

Night and Day divided London.

Jacob Epstein's monolithic statues *Night* and *Day* suggest cannibalism, sacrifice and lust.

Both statues concentrate on a parental situation.

Day: a sinister patriarch surrounding a naked youth.

Night: conjures **Michelangelo's** [*Pieta*](#) – although a woman holds the body of a son (is it the sun?), extinguishing his life and his light.

Epstein believed direct carving respected the nature of the material. *Night* and *Day* skilfully respond to the shape and grain of the Portland Stone – formidable, unwavering and assertive.

Deliberately abandoning a Classical aesthetic – Epstein found inspiration in India, Mexico, West Africa and the Pacific Islands. At a time when the primitive was linked to political anarchy his realist, avant-garde style tested conventions regarding 'suitable' subjects for public art.

Commissioned as part of **Charles Holden's** new headquarters for the London Underground, *Night* and *Day* were unveiled in 1928. They provoked controversy and moral panic and attempted defamation ensued, campaigns were mounted to have the sculptures removed.

[**Frank Pick**](#), the managing director of the London Underground, the leading force behind 55 Broadway, took full responsibility for the statues and offered to resign. (Later, he privately admitted that the statues were not to his taste – but he stood up for his artist on principal)

In due course, Epstein removed 1½ inches from the boy's penis and the protest died down.

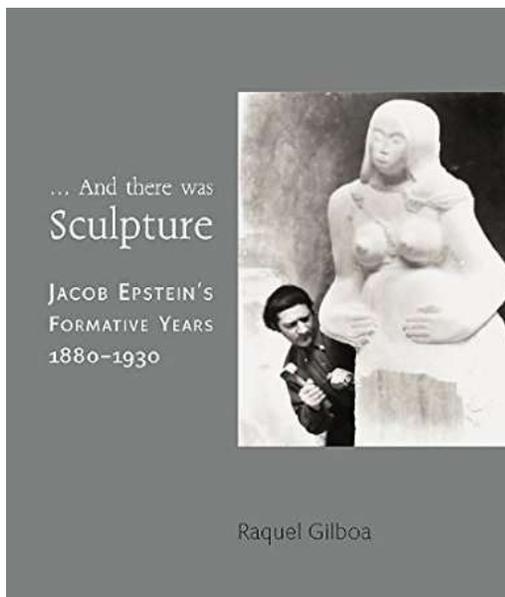
Night and *Day* are part of the facade at St James Street Station, London.

The Lewd, the Crude and the Ugly: Epstein's Sculpture

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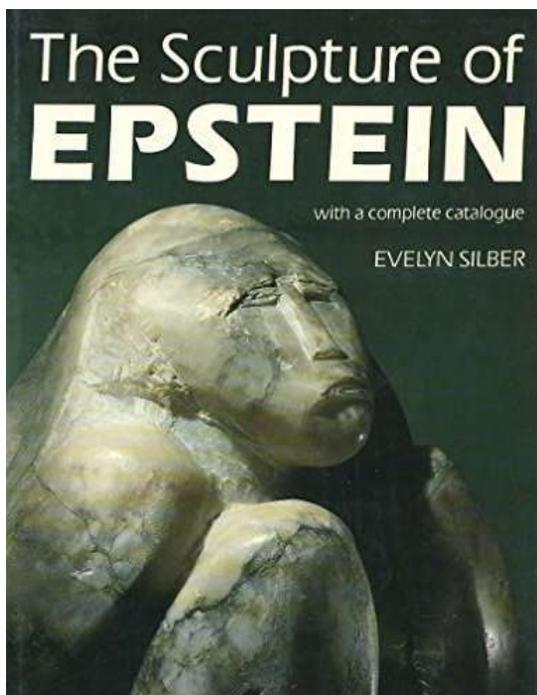
On the **10th of November 1880**, sculptor Jacob Epstein was born in New York, yet he is best known as an English artist, having settled in Britain in 1905. As a Jewish American in Edwardian London working in a rough, stylised modernist manner, the critical reception of his work was far from friendly. Epstein has historically become the artist who suffered more abuse for his work than any other British artist, being very likely the Hirst or Emin of his day. His sculptures were called 'depraved' and 'hideous' especially as many were large pieces flanking important buildings in openly public spaces in London. His cool American background and creative stints in Paris – where he met Picasso, Brâncusi, Modigliani and was even given a recommendation letter by Rodin – gave him a certain status which allowed him such exposure.



Epstein's career started off with a (crash and a) bang in 1908 as he received his first commission of 18 statuettes for the British Medical Association now decorating the second floor of Zimbabwe House in the Strand. In spite of the commission's solemn scope – he was meant to pay homage to the great men of medicine – Epstein, strongly influenced by Asian iconography, proceeded to carve Portland stone in situ into large naked figures. He entitled it *The Ages of Man*, "**noble and heroic forms to express in sculpture the great primal facts of man and woman.**" (Epstein in Evelyn Silber, *Sir Jacob Epstein*, Bucknell University Press, 1986). Contemporaries deemed them obscene, but equally shocking was the artist's departure from traditional European iconography in favour of that of classical India, with especially the female

figures adopting Buddhist and Hindu postures and gestures. In [Epstein's 1999 biography](#), Richard Cork pointed out that the sculptor's penchant for 'direct carving', another alien concept in modernist British sculpture, hailed back to a winter he had spent cutting ice in lakes in New Jersey. In this sense, his influence was significant for younger carvers such as Moore and Hepworth. The Strand statues outraged Edwardian London and *The Evening Standard* denounced them as **"A form of statuary which no careful father would wish his daughter, or no discriminating young man, his fiancée, to see."** The seeds of sensationalist art were sown and the public came in masses to relish the scandal. In 1930, some of the statues crumbled and the more protruding anatomical parts (!) were hacked off allegedly to make them safe for the public below, which explains their current mutilated form.

Various other works followed, eliciting no less sensation. Epstein left his *Maternity* (1910) purposely unfinished, showing the heavy body of the pregnant woman emerging from the rock. His material, the stone, became the symbol of the compliant female, which the virile male sculptor forced himself upon in order to create something raw and beautiful. With Epstein, carving acquired an evident sexual connotation, and by choosing this direct approach, he was clearly staging his own protest against the moral and aesthetic limitations of his time. The artist stated: **"Sculpture, is fit work for a man (...) a strange copulation of spirit and matter (...) laying loving hands upon the willing and love-returning stone. (...) At one blow, whole generations of sculptors and sculpture are shattered and sent flying into the limbo of triviality, and my "Genesis", with her fruitful womb, confronts our enfeebled generation. Within her, Man takes on new hope for the future."**



[Rock Drill \(1913–14\)](#), the first ever British sculpture to include a mass-produced object (still displaying the American drill manufacturer's name) was extensively ridiculed in the press. [Epstein's tomb of Oscar Wilde \(1914\)](#) in Père Lachaise cemetery, Paris, was condemned and covered in a tarpaulin by the French police. Epstein remembered this scandal with indignation:

“Imagine my horror when arriving at the cemetery to find that the sex parts of the figure had been swaddled in plaster! And horribly I was told I must either castrate or fig leaf the monument!” (quote from [Michael Pennington *An Angel for a Martyr: Jacob Epstein’s Tomb for Oscar Wilde*](#), 1987). It seemed that, although sexual elements had been intrinsically part of figure sculpture in art history, within the frame of modernist carving, clearly defined anatomical organs were too much to take, even for a more liberal Parisian society. In London, Epstein’s Hyde Park bird sanctuary *Rima* (1925) dedicated to environmentalist W. H. Hudson, was splashed with paint and feathered. The nude sculptures for the London Electric Railway building in 1929 were deemed indecent and plans were made for their removal. Four of Epstein’s works, including [*Jacob and the Angel* \(1940-1\)](#) now underneath the central dome of Tate Britain) were displayed in the ‘anatomical department’ of Blackpool’s Tussaud’s and promoted by loudspeakers as ‘the strangest thing you have ever seen’ – it worked, as 17,000 visitors a day flocked to the attraction to stare at it! Similarly, the sculpture *Adam* (1938), was bought in 1939 by a showman who promoted it as an obscene curiosity and toured it throughout Britain and the US as part of a freak show. Today we wonder what all the fuss was about. Yet, this puts into perspective Charles Saatchi’s fervent support of the Young British Artists in the 1990s... but what a scandalous presumption that would be!

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