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ERIC GILL: NUPTIALS OF GOD

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ERIC GILL (1882-1940) is one of the major erotic artists of the 20th century, and one of the major British 20th century artists. Gill is still a controversial figure in art. His personal life was notorious for its sexual relationships. Wyndham Lewis called his work 'excellent and ribald', while influential critic Roger Fry, one of Gill's supporters, said Gill's sculpture was 'the outcome of a desire to express something felt in the adventure of human life.'

For Eric Gill, eroticism was a vital part of life, and should be openly displayed in art. He moved from nudes to Madonnas easily and simply: sex and religion were part of the same mystery for him.

Eric Gill built eroticism into most of his depictions of people. 'Quite mad on sex', Gill wrote of Jacob Epstein, the sculptor, in his diary (December 9, 1913). The statement might equally apply to Gill. He thought of sex a lot.

Fully illustrated, featuring many lesser-known works by Eric Gill.

EXTRACT FROM CHAPTER FOUR

Eric Gill set up mirrors to watch his love-making, collected erotic photographs and books, drew genitals in detail (his own and other people's), wrote up his sexual exploits in his diary, copied out extracts from Havelock Ellis, studied animals mating and recorded their activities in his diary, spent a day photographing himself and the Epstein family nude, played tennis in the nude, made a good deal of erotic art, and spied on people having sex (as in Hyde Park). Robert Speaight said Gill was 'prey to an obsessive curiosity'.

Despite his self-confessed obsession with sex and human bodies, some critics remarked that Eric Gill was also curiously reticent about it, perhaps due to his Victorian and Nonconformist childhood; he was also seen as being ignorant of women's bodies. Gill's ethical view of sex in art is essentially that of the pornographer: people have sex, so why not show them fucking in images and texts? It's natural, so it's natural people should depict tupping in art. Gill wrote in his Autobiography: '...even pornographic photographs are generally photographs of things very good in themselves. I mean: what's wrong with a naked girl that you shouldn't look at the photograph of one? What's wrong with sexual intercourse that it should be considered damnable?' Eric Gill loses himself here in the art versus pornography debate, an extremely complex area where the relations between art and life, between politics and the body, between things-in-themselves and representations of them are complicated by all manner of issues.

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