

Between 1909 and 1916, **Jacob Epstein (1880-1959)** created his most radical work. His early, naturalistic sculptures and drawings gave way to a more abstract, geometric and modern style which culminated in *Rock Drill* (c.1913), his most daring avant-garde sculpture. Part of the reason for the stylistic shift in Epstein's work was the influence of other modern artists. In 1912, Epstein spent six months in Paris where he became friends with Pablo Picasso, Constantin Brancusi and Amedeo Modigliani whose cutting-edge art was bound to influence him.

*Rock Drill* combines a plaster figure of a robotic rock-driller perched on top of a rock drill. Epstein's innovative use of an actual drill makes *Rock Drill* an early example of a readymade, created the same year as Marcel Duchamp's famous *Bicycle Wheel* (1913). Duchamp believed that ordinary, manufactured objects could be elevated to the status of art simply by being selected by an artist and exhibited in an art gallery. This was a revolutionary idea at the turn of the 20th century and it had a huge impact on sculpture, challenging the idea that artworks were entirely handcrafted



Reproduction of *Rock Drill* at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, date/photographer unknown, Epstein Archive, The New Art Gallery Walsall

by artists and that sculpture traditionally reproduced natural forms such as the human body.

*Rock Drill* also connects with Epstein's passion for so-called 'primitive' art and his extensive collection of African objects. Epstein was clearly inspired by the simplified, angular appearance of some of his African carvings which he adapted and transformed into his robotic man-machine. In addition, many of these carvings were fertility statues and Epstein was fascinated by the themes of procreation and sexuality throughout his career.

*Rock Drill* is no exception. Not only does the head of the drill appear as a powerful phallic symbol; the driller's ribcage contains an unexpected foetal form. Its presence is ambiguous – is Epstein suggesting that the new machine-age will bring with it a renaissance, or, is he questioning whether the vulnerable organic form will mature into a robot as dehumanised as the driller himself?

Persistently praised as his masterpiece; it seems extraordinary that Epstein destroyed the original *Rock Drill*. He discarded the drill and mutilated the figure to create *Torso in Metal from Rock Drill* (c.1915-16). The First World War partially explains Epstein's destruction of *Rock Drill*. Conceived before war was declared, *Rock Drill* stood as a celebration of modern machinery and masculine power and energy. In contrast, the disfigured *Torso in Metal from Rock Drill* has been likened to the wounded soldiers returning home from the front line.

The First World War was the first industrialised, global conflict. New inventions including the tank and rapid-fire machine gun claimed a horrific number of victims and as soon as the devastating power of such weapons was realised, it was no longer possible to see *Rock Drill* in a positive light. Epstein came to the conclusion that it should be

excluded from his oeuvre. In 1940, remembering the devastation of the First World War in the context of the Second World War, Epstein described *Rock Drill* as 'the armed sinister figure of to-day and to-morrow. No humanity, only the terrible Frankenstein's monster we have made ourselves into.'

Two of Epstein's close friends were killed during the war. Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, a fellow sculptor, was only 23 when he died in 1915 and the philosopher T.E. Hulme was writing a book about Epstein when he was called up and killed in battle in 1917. Epstein appealed for exemption from military service but was finally conscripted less than one month after losing his second friend. Epstein suffered a mental breakdown the night before his battalion were mobilised and was released from the army on 25 July 1918.

The war-time context does not fully explain Epstein's dismantling of his most revolutionary sculpture. The destruction of *Rock Drill* is a pivotal moment in Epstein's career. He did not just abandon the work; he destroyed it, turning his back on experimental, abstract art and returning to figurative sculpture. The history of modern sculpture emphasises the movement away from figuration and towards abstraction, meaning Epstein was

moving in the opposite direction. This has had an impact on his legacy. After his death in 1959, Epstein's contribution to modern British sculpture was overshadowed by more abstract sculptors such as Henry Moore (1898-1986) and Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975). Interestingly, in 1973, an article in *The Times* proposed that 'if someone were to reconstruct the original version of *Rock Drill* it could substantially change the history of the modern movement.' The sculpture exhibited here is a reconstruction made in 1974 with the consent of his widow, Kathleen Garman.

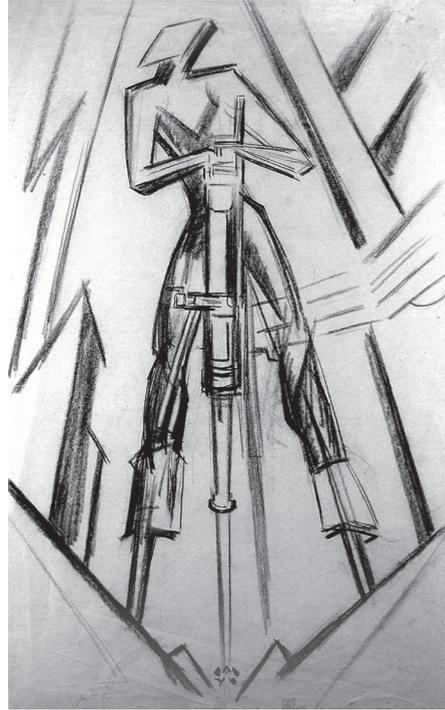
Arguably, the reconstruction has not substantially altered modernist history; but it has had a significant impact on Epstein's reputation. On the one hand, the resurrected sculpture triggered a reappraisal of Epstein, situating him at the forefront of avant-garde sculpture and challenging the neglect he suffered after his death. On the other hand, *Rock Drill* - a sculpture that Epstein deliberately destroyed - is hailed as his greatest achievement, overshadowing other aspects of his career.

Exhibited once in 1915, the original *Rock Drill* was only seen by a small number of people. In contrast, the reconstruction has featured in a number of exhibitions where it

has been praised as representing 'a dramatic, revolutionary moment when sculpture in Britain first became uncompromisingly modern' (Richard Cork, 2009). Whilst there is truth in this - *Rock Drill* is undeniably revolutionary and hugely important - it is interesting to reflect whether a sculpture that was destroyed by its maker and reconstructed almost 60 years later should be considered as his greatest achievement.

The sculpture's *un-making* is as important as its making. Examining the moment that Epstein destroyed *Rock Drill* not only reveals the impact of the First World War, it also provides insights into Epstein's sculptural philosophy. In 1940, Epstein reflected that *Rock Drill*:

*was really child's play... far removed from the nature of the aesthetic experience and satisfaction that sculpture should give. When I returned to a normal manner of working, and was so bold as again to carve and model a face with its features, the advanced critics spoke of my having 'thrown up the sponge.' I was lost to the movement. I feel easy about this.*



Jacob Epstein, *Study For Rock Drill*, c.1913, charcoal on paper, The Garman Ryan Collection, The New Art Gallery Walsall

Epstein clearly did not consider *Rock Drill* to be part of his oeuvre. However, even before it was reconstructed, we knew of its existence through photographs, preparatory drawings and Epstein's own words when he wrote about it in his autobiography and discussed it with friends. A huge number of commentators, from across a century, have also written about *Rock Drill*, and the mutilated *Torso in Metal from Rock Drill* also reminds us of the original sculpture - like

a fragment of an ancient artwork that used to be part of a lost whole.

American art historian George Kubler likened ancient artworks to 'dead stars'. He argued that even though they might have been destroyed, lost or decayed over time, we know they existed and should still consider them to be masterpieces. He believed that the quality of such missing masterpieces is determined by the statements that have been made about them, and the existence of copies and reproductions. This approach can be applied to *Rock Drill*. It is almost as if although Epstein was determined that his original sculpture should not survive, it was kept alive in a state of suspended animation in the comments of artists and writers until it was 'reanimated' in 1974. Such a science fiction analogy seems particularly apt for the futuristic, robotic *Rock Drill*.

It has also been argued that a spectator's opinion of an artwork is just as important as the artist's and that the significance of a work of art 'lies not in its origin but in its destination' (Roland Barthes, 1977). In other words, the importance of an artwork is determined by its audience rather than its creator. The artist is not necessarily the best judge of how an artwork should be seen, or, in

*Rock Drill's* case, not seen at all. Epstein had no control over the resurrection or reappraisals of the sculpture that he destroyed. We can question whether a sculpture that was deliberately destroyed by its maker should be described as his greatest achievement, but we can also question whether the artist's intention is more, less, or equally as important as what we think about artworks when we look at them.

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August 2015

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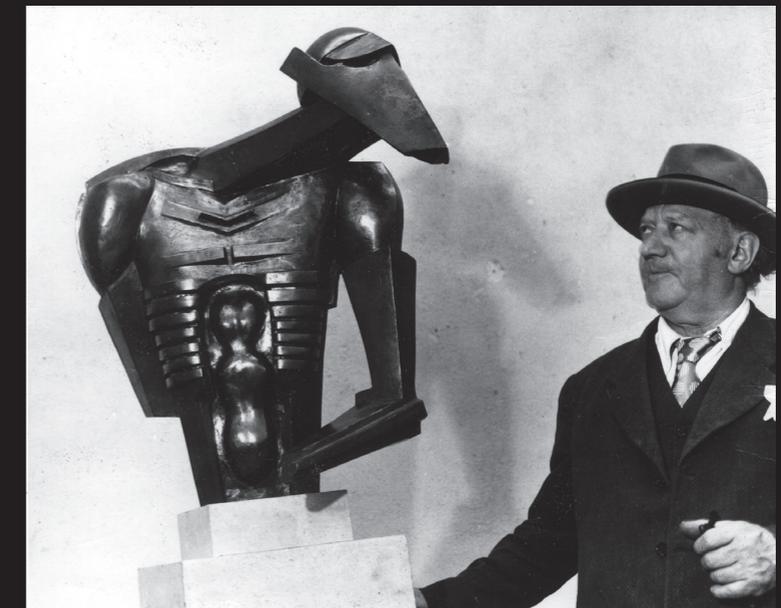
**Exhibition tour**  
Saturday 3 October, 2pm  
Join Epstein Research Assistant Elin Morgan for an in-depth look at the exhibition

Cover image ~ Jacob Epstein with *Torso in Metal from Rock Drill*, unknown photographer, c.1952, Epstein Archive, The New Art Gallery Walsall



# EPSTEIN'S ROCK DRILL TRANSFORMED BY WAR

4 September 2015 — 24 January 2016



Exhibition guide