

The Museum of Modern Art

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A group of 11 works, including seven portraits by Sir Jacob Epstein comprise the exhibition, RECENT ACQUISITIONS: EPSTEIN AND OTHERS, on view at The Museum of Modern Art from October 26 through January 2. The exhibition, installed by Betsy Jones, Assistant Curator of the Museum Collections, is one in the series of continuing shows intended to supplement the larger annual exhibitions of painting and sculpture acquisitions.

Six of the Epsteins are original plasters given on behalf of the artist's estate by his widow Lady Kathleen Epstein. The seventh is a bronze of Paul Robeson given by Fania Marinoff Van Vechten who has also given the paintings by Louis Eilshemius and Raoul Dufy which complete the exhibition. Mrs. Van Vechten's gifts were made in memory of her late husband, the music critic, novelist and photographer Carl Van Vechten.

Born in New York City in 1880, Epstein went to Paris in 1902 to study art and later moved to England, becoming a British citizen in 1907. At his death in 1959 he ranked as one of the great sculptors of his time. He is perhaps best known for his portraits, which make up the majority of his more than 500 known works, although he also did many other works including monumental architectural commissions. Most of the extant plasters have been given to museums in Israel, but Lady Epstein felt that some should also come to his native city. Lady Epstein's gifts and Mrs. Van Vechten's join six other works by Epstein already in the Museum's Collection. These thirteen works ranging in date from 1911 to 1956 make the Museum's probably the most comprehensive public collection of the sculptor's work in this country.

Earliest of the plasters in the show is the head of the American documentary film-maker, Robert Flaherty, done in 1933 while he was filming his study of Irish islanders, Man of Aran.

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"In the same year," Miss Jones notes, "Epstein did the superb half-length Second Portrait of Isobel. The subtly modelled planes in this flamboyantly posed figure combine to produce a work of extraordinary beauty." The sitter was Isobel Nicholas, then an art student, later a painter and ballet set designer.

In 1936 Haile Selassie, the Emperor of Abyssinia, was in exile in London, his country having been over-run by Mussolini's army. It was hoped that a portrait by the famous sculptor would rally support and sympathy for Ethiopia's sad plight. In his autobiography, Let There Be Sculpture, Epstein recalls that he was at first surprised by Haile Selassie's "calm air of dignity," and he comments on "his fine, handsome features...lit by a pair of melancholy eyes which seemed tired and strained. Finally, he writes, "the Emperor's hands especially attracted my attention. They were fine, even feminine. He was altogether delicately fashioned, although this delicacy was tempered with a Semitic virility. I made what I considered an interesting study, although an unfinished one."

A mood of profound sadness pervades the First Sketch of Pandit Nehru of 1946. Nehru was in London for a Commonwealth Conference and asked to visit Epstein's studio. The sculptor seized the chance to do his portrait. A second head was done in 1949.

Throughout his career Epstein did studies of infants and children of which the head of his granddaughter, Fourth Portrait of Leda (with Coxcomb) is one of his most engaging. Epstein's lifelong love of music led him to do portraits of a number of musicians, among them the serene head of the concert pianist, Rosalyn Tureck.

Late in 1927 Epstein returned to New York on the occasion of a one-man show of his work. During his four-month stay he met the singer Paul Robeson -- who took him on a tour of Harlem -- and also the writer Carl Van Vechten, who was well known for his interest in the art and culture of the American Negro. Epstein began the Robeson head in January of 1928 but left for London before doing what he felt was a finished work. Nevertheless, the slightly over-life-size head conveys the intensity of spirit for which Robeson was admired.

The range of Van Vechten's taste as an art collector may be gauged from the three artists included in this group of works -- the naive Eilshemius, the sophisticated Dufy and, of course, Epstein. Eilshemius was in his fifties in 1917 when Marcel Duchamp first called his work to public attention. Discouraged by years of neglect, however, he very shortly gave up painting altogether and never resumed it even though he received increasing recognition in the twenties and had more than 25 one-man shows from 1932 until his death in 1941.

Photographs and additional information available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019. Circle 5-8900.