As early as the end of the 18th century, Anton Raphael Mengs was urging that the door be restored. It was cleaned in 1948, and the gilding reappeared for the first time, but within a few years it was again covered with black scale due to pollution. Studies by Florence’s Opificio delle Pietre Dure in the mid 1980s showed that the gilding rested on an uneven layer of oxidation that was gradually destroying it. A new, extraordinarily difficult conservation effort was undertaken. The panels were detached from the frame, and the process of removing the external deposits began, first with chemical baths, more recently with lasers. At the end of these operations, the door will be installed in a large climatized showcase at the Museo dell’Opera del Duomo. In 1990 a copy of the door replaced the original at the Baptistry.

GIORGIO BONSANTI

Further Reading


ALBERTO GIACOMETTI 1901–1966

Swiss, active in France

Although Alberto Giacometti is considered the premier sculptor of the Surrealist movement of the early 1930s, the Swiss artist is best known for the tall, thin figures he produced after World War II. He came to prominence in Paris in the mid 1920s when he began to produce works influenced by contemporary abstract styles and by ancient and non-Western art (particularly African art, which inspired his Spoon Woman). From 1926 to 1930 Giacometti created numerous works with the geometric abstraction and spatial emphasis found in Cubist sculpture, and during this same time he began making innovative plaques with extreme abstractions of a head or female figure (for example, Gazing Head).

With his work of the late 1920s, Giacometti began to gain serious recognition, and in 1930 the Surrealist leader André Breton invited the artist to join the Surrealist group. This began a very fertile time in Giacometti’s career in which he produced a variety of innovative and imaginative works that revolutionized Surrealist sculpture. During this period he contributed to the development of open-form sculpture, kinetic art, and sculptural construction. Among his innovations are “cage sculptures,” which consist of objects contained within cage-like structures or models, and tabletop works such as the gamelike No More Play and the macabre Point to the Eye.

Much of Giacometti’s work of this time reflects a characteristically Surrealist interest in the unconscious world and dreams as well as the themes of sexuality and violence. The kinetic sculpture Suspended Ball, for example, elicits erotic connotations and conveys a sense of sexual frustration, whereas Woman with Her Throat Cut suggests not only the Cubist construction of plastic form but with sinister undertones of rape and murder. Evocation of the dream world can be found in the most complex and enigmatic of Giacometti’s Surrealist works, Palace at Four A.M., a sculptural construction consisting of seemingly unrelated objects placed in a fragile environment defined by the thin wooden skeletal frame of the “palace.” Giacometti once identified the personal experiences that inspired this work, but—as with most Surrealist art—the meaning remains vague (although the sculpture definitely conveys something ominous and suggests an unsettling dream). This highly inventive work had an influence on the open-form constructions prevalent in sculpture after World War II.

In the winter of 1934–35, Giacometti returned to working from the live model, a move that resulted in a split with Breton and the Surrealists who frowned upon such an approach. For the next ten years Giacometti struggled to find his way, at first working from the model and then working from memory. His desire was to capture the reality of a human figure not in a conventionally realistic way but in the way we perceive (at a glance) the whole person in space from a distance. This quest led him to make from memory extremely small sculptures on proportionally large bases.

After World War II, Giacometti found that he could retain that particular sense of reality by making tall figures extremely thin and without detail. Thus he arrived at his mature style, which consisted of tall, attenuated figures with irregular, rough-hewn surfaces. Sutured with existentialist drama and energy, his typical female figures are stiff, frontal, and immobile, whereas male figures act in some way, primarily through walking (as in Walking Man) but also by gesturing (as in Man Pointing). All of Giacometti’s figures are characterized by a dichotomous sense of groundedness that appears to contradict their tenuously thin limbs; this is expressed by their large, heavy feet that are rooted to a base raised only slightly off the floor.

During the postwar period, Giacometti also produced groups of smaller figures, sometimes arranged in planned environments, such as City Square II. Many observers of the time interpreted a powerful existential content in these postwar works, and his figures do evoke a sense of alienation and loneliness in the tradition of Jean Paul Sartre, who wrote several critical essays on Giacometti’s work. This sensation perhaps most pronounced in figure groups such as City Square.
II, in which four men walk in aimless futility around a solitary, immobile female figure. It should be noted, however, that Giacometti claimed to have no existential meaning in mind when creating these works, and in more recent years many scholars have seen such interpretations as too narrow and limiting.

The years 1946–52 were productive ones for Giacometti. He developed his mature style and—after many years with few exhibitions and little financial reward—attained success greater than at the height of his Surrealist period. After 1952 Giacometti continued to concentrate on tall walking male and rigid female figures, with the latter being the most common subject. Among the best of his female figures are the Women of Venice.

Also important to Giacometti’s oeuvre are the many busts he completed, especially those done after 1950. The key model during this time was the artist’s brother, Diego, who also served for many years as Giacometti’s indispensable assistant. The busts have varying degrees of naturalism, and Giacometti never desired to achieve a conventional individual likeness. However, he did want his portraits to convey to the viewer a lifelike presence, and to do that he felt it important to capture the model’s gaze. The 1965 busts of Diego and the photographer Elie Lotar are good examples of this effect. These late busts, along with a series of the artist’s wife Annette (from 1962 to 1965), are some of Giacometti’s most expressive. Perhaps the most evocative is Elie Lotar III. In this bust—the artist’s final work—the head rises from a body that looks like it was formed by hardened flowing lava. Lotar gazes at us in silence and creates around himself an almost holy aura, an effect much like that of the ancient Egyptian statues Giacometti so admired.

From 1948 until his death in 1966, Giacometti’s stature in the art world grew, with several solo exhibitions in Europe and the United States. Since his death admiration for his work has only increased, and today he is recognized not only for his importance to the development of modern sculpture, but also for his unique contribution to the figurative tradition.

JOHN ALFORD

See also Surrealist Sculpture

Biography


Selected Works

1926–27 Spoon Woman; bronze; Alberto Giacometti Foundation, Zurich, Switzerland
1927–29 Gazing Head; marble; Alberto Giacometti Foundation, Zurich, Switzerland
1930 Suspended Ball; wood, iron, filament; private collection, Paris, France
1931–32 No More Play; marble, wood, bronze; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., United States
1932 Point to the Eye; wood, metal; Musée Nationale d’Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France
1932 Woman with Her Throat Cut; bronze; Alberto Giacometti Foundation, Zurich, Switzerland
1932–33 Palace at Four A.M.; wood, glass, string, wire; Museum of Modern Art, New York City, United States
1934 The Invisible Object (Hands Holding the Void); plaster; Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut, United States; bronze cast: National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., United States
1947 Man Pointing; bronze; Museum of Modern Art, New York City, United States
1947 Walking Man; bronze; Alberto Giacometti Foundation, Zurich, Switzerland
1948 City Square II; bronze; private collection, List family, New York City, United States; another version: National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., United States
1950 The Forest (Composition with Seven Figures and a Head); bronze; Kunsthhaus, Zurich, Switzerland
1954 Large Head of Diego; bronze; Alberto Giacometti Foundation, Zurich, Switzerland
1956 Women of Venice; bronze; editions of nine different works in various locations, including Woman of Venice III, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California, United States
1965 Elie Lotar III; bronze; private collection, Switzerland
Further Reading

Alberto Giacometti: A Retrospective Exhibition (exhib. cat.), New York: Praeger, 1974
Lord, James, Giacometti, a Biography, New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1985
Schneider, Angela (editor), Alberto Giacometti: Sculpture, Painting, Drawings, New York: Prestel, 1994

MAN POINTING

Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966)

1947

bronze

h. 1.79 m

Museum of Modern Art, New York City, United States

Alberto Giacometti created Man Pointing during his prolific postwar period, when he began to make his famous tall, thin statues of standing men and women. Although the pose in Man Pointing is unique in the artist’s oeuvre, the sculpture well reflects the new direction taken by Giacometti at this time, in which he sought to capture the way we perceive a figurative gestalt, all at once and at a distance. Giacometti’s figures are painfully attenuated and loosely modeled such that the viewer perceives each figure as thin, light in weight, and void of detail. One would expect such an approach to result in a certain remoteness, and it does. Yet Man Pointing, in particular, also has an active sense of vitality and a telling physical presence.

Man Pointing was one of the key sculptures that Giacometti completed for a solo exhibition in 1948 at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York City, where for the first time, this work and other postwar sculptures were shown in public. The show was a success, and as a result, Giacometti’s new work became well known in the English-speaking world a few years before it did elsewhere, although he lived and worked in Paris.

The gesturing pose of Man Pointing resembles that of a speaking figure or—as a photo taken of the work in the street outside Giacometti’s studio suggests—a policeman directing traffic. The elongated, slender figure (barely larger than the armature in places) has a rough surface that conveys dynamism, but might also suggest decayed flesh. Although the narrow head has the indistinct facial features of a distant figure, the drooping shapes above the eyes convey sadness, an effect particularly pronounced when strong lighting casts deep shadows. One feature unique to this work among the artist’s male figures is an unambiguous male sex organ. Perhaps Giacometti in some sense portrayed himself (a notion strengthened by the resemblance of the figure to the artist, who had a similar thick mass of hair and a furrowed face).

Nobody knows why or for whom the man points. It is known that sometime between 1947 and 1951 Giacometti combined a bronze cast of Man Pointing with a plaster male figure of similar height to form a two-figure composition on one plaster base. A photograph exists of Group of Two Men (as it was titled), but the sculpture no longer exists. In the composition, Man Pointing has his left arm around—although not touching—the other figure, which has an immobile stance very similar to the typical Giacometti female pose. One assumes that the pointing man’s gesture is for the other figure, and the grouping implies a relationship of sorts. Interestingly, the pointing figure seems more isolated gesturing for his unresponsive rigid companion than he does alone as Man Pointing.

Many observers in the postwar period saw in Giacometti’s work a visual expression of existentialist ideas. At the time, the philosophy was very prominent in Paris, and existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre wrote an essay for the artist’s 1948 Pierre Matisse Gallery show in New York City. For Sartre and others, Giacometti’s works conveyed the despair, futility, and loneliness of the human condition. One can see such solitude and futility in Man Pointing, particularly in the way he points in isolation and in the way the figure—with heavy feet that seem imprisoned within the bronze base—seems unable to move, implying permanent separation from others. One also senses sadness in the sagging face, vulnerability in the frail body, and perhaps inner emptiness in the lack of individualized features. One could also argue, however, that the pointing figure (by gesturing) conveys a sense of hope and expectation, rather than despair. Yet even this can be interpreted in existential terms because the striving hints at the existential idea that one can—through taking individual responsibility—find worth in an ultimately meaningless life.
In more recent years, certain scholars have seen purely existential interpretations as a product of the times and no longer adequate or appropriate. For some, such preoccupations leave little room for other meanings and ignore much of the sculpture’s formal aspects. It should be noted that Giacometti said he never intended to convey in his work any particular philosophy or to suggest conditions such as solitude. Many current writers, however, continue to use this language in their observations of Giacometti’s work. The disagreements over interpretation point to the subtle complexity and depth of Man Pointing. Indeed, it can be viewed on many levels and can convey seemingly contradictory ideas. The figure appears fragile, remote, and lonely, and his face reveals timidity and doubt, yet he holds his head high and gestures with a certain amount of confidence and anticipation. He seems grounded and unable to move, yet comforted by his rootedness to the earth.

Man Pointing belongs to the figurative tradition in Western art. Similar poses, for example, are found in certain Classical Greek and Roman statues and in works by Auguste Rodin, particularly his St. John the Baptist Preaching (1878). Of course, numerous artists in the history of Western art have used the human figure—just as Giacometti has done here—to convey something significant about the human condition, but one particularly finds the stylistic characteristics of Man Pointing (for example, distortion, expressive irregular surfaces, and/or evocative content) in the figurative sculpture of modern or contemporary artists such as Rodin, Medardo Rosso, Wilhelm Lehmbruck, Germaine Richier, César, George Segal, and Magdalena Abakanowicz, among others.

Perhaps more than any other modern artist, however, Giacometti owes much to non-Western and pre-Classical ancient art, which impressed him greatly. He particularly appreciated the stylized and frontal aspects of ancient Egyptian statues, which he thought captured physical reality better than more conventionally realistic works. One sees something similar in Man Pointing, where the artist used stylistic means (rather than conventional realism) to portray his own vision of reality.

JOHN ALFORD

Further Reading

Sartre, Jean-Paul, “The Search for the Absolute,” in Exhibition of Sculptures, Paintings, Drawings [by Alberto Giacometti], New York: Pierre Matisse Gallery, 1948

GIAMBOLOGNA 1529–1608  Flemish, active in Italy

Giamboologna (elided from Giovanni Bologna, the Italianized form of the sculptor’s real name, Jean [de] Bologne) was trained as a carver of alabaster by the important sculptor Jacques du Broeucq while in his native French Flanders. Du Broeucq taught Giamboologna the technique of carving in an Italianate, classicizing style. This technique was reinforced when Giamboologna traveled to Rome in 1550, where he made models of Greco-Roman and Renaissance sculpture. He was particularly impressed by the technical and anatomical skill of Hellenistic statues, such as the Farnese Bull (3rd century BCE; excavated as recently as 1545). Michelangelo criticized a model that Giamboologna showed him as having been too highly finished before the basic pose had been established. Giamboologna