

Mother and Child

Francesco Carelli

The Royal Academy of Arts presents an exhibition of works celebrating the radical change that transformed British sculpture in the twentieth century. Over a period of 10 years (1905 – 1915) three outstanding young sculptors emerged: Henri Gaudier -Brzeska, Jacob Epstein and Eric Gill.

The origins of these three artists could hardly have been more diverse: Epstein was a Jew from New York, Gaudier-Brzeska the son of an Orleans joiner, and Gill's father a Brighton clergyman. But between them, in a sustained burst of bold inventiveness before the First World War, they brought about the birth of modern British sculpture. Committed to carving direct in stone, they aimed at returning to the prehistoric origins of sculptural expression, shocking contemporary viewers by their obsession with virility, fertility and procreation.

Gill devoted much of his formidable energy to Mother and Child carvings. As the result of a miscarriage, Gill's wife was unable to have anymore children. So, his heartfelt concentration on the art of breast-feeding took on an additional poignancy.

The relationship between mother and baby become even closer. Now sitting upright and pressing eagerly on the proffered nipple, the child is more active than the reclining infants in the earlier versions. Later, Gill decided that lettering would add an unexpected dimension to the meaning of the work. The Latin words, from Luke I, 53, triumphantly announce that “ He has filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he has sent empty away “.

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Incised in capital letters around the base of the carving, they ensure that its beneficent placidity suddenly takes on a defiant sense of solidarity with the poor, thereby prophesying Gill's subsequent increasing obsession with religious version of optimistic fertility of the mother and child subject.

By December 1913, he had made a Portland stone relief of a Madonna and Child, that shocked many of his conventional religious friends: for he applied red paints to the lips of both Virgin and infant and added the same pigment to the Madonna's nipples. The gilded hair on both figures possesses a religious aura, and Gill half – hid the Madonna's nudity by clothing her in a blue painted skirt.