

Sexual Anarchy

The Monument to Oscar Wilde

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The Pere Lachaise Cemetery in Paris contains many tombs honoring artists and rebels, but the most striking of them all is the monument to the gay English playwright and anarchist Oscar Wilde. [1]



Oscar Wilde's Paris tomb became a battleground for sexual liberation.

The story of Wilde's trial for homosexuality and subsequent imprisonment in England is well-known. After his release from jail in 1897, he fled to the continent and settled in Paris. He died there in exile in 1900 and was quietly buried in Pere Lachaise.

There were no plans to mark his grave until 1908, when an anonymous English donor put up £2,000 and asked Robert Ross, Wilde's literary executor, to hire the sculptor Jacob Epstein to carve a gravestone monument. Epstein was an expatriate American whose own anarchist libertarianism had been nurtured in New York and later in Paris, where he lived from 1902 to 1905. [2]

He eagerly accepted the project, but did not settle on a design until 1911. Epstein (with the assistance of Eric Gill) spent approximately a year carving his sculpture out of an immense stone block weighing 20 tons. The monument was a flying "demon angel," naked except for a headdress with symbolic figures representing Fame flanked by Intellectual Pride, and Luxury,

which was carved on three sides and mounted on a plinth so as to appear to be in mid-flight. [3] The sculpture was completed in the spring of 1912 and shipped to Paris that June. Epstein followed in July to oversee its installation in the cemetery where Wilde was buried, however at this point problems arose.

No sooner had Epstein set the sculpture in place than the civic authorities in charge of the cemetery condemned it as indecent due to its highly visible genitals, which had been given a "peculiarly elaborate and almost decorative treatment," in the words of one visitor who had seen the finished product in the studio. [4]

The monument was covered with a tarpaulin and Epstein ordered to "modify" it. This demand was backed up by the Prefecture de Police and an official Comite d'esthetique composed of important artists from the state-sponsored Ecole des Beaux Arts, which issued a public declaration that the work was "obscene." [5] Desperate to

save his monument, Epstein penned an open letter asking “all artists and writers who value the freedom of their conceptions and who might wish to protest against the tyranny of petty officials” to rally to its defense. [6]

Among those who responded were the Artistocrats, an anarchist collective of Parisian artists and-critics who published a journal, *L'Action d'Art*, from a storefront space on the rue Edouard Manet, located in the heart of the city's working-class district. There they ran a noncommercial gallery and evening free school where they propagated their own distinctive “Artistocratic” brand of anarchist-individualism. [7]

The Artistocrats had long admired Wilde, both for his defiant sexual rebellion and for his essay, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” (1891), in which he called for every individual to develop their artistic potential and wrote that “the form of government which best suits the artist is the absence of all government.” [8]

Wilde believed only a communist society could ensure the spread of an artistic sensibility, since under capitalism the vast majority were caught up in the struggle to survive. The Artistocrats shared his anti-capitalist views, but held that a change in one's state of mind must come before social revolution. Once individuals adopted an anti-materialist, Artistocratic attitude toward life, rebellions against capitalism would follow, though the group never spelled out what form those revolts would take. [9]

Gerard de Lacaze-Duthier was the prime spokesperson among the group who articulated what an “Artistocratic” state of mind entailed. The Artistocrat enjoyed a psychological and physiological “equilibrium” or “harmony” that in turn produced a desire to share his or her experience with others. Everyday life was transformed into an act of beauty because the Artistocrat was “a being free from all dogma, possessing his own law, his own morality, sole master of his destiny, creating his life harmoniously such as he believes it, managing to equilibrate all his passions and all his ideas, and to rejuvenate and renew himself through his incessant action.”

The Artistocrat not only experienced life's “profound meaning”: he or she composed with “lyricism,” creating art forms whose equilibrium,” “beauty,” and “justice,” infused the surrounding environment. Lacaze-Duthier did not propagate art-for-art's-sake escapism; rather, the Aristocratic way of life was a revolutionary anti-capitalist example for others to emulate. [10]

These same principles informed the defense of the Wilde monument mounted by the group's leading art critic, Atl (Gerardo Murillo, a future participant in the post-World War I muralist movement in Mexico). Atl evoked the Artistocrat notion of physiological and psychological harmony, arguing that anyone “in full possession of his sexual equilibrium cannot be offended before the symbol of virility.” Noting other sculptures had been repressed on similar grounds by the Ecole officials in their capacity as judges for the Salon de la Societe Nationale des Beaux Arts, he argued the Wilde debacle was evidence that a pervasive “pathology” was at work.

Such censorship was an insult “to the simple dignity of the healthy man” and served notice that the state's cultural officials were morally corrupt and therefore artistically “impotent.” In fact, Epstein's monument was one of those harmonious manifestations of aesthetic individualism” fully in keeping with the anarchist philosophy of the Artistocrats and Wilde himself. [11] Thus, Atl deftly turned the tables on Epstein's critics, labeling them deviants.

In 1913, the Artistocrats organized a campaign to obstruct government plans to “mutilate” the sculpture by covering its genitals with a plaque. They issued a broadsheet calling on all “thinkers, artists and writers” to sign a petition of protest. And, in keeping with the Artistocrat attitude toward sexual liberation, the group reproduced an image of the monument, genitalia triumphant, to expose the homophobic and anti-sexual prejudices fueling the state's actions.

The success of their campaign is reflected in the list of petitioners published in the 15 April 1913 issue of *L'Action d'Art*, which reads like a virtual cross-section of the French and English avant-garde. [12] Ultimately, the protests were to no avail and the sculpture's genitals were covered over by a bronze plaque.

Epstein was disgusted. However, the Artistocrats had their revenge. “A band of artists and poets subsequently made a raid upon the monument and removed this plaque,” the sculptor later recalled. “One evening at the Café Royal, a man appeared wearing this affair suspended from his neck and, approaching me, explained its significance. [13]

One can only imagine the laughter that ensued. Sensing further actions to alter Epstein's statue would be useless, the authorities kept the monument under a tarpaulin until August 1914, when the “obscene” work finally saw the light of day.

That same month the uncorrupted youth of France marched off to World War I, where they perished in the hundreds of thousands.

Endnotes

(1) Wilde declared himself an anarchist in 1893. See Donald Drew Egbert, *Social Radicalism and the Arts in Western Europe* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, &, 1970), 465.

(2) Epstein was born in New York's impoverished Lower East Side Jewish community in 1880. Around the age of 18, he met Emma Goldman and began attending anarchist meetings while still a teenager. In 1902, another anarchist, Hutchins Hapgood, hired Epstein to illustrate a book on the Lower East Side.

Epstein was already aspiring to be an artist and this gave him the means to travel to Paris, where he studied from 1902 to 1905. With introductions from Goldman and Hapgood to pave the way, he gained the friendship of many Parisian comrades, including the venerable Bakuninist Victor Dave. Epstein met his Scottish-born wife, Margaret Dunlop, at Dave's apartment. She was the one who convinced him to move to England in 1905, where his career took off.

In England, he befriended Augustus John (painter), Eric Gill (sculptor), Charles Holden (architect) and other anarchists in London's art community. He even planned to set up a rural artists' commune with Gill where they could "celebrate human sexuality in art" (the project failed for lack of funds to lease or purchase the chosen site—a farm in Sussex).

On Hapgood's anarchism and the connections linking New York and Parisian anarchists, see Allan Antliff, *Anarchist Modernism: Art, Politics, and the First American Avant-Garde* (forthcoming, University of Chicago Press, Spring, 2001). Epstein's anarchist contacts in France and England are outlined in Evelyn Silber, *The Sculpture of Epstein* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1986), 10–22 and Mark Antliff, "Cubism, Futurism, Anarchism: The 'Aestheticism' of the Action d'art Group," *Oxford Art Journal* 21, no. 2 (1998), 109, note 44.

(3) Silber, 131, note 40.

(4) A. Mola to J. Stern, October, 25, 1942, cited in *Ibid.*

(5) M. Antliff, "Cubism, Futurism, Anarchism," 107.

(6) Epstein to H. P. Roche, September 14, 1912 cited in Silber, 131, note 40.

(7) M. Antliff, "Cubism, Futurism, Anarchism," 112–113. From 1907 through to World War II the Artistocrats propagated their tenets in a series of journals, notably *La Foire aux chimères* (1907–08); *Les Actes du poètes* (1908–11); *La Forge* (1911); *Le Rhythme* (1911–12); *L'Action d'Art* (1913, 1920) and *L'En dehors* (1922–39).

(8) Oscar Wilde, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" in Richard Ellmann, ed. *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 257.

(9) M. Antliff, "Cubism, Futurism, Anarchism," 106. That said, the group did support the anarchist-individualist Bonnot Gang's string of pre-World War I bank expropriations and developed a number of anti-commodification strategies in the realm of art production. On their support for Bonnot, see Mark Antliff, *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (Princeton University Press, 1993): 135–67.

(10) These views are expounded in Lacaze-Duthier, "L'Individualisme esthetique et L'Artistocratie," *L'Action d'Art*, 10 September 1913, 2 and Lacaze-Duthier, "Reflexions sur la Litterature," *L'Action d'Art*, 25 June 1913, 8.

(11) Atl, "Notre Protestations en Faveur du Monument Oscar Wilde," *L'Action d'Art*, 10 May 1913, 3–4 and Atl, "Les Edits Delanney," *L'Action d'Art*, 15 March 1913, 3.

(12) The list includes Wyndham Lewis, Francis Picabia, Albert Gleizes, Guillaume Appollinaire, Paul Fort, Max Jacob, and Alexander Archipenko. See M. Antliff, "Cubism, Futurism, Anarchism," 109.

(13) Jacob Epstein, *Let There Be Sculpture*. (New York: P.G. Putnam's Sons, 1940), 46–7. This book contains an invaluable appendix with documents related to the controversy.

See also

Letters to the Fifth Estate, FE #356, Spring, 2002.

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