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JULY 2020
The London
Issue



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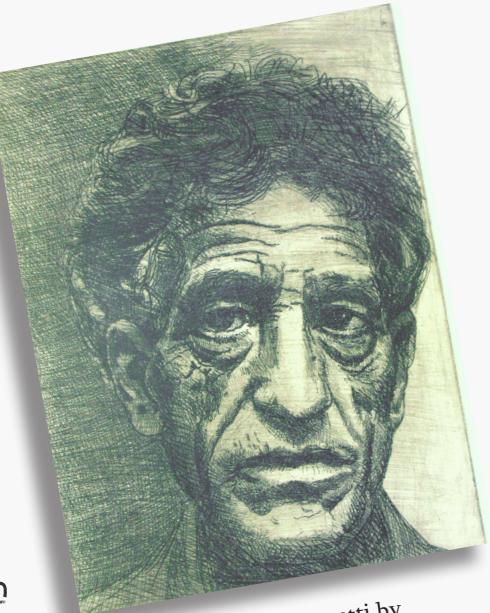


Giacometti poses in his studio in 1957. (Photo by Robert Doisneau)

EDGE OF MADNESS

The genius and torment of
Alberto Giacometti

BY Lara Feigel



An etching of Giacometti by Czech artist Jan Hladik.

In 1957, the writer Jean Genet described the studio of his friend Alberto Giacometti. It was "a milky swamp, a seething dump, a genuine ditch". There was plaster all over the floor and all over the face, hair and clothes of the sculptor; there were scraps of paper and lumps of paint on every available surface. And yet, "lo and behold the prodigious, magical powers of fermentation" – as if by magic, art grew from the rubbish; the plaster on the floor leapt up and took on permanence as a standing figure.

Of all the artists working in Paris in the 20th century, Giacometti was the great enthusiast of plaster. He worked away at it with his knife, often subjecting it to so much pressure that it finally crumbled away, forming the rubbish observed by Genet. When he was happy with it, he painted it. The original Women of Venice exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1956 were plaster figures with black and brown lines etched on to their faces and bodies, making them resemble

the women in his paintings.

Now the Giacometti Foundation in Paris has found new methods of restoring his plaster sculptures, many of which were damaged by being broken apart and covered in orange shellac to be cast in bronze. The Women of Venice, whose painted surfaces have been revealed, can once again be exhibited as they were at the Biennale, rather than as bronzes. And they will make their first appearance at a major retrospective opening at Tate Modern in London next month. This will be Giacometti's first Tate show since a retrospective in 1965, when the sculptor worked away in a basement, perfecting the works that he was never quite prepared to declare finished. It will be his first major exhibition in London for a decade.

Giacometti was born in a remote Swiss valley in 1901, the son of a successful, conventionally realist Swiss painter. He made his first sculpture of his brother Diego at the age of 13, and swiftly

A Master of Many Mediums...



Seated Man (1940)
Seated Man depicts his brother Diego, one of Giacometti's most frequent models



Self Portrait (1921)
Alberto Giacometti painted this self-portrait when he was 20

dedicated himself to art. In 1922 he moved to Paris, where he discovered surrealism, becoming a friend of André Breton. He stopped modelling from life and devoted himself to dreamlike visions, claiming in 1933 that for some years he had "only realized sculptures which have presented themselves to my mind in a finished state".

During the second world war, Giacometti returned to Switzerland. There he met Annette Arm, the ingenuous and adoring girl who seems to have decided almost immediately that she would share his life, and waited patiently for him to agree. Living in a hotel with her in Geneva, he sculpted smaller and smaller figures, claiming that they shrank against his will. Many were only the size of a finger.

After he returned to Paris in 1945, he had a vision that enabled him to break away from the miniature. Coming out of a cinema on to the Boulevard Montparnasse one day, he experienced a "complete transformation of reality" and understood that, until that moment, his vision of the world had been photographic, though in fact "reality was poles apart from the supposed objectivity of a film". Feeling as though he was entering the world for the first time, he trembled in terror as he surveyed the heads around him, which appeared isolated from space. When he entered a familiar cafe, the Brasserie Lipp, he found that time froze and he experienced the head of a waiter as a sculptural presence as he leaned towards him, "his eyes fixed in an absolute immobility".

Now he was able to enlarge his figures, but he found that as they became taller they lost heft, becoming inevitably more slender. It was thanks to these elongated, pointy figures with heavy feet that he swiftly rose to fame. He had some money now, though he insisted on living in his studio, refusing to indulge Annette in her desire for an ordinary home. He became acquainted with many of Paris's most exciting writers and artists. He drank in cafes with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, went for late night, largely silent walks with Samuel Beckett, and became a regular – though often rather critical – visitor at Picasso's studio.

Even at his most successful, this was not so much an artistic career as it was an endless, inevitably failed attempt to capture life that hovered on the verge of obsessive madness. "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better," wrote Beckett, perhaps

Annette IV (1962)



the friend whose vision of the world most closely resembled his own. "I do not work to create beautiful paintings or sculpture," Giacometti explained. "Art is only a means of seeing. No matter what I look at, it all surprises and eludes me, and I am not too sure of what I see." Though he was friends with Picasso, the two were never really comfortable with each other's work. Picasso criticized Giacometti for his lack of range, mocking his endless repetition, while Giacometti dismissed Picasso for creating mere decoration, unconvinced of the necessity of the underlying quest.

The attempt to reflect the reality of vision did not only result in the elongated figures for which he is most famous, and the Tate exhibition will demonstrate his versatility and range. There are more than 2,000 drawings and prints in the archive, and a handful of these will be on show, including some of the images he half-doodled into books. There will be lamps and vases, there will be paintings, and there will be the full range of sculptural forms – not all of which were thin.

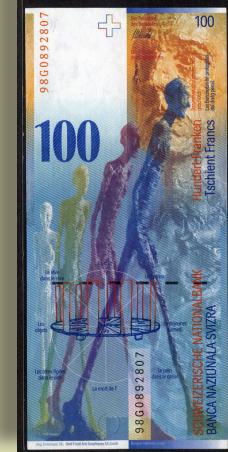
In his final years, he concentrated on painting, producing a series of insistent, rather frenzied portraits. In January 1966, he died from illnesses that his physicians saw as partly caused by years of fatigue.

But exhaustion is not the only mood. The intensity of his subjects' expressions, in the sculptures, and particularly in the paintings, creates the effect of a moment that is also timeless. This was something Giacometti had sought to capture since that vision outside the cinema after the war. And in his final busts of Annette, there is a resilience that the sculptor appears to forge with gratitude. He was trying "to succeed, just for once, in making a head like the head I see". He failed, of course, but these are failures that stand as cautions to those who seek to do more than strive.

L'homme Qui Marche II (The Man Who Walks) (1960)

He is an era-defining sculptor

Giacometti won the grand prize for sculpture at the 1962 Venice Biennale, bringing him worldwide fame. In 2010, his life-sized bronze sculpture of a man, L'Homme qui marche I became one of the most expensive sculptures to ever be sold at auction. The same work currently appears on the 100 Swiss Franc banknote.



Much of his work's focus is on the human head

The human head was an important motif in the artist's work throughout his life. Fascinated by the idea that one's life lies within our eyes, he concentrated on the sitter's gaze. "I cannot simultaneously see the eyes, the hands and the feet of a person standing two or three yards in front of me," he once said, "but the only part that I do look at entails a sensation of the existence of everything."

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Fail Better.

