

Jacob Epstein: Babies and Bloomsbury, Foundling Museum

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This show of his family portraits gives us an insight into the dark, domestic life of sculptor Jacob Epstein, says Richard Dorment.

A lot of people hate the work of **Jacob Epstein**. I know - because I used to be one of them. My line was that all his innovative sculptures were done just before and during the First World War, such as **Rock Drill** and the tomb of Oscar Wilde. Thereafter, and until his death in 1959, he reverted to his default style, a sort of outdated romantic expressionism that had nothing to do with mainstream modernism.

His bronze full-length of **Jan Christian Smuts** in Parliament Square (nicknamed **The Skater**) utterly lacks the one thing a public monument must have - dignity. The monstrous bronze family group that used to stand at Bowater House in Knightsbridge, meanwhile, is so stridently over-emphatic I used to wince every time I passed it.

But looking back, I accept it was unfair to dismiss his work as a whole. For sheer brute force, there is nothing in British art like his monumental carving in alabaster **Jacob and the Angel**. In turn, his best portrait busts - Joseph Conrad, Albert Einstein, Somerset Maugham - are how I'll always visualise each of these men.

Epstein was born in 1880, on Manhattan's lower east side. After studying at the Art Students League he set sail for Paris in 1902 and three years later made his way to London. Except for his absolute belief in his own genius, the most American thing about him was his genius for self-publicity.

The outcry in 1907 over the supposed indecency of the over life-size stone figures for Charles Holden's British Medical Association Building, in the Strand, left him in the enviable position of enfant terrible - so, naturally enough, he provoked another kerfuffle in 1912, by exaggerating the size of the genitals on the dramatic winged demon angel on **Oscar Wilde's** tomb in Pere Lachaise cemetery in Paris. But notoriety has its downside. Whereas the scandals stay in the memory, the more intimately-scaled sculptures tend to be overlooked

That's what makes a small exhibition of Epstein's sculptures of children, at the Foundling Museum, so delightful. Focusing on the years (1914-1927) he lived in Bloomsbury, it brings us into contact with the private, domestic side of Epstein's life and art in a way that a larger show could not do.

The reason is that Epstein himself was the father or grandfather of most of the children whose portraits are on show. Since their mothers and step-mothers are also here, in effect we are given an overview of the extended Epstein family in all its dysfunctional glory.

It doesn't take long to become familiar with the faces of his eldest and youngest children, Peggy Jean and Jacky - because Epstein modelled their heads when they were small, whereas his estrangement from the mother of his other children meant he only sculpted Kitty and Esther as young adults (and he didn't do their brother Theo at all).

The show starts, though, with two bronze heads of new-born babes whose identity we do not know. *Baby Asleep* and *Baby Awake* were both modelled in Paris in 1904. The subject itself is surprising for a 24 year old - if only because modelling a convincing image of an infant's head is so difficult. A lesser sculptor would have made the head uniformly smooth, like a doll's. But so sensitive is the modelling here that we sense the sculptor's hands lightly moving over the clay to suggest barely detectable distinctions between the textures of cranium, cheeks and lips.

What's striking is that Epstein's preternatural fidelity to nature extends even to his ability to discern personality - or, more accurately, a sense of the infant as a separate, complete, and unique human being. He does it again in the enchanting head of Augustus John's slightly older son Romilly (1907), where the one-year-old makes his dissatisfaction with the way the sitting's going perfectly clear.

Remember that most of the works in this show are not commissioned. Epstein was free to present his offspring to the world as the boisterous, messy, and badly behaved brats he knew and loved. A 1928 bronze called *The Sick Child* is like a sculpted snapshot: in it, Epstein breaks all the rules of sculpture by showing Peggy Jean's head slightly bowed, her shoulders hunched forward, and her thin arms extended over a flat surface as though to steady herself.

She is the opposite of an adorable poppet in a party frock. The work's exuberance feels true to life, and I admire Epstein's courage in attempting to convey movement and transitory expression in an intractable material like bronze. But for those very reasons *The Sick Child* is an artistic failure. Compare it to Edvard Munch's paintings and lithographs on the theme of *The Sick Child* you see at once that, as a medium, painting is able to convey fragility in a way sculpture rarely can.

One of the pleasures of the show is watching Peggy Jean and Jacky grow from childhood to maturity. And yet, with a few exceptions, there isn't a lot of joy in Epstein's portraits. I was chilled both by the absence of a portrait of Theo and just the single portrait of his sister Esther - suggesting why as adults they were both to commit suicide.

The knowledge that an artist's private life was messy isn't normally a factor in our response to an exhibition of their work. But this exhibition is different. The language of the wall labels and catalogue essays is always neutral, but the mere factual account of how Epstein treated his own family amounts to a story of betrayal, abandonment, and rejection.

Delightful many as many of the portraits are, I left the show thinking of these women and children not only as models but also as victims.

To May 10; foundlingmuseum.org.uk 020 7841 3600

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