Jacob Epstein (1880-1959)

Please see separate sheet for image (Rockdrill reformed) and copyright request form.

Sculptor Jacob Epstein’s contribution to the development of modernism in Europe is one that is often overlooked. Born in New York’s Lower East Side, Epstein trained to be a sculptor in Paris before settling in London in 1905. He was best known for his expressionist bronze portraits of the rich and famous, including busts of *Albert Einstein* (1933), *Winston Churchill* (1946) and *H. R. H. Princess Margaret* (1948). However, he courted controversy with his shocking public carvings which were often seen as blasphemous or obscene.

His key contributions to the development of European modernism came during the period 1910-14. It was within this relatively short timeframe that Epstein produced some of his most forward-looking and innovative work. During this period, Epstein was engaged in a number of themes and concepts that later became seen as characteristic of the modernist movement including the technique of directly carving into stone and the use of found objects within sculptural compositions. His seminal sculpture *The Rock Drill* (1913) was his most revolutionary. *The Rock Drill* depicts an angular robotic figure straddling a readymade rock drill used for quarrying – the bit of the drill acting as an obvious phallic metaphor. Within the stomach cavity of the robotic figure, however, is the organic shape of its progeny.

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Art historian Charles Harrison saw *The Rock Drill* as a work that embodied the core values of the modernist movement, he wrote:

“No work, then or since, 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.”

During this period, Epstein associated with avant-garde artists, writers and thinkers in London and Paris, and found close intellectual allies in the philosopher and poet T. E. Hulme, the sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, and the artist Amedeo Modigliani. He was also a founding member of the London Group and exhibited his work alongside Wyndham Lewis, David Bomberg and Edward Wadsworth – artists who became associated with the Vorticist movement.

Epstein’s contribution can also be seen in more abstract terms, in that he laid the foundations for the acceptance of modernist ideas in the generation that followed. Sculptor Henry Moore paid tribute to Epstein in an obituary piece for *The Times* (London). He wrote:

“He took the brickbats, he took the insults, he faced the howls of derision with which artists since Rembrandt have learned to become familiar. [...] We of the generation that succeeded him were spared a great deal, simply because his sturdy personality and determination had taken so much. [...] 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.”

References and Further Reading

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Jacob Epstein Rock Drill Birmingham Art Gallery June 2012: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6S1Or9x1Pp0>

‘Jacob Epstein’ From the BBC's art programme "Monitor", broadcast in 1958: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D_gYH5GnBNY>