

JACOB EPSTEIN: BABIES AND BLOOMSBURY

Catalogue essay by Gill Hedley for exhibition at The Foundling Museum, Jan 2015

IN BLOOMSBURY

Antony Gormley said in 2009 that Epstein 'was solely responsible for the arrival of Modernism, and in particular for bringing direct carving to Britain.'

Since Jacob Epstein's first public commission in London in 1908, he had been criticised, often viciously, for his monumental avant-garde sculpture. Throughout his career, he also consistently produced lyrical, intimate portraits of his wife, his lovers and their children.

Epstein lived for many years in Bloomsbury but was never part of the literary, painterly Bloomsbury Group often characterised as people who 'lived in squares, moved in circles and loved in triangles.' This might also serve as a description of Epstein's own complex family life. He knew Bloomsbury for over twenty years. It was where he first stayed in London, had a series of studios and stores, a family home and where his first children were born. It was also the location of the British Museum whose collections of ancient and non-European sculpture were his early inspiration.

Jacob Epstein was born in 1880, the second son of a businessman Max Epstein and his wife Mary Solomon who were middle-class, Orthodox Russian-Polish Jewish refugees in New York. He was the third of eight surviving children and his interest in drawing came from long periods of enforced rest due to pleurisy.

Aged 22, Epstein moved to Paris to study art formally in academies and then independently, regularly visiting museums. In 1904, he made a brief exploratory trip to London and stayed in Bloomsbury visiting more museums, above all the British Museum.

When thinking of leaving Paris, I determined to go to London and see if I could settle down and work there. My 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.¹

His main reason for discovering whether he could settle in London was a love affair. In Paris in 1903 he met and fell in love with Margaret Williams, a Scot seven years his senior, still married to another man. Margaret Dunlop and Thomas Williams (she worked for the GPO, he was a London County Council clerk) had married in Holborn in 1896 and lived in Bloomsbury, at 49, Clovelly Mansions on the Gray's Inn Road. Epstein stayed with them on his reconnaissance visit.

Thomas Williams filed for divorce in 1905 after Margaret moved into an artists' studio block, between the Fulham Road and the King's Road, with Epstein. *La vie Bohème* began there for them as a couple on 5 November 1905 when she left a letter for her husband (quoted here for the first time) saying 'I am going to Jacob Epstein, I feel myself drawn away by a power I cannot resist.'² They wed as soon as the divorce was finalised in 1906 and their remarkable marriage lasted until her death over forty years later.

¹ All quotations are, unless otherwise stated, from Jacob Epstein, *Let there be sculpture: an autobiography*, Michael Joseph, 1940

² England & Wales, Civil Divorce Records, 1858-1911, copyright The National Archives

When Epstein left Paris for England in early 1905 he brought little work with him, probably only a folio of drawings and possibly two life-sized bronze sculptures of new-born babies. (fig.1) If this seems an unusual subject for such a young artist, created when he was only about 23, they reflect his interest in Renaissance sculpture which he had seen for the first time in Paris:

The Florentines had a special love of children. From Donatello's mad incarnations of robust vitality, to graceful Verrocchio's ...

To work from a child the sculptor has to have endless patience. He must wait and observe, and observe and wait. The small forms, so seemingly simple, are in reality so subtle, and the hunting of the form is an occupation that is at once tantalizing and fascinating.

This influence can also be seen in his head of Augustus John's infant son Romilly, 1907. The child's fashionable pageboy haircut is smoothed like an archaic helmet, lending him a princely air. (fig 2)

Epstein returned to New York briefly in June 1905, presumably trying to make a decision about Margaret, but returned to her and to England where he became a naturalised citizen in 1910. The Epsteins often moved home in these difficult early years but Epstein always kept some premises for his work in Bloomsbury. In 1916 the Epsteins finally made a permanent home at 23, Guilford Street, opposite the gates of the Foundling Hospital, for twelve years.

In *Bohemia in London* Arthur Ransome described a sculptor's wedding, the year after that of his friends the Epsteins. While the book is fiction, not reportage, references to a flat in the Gray's Inn Road, a Bloomsbury restaurant and descriptions of gaiety do ring true: 'it was not genteel; it was perhaps a little vulgar; but it was tremendously genuine.'

Epstein became notorious in 1908 when a press scandal arose over the powerful figures he created for the British Medical Association building in the Strand. These personifications of maternity, infancy and other stages of life were forty feet high, largely nude and such naturalism caused a powerful controversy in the press. One particularly striking work showed an old woman carrying a child, neither nativity nor pietà, but a powerful female statement.

In 1914, Wyndham Lewis set up the Rebel Art Centre at 38, Great Ormond Street and its Vorticist journal *Blast* first appeared in July. While Epstein was not a signatory to its manifesto his most experimental and challenging modernist work - *Rock Drill*, 1913-15 - is considered its epitome and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and Ezra Pound saw it in 1913 at Epstein's studio in Lamb's Conduit Street. Other places for work included the mews behind Devonshire Street (now Boswell Street), Great James's Street and 42, Emerald Street, where he had a studio from January 1914 until September 1920.

An important Bloomsbury institution, The Poetry Bookshop, was created by Epstein's friend and landlord Harold Monroe in 1913 at 35, Devonshire Street. The Bookshop also published poetry by living poets and several poets actually made their home there. The atmosphere was friendly and warm and the shop's bestsellers were hand-coloured rhyme sheets for children. There was also Cameo Corner, a jeweller's on New Oxford Street, later on Museum Street, whose owner, Moshe Oyved, collected and also sold work by Epstein. The area provided both intellectual companionship and local colour:

Often in Bloomsbury, where I live, I see an old, bareheaded, bearded man with a hand organ. His savage apostle's head attracts my attention. He turns and says, "Take another look!" I ask him to sit for me, and he consents. He sits, a silent character, revealing only that he had been in the Army on service in India.

He is determined to keep out of the workhouse, and is glad of the opportunity of making a little extra. His head is bronzed with his outdoor life, and I suspect he is a gypsy. I like his rugged, defiant character, and I think of doing a life-size figure of him, or of using him for a group. I am planning a "Descent from the Cross." I never carry out this plan, and Old Smith disappears from Bloomsbury.

The Epstein family home in Guilford Street was always full of visitors, models and those who stayed much longer.

The front ground-floor room was their sitting room and, as far as I can remember, the furniture consisted only of a table and some chairs - also innumerable saucers with dregs of tea in them or mountains of cigarette ends. Behind double-doors was their bedroom in which a large and often unmade bed could be seen. On one occasion the bedclothes were pulled back in place to conceal a laid breakfast tray being kept warm for someone who was coming to breakfast. The first, or drawing-room, floor was Epstein's studio.³

Epstein had a breakdown in 1917 training as a private in the Jewish 38th battalion of the Royal Fusiliers, just after his second one-man show at the Leicester Galleries which finally brought him some measure of critical and financial success. However, he also suffered from the pressure of a love affair begun sometime around 1916 with a model, Dorothy Lindsell-Stewart (fig 3) In February 1918. Meum (as she was always known) became pregnant with Epstein's first child. Margaret travelled to visit Epstein in his camp and, as she was never able to have children, a decision was made that the baby would be brought up as hers. Peggy Jean Epstein, named after her adopted mother who was known as Peggy, was born in Bloomsbury a fortnight before the Armistice; Epstein was invalided out of the army that summer.

In the same year, Epstein made a remarkable portrait of his wife, her head covered by a lace mantilla and her eyes cast down, the conventions of a Madonna with a gaze both of maternal love and acceptance. He wrote:

This bust, I think, is one of my bravest....and....one of my most beautiful busts. This work was unhurried and brooded over, and the drapery was worked with great care. The lines, all running downwards like the rills of a fountain, are essential to the effect of the bust and help to express its innermost meaning. I think of this bust as a crowning piece, and I place it with any work I have done. (fig 4)

Epstein found a new source of energy and inspiration in his baby daughter and made many portraits of her throughout her childhood:

I never tired of watching her, and to watch her was, for me, to work from her. To make studies in clay of all her moods; and when she tired and fell asleep, there was something new to do, charming and complete. To work from a child seemed to me the only work worth doing, and I was prepared to go for the rest of my life looking at Peggy Jean, and making new studies of her... (fig 5)

By the time Peggy Jean was a toddler, Epstein had begun a serious and long-term love affair which would finally end in marriage decades later.

³ Viva King, *The Weeping and the Laughter*, Macdonald and Jane's, 1976

In 1919 Kathleen Garman, aged 18, and her sister Mary ran away from home in the West Midlands to London. Kathleen got a job at Harrods, helping with delivery-van horses and also worked as an artist's model; Mary drove a Lyons delivery van. Shocked by their behaviour, their father eventually decided to support them and they rented a studio apartment at 13, Regent Square, Bloomsbury, and enrolled in a private art school. They visited nightclubs, including *The Harlequin* in Soho, where Kathleen met Epstein who invited her to pose for him. In 1921, they became lovers. Mrs. Epstein, fully aware and tolerant of previous affairs, sensed that this was a more serious matter and in the summer of 1923, invited Kathleen to Guilford Street. Margaret shot Kathleen in the shoulder with a pearl-handled pistol, hidden in her skirts. Epstein paid Kathleen's hospital bills and persuaded her not to press charges to avoid a public scandal.

The relationship between Kathleen and Epstein continued in spite of Margaret's best attempts to stop it, including spending more time at their cottage in Epping. He wrote to Kathleen 'How I wish we were together you and I in our little place. How happy I would be beyond words and all expression in words.'⁴

Kathleen and Epstein remained together and had three surviving children: Theo(dore), also given the name Jacob, in 1924, Kathleen, known as Kitty, in 1926 and Esther in 1929. A baby daughter lived only a few months in late 1922, not long before the shooting episode. Epstein's name is not on their birth certificates. Kitty and Esther were sent to live in the country while Theo and his mother and aunt lived in the studio in Regent's Square. The boy was never sculpted by his father.

Epstein went most evenings from Guilford Street to Regent's Square - a ten minute stroll past the Foundling Hospital. (fig 6) To a modern mind there is an irony, at least, in this walk past a building, so familiar to him, in which some 400 children lived, given up by their parents. But Epstein clearly doted on children and created some of his most successful works with them as subjects. It is a matter of regret that he did not make sketches of any of his small foundling neighbours.

The household remained complicated and, for about ten years, Sunita Devi (whose real name was Anima Peerbhoy, c.1897-1932) and her young son Enver came to live with them. Epstein drew and sculpted them many times and they were the models for his *Madonna and Child*, 1927, though Epstein had great difficulty getting Enver to stand still.

That year the Epsteins made a family trip to New York, and Enver was left behind only at the last moment. Peggy Jean, about nine, injured her eye with some metal debris and Epstein created one of his most tender but objective portraits. A critic remarked:

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.⁵

The failure to end the affair with Kathleen must have lain behind the decision to leave Bloomsbury and the busy, ramshackle house. By 1928, the family was living in greater style at 18, Hyde Park Gate, a few doors away from where Virginia Woolf was born. Kathleen moved to Chelsea, remaining in Bohemia, while the Epsteins lived in the elegance appropriate to a respected portrait sculptor.

The Foundling Hospital was demolished in 1928.

⁴ Quoted in Cressida Connolly, *The Rare and the Beautiful: The Lives of the Garmans*, Fourth Estate, 2004

⁵, Reginald H. Wilenski, *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture*, Faber and Faber, 1932

MORE BABIES

Margaret continued in her attempts to divert her husband's attentions and introduced him to a young art student Isabel Nicholas who modelled for him. They became lovers about 1932 when she was twenty and had a son, Jackie. Margaret brought him up as her own child. (fig 7) Peggy Jean was by now 14 and, when Isabel first joined the household, they shared a room.

Isabel Nicholas later became a muse to many artists including Alberto Giacometti and Francis Bacon, and married three times: the journalist Sefton Delmer and composers Constant Lambert and Alan Rawsthorne. Her portrait by Epstein of 1933 is probably the most powerful and erotic portrayal of any of his lovers.

Jackie (Jacob) who, like his half-sister Peggy Jean, bore their father's surname became a racing driver. His portraits by Epstein have an electric energy and the relationship between father and son seems to echo the delight he had shown 15 years previously when he had enjoyed daily contact with his first child:

.... the child cannot sit still, and to compel a child to be quiet is at once to destroy the spontaneity and charm which lie in its frank and natural expressions. Yet I have attempted time and time this most difficult subject for sculpture ... I know I have by no means exhausted the subject.

My drawings of Jackie present a period of my life and mark out, through drawings, a plastic expression I am proud of. To have captured the fugitive and endless expressions and changes of movement of a child has been a rare experience.

Peggy Jean attended Dartington School (at the same time as Lucian Freud) and later moved to America. Peggy Jean married twice, and her daughter Leda and son Ian were both modelled by their grandfather. Kitty Garman had two daughters, Ann and Annabel, with her husband Lucian Freud and they also sat for mischievous and captivating portraits.

Epstein commented that 'Children I love to do, but not at the command of their parents. They likewise want to see them as angels with wings on, and not just lovely and charming, or roguish and capricious.'

Nonetheless Epstein responded very successfully to commissions of young children – notably those of Paul Robeson, the American singer and black activist who sang lullabies to Peggy Jean, and James Mason, the British film star. The Duke of Devonshire (one of Lucian Freud's patrons) commissioned a head of his three year-old daughter and the Duchess wrote:

They had to go every day for two hours for 14 days so Diddy [the nanny] & Sir Jacob became terrific friends & Diddy said 'I think Sir Jacob's fallen for me - he likes a ton weight.'⁶

Epstein's enduring reputation depends on a series of monumental sculptures which attracted calumny early in his career and public distinction later in life and today. He returned often to the subject of woman, as a lover, a symbol of Maternity, as the Virgin or in old age, always expressively and experimentally. Childhood - infancy to adolescence - was his other preoccupation.

⁶ Charlotte Mosley, edited, *In Tearing Haste: Letters between Patrick Leigh Fermor and Deborah Devonshire*, Hodder & Stoughton, 2010

I regret that I have not done more children, and I plan someday to do only children. I think I should be quite content with that, and not bother about the grownups at all. I would love to fill my studio with studies of children. This is a fancy, a dream of mine; but naturally I must sometimes turn to and earn a living like other persons.

Margaret Epstein died in 1947. Theo and Esther Garman both died in 1954, the year Epstein was knighted. He and Kathleen were married in 1955. As his sole heir, Lady Epstein presented his original plaster casts to the Israel Museum and helped create the Garman Ryan Collection which is now at the heart of The New Art Gallery Walsall, near her family home.

Epstein's final and most permanent link with Bloomsbury came shortly before he died in 1959. One of his last works was a memorial to the dead trade unionists of both world wars and it was installed at the Trades Union Congress headquarters in Great Russell Street. in 1958. This monumental pietà might echo the recent tragic losses of Theo and Esther but certainly reflects the lifelong importance to him of pre-classical and non-European sculpture which he began to study 50 years previously at the British Museum, only a few moments' away and close to his Bloomsbury home.