

Jacob Epstein 1880–1959
Sculptures for the British Medical Association Building 1908
Portland stone, 18 sculptures,
each c.2 metres tall

A Thirty Years War

When installed on the façade of the new British Medical Association headquarters in the Strand in London in 1908, Jacob Epstein's eighteen nude statues were among the most hotly debated artworks in Britain. Condemned as obscene by some and praised as bracingly modern by others, the monumental sculptures served to establish Epstein's public reputation as one of the most gifted, albeit controversial, artists of the day – but at the expense of embroiling him in what he later described as 'a thirty years war'.

Although the details of the carvings forty feet high were not easily seen from ground level, the nudity of Epstein's figures provoked immediate protests. The sculptor later wrote: 'Perhaps this was the first time in London that a decoration was not purely "decorative"; the figures had some fundamentally human meaning, instead of being merely adjuncts to an architect's mouldings and cornices.' In the end, however, it was not moral or aesthetic arguments that proved the undoing of Epstein's carvings. Instead, thirty years of acid rain, caused by London's smog, weakened the stones and in 1937 part of one sculpture became detached, falling into the street below. The sculptures were immediately checked and all protruding sections of the figures were chiselled away, despite Epstein's protests as what he saw as blatant vandalism and the revenge of traditionalists who disliked the sculptures. Epstein lost the war, but his enemies won it only on dubious, and somewhat inglorious, grounds.

Born in New York in 1880, Epstein had studied in Paris before arriving in London to start his career in 1905. He was thrilled when approached by the architect Charles Holden with the offer to provide a series of statues to decorate the second floor of the new building he was designing, the headquarters of the British Medical Association, on the corner of London's Agar Street and the Strand. Holden was keen to incorporate sculpture into architecture but wanted a simpler, more modern approach than the somewhat clichéd grand style typical of Edwardian buildings. Introduced by a mutual friend, the artist Francis Dodd, Holden found in Epstein's work the clarity and energy he sought. And Epstein found in Holden an enlightened and sympathetic patron for what was his first public commission.

Having swiftly rejected the idea of representing famous medical men, Epstein set to work with relish on the agreed theme of 'The Ages of Man'. He was apparently warned from the outset not to produce anything too outrageous but that did not weigh with him. He later said, 'Apart from my desire to decorate a beautiful building, I wished to create noble and heroic forms to embody in sculpture, the great primal facts of man and woman.' Nudity was essential (though he later in fact added some drapery): 'I was determined to do a series of nude figures', Epstein later recalled, and he set about 'in

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symbolism ... to represent man and woman, in their various stages from birth to old age'. Paid £100 per figure, he quickly set to work to produce the eighteen sculptures, each measuring about two metres in height, needed to fit within the narrow niches set between the second-floor windows of Holden's building. Over a period of fourteen months he worked with feverish intensity. 'I had been like a hound on a leash, and now I was suddenly set free.' Most of his sculptures were demonstrably related to the classical tradition of figurative sculpture but Epstein was fascinated by collections of non-Western art held in the British Museum, and in the postures of some of his sculptures can also be seen traces of his admiration for Hindu and Buddhist sculptures. He sketched from life and made clay models, which were then cast in plaster. The plasters provided a guide for Epstein and his two assistants to carve directly into the Portland stone of the building's façade.

In this preparatory phase Epstein widened his brief beyond the Ages of Man to produce eighteen figures with a vaguely medical or scientific character. The sculptures included, for example, *The Newborn* – an elderly woman presenting a newborn child; *Chemical Research* – a male figure engaged in examination of an argument; *Matter* – a male figure presenting a rock in which was inscribed the form of a foetus; and *Primal Energy* – a male figure breathing life into the atom. When the first set of plaster models was submitted to Holden for approval in summer of 1907, the architect rejected only one. Titled simply *Nature*, this showed a walking naked woman holding a leaf: the figure's unapologetic nudity and references to Asian art were perhaps too much for even this forward-looking Edwardian.

From the summer of 1907 Epstein and his assistants began the year-long process of carving the figures into the building's façade, bringing the plaster casts to site and taking them beneath a covered scaffold to carve while keeping the entire series from public view before its completion. In the summer of 1908 the plaster cast of one of the last figures to be carved – *Maternity* – was delivered to the site. Unfortunately, while waiting outside the scaffolding for its accompanying child, this two-metre-tall female nude, inexplicably staring down at her own body, caught the attention of the British Medical Association's neighbours on Agar Street, the National Vigilance Association for the Repression of Criminal Vice and Public Immorality, an organisation that campaigned against prostitution and indecent publications.

Outraged at the nude figures' possible corrupting effects on young people, the National Vigilance Association started a public campaign against the sculptures, lobbying the British Medical Association and sending letters of protest to key public figures and the press. London's *Evening Standard* and *St James' Gazette* called for the removal of the figures, 'a form of statuary which no careful father would wish his daughter ... to see'. Author of *The Sins of Society* (1906), Father Bernard Vaughan was quoted as saying, 'Let us not ... convert London into a Fiji Island, where there may be some excuse for want of drapery ... to the average man or woman ... these figures will be occasions ... for vulgarity and unwholesome talk, calculated to lead to practices of which there are more than enough in the purlieus of the Strand already'. The fuss had the opposite

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effect intended, and for a period passengers in open-topped buses, Epstein recorded, would ‘stand up in a mass and try to view the now famous Strand Statues.’

Publicly expressing his personal dislike of the sculptures, the chairman of the British Medical Association forced Epstein to account for his work to a committee. Yet London’s artistic community rallied in support. The artist Eric Gill declared the figures ‘far from being indecent, to be almost ascetic in character’. Professor Charles Holmes of Oxford University, art historian and poet Laurence Binyon, artist Charles Ricketts and the editorial team of *The Times* newspaper all made public statements defending the works. The matter was decided in July 1908 when the British Medical Association consulted Sir Charles Holroyd, then-director of the National Gallery. After Holroyd’s evaluation of the sculptures as ‘interesting ... dignified and reverent in treatment’, they were allowed to remain in place.

Epstein’s sculptures survived his critics but faced a more pernicious enemy. London was then one of the most polluted cities in the world owing to its millions of domestic and industrial coal fires. Fumes mixed with rainwater to form a weak acid, leading to the gradual erosion of the alkaline Portland limestone. The process was worsened by the many deeply carved areas in Epstein’s sculptures, which allowed the rainwater to collect, and by a metal ledge running above the sculptures that leached black chemicals onto the stone. As early as 1914 the discoloration of the sculptures was clearly visible. In 1924 the British Medical Association sold the building to the High Commission of New Zealand, which produced a report on the sculptures noting that owing to ‘exposure to the weather ... six of them are more or less eroded’. However, no action was taken at the time.

Epstein faced controversy with other public commissions. In 1925 his sculpture of writer W.H. Hudson’s heroine Rima, for example, was termed the ‘Hyde Park Atrocity’ by the *Daily Mail*, and daubed with green paint, tar and feathers in protest at its alleged obscenity. A letter campaign waged through the national newspapers saved the sculpture, with the playwright George Bernard Shaw and sculptor Frank Dobson among Epstein’s supporters. Three years later Epstein was commissioned by Charles Holden to produce decorations for the London Transport Headquarters and his monumental sculptures *Day* and *Night* again met with public condemnation. Newspapers campaigned to have them removed and the managing director of London Underground offered his resignation until the furore died down when Epstein agreed to tone down the sexuality of one of the figures, by shortening its penis. Epstein, however, did not receive another public commission for over a decade.

In 1935 the Government of Southern Rhodesia acquired the former British Medical Association building, and the newly appointed High Commissioner quickly made plans for the sculptures’ removal. While perhaps fitting for a medical establishment, he argued, they were by no means appropriate for government offices and had nothing to do with his country. The debate over the sculptures’ propriety was reignited in the face of this threat. Epstein wrote to the *Observer* on 5 May 1935 that the sculptures were

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part of the building and any attempt to remove them would damage them: ownership, he said, ‘does not give the right to remove, and destroy or even the right to sell’. The art world rallied in Epstein’s defence, though not without some dissent and rows. (Kenneth Clark, director of the National Gallery, headed a list of signatories of a letter to *The Times* saying that if the sculptures were removed or damaged, ‘we find it difficult to believe that this generation will be acquitted by our successors of a charge of grave vandalism’. The President of the Royal Academy, however, refused to sign, something that caused the distinguished painter Walter Sickert to resign.) The High Commissioner was forced to back down temporarily.

In the summer of 1937 the coronation procession of King George VI passed down the Strand. The renamed Rhodesia House was decorated with bunting for the occasion; during the removal of these decorations part of one of Epstein’s seriously eroded sculptures fell into the street, allegedly narrowly missing one pedestrian and injuring another. The Rhodesian High Commissioner now had an excuse to act. A scaffold was immediately erected, and architect Charles Holden was instructed to inspect each sculpture in the company of the police and a representative of the Rhodesian Government. Any element of the sculpture deemed to be potentially hazardous was knocked out or chiselled away.

Epstein was not allowed to inspect the sculptures but the architect Charles Holden was permitted to supervise the taking of plaster casts of the sculptures, paid for by an unknown benefactor, before this. Epstein was furious with the state of these rapidly made casts – ‘complete travesties of the originals’ – though having not been allowed on the scaffold he was perhaps not fully aware of how eroded they had become. In truth, the only other option would have been to have removed and replaced all the damaged parts, but it is thought that the sculptures were already in an advanced state of decay and that there was simply no money to fund this (certainly, none would have been forthcoming from the building’s owners).

Writing in 1958, Holden maintained that the precautionary knocking out of parts of the sculptures was not disastrous:

Although some of the stones were disfigured in this process the general decorative character of the band of figures was not seriously destroyed, and they still convey something of Epstein’s intention to portray the seven ages of man and have not lost their decorative value.

Epstein saw the matter quite differently. In his 1940 autobiography he wrote that the greater part of every statue had been demolished. ‘What is left ... is a portion of the torso here, a foreleg there, and an arm somewhere else. Not a single head remains. The mutilation was complete.’

Evidence today suggests that he was correct, and that what had been a grand public statement by one of the greatest modernist sculptors working in Britain before the

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First World War was lost, notionally on the dubious grounds of ‘health and safety’.
‘The battle was lost’, Epstein wrote in his autobiography, ‘I had made my protests on
aesthetic and spiritual grounds. Naturally, in a court of law I had no case, and so my
earliest large work ended tragically.’

Text—
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