

GIACOMETTI

A black and white photograph of the artist Alberto Giacometti. He is shown from the chest up, wearing a dark jacket over a light-colored shirt. He has his characteristic wild, curly hair and is looking intently at a sculpture he is working on. The sculpture is a tall, thin, elongated figure, possibly a head or a torso, made of a rough, textured material like plaster or clay. He is using a tool to shape the top of the sculpture. The background is dark and out of focus, suggesting a studio or workshop environment.

SCULPTURES, PRINTS AND DRAWINGS FROM THE MAEGHT FOUNDATION

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Each day the world astounds me more and more. It either becomes vaster or more marvellous, more ineffable, more beautiful. Detail excites me, the small detail like the eye on a face or the moss on a tree. But no more than the totality because how does one distinguish between the detail and the totality. It's the details themselves that make the whole ... which create the beauty of form.

Alberto Giacometti

ALBERTO GIACOMETTI 1901–1966

One of the great and most independent sculptors of twentieth century Western art, Alberto Giacometti was also one of the most original. Renowned for his relentless investigation of the human figure and his unique and singular vision, Giacometti stands beside Picasso and Matisse as one of the towering masters of modernism.

Born in the Bregaglia valley (a remote Italian-speaking region of the Swiss Alps), Giacometti moved to Paris in the 1920s. He remained there for the rest of his life with the exception of a brief interlude in Geneva during the war. Thus he lived at the heart of the European art world through one of the most exciting yet turbulent periods of modern history. In post-war Paris he continued to immerse himself in the lively artistic and intellectual debates centred around the Left Bank, frequently socialising with Pablo Picasso, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet and the existentialists Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.

Giacometti's work has often been interpreted as embodying the spirit of existentialism which may be understood as the search for a purpose beyond the indifference of a secular world. Indeed Giacometti drew upon his own values, intuition and perception to produce highly individual works of austere beauty. In their gaunt isolation and their brooding presence, there is a sense in Giacometti's figures that notwithstanding the corrosive forces that surround them, life burns strongly at the wick of being.

THE MARGURITE AND AIMÉ MAEGHT FOUNDATION

The works in this exhibition have been drawn from the Marguerite and Aimé Maeght Foundation in the south of France, which holds one of the most internationally significant collections of Giacometti's work.

Giacometti enjoyed a long association with the Maeght family, who played an important role in establishing his reputation. In 1947, Marguerite and Aimé Maeght opened a gallery in Paris specialising in modern French art. They soon became passionate advocates of Giacometti's work, and held exhibitions of his work in the 1950s and early 60s.

The sculptures, prints and drawings assembled in this exhibition comprise almost the entire collection of the artist's work in the Maeght Foundation providing an extraordinarily rare and unique opportunity to view a representative selection of Giacometti's work in Australia and New Zealand.

COMMENTARY: FACING THE VOID

While working in his studio in Paris Giacometti's fingers obsessively squeezed and gouged the clay, or scraped and scored the surface with the point of a penknife. This endless, almost blind, kneading of the sculpture on its armature leaves the surface of his figures with a turbulent appearance, like the granite alpine mountains that faced his house in the Bregaglia valley where he was born.

Akin to those geological forces that turn a mountain into a pile of scree or rubble, there are invisible annihilating forces that surround the human figure. What the standing

female figure or the walking man confronts is the threat of these forces, which may be called the void, emptiness, space or death. These erosive energies, which are beyond the physical, still feel like real substances. They leave the sculpture frayed, their surfaces crumbling, and yet with an apparently invincible uprightness.

Instead of dissolving in the infinite void the figures remain earthed to the wedge-shaped base and the heavy pedestals. This heightens the effect of everything being pared down to the essence, close to the bare bones of the thing. Like a candle burned down to the wick, a fish down to the bones, an apple down to the core, a head down to the skull.

In Giacometti, 'the apple' is all apples, 'the sideboard' is all sideboards, 'the cube' is all cubes, 'the cat' is all cats. At the same time these universals are always eluding our grasp.

For Giacometti the essence of something is thin and hard. A dog is all vertebrae, with no flesh or fat. It looks as if it could slip through a crack in a wall. The stray dog has a forlorn look, and yet the nose still sniffs along the ground, while the tail is neither down nor up, and has a hint of life-force still in it. "I saw myself in the street like that. I am that dog", said Giacometti.

SURREALISM

Like many artists of his generation in both Europe and America, Giacometti too had his flirtation with the surrealist movement early in his career. Surrealism was less a style than a web of ideas or a complex of mental states. Influenced by Freud's theory of the unconscious, and commandeered by André Breton, the surrealists felt the Id needed to be released like the prisoners of the Bastille. Seen as a new wilderness of the sensibilities, subjectivity escaped human minds and roamed the world.

Giacometti first met André Breton, Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris and André Masson around 1929 and formally joined the surrealist movement the following year. Surrealist artists wanted the viewer to experience unreality through their works, and find in them a clue to their own hidden reality. In this disorientation, things lost their thingness. They took on emotions and inclinations. Giacometti's early sculptures such as *The couple* and *Spoon woman* appealed to the surrealists in their representation of profoundly personal feelings and deeply buried desires.

GIACOMETTI'S PEOPLE

From an early age Giacometti had made portrait sketches and busts of family members. However it was during the immediate post-war years in Paris that he created his most intense studio portraits of his family and closest friends. These include some of the most prominent artists and intellectuals of the post-war era – the writers Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean Genet, David Sylvester and James Lord and artists such as Picasso and Matisse.

After the war, his younger brother, Diego, became his principal model and also an indispensable collaborator, attending to practical matters such as the construction of

metal armatures for the sculptures and the casting and patination of the bronzes. Diego is nearly always posed sitting on a chair in Giacometti's studio, depicted in a very direct, frontal manner with a clear vertical axis. The concentration on the head, particularly the eyes, to the extent of dispensing with any extraneous detail underscores Giacometti's main concern to render as accurately as possible what he saw and the feelings this aroused.

Another of Giacometti's favourite models was his wife Annette. Annette had moved from Geneva to Paris in 1946 to join Giacometti in his studio thus beginning a 20-year partnership between artist and model. As James Lord has noted, Giacometti was very demanding of his models who were expected to remain immobile for hours on end. Giacometti became obsessed, endlessly working and constantly revising his portraits in an attempt to capture what he called his 'vision of reality'.

Although Diego and Annette continued to regularly model for him in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it was Japanese philosopher, Isaku Yanaihara and Giacometti's mistress, Caroline, as well as his ninety-year old mother who feature strongly in the late portraits.

... [the] model appears to be near and far at once, as if it were unattainable at the moment we thought it was within our grasp.

Giacometti's portraits are double and divided, given over to a struggle of contraries. The inner and outer, the buried and visible coexist in each of them without clashing or destroying each other – with always something tragic and fragile implied. Isabelle Maeght

COMMENTARY: THE STRUGGLE OF CONTRARIES

The strength of Giacometti's art comes from the viewer having to create a space for these contradictions. When we face a Giacometti work, they appear both light and heavy, both near and far, both smooth and scorched; the walking ones look as if they were approaching and receding at the same time, both moving and fixed. Drawings, paintings and sculptures look both serene and unsettled, both finished and unfinished, both dead and alive.

Irish novelist James Joyce wrote "There is no phoenix". What Joyce does with language – folding paradoxes back on themselves so that they utter both contrasting halves simultaneously – Giacometti does with his materials: telescoping opposites, finish and phoenix.

When you look front on at some of the portrait busts – his brother Diego for example – they look as thin as a razor. From the profile however the figure takes on bulk and volume. It is as if the two-dimensional is in conflict with the three-dimensional. This incom-mensurability between front and side recalls the incommensurability in geometry of side and diagonal of a square: the result is the irrational number. Between the numbers of a rational domain, lie the irrational numbers that never end and that never run into a pattern.

The sort of irresolvable complexity of the human condition, the baffling sense of the absurd encountered by writers in the twentieth century like

Kafka and Beckett, philosophers like Sartre and Camus, are embodied in these sculptures by Giacometti.

THE WOMEN OF VENICE

In 1956 Giacometti resumed work on the standing female figure in preparation for exhibitions of his work in the French pavilion at the Venice Biennale and at the Kunsthalle in Bern. He modelled a group of 15 almost life-size standing female figures, which were created as different states of the same figure. Ten of the plaster figures were exhibited in Venice (in groups of four and six) and five plasters were shown in Bern. The nine sculptures that Giacometti chose for casting into bronze became known as the *Women of Venice*.

Each figure is a unique expression of Giacometti's tireless effort to recreate the female body either by varying the slant and length of the feet and the base or the size of the head in relation to the rest of the body. The series' evocative name, which binds the individual figures into one group despite their differences, has helped to establish the legendary status of these figures which have come to epitomise Giacometti's art.

THE STUDIO

In 1927, Alberto and Diego Giacometti moved into a studio at 46 rue Hippolyte-Maindron. The studio was just a short walk from the cafés of Montparnasse and Saint-Germain-des-Prés where Giacometti regularly socialised with writers, artists and philosophers.

The studio was about sixteen feet square, and had a high ceiling with a narrow wooden balcony at the back reached by stairs. There was gas lighting but no electricity or running water other than a common tap and toilet in the courtyard. The only form of heating was a conventional coal heater and furnishings were kept to a minimum – a bed, a table and some chairs, a cupboard and the necessary sculpture stands and easels.

From about 1939 Diego began to rent a separate room in the same building next to Alberto's studio. Alberto rented an adjacent studio room in 1948 which he used as a bedroom when Annette moved to Paris. Every summer he returned to the family home at Stampa in the Swiss Alps.

Giacometti often said that he did not have to look far for appropriate subject matter – that he could spend the rest of his life trying to draw a chair or an apple faithfully. From the early 1950s, he often drew the interior of his studio crowded with works of art and artists' materials. This atmosphere of intense creativity has also been captured by the Swiss photographer, Ernst Scheidegger, in the series of evocative photographs he took of Giacometti at work in his Paris studio during the years 1943–66.

COMMENTARY: CONCLUSION

Giacometti's deeply moving last works display on the one hand form undone by formlessness, and on the other hand, consciousness willing itself back into existence despite the nothingness. The oscillation is endless between being and non-being. "I can't go on, I'll go on" wrote Beckett. For Giacometti too, it was always a quest on the verge of renunciation.

Giacometti's vulnerable, existential, all-too-human figures remain one of the most potent symbols of endurance in an incomprehensible world.

... to sculpt, for him, is to take the fat off space ... Jean-Paul Sartre

left *Woman of Venice VII (Femme de Venise VII)* 1956, bronze. Art Gallery of New South Wales Foundation purchase 1994 cover and p2 Alberto Giacometti in his Paris studio, working on sketches and figures of the *Walking man* sculptures for the Chase Manhattan Plaza project, 1960 (detail). Photos Ernst Scheidegger © Neue Zürcher Zeitung 2006





Spoon woman *Femme cuillère* 1926

bronze, 145 x 51 x 21
Gift of Marguerite and Aimé Maeght 1964

What counts is the subject. Space, forms, canvas, plaster, bronze ... just so many means. The important thing is to create an object which can give the closest sensation to that felt in front of the subject. Alberto Giacometti

K-6 LOOKING AND MAKING

VISUAL ARTS Describe what you can see. **Imagine** walking around it, viewing it from different angles, what does it remind you of? What would it feel like to touch? Why do you think it is called *Spoon woman*? Using three-dimensional forms and found objects create a figurative sculpture.

ENGLISH/DRAMA Brainstorm words for this sculpture and use them to write a Surrealist, nonsensical poem inspired by this artwork. **Perform** your poems to the class.

HSIE Find examples of fertility symbols from different cultures. What do you notice about the way they look? **Compare** these with Giacometti's *Spoon woman*. **Discuss** why they are important in so many different cultures.

7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

- Describe *Spoon woman* in terms of shape, line, volume, texture and size. How has it been made? What would it look like from other angles? Is it well balanced? What might the surface feel like?
- Research the Surrealist movement and list its key characteristics. Explain the ways in which it was influenced by art from 'primitive' or non-European cultures. Describe how this sculpture may resemble a fertility figure. Outline the influence of Cubism in this work. Is there any evidence of Giacometti's early Surrealist concerns in his later work? Analyse how his sculptural forms and art practice have changed over time.
- Define the term *anthropomorphic*. Collect household objects such as kitchen implements and create a Surrealist sculpture. Experiment with positioning the different objects and shapes to breathe a sense of life into their composition. Discuss why some objects seem to engender an anthropomorphic presence more than others.

Walking man II *Homme qui marche II* 1960

bronze, 187 x 27 x 109 cm
Gift of Marguerite and Aimé Maeght 1964

The man who walks in the street weighs nothing, much less at any rate than the same man if he were dead or unconscious. He keeps himself balanced on his legs. We do not feel his weight. It was this lightness that I unconsciously wanted to portray by making my figures slimmer.

Alberto Giacometti

K-6 LOOKING AND MAKING

VISUAL ARTS Why did the artist make this man so tall and thin? How does it make you feel? Do you like this work? **Explain** why. **Draw** people walking using different materials. How do you create a sense of movement?

ENGLISH Write a story about this figure. Where is he going? Why is he going there? Is he alone? **Read** your piece to the class.

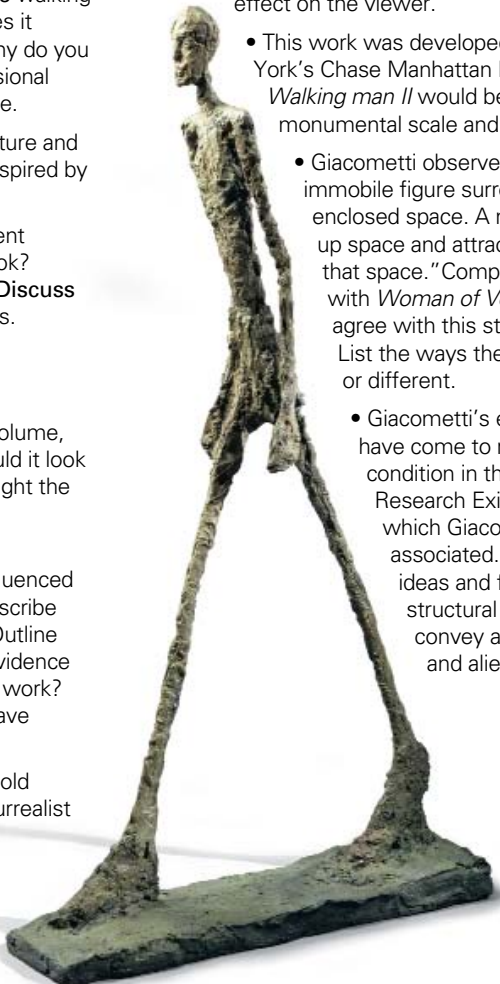
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY Scan a photo of yourself and experiment with distorting the image. **Stretch** it vertically and horizontally, change the way your skin looks. What ideas do they communicate? Why have many twentieth century and contemporary artists used distortion? **Discuss**.

MATHS Cut and measure several lengths of wire and experiment with them to create a Giacometti-type figure. **Measure** the height of your figure. **Estimate** the amount of wire needed to create a life-size figure.

DRAMA Imagine you are this tall, thin man and **move** your body in the way you think he might move.

7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

- Look at *Walking man II*. Stand back and observe the figure as a whole, surrounded by space. Outline the emotions you associate with this work. Is *Walking man II* approaching or receding from the viewer? Analyse the importance of the base to the overall form of the sculpture and its effect on the viewer.
- This work was developed for the plaza of New York's Chase Manhattan Bank. Propose how *Walking man II* would be different in such a monumental scale and public space?
- Giacometti observed that, "... an immobile figure surrounds itself with an enclosed space. A moving figure opens up space and attracts other figures into that space." Compare *Walking man II* with *Woman of Venice VII*. Do you agree with this statement? Explain. List the ways these works are similar or different.
- Giacometti's elongated figures have come to represent the human condition in the twentieth century. Research Existentialism with which Giacometti's work is associated. Describe its key ideas and figures. Outline the structural elements which convey a sense of isolation and alienation.





Bust of Diego *Buste de Diego* 1954

bronze, 26.7 x 20.5 x 11
Gift of Aimé Maeght 1981

I will never be able to put into a portrait all the force that is in a head. The mere fact of living already requires such wilfulness and such energy ... Alberto Giacometti

K-6 LOOKING AND MAKING

VISUAL ARTS Look at *Bust of Diego*. What is it made of? Is it hard or soft? **Find** words to describe the surface. Can you look the person in the eye? Diego was the artist's brother. Why do you think Giacometti made so many portraits of him?

Study the facial features of a family member. **Draw** a series of frontal, three-quarter, profile and back views of your subject. Using your drawings, **model** a small bust in clay. Allow thumbprints and finger marks to remain. **Focus** on the strongest facial features which would give a likeness.

HSIE Why is portraiture such an important art form? **Find** examples of sculptural portraits from different cultures and times. **Observe** the differences. What do these artworks tell you about the people who made them?

7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

- Observe this sculpture. Walk around it. How is the experience different from the sides, the front and the back? Which point of view is more powerful or affecting? Could this work be categorised as 'realistic'? Discuss.
- French poet Paul Valéry remarked that, "... great work is never finished, only abandoned." Consider *Bust of Diego*. Is it finished or unfinished? What difference would one thumbprint or tool scratch, more or less, have made? Is the concept of 'completeness' compatible with Giacometti's project to render the experience of human existence? Re-enact the movements of the artist's making the bust. Write a step-by-step guide to making a Giacometti sculpture. Discuss the issues this may raise.
- *Bust of Diego* is one of countless sculptures of Diego, Giacometti's brother, made in a relentless attempt to get an 'absolute likeness'. Investigate the role Diego played in Giacometti's art practice. Was he muse, assistant, model or collaborator? Make a case for one or more of these roles.
- Research the technique of the bronze casting used by Giacometti. What are the qualities of bronze which made it an attractive medium for this artist to use? Organise samples of materials Giacometti used including, wax, wire, plaster-of-paris, plaster bandage and bronze. Describe their physical qualities and outline how they can be manipulated. How do these materials differ? Propose what each may offer to the artist in making, and the audience in viewing, a sculpture.

The glade (square and 9 figures) *Place (9 figures) La Clairière* 1950

bronze, 56 x 58.5 x 48.5
Gift of Marguerite and Aimé Maeght 1964

To my great surprise, the composition with nine figures seemed to be the fulfilment of an idea I was left with the previous autumn on seeing a clearing (it was more like a slightly wild meadow, with trees and bushes, on the edge of the forest) that really appealed to me. Alberto Giacometti

K-6 LOOKING AND MAKING

VISUAL ARTS The people in this sculpture have been described as a 'tribe of people'. **Create** your own tribe of miniature figures using papier mâché. **Exaggerate** either the height or width of your figures. **Arrange** them in different patterns and take digital photos. Use these images to **create** a simple animation.

DRAMA With other class members **stand** in the same configuration as the people in this sculpture. **Stand** rigidly with your arms by your side. **Look** straight ahead. How do you feel? Is it easy to communicate with each other? What would your voice sound like: hoarse, squeaky, whispery or loud? **Invent** a dialogue for the sculpture people and act it out.

MATHS Are all the figures in this work the same size? **Read** the 'dimensions' provided for this work. **Estimate** the heights of the various figures. **Devise** a formula to calculate the size of the base if the tallest figure was life size.

7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

- Consider the name of this work. Why this title? Describe the ways the artist has created a landscape using figurative elements. How important is the base to the reading of the work? If the figures were arranged directly on the floor, would the effect be the same?
- Draw this sculpture in wire and experiment with the composition altering the position, orientation or relationships of the figures. Develop some figures using foil or clay, experimenting with their scale and form. Analyse the effects suggested by these differing manipulations. Compare this work with *Asian field* by Antony Gormley in the Gallery's collection. How is the viewer's response to each work affected by the placement of figures, the implied viewing position and the materials used?
- Giacometti's lifelong project was to study reality and render it as seen. Attempt to draw what you see rather than what you know. Make a drawing of a subject, closing one eye or looking at its reflection in a mirror. Draw only the shapes or outlines. Have you captured the essentials of the subject and the 'reality' of what you have seen? Can an artist ever be totally objective and truly capture 'reality'? Discuss.





Figure in the studio *Personnage dans l'atelier* 1954

lithograph, 63.3 x 40.6
Art Gallery of New South Wales, purchased 1968

For me reality has never been a pretext for making works of art – on the contrary, art is an indispensable means of trying to better understand what I see. Alberto Giacometti

K–6 LOOKING AND MAKING

VISUAL ARTS Describe this lithographic print. Using a viewfinder **select** a corner of your class room. Do a continuous line drawing. **Copy** your drawing onto scratch foam board or lino and make a series of prints onto paper.

ENGLISH Who do you think this person is? Where are they and what are they doing? **Write** a stream-of-consciousness diary entry about one of these sculptures coming to life.

HSIE Investigate Giacometti's connection to his life long studio in Montparnasse. **Explore** the reasons why artists flocked to Paris in the early twentieth century. **Research** other artists who had studios in Paris during this period.

7–12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

- Drawing was an integral part of Giacometti's art-making practice, forming the basis of his sculptural explorations. Examine the drawings in the exhibition. Find words to describe the qualities and characteristics of the lines. Compare the drawings and your descriptions to Giacometti's sculptures. Outline the commonalities. Investigate the continuum from drawing to sculpture in Giacometti's process. Is drawing from life an essential preparation for working in three dimensions?

- Giacometti's biographer James Lord has said, "His drawing was sculptural, the mark of the pencil appearing to carve and model spatial relationships ..." Sketch someone in the class using fast, repetitive line only to build up form in a variety of media. Investigate how a sense of human presence can be suggested through marks on paper. Choose one sketch and develop a three-dimensional work using wire, foil or clay.

- How does the medium of lithography suit Giacometti's vigorous, spontaneous graphic style? Make observational studies of people in action. Develop a print based on your drawings using different printmaking processes. How do the different methods affect the results?

GLOSSARY

Austere: severe or stern in disposition or appearance

Endurance: the act, quality, or power of withstanding hardship or stress

Essence: the most important ingredient; the crucial element

Existentialism: a philosophy that emphasises the uniqueness and isolation of the individual in a hostile or indifferent universe. It stresses freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one's acts

Infinite: having no boundaries or limits

Intuition: the act or faculty of knowing or sensing without the use of rational processes;

Modernism: the cultural response to machine-age modernisation at the beginning of the 20th century. Modernism was characterised by a departure from tradition and the use of innovative forms of expression

Monumental: impressively large, sturdy, and enduring

Obsess, v obsessed: to preoccupy the mind of excessively

Surrealism: an avant-garde movement that developed out of Dada. Influenced by Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious, Surrealists used principles of free association and chance to tap into the unconscious mind which they saw as a powerful source of imagination and the conduit to art making

Symbol: something that represents something else by association, resemblance, or convention, especially a material object used to represent something invisible

Unconscious: lacking awareness and the capacity for sensory perception; not conscious

Void: containing no matter; empty

Vulnerable: susceptible to physical or emotional injury

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ONLINE

Maeght foundation: www.fondation-maeght.com
www.giacometti.com.au
www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/ed/kits
This printed education kit is also available online

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