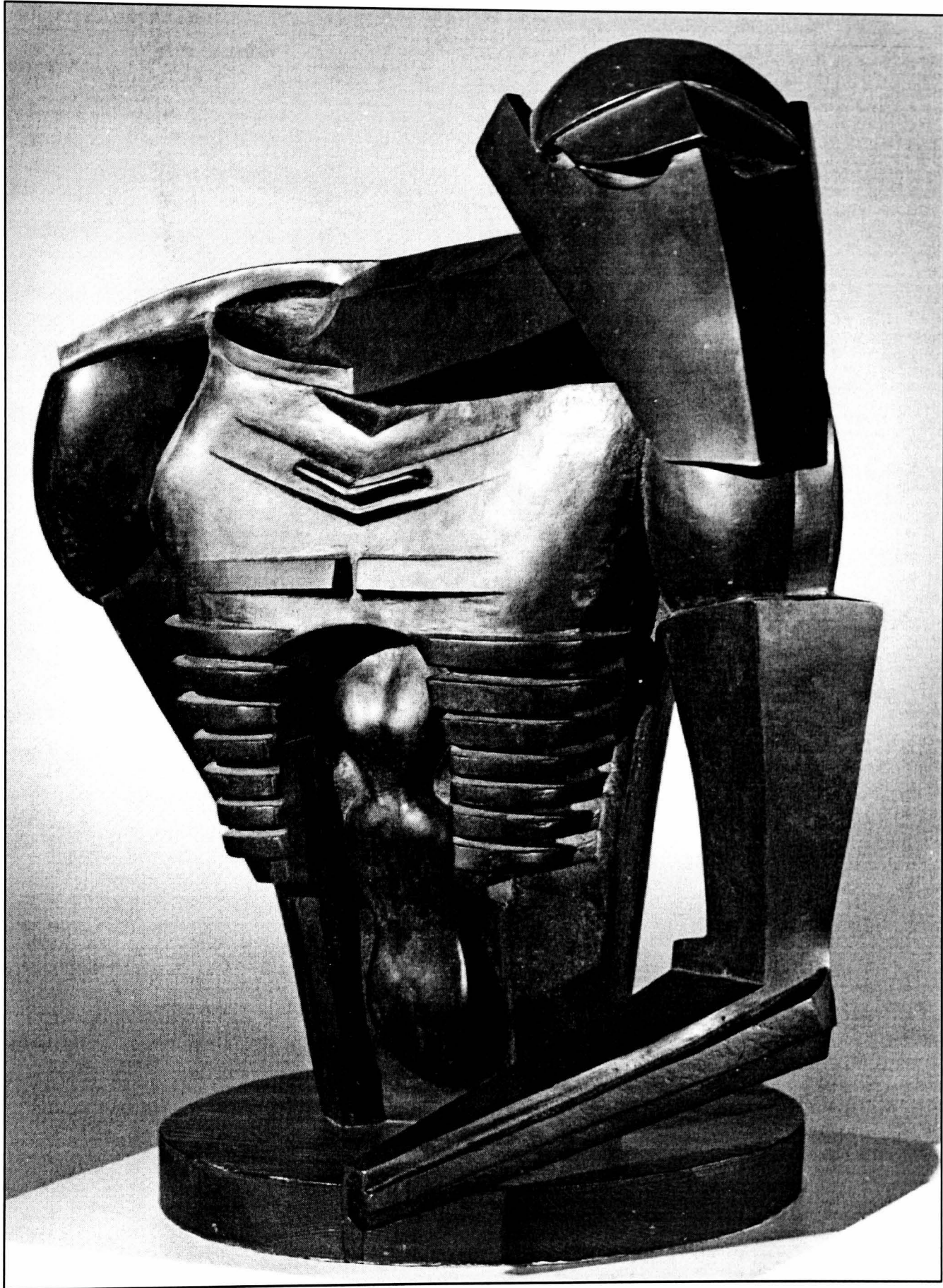
²⁶⁸ Buckle, Richard, *Jacob Epstein Sculpture*, (Faber and Faber, 1963), p.68

²⁶⁹ Cork, Richard, *Jacob Epstein*, (Tate Gallery Publishing, 1999), p.15

This argument has become the standard explanation for *The Rock Drill's* alteration. Cork's argument strikes one as being little more than romantic pondering, and does not take into account some quite obvious points. Firstly, Cork was correct in his assertion that Epstein had 'doubts about the aesthetic desirability of placing a ready-made object in a work of art.' This can be illustrated by Epstein's attitudes to Modernism as remarked by Arnold Haskell in *The Sculptor Speaks*: 'I once heard him apply the term 'modernist art' to the vacuum cleaner standing in the corner.'²⁷⁰ So with Epstein's rejection of the inclusion of a real drill, it would make sense that Epstein would remove the legs and part of the arm of the driller. It was not for symbolic reasons, but rather for aesthetic and economic ones. With the removal of the drill, the driller's legs would look awkward standing independent of the drill. Thus, the legs were removed and the arms were repositioned to fit in with the new composition. It was also suggested by James Laver (1899-1975) in his book *Portraits in Oil and Vinegar* that there was only some parts of *The Rock Drill* 'which it was found possible to cast'²⁷¹, but he did not provide any evidence for this statement. Also, we have to consider that casting the entire figure during this period would have been incredibly expensive; with the war effort, the price of metal had sky-rocketed, so any ways of cutting the cost of casting, while still keeping the general feel of driller would have been a likely course of action. An unfortunate side effect of casting *The Rock Drill* in metal is that it removed some of the ambiguity of the original rendering. When we look below at the rib cage of the driller, one can see an organic form. Rendered in plaster, it is uncertain whether the form is of the same material as the driller; when cast in metal, we are left with no doubt that the organic shape is of the same material as the driller.

²⁷⁰ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.iii

²⁷¹ Laver, James, *Portraits in Oil and Vinegar*, (John Castle, 1925), p.128



Torso in Metal from 'The Rock Drill' (1915)

The contemporary critical reception of *The Rock Drill* was, on the whole, a negative one. When we look, for example, at P. G. Konody's review in *The Observer* on March 14th 1915, we see a treatment of *The Rock Drill* which can only be described as hostile. He saw in *The*

energy, and to have hit on what his contemporaries must have welcomed as a highly contemporary subject.²⁷⁵

Perhaps it was because of his involvement in anti-Futurist protests that Epstein was so keen to decry Futurism whilst simultaneously experimenting with its ideas. It is possible that Epstein did not attach pneumatic power to *The Rock Drill* because of political pressure from other members of the London Group. What is perhaps ironic is the fact that Epstein went on to describe Marinetti's Futurist manifestos as the Futurists' 'silly gospel' and wrote that: 'these Italian charlatans were welcomed with open arms' by London, and explained that: 'in England, we are very ready to receive what seems novel and exciting, on the condition that it is superficial enough and entertaining enough.'²⁷⁶

One of the few positive reviews of *The Rock Drill* was found in *The Manchester Guardian*. Critic 'J. B.', wrote that:

Mr. Jacob Epstein carries with him a weight and mystery which always raises his work above its company, and compels serious consideration. We know from other examples that he is a strong and subtle craftsman in accepted convention. He cannot be denied consideration even when his figures seem naive as a child's mud-pie figure, or intended for other aims than art. Like a piece of machinery. He has found in a rock-drill machine the ideal of all that is expressive in mobile, penetrating. Mr. Epstein has accepted the rock drill, and says frankly that if he could have invented anything better he would have done it. But he could not. One can see how it fascinated him; the three long strong legs, the compact assembly of cylinder screws and valve, with its control handles decoratively at one side, and especially the long, straight cutting drill like a proboscis—it all seems the naked expression of a definite force. Mounted upon it Mr. Epstein has set a figure of the spirit of the drill—an idea of what man might be who existed only for rock drilling. Everything is sharp, flanging lines, and the legs describe a curve of a strong piece of invention, a synthetic shape which has a swift, significant interest, even beauty, all of its own.^{277 278}

²⁷⁵ Buckle, Richard, *Epstein: Edinburgh Festival Society Memorial Exhibition*, (Edinburgh Festival Society, 1961), p.21

²⁷⁶ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, (Hulton Press, 1955), p.59

²⁷⁷ J. B., 'The London Group' in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (March 15th, 1914), p.6.

²⁷⁸ There is a fascinating point within this passage for which the critic failed to elaborate upon and relates to my initial impressions of *The Rock Drill* when I saw it for the first time over a decade ago. When the critic wrote that *The Rock Drill* could be considered 'an idea of what man might be who existed only for rock drilling', I was reminded of my own theory that *The Rock Drill* represented an alienated worker who had become faceless and one with his labour. It is of course a theory I have since rethought in light of the work's foetal imagery and a deeper awareness of Epstein's biography and motives.

Rock Drill ‘a ghastly plaster creature that suggests a monstrous insect rather than a human being’, and wrote that: ‘The whole effect is utterly loathsome’. He continued:

Even leaving aside the nasty suggestiveness of the whole thing, there remains the irreconcilable contradiction between the crude realism of the machinery (of American make) combined with the abstractly treated figure; and the lack of cohesion between the black iron drill and the white plaster monstrosity perched upon it.²⁷²

In this passage, Konody expressed his acute displeasure at beholding the ugliness of *The Rock Drill*. Though Konody criticised the inclusion of a real drill for its ‘crude realism’, his attention was focused mainly upon the driller and the incongruity between the plaster of the figure and iron of the drill. Konody had preceded this argument by writing that *The Rock Drill* was a Futurist work. He made reference to Italian Futurist leader Filippo Marinetti (1876-1944), noting:

How he would chuckle in his cell were he to know that his “art of the dynamic combination of objects” has attracted a disciple in England! Mr. Jacob Epstein was once a sculptor—a sculptor as some think, of genius, and as everyone will agree, of rare promise.²⁷³

Konody’s review highlighted a real tension that existed within *The Rock Drill*. Indeed, through its combination of dynamism and machinery, it is difficult to deny the Futurist undertones of such a work. When we look to Epstein’s statements, we can see within his discourse that he had seriously considered bringing noise and movement into the gallery. Epstein explained that: ‘I had thought of attaching pneumatic power to my rock drill, and setting in motion, thus completing every potentiality of form and movement in one work.’²⁷⁴ Similar sentiments were echoed by Richard Buckle in relation to Epstein’s Futurist tendencies in this work. Buckle explained:

I believe that Epstein subscribed temporarily to the Futurist admiration for speed, noise and machinery; that a masked man drilling rock, held for him the fascination of a heroic, demonic, even sexual image; that he was happy to borrow some of the angularity of Cubism, to glorify the Vorticist ideal of

²⁷² Konody, P. G., ‘Art and Artists: The London Group’ in, *The Observer*, (March 14th, 1915), p.5

²⁷³ Konody, P. G., ‘Art and Artists: The London Group’, p.5

²⁷⁴ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.56

Although exhibited twice with the London Group, *The Rock Drill* remained unsold until it was acquired by the Tate Gallery in 1960. During this period, the main collector of Epstein's more radical works was American art collector and patron John Quinn (1870-1924). Quinn had purchased a number of Epstein's works on the advice of Ezra Pound and Augustus John. It is probably a fair assessment that *The Rock Drill* was not purchased by Quinn under advice from John, who wrote to him on April 3rd 1915. He noted of the figure that: 'He's turning the handle for all he's worth and under his ribs is the vague shape of a rudimentary child or is it something indigestible he's been eating? Altogether the most hideous thing I've seen.'²⁷⁹

In 1920 Bernard van Dieren published a monograph on Epstein which attempted to justify and critique Epstein's work. Van Dieren emphasised the excitement and energy *The Rock Drill* presented. He explained that: 'the man who has become part of the machinery he controls is exactly as new as the machinery happens to be'²⁸⁰. He continued:

I may say it embodies the epic of man's Promethean efforts to force the earth into his service – the strained neck suggests how his eyes seek to pierce into the distant night of the hidden future [...] while his redeeming hope clings to the tender embryo he carries lovingly in his toil racked body because it promises him immortality, the saving reward of his heroic labours which alone can sustain the glorious battle to the last stage of the race's progress.²⁸¹

Van Dieren saw *The Rock Drill* as being at the cutting edge of art, for the reason that no other work of art had used a rock drill: the tool was new and powerful and suggested man's power to harness and mould nature. Far from being the alienated figure suggested by some critics, Van Dieren's reading of *The Rock Drill* emphasised the hope that such an amalgamation of man and machine can bring. Van Dieren essentially saw *The Rock Drill* as a work which suggests rebirth and hope for the future.

²⁷⁹ Reid, B. L., *The Man from New York*, (Oxford University Press, 1968) , p.203

²⁸⁰ Van Dieren, Bernard, *Epstein*, (John Lane, 1920), p.92

²⁸¹ Van Dieren, Bernard, *Epstein*, p.116

Hubert Wellington, in his 1925 monograph on Epstein, *The Sculpture of Jacob Epstein*, made a brief discussion of *The Rock Drill*. Wellington echoed Epstein's argument that: '*The Rock Drill* is not entirely abstract' and that it has 'very definite human associations'²⁸² when he wrote that the work: 'shows the leaven of abstract design working in one who has a strong interest in emotional and intellectual content.'²⁸³ Wellington articulated the meaning of *The Rock Drill* as being related to man's relationship with machinery, arguing that this is reflected in the hybrid nature of the work 'where the machine is an extension of the humane frame, the two together producing a new organism, semi-human of magnified power'. He continued:

He has in mind, I think, both the force of mechanical power, and the force of the specially masculine qualities, as in the strong forms of the neck and the shoulders, and in the thorax, where repeated arches of the ribs are shown as protecting an embryonic form.²⁸⁴

Wellington highlighted 'the force of the specially masculine qualities' which is often overlooked by critics. Though much is made of the phallic qualities of the drill in later scholarship, the almost arrogant masculine nature of the driller tends to get overlooked. There is a real tension, however, within Wellington's writing. He praised *The Rock Drill* for its intellectual and conceptual qualities, but could not resolve the aesthetic issues which he raised, the essential attitude being that the machine aesthetic is not an artistic one. He wrote that:

The divided aim is vague and troublesome, and the symbolic content seems to me too heavy and oppressive for the aesthetic interest, and is not fused with it. More satisfactory are the strong craftsmanship, the feeling for the beauty of burnished metal, of keen finish, and clean-cut shapes and planes, akin to machinery. The interest in machinery, as the one form of creation characteristic of modern times, and an admiration for its expression of naked purpose and function, were constantly emphasized in the Vorticist programme. The salutary effect of this can be seen in the head-piece of the visor of the powerful, sinister, incomplete fragment.²⁸⁵

²⁸² Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.45

²⁸³ Wellington, Hubert, *The Sculpture of Jacob Epstein*, p.18

²⁸⁴ Wellington, Hubert, *The Sculpture of Jacob Epstein*, p.18

²⁸⁵ Wellington, Hubert, *The Sculpture of Jacob Epstein*, p.18

Wellington, here, makes the distinction between ‘art’ and ‘craftsmanship’ and between a ‘formal’ and ‘mechanical’ aesthetic, with the assumption being that ‘art’ and ‘form’ are preferred to ‘craftsmanship’ and a ‘mechanical’ aesthetic. Wellington saw the aesthetic issue as being related to the work’s ‘strong craftsmanship’ as opposed to its aesthetic qualities. He ended his treatment of *The Rock Drill* by saying that:

Far more satisfying is the marble carving of “Two Doves,” a work of real aesthetic value, with its varied, interesting, and lovely forms and proportions. Before so clear a vision of form, volumes so inherently right in their relationship, expressed with such precision and refinement of craftsmanship, one asks no more.²⁸⁶

It is fair to suggest that as much as Wellington was interested in the concepts of Epstein’s work, he could not move past his Formalist prejudices which keep artistic quality shackled to the relationship between line and form.

In his book, *Evolution in Modern Art*,²⁸⁷ Frank Rutter (1876-1937) noted the confusion and misunderstanding that occurs when confronted by *The Rock Drill*. He explained that an understanding of the work would be overshadowed by its context of reception:

In one of his charming essays the late Mr. Clutton Brock referred to a growing belief that man is a machine and “should be conscious of the fact that he is one.” Jacob Epstein expresses his consciousness of the fact in his statue *The Rock Drill*, but before August 1914 the masses were not familiar with this belief, and his sculpture consequentially was not understood. If he had exhibited a few years later with the title *The Prussian War God* it might have been as popular and universally accepted as the War paintings of Mr. Nevinson.²⁸⁸

Rutter, in this passage, echoed some of the arguments laid out by Van Dieren. The perception of man as a machine is seen to have been taken literally by Epstein. As Rutter remarked, although *The Rock Drill* was produced before the First World War, it was not exhibited in public until 1915. To some extent, the outbreak of war influenced the critical reading of *The Rock Drill*, which to some extent provides some explanation as to why the

²⁸⁶ Wellington, Hubert, *The Sculpture of Jacob Epstein*, pp.18-19

²⁸⁷ Rutter, Frank, *Evolution in Modern Art*, (George G. Harrop & Co. Ltd., 1926)

²⁸⁸ Rutter, Frank, *Evolution in Modern Art*, p.124

work was so linked to the First World War. The argument that if Epstein: 'had exhibited a few years later with the title *The Prussian War God* it might have been a popular and universally accepted' is probably a fair assessment. Though Rutter compared the tripod of the drill to the mounting for a machine gun, this was not Epstein's intention. As we shall see later, the link between the First World War and *The Rock Drill* has become embedded into its discourse, thus overshadowing Epstein's intention in creating the work.

Rutter continued, turning his attention from articulating *The Rock Drill*'s link to the man-machine doctrine to a discussion relating to Hegel's master/slave dialectic. Rutter asked whether man is the master of the machine, or whether the machine is the master of man:

Thoughtful observers who have watched the working of labour-saving appliance have often been tempted to wonder whether Man is the master of Machinery or whether, perchance, Machinery is the master of Man. It is this latter thought that Epstein, consciously or subconsciously, has expressed in *The Rock Drill*.²⁸⁹

The relationship between man and machine was also espoused by L. B. Powell in his 1932 monograph *Jacob Epstein*. In his short treatment of *The Rock Drill*, he echoed Rutter's arguments. He wrote that:

The "Rock Drill" was conceived in New York, and is the expression, in more or less abstract form, of a common spectacle there and elsewhere, the fierce service of man to the machine he has created, though the sculptor's imaginative interpretation takes on an immensely great significance with the tender shape of an infant sheltered within the forceful frame of the large figure. It is the outcome of an intensely penetrating vision and more, of a sympathy deeply responsive to fundamental human values.²⁹⁰

These arguments were developed by the critic in *The Times* who turned his attention to emphasising the beauty of the machine aesthetic. Instead of examining *The Rock Drill* itself, the critic used two preparatory drawings of *The Rock Drill* to articulate his argument. He wrote that:

²⁸⁹ Rutter, Frank, *Evolution in Modern Art*, p.125

²⁹⁰ Powell, L. B., *Jacob Epstein*, p.7

In two drawings, both called “The Rock Drill,” machinery itself is actually represented. [...] We believe that these works of Mr. Epstein are genuine experiments and not mere brainless freaks. We do believe that they do express this new sense of the beauty of machinery of which we have spoken and express it far better than if they were representations of machinery itself. The metaphor here is more impressive than the direct statement could be, as it often is in literature, just because it expresses an interest half-unconscious.²⁹¹

It is probable that the ‘two drawings’ referred to were the ones exhibited by Epstein in January 1914 at his first one-man-show at the 21 Gallery, London.

In Richard Cork’s seminal text on Vorticism and in the 1987 catalogue for *Jacob Epstein: Sculpture and Drawings*, Cork characterised *The Rock Drill* as a work which resulted from the fusion of three major aspects. Firstly, he noted that in 1912, Epstein visited Paris for six months to install his *Tomb for Oscar Wilde*. During his stay he met Picasso, Brancusi and Modigliani. Cork argued that the influence of these three artists goes some way to explaining the conception of *The Rock Drill*. Secondly, Cork asserted that the inclusion of a real rock drill stemmed from Epstein’s fascination with the drills in the quarries he visited to gather stone for his work. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly to Cork, is the influence of the philosopher T. E. Hulme, who at the time of constructing *The Rock Drill* was a close friend of Epstein’s. Cork goes as far as describing *The Rock Drill* as a ‘Hulmean sculpture’.²⁹² Cork explained:

Hulme was bound to encourage his new friend to think about moving from ‘archaism’ towards a mechanistic language, and Epstein’s passionate concern with sexuality and procreative forces ensured that he would cast around the mechanical equivalent of a penis.²⁹³

The ironic thing is that Hulme did not write single word about *The Rock Drill*, and only made passing remarks about two of the preparatory drawings in any of his published (or known unpublished) writings. The influence of Hulme takes centre stage in Cork’s conclusion, but not in the sense outlined above. Cork believed that it was because of the

²⁹¹ Anon., ‘Mr. Epstein and the Art of Machinery’ in, *The Times* (December 4th, 1913), p.11

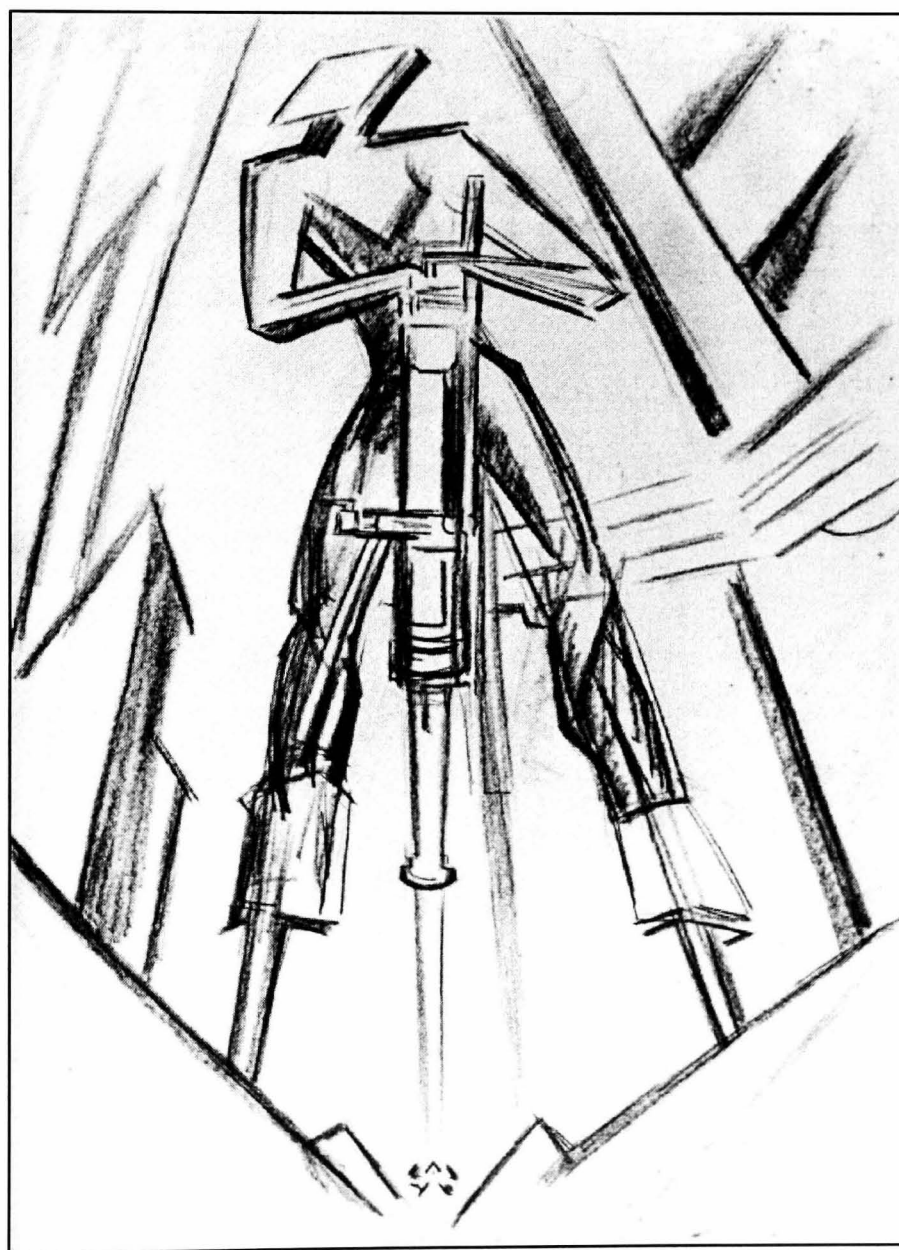
²⁹² Cork, Richard, *Vorticism: Volume Two*, (University of California Press, 1976), p.465

²⁹³ Cork, Richard, ‘The Rock Drill’ in, Silber, Evelyn and Friedman, Terry, *Jacob Epstein Sculpture and Drawings*, (Leeds Art Galleries, 1987), p.161

deaths of Hulme and Gaudier-Brzeska that Epstein amputated the limbs from *The Rock Drill*. Cork explained:

Two of his [Epstein's] most valued friends, Gaudier and Hulme were killed during the war, and Epstein himself suffered a 'complete breakdown' in 1918. He could not, in all conscience, return to the unqualified optimism which had produced his early *Rock Drill* drawings. The aggression both of the driller and the instrument were now anathema to a man who sought comfort in modelling an image of the *Risen Christ*. Handled with a renewed respect for the gentle resilience of the figure who returns from death, this gaunt compassionate sculpture also announces the rebirth of a sculptor who wanted in the post-war world to put the machine age behind him.²⁹⁴

As mentioned earlier, Cork placed far too much significance on the symbolic nature of the casting of *The Rock Drill*.



Study for The Rock Drill, (1913)

²⁹⁴ Cork, Richard, 'The Rock Drill', p.171

Cork spent much of these chapters arranging Epstein's preparatory drawings for *The Rock Drill* in what can be seen as an order of artistic development, which, appears to be arbitrarily, probably based upon the strange assumption that the creative process involves a linear evolution of an artistic scheme which can be seen as the whittling down of a broad conception to a focused final idea. His means of ordering the drawings began with the work which shared the least in common with the final sculpture and then assumed a gradual development which saw the ideas become focused and closer to the sculpted work. It is of course possible that Cork was correct in ordering the drawings in the way he did, but the fact remains that we simply do not know this for certain, and although this can be considered an interesting exercise, it one which has very little historical value in trying to understand the intended meaning of *The Rock Drill*.

The First World War has become an inescapable factor when scholars have taken to considering *The Rock Drill*. When Epstein made the statement that *The Rock Drill* was 'a thing prophetic of much in the great war', it was taken up by many scholars and critics as an explanation for the work. This uncritical relationship between *The Rock Drill* and the Great War has been most apparent in exhibitions over the last two decades. For example, in 1998, the Another Space Gallery in Inverness held an exhibition entitled *The Rock Drill and Beyond*. This exhibition placed *The Rock Drill* firmly within the discourse of the First World War. The opening passages to Trevor Avery's catalogue introduction leave us in no doubt that *The Rock Drill* is a work about the Great War:

Just as people think they 'know' Jacob Epstein they also think they 'know' the First World War. When someone asks me 'why Jacob Epstein?' or 'why the First World War?' I could just say 'why not?'. That's not good enough though.

[...] In the case of Epstein and the Great War we are, as Thomas Hardy put it, at the moment of the 'second death'. The 'second death', as I see it, is the dying of a person's contemporary generation. The first dying is the physical death, the dying of the body, the end of life. The 'second death' is the dying of those members of the generation who shared the same lived space and time. Epstein was of the Great War generation and was, as such of my Grandfather's

generation. In this apparently perverse way, a piece of sculpture described as 'seminal' or 'pivotal' can be linked, through this exhibition, to a snatched childhood memory of an old man's war medals. The war medals as was *Rock Drill*, were destined for a museum. Most First World War medals, as was the original *Rock Drill*, have been long lost and discarded.²⁹⁵

Though no direct causal links are made in Avery's discourse between the Great War and *The Rock Drill*, there is a suggestion that the two are conceptually linked. This rhetoric is made explicit within the show's exhibition catalogue. Jo Digger, in her essay, argued that *The Rock Drill* was: 'produced in the depressing First World War period during which Epstein himself suffered a breakdown.'²⁹⁶ What is perhaps an obvious point to make here is that *The Rock Drill* was made before the First World War had even begun. There are no causal links between the creation of *The Rock Drill* and the First World War. The Great War did not cause or inform the creation of *The Rock Drill*. To see *The Rock Drill* as prophetic of the First World War is all well and good after the event, but it is this line of logic that serves to cloud our understanding of this work's intended meaning.

In September 2006, *Torso in Metal from 'The Rock Drill'* (1915) appeared as part of the Tate Modern's *Sound and Vision* series. The gallery invited dance act The Chemical Brothers to explore the museum and choose a work which would inspire them to write an accompanying piece of music; they chose Epstein's *Torso in Metal from 'The Rock Drill'*.²⁹⁷ The Chemical Brothers justified their use of techno music to accompany the sculpture to the BBC:

We chose to write music for The Rock Drill as it seemed so dynamic, powerful and modern – it just seemed so techno – we could imagine music as soon as we saw it.

The sculpture has a feeling of movement. We wanted to capture the latent feeling of force the figure has.

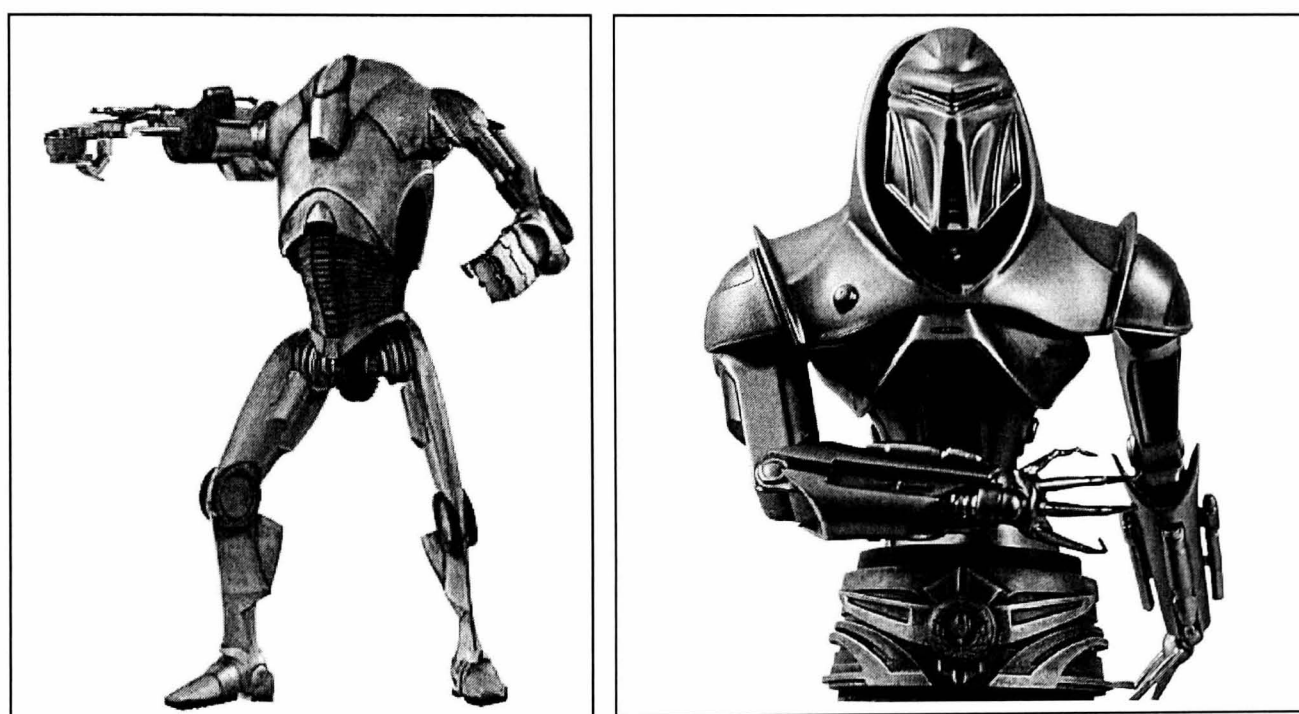
²⁹⁵ Avery, Trevor, 'The Second Dying' in, in, *The Rock Drill and Beyond*, (Another Space Limited, 1998), pp.2-4

²⁹⁶ Digger, Jo, 'Epstein – The Man' in, *The Rock Drill and Beyond*, (Another Space Limited, 1998), p.28

²⁹⁷ Tate Britain Website, 'Tate Tracks: The Chemical Brothers vs Jacob Epstein', http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/tatetracks/chemical_epstein/default.shtm, (accessed 17th May, 2007)

Having heard music in art galleries before that is largely ambient, we wanted to make something rhythmic and structured that connected to the piece.²⁹⁸

Perhaps this highlights one of the main reasons for the intrigue surrounding *The Rock Drill*: it has the ability to capture our imagination. With its geometric lines and mechanical aesthetic, the work cannot help but look modern. *The Rock Drill* would not look out of place in a science fiction film; after all, the Machine Mensch is a recurring theme in science fiction.²⁹⁹ It is perhaps no surprise then, that The Chemical Brothers would choose *Torso in Metal* from '*The Rock Drill*', as we can see Epstein's model is analogous with The Chemical Brothers' style of music: cold, mechanical and loud.



Left: 'Battle Droid' from Star Wars Episode I

Right: 'Cylon Centurian' from Battlestar Galactica

Although Epstein never mentioned the driller's gender, we can see through the imagery that the figure represented is male. The broadness and shape of the shoulders, the lines of the collarbone and the shape of the pelvis, all suggest a masculine figure. Indeed, Epstein's

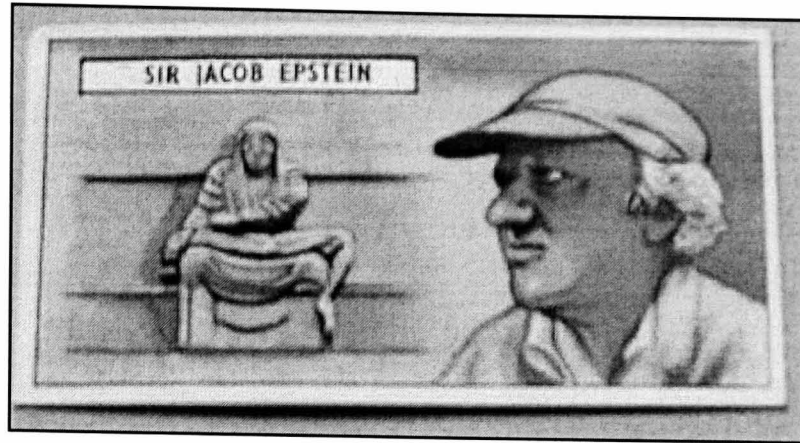
²⁹⁸ BBC Website, 'Tate Modern Gets Art Soundtracks', <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/5305182.stm>, (accessed 17th May 2007)

²⁹⁹ There are stylistic similarities between *The Rock Drill* and the War Droids from *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (George Lucas, 1999), and the armoured Mangalore from *The Fifth Element* (Luc Besson, 1997)

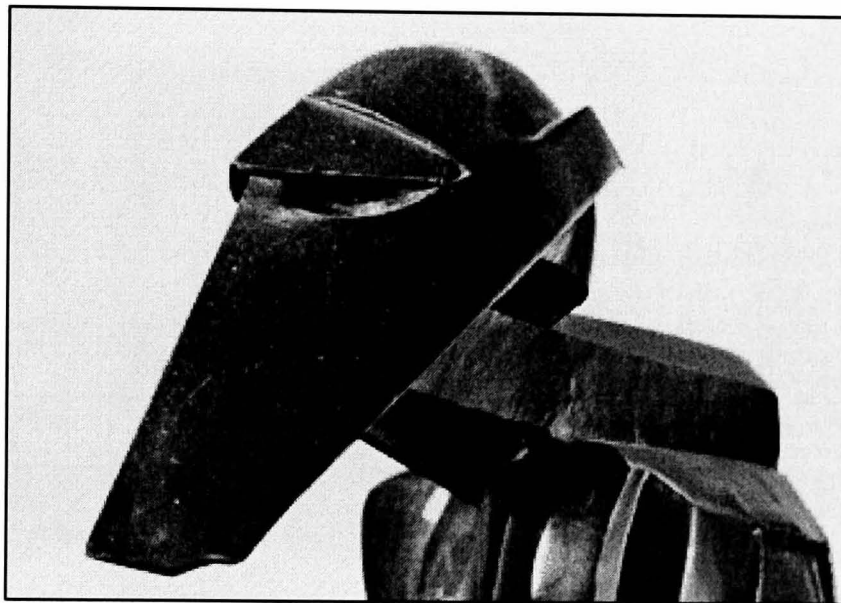
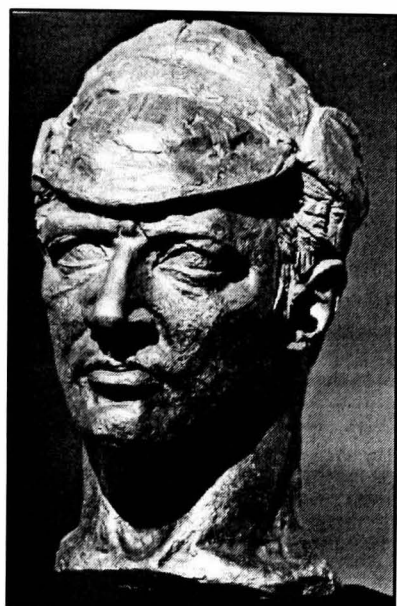
drawing *Man and Woman* (1913) depicts a *Rock Drill*-like angular figure next to the curved lines of a semi-abstract female. The use of a real drill has obvious connotations as a phallic substitute. Indeed, the penetrating and violent nature of the drill is a very forceful metaphor relating to the intensity of male sexual energy and libido. Although we can see the drill as essentially phallic, it is a phallus which cannot reproduce: it can only destroy. A drill cannot be used to create material, only break material away, thus suggesting impotence linked to sexual violence. However, this violent and forceful imagery is contrasted within the work by the inclusion of a foetal motif. Within the stomach cavity, contrasting the harsh mechanistic lines of the figure, is the soft curved shape of a human foetus. The inclusion of a maternal motif complicates the work immensely. Rather than understanding the driller as a forceful sexual predator, there is something else present: a desire to bring life into the world. The driller by no means represents a hermaphrodite or trans-gendered man, or even something remotely feminine. The inclusion of the foetus acts as a representational symbol of paternal desire, specifically, Epstein's desire for a child.

The links between the imagery of *The Rock Drill* and Epstein's person can further be emphasised. Upon the head of *The Rock Drill* is a worker's cap; a strange addition to a machine. Epstein was wearing the same cap in his *Self-Portrait with Storm Cap* (1916) and was photographed throughout his career wearing such a cap. Indeed, the cap is so attached to the image of Epstein, that even after his death, drawings of Epstein wearing the cap were produced in the unlikeliest of places. For example, in 1966, Lyons Maid teabags issued a series of tea cards, 'Famous People'. Epstein's card featured a watercolour image of Epstein's visage alongside a rendering of *Night*.³⁰⁰

³⁰⁰ There were 50 tea cards in the 'Famous People' series, the top ten personalities were as follows: No.1 Sir Winston Churchill, No.2 Lord Baden Powell, No.3 Lord Montgomery, No.4 Albert Schweitzer, No.5 Charles Dickens, No.6 Sir Jacob Epstein, No.7 Florence Nightingale, No.8 Captain R. F. Scott, No.9 Sir James Barrie, No.10 Sir Thomas Beecham.



'Famous People' No. 6 Sir Jacob Epstein

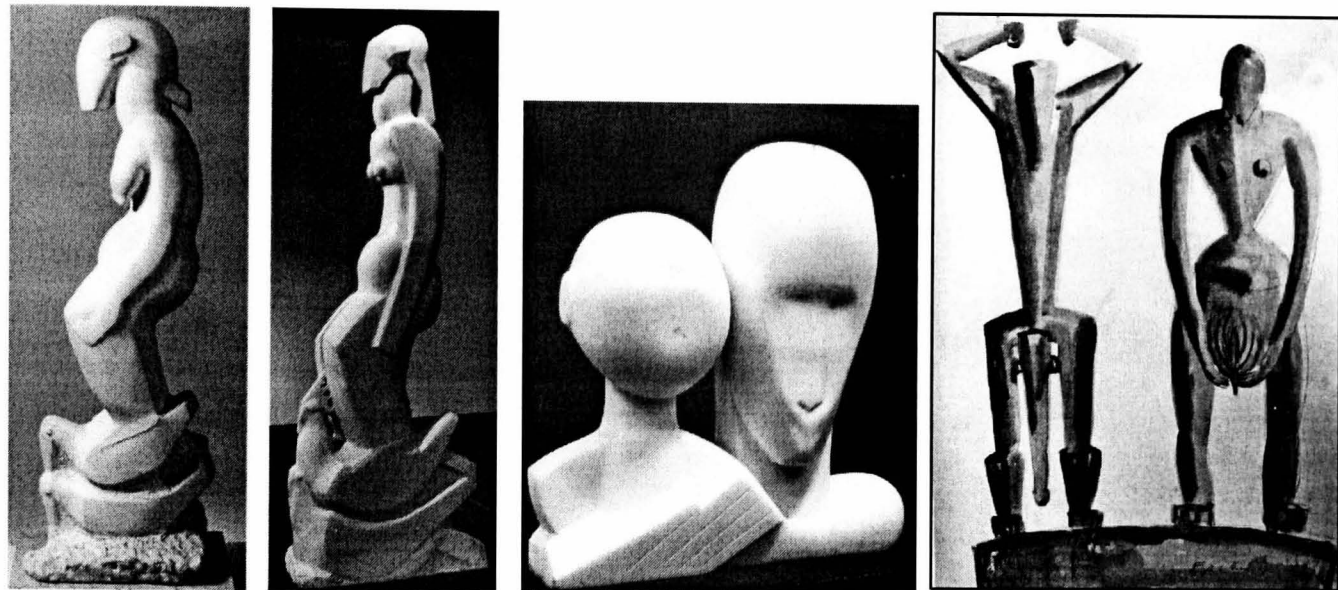


Left: *Self Portrait with Storm Cap*, (1916)

Right: *Torso in Metal from 'The Rock Drill'* (1916), (detail)

Epstein's obsession with motherhood, pregnancy and children is no secret; the maternal motif appears again and again throughout Epstein's work. Epstein's two representations of *Venus* (made around the same time as *The Rock Drill*) show clearly that Epstein's notion of the *Venus* was of a pregnant woman. To understand the importance of this imagery we have to take a moment to examine Epstein's biography. The notion of motherhood was cast into stark light for Epstein on February 1st 1913, for it was then that his mother, Mary Epstein died. Epstein wrote that, as a child, he spent many years sick at home, and was thus very close to his mother. In terms of his own children, Epstein fathered his first child Peggy Jean in 1918 with actress Meum Lindsell. The child, however, was raised by Epstein and his wife in the family home and was brought up as their own. Epstein then went on to have four

more children with three different women. At no point did Epstein have a child with his wife. Although it would be impossible to gather any firm evidence on the matter, there is a chance that Epstein's first wife may have had fertility problems. When we think of the foetal imagery within *The Rock Drill*, we can begin to see this as a representation of Epstein, alienated by his, then, unfulfilled desire for fatherhood.



From left: *Venus* (1914-16), *Venus* (1914-16), *Mother and Child* (1913),
Man and Woman (1913)

Thus, we can read *The Rock Drill* as an allegorical self-portrait, representing a time in Epstein's life where his desire for a child was so strong that the obsession appeared many times during this period. Indeed, many of the surviving works produced during his Vorticist period present the various stages of procreation: from the sexual act, through pregnancy, to the bond between a mother and child – they all hold within them Epstein's desire to father a child of his own.

In conclusion, we have seen some correlations that may determine certain overlooked issues relating to *The Rock Drill*. As a work which hints at Epstein's own unfulfilled paternal desire, *The Rock Drill*, though critically informed by the First World War, was not made or

conceived in this context. *The Rock Drill* can be seen as an expression of unfulfilled male heterosexual energy; the desire to reproduce which has been stifled by external problems.

In our next chapter we will turn to one of Epstein's most controversial non-commissioned sculptures, *The Risen Christ* (1917-19). We will see how the critical reception of this complex work was influenced by a wider anti-Semitism that existed in Britain at the time.

* * *

Carving a Legacy: Part Three:

Selected Works: The Risen Christ (1917-19)

The Risen Christ (1917-19) can be fairly described as one of the most controversial bronzes of American-born, Jewish sculptor, Jacob Epstein's oeuvre and remains one of his most misunderstood works. Like Frankenstein's monster, *The Risen Christ* depicts the dead risen as an amalgamation of body parts from various sources: the head of composer Bernard van Dieren; the hands and torso of painter Jacob Kramer; and the feet of musician Cecil Gray. At over seven feet in height, it stands, draped in burial clothing, pointing at a stigmata wound on his hand and staring accusingly at the spectator. The Christ's head diverges from the traditional image of Christ and depicts Him as a modern man, with a gaunt face, short hair and cultivated beard. The hands and legs are over-sized and out of proportion with the rest of the body. Indeed, the hands are longer in length than the head, and the legs make up almost two-thirds of the length of the entire figure. This disproportionate representation somewhat resembles statues intended to be placed upon buildings, as if Epstein was compensating for an upward gaze. The figure is tightly wrapped from the ankle to the top of the chest in bandages; they drape loosely over the arms as if Christ has broken free of them.

In order to understand the work's iconography, the obvious place to begin our enquiry would be to examine the Biblical scene in which *The Risen Christ* is derived:

But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples said unto him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said unto them, "Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe." And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them. Then came Jesus the doors being shut and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be unto you." Then said he to Thomas, "Reach hither thy hand and thrust it into my side, and be not faithless, but believing." And Thomas answered and said unto him, "My Lord and my God." Jesus saith unto him, "Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed. Blessed are they that have not seen and yet believeth." - *John*, 20.24-29

This passage goes some way to placing *The Risen Christ* within the narrative of the book of John in New Testament, however, as with most explanations derived from a purely iconographical analysis we are left wanting. The appeal to iconography only begins to answer what is being represented, but no clues can be given as to why this imagery has been used in such a way. It is the purpose of this chapter to try and puzzle some of Epstein's reasons for producing such a work at the time that he did and to analyse the work's mostly hostile reception.



The Risen Christ, (1917-19)

Modelled in clay between 1917 and 1919, Epstein explained in his autobiography that *The Risen Christ* was essentially a complex war memorial:

It stands and accuses the world for its grossness, inhumanity, cruelty and beastliness, for the First World War. [...] The Jew – the Galilean – condemns our wars, and warns us that “Shalom, Shalom”, must still be the watchword between man and man.³⁰¹

It is in this passage where something interesting emerges. Epstein’s statue of Christ is not merely a representation of Him; instead the work is polemical, with Epstein locating *The Risen Christ* as a Jewish conception of the Redeemer. When we compare *The Risen Christ* with other Jewish conceptions of Christ, we are left wondering: what, apart from the artist’s statements, would suggest a specifically Jewish interpretation of Christ? There is nothing obvious. There is a lack of Christian iconography and imagery, but this absence does not automatically equate to a specifically Jewish interpretation. When we briefly compare *The Risen Christ* with another Jewish conception of Christ, it becomes obvious that *The Risen Christ* is also lacking in any specifically Jewish imagery. Russian artist, Mark Antokolsky, for example, produced numerous renderings of Christ with payot (פאות) (traditional side-curls) and clothing specific to Jewish worship, such as prayer shawls and skullcaps. The imagery was traditional enough in their execution to be recognised as statues of Christ, however, the inclusion of Jewish clothing and payot gave it obvious Semitic connotations. Antokolsky’s *Jesus Before the People’s Court* (1873) is a life-sized depiction of Christ standing with hands behind His back in a simple robe; the robe is tied together with a single belt of rope. A prayer shawl drapes over His shoulders and He is shown wearing a skullcap. His hair is long and centre parted, and He is portrayed with a long beard and payot. When we look at *The Risen Christ*, we are more likely to come to the conclusion that the statue is actually a secularised and contemporary rendering of Christ. With its side-parted short hair, its cultivated beard and a lack of any religious symbolism, it is difficult to see *The Risen Christ* as offering a rendering of Christ at all. This of course begs the question, what makes

³⁰¹ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, (Hulton Press, 1955), p.102

this work a representation of Christ? To answer this, it is necessary to examine how the work was initially conceived. Writing in his autobiography, Epstein shed some light onto the inspiration for this work:

I began it as a study for Bernard Van Dieren when he was ill. I went to his bedside to be with him and talk. Watching his head, so spiritual and worn with suffering, I thought I would like to make a mask of him. I hurried home and returned with clay and made a mask which I immediately recognised as the Christ head, with its short beard, its pitying accusing eyes, and their lofty and broad brow denoting great intellectual strength.³⁰²

The way Epstein referred to the conception of *The Risen Christ* brings to mind suggestions of divine inspiration. Indeed, the suggestion of divine inspiration was made explicit. Epstein wrote that:

You will say – an accident. That was no more an accident than the event recorded in some short sketch of Turgenev. When he records how, standing in the crowd somewhere, he instantly felt, in some man beside him, the presence of the Christ Himself and the awe that overcame him.³⁰³

It may be somewhat surprising to discover that Epstein did not address such issues until he wrote his autobiography in 1939. The fact that it took Epstein twenty years to mention the fact that *The Risen Christ* was based on a mask of Bernard Van Dieren can be seen as an effort to preserve the ‘universal’ quality of the face. Indeed, this is supported by the fact that Van Dieren published a monograph on Epstein in 1920 in which he did not mention the fact that he provided the mask for the Christ, but instead set out an apologia for Epstein’s rendering. Van Dieren remarked that: the ‘majority of Christians shrink from looking at this uncomfortable side in their Redeemer’s human existence and prefer to see His suffering only as symbolically represented in ritual ceremonies whose meaning they can forget for their magnificence.’³⁰⁴ He continued: ‘Only the great, convinced minds have dared thus to represent the idea of Christ on Earth. [...] the artistic integrity and perspicacity of Epstein’s attitude command admiration.’³⁰⁵ Van Dieren’s writings emphasise Epstein’s role as an

³⁰² Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.101

³⁰³ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.101

³⁰⁴ Van Dieren, Bernard, *Epstein*, (John Lane Company, 1920), p63

³⁰⁵ Van Dieren, Bernard, *Epstein*, p.64

artist who transcends the trends of the arts, and who creates work with an intellectual rigour. The fact that the Christ was based on Van Dieren's likeness, however, was not mentioned. Van Dieren was complicit with Epstein in covering up this fact to such an extent that Epstein's contemporaries were left unaware. The reasons for doing this can only be speculated upon. What we do know is that Epstein and Van Dieren were close friends, and although it may not necessarily be the case, it would be highly unlikely that one would write a book about one's close friend without consulting them about it. It would be a fair assessment to suggest that Epstein probably had a significant say about what was included or excluded in this text.

The Risen Christ was first exhibited at Epstein's second one-man show, which opened February 4th, 1920, at the Leicester Galleries. The initial critical reception was mixed and can be characterised by three main lines of criticism. In the first instance we have a critical consideration of the image of Christ, and a number of debates surrounding the tradition of such representations. Secondly, there were critics who considered *The Risen Christ* as a war memorial, and related the work as such to Epstein's involvement in the First World War. Finally there was a more virulent form of criticism which placed Epstein and *The Risen Christ* within an anti-Semitic discourse.

When we look, for example, at the review featured in *The Times*, we are left with the impression that the critic was somewhat confused when confronted by *The Risen Christ*, seeing the work as being unrecognisable as a depiction of Christ. The critic wrote:

As for the Christ, we do not know what to say of it. We feel a bewilderment, an incongruity between the vivid reality of the face and Byzantine feeling and attitude, as if the artist itself had not received a perfect unity of feeling or idea, as if he had set out to do Christ, has set himself the task and had determined to

avoid certain obvious pitfalls, which he has triumphantly avoided. But the result is not his own, or anyone else's idea of Christ.³⁰⁶

The review is centred on the critic's confusion regarding the 'type' of Christ being represented, and his inability to understand Epstein's reasons for depicting Christ in such a way. The critic made an appeal to tradition, but was keenly aware that a work which was a purposefully non-traditional rendering of Christ could not be criticised on those grounds. It is because of this confusion regarding the conceptual framework for evaluating the merits such a work that the critic found it so difficult to formulate a clear explanation. Epstein responded to the accusation that *The Risen Christ* did not correspond to 'anyone else's idea of Christ', by stating that: 'the whole line of criticism adopted was illogical and showed little real understanding. [...] The conventional countenance of Christ is purely traditional and legendary.'³⁰⁷ He then joked that: 'The best known and accepted images of Christ wear Florentine costume and live in Tuscan gardens.'³⁰⁸ He continued, remarking that traditional representations of Christ tend to be:

a purely third-hand rendering: a realistic study in fact of a model who must look as like a late Renaissance model as possible, and that image has become so firmly set that there is a definite formula now for all artists who would depict Christ without giving any offence.³⁰⁹

Indeed, such was the impact of Epstein's depiction of Christ, that art critic for the *Birmingham Post*, L. B. Powell, would later write in his book on Epstein that he considered *The Risen Christ* to be 'the strongest and most startling of Epstein's achievements'. He continued:

if nothing else had come from Epstein's studio, this would have been enough to rank him as one of the greatest, as well as one of the most religious of sculptors. No one has handled a religious subject more reverently or with more poignant realism.³¹⁰

³⁰⁶ Anon., 'Epsten's Figure Of Christ. Exhibition At Leicester Galleries' in, *The Times*, (7th February, 1920), p.14

³⁰⁷ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, (William Heinmann Limited, 1931), p.40

³⁰⁸ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.39

³⁰⁹ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.39

³¹⁰ Powell, L. B., *Jacob Epstein*, (Chapman and Hall, 1932), p.103

This level of admiration for *The Risen Christ* was not shared by everyone. Indeed, when we look at the writing of art critic Charles Marriott, for example, we have someone who was entirely resistant to the notion of sculptural interpretation. Writing in *The Outlook* on February 21st 1920, Marriott posited that Epstein had made ‘an artistic mistake’, he explained: ‘Re-interpretation, or even interpretation, is not the job of sculpture’. He wrote that he saw *The Risen Christ* as ‘a study of religious enthusiasm’, but continued to point out that nobody actually cared for such interpretations (his justification for such a sweeping generalisation was not forthcoming). Marriott continued, arguing that ‘the figure is all wrong’:

It is wrong in a way that applies to a great deal of modern art, and therefore, it lends itself to consideration. At this time of day neither Mr. Epstein’s nor any other artist’s ideas of the Redeemer are of the least interest to anybody. They are, in the true sense of the word, impertinent. Above a certain level, all historical figures are true in proportion as they are traditional, and any attempt to “re-interpret” them makes them relatively untrue. Humanity may be a poor thing, but it does not make that mistake.³¹¹

Marriott continued his attack on the improperness of interpreting (as opposed to representing) historical figures in sculpture, by attacking Rodin’s interpretation of Balzac, a sculpture in which Rodin trod an awkward line between portraiture and poetic interpretation. As Marriott commented:

Rodin set a very bad example to sculptors with his “Balzac”. He might have made either a portrait of Balzac or a symbol of his genius. As it was he combined the two, and queered the pitch of sculpture. Nobody would have boggled at a more extravagant symbol of Balzac’s genius had it not looked like a portrait.³¹²

Marriott continued his criticism, by making an appeal to the ‘truth to materials’ doctrine which was being espoused by many prominent artists and critics working in Britain during this period. He wrote that: ‘The business of sculpture is not to interpret the subject but the

³¹¹ Marriott, Charles, quoted in: Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, (Hulton Press, 1955), p.257

³¹² Marriott, Charles, quoted in: Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.257

material'.³¹³ As with all 'truth to material' style arguments, the critic gives no reasons beyond the doctrine itself for its justification.



Auguste Rodin, *Balzac*, (1891)

³¹³ Marriott, Charles, quoted in: Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.257

Perhaps one of the strangest and most vicious writings on *The Risen Christ* came from the Catholic priest, Father Bernard Vaughan. Epstein wrote that he ‘attacked it bitterly’³¹⁴ and was so infuriated by Vaughan’s criticism that he quoted the following passage in both *The Sculptor Speaks* and his autobiography, writing that: ‘although it is far more violent than any of the others and goes far beyond legitimate criticism, it is typical of the line adopted by many.’³¹⁵ Vaughan wrote:

I feel ready to cry out with indignation that in this Christian England there should be exhibited the figure of Christ which suggested to me some degraded Chaldean or African, which wore the appearance of an Asiatic-American or Hun, which reminded me of some emaciated Hindu or badly grown Egyptian.³¹⁶

As Epstein suggested, Vaughan did provide some of the most violent criticism of *The Risen Christ*, however he was being somewhat misleading when he suggested that it was ‘typical of the line adopted by many.’ To group other critics with Vaughan is to issue the same violence which was issued to Epstein. Though many critics took exception to Epstein deviating from tradition, they often did so with a much more reserved and less hysterical consideration. Epstein emphasised the illogical nature of such criticism, whilst he simultaneously suggested that his conception of Christ was arrived at through a logical consideration of the Gospels.³¹⁷ He explained:

I am and always have been deeply interested in the personality of Christ [...] Sweetness and meekness are certainly present in that personality, but it is far more complex. The Gospels show that there was intellect power and a sense of justice as well. [...] I have tried to indicate in my statue of Christ what I found in the Gospels.³¹⁸

This is key to Epstein’s representation of Christ: *The Risen Christ* should not be considered a likeness or representation, but rather an interpretation in sculpture of an idea of Christ: a

³¹⁴ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, pp.40-41

³¹⁵ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, pp.40-41

³¹⁶ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.99 and Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.41

³¹⁷ The projection of Epstein as the logical intellect is emphasised throughout *The Sculptor Speaks*. For example, Arnold Haskell, in his introductory essay, wrote that: ‘Epstein is a man of superior intelligence and culture [...] It is only the fact that he possesses an extremely balanced and logical mind that has prevented him from frittering away his time in controversy. On the rare occasions when he has appeared in print his letters have been models of conciseness, clear thinking and hard hitting.’ (Haskell, p.xi)

³¹⁸ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, pp.39-40

subjective interpretation of what is already a textual representation of Christ's personality. Epstein's appeal to the Gospels can be seen as an attempt by Epstein to bypass the debate relating to traditional imagery, and to show that his interpretation is conceptually closer to the original source, than what he has elsewhere described as 'a purely third-hand rendering'.³¹⁹ Indeed, the relationship between *The Risen Christ* and the Gospels was not lost on some critics. Writing in *International Studio*, John Cournos suggested that:

Epstein has gone to the Gospels. That is to say, he has gone to the source of his theme; and those who quarrel with him can do so only on the grounds that he has gone to the tradition where it began, and not where it ended. [...] Now, if you go to the Gospels to learn about Christ and compare the astonishingly virile figure of the Book with the latter-day effeminate confections which pass as portraits of Christ, you will see that the discrepancy between them is as immense as the time that separates us from the original figure.³²⁰

In agreement with this, the Reverend Edward Shillito wrote in *The Sunday Times* that Epstein had expressed an aspect of Christ's personality which was rarely represented in art:

Yet there is another figure in the Gospel, and the value of this great work lies in the insight which has led the artist to interpret the other strand in the story. This may have been the Christ of whom men said : "Elijah is returned." This may have been the Christ who strode ahead of His disciples towards the city, and they were afraid of Him. This Christ might have cleansed the Temple and cursed the fig-tree. It is as though the artist has personalised this aspect of the historical Christ.

It has surprised students of the Gospel that this has not been done by artists before now; the dramatic possibilities are great, and yet have remained unexplored.

Because Mr. Epstein has dared to break new ground, his art is to be welcomed even by those who saw in his interpretation, any more than in Leonardo's, the whole Christ. They will find a justice done at least to the power in mastery of the Saviour, who marched upon Jerusalem and took command, and held it in His grasp even after they had crucified Him.³²¹

With these arguments, 'authenticity' and 'tradition' become opposed, with each term taking on a distinct epistemological value. The division of these two terms comes not from the representation itself, but, rather, the source of the representation. The assumption being that

³¹⁹ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.39

³²⁰ Cournos, John, 'Jacob Epstein: Artist-Philosopher' in, *International Studio*, (Volume LXXI, August 1920), p.175

³²¹ Shillito, Rev. Edward, 'Epstein's Christ: a Novel Aspect.' in, *The Sunday Times*, (February, 8th, 1920)

a representation of Christ which was derived from the Gospels (in which there are no physical descriptions of Christ), has more epistemological validity than a work which has derived its representation from the tradition of conventionalised visual imagery. Neither side of the argument can make such claims to validity: the ‘authentic’ representation of Christ is derived from a feeling or impression gained from reading the Gospels; the ‘traditional’ representation is derived from convention. Neither representation was drawn from an actual likeness of Christ.

John Middleton Murry, writing in *The Nation*, argued that spectators would be shocked by *The Risen Christ*, not because it was a divergence from tradition, but because they would experience a profound sense of recognition when beholding the work. He explained:

The point is that several hundred (perhaps thousands) of people who will go to see a Christ will come away with the shock of recognition that, although they had never imagined such a Man of Sorrows, this strange embodiment of a traditional figure has impressed them deeply. So they will discover, though not in these terms, what Art can do; and they may feel, however vaguely, that civilisation itself depends, not on wealth or victories, but on the possibility of achievement like Epstein’s Christ.³²²

Key to Murry’s argument is the notion that most people have not spent any time considering the personality of Christ, and rely upon the assumptions and assertions of others to draw their conclusions. He wrote that: ‘I believe it to be true that almost as few people make up their minds about Christ as about Einstein’s theory. It is one of the things they leave to other people. All the important things are. Christ is as familiar and as unreal as liberty.’³²³ Of course, there is no real way of qualifying or quantifying such arguments. Murry’s discourse, then, should not be taken as fact. After all, he provided no real evidence for his assertions, but rather paved the way for a fascinating discussion relating to Christ’s ‘human’ personality. He wrote that:

³²² Murry, John Middleton, quoted in: Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, (Hulton Press, 1955), p.258

³²³ Murry, John Middleton, quoted in: Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, pp.258-259

I did not mean that we must decide whether or not he was the Son of God—that may come afterwards—but we must decide whether he was the world’s greatest man. Was he a failure? What is the true meaning of “My God! Why hast Thou forsaken me?” Are they or are they not the most fearful, agonising words that were ever drawn from human lips, the break of the world’s greatest heart, the shattering of the sublimest and most human fate ever conceived by the spirit of man? And if they are, is it better to be broken thus on the wheel of reality? Such questions are urgent to the life of man, of which Christ is a supreme exemplar. Epstein’s “Christ” is there to remind the world that it is always the artist who faces them. That is worth remembering.

Epstein’s “Christ” is a man, austere, ascetic, emaciated, having no form or comeliness. He is a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief. There is pain, bodily agony, but not merely in the gesture with which he points to the torn flesh of his outspread hand, but in the poise of his proud unseeing head.³²⁴

By emphasising Christ’s ‘human’ qualities, over his supernatural ones, Murry’s criticism takes a turn which tried to emphasise the human side of Epstein’s interpretation. By drawing on the human side of Christ, we are able to empathise with his pain. Furthermore, an emphasis of Christ’s human qualities will inevitably lead to a consideration of the historical Jesus: a Jewish apocalyptic prophet who preached a message of judgement and revelation.

In summary, it will be useful to turn to a passage from the book *Portraits in Oil and Vinegar* by James Laver. Though he did not write much about *The Risen Christ* in his book which focused mainly on portraiture, he did write that:

The *Christ* has been too often and eloquently defended to need much more ink spilt on its behalf. We have become so accustomed to, and so bored with, the dapper, red-bearded, effeminate-looking Christ of recent convention, that any original conception, however startling at first, is in the end accepted with pleasure.³²⁵

According to Laver, much of the criticism received by *The Risen Christ* can be summarised as relating to the spectators’ expectations regarding what a rendering of Christ should look like, namely ‘the dapper, red-bearded, effeminate-looking Christ’.

³²⁴ Murry, John Middleton, quoted in: Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.259

³²⁵ Laver, James, *Portraits in Oil and Vinegar*, (John Caster, 1925), p.127

As well as being unable to agree on the ethical and religious issues raised by *The Risen Christ*, critics also found difficulty in deciding whether or not the work was successful as sheer sculpture. When we look, for example, at Hubert Wellington's monograph on Epstein, entitled, *The Sculpture of Jacob Epstein*, we are left with little doubt that *The Risen Christ* can be considered successful as a work of sculpture:

The power of the simplification in the sharply marked planes of the head is admirable, the modelling of the uplifted hand is sensitive in the extreme, and the proportions, the rigidity, and parallelism of the figure are of a queer convincing rightness. Imagine yourself coming upon it in a corridor of a foreign museum, knowing nothing of its date, country, or subject; could it fail to arrest you and to impress you by its intrinsic qualities of mass, gesture, and monumental dignity, as evocation of will and vitality, as a statue of some divinity?³²⁶

Wellington seemed at pains to prove that *The Risen Christ* was successful in sculptural terms. His argument seems to be that sculpture should be judged on its own merits, within its own internal logic and removed from any 'polluting' factors such as its context of production or the artist's intention in making the work. But even with this, Wellington evaded suggestions that the work was unsuccessful in terms of form by drawing attention to the work's 'queer convincing rightness'. Essentially the work succeeds as a sculpture, but only on its own terms of qualification. Robert Black, writing in his 1942 monograph *The Art of Jacob Epstein*, wrote that *The Risen Christ*:

is a long, cadaverous figure wrapped in a linen winding sheet. The features have been refined by suffering into sharp and almost delicate forms, and the face stares out over the world with a strange bleakness. In tongueless eloquence, one finger points to the gaping wound in the flattened and spike-torn palm. The long limbs point to the ground in sternly unbroken lines, and the bared feet are set flat and immovable upon the very rock of earth. Here there is no adornment, for none is needed. Every line carries the weight of suffering, compassion and most of all, an unshakable conviction. As one element, the form of this figure works to affirm its fundamental dignity and strength.³²⁷

Again, we have an author mistaking the artist's ability to create emotive and empathetic effects on the spectator with effects of lines and forms. Robert Black has essentially

³²⁶ Wellington, Hubert, *The Sculpture of Jacob Epstein*, (Ernest Benn Ltd., 1925), p.23

³²⁷ Black, Robert, *The Art of Jacob Epstein*, (The World Publishing Company, 1942), p.11

understood the effect of the work, but has pointed to an incorrect cause. It seems obvious that the power of the human figure to affect us stems not from the relationship of line, rhythm and form, but is rather derived from being able to relate and empathise with both the human subject depicted, and the artist who produced it.

In opposition to a positive formal reading, we have the arguments of Stanley Casson. When we look at Casson's book, *Some Modern Sculptors*, Casson briefly discussed *The Risen Christ*, writing that: Epstein's 'figure called 'Christ' was hardly a Christ at all because he had done virtually no work on the body. It was an experiment in emotion and a most unsuccessful one at that.'³²⁸ Casson dismissed the emotional and symbolic content of the work, and criticised *The Risen Christ* on the grounds that he saw the work, essentially, as a portrait bust which had been misplaced on top of a pillar. James Laver, however, saw the pillar-like composition of *The Risen Christ* as a virtue, writing that:

It was a fine invention to clothe Him in the long bands of the sepulchre, one narrow strip falling from the arm like the stole worn by the priest officiating at the altar; and there is something austere and hieratic in the slender simplicity of the tall, almost column-like figure, in the stiffness of the pose and the largeness of the lifted hands.³²⁹

Writing in his book *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture*, Reginald Wilenski discussed *The Risen Christ* only in passing, grouping the work with *The Visitation* and *Weeping Woman*. Rather than discussing the works in conceptual terms, Wilenski linked these works to the tradition of Donatello and Rembrandt. He wrote that:

Donatello's work has been of cardinal service to Epstein as a Romantic modeller for bronze. In Donatello's modelling Epstein has seen technical procedures which have been of use to him, and in Donatello's temperament and psychological insight he has found reinforcement for his own morale.

Epstein's *Christ* is fundamentally the same kind of imaginative work as Donatello's *Magdalene*; his *Visitation* has the intense emotional meaning of Donatello's *Cupid* (Florence) translated to another mood; and Donatello's grimacing Virgin in the bronze *Pieta* of the Victoria and Albert Museum has

³²⁸ Casson, Stanley, *Some Modern Sculptors*, (Oxford University Press, 1928), p.117

³²⁹ Laver, James, *Portraits in Oil and Vinegar*, pp.127-128

the same kind of meaning as Epstein's *Weeping Woman* in the Gallery at Leicester.

Only, of course, we must not forget that Rembrandt and Rodin and all they stand for have come between Epstein and the Renaissance.³³⁰

In his writing, Wilenski positioned Epstein's modelled work as almost derivative. Though he acknowledged Epstein's skill as a modeller, Wilenski rarely engaged with any conceptual consideration of Epstein's bronzes.

The pain illustrated by the wounds on *The Risen Christ* was seen by some critics as being a visual metaphor the pain felt by the First World War generation. John Cournos, for example, discussed such a point. He began his argument by asking a series of questions of the work:

The subject: Christ.

The subject's time: after Golgotha.

The artist: Jacob Epstein.

The artist's time: After the Great War.³³¹

This may seem like a simple thing to do, but out of the criticism examined in the production of this chapter, only Cournos discussed in any detail the link between *The Risen Christ* and the First World War in any significant way. Cournos wrote:

Then His final appearance before His disciples, and His words to doubting Thomas: "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed"; the moment with the whole past behind it; it was evidently just this moment that Epstein has chosen for a portrayal of his Christ.

Then turn to the present, the devastation of Europe, Golgotha on an immense scale, the crucifixion of civilization, the crucifixion of Christianity itself. Imagine a Christ arising out of the entombment of a shell-torn earth; His profound reproach, his fierce anger, touched with scorn at the sight of what had been wrought by men professing a belief in Him; were they not also doubting Thomases of a sort?³³²

³³⁰ Wilenski, R. H., *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture*, p.113-114

³³¹ Cournos, John, 'Jacob Epstein: Artist-Philosopher', p.174

³³² Cournos, John, 'Jacob Epstein: Artist-Philosopher', p.177

Not only did Cournot see *The Risen Christ* standing as a metaphor for the First World War, he also suggested that there was a direct causal relationship between them, a necessary connexion if you will. Indeed, Cournot's formulation seems simple: Epstein plus the First World War equals *The Risen Christ*. To deny a connection would be misguided, but to ascribe full causality without qualification would equally be as problematic. Though one would be inclined to agree with Cournot's statement that if it was not 'for the war, I hardly think this *Christ* would have come into being', the simple fact is that Epstein's intentions are unclear. What is perhaps most striking about Cournot's article is that he considered Epstein to be a philosopher; a philosopher who expressed his ideas through the medium of sculpture:

Epstein is, surely, a philosopher. An examination of the conditions in which such a work as the *Christ* may have been created will either bear out the assertion that Epstein is a sculptor-philosopher, or that he is neither one nor the other; for there can be no more foolish assumption than that a man has produced a great piece of sculpture without realizing his own spiritual, poetic – or if you like philosophic – conception of his subject.³³³

Though Cournot never made it explicit within his discourse, his writing highlighted an incredibly important factor to consider in Epstein's work, namely that in simple terms, there are two types of critics, those interested in form and those interested in content. Epstein was an artist who privileged a work's content over its form, and as has already been, those arguments which derive their criticism from form alone beg more questions than they tend to address.

If we can agree that *The Risen Christ* stands as a metaphor for the First World War, the pertinent question would be: in what sense? What does Epstein actually mean when he talks about the First World War? At first glance, this may seem like a pointless question, but to consider the First World War like a monument in which its meaning is static and obvious is somewhat misguided. The point that Cournot missed was that *The Risen Christ* relates to

³³³ Cournot, John, 'Jacob Epstein: Artist-Philosopher', p.174

the First World War only in the sense of Epstein's experience and interpretation of it, whether in personal or general terms. This is a point where subjective history must take precedence over and above a more objective and general one. Though it may be useful to the historian to know all of the names, dates and key events of the war, this was not Epstein's experience of this period.

The heightened nationalism of wartime Britain led to questions being raised about the allegiance of the Anglo-Jewry, especially the allegiance of recent immigrants from Eastern Europe. The questions being raised regarding allegiance naturally extended to questions regarding identity. Were the recent Jewish immigrants to be considered as British, as subjects of their Homeland, or as part of a country without borders: namely, international Judaism? The inability to come to a consensus between a variety of individuals and institutions (including the British Government) led to many expressions of anti-Jewish sentiment. British Jews were at an awkward point in history, and were forced to make a choice between their Jewish identity and their British identity. This problem was further complicated by the fact that many of the recent Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe had fled anti-Semitic persecution in Russia and Poland. By going to war against Germany, the Jewish immigrants would be fighting alongside Britain's Russian allies, essentially fighting on the same side as those from whom they fled persecution. However, even if foreign-born Jews had wanted to enlist and fight for the Allied cause, it was not until 1916 that the War Office would accept foreign-born Jewish volunteers into the Army, and even when the law was changed, many of the enlisting offices turned Jews away, which was contrary to the official policy. This meant, for a while, that around 30,000 Russian-born Jews who were of military age were unable to join the army, meaning that they were the only group of able-bodied young men not enlisted, making them an obvious visible target for press and public hostility. Heightened tensions in cities such as London, Manchester and Leeds, meant that

Jewish immigrants were often labelled as 'shirkers' and 'job snatchers'. Jewish shopkeepers' windows were often smashed, and, on a few occasions, tensions led to anti-Semitic riots.

In July 1917, the War Office announced the creation of a Jewish regiment – the 38th and 40th battalions of the Royal Fusiliers.³³⁴ In September 1917, pushed by a policy which meant that immigrants (whether naturalised or not) would be deported if they did not 'choose' to 'volunteer,' Epstein was forced to enlist, joining the 38th Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers. When Epstein first enlisted in the army, he and others campaigned for him to become the official war artist; this post was never given to him. Before being enlisted in the army, Epstein had applied for exemption on the grounds of 'national importance'. It was stated that:

Mr. Epstein was a sculptor who did all his own work and had commissions of an exceptional kind. He was a man who was unlike anyone else in the country. [...] If a sculptor lost an eye or a hand he would never afterwards be able to do work which no one else could do.³³⁵

Epstein's appeal, though initially granted, only lasted for three months before Epstein was forced into active service. It is perhaps no surprise that Epstein's failed appeal for exemption and his failed application to be war artist led to another attempt to escape military service.

In the spring of 1918, the 38th Battalion were about to go on a tour of duty to Palestine. Epstein was found aimlessly wandering around Dartmoor and was sent to hospital, diagnosed with a nervous breakdown. In the summer, Epstein was discharged and did not have to fight in the trenches. Whether Epstein's nervous breakdown was an act on Epstein's part or not is perhaps beyond the point. The point is that Epstein reacted (consciously or

³³⁴ Cesarani, David, 'An Embattled Minority: The Jews in Britain During the First World War' in, Kushner, Tony, and Lunn, Kenneth, *The Politics of Marginality*, (Frank Cass, 1990), pp.71-72

³³⁵ Anon., 'Mr. Jacob Epstein And The Army. "National Interests" In Sculptor's Appeal' in, *The Times*, (Thursday, June 7th, 1917), p.3

unconsciously) against being pushed into a situation he did not want to be in (especially when related to the treatment of other Jewish people at the time in the popular press). *The Risen Christ* points to the treatment of Epstein and his fellow Jews in a time of such tension, and points the finger at those who wished to criticise conscientious objectors, especially those who did not want to fight alongside a country hostile to the Jewish people.



Cap badge of the Jewish Battalion

It was this prevalent atmosphere of hostility towards the Jews which informed some of the most extreme and virulent criticism of *The Risen Christ*. If we can characterise Father Bernard Vaughan's criticism as attacking Epstein on racial lines, the criticism which followed in the fascist Press, pointed to Epstein's work, and especially *The Risen Christ*, as evidence of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy. In an article printed in *The British Guardian* in May 1924, Epstein's work was contrasted with the work of sculptor Adrian Jones (1845-1938). The anonymous author wrote that in a time when 'crowds of people are ready to

flock to any Alien “Art” show which tends to debase England’s Christian ideals’, Jones’ *Monument to the Cavalry of the Empire* (1924)³³⁶ was ‘the perfect antidote to the poisonous influence of works like the so-called “Christ” by the Jew Epstein.’³³⁷ By making reference to the ‘Jew Epstein’, *The British Guardian* was trying to place Epstein within the discourse of what they saw as ‘poisonous Jewish influence’. What is striking about this article is not only the level of hatred targeted towards Epstein, but also the fact that this article was written over four years after the debate surrounding Epstein’s statue had occurred. It does not take a great leap in logic to realise that this article was not intended as a simple art review or polemic about the relative merits of Epstein’s work, but was used to reinforce *The British Guardian*’s anti-Semitic project.



Adrian Jones, *Monument for the Cavalry of the Empire*, (1924)

³³⁶ The work denoting a rendering of Saint George and the dragon can be found on Hyde Park Corner in London.

³³⁷ Anon. ‘Saint George For England! The Cavalry Memorial’ in, *The British Guardian*, (Volume 5, May 1924), p.69

The British Guardian was characterised by a fanatical belief in *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*.³³⁸ The text purported to record the minutes of a meeting between the leaders of world Judaism. The text contains an outline of an apparent Jewish plot to control the world through subverting Christian morals in a process which involved the control of the Press and of the world's economies. Although the text was revealed to be a forgery in 1921, the text is believed to be true by many anti-Semites. *The*



British Guardian was the periodical of a group calling themselves 'The Britons Society' who were a small group of reactionary conservatives and racial fascists who held secret meetings and published works which they saw as 'exposing' a worldwide Jewish conspiracy to undermine British values and destroy Christianity through a process of modernisation and Jewish hegemonic control. *The British Guardian* had gone through a series of name changes, from *The Hidden Hand* to *Jewry Uber Alles*. It is worth noting that the influence of The Britons Society was marginal (the circulation of *The Hidden Hand* was only 150³³⁹). What interests me, however, is not the popular impact of such esoteric literature, but the notion that attitudes such as those expressed through this type of literature can act as an indicator of the attitudes of some members of the wider population, who perhaps held similar views, but did not join a group or subscribe to anti-Semitic

³³⁸ Nilus, Sergius, *The Jewish Peril: Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1920)

³³⁹ For a more detailed examination of extreme anti-Semitism in Britain between 1918-1939 see the chapter 'The British Fascists and the 'Jew Wise' 1918-1939' in, Thurlow, Richard, *Fascism in Britain*, (I B Tauris and co., 1998), pp.30-60

newspapers.³⁴⁰ To illustrate this point further, a group of social researchers called Mass Observation interviewed numerous people regarding their attitude towards the Jews in 1939. They concluded that the consensus of those interviewed was that the Jewish people were to blame for their own misfortune. Interviews with children as young as eleven displayed evidence of anti-Jewish sentiment; one response was that ‘Most countries are persicuting [*sic*] them because they own important places such as theatres and hotels.’³⁴¹ It is impossible to ignore this backdrop when considering a work so loaded with questions relating to Jewish identity by a Jewish artist.

When read with *The Protocols*, the *British Guardian*’s attacks on Epstein can be seen as an effort by its writers to position him as an artist who would distort the image of Christ as another tactic in the world-wide Jewish conspiracy. In an article written with specific reference to the Hudson Memorial entitled ‘The Protocols Plan at Work in the Sphere of Art’,³⁴² Epstein was put forward as a key propagator of the Jewish plot, but at the same time was unaware of the part he was playing. Again *The Risen Christ* was discussed:

Then there was the blasphemous affair of the figure which he modelled and exhibited in London which he called “The Christ,” for doing which he would certainly have been imprisoned for blasphemy had our public men not all been under the same evil Jewish control which is exploiting Epstein himself.³⁴³

It is always difficult to get to grips with the circularity and lunacy of the arguments of the extreme right. When we engage with arguments along these lines, the lack of evidence of

³⁴⁰ *The Hidden Hand* has been used by other Epstein scholars, however questions have not been asked regarding its circulation and its relation to wider society. In Elizabeth Barker’s essay ‘The Primitive Within: The Question of Race in Epstein’s career 1917-1929’ in, Silber, Evelyn and Friedman, Terry, *Jacob Epstein Sculpture and Drawings*, (Leeds Art Galleries, 1987), pp.44-48, *The Hidden Hand* is discussed briefly. The issue I take with Barker’s use of *The Hidden Hand* is that she uses it to articulate a binary discourse to enable her to explore racial difference. The problem arises not in the treatment of the text itself, but in the fact that it is treated as if it were a popular magazine.

³⁴¹ Reproduced in: Kushner, Tony, ‘Beyond the Pale? British Reactions to Nazi Anti-Semitism, 1933-1939’ in, Kushner, Tony, and Lunn, Kenneth, *The Politics of Marginality*, (Frank Cass, 1990), p152

³⁴² ‘The Protocols Plan at Work in the Sphere of Art’ in, *The British Guardian*, (12th June 1925), pp.2-3

³⁴³ ‘The Protocols Plan at Work in the Sphere of Art’, p.2

their claims becomes proof that a conspiracy exists.³⁴⁴ The article continued by warning the public not to be fooled by art critics who supported Epstein:

The public must not allow itself to be silenced by the publicity given to “expert” opinion, which has the impudence to say that it is incapable of appreciating true “art” and “beauty”. This opinion is entirely Jewish and anti-Christian and is all part of the deliberate Jewish plot to destroy Christian culture. [...] the whole thing is only part of a deliberate Jewish plot disclosed to us in the Protocols, and our public authorities and Government being under the most absolute Jewish control.³⁴⁵

The British Guardian discussed the issue of Jewish influence on many aspects of everyday life including: the distribution of food; the control of the film industry; the trafficking of white slaves; the influence over the legal system; and that Jews were responsible for all wars.³⁴⁶ The publishers of *The British Guardian* were not only influenced by the conspiracy as illustrated in *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*; the Britons Printing Company (the publishers of *The British Guardian*) was also responsible for the dissemination in Britain of *The Protocols*, which continued until the 1960s. As noted in an advertisement in *The British Guardian*:

Readers of the “The British Guardian” should never forget that it was this Company which made the continued publication of “The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion” possible by printing the work, when no other printing concern in the country would undertake to do so.³⁴⁷

As we have seen, the reception of *The Risen Christ* can be seen as an attempt by its critics to not only evaluate the merits of the work itself, but to puzzle some of the wider issues that the work inevitably raises. It is useful to consider *The Risen Christ* in the same light as Robert Graves’ autobiography *Good-Bye to All That*. Both works were symptomatic of the aftermath of the First World War, and both were very personal works which resonated with a wider public. It is at this point that we can argue for the assertion of Epstein’s concerns

³⁴⁴ Indeed, when the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* were revealed by *The Times* in August 1921 to be forgery, writers in *The British Guardian* saw this as evidence of a Jewish cover-up.

³⁴⁵ The Protocols Plan at Work in the Sphere of Art’, pp.2-3

³⁴⁶ See for example: ‘Free Our Food Supply From Jew Control’, ‘Jewish Responsibility For All Wars: One Instance Of Their Influence’, ‘Pride of Race: The Inassimilable Oriental Race’, ‘The Menace of Alien Film Control’ and ‘Jews Above The Law’ in, *The British Guardian*, (Volumes 5 and 6, May and June 1924). I am indebted to Terry Friedman for advising me on the existence of this literature.

³⁴⁷ ‘The Britons Printing Co.’ in, *The British Guardian*, (Volume 5, May 1924), p72

as a Jewish artist through *The Risen Christ*. The concept of redemption, a desire by Epstein to address social change by highlighting the ills of the world, is something very fundamental to Jewish ethics. So in effect, Epstein used a complex image of Christ as a means to redemption - a conception of messianic redemption that points to Epstein's identity as a Jewish artist.

The Risen Christ situates itself in the awkward space between Christianity and Judaism - the image of the Christian saviour, but also of a Jewish prophet. In all its complexity, *The Risen Christ* can be seen as both the one who judges and the one who rehabilitates. The crimes against the world are great, but there is a hint that there can be change.

In our next chapter we will continue with the theme of a Jewish artist representing Christian themes when we look at the exhibition of *Madonna and Child* (1926-27) in New York.



Private Jacob Epstein

Carving a Legacy: Part Three

Selected Works: Madonna and Child (1926-27)

Epstein's first interpretation of the subject of the *Madonna and Child* (1926-27) was produced as a full-length, life-sized portrait of his model Sunita with her son Enver. The sculpture represents an image of the Madonna crouching in heavy clothing, holding her son before her. The boy's arms are curled in an awkward restlessness and both he and his mother stare towards the spectator with wide-eyed intensity. Unlike Epstein's later *Madonna and Child* (1950-52), this interpretation is not immediately recognisable as a Madonna and Child group; there is a distinct absence of iconographical symbols or suggestions through imagery that the work is to be seen as a religious sculpture. Indeed, it is only through the title of the work that we are made aware of the work's purported religious significance.

When we examine the scholarship relating to the *Madonna and Child*, it soon becomes obvious that this work had been overlooked. We can see, for example, that no mention of the work is made in Richard Cork's *Jacob Epstein*; in Evelyn Silber's *The Sculpture of Epstein*, we only find rudimentary information about the models and the work's provenance; it barely received more than a passing mention in Evelyn Silber and Terry Friedman's *Jacob Epstein Sculpture and Drawings*; and when we look at Richard Buckle's *Jacob Epstein: Sculptor*, we find little more than a description of the work bolstered by anecdotes from Epstein's autobiography.

The purpose of this chapter is to address Epstein's experience of exhibiting *Madonna and Child* in New York as a case study for exploring American attitudes to the artist and his work. We will closely examine to a series of love letters sent between Epstein and his

mistress Kathleen Garman (who would later become Lady Epstein) during his time in New York.³⁴⁸



Madonna and Child, (1926-27)

³⁴⁸ Although extracts from these letters have been reproduced by June Rose in *Demons and Angels* to detail Epstein's and Kathleen's love affair, I intend to re-examine them in relation to Epstein's articulation of his experience of America and his true feelings towards his portrait commissions.

On September 22nd 1927, it was reported in *The New York Times* that Epstein was to return to 'America early next month to pay the first visit to the country of his birth since he left New York for Europe practically penniless twenty five years ago.' The article went on to add that: 'For the exhibition of his latest works which is being organised for a Fifth Avenue gallery he has been engaged for many months on a symbolic mother and child, a piece which has not yet received a name.'³⁴⁹ It is interesting that the name of the work had not yet been released or decided upon at that point. Was it the case that Epstein had not yet decided on a name? Or perhaps, Epstein was using the same technique that he had used in the previous year exhibiting *The Visitation* under the name *A Study*. Or a third option is simply that the journalist writing the article did not yet know the name. It is a question to which we do not have the answer to. However, we can be certain that by the time the work was exhibited at the Ferargil Galleries, New York, the work was exhibited under the title *Madonna and Child*.³⁵⁰

On October 1st, Epstein left England on the ship *The Berengaria* for America, arriving in New York on October 7th. He took with him forty five sculpted works, all of them bronzes, including *Peggy Jean Laughing*, *Moysha Oyved* and *Cunninghame Graham*. Epstein remarked of his departure in his autobiography that:

It was generally thought that I was shaking off the dust of England from my feet. That was not my intention. English artists often visited America. Some made it the habit of going yearly. I had been away from America for twenty-five years, so there was nothing unusual in my holding an exhibition of my work there.³⁵¹

In America, there was much hype and speculation in the Press about Epstein's return, with a number of editorials, profiles and opinion pieces being published. There was much gossip and speculation as to whether Epstein would be permanently returning to New York. The

³⁴⁹ Anon., 'Epstein to Show Art Here' in *The New York Times*, (Undated press cutting, New Art Gallery, Walsall Archive).

³⁵⁰ Ferargil Galleries (New York), *Exhibition of Sculpture by Jacob Epstein*, (1927)

³⁵¹ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, (Hulton Press, 1955), p.124

revelation that Epstein had given up his London home only fuelled such theories. Although the articles were on a variety of subjects and tackled the Epstein story from a variety of angles, the consensus was clear: the return of Epstein was exciting and important, but was treated with an air of suspicion and caution. For example, in an editorial piece in *Nation*, the author remarked that:

No more important art event can occur here this winter than the return after twenty-eight [*sic*] years of Jacob Epstein, the sculptor to America, his native country, and the exhibition of some fifty of his works in New York and, we hope, other cities. Mr. Epstein is another of those productions of free immigration which, as every patrioteer proclaims, has done infinite harm to us as a nation and to our standing in the world [...] Now he is back on the spot where his Russian-Polish parents landed from the Old World. So far America has let him see by its indifference that it knows how to treat him. We wonder if this superior attitude will be maintained or whether America can be induced to forgo its prejudices long enough to follow British example and honour a man who as much as any other living has convinced England that art did not die with the last century.³⁵²

The ambivalence of this editorial piece is quite striking; it is not clear whether or not the author is one of the ‘patrioteers’ referenced. The emphasis of Epstein’s ‘Russian-Polish parents’ problematises his status as an American, and would suggest that the views on immigration expressed are held by the author. Although the author pondered the potential for Epstein to be honoured and praised within America, the suggestion that ‘America has let him see by its indifference that it knows how to treat him’, would imply that the author believed that it was best to ignore him.

Epstein’s experience of America was far from satisfactory. During his time in New York, Epstein had a number of run-ins with gallery owners, fell out with his family and complained of his dislike for American attitudes and for how much New York had changed in his twenty-five year absence. Issues with the Ferargil Galleries’ owners emerged as soon

³⁵² Anon., ‘Editorial’ in, *Nation*, (undated press cutting from Walsall New Art Gallery Archive, (October 1927?))

as Epstein entered America. He was unhappy with the layout of the gallery and the attitudes of the gallery owners. On October 14th, Epstein wrote to Kathleen complaining that:

My show has been moved to a basement gallery in a horrible place. [...] From what I have seen of the manager of the gallery he is entirely untrustworthy a confirmed boozier and only looks at dealing in works of art as an easy method of getting a good living from exploiting artists.³⁵³

In a letter dated October 22nd, Epstein wrote that he had negotiated better terms with the gallery owners and that his exhibition had been moved to a better gallery for either four or six weeks rather than two. There is little evidence to support the claims of this letter, as will be evident later. What comes through quite strongly in this letter is a real sense of Epstein's naivety; naivety in business affairs and in organisation. It seems that Epstein agreed to exhibiting his work in a gallery thousands of miles away from his home before even agreeing to terms, essentially travelling halfway across the world blindly. As Epstein wrote in his letter:

I had hardly known what I let myself in for when I planned to show here and gave up my works to those damnable people. I found on arriving that I was supposed to show here in a sort of basement place badly lit, a commission of 1/3 imposed on the works and only a 2 weeks show. I have forced on the gallery now these terms: a 2 weeks show in their upper and best gallery and the show to be extended beyond that for at least 2 weeks longer – possibly 4 weeks longer. This will give my works time. Also as agreed, 25 per cent commission. There is terrible lot of balderdash written here in the papers here as preliminary publicity.³⁵⁴

An example of such 'preliminary publicity' was to be found in *The New York Times* on October 30th. A gaudy advertisement presented ten photographs of Epstein's sculptures framed in what look like photograph frames, either rectangular or ovular, arranged around text which read:

A Prophet in Sculpture Not Without Honor in His Own Country: the Work of Jacob Epstein, Who Has Returned to America After Twenty Years.

Jacob Epstein, who was born of Russian parents in New York, when he failed recognition in America went to England, where he was hailed as one of the

³⁵³ Letter from Jacob Epstein to Kathleen Garman, (Dated October 14th, 1927) in, The New Art Gallery Walsall Archive.

³⁵⁴ Letter from Jacob Epstein to Kathleen Garman, (Dated October 22nd, 1927) in, The New Art Gallery Walsall Archive.

greatest sculptors of the day. His work has always produced violent critical discussion, which culminated in his memorial to W. H. Hudson in London. His sculpture has followed the unconventional, and the turn of the genius is best represented in his latest work, a biblical subject, for which he went to the East for inspiration. The exhibition will open at the Ferargil Galleries on Nov. 14.³⁵⁵

This advertisement makes for strange viewing. One is immediately struck by the tackiness of the copy and the gaudiness of the images. The lofty sentiments within the text identified Epstein immediately as a prophet. The text portrayed Epstein leaving America to follow the dream of fame and fortune. The text articulated a narrative which ignores Epstein's reasons for leaving America being related to the furthering of his artistic education and instead presented a rags-to-riches story.

On October 26th, Epstein wrote to Kathleen that there were further issues with the Ferargil Galleries, remarking that his show would only last for two weeks after all, and that he was unhappy with the way his work was being stored:

At the gallery we are at deadlock. The show is postponed to the 14th and will only be held in their decent gallery for 2 weeks, of selling they say nothing [...] a dollar here goes as easily as a shilling in London so as you can imagine I am feeling anxious about things especially with a postponed exhibition. [...] I offered to release them from their contract and their only concern was to get out all the smaller pieces straight away to the gallery where they are stored higgledy-piggledy in a wretched small room including a bath room and even in the bath tub. This is their idea of showing works "privately". I am getting legal advice on Monday and if can do nothing with them I will endeavour to seize my things and get another gallery, offers of which have been made to me already, and better galleries than "Ferargil".³⁵⁶

It should be noted at this point that the Ferargil exhibition was Epstein's only commercial exhibition in a New York gallery during this period (though he did exhibit his work at his old art school, The Art Students' League).

In a letter dated October 29th, Epstein complained again to Kathleen, this time regarding the Ferargil Galleries' owners' advice to Epstein regarding the publicity of the show. Epstein

³⁵⁵ Advertisement in, *The New York Times*, (October 30th, 1927), p.RP2

³⁵⁶ Letter from Jacob Epstein to Kathleen Garman, (Dated October 26th, 1927) in, The New Art Gallery Walsall Archive.

tells Kathleen that their tactic was to get him to provide negative statements about America and American art in order to stir up a controversy. Epstein resisted, stating to Kathleen that: 'The gallery people are impossible. Vulgar and seeking to make a circus of me. Their publicity agent suggested that I should grant an interview in which I abuse everything American! What a bright idea.'³⁵⁷ On November 14th, the show opened and lasted for two weeks (not the four or six Epstein had reported to have arranged in the letter from October 22nd quoted above).

An exhibition catalogue detailing the works and prices was issued with a foreword by Frank Crowninshield, editor of *Vanity Fair*. The foreword detailed only the most rudimentary of biographical details about Epstein. Epstein later remarked that one of the gallery owners had written a more thorough foreword which Epstein had rejected. He recalled this in his autobiography, writing that:

The head of the firm in arranging my show said that a preface was absolutely necessary. For this purpose he wrote one himself which was a strange mixture of illiterate jargon about my aims and achievements. I had, of course, to reject this out of hand, which made him feel none too friendly to me, as he rather fancied himself in the rôle of creative art critic.³⁵⁸

As detailed in previous chapters, Epstein often refused to explain his works' meaning and would resist the actions of critics and writers who would try to articulate any sense of a fixed meaning or explanation of his work or motives. Epstein saw art as self-sufficient and self-explanatory with any efforts to understand the artist's 'aims and achievements' being quashed whenever possible. When we look, for example, at Epstein's explanation of *Madonna and Child* in his autobiography, he only dealt with the creation and conception of the work and made no effort to explain the work or place it within a clearer context:

I had worked for a year on the "Madonna and Child". An Indian woman, Sunita, and her son, Enver, posed for me. The model was of that eternal Oriental type which seemed to me just right for a work of this religious

³⁵⁷ Letter from Jacob Epstein to Kathleen Garman, (Dated October 29th, 1927) in, The New Art Gallery Walsall Archive.

³⁵⁸ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.127

character. When I had finished the head the model remarked that she could not possibly “look as good as I had made her”. She recognised that there was something eternal and divine in it outside herself. [...] It was a work I carried through with great concentration and continuity of thought and its complex linear plan and very elaborate secondary motives were dominated by my original idea of presenting a massive group that would go into a cathedral or religious sanctuary.³⁵⁹

It is of no surprise that Epstein would commission a friend (Crowninshield acted as Epstein’s guide and manager during his stay in New York) to produce a short biography and veto the efforts of any critical engagement with his work, seemingly fearing the polluting effects that a textual supplement would have upon the comprehension of his work.

The show opened on November 14th; Epstein was notable by his absence. He wrote to Kathleen of the opening, noting that: ‘My show opened with private view on Sunday and crowds were there but of course I didn’t show up. [...] I am getting to hate this country and all its crude ways and only want to get away from it.’³⁶⁰ Epstein’s apparent dislike of America began to emerge in these letters. We do however have to take a step back and ask whether Epstein’s expressed dislike of America in these letters is rather a reflection of his own misdirected bitterness towards the situation. This is of course impossible to answer. In relation to the opening of the exhibition, Epstein noted that his absence was ill-received, remarking that: ‘I made the mistake of not going to my private view, or as Americans call it, “preview”. Americans want to see *you*, I thought the works were enough.’³⁶¹ As well as complaining about the opening of the exhibition and the storage of his works before the exhibition, Epstein also complained about the exhibition space itself, writing that the galleries in New York were let down by their lack of natural light. Epstein wrote in his autobiography that: ‘In New York galleries have no top daylight as in London, and this particular gallery presented a tawdry, conventional appearance, curtained walls, plants, and

³⁵⁹ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.123

³⁶⁰ Letter from Jacob Epstein to Kathleen Garman, (Unated (Late November, 1927?)) in, The New Art Gallery Walsall Archive.

³⁶¹ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.127

chandeliers.³⁶² During the exhibition Epstein sold eleven works including the portrait of *Sellina* to the Brooklyn Museum. The sales during this exhibition were quite poor in comparison to Epstein's expectations. Epstein wrote to Kathleen of his disappointment at the low number of sales. Rather than considering the notion that Epstein's work had not gained the reputation with collectors that it had in London, Epstein blamed the poor sales on the gallery setting itself, writing that: 'I have been worried and have not enjoyed showing my things. Remember all my pieces are seen in an extremely low room pink yellowish walls garish lighting and far too crowded.'³⁶³ There did not seem to be an element of the exhibition about which Epstein was happy.

The critical reception of *Madonna and Child* in America was mixed and often dealt with Epstein's identity and return to New York rather than assessing the work's merits. There was a tendency to deal with Epstein's works in general, rather than review the exhibition or engage with dealing with the *Madonna and Child*, which may go some way to explaining the scholarly black hole which has characterised this work. For example, writing in *The New York Herald-Tribune*, Royal Cortissoz wrote that Epstein's reputation, referred to in his review as 'the Epstein legend', overshadowed any attempts to appreciate his sculpture in a dispassionate or objective way. Cortissoz explained that the legend 'implies that this American-born son of Russian parents, for many years occupied in London is a kind of portent. He is, of course, nothing of the kind.' He continued:

There is nothing revolutionary about his work. It is simply the sincere expression of considerable talent. His great merit is one which lies, so to say, upon the surface. It is his vital grasp upon the principles of reality. He is the kind of sculptor who could not, we imagine, be merely conventional if he tried. Confronted by a man or woman of character he seizes his or her traits with a hand that seems positively eager. His touch is vigorous, trenchant. It truly

³⁶² Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.126

³⁶³ Letter from Jacob Epstein to Kathleen Garman, (Dated November 29th, 1927) in, The New Art Gallery Walsall Archive.

vivifies the clay, and the transition into bronze only deepens our sense of being in the presence of a powerful living impression.³⁶⁴

This article captured the primary reasons for the poor sales at the Ferargil gallery: the gallery goers were expecting revolutionary and shocking works, but were instead confronted with a series of Romantic portrait bronzes. There were no carvings exhibited in the exhibition and no works which contained any Modernist traits. If one were to base their view of Epstein solely on the works on display within the Ferargil Gallery exhibition, it is fair to observe, as Cortissoz did, that ‘There is nothing revolutionary about his work’, but that he is also ‘the kind of sculptor who could not [...] be merely conventional if he tried’. Being neither revolutionary nor conventional has presented a number of problems for critics and scholars alike, and highlights the awkward space which Epstein continues to occupy within the history of art.

Other critics considered whether American sensibilities would be challenged as they had been in Britain. For example, Stark Young, writing in *New Republic*, noted that as regards Britain, Epstein ‘has had the honor to stir up more commotion than any sculptor, good or bad, in a century’, but raised doubts as to whether this would be true in America, asserting that:

We are less of a swarming community of personal traditions, convictions, and we are less apt to seethe and stew about any idea of style in art. We are more tolerant toward diverse forms of art, partly because they are often so far from origins native to us that they mean nothing very profoundly; partly because we are used to strangers of every sort, races, ideas and institutions; partly because we are less deeply concerned with convictions; partly because we long ever for new movements, fads, sensations, these in their turn to be shortly set aside for those still newer.³⁶⁵

Essentially, it was argued, because New York was such a diverse community of immigrants from across the world, there was no single American cosmopolitan tradition to consider.

³⁶⁴ Cortissoz, Royal, (title missing), (undated press cutting from: *The New York Herald-Tribune* in, The New Art Gallery Walsall Archive)

³⁶⁵ Young, Stark, (title missing), (undated press cutting from: *New Republic* in, The New Art Gallery Walsall Archive)

Instead, we can consider any number of disparate influences and backgrounds within the cultural field, meaning that a consistent set of artistic values and traditions was not as entrenched in the culture as it was in London.

In terms of the reception of the *Madonna and Child* itself, we have to look to a review printed in *The New York Times*; the critic was particularly impressed with the work. He wrote that:

the “Madonna and Child,” for which a Hindu woman posed with her boy, is an isolated performance. The head of the woman corresponds, it may be assumed, to an ethnic type, and there is dignity in the great length of limb, the naturalness of the protecting gesture, the absence of self-consciousness in the pose. The over-emphasis upon emotional expression, which is the weakness of much of Epstein’s sculptures, is replaced by a deeper reading of mood. The swollen, dolorous eyes suggest an inner life profound and intense behind their view of realism. In this latest of Epstein’s achievements the form to a remarkable degree conveys the idea which he has struggled repeatedly to release—the idea of miracle within nature, of nature enhanced to miraculous significance.³⁶⁶

It is somewhat unfortunate that many readings of Epstein’s works fall back on a notion of Epstein representing racial ‘types’, which is often used to explain away much of the work’s conceptual content.

The critical reception of the *Madonna and Child* in America was somewhat overshadowed by the circus surrounding Epstein’s return to New York. It is necessary to look at how the work was received in Britain in order to gain a firmer grasp of its critical reception. *Madonna and Child* was exhibited in London two years after Epstein’s return from New York. With the *Madonna and Child* remaining unsold at the New York exhibition, it was loaned to the Brooklyn Museum for a year, and then the work was exhibited at Knoedler’s Gallery, Old Bond Street, London, in May 1930. The critical reception of the work was mixed, with the

³⁶⁶ Anon., (title missing), (undated press cutting from: *The New York Times* in, The New Art Gallery Walsall Archive)

critic from *The Times*, praising the work for its humanistic qualities, but criticising its composition as awkward:

Mr. Epstein's bronze group of "The Madonna and Child" at Messrs. Knoedler's, 15, Old Bond-street, is humanistic rather than religious. [...] Though in the round it is essentially a front view composition, the side views showing some very awkward lines and proportions. Even in front view the composition is not perfect, the free right arm and hand of the Child breaking away in a trivial form.³⁶⁷

In opposition to this view, L. B. Powell suggested in his book *Jacob Epstein* that rather than 'showing some very awkward lines and proportions', the *Madonna and Child* 'offers the most absorbing study of rhythms in all Epstein's bronze work.'³⁶⁸ Powell explained:

Simple enough in conception, they are boldly accentuated, and give the work much of its grandeur. It is fascinating to observe how the rhythms of the pattern formed by the hands are repeated in the loin-cloth round the Child and in the upper part of the Madonna's garment, and how these in turn are set off by the increasing amplitude of downward-sweeping folds. The arrangement of masses also is complete, the massive modelling of the knees of the Madonna supplying the right sense of solidity and repose to balance the slender, tentative gesture of the Child facing a world from which we are made to feel instinctively there can be no turning back.³⁶⁹

Powell continued his praise of the *Madonna and Child*, noting that though the work was formally successful, its meaning lay in its vitalistic qualities. A few pages before he outlined why *Madonna and Child* was a success in terms of pure form, Powell wrote that:

The first and last thing that can be said of Epstein's bronze "Madonna and Child," which was shown at the Ferragil [*sic*] Galleries in New York in 1927 and Knoedler Galleries in London in 1929, [*sic*] is that it is vital. It has a compelling urgency which not only holds the attention, but leaves in the mind a permanent impression—it becomes an addition to our own experience whether we like it at first glance or not.³⁷⁰

It seems a little odd that Powell wrote 'The first and last thing that can be said of Epstein's bronze "Madonna and Child" [...] is that it is vital', but then continued to discuss the work's formal qualities. Surely if the work's 'vital' qualities were the 'first and last thing that can be said', then it makes little sense to say anything else.

³⁶⁷ Anon., 'Mr. Jacob Epstein' in, *The Times*, (May 21st, 1930), p.22

³⁶⁸ Powell, L. B., *Jacob Epstein*, (Chapman and Hall Ltd., 1932), p.113

³⁶⁹ Powell, L. B., *Jacob Epstein*, pp.113-114

³⁷⁰ Powell, L. B., *Jacob Epstein*, p.110

By the end of the exhibition in New York, although the sales were poor, Epstein had received commissions to produce a number of portraits. One such portrait was of Columbia University's Professor John Dewey. He wrote of this commission to Kathleen: 'I am already in harness working mornings on Professor Dewey this is to be a presentation portrait from his pupils and as I was asked if I could do it for £500 I agree as the money is to be raised from students and philosophers etc.'³⁷¹ The bust was unveiled in Columbia University the following December. John Dewey was quoted as saying of the work that 'he did not know whether he looked as the bust indicated, but he knew that he felt that way. He added that he had rather go down in posterity as a work of art, rather than as a likeness.'³⁷² In his autobiography, Epstein reflected on this portrait, noting that: 'I enjoyed making this bust and I recall the event with pleasure.'³⁷³ This reflection is contrary, however, to Epstein's feelings as expressed to Kathleen at the time. As well as sharing his doubts of the work's quality, noting that: 'I'm not sure how good a work it is',³⁷⁴ he also vented his frustrations at having to produce commissioned portraits, writing that if he remained in America he would have been 'condemned for the rest of my life to do the faces of American professors' and exclaimed: 'Oh to work on something more than a portrait. To do a portrait seems my chief use to the world.'³⁷⁵ Epstein continued:

I know I can get portraits here even for the rest of my life but I'd rather be free. And haven't the ambition to do busts of professors and public men which seems to be what everyone here is trying to push me into. I loathe the idea of doing such work and I look forward to a better life than that. [...] As things stand now I could get heaps of portraits and I'd be condemned for the rest of my life to do the faces of American professors and businessmen. Curiously enough no women want these busts only men and what I think I dislike most is the type of academic professor, they swarm in thousands and my entire time

³⁷¹ Letter from Jacob Epstein to Kathleen Garman, (Dated November 29th, 1927) in, The New Art Gallery Walsall Archive.

³⁷² Anon., 'An Epstein Bust' in, *The Manchester Guardian* (December 12th, 1928), p.5

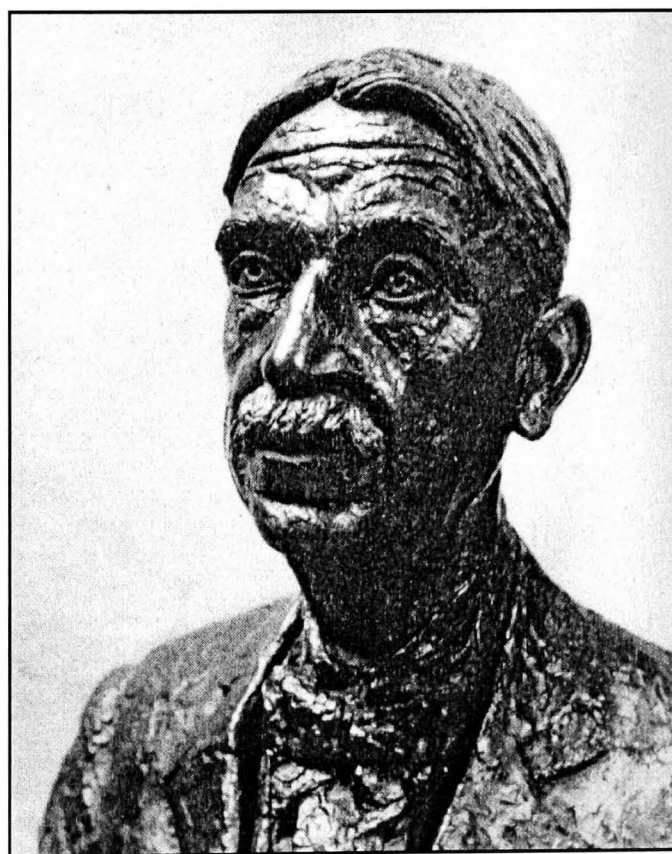
³⁷³ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.131

³⁷⁴ Letter from Jacob Epstein to Kathleen Garman, (Dated January 20th, 1928) in, The New Art Gallery Walsall Archive.

³⁷⁵ Letter from Jacob Epstein to Kathleen Garman, (Dated January 21st, 1928) in, The New Art Gallery Walsall Archive.

could be taken up by these dull fellows if I let them. They want to talk about art and its relation to everything under the sun.³⁷⁶

What is interesting about this particular letter is the sense that Epstein expressed his feeling of being constrained by his own skill as a portraitist. Although in *The Sculptor Speaks* and his autobiography Epstein expressed the idea that he enjoyed portraiture and considered his portraits to be equal in terms of conception and the satisfaction it gave to him as his expressive works, it is quite clear in these letters that this is not the case. This being said, it is also quite obvious why he chose to speak about them publicly with such high regard. After all, if Epstein had published his thoughts on commissioned portraits publicly, it would be very unlikely that he would have received as many commissions for portraits. Essentially, Epstein's public attitude to portraiture can be seen as a marketing strategy on Epstein's part. A portrait bust can be modelled in a few hours and cast a number of times (most busts were cast in an edition of six). Epstein would be paid for the commission, then for further sales, thus meaning that portraits were Epstein's main source of income.



Prof. John Dewey, (1927)

³⁷⁶ Letter from Jacob Epstein to Kathleen Garman, (Unated (Late November, 1927?)) in, The New Art Gallery Walsall Archive.

Epstein returned to England, quite suddenly, in the February because Kathleen had sent a cable to Epstein stating that if he did not return that she would commit suicide. According to Epstein's sister Sylvia:

The Epsteins had come to America in October 1927, and suddenly, in January, 1928, Jacob up and went back to London. He was supposed to go to Chicago to see Darrow, but he didn't. He borrowed the passage money from Leo Epstein and Ida Stone, got on the *Aquitania* and went back, leaving Margaret and Peggy Jean in New York. The borrowed money was never paid back. He went back because he received word from Kathleen that if he didn't return she was going to kill herself.³⁷⁷

Shortly after his return to England, Epstein began work on *Genesis*, and was commissioned to produce *Night and Day* for the London Underground Headquarters.

The *Madonna and Child* remained unsold until 1937 when it was purchased by collector and sculptor Sally Ryan for £1,500. The work was exhibited as part of the British Pavilion at the 1939 World's Fair in New York, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art. The work was finally donated to the Riverside Church, New York, on December 29th 1959, where it resides today. The donation was briefly discussed in *The New York Times*. The author wrote:

The work, sculpted in 1927, was donated by Sally Ryan, a New York sculptor. When she purchased the statue, Sir Jacob said he thought it ought to be given to a church.

After Sir Jacob's death this year, Miss Ryan fulfilled his wish by asking that the statue be moved from the museum where she had placed it on loan.

The Madonna and Child, sixty-four inches high and weighing 1,500 pounds, now rests on a marble base in the courtyard facing Claremont Avenue near 120th Street.³⁷⁸

A dedication service was held for the sculpture almost a year later on December 18th 1960.

The service began by briefly outlining the provenance of the work and how it came to be

³⁷⁷ Babson, Jane F., *The Epstein Family Album*, (Taylor Hall Publications, Undated)

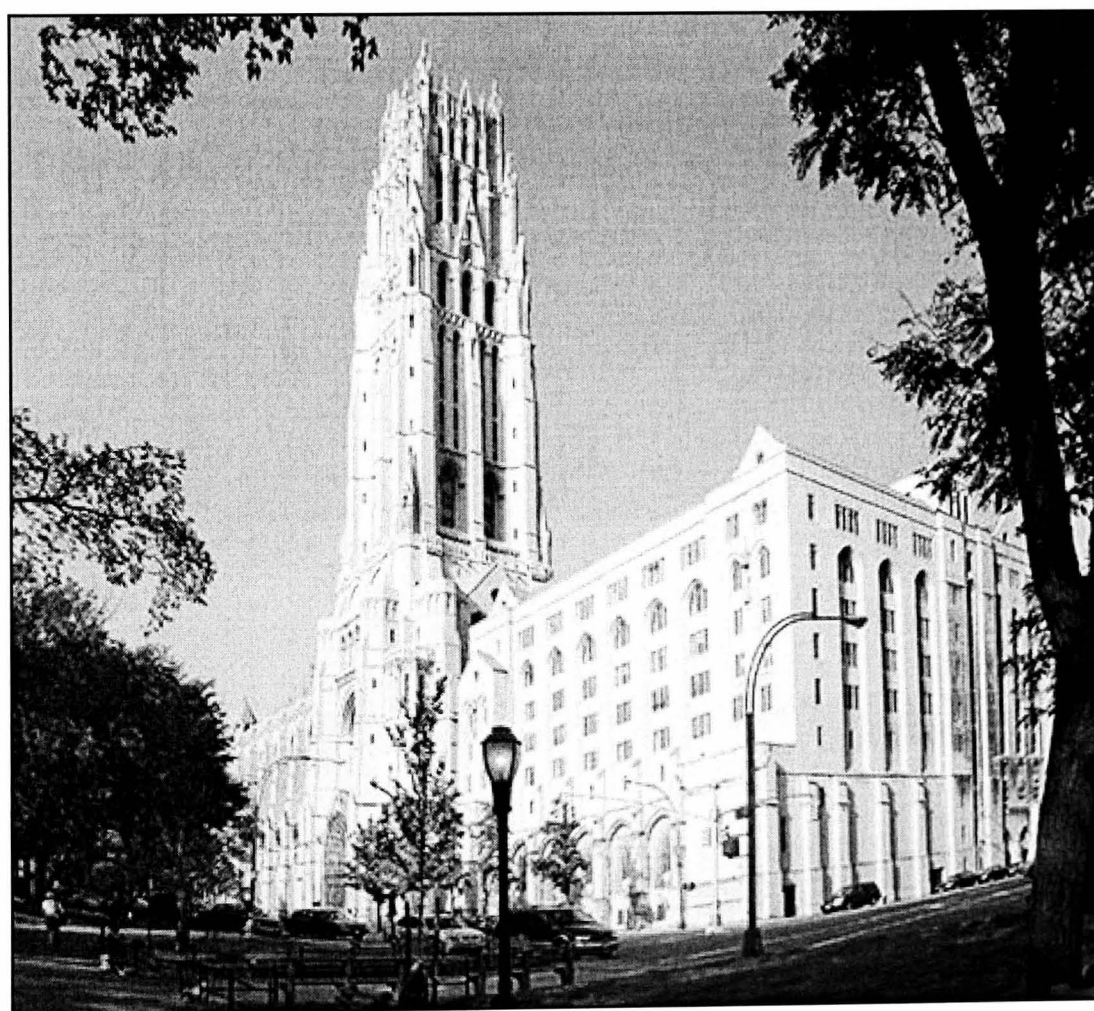
³⁷⁸ Anon., 'Church Gets Madonna by Epstein' in, *The New York Times*, (December 30th 1959), p.19

donated to the church. A transcript of the service, which resides in the archive of the New Art Gallery Walsall, reads thus:

The Madonna and Child has been described as an outstanding example of contemporary religious art, attempting to explore possible avenues of communication between the modern artist and contemporary religious necessities. The statue emphasises the humanity of our Lord, reminding us of the humble origins from which He came and the corresponding greatness of the miracle of the Incarnation.

In his autobiography, Sir Jacob expressed the hope that this statue might be placed in a cathedral or religious sanctuary. Shortly before his death in 1959 he personally expressed approval of Miss Ryan's proposed gift of the Madonna and Child to The Riverside Church. Located in the Garth the two figures overlook the street with the same compassion and concern the Church is challenged to look upon the cities of men today, and like Her Lord to serve mankind.

The Riverside Church gratefully acknowledges both the appropriateness of the gift and the generosity of Miss Ryan in presenting Sir Jacob Epstein's Madonna and Child to the Church, anticipating that it will be a continuing inspiration for those who assemble here to worship.³⁷⁹



Riverside Church, New York

³⁷⁹ 'The Service of Dedication' in The New Art Gallery Walsall Archive.

It is fair to suggest that Epstein's return to New York was one characterised by frustration and disappointment for Epstein. This frustration, however, could have easily been averted had Epstein spent a little time before leaving England making sure that the terms of his exhibition were to his liking, and, further to this, understanding what was expected of an artist exhibiting in New York. It seems as though Epstein made an effort to work against every convention in the New York art world at that time, including: not turning up to his exhibition opening, printing the prices of works within his catalogue and not laying out his artistic intentions for the viewing public. Perhaps if Epstein had adopted the 'when in Rome' approach, he may have been more satisfied with his exhibition and would have sold more works. Instead Epstein was let down by his own arrogance and sense of entitlement, in the sense that he believed that he was entitled to sales simply due to the fact that he was Jacob Epstein.

In our next chapter we will turn our attention to one of Epstein's most controversial carvings, *Genesis* (1929). We will look at how this work was received by the critics and general public, and explore some of the key issues raised by this complex work.

* * *

Carving a Legacy: Part Three

Selected Works: Genesis (1929)

Jacob Epstein's *Genesis* (1929), described by Evelyn Silber as the 'strangest and most disturbing of all his works',³⁸⁰ is perhaps one of the most controversial of his non-commissioned carvings and probably the most misunderstood. Carved in marble throughout 1929 in his Epping Forest studio, *Genesis* portrays a heavily pregnant woman with exaggerated thighs, hands and stomach, with a face reminiscent of a concave African mask. Indeed, such is the discrepancy in styles that art historian John Berger remarked: 'Epstein's works are scarcely ever consistent. The head of "Genesis" is carved like a wooden mask whilst the buttocks are an academic imitation of flesh.'³⁸¹ *Genesis* has received much critical attention, with many pages being dedicated to the work in *Jacob Epstein* by L. B. Powell, *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture* by R. H. Wilenski and *Mother Stone* by Anne Middleton Wagner. Epstein also gave an account of the work in *The Sculptor Speaks* and *An Autobiography*; he described *Genesis* thus:

I felt the necessity for giving expression to the profoundly elemental in motherhood, the deep down instinctive female, without the trappings and charm of what is known as feminine; *my* feminine would be the eternal primeval feminine, the mother of the race. [...] She is serene and majestic, an elemental force of nature. How a figure like this contrasts with our coquetties and fanciful erotic nudes of modern sculpture. At one blow generations of sculptors and sculpture are shattered and sent flying into the limbo of triviality, and my "Genesis", with her fruitful womb, confronts our enfeebled generation. Within her, Man takes on new hope for the future. The generous earth gives herself up to us, meets our masculine desires, and says: "Rejoice, I am Fruitfulness, I am Plentitude."³⁸²

In his arrogance, Epstein believed *Genesis* to be a work so revolutionary that 'generations of sculptors and sculpture are shattered and sent flying into the limbo of triviality'. Epstein complained that his work was purposefully misunderstood by critics and claimed that the

³⁸⁰ Silber, Evelyn, *The Sculpture of Epstein with Complete Catalogue*, (Phaidon, 1986), p.50

³⁸¹ Berger, John, 'Epstein's Pyrrhic Victory over the Philistines' in, *The Observer, Weekend Review* (September 3rd, 1961), p.21

³⁸² Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, (Hulton Press, 1955), p.139

critics were ‘alarmed at the symbolic truth’ that *Genesis* presented, and exclaimed that: ‘The misunderstanding of my motives and the perverse construction placed upon my aims always astonish me.’³⁸³ This attitude to the critics ran contrary to the attitude expressed elsewhere by Epstein. For example, it was noted in *The Manchester Guardian*, that: ‘Epstein himself refused to make any reply to the critics’. Epstein was then quoted as saying: “‘I never explain my things,” he said at the time. “It is for those who look at the work to say what it means - or what they think it means. They must search for the idea.””³⁸⁴ Within *The Sculptor Speaks*, when questioned by Arnold Haskell about how he felt about critics misunderstanding his work, Epstein answered by stating that:

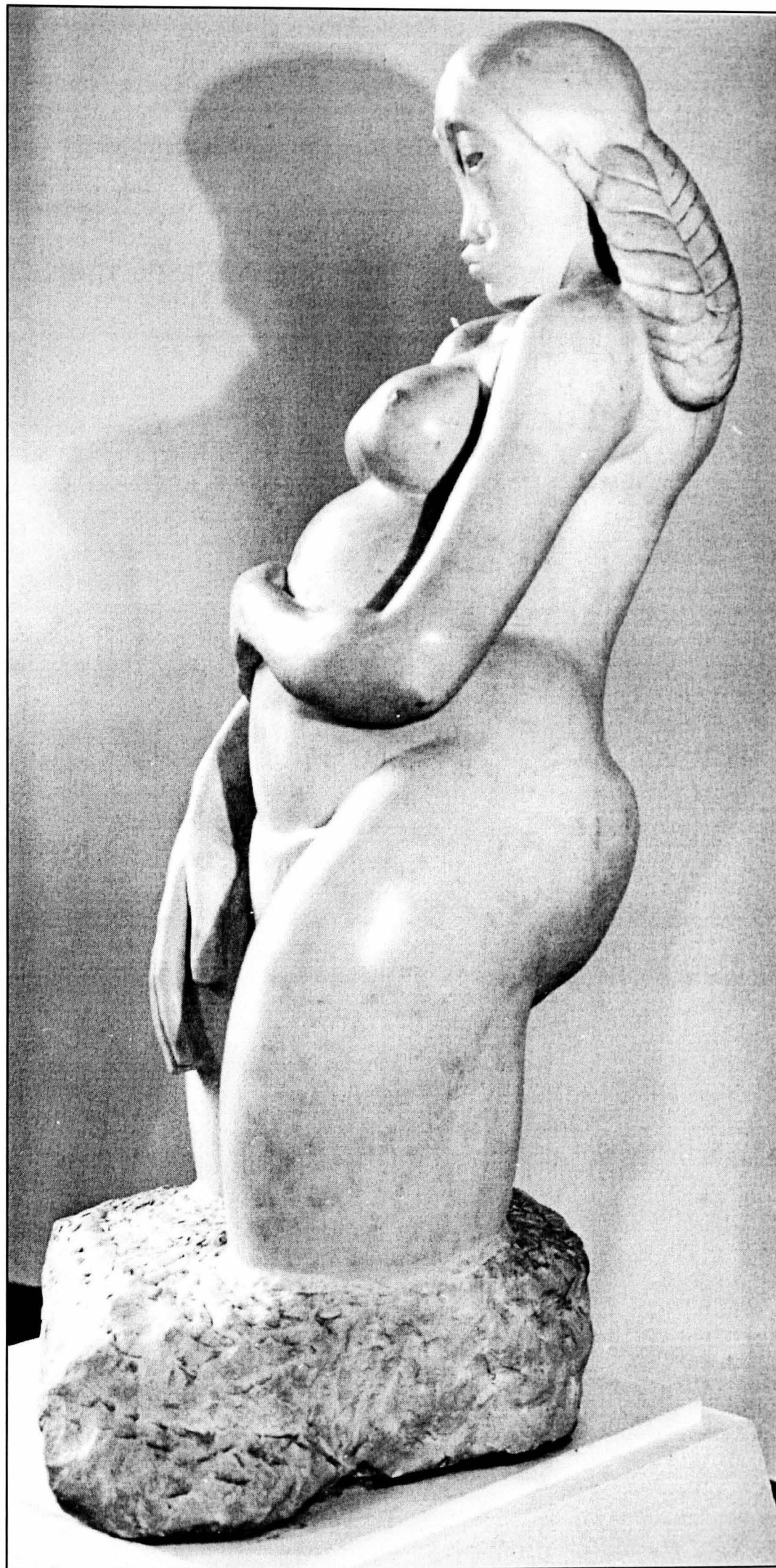
I cannot protest. My business is to get on with my own work, not to defend it to the press. You are indignant because you are not used to these things [...] I don’t mind criticism. If there were none, I would be quite certain that something was wrong with my work.³⁸⁵

What is particularly interesting about this passage is that it highlights a real tension within Epstein. Epstein was obsessed with critics; he kept newspaper cuttings of all of his criticism, and devoted much of *The Sculptor Speaks* and his autobiography to addressing the critics.

³⁸³ Epstein, *An Autobiography*, p.140

³⁸⁴ Anon., ‘Epstein’s “Genesis” Sold’ in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (16th March, 1931)

³⁸⁵ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculpture Speaks*, (William Heinmann Limited, 1931), p.81



Genesis, (1929)

Genesis has received mixed assessments from other Epstein scholars. Before embarking on the task of assessing *Genesis*'s critical reception, it is useful to unpack and examine the merits of *Genesis* as articulated by experts on Epstein's work. In his book *The Art of Carved Sculpture*, Kineton Parkes, usually a champion of Epstein's carvings, wrote that: 'There is no reason for the distortion and unnecessary ugliness of Epstein's *Genesis*.' Parkes' major criticism of *Genesis* is based on formal grounds:

As form, *Genesis* is astonishing; never in one piece has a sculptor so needlessly attempted to combine nobility with ugliness. The whole torso of *Genesis* is a triumph of pure form, rounded, conditioned and explicated to a perfection of expressiveness that leaves nothing to the imagination; an evocation of the triumph of the nude human shape over all other form. Yet the joy of it is modified by the grossness of the head and by the formation of the hands. [...] The head of *Genesis* is designedly ugly and without any more worthy aspiration than that of exaggerating its undeveloped animal character.³⁸⁶

This line of criticism is echoed by Richard Cork. In his book *Jacob Epstein*, published as part of the Tate's British Artists series, Cork also criticises *Genesis* on the same formal grounds, stating that the work is essentially a failure because it tried to combine too many disparate elements into a cohesive form. He wrote that 'the contrast between the highly African stylization of the woman's features, and the more realistic treatment of her pregnant body, seems ill-judged. It lacks unity and fails to fuse disparate sources as convincingly as *Night and Day*.'³⁸⁷

Amidst the sea of negative assessments, there were some notable supporters. Reginald Wilenski, who was later to publish a book which laid emphasis on Epstein entitled *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture*, wrote a favourable treatment of *Genesis* in *The Observer*, arguing that the reason why critics were shocked when confronted with *Genesis* was that:

this marble shocks us in the first place because it calls up a rush of emotive [*sic*] which the subject before us is usually associated. [...]

³⁸⁶ Parkes, Kineton, *The Art of Carved Sculpture*, p.133

³⁸⁷ Cork, Richard, *Jacob Epstein*, (Tate Publishing, 1999), p.51

The truth is that we cannot begin to appreciate *Genesis* until we have forgotten our habitual environment [...] As sheer sculpture, in the modern sense, this carving is a failure; the forms are not homogeneous, the plastic language is diverse, the flow of lines downward suggest a falling body rather than the organisation rising upward from the ground. But this sculpture must not be considered as sheer sculpture, it must be considered as *Genesis* [...] undeniable primeval and profound.³⁸⁸

What is particularly interesting about this article is Wilenski's articulation of *Genesis* as a work which must not be considered as a sculpture in the usual sense (thus sidestepping the criticism on formal grounds), but one which considers *Genesis* under its own merits and set of rules. Wilenski saw *Genesis* as falling outside of the conventions of modern sculpture, and urged us to behold *Genesis* as a work which is essentially vitalistic and spiritual.

L. B. Powell was also at pains to convince the public that *Genesis* was a masterpiece in his book devoted to Epstein's art, *Jacob Epstein*. Powell referred to *Genesis* as Epstein's 'most important work in marble,'³⁸⁹ and dedicated two chapters to labour this point. Powell stressed the work's 'elemental motives' over its sculptural qualities, claiming that critics were deluding themselves if they thought that they could understand such a work through formal analysis alone. Powell also took to task the critics who had attacked *Genesis* on moral grounds, writing that:

Art is life: it expresses states of consciousness in the artist which are deeper and more instinct with spiritual awareness than the consciousness of other people, and it can never submit to being cramped by "moral" restrictions, which are really not moral at all, that the charlatans posing as judges would like to enforce. Were they sincere, these people would of course advocate the suppression of a vast amount of the best work in literature, music, sculpture, and the graphic arts, but they do nothing of the kind.³⁹⁰

Powell continued by deconstructing the various schools of critics and noted, in a similar vein to Wilenski, that *Genesis* must be considered within a unique conceptual boundary. Powell emphasised the notion that *Genesis*'s 'true meaning' will somehow reveal its inner-

³⁸⁸ Wilenski, R. H., 'Art and Artists: Mr. Epstein's New Sculpture' in, *The Observer* (February 8th, 1931), p.12

³⁸⁹ Powell, L. B., *Jacob Epstein*, (Chapman and Hall Ltd., 1932), p.45

³⁹⁰ Powell, L. B. *Jacob Epstein*, pp.46-47

meaning to us if we spend time pondering the work, as if by doing so we can make a psychical connection to Epstein's imagination:

[I]t will not be long before we realise that the far-reaching thought it awakens transcend the limits of language as a vehicle for the expression of spiritual ideas. The more we ponder this, the nearer we shall approach the vision, the state of mind that must have been Epstein's before he set chisel to the marble to which he has given this name, and the more fantastic will appear the notion that "Genesis" is a study of a woman in pregnancy and nothing more.³⁹¹

Powell saw this message as a universal one which cannot be articulated using conventional language. By suggesting this, Powell reduced any form of criticism to a useless and irrelevant language game. Thus, the only way to be critical is to be critically nihilistic: to remain silent. As Powell explained:

Any attempt to sum up the extraordinary emotional appeal of "Genesis" must end by leaving unsaid more than can be said; and those nimble-witted people who suppose that the meaning of the work can be "explained" in a few words may be envied the possession of a remarkable elasticity of mind.³⁹²

The rhetorical device used by Powell serves to evade actually discussing the work's meaning and renders the meaning of *Genesis* unclear and obscure, situating *Genesis* in a place which is somehow beyond criticism. Powell does not attempt to articulate a sense of the work's meaning, only the sense of awe that he felt when confronted by the work, writing that: "Genesis" produced that rather speechless state on experiences under the impact of great surprise, a feeling of awe, as when, for example, the majesty of mountain ranges is suddenly and unexpectedly brought to view."³⁹³ The emotive impact of the work goes no further to clarify *Genesis*'s meaning. We are left with a sense that *Genesis* is somehow a magical artefact which contains within it the ability to transmit psychic messages directly from the mind of the artist, as if a block of marble can act as a conduit to telepathic messages. It produces a feeling of religious awe and a feeling of being in the presence of something sublime. It transcends our definitions of sculpture and is beyond understanding on any linguistic level. We have a problem.

³⁹¹ Powell, L. B. *Jacob Epstein*, pp.48-49

³⁹² Powell, L. B. *Jacob Epstein*, p.49

³⁹³ Powell, L. B. *Jacob Epstein*, pp.49-50

Genesis was first exhibited from 7th February, until late-March 1931 at Oliver Brown's Leicester Galleries in London. The critical reception was staggered over several months as *Genesis* was exhibited around the country, and as *Genesis* moved to a new town, the letter writers would be out in force to attack or defend the work. We will now unpack and examine how *Genesis*'s meaning has been articulated, and what conclusions have been drawn by the critics and public alike.

On the 7th February, 1931, the critic of *The Manchester Guardian* wrote that: 'Mr. Jacob Epstein never gives his denouncers a rest. As soon as their outcry against one of his works flags, a new one appears to send them into yet further paroxysms of rage.'³⁹⁴ Aware of the inevitability of yet another Epstein controversy, the critic was accurate in his assertion. The critical reaction to this show was characterised perfectly by Leman Hare writing in *Apollo*:

One has come to expect, at regular intervals, when Jacob Epstein produces an original work, a torrent of abuse poured, not merely on the work, but also on the artist himself. [...] Now the flood-gates are open once more and the cascade of unthinking prejudice, vulgar wit and ignorance, falls upon the marble statue called "Genesis" exhibited at the Leicester Galleries.³⁹⁵

This 'cascade of unthinking prejudice, vulgar wit and ignorance' that Hare was referring to came from the popular press. The critic of *The Daily Express*, for example, took great exception to such a 'blasphemous' representation of motherhood, exclaiming: 'You white foulness! I had not seen such blasphemy in stone until today. It is nothing less than a bad joke on expectant motherhood.'³⁹⁶ Interestingly the critic did not explain why *Genesis* was so blasphemous; it seemed that the sense of indignation was sufficient. *The Daily Mirror* used an anonymous critic, who finished his article with the line 'by a mere man', to write of his disgust at the 'Brutal Figure' of *Genesis*, writing that: 'Nothing more revolting and less

³⁹⁴ 'J. B.', 'Mr. Epstein's New Work' in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (February 7th, 1931), p.14

³⁹⁵ Hare, Leman, 'Much ado about "Genesis"' in, *Apollo*, (Issue XIII, June 1931), p.176

³⁹⁶ Quoted in: Anon., 'London Critics Rage at New Epstein Work' in, *The New York Times*, (February 7th, 1931), p.23

like art than Epstein's "Genesis" has been seen in London for a long time.'³⁹⁷ The critic continued by stating that art should be beautiful and that the subject of motherhood was 'one which should be dealt with a certain amount of delicacy and reverence',³⁹⁸ with words such as 'ugly', 'brutal' and 'shocking' appearing again and again throughout his discourse. The critic continued:

Statuary is very much in the public eye at the moment, because of the controversies over Epstein's work and the Haig memorial.

Why should there be any necessity for controversies over these sculptors' works?³⁹⁹

This review was printed a day before the public opening of the exhibition and already spoke of the storm surrounding *Genesis*. When Hare, writing in *Apollo*, commented that 'the flood-gates are open once more', he was of course referring to the inevitability of such a controversy; a controversy which was not engineered by the artist, but instead, by the Press. In the same issue of *The Daily Mirror*, a letter to the editor was printed, apparently submitted by an anonymous writer who simply signed their letter 'Old-fashioned Artist'. Under the banner 'Ugly Art', it read: 'As an admirer of Mr. Epstein I cannot help questioning his statue "Genesis" illustrated by you. Need One have so much ugliness? Ought not art and beauty go together?'⁴⁰⁰ What is striking about this letter is the simple fact that the Press view of *Genesis* occurred on February 5th, *The Daily Mirror*'s first article on the subject appeared on February 6th, the same day as the letter. Unless the 'Old Fashioned Artist' was a member of the Press it seems highly unlikely that they would have seen *Genesis*. The letter writer also made reference to the ugliness of the statue as illustrated by *The Daily Mirror*; if the letter writer was referring to the article in question 'illustrating' *Genesis* with words, then as is evident above, the dates of this claim simply do not correspond. If the writer is referring to an actual reproduction of *Genesis*, then one did not

³⁹⁷ Anon., 'Epstein Gives Another Shock' in, *The Daily Mirror*, (February 6th, 1931)

³⁹⁸ Anon., 'Epstein Gives Another Shock'

³⁹⁹ Anon., 'Epstein Gives Another Shock'

⁴⁰⁰ Anon., 'Ugly Art' in, *The Daily Mirror*, (February 6th, 1931)

appear in *The Daily Mirror* (or any other national newspaper I have looked at) until the 7th February, the day after the letter was published. Coupled with the anonymous signature, I can only reach the conclusion that the letter was actually a cynical ploy by *The Daily Mirror* to spark a controversy within its letter pages. To add further fuel to this was the inclusion of 'The Ep-Stein Song', signed 'Merry Andrew':

Now Epstein, my son, is well known to the smartest,
Of folk as the great mathematical artist,
And, though quite a few find it hard find it hard to believe it, he
Invented a theory about Relativity
Called Art for the Artless. Its principle menace is
A flat contradiction of all that's in Genesis!
Each day more emphatic and primitive he grows
To prove you and I are related to negroes;
He goes fourth [*sic*] demented, turns Day into Night
And drives us all Underground, filled with affright!
This theory of his has no Rima or Reason
For souls who are simple travel by Season,
Tho' learned astronomers, clever as Jeans,
And playwrights like G. B. S. know what it means.
To add to his crimes and to finish my fine song,
I feel quite convinced that he's written the Stein Song!⁴⁰¹

What is striking about this song is the fact that it articulated the notion that *Genesis* is a work which attempts to 'prove you and I are related to negroes', a point which was avoided in the main article which focused on artistic beauty and the representation of motherhood. Indeed, this same racially motivated sentiment was echoed by other critics. Reporting in *The New York Times*, an anonymous critic articulated the same underlying racism that was buried in 'The Ep-Stein Song!'. The critic wrote: 'This repellent figure of a negroid woman is bestial to the last degree, with slanting eyes and prehensible lips.'⁴⁰² As well as negative reactions within the tabloids, *Genesis* was ill-received by many 'serious' critics. Writing in *The Daily Telegraph*, R. R. Tatlock described *Genesis* as 'a statue unfit to show' and took issue with Epstein's representation of maternity:

Both in ancient and modern art fecundity has been represented many times with the delicacy and reverence proper to the theme. [...] Epstein goes out of

⁴⁰¹ Anon., 'The Ep-Stein Song' in, *The Daily Mirror*, (February 6th, 1931)

⁴⁰² Anon., 'Epstein Raises a New British Art Storm' in, *The New York Times*, (March 29th, 1931), p.11

his way to impress us, not with his sense of beauty (a sense which he certainly possesses), but with what is ugly, and does not hesitate to thrust upon us a vision of maternity, usually treated as a thing sacred, that can only repel and cannot conceivably delight or entertain.⁴⁰³

It is interesting that such opinions, though expressed differently, are shared by a wide variety of critics. Even *The Times*, which usually gave Epstein positive reviews, found *Genesis* unbearable. The article began with the critic declaring: 'There are two Mr. Jacob Epsteins: one is a powerful and expressive modeller for reproductions in bronze, and the other is, or behaves like, the sculptor hero of a bad novel.'⁴⁰⁴ Epstein's apparent dual nature is a theme which has caused much discomfort amongst critics. *The Times*' critic described Epstein's skill as a modeller as 'masterly' and argued that 'the extraordinary vitality of his work as a modeller made him 'reluctant to see him attempting any other form of sculpture.' It is quite telling that the critic paid most attention to Epstein's modelled work, dismissing *Genesis* almost completely out of hand, whilst acknowledging that *Genesis* 'is the work that is most likely to be talked about', but wrote that it 'has very little sculptural interest, and it represents a terrible waste of good marble and of the time and energy that might have been devoted to the production of such works of art.'⁴⁰⁵ Perhaps we can ascribe this reaction to the critic being unable to fathom or articulate the work's meaning, and thus avoiding a direct engagement with difficult subject matter.

In *The Manchester Guardian*, critic 'J. B.' saw *Genesis* as one of Epstein's most profound works in terms of emotional content, but argued that considered in sculptural terms, *Genesis* was weak when viewed as 'pure form.' J. B. described the work thus:

[Epstein] has brooded for several years over the "Genesis" and it represents a definite phase of his art. His early cubic "Venus" and his later "Maternity" in different styles prepared the way. The figure is a primitive, almost simian, pregnant woman, stark and expressive, with something terrible in it like birth itself, transcending the properties of life [...] The face has a blind dignity and

⁴⁰³ Tatlock, R. R., 'A Statue Unfit to Show' in, *The Daily Telegraph*, (February 7th, 1931)

⁴⁰⁴ Anon., 'Art Exhibitions: Leicester Galleries' in, *The Times*, (February 7th, 1931), p.10

⁴⁰⁵ Anon., 'Art Exhibitions: Leicester Galleries', p.10

pathos, and the forms mount up in strange rhythm from the vast limbs set in a rough base through emphatic stages to the head with its hard mass of hair.⁴⁰⁶

Again, the critic had trouble articulating his sense of awe when confronted with the work's emotive forcefulness, whilst simultaneously finding the composition weak and the forms inconsistent. He was unable to synthesise these issues in any way which was useful. The critic continued:

A weakness is a wavering between naturalism and formalised shape in the treatment of some of the parts. Like all original works of art, it is not a work which one can quickly form an estimate, but at first study one would not rank it with one of his best.⁴⁰⁷

The debates surrounding Epstein meant that *Genesis* was the topic of many conversations over the following months. Reports of well-known figures offering their opinion on *Genesis* appeared frequently in the Press. For example, a short extract of Lord Moynihan's after-dinner speech to the centenary dinner of the Royal Institute of Painters in Watercolours found its way into the gossip pages of *The Manchester Guardian*. He was reported to have said in his speech:

That extraordinary production "Genesis" is not really deliberately ugly. I suggest it is the sensitive and keenly appreciative mind of an artist which is feeling and recording something which I am incapable of distinguishing – something indicating perhaps a new genesis, a new birth in the world to come.⁴⁰⁸

What interests me particularly about this article and those like it, is the sense in which commentators feel the need to articulate not only their opinion of the work's virtues, but more interestingly, there exists a real attempt by these writers to try to fathom *Genesis* in all of its complexities. What makes these articles so complex, and it can be said of much criticism relating to Epstein, is that they seem incredibly partisan and emotionally charged. It is as if we have two factions, the supporters and the detractors, shouting their opinions as loud as possible thus rendering the middle-ground silent. As I will argue in more detail later, the incongruity of elements within *Genesis* is not something which can easily be

⁴⁰⁶ 'J. B.', 'Mr. Epstein's New Work' in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (February 7th, 1931), p.14

⁴⁰⁷ 'J. B.', 'Mr. Epstein's New Work' p.14

⁴⁰⁸ Anon., 'A Defence of Epstein's "Genesis"' in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (March 25th, 1931), p.8

synthesised. However, there is virtue in the incongruity. The inconstancies present in *Genesis* are not accidental on Epstein's part, and it actually forms an integral part of the work's meaning.

On 15th March, it was reported in the *New York Times* that Epstein's *Genesis* had been sold to an anonymous English collector the previous day. The report stated that:

Neither the purchaser's name nor the price was revealed.

Mr. Epstein said today he was satisfied with the transaction.

"As for the price, it does not really interest me," he said. "I am an artist. If money were my object I should not have produced the work I have."

He added that the offer he accepted was one of several, all from England.⁴⁰⁹

Speaking in *The Manchester Guardian* the following day, Epstein gave further details of the transaction, explaining that: 'The work has been bought by an English collector, and will remain in this country. At the moment I cannot disclose the name of the purchaser or the price that has been given.'⁴¹⁰ When a reporter spoke to Cecil Philips (a partner at the Leicester Galleries), he gave a somewhat different version of events: Epstein could not disclose the price or the name of the buyer simply because, according to Cecil Philips, he was unaware of either. His claim that the offer 'was one of several offers' was also cast into doubt, as Philips remarked: 'The deal was only concluded this morning. Mr. Epstein does not yet know who is the purchaser and we cannot give the name at the moment. Offers for the work have not been numerous.'⁴¹¹

Genesis was sold to architect and M.P. Alfred Bossom and was offered to the Tate Gallery as a gift and was subsequently rejected by the trustees. It was then offered to the Tate as a loan, which again they refused. Bossom decided to send *Genesis* on a multi-city tour around the country to raise money for various charitable causes. The sensation surrounding *Genesis* reignited each time the work was moved to a new city.

⁴⁰⁹ Anon., 'Epstein Sells 'Genesis.' In, *The New York Times*, (March 15th, 1931), p.10

⁴¹⁰ Anon., "'Genesis' Sold' in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (March 15th, 1931), p.15

⁴¹¹ Anon., "'Genesis' Sold', p.15

One of the first stops on *Genesis*'s tour was Manchester. The exhibition was announced in *The Manchester Guardian* on 9th April 1931:

“Genesis,” by Jacob Epstein, to be shown in the City Art Gallery [...] will be on view early next week and will remain in Manchester, at any rate, for a couple of months. [...]

The Art Gallery Committee was not unanimous in desiring to put “Genesis” on exhibition in Manchester. Some members were most strongly opposed to doing so, but the majority felt that the work, whether one liked it or not, was notable and a thing that the citizens should have an opportunity to judge for themselves.⁴¹²

And judge they did. According to the reports, over 6,000 visitors viewed *Genesis* on its opening day in Manchester; an average of 1,000 people per hour (the Manchester Art Gallery was open from 12pm-6pm on a Wednesday). The following day, this number increased to over 13,000.⁴¹³ A reporter described the scene as follows:

From the moment of opening yesterday until six o'clock in the evening, when the gallery closed, a thick stream of people poured continuously through the turnstiles and through the luncheon hour the congestion was so great – a column four or five deep extended from the pavement in Mosley street all the way up to the exhibition gallery itself – that attendants had considerable difficulty in keeping the crowd moving.⁴¹⁴

With such chaotic scenes, it must have been difficult for the patrons to get a sufficient glimpse of *Genesis*, let alone spend sufficient time with the work to experience it properly.

The following day it was announced that:

Because of the large number of visitors to the Manchester City Art Gallery to see the Persian Exhibition and Epstein's “Genesis,” it was decided yesterday to keep both exhibitions open till seven o'clock in the evening, instead of six, until further notice.⁴¹⁵

With so many people wanting to get a glimpse of *Genesis*, complaints were made to The Manchester Watch Committee by the Moral Welfare Association, who wanted *Genesis* to

⁴¹² Anon., “‘Genesis’ Coming to Manchester” in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (April 9th, 1931), p.5

⁴¹³ Anon., ‘Crowds at the Art Gallery’ in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (17th April, 1931), p.18

⁴¹⁴ Anon., ‘Crowds at the Art Gallery’, p.18

⁴¹⁵ Anon., ‘The Attraction of “Genesis”’ in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (18th April, 1931), p.13

be censored, or, at least, that young people be refused entry to the exhibit on moral grounds. No action was taken by the Watch Committee.⁴¹⁶

The hullabaloo and brouhaha surrounding *Genesis* meant that over the weeks that followed, the letters pages of *The Manchester Guardian* were full of letters trying to articulate the work's meaning, or to simply express disgust. The meanings articulated by the letter-writers in *The Manchester Guardian* vary in tone and conclusions, and are spread over a number of weeks. The main themes of the letters focused upon five main issues: the racial, maternal, moral, religious and aesthetic characteristics of the work. There are also a number of letters which simply articulate a sense of bafflement when confronted by *Genesis*. For example, a letter writer who signed S. Holden Wood wrote, 'Lik [*sic*] many others I visited the Art Gallery on Wednesday to see Epstein's "Genesis" and like many others cannot comprehend or behold its message.'⁴¹⁷ At first glance, this seems a somewhat strange letter to publish; all it offers to the critical discourse is a sense that *Genesis* is not an easy work to understand, but it is worth considering this sentiment is just as valid as the assertions of many of the critics who have claimed to understand the work. The sense of bafflement felt by S. Holden Wood was undoubtedly felt by many other members of the public (and it must be said, many Epstein scholars) when viewing *Genesis*. After all, *Genesis* does not offer us simple answers or a coherent message; what we have is a work in which meaning is somewhat elusive and unstable.

The racial aspect of *Genesis* arose in a number of letters. In a letter dated April 16th, Arthur Leander saw *Genesis* as representing the first human. He argued that Epstein had attempted, in the face of *Genesis*, to create a synthesis between all of the 'widely different physical characteristics of the world, Chinese, negroes, Indians and Europeans.' Arguing that we all

⁴¹⁶ Anon., 'Should the Young See "Genesis"?' in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (24th April, 1931), p.9

⁴¹⁷ Holden Wood, S., 'Letters to the Editor, Epstein's "Genesis"' in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (April 18th, 1931), p.13

have a shared ancestry (Adam and Eve), it followed that they must 'have embodied a trace of every [racial] feature'. He concluded by stating that *Genesis* 'possesses a blending of all these in one being' and should thus be considered 'the mother of the whole human race'.⁴¹⁸ In this sense then, *Genesis* is seen to provide a synthesis between racial characteristics. It is a work which is seen to both embody racial categorisation whilst simultaneously transcending it.

The maternal aspect was explored in a number of letters, many of which articulated a sense that *Genesis* represented a mythologized primitive form of motherhood. Only articles written by women seemed to address the issue of maternity. It is unclear whether an editorial choice was made by *The Manchester Guardian* not to print the letters by men addressing this point, or whether it was because men were simply not prepared to address the point in writing. Dated 24th April, Muriel E. Edmunds, for example encapsulated the dominant opinions on the maternal aspects of *Genesis*:

Epstein's "Genesis" is permeated with vitality – the vitality of a primitive mother, fiercely and passionately loving her unborn child; fiercely and passionately protecting it from harm. Surely a sculpture which represents such emotion is beautiful.⁴¹⁹

What is interesting about this particular letter is that the writer expressed the idea that maternal instincts are something purely emotional. The language she used suggests that unconditional love for a child, and the maternal instinct, is somehow an act of violence. This emotion, however, is not possessed by the mother of the 1930s, but the 'primitive mother, fiercely and passionately loving her unborn child.'

In an undated press cutting from *The Birkenhead News* in the archive of the New Art Gallery Walsall, a correspondent called Margaret Towers tried to explain the meaning of

⁴¹⁸ Leander, Arthur, 'Letters to the Editor, Epstein's "Genesis"' in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (April 18th, 1931), p.13

⁴¹⁹ Edmunds, Muriel E., 'Epstein's "Genesis"' in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (April 27th, 1931), p.16

Genesis ‘through a woman’s eyes’.⁴²⁰ Towers saw *Genesis* as a work which embodied a number of contradictions: ‘Brooding, remote – pathetic, majestic – powerful, yet infinitely helpless.’⁴²¹ Essentially viewing *Genesis* as a part-human, part-animal hybrid, Towers developed the idea that *Genesis* was a work which expressed God’s grand design of evolution. By drawing on Biblical and Darwinist themes, Towers attempted to show how *Genesis* was a symbolic embodiment of the synthesis of Christian theology and Darwinist evolutionary theory. She explained:

Not far removed from the animal-kingdom is that brooding face, where parturition, birth, is easy, almost a thing of a moment and forgotten in a moment. But lo, the creature has received the Divine Spark, has caught a glimpse of a wondrous plan. Evolution!⁴²²

Towers expounded a sense of *Genesis*’s eternal themes, that even though the work may be subject to negative criticism, *Genesis* would remain silent and would outlive its critics. It is only with hindsight that the true value of *Genesis* will be realised, as Towers suggested:

Hostility, side-by-side with a vulgar sniggering, bewilderment, amusement, disgust, shocked prudishness – crude curiosity, shame – a rare gleam – oh, so terribly rare – of understanding, recognition, awe, flash at her, in her isolation, The people stare, mock, comment, and pass on! *Genesis* remains!⁴²³

The meaning of *Genesis*, Towers argued, relates to the notion of the ‘eternal mother’ (both in the sense of an abstract, primeval mother of humanity (‘[in *Genesis*] mankind glimpses the intent of the Supreme Master Hand shape our destinies’), and also in the sense that a mother’s bond with her child does not end at birth but continues until her death (‘Never from the moment of birth, through adolescence and maturity does a mother know peace’)).

Towers challenged those who criticised *Genesis* on the grounds of ugliness by arguing that:

“Uncouth, distorted, ugly” – are some of the epithets freely used by the passing crowd. But life itself, which is but in process of “becoming,” is all these – painful and incredibly bitter as we now view it, especially in these post-war

⁴²⁰ Towers, Margaret, ‘Epstein’s *Genesis* Through a Woman’s Eyes’ in, *The Birkenhead News* (Undated press cutting, New Art Gallery, Walsall archive).

⁴²¹ Towers, Margaret, ‘Epstein’s *Genesis* Through a Woman’s Eyes’

⁴²² Towers, Margaret, ‘Epstein’s *Genesis* Through a Woman’s Eyes’

⁴²³ Towers, Margaret, ‘Epstein’s *Genesis* Through a Woman’s Eyes’

days, but surely bearing within its distorted semblance, the embryo of a beautiful, gracious, more highly-evolved life.⁴²⁴

Towers related the ugliness of *Genesis* to the ugliness of war. Though war itself is seen as negative and brutal, it can result in peace and security. Towers seemed to believe that within *Genesis* was not another part-human, part-animal hybrid, but a 'beautiful, gracious, more highly-evolved life.' This is an interesting leap of faith by Towers.

There existed in Towers' article a willingness by the author to articulate the meaning of *Genesis*; this was something which was largely sidestepped by many male critics. Indeed, *Genesis* was a work which called on criticism, not from Epstein's usual critic, 'the man in the street', but specifically 'the woman in the street' who attended to dealing with the maternal and emotional aspects of the work. We see that a number of publications called upon women to give their assessment of *Genesis*. The reasons for this can only be surmised, but it is plausible that it points towards a particular prudishness by men at the time to discuss the issues relating to pregnancy and motherhood. Note that much of the criticism given by male critics emphasised the work's sculptural form, whereas much of the criticism presented by women emphasised the work's emotional and vital content.

Many male letter writers attempted to understand *Genesis* on formal aesthetic grounds alone, often coming to the conclusion that *Genesis* was a failed sculpture, but that there was something else, something which could not be talked about which made *Genesis* work as a piece of art. As noted above, Richard Cork, L. B. Powell, Kinton Parkes and R. H. Wilenski have all noted problems with the formal composition of *Genesis*. In a letter printed in *The Manchester Guardian* on 1st May, and signed 'M. H. B.', the privilege of aesthetic concerns over those which can be described as emotive, subjective or vital were clearly expressed:

⁴²⁴ Towers, Margaret, 'Epstein's *Genesis* Through a Woman's Eyes'

Sir,—"Genesis" is to be with us till June. Perhaps, then, there is an excuse for mentioning her again, for few of those who have written to "The Manchester Guardian" have touched on the æsthetic issue. Nevertheless, æsthetics should be our chief concern, for the statue is exhibited as a work of art.⁴²⁵

M. H. B. followed this by listing a series of questions that must be asked of an art work when judging it. He asked whether a work's subject matter had 'been conceived in terms of design, as rhythmic and harmonious relationships of form'. He argued that a work of art's inherent meaning should only be understood through the 'organic unities of form in which the ideas are inherent', as if by considering the lines and dimensions of *Genesis* one could somehow formulate the work's meaning.

There is a great tension in M. H. B.'s discourse. On the one hand, he rejects the importance of understanding art from an emotional or subjective viewpoint. On the other, M. H. B. wrote that:

I imagine that those people are right who say that Epstein has expressed his idea of woman "in the beginning" - a creature subhuman, the lamp of spirit hardly yet alight. [...] But the form? Has the figure the self-contained life of art, animating and uniting each part? To find this out we must study at length. Æsthetic values reveal themselves only to the lover.⁴²⁶

M. H. B. gave concessions to a subjective reading, but then rejected this in favour of the more noble consideration of 'æsthetic values'. To M. H. B., the subjective reading was somehow amateurish, believing that the true meaning of *Genesis* can only be revealed through lengthy study by a 'real' art lover of lines, rhythm and form.

Noting that *Genesis*'s display in the Manchester City Art Gallery was inadequate to provide a full aesthetic consideration of the work, he attempted it anyway:

Consider, for example, the head and shoulders from the back. The longer we look at them the less of this inner rhythm do we find. The back of the head; the two plaits of hair; the half-hidden neck; the shoulder bones and blades, which look, under their covering of skin and muscle, like a pair of inflated lungs-all

⁴²⁵ 'M. H. B.', "'Genesis" Revisited: Æsthetic Values' in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (May 1st, 1931),

p.11

⁴²⁶ 'M. H. B.', "'Genesis" Revisited: Æsthetic Values', p.11

these have no connection in a formal sense. We are pulled up by jerks. The relationships are not harmonious or inevitable. They have only descriptive value, whereas in the true æsthetic idea the two elements are fused, form and content, indivisible in birth and expression. Or pause by the seats and face the statue from the front. Look at the hands. The artist has been more engrossed in the ideas they suggest than by the look of them in relation to other parts of the body. As a result they detach themselves from the surrounding forms and mar the plastic unity.⁴²⁷

Genesis is inconsistent, its rhythm is jerky and the figure lacks unity. But, this is, in essence, the point of *Genesis*. It is an assemblage of incongruous and incompatible ideas and elements; not by accident, but purposefully figured by the artist.

As well as being perceived as an aesthetic failure, *Genesis* was also the subject of much discussion relating to religious doctrine and morality. *Genesis* was even denounced as being anti-Christian. Gertrude Ashton, for example, argued that *Genesis* ‘appears to me simply as an image appropriate to some rather dubious form of nature worship in some primitive, pre-Christian mystery cult, and to exalt nothing bigger than the “dark gods” which gloom so flesh-hauntingly in the polytheism of the late D. H. Lawrence.’⁴²⁸ To some commentators, the aesthetic qualities of *Genesis* were necessarily connected to its moral qualities. Canon Peter Green of Manchester, for example, noted that there was a ‘cult of ugliness’ which attempted to debase Christian values by turning emphasis away from God and beauty. He argued that we are at a point of ‘chaos’ in ‘human ethics’ where ‘The cult of ugliness and violence are the cult of today.’ He asked if *Genesis* ‘is the best thing that modern art could do’ and urged a rejection of *Genesis* and similar forms of art, noting that the only way to recover beauty in art was to ‘go back to “Him who is of perfect beauty.”’⁴²⁹

There was no consensus on the religious aspect of the work from the Church. For example, the Reverend S. Proudfoot of Pendleton was noted for his support of *Genesis*:

⁴²⁷ ‘M. H. B.’, “‘Genesis’ Revisited: Æsthetic Values’, p.11

⁴²⁸ Ashton, Gertrude, “‘Genesis’” in, *The Manchester Guardian*. (May 16th, 1931), p.18

⁴²⁹ Green, Canon Peter, ‘Cult of Ugliness’ in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (September 2nd, 1931), p.11

When he inspected the figure he realised that he was surrounded by an atmosphere of deep reverence, combined with a sense of mystery. In this statue they [*sic*] saw a representation of motherhood which only a genius could place before the world. His definite conclusion was that “Genesis” was one of the greatest triumphs of the human mind.⁴³⁰

The religious debates surrounding *Genesis* were linked to those arguments which saw the meaning of *Genesis* as being derived from evolutionary theory. M. Lazloff, writing in *The Manchester Guardian* argued that in *Genesis*, Epstein saw ‘the birth of humanity, not enveloped and shrouded by conventional conceptions or legendary fabrications, but even isolated from the later evolutionary developments: it stands as an artistic and scientific tribute to truth.’⁴³¹ This is a very significant argument. Lazloff believed that *Genesis* should be viewed as an entirely realistic and literal depiction of early man, and considered *Genesis* to be a ‘scientific tribute to truth’.

As *Genesis* continued to be toured around England over the following year, Epstein became increasingly displeased with the way in which his work was being touted as a sideshow. Writing to *The Manchester Guardian* on 13th December, 1931, Epstein presented a written protest against the display of his work at the West Bromwich Tradesmen’s Association Christmas Exhibition at West Bromwich Town Hall; his letter was printed on 14th December:

Sirs,-In the interest of sculptors and sculpture I wish to protest against the exhibition of my marble statue called "Genesis" as a sideshow in a trade exhibition. The work does not belong to me, and I wish to dissociate myself from what I must consider an indignity. I have written to the owners of the statue and received no reply. It should be obvious to people of any sensibility that a work shown in this manner is disgraceful. I enclose the catalogue and advertisement to bear out my protest: Yours sincerely,
JACOB EPSTEIN.⁴³²

The enclosed catalogue cutting read as follows:

⁴³⁰ Anon., ‘A Clergyman’s Defence of “Genesis”’ in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (May 11th, 1931), p.10

⁴³¹ Lazloff, M., ‘Epstein’s “Genesis” Beauty or Truth?’ in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (April 22nd, 1931), p.11

⁴³² Epstein, Jacob, ““Genesis” Exhibited as Side-Show “Disgraceful”” in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (December 14th, 1931)

By the Courtesy of the Proprietors, Mr. and Mrs. A. Bossom,
We are enabled to display for the first time in any trades exhibition,

GENESIS.
By Epstein.

The Mystery of Life.
The Wonderful Creation.
Attracts as it Repulses.

Proceeds to Your Local Hospital.
Admission Threepence⁴³³

When approached by *The Manchester Guardian* to comment on the affair, Alfred Bossom pleaded ignorance to the advertisement in question and noted that he was unaware when he had agreed to loan the sculpture in good faith that *Genesis* was to be exhibited as part of a larger exhibition:

“When we were asked to loan 'Genesis' Mrs. Bossom and I did not know it was to be shown in connection with any other exhibition. I received a letter from Mr. Epstein only yesterday, and I immediately telegraphed to West Bromwich Town Hall making inquiry. I received the reply: 'Genesis not with trade exhibits. Separate for hospital funds. Writing.-HUGHES.' Mr. Hughes, I understand, is an organiser of the exhibition. The present placing on view of 'Genesis' is therefore exactly on a par with the exhibition of the statue in Manchester, Liverpool, and other cities. The statue has always been exhibited as an individual work of art, and so far as finance goes it has never been loaned for any other purpose than aiding charity.” Referring to the wording of the advertisement, Mr. Bossom said, “Obviously we were not consulted about that in any way.”⁴³⁴

Epstein protested again, raising the issue of the work's integrity in its setting and highlighting the risk to *Genesis* from damage while in transit:

“I have first-hand information from people who have seen how the statue is placed. They tell me that it is in a position where it forms part of what is called a model bungalow. These people wrote to me in protest. They wondered whether I had anything to do with the exhibition. I have protested before against the way this marble statue has been taken about the country, it may suffer almost any damage. There are its surroundings in exhibition to be considered. I did not complain in the case of Leeds; there the statue was shown in an art gallery.”

Asked whether the charging of a separate entrance fee for the viewing of "Genesis" affected his protest, Mr. Epstein said : “That does not alter my

⁴³³ Epstein, Jacob, ““Genesis” Exhibited as Side-Show “Disgraceful””

⁴³⁴ Epstein, Jacob, ““Genesis” Exhibited as Side-Show “Disgraceful””

opinion in the least. The vulgarity of the manner in which the statue is advertised is sufficient for me. I am disgusted.”⁴³⁵

It was also the opinion of an unnamed official from West Bromwich Council that the display of *Genesis* removed the work of its dignity and integrity, likening the display to a sideshow, but noting that the Council were not in any position to dictate the display of the work:

"The Council has nothing to do with the arrangement of the exhibition, having simply let the Town Hall for it. I quite agree that the statue is shown in a very unsuitable manner. It is in a corridor with a small piece of imitation green grass in front of the statue, and there are some small trees and floral pots alongside. The effect is incongruous and very bad. Many people have simply looked at it and laughed. They do not understand. They think it is an amusing sideshow.”⁴³⁶

This exhibition can be seen as a pivotal point in Epstein’s career. Before this show, his work had been displayed in many art establishments as serious works of art. The exhibition of *Genesis* in this setting can be seen as the point which laid the foundation for some of Epstein’s other carvings being shown in Blackpool as part of a sideshow. This exhibition allowed Epstein’s work to be laughed at by the public and thus made Epstein’s work fair game for ridicule.

Interestingly, Emily Bossom, the wife of Albert Bossom wrote to *The Manchester Guardian* in order to justify and clarify the Bossoms’ position regarding the use of *Genesis*. She argued that Epstein should be happy that his work ‘has achieved usefulness’ by raising money for various charitable causes:

"Mr. Jacob Epstein in his letter that you published on December 14 is under a misconception in protesting against the exhibition of 'Genesis' in a side-show in a trade exhibition.

I was asked to loan the statue to the West Bromwich Town Hall, where it might be shown in aid of the West Bromwich Children's Hospital, and I complied with the request. The fact that a trade show is being held in the Town Hall separately but at the same time is not one for which I can take any

⁴³⁵ Epstein, Jacob, ““Genesis” Exhibited as Side-Show “Disgraceful””

⁴³⁶ Epstein, Jacob, ““Genesis” Exhibited as Side-Show “Disgraceful””

responsibility. If, however, it has resulted in 'Genesis' being displayed in an inappropriate surrounding I regret it just as much as Mr. Epstein himself.

"May I add that at the request of local authorities and institutions 'Genesis' has been exhibited in Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, Cambridge, Leicester, and Leeds, and has been seen by nearly half a million people, the very great majority of whom have paid to do so? In every case where a charge has been made the proceeds - amounting to many thousands of pounds - have been given to charities, picture galleries, or devoted to the preservation of historic buildings in the neighbourhood.

"I see that Mr. Epstein says: 'I have written to the owners of the statue and received no reply.' No letter from Mr. Epstein has reached either my husband or myself, yet in spite of Mr. Epstein's protest the statue has achieved a usefulness which, I am sure, must have been gratifying to him."⁴³⁷

Here, Emily Bossom attempted to undermine Epstein's credibility by noting that: 'No letter from Mr. Epstein has reached either my husband or myself,' however, when we look back at Alfred Bossom's letter of December 14th we see that this is simply not true. Bossom himself wrote that: 'I received a letter from Mr. Epstein only yesterday, and I immediately telegraphed to West Bromwich Town Hall making inquiry.'⁴³⁸ There is maybe a chance that Emily Bossom was unaware of Epstein's letter, the telegram, the letter sent by her husband and the newspaper article of the 14th, but this seems unlikely. What is more likely is that she tried to make herself look altruistic by emphasising the charitable nature of the exhibition whilst simultaneously sidestepping the debate by claiming ignorance. Epstein, unsurprisingly, took exception to this:

"I am not interested in being regarded as a benefactor of mankind. I am an artist," declared Mr. Epstein last night, when his attention was drawn to Mrs. Bossom's letter.

"The reference to charities does not concern me in the least" he said. "I see no reason to be gratified by Mrs. Bossom's statement that many thousands of pounds have been raised by the exhibition of 'Genesis.' As an artist I protest that the work is shown in a most unsuitable manner. In effect, at any rate, it is part of a trade show, and that is not the environment in which a statue should be seen. One has only to look at the catalogue of the exhibition to see the real position.

⁴³⁷ Anon., 'Epstein Unappeased' in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (December 16th, 1931), p.9

⁴³⁸ Epstein, Jacob, "'Genesis' Exhibited as Side-Show 'Disgraceful'"

"I protest, too, at the way in which the work is moved from place to place. A painting would not stand such treatment and a statue should be treated with even more care.

"I see that Mrs. Bossom announces her intention to take 'Genesis' to America. I should like to ask if she intends to show it at Coney Island for charity or for any other purpose.

"As regards the statements that neither Mr. nor Mrs. Bossom has received a letter from me, there must be a misunderstanding somewhere. I wrote to Mr. Bossom last Thursday morning.

"It is with real sadness that I see that Mrs. Bossom has failed to call for any modification in the showing of my work."⁴³⁹

This letter shows Epstein's acute awareness of the consequences of exhibiting *Genesis* in such a way. The reference to Coney Island is ironic, essentially being the Brooklyn equivalent of Blackpool: a tawdry and seedy pleasure beach with fairground rides, peepshows, amusement arcades and freak-shows.

In March 1958, *Genesis* was sold by the Bossoms at Sotheby's for £4,200 to Louis Tussaud's waxworks in Blackpool to join *Adam, Consummation Est* and *Jacob and the Angel* already on display in the 'anatomy room' in the waxworks' basement. The Sotheby's saleroom attracted a number of pranksters; one such prank involved the placing of a bowler hat on the head of *Genesis* and photographing it. *The Times* reported the event, describing these acts as an insult to the art and the artist:

Before it [the sale] opened Sir Jacob Epstein's *Genesis* was photographed crowned by a bowler hat – a barbarous insult in keeping with the treatment this work by a great sculptor has received from the public since it first appeared at the Leicester Galleries nearly 30 years ago. It is scarcely necessary to add that such schoolboy antics were performed without the management's permission.⁴⁴⁰

As the criticism of the 1930s has shown, the meaning of *Genesis* is a discussion which has been largely evaded. However, in recent years, the meaning of *Genesis* has been explored

⁴³⁹ Anon., 'Epstein Unappeased' in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (16th December, 1931), p.9

⁴⁴⁰ Anon., "'Genesis' for Tussaud's at Blackpool' in, *The Times*, (27th March, 1958), p.4

by two notable art historians: Raquel Gilboa and Anne Middleton Wagner. We will now turn to unpacking and examining their respective approaches to the meaning of *Genesis*.

In her MA thesis, *Mythic Motifs in the Sculptural Works of Jacob Epstein*,⁴⁴¹ Raquel Gilboa explored what she termed the ‘mythic motifs’ in Epstein’s work. Gilboa began by dividing Epstein’s work into distinct categories:

The sculptural oeuvre of Jacob Epstein (1880-1959) which encompasses 528 works can be divided into two distinct groups: on the one hand, portraits or busts of personalities, most of which were commissions that provided his bread; on the other hand, a smaller group of 82 sculptures which the artist made usually for his own pleasure and in most cases remained unsold.⁴⁴²

Gilboa, here, has made the mistake that many critics and scholars of Epstein have in the past; namely, to create a dual character of Epstein. Once we begin to unpack this dualism we realise that these distinctions are too simplistic and create more problems than they solve. These categories allow a conceptual distinction between works based on arbitrary qualifications such as whether a work was carved, or whether its title was abstract. Gilboa focused upon the works she identified as containing ‘mythic motifs’; namely, those works which pertain to, or suggest a universal idea or concept. She explained:

The sculptures of the last group are called by names which express universal subjects like “Mother and Child”, abstract names like “Genesis” and names like “Sun God” derived from mythologies. This obvious emphasis on content enables the viewer to find a mythic motif, that is: a universal fundamental motif [...] in any sculpture which is not a portrait.⁴⁴³

This only emphasises further the limitations of categorizing works within such simplistic divisions. Many of Epstein’s monumental bronze works which represented mythic or spiritual themes were often simultaneously portraits (works such as *The Risen Christ* (1917-19), *Madonna and Child* (1926-27) and *Lucifer* (1946) for example). Within the category of

⁴⁴¹ Gilboa, Raquel, *Mythic Motifs in the Sculptural Work of Jacob Epstein*. (Unpublished MA Thesis, Tel Aviv University 1998)

⁴⁴² Gilboa, Raquel, *Mythic Motifs in the Work of Jacob Epstein*, p.7

⁴⁴³ Gilboa, Raquel, *Mythic Motifs in the Work of Jacob Epstein*, p.8

‘mythic’ works, Gilboa further identified 29 sculptures which express the motif of ‘life-creation’:

[A]mong the 82 sculptures, 29 form a distinctive group which may be included under the umbrella-title “Life-Creation”, that is – they express phenomena connected with procreation, such as mating, birth, newborn babies, children and parenthood.⁴⁴⁴

The ‘life-creation’ motif can be seen as a useful division, as it does provide a conceptual link between a number of works. The categorical demarcation of what constitutes a work relating to life-creation does, of course, require further examination and should be considered in the most general of terms. However, at the present moment, it is a useful term to help us to understand *Genesis*.

Gilboa dedicated several pages within her thesis to exploring the meaning of *Genesis* in relation to its ‘mythic motifs’. Interestingly, Gilboa looked to the symbolism of the work to demonstrate the meaning of *Genesis* as a broadly religious Venus:

In ‘Genesis’, the sculptural concept of the female posing with her body a backward-forward movement of “S” and presenting the swollen belly presents only one facet of the female’s entity, and thus seems to be a narrower contextual concept than “Venus”. Epstein, however, complicates this apparent simplicity by presenting in ‘Genesis’ a mixture of formal and conceptual sources:

- the formal elements are a mixture of the traditional presentation of Venus Pudica (the hand near the vulva) with a body movement influenced by African sculpture, and a non-European face given to a European concept.

- the content is a mixture of pagan, Hebrew and Christian elements: the name points to Eve and one hand movement is traditionally related to “Venus Pudica” the movement of the other hand characterizes pregnancy, also that of the Virgin Mary.

[...] To the same category are related similar sculptures (‘Maternity’ of The Strand Sculptures, 1908; ‘Maternity’, 1910; ‘Woman in Flinit’ [*sic*] and ‘Figure in Flenit’ [*sic*] 1914; ‘Visitation’, 1927; altogether in this category – 6 works.⁴⁴⁵

⁴⁴⁴ Gilboa, Raquel, *Mythic Motifs in the Work of Jacob Epstein*, p.8

⁴⁴⁵ Gilboa, Raquel, *Mythic Motifs in the Work of Jacob Epstein*, p.23

It is difficult to determine what Gilboa's terms of definition are for such categorisation. It seems a little odd that in defining a category of works which loosely link the motif of Venus with that of 'life-creation', she failed to include Epstein's two statues of *Venus* (1913-15). After all, Gilboa included the carvings in Flenite, so it is not abstraction which is the limiting factor. The two statues of *Venus* present the swollen bellies of pregnancy, and their name is explicit in linking the works to the depiction of the mythological character of Venus.

Interestingly though, when we compare the depiction of *Genesis* with the mythological character of Venus, it is apparent that there is little relationship between them, and *Genesis* moreover, can be seen to provide an antithesis of Venus. Venus is often characterised as the giver of beauty and sexual attraction, often presented smiling mockingly to the spectator. The focus on the work's title is also problematic. Though there are obvious links to the Old Testament, we have to be careful not to allow our understanding of *Genesis* be dictated by the contents of the Biblical chapter of the same name and consider the concept of genesis in its broadest sense as relating to origins.

Genesis can be seen as a work which is broadly religious. As Gilboa noted, *Genesis* is a work which points to Christian, Hebrew and Pagan themes. This, it can be argued, is related to the universal nature of the 'life-creation' motif, a theme which could arguably be related to any number of religious doctrines. The notion of an abstract, universal theme is more useful than tagging *Genesis* onto a particular set of beliefs.

Gilboa wrote that *Genesis* contained within it two distinct meanings, one explicit meaning and one implicit meaning:

Epstein's sculptural work on the motif of The Female-Creator, therefore, accentuates two ideas – the unity of the archetypes Venus-Demeter and the

female's potential for creation of life respectively. As the motif of Demeter in the first concept is also a metaphor for the Female Life-Creator, the common denominator of the two sculptural concepts is their being an explicit expression of the female potential for creating life.

In light of this emphasised explicit meaning, I suggest that the hidden implicit meaning is the male envy of this potential; this subconscious envy, the "womb-envy", is the common mythic motif in Epstein's work that corresponds to the Female Life-Creator motif. The "womb-envy", as explained by psychology, springs from a deep unfulfilled need in the male because nature appointed the female as life-giver.

As compensation for the female's notable potential, manifested by pregnancy, Culture invented images-in-prose in which human-beings are created by a male god. But as things had to be settled in accordance with nature, the male god creates the first human couple, after which Culture transmits the power of life-giving to the female. Such images of male creators constitute a part, although a small one, of Epstein's work.⁴⁴⁶

The explicit meaning is that of an expectant mother. The implicit meaning relating to 'womb-envy' is of great interest and is an issue which we explored in relation to *The Rock Drill* in an earlier chapter, but is one which is perhaps not as simple as 'womb-envy', but is linked more to a desire by Epstein to father a child with his wife, who, as mentioned earlier, never gave birth to any children of her own. Perhaps the term 'child-envy' would be considered more suitable to Epstein's case than 'womb-envy'.

Anne Middleton Wagner has presented the most thorough examination of *Genesis* to date. Writing in her book *Mother Stone*,⁴⁴⁷ Wagner explored the carved work of Epstein, Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth in the interwar years, asking why the theme of maternity was so prevalent in the wake of the mechanised slaughter of the First World War. In the chapter entitled '(De)generation', Wagner provides an extended reading of *Genesis* which attends to dealing with the complexities of such an inconsistent work. Essentially, Wagner argued that *Genesis* is a work which presents a racially complex pregnant woman who is 'apparently so

⁴⁴⁶ Gilboa, Raquel, *Mythic Motifs in the Work of Jacob Epstein*, p.24

⁴⁴⁷ Wagner, Anne Middleton, *Mother Stone: The Vitality of Modern British Sculpture*, (Yale University Press, 2005)

African in inspiration, yet also blindingly white.⁴⁴⁸ Wagner saw *Genesis* as an attempt by Epstein to offer synthesis to a number of artistic and philosophical debates, noting that in *Genesis* Epstein attempted to lay claim to:

realism *and* abstracted composition, to portrait *and* allegory, to past *and* present, to Africa *and* Europe, to the sacred *and* the secular, to the Christian *and* the scientific, to the raced female body both as physically present, available, *and* as modern dreamscape, an inflated, disjunctive, and mechanical terrain.⁴⁴⁹

This, one could argue, is slightly missing the point of *Genesis*. Epstein did not try to offer a synthesis of these seeming oppositions, but presented them in a way which emphasised the impossibility of synthesis. The oppositions are present, but any notion of synthesis is kept at bay by Epstein in very conscious way.

The inconsistency of *Genesis* is cleverly sidestepped by Wagner. By showing that the face of *Genesis* is a mask, Wagner answered the critics who complained that the relationship of forms in *Genesis* is inconsistent by revealing the fully intentioned inclusion of an African-style mask. This argument provided the core of Wagner's discourse, writing that: 'I think Epstein's marble also operates via likeness and difference, most clearly as it presents a body whose visage might be a mask.'⁴⁵⁰ The use of the modal verb 'might' here is very important and renders Wagner's argument very difficult to engage with fully. She notes that 'the figure both does and does not wear a mask.'⁴⁵¹ Wagner acknowledges that there is nothing integral to the sculpture itself which suggests a mask. There are no demarcations which suggest a mask. If anything, looking at the sculpture itself would suggest something different: a face with the appearance of a mask, but not actually a mask. Wagner continued:

if the face *is* a mask, this is certainly in part because of its fixity of expression and the emptiness of its eyes. Above all this impression results from the way in which the whole massive oval is carved: though not fully symmetrical, each

⁴⁴⁸ Wagner, Anne Middleton, *Mother Stone: The Vitality of Modern British Sculpture*, p.210

⁴⁴⁹ Wagner, Anne Middleton, *Mother Stone: The Vitality of Modern British Sculpture*, p.211 (Wagner's emphasis.)

⁴⁵⁰ Wagner, Anne Middleton, *Mother Stone: The Vitality of Modern British Sculpture*, p.214

⁴⁵¹ Wagner, Anne Middleton, *Mother Stone: The Vitality of Modern British Sculpture*, p.214

feature (the nose, for example) is faceted like some large and rough cut. The great flanks of hair – twin braided plaits – hang well behind the neck and visage, so as to set off the main oval.⁴⁵²

By writing in this non-committal way, Wagner does not actually provide a solid argument; she treads a strange logical path which can encompass both tautology and contradiction, because she has refused to commit to a line of argument. This said, much of Wagner's discourse rests on an articulation of a theoretical understanding of 'the mask', derived from the writings of Claude Levi-Strauss, in which she invests much faith. Of course, if Wagner is mistaken, she will be able to fall back on the clause that she used the word 'might' and did not actually commit fully to her argument. Let us for a moment explore the line of argument that *Genesis* is wearing a mask. Wagner's key arguments rest upon this notion:

how they worked within a system of likeness of difference extensive enough to structure a self-sustaining social world. Which is to say, he grasped that mask and myth, when actively deployed together, both explained and determined how humans lived and died, and how their existence tied them to other humans and animals, as well as to the gods and cosmos.⁴⁵³

Wagner's arguments relating to masks strike me as being somewhat problematic. Although an engaging and intelligently argued case, the reading of *Genesis* as a pregnant woman wearing a mask does not follow from any evidence integral to the sculpture. The use of the mask to explain *Genesis* can be seen as insightful, but also problematic, yet there still remains a number of unresolved and irresolvable incongruities within *Genesis*.

It was the efforts in intellectual history over the previous century which culminated in the inversion or rejection of origins. Writers such as Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud, had systematically inverted or denied the notion of a single origin. The notion of a single origin had pervaded Western metaphysics since Plato, so we need to consider *Genesis* within the context of this radical paradigm shift.⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵² Wagner, Anne Middleton, *Mother Stone: The Vitality of Modern British Sculpture*, p.215

⁴⁵³ Wagner, Anne Middleton, *Mother Stone: The Vitality of Modern British Sculpture*, p.214

⁴⁵⁴ The single origin (or logos) has been conceived of in a number of ways: spirit, mind, God, genetics, society, are all examples.

Debates surrounding origins through the 1920s and 1930s informed both the production and reception of *Genesis*. When we look at the debates surrounding religion and science during this period, we can see that many elements of our worldview were being overturned. Advances in archaeology, biology, quantum physics and astronomy challenged Judeo-Christianity's authority of the knowledge of our origins. Discoveries in science began to answer questions about the origins of life, the universe and primitive man; these discoveries were often at odds with Judeo-Christian dogma. As a man who was both rational and spiritual, Epstein expressed the problematic relationship of science and religion through *Genesis*.

The lack of aesthetic and conceptual unity embodied by *Genesis* can be seen as an attempt by Epstein to communicate the incompatible ideas relating to debates surrounding the origins of life and the universe which were being challenged in the 1920s and 1930s. *Genesis* is a work which calls into question the very notion of a singular originator, or perhaps more specifically, *Genesis* articulates the notion that a singular originator is something which can no longer be considered to be a valid argument.

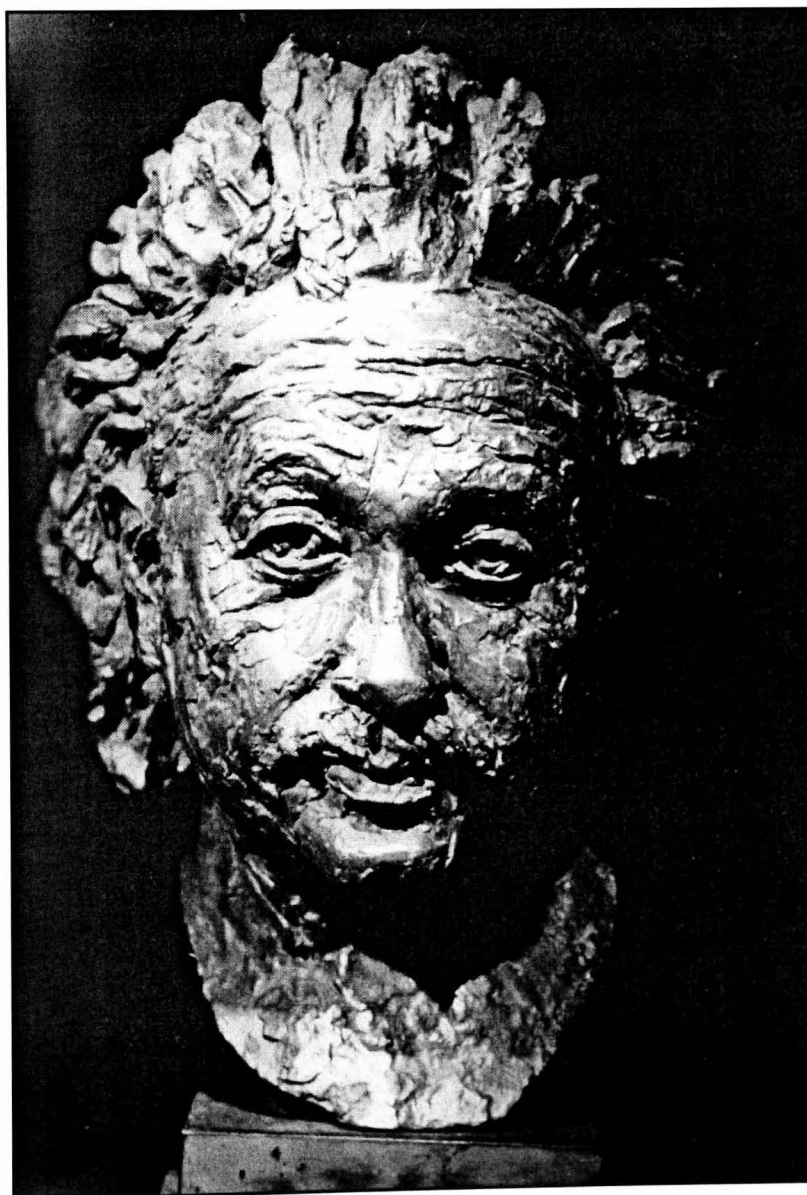
In our next chapter, we will examine the production and exhibition of *Albert Einstein* and explore some of the perceived conceptual links between Epstein and Einstein which were pointed to by their contemporaries.

* * *

Carving a Legacy: Part Three

Selected Works: Albert Einstein (1933)

Jacob Epstein's portrait of Albert Einstein was modelled over seven days in September 1933. The portrait was commissioned by Commander Locker-Lampson, MP and is considered to be one of Epstein's finest and most impressionistic portrait sculptures. With its rough surface treatment, the sculpture is full of vitality; the play of shadows on the surface creates the illusion of movement and the surface appears to flicker. The work itself is little more than a mask and considered incomplete by the artist. The purpose of this chapter is to unpack and examine the events surrounding the conception of Epstein's bronze bust *Albert Einstein* and its critical reception.



Albert Einstein, (1933)

Epstein provided only a cursory discussion of *Albert Einstein* in his autobiography, providing an anecdotal account of the experience of producing the portrait (unfortunately, Einstein himself failed to mention the experience in his own autobiography). There has been very little useful scholarship on *Albert Einstein*. Robert Black, Richard Buckle, Stephen Gardiner and June Rose all reproduce the anecdotal evidence provided by Epstein about the conception of the work, other scholars chose to overlook the work, or mention it in passing. Only Evelyn Silber has added anything useful to Epstein's account, situating the work within the aesthetic context of Epstein's other portraits noting that:

Einstein is the roughest and most impressionistic of all his portraits partly as a result of the speed with which the work had to be done, but also because of a conscious decision to play up the Rembrandtesque humanity of his head. The intense contrasts of dark and light, the deeply broken surface, in which every fragment of clay and each modelling gesture is distinctly visible, results in a sculptural impasto. He never attempted to repeat the extreme roughness of *Einstein* and employed a much less broken finish for many of the male as well as most of the female portraits.⁴⁵⁵

By emphasising the 'painterly' qualities of the work's surface-matter, Silber points out the aesthetic uniqueness of *Albert Einstein* in relation to much of Epstein's oeuvre.

On September 11th, 1933, it was reported in *The Times* that Einstein had arrived in the UK as a refugee to escape persecution from the Nazis for his involvement in the World Committee for Help for the Victims of German Fascism, of which Einstein was a member. The Committee had published a work entitled *The Brown Book of the Hitler Terror*, and although Einstein denied any involvement in the production of the work, the Nazis offered a £1,000 reward for his assassination. Einstein was quoted as saying: 'I was not responsible for the Brown Book which has angered them. I was on the committee which authorised the publication of the book, but I did not write anything in it, although I agreed with its contents.'⁴⁵⁶ Einstein had been hiding in Belgium, but fearing for his safety and feeling guilt

⁴⁵⁵ Silber, Evelyn, *The Sculpture of Epstein with Complete Catalogue*, (Phaidon, 1986), p.43

⁴⁵⁶ Anon., 'Professor Einstein in England: A Peaceful Retreat' in, *The Times* (September 11th, 1933), p.10

for the burden he had put on those protecting him; he fled to England for a month before moving to the United States. Einstein was placed in a secret refugee camp near Cromer, in East Anglia, under the care of Commander Locker-Lampson. It was during this short time that Epstein modelled Einstein's portrait:

I had some correspondence with Commander Locker-Lampson about my working from Einstein, and we arranged for a week of sittings. I travelled to Cromer, and the following morning was driven out to the camp situated in a secluded and wild spot very near the sea.

Einstein appeared dressed very comfortably in a pullover with his wild hair floating in the wind. His glance contained a mixture of the humane, the humorous and the profound. This was a combination which delighted me. He resembled the aging Rembrandt. [...]

I worked for two hours every morning, and at the first sitting the Professor was so surrounded by tobacco smoke that I saw nothing. At the second sitting I asked him to smoke in the interval. Einstein's manner was full of charm and *bonhomie*. He enjoyed a joke and had many a jibe at the Nazi Professors, one hundred of whom in a book had condemned his theory. "Were I wrong," he said, "one Professor would have been quite enough." Also, in speaking of the Nazis, he once said: "I thought I was a Physicist, I did not bother about being a Jew until Hitler made me conscious of it." [...]

Einstein watched me work with a kind of naïve wonder, and seemed to sense that I was doing something good of him.

The sittings unfortunately had to come to a close, as Einstein was to go up to London to make a speech in the Albert Hall and then leave for America. I could have gone on with the work. It seemed to me a good start, but, as so often happens, the work had to be stopped before I had carried it to completion.⁴⁵⁷

Einstein's speech at the Royal Albert hall was given to the Refugee Assistance Committee on October 3rd and he left for the United States of October 5th, which means that Epstein's portrait was probably produced in the last week of the September.

Albert Einstein was first exhibited in December 1933, not at Epstein's usual gallery (The Leicester Galleries), but at Tooth's Gallery, New Bond Street, London. *Albert Einstein* was the only sculpture on display, the rest of the exhibition being dedicated to Epstein's colourful watercolours of Epping Forest (33 were on display at any one time, with sold

⁴⁵⁷ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, (Hulton Press, 1955), pp.77-78

pieces being replaced throughout the exhibition). The exhibition was originally set for January 18th-February 10th 1934 and was seemingly intended as an exhibition devoted to Epstein's watercolours alone. However, as Dudley Tooth wrote in a letter dated September 26th: 'If by any chance Skeaping is not ready for his Exhibition from Nov 29th to December 23rd, I will keep the date free for you instead.'⁴⁵⁸ John Skeaping did not complete his work in time, so Epstein and Skeaping swapped exhibition dates.

Albert Einstein was universally praised in the Press. A critic, writing in *The Observer*, remarked that *Albert Einstein* was one of Epstein's finest bronze portraits:

It is one of the finest bronze heads the sculptor has ever produced, dignified as a work of art and subtly expressive as a portrayal. In an inspired moment the artist not only fixed the facial features, but also fathomed and interpreted the whole personality of the German philosopher. A gentle and kindly smile plays around his lips; his deep-set, wide-opened eyes are looking far away into space, his forehead is slightly wrinkled, as if his mind were in pursuit of some new philosophic truth; the head crowned by an opulent crown of hair, which surrounds it like an aureole of flames. The work constitutes a truly magnificent tribute by a great artist to a great thinker.⁴⁵⁹

The critic of *The Times* also praised the work, again considering the work to be one of Epstein's finest portraits:

We are inclined to think that this is one of his most successful heads, for reasons which bear upon the nature of his genius. Odd as it may sound, Mr. Epstein is not at his best with subjects who are naturally "sculptural" in type. He needs complete translation into forms of bronze. With its radiating halo of hair from off the forehead, and response between the upcurved mouth and forehead lines, the head is alive with expression and yet properly "stilled" as a work in sculpture.⁴⁶⁰

The critic of *The Manchester Guardian* remarked that the work was of 'extraordinary vitality and vision, at once realistic and imaginative'.⁴⁶¹ A critic writing in *Apollo* remarked that *Albert Einstein's* effect is elevated and given a poetic quality through its context,

⁴⁵⁸ Letter from Dudley Tooth to Jacob Epstein dated September 26th, 1933. Tate Gallery Archive.

⁴⁵⁹ Anon., 'Art and Artists' in, *The Observer*, (December 10th, 1933), p.12

⁴⁶⁰ Anon., 'Art Exhibition: Mr. Jacob Epstein' in, *The Times*, (December 8th, 1933), p.12

⁴⁶¹ Anon., 'Our London Correspondent' in, *The Manchester Guardian* (January 12th 1934), p.8

surrounded as it was by Epstein's watercolours of Epping Forest. The critic notes that the portrait, though strange in conception, represents different aspects of Einstein's personality:

Surrounded by this peaceful scenery of our Epping Forest, the bronze head of Einstein seems unwittingly to have received a due poetic setting. It is a strange head, with no back to it, with the curls and wistfulness of a child and the concentration of a thinker. And the two parts of him are separated in his physiognomy. Facing the bronze one perceives the philosopher and mathematician on the right and the wistful, almost puzzled child on the left side: a babe in the wood of politics; or so might Archimedes have looked when he saw his "circles" threatened by the enemy.

The head is modelled with Epstein's usual psychological insight.⁴⁶²

Indeed, such was the quality of *Albert Einstein*, that the work was used as a benchmark for reviewing later sculptures. For example, when reviewing Epstein's exhibition of October 1937 at the Leicester Galleries, *The Times*' critic noted that:

None of the male portraits in this exhibition quite reaches the level of "Einstein" but "Professor Franz Boaz," "Sir Frank Fletcher" and "J. B. Priestley" are all portraits of astonishing vitality—and it is vitality that distinguishes Mr. Epstein from any other living sculptor.⁴⁶³

This point was also echoed by *The Manchester Guardian*'s critic who remarked of the same exhibition that Epstein's portrait of Franz Boaz is 'perhaps Epstein's most expressive head since he modelled "Einstein"'.⁴⁶⁴

The exhibition at the Tooth's Gallery was a success. By the end of the show all of the watercolours had been sold, including a number which were not exhibited, and six casts of *Albert Einstein* were sold to private individuals, commercial galleries and public bodies including the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, The Palestine Museum in Jerusalem and Chantrey Trustees for the Tate Gallery. Interestingly, the exhibition was not without incident. During a quiet period of the show, Epstein explains that *Albert Einstein* was vandalised:

⁴⁶² Anon., 'Notes of the Month' in, *Apollo*, (Volume 19, January-June, 1939), p.8

⁴⁶³ Anon., 'Consummatum Est' in, *The Times* (October 22nd, 1937), p.14

⁴⁶⁴ Anon., 'An Epstein Riddle' in, *The Manchester Guardian* (October 22nd, 1937), p.12

During the exhibition, while the Gallery was without attendants for a short time, it was discovered on the floor, fortunately only bent on to its stone pedestal which could easily be remedied. Who had overthrown it? This version bought by the Chantrey bequest, and is at present in the Tate Gallery.⁴⁶⁵

The purchase of *Albert Einstein* by the Chantrey Trustees created much speculation in the press about Epstein being nominated for the Royal Academy. For example, a 'London Correspondent' writing for *The Manchester Guardian* noted that:

The purchase by the Chantrey Trustees of Mr. Epstein's bust of Professor Einstein is a welcome event. It is a work of extraordinary vitality and vision, at once realistic and imaginative. It will stand in the Tate Gallery as a companion to the same sculptor's "Nan," which was also purchased by the Chantrey Trustees some fifteen years ago. The Chantrey Trustees are a committee of the Royal Academy with two outside advisers, and it is interesting to note in connection that, although Mr. Epstein's name has been proposed several times, I believe in the elections for new associates, he has never been elected. Perhaps the purchase of the Einstein bust is an indication of how things will go at the next election of associates which is almost due.⁴⁶⁶

Of course, Epstein never became an associate of the Royal Academy. However, *Albert Einstein* was included in the 166th Royal Academy's summer exhibition; this was the first of Epstein's works to appear at the Royal Academy. Jan Gordon, reviewing the Royal Academy exhibition in *The Observer*, praises Epstein's work:

To say that Epstein has understood Einstein might be untrue—probably there are not a dozen men alive who can understand Einstein properly—but Epstein has done something more: he has divined him by means of the bond of a great simplicity which underlies the two different types of genius and in divining him he has endowed him with a blend of that simplicity and of intellectual divinity. And divinity, as we know, is comprehensible.⁴⁶⁷

The odd quasi-religious tone was echoed by *New York Times* critic Ruth Green Harris who stated that 'The Epstein is "transcendental"'⁴⁶⁸ Talk of divinity and genius here place both Epstein and Einstein in a curious space. Interestingly, there seems to be a suggestion that the creation of a portrait of a genius must be conducted by a genius, because only they have the level of understanding to comprehend and translate 'genius' into form.

⁴⁶⁵ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, p.78

⁴⁶⁶ Anon., 'London Correspondence' in, *The Manchester Guardian* (January 12th, 1934), p.8

⁴⁶⁷ Gordon, Jan, 'The Opening of the Academy' in, *The Observer* (May 6th, 1934), p.11

⁴⁶⁸ Green Harris, Ruth, 'A Crowded, Rewarding Summer Season in London' in, *New York Times* (August 5th, 1934), p.X7

It is difficult not to draw parallels between Epstein and Einstein. They were both Jewish, and they were both following intellectual endeavours. They had both received negative criticism which stemmed from anti-Semitism, and both had produced controversial work. When we look at how Epstein spoke of Einstein, he noted that he ‘resembled the aging Rembrandt’, and much of Bernard Van Dieren’s book *Epstein* was dedicated to showing how alike Rembrandt and Epstein were.

Even within the popular press, the names Epstein and Einstein were seen as interchangeable, with a number of jokes stemming from the coupling of their names. ‘Merry Andrew’ writing ‘the Ep-Stein Song’ in *The Daily Mirror*, for example, proposed that Epstein expressed a Theory of Relativity in his artistic practise:

Now Epstein, my son, is well known to the smartest,
Of folk as the great mathematical artist,
And, though quite a few find it hard find it hard to believe it, he
Invented a theory about Relativity
Called Art for the Artless. Its principle menace is
A flat contradiction of all that’s in Genesis!⁴⁶⁹

There were also a number of other examples of this simplistic linking of Epstein and Einstein. For example, in an unsourced press cutting found in the HMI archive, there is a limerick about the ‘Family Stein’ in which the anonymous author made reference to Gertrude Stein as well:

I don’t like the family Stein,
There is Gert, there is Ep, there is Ein,
Gert’s writings are punk,
Ep’s statues are junk,
Nor can anyone understand Ein.⁴⁷⁰

What this poem, and ‘the Ep-Stein’ song clearly illustrate is that the link made between Epstein and Einstein was a simplistic one which obviously would not have happened if their names were not similar. Indeed, it would seem that the conceptual link between Epstein and

⁴⁶⁹ Anon., ‘The Ep-Stein Song’ in, *The Daily Mirror*, (6th February, 1931)

⁴⁷⁰ Henry Moore Institute Archive, 2002.79, *Three Press Cutting Albums Relating to Jacob Epstein’s Carvings, 1939-1960*, 3 Volumes, Gift of William Cartmell, c.1992,

Einstein stemmed, at least, from ignorance; though, more likely, it is a thinly veiled anti-Semitism.

In our final chapter we will examine the history and Christian reception of one of Epstein's most well-received works: *Madonna and Child*. As well as outlining the unusual set of circumstances surrounding the commissioning of the work, we will also see how this work was considered to be an excellent piece of Christian sculpture which was deemed to be suitable for aiding Christian worship.

* * *

Carving a Legacy: Part Three

Selected Works: Madonna and Child (1950-52)

Described by Richard Cork as ‘the most successful of his large modelled sculptures’,⁴⁷¹ Jacob Epstein’s *Madonna and Child* (1950-52) has received very little scholarly attention. The reasons for this are unclear, but what is clear is that the circumstances surrounding the commissioning of this work are somewhat unusual and require a closer examination.

Forming part of the newly rebuilt Convent of the Holy Child Jesus, Cavendish Square, London, *Madonna and Child* gives the illusion of the Christ child and the Holy Mother levitating above the square. Attached to the side of a covered bridge, cast in lead and over four metres in length, *Madonna and Child* is an impressive sight. With its diamond-shaped composition, the work displays the Madonna and Christ child draped in simple clothing. The Christ child’s arms are outstretched echoing both Christ’s open and embracing nature and prefiguring His death by crucifixion. The Madonna stares downward, deep in contemplation. Epstein, himself, wrote nothing of the work’s intended meaning, however, in his autobiography he briefly summarises the nuns’ and public’s reaction to the work.

Epstein wrote very little about *Madonna and Child* in his autobiography, only providing one paragraph to its discussion. He wrote that:

No work of mine has brought so many tributes from so many diverse quarters. One which particularly pleased me by reasons of its spontaneity was from a bus driver. Halting his bus as he passed the statue he suddenly saw me standing by and called out across the road, “Hi Governor, you’ve made a good job of it.” A less aesthetic but equally spontaneous comment was overhead when the cockney owner of a bedraggled pony and cart halted beneath the statue and observed wistfully to his mate, “Think of that now. A solid lump of lead.” Fortunately the statue is suspended about twenty feet from the ground.⁴⁷²

⁴⁷¹ Cork, Richard, *Jacob Epstein*, (Tate Publishing, 1999), p.69

⁴⁷² Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, (Hulton Press, 1955), p.236

Epstein's writings on the commissioning, conception and critical reception of the work are somewhat lacking, with the above quotation providing the entirety of Epstein's account. We can also see within this statement a marked change in his attitude from that expressed in *The Sculptor Speaks* when Epstein stated that: 'It is no good paying any attention to the opinions of the man in the street.'⁴⁷³ Had there been a change in Epstein's attitude to 'the man in street', or was it simply that Epstein was only happy with positive criticism, no matter where it came from?



Madonna and Child, (1950-52)

⁴⁷³ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, (William Heinemann Limited, 1931), p.2

Madonna and Child was not commissioned by the convent directly, but by architect Louis Osman, who had been commissioned by the convent to rebuild parts of the bomb-damaged square. As part of the rebuild, Osman conceived of a covered bridge to link the buildings on the west and east sides of the square, which until that point had only been linked by an underground basement. As the bridge was covered, a large flat space was made available, which Osman considered the perfect space for a fully realised sculpture. This was Epstein's first public commission since the outcry surrounding his contributions to the Temple of the Winds project, *Night and Day*, on the London Underground headquarters building, in 1928.

Osman spoke in detail about the experience of commissioning and working with Epstein on this project. Speaking at an Ordinary General Meeting of the Architectural Association on 28th April 1954 (almost two years after the work was completed), Osman outlined the unusual process of negotiation and wrangling which the production and installation of this work required. It is interesting to note that because of the irregular process that was followed in asking Epstein to produce *Madonna and Child*, Osman asserted that: 'this work has never been commissioned at all, which is most unusual, particularly for a work of this size, costing some £5,000.'⁴⁷⁴ What was so unusual about this case that prompted Osman to reject the use of the term 'commission'? It would seem that although Osman was responsible for the rebuilding of the damaged buildings, he did not have the authority to commission works of art to be attached to them. As Osman explained: 'I had no authority and no commission and no money.'⁴⁷⁵

Osman dismissed the idea of a low relief as a focal point on the bridge from the outset, asserting that low relief may work in Italy, because: 'in Italy there is good light and a clean atmosphere,' but remarked that: 'in London I could see the whole thing becoming

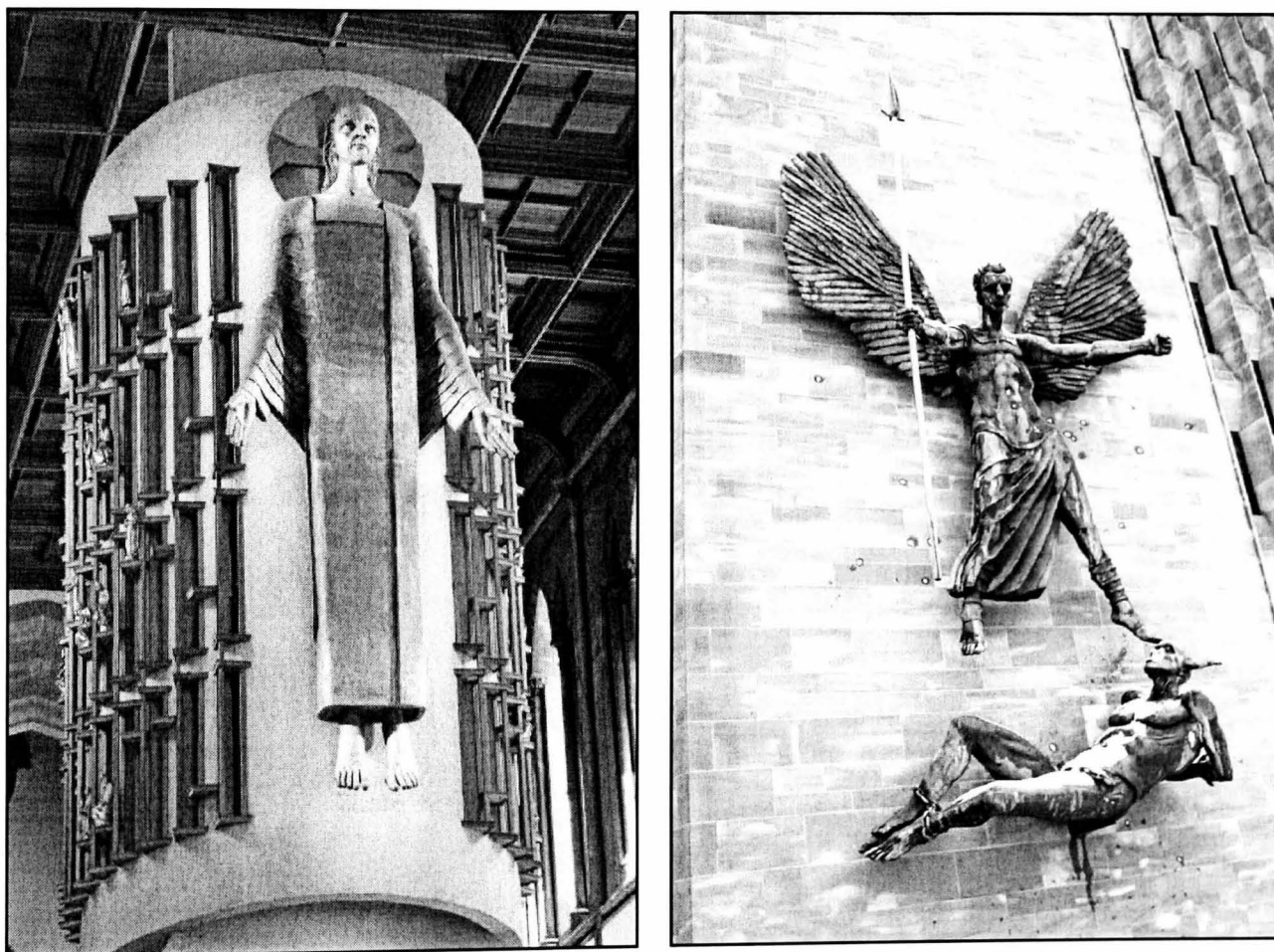
⁴⁷⁴ Osman, Louis, 'Architect, Sculptor and Client' in, *Architectural Association Journal*, (Issue 70, 1954), p.7

⁴⁷⁵ Osman, Louis, 'Architect, Sculptor and Client', p.11

depressing and dreary.’⁴⁷⁶ Osman considered the idea of a modelled sculpture ‘over the arch so that it would rest on nothing’.⁴⁷⁷ Osman continued:

The sculpture could not recede again [*sic*] but must project away from the wall over the arch. This immediately gave me an interesting plastic form and also suggested a religious subject in which it was appropriate that the sculpture should not rest on anything but should have levitation of its own, not being concerned with gravity.⁴⁷⁸

The Cavendish Square *Madonna and Child* was Epstein’s first work to have the appearance of levitation, but was repeated in later religious works such as *Christ in Majesty* and *St. Michael and the Devil*. We can thus assert that the weightless appearance of Epstein’s later religious works was not Epstein’s own conception, but was a translation of Osman’s vision.



Left: *Christ in Majesty*,
Right: *St. Michael and the Devil*.

⁴⁷⁶ Osman, Louis, ‘Architect, Sculptor and Client’, p.10

⁴⁷⁷ Osman, Louis, ‘Architect, Sculptor and Client’, p.10

⁴⁷⁸ Osman, Louis, ‘Architect, Sculptor and Client’, p.10

To Osman, Epstein was the perfect candidate to embark on such a task. Osman saw in Epstein's modelled work, a style which: 'linked with that of Donatello, right in the main stream of Palladian art and Palladian theory. I also knew him to be an artist deeply concerned with religious themes and passionately fond of children.'⁴⁷⁹ Although not explicit, Osman seemed to imply that Epstein's carved work was not of the high standard of his modelled work, arguing that:

His wonderful gift of modelled form had not been made use of by any architect before. He was a man of seventy, but previously had only been employed to do carved work in relation to a building. [...] Epstein had not in my opinion been used properly.⁴⁸⁰

Osman made it a condition that the work must be modelled with a religious theme and was to be cast in lead rather than the traditional bronze because 'If it were in bronze it would splash and make unpleasant stains on the stone'.⁴⁸¹

Osman wrote to Epstein outlining his idea for the sculpture; Epstein responded the very next day and suggested that he and Osman met at the earliest opportunity; Epstein was obviously excited about the prospect of producing another public commission. According to Osman: 'The idea of producing a work of religious art linking and forming an integral part of a work of architecture thrilled him.'⁴⁸² Epstein began work in earnest, and within a week had produced a maquette for the work. Osman had not suggested a subject to Epstein, so the theme of a Madonna and Child was Epstein's own conception.

Osman was thrilled with the design, stating that: 'it surpassed beyond measure what I had imagined as sculpture, and was quite convinced that here was a masterpiece.'⁴⁸³ However, the maquette was not as well received by the authorities at the convent as one might expect.

⁴⁷⁹ Osman, Louis, 'Architect, Sculptor and Client', p.11

⁴⁸⁰ Osman, Louis, 'Architect, Sculptor and Client', pp.10-11

⁴⁸¹ Osman, Louis, 'Architect, Sculptor and Client', p.11

⁴⁸² Osman, Louis, 'Architect, Sculptor and Client', p.11

⁴⁸³ Osman, Louis, 'Architect, Sculptor and Client', p.11

Osman took the sketch to show the nuns, and to alleviate any prejudice which they may have associated with the Epstein name, he did not reveal who had sculpted the design. Indeed, Osman kept Epstein's identity a secret until 'the plaster cast had been produced'.⁴⁸⁴ When the maquette was shown to the nuns, they saw the design as being 'alien to their own conception'⁴⁸⁵ of a Madonna and Child group. After meeting with Epstein, the nuns urged him to alter the design of the Madonna, changing the face to one which was more contemplative than on the maquette, in which the visage has an outgoing and cheerful expression. The first design, which used Epstein's long-time mistress Kathleen Garman, was altered and replaced by a portrait of pianist Marcella Barzetti. Kenneth Clark also stepped in at this point and said to the nuns: 'Take it. Take it'.⁴⁸⁶ This intervention, coupled with Epstein's concession over the Madonna's face settled any doubts which the nuns had about the initial design.



Maquette for Madonna and Child, (1950)

⁴⁸⁴ Osman, Louis, 'Architect, Sculptor and Client', p.13

⁴⁸⁵ Osman, Louis, 'Architect, Sculptor and Client', p.13

⁴⁸⁶ Archives of the Convent of the Holy Jesus Christ, Mayfield, Sussex. (Quoted in: Rose, June, *Demons and Angels*, p.247)

The project was made public in *The Times* on January 10th 1952. The author wrote of the restoration of Cavendish Square and noted that a sculpture had been commissioned, ‘13ft. high’, to adorn the bridge of the convent. The author continued:

Mr. Jacob Epstein, at the request of the architect has made a sketch for the sculpture, in the form of the Madonna and Child, designed to be cast in lead. The sketch, which gives promise to be a work of real nobility has been approved by all the authorities concerned and, in view of the prominence of the site and the opportunity presented of furnishing London with an important work of religious art, the Arts Council has made a grant towards the cost.

This has enabled Mr. Epstein to make a start on modelling the group to full size. The owners of the building have also set aside money for the sculpture, but a further sum is still required to complete and cast the group and fix it in position. If this is successfully raised, the work should be in position in about six months’ time.⁴⁸⁷

With the bridge under construction and the statue under way, Osman had still not secured funding for the *Madonna and Child*. Applications for funding were made to the Arts Council and to the Contemporary Arts Society, with the former providing £500, and the latter turning down the application. Costs were kept down in a number of ways: firstly, Epstein’s fee was nominal; secondly, the lead used for casting was to come from the roof of the destroyed convent; and thirdly, the sculpture was modelled over a wooden, rather than a bronze, skeleton. As noted by Osman, though, the lack of a bronze skeleton within the work led to problems:

One evening the figure of the Holy Child, modelled completely in clay, without any support apart from a few bits of firewood nailed on to its armature, completely collapsed. I had called in to see the work and found the child a heap of rubble on the floor. Epstein worked that night and produced the child again. That was the wonderful kind of spirit about the work throughout.⁴⁸⁸

Indeed, the budget was so tight for the project that art historian, Kenneth Clark, took it upon himself to write a letter to *The Times* in an effort to raise more money. Though donations had been received from the nuns and other private benefactors, this was only enough to cover the cost of producing a plaster cast of the model. Clark wrote that:

⁴⁸⁷ Anon., ‘Epstein Group for Cavendish Square’ in, *The Times*, (January 10th, 1952), p.2

⁴⁸⁸ Osman, Louis, ‘Architect, Sculptor and Client’, p.13

It can now be seen that the work will be of arresting beauty and dignity, entirely appropriate to its setting, and will certainly be one of the first pieces of sculpture permanently exhibited in London. Apart from a small balance of donations and a gift of metal, however, there are now no funds available for the casting and the fixing in position of this great work. Although a considerable sum is required, those who wish to be associated with this work will help to make its completion possible by sending donations, however small, to the Cavendish Square Group Appeal...⁴⁸⁹

Osman noted that due to Clark's appeal 'the money trickled in'.⁴⁹⁰ However, the monies that were received still did not come close to covering the cost of casting in lead. With two tonnes of lead being procured from the damaged roof of the convent, Osman explained that the Art Bronze Foundry agreed to cast the work for a nominal fee, believing that this would gain them positive publicity, and Mr. Stoner of Messrs Stoner and Saunders produced a bronze skeleton and wall attachments for the final cast in the same spirit.

The critical reception of the *Madonna and Child* was almost entirely positive. In a review in *The Manchester Guardian*, for example, Eric Newton wrote that: 'It is not perhaps Mr. Epstein's most inventive work, from a purely formal point of view, but it is one of the most serious and deeply felt.'⁴⁹¹ Perhaps the only negative criticism of the group came from the critic of *The Times*, who remarked that:

Mr. Jacob Epstein's new group of the Virgin and Child on the wall of the Convent of the Holy Child Jesus at 11, Cavendish Square, was unveiled by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Butler, yesterday afternoon. It is in bronze [*sic*], some 12ft. high and is fixed in the centre of a blank wall above an arch over a turning of the square.

No. 11, Cavendish Square, is a markedly classical building ornamented with pillars and Corinthian capitals and Mr. Epstein has, as might be expected, made no sort of concession to this architectural style; his work is completely in his individual expressionist manner, the features full of character and in no way idealized or even generalized. What is more, there is a marked incongruity between the sedate and static edifice and the way in which the sculpture is applied to it. The vertical lines of the two elongated figures are strongly emphasized, but they are standing on nothing, only fastened at the back to the wall and standing out from it in high relief; the lack of a firm and obvious base to sustain the weight of the figures might be reasonable in a Gothic building,

⁴⁸⁹ Clark, Kenneth, 'Cavendish Square Group' in, *The Times*, (May 23rd 1952), p.12

⁴⁹⁰ Osman, Louis, 'Architect, Sculptor and Client', p.13

⁴⁹¹ Newton, Eric, 'Madonna and Child' in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (May 15th 1953), p.7

but seems to be against all the principles of the classic style. [...] Perhaps the head of the Child is rather too individualized, too much of a lively portrait for a work of such size, but the head of the Virgin has, by contrast, an impressive gravity.⁴⁹²

Indeed, Osman was so incensed by the article in *The Times* that he took up his pen and wrote a letter criticising the reviewer. Though Osman could not criticise the critic on his subjective aesthetic assessment of the work, he pointed out a number of factual errors within the article such as the critic writing that the *Madonna and Child* 'is in bronze', Osman wrote that:

Your critic is incorrect in stating that the great Epstein Madonna and Child which was unveiled yesterday in Cavendish Square is in bronze. It was designed for, and cast in, lead saved from the buildings gutted during the war which are now being reconstructed.⁴⁹³

Osman later noted that: 'After the unveiling almost all press comment was favourable and well informed. *The Times* were a notable exception.' Osman explained:

The critic had completely missed the whole idea and even his facts were incorrect. I felt that Epstein had interpreted exactly what I had wanted—this wonderful feeling of levitation, with the sculpture resting on nothing. *The Times* had missed the point entirely.⁴⁹⁴

It is of interest that Osman did not write to *The Times* of his annoyance at their critic misunderstanding the work's motives and instead focused on the article's factual errors. Perhaps this was done to undermine the critic, after all, if the critic was ignorant of the facts, then it followed that they would also be ignorant about other things.

As well as the criticism of the *Madonna and Child* from an artistic standpoint, there was another line of engagement which dealt with the group from a wholly Christian perspective. This is an area which has received no attention from previous scholars, and is one which I believe to be of the most importance. After all, this was the first of Epstein's works which was commissioned specifically for a religious purpose. It is the reflection of the *Madonna*

⁴⁹² Anon., 'Major work by Mr. Epstein' in, *The Times*, (May 15th, 1953), p.2

⁴⁹³ Osman, Louis, 'A Sculpture in Lead' in, *The Times*, (May 16th, 1953), p.7

⁴⁹⁴ Osman, Louis, 'Architect, Sculptor and Client', p.13

and Child and its relationship to this religious purpose which is pivotal in assessing the group's success as works of primarily religious sculpture.

Writing in *Liturgical Arts* in 1955, sculptor John Bunting reflected upon Epstein's *Madonna and Child* as a piece of Christian sculpture. Bunting began the article by detailing the dogmatic process by which the *Madonna and Child* become dedicated as a piece of religious sculpture fit for the purposes of worship:

When the Cardinal-Archbishop of London blessed a sculpture by Epstein, he dedicated it to the service of God. The Church has traditionally exercised this divine blessing, and through this God-given power the Church transforms our actions so that they are "born not of blood or of nature or of man but of God." It is the Church's mission, and such was the Cardinal's mission when he blessed the new statue of the Madonna and Child for the Convent of the Holy Child Jesus in Cavendish Square. The blessing was a kind of baptism.⁴⁹⁵

As 'a kind of baptism' we can see this dedication as a ceremony of purification and acceptance. Indeed, through the ritual of dedication, the Cardinal-Archbishop of London altered believers' perception of the work. This was not merely a representation of Christ and His Mother, but a representation which had been sanctioned by the Church, and therefore God, for the purpose of religious service. This point was of the utmost importance to Bunting, who worried that Epstein, as a non-Catholic, would not have the sensitivity towards Christ to produce such a work. Bunting explained his reasoning thus:

I do not propose [*sic*] about the artistic or aesthetic qualities of a work which I admire. There is a problem that made the nuns apprehensive for similar reasons that I wish to consider. It is a problem the Church must face when she cooperates with modern artists. How can a man who is not Christian, let us suppose, produce a Christian work of art?⁴⁹⁶

Indeed, this is a question which had been asked of Epstein since he first exhibited *The Risen Christ* in 1920. It is also a question for which no definite answer can be pointed to, after all, the qualifications seem to relate to intangible notions of 'feeling' and 'faith' which cannot be measured or experienced by another in any direct or useful way. The same question was

⁴⁹⁵ Bunting, John, 'Reflections of Epstein's Madonna' in, *Liturgical Arts*, (Issue XXIII, February 1955), p.43

⁴⁹⁶ Bunting, John, 'Reflections of Epstein's Madonna', p.43

asked by Cottie Burland in the religious journal *Common Ground* some four years later, and concluded that Epstein was able to produce deeply felt Christian art because he was a prophet:

Somehow this man got at us, and if that is not the function of a prophet, what is?

One of the strangest things about the art of Jacob Epstein was that, as a Jew, he could give us such a magnificent statement of Christian faith. At Llandaff his *Christ in Majesty* stands floating before its curved background. His *Lazarus* is no sentimental resurrection, but the victim of a miracle, bursting grimly from the bonds of death—one who is raised by the power of God is a frightening being. Or go to Cavendish Square and look around until you see his bronze Virgin and Child, and look in that Child's eyes. This Jewish prophet indeed had things to tell us Christians.⁴⁹⁷

Bunting did not make such lofty claims and instead made a quasi-sociological argument which appealed to the influence of Christian culture and ethics over European history, arguing that:

we are all, consciously or unconsciously, Christian through our Christian past, so that it is impossible to not to be in some sense Christian, then I wonder how it is possible for a man who is not a Catholic to produce a Catholic work of art? Or perhaps there is no such thing as a Catholic work of art? Or are all real works of art Catholic?⁴⁹⁸

Bunting does not make it clear what he meant by 'real works of art', or what qualifies as real, unreal or fake. Later in his article, Bunting wrote that: 'For whatever field of knowledge there is truth, the Church regards it as its own property.'⁴⁹⁹ If one considers the notion of what is 'real' and what is 'true' to be synonymous, we can begin to unpack Bunting's arguments. It would seem that Bunting considered any work of art which contained 'truth' to be within the realm of Catholicism. Again, we are left with the question, how exactly does truth manifest in a work art? Are some works of art 'more true' than others? Or are works of art either true or not true? It is difficult to know exactly what concrete property, if any, can be pointed to in assessing the 'truth' of a work of art. Like Epstein, who claimed that: 'Sincerity in art may be sneered at by some, but it is an all

⁴⁹⁷ Burland, Cottie A., 'Sir Jacob Epstein—a Retrospective Comment' in, *Common Ground* (Winter, 1959), pp.12-13

⁴⁹⁸ Bunting, John, 'Reflections of Epstein's Madonna', p.43

⁴⁹⁹ Bunting, John, 'Reflections of Epstein's Madonna', p.43

important point',⁵⁰⁰ Bunting pointed to the dubious abstract notions of 'sincerity' and 'conviction'. Bunting argued that:

conviction provides the raw ideas of a work of art and without conviction a work of art degenerates into sentimentality or decoration [...] All sculptors who work honestly at their profession have a single aim, and receive their inspiration from a single source, and the work is illuminated by a single light. [...] It is obvious that a sculptor who has a conviction will have more power than one who has not realized his beliefs; for an unrealized belief or no belief at all is uncreative.⁵⁰¹

One could argue that the Catholic Church held onto this conviction that the Earth was the centre of the universe, but this conviction was not helpful to our understanding of the truth. Indeed, seeing abstract traits such as 'conviction' as ends in themselves is incredibly problematic and makes no consideration of the importance of the quality of the final design. The mistake which has been made here is to confound quality and conviction. The presence of quality does not provide evidence of conviction. One cannot judge the degree of conviction possessed by someone purely based upon the quality of their work. A craftsman without conviction could produce work of great quality, in which the observer could perceive some abstract religious qualities; under Bunting's assessment, the viewer would be left with no doubt that what they were looking at was from an artist of conviction.

It is somewhat strange that Bunting made no direct reference to Epstein's conviction, but this sense of conviction was implied when Bunting wrote that:

In making the choice which led to Epstein's [*sic*] being commissioned to do this work, the architect could rightly claim he was assisting the Church in recognizing Truth. Epstein is a sculptor of real genius. The decision to approach him was a happy one.⁵⁰²

Bunting never fully resolved the issue of a non-Christian producing Christian works of art. The implication, though, is that Epstein successfully managed to portray some kind of religious truth which seemed to appeal to Bunting's sense of Catholicism.

⁵⁰⁰ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.141

⁵⁰¹ Bunting, John, 'Reflections of Epstein's Madonna', p.43

⁵⁰² Bunting, John, 'Reflections of Epstein's Madonna', p.43

Indeed, it was the consideration of the *Madonna and Child* in terms of religious art which led a critic writing in *The Times* in 1958 to note that:

Going almost daily through Cavendish Square in London, I am increasingly impressed by Sir Jacob Epstein's "Madonna and Child" for the Convent of the Child Jesus, as a masterpiece in which the sculptor's personal power is happily subdued in its purpose and is a most fitting reminder of the existence of a religious building there.⁵⁰³

This level of praise for the work runs somewhat contrary to the assertion made in *The Times* at the unveiling of the group five years prior. The key argument here is that in order to be seen as a religious work of art, it is not simply enough for it to be of a religious figure or to be placed in or on a religious building, but that it must foster a sense of worship and reverence within the viewer. The author wrote that Epstein's 'personal power is happily subdued' within the *Madonna and Child*, and this, it would seem, is most important. By making small concessions towards iconography and generalized stylization, Epstein subdued the vital aspects of his work. By doing this, Epstein produced what has been perceived as a successful piece of Christian sculpture.

Writing in 1958, in Catholic periodical *Studies*, George A. Cevasco discussed Epstein's religious art, paying particular attention to the *Madonna and Child*. The article began with Cevasco's assertion that:

Any visitor to Cavendish Square, London, is bound to be struck by the formidable piece of modern sculpture that decorates the bridge joining two sections of the Convent of the Holy Child Jesus. Not only is this work striking in its appearance, but it is the first time since the Reformation that a monument representing Our Lady and the Christ Child has even appeared in London in so public a space.⁵⁰⁴

⁵⁰³ Anon., 'The Modern Aspect of Christian Art' in, *The Times*, (May 6th 1958), p.3

⁵⁰⁴ Cevasco, George A., 'Epstein's Religious Art' in, *Studies*, (Summer, 1958), p.177

Cevasco's article is made particularly interesting by virtue of the fact that he spent time comparing the *Madonna and Child* on Cavendish Square with the *Madonna and Child* (1926-27). Cevasco wrote that:

In no better way can the excellence of this figure be acknowledged, perhaps, than by contrasting it with Epstein's first study of the subject. His *Madonna and Child* of 1926, theologically considered, is a dismal failure. A perfectly valid complaint is that it falls short of the Christian concept of the Blessed Mother and Child. Modelled from an Indian mother and son of the Moslem faith, this work depicts an unusual Orientalness but little else. It is unlikely that anyone would immediately perceive that this work represented the Madonna and Christ Child, were it not so named.⁵⁰⁵

When Cevasco here spoke of 'theological' considerations, it would perhaps be more fitting to consider this in terms of 'conventional' or 'iconographical' considerations. After all, Cevasco's main criticism of the first *Madonna and Child* was that it is not a conventionalised or idealised representation of the Madonna. Cevasco continued his argument by highlighting the secular nature of the first *Madonna and Child*:

the fact remains that this first *Madonna and Child* is not acceptable iconographically. Epstein could have labelled the work 'Motherhood' or some such title. In fact, a Soviet Ambassador was so taken up with the statue's 'social realism' that he tried to arrange for its purchase. Though the given title did not accord with Marxist ideology, he still thought the Soviet Union would be interested. Only the title need be changed.⁵⁰⁶

Cevasco concluded by noting that Epstein had matured when it came to sensitively portraying religious subjects. He dismissed a number of Epstein's depictions of Christ as being primarily experimental in nature, and not of a religious nature. The article concluded with Cevasco's suggestion that the Cavendish Square *Madonna and Child* and *Christ in Majesty* exhibit the qualities of a successful religious sculpture, writing that: 'These two works in particular are aesthetically satisfying and highly acceptable progressions within the realm of traditional sacred art: both are capable of fostering piety and faith to receptive viewers.'⁵⁰⁷

⁵⁰⁵ Cevasco, George A., 'Epstein's Religious Art', p.178

⁵⁰⁶ Cevasco, George A., 'Epstein's Religious Art', p.178

⁵⁰⁷ Cevasco, George A., 'Epstein's Religious Art', p.184

What is clear from this case study is that the *Madonna and Child* was highly regarded by art critics and religious observers alike. The work was acceptable because it was a recognizable form and suggested its subject through its imagery rather than superimposing a meaning onto the work through its title.



* * *

Carving a Legacy:

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to provide a framework for the consideration of the legacy of Jacob Epstein. This has been done by considering three key areas of historical evidence: the consideration of Epstein's legacy in the immediate years after his death; the texts written during Epstein's life which sought to position Epstein in relation to artistic tradition; and in the creation and critical reception of some of his sculptures.

The overarching concern about Epstein in this thesis has been related to the reception of his work and its relationship to the history and tradition of Western art. We have noted how Epstein's stormy relationship with the media was seen as sufficient to characterise his personality and crystallize his legacy as a 'controversial sculptor'.

Through our sources and case studies, we can conclude that the main reason that Epstein's work attracted hostility was, first and foremost, due to the nature of the sculptures themselves, and the incongruity between Epstein's motives and the expectations of the gallery-going public, art critics and journalists.

Epstein's sculptures were often seen as being offensive and lacking in elegance; nudity was presented frankly and without subtlety; familiar themes were presented using an artistic language which was obscure; sacred subjects were dealt with without sensitivity; his work was considered to be too conservative by the avant-garde and too unusual by the traditionalists; and the fact that 'he was the kind of artist who is easily "badgered" into saying foolish things'⁵⁰⁸ served only to exacerbate matters. Indeed, not only was Epstein led

⁵⁰⁸ Anon., 'Sir Jacob Epstein: A Controversial Sculptor' in, *The Times* (22 August, 1959), p.10

to make foolish statements; he would frequently contradict himself. For example, we saw that in *The Sculptor Speaks* when first asked ‘what is art?’ Epstein responded in a positive way, remarking that ‘‘I was once asked very much the same question by a judge in a New York court’,⁵⁰⁹ and relayed his response. Later on, in the same text, the same question was asked again and Epstein responded that it was the ‘question that no one can ever answer’.⁵¹⁰

The controversies surrounding many of Epstein’s works were seen, in hindsight, as being emotional over-reactions on the part of both the dissenters and supporters. It was noted that there was a sense of ‘critical justice’ in play which sought to redress the balance of hostile criticism, but ultimately meant that the views expressed were often extreme and lacking in reason and objectivity, thus doing Epstein a disservice.

If we are to take Epstein and his followers’ views at face value, we would be led to conclude that Epstein was a sculptor of great genius whose works found their place within the teleology of sculptural history. We have seen, throughout this thesis, the efforts that have been made to align Epstein with such a tradition, whether it was expressed as the ‘unbroken chain of tradition’,⁵¹¹ as suggested in 1920 by Bernard Van Dieren, the ‘straight line of real tradition’⁵¹² as suggested by Arnold Haskell in 1932, or the ‘return in sculpture to the human outlook’⁵¹³ as asserted by Epstein in 1954.

We have seen how Epstein’s relationship to tradition became the most important factor in his career. We have seen how efforts were made by Epstein to not only define ‘true tradition’, but also to make sure, through a series of carefully figured interventions, that he would be considered as part of the ‘great tradition’. It is evident, however, that these interventions were,

⁵⁰⁹ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, p.2

⁵¹⁰ Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, pp.138-139

⁵¹¹ Van Dieren, Bernard, *Epstein*, (John Lane, 1920), p.45

⁵¹² Haskell, Arnold, and Epstein, Jacob, *The Sculptor Speaks*, (William Heinemann Limited, 1931), p.ii

⁵¹³ Epstein, Jacob, *An Autobiography*, (Hulton Press, 1955), p.226

to a large extent, unsuccessful. Although Epstein and his supporters reiterated his position as a traditional artist for almost half a century, this message was not received by the wider public, who saw Epstein as representing the excesses of modern art; a view which he was unable to shake throughout his career and until long after his death. When we look for example, at the second episode of science fiction drama *The Prisoner* (1967), Patrick McGoochan's character 'Number Six' is entered into an art competition. Seeing this as an opportunity to prepare for an escape from 'the Village', Number Six constructs a sculpture out of wood. The sculpture was actually a boat, but he exhibited the hull and accompanying structures tipped on its rear and displayed it as a work of abstract sculpture entitled *Escape*. The dialogue proceeded thus:

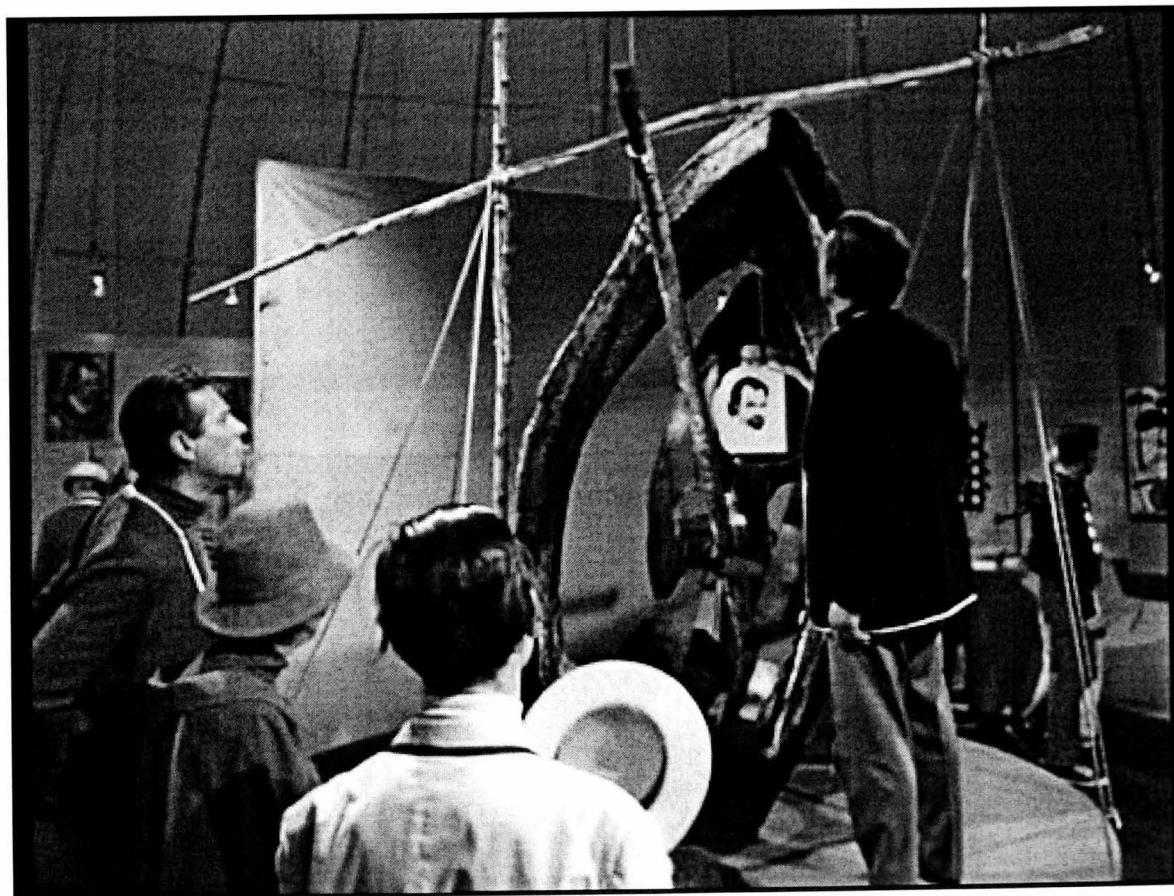
Number Two: And here he is, our very own Epstein!

Number Six: Can I help you?

Spectator: But we are not quite sure what it means.

Number Six: It means what it is.

Number Two: Brilliant! It means what it is! Brilliant!



Number Six, *Escape*, (1967)

Those with even a passing knowledge of Epstein's oeuvre would be aware that he never made such abstract work. The simple fact remains, however, that this is how his work was perceived by the general population. The mere mention of the name 'Epstein' obviously triggered something in the minds of the audience. The name 'Epstein', for a while, became a synonym for all that was obscure and modern in art. Even Number Six's explanation of *Escape* seems to echo Epstein's own technique for describing his work: 'It means what it is.'

It was the critical consensus at the time of his death that Epstein was not a great sculptor. We have seen how a number of arguments emphasised the importance of arbitrary artistic categories and hierarchies in sculpture and aesthetics to justify the refusal of Epstein's place in the history of art as a great sculptor. Some arguments relied upon the hierarchical relationship between sculptural techniques (such as modelling and carving); others saw the expression of emotion as being subordinate to a concern with form. These hierarchies and categories are arbitrary, but have served to subsume Epstein's importance.

If we were to adopt the position of commentators such as Henry Moore, for example, we would be led to consider Epstein's legacy, not on the merits of his work, but because he paved the way for the reception of Modernist ideas. As Moore suggested:

He took the brickbats, he took the insults, he faced the howls of derision with which artists since Rembrandt have learned to become familiar. And as far as sculpture in this century is concerned, he took them first.

We of the generation that succeeded him were spared a great deal, simply because his sturdy personality and determination had taken so much.⁵¹⁴

This line of argument, unfortunately, serves to render Epstein's contribution to sculpture, though historically important, as outdated and conservative.

⁵¹⁴ Moore, Henry, 'Jacob Epstein: An Appreciation' in, *The Sunday Times*, (August 23rd, 1959), Press cutting from New Art Gallery, Walsall archive.

Should we then look towards Epstein's works themselves to secure his legacy? Does Epstein's legacy lie in the fact that some of his portraits record the likenesses in three dimensions of some of the most important personalities of his day? After all, Epstein made renderings of such notable people as Winston Churchill, Albert Einstein, Bertrand Russell, T. S. Elliot and Princess Margaret. Are we to take the view that it is with these works that Epstein's legacy resides? As Cottie Burland suggested: 'If nothing of the work of Epstein was to survive except a few bronze portraits, the world of the future would have some glimpse of the living force of our times.'⁵¹⁵ It would be fair to state that a person considering Epstein's legacy at the time of his death, might conclude that he was a great portraitist of the Romantic tradition.

Was Epstein's legacy secured by the works which he produced before 1916 as suggested by Richard Cork and Charles Harrison? Indeed, of the importance of *The Rock Drill* Harrison wrote that it:

embodied the sensibility of Radical Modernism more dramatically than any other sculpture, English or Continental, then or since. The aggressiveness, the 'primitivism', the abstraction, the anti-humanism, the celebration of energy, the use of mechanistic metaphors for human functions, the fundamental pessimism, all are to be found in this exceptional work.⁵¹⁶

Of course, if we give privilege to the first decade of Epstein's career, we ignore everything which followed. The problem with this line of thought is that Epstein's contribution to the history of art is viewed from a very narrow consideration of the development of art in the twentieth century.

In the immediate decades following Epstein's death, his reputation as a great artist quickly dissipated. The efforts of those who had tried to carve Epstein's legacy had seen their efforts crumble in the face of a changing world. This can be attributed to three major

⁵¹⁵ Burland, Cottie A., 'Sir Jacob Epstein—a Retrospective Comment' in, *Common Ground* (Winter, 1959), p.16

⁵¹⁶ Harrison, Charles, *English Art and Modernism, 1900-1939*, (Indian University Press, 1981), p.99

contributing factors: firstly, that Epstein was no longer producing work, meaning that his work was no longer being debated in public forums; secondly, much of his work had been purchased in the 1960s by an American collector Edward Schinman, meaning that many of Epstein's major works had not been exhibited in Europe since 1961; and thirdly, with the advances in art, Epstein's sculptures simply went out of fashion as new means of expression gained prominence. In 1980, the legacy of Epstein once again was placed under the spotlight, this time because it was the centenary of his birth. In the nineteen years that had passed since the major retrospective held at the Edinburgh Festival, Epstein's reputation had changed significantly. The programme of centenary exhibitions can fairly be characterised as an effort to resurrect the reputation of a forgotten artist. The person who seemed to be most passionately involved in this project was Evelyn Silber, a scholar whose efforts have made more impact to Epstein scholarship than any other writer.⁵¹⁷ In Silber's catalogue for the centenary exhibition of Epstein's work at the Birmingham Art Gallery, entitled *Rebel Angel*, Michael Diamond, then director, wrote in the catalogue's foreword that:

It is one of the less pleasant facts of life that the whims of fashion are often capable of denting the reputation of the best known figures. Sir Jacob Epstein has suffered as much as any in recent years and it is, therefore, a particular pleasure to us to have the opportunity of setting his work once more before our public in the hope of redressing the balance of critical comment.

We have tried to draw attention to his subject pieces and portraits rather than concentrating on his obviously Vorticist work of 1913-20. We hope in this way to demonstrate the enduring quality of his endeavours throughout the full range of subject matter he tackled at different periods of his life.⁵¹⁸

It is difficult to ignore Diamond's sense of moral duty in this passage. There is a perception by the author that Epstein had slipped into obscurity, and that the centenary would be the perfect opportunity to, again, examine Epstein's work.

⁵¹⁷ Silber's (almost) complete catalogue of Epstein's sculptural work remaining open on my desk throughout my research.

⁵¹⁸ Silber, Evelyn, *Rebel Angel: Sculpture and Watercolours by Sir Jacob Epstein 1880-1959*, (Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, 1980), 'Foreword'

There are a number of reasons which can be cited for Epstein's drift into obscurity. In the first instance, his work received exaggerated praise, often to redress the balance of hostile criticism, but this was to the detriment of Epstein in the long-term. Secondly, Epstein's reputation quickly evaporated after his death probably due to the old adage: 'out of sight, out of mind'. Epstein had become characterised to the public, not by his works in the gallery, but by his celebrity in the Press. Thirdly, as noted by art critic Eric Newton:

Epstein set out to express themes of deep significance in language which no one who was not in the habit of paying regular visits to the ethnographic collection in the British Museum could be expected to read. It was the clash in his monumental work between the familiar theme and the unfamiliar idiom, which provoked all the indignation.⁵¹⁹

Epstein's visual language was too obscure for the casual observer to understand, and coupled with Epstein's refusal to explain his works, left many with the sense that many of his objects were meaningless or that their creator was arrogant. Indeed, the obscurity of Epstein's motives had, on occasions, incited members of the public to pick up their pens and express the fact that: they 'cannot comprehend or behold its message.'⁵²⁰

It has been suggested by later scholars such as Raquel Gilboa and artists such as Anthony Gormley that Epstein's importance lies within his large carved sculptures of the late-20s to early-40s. In 2009, Anthony Gormley presented a programme on Radio 4 which attended to assessing Epstein's place in the history of sculpture. Gormley argued that:

Instead of listening to, and attending to, the developments in monumental sculpture, I think he was distracted and undertook too many unnecessary commissions, both for the Church and in portraiture. However, in my view, I forgive him everything because of seven great carvings and the incredibly important *Rock Drill*. He was solely responsible for the arrival of Modernism, and in particular for bringing direct carving to Britain.⁵²¹

⁵¹⁹ Anon., 'Epstein's Critics' in, *The Burlington Magazine*, (Volume 1, Number 680, November, 1959), p.369

⁵²⁰ Holden Wood, S., 'Letters to the Editor, Epstein's "Genesis"' in, *The Manchester Guardian*, (18th April, 1931), p.13

⁵²¹ Gormley, Anthony, 'Gormley on Epstein' (Radio Broadcast on BBC Radio 4, November 2009).

Of these 'seven great carvings', Gormley only mentioned *Consummatum Est*, *Elemental*, *Adam*, and *Jacob and the Angel*. The other three can only be guessed upon, but may have included *Genesis*, *Ecce Homo* and *Woman Possessed*, though this is not entirely clear. What is clear is that Gormley was obviously drawn to those monumental carvings which deal with the unknown. To the Modernist, Epstein's output between 1910 and 1915 is enough to secure Epstein's legacy. His contribution to the development of Modernist ideas in Britain is a most important one. To the Romantic, Epstein's legacy is found in his vast array of portraits which not only presented a likeness of its sitter, but also spoke something of their personality and pointed to some psychological insight. The traditionalist might point to some of Epstein's later modelled religious figures such as the *Madonna and Child* on Cavendish Square, London, or his *Christ in Majesty*, both of which are large scale and hold reverence for their subjects. Others may point to Epstein's architectural sculptures, noting that Epstein in his statues for the British Medical Association Building put architectural sculpture at the centre of public debate. Others, like Anthony Gormley, may suggest that his legacy rests with him reintroducing the technique of direct carving to Britain.

At his best, Epstein was an insightful artist who occasionally produced works with a great psychological insight, whether in relation to individuals, as in some of his finest portrait busts, or in broader terms with works which seemed to capture the psychology of a particular age, such as *The Rock Drill*, *The Risen Christ* or *Genesis*.

Epstein's influence on the history of twentieth century art has certainly been underestimated. It is fair to say that though Epstein may not have been a great innovator in terms of style, he was a trend-setter. When we look at some of the things which Epstein popularised, such as the collecting of African sculpture, the promotion of direct carving, and the inclusion of readymade objects within sculptural schemes, one would be hard-pressed to deny Epstein's

importance. The fact is that Epstein, for better or worse, brought sculpture to the forefront of reported artistic life in Britain. Though, in hindsight, works such as *Rima* or *Genesis* may not be the greatest works produced at this time, or even by the artist, the fact is that they made people think about and discuss issues of representation, identity and aesthetics in a way which had not been seen in England before.

The general feeling today is that Epstein was an oddity, an anomaly. His oeuvre is, on the whole, somewhat misunderstood, it is perhaps now, with half a century between us and Epstein's death, coupled with the contribution of this thesis, that we can really begin to evaluate Epstein's legacy.

* * *

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THE END