

Jacob Epstein's London

The sculptor's legacy 50 years after his death

Jacob Epstein (who died on August 19 1959) was one of the greatest British sculptors of the twentieth century. He was also the most controversial. His sculptures have been decapitated, castrated, covered in paint and tarred and feathered. 'He took the brickbats,' said Henry Moore, 'and he took them first.'

Graham Barker scours London for his finest works.

1 BMA, now Zimbabwe House, Strand (1908)

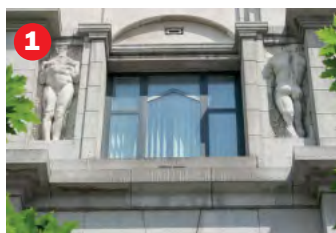
On the junction with Agar Street you'll see a macabre spectacle: 18 mutilated naked figures in niches around Zimbabwe House. Epstein was a daring choice as sculptor for the British Medical Association headquarters. His 'Ages of Man' figures were more than Edwardian London could bear. Here were statues that 'no careful father would wish his daughter... to see', warned the *Evening Standard*. Some 29 years later the genitalia, heads and limbs were hacked off by the building's new owners, allegedly after a penis fell from above and injured a passer-by.

2 'Rima', WH Hudson Memorial, Hyde Park (1925)

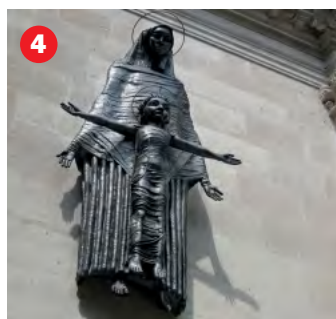
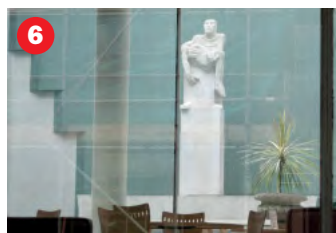
North of the Serpentine is a wildlife garden dedicated to naturalist WH Hudson. Placed centrally is Epstein's stone relief of Rima, the bare-breasted nature-spirit heroine of Hudson's book 'Green Mansions'. It was dubbed the 'Hyde Park Atrocity'. Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin was 'visibly shocked' as he unveiled it, questions were asked in Parliament, the Royal Academy president campaigned for its removal and it was vandalised with green paint. Thankfully George Bernard Shaw and others rallied to its defence.

3 'Day' and 'Night', 55 Broadway, St James's (1928)

Peer up at the brooding figures of 'Day' and 'Night' over the entrance



of St James's Park tube. This art deco office block – London's first 'skyscraper' – was London Transport's headquarters. Architect Charles Holden insisted on its sculptures being carved *in situ* 'to preserve all the virility and adventure brought into play with every cut of the chisel'. Holden might have got more virility and adventure than he'd bargained for. Critics argued that these were obscene pagan deities and found undertones of paedophilia in the ponderous man looming behind the naked child. On Guy Fawkes Night, 2,000 students rallied in protest, and later a gang tarred and feathered the sculptures. To quell the uproar, Epstein truncated the child's penis. But he had to wait another 25 years for his next public commission in London.



4 'Madonna and Child', Dean's Mews, off Cavendish Square (1953)

Sculpted in lead and suspended over a mews arch between two neo-Palladian buildings, this graceful mother and child celebrates the former site of the Convent of the Holy Child Jesus. The nuns were initially alarmed when they heard Epstein was involved, but his Madonna and Child shows he could bring freshness and warmth to a traditional theme. Nikolaus Pevsner approved of how it 'broods in great stillness'.

5 Field Marshal Smuts, Parliament Square, Westminster (1956)

Like an ice skater, hands clasped firmly behind his back, the former South African prime minister Jan Christian Smuts cuts a thrusting figure. Smuts was a controversial subject – soldier, statesman and scholar, he was seen as a groundbreaking humanitarian for his role in establishing the League of Nations, but he advocated racial segregation and opposed black enfranchisement. Nelson Mandela, arms aloft, now attracts more attention in the opposite corner.

6 'Pietà', Congress House, Great Russell Street, Bloomsbury (1957)

Speak nicely to the receptionists at Congress House and they'll let you sneak into the café to marvel at Epstein's 'Pietà' across the courtyard. Stark and square, the towering mother figure grows out of the stone plinth, the figure of her lifeless son draped in her arms. As a war memorial for the TUC headquarters, 'This is neither a

tribute to military valour nor even a symbol of grief,' says art historian Dr Evelyn Silber, 'but more an indictment of the pitiless indifference of war.'

7 'Woman Taking Off Her Dress', Roper's Garden, Chelsea (unveiled 1972)

Here you're literally standing in Epstein's footsteps, on the site of his studio from 1909-1914. At the eastern end of this sunken garden on the Embankment, sheltering by Chelsea Old Church, sits one of his simple stone reliefs. Pitted with chisel marks and unfinished, it depicts a plump primitive female figure battling forward, legs bent, arm across her face. Its alternative title of 'A Woman Walking Against the Wind' captures the essence of the piece most vividly.

More Epstein sculptures can be seen at the National Portrait Gallery (bust of TS Eliot) and Tate Modern ('Rock Drill').

'Whenever I see a pigeon on the tube I want to barbecue it.' 'Orinoco doesn't flow – he's a Womble.' www.themanwhofellasleep.com