

CONSUMMATUM EST

SPEAKING as one less wise in such matters, I should say that Mr. Epstein's object in the grotesqueness of his sculptured figures is twofold: first, to bring out, by deliberate over-emphasis, points that others might overlook; and secondly, to balance the inadequacy of his medium, stone.

The first point explains the exaggeration of feature in his figures. And how justifiable this is I was able to note upon seeing in the flesh the original of one of the busts, exhibited in the Leicester Galleries, standing alongside the bust itself. To look at the original immediately after seeing the reproduction was to see how much one had missed in the former—and what a great sculptor Mr. Epstein is.

The second object explains what one might call the brutality of his technique, the hard mathematical lines, the artificial disproportions, and the rough, clay-model surfacing. A sculptor's problem is this: he has to produce out of stone upon the observer the same dynamic effect as a living personality produces. Stone with the lines of a human face is something much less than the lines of a human form in flesh and blood vitalized by a human personality. The deficit has to be made up. There are many ways of making it up. Mr. Epstein's way is to change the lines or usual appearance so that the thing presented is calculated, by its very strangeness, to jolt the mind and encourage the recognition of underlying realities, or suggested realities.

Whether the ideas which Mr. Epstein here portrays are right or not is open to dispute. But any shortcoming in this respect must not be confused with shortcomings in his technique. The perfection of line and its carrying force are alone enough to put him amongst the great sculptors. And the undeniable strength and character of his works is a certain corrective to the tinsel weakness of much of the sculpture that has been imposed upon us in the past, even though it be an exaggeration in an opposite direction, truth lying somehow between the two.

But when we come to consider the underlying ideas which

this artist expresses in stone, our approval of Mr. Epstein must be considerably modified. To confine ourselves to the work *Consummatum Est*, if it is meant to bear any relation to Him Who spoke these momentous words it is a failure. What it conveys is this: Life, cumbersome in its early forms, (expressed by the disproportion and ungainly attitude of the limbs), evolving from the cosmic mechanism, (expressed by the giant mathematical lines of the whole), straining upwards (shown in the strained upheaving of the shoulders from a recumbent position); there is suffering there (the conventional nail marks are used) combined with un-understanding resignation (clearly observable in the face and in the upturned hands). Standing at the feet of the prone figure, one sees in addition an expression of irony in the face; but this disappears as one moves up to look at the full face, and is perhaps unintentional.

That is, in general, our interpretation of *Consummatum Est*, and it most certainly does not represent the historical Christ Who uttered these words. Even *historically* it is certain that Our Lord had a clear knowledge of the purpose of His dying and, in spite of His agony, died willingly in love and hope and joy; there was no blank resignation to the unknown, dead-ended, such as this sculpture portrays. Everything even in the humanity of Christ cries out against this use of His consummated self-sacrifice of love to picture a naturalistic and mechanistic fantasy of cosmic evolution. Leaving aside the Divine Revelation of the Incarnation, there is nothing here to suggest even humanity, certainly nothing to suggest a soul in the image of God shining through the material flesh. So that the untruth of this representation is painfully clear, its untruth in its historical association signified by the nail-marks and the title.

An interesting comparison is provided by the *Head of a Young Communist* in the same exhibition. Mr. Epstein has here reproduced everything to the life, notably the mechanical intellectualism in the heavy forehead and the saturnine determination of the strong mouth. Because there is nothing more in the ideal than this, no hope or love or joy, and perhaps because this is a subject that the artist can appreciate, he has produced a true likeness. But in *Consummatum Est* he has missed the elementary truth and suggested elemental notions that are not true. He has no

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right to use the central personality of human history as a lay figure for the expression of a cosmic idea totally opposed to the known purpose and ideals of that historic Person. And Christians, Catholics above all, are right in resenting the untruth and the lack of consideration for all that they hold sacred shown in the exhibition of this piece of sculpture. They have no right to decry his chosen medium of expression, which has indeed much to recommend it, but every right to resent his choice of subject on which to exercise it.

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