

ARTS SOCIETY STUDY DAY

Evelyn Silber

‘What a brilliant day! I thoroughly enjoyed every minute. All the lectures were interesting, enlightening and fun’ (Felicia Wade, Sherborne AS)

Hosted by The Arts Society Chichester

29th October 2024 at The Assembly Rooms Chichester



BREAKING THE MOULD

Rebellion and rebirth in British Sculpture 1900-1930s

Revolutionaries need guts, vision and determination to take the opposition they will undoubtedly face! Overturning centuries of tradition in art was the challenge for many young sculptors in the early 20th century. Sculptural practice in 1900 was conservative and costly geared to the needs of public commissions and private patronage. Artists across Europe including Picasso and Matisse, Brancusi and Modigliani, Duchamp-Villon and

Boccioni were jettisoning classical baggage and literary lumber in favour of radical experiments in form, material and content. This study day surveys the late 19th century scene in London and Paris before showing how in Britain carvings by Jacob Epstein, Eric Gill, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska challenged critical and public taste with their sexual candour and perceived ‘primitivism’. Their work before the First World War paved the way for Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth and their contemporaries, the subjects of the third talk.

If you have wondered how British sculptors have achieved international acclaim in the past 50 years this is where you can trace the origins of their success.

Part One – Revitalising Tradition. Paris and London around 1900

On overview of the sculpture scene around 1900 revealing the status quo young rebels such as Modigliani, Brancusi, Epstein and others were determined to reject, redefining sculpture and drawing on diverse sources of inspiration outside the classical world and western European tradition. From the Paris Salon with its galaxy of sculptures, the Statue of Liberty – also made in Paris – to the naturalism and bravura modelling of Rodin we explore the role of Paris as the centre of the art world and of ‘statuemanía’, and parallel developments in Britain such as the Victoria Memorial outside Buckingham Palace.

We look too at the making sculpture and training those who made it – the workshops and the men who supported the stars such as Rodin, focussing on *The Kiss* and contrasting it with the same subject treated by the Romanian Brancusi.

Part Two – Raising Modern Sculpture from the Dead:

Epstein, Gill and Gaudier-Brzeska

Jacob Epstein, Eric Gill and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska were the young sculptors who re-defined sculpture during the frenetic period before the First World War, alongside the Bloomsbury Group, the Rebel Art Centre and the Vorticists and responding to the example of their Paris-based contemporaries, Modigliani and Brancusi, as well as the formal innovations and sheer energy of the Cubists and Futurists. They adopted the method of carving direct in stone and challenged or rejected the classical tradition. Their work, especially Epstein's, attracted great controversy but they were changing not only how sculpture was made but also its form and content giving rise to a new environment for the exhibition and marketing of work for the collector rather than the public stage. There is a handling opportunity after this talk.

Part Three: 'True and Pure Sculpture': the Carving Ethos in Britain during the 1920s and 30s

In the afternoon we look at sculptors, dealers and critics between the wars, principally through the work of the up and coming British sculptors Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore. In the aftermath of the war, Epstein's work like that of many other artists changed but he remained in the public eye the leading modernist sculptor but now cast adrift from groups and pursuing his individual, controversial path ending with major works in a Blackpool side show. As it happens both Epstein and Moore had the same dealer in this period so we can see how their work was received and bought – or not.

Evelyn Silber is the author of major books and curated exhibitions on the work of Jacob Epstein and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and has more recently been researching the exhibition and marketing of modernist art by London commercial galleries during the early 20th century.

She studied at Cambridge and the University of Pennsylvania before becoming an art curator and subsequently Assistant Director at Birmingham Museums. She was Director of Leeds Museums and Galleries and of the Hunterian, University of Glasgow. Based in Glasgow she is involved in a range of heritage projects. She is a past Chair of the Charles Rennie Mackintosh Society, has chaired the Scottish Treasure Trove Panel and leads specialist cultural tours to the city. She is an Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the University of Glasgow.