

Russia, where he helped to build the Kremlin. The problems facing Venetian engineers are usually peculiar to themselves, offering no guiding precedents or parallels; but we need not doubt that the city can at least be kept on its feet for a good many centuries to come.

WHAT IS LESS CERTAIN is whether its feet can be kept dry. Though the process is much less dramatic than the jeremiads imply, it is more or less true that Venice is slowly sinking into the waters of the lagoon. The Venetian lagoon is tidal and shallow. At high tide it is mostly watery. At low tide it is mostly mud. Within its wide crescent enclave two geological evolutions are now occurring: the water is going up, and the mud is going down. Look again at the houses beside you as you pass down the Grand Canal and you will notice how often the water rises above their doorsteps and even seeps into the ground floors. Centuries ago, the merchant-aristocrats of Venice used to store their bales of silk, damask, and brocades upon the canal floors of their great houses; today those fineries would be ruined in a week.

All over Venice you may see evidence of this process—pillars that have been successively heightened as the general level of the city has been forced upwards. The piazza of St. Mark's is nowadays often flooded by the spring tides—a picturesque exigency unknown to the ancients. If you peer over the workmen's shoulders when they remove the paving stones for a drain or a water pipe, you may sometimes see the remains of another street about a yard below, built in the fourteenth or fifteenth century when the lagoon was lower. Venice has often hitched up her skirts to keep clear of the damp, successively heightening the level of streets and squares; but the water is gaining, so they say, at the rate of an inch every ten years—which means that in just 3,612 years the potted azalea on the terrace of my third-floor apartment will be watered by the Grand Canal.

This is mainly a natural phenomenon, but it is also in some measure humanly induced. The dredging of deep-water entrances into the lagoon (down which, as you may see from your hotel window, the white Italian

liners sail with incomparable grace) has increased the flow of the tides and affected the natural balance of the lagoon. So has the deepening of canals inside the city, and the constant scouring of the waterways to remove silt. The diversion, several centuries ago, of the rivers that used to pass through the lagoon into the sea has apparently (for reasons I am unable to master) heightened the level of water rather than lowered it. Earth tremors have contributed to the subsidence of the mudflats, but so have various industrial activities on the mainland, and if they start drilling for oil—they are prospecting now—the mud may sink a great deal faster, and Venice with it.

IT is technically possible to arrest this movement. In Florida, I am told, well-heeled communities threatened with subsidence by neighboring oil drills have been successfully propped up: salt water has been in-

jected into cavities under the soil to replace pressures lost by the removal of oil. This would, though, be prohibitively expensive for Venice, and the city engineers do not even consider it as a possibility. No, they say, for the moment we must just wait and see. It is a slow emergency, like the ones that sometimes threaten the Mississippi towboats ("Time for a cup of coffee," as a towboat captain once remarked to me, "before we get thinking what to do"). At the moment the engineers are more concerned with keeping the place upright and healthy than with rescuing her from a distant and still hypothetical fate. Still, if the romantics bide their time, they may yet see the old sea mistress obeying her obvious destiny—her towers and mansions slipping in lurches beneath the mud, until only the high golden baubles of St. Mark's remain fitfully glittering through the water, and all the rest is seaweed.

ART

Homage to Sir Jacob

HILTON KRAMER

WITH THE DEATH of Sir Jacob Epstein in London on August 20, one of the strangest artistic careers of modern times has come to an end. Epstein was the rare example of a serious modern artist whose career had been safeguarded by the public rather than the community of fellow artists. For decades he enjoyed a renowned international patronage. He was one of the very few artists of our time to have faced the temptations of success on a grand scale and come through with his artistic soul intact.

He had not always been the public's darling. Very few artists of the twentieth century had to face a more vilifying campaign of insult and abuse, but of course the intensity of this campaign was a testimony to Epstein's public standing. He might remark in his *Autobiography* that he had had "to create heroic works from time to time in my studio, without commissions and with little or no encouragement from official bodies,"

but he clearly regarded such a state of affairs—which most serious artists for a hundred years have looked upon as the normal condition of existence—as an exceptional and temporary circumstance. If his monuments were often abused and even disfigured, it was because they occupied positions of prominence in the public eye.

Epstein was, moreover, the greatest portrait sculptor of the age, the successor to Rodin in this genre, and no sculptor since Rodin had enjoyed a distinction comparable to his in the realm of sponsorship. His subjects included the most celebrated names in the cultural and political life of our time. All in all, there was something old-fashioned, something utterly unmodern, in the vigor and combativeness with which Epstein conducted his public life as an artist. He seems never to have accepted the twentieth-century idea of the artist's isolation.

He was obviously a man of ex-

traordinary character and a tireless will, and yet I think he was able to succeed in this highly untypical career largely by reason of a single decision. Epstein was born in 1880 on New York's lower East Side, the son of Jewish immigrants. He studied art in New York and then in Paris, but very early in his life as an artist—in 1905, when he was twenty-five—he decided to live in England. It was not only a geographical choice but a moral and aesthetic decision as well. Above all, it was a decision about the life of art in the twentieth century. Epstein had never felt at ease in the bohemian artists' milieu of Paris; he hated the life of the cafés. (For a sculptor to have turned his back on Paris in the year 1905 constitutes in itself, I think, a historic distinction of a kind.) A brief return to New York ruled out his native city. He chose London, and thereby determined his whole future course.

LIKE SARGENT before him, Epstein thus consciously chose to become an English rather than a French artist. In both instances there may have been an element of shrewd calculation, but in both cases too there was something fundamental at stake. In electing to be English they voted themselves out of the modern movement and threw the fate of their art on the mercy of the public. Although Sargent was one of the most gifted painters of his time, he succumbed in the end to the terms of his own success and only rarely lived up to the brilliance of his talent. Epstein, however, succeeded in becoming something more than the Sargent of sculpture. Perhaps it was his humbler origin, together with that legendary tenacity which inspired so many gifted Jews of his generation to pursue ideal goals, which provided him with a solid defense against corruption.

Epstein did not, to be sure, come out entirely free of losses. No artist of the period turned his back on Paris with impunity. The isolation of London from the modern movement was profound, and one sees the effect of that isolation wherever Epstein tried to essay a truly modernist statement. It is for this reason, I think, that his portrait sculptures are so much greater than his other work, and are so much more his own than

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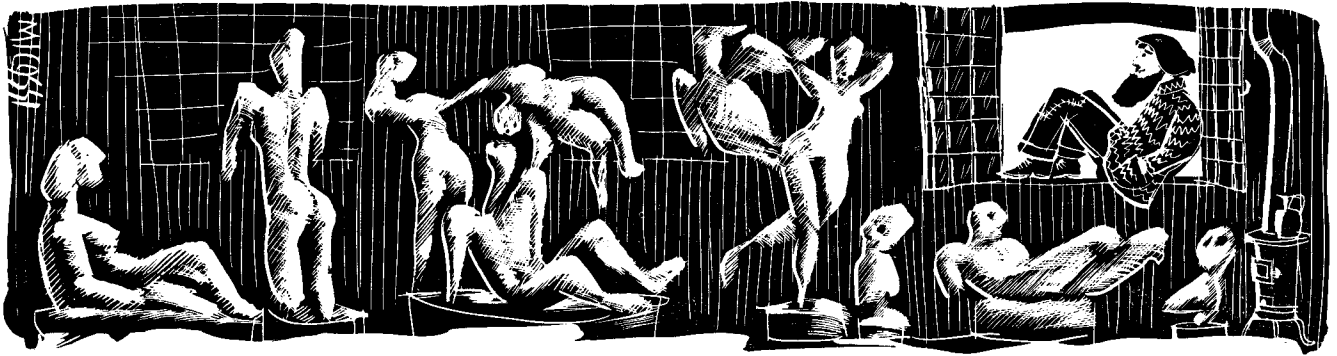
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THE FLOWERS OF HIROSHIMA

by EDITA MORRIS

VIKING





his carvings and monuments. The latter remain fixed in the style and thinking of the period before the First World War—the period when Epstein saw a good deal of Modigliani and Brancusi—when the influence of African, Egyptian, and other alien styles was beginning to make itself felt in avant-garde circles. For artists of the School of Paris, the violent eclecticism of this influence was ultimately transmuted into a variety of authentic and original styles; but on his own in London, isolated from the intellectual ferment which transformed alien images into new and complex ideas, Epstein was never able to carry through that side of his art to a truly individual statement. In the formal clumsiness and intellectual confusion of his “modern” pieces, we see the price he paid for his English provincialism.

FOR THIS REASON, too, Epstein has had little influence on younger artists in England and America. At a moment when sculpture has been passing through something of a renaissance on both sides of the Atlantic, Epstein has not counted as an influence on anybody. It may be that in some remote way the younger generation of English sculptors owes him something by way of his moral example, but his sculpture is certainly not regarded as a source of ideas. It is too individual and at the same time too traditional. It is least of all a doorway into the next phase of modernism, and it is that which is the principal *raison d'être* of sculpture in England today. Even now, to be “modern” still constitutes a conscious aesthetic decision for an artist in England—and it is this decision which English sculptors have now taken—whereas an artist in Paris or New York decides to be modern at precisely the same mo-

ment he decides to become an artist.

It was in his great series of portraits that Epstein's art came to its full glory and power. He worked in the tradition of Rodin, and yet he submitted this tradition to the demands of a very personal mode of expressionism. This too was a mark of Epstein's distance from the School of Paris. Of all the modern styles, expressionism is the least dependent on intellectual clarity and the most vulnerable to the pressures of sensibility and passion. Rodin may have provided Epstein with a syntax for his portrait style, but it was Sir Jacob's own expressive power that made his work in this genre unique.

Of Epstein as a portrait artist one

could almost say that he was less a creator—in the intellectual sense—than a collaborator: the ravages of time on the human visage were always his “first impression.” In the great series of master portraits by which his name will go down to posterity—the busts of Conrad, Einstein, Weizmann, Shaw, and Haile Selassie, as well as the many exquisite, sensual women who posed for him—it was the mark of physical decay, the scars of experience on those human faces, which formed the expressive locus of his final image. In this realm, where feeling counted for a great deal, Epstein could get along supremely well without the intellectual refinements of Paris.

RECORDS

Music of the Streets

NAT HENTOFF

IT IS the contention of Tony Schwartz, a thirty-six-year-old New Yorker for whom a tape recorder is a constant third ear, that there is much more music in the streets than we realize.

In *New York 19* (Folkways), Schwartz has focused on a study of “the folklore of the community in which I live.” Postal Zone 19 in New York is bounded by Sixtieth Street on the north, Forty-eighth Street on the south, the Hudson on the west, and Fifth Avenue and the Rockefeller Center enclave on the east.

Among the music makers he has collected therein are street players, theater barkers, pen criers (“... you can go downtown, uptown, into town, in the summertime, in the

wintertime. . . All the way through, you'll never get a pen like this. . . You can write Yiddish, English. . . You can print; you can sketch with this very same pen”), children, street preachers, a Puerto Rican religious service, a molten Negro gospel tune, and several other daily local music events that are not covered by the *New York Times* or *Musical America*.

Schwartz's biggest success to date is *1, 2, 3 and a Zing Zing Zing* (Folkways), subtitled “Street Games and Songs of the Children of New York City.” In it he recorded Negro, Puerto Rican, Jewish, Irish, and other children in an area two blocks wide and twenty blocks long in west midtown Manhattan. “In the folk process,” Schwartz explains in his