

11 - London Transport Building, (St James's Park), 55 Broadway, SW1.

Date: 1927-9

Architect: Charles Holden

Sculptors: Jacob Epstein, Eric Gill, Alan Wyon, Alfred Gerrard, F Rabinovitch, Henry Moore.

Sculptures: There are two groups of sculptures:

A - Two free-standing sculptures by Jacob Epstein:

1. depicting 'Day' (above entrance on SE side): a standing naked boy with arms reaching upwards to his partly draped parent **[D,E]**.

2. depicting 'Night' (above entrance on NE side): a heavily draped female figure holding the recumbent figure of a man stretched out on her lap **[F-G]**.

B - Eight relief carvings of flying figures by various sculptors, high up on the facades of each of the four wings of the building, depicting 'the four winds' (two carvings for each) **[D,H-M]**.

East wind

1. S side of W wing - crouched figure of a man holding a soft bag emitting air **[D,M]**.

Sculptor: Alan Wyon.

2. N side of W wing - crouched figure of a naked man with stylised drapery behind **[D]**. Sculptor: Eric Gill.

North wind

3. W side of S wing - female figure with arms reaching behind, holding stylised flowing hair **[D,L]**. Sculptor: Alfred Gerrard.

4. S side of S wing - crouched figure, facing forward, with stylised flowing drapery behind **[D,I]**. Sculptor: Eric Gill.

West wind

5. S side of E wing - female figure, facing forward, with stylised bird [D,J].

Sculptor: F. Rabinovitch.

6. N side of E wing - female figure, partly turned sideways. Sculptor [D,K]: Henry Moore.

South wind

7. W side of N wing - male figure, with flowing hair, facing forward [D]. Sculptor: Eric Aumonier.

8. E side of N wing - female figure, with stylised drapery behind [D,H]. Sculptor: Eric Gill.

These groups of sculptures are justly celebrated as being amongst the finest architectural sculptures of the period. They were commissioned by the architect Charles Holden, after discussions with Frank Pick, then assistant MD of the underground railways. Pick was a strong advocate of good design, and was ultimately responsible for the 'design identity' of London Transport in the 1930s (Forty 1986: 223-38). Both Pick and Holden were founder members of the Design and Industries Association in 1915, which emphasised the Modernist tenet of 'Fitness for Purpose'. Holden placed Eric Gill in charge of the sculptural project, and gave Jacob Epstein the task of producing two sculptures on a subject of his own choosing above the two main entrances. This was in spite of the furore which had greeted the latter's ~~his~~ sculptures on Holden's Strand building of 1907, and in the Rima memorial to W H Hudson in Hyde Park of 1926, which Holden also designed.

The building itself [A-C] was, at the time of its completion, the largest office block in London. It is described by Richard Cork as a "thrusting and confident monument", a "revolutionary building, the forerunner of the City's large-scale blocks of the 1930s, and the most primitive in its desire to assert the massive weight and strength of a twentieth century Ziggurat" (1985: 252). As he also observes, "The symbolic impact of such a virile landmark, especially in contrast to the fussy convolution of the Victorian buildings around

it, was inescapable. So far as Pick was concerned, it must have affirmed the energetic optimism with which his company had burrowed through the entrails of the metropolis and supplied it with a transport system fit for the machine age" (ibid: 251).

The sculptures were, however - as Cork has observed (ibid: 256) - something of an afterthought. They did not appear on the final drawings presented to the Transport Board, and the flying figures occupy a rather subsidiary place on the building, being placed too high up to make the impact that they were clearly intended to achieve, even though Henry Moore in particular was very conscious of how they were to be viewed from below (Cork ibid: 278). Nevertheless, their symbolism is interesting. They were understood by a contemporary as "a crucial means of asserting that modern transport should be life-enhancing . . . and not merely efficient" (ibid), an affirmation against the depersonalised aspects of machine prowess and of technological extremism. Overtly, however, these sculptures represent the 'four winds'. In Holden's words, this was "considered appropriate for the reason that the positions were facing every point of the compass and exposed to all the winds that blow, and that the panels were horizontal, therefore suitable to figures in a floating movement" (quoted in Cork, ibid, 256). Cork also points to influences of similar floating figures in Epstein's carving for Oscar Wilde's tomb of 1912, and the 'Tower of the Winds' in Athens of 40BC (ibid: 256-7). It seems unlikely that the personification of the four winds was intended as a metaphor for the speed of underground travel. Neither they nor Epstein's sculptures are therefore to be seen as literal pointers to the building's function, as some other architectural sculptures of the period undoubtedly were.

I would however suggest that the contemporary styles of the sculptures - even though the sculptors were left to find their own solutions to the brief (ibid: 256) - were also to be seen as an appropriate complement to the modernism of the building itself, enhancing rather than detracting from its bold statement of forward-looking corporate identity, and as a fitting monument to the machine age extending beneath its foundations. I do not see this as incompatible with the more 'humanistic' idea of their function mentioned above. As Forty has discussed in some detail (1986: 223-8), this enhancement of

the future London Transport's corporate identity by innovative, distinctive and bold Modernist design, which was encouraged by Frank Pick, was to become an important factor in its growth in the 1930s and beyond. I believe that this building and its sculptures was a bold beginning, at a rather earlier period than Forty would allow, along this path towards this corporate identity.

The attitudes and practice behind the creation of the ensemble as a whole are significant in tracing the development of architectural sculpture in the period in question. Holden was an early exponentⁿ of Modernism (and perhaps one of the greatest working in England), and even in 1915 had consciously taken on board the reality of the Modernist practice of 'truth to materials'. In the St James building he was insistent that the principle of direct carving onto the stone be employed "without the use of a pointer or mechanical means of production from a preliminary clay or plaster model. . . It was preferred to preserve all the virility and adventure brought into play with every cut of the chisel, even at the expense of some degree of accuracy of form" (quoted in Cork, *ibid*, 258). He also wished to bring about a "marriage of architecture and sculpture at a time when they were in danger of pursuing very separate identities" (*ibid*). To this end he tried to create a community of craftspeople to mirror the practices of the medieval cathedral builders, insisting that at least the finishing work on the carvings be done in position on site. While Gill and Moore railed against these idealistic notions during their period of working on the building, it was nevertheless a powerful and inspired vision, and one which was repeated in G. Grey Wornum's creation of the RIBA building 10 years later.

Sources

Anglo-American Trade Magazine, August 1929.

Architectural Review, Nov. 1929.

Architectural Association Quarterly, 1976).

R Cork, 'Overhead sculpture for the underground railway),ch 6 pp249-296 in Cork 1985.

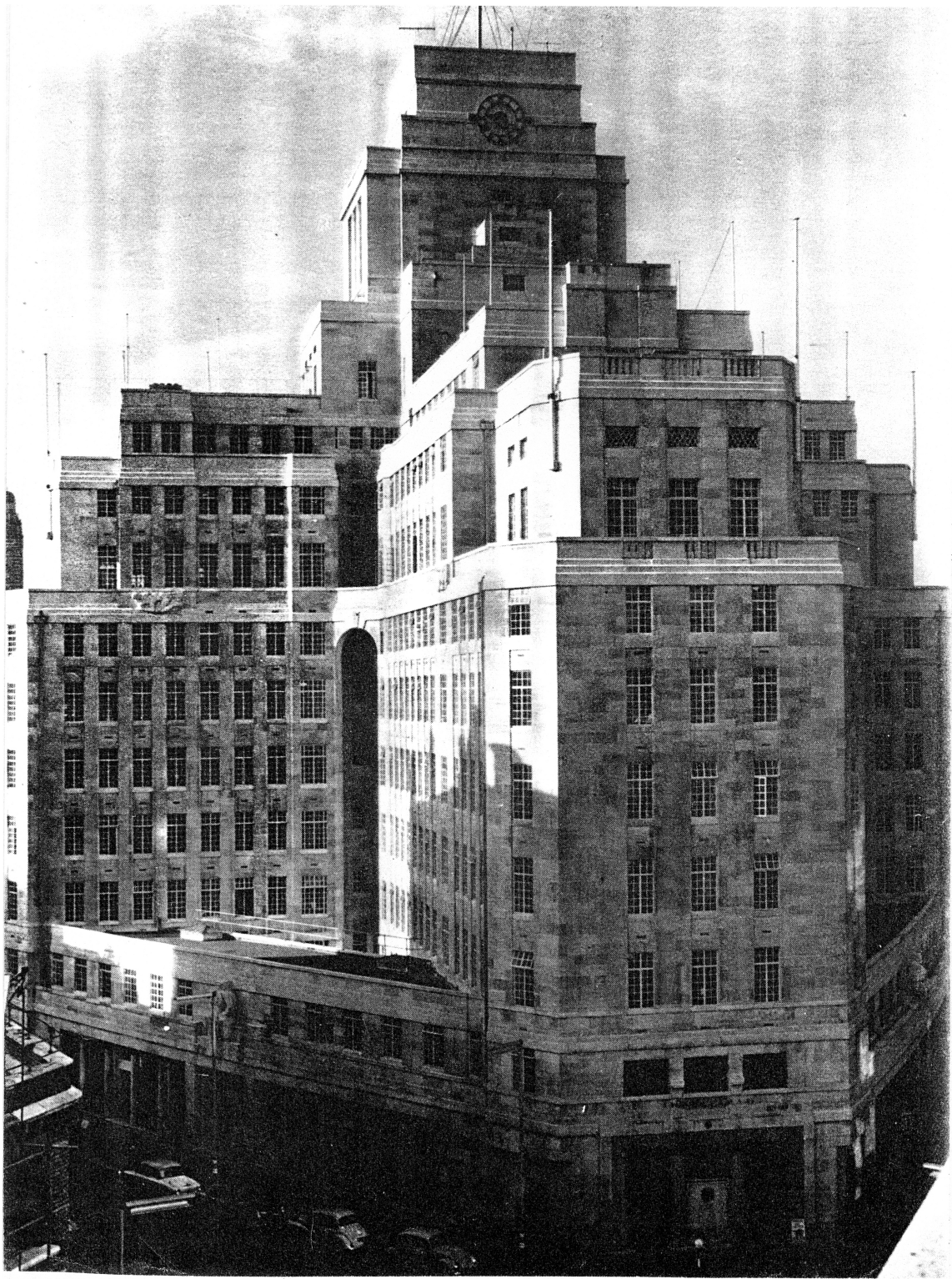
Pamphlet, '55 Broadway - The sculptures', pub London Transport [D].



A



B



C

THE SCULPTURE ON 55 BROADWAY

Despite the furore which greeted the carvings by Jacob Epstein on an earlier building he was commissioned to design in The Strand, Charles Holden not only approached Epstein once more but also invited six other modern sculptors to work on 55 Broadway.

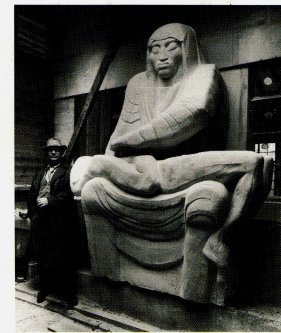
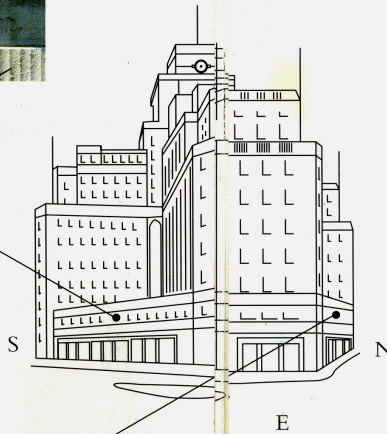
Epstein was given a free hand in choosing the subjects for the prominent positions above the pillared doorways at street level. "Day" (south east facing) and "Night" (north east facing), were reviled at the time by the popular Press, by the general public ("Night" was vandalised) and even by some art critics. Pick tendered his resignation (although it was not accepted), and one of the Underground Directors offered to replace the sculptures with less controversial images at his own expense. A compromise eventually prevailed, with Epstein reducing the prominence of the nudity of the young boy depicted in "Day" by one and a half inches.



DAY
Jacob Epstein
above the south east
facing portal



NIGHT
Jacob Epstein
above the north east
facing portal



Jacob Epstein
in his studio

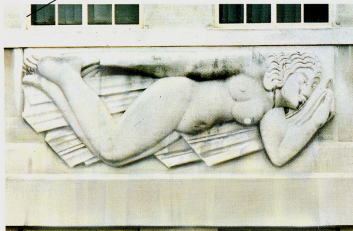
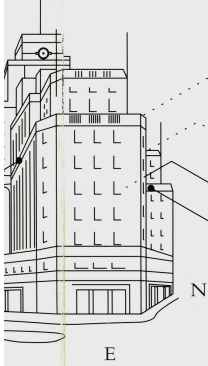
THE SCULPTURE ON 55 BROADWAY



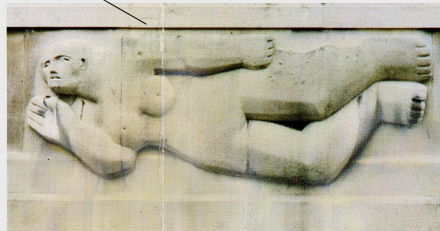
East Wind
Eric Gill
on the north side of
the west wing



South Wind
Eric Aumonier
on the west side of
the north wing



South Wind
Eric Gill
on the east side of
the north wing



West Wind
Henry Moore
on the north side of
the east wing

Contrasting with the visual impact of the Epstein carvings, the horizontal reliefs on the theme of "The Winds", 80 feet above the street on each side of the four wings of 55 Broadway, need an enquiring eye to discern them. Holden, who suggested flying figures for each image, placed Eric Gill in overall charge of the project asking him to carve three of the eight reliefs himself. The other five "Winds" were sculpted by Eric Aumonier, Alfred Gerrard, Allan Wyon, Henry Moore (whose first public work this was) and F Rabinovitch.

Eric Gill and Henry Moore appear to have had initial reservations about undertaking the commission, not least because they felt it belittled their status as artists. Nor did they enjoy working at such a height surrounded by unappreciative building contractors! Nevertheless the artists all responded positively and with individual imagination to the challenge of sites so high above the viewer. "The Winds" – six taking a female form – are illustrated as some parts of 55 Broadway are not visible from the street.

Henry Moore
at work



THE CONSTRUCTION OF 55 BROADWAY

London Transport's predecessors had a far-sighted vision of the rôle of public transport in the commercial and social life of London. The construction of 55 Broadway between 1927 and 1929 provided an opportunity to symbolise this proud vision. The imposing building was the tallest in London when it opened, and the recent external refurbishment has emphasised the timeless quality of the architectural design. And just as skilled stonemasons, working on site, decorated medieval Cathedrals, contemporary artists were invited to carve sculptures on the façade to balance the strong vertical lines of 55 Broadway.

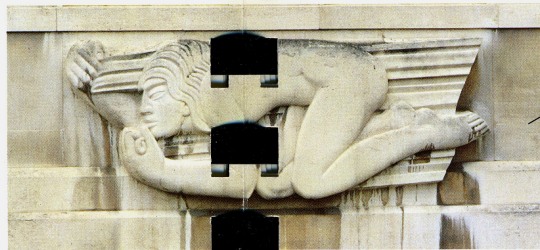
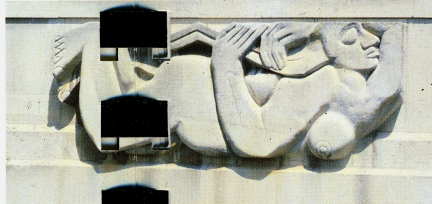
The project reflected the forward-looking optimism of Frank Pick, joint Assistant Managing Director of the Underground Group (who became Vice Chairman of the newly-constituted London Transport in 1933). Pick believed that the highest standards of design should be applied to every facet of London's public transport, from the printed word to the design of buildings. It was Pick who commissioned the architect Charles Holden to design 55 Broadway and who was persuaded by Holden that uncompromisingly modern carving was an appropriate decoration for the otherwise stark Portland stone façades.



East Wind
Allan Wyon
on the south side of
the west wing



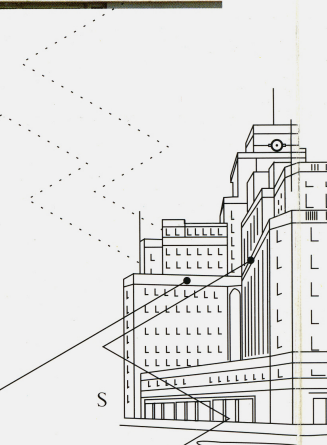
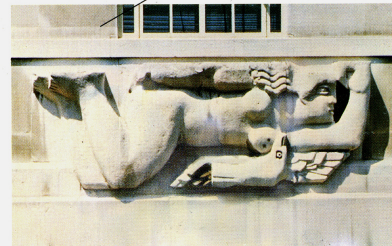
North Wind
Eric Gill
on the west side of
the south wing



North Wind
Eric Gill
on the east side of
the south wing



West Wind
F. Rabinovitch
on the south side of
the east wing



S



E



F



G

H



I



J



K



L



M

