

A black and white portrait of Alberto Giacometti, an elderly man with thick, textured hair, wearing a light-colored shirt, a dark tie, and a textured jacket. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a serious expression. In the background, a large, abstract sculpture of a face is visible, rendered in a similar textured style.

ALBERTO GIACOMETTI

Genius manifest in art

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Alberto Giacometti, 1901–1966

by Beat Stutzer*



Page I:

Alberto Giacometti in the courtyard
to his atelier in Paris, ca. 1958.

This portrait is featured on Switzerland's
100-franc banknote.

On this page:

Alberto Giacometti in his atelier in Paris,
ca. 1952.

Left:

Alberto Giacometti's
Self-portrait, ca. 1923.

Oil on canvas, on wood: 55 x 32 cm.

Kunsthau Zürich,

Alberto Giacometti Foundation.

Virtually every book or article on Alberto Giacometti includes some element of biography. Some publications illuminate Giacometti's life through the use of a special literary treatment, such as a biography in the form of a novel, a picture biography, a biography of his work and even an "Egyptian" biography¹. The many expressive photographs depicting Giacometti's art and Giacometti himself – at work, together with his wife Annetta, his brother Diego or his friends, during his time in Montparnasse, in his studio in Paris and in Bergell – are also of great biographical significance and afford us further insights into the artist's life².



Stampa, a small mountain village, was put on the modern art map thanks to Giovanni, Alberto, Diego and Augusto Giacometti, who attained national and international fame as artists. *Bergell – Land of the Giacometti*, *The Remote Valley of Art* and *The Stampa Phenomenon* are just some of the publications that have drawn attention to this special place. Indeed, Stampa at the bottom of the valley is untouched by the sun during the winter months, unlike the towns in nearby Engadine, which are

bathed in sunlight. Its bare landscape and tough climate had a great influence on the rural population here. The people of Bergell were used to hardship and deprivation, as the land was unable to support them all. Many were therefore forced to emigrate, and they had a history of working as confectioners to earn their living abroad.

Alberto Giacometti was born in Borgonovo on the 10th of October 1901, the son of the painter Giovanni Giacometti and Annetta Giacometti-Stampa. His godfather was the painter Cuno Amiet of Solothurn. Alberto spent his early childhood in Stampa. In 1906 his family moved from the Piz Duan – the family hotel where they were living at the time – to the house opposite, which had a barn that Giovanni turned into a studio. In 1909 the Giacometti family inherited a house in Capolago, on Lake Sils, near Maloja, where they used to spend their summers. Here too, Giovanni set up a studio, which would later become Alberto's main studio when he stayed in Bergell.

For many decades Giacometti's mother, Annetta, a woman with a strong and independent character, was the anchor of this unusual family, as can be seen by the many drawings, paintings and sculptures her husband and, later, her son dedicated to her over the course of her long life. Giacometti had a particularly strong relationship with his mother, as revealed in an early photograph dated 1911, taken in Soglio by the photographer Andrea Garbald on Annetta's 40th birthday. While Giacometti's brothers and sister – Diego, Bruno and Ottilia – look into the lens and his father gazes at his children, Giacometti and Annetta look deeply into each other's eyes, showing their great affection for each other. This is "Alberto's unprecedented intense look at his mother" and the "confidence with which she returns it". The "very same look"³ that Giacometti would later direct to his observations of reality.

A natural talent

Giacometti started to draw at a very young age. In 1913 he painted his first oil painting and shortly afterwards began sculpting, the subjects being the heads of his brothers

Alberto and Bianca on the Lunghin Pass, 1936.

Diego and Bruno. His father's studio was a haven where his artistic skills were allowed to develop naturally. The works of the "naturally talented beginner"⁴ are testimony of Alberto's extraordinary giftedness, which was apparent from early childhood and actively nurtured by his father. At the same time, Alberto diligently taught himself by copying masterpieces, a practice he would keep up all his life. A sharing and intensely artistic relationship existed between Alberto and his father (a widely recognised post-impressionist painter who was the first to introduce "luminous colour" to Swiss art). While attending a protestant school at Schiers in Prättigau (1915-1919), Giacometti not only produced drawings and watercolours, but also started experimenting with oils and small sculptures, including a head of his mother and his school chum Simon Bérard. When at home in Stampa, he drew subjects familiar to him: his mother cooking, the family at table, and his father. Although as a young prodigy Giacometti tended to emulate his father, his early works already revealed his virtuosity in capturing observed reality. His insistent drawing of his surroundings would become a habit of his. Giacometti's attention was not focused on a particular motif, but rather on the fundamental artistic problem of understanding how objects seen at a distance fit into the space surrounding them.

Education and travels

In the autumn of 1919, Giacometti enrolled at the École des Beaux-Arts (painting) and the École des Arts et Métiers (sculpture and design) in Geneva. In 1920 he accompanied his father to the Venice Biennale, where he was enraptured by Tintoretto's paintings and, in Padua, by Giotto's work. He then spent a longer period in Italy (autumn 1920 – summer 1921), initially in Florence where he studied Egyptian art, then in Perugia and Assisi, before reaching Rome where he experienced his first "creative crisis". There, he judged a bust of his cousin Bianca he was working on to be "not good enough" and eventually gave up on it. During a trip in autumn 1921, Giacometti witnessed the death of his friend and companion Pieter van Meurs in a hotel in Madonna di Campiglio. This was such a

defining moment in his life that he later dedicated his book *Le Rêve, le Sphinx et la mort de T.* (1946)⁵ to Van Meurs, as well as the sculpture *Tête d'homme sur tige*.

Paris

On the 9th of January 1922, Alberto Giacometti moved to Paris. For five years he studied sculpture under Émile-Antoine Bourdelle at the Académie de la Grande-Chaumière. In 1924 he found his first studio, then in 1925 his second. His brother Diego also moved to Paris to live and work with Giacometti: the brothers would benefit from each others' company and expertise for many decades. Diego produced the art objects that Giacometti designed, created the plaster and clay moulds needed for his sculptures and was in charge of the bronze casting of the same. Giacometti had a loose relationship with the American sculptress Flora Mayo up until 1929. The two artists portrayed each other in clay sculptures.

Giacometti tended towards a cubist style in his drawings and sculpture, having discovered the works of Henri Laurens, Jacques Lipchitz and Constantin Brancusi. In 1926 he produced the first of his most important works, *Femme Cuillère* (Spoon Woman), which reflects the attraction he felt for African art. Around this time he moved to a small, modest studio at Rue Hippolyte-Maindron 46, where he would live and work for the rest of his life. After the war, he extended the space by renting some adja-



Alberto Giacometti's
Femme-cuillère,
1926/27.
Bronze:
144 x 41 x 23 cm.
Kunsthau Zürich,
Alberto Giacometti
Foundation.



cent rooms and had water, electricity and a phone put in. He made no further improvements. Commenting on his rather bizarre working conditions, Giacometti said: "It's strange. When I first rented my studio in 1927 I initially felt it was tiny. I intended to relocate as soon as possible – it was just too small, a right "hole". But the longer I stayed, the bigger it got. I managed to do everything there. [...] Even if I were to have a larger studio, I doubt very much that I would use the extra space"⁶. Despite becoming a successful artist in the 1950s, Giacometti kept his old studio, admitting that his "*condition misérable*" was growing on him⁷.

The surrealist period

Giacometti initially spent only six months a year in Paris. In 1927, while working in Bergell, he created a series of portraits of his father that point to his radical distancing from the academic tradition: the heads were increasingly squashed, eventually becoming simple flat surfaces with carved features. This creative process led to thin rectangular sculptures, marking a definite and clear break with figurative art. The artist's "slabs" attracted the attention of avant-garde Paris. He was regularly invited to show his work. The collector Vicomte Charles de Noailles bought his *Gazing Head* at Jeanne Bucher's art gallery. During this period Giacometti met many artists and

writers, such as André Masson, Hans Arp, Joan Miró, Max Ernst, Louis Aragon, Jean Cocteau, Alexander Calder, Jacques Prévert, Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris, the latter writing the first article on Giacometti in 1929 for the magazine "Documents".

At a show at the Galerie Pierre Loeb in 1930, André Breton bought Giacometti's *Suspended Ball*. The artist was admitted to the circle of Surrealists, led by André Breton and Louis Aragon. Giacometti was to play a central role in this movement as a sculptor. Man Ray introduced Alberto and Diego Giacometti to Jean-Michel Frank, a fine furniture dealer and interior decorator who commissioned many vases, fire surrounds, lamps, appliques and other objets d'art from the brothers over the next ten years or so. During this time, the Giacomettis also created jewellery for the fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli.

In his surrealist poem "*Yesterday, the Quicksands*"⁸, published in 1933, Alberto Giacometti recalls childhood memories and adolescent experiences. His sometimes terrifying dreams and sexual fantasies, in symbiotic union with Breton's theories and revealing his attraction for remote primitive cultures, were later given artistic form in complex surrealist sculptures, such as his *Woman with her Throat Cut*, *The Cage*, *Pointe à l'œil*, *The Captured Hand* and *The Invisible Object*: all cryptic works dealing with the themes of sexuality, aggression and violence, the battle between the sexes and the unfathomable, numinous game of life and death (*No More Play*, *The Surrealist Table*).

1934 saw his break with the Surrealists. As Giacometti was working on his enigmatic plaster sculpture *1+1=3*, he was overcome by doubts and felt the need to turn to materiality and naturalness. This manifested in his impulse to draw and sculpt his brother's head. André Breton was indignant: "A head, everyone knows what a head is!" The Surrealists opposed the trend for restoration and figurative clichés promoted by the supporters of "orthodox" art and called Giacometti's return to the model reactionary and a betrayal of the avant-garde movement. Breton soon shut out Giacometti, though it was the artist himself who wanted to distance himself from the movement.

Corner with Alberto Giacometti's daybed in his Paris studio, ca. 1953.

Alberto Giacometti's
La mère de l'artiste,
1937.
Oil on canvas:
60 x 50 cm.
Kunsthaus Zürich,
collection of Anton and
Anna Bucher-Bechtler.

Return to the model

Although his split with the Surrealists meant Giacometti lost a lot of friends, he found many new ones, such as Balthus, André Derain, Pierre Tal-Coat and Pablo Picasso, all artists, who like him, were returning to Realism and “representation according to nature”. During this period in his life, which saw him working exclusively according to a model, Alberto Giacometti produced drawings and sculptures (mostly figures on pedestals) with increasingly smaller heads, some no bigger than an inch. In 1937, when his mother, Annetta, expressed doubts about her son's giftedness, Giacometti painted two works to reassure her as to his ability to create valid works. These – the portrait *The Artist's Mother* and the still life *Apple on a Sideboard* – illustrate his dialectic approach to Paul Cézanne's painting. Both these works go well beyond Cézanne's limits when it comes to his portrayal of space and set the foundations for Giacometti's post-war paintings.



Giacometti entered into a new relationship, with the English woman Isabel Delmer, his drawing and sculpture model (*Head of Isabel*). In 1938 he was run over by a car in the Place des Pyramides in Paris; he broke his right foot in the accident, which left him with a limp. This deeply

affected him, both as a man and an artist, as Giacometti himself admitted.

Geneva

Shortly before the occupying German forces entered the city of Paris, Giacometti buried his small sculptures in his studio. Diego decided to stay on in Paris, while Giacometti chose to move to Geneva in late 1941, where he would stay until September 1945. Even though he was welcome to work in his father's studio in Bergell, Giacometti opted for a life in Geneva, not the least on account of his close ties with his mother Annetta, who was spending a lot of time in Geneva looking after her grandchild, Silvio. Giacometti's sister, Ottilia, had died in childbirth in 1937, leaving behind her husband, the doctor Francis Berthoud, to bring up their child Silvio in Geneva. Giacometti lived in a small spartan room on the third floor of the Hôtel de Rive, furnished with just a ceramic stove and a wooden table. In this cramped space he worked on small plaster figures, deliberately match-stick sized to stress the spatial distance between him and the model. The pedestals for these figures therefore appear oversized (*Small Man on a Base*, *Bust of Silvio*). Giacometti met the publisher Albert Skira, the photographer Elie Lotar and Annette Arm in Geneva. During a summer break in Maloja in 1943 he produced his *Woman with Chariot*, a work that marks a clear break from his Geneva miniatures.

Anni mirabilis

Giacometti returned to Paris in mid September 1945, after almost four years of “exile”. There he started working on his own again, though he did occasionally enjoy the social night life of Montparnasse. His vision of reality, his new plastic approach to the subject, began to take shape – it would later become known as the “Giacometti style”. His figures got slimmer and longer, standing on their high pedestals. Stick-like beings halfway between mimesis and apparition, but with perfect proportions, a magnetic stare and an incredible presence in space. Giacometti reduced the plastic matter of his sculptures to accommodate the surrounding space, thus creating a very close dialogue between the two (*Man Pointing*, *Standing Woman*).



After his break with the Surrealists, none of Giacometti's works were shown until 1947. In his solo show of 1948 at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York, he exhibited some of his new filiform sculptures (some life-size) alongside his earlier works. This show made him famous in America. His fame later spread to Europe, where his work was shown at a number of important exhibitions. The catalogue for his show in New York contains a letter from the previous year in which Giacometti explains to the gallery owner how he created his works, together with sketches and notes for each piece⁹; it also includes Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Search for the Absolute*¹⁰. The Americans immediately classed Giacometti as the sculptor of French Existentialism par excellence.

The years 1946 to 1950 were "*anni mirabilis*" for Giacometti. He produced a series of masterpieces, through which he visualised his fundamental issues. His main intent was to explore the visual experience of the living breathing presence of another. His sculptures are true "models of perception", which manifest opposites, like closeness and distance or attraction and repulsion, coming together (*Four Figurines on a Base*). Giacometti's major theme is the visual and emotional relationship between the artist/observer and observed/experienced reality. Giacometti never viewed sculpture as a means of reproducing reality, but rather as a product of imagination within space, tangible and at the same time inaccessible (*The Nose, Man Falling*). Giacometti also produced *The Chariot*, a variation of his earlier *Woman on Chariot*.

In 1950 the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York organised another solo exhibition of Giacometti's work. Again he accompanied his work with an enlightening explanatory letter¹¹. The show featured his new compositions of several figures, model spatial configurations on a base (*The Square*) or in a cage. The artist's theme was the experience of space and time, and man's existential condition within space and time. His walking figures move along a thin base, almost as though on stage. Giacometti thus established the idea of bewilderment concerning human existence in space.

On the 19th of July 1949 Giacometti married Annette Arm (his favourite model) in Paris. His lifestyle did not change, however. He continued his early afternoon visits to the Café-Tabac on the corner of Rue d'Alésia and Rue Didot where he would eat a few boiled eggs, drink several cups of coffee and smoke like a chimney. Then he would return to his studio and concentrate on his work until roughly midnight. Later he would go to the Brasserie Coupole to eat his second meal of the day at "his" table. His nocturnal "escapades" would nearly always last until dawn, at which point he returned to the studio to work for a few more hours.

The fifties

Alberto Giacometti became interested in painting landscapes again during the 1950s. His inspiration came from the everyday objects in the area around his studio, views of Rue Hippolyte-Maindron, Rue d'Alésia or Rue Didot. In Bergell he painted places he had known since his childhood, as he saw them from his studio in Maloja or Stampa: the view of Lake Sils from Capolago, the garden next to his home in Stampa and the view up the valley towards the mountain ridges. Although he did in fact use cleverly blended colours, the prevalent colour is grey, in a variety of shades. Giacometti was not so much interested in depicting the topography and atmosphere of a landscape as extracting its essential character. He wanted to evoke what persists as time goes by – the content of truth in an image. In Giacometti's work we are faced with the enigmatic problem of creating a credible reproduction of observed reality. This is a constant and central aspect of his work and something he never ceased to explore. His goal in painting these landscapes was to penetrate the elementary structures and identify the complex spatial relations using an insistent fabric of interwoven lines. Just as was the case with his sculptures, Giacometti was not concerned with copying reality, but re-evoking it in an artistic manner.

Giacometti got to know the French author Jean Genet in the 1950s and did his portrait several times. In the catalogue for his show at the Galerie Maeght in 1957, Genet pub-

Alberto Giacometti in *Café Express* on Rue d'Alésia, where he regularly drank his morning coffee and met with friends.



lished the work entitled *L'Atelier d'Alberto Giacometti*¹², the first literary homage paid to Giacometti's studio and his "*genius loci*". Giacometti met Isaku Yanaihara, professor of Japanese philosophy towards the end of 1955. Yanaihara was to sit for him repeatedly until 1961 (paintings and sculptures). Unlike his previous frontal portraits depicting familiar scenes, such as his studio and drawing-room, Giacometti's later works seemed to be suspended in indeterminate space. In fact, the artist's attention was almost exclusively concentrated on the head and gaze of the subject he was depicting.

In 1955 Giacometti finally became well-known in Germany after shows in Krefeld, Düsseldorf and Stuttgart. That same year the first retrospective shows were held in London (Art Council) and New York (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum). Another milestone was his participation in the Venice Biennale of 1956 in the French Pavilion, where he exhibited the *Women of Venice* series: ten versions of the same large-scale standing female figure.

Paris – Stampa

Paris was Giacometti's adopted home for almost forty years and his main residence and workplace. Most of his works were created in Rue Hippolyte-Maindron; in Ville Lumière he set down his roots in symbiosis with the avant-garde movements of Surrealism and, then, Existentialism. However, he never forgot his home in the Bergell valley, returning often to work there just as intently, and producing many important drawings, painting and sculptures. Bergell was not just a place for him to escape to and rest, it was also a source of artistic inspiration. Throughout his life, he drew creative energy from the contrast between the French metropolis and capital of art and the peace and quiet of the mountains. His movement back and forth between Stampa and Paris had almost a ritual quality about it¹³.

His final years

In 1956 Giacometti was invited to create a sculpture with Alexandre Calder for the square in front of the new Chase Manhattan Bank skyscraper in New York. This project

kept him busy over the next few years, as he wanted to produce three sculptures in a reciprocal relationship: a walking man, a standing priestess and a huge head on a pedestal. In early October 1965, a few months before he died, Giacometti embarked on the Queen Elizabeth to New York to visit his exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. He went to the Chase Manhattan Bank site that same night and came face to face with the actual size of the square for the very first time. He realised that the only solution would be a female figure some six to eight metres high, something he knew he would never be able to realise. In 1964, however, he did complete a work consisting of three large sculptures – *Walking Man II*, *Standing Woman III* and *Walking Man I* – for the courtyard of the Maeght Fondation in Saint-Paul-de-Vence.

Giacometti started working on another ambitious project in 1958. In fact, he widened his horizons to beyond Montparnasse and started drawing scenes from all over the city of Paris. He treated these scenes just like ordinary subjects, such as the detail of a chair back or an ashtray. He drew these views directly on a lithographic plate. They were all published posthumously in 1969 by the art critic and publisher Tériade in a comprehensive volume of 150 lithograph prints, entitled *Paris sans fin*¹⁴.

In the autumn of 1959 Giacometti met Caroline, a prostitute with whom he became besotted and whom he immortalised in a series of portraits. On the 25th of January 1964 his mother, Annetta, died and was buried in the cemetery in Borgonovo, under the same stone that some thirty years earlier Giacometti had designed for his father.

Meanwhile, Giacometti had become world famous, which led to many more individual shows of his work. In 1962 he won the *Gran Premio della Scultura* at the Venice Biennale. The Kunsthaus Zürich dedicated a major retrospective show to him. Shows followed in Washington and Basel, and then in 1965 at New York's Museum of Modern Art (before going on tour to Chicago, Los Angeles and San Francisco), the Tate Gallery in London, the Louisiana Museum in Humlebaek and in Amsterdam.

Alberto Giacometti working on *La Grande Tête*, a piece intended for Chase Manhattan Plaza in New York, ca. 1960.



Giacometti made every effort to attend these exhibitions in person. In 1962 the first monograph was published, written by Jacques Dupin and including a wealth of documentation on Giacometti's work from 1914 to 1962. In 1965 Ernst Scheidegger and Peter Mürger dedicated a film to him. In November of that year Giacometti was awarded the *Gran Prix National d'Art* by the French government and an honorary degree from the Faculty of Philosophy at Bern University.

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In early December 1965 Giacometti was admitted to hospital in Chur suffering from chronic bronchitis. He died of pericarditis on the 11th of January 1966. His funeral was held on the 15th of January in the cemetery of Borgonovo (Stampa), attended by many friends, acquaintances, fellow artists, museum directors and gallery owners from around the world, as well as representatives of the French and Swiss governments. His brother Diego designed the tombstone, on which he placed the bronze bust entitled *Elie Lotar III*, Alberto Giacometti's final work.

Still life from the atelier in Paris; the hanging hand is from Giacometti's surrealist phase, ca. 1953.

- ¹ JAMES LORD, *Alberto Giacometti – A Biography*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1983; JAMES LORD, *Alberto Giacometti. Der Mensch und sein Lebenswerk*, Scherz Verlag, Berna/Monaco/Vienna, 1987; REINHOLD HOHL, *Giacometti, Eine Bildbiographie*, Stuttgart, 1998; YVES BONNEFOY, *Alberto Giacometti. Biographie d'une œuvre*, Paris, 1991; YVES BONNEFOY, *Alberto Giacometti. Eine Biographie seines Werkes*, Wabern-Bern, 1992; CHRISTIAN KLEMM, *Alberto Giacometti – ein ägyptischer Lebenslauf*, in: *Giacometti. Der Ägypter*, catalogue of the exhibition at the Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kunsthaus Zürich, Deutscher Kunstverlag, Munich and Berlin, 2008.
- ² Cf. *Von Photographen gesehen: Alberto Giacometti*, catalogue of the exhibition at the Bündner Kunstmuseum in Chur, Kunsthaus Zürich, Stiftung für die Photographie, Zurich, 1986; *Alberto Giacometti: neu gesehen*, Bündner Kunstmuseum in Chur, Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich, 2011.
- ³ CHRISTIAN KLEMM, *Annetta, gesehen von Giovanni und Alberto Giacometti. Notizen zum Thema*, in: *La Mamma a Stampa. Annetta – gesehen von Giovanni und Alberto Giacometti*, catalogue of the Kunsthaus Zürich exhibition, Bündner Kunstmuseum in Chur, Zurich, 1990, p. 12.
- ⁴ DIETER KOEPLIN, *Die Zeichnungen des scheinbar mühelosen Anfängers*, in: *Alberto Giacometti. Zeichnungen und Druckgraphik*, Hatje, Stuttgart, 1981, pp. 10-37.
- ⁵ Cf. ALBERTO GIACOMETTI, *Écrits*, présentés par Michel Leiris et Jacques Dupin, préparés par Mary Lisa Palmer et François Chaussande, Paris, 1990, pp. 27-35; ALBERTO GIACOMETTI, *Gestern, Flugsand. Schriften*, Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich, 1999, pp. 52-61.
- ⁶ DAVID SYLVESTER, *Interview with Alberto Giacometti*, September, 1964, London: BBC; quoted in REINHOLD HOHL, *Alberto Giacometti*, Gerd Hatje, Stuttgart, 1971 (1987), p. 246.
- ⁷ Cf. *L'atelier d'Alberto Giacometti, Collection de la Fondation Alberto et Annette Giacometti*, catalogue of the exhibition at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2007; *The Studio of Alberto Giacometti, Collection of the Fondation Alberto et Annette Giacometti*, catalogue of the Fondation Alberto et Annette Giacometti exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 2007.
- ⁸ Cf. ALBERTO GIACOMETTI, *Écrits*, pp. 7-9; Alberto Giacometti, “Hier, sables mouvants”, pp. 33-35.
- ⁹ ALBERTO GIACOMETTI, *Écrits*, pp. 37-50; ALBERTO GIACOMETTI, *Gestern, Flugsand*, pp. 62-89.
- ¹⁰ JEAN-PAUL SARTRE, La Recherche de l'Absolu, *Alberto Giacometti*, cat. exhibition at the Matisse Gallery, New York; reprinted in: *Situations III*, Gallimard, Paris, 1949, pp. 289-305.
- ¹¹ ALBERTO GIACOMETTI, *Écrits*, pp. 51-63; ALBERTO GIACOMETTI, *Gestern, Flugsand*, pp. 90-105.
- ¹² JEAN GENET, *L'Atelier d'Alberto Giacometti*, Barbezat, Décines, 1958; JEAN GENET, *Alberto Giacometti*, Ernst Scheidegger, Zurich, 1962.
- ¹³ *Alberto Giacometti, Stampa-Paris*, catalogue of the exhibition at the Bündner Kunstmuseum in Chur, Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich, 2000.
- ¹⁴ *Paris sans fin, 150 lithographies originales*, Tériade, Paris, 1969; OTTO BREICHA, REINHOLD HOHL, *Alberto Giacometti. Paris sans fin*, Rupertinum, Salzburg, 1985.



Alberto Giacometti: a frontiersman and his relationship with his homeland

by Franco Monteforte*



Left:
Luciano, Odette (probably), Max Ernst,
Alberto, Ada and Bianca (from left to right),
August 1935.

On this page:
Alberto Giacometti in front of the post office
in Maloja.

On the 9th of January 1922, at the age of just twenty, Alberto Giacometti moved to Paris to study under Antoine Bourdelle at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière.

The French capital was gaining a reputation at that time as the undisputed capital of culture and art in the 20th century, thus making it the “new Vienna” after the collapse of the Hapsburg empire. Giacometti would, in fact, have preferred to go to Vienna, as he found that “life was cheaper there”.

It was not the first time Giacometti had left the Bergell valley, his birthplace. He attended the protestant secondary school in Schiers, near Chur, from 1915 to 1919, but had quit before sitting his final exams. He then enrolled in the École des Beaux-Arts and, later, the École des Arts et Métiers in Geneva, but did not enjoy the city and returned home within the year. He visited Florence and Rome, where he stayed with his uncle Antonio, a pastry baker, and his fifteen-year daughter Bianca, the eldest of Giacometti’s six “Roman” cousins, on whom he had an adolescent crush. Even despite the artistic circle he joined and the small studio he had on the Via Ripetta, where he got to know two other young Swiss artists, Arthur Welti and Hans von Matt, Giacometti soon tired of Rome.

His stay in Paris, too, was only intended to be relatively short. He went there to study, as his father had done. In fact, Giacometti spent more time in Bergell than in Paris during the first three years. It was only in 1925, when he started to show his work at the annual exhibitions at the Salon des Tuileries and the Salon des Indépendants, that his regular trips home became shorter and less frequent. Paris and its artistic and intellectual world would eventually become inextricably linked with his art.

His ties with the Bergell valley remained strong. The family home and the landscape of Stampa and Maloja, his parents and siblings, and his father’s studio continued to be recurrent themes in his work, parallel to those on which he worked in Paris. Indeed, his work and his personality would not be understandable outside the context of his moves between Paris and Stampa¹.

As James Lord wrote in his biography of Giacometti, “Even after he had put down firmer roots in Paris, he regularly returned

to Stampa. It was almost as though there were two Albertos, one that lived abroad and another that had never left the family home. The Alberto of Paris drew his self-certitude from the Alberto of Bergell and he was compelled to return to Stampa on a regular basis, to the mountains and rocky terrain of the valley of their birthplace, which sustained them both.”²

It could hardly have been otherwise. Giacometti had had a marvellously happy childhood in Bergell with his two brothers and sister, in a warm, harmonious family atmosphere, dominated by the strong character of their mother, Annetta, and imbued with a non-provincial, internationally oriented artistic culture, thanks to their uncle, Augusto, and father, Giovanni, both outstanding painters themselves. Openness had long been a virtue of this mountain valley situated between Italy and Switzerland; its inhabitants had, over the centuries, frequently left the mountains to seek their fortunes throughout Europe. Giacometti’s father had always been influenced by the modern currents of Divisionism, Expressionism and Fauvism. This was thanks to Segantini, a friend and



colleague, Cuno Amiet, Giacometti's godfather and first teacher, and Ferdinand Hodler, Switzerland's most famous artist of the time and Bruno's godfather. In 1920 Giovanni Giacometti was appointed Switzerland's commissioner at the Venice Biennale and he took his son Alberto with him to Venice.

Alberto first tried his hand at art in Stampa, where the family lived in a large pink house with a studio in the adjacent barn, and in Maloja, where the family spent their summers in a house inherited from a maternal aunt.

It was there that Giacometti, just 12 years old, did his first drawings: *Snowwhite's Death* and a copy of Dürer's engraving *Knight, Death and the Devil*. At age 13, he used plasticine to make his first sculpture, a portrait of his brother Diego, and then did the first bust of his mother two years later. Sitting next to his father, he had painted his first landscapes of the Maloja Pass and the Bergell valley, adopting his father's style, a blend of Divisionism and Fauvism.

It was there, with a pencil in his hand, he first experienced the thrill of omnipotent expression that led him to become an artist. As he would say many years later, "I felt I had such mastery of what I wanted to do, that I could do exactly what I wanted to. [...] I felt I could reproduce and assimilate anything at all. [...] Nothing could stand in my way. [...] My pencil became my weapon."³

In 1921, while working on a bust of his cousin Bianca in Rome, he experienced his first episode of artistic confusion and was unable to reproduce exactly what he could see. "I became lost, everything eluded me, the head of the model before me was like a cloud, vague and limitless."⁴

This setback led to his decision to leave Bergell and dedicate his efforts to sculpture. His father, until then his tutor, could teach him no more. "I started to sculpt because that was precisely the field I understood the least. I could not stand the idea that it would elude me. I had no other choice."⁵

This was not a failure – it was his destiny, albeit difficult at first. Over the course of years he gradually accepted this and eventually created his very own distinctive style

which would lead to his success and international fame. That initial defeat not only contained the seeds of his style, but also the essence of an entire age, the age of uncertainty, which was starkly reflected in Giacometti's work.



The 1900s had sown the seeds of its own uneasiness in his soul. This seed could only flourish between two such contrasting places as Paris, the centre of the unrest, and Bergell, where Giacometti's soul was rooted and drew nourishment.

If he had not taken the decision to sculpt, Giacometti would not have become the Giacometti we know today⁶. In fact, up until 1925 the style of his portraits and landscapes hardly differed from that of his father.

That year Giacometti gave his parents a painting to celebrate their 25th wedding anniversary. Entitled *Noza d'argent, 4 ottobre 1925* (Silver Anniversary, 4th October 1925), it depicted the family *en plein air* during the summer in Maloja: his father busy painting, his mother sewing as she sits on a bench, his sister Ottilia holding a bunch of flowers, and himself next to his mother, carving a stone, while, in the background, builders are working on their house in Capolago; on the left and right are two paintings within the painting depicting his absent brothers: Diego working in a chemicals factory in St. Denis and Bruno, then studying at a school in Chur, playing the violin. It was an unusual

Alberto Giacometti's
*Blossoming Tree in
Stampa*, ca. 1920.
Watercolour over pencil
on paper: 31 x 21.5 cm.
Kunsthaus Zürich,
Alberto Giacometti
Foundation.

Alberto Giacometti
with his mother,
Annetta, on the steps
to the house in
Stampa, ca. 1960.

painting for Giacometti, not just because of the *naïveté* of the *fauve* colours, which contrast with the Cézanne-like style he would adopt after his first few years in Paris. What is most striking is the narrative tone of the composition and the almost choral representation of his family in a sunny atmosphere of relaxed, peaceful tranquillity. The faces have hardly any detail, but are merely hinted at. Giacometti would go on to draw and sculpt his mother, father, Diego and Ottilia many more times, as well as the house and the Maloja mountains, but never all together as they are in this family scene. Instead, they would be treated as isolated figures and faces, the subjects of obsessive analysis, unfathomable existential enigmas. It is almost as though Giacometti were taking leave of his former self in this picture, although not of his family or homeland.

Compared to his brother Bruno, who moved to Zurich after obtaining a degree in engineering, and Diego, who went to Paris in 1925 to work alongside his brother, Alberto returned most frequently to the Bergell valley. All three brothers had strong ties to the land, largely on account of their mother, Annetta, whose strong personality was a powerful catalyst within the family, even after her three sons had left home. However, Giacometti's relationship with his mother was most special⁷.

Andrea Garbald's famous photo, taken in 1911, depicting the family on Annetta's fortieth birthday tells us more about this than an entire psychoanalytical treatise ever could.



In the photo, Giacometti exchanges a look with his mother, on the other side of the group, that is so affectionate and intense and has such magnetism that it seems to exclude all the other members of the family. This look is the obscure and deep existential background for Giacometti's busts, oil paintings, engravings and innumerable drawings of his mother. Together with Diego and Annette (Giacometti's wife), his mother would always be one of his most important models.

While Giacometti enjoyed a deep and very affectionate relationship with his father, it was a different kind of relationship to the one he shared with his mother. He felt a sense of both artistic affiliation and disengagement with respect to his father, as can be seen in the aforementioned painting of 1925, in which he balances his father, the painter, against himself, the sculptor. Giacometti had done sculptures of his mother and brothers since 1915, but, with the exception of a single plaster statue dated 1923, he did not sculpt his father until 1927. It was then he created a cycle of busts in a striking range of styles, from traditional three-dimensional style to a flat almost abstract sublimation of his face. It was the same year that he produced his flat sculptures inspired by the Cycladic art he had studied during his daily visits to the Louvre, alongside Egyptian art. It was only then that Giacometti finally broke free of his father's artistic influence. A few years later, in the summer of 1930, Giacometti installed his monumental *Three Figures on a Mountain Pasture* in Maloja, almost as though wishing to affirm his own identity as a sculptor in his own land, after having affirmed it in the sculpted figure of his father.

His father died in 1933. Giacometti and Diego reached the clinic in Glion too late to say goodbye. Then, suffering from a terrible cold, Giacometti was unable to attend the funeral in Bergell. Some time later he designed a monument for his father's grave, which was then sculpted by Diego: a mass of granite with a bird, goblet, sun and star carved on it, symbols of rebirth and immortality. This was probably done in summer 1935, when Max Ernst was invited by Giacometti to stay in Maloja. Ernst spent a whole year there, painting large rocks

made smooth by the water, either in their natural form or sculpted and carved like the monument Giacometti and his brother had erected to their father.⁸

Max Ernst probably never got to see Giacometti's *Three Figures on a Mountain Pasture* in 1935, as they had been left to the elements and were almost certainly destroyed in the winter of 1931, but it is likely he had seen pictures of them, as his *Les asperges de la lune* (Moon Asparagus), which he sculpted in 1935, clearly echoes them.

In the years after his father's death, Giacometti created many works in his father's studio in Stampa, to the point that they eventually dominated the atmosphere, reflecting a gradual artistic transition from father to son.

The Stampa studio was a counterbalance to the studio in Paris at Rue Hippolyte-Maindron. Giacometti acquired his Paris studio in late December 1926 and, although small and cramped, he refused to give it up even after his fame and fortune would have allowed him to.

The studio was laden with the smell of wet clay, and one had to manoeuvre carefully amongst a jumble of canvases, sculptures and plaster casts. This was where Giacometti loved to read and draw, sitting on his bed, or draw on the worn walls that would eventually become filled with sketches, drawings, figures and graffiti, a visual archive of projects he never completed. It was not really a home, but more of a den, a cave, similar in character to the studio in Stampa, which was situated beneath a cliff not far from the family home. He had often gone there with friends as a child and even wrote about it in 1935 in "*Hier, sables mouvants*" (Yesterday, the Quicksands). "It was a golden monolith," wrote Giacometti, "with a cavern at its base: the soil at the bottom had been dug away, eroded by water. The entrance was low and oblong, just about as high as we were at the time. The inside of the room pushed into the rock at spots, forming what amounted to a second, small cavern. [...] On discovering the cliff, we first tried to narrow down the entrance to just a crack only large enough to let us enter. What I loved best was being below in my

small cavern; I could scarcely move around in it, but it fulfilled my every wish."⁹ Giacometti's studio at Rue Hippolyte-Maindron was a like replica of that cavern. A thirty-square-metre space in Paris serving as a secret umbilical cord sustaining Giacometti's ties with his childhood in Bergell right up until his final days in Paris. That is why he never wanted to leave it.



"The longer I stayed there, the bigger it got," Giacometti would say. Likewise, the longer he spent in the Stampa cavern, the more his child's unconscious gave reign to unsettling fantasies. The tale of the cavern culminated in a public confession of the sadistic and homicidal impulses he had had as a child, impulses and fantasies that were projected onto almost all his sculptures during his Surrealist period (1930 – 1934), when his father believed he had "lost his way".¹⁰ This, however, marked another important milestone in his artistic development and led to his artistic affirmation in Paris.

It is difficult to conceive how he could have achieved such a powerful release of contents from his unconscious leading to his Surrealist sculptures without the context of Paris. Yet these traces of remembered surreal visions of cruelty, violence and imminent threats led straight back to his childhood in Bergell. This is apparent not only in the literary accounts mentioned above, but also in another of his poetic *morceaux littéraires* from that time, *Charbon d'herbe* (Charcoal Grass, 1933) where he writes of "Bianca's head looking slightly behind her" and "the little boy, all dressed up, crossing a meadow in a space where time stood still."¹¹ In these and other instances of literary Surrealism Giacometti

Corner with daybed where Alberto Giacometti frequently sketched, ca. 1953.

offers us an explanation of his sculptural Surrealism.

Giacometti's sculptural Surrealism, with the exception of his *Three Sculptures on a Mountain Pasture* mentioned above, was entirely the work of the Paris Giacometti, while the other Giacometti, the one who returned each year to Bergell, adopted a natural figurative style for his sculptures, like in his drawings and paintings, paving the way to the Cubism tendency of the post-Surrealist Giacometti, in contrast to his style in the early 1920s.

During this time he drew very few landscapes of Stampa and Maloja. Instead he had a very physical relationship with the mountains and nature in his beloved valley during the 1930s as seen in the photos from 1935-36 showing him in the mountains with Max Ernst, with his brother-in-law Francis Berthoud, an expert climber, with Odette, Bruno's wife, and with his Roman cousins, including Ada and Bianca. It is as though in those years Giacometti was absorbing the Bergell alpine landscape through direct contact with the mountains and rocks,

sents a special, as yet little explored, aspect of his ties with Bergell.

Giacometti's deep, intense ties with the Bergell valley were, however, free of patriotic elements. Unlike his father and brother Bruno, Giacometti did not feel particularly Swiss. Perhaps this was partly due to how the Swiss authorities treated him during his early years in Paris, refusing him a grant available to students wishing to study in a foreign country. The financial gap was filled by his first major buyer, a famous Swiss collector, Josef Müller, who commissioned a bust from Giacometti in 1926, though this did not alter Giacometti's lack of patriotic feeling. Later, in 1939, with the threat of National Socialism in Germany looming, Switzerland decided to organise the National Exhibition in Zurich to strengthen its own national identity. His brother Bruno arranged for a sculpture of Giacometti's to be exhibited in the central yard of the pavilion Bruno had designed. At the time, Giacometti (no longer a Surrealist) was going through a period when his figures kept getting smaller and smaller. Bruno had told him he would meet him at the airport with a truck for his installation, so Giacometti promptly informed



Left:
Resting during a hike
in Juf, 1936.

Right: At the top of
Piz da la Margna,
1936.

Pictured left to right:
Francis Berthoud,
Tullio, Bianca, Rodolfo
and Alberto Giacometti.

which he would later embody in the tormented, elongated forms of his most famous works.

Pictures and impressions of his homeland also accompanied him while he was in Paris, provided by two magazines to which he subscribed his entire life: "Almanacco dei Graubünden", which had published a picture of his sculpture entitled *Portrait of Diego* in 1926, the first publication in Switzerland to recognise its artistic worth, and "Quaderni Graubünden Italiani", in which numerous of Giacometti's sketches and drawings were featured. This repre-



him that there was no need and pulled a matchbox out of his pocket to show him the size of the sculpture he was intending to do: a figurine no more than 5 centimetres high. Bruno absolutely refused to consider the idea, thus enraging Giacometti. In the end, however, the artist gave in and sent a large abstract plaster sculpture from 1934.¹²

What distanced Giacometti the most from any form of patriotism was his own character and the intrinsically cosmopolitan nature of his work. Thus, when he was invited in 1952 by the Federal Commission to exhibit at the Venice Biennale in the Swiss pavilion, designed by his brother Bruno, Giacometti declined the invitation, saying that he considered himself more an international artist than a Swiss one. Although he agreed to exhibit some of his works in Basel in 1950, he did so purely to satisfy the insistent requests from his old Schiers school chums, Christoph Bernoulli and Lucas Lichtenhahn, and then only on the condition that he could exhibit along with another French friend, André Masson. When he agreed to stage a retrospective in Berne in 1956, he also accepted an invitation to take part in the Venice Biennale as a representative of France, for which he created his extraordinary series of ten Venetian women, the *Femme de Venise*. This was clearly another way to stress that he did not feel himself to be particularly Swiss. The only Biennale where he felt completely at ease was that of 1962, having been invited directly as an artist and winning the Gran Premio della Scultura. That same year Switzerland also held a major retrospective of his work at the Kunsthau in Zurich (a total of 249 sculptures, paintings and drawings), the most important and largest exhibition dedicated to him to date. This had a special meaning for Giacometti, especially since it was staged in a museum, among major works from the past. "The importance Switzerland gave its son," writes James Lord, "and the artist's own interests combined to generate a feeling of having really achieved something that would not have had such an impact elsewhere. He had emigrated because of his work, but then had the satisfaction of seeing the most comprehensive exhibition of his work held in the most important city in

his country."¹³ Switzerland thus recognised him as its greatest living artist, despite his no longer truly being a Swiss artist by that time, but an artist of international purport. In 1963 the Fondazione Giacometti would be set up in Zurich, albeit amid great controversy, with Giacometti taking pains not to get involved. More recently, the Swiss government dedicated the 100 Swiss franc banknote to him.

While Giacometti might not have felt truly Swiss, neither did he feel French. During his early years as an artist in Paris he associated with a group of Italian artists (Campigli, Tozzi, etc.) and exhibited his works with them in 1928 in the *Les artistes italiens de Paris* show at the Salon de l'Escalier and the *Un groupe d'Italiens de Paris* show at Galérie Zak. That same year, he had also shown two of his flat sculptures in Campigli's exhibition at Galérie Bucher. One, a *Tête qui regarde* (Gazing Head), was bought by one of the most important art collectors in Paris, Vicomte Noailles, which attracted the attention of the Surrealists and led to his first contract with the arts patron Pierre Loeb. Giacometti thus started making a name for himself as an artist thanks to the Italians. What most appealed to Giacometti, however, was the cosmopolitan artistic atmosphere in Paris. He had been born in a frontier valley and so in some sense was fully aware of the absurdity of manmade borders. It would seem that he never regarded the Bergell valley in terms of a geopolitical concept, but solely from a human geographical perspective, which also included the Italian part of the valley. For Giacometti, the Bergell valley started at the Maloja Pass and ended at Chiavenna, especially once he got to know his new friends in Italy and started visiting them regularly in the mid 1950s.

The first of these friends was the sculptor Mario Negri from Valtellina. Giacometti met him towards the end of 1955, when Negri was working for Giò Ponti's magazine "Domus". Negri went to Stampa in December 1955 to write an article on Giacometti for "Domus", spending a total of three days there. The article, *Frammenti per Giacometti*¹⁴, one of the first to be published in Italy on the artist and perhaps one of the

most perceptive, was published in the July 1956 issue of the magazine with photos by Ernst Scheidegger. Thanks to this article, Giacometti's work finally received the recognition it deserved in Italy. Until then, he had been almost unknown there.

Negri and Giacometti became good friends and Giacometti began to travel between Paris and Stampa via Milan instead of Zurich. Negri would pick him up at the station and, before driving to Stampa, show him the major sights in Milan. These included Sant'Ambrogio, Sant'Eustorgio, San Lorenzo – where Giacometti never grew tired of admiring the frescoes in the Sant'Aquilino chapel (“incredible, incredible in their truth”) – Michelangelo's *Pietà Rondanini* at Castello Sforzesco, which Giacometti immediately felt was in tune with his own work, Santa Maria del Tiglio in Gravedona and the Romanesque frescoes in the small church of S. Fedelino by the lake at Novate Mezzola. This was a kind of pilgrimage to Italian art en route to the Bergell valley. Negri also introduced him to the intellectual circles in Milan, where he met the art critics and historians Lamberto Vitali, Enzo Carli, Franco Russoli and Luigi Carluccio, amongst others. Thanks to these new friends, in 1957 Giacometti helped organise the *Mostra di scultura nel parco* exhibition at the eleventh Milan Triennale, using all his contacts and expertise to attract exhibits by major artists.¹⁵

As Negri got to know Giacometti, he realised just how important his habit of copying past works was for Giacometti's own work. He considered this habit a “school of observing” and suggested that Giacometti publish a volume devoted exclusively to these copies. Giacometti enthusiastically agreed to do so and the book was published posthumously in 1967 by Luigi Carluccio.

One of the people Giacometti met in Lombardy was the doctor and professor Serafino Corbetta from Brianza. In 1942 Corbetta had moved to Chiavenna where he played an active role in the Resistance movement against fascism, reorganised the local health service and created a successful blood donor unit. The doctor soon became a living legend in the valley (an

expression derived from his name was coined for the ill for whom there was no hope of recovery: “*quel li el guaris pü gnànca 'l Corbetta*”, i.e. “one who can't be saved, not even by Dr. Corbetta himself”¹⁶).

Giacometti found many things to like in Professor Corbetta. He was a connoisseur and collector of art and thus a much-appreciated conversation partner. He had a beautiful, round, nearly bald head, making him a very interesting model for Giacometti, who loved bald heads and considered hair to be “a lie”. Lastly, he was also a doctor, and doctors would become more and more important to Giacometti in his later years.

Giacometti had met him in Bergell in 1957, when a neighbour recommended him to Annetta, Giacometti's mother, by then 86 years old.¹⁷ Corbetta started to visit the Giacometti family in Stampa on a regular basis and sat for Giacometti for an oil painting over the course of several summers. The painting was finished in 1961 and is one of the best of Giacometti's late works.

To thank the doctor for looking after his mother, Giacometti surprised him by sending him one of the 8 copies of his famous *Femme qui marche* (Walking Women, 1932). Later, in addition to his portrait and many drawings, Giacometti also gave him the painted plaster sculpture of a *Femme au chariot* (Woman on Chariot) and a *Femme debout* (Standing Woman), all works that greatly enriched the doctor's own fine collection, described by Manuel Gasser in “Du” in 1965 and by Luigi Carluccio in “Bolaffiarte” in 1970.¹⁸

During these years, Giacometti also met the Italian writer Giorgio Soavi in Paris, through Franco Russoli. Soavi's photos and writings provide us with a vivid, stimulating portrait of the artist. Giacometti also met the art critic Alberto Martini, who published two large critical essays on the artist and his work.¹⁹ Thus, by 1962, the year that Giacometti won the *Gran Premio per la Scultura* in Venice, he had greatly extended his circle of Italian friends. Many journalists, photographers, and friends old and new from both Switzerland and Italy would drop by whenever he was in Stampa, to interview him, sit for him or take his photo. Yet these visits would never prevent Giacometti from arriving punctually each

evening to drink with the locals at the Piz Duan hotel bar opposite his home, which had once belonged to his grandfather, who was also named Alberto Giacometti. Although the locals could not understand his artist's language, they always considered him one of them and so, it would seem, did Giacometti, who was always happy to chat to his friends at the Piz Duan about his changes to a canvas or block of clay, just as he did with his friends in Paris at the La Coupole bar in Montparnasse.²⁰

Giacometti's relationship with Italy in the late 1950s appears to be a natural extension of his relationship with Stampa and the Bergell valley. Chiavenna and Professor Corbetta's home soon became a regular stop-over when Giacometti was travelling from Milan to Stampa. In fact, he went there nearly every day when in the valley, as documented in his drawing *Annette al Crotto Caurga* (1961) and the signed message he left in the visitor's book at the Chiavenna grottoes, where he also drew plates and jugs on the table. In 1961 the great Parisian photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, who took several of the most famous photos of Giacometti, photographed Giacometti in the company of Professor Corbetta in Stampa and Chiavenna, creating a series of memorable shots that culminate in a beautiful photo of the artist greeting his mother on a balcony. This photo shows them exchanging a look reminiscent of Garbald's 1911 photo. Almost two years later, in April 1963, Giacometti visited the Chiavenna grottoes again and it was there that something happened that would leave an indelible mark on his final years.

Giacometti's health had started to fail towards the end of 1962, and a young doctor and friend in Paris, Reto Ratti, originally from Maloja, had strongly advised him to see a specialist. Giacometti had thus gone to see his personal physician, Dr. Theodore Fraenkel, an old friend from his Surrealist days. Instead of receiving the usual palliative care, Giacometti was sent to a surgeon, Dr. Leibovici. This doctor had, in fact, treated him some 24 years earlier for a fractured foot suffered when Giacometti was run over by a car in the Place des Pyramides, leaving him with a slight limp. The X-rays revealed that Giacometti had a malignant growth in

his stomach, the result of a 10-year-old neglected gastric ulcer. An emergency operation was therefore needed. Fraenkel had told Annette, Bruno, Leibovici, Reto Ratti and Professor Corbetta, who had travelled to Paris as soon as he had heard the news, not to tell the patient the truth. When Giacometti insisted on knowing the truth, Fraenkel swore it was not cancer. The operation took place on the 6th of February 1963 and was a total success.

When he awoke from the anaesthetic, Giacometti felt reborn and had a great desire to work, see his friends and family, including his new Italian friends, and Bergell. "Get up, go out, go to the studio and observe" was what he wrote in his notebook upon waking. "Yes, Lake Como, head for Bellano, get to Lecco, on to Colico and, then, Chiavenna, the Lago di Mezzola and Stampa. Where is my life? I no longer know. Here? In Rue Hippolyte-Maindron? [...] Write to mother and my friends, to Corbetta, and to Milan and to Pierre Matisse. [...] Diego, the first word I uttered on waking after the operation, his bust." And a few days later: "Leave for Stampa with Annette or Diego early next week; go via Milan. In Milan, Corbetta at the station. In Stampa, work, start again, see stuff, all I want to, in total freedom. Back in Paris, heads and figures. [...] Heads, above all heads, and then figures. Diego, Annette, Caroline, other sculptures, paintings, drawings. Start everything afresh, just as I see people and things, especially people and heads, eyes on the horizon, the eye ball, the partitions of the eye. Don't understand life any more, nor death, nothing."²¹ It was a programme for a new lifestyle and his work. Giacometti stuck to it religiously, especially once he learnt the real nature of his illness during that trip to Stampa, via Chiavenna, which he had immediately and unconsciously felt was an appointment with the truth.

Giacometti and Annette found Mario Negri waiting for them in Milan. They reached Chiavenna in time for lunch, and Corbetta greeted him so enthusiastically ("How great to see you here again. We were all so worried.") that Giacometti was immediately suspicious. Corbetta, who did not share Fraenkel's views on the doctor/patient

relationship, was eventually forced by Giacometti to reveal the truth and showed him the letter from Leibovici telling him the outcome of the operation.²²

Giacometti would have nothing to do with Fraenkel from that time onwards, although he did send the doctor in Paris six post-cards with magnificent ink sketches of his home and the Stampa mountains, the River Mera and an interior with still life a few months later at the end of his convalescence in Bergell, thereby keeping a promise he had made.²³

Fraenkel probably had no idea just how important it was for Giacometti to know the truth about his illness. Giacometti had been dreaming a lot about having cancer and said he almost wished to have cancer in order to experience in his own body that dreaded disease he so closely identified with death. The dialectic between life and death had always been the inner driving force for his art. Giacometti was only 20 years old when he accompanied his father to Venice, fell in love with Tintoretto and then became besotted with Giotto in Padua. During this trip he had seen some pretty young girls walking down the street and suddenly realised that neither Giotto nor Tintoretto's images, however powerful they might be, could ever equal the truth of life in flesh and bone. They could only ever be a reflection of the truth. Art, even the greatest masterpiece, had something irremediably dead about it. The following year, in Vicenza, he witnessed the death of his Dutch travelling companion, Van Meurs, whom he had met just one year earlier on the train between Pompei and Rome. "The trip I made in 1921 (van M.'s death and all that went with it)," Giacometti wrote in 1946, recalling the incident, "ripped my world apart. Everything changed." Art was not just a pallid reflection of life, but life itself had suddenly proved to be fragile and evasive.

These episodes led to his creative crisis and his move to Paris. Then, in 1946, the sudden death of Tonio Pototsching, the adventurous Swiss concierge for Giacometti's building in Rue Hippolyte-Maindron, strongly affected him. The rigidity of the man's head suddenly seemed to spread out and unveil the truth about life, giving Giacometti a

horrifying glimpse of "a world never seen before". After this, everything seemed to point to his own death, whether on the metro, in the street, at the restaurant or with his friends. "All the living were dead."²⁵ After this, Giacometti's images became long and slender, fragile and tormented, balancing on the edge between life and death. His art delved into the roots of human existence and started to question the real meaning of life.

As has often been surmised, his elongated, rough and jagged forms were perhaps a sublimation of the sharp and tortured geology of the Bergell mountains. The way he sculpted his medium reflected the way the moraine rocks of the mountains had eroded as the water carved its first thin, long bubbling stream, like his figures. Then there were the rural aspects which, as Giorgio Soavi noted, were "always present" in Giacometti, first expressed through his energetic and rough way of modelling clay with his "big hands, like a pre-industrial peasant", that had so impressed the writer Vargas Llosa in Paris.²⁶ No one managed better than Ernst Scheidegger did in his photos to illustrate the close relationship between Giacometti's sculpture and the mountain landscape in the Bergell valley. A close friend and model for Giacometti, this great Swiss photographer best appreciated the intimate ties between the artist's work and the natural and manmade landscape of his birthplace.²⁷



La Grande Tête and *Femme debout* – both drafts for the Chase Manhattan Plaza, ca. 1960.

Once again, the Parisian Giacometti drew inspiration from his homeland for his artistic creations. And, once again, those roots could only grow and bear fruit in Paris after coming into contact with Merleau-Ponty's theories of visual perception, with the work and personality of people like Jean Genet or with Sartre's existentialism, as two famous essays on Giacometti of that period indicate.

Giacometti's wearing down and breaking up of the sculptural form was accompanied by a passionate intensification of the use of lines in his drawings and paintings. He began to paint and draw with great flowing strokes and this gave his portraits and landscapes new expressive force. Just as his sculptures became stretched and the human figure crumbled away, drawing closer to death and being magnified by its presence, so too did the people and objects in his paintings and drawings acquire unexpected importance. Rather than dissolve away behind the flickering screen of lines, they were frozen in time, captured in an instant of life.

All the many oil landscapes of Maloja and Stampa Giacometti painted in the 1950s show how he had changed the way he used the shadows and greys he so loved. This is best expressed in the two large lithographic prints of 1957, *Giacometti's House in Maloja* and *Mountain in Maloja*. In both these prints he also picked up two of his favourite themes from the 1920s, reflecting his faithfulness in his work to just a few objects, places and people, subjects always dear to him. His repeated representation of them had been his way of exorcising Death, but now what he was looking for most was Life. Paradoxically, Life, and not Death, became the theme of his work once he learnt the real nature of his illness. Leibovici had cured him of cancer in Paris, but Corbetta had freed him of his fear of death in Chiavenna.

Giacometti worked feverishly from 1963 to 1965. In 1963 his book *Quarantacinque disegni* was published by Einaudi, having been edited by Lamberto Vitali, with a preface by Jean Leymarie. On receiving the first copies one cold winter's day in Milan, he

was very satisfied with the accuracy and faithfulness of the reproduced works of art. That evening, when he got back to Stampa, he proudly showed his mother the book: "*mama i' a al libar, al libar*" (Mother, here's the book, the book!). Giorgio Soavi, who had accompanied him, was then asked to sit for two portraits in oil, which Giacometti painted that very night.²⁸

By then 92 years old, Giacometti's mother hardly ever left Stampa and only rarely went up to Maloja in the summer. The following year she died. Instead of throwing him into depression, her death seemed to multiply Giacometti's creative energies.

In 1965 he travelled like never before. He went to London for his show at the Tate Gallery, to Copenhagen for the show at the Louisiana Museum and to New York for a major exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. While sailing to New York (Giacometti hated flying), he wrote the preface to the book *Le copie del passato*, which Luigi Carluccio had finally completed, though Giacometti never lived to see it published: "Ever since I first saw reproductions of art, and that goes back to my early childhood and forms some of earliest memories, I have always immediately wanted to copy all that most attracted me, and to tell the truth, I have never lost that desire to copy things. [...] In a certain sense, I am still twelve years old. Perhaps, I am, after all, just a twelve-year-old".²⁹

Now, when in Stampa, Giacometti not only painted and drew, but also continued modelling his busts: of Annette as she sat for him and of Diego, from memory. His brother, who had always prepared the casts for him, was not available to him in Stampa at the time, so Giacometti asked Corbetta to find him someone locally. The doctor introduced him to a fine craftsman and amateur artist in Chiavenna, Italo Rizzi, whom Giacometti paid by giving him, among other things, one of his Standing Women (*Femme debout*), which sat in the window of Italo Rizzi's local bar in Chiavenna for some time. Giacometti used to go there with Corbetta, a sort of Chiavenna surrogate for his local bar in Montparnasse, Paris. Thus Giacometti produced the two clay busts of Diego, modelled in Stampa in 1964 – *Chiavenna I* and *Chiavenna II* –

which would later be cast in bronze in Paris after his death.³⁰

Giacometti was full of life during those years in Stampa. The photos taken by Lamberto Vitali and Giorgio Soavi show him busy at work, modelling with clay. Paola Martini Salvioni's photos also show us another human side of Giacometti, relaxed and affectionate with his wife Annette.

His style, too, had changed. The agitation of flowing lines had been replaced in his drawings and engraving by a more serene and relaxed rhythm of composition, gradually becoming more and more ethereal and essential.³¹ Giacometti began to concentrate more on interiors and faces. *La Suspension*, the huge chandelier in the Stampa kitchen, envied by all the villagers and which he had drawn innumerable times since childhood, hangs freely in the air like an ascending balloon. His mother, Annetta, already depicted in thousands of poses (standing, lying, sitting at the table under the light) became merely a face, two eyes, a simple look towards the horizon in the large vacuum of a white sheet of paper. The lithographic portrait of Lamberto Vitali, drawn one evening in 1963 in the famous Upiglio printshop in Milan, also focuses on the eyes, as do the pen and oil portraits of Corbetta, Soavi, Annette and Nelda from Bergell.

Giacometti was no longer obsessed with the fragility of our existence, but rather with the way we challenge life. Art was no longer a way to rescue people and things from death and nothingness, but a giant attempt to create twice as much life.

Therefore, his sculptures were no longer full of figures, but instead were busts. He was less interested in the overall effect and focused instead on the face, the eyes, the look. "The eyes are the very being," Giacometti told Jean Clay in 1965, and he tried to capture the spark of life in them, aware that, like a modern-day Sisyphus, any attempt would be in vain, as each day life changes and one can never stop what, by its very nature, is in an eternal process of becoming.

In 1962 he declared to André Parinaud that "The world surprises me more and more

each day. It gets bigger, more marvellous, more difficult to grasp, more beautiful. [...] And the adventure, the great adventure is to see something new emerge each day in the same face: this adventure is greater than any journey around the world. [...] Nor can one ever hope to attain a full understanding".³²

Thus the creative failure in 1921 that had compelled him to go to Paris was no longer a frustrating damnation, but the destiny and condition of the modern artist. "There is no success unless in the measure of the setback: the more one fails, the more one succeeds," he told Jacques Dupin a few months before he died.³³ The unfinished, then, marks not just the inevitable failure of the artist when dealing with Life, but is also the only artistic form capable of expressing the infinite rebirth of Life. Art is nothing more than an eternal beginning, an "endless seeking".³⁴

The man, the objects, the faces, Diego's face, Annette's face, Stampa, Maloja, Paris... all is endless, just as he endlessly tried to represent them throughout his life. *Paris sans fin* is not just the title of the large album of 150 lithographic prints he completed in his last few months of life, his homage to the city that "made" him, but it also encompasses the human and artistic sense of his whole life's work.³⁵



Giacometti died gazing melancholically at the infinite horizon of Life, the same gaze that can be seen in the eyes of his last bust of Elie Lotar, *Lotar III*.

He had been working on this bust of his Parisian model that evening in December 1965 before leaving Paris to go to the hospital in Chur, where he died on the 6th of January 1966.

Annette, Diego and Alberto Giacometti in the courtyard to the atelier; Alberto had his studio on the left, and Diego's was on the right, ca. 1958.

Alberto Giacometti's
Femme debout, 1948.
Bronze:
167.5 x 18.5 x 34 cm.
Kunsthau Zürich,
Alberto Giacometti
Foundation.



All his friends from Paris, Milan, Chiavenna and Zurich joined the people of Bergell in Stampa to accompany his coffin to the cemetery.

Diego placed a bronze bird he had sculpted on Giacometti's grave in Borgonovo, close to where their parents were buried. Unfortunately, Diego's bronze bird was later stolen. The *Lotar III* bronze was also added and now sits in the *Ciäsa granda* in Stampa, in the room dedicated to Giacometti and Varlin, the two most famous Bergell artists of the twentieth century.

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¹ *Alberto Giacometti. Stampa-Paris*, by BEAT STUTZER, Bündner Kunstmuseum, Chur, 2000; *I Giacometti, la valle, il mondo*, by PIERO BELLASI, MARCO OBRIST, CHASPER PULT, Mazzotta, Milan, 2000.

² JAMES LORD, *Giacometti. Una biografia*, Umberto Allemandi, Turin, 1988, p. 70.

³ *Entretien sur l'art actuel: Marie-Thérèse Maugis avec... Alberto Giacometti*, in "Les Lettres françaises", 6-19 August 1964.

⁴ *[Prima] lettera a Pierre Matisse*, in ALBERTO GIACOMETTI, *Scritti*, introduction by MICHEL LEIRIS and JACQUES DUPIN, by ELIO GRAZIOLI and CHIARA NEGRI, Abscondita, Milan, 2001, p. 70.

⁵ JEANNE-MARIE DRÔT, *Alberto Giacometti*, interview for ORTF, 19 November 1963.

⁶ In this respect I take issue with the opinion of the Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa when he maintains that "Given the absolute indifference he showed in passing fashions, this provincial Swiss would have fulfilled the same destiny, even if he had never left the Bergell valley" (MARIO VARGAS LLOSA, *Giacometti e quella sua Parigi anni '60*, in "La Repubblica", 2 August 1997, p. 30).

⁷ *La mamma a Stampa Annetta gesehen von Giovanni und Alberto Giacometti*, by BEAT STUTZER and CHRISTIAN KLEMM, Kunsthau Zürich and Bündner Kunstmuseum Chur, 1990.

⁸ The stones painted and sculpted by Max Ernst would remain in front of Giacometti's house in Maloja for a long time afterwards, lovingly cared for by Annetta, forming a sculptural "Alberto Giacometti's garden", as Ernst himself called it. Cf. *Max Ernst. Sculpture*, by IDA GIANNELLI, Castello di Rivoli, Museo d'arte contemporanea, Charta editore, Milan, 1996, pp. 69 and 211. This book, based on Ernst's notes, dates his stay in Bergell as 1934, although all other sources cite 1935 as the year. See what Odette Giacometti, Bruno's wife, says in ERNST SCHEIDEGGER (editor), *La Bregaglia*.

Patria dei Giacometti, Pro Grigioni Italiano/Armando Dadò editore, Locarno, 2001, pp. 176-179.

⁹ ALBERTO GIACOMETTI, *Hier, sables mouvants*, in “Le surrealisme au service de la révolution”, no. 5, May 1933 (Italian translation: *Ieri, sabbie mobili*, in ALBERTO GIACOMETTI, *Scritti*, cit., p. 35).

¹⁰ JAMES LORD, *Giacometti. Una biografia*, Umberto Allemandi, Turin, 1988, p. 117. Lord attributes this negative view to a remark made by Diego Giacometti.

¹¹ ALBERTO GIACOMETTI, *Charbon d’herbe* in “Le surrealisme au service de la révolution”, no. 5, May 1933, (Italian translation: *Carbone d’erba*, in ALBERTO GIACOMETTI, *Scritti*, cit., p. 34).

¹² Episode mentioned by JAMES LORD, *Giacometti*, cit., pp. 179-180.

¹³ JAMES LORD, *Giacometti*, cit., p. 380.

¹⁴ Mario Negri’s article in “Domus” along with another article published in the same magazine in June 1966 (pp. 83-111) were included in MARIO NEGRI, *All’ombra della scultura*, All’insegna del pesce d’oro, Milan, 1985, pp. 70-82. Both these articles are also reproduced in *Alberto Giacometti. Percorsi lombardi*, by CASIMIRO DI CRESCENZO and FRANCO MONTEFORTE, Credito Valtellinese, Sondrio, 2003, pp. 299-303.

¹⁵ For more details on Giacometti’s friendship with Negri and, more generally, Giacometti’s relationships in Italy, see my essay *L’ultimo Giacometti tra Parigi, Bregaglia, Chiavenna e Milano*, in *Alberto Giacometti percorsi lombardi*, cit. pp. 43-80, which also includes various testimonies, letters and documents, such as those concerning Giacometti’s active efforts as one of the organisers of the “Mostra di scultura nel parco” during the 11th Milan Triennale.

¹⁶ For further reading on Prof. Serafino Corbetta see NATALIA CORBETTA (editor), *Serafino Corbetta un medico tra arte e natura*, Milan, 2003.

¹⁷ Serafino Corbetta’s memories are recorded in the film by GIORGIO SOAVI *Ritratto di Alberto Giacometti*, TSI, Lugano, 1969.

¹⁸ M. G. (MANUEL GASSER), *Una città, un medico, una collezione*, in “Du – Atlantis”, a. XXV, April 1965, pp. 267-289, (Italian translation in *Alberto Giacometti. Percorsi lombardi*, op. cit., pp. 393-397); LUIGI CARLUCCIO, *L’amico di Giacometti. La collezione del prof. Corbetta a Chiavenna*, in “Bolaffiarte”, no. 3, Oct. 1970, pp. 42-46. Now also in *Alberto Giacometti. Percorsi lombardi*, op. cit., pp. 363-365. See also the review by PUCCI CORBETTA and ROBERTO SARFATTI, *Giacometti in casa Corbetta*, in the catalogue for the show *Alberto Giacometti – Die Frau auf dem Wagen Triumph und Tod*, Lehmbruck Museum, Duisburg, 2010, where the *Femmes au chariot* series was exhibited, including the painted plaster version belonging to Corbetta.

¹⁹ Franco Russoli’s writings concerning Giacometti can be read in FRANCO RUSSOLI, *Arte moderna, cara compagna*, Garzanti, Milan, 1987, pp. 150-153, 267-269, 282-286. ALBERTO MARTINI’s two essays, *Solitudine di uomini e cose nel vano profondo dello spazio* and *Alberto Giacometti: la poesia delle apparenze*, both published in 1965, are reproduced in *Alberto Giacometti. Percorsi lombardi*, pp. 371-377 and pp. 379-387. There are many books, articles and films on Giacometti by Giorgio Soavi. These include *Il mio Giacometti*, Longanesi, Milan, 1969; the film *Ritratto di Alberto Giacometti* for TSI, Lugano, 1969; *Alberto Giacometti. La ressemblance impossible*, Paris, 1991; *Alberto Giacometti. Il sogno di una testa*, Mazzotta, Milan, 2000; *I segni dell’anima, Volti e memorie familiari nei disegni di Alberto Giacometti*, in “Notiziario della Banca Popolare di Sondrio”, no. 86, August 2001, pp. 68-71.

²⁰ GUIDO GIACOMETTI shares an interesting memory of this period in *Giacometti nel suo paese*, published in the catalogue for the show *Alberto Giacometti*, edited by ANDRÉ KUENZI, Fondation Pierre Giannada, Martigny, 1986, pp. 21-26.

²¹ ALBERTO GIACOMETTI, *Scritti*, op. cit., p. 259.

²² This episode is mentioned by JAMES LORD, *Giacometti*, op. cit., p. 405 and is also confirmed by Corbetta's daughters. In a recent autobiography, Paola Caròla, one of Giacometti's and Annette's close friends, claimed that Giacometti had learnt about his cancer operation after reading his medical record "during a check-up at Chur hospital", but did not reveal the source (PAOLA CARÒLA, *Monsieur Giacometti, vorrei ordinarle il mio ritratto*, Abscondita, Milan, 2011, p. 85).

²³ For an analysis of these sketches, see DONAT RÜTIMANN, *Rückker zum Anfang*, in *Alberto Giacometti: Stampa-Paris*, op. cit., pp. 49-86 and BEAT STUTZER, *Alberto Giacometti: vedute di Maloja e Stampa. Due nuove acquisizioni del Museo d'arte grigione*, in "Quaderni grigionitaliani", a. 70/71, no. 4/1, October 2001/January 2002, pp. 65-68.

²⁴ ALBERTO GIACOMETTI, *Le rêve, le Sphinx et la morte de T*, in "Labyrinthe", no. 22-23, December 1946, (Italian translation in ALBERTO GIACOMETTI, *Scritti*, op. cit., quoted on pp. 66-67).

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 62.

²⁶ GIORGIO SOAVI, *Alberto Giacometti. Il sogno di una testa*, op. cit., p. 15; MARIO VARGAS LLOSA, op. cit.

²⁷ ERNST SCHEIDEGGER, *Alberto Giacometti, Traces d'une amitié*, Maeght Editeur, Paris, 1991. Scheidegger had met Giacometti in 1943, during his military service in Maloja.

²⁸ Giorgio Soavi, *Alberto Giacometti. Il sogno di una testa*, op. cit., p. 10.

²⁹ ALBERTO GIACOMETTI, *Tre note per le copie*, introduction to the book by LUIGI CARLUCCIO, *Alberto Giacometti. Le copie del passato*, Botero, Turin, 1967, p. VII, (Italian translation by ELIO GRAZIOLI and CHIARA NEGRI in ALBERTO GIACOMETTI, *Scritti*, op. cit., p. 129).

³⁰ There is a long note on these two sculptures and the relationship between Rizzi and Giacometti by CASIMIRO DI CRESCENZO regarding the *Buste d'homme (Chiavenna I)* in *Alberto Giacometti. Disegni, sculture e opere grafiche*, by MARILENA PASQUALI, Mazzotta, Milan, 1999, pp. 145-146.

³¹ Herbert Lust, referring to Giacometti's last graphic works, speaks of his "Apollinean period" (HERBERT LUST, *Giacometti. The Complete Graphics*, Tudor Publishing Company, New York, 1970, p. 85).

³² ALBERTO GIACOMETTI, *Conversazione con André Parinaud*, in *Scritti*, cit., pp. 310-314.

³³ ALBERTO GIACOMETTI, *Conversazione con Jacques Dupin*, transcript from the film by ERNST SCHEIDEGGER and PETER MÜNGER, *Alberto Giacometti (1965-1966)* (Italian translation by di ELIO GRAZIOLI in *Alberto Giacometti*, by MARCO BELPOLITI and ELIO GRAZIOLI, Marcos y Marcos, Milan, 1996, p. 103).

³⁴ Giacometti's actual words, in *Conversazione con André Parinaud*, op. cit., p. 311.

³⁵ This album was published posthumously by Tériade in 1969.



Alberto Giacometti: a natural talent and master of intimate expression

by Casimiro Di Crescenzo*



Left:
Alberto Giacometti working
on a small figure, ca. 1950.

On this page:
Self-portrait, 1921.
Oil on canvas: 82.5 x 70 cm.
Kunsthaus Zürich,
Alberto Giacometti Foundation.

Almost fifty years after Giacometti's death (11th of January 1966), his sculptures, paintings and drawings continue to fascinate us. Perhaps even more so than in the past. The poets, writers and philosophers of his day were very interested in Giacometti and his work because of his ability to question our human condition and destiny through his creations. His form of creative expression developed around the concept of reality – reality not as the passing of easily defined and explicable everyday life, but as a higher plane in which mankind lives and interacts, altering it and being altered by it in turn. Reality becomes something that reaches to the fantastic, to the unfathomable, and it becomes the source of boundless surprises. This continuous process of change, to which the artist's eye is also subject, makes it impossible to achieve a final and complete understanding of reality. Indeed, Giacometti was convinced that the process stops if we attempt (unsuccessfully) to duplicate reality. What is important is not that we get a result per se, but that we persevere in our search and learn from our failures in order to advance and improve ourselves.

Giacometti's work was constantly directed at investigating what is real, and his poetic vision betrays his knowledge of reality and the mystery surrounding it. He invites us to go beyond mere appearance, and challenges us to question things and try to find an answer. His greatest appeal was his divining approach where an initial reality lets us glimpse another, that then reveals another... like veils, letting us penetrate further and further. This intimate process inevitably involves the observer, as it makes him reflect on his human condition and vital presence in this world. Man is at the very centre of things for Giacometti. Not heroes, but the common man. This means that we are aware of the temporal limits to our existence and the unavoidable presence of death. However, charged with our desire to live, we accept the idea of the continuity of life, even in our absence, even after our death.

Faced with a reality seen as a mysterious superior being, Giacometti felt the need to limit his field of research, to strip himself of all superfluity and to concentrate on just a few objects: an apple sitting on a sideboard

was enough for him to represent this mystery. When it came to portraits, he turned his attention to the faces of his close family. Although familiar, they were still enigmatic. His brother Diego and his wife Annette would sit patiently for him, hours at a time. Other important models were his mother Annetta, the philosopher Yanaihara, Caroline and Elie Lotar. Giacometti's paintings show his limited use of colour, the pallet bearing infinite shades of grey and ochre, with just a little white to add light. Giacometti kept returning to the same subjects and he stayed within the bounds of his studios in Paris and in Stampa, which represented the whole of his universe.

Giacometti's artistic path was thus unusual. Giacometti's life seems to have been spent in search of the objective, the concrete – figurative art, as opposed to the abstract style that was in fashion during the second half of the twentieth century.



However, similar to a poet, who in today's society is rather marginalised, Giacometti succeeded in developing his thoughts around the most intimate and authentic core of this intensely turbulent, painful era. Looking back upon the last century today, he seems to have represented the arduous course of the period through his work better than other artists did. His *Walking Man*, obstinately persisting in his chosen direction, and his various versions of the *Standing Woman*, looking like inaccessible superior divinities, are an ultimate confirmation of the centrality of man and his real, tangible presence in the world.

Every review of Giacometti's artistic career starts in his home valley – the Bergell, in the Swiss canton of Graubünden. His father, the famous post-Impressionist artist

Alberto Giacometti
painting in his studio
in Stampa, ca. 1960.

Giovanni Giacometti, a disciple and friend of Segantini, came from this valley. Giovanni Giacometti had close ties with the land and was deeply enamoured of its luminous landscape and the forceful presence of its high mountains. It was in this valley that he met Annetta Stampa, a down-to-earth woman with a strong character. They married on the 4th of January 1901 and decided to live in Borgonovo. Nine months later, on the 10th of October, Annetta gave birth to their first son, Giovanni Alberto Giacometti. The couple had three more children: Diego, Ottilia and Bruno. The family moved after the birth of Ottilia to the nearby village of Stampa, which was to become their permanent home.

It is amazing how the Giacometti family produced so much artistic talent. Indeed, it is a real phenomenon. In addition to Giovanni, there was also Augusto Giacometti, his first cousin twice-removed, who was a major abstract painter. Not only was Giovanni's first son an artist, but also his second son, Diego. Diego would spend his life in the company of his brother Alberto, becoming one of his most important models and a faithful assistant in his studio. Diego would later be recognised as a producer of fine, decorative bronze objects, mostly furniture and lamps. His other brother, Bruno, moved to Zurich and became a successful architect. Thanks to his father's artistic ties and cultural interests, Alberto Giacometti lived in a nurturing, stimulating family environment. His parents showered him with affection and encourage-



ment, without attempting to direct his natural talent for drawing, which was apparent from a very early age. All the Giacometti children were free to use their father's library and welcome in his studio. Of course, Giovanni's paintings must have had an influence on the young Giacometti, who would long recall the pleasant smell of the paints his father used and the joy he felt on returning home from school and being able to sit in the studio, look at pictures and sculptures in his books and draw to his heart's content. By the age of ten, Giacometti was already signing his early works with a monogram inspired by that of Dürer, one of his first great passions, along with Rembrandt. The young Giacometti started copying all the works of art that most interested him, using just a pencil, often in the very book containing the picture. This was a habit he would have all his life, and it proved to be a very useful exercise in understanding the work; it was a way to study the work in detail and thus understand its structure and complexity.

In Giacometti's earliest works his subjects were his home, everyday scenes featuring his family and the inhabitants of Stampa, landscapes of the valley, fantastic tales and stories from the Bible. His first sculpture, done in 1914, was a plasticine bust of Diego, a delicate, perfectly wrought work. He then did sculptures of his brother Bruno and their mother. He completed his first painting the following year, a still life in bright, strong colours.



Top right:
Giovanni and Annetta
Giacometti.

Below left:
Fex Valley, 1935.

Giacometti was a brilliant scholar and top of his class. He himself asked his parents to enrol him in the Schiers Secondary School in 1915, a protestant school with a reputation for challenging studies and strict discipline. In this new, different setting, far from the protective warmth of his home, Giacometti distinguished himself and gained his teachers' and companions' respect through his intelligence, perseverance and talent. Noticing the clear difference in his abilities as compared to his classmates, he himself realised he had an exceptional artistic gift. The school's staff soon recognised this as well and allowed him to set up a small studio where he could work on his own. It was a period of great creative happiness for the young scholar; he was at peace with the world and a master of his vision of reality. Then, inexplicably, in 1919, he decided to leave the school in Schiers before his final exams and asked his father to allow him a three-month period of reflection during which he worked with him in his studio. At the end of this period, Giacometti announced a decision he had been considering for some time already: he wanted to become either a painter or a sculptor. He had no intention of returning to school. As he recalled it, it was at that time, when he definitively set his sites on an artistic career, that he lost the wondrous view of the world that had sustained him and motivated him. He became aware, with a sense of loss, that reality was escaping his grasp, becoming vague and unknowable.



Alberto Giacometti's
Carafes et fleurs,
ca. 1938.
Pen and brown ink on
paper: 27 x 20.5 cm.
Kunsthaus Zürich,
Alberto Giacometti
Foundation.

His father used all his contacts and experience to support Giacometti on this path and provide him all the opportunities and possibilities that he himself had not enjoyed. At his father's advice, Giacometti enrolled at the School of Fine Arts in Geneva to study painting and drawing. This, his first time away from Graubünden, turned out to be a negative and unsatisfying experience for him and he stuck at it for only a few months. Giacometti enjoyed neither city life nor his classes. Then, in May 1920, he travelled to Venice with his father, who was a member of the Swiss Arts Commission and was required to go to the Venice Biennale. This trip was a true eye-opener for the young man and had a decisive, lasting influence on his future. Venice took Giacometti completely by surprise, a city full of history and art and with an almost magical atmosphere, full of sunlight and reflections off the water. Not interested in the new works on show at the Biennale, instead Giacometti concentrated on the works of Tintoretto and fell in love with them. It was an exclusive, unique type of love which drove him to see every one of Tintoretto's painting in Venice's museums and churches. It was a marvellous discovery for him, one that opened up a completely new world, a reflection of the real life surrounding him. On their way home from Venice, they stopped at Padua to visit the Cappella degli Scrovegni, where, seeing Giotto's frescoes, Alberto had another shock, which he later described as a punch in the stomach. He could think of nothing else, not even Tintoretto. Giacometti was torn between the reflection of reality he loved so dearly in Tintoretto's paintings and the superior art form he recognised in Giotto's work, which expressed eternal, unchanging values. This irresolvable conflict between art and reality became the theme of all his later studies.

Giacometti passed the summer at home, keenly aware of the attraction Italy held for him and with a strong desire to visit all the Italian cities of art. So, from autumn 1920 to summer 1921, with his father's permission, he visited Italy for a longer period. First he visited Florence, staying about three weeks. Unable to gain entrance to the crowded Accademia, he spent all his time



Postcard from
Alberto Giacometti
to his great uncle
Antonio in Rome, 1935.

seeing the monuments. Then he went to Rome, via Assisi, and lived as the guest of one of his father's cousins, entranced by the city and its lifestyle and wanting to see everything. He enrolled in a school to study nudes, and he painted and sculpted. However, he had another creative crisis in Rome as he attempted to create two busts of his cousin Bianca, with whom he had fallen in love. Unable to finish the work, he ended up destroying them. After his stay in Rome, Giacometti still travelled to Naples, Pompei and Paestum. The trip would be a turning point in his life. On the train from Paestum to Pompei he entered into conversation with an old Dutchman, named Peter Van Meurs. Shortly after his return to Stampa, his cousin Antonio sent him a newspaper cutting: Van Meurs was trying to contact a young art student he had met on a train a few months earlier. Giacometti thought that perhaps he had left something behind on the train and therefore answered the advert. Van Meurs, however, replied with an invitation to travel with him, all expenses paid, to Venice; he was an old man and, having found Giacometti interesting, would enjoy his company on the trip. After hesitating, Giacometti finally accepted his invitation and met Van Meurs in Madonna di Campiglio. Unfortunately, Van Meurs suddenly fell ill. Giacometti cared for him, staying at his bedside all day. In the evening,

Van Meurs took a turn for the worse, and he died a few hours later. This was the first time Giacometti had had anything to do with death. Until then, he had thought there was something solemn about death, that there was potential for it to in some way add value to life, as though it were possible to prepare for such a moment. He suddenly and dramatically found death to be a total negation of life: in just a few hours Van Meurs had simply become an inert object. Death, therefore, was an ever-present threat, something that could strike anyone at any time. Giacometti had never before felt man's sense of fragility and vulnerability. His very existence seemed to be the product of a random process. Giacometti nevertheless went to Venice, trying to block out his memories of this tragic experience. However, deep down, he knew his own life and his conception of life had changed forever.

When he got back to Switzerland, he told his family that he wanted to be a sculptor. He then acted on a suggestion of his father's and left Stampa in early 1922 to live in Paris. There he studied sculpture under Antoine Bourdelle at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. It is likely that Giacometti's decision to become a sculptor was the result of his desire to follow a different path to that of his father. Even so, by the time he went to Paris it was obvious that he had mastered the art of painting. His paintings were

already comparable in skill, confidence and quality to those of his father, Giovanni Giacometti. His style was happy, sunny, full of colour and typically post-Impressionist. Giacometti had yet to encounter any avant-garde painters. In any case, he continued to paint until 1925. Then he abandoned painting for the rest of his time in Paris, although he did the occasional painting on his regular visits to Stampa and Maloja, doing portraits of family members.

Giacometti did not particularly like Paris at first, unlike his immediate enthusiasm for Venice and Rome. He felt a fish out of water and lonely, was wary of the attractions of the French capital city and was very homesick for life in his Swiss valley. Indeed, he often returned home for long periods (sometimes even months). Not until 1925 did he begin to feel at home in Paris. In addition to his studies at the Académie, once again museums offered him new stimulus and food for thought: he copied the Egyptian, Sumarian and Cycladic figures at the Louvre and discovered African, Oceanic and Mexican art at the Trocadero museum, copying these works with great passion. He also discovered avant-garde art on his visits to the art galleries and by reading magazines in support of this movement, such as “Cahiers d’Art” and “Documents”. Soon, Giacometti, whose artistic education had stopped with Cézanne and post-Impressionist art, widened his horizon and involved himself intensively with the approaches of Picasso, Brancusi, Zadkine, Laurens and Lipchitz. Giacometti recalled that 1925 was the year when he had his greatest artistic crisis. Disillusioned with what they were teaching him at the Académie, unable to capture the figure as a whole while also analysing its details – as the form just seemed to melt away – he was also unable to come up with a new method for working. He decided to abandon his studies using models and to trust in his memory. There is much to show that this crisis was not as sudden and immediate as Giacometti wanted to believe. It did not coincide with his quitting the Académie (which he continued to attend until 1927) and did not prevent him from completing a study of a head using a real-life model. His *Tête Otilia* (Head of Otilia, 1926) was

inspired by Charles Despiau’s busts, and shows how Giacometti was perfectly able to sculpt in the traditional manner. His passion for sculpting heads persisted during his stays in Switzerland, even after he joined the Surrealist movement. The result was a splendid series of heads of his father, produced in the summer of 1927. Giacometti used his father’s head for a complex cognitive study, modelling it in plaster and sculpting it in granite and marble, as a round full figure or a symbolic flattened face, or the most abstract version on marble that delicately evokes his father’s features. His treatment of his father’s head represents a comprehensive search for understanding, beginning with three-dimensional forms, then questioning what the human eye actually sees and pushing to the limits, reaching for a radical solution and touching on abstraction. The outcome of his crisis in 1925 was his renunciation of traditional art, which caused him to abandon working from models. He felt traditional art was incapable of representing reality, preferring avant-garde art with its new language of signs and unprecedented shapes and exploration of reality as an inner vision.



Alberto Giacometti's
Le couple.
Bronze: 60 x 40 x 19 cm.
Kunsthaus Zürich,
Alberto Giacometti
Foundation.

Alberto Giacometti's
*Femme couchée
 qui qui rêve*, 1929.
 Bronze, painted white:
 24 x 43 x 13.5 cm.
 Kunsthau Zürich,
 Alberto Giacometti
 Foundation.

His search into what is real was not just based on the appearance of shapes, but also an analysis of universal archetypes. Giacometti started using his imagination and the post-Cubist language, which quickly put him at the centre of the Surrealist movement. His *Femme Cuillère* (Spoon Woman, 1926) was inspired by the wooden spoons of the African Dan tribe and is a totem-like representation of female fertility. This is a primitive, sensual and powerful idol, a mother-goddess proud of her ability to generate new life. His *Le Couple* (The Couple, 1927) presents a similar, but more shocking conceptualisation of form, where the form of the bodies reflects the principles of the human sex organs. The erotic relationship between man and woman, each of whom sits on its own base, is suggested by the form of their eyes, each symbolic of the sex of the other. The most simplified expression of his perception of form was a series of *plaques* where he reduced sculpture to a mere slab bearing a simple impression. A development of his *Femme Cuillère*, the forms suggest that the female body was a favourite subject, and we can see just how effective his reduction of form was, together with his developing interest in archetypes with the power to reveal the mystery of female fertility. A small concave circle was enough to symbolise the head, a large cavity represented the womb, and short carved lines were used to indicate the arms or legs. In winter 1927-28 he produced his *Tête qui regarde* (Gazing Head). Inspired by the forms of Cycladic art, Giacometti took this to the extreme, creating a simple almost page-like slab representing a head. Here the head is reduced to two concave indentations: the horizontal one is an eye looking upwards; the other, a vertical line, is the nose. Having reduced sculpture to its bare essentials and distancing himself from figurative art, Giacometti thus forces us to consider, or rather observe, the enigma of existence. This piece, first shown at the Galerie Jeanne Bucher in June 1929, was a huge, unexpected success for Giacometti. In fact, it was bought by the Vicomte Charles de Noailles, a wealthy collector and generous patron of the Surrealist movement. His decision to buy the piece did not go unnoticed. Giacometti quickly became



the darling of the Parisian art world, and soon got to know everyone within the avant-garde scene, especially the members of the Surrealist movement. His contact with Surrealism was inevitable, as his work from 1929 onwards possesses a dream-like quality. The series of figures he called “transparent constructions” were inspired by Lipchitz’s bronze sculptures and Picasso’s wire creations, which both these artists regarded as drawings in space. This new concept of sculpture helped Giacometti to include space in his compositions and to use emptiness to outline or integrate the figure. The sculpture *Femme couchée qui rêve* (Reclining Woman Who Dreams) reflects this new direction, even its title. The same signs/forms otherwise used by the artist are present in this work, but the final result is quite different. The female body is indicated by gentle waves that seem to float, suspended between reality and dream. The three rods that pierce the sculpture signify an imminent threat rather than an actual act of violence. A more cruel depiction is seen in his *Le Couple* (The Couple, 1929) where the male figure violently directs a phallus-like rod towards the female figure, who is facing him, immobile, either frozen in fear or desire. During the *Tête qui regarde* show at the Galerie Jeanne Bucher, Giacometti met Pierre Loeb, a patron of the Surrealists, who offered him a year’s contract, honoured in spring 1930 with a show which exhibited his work alongside Miró and Arp. One of his pieces, *Boule suspendue* (Suspended Ball), was immediately noticed

Alberto Giacometti's
Main prise, 1932.
 Wood and metal:
 20 x 59.5 x 27 cm.
 Kunsthaus Zürich,
 Alberto Giacometti
 Foundation.

by Dalí and Breton. The latter bought it and met the artist and officially invited him to become part of the Surrealist movement. Giacometti accepted. *Boule suspendue* inaugurated a series of surrealist “objects with a symbolic function”, to use Dalí’s famous definition. These were objects with minimal mechanical functions, full of unconscious erotic fantasies. Giacometti’s *Suspended Ball* was a cage-like structure with a large sphere missing a section inside and hanging from a thread, below it a crescent-shaped form. The observer is invited to participate by making the object move. However, only the sphere can move, and only in one direction, swinging back and forth above the crescent, seemingly grazing it but not actually touching it. Thus there can be no gratification, as the sphere only repeats its movement without actually achieving anything. This leads to a sense of frustration due to the pointlessness of the whole thing. Hence, Giacometti’s mechanism depicts our most hidden sexual desires. Many of his surrealist works depict a cruel, sadistic eroticism. They are unsettling representations of psycho-dramas that explore relationships within the family or between man and woman, frequently played out as a violent struggle, doomed to be fatal for one of the two. He produced a multitude of cages, unpleasant objects, threatening wheel-works and mysterious mechanisms, as well as game boards with obscure rules requiring interpretation. Giacometti achieved unparalleled sculptural expression through this work, however, which would gain him a place among the top sculptors of the twentieth century.

In June 1933, Giacometti’s father suddenly died, bringing an end to these fantasies and turning Giacometti’s attention to the themes of death and the continuance of life,

which dominate the last stage in his Surrealist period. Unavoidably, his interest in reality re-emerged. In a letter he wrote to Pierre Matisse, he said that he could once again see the bodies in reality which possess a power of attraction and abstract forms in sculpture that seem true. In February 1935 his desire to create compositions of figures motivated him to start using models again to sculpt from. Breton was outraged with his decision, saying: “A head, everyone knows what a head is!” He considered this activity pointless and reactionary. For Giacometti, on the other hand, it spurred him on to follow a new path, one that he would follow for many years. Giacometti saw his quitting the Surrealists as re-embracing his freedom, even if it did mean that he was isolated and abandoned by his old friends. However, he was supported by his new friends, Beckett, Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, who encouraged him to persevere.

Giacometti felt that his new analysis of the head would keep him busy for a fortnight or so, just enough time to reflect on its construction, and then he could start working on the composition. His study of the head was, however, to turn out to be his major interest and so he soon abandoned the idea of the entire figure. His models were Diego, who sat for him in the morning, and a hired model, Rita, who sat for him in the afternoon. Rita was soon replaced by Isabel, a woman Alberto fell in love with. His sculpture *Diego* (1937) illustrates the difficulties he was having. Even a head as familiar as his brother’s became a strange object. This tormented work shows how much effort Giacometti put into finding a personal style capable of recreating his vision of reality. Giacometti wanted to be able to create a head that from a certain distance could be fully captured in a single glance. He therefore decided against traditional sculpture and its formula-like processes and tried to examine his own vision and understand its mechanisms. This was by no means easy, indeed it was almost impossible, as Giacometti was hindered by all the technical knowledge he had gained as an artist over the years.

Giacometti’s explorations of sculpture in Paris, using his brother Diego, Rita and then Isabel as his models, carried over to his



painting in Stampa, first using the face of his sister, then Maria and finally his mother, Annetta. Two paintings from 1937, *Portrait de la mère* (Portrait of My Mother) and *Pomme sur buffet* (Apple on a Sideboard), are true masterpieces, revealing early signs of Giacometti's new style that would take him another ten years to develop fully. In these two works he finally mastered the teachings of Cézanne, an artist he had always admired. The portrait of his mother is startling through its immediacy; the space around it embraces the face completely and vibrates with her vital presence. Even the background, drawn in with black lines, plays a part in creating the rhythm of the composition.



On this page, left:
Alberto Giacometti
working on a portrait of
Jacques Dupin, Paris,
1964.

Right:
Corner in Giacometti's
Paris studio with
several plaster casts,
Paris, 1953.



last page of this notebook contains a sketch of Ottilia, many a time erased and re-drawn as he worked from memory, thus bearing witness to her passing. On his return to Paris, he started working on the sculpture, the last portrait he was to make of his sister. Giacometti felt her loss deeply, and the certainty he had attained that very same summer when he drew *La mère de l'artiste* and *Pomme sur buffet* vanished. His works continued to get smaller. Giacometti explained this phenomenon by the fact that he was only able to see the whole vision without being distracted by single details by viewing the model at a distance. Giacometti often created huge bases for these sculptures, sometimes using a double base, as in his *Petite buste sur double socle* (Small Figurine on a Double Pedestal, 1940-41) to increase the monumentality of the piece and underline the sense of distance between the figure and the observer.

The Nazi invasion of France surprised Giacometti in Paris. He tried to flee, but soon realised it was pointless and so returned a few days later. He stayed in Paris until the 31st of December 1941, at which point he decided to go to Geneva to see his mother. She had moved there to help bring up his nephew, Silvio, and through her love try to compensate for the loss of the boy's mother. Giacometti thought he would stay in Geneva just long enough to renew his visa for France, but the German authorities refused

him a new visa. So Giacometti remained in Switzerland throughout the war, living in a small, shabby hotel room. There he continued producing tiny sculptures. Giacometti met with other “exiles”, especially the group of intellectuals that gravitated around the publisher Skira and the editorial staff of his



magazine, “Labyrinthe”.

Several months after the end of the war (September 1945), Giacometti finally made the decision to return to Paris, where he found his studio still intact thanks to his brother Diego. He started working again, reaching new conclusions that were also influenced by his knowledge of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological theories. His sculptures started to get longer, slenderer and lighter, appearing almost weightless. Giacometti had finally found his own style. He soon started showing these sculptures to the public and met with a lot of interest. People recognised that here was something totally new in sculpture. His show at the Galérie Pierre Matisse was a complete success. Opened on the 19th of January 1948 and accompanied by an outstanding catalogue that contained an important contribution by Jean-Paul Sartre, the show was like a retrospective, beginning with Giacometti’s early works and ending with his stick-like sculptures of 1947, shown to the public for the first time. Giacometti’s fame was assured, and his busts, such as *Diana Bataille* (1946), his female figures and his walking men were seen as the expression of an increasingly

popular new style.

After the ebullience of the 1940s, during which Giacometti produced an amazing variety of works, he opted to concentrate on just a few themes, mostly busts and standing nudes rendered with great naturalness and expressive force. His main models were Diego and Annette, his young wife, whom he had met while in Geneva and took back with him to Paris in 1946, finally marrying her in 1949. His *Petit buste d’Annette* (Small Bust of Annette, 1946) was one of the first sculptures where she served as his model. Giacometti was constantly inspired by her face and figure, producing dozens of sculptures, drawings and paintings. Diego, too, sat for him, resulting in a highly interesting and varied series of busts, in particular *Buste de Diego [dit Aménophis]* (Bust of Diego – Aménophis) constructed so as to produce two perspectives. Seen from the front, the head is as sharp as a knife, while the bust is a heavy, compact mass; seen from the side, the bust almost disappears and the head looks like a



real face.

Giacometti began reworking his sculptures, sometimes reworking the same sculpture over a long period of time. His preferred medium became clay, because it was a more ductile material than plaster, if kept damp. Hence he could continue working on a sculpture in the presence of the model, regardless of how many sittings were needed. His *Donne di Venezia* (Women of Venice) were created in this way and owe their name to the fact that he did them as a contribution to the Venice Biennale in 1956. These figures are successive stages in the development of a single clay sculpture. Once Giacometti was happy with each one,

Left:
Alberto’s younger brother, Diego, who was an artist in his own right, specialised in furniture design, and supervised all the castings and patination of Alberto’s work, Paris, ca. 1958.

Right:
Alberto Giacometti and his wife, Annette, in the studio at Stampa, ca. 1960.

he asked his brother to make a plaster cast. He then continued working with clay to create a new figure and so on and so forth. In the end he created fifteen versions. Six were shown at the Venice Biennale and five at his Bern show. Nine were chosen to be cast in bronze though not numbered chronologically. Giacometti often said that he was not interested in the final result. A finished work and an incomplete work were of equal interest to him: what was important was the attempt to re-create the live presence of the model.

Two years later, in 1958, he was commissioned to create a sculpture for the square in front of the Chase Manhattan Bank skyscraper in New York. Giacometti wanted to create a composition that brought together all his favourite themes: standing women, walking men and a monumental head. He drew a few studies in 1959, and the following year, in a burst of creative fervour, he created four *Standing Women* (his tallest sculptures ever), two *Walking Men* and two *Large Heads*. However, he decided not to present them to the project's selection committee. In 1965, while visiting New York to attend an exhibition of his at the Museum of Modern Art, he nevertheless went to view the square several times, and concluded that the best solution would be a huge single sculpture of a female body, some seven or eight metres high, reflecting the monumental height of the skyscraper behind it. On returning to France, however, Giacometti was unable to pursue the idea, as he died just two months later.

Looking at his mature works, it is clear that Giacometti understood that the reality of an individual lies in the individual himself and is revealed through the eyes. His last years were dedicated to this concept, both in painting and sculpture. His models were always the same: he drew and sculpted Annette many times (a beautiful series of busts are of special note) and Diego, who was often drawn and sculpted from memory. Examples of this are the series of sculptures called *Diego Assis* (1964), a reformulation of the stylistic features of Egyptian statues, and the *Bust of a Man*, better known as the *Chiavenna Head II* (1965), where the head is the subject of great tension with the features stretched almost

beyond recognition, while the bust has a more stylised form. Some of his best paintings from this late period are his portraits of Caroline, a young prostitute Giacometti became infatuated with, and of Lotar, a new model. Lotar had met Giacometti in his Surrealism days, when he had had success as a photographer, albeit short-lived. Then, many decades later, having bumped into Giacometti in a bar, he became a regular at the studio. In 1964 he started to sit for Giacometti, resulting in three *Lotar* sculptures. The first was the smallest, just the head and shoulders; the second included the chest; the third, the full body and the tops of his legs. Lotar had a beautiful bald head with a fine cranial structure, that Giacometti found perfect. It was also similar to the Gudea head he had often observed in the Louvre, of which he even acquired a plaster cast, which sat in full view on the table in his studio in 1965. The power of the eyes in these three sculptures is quite striking. *Lotar III*, especially, seems to look right through the observer, towards a space he does not belong to. *Lotar III* was the last sculpture Giacometti worked on in December 1965, before leaving Paris to go to Chur in Switzerland, where he was hospitalised. He died there on the 11th of January 1966. Diego later returned to Paris and found *Lotar III* intact, as the clay had not yet dried out or cracked. Diego slowly heated the studio in order to make a plaster cast. When, years later, a bronze edition of this sculpture was produced, Diego placed a copy on his brother's grave, beside a small bronze bird done by Diego himself.

* *Casimiro Di Crescenzo*

Art historian, exhibition curator and head of the Archivio Armando Pizzinato in Venice



The Ernst Scheidegger Archive Foundation

by Christian Dettwiler*



Left:
Ernst Scheidegger in his Zurich apartment;
in the background is a portrait
of Scheidegger by Varlin, Zurich, 1998.

On this page:
Ernst Scheidegger in front of his portrait
by Varlin, Zurich, 2002.

Below:

Title page of the book *Traces of a Friendship: Alberto Giacometti* by Ernst Scheidegger, first published in 1990; a new revised edition is to be issued in 2012.

Right:

The only known photograph of Ernst Scheidegger and Alberto Giacometti, at a circus in Paris, undated.

Ernst Scheidegger is one of the most important Swiss photographers of the 20th century. A self-made man, he had a special knack for being in the right place at the right time and for meeting the right people. An anecdote from his life illustrates this well. After apprenticing as a window-dresser, he was called up for Swiss military service as an aircraft observer in Maloja. Since there were very few planes to be observed there – and the few that did pass overhead he often missed – Scheidegger decided to set off and explore the area. On one of his tours, he met the artist Alberto Giacometti working in an old stable that had been converted into a studio. This chance encounter culminated in a life-long friendship.

Maloja was the area where Giacometti had been born and grown up, but the war had separated him from his second, adopted home – Paris, France, in particular his studio at Rue Hippolyte-Maindron. It may indeed be that Giacometti's sense of isolation during the war, of being cut off in the mountains of Graubünden and during his occasional stays in Geneva, came to expression in his work, manifesting in his gaunt, solitary sculptures and the distinct contour-style of his drawings and paintings, which after the war would make him famous as a leading Existentialist artist. The friendship between Scheidegger and Giacometti resulted in a comprehensive

photographic and filmed documentation of the life and work of Giacometti. Scheidegger also published a book, “*Alberto Giacometti - Spuren einer Freundschaft*” (Traces of a Friendship), that today is still regarded as the most in-depth and significant photographic publication documenting Giacometti and his art. Scheidegger also produced a documentary film in 1964–1966, which is considered the most important film ever made about Alberto Giacometti.



To describe Ernst Scheidegger primarily as “Giacometti's photographer” would be inaccurate, however. Scheidegger was also a long-time friend of Max Bill, the world famous artist, architect and graphic designer, whom he met when studying at the School of Applied Arts in Zurich. The two remained friends until Bill's death in 1994. During his studies, Scheidegger also met Werner Bischof, another famous Swiss photographer. Bischof introduced Scheidegger to the Magnum agency in Paris, which was associated with a number of renowned photographic journalists, including Robert Capa and Henri Cartier-Bresson. Scheidegger joined the team at Magnum. Together, Bischof and Scheidegger discovered a shared passion for cinema. Unfortunately, Bischof's premature death robbed him of the opportunity to pursue film, but Scheidegger went on to develop himself in the field and create many important documentaries and advertising films.

There were many other milestones in Ernst Scheidegger's life. After the Second World War, he worked as the curator of exhibitions under the Marshall Plan and as professor of photography and graphics at the “HfG” (School of Applied Arts) in Ulm. In 1960 he was appointed editor-in-chief of the photographic supplement of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. He travelled extensively doing

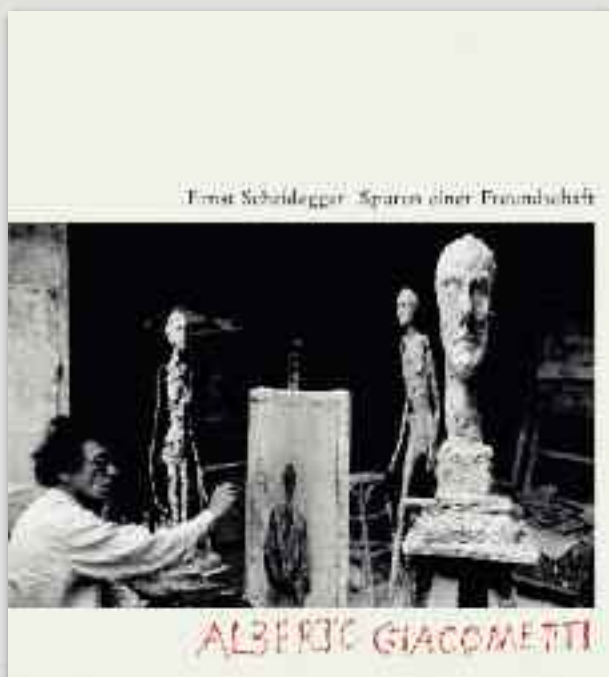


photo reportages in many different countries, especially in the Middle and Far East. Scheidegger always kept up his contacts in Paris, especially with Giacometti and other artists. One day, while eating in the famous “La Coupole” restaurant in Paris, he was showing Giacometti his latest set of photos when Joan Miró joined them. This turned out to be yet another case of being in the right place at the right time: a few days later Scheidegger received a telegram from Miró in Barcelona, inviting him to photograph Miro’s studio and work. The two soon became firm friends and Scheidegger later published a book regarded as a key work in the literature on Miro: “Spuren einer Begegnung” (Traces of an Encounter). Scheidegger was constantly on the move: a stop-over in Paris before heading to India to photograph Le Corbusier’s urban development project in the city of Chandigarh, the new capital of the Punjab, and then off

to Burma to document a Buddhist priest ordination ceremony.

Scheidegger’s untiring activity resulted in an archive of roughly 80,000 black and white negatives, about 50,000 colour slides, 20 films on different artists and a series of documentaries on many countries around the world. Some of these films have won awards: in 1966, for example, Scheidegger won the Swiss Film Prize for his work on Giacometti.

In 2000 Scheidegger entrusted his life’s work, including all his photos and films, to the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. For some thirty years Scheidegger had defined the photographic style of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. Following in the footsteps of Gotthard Schuh, another leading Swiss photographer, Scheidegger produced innumerable photo reportages from 1960 to 1988. The *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* made a full inventory of the



Ernst Scheidegger in his studio in Zurich. Scheidegger was not only a photographer and filmmaker, but also an artist, publisher and graphic artist. Zurich, ca. 2000.

Scheidegger archive and digitalised some of it. Ten years later, however, the Zurich-based newspaper decided that the archive did not qualify as part of its core business of newspaper publishing and advertising, and thus decided to part with it.

A consortium of various interested parties undertook to ensure the survival and promotion of this archive. This group included the Kunsthaus Zürich, which had done a major retrospective on Scheidegger's work in 1992, and the Alberto Giacometti Foundation, based in Zurich, which thus guaranteed itself access to a virtually inexhaustible source of photographic material.

The Ernst Scheidegger Archive Foundation was set up in spring 2010 under the direction of Ernst Scheidegger himself.

The board of directors included Helene Grob, Scheidegger's partner, Christian Klemm (director of the Alberto Giacometti Foundation in Zurich), Tobia Bezzola (curator of the Kunsthaus Zürich), Peter Uhlmann (a Zurich lawyer and the Foundation's legal representative) and Herbert Heeb (also a Zurich lawyer).

In spring 2011 the Foundation acquired the archive from the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. The film archive is now kept at the Kunsthaus Zürich; for administrative reasons, the negatives and slides in the archive are still in private hands, although they will ultimately be housed at the Kunsthaus. The Foundation has been active from the very start (producing original prints, digitalising the negatives and slides, etc.) and has a website (www.ernst-scheidegger-archiv.org) featuring a constantly growing number of photos. An English version will soon go online.

The photos in the Scheidegger Archive include portraits of famous artists, such as Alberto Giacometti, Joan Miró, Max Ernst, Hans Arp, Georges Vantongerloo and Eduardo Chillida. Publishers and museums all over the world – from New York's Museum of Modern Art to the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Lehnbrückmuseum in Duisburg and the Museo Picasso in Málaga (to name but a few) – wishing to publish books or articles on these great masters can only hope to do so properly with the use of Scheidegger's photographic material. That is what makes this archive so unique.

The archive also includes material from Scheidegger's many photojournalism reports on Morocco, Egypt, Yemen, Sudan, Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Burma and Cambodia, which are unique in their historical authenticity. Every one of these photos reflect Scheidegger's talent for being in the right place at the right time and capturing an essential moment. Equally important is the preservation of Scheidegger's numerous films. The Foundation has therefore entered into an agreement with the Cinémathèque Suisse in Lausanne, which in future will be responsible for conserving these films.

The preservation and promotion of the work of one of the leading photographers of the last century is of prime importance – and the Ernst Scheidegger Archive Foundation intends to dedicate all its efforts to this task. Its co-operation with Banca Popolare di Sondrio (Suisse) is a superb example of this undertaking.

*** Christian Dettwiler**

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Photo sources and information on the quotations in the financial section and on the cover

The quotations accompanying the thematic pictures in this year's Annual Report were selected by Myriam Facchinetti. They originated from ALBERTO GIACOMETTI, *Gestern, Flugsand. Schriften*, Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich, 1999.

Ernst Scheidegger Archive Foundation: all the photographs on pages 4-5, 8, 13, 14, 20, 28 and 36.

Kunsthau Zürich, Alberto Giacometti Foundation: all the photographs of Giacometti's work on pages 8, 13, 14, 20, 28 and 36.

Sources of photographs in the cultural section

Ernst Scheidegger Archive Foundation: photographs on pages I, III, VI, VIII, X, XII, XVIII, XIX, XXIV, XXVI, XXX, XXXII, XXXIX, XL, XLII, XLIII, XLIV, XLV.

Kunsthau Zürich, Alberto Giacometti Foundation: photographs on pages II, V, VII, XVII, XXVII, XXXI, XXXIV, XXXVI, XXXVII, XXXVIII.

Maria Giacometti family, Chur: photographs from the family album on pages IV, XIV, XV, XVI, XX, XXXIII, XXXV.

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Notes

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Alberto Giacometti

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Alberto Giacometti's
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Bronze: 170 x 23 x 53 cm.
Kunsthau Zürich,
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