

## Alberto Giacometti: A Biography

*Sylvie Felber*

Alberto Giacometti is born on October 10, 1901, in the village of Borgonovo near Stampa, in the valley of Bregaglia, Switzerland. He is the eldest of four children in a family with an artistic background. His mother, Annetta Stampa, comes from a local landed family, and his father, Giovanni Giacometti, is one of the leading exponents of Swiss Post-Impressionist painting. The well-known Swiss painter Cuno Amiet becomes his godfather. In this milieu, Giacometti's interest in art is nurtured from an early age: in 1915 he completes his first oil painting, in his father's studio, and just a year later he models portrait busts of his brothers.<sup>1</sup>

Giacometti soon realizes that he wants to become an artist. In 1919 he leaves his Protestant boarding school in Schiers, near Chur, and moves to Geneva to study fine art. In 1922 he goes to Paris, then the center of the art world, where he studies life drawing, as well as sculpture under Antoine Bourdelle, at the renowned Académie de la Grande Chaumière. He also pays frequent visits to the Louvre to sketch. In 1925 Giacometti has his first exhibition, at the Salon des Tuileries, with two works: a torso and a head of his brother Diego. In the same year, Diego follows his elder brother to Paris. He will model for Alberto for the rest of his life, and from 1929 on also acts as his assistant. In December 1926, Giacometti moves into a new studio at 46, rue Hippolyte-Maindron. The studio is cramped and humble, but he will work there to the last. In 1926 he exhibits *Le Couple* (1926) and a year later *Femme-cuillère* (1927) at the Salon des Tuileries. In 1929 the French writer, anthropologist, and critic Michel Leiris publishes an enthusiastic essay on Giacometti in the journal Documents. Despite his growing artistic reputation, fueled by his first exhibitions and by Leiris's essay, Giacometti's commercial success remains limited. Hence, in 1930 he begins making design objects – with Diego's assistance – for a range of clients, but chiefly for the interior decorator Jean-Michel Frank, who commissions vases, lamps, and sconces from him.

The sculpture *Boule suspendue* (1930), shown with works by Joan Miró and Jean (Hans) Arp in a group exhibition at the Galerie Pierre, marks a first turning point in Giacometti's career. Giacometti comes to the attention of the Surrealist circle around André Breton and Salvador Dalí, and a year later affiliates himself with the group. His first solo show, held in Paris in 1932 at the Galerie Pierre Colle, is favorably reviewed. In 1933, despite his success, he leaves Paris for several months and returns to Stampa to assist his mother in settling the estate of his recently deceased father.

From December 1934 to January 1935, the Julien Levy Gallery, in New York, stages Giacometti's first exhibition in the US, featuring twelve works by the artist. Giacometti begins to work from the model, creating portrait busts and studies of heads. This shift toward realism leads to a falling-out with the Surrealists and to Giacometti's exclusion from the group. In 1935 Giacometti meets the English artist Isabel Nicholas (later Rawsthorne) and creates two heads using her as a model (*Tête d'Isabel*, 1936 and ca. 1937–38). He also makes his first attempts at modeling entire figures and begins experimenting with perspective and perception. In 1936 Giacometti participates in the International Surrealist Exhibition, at the New Burlington Galleries, in London, and the New York Museum of Modern Art becomes the first museum to acquire a work (*Le Palais à 4 heures du matin*, 1932) by Giacometti. On October 19, 1938, Giacometti is hit by an automobile and suffers a foot injury that leaves him with a permanent limp.

Alberto and Diego Giacometti spend the first year of World War II in Paris, but in December 1941 Alberto moves to Geneva, where he remains until 1945, while Diego stays in Paris as custodian of his studio. The sculptures from this period (busts and figures) are tiny, with the exception of *Femme au chariot* (ca. 1943)<sup>2</sup>, showing a female figure modeled from the artist's memory of Isabel Rawsthorne. This work paves the way for the standing figures that Giacometti will make after the end of the war. In Geneva, Giacometti

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<sup>1</sup> *Alberto Giacometti: Pionier der Moderne / Modernist Pioneer*, ed. Franz Smola and Philippe Büttner, exh. cat. Leopold Museum (Vienna, 2014), p. 190. The catalogue includes a biography of the artist on pp. 190–95.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Catherine Grenier, *Alberto Giacometti* (Paris, 2017), pp. 168–69, and 176 for the work's title.

meets regularly with Albert Skira, publisher of the journal *Labyrinthe*, to which the artist contributes drawings and texts. In 1943 Giacometti meets Annette Arm, whom he marries six years later and who becomes one of his most important models.

In 1945 Giacometti returns to Paris. In the harsh conditions of the postwar period, art and design have a low priority, which poses a financial problem for the Giacometti brothers. A visit to the cinema in 1945 leads Giacometti to take a particular interest in the perception of the relationship between figure and space. From his deliberations on this subject, a new style emerges, with thin, elongated figures, set on oversized pedestals – necessary for conceptual reasons – that represent the space animated by the figure. In 1947 Giacometti creates a series of life-size female figures, together with his first male full-body figures, and works such as *Le Nez*. In 1948 he has a successful solo exhibition in New York at the Pierre Matisse Gallery. The catalogue includes Jean-Paul Sartre's introductory essay, "The Search for the Absolute." Giacometti has become a close friend of Sartre's and Simone de Beauvoir's, whom he has known since the late 1930s or early 1940s. In 1949 the Tate Gallery becomes the first European museum to buy a work (*L'Homme qui pointe*, 1947) by Giacometti.

In the mid-1950s Giacometti meets the Japanese philosophy professor Isaku Yanaihara, who models for him repeatedly between 1956 and 1961 and is the subject of numerous portraits and sculptures. At the same time, he continues to work with Diego and Annette, seeking to give his sculptures "a new volume and a hieratic monumentality."<sup>3</sup> In the 1950s Giacometti's fame grows, and he becomes fully established as an artist. A second exhibition at the Pierre Matisse Gallery, in 1950, is followed a year later by his first solo show at the Galerie Maeght in Paris. In 1955 Giacometti's international reputation manifests itself in retrospectives at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, in New York, and the Arts Council in London, and in three West German cities. In 1956 Giacometti exhibits *Femmes de Venise*, a series of large, slender female figures, in the French pavilion at the Venice Biennale. In the same year, Switzerland honors him with a retrospective at the Kunsthalle Bern. In 1958 he is awarded a prestigious commission to create a group of sculptures for the Chase Manhattan Plaza, in New York. Giacometti works on the project from 1958 to 1960, developing figures of a walking man and a standing woman, along with a monumental head. In the end, however, the project is abandoned.

At the end of the 1950s, Giacometti meets Yvonne Poiraudreau (better known as Caroline) in one of the Paris bars that he regularly frequents. She begins to model for him (e.g., for the painting *Caroline*, 1961).<sup>4</sup> In Paris, too, the young Francis Bacon introduces himself to Giacometti, at the latest in the early 1960s. In 1961, Giacometti designs the stage set – consisting of a single tree made of plaster – for a new production of Samuel Beckett's *En attendant Godot* at the Paris Odéon. In the same year, his fourth solo exhibition at the Galerie Maeght attracts much interest and is a resounding success. Giacometti's career reaches its peak. The organizers of the 1962 Venice Biennale invite him to exhibit a group of paintings and sculptures in the main pavilion, which earns him the State Prize for sculpture. In the fall of 1962 he travels to London, where a major retrospective is planned for 1965 at the Tate Gallery. There he meets Rawsthorne and Bacon again – Giacometti and Bacon greatly admire each other. Also in autumn 1962, preparations are under way for a retrospective at the Kunsthhaus Zürich, which opens that winter.

Giacometti's state of health gives cause for serious concern. A chain smoker, he has suffered from chronic bronchitis for years, and his lifestyle, with little sleep and a liberal consumption of coffee and alcohol, places an increasing strain on his constitution. In 1963, a diagnosis of cancer necessitates the removal of a large part of his stomach. A year later, his mother Annetta dies, aged ninety-two, in the bosom of her family in Stampa. Back in Paris, the photographer Eli Lotar becomes Giacometti's last model. The artist depicts him in works such as *Tête d'homme (Lotar I)* (1964–65) and *Eli Lotar III (assis)* (1965).

In 1964 the art collectors and dealers Marguerite and Aimé Maeght establish the Fondation Maeght on the Côte d'Azur, where sculptures by Giacometti are displayed in a central courtyard. In the same year, at the

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<sup>3</sup> Exh. cat Vienna 2014 (see note 1), p. 194.

<sup>4</sup> *The Women of Giacometti*, exh. cat. Pace Wildenstein, New York; Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas (New York, 2005), p. 21.

initiative of Ernst Beyeler and others, a group of Swiss collectors and patrons acquires the extensive Giacometti collection of the Pittsburgh industrialist G. David Thompson, which forms the basis for the creation of the Alberto Giacometti Foundation a year later.<sup>5</sup> In 1965 Giacometti travels again to London for the opening of his exhibition at the Tate Gallery. Further retrospectives take place at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, near Copenhagen, and at the New York Museum of Modern Art. For the latter exhibition, Giacometti travels for the first time in his life to the US. In the fall of 1965, the Swiss film director Ernst Scheidegger makes a documentary portraying the artist. In December 1965 Giacometti leaves Paris for the last time and returns to Stampa. The budding friendship between Bacon and Giacometti ends abruptly on January 11, 1966, when Giacometti dies of pericarditis at the Cantonal Hospital in Chur. In addition to the Giacometti Foundation, established in 1965 in Zurich, the Fondation Giacometti, based in Paris, is set up in 2003 from the estate of Annette, who dies in 1993.

Sources:

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- "Biography," Alberto Giacometti-Stiftung, [http://giacometti-stiftung.ch/index.php?sec=alberto\\_giacometti&page=biografie&language=en](http://giacometti-stiftung.ch/index.php?sec=alberto_giacometti&page=biografie&language=en) (accessed February 22, 2018).
- Biography of Alberto Giacometti in *Giacometti*, exh. cat. Le Fonds Hélène et Edouard Leclerc, Landerneau (Paris, 2015), pp. 214–15.
- Biography of Alberto Giacometti in *Giacometti. L'oeuvre ultime*, exh. cat. Galerie Lympia, espace culturel du Département des Alpes-Maritimes, Nice (Ghent, 2017), pp. 152–59.
- Catherine Grenier, *Alberto Giacometti* (Paris, 2017).
- Reinhold Hohl, *Giacometti: A Biography in Pictures* (Ostfildern, 1998).
- James Lord, *Giacometti: A Biography* (New York, 1985).

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<sup>5</sup> Grenier 2017 (see note 2), pp. 297–98.