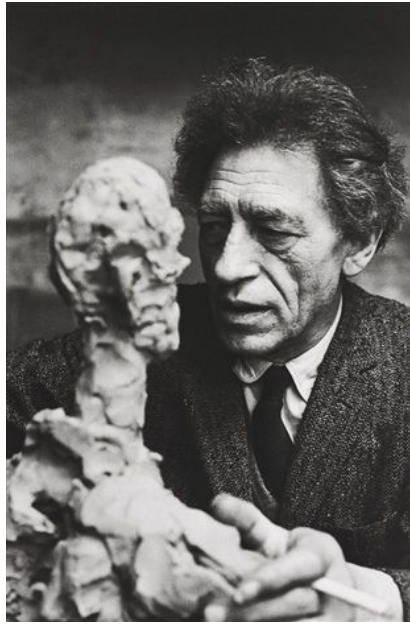


Alberto Giacometti: The Profile of a War Artist



Ariston Zhou

16 May 2019

Alberto Giacometti, one of the 20th century's most renowned sculptors, was born in Switzerland in 1901 and was involved in art at a young age due to his family's artistic influence. Alberto Giacometti's father, Giovanni, inspired his son's artistic mind. Later, Alberto decided to continue his artistic education by moving to Paris. During the 1930s, Giacometti became a part of the Surrealist movement, and he started working on sculptures and paintings with a dreamy and imaginative nature. Giacometti later split with the group when he became attracted to Existentialist movement, a new way to express the human form. Influenced by the emerging Existentialist artists, his small, thin figurative sculptures resonated with the atmosphere of suffering, pain, and misery that was felt in the post World War II era. These sculptures soon became famous, and many influential collectors and museums were trying to buy his work. Giacometti's sculptures and paintings continued to evolve in the 50s and the 60s, during which he matured stylistically. Giacometti received numerous awards, honors and retrospective exhibitions throughout the latter part of his life, and peacefully died in 1966 in Chur, Switzerland. Throughout his career, Giacometti experimented with many sculpture styles, but eventually matured in the realm of logic and reality in the post World War Two era in order to convey the social messages of the time.

Giacometti lived through one of the most tumultuous periods of modern European history, where he experienced horror and fear during both World War I and World War II. These life experiences eventually became instrumental to the maturation of his style, and what viewers see in his sculptures are representations of his inner emotions and judgment concerning the horrendous acts of human abuse and brutal killings.<sup>1</sup> Artists, such as Giacometti, created works

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<sup>1</sup> Bell, Richard H. "Giacometti's Art as a Judgment on Culture" [Giacometti's Art as a Judgment on Culture]. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (Winter, 1989), pp. 15- 20 47, no. 1 (February 9, 2018): 15-20. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/>

of art that pushed the abstract boundaries of the humans' consciousness. They used art as an escape from the violent world that was emerging in 20th century Europe and to address the anger and anxiety they felt. By using their creativity, the artists tapped into fantasy and dream imagery, and generated unique and original masterpieces in a variety of materials, showcasing their complex inner minds radically and symbolically.<sup>2</sup> This new emerging style is now recognized as "Surrealism", in which there was a sophisticated thinking process that uncovered emotions of anger and anxiety. Surrealist artists expressed these raw emotions through their works in a systematic and logical approach.<sup>3</sup>

When Giacometti joined the Surrealists in the early 1930s, he quickly made a name for himself by creating original sculptures which spread common themes at the time, such as the antiwar sentiment. Giacometti chose to abandon the sculpting of reduced human forms, in order to focus on the depiction of the truest human form, as he saw it. He was fascinated by the human body and how it could lead to essential discoveries on nature and perception. One of his inspirations during this period of transformation was Egyptian art. He was attracted to the upright and straightforward style of Egyptian sculpture, and which he exhibited in many of his mature works such as *Standing Woman* or *Walking Man*.<sup>4</sup> Another aspect of Egyptian art that was striking for him was the theme of tombs and mummies because one represented the fragility of life and while the other showed the totality of death. Giacometti was attentive to the idea that

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431989.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A11b4f36ced8671071dc54d69292d2f54&loggedin=true.

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<sup>2</sup> "Alberto Giacometti Spoon Woman 1926-27" [Alberto Giacometti Spoon Woman 1926-27]. Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Accessed May 8, 2019. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81046>.

<sup>3</sup> "Surrealism" [Surrealism]. The Art Story. Accessed May 5, 2019. <https://www.theartstory.org/movement-surrealism.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Mathews, Timothy. *Alberto Giacometti: The Art of Relation*. London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014.

life was fragile, and one will not know when death will suddenly reach you. In order to express his feelings and ideas, Giacometti went back to working with human models. In closely observing his model, he would often look right through the skin and flesh and pay much more attention to the bones. He was intrigued by ambiguous figures and images. Sometimes, the heads he created would look like an insect while the body resembled the erectness of trees. After the war, Giacometti continued his style while initiating the process on much larger sculptures, which ranged anywhere from five to eight feet in height. The new sculptures represented a drastic change in size from his pre-war sculptures which were as small as one to three inches.

Giacometti's style matured at the end of World War II period after spending the entire wartime in Switzerland. From experimenting with various mediums, he enjoyed working with bronze the most. Since plaster is soft, malleable, and quick to set, Giacometti found it easier to shape the sculpture models, giving him more flexibility when he made the models.<sup>5</sup> Plaster suited Giacometti's attention to detail well because the material is capable of capturing details, important to the final bronze casting. As the critics from Phillips Inc, a contemporary art auction house, said: "Giacometti treated plaster as a noble material, valuing it for its malleability and sense of fragility".<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Giacometti would often remake the plaster models for his sculptures over and over again until it was completely aesthetically pleasing to him. This meant that it had to fill the surrounding air and space, and most importantly convey philosophical ideas on life, death, and human nature. He was able to accomplish these things through the little details that he would often subtly place in his sculptures. Many of the seemingly unnoticeable features

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<sup>5</sup> McEwan, Olivia. "Seeing Beyond Alberto Giacometti's Bronzes." Hyperallergic. Last modified July 12, 2017. Accessed May 8, 2019. <https://hyperallergic.com/389821/tate-modern-alberto-giacometti/>.

<sup>6</sup> "Alberto Giacometti's Work in Plaster." Phillips. Last modified April 7, 2017. Accessed May 11, 2019. <https://www.phillips.com/article/10682378/alberto-giacometti-s-work-in-plaster>.

of the sculpture would not be discovered for many years. Giacometti's mature style consisted of unnaturally elongated limbs, the uniquely textured surface of the skin of the sculpture, and a very fragile frame for a human being. The artist chose to do so because the longer limbs showed fragility and thinness, which, in the physique of the human body, shows a lack of strength and maybe even a feeling of fear.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the artist's famous elongated limbs, Giacometti also incorporated an element of striding in most of his late works, and they all seemed to be strong and determined at heart despite their skinny limbs and bent backs.<sup>8</sup> When Giacometti tried to convey the ideas of a geometric frame, he would utilize a narrow head, a sharp nose, and long limbs. The sculptures he creates captures the viewers because of their irregularities. Also, "if we place these under the concept shared by Giacometti's judgment of our culture we, as viewers, can make a similar judgment of humanity and understand a single individual's struggles to break free from the geometric cage of our scientific world."<sup>9</sup> Following the logic and reasoning of the time, Giacometti started to use art as a realistic perception of the world, as opposed to a purely imaginative one.<sup>10</sup> Giacometti abandoned his old style of using solely his creativity and

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<sup>7</sup> Mathews, Timothy. *Alberto Giacometti: The Art of Relation*. London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Mathews, Timothy. *Alberto Giacometti: The Art of Relation*. London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Bell, Richard H. "Giacometti's Art as a Judgment on Culture" [Giacometti's Art as a Judgment on Culture]. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (Winter, 1989), pp. 15- 20 47, no. 1 (February 9, 2018): 15-20. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/431989.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A11b4f36ced8671071dc54d69292d2f54&loggedin=true>.  
*Note:* Published by Wiley on behalf of The American Society for Aesthetics

<sup>10</sup> Strout, Cushing. "N/A." In *American Political Science Review*. Previously published in *American Political Science Review*. June 1955, No.2 ed. Vol. 49. American Political Science Review. N.p.: American Political Science Association, 1955. 321-39. [https://www.jstor.org/stable/1951806?read-now=1&loggedin=true&seq=3#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/1951806?read-now=1&loggedin=true&seq=3#metadata_info_tab_contents).

imagination to create works and moved towards defining his sculptures with the rational world of science.<sup>11</sup>

Giacometti also focused on, besides the long limbs and the pointy nose, the rough and textured surface of the sculpture. The first detail one would notice when examining the surface of the artwork is the amount of uneven thumb sized streaks on the surface of the sculpture. These add to the complexity and a greater feeling of space and dimension, and Giacometti surfaced his works in such a manner because they represent the age associated with the theme of his artworks. The fascinating aspect of the sculptures is the fact that the sculptures can be admired from both afar and closeup. Giacometti's sculptures can be fascinating to look at from far away since it gives the viewer an impression of dominance and control. When studied alone, the sculpture itself is enough to magnetize and surround the light and air, and the textures would release a sensation of weakness, anxiety, or even sadness. Those feelings rushing through the viewers were the same as the ones gushing through Giacometti's mind at the time of the piece's creation.

Giacometti was initially a Surrealist, and *The Spoon Woman* (see Appendix A)<sup>12</sup> is one Giacometti's first major works during his Surrealist stage. The figure's geometric head, chest, and feet reflect the characteristics of Cubism, and its concave spoon stomach is likely to be influenced by the specific spoon carving techniques of the Dan culture in Africa.<sup>13</sup> *The Spoon Woman* is one of his first sculptures involving the simplified and geometric shapes of the human

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<sup>11</sup> Thackara, Tess. "Alberto Giacometti Abandoned Surrealist Success to Focus on the Human Body" [Alberto Giacometti Abandoned Surrealist Success to Focus on the Human Body]. Artsy. Last modified June 5, 2018. Accessed May 9, 2019. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-alberto-giacometti-abandoned-surrealist-success-focus-human-body>.

<sup>12</sup> "Alberto Giacometti Spoon Woman 1926-27" [Alberto Giacometti Spoon Woman 1926-27]. Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Accessed May 12, 2019. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81046>.

<sup>13</sup> "Alberto Giacometti Swiss, 1901-1966" [Alberto Giacometti Swiss, 1901-1966]. The Art Institute of Chicago. Last modified 2013. Accessed May 3, 2019. <http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/37761>.

body. The spoon-shaped abdominal region resembles the woman's womb. Giacometti created this sculpture to be live size, standing at 144.8 cm tall<sup>14</sup>, causing the depiction of the woman's womb to be flipped. As the art historian and theorist Rosalind Krauss has noted, "By taking the metaphor and inverting it, so that 'a spoon is like a woman' becomes 'a woman is like a spoon,' Giacometti was able to intensify the idea and to make it universal by generalizing the forms of the sometimes rather naturalistic African carvings toward a more prismatic abstraction."<sup>15</sup>

Distinctly different from Giacometti's Surrealist works such as *The Spoon Woman*, *The Walking Man* (see Appendix B) can be considered one of Giacometti's matured Existentialist masterpieces. This sculpture has almost endlessly extended limbs, symbolizing the fundamental and natural form of the human body.<sup>16</sup> Through the unnatural elongation of the figure's limbs and the declined body, the sculpture is fragile to the viewers' eyes. Giacometti also includes a strong determination in the motion of his artwork, which can be seen from its upwards and forward-looking gaze. *The Walking Man* indicates that he wants to find purpose, and the artist thoughtfully conveyed this idea to the viewers through *The Walking Man's* final forward stride, his onward gaze, as if the future was on the horizon, and the lifting of his back foot, showing an intention to keep moving. Giacometti intentionally made *The Walking Man* tall and dominating, resulting in the sculpture standing at 183cm tall<sup>17</sup>, about 5cm taller than the average American<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> "Alberto Giacometti Spoon Woman 1926-27" [Alberto Giacometti Spoon Woman 1926-27]. Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Accessed May 8, 2019. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81046>.

<sup>15</sup> Blessing, Jennifer. "Alberto Giacometti Spoon Woman (Femme Cuillère)" [Alberto Giacometti Spoon Woman (Femme Cuillère)]. Guggenheim. Accessed May 2, 2019. <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/1421x>.

<sup>16</sup> Fontanella, Megan, Karole P.B. Vail, Valerie J. Fletcher, and Catherine Grenier, eds. *Giacometti*. New York, NY: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> UNESCO.org > L'Unité des uvres d'art et des Projets Spéciaux. "GIACOMETTI, ALBERTO (1901-1966), Suisse" [GIACOMETTI, ALBERTO (1901-1966), Swiss]. UNESCO. Accessed May 10, 2019. <http://www.unesco.org/artcollection/NavigationAction.do?idOeuvre=2919&nouvelleLangue=fr>.

<sup>18</sup> Dr. Halls. "Stand Tall: Average Height for Men" [Stand Tall: Average Height for

Valerie J. Fletcher, noticing, this detail observed: “Although the sculpture's eyes are almost on the viewer's level, the figure remains essentially remote, staring out at an unseen goal. With its gnarled, devastated surfaces, *Walking Man I* stands as a symbol of humanity always striving, ever seeking, never at peace. The roughly modeled surfaces shimmer under different light conditions, as if indicating the transient nature of reality, and the figure's nervous energy activates the surrounding space.”<sup>19</sup> The sculpture is also an extensive exploration of the individual self and the occupation of the space by a single person. *The Walking Man* is seen as a metaphor for the post-war experience of doubt, alienation, and fear. *The Walking Man*<sup>20</sup> and *The City Square* (see Appendix C) are both very thematically similar sculptures made by Giacometti on the topic of human alienation. The former is depicting a striding man, and the latter being a collection of seven men who are striding on a much smaller scale.<sup>21</sup> From these pieces, the Art Institute of Chicago draws a recurrent theme of Giacometti's depiction of man's isolation. Giacometti represents the unprecedented inhumanity of man to man the world had borne witness to in the 20th century.<sup>22</sup>

Similar to *The Walking Man*, *L'homme au Doigt* (see Appendix D) was also created as a post-war response. Giacometti reflects on the brighter future that is ahead of mankind. Leaving behind these world wars, *L'homme au Doigt* stands with a high level of confidence, dominating

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Men]. halls.md, Moose & Doc. Last modified August 28, 2018. Accessed May 7, 2019. <https://halls.md/average-height-men-height-weight/>.

<sup>19</sup> "Alberto Giacometti, L'HOMME QUI MARCHE" [Alberto Giacometti, The Walking Man]. *Sotheby's*. <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2010/impressionist-modern-art-evening-sale-110002/lot.8.html>.

<sup>20</sup> "WALKING MAN I" [WALKING MAN I]. Fondation Alberto Giacometti. Accessed May 11, 2019. <https://www.fondation-giacometti.fr/en/database/173445/walking-man-i>.

<sup>21</sup> Fontanella, Megan, Karole P.B. Vail, Valerie J. Fletcher, and Catherine Grenier, eds. *Giacometti*. New York, NY: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Authors and Curators of The Milton D. Ratner Family Collection. *Alberto Giacometti*. N.p.: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1974.  
This excerpt of three sentences has been rephrased.



the space it surrounds, but it does not give the original impression of more serious themes that is transparent throughout dozens of Giacometti's mature works.<sup>23</sup> *L'homme au Doigt*, however is not a sculpture Giacometti made to display human vulnerability, nor did the artist intend on elaborating on the themes of loneliness, isolation, and sadness in general. Jussi Pylkkänen, who is the Global President of Christie's artfully explains the *L'homme au Doigt* themes in a short sentence: 'Executed after the War in one incredible night of creative fervour, this noble figure points mankind to a brighter future beyond our limited horizons,'<sup>24</sup> and he is exactly right when he describes the sculpture pointing towards a brighter future, since the sculpture was created by Giacometti two years after World War Two, in 1947.<sup>25</sup>

Alberto Giacometti's works and imagination changed as the social climate in Europe turned messy and chaotic in the wake of the Second World War. The post-WWII era struck him with grief and sorrow, for the human suffering endured between 1939 and 1945, but also for the damage and destruction the war had caused. Such emotions pushed him to rethink the definition of life, and to reconsider the line drawn between life and death. Through Giacometti's distinct and matured style, he succeeded in representing human potential and fragility. Alberto Giacometti's message emphasizes the importance of remembering the past, but also stresses the need to look ahead to a brighter future.

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<sup>23</sup> Fontanella, Megan, Karole P.B. Vail, Valerie J. Fletcher, and Catherine Grenier, eds. *Giacometti*. New York, NY: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> "Giacometti's Iconic L'Homme au Doigt (Pointing Man)" [Giacometti's Iconic L'Homme au Doigt (Pointing Man)]. Christie's. Last modified April 16, 2015. Accessed May 8, 2019. <https://www.christies.com/features/Giacometti-Pointing-Man-5910-1.aspx>.

<sup>25</sup> Museum of Modern Art. "Alberto Giacometti; Man Pointing; 1947" [Alberto Giacometti; Man Pointing; 1947]. MoMA. Accessed May 8, 2019. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81779>. Publication excerpt from *The Museum of Modern Art, MoMA Highlights*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, revised 2004, originally published 1999, p. 214.

Appendix A



*Image A1*<sup>26</sup>



*Image A2*<sup>27</sup>



*Image A3*<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. "Spoon Woman (Femme cuillère)." Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Accessed May 14, 2019. <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/1421>.

This is for an image, in Appendix A

<sup>27</sup> Photo Credits: Ariston Zhou

<sup>28</sup> Photo Credits: Ariston Zhou

Appendix B



*Image B1*<sup>29</sup>



*Image B2*<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> "Walking Man I." Artsy. Accessed May 10, 2019. <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/alberto-giacometti-walking-man-i>.

This is for an image, in Appendix B.

<sup>30</sup> "WALKING MAN I." UNESCO. Accessed May 8, 2019. <http://www.unesco.org/artcollection/NavigationAction.do?idOeuvre=2919>.

This is for an image, in Appendix B.

## Appendix C



*Image C1*<sup>31</sup>



*Image C2*<sup>32</sup>

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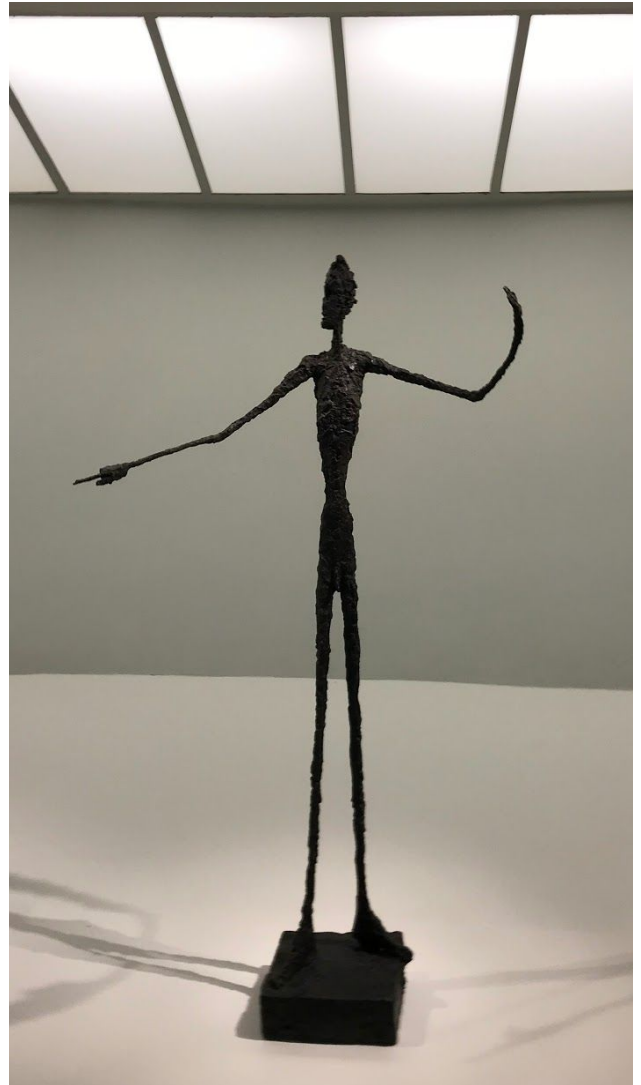
<sup>31</sup> Photo Credits: Ariston Zhou

<sup>32</sup> "The City Square." National Gallery of Art. Accessed May 3, 2019.  
<https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.56340.html>.  
This is for an image, in Appendix C.

Appendix D



*Image D1*<sup>33</sup>



*Image D2*<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> "Giacometti's Iconic L'Homme au Doigt (Pointing Man)" [Giacometti's Iconic L'Homme au Doigt (Pointing Man)]. Christie's. Last modified April 16, 2015. Accessed May 9, 2019. <https://www.christies.com/features/Giacometti-Pointing-Man-5910-1.aspx>.

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<sup>34</sup> Photo Credits: Ariston Zhou

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