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Giacometti, Alberto, *La clairière (Composition avec neuf figures)*, 1950, Bronzeguss, 59,5 x 65,5 x 52 cm (Objektmass), Kunst Museum Winterthur. Beim Stadthaus

Documentation level



Name

Giacometti, Alberto

Dates of birth and death

* 10.10.1901 Borgonovo, † 11.1.1966 Coire

Municipality of origin (CH)

Stampa (GR)

Nationality

CH

Brief biography

Sculpteur, peintre et dessinateur actif à Paris. D'abord surréaliste, puis adepte d'une figuration liée à la phénoménologie et à l'existentialisme

Fields of activity

sculpture, peinture, dessin, graphique, gravure, lithographie, objet, modelage, sculpture en bronze

Lexicon article

Son of the painter [Giovanni Giacometti](#) and Annetta Stampa, who would remain a strong presence throughout his life, Alberto displayed an exceptional gift for drawing from childhood. During several sojourns in Italy during 1920–21, he discovered Tintoretto, Giotto, ancient ruins – notably at Paestum and Pompeii – as well as mosaics and the Baroque. Giacometti's last trip was overshadowed by the death of his travelling companion, and the experience was to impress itself on his work. Arriving in Paris in 1922, he studied sculpture under Antoine Bourdelle at the Académie de la Grande-Chaumière until 1927, all the while visiting the Louvre assiduously. In 1927, he established himself in a little studio, which he was never to leave. He met Alexander Archipenko, Henri Laurens and Jacques Lipchitz, and exhibited his first personal works, such as the *Torso* or the

Femme-cuillère (Spoon Woman) at the Salon des Tuileries, from 1925 to 1928. To earn their living, Alberto and his brother [Diego](#) took on decorative commissions from Jean-Michel Frank and Elsa Schiaparelli, as well as creating jewellery. An exhibition of “plaques” at the Galerie Jeanne Bucher in 1928 marked Giacometti's first success. André Masson took an interest in him and introduced him to Michel Leiris, who in 1929 wrote the first major article about his work in *Documents*, a journal founded by Georges Bataille. The dealer Pierre Loeb offered Giacometti a contract. The young artist exhibited with Joan Miró and [Jean Arp](#). Giacometti's *Boule suspendue* (Suspended Ball) of 1930, which was admired by Salvador Dalí and André Breton, gave him an entrée to the Surrealist group, in whose activities he was to participate until the end of 1934. This was an intensive period marked by Giacometti's first solo exhibition, in 1932, at the Galerie Pierre Colle.

Various factors, including his political engagement, which was similar to that of the Communist writer Louis Aragon, made Giacometti doubt the artistic status of the “objects” he created. This doubt was accentuated by the death of his father in June 1933, which affected him very deeply. He construed this loss as an injunction to pick up the thread of his past work, and as a result distanced himself from the Surrealists and returned to studying from nature in 1935. Although the artist lost friends and dealers, he did become close to [Balthus](#), Francis Gruber, André Derain and Pierre Tal Coat, who like him were experimenting with the figurative. Nevertheless, not even a barren spell lasting until 1947 and an accident in 1938 were enough to leave him embittered. Far from it: in renewing his art, he attracted the attention of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir in 1939. Between 1941 and 1945, Giacometti was one of the major figures in the circle surrounding Albert Skira, Jean Starobinski and Balthus in Geneva. In 1943, Giacometti met Annette Arm. Joining him in Paris in 1946, she became his wife in 1949.

The war and its aftermath, as well as another brutal death among his entourage, rekindled the artist's existential angst, which he expressed at first by the reduction, then the attenuation of the figures in his work. In 1948, Pierre Matisse organised a memorable exhibition for him in New York; the catalogue featured a foreword by Sartre and the famous “Letter to Pierre Matisse.” Aimé Maeght commissioned Giacometti's first bronzes, and having become his dealer, exhibited his work in Paris in 1951. The exhibition at the Kunsthalle in Basel in 1950 was the first of a long series of retrospectives held all over the world. Samuel Beckett and Jean Genet became interested in his work. He exhibited his *Femmes de Venise* (Women of Venice) in the French Pavilion at the Biennale in 1956, and in 1959 was commissioned to produce a group sculpture, which was

never realised, for the Chase Manhattan Plaza, New York. He was awarded several accolades: the Guggenheim Prize for Painting (1958), the Carnegie Prize for Sculpture (1961) and – most importantly – the Grand Prize for Sculpture at the Venice Biennale in 1962. After Ernst Scheidegger, who had published an anthology of the artist's texts and photographs in 1958, Jacques Dupin dedicated a monograph to him – the first – in 1962. In 1965, the artist went to New York for an exhibition of his works at the Museum of Modern Art. Giacometti, who had undergone an operation for stomach cancer in 1963, died in Chur in 1966.

Alberto Giacometti's œuvre can be divided into two distinct periods. Until 1935, it can be seen in the context of the history of the major trends of the European avant-garde (Cubism, Surrealism and Abstraction). Once again figurative after 1935, it was to rejuvenate the very essence of artistic representation.

Giacometti's *Torso* (1925) should be understood in the spirit of the post-Cubist movement. It was the first work in which the artist abandoned the Bourdellian principle of analysing the figure in terms of facets, opting instead to construct a synthetic form inspired by Constantin Brancusi. This work was followed by sculptures influenced by African statuary (*Femme-cuillère*, 1926) and the art of the Cyclades (*Tête qui regarde*, Gazing Head, 1928–29). In the scarcely incised "plaques," which he produced in 1927–28, all space has been abolished. From 1930 to 1935, Giacometti, integrated in the Surrealist group, created sculptures that Dalí called "symbolically functioning objects." From *Boule suspendue* (1930), the first of his "cages," to *Fleur en danger* (Flower in Danger, 1933), the last of the horizontal sculptures – the "mobile and mute objects," removed from real space and liberated of their pedestals – these works embody, in a place without scale, a clash of opposing principles and profound psychological forces: love and death, man and woman, attraction and repulsion. Several of them are made to be put into motion by hand. The sculptor explores the major themes of Surrealism – from the praying mantis of *La cage* (1930–31) to the gouged eye of *Pointe à l'œil* (Point to the Eye, 1932) and the sacrifice of *L'Heure des traces* (The Hour of Traces, 1932). Similarly to Bataille, he created ambivalent forms, such as the landscape that turns out to be a reclining head (*La vie continue*, Life goes on, 1932).

The Surrealist Giacometti was above all a sculptor: his "objects" within transparent structures inherited from Picasso should be placed in the context of Jean Arp and Alexander Calder's experiments. While Giacometti emphasised in the *Minotaure* (December 1933) that the *Palais à quatre heures du matin* (Palace at Four in the Morning, 1932) was the result of an unconscious development, at any given moment concentrating entire swathes of the artist's life under the astonished gaze of its creator, this work is also a remarkable sculpted equivalent of the squares painted by Giorgio De Chirico. However, from *Femme qui marche* (Walking Woman, 1932) to *L'objet invisible* (The Invisible Object, 1934), a new preoccupation becomes apparent: the reintroduction of the figure and the possibility of creating a version consisting of summarised abstract forms, inspired by Egyptian art, that were "true in sculpture," and bodies that "attracted (him) in reality." After some more or less abstract experimentation, such as *Cube* (1934), Giacometti returned to studying from nature in 1935.

By giving priority to the analysis of his vision as the basis of representation, Giacometti disregarded not only the tradition of Auguste Rodin – who considered the statue as an object in its own right – but also Picasso's interpretation of reality, in order to come closer to "the small sensation" studied by Paul Cézanne. The artist abandoned the certainties of construction and objectivity on which his surrealist work had been based. Until about 1946, he practised modelling in the impressionist manner and silhouetted drawings with double features to substitute what he saw. Retaining a detached view, which reduced the figures, the artist depicted objects in situ (*Pomme sur le buffet*, Apple on a Sideboard, 1937), anticipating the phenomenological analyses of Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In order to prevent the fragmentation of the viewer's gaze and preserve the unity of presentation, Giacometti used a fictitious frame – which would later become a simple halo – to delimit the space around the painted figure (*La mère de l'artiste*, The Artist's Mother, 1937), and positioned what had become minuscule sculptured figures on oversized plinths, to be perceived as an overall vision. At the end of 1945, he had a defining experience while watching a newsreel at the cinema in Montparnasse, and understood, observing his fellow viewers, that depth is the dimension of human experience par excellence. After 1946, he succeeded in enlarging his sculptures while nonetheless preserving the integrity of the space thanks to the attenuated forms characteristic of his work.

In an international artistic context dominated by abstraction, with his figures torn from the void, Giacometti proposed a new image of man and the relationships he maintains with his contemporaries and the world. Sartre and Beauvoir brought his œuvre closer to existentialism. Jean Genet posed for Giacometti from 1954, and drafted *L'atelier d'Alberto Giacometti* (Alberto Giacometti's Studio) for him. Besides expressionist sculptures such as *Tête sur tige* (Head on a Rod, 1947) or *Le nez* (The Nose, 1947), the *Femmes debout* (Standing Women) of 1946 and *L'homme qui marche* (Walking Man) of 1947, concise images halfway between sketches and blueprints enable the artist to realise compositions entitled *Places* (Squares). From now on, Giacometti's phenomenological studies are linked to fixed structures (cages, carts, pedestals, tables) that are part of the history of sculpture and lend them a universal value. This applies to the sculptor's *Quatre figurines sur base* (Four Figurines on a Plinth), *La cage* (The Cage), and *Le chariot* (The Cart, 1950). From now on, Giacometti's work was to unfold on several levels, encompassing visual studies, such as the many, incessantly repeated portraits of Annette, Diego, Genet, Yanaihara – a Japanese professor who started to pose for him in 1956 – and, from 1960, of Caroline; the thematic series, such as the *Femmes de Venise* (Women of Venice); and the compositions, which as of *La place* (The Square, 1948–49, Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kunstmuseum) explore the possible relations of three sculptural themes: the walking man, the standing woman, and the head. In parallel, the œuvre of the draughtsman and lithograph culminated in *Paris sans fin* (Paris without End), published posthumously in 1969.

Giacometti conceived artistic creation as an analysis of phenomena and forms above a fundamental bedrock of anthropological experience. Nothing that had crossed the

centuries in terms of the depiction of man – since the talisman or the painted skull – was alien to him. He intended to rediscover everything by coming face to face with the model. The series of busts of Annette in 1962, the busts of Diego and the photographer Eli Lotar, which Giacometti completed at the end of his life, bear witness to this. To delineate for ever the memory of a face subjected to the most intense scrutiny, to offer the viewer the keys to a unique experience, allowing the observer to renew that vision – this is how Giacometti's œuvre appears to posterity. European figurative artists (Balthus, Francis Bacon) as well as American abstract artists (Barnett Newman, Donald Judd) and the post-modernist artist Robert Smithson have all paid homage to his œuvre, which defies classification.

Works: Kunstmuseum Basel, Kupferstichkabinett; Humlebaek, Louisiana Museum; Londres, Tate Gallery; New York, Museum of Modern Art; Paris, Musée national d'art moderne; Saint-Paul de Vence, Fondation Maeght; Washington, Smithsonian Institution, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden; Kunsthaus Zürich, Alberto Giacometti-Stiftung.

Sources: Kunsthaus Zürich, Giacometti-Stiftung; Paris, Association Alberto et Annette Giacometti.

Thierry Dufrière, 1998, updated 2015
Translation: Toby Alleyne-Gee

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