Sir Jacob Epstein (1880-1959) began his career as a sculptor in Bloomsbury, subject to public hostility and notoriety. He ended it in Kensington with a knighthood and a secure place as a leading sculptor in the history of British modernism. Antony Gormley said in 2009 that Epstein ‘was solely responsible for the arrival of Modernism, and in particular for bringing direct carving to Britain.’

Epstein’s earliest avant-garde works were made in various studios around Bloomsbury and, from 1916 to 1927, he and his wife lived directly opposite the gates of the Foundling Hospital, which continues today as the children’s charity Coram. His daughter Peggy Jean grew up in this house and Epstein began a long and lasting affair with Kathleen Garman who lived just behind the Hospital. They had three children together. Epstein drew and modelled all his children and later his grandchildren. Babies and Bloomsbury focuses on these intimate and personal works which were a constant counterpoint to his public commissions.

To work from a child the sculptor has to have endless patience. He must wait and observe, and observe and wait. The small forms, so seemingly simple, are in reality so subtle, and the hunting of the form is an occupation that is at once tantalizing and fascinating.

Jacob Epstein and Portland Mason, c.1952

Curated by Gill Hedley
Designed by Joe Ewart for Society

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Jacob Epstein was the second son of businessman Max Epstein and his wife Mary Solomon who were middle-class Orthodox Jewish refugees living in New York. In 1902, aged 22, Epstein moved to Paris to study art. In 1904, he made a brief trip to London and stayed in Bloomsbury, visiting many museums, above all the British Museum, continuing his fascination with pre-classical and non-European sculpture. A year earlier he had met Margaret Williams, who left her husband for Epstein: they moved in together in London, marrying in 1906. The couple later moved to Chelsea, and then Sussex, but Epstein always had studios in Bloomsbury, including the buildings in the mews behind the Poetry Bookshop in Devonshire Street (now Boswell Street), Lamb’s Conduit Street, Great James’s Street and Emerald Street.

Epstein became notorious in 1908 when a press scandal arose over the powerful figures he created for the British Medical Association building in the Strand. These personifications of maternity, infancy and other stages of life were forty feet high and largely nude. The theme of maternity and images of small children continued to fascinate Epstein. He experimented in his approaches to the subject revealing his knowledge of Renaissance bronzes in his portrait of Augustus John’s son Romilly. A study for the voluptuous, Indian-inspired Maternity is also shown here.

In 1916, the Epsteins moved to 23 Guilford Street, Bloomsbury, directly opposite the gates of the Foundling Hospital. They lived there for the next twelve years during which his first child was born and a lasting love affair began.
Margaret Epstein was born Margaret Gilmour Dunlop in Scotland and known as Peggy. She married Thomas Williams in Holborn when she was 23. After ten years of marriage, in November 1906 he divorced her citing Jacob Epstein as the cause; Margaret and Epstein married immediately. Their long marriage was unconventional but lasted until Margaret’s death in 1947.

Margaret was not able to have children and brought up Peggy Jean, Epstein’s daughter with Meum Lindsell-Stewart, from her birth in 1918. In that year Epstein made his fifth portrait of his wife, wearing a lace mantilla draped over her bowed head.

_This bust, I think, is one of my bravest ... and ... one of my most beautiful ... This work was unhurried and brooded over, and the drapery was worked with great care. The lines, all running downwards like the rills of a fountain, are essential to the effect of the bust and help to express its innermost meaning. I think of this bust as a crowning piece, and I place it with any work I have done._

In 1918, Epstein had a breakdown while training as a private in the Jewish 38th battalion of the Royal Fusiliers. He was invalided out in the summer of 1918, shortly before Peggy Jean’s birth in late October. The year before, his second solo show at the Leicester Galleries in London finally brought him some measure of critical and financial success.
I never tired of watching her, and to watch her was, for me, to work from her. To make studies in clay of all her moods; and when she tired and fell asleep, there was something new to do, charming and complete. To work from a child seemed to me the only work worth doing, and I was prepared to go for the rest of my life looking at Peggy Jean, and making new studies of her...

Dorothy Lindsell-Stewart, nicknamed Meum, was separated from her soldier husband and became Epstein’s model and lover and, at first, was part of the household in Guilford Street. Her daughter Peggy Jean, Epstein’s first child, was born two weeks before the end of World War I and was brought up lovingly by Margaret, whose name she was given. Peggy Jean married twice and later moved to the United States. She had a son, Ian, and a daughter, Leda, both of whom were sculpted by their grandfather.

Epstein found a new source of energy and inspiration in his baby daughter and made portraits of her throughout her childhood. When she was about nine, Peggy Jean injured her eye with some metal debris and Epstein created one of his most tender portraits of her in this fragile state. A critic remarked: ‘The modern sculptors regard The Sick Child as a masterpiece but not as a work of sculpture. They regard it as a pictorial masterpiece of the character of a genre portrait by Rembrandt.’
It may seem strange that the Epsteins made their home in Bloomsbury, where Margaret had lived with her first husband, but it placed Epstein in one of the centres of London’s Bohemia and was the first place in London that he visited. Although he was never part of the literary Bloomsbury Group, Epstein’s life had much in common with aspects of theirs – ‘they lived in squares, moved in circles and loved in triangles’ – but his approach to modernism was much more muscular and iconoclastic. Yet it was always tempered by the tender realism of his portraits of children.

Bloomsbury had many attractions for Epstein, especially proximity to the inspiration of the British Museum, and its elegant but often shabby Georgian houses had spacious rooms and useful mews buildings for studios.

_The front ground-floor room was their sitting room and, as far as I can remember, the furniture consisted only of a table and some chairs – also innumerable saucers with dregs of tea in them or mountains of cigarette ends. Behind double-doors was their bedroom in which a large and often unmade bed could be seen. On one occasion the bedclothes were pulled back in place to conceal a laid breakfast tray being kept warm for someone who was coming to breakfast. The first or drawing-room, floor was Epstein’s studio._

The Epstein family home was almost directly opposite the gates of the Foundling Hospital which was demolished in 1928, the year that the Epsteins moved to Hyde Park Gate in Kensington after a brief time in New York.

Margaret had her own reasons for wishing to leave Bloomsbury. In 1921, Jacob Epstein fell in love with Kathleen Garman, who lived just a few minutes’ walk away behind the Foundling Hospital.
In 1919, Kathleen Garman and her sister Mary decided to run away from their home in the West Midlands to London. Kathleen got a job at Harrods, helping with the delivery-van horses and also worked as an artist’s model; Mary drove a delivery van. Shocked by their behaviour, their father eventually decided it was better to support them. They rented a studio apartment at 13 Regent Square, Bloomsbury, and enrolled in a private art school. At night they visited nightclubs, including The Harlequin in Soho where Kathleen met Epstein who invited her to pose for him. In 1921, they became lovers. Margaret, aware of previous affairs, sensed that this was much more serious and, in the summer of 1923, invited Kathleen to Guilford Street for tea. Margaret shot her in the shoulder with a pearl-handled pistol. Epstein paid Kathleen’s hospital bills and persuaded her not to press charges against Margaret to avoid a public scandal.

The love affair continued and flourished. Every evening Epstein walked from Guilford Street to Regent Square – a ten minute stroll past the Foundling Hospital. The couple had four children together, but only three survived infancy: Theo was born in September 1924, followed by two daughters in 1926 and 1929. Epstein’s name is not on their birth certificates. When the Epsteins moved to Kensington, Kathleen moved to Chelsea.
Isabel Nicholas (1912–1992)

Isabel Nicholas studied at the Royal Academy Schools then became an artist’s model; Margaret introduced Isabel to Epstein, always hoping to encourage him away from life with Kathleen. Epstein and Isabel became lovers and had a son, Jackie. Yet again Margaret brought up the child as her own along with Peggy Jean, who was by now fourteen. Kathleen Garman learnt of Jackie’s existence only by accident when he was five years old.

Isabel was a painter and set designer, as well as muse to artists including Alberto Giacometti and Francis Bacon. She married three times: to the journalist Sefton Delmer and the composers Constant Lambert and Alan Rawsthorne.

Jackie became a racing driver at the age of nineteen.

Jackie and Jacob Epstein
Courtesy Tate, London 2015

... the child cannot sit still, and to compel a child to be quiet is at once to destroy the spontaneity and charm which lie in its frank and natural expressions. Yet I have attempted time and time this most difficult subject for sculpture ... I know I have by no means exhausted the subject.

My drawings of Jackie present a period of my life and mark out, through drawings, a plastic expression I am proud of. To have captured the fugitive and endless expressions and changes of movement of a child has been a rare experience.
The Epsteins left Bloomsbury in 1927, by which time Epstein was a highly successful artist working on major public commissions and many private portraits. The *enfant terrible* had developed into a Grand Old Man. Paul Robeson, the American singer and black activist, James Mason, the British film star, and The Duke of Devonshire, amongst many others, commissioned portrait heads of their small children.

Margaret died in 1947 and Theo and Esther died in 1954. Epstein was knighted the same year. In 1955, he and Kathleen married; she became Lady Epstein and his sole beneficiary. After Epstein’s death in 1959, she donated many of his works to the Israel Museum. Further works by Epstein were incorporated into the Garman Ryan Collection, which Lady Epstein and the sculptor Sally Ryan bequeathed to the New Art Gallery Walsall, close to the Garman family’s home town.

The theme of maternity and links with Bloomsbury continued in Epstein’s last years. His *Madonna and Child* (1950-52) for the exterior of the convent of the Holy Child Jesus, Cavendish Square, London, received unprecedented critical and public acclaim.

The charming head of *Victor* is a portrait of the son of their West Indian cook.

In 1956, Epstein’s final work, *Pietà*, was installed in the courtyard of the trades union headquarters, Congress House in Great Russell Street, as a memorial to the dead trade unionists of both world wars. The monumental female figure holding the body of a soldier shows the lifelong importance of pre-classical and non-European sculpture in Epstein’s work, which he had first studied in 1904 at the British Museum, a few moments’ walk away along Great Russell Street.