Former building of the British Medical Association, with sculptures by Sir Jacob Epstein. 1930. Royal Academy of Arts, London.

> Charlie Godin

Sir Jacob Epstein, “Primitive Mercenary in the Modern World”

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Jacob Epstein, born in Manhattan in 1880, is a figure too little known in the French-speaking world, even today. The son of Polish Jewish émigrés, he spent his youth on Hester Street on the Lower East Side of New York, a neighbourhood whose residents at the time were immigrants from throughout the world. As a child, Epstein had a passion for reading and for drawing, and he rapidly acquired a taste for sketching the people around him and those he happened to run into. Gradually, his curiosity impelled him to visit monuments and galleries, notably Paul Durand-Ruel's gallery on Fifth Avenue. Epstein, an admirer of Manet, Pissarro and Renoir, enrolled at the prestigious Art Students League and took evening classes there with George Grey Barnard, himself a student of Pierre-Jules Cavelier, and a collector of medieval sculptures.

Perceiving the advantage of studying in Europe, to gain a better understanding of classical artworks and ancient originals, Epstein left New York, arriving in Paris in autumn 1902. Two years after the Exposition Universelle, the French capital was under the influence of Art Nouveau. The artist visited with pleasure the Musée du Louvre, the ethnographic collection at the Trocadéro and Musée Cernuschi. There he contemplated what at the time was called primitive sculpture (African, Oceanic and Asian) and examined both European and non-Western art. The American artist, deeply moved by Egyptian antiquities, the art of the Cyclades, the Venus de Milo, the slaves of Michelangelo, and Notre-Dame de Paris's decorations, decided to pursue his training further, first by entering the École des Beaux-Arts and then by joining the Académie Julian. At the time, Paris was making a name for itself as the city of the avant-garde, and Epstein revered the creativity of Isadora Duncan, Yvette Guilbert and Auguste Rodin. Making the most of his presence on the Old Continent, he went to Italy, where he visited the Sistine Chapel, admired Michelangelo, Donatello and Ghiberti. In response to the riches he discovered, he promised himself he would become a sculptor and assert his own originality. To achieve that objective, he separated himself from the Paris scene, leaving for London at the age of twenty-four.

Having settled in the poor neighbourhood of St Pancras, Epstein, who had just completed his art training, launched his career by sculpting a few children's heads. His first major public commission was for a group of sculptures for the British Medical Association building on the Strand. Here, he created his response to Greek statuary, especially the Parthenon's metopes, which he had seen at the British Museum and that represented the classical ideal. But he was also influenced by the aesthetic audacity of Indian art. The artist thus undertook a vast cycle on the Ages of Man (**title pages**), a project that lasted fourteen months. After working in clay and plaster, he then sculpted the stone at a height of more than ten metres. Eighteen figures took their places against the walls of the administrative building.

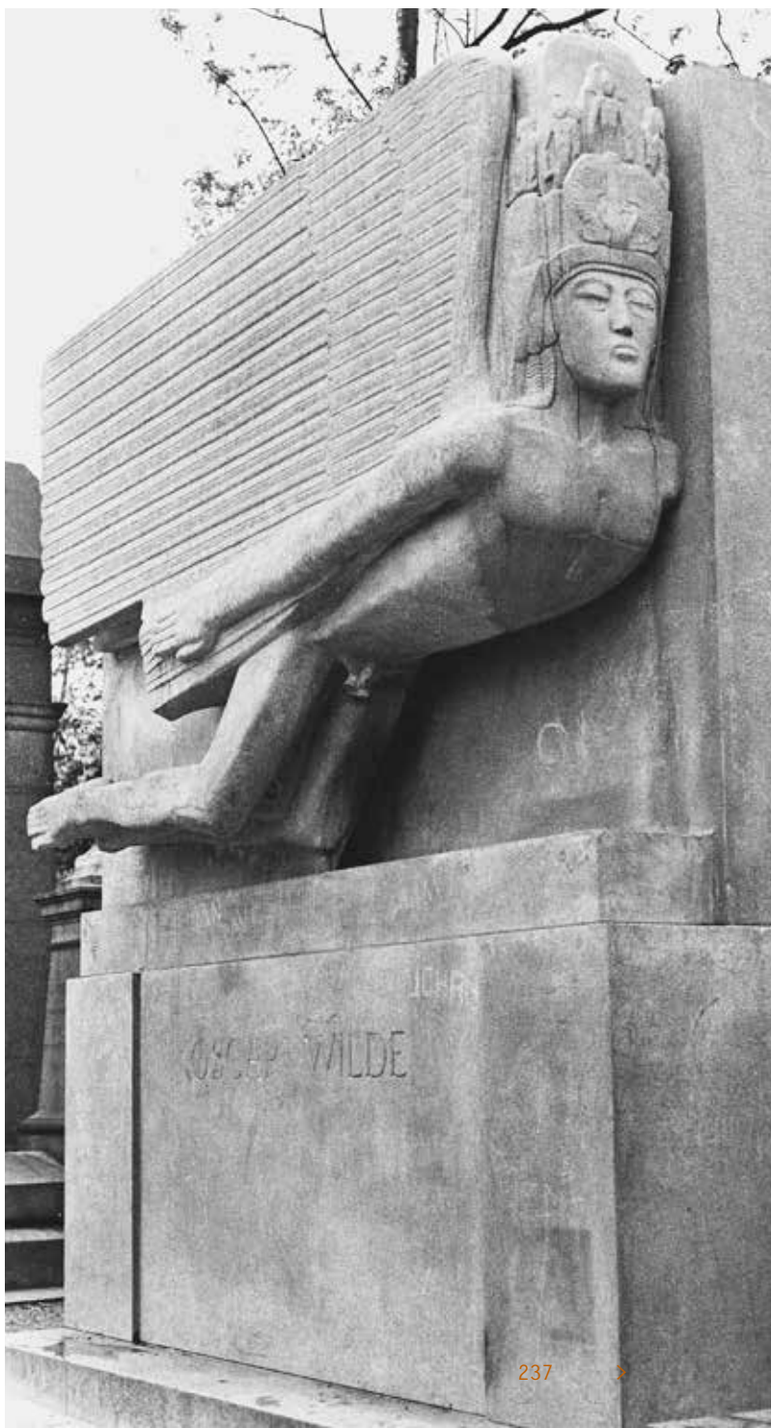
Fig. 1. Sir Jacob Epstein sculpting *Maternity*, 1910. © The estate of Sir Jacob Epstein.

As soon as they were created, these sculptures attracted headlines and bestowed a sulphurous reputation on the artist. Throughout his life, Epstein would be associated with scandal, the object of a great deal of sometimes virulent criticism. For this commission, he was reproached primarily for the blatant nudity and the uncompromising realism of the different bodies. These works, which fell victim to acid rain falling on London, were maimed in the 1930s to avert the risk of falling stone. They are now very damaged and have become difficult to interpret.
After treating the theme of the Mother and Child for that architectural setting, Epstein embarked on a clearer exploration of his primitive inspiration with *Maternity*, a sculpture he carved directly in stone, as attested by a photograph from 1910 (**fig. 1**). With a protective and benevolent gesture, a woman is placing her hands on her belly, showing her breasts like a Hindu statue. She is the incarnation of an ancestral fertility goddess, her closed eyes reminiscent of the serene calm of a Buddha. Captured in an attitude of a great sensuality, this mother-to-be may also be understood as a metaphor for artistic creation, with Epstein himself becoming the progenitor of a destiny.

That stylistic freedom became more pronounced in his most famous work in France: Oscar Wilde's tomb in the Père-Lachaise Cemetery (**fig. 2**). Impressed by the sculptures for the British Medical Association building, Robbie Ross, Wilde's former lover and his literary executor, asked Epstein to design and execute a monument in honour of the author. In 1911 Epstein was inspired by Wilde's poem "The Sphinx" and by an Assyrian sculpture of a winged bull held at the British Museum. An angel with tired eyes, a tall diadem on his head, was inscribed in a 20-ton monolith. Several interpretations are possible: the sculptor took care not to be definitive about the work's meaning. The tomb created a scandal as soon as it was unveiled, since the representation of the angel's genitals shocked passers-by and visitors to the cemetery. Even now, the angel's body is mutilated. Protected as a historical a monument in 1995, the tomb stands as a timeless place charged with mystery, on which admirers of the writer and his work come to meditate.

During that stay in Paris, Epstein met Constantin Brancusi, Amedeo Modigliani and Pablo Picasso, visiting their studios and observing their works in progress. Like them, the sculptor set the tone for modernity by seeking a new vitality, a new feeling, which meant moving away from reality and paying attention to non-European forms of expression. In parallel, beginning in the early twentieth century, Epstein put together a major collection of African and Oceanic art, which significantly marked his own artistic production. His plaster and wood sculpture

Fig. 2. Tomb of Oscar Wilde at the Père-Lachaise Cemetery, executed by Sir Jacob Epstein, 1909–1912. Photo © Merlin Holland.



Cursed Be the Day Wherein I Was Born (**fig. 3**), dating to 1913–1914 (location unknown, probably destroyed), is symptomatic of the porousness between his collection and his oeuvre, the influence of African art being obvious. That modern collector, buying particularly from the art dealer Paul Guillaume, accumulated many objects and found his inspiration in what he purchased, whether a Fang reliquary figure (**fig. 4**) or a *moai miro* from Easter Island (**fig. 5**), which, as it happens, was acquired by Jean Paul Barbier-Mueller in the 1970s.

Fig. 3. Sir Jacob Epstein, *Cursed Be the Day Wherein I Was Born*, 1913–1914. Reproduced with the kind permission of Hull University Archives. Thomas Hulme Collection. Photograph U DHU/12/14. © The estate of Sir Jacob Epstein.

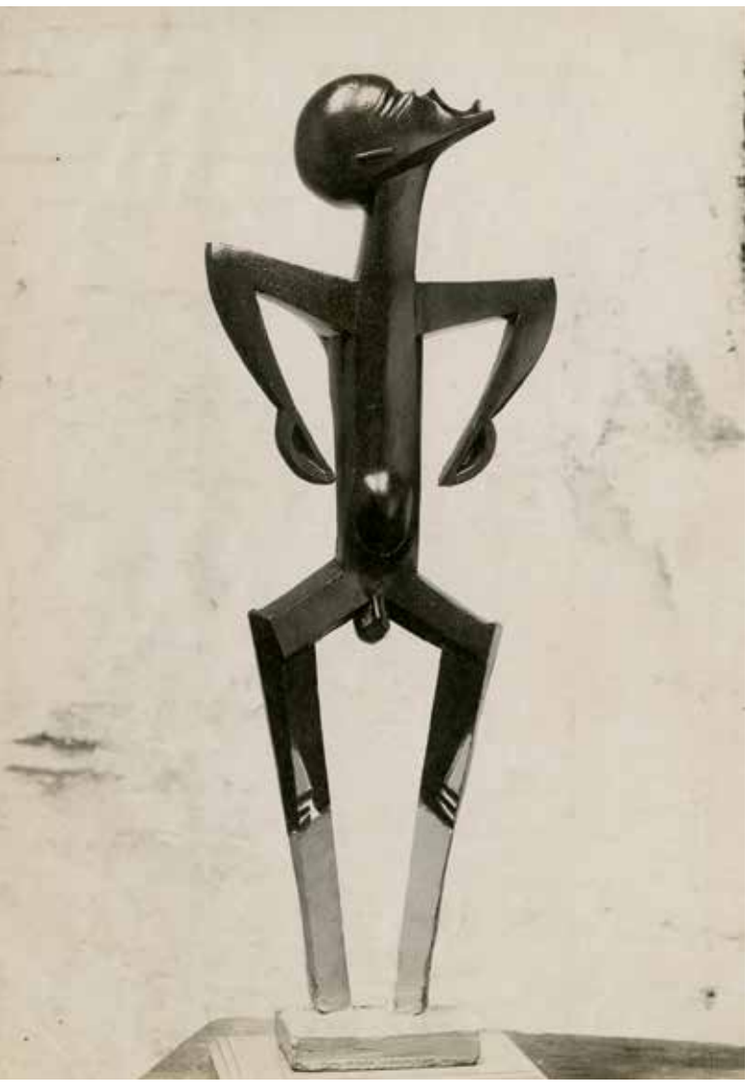


Fig. 4. *Nio byeri* reliquary head, Fang, Gabon. H. 63 cm. Fondation Dapper. Inv. 2664, former collections of Joseph Brummer (Paris and New York), Carl Reininghaus (Vienna), and Jacob Epstein (London). © Musée Dapper archives, photo Hughes Dubois.

Epstein, henceforth a citizen of the British Crown, returned to England, where the response to Cubo-Futurism was getting under way. On 20 June 1914 the publication of the first issue of the review *Blast* signified a turning point in the history of modern art in Great Britain. Writers, painters, poets and philosophers, including Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound and T. E. Hulme, came together to breathe new life into the arts. The publication's subtitle, *Review of the Great English Vortex*, would give its name to the movement: Vorticism. A precise definition of the term was provided in the second issue:

By Vorticism we mean (a) Activity as opposed to the tasteful Passivity of Picasso; (b) SIGNIFICANCE as opposed to the dull or anecdotal character to which the Naturalist is condemned; (c) ESSENTIAL MOVEMENT and ACTIVITY (such as the energy of a mind) as opposed to imitative cinematography, the fuss and the hysterics of the Futurists.

Fig. 5. Male statuette, goitrous figure, *moai miro*. Rapa Nui (Easter Island), Polynesia. *Sophora toromiro* wood, fish-bone and obsidian eyes (the left eye is missing). H. 19.7 cm. Former collection of Sir Jacob Epstein. Inv. 5701. Photo Studio Ferrazzini Bouchet. Musée Barbier-Mueller.

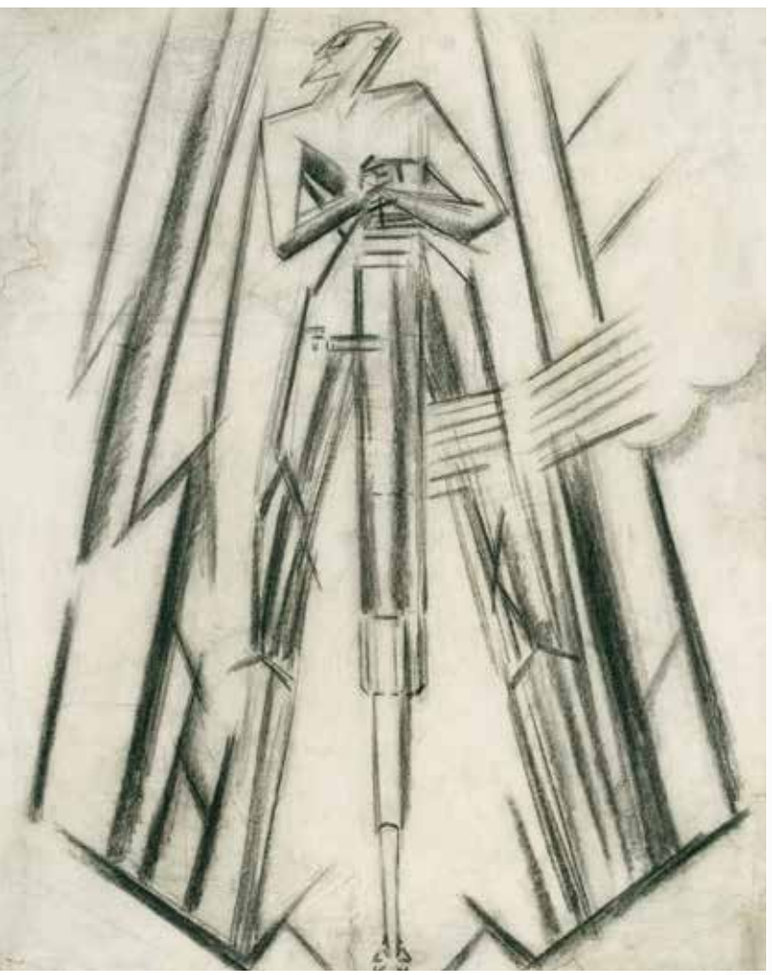


Fig. 6. Sir Jacob Epstein, *Study for "The Rock Drill"*, 1913, charcoal on paper, 64.1 x 53.3 cm. Tate, T00363 © Tate, London, 2019. © The estate of Sir Jacob Epstein.

Like the sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Epstein became more closely associated with Vorticism, and one work in particular belongs to that movement. *Rock Drill* is distinguished by its Futurist temptation and its attention to the machine. In a 1913 drawing (**fig. 6**), the artist makes reference to the angular reading of reality proposed by Cubism, even while seeking to express an energy, a force. He later displayed a three-dimensional plaster for the body of his machine, mounted on a real drill. It is as if the angel on Wilde's tomb had metamorphosed into a soldier for a new era. It is possible to make out a strange hybrid with a stylized simian head and a mechanical body, both primitive and robotic. Like Marcel Duchamp, the artist had the notion to combine his sculpture with an object of commerce, in this case a drill, which in his time was on the cutting edge of technology. Epstein unveiled the Frankenstein's monster that humankind was producing. Marked by the horrors of war, the sculptor associated the machine with the destruction of humanity. Later, in 1916, he dismantled the work. He then cast the upper part in metal, creating a black torso (**fig. 7**) and leaving aside the drill. He issued a warning to society by leaving the machine's progeny visible: an embryo ready to take over already appears in the monster's belly.

Fig. 7. Sir Jacob Epstein, *Torso in Metal from "The Rock Drill"*, 1913–1915, bronze, 70.5 x 58.4 x 44.5 cm. Tate, T00340. © Tate, London, 2019. © The estate of Sir Jacob Epstein.

Fig. 8. Sir Jacob Epstein, *Genesis*, 1929–1931, marble, 162.5 x 83.8 x 78.7 cm. Whitworth Art Gallery, The University of Manchester, S. 1999. 1. Bridgeman Images. © The estate of Sir Jacob Epstein.

Ezra Pound portrayed his friends as "Primitive Mercenaries in the Modern World". In taking an interest in savagery, violence, and the geometrization of forms, Jacob Epstein dynamited the traditional codes of sculpture and opened the way for a new stylistic language. Although he managed to live by his art, thanks to his work as a portraitist (for example, he produced busts of Albert Einstein and Winston Churchill), it was truly in his works associated with the sacred and the religious that he brought innovation to sculpture and established himself as a major artist of the first half of the twentieth century. This is attested in a large series of sculptures in which the connection to the spiritual impelled him to take inspiration from the most remote cultures. *Genesis* (**fig. 8**), from 1929–1931, and *Woman Possessed* (**fig. 9**), from 1932, are suggestive of African masks, for example.

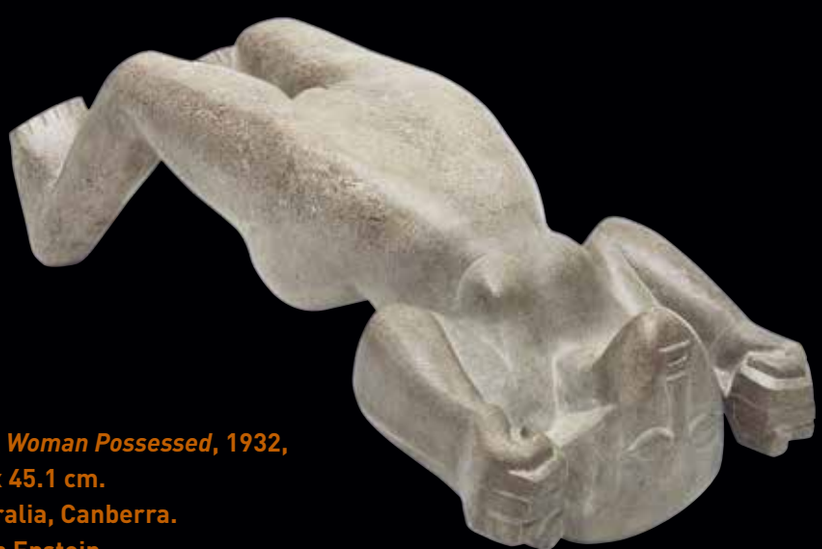


Fig. 9. Sir Jacob Epstein, *Woman Possessed*, 1932, limestone, 33.3 x 102.2 x 45.1 cm. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. © The estate of Sir Jacob Epstein.

Fig. 10. Sir Jacob Epstein, *Jacob and the Angel*, 1940–1941, alabaster, 214 x 110 x 92 cm, 2,500 kg. Tate, T07139. © Tate, London 2019. © The estate of Sir Jacob Epstein.

In the last stage of his career, from the mid-1930s to World War II, a few large-format works in alabaster came to complete his oeuvre. *Consummatum Est*, *Adam* and the group *Jacob and the Angel* (**fig. 10**) all combine Epstein's taste for the simplification of forms with an attention to the material and a reinterpretation of biblical subjects. In his desire to rediscover a form of energy that he captured in his "primitive" sculptures, the Englishman achieved a unique synthesis, to the benefit of a corpus that seems outside time and which, despite the heaviness of his materials, seems to brush up against immateriality and myth.

Epstein died in London in 1959. *Jacob and the Angel* seems to have acquired a particular resonance, in view of the way the artist wrestled with matter throughout his life. Like the Old Testament Jacob, with whom he shared his name, the sculptor fought with forces that surpassed him and that drove him forward. To the end, he disregarded the critics and the technical difficulties, constituting a body of extraordinary works, both in his private collection and in his own art. An authentic figure of modern art, he stands as a go-between, a bridge, able to connect remote cultures in fertile dialogues.

NOTES

1. His collection, which includes elements from cloisters in southern France, was purchased by John D. Rockefeller Jr, before becoming a department of the Metropolitan Museum known as The Cloisters.
2. *Blast: War Number* (July 1915).
3. "Manifesto – II", *Blast* 1 (1914): p. 30.

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BIOGRAPHY

Charlie Godin, a 2013 graduate of the École du Louvre, is a specialist in modern and contemporary art. He curated, notably, the exhibition *Refractive Distance* at the Art Exchange in the United Kingdom, and is the author of several scholarly articles, including for the Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne. In 2018 Charlie Godin joined the City of Paris's Conservation of Civil and Religious Artworks department.

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