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GIACOMETTI AT THE TATE

After 50 years, the prodigal
son returns

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The genius and torment of Alberto Giacometti

By Lara Feigel

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

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

Now

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

Giacometti was born in a remote Swiss valley in 1901, the son of a successful, conventionally realist Swiss painter. He made his first sculpture of his brother Diego at the age of 13, and swiftly dedicated himself to art. In 1922 he moved to Paris, where he discovered surrealism, becoming a friend of André Breton. He stopped modelling from life and devoted himself to dreamlike visions, claiming in 1933 that for some years he had "only realized sculptures which have presented themselves to my mind in a finished state".

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

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

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

“Ever tried.

Ever failed. No matter.

Try again.

Fail again.

Fail better”



Even at his most successful, this was not so much an artistic career as it was an endless, inevitably failed attempt to capture life that hovered on the verge of obsessive madness. "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better," wrote Beckett, perhaps the friend whose vision of the world most closely resembled his own. "I do not work to create beautiful paintings or sculpture," Giacometti explained. "Art is only a means of seeing. No matter what I look at, it all surprises and eludes me, and I am not too sure of what I see." Though he was friends with Picasso, the two were never really comfortable with each other's work. Picasso criticized Giacometti for his lack of range, mocking his endless repetition, while Giacometti dismissed Picasso for creating mere decoration, unconvinced of the necessity of the underlying quest.

The attempt to reflect the reality of vision did not only result in the elongated figures for which he is most famous, and the Tate exhibition will demonstrate his versatility and range. There are more than 2,000 drawings

and prints in the archive, and a handful of these will be on show, including some of the images he half-doodled into books. There will be lamps and vases, there will be paintings, and there will be the full range of sculptural forms – not all of which were thin.

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

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

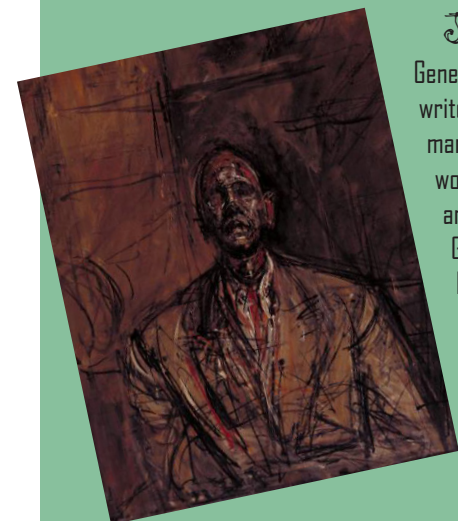
Painter Man

Though renowned as a sculptor, Giacometti was also a printmaker, a draughtsman, a designer of decorative objects – and a painter. The Tate exhibit will include several of his portrait paintings, some of which have never been exhibited in the UK.



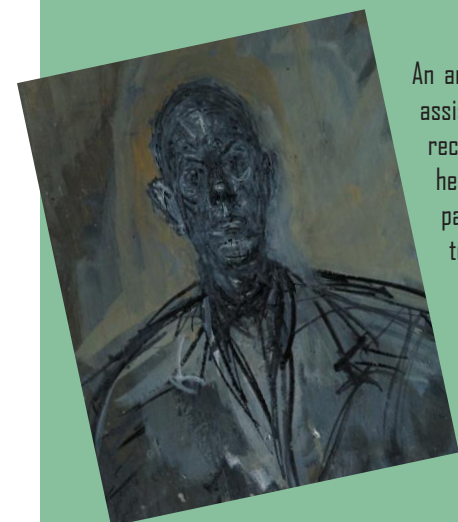
Seated Man (1949)

Like his sculptures, Giacometti's portraits emerged from an intense scrutiny of his subjects, and a process of continually reworking the image in order to record his shifting visual impressions. Seated Man depicts his brother Diego, one of Giacometti's most frequent models, but even this familiar face became an object of investigation and discovery for the artist.



Jean Genet (1955)

Genet was among the leading French writers of the twentieth century. Like many of Giacometti's portraits, this work uses a reduced palette of colors, and gradually builds its likeness of Genet with a series of small tentative brushstrokes. This technique creates a tense, shifting outline around the figure, which parallels the rough, highly-worked surfaces of Giacometti's sculptures.



Diego (1959)

An artist in his own right and a lifelong assistant to his brother, Diego was a recurrent subject of Giacometti's. Here he is depicted alone against a sparsely painted grey backdrop, infused with tones of ochre and sage green. The background is built up in layers, so that the thinly coated periphery of the painting, where patches of the canvas remain exposed, give way to a more densely painted center from which the figure of Diego emerges.

FIVE ICONS OF BRITISH DESIGN

From public structures to flamboyant fashion, perfectly formed household products to streamlined sports cars, British designers have built a reputation for innovation, imagination and style. Here are six legendary, 20th Century British designs that have become icons in their own right.

SUPERMARINE SPITFIRE

(1936)



The Spitfire was designed as a short-range, high-performance, single-seat fighter aircraft by R.J. Mitchell, and was used extensively by the Royal Air Force during World War II. The Spitfire continues to be popular among enthusiasts; nearly 60 remain airworthy, and many more are static exhibits in aviation museums.

THE MINISKIRT

(1961)



Six decades after its debut, and with Mary Quant, the woman widely credited with inventing it now 90, the mini remains a wardrobe staple worldwide. A hemline half-way up the thigh is no longer synonymous with rebellion, but the style remains as popular as ever, with the likes of Kate Moss and Sienna Miller having lately given it a contemporary twist.

PENGUIN BOOKS

(1936)

Penguin revolutionized publishing in the 1930s through its inexpensive paperbacks, bringing high-quality paperback fiction and non-fiction to the mass market. Penguin opted for the simple appearance of three horizontal bands, color-coded according to series, with the author and title printed in Gill Sans. The initial design was created by 21-year-old office junior Edward Young, who also drew the first version of the Penguin logo.

PENGUIN
BOOKS

PERSUASION

JANE AUSTEN



THE MINI COOPER

(1958)



Sir Alec Issigonis hadn't even seen a car until he was 12 years old. But at the age of 50, he began designing one of the most iconic vehicles ever produced: the classic Mini. Created with sporty performance and charming looks and proportions, the best-selling British automobile in history was perhaps one of the most ideal cars ever produced.

THE K2 TELEPHONE BOX

(1924)



The traditional British red telephone box was the result of a competition in 1924, with the winning entry designed by architect Sir Giles Gilbert Scott. Despite a reduction in their numbers in recent years, kiosks can still be seen in many places throughout the UK, and in current or former British colonies around the world.