

# CREATION, PERTURBATION, MUTILATION

by Pierre de Montaulieu

SIR JACOB EPSTEIN, 1880-1959  
THE AGES OF MAN, 1908-1937

Jacob Epstein was born and raised on the lower east side of New York City, the son of orthodox Jewish immigrants from Poland. He studied art in New York and then in Paris, working for a time in the studio of the great Rodin, before locating to London. His ambition was to be an architectonic sculptor, but he was finding that a difficult path to follow as commissions were not forthcoming. Then one day in the spring of 1907 opportunity knocked on the door of his modest studio.

Architect Charles Holden had recently won a commission to design a new building for the British Medical Association on the Strand, a major thoroughfare in central London. He was looking for a sculptor to create a frieze of figures to animate the facade of the building.

Holden considered himself a 'modernist' and had an aversion to the vapid ornamental elaboration with which so many contemporary buildings were laden. He must have recognized a kindred spirit in this young artist who forswore 'crafty prettiness' and advocated an honest, even harsh, realism. Epstein's work at this time was derived from classical forms and allied with a down-to-earth idealism of the sort espoused by Walt Whitman, a poet admired by both men.

The theme of the frieze was to be *The Ages of Man* and would be expressed by 18 figures, each larger than life size. Holden and Epstein persuaded the BMA Council to forgo representations of historically famous men of medicine. Epstein would instead use figures, both clothed and nude, of men, women and children to express a broader and more profound theme.

Rather than carving the figures in the studio and then transporting them to the building for installation, the work would be done *in situ*. Blocks of excellent Portland stone were cemented in place along the building's facade. The architect's original intention "was to build up the blocks in two or three stones, which would have been the natural way of the stone and would have offered greater resistance to the weather," but Epstein insisted upon working from singular blocks of stone.

Though Epstein would later come to be an outspoken advocate of 'direct carving,' for this, his first major commission, the relatively inexperienced sculptor chose to make clay models from posed figures and cast these in plaster to bring to the site for use as models for the final carvings.

The work began in the summer of 1907, and despite the difficulties of working on scaffolding planks 40 feet above the street and the rigors of a London winter, excellent progress was made by Epstein and his two assistants. The work was in large part completed in June '08, when a dramatic turn of events commenced and progress came to a halt.



The front of the BMA building faced the Strand, and the side of the building ran along Agar Street. By an ironic coincidence the building on the other side of Agar Street housed the offices of the NVA, the National Vigilance Association, an organization devoted to social purity and the eradication of indecency. Its main targets were prostitution and obscene literature, but it considered painting and sculpture within its purview.

One day the plaster model of a hugely pregnant woman was brought onto the scaffolding. The child that the woman would be holding was not included for some reason, and she seemed to be absorbed in contemplation of her distended belly. This doubtlessly offended the sensibilities of the NVA staff, for shortly thereafter the work site was visited by a police constable who carried out an inspection of the statues and took notes. Epstein recorded that he saw the constable write the word 'rude,' a mild term of disapproval considering what was to follow.

The NVA knew how to stir up a scandal. On June 19th an article was published in the *London Evening Standard*. The tone of the piece can be surmised by a few sentences: "They are a form of statuary which no careful father would wish his daughter, or no discriminating young man his fiancée, to see." It went on to say that nude statuary figures might appropriately be displayed in galleries where they are seen by those "who know how to appreciate the art they represent (but) to have art of the kind indicated laid bare to the gaze of all classes, young and old, in perhaps the busiest thoroughfare of the Metropolis of the world . . . is another matter."

"The Strand Statues" quickly became notorious. Soon there was a continuous throng of spectators on the sidewalk across from the building, most of them young men and women. The NVA called for the statues to be removed and a great debate commenced in the city's newspapers and magazines. Everyone, it seemed, had an opinion on the subject. But the final decision on the fate of the statues was in the hands of the BMA building committee which had the right to refuse the works.

The BMA's announcement of an emergency meeting to determine the fate of the statues precipitated a final flurry of opinion in the media. Perhaps the most influential argument was expressed in the issue of *The Times*, London's most prestigious newspaper, strategically published on the morning of the meeting: "Well, it is difficult in these days to be surprised at anything; but we confess that we

are surprised to find any portion of the London Press assuming the attitude of the Pope who ordered the Vatican Venus and some of her marble sisters to wear tin petticoats. We trust this appeal to the philistinism and hypocrisy of a portion of our middle class will be met by the British Medical Association with the contempt it deserves."

The BMA committee members were almost certainly devoted readers of *The Times* and when this article was read aloud at the meeting they moved to recommend that Epstein be allowed to complete the work, pending approval by the Director of the National Gallery. Approval was given and Epstein finished the carvings. When the hoardings were finally removed and the statues could be viewed, Londoners found that Epstein's figures were notable for the extraordinary reserve with which they filled the spaces allotted them on the building's facade. They came to be accepted by the general public.

In 1924 the BMA relocated to larger premises. The upper stories of the old BMA building were rented out and the building was put up for sale. In 1935 it was purchased by the Southern Rhodesian government and almost immediately an announcement was made that the carvings would all be removed as they were not "within the austerity usually appertaining to Government buildings."

Once again the 'indecent' sculptures were the subject of controversy and public debate. The Rhodesian High Commissioner's attitude was that his government had purchased the building and the carvings and had the right to do with them as they pleased. Epstein and his supporters asserted that the owners of works of art in the public realm had a responsibility to respect and preserve them.

Epstein might have prevailed had it not been for his original insistence on using a full block of stone for each sculpture. He had chosen artistic integrity over physical integrity, using a single block with the bedding plane oriented vertically, instead of more than one block with the bedding planes horizontal. Although the statues were basically intact, some of the pieces were already beginning to show the effects of corrosion. Hence the High Commissioner had an unassailable excuse for the sculptures' removal: public safety. Workmen were brought in to fence off stretches of pavement declared to be hazardous to pedestrians. What seems to be an unsubstantiated

urban myth—that a phallus detached from one of the carvings fell to the sidewalk, narrowly missing a passerby—may have had its origin here.

Notable architects, artists and organizations sympathetic to Epstein made public entreaties to the Rhodesian officials to restore the affected portions (as was and still is common practice) rather than remove the statues. But their pleas were disregarded. Because the argument had become acrimonious between the High Commissioner and the artist, Epstein was refused access to the works to evaluate the damage. Later, when Epstein realized that the battle was lost and the original figures would be sacrificed, he wanted to make casts from the carvings so the original forms would at least be preserved by full-sized replicas, but his molder was also rebuffed. Some casts were made independently, but Epstein deemed them to be 'atrocities.'

Finally, rather than restoring the damaged portions of the statues or removing them entirely, the Government of Rhodesia took the worst possible course of action. The building's architect, Charles Holden, was hired to assess the 'health' of the sculptures. Holden and Epstein had had a falling out during a project they had undertaken subsequent to the BMA and this probably influenced the architect's role. Holden went along the scaffolding with government officials and policemen in tow and, using a hammer, tapped each sculpture from top to bottom. All that he condemned as dangerously hollow or eroded were then brutally removed. Heads, arms and the male genitalia were hacked away, leaving mutilated human figures that remain to this day, memorialized martyrs in the struggle between art and morality. ■

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*Art Beyond the Gallery in early 20th Century England*, Richard Cork, 1985, Yale University Press

*Let There Be Sculpture*, Jacob Epstein, 1942, London Readers Union