

Giacometti.

La Scultura

GALLERIA • BORGHESE

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Giacometti. La scultura
Rome, Galleria Borghese
5th February – 25th May 2014
curated by Anna Coliva and Christian Klemm

The Galleria Borghese, a shrine of priceless antique masterpieces, hosts for the very first time the tragic of modern sculpture embodied in the work of one of the greatest 20th century artists: Alberto Giacometti.

PRESS RELEASE

From 5th February to 25th May 2014 the Special Department for the Historical, Artistic and Ethno-anthropological Heritage and Museums of the city of Rome, chaired by Daniela Porro, presents the exhibition *Giacometti. La Scultura*, curated by Anna Coliva and located in the halls of Galleria Borghese.

Under the high patronage of the President of the Republic, the exhibition is promoted by the Ministry for Cultural Affairs and Tourism and organised and produced by Arthemisia Group. Curated by Anna Coliva and Christian Klemm, a distinguished scholar of Giacometti's work and the author of the most important monographs on the artist, the exhibition bring to Rome the undisputed and dramatic art of one of the greatest artists of the 20th century.

Villa Pinciana, a noble setting for numberless masterpieces, is by definition the favoured location for sculpture, thanks to its collection featuring sublime examples of Greek and Roman times, the Renaissance, the Baroque and the neoclassicism.

The destination of this journey through the centuries is the sculptural interpretation of the human figure in the 20th century epitomised by the artistic work of one of the greatest artists of the 20th century: Alberto Giacometti.

The desire to explore the tragic of modern sculpture compared to classical antiquity has arisen from an investigation on Giacometti's poetics, which was strongly emblematic of a century when great political, historical and cultural turmoil took place. The exhibition curators chose to explore the way in which the artists' vision changes when it tackles the representation of the human being.

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The exhibition is therefore an opportunity to explore the artist – a visionary, oneiric, surrealist figure that left an unforgettable mark in art – and above all to show his art “conversing” with the masterpieces on display in the Galleria: the white, curvy shape of *Femme couchée qui rêve* (1929) in which Canova’s *Paolina* (1805/1808) can be glimpsed, whose face is mirrored by the *Tête qui regarde* (1928) on the other side; the heavy step of the *Homme qui marche* (1947), echoing Aeneas’ weary step under Anchises’ weight (1619); the *Femme qui marche* (1932/1936), as dark and mysterious as the basalt sphinxes in the Egyptian hall; the unstable balance of the *Homme qui chavire* (1950), off-axis and on the verge of losing its balance like Bernini’s *David* (1623/1624).

In the Galleria setting, the 40 exhibited works - bronzes, plaster works and drawings - release the burning energy of Giacometti’s art, which investigates the lively depth of his subjects by carving their soul until the human figure is “stripped to the bone”: this is the tragic modernity conveyed to visitors, who will perceive the way in which Giacometti’s sculptures create around them the volumetric halo of an immaterial frame, invisible yet perceivable.

THE EXHIBITION

Surrounded by the visual celebration of Galleria Borghese, Giacometti’s representation of mankind highlights the man and his fatal failure that becomes the tragic achievement of modernity.

As opposed to the past, here the greatness of man along the centuries is glorified and the exhibition explores the boundless complexity of the human being – also through the metamorphosis undergone by the Galleria.

1. Hall – *The sculptures for the Chase Manhattan Plaza*

The *Chase Manhattan Plaza* has been reproduced in the Hall welcoming visitors at their arrival, complete with the following works by Giacometti: *Standing Woman I* (1960), *Large Woman II* (1960), *Walking Man I* (1960).

This work combines the three most important themes of his later production, but also the different aspects featured by previous compositions, such as *La Place* and *La Foret*.

The tiny figures created by the sculptor during the war to convey the impression of a person seen from a great distance turn into figures that are larger than their life-size.

Creating monumental sculptures for public spaces has always been every sculptor’s aspiration and for Giacometti, too, this assignment brought with it the nostalgic aura of an enterprise he had ventured upon several times, although none of his projects had ever become reality.

The exhibited work was executed upon architect Gordon Bunshaft’s invitation to realise monumental sculptures for Chase Manhattan Plaza to be displayed in the area in front of the 60-floor skyscraper where the bank of the same name is based.

2. Canova Hall – *Plastic perception*

Alberto Giacometti’s extraordinary talent for shapes emerges very early on and at seventeen only he already makes masterful drawings. However, becoming a professional sculptor doesn’t appear to be an easy task. Nevertheless, following a first crisis in 1920/21 and his subsequent departure from figurative art in order to resort to cubism, his art turns towards the discovery of a fully personal form. In 1928 *Observing Head* (1928) came to life, on display in the Canova

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Hall beside *Paolina Borghese*. This is a formally fully accomplished work, featuring extreme essentiality, whose pure abstraction conjures the material figure.

This hall also displays *Reclining Woman who Dreams* (1929), *Man (Apollo)* (1929), *Reclining Woman* (1929); these works, when compared to the organic fullness, the tense muscles and the purity of contours in Canova's work, highlight Giacometti's inclination to lightness and concave, hollow shapes – a rather unusual thing for a sculptor.

3. David Hall – *The sight*

In David Hall, Bernini uses his art to “instruct” us on how to perceive the intensity of Giacometti's sculptures: David's static energy contrasts with the swinging movement of the *Swaying Man*.

What the modern artist perceives as something temporary because it is perpetually moving, for Bernini it can hold its position for a single instant. The rotating movement applied to a highly dramatic situation is radically transformed by the Swiss sculptor and shown as a universal condition of the human being. The surface of the object, full of marks to make the viewer's eye move along it, testifies to Giacometti phenomenological research in his attempt to make the viewer perceive the sight process.

4. Apollo and Daphne Hall – *Movement in stillness*

Evoking movement as a physical and psychic emotion in sculptures that stand still and motionless: this is Bernini's fundamental aspiration, whose most epitomising work in this sense is *Apollo and Daphne*.

Giacometti is aware of this contradiction from an early age: in his 1921 great self-portrait after coming back from Italy, he is still under the influence of tympana in classical temples and he represents himself in the running gait (with one knee bent and the other raised) of Medusa, whose gaze freezes whoever dares look at her.

He changes perspective by resorting to perception: it is the ceaseless eye movements that are supposed to make the original creation alive by imagining the shapes.

His first work along the same lines is *Standing Woman* of 1948, sculpted in the aftermath of the Second World War when the *Femmes debouts* increase in number. The group of *Femmes de Venise* stands out from the rest; here, as well as in the four subsequent *Grandes Femmes*, Giacometti investigates different possibilities for sketching the woman figure.

Some 1956 works belonging to the *Femmes de Venise* (1956) group are on display in the Apollo and Daphne hall. Through these sculptures the artist investigates different possibilities for sketching the woman figure and, similarly to Daphne turning into a tree, in Giacometti's women the metamorphosis is also linked to a universal presence: the tall and slim forms are anchored to the ground through huge feet, resembling roots, and surfaces are as chapped as tree barks. The small heads are prospectively thoughtful; an uninterrupted flow pushes upwards the whole shape.

5. Emperors Hall – *A sculpture as fragment*

The fact that representations of body parts can be considered fully accomplished works of art dates back to the discovery of some ancient sculptures among Rome's ruins: more specifically, a bust that, as per Michelangelo's instructions, was never completed, but left in the Belvedere court in Vatican, where it became the favourite subject matter of research for sculptors in bud.

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Later on, from Rodin onwards, the expressive representation of the bust represents a peculiar challenge, so much so that Giacometti also exhibits a bust for the first time at the *Salon des Indépendants* in 1925, his first “abstract” sculpture, so to speak. Shortly afterwards he creates another composition reminiscent of cubism and clearly inspired by the fragment of a Sumerian sculpture with two clasped hands. Along these lines, in 1932 Giacometti executes *Main prise* – a wooden hand stuck in a gearwheel – whereas his work *The Hand* displayed in Rome dates back to 1947, when the artist resumes this topic with a sharper expressive drama following his return to figurative art and the experience of the war.

As he later stated, the hand’s splayed fingers reminded the artist of an arm detached from the body he saw in 1940, when he was fleeing from Paris.

Giacometti’s chapped and ragged surfaces appear here for the first time: their link to reality is sharp and clear, since they represent gruesome wounds. This is soon to become an expressive means distancing itself from figurative art.

The Roman busts too – whose versions of the 18th century are on display in this hall – were inspired by the cult of the dead: the myth of Pluto’s abduction of Proserpina, the goddess of fertility, represented by Bernini in the dramatic group of sculptures, lies at the core of the Mysteries of Eleusis, in which the initiate can experience the overcoming of death.

Cube (1933), *Invisible Object* (1934 - 35) and *The Leg* (1958) are also on display in this hall beside the Roman busts.

6. Hermaphrodite Hall – *Spoon Woman and Woman with Her Throat Cut*

Female figures seem to always feature in the work of Giacometti, who in his first *grande femme* creates a different and unique female shape, the *Spoon Woman*. In his first “grande femme”, followed by others marking one of the peaks of his career, the artist combines the two different sources of inspiration of his first period, the avant-garde: the formal rigour of Cubism combined with the hieratic symmetry and bold expressive representation of African sculpture.

In this work the shape of the “spoon” is used to effectively conjure the idea of a woman whose only presence is her trace left in the title. It is precisely the title that stirs a sense of initial bewilderment triggered by the contrast with the represented object; the lack of human traits turns the tortured human being in an instrument of torture. The concave lap reminds of a primitive goddess of fertility with its forward and backward movements, opening and closing in front of the viewer. The pure forms of life, breasts and head, break out upwards, floating like an apparition. The elusive concave emptiness and the dominating oval pattern pushing in opposite directions seem to portray a nearly erotic frustration, similar to the effect evoked by *Hermaphrodite*.

Between the ancient figure lying on a marble mattress and the Swiss artist’s not less unusual *Woman with Her Throat Cut* there is a *fil rouge* linking the two: they both portray a nearly disturbing contrast between concave and convex shapes; their limbs move in opposite directions and – a particularly odd aspect – they appear in two opposing conditions.

The former is lying down almost asleep, whereas the latter, with its unstable, dead limbs, looks dead and trodden on, but seen from a distance it looks like a creature threateningly rushing away.

7. Aeneas and Anchises Hall – *The iconic condensation. The Walking Man*

The Walking Man was originally a sketch for a monument commemorating the Communist Member of Parliament Gabriel Péri, but it has become Alberto Giacometti’s most famous

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sculpture, whose intent was to make the dead man's soul come back and enjoy the daylight. The man's hesitation in making the first step transforms this hieroglyphical figure, dating back to the origin of civilisation, into something subjective and precarious.

Through his elusive and nearly gravityless creations Giacometti tells us of the ancient tradition of representing the human being: the anxious gait of the figure, its fragility and the humble matter it is made of resembles the condition itself of the human being. His transience, made of dignity and weakness, is the "unrelenting" reality draining the human being, because it never concedes a final and total cancellation.

As a matter of fact, his suspended figures always maintain a lowest common denominator making them still recognizable as human features. They no longer represent anything physical and in other words they are therefore reduced to "signs".

The great work *The Walking Man* of 1947 has remained unique: its message could no longer be further processed or elaborated. The walking figures created in the three following years have a completely different character.

8. Egyptian Hall – *Egyptian origins*

Throughout all his life Giacometti was fascinated by the perfection and rigour of Egyptian art, the embodiment of "style" itself; when he was still a teenager, Giacometti held a lecture on the superiority of Egyptian sculpture to the Greek one.

After seeing some original Egyptian works for the first time in Florence in 1920, he then often copied those works of art.

Later on, he travelled to Rome to study some further samples of this art and, back home, he made the great self-portrait with the sketchy traits of Akhenaton's face.

The Egyptian Hall of Galleria Borghese hosts *Walking Woman* of 1932, a bizarre work that holds no ties with the other surrealist works by the artist. This figure, featuring an extreme formal perfection, is closer to the *objets décoratifs* that Giacometti had executed for the Jean-Michel Frank *ensemblier* and his elegant *boutique* in Faubourg Saint-Honoré, partly drawing from the Egyptian inspiration, too.

His return to figurative arts also means that the dialogue with Egyptian sculpture becomes a core topic for him; in 1936 he makes the Egyptian-like portrait of his partner Isabel.

9. Vestibule

Giacometti has always made drawings, from a very early age and for the rest of his life, without any breaks. It was his main means to investigate reality and rapidly capture its truest essence before the apparition disappeared or faded into a blurry memory or before it became something different altogether.

The watercolour *Roma* (1921), on display in the exhibition, takes us back to the artist's youth and his happy stay in Rome, with its numberless artistic experiences. Alberto had learnt the watercolour technique from his father but he used it with freshness and inventiveness, as in this airy and lively composition.

However, this new vision too, although different but nonetheless fascinating, deserved to be thoroughly investigated and committed to paper in an endless game transforming reality into a marvellous entity, given the impossibility to understand it fully. An original and fascinating adventure constantly springing out of an apparently trivial object or from the faces of the dear ones, like his brother Diego or his wife Annette, patient models who posed for him numberless times, but whom Giacometti declared no longer to recognise, by observing them so much and for so long. This was the origin of *Portrait de Madina Visconti* (1932), *Head of Annette* (1959)

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and *Head of Professor Corbetta* (1962), showing to the viewer both the free loose trait and the one featuring a more rigid structure of imaginary dots linked to one another through straight lines.

10. Lanfranco's Loggia - Busts

The exhibition ends in the magnificent Lanfranco Hall, where the mythical figures of the frescoed vault converse with Bernini's works and with some of the most famous busts by Giacometti, such as *Lothar III* (1965), the *Bust of Man* of 1961, and the beautiful *Bust of Annette* (1961).

If Bernini's lively and extrovert characters and Giacometti's barely sketched apparitions seem to represent two opposing extremes of European figurative sculpture, their respective busts share a surprising, intimate affinity. They are both trying to capture vitality, movement, momentary dimension and engagement with the viewer, expressed through the gaze.

Heads and busts represent the beginning and the end of Giacometti's sculpture. Following his visionary stage portraying incorporeal figures (from 1947 to 1950), the artist inaugurates a new beginning that will be fundamental for this genre. In Diego's busts he returns to plastic mass. He starts off with quite realistic works along the lines of early Renaissance, which he had himself transformed and driven to several original and different directions through the adoption of phenomenology; his squashed heads in the shape of a disk are very famous. The busts on display feature a complete transformation of the traditional genre through a new style breaking apart the compactness of the body to express an ineffable vital unrest. The traces of the artist's fingers and the vision of him at work in front of the model are embedded in the work itself; when the viewer's eyes then follow the shape of the bust, its vital presence springs back to life again.

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