

The Force of Giacometti—painter, sculptor

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Alberto Giacometti, Greatest Sculptor of the Twentieth Century at the Musée Des Beaux-Arts, Montreal, June 18 to October 18, 1998

While he may not be as widely known as some of his more celebrated contemporaries, Alberto Giacometti (1901-66) is generally regarded as one of the most important artists of the twentieth century. This exhibition of his work affords an opportunity to consider the significance of this artist and to introduce many to one of the most intriguing creative geniuses of our time. It is an extensive exhibit comprising 73 sculptures, 60 drawings and 36 paintings and prints from private collections and from the Fondation Maeght, which holds perhaps the most important collection of works assembled during the artist's lifetime.

While many may be familiar with his elongated sculptures of rough worked figures and busts, it could be argued that Giacometti's paintings and drawings are at least as successful as his sculpture. Certainly this reviewer was most struck by this work in the exhibit; dense and haunting in the gaze of the subjects, at once simple and deeply disturbing.

Giovanni Alberto Giacometti was born in Borgonovo, Switzerland near the Italian border, the eldest child of a painter. He was brought up in relative comfort, his father a successful artist himself. By the age of ten Alberto already had great confidence in his ability as a draftsman and this was reinforced when he began sculpting at the age of fourteen. In his words: "I had the feeling that there was no obstruction at all between seeing and doing. I dominated my vision, it was paradise; and that lasted until I was about eighteen or nineteen, when I got the feeling that I could no longer do anything at all."

Whatever the roots of this crisis, it never truly left him, and he was chronically afflicted with an anxiety over the inability he felt to capture reality in his work. The problem was not a technical one since he truly had mastered the skills of painting and sculpting from life at an early age. His obsession was "to find the real through external appearances"; to reconcile the contradiction between things as they appear and as they actually are, a struggle which clearly has significance beyond the problems of art as such.

In his twenties, Giacometti moved to Paris to continue his studies. Immersed in the cultural ferment of that city, he eventually made it his home. Here he studied with the famed sculptor Bourdelle, drawing and sculpting from live models. In 1925 he gave up working from life and in a matter of a few years had achieved a measure of fame, exhibiting with such well-known artists as Joan Miré and Hans Arp. He also collaborated with his most favored subject, his brother Diego, in the construction of

furniture and art objects.

In the tumultuous years of the late 1920s, he was drawn to the Surrealist group which was led by the poet-thinker André Breton. His work during this period, as with that of all the Surrealists, was guided by the aim of revolutionizing art and perception and through that, the political and social status quo. While this association lasted only about four years, it was a significant episode in his development.

The Surrealists rejected many of the artistic conventions of the past, while seeking to preserve their best traditions. They sought to demonstrate, as Breton said, "that no limits can be set to human imagination." This led them to less conscious sources such as dreams and "automatic writing" (writing carried out supposedly free of conscious control) in a search for imagery that offered a more direct means of knowing reality. The influence of these ideas is evident in his writings at that time for publications such as *Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution*.

From themes expressed through portrayal of the human figure, Giacometti began to use objects as representations of more abstract concepts. In works such as "Composition (Man and Woman)" (1926), included in the Montreal exhibit, he deals in abstraction with tormented relations, between men and women in particular. While it has been said that his attitude toward women was problematic, treating them as passive objects in his work, this obsessive interest manifested what was for him an inescapable pursuit of personal truth. Many of these works involve a figure or a dismembered appendage ensnared or precariously suspended. In this particular work, made of bronze, there are no such recognizable forms, but a dense sort of cage straining to hold the tumbling shapes constrained within. The evocation is of sensual danger and a desire for liberation.

Critics often downplay his association with the surrealists in favor of his later connections to the existentialists of the postwar period. This reflects the critics' preferences and some of the difficulties of the twentieth century. The victory of fascism in Germany and Stalinism in the USSR contributed to both the demise of the Surrealist movement and to Giacometti's great disillusionment. In 1932 he briefly left the Surrealist group, which was led by André Breton, along with Aragon and others, but for somewhat different reasons than the latter who threw their lot in with Stalinism. While others may have had political or ideological differences with Breton, Giacometti's interests in the mysteries of the figure lured him back to such familiar subjects, putting him at odds with the Surrealists. The disappointment he undoubtedly accumulated in this period left him wary of any kind of socially organizing principles in politics or art. He came to repudiate this

phase in his life, but it remains one of his most productive and fertile periods.

However one judges their theories, the liberating themes of the Surrealists aligned them with the struggle for human emancipation and against the growing threat of fascism. Their inability to reach a broader audience during this time is bound up with far-reaching social questions, above all, with the great defeat of socially progressive movements at the hands of Stalinism and fascism. The Surrealists' imprint, however, was indelible on trends in both art and thought. It should be noted that Giacometti's imagery was perhaps at its most vigorous during this time.

In 1934 he began working from a model again, much to the dismay of the Surrealists whom he had rejoined. The Surrealist group then expelled him for this diversion, which they regarded as retrograde. For several years he worked almost exclusively from a model, but in the years that followed he alternated between working from life and from memory. Oddly, the elongated distortions and two-dimensionality characteristic of his sculptures were even more pronounced when he worked from a live model.

He left Paris following the German invasion in World War II and stayed in Switzerland until 1945. Prior to the war he had been struck by a car and the resulting disability exempted him from military service. During the war he suffered from greater anxiety than usual and over a seven-year period his sculptures became smaller and smaller, often measuring no more than an inch in height. While he was never able to fully explain this development, one might infer that his acute sensitivity to the tenuous nature of human existence was intensified by the horror of the war.

During his stay in Switzerland he met Annette Arn, whom he married in 1949. The previous year he had his first exhibition in 14 years at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York. During the 1950s he became acquainted with the existentialist Jean Paul Sartre and the writer Jean Genet. Notwithstanding his relationship with the Surrealists, he never became an avowed follower of any artistic school and his relations with other painters, particularly after the Second World War, were extremely limited. Toward the end of his life he had come to the conclusion that he did not need to venture beyond the confines of his studio, except to go occasionally to the cafe, to find the world.

For the majority of his later life Giacometti concentrated on depicting three themes: a portrait of a head, a woman standing, and a man walking. Each of his sculptures was the result of a frenzy of repeated creation and destruction. He would work a sculpture quickly and completely in a matter of hours, then take it apart and start over, again and again. The artist acknowledged that the final version was in no way an improvement over the first, but explained that he was compelled to repeat the process to deepen his own understanding of the problem posed before he could leave it. This seemingly arbitrary creative method reveals the intense demand he placed on himself to find truth in his work, a search he was never able to satisfy. It vividly preserved the spontaneity he cherished, which he felt allowed him to retain more of the honesty of his perceptions.

His attitude to his work strikes one deeply in all its contradictions. His pieces are so intimate, personal, even tender, that is, so thoroughly subjective; and at the same time, the figures

all seem to be viewed as though from a great distance, almost objectified. The surfaces of his sculpture have been described as decaying or exploding flesh, and the forms are always hauntingly distorted. Yet the subjects he chose were those he loved deeply. In some recognizable way he touches much that is fundamental in his sculptures, yet when examined concretely they seem so peculiar in their distorted perspective.

His painting and drawing reveal the same kind of intensity as his sculpture. While the entire figure in a painting may be sketched, the face is always densely reworked, redrawn or painted and rubbed out innumerable times on the same canvass. The view is always a simple frontal pose. The resulting effect is oddly haunting, the gaze of the subject impossibly heavy, engendering what seems an eternity of experience.

One particularly striking piece in the current exhibit is his "Portrait of a Woman" (1954), that of his wife Annette. It is not a large piece and is executed, like most of his painting, in somber hues of brown, black and gray; the only bright color—the red, blood-like flecks over the eyes and mouth. The figure is seated, facing the viewer, and confined in a heavy outlined frame, making her seem small and alone. The piece is a patchwork of lines and brushings which seem to constantly change except for those which direct us to the face of this woman, and draw us into the deep well of her eyes. It is a terrifying image and yet so filled with yearning and compassion. It is striking that Giacometti was able to focus his attention so acutely on a few simple subjects in his effort to comprehend the world, and through this work to reveal such complexity and depth.

While in many respects it is difficult to fathom the consuming struggles that were Giacometti's, there is at the same time something extraordinarily familiar. He felt and expressed the alienation and brutality of life, and at the same time, the yearning for another kind of existence. His genius is revealed in the forms, so personal and tortuous, which he chose. They expressed an understanding and sensitivity of the most profound sort, which has the power to speak at once to every viewer.



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