

## Solar Appreciation Day: Celebrating the Power of the Sun

Solar Appreciation Day recognises the growing role of solar energy in building a cleaner and more sustainable future. Observed to highlight the benefits of renewable power, the day encourages individuals, businesses and governments to adopt solar solutions. As climate concerns intensify and energy costs fluctuate, solar power offers an efficient, low-emission alternative that reduces dependence on fossil fuels. From rooftop panels to large-scale solar farms, technological advancements have made solar energy more accessible and affordable. The occasion also underscores the importance of innovation, policy support and public awareness in accelerating the global transition towards green energy.



## #SPECIMEN

# A Cruel People

The Tragic Story of Ota Benga: When a Human Was Put in a Cage



In the early 1900s, as the world grappled with colonialism, racism, and pseudo-scientific ideologies, a young Congolese man named Ota Benga became the subject of one of the most horrifying examples of dehumanization in modern history. His life, marked by violence, captivity, and exploitation, serves as a haunting reminder of the dangers of scientific racism and the complete disregard for human dignity.

### Who Was Ota Benga?

Ota Benga was a member of the Mbuti people, one of the Indigenous pygmy groups of the Congo. In 1904, at the age of around 23, he was captured by American businessmen and explorer Samuel Phillips Verrier, who had been commissioned to bring African 'specimens' for the St. Louis World's Fair.

Benga's wife and children had already been killed during colonial violence. Liked by the Force Publique, a brutal military force operating under Belgian King Leopold II's regime in the Congo Free State, a regime responsible for mass atrocities and millions of deaths.

### Displayed at the St. Louis World's Fair

At the World's Fair, Benga and several other Africans were displayed in mock native villages for visitors to gawk at. Benga, like many others, was treated not as a human being, but as a curiosity, an object for public amusement and pseudo-anthropological study.

Despite his suffering, Benga reportedly tried to assert his dignity, sometimes mocking the white visitors or challenging their assumptions. But his resistance could do little to protect him from what came next.

### The Bronx Zoo Incident

In 1906, after returning briefly to Africa and then coming back to the U.S., Ota Benga found himself under the care of William Temple Hornaday, the director of the Bronx Zoo in New York City. Hornaday was a respected zoologist, but he also held deeply racist views that were common among white elites at the time.

Shockingly, Hornaday placed Ota Benga in the zoo's Monkey House, alongside an orangutan, parrots, and other animals. A sign outside his cage read: "The African Pygmy, 'Ota Benga.' Age, 23

years. Height, 4 feet 11 inches. Weight, 100 pounds. Brought from the Kasai River, Congo Free State, South Central Africa, by Dr. Samuel P. Verrier."

Crowds came in the thousands to see him. Some mocked him. Others threw things. He was caged. A human being reduced to an exhibit. Even in that era, some black ministers and newspapers condemned the act, calling it inhumane and racist. The public outcry eventually forced the zoo to release Benga from the exhibit, but the damage had already been done.

### A Life Cut Short

After being freed from the zoo, Ota Benga was placed in the care of Black institutions and lived for some time in Lynchburg, Virginia. He attempted to build a life, learned English, had his teeth fixed (which had been filed to sharp points as part of his cultural tradition), and hoped to return to Africa. But the trauma he endured, the isolation, and the loss of his homeland took a devastating toll. In 1916, at the age of 32, Ota Benga died by suicide. He shot himself in the heart with a borrowed pistol.

### The Legacy and Lessons

Ota Benga's story is more than just a bizarre footnote in history. It's a profound indictment of scientific racism, colonial arrogance, and dehumanization. His life, and the way it was exploited, reflects how institutions that were seen as enlightened (zoos, museums, universities) were complicit in treating people from colonized nations as less than human.

In modern times, his story has been revisited in books, films, and academic work as a way to confront the disturbing legacies of white supremacy and to ensure that such atrocities are never forgotten.

### Final Thoughts

Ota Benga was not a curiosity. He was a man with a name, a past, a family, and a culture. His tragic life is a stark reminder of what happens when societies strip individuals of their humanity in the name of science, entertainment, or profit.

Remembering Ota Benga is not just about mourning a horrific injustice. It's about facing uncomfortable truths, acknowledging historical wrongs, and recommitting to the dignity and worth of all human beings.



Sunita Devi and Jacob Epstein, c. 1925.

# Sculptor Jacob Epstein's Muse

## • Bulbul Joshi

In 1925, British newspapers announced that the eminent sculptor Jacob Epstein had found a new muse. She was neither English nor European. *The Daily Record* described her as beautiful 'in a way that perhaps only women of the east can be beautiful', praising the inscrutability of her expression, the 'symmetry of her form and dignity of mien.' Her name was Sunita Devi and she had arrived from India with a small child, an older sister and a past that has now blurred into legend.

Sunita posed for many of Epstein's ambitious works. She became the face of his celebrated *Madonna and Child* as well as *Lucifer*, and the subject of several of his drawings and sculptures. Other women competed for Epstein's attention too, but, if British newspapers are to be believed, it was Sunita who was the most intriguing and enigmatic of them all. By the time

she disappeared from London six years later, she had left behind a trail of rumours and sculptures that bear her features.

Almost everything known about Sunita before her arrival in England comes second-hand from Epstein's biographers and from newspaper eager for sensation. She was born in 1897, according to some accounts, and was said to be a Kashmiri Muslim. Her original name was Amina or Armina. She lived in Bombay with her husband Ahmed Peerbhoy, heir to one of the city's most influential business families. Adamjee Peerbhoy, the family patriarch, had risen from poverty to build cotton mills and tanneries and serve as sheriff of Bombay and president of the Muslim League.

She left behind the comforts of her life in Bombay to move to England.

### London acts

Sunita arrived in London with her young son Enver or Anvar, no more than four years old, and her older sister, Miriam Patel. One newspaper claimed that both women had 'abandoned' their husbands in India, unwilling to submit to the lives prescribed for them. Miriam shed her name and became Anita Devi. Amina was now Sunita Devi.

Another version of events suggests the sisters were entranced by Anna Pavlova when the celebrated dancer visited India in 1922. Though Pavlova claimed to be disappointed by Indian dance forms, which she felt required 'urgent revival', she was deeply impressed by the Ajanta frescoes. In 1923, Pavlova staged two acclaimed collaborations with Uday Shankar in London: *Krishna Radha* and *Oriental Impressions*.

Whether the sisters performed in these productions is difficult to establish, but they did join Pavlova's company in 1925. In one account, provided by Sunita to a newspaper, the sisters were spotted in a London restaurant by someone, perhaps a talent scout from Anna Pavlova's company. Around this time, the sisters ran a stall at the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley Park, where they sold 'Oriental' artefacts, including ivory objects, Benares brassware, trinkets, jewellery and even items described as erotica.

White Anita continued as a dancer, performing small acts in productions such as *All's Button and Slaves of a Caravan*. Sunita's career took a very different turn. Soon, glowing reports appeared of 'Princess Sunita's' occult abilities and her supposed gifts as a psychic. Advertising her programme with the slogan 'You ask-I tell', Sunita reportedly evoked laughter and admiration in equal measure with her uncanny responses to audience questions.

The sisters joined a troupe of magicians known as the Maysculine Brothers. Sunita also appeared in the Maskelyne brothers' magic act. One of her feats involved lying submerged in a water tank on stage for over five minutes, apparently breathing through a transparent, nearly invisible hose.

The sisters entered Jacob Epstein's orbit in 1925, shortly after the British Empire Exhibition. One account suggests that the painter Matthew Smith (1879-1959) first encountered Sunita and made her his muse. One of his best-known paintings of her is *A Red Sari: Sunita Reclining*. A few months

## #ART



later, she began modelling for Epstein, as did her son and, on occasions, her sister. Epstein described her as one of those 'divinely discontented models,' possessing an 'exotic, undefinable quality.'

### Predatory figure

Sunita, Anita and Enver even became members of Epstein's household, sharing his Bloomsbury home with his sculptor wife Margaret. This arrangement was initiated by Margaret herself, largely as Epstein's biographers suggest, to counter the influence of his younger mistress and model, Kathleen Garman. In one lurid episode, Margaret even shot Garman, and it was only Epstein's intervention that prevented the matter from being taken to the police.

Epstein was already renowned as a radical, unconventional and controversial figure. Born in New York in 1880 to Jewish parents from eastern Europe, he trained as an artist in Paris before settling in London. He drew profound inspiration from the immense Egyptian and Assyrian sculptures in the British Museum.

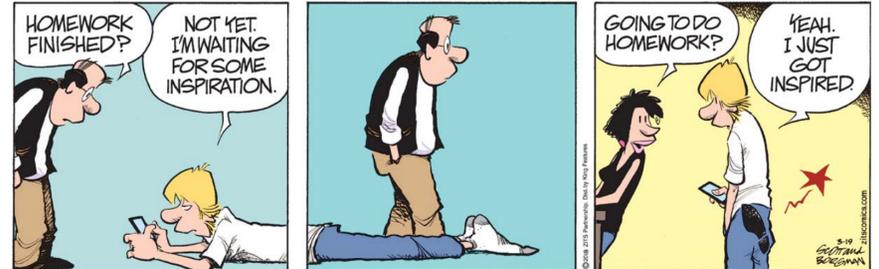
His career was marked early by scandal. In 1908, his monument to Oscar Wilde at Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris provoked outrage, and his later sculptures for the British Medical Association building on the Strand attracted both admiration and condemnation for

## BABY BLUES



By Rick Kirkman & Jerry Scott

## ZITS



By Jerry Scott & Jim Borgman

admiration and condemnation for



Madonna and Child.

*Goddess*. In 1931, Sunita became inexplicably entangled in contemporary political currents. The first Round Table Conference (November 1930-January 1931) convened in London to discuss the Simon Commission's recommendations, with delegates from princely states, minority groups and the British government. The Congress, whose key leaders were imprisoned during the Mahatma Gandhi-led Civil Disobedience Movement, boycotted the conference. Sunita was speculated to be a Congress spy.

Soon afterwards, Buckle writes, Sunita 'disappeared' with the secretary of a maharajah into the interior of India. Nothing further was heard of her until news arrived of her sudden and mysterious death in 1932, widely attributed to 'intestinal inflammation.' Newspapers reported that Sunita had foretold her own end, telling friends in London: "I am going to my death. I know it is so."

Those who attended her funeral struggled to reconcile the name Amina Peerbhoy with the woman known to the world as Sunita Devi. Anita returned to India upon

hearing of Sunita's death, but went back to London. Enver remained in the UK, working as a manager for a company. As for Epstein, he went on to earn the admiration of a new generation of artists. On the centenary of his birth, Henry Moore paid tribute: "He bore the brunt of public criticism, in fact, he took the brick bats and made the way easier for sculptors like me coming after him." Epstein's *Madonna and Child*, first shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, is now installed at Riverside Church. His study busts of Sunita and Enver are held at the New Art Gallery Walsall, England. *Lucifer*, an 11-foot sculpture inspired by Milton's *Paradise Lost*, is housed in the Birmingham Museum. Sunita clearly relished the attention she received as Epstein's muse. In 1930, she remarked of him: "He is a wonderful man. He is kind to everybody and would not hurt a fly. Whatever people think of his art, they are always impressed by the wonderful sense of life one gets from his work."

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Jacob Epstein with a bust of Sunita Devi.

## #INFAMOUS

# The Mona Lisa Heist

Ironically, Mona Lisa became a cultural icon after it was stolen from the Louvre Museum in Paris in 1911, a heist that made headlines around the world.

The Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci is one of the most famous paintings in history, but its rise to global fame wasn't due to its artistry alone. Ironically, the painting became a cultural icon after it was stolen from the Louvre Museum in Paris in 1911, a heist that made headlines around the world. Even more ironically, Leonardo himself never referred to the painting by the name Mona Lisa, and it was far from the world-famous masterpiece we know today during his lifetime. It was the dramatic theft and subsequent media frenzy that transformed the Mona Lisa into the globally recognized painting it is today.

### Leonardo's Unnamed Masterpiece

Leonardo da Vinci painted the Mona Lisa between 1503 and 1506, although some believe that it took him even longer to finish. The painting is thought to depict Lisa Gherardini, the wife of a wealthy Florentine merchant, Francesco del Giocondo, which is why it is also called *La Gioconda* in Italian. Despite its exquisite quality, the Mona Lisa was not widely acknowledged as one of Leonardo's greatest works during his life. In fact, Leonardo never named the painting and, for much of its early history, it was just another portrait hanging in royal collection.

After being acquired by King Francis I of France in the 16th century, the painting was eventually moved to the Louvre Museum in Paris. For centuries, it remained one of many art pieces in the Louvre and wasn't particularly famous until the early 20th century.

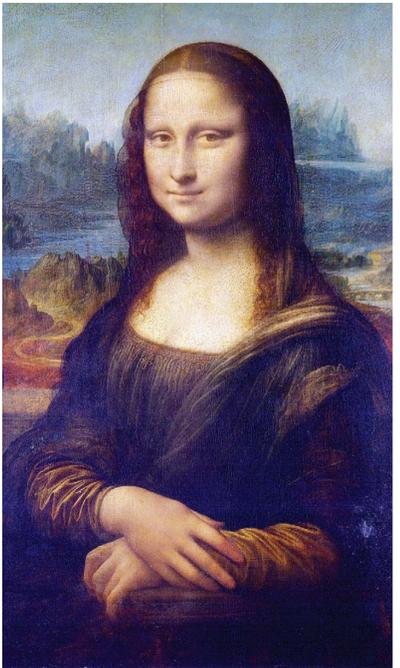
### The Theft: A Crime That Changed Everything

On August 21, 1911, the Mona Lisa was stolen from the Louvre by Vincenzo Peruggia, an Italian handyman and painter who had worked at the museum. Peruggia believed that the painting belonged in Italy as he felt it had been wrongly taken by France during Napoleon's conquests. He planned to return the Mona Lisa to Italy and staged a theft to make this happen.

### A Worldwide Sensation

At first, authorities were baffled by the disappearance. There were no signs of forced entry, and the museum had been locked down for hours. The theft became a media sensation, and newspapers around the world covered the story in great detail. For the first time, the Mona Lisa was thrust into the global spotlight.

Despite the painting's high profile in the Louvre, it had never been considered the most famous or valuable work in the museum. But now, with the Mona Lisa missing, people became obsessed with the mystery of its disappearance. The public became fascinated with the painting itself, and its notoriety soared. The painting had become more than just a work of art, it had become a symbol



of intrigue, mystery, and cultural loss.

### The Recovery: The Painting's Return to France

For more than two years, Peruggia kept the Mona Lisa hidden in his apartment in Florence, Italy. He tried to sell the painting to various art dealers, but no one was fooled. In 1913, Peruggia attempted to sell the painting to Giovanni Poggi, an Italian art dealer, who recognized the painting immediately. Poggi contacted the authorities, and after an investigation, Peruggia was arrested. The painting was returned to the Louvre in 1914, just in time for the start of World War I.

The Mona Lisa's return was a major event, but the painting's fame had already skyrocketed during its absence. The story of its theft had turned the artwork into an international sensation, and its cultural value was now beyond measure. The Mona Lisa was no longer just a beloved portrait, it had become a symbol of art crime, mystery, and national pride.

### Post-Theft Fame: From Mystery to Icon

After its recovery, the Mona Lisa was placed back on display at the Louvre, but its status had forever changed. The painting had been transformed from a relatively unknown work of art into the most famous painting

in the world, thanks to the sensational media coverage of its theft. The media frenzy surrounding its disappearance made it one of the most talked-about paintings in history, and the Mona Lisa's newfound fame has only grown since.

Today, the Mona Lisa is one of the most visited artworks in the world, attracting millions of visitors to the Louvre every year. Its fame continues to grow, and it remains a symbol of the power of art, mystery, and intrigue. What was once a relatively unknown painting has become an icon, its legacy cemented not only by its artistic qualities but by the incredible story of its theft.

### The Irony: Fame Through Theft

The most ironic part of the Mona Lisa's fame is that Leonardo da Vinci never viewed it as the masterpiece it would later become. He never named it, and it wasn't widely celebrated during his lifetime. It was the painting's theft, its time in hiding, and the intense media coverage that transformed it from a lesser-known work into a global symbol of art.

Today, the Mona Lisa's fame is inseparable from the story of its theft and recovery, making its legacy a fascinating example of how art's value can sometimes be shaped as much by the stories surrounding it as by its intrinsic qualities.



## THE WALL

