

London Calling: The London Issue

THREE SIX FIVE

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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 bod-

ies, making them resemble the women in his paintings.

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



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

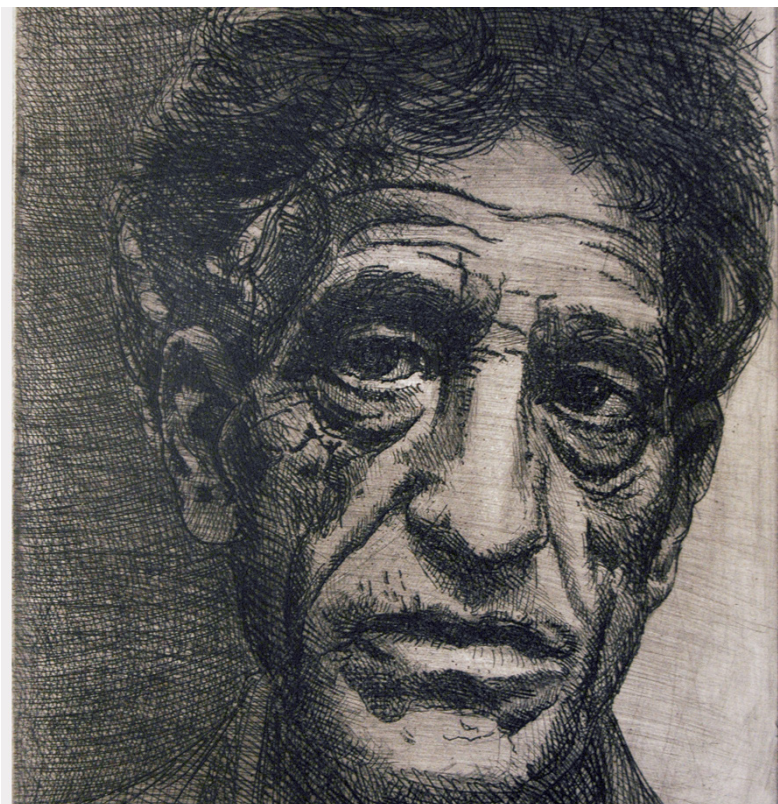
During the second world war, Giacometti returned to Switzerland. There he met Annette Arm, the ingenuous and adoring girl who seems to have decided almost immediately that she would share his life, and waited patiently for him to agree. Living in a hotel with her in Geneva, he sculpted smaller and smaller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

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

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

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

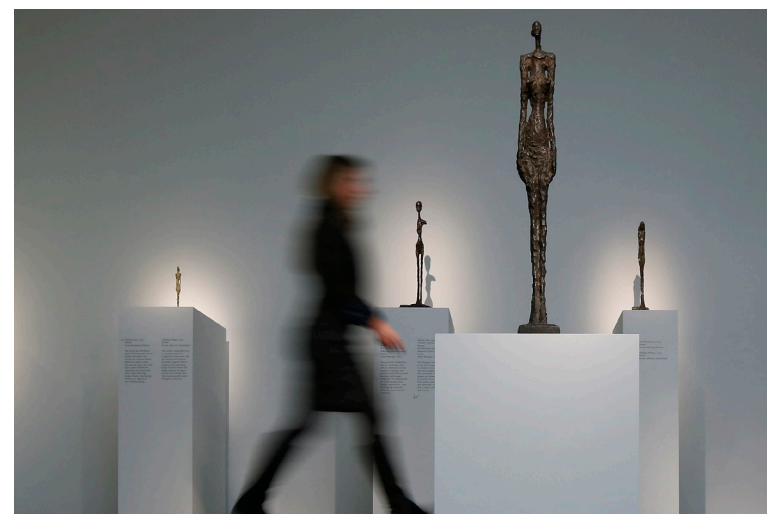
The attempt to reflect the reality of vision did not only result in the elongated figures for which he is most famous, and the Tate exhibition will demonstrate his versatility and range. There are more than 2,000 drawings and prints in the archive, and a handful of these will be on show, including some 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.



An etching of Giacometti by Czech artist Jan Hladik.



Jean Genet 1954 or 1955 • Alberto Giacometti 1901-1955 • Accepted by HM Government in lieu of tax and allocated to the Tate Gallery 1987 <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/work/T04905>



A museumgoer walks past several Giacometti sculptures at the Bucerius Kunstforum in Hamburg, Germany. (Photo by Philipp Guelland)

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.

5 Things to Know About Alberto Giacometti

1. He is an era-defining sculptor

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



The artwork of Alberto Giacometti titled 'l'Homme qui marche I' (The Man Who Walks), pictured on the Swiss 100 Franc banknote. (AP Photo/KYODO/Gregory Hejblum)

2. He is best known for his human figures

Following the Second World War, Giacometti began to focus on elongated single figures, often walking or standing, as well as figural groupings in different spatial situations. These figures became associated with existentialist ideas and a sense of post-war trauma. As one critic commented, “these figures evoke lone trees in winter that have lost their foliage.” The image of a walking man preoccupied Giacometti for the rest of his career.



Two women examine the sculpture, *L'Homme qui marche I*, by Alberto Giacometti during a preview exhibition for Sotheby's Spring Evening Sale of Impressionist and Modern Art, in New York. (AP Photo/Jodie Jacobson, File)

3. His work often includes his friends and family

Giacometti preferred to use models who he knew personally, including his brother Diego, his wife Annette and his lover Caroline. Rejecting classical ideas of perspective, he also often recorded his models from memory. “Diego has posed ten thousand times for me,” Giacometti said. “When he poses I don’t recognize him.”



Diego 1959 by Alberto Giacometti 1901-1966



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

5. Much of his work focuses on the human head

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

4. He worked from the same studio for most of his career

As a young artist, Giacometti moved into his studio in Paris — a small, cluttered space far from Parisian glamour. “I planned on moving on as soon as I could because it was too small – just a hole,” he said. Despite this, Giacometti continued to work from the same space for the rest of his career and hosted many cultural figures there, including philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, novelist Samuel Beckett and actress Marlene Dietrich.



'Annette IV', a bronze sculpture cast in 1962 by Alberto Giacometti, appears to keep a watchful eye on the gallery as visitors view a display of avant-garde works at the Art Institute of Chicago. (AP Photo/Charles Benoit)

Reader's poll: The 5 best album covers ... ever

The album cover dates from 1939, when Columbia Records art director Alex Steinweiss decided his label's offerings might find a wider audience with some added visual appeal. Since the very first Steinweiss design, an album of showtunes by Rogers and Hart, album covers have represented the apotheosis and nadir of graphic design, and have touched all points in between.

Last month, we asked our readers to select the best album covers of all time. In the age of the digital download, the album cover is sadly a lost art – which probably explains why 90 percent of the albums that readers selected come from the 1960s and the 1970s.

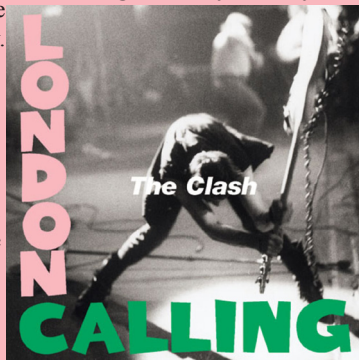
Here are the Top 5:

5. The Clash, 'London Calling'

(1979, CBS Records)

Designer: Ray Lowry

Pennie Smith was snapping photos of the Clash at New York's Palladium when she captured one of the most iconic images in rock history. Paul Simonon was annoyed by the relatively quiet audience, so he began smashing his bass guitar against the floor. Clash singer Joe Strummer loved the photo, but Smith tried to convince him it was too out-of-focus for the cover. The pink and green lettering of the design was an intentional echo of Elvis Presley's 1956 debut album.



4. The Beatles, 'Abbey Road'

(1969, Apple Records)

Designer: John Kosh

Beatles nuts who believed that Paul McCartney died around 1967 and was replaced by a doppelgänger found a lot to examine on this cover. They saw the picture as a funeral procession: John as the preacher, Ringo as the mourner, George as the gravedigger and barefooted Paul as the corpse. Iain Macmillan shot the cover on August 8th, 1969, outside of Abbey Road studios. The shoot involved just six frames and 10 minutes of work. Tourists flock to the spot, and it's been parodied countless times – sometimes by members of the Beatles themselves.



3. Nirvana, 'Nevermind'

(1993, Geffen records)

Designer: Robert Fisher

Spencer Elden, the naked baby on the cover, said he feels weird about his bizarre role in history. "It's kind of creepy that many people have seen me naked," he said. But what does this cover mean? "Kurt was intellectual and deep-thinking about his work," says Fisher. "I must assume that the naked baby symbolized his own innocence, the water represented an alien environment, and the hook and dollar bill his creative life entering into the corporate world of rock music."

2. Pink Floyd - Dark Side Of The Moon

(1973, Harvest records)

Designer: Hipgnosis



Hipgnosis had designed several of Pink Floyd's previous albums, with controversial results: the band's record company had reacted with confusion when faced with the collective's non-traditional designs that omitted words. Their initial inspiration for Dark Side was a photo of a prism on top of some sheet music. It was black and white, but a color beam was going through it. Hipgnosis presented the prism design along with some others ideas to the band (including a design that featured the Marvel Comics hero the Silver Surfer).

1. The Beatles - Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band

(1967, Apple Records)

Designer: Peter Blake



The cover was originally going to show the Beatles playing in a park. That slowly evolved into the final concept, where they stand amidst cardboard cutouts of their heroes. The band originally planned on including Leo Gorcey, Gandhi, Jesus Christ and Adolf Hitler. Common sense kicked Hitler off the cover, the still-lingering bitterness of John Lennon's "bigger than Jesus" comment eliminated Jesus and Gandhi got the boot over concerns that India wouldn't print the album. Actor Gorcey requested \$400 for his likeness, a decision he probably lived to regret.