

Jacob Epstein – the Indian connection

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SURVEYS OF MODERNIST British sculpture regularly begin with a description of the architectural carvings made by Jacob Epstein for the new British Medical Association building on the Strand in London during 1907 and 1908 (Fig.26). Despite this apparent consensus among art historians, it is still far from clear exactly why the carvings should herald such a radical change in sculptural aesthetics and techniques, and what Epstein's intentions were in creating them. Fortunately, a century after the sculptor began work on the project, new evidence has emerged that goes a long way towards clarifying both questions. The present article not only confirms the position of the BMA carvings at the roots of British Modernism, but also exposes their debt to a specific artistic tradition from outside Europe. Intercultural aesthetic exchange is persistently ignored in discussions of early Modernism, in particular, but Epstein's trans-national leanings confirm it as an important factor even during the first decade of the twentieth century.

Epstein's sculptures for the BMA are regularly lumped together by critics into one series, when in fact they fall into two distinct groups.¹ Charles Holden, the architect of the new headquarters, pointed this out to a journalist for the *British Medical Journal* as early as 1907. While an initial group of reliefs was to 'represent medicine and its allied sciences, chemistry, anatomy, hygiene, medical research and experiment', Holden explained, Epstein was also to create a 'series of figures telling the evolutionary scheme of man's development from primitive inchoate form to the highest perfection of manhood and womanhood'.² The initial group, which includes the four sculptures visible on the narrow Strand façade as well as the first two around the corner on the building's flank, is no more daring than contemporary examples of allegorical statuary by Royal Academy stalwarts such as F.W. Pomeroy and Hamo Thornycroft. A few years later Ezra Pound lambasted exactly such 'allegorical ladies in night-gowns holding up symbols of Empire or Commerce or Righteousness' in his articles for *The New Age*, even going so far as to suggest 'that such statues be made by the gross, with detachable labels'.³ It is very likely that Holden wanted the initial group positioned on the more exposed Strand façade and corner precisely because its anodyne character was



26. The British Medical Association Headquarters (429 Strand, Westminster), designed by Charles Holden as partner of Adams, Holden & Pearson. 1908–09. Grey Cornish granite and Portland stone cladding a steel frame, slate roof. Sculptures by Jacob Epstein between windows on the second floor.

unlikely to offend the public; such cautiousness, if it existed, was strongly vindicated by subsequent events.

The second, larger group of carvings – twelve figures along the Agar Street side of the building – is far more ambitious. Intended, as Holden's private notes on the project make clear, to be 'as wide in scope as [the poetry of Walt] Whitman',⁴ it depicts unusually posed male and female nude figures at various stages of sexual maturity. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the initial 'allegorical' series was entirely overlooked when the sculptures began to arouse the attention of the nation's press in 1908. The second, 'evolutionary' set, on the other hand, stimulated the most spectacular artistic rumpus of the entire

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¹ E.g. see A. Middleton Wagner: *Mother Stone – The Vitality of British Sculpture*, New

Haven and London 2005; S. Gardner: *Epstein – Artist against the Establishment*, London 1992; and R. Cork: *Jacob Epstein*, London 1999.

² Unnamed journalist: 'The British Medical Association – the New Offices', *British Medical Journal* (7th December 1907), p.1664.

³ E. Pound: 'Affirmations: Jacob Epstein', *New Age* (21st January 1915), p.311, repr. in H. Zinnes, ed.: *Ezra Pound and the Visual Arts*, New York 1980, p.11.

⁴ C. Holden: untitled notes on his collaboration with Epstein on various projects, 3rd December 1940, RIBA, AHP 26/25/1, p.1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.1–3. Holden records that the affair began in June 1908 with an official

pre-War period – a rumpus that included accusations of indecency from religious groups, invective from the *Evening Standard* and widespread public demands for the destruction of Epstein's work.⁵

Commentators on the Strand project broadly agree that the carvings which attracted the greatest controversy – *Maternity*, *Nature* and the four *Maidenhood* figures – seem to challenge existing European sculptural conventions. Defining the exact terms of this challenge and their ramifications for the wider history of Modernism is, however, a task that has inspired much uncertainty. Take *Nature*, for example, a sculpture considered so radically provocative that it was vetoed by Holden before transfer to the BMA façade had even begun (Fig.27). The voluptuous figure stands in an awkward cross-legged posture, one hand extended, palm outwards, the other grasping what appears to be a leafy twig containing fruit or seeds. Richard Cork's detailed study – still the best overall account of the BMA project – takes the woman's open left palm to indicate that 'she is brandishing her breasts with an admirable lack of embarrassment'. Because of the foliage held in the other hand, it is suggested that the sculpture represents 'Eve apparently depicted in the act of removing her traditional fig-leaf'.⁶ Cork notes the figure's 'strangely twisting' posture, and 'generously proportioned' physique, but does not draw these elements into his interpretation of the motif as a depiction of Eve, probably because they do not reflect standard European conventions in the portrayal of this particular character from Christian mythology. Published as recently as 2005, Anne Middleton Wagner in her discussion of the BMA series finds herself equally baffled by the unusual postures of these female figures. 'What is striking', she remarks, 'is how much Epstein thinks it necessary to push and pull the sculpted body to make it stand for joy in life'.⁷ Cork describes the motif of *Maidenhood* in very similar terms – as a 'strange and convoluted woman' whose crossed-over shin makes her seem to be 'lifting her leg off the ground like a dancer about to undertake a leap' (Figs.28 and 29). Such a position of the legs would make any kind of leap impossible, however; and the figure of *Nature* grasps not a fig-leaf but a fruit-laden twig. Something important about this second set of Strand carvings has clearly been overlooked – but what?

A crucial clue may be found in Epstein's preparatory drawing for the BMA *Maternity* – another 'evolutional' sculpture displaying the sinuous 'twisting' posture noted by Cork with reference both to *Nature* and to *Maidenhood*. Above the drawing, which is held by the New Gallery in Walsall, the name inscribed is not of a Christian mythological character but of a Hindu one – 'Parvati'.⁸ This deity, regarded in most branches of Hinduism as a patron of motherhood, is the goddess depicted most frequently in Indian art. She is shown in several



27. *Nature*, by Jacob Epstein. 1907–08. Clay, 213 cm. high. Lost. (Photograph reproduced by permission of the Estate of Jacob Epstein and the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds).

complaint by a group calling itself the National Vigilance Society. The complaint was about the *Maternity* carving on the Agar Street façade of the BMA building. The front page of the *Evening Standard* soon afterwards described the figures surrounding *Maternity* as 'statuary which no careful father would wish his daughter, or no discriminating young man his fiancée, to see' (9th June 1908). Although the BMA defended Epstein's work and prevented its removal on this occasion, the figures were partially destroyed in 1937 when the building was taken over by the government of Rhodesia. It was claimed that the carvings had become structurally unsafe and constituted a physical danger to pedestrians walking below.

⁵ R. Cork: *Art Beyond the Gallery in Early 20th Century England*, New Haven and London 1985, p.19.

⁷ Middleton Wagner, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.36.

⁸ The sculptor's second wife, Kathleen Epstein, commented that the handwriting used to inscribe the name 'Parvati' does not appear to be her husband's (K. Epstein: 'Notes on the Plates' in R. Buckle, ed.: *Epstein's Drawings*, London 1962, no.15, pg.52). Inescapable similarities with Charles Holden's hand do, however, exist. It seems reasonable to assume that Holden added the inscription during a discussion over the BMA decorations with Epstein during 1907–08, for reasons that this article make clear.

28. Jacob Epstein posing with one of the *Maidenhood* figures. c.1908. (Photograph reproduced by permission of the Estate of Jacob Epstein and the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds).



29. *Maidenhood*, by Jacob Epstein. 1907–08. Plaster, 210 cm. high. Destroyed. (Photograph reproduced by permission of the Estate of Jacob Epstein and the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds).



works on display at the British Museum before the First World War, one of the finest of which is a bronze figurine from the Chola dynasty (Fig.30). The largest bronze from the Subcontinent then possessed by the Museum – a life-sized gilt figure from Sri Lanka, acquired in 1830 – is also an image of the deity but in her tantric aspect as the goddess Tara (Fig.32). When these exhibits are examined in relation to Epstein's work, what stands out most emphatically is a close similarity in posture to that of the BMA carvings described above. This posture is in fact a standard sculptural convention as essential to the Indian canon of beauty as the contrapposto is to the European; it is known as the *tribhanga*, meaning 'three bends' in Sanskrit. B.N. Goswamy has offered a concise definition of this as an idealised stance in which 'the knee bends, the hip projects, and the head tilts so that the body forms an 'S' curve'⁹ – a description that applies perfectly to Epstein's *Nature*, *Maidenhood* and *Maternity*.

Epstein is certain to have examined the Indian and Nepalese bronzes already mentioned during his frequent visits to London's museums. Museums were the primary reason for his location to the city from Paris in 1905; in his autobiography he recalls that the move was made mainly so that he could 'have a good look round at leisure' at the British Museum,¹⁰ and his other writings are full of references to the institution.¹¹ The diaries of the sculptor Eric Gill record a trip in Epstein's company specifically to view Indian art at the Victoria and Albert Museum,¹² while a later visit to the British Museum is illustrated by a sketch of a raised palm with an eye at the centre – a recognised symbol in Hindu iconography, versions of

which feature in many of the Indian sculptures held there.¹³ Still more common among such exhibits was a hand position known as *varadamudra*, in which the palm is turned flatly outwards with the fingers pointed down in a gesture signifying abundance, or giving. Aside from its appearance in the *Tara* image itself, Epstein would have been able to note the *varadamudra* in the Museum's most recent acquisition: a standing Buddha presented by the Secretary of State for India in the very year of the sculptor's arrival in London (Fig.31). Assuredly, this gesture is what inspired the mysterious open palm of Epstein's *Nature*.

The origin of the crossed-over leg position seen both in *Nature* and in the four *Maidenhood* figures may be found in the same section of the British Museum. One of the largest of all the Indian exhibits on display before the First World War was an eleventh-century column base, probably originating from the Jain shrines of Mount Abu in Rajasthan or from Northern Gujarat. The carvings upon this resemble Epstein's work for the BMA so convincingly that a pictorial comparison might almost be allowed to stand without comment (Fig.34). 'Whenever I had done a new piece of work', Epstein remarked of his early years in London, 'I compared it mentally with what I had seen at the [British] Museum'.¹⁴ The overblown *tribhanga* stance of the Mount Abu sculptures has certainly found its way into the *Maidenhood* sculptures via exactly this method of comparison, while the legs positioned in the form of the figure four in the illustrated examples also show uncanny similarities. The aesthetic conventions used by the Jain sculptors of Mount Abu had been drawn from idealised

⁹ See B.N. Goswamy: *Essence of Indian Art*, San Francisco 1986, p.279.

¹⁰ J. Epstein: *Let there be Sculpture*, London 1940, p.30 (hereafter cited as LTBS).

¹¹ See particularly A.L. Haskell, ed.: *The Sculptor Speaks: Jacob Epstein to Arnold L. Haskell – a Series of Conversations on Art*, London 1931, *passim*.

¹² E. Gill, diary entry for 22nd March 1910, Berkeley, Bancroft Library,

Eric Gill Diaries.

¹³ *Ibid.*, diary entries for 11th and 12th November 1910.

¹⁴ LTBS, p.32.

¹⁵ Eleven carvings were taken from the site in 1816, nine of which were sent to the East India Company's premises in London's Leadenhall Street (the material was



30. *Parvati*. Southern India. Mid-sixteenth century. Bronze, 40 cm. high. (British Museum, London).



31. *Standing Buddha*. South-eastern Deccan, India. Eighth century. Bronze, 38 cm. high. (British Museum, London).



32. *Tara*. Sri Lanka. Eighth century. Gilt bronze, 143 cm. high. (British Museum, London).

images of the female form observable at earlier, Buddhist, sites. One such image – a figure in a second-century frieze from the great stupa at Amarvati in Andhra Pradesh (Fig. 33; second figure on the right) – seems to have given Epstein the raised left arm, inclined head and abdomen detail used in the *Maidenhood* figures. That a second Amarvati carving contributed vital iconographic elements to Epstein's *Nature* will be demonstrated later in this article.

The Amarvati collection, now recognised as the most significant display of Indian art in Europe and housed in a temperature-controlled glass enclosure, has not always been so reverently treated. Colonial government officials salvaged the reliefs from the stupa between 1816 and 1845, ostensibly because the local population – which by that time was predominantly Muslim rather than Buddhist – had begun quarrying the ancient structure for raw materials for house building.¹⁵ The carvings were accorded little more respect upon their arrival at the British Museum in 1880. Despite their obvious technical brilliance, they were not added to the official galleries of sculptural art, which already contained examples from Greece, Rome, Assyria and Egypt. These galleries, which occupied the ground floor of the Museum's West Wing, had been carefully arranged into a grand hierarchy intended to emphasise the primacy of Classical Greek statuary over all other forms of three-dimensional art from the Mediterranean region.¹⁶ Sculpture from the rest of Asia and Africa, as well as that originating from the Americas and the Pacific, was instead diverted to the upper floor. There it was presented not at all as art but as an anthropological resource. Items from India were

arranged under the vague rubric 'Collections Illustrating Religions' – a heading that underlined their perceived status as artefacts.¹⁷ The Amarvati reliefs were used to decorate the principal staircase linking these two separate domains as if to illustrate just such a transition from the European to the extra-European. Perhaps ironically, the resulting arrangement meant that these carvings were the first exhibits encountered by pre-War visitors to the Museum, as the foot of these stairs is located immediately inside its front doors.

The most brilliant of the Amarvati sculptures – a storyboard-like treatment of the nativity of Gautama Siddhartha, the future Buddha (Fig. 35) – allows further insight into both the aesthetics and the iconography of Epstein's *Nature*. Early depictions of this scene favoured aniconic representations of the Buddha, and the reader will notice that work from the second century contains an empty space where the infant Gautama Siddhartha might be expected to appear. All that can be seen of the young prince is a pair of tiny, indented footprints on the swaddling cloths held by the midwives. The effect of this lacuna is that Mayadeva, the Buddha's mother, becomes the visual focus of the narrative. She may be seen in the lower right-hand section of the composition, standing in the *tribhanga* pose, and with her leg positioned in a version of the figure four position discussed above. It is what she is doing with her left hand, however, that is of the greatest relevance here. It reaches up towards an overhanging tree to grasp a leafy twig – a gesture that identifies her with a particular type of Indian temple carving known as a *shalabhanjika*. In this traditional genre of figure sculpture, which is a more or less ubiquitous feature of

moved to the Company's Whitehall offices in 1861). Further removals were made during 1845, until 131 pieces had been shipped to London. When the Company decided to redistribute its collections in 1879, it was decided that the Amarvati reliefs would be donated to the British Museum; see D. Wilson: *The British Museum*

– a History, London 2002, p.172.

¹⁶ See I. Jenkins: *Archaeologists and Aesthetes in the Sculpture Galleries of the British Museum 1800–1939*, London 1992.

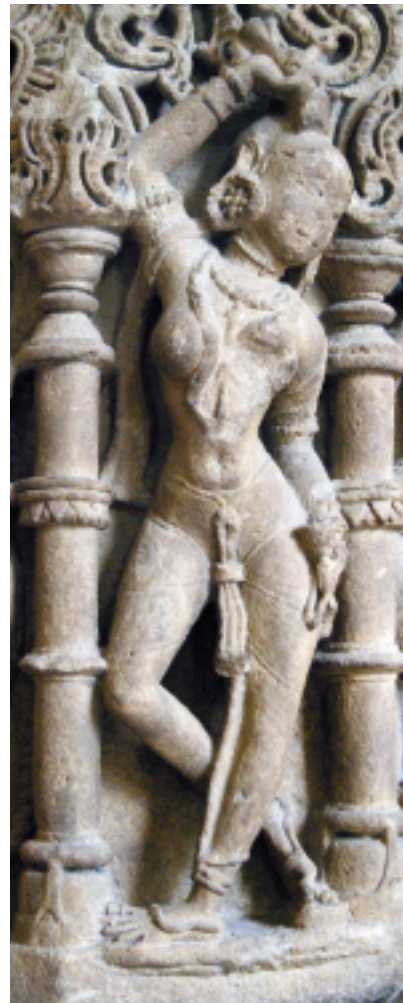
¹⁷ *Guide to the Exhibition Galleries of the British Museum*, London 1908 (8th ed.), p.57.



33. *The departure of Prince Siddhartha from Kapilavastu*. Fragmentary drum slab from the great stupa at Amarvati, India. Second century. Limestone, 110 cm. high. (British Museum, London).

temple architecture in India, female fertility is linked symbolically with the fructive potential of a flowering or fruit-bearing tree. The branch should technically be that of a shal tree (*shorea robusta*), as the word *shalabhanjika* – which literally means ‘breaker of the shal-branch’ – indicates. Other branches are regularly substituted in Indian sculpture, however, including those of the pipal (*ficus religiosa*), whose leaves and seeds bear a striking resemblance to the ones depicted in Epstein’s *Nature* (Fig. 27). When photographs of *Nature* are re-examined in such a light, the full significance of the enigmatic foliage held by the figure suddenly becomes clear. Epstein must have intended his carving to perform the same aesthetic function on the façade of the BMA as the *shalabhanjika* performs upon a stupa – that of drawing attention to the generative processes of nature. These processes – described by Pound as the ‘enigma of the germinal universe’¹⁸ – may be seen to inspire almost all Epstein’s pre-War output.

New documentary evidence indicates that the decision to incorporate Indian elements into the design for the BMA was made with the encouragement of Charles Holden. The architect’s personal papers, in the archives of the Royal Institute of British Architects at the Victoria and Albert Museum, contain one very significant page of notes that has never previously been published. Its tone and rhetorical style suggest that it was originally intended as part of an anonymous series of articles criticising Edwardian principles of design that Holden began to publish in the *Architectural Review* during the summer of 1905.¹⁹ ‘Necessary to get back to early times’, the pencil-written manuscript proposes. ‘Complete dependence on static



34. Jain column base (detail). Probably from Mount Abu, Rajasthan. Eleventh century. Limestone, 106 cm. high. (British Museum, London).

form of coordination in early work – rock cut temples and the stratified & many levelled architecture of Indian temples’.²⁰ The complex stratification Holden notes with regard to such architecture is strikingly apparent in his own design for the BMA headquarters, while his approach to the addition of sculptural decoration on the building’s façade further highlights the influence of the Subcontinent. Rather than making use of the Greek-style friezes featuring posed groups of figures that were popular among his contemporaries, Holden wanted single ‘figures posted in the niches on the third or fourth floor’ to ‘break up the surface of that level’.²¹ Such a decorative strategy would have been familiar to him from the many engravings in James Fergusson’s popular *A History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*,²² and possibly also from Henri Pigou’s comprehensive photographic survey of Hindu monuments in Karnataka, which had been available for consultation in the Victoria and Albert Museum since 1880.

¹⁸ Ezra Pound, quoted in LTBS, p.72.

¹⁹ Holden eventually published two anonymous articles in the ‘Notes’ section of the Magazine. These were: ‘If Whitman had been an Architect’, *Architectural Review* 17, 103 (June 1905), p.258, and ‘Thoughts for the Strong’, *ibid.* 18, 104 (July 1905), p.27. Forty-six years later, on 16th July 1951, Holden wrote to J.M. Richards – at that time the Review’s editor – admitting to his authorship of both pieces (RIBA, AHP 26/20/1). Richards’s surprised response thanked Holden for clearing up a mystery from ‘before I was born’ (RIBA, AHP 26/20/2).

²⁰ C. Holden: undated, handwritten note entitled ‘Modern Archit.’, RIBA, AHP 26/1/8.

²¹ P. Vaughan: ‘Historical Note’ on an interview with Holden conducted on 5th March 1958 (typescript dated 14th March 1958), RIBA, AHP 1/16/1, p.2.

²² J. Fergusson: *A History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, London 1876.

²³ Another friend of Rothenstein’s, H.G. Wells, described the painter’s enthusiastic espousal of Indian art and architecture as follows: ‘[Rothenstein] has brought India – which has so persistently remained away there, spectacular, marvellous, inaccessible – into the proximity of a personal acquaintance’; H.G. Wells: introduction to exh. cat. *Drawings Made in India by William Rothenstein*, London (Chenil Gallery) 1911.

²⁴ Rothenstein’s description of the meeting has Epstein appearing on his doorstep in 1907 with a letter of introduction from George Bernard Shaw. ‘Shaw couldn’t help him’, the account runs, ‘he thought his drawings mad, like burnt furze bushes [. . .] but Epstein deemed I would think otherwise, so Shaw sent him to me’; W. Rothenstein: *Men and Memories*, London 1932, p.87.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.234.

²⁶ Immediately after describing the early days of his friendship with Epstein,

Epstein's familiarity with Indian aesthetics and iconography doubtless indicates a greater understanding of such matters than casual museum-browsing could have offered, especially as none of London's museums at that time provided the informative labels that now enlighten visitors. E.B. Havell's *Indian Sculpture and Painting* – the first full-length publication in English to recognise Indian sculpture as art rather than artefact – did not come out until 1908, by which time Epstein's BMA figures had already been completed; the sculptor did not, then, acquire his knowledge from a textbook. Epstein's earliest friendship in London, however, was with a confirmed Indiaphile with a passionate interest in Indian art.²³ By the time of their first meeting in 1907,²⁴ the painter William Rothenstein (1872–1945) was already planning a tour of the Subcontinent's rock-cut temples that eventually took place three years later. The itinerary was to include Elephanta, Ellora and Ajanta, sites whose famous relief carvings Rothenstein interpreted as representing 'the creative and destructive aspects of nature – the agony of birth, the peace of sleep, and of death'.²⁵ The trip also resulted in Rothenstein's discovery for London of the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, the complex symbolism of whose verse was later to intrigue such poets as W.B. Yeats and Ezra Pound. 1907 also saw the beginning of an enduring friendship between Rothenstein and Eric Gill, and it seems reasonable to assume that the first meeting between Gill and Epstein occurred at the painter's house soon afterwards.²⁶ Whatever the circumstances of this initial encounter, by 1911 the two sculptors were discussing the possibility of making a journey to India together in imitation of Rothenstein's: 'I agree with you in your suggestion that the best way to Heaven is via Elephanta, Elura [*sic*] and Ajanta', Gill wrote to Rothenstein that spring of his and Epstein's ambitions to combine travel with the study of Indian sculpture. 'Some day we will follow in your footsteps and go and see the real thing'.²⁷

It is likely to have been a third member of Rothenstein's circle, however, who was responsible for providing both Gill and Epstein with a detailed education in the principles of Indian art. Following a similar pattern to that later set by Picasso, the post-War Epstein became increasingly reluctant to acknowledge extra-European influences in his pre-War modernist works. Gill, fortunately, was never one to be reticent on such matters. 'I dare not confess myself his disciple; that would only embarrass him', he later wrote of the art historian Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947), a future Keeper of Indian art at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, who was another regular guest at Rothenstein's home after 1906.²⁸ 'It is absurd to say that he has influenced me', Gill's account continues; 'that would imply that his influence has born fruit. May it be so – but I do



35. *The birth of Gautama Buddha*. Drum slab from the great stupa at Amarvati, India. Second century. Limestone, 157 cm. high. (British Museum, London).

not claim it'.²⁹ Educated at London University, the son of a Tamil nobleman and an English woman, Coomaraswamy had returned to the city from his native Ceylon on a self-appointed mission to improve Western perceptions of art forms from the Subcontinent.³⁰ The idea that Indian sculpture represented nothing more than a malformed offshoot of Greek art that had originated with Alexander's stranded colonists in Bactria was at that time an article of faith among European art historians and curators. Alfred Foucher's widely read treatise *L'Art Greco-Bouddhique du Gandhara* (1905) was only the most recent work to reiterate this narrative, stating that even the classic seated Buddha-image should be considered merely 'an Indianized version of Apollo'.³¹ Perhaps unsurprisingly, Coomaraswamy came to the conclusion that artists would provide more fertile ground for his programme of aesthetic re-education than would academics. 'The main difficulty so far seems to have been that Indian art has been studied so far only by archaeologists', he wrote in 1908 as controversy raged over Epstein's carvings for the BMA; 'it is not archaeologists, but

Rothenstein recalls the following: 'Meanwhile another figure appeared who was destined, though no one suspected it then, to stand high among English sculptors. This was Eric Gill, who was not yet a sculptor, however, when I got to know him [...] I was charmed by Gill's blithe temper and we became great friends'; *ibid.*, p.89.

²⁷ Gill to Rothenstein, 20th April 1911; repr. in W. Shewring, ed.: *Letters of Eric Gill*, London 1947, pp.36–37.

²⁸ Rothenstein recalled that he had first met Coomaraswamy 'while staying with Ashbee at Campden'. This would have been during Rothenstein's involvement with C.R. Ashbee's Guild of Handicraft, based at Chipping Campden, a venture that was forced into liquidation early in 1907; Rothenstein, *op. cit.*, (note 23), p.231.

²⁹ E. Gill: *Autobiography*, London 1940, p.174.

³⁰ Coomaraswamy attended Wycliffe College, Glos., and then University College London, where he took a first in geology. Between 1902 and 1906, he was in Ceylon to conduct the fieldwork that earned him a doctorate from UCL. During this period, however, he became concerned at the apparent erosion of indigenous forms of visual culture in Southern Asia, and used his free time to research the histories of Sinhalese and Indian art. In 1906 he abandoned geology to concentrate on this new interest. After moving to Broad Campden, Glos., he used Morris's Kelmscott Press to publish his writings. Coomaraswamy became Keeper of the Indian Section at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1917, a position he retained until his death in 1947; see R. Lipsey: *Coomaraswamy*, Princeton 1977, and J. Mohan: *Ananda K. Coomaraswamy*, New Delhi 1979.

³¹ A. Foucher: *L'Art Greco-Bouddhique du Gandhara*, Paris 1905, transl. L.A. Thomas and F.W. Thomas: *The Beginnings of Buddhist Art*, London 1917, p.130.

artists [. . .] who are the best qualified to judge of the significance of works of art considered as art'.³²

It was not only the aesthetics of the BMA figures that had come to Epstein via Indian art, but also the preference for direct carving that was to become an obsessive concern of British sculpture during the inter-War period. Coomaraswamy had brought with him to London his own substantial collection of photographs of stone-carved monuments and devotional statuary from India and Ceylon; he had taken many of these personally, while others had been drawn from museum collections. Between July 1912 and July 1914 Coomaraswamy published around a hundred such images in eight instalments of what constituted the periodical *Visvakarma*. This was a picture resource intended specifically 'for those who are interested as artists in Indian art' rather than for academics.³³ In the introduction to the publication's final part, Eric Gill noted that while European sculptors had concentrated on modelling in clay, Indian artists had 'avoided the model but carved that which they loved and as they loved it. They were clear, clean and hard about everything from the beginning to the end'.³⁴ Clearly, the important fascination for direct stone carving among British modernists had far more to do with the influence of non-European art than it did in, for example, France, where a short-lived fad for *sculpture en taille directe* was to emerge after the First World War mainly in reaction to a perceived lack of honesty in the studio practices of clay modellers such as Rodin.³⁵

An erstwhile letter-cutter for public monuments, Gill had possessed from the outset of his career a great affinity for the practical, highly physical business of stone carving. During the Christmas season of 1910, Epstein began to identify such skills as a possible way out of the impasse that European academic sculpture then seemed to have reached. By that date, he had been struggling for months with abortive attempts to create a clay figure for Oscar Wilde's tomb in the Père Lachaise cemetery, the commission for which he had been awarded as early as 1908.³⁶ Gill's letter to Rothenstein in India, quoted above, clearly documents the sudden change in Epstein's technical approach. 'Epstein has decided to do the Wilde monument in stone and to carve it himself too', he wrote from his home in Sussex; 'that is why he is down here – getting into the way of stone carving'. The letter adds that Epstein had been honing his newly acquired skills by 'working on a large figure in stone'.³⁷ This practice-piece was almost certainly the 1910–11 *Maternity* – a directly carved version of the same subject that had caused such controversy when applied to the façade of the BMA (Fig. 36). The new sculpture displays the bodily proportions preferred in Indian temple reliefs along with the *tribhanga* posture, but it is a third feature that confirms without doubt its connection with such works. Running from the figure's right shoulder, across the chest and beneath the left breast may be seen a narrow band or string. In India this is given the Sanskrit



36. Jacob Epstein carving a version of *Maternity*. 1910–11. Hoptonwood stone, 210 cm. high. (Leeds City Art Gallery); photograph by Walter Benington reproduced by permission of the Estate of Jacob Epstein and the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds).

name *yajnopavitam*, a term describing a ceremonial cord observable on almost all sculptures of Hindu gods and goddesses including the bronze *Parvati* that has been described above.³⁸

Although the vogue for direct carving in British sculpture after the First World War is the most obvious legacy of Epstein's engagement with Indian art between 1907 and 1911, it is not the most significant. By late 1911, his work had begun to explore Assyrian and Egyptian styles of stone cutting, while the closing months of 1912 witnessed a decisive shift towards the elegant traditions of African and Oceanic wood carving. That the sculptural conventions of regions beyond Europe could finally be presented as art rather than as archaeology or anthropology indicates that a sea change was occurring with regard to the perceived boundaries and principles of Western aesthetic identity. The fact that the nature and extent of Epstein's borrowings from other sculptural traditions have become visible in a more revealing light may also alter our understanding of early twentieth-century culture in a global context. European sculpture, which for two hundred years had been concerned primarily with provincial quibbling over what the Greeks had proposed with regard to naturalistic or idealistic representations of the human form, was finally poised during the pre-War years to engage in a significant artistic dialogue with the rest of the world. Far from the monolithic, essentially European edifice that is often assumed, the Modernism of the years leading up to the First World War can be more authentically characterised as a dynamic transnational *métissage* of intertwined aesthetic components with no dominant centre or point of origin.

³² A.K. Coomaraswamy: *The Influence of Greek on Indian Art*, Broad Campden 1908, p.1.

³³ *Idem*: Editorial Note to *Visvakarma* 8 (July 1914).

³⁴ E. Gill: Introduction to *Visvakarma* 8 (July 1914) p.7.

³⁵ The beginning of the fashion for direct carving in France may be traced to 1919, when a legal case over 'fake' Rodin marbles produced by the sculptor's assistants raised doubts about the extent of the master's involvement in producing the 'genuine' examples; see P. Elliott: *Sculpture en Taille Directe en France de 1900 à 1950*, Saint-Rémy-lès-Chevreuse 1988.

³⁶ Epstein's autobiography has the following: 'I heard of the commission to do the tomb of Oscar Wilde the day after it had been announced at a dinner given to Robert Ross by his friends at the Ritz'; LTBS, p.65. Ross's dinner took place on 1st December 1908.

³⁷ Gill to Rothenstein, 11th January 1911; in Shewring, *op. cit.* (note 26).

³⁸ In Hindu sculpture, the *yajnopavitam* is usually shown as worn *upavitam*, meaning it passes over the left shoulder. Hindus wear the cord *prachinavitam* – over the right shoulder – much less commonly and for specific ceremonial reasons, but it is unlikely that Epstein realised this.