Magnificent Obsession

Giacometti struggled to capture perception
in sculpture and paint--and thought he'd failed

by Paul Trachtman, © 2004

Originally appeared in Smithsonian, November 2001

"The artist," Alberto Giacometti once told his boarding school classmates, "must portray things as he sees them, not as others show them." He was just 16, but those words would define and haunt him for the rest of his life. Born just 100 years ago on October 10, 1901, he became one of the titans of 20th-century sculpture and painting, an artist who gave Picasso advice on sculpting and was picked to draw Matisse's portrait for a medallion honoring the painter's career. Yet to his last days, Giacometti was still trying to live up to those boyhood words, and claiming that he'd failed.

Of course, the idea of painting one's own perceptions and disregarding conventional views of reality was not born with Giacometti. It is at the heart of modern art. "Exactitude is not truth," declared French painter Eugène Delacroix. "Accurate drawing is dry and destroys the impression of the whole, it annihilates all sensation," said Impressionist Camille Pissarro. "Don't proceed according to rules and principles, but paint what you see and feel."

Although Giacometti enjoyed early success among the Surrealists in Paris in the 1930s and later as a radically original portraitist, it was his tall, spindly, vanishingly thin bronze sculptures of walking men and standing women that captured the world's imagination. An unprecedented exhibition of his work—nearly 200 paintings, drawings and sculptures—opened last month at New York's Museum of Modern Art to coincide with the centennial of his birth. "One of the great struggles in the history of 20th-century art," says the show's cocurator, MoMA's Anne Umland, "is that between abstraction and figuration, the ideal and the real, and this all comes together in Giacometti's work." On view through January 8, 2002, the exhibition, which had an initial showing in Zurich this past summer, is a collaboration with the Kunsthaus Zurich and the Alberto Giacometti Foundation in Switzerland, which allowed many of the artist's original plaster models to travel. Because of their fragility, this is the first time many of these original plasters, usually seen as bronze castings, will be on view in this country. In their ghostly white frailty, they offer a unique window on the world of images that Giacometti saw, and tried to show us.

As the son of the Swiss painter Giovanni Giacometti, Alberto first looked at the world through his father's Postimpressionist eyes. In the cocoon of Giovanni's studio in the town of Stampa in Italian-speaking Switzerland, Alberto also formed a lasting habit of studying and copying works of art—both ancient and modern—as a way of seeing for himself how others see. With his father's guidance, he made his earliest drawings, paintings and sculptures using his family for models. Such artistic activities were a big part of his early years—by age 10 he had progressed from a simple illustration for Snow White to a detailed copy of Rembrandt's Good Samaritan. He had an idyllic childhood, swaddled in his father's encouragement and the praise of his adoring mother, Annetta. Even in boarding school he was admired as a budding artist, and given his own studio.

His first bust, made in 1914 when he was just 13, was of his year-younger brother, Diego, who would become his lifelong assistant and whose head he would portray again and again.

His brother Bruno, six years younger, remembered Alberto's initial attempt, the following year, to capture him in clay. Still learning traditional techniques, Alberto wanted the bust to be exactly life-size. "He had an old, rather rusty pair of compasses that he used to measure my head," Bruno later recalled. "I was scared whenever he came near my eyes with the points. It seemed to me as though he wanted to gouge them out." When he would seek refuge with his mother, Bruno added—a furious Alberto and his compasses in hot pursuit—she usually "took the artist's side."

Many years later, after Giacometti had achieved fame for his own way of seeing, he tried to explain his unique vision. Pointing out that Rodin had always used instruments to measure the roundness of a head, Giacometti argued that we only see a head as round because we know it is. What we actually see when we look at a face or profile is a rather flat image, more like a primitive mask than one of Rodin's busts. "I think," he said, "we have for so long automatically accepted the received idea of what a sculptured head should look like that we have made ourselves completely incapable of seeing a head as we really see it."

In 1920, during a break from his studies at an art school in Geneva, Giacometti accompanied his father on a trip to install an exhibition of Swiss artists at the Venice Biennale. For the young Alberto, it was a profound moment. "During my stay in Venice," he later wrote, "I loved and was carried away only by Tintoretto. I spent the whole month running through the city; the thought that I might miss seeing even one of his paintings . . . left me no peace." Looking at Tintoretto's work, with its elongated and often sketchy figures almost melting into light and space, as well as its anamorphic perspective (a calculated distortion that made figures appear normal when viewed from a certain distance or seen from below), "a curtain," said Giacometti, "went up on a new world." But on the way home from Venice, the young artist visited a church in Padua filled with frescoes by the Florentine artist Giotto, who painted two centuries before Tintoretto. These works, wrote Giacometti, "gave me a crushing blow in the chest." Simple in form and floating in a flat space, Giotto's figures violated every rule Giacometti knew. That evening, as he walked behind several young girls in the street, he had a disconcerting vision. "They appeared immense to me, all out of proportion to normal size," he said. "I stared at them like a madman, fear shot through me. It was like a fissure in reality." His almost hallucinatory vision suddenly rendered the works of Tintoretto and Giotto "small, meaningless, weak, and insipid."

Not yet out of his teens, Giacometti was asking questions about perception—about truth and illusion—that would challenge and confound the best philosophers and scientists of the century. Even before the trip to Venice, at home in his father's studio, the artist had begun to see the difficulties his need to portray the world as he saw it would get him into. "I was in his studio drawing some pears that were on a table, at the normal distance for a still life," he recalled. "And the pears kept getting tiny. I'd begin again, and they'd always go back to exactly the same size. My father got irritated and said, 'But just do them as they are, as you see them!' And he corrected them. I tried to do them as he wanted but I couldn't stop myself. . . . Half an hour later they were exactly the same size to the millimeter as the first ones."

At 21, Giacometti moved to Paris and enrolled in an art academy to study with the well-known sculptor Emile-Antoine Bourdelle. But drawing a live model seemed as impossible to Giacometti as drawing his father's pears. If "one began by ana- lyzing a detail, the end of the nose, for example, one was lost," he later wrote. "The distance

between one side of the nose and the other is like the Sahara, without end, nothing to fix one's gaze upon, everything escapes."
Still there was no lack of new ideas to excite a young artist in Paris in the 1920s. As Dada had defied all logic, and Cubism had cut all imagery to pieces, Surrealism focused the attention of artists and writers on the subconscious. In an attempt to turn the psyche inside out, the movement probed the world of dreams and chance effects and looked to tribal art for iconic images.

Like Brancusi, Picasso, André Breton and Salvador Dalí, Giacometti found himself fascinated with the "primitive" art of Africa and other non-European cultures. Tormented by the uncertainties of perception, he also experimented with an escape into abstraction. A sculpted piece titled Torso (opposite), which seemed partly geometric and partly organic, representing cutoff segments of a trunk and two legs, won him a place in the 1925 Salon des Tuileries in Paris. Although clearly a nod to Brancusi, Giacometti's sculpture, with its sliced-off slabs, angles and curves, looks as if it's about to leap from abstraction back into flesh. A year later the artist produced his first large Primitivist work, the nearly five-foot-tall sculpture Spoon Woman, inspired by the people-shaped spoons made by the Dan tribe of West Africa. The next few years saw a prolific outpouring of pieces that resonated with Cubist, Surrealist and African influences, even as Giacometti continued sculpting more realistic busts of his parents during vacations in Stampa.

With one foot in the world and the other in an inner landscape of abstraction and imagination, Giacometti was soon attracting attention. Two of his sculptures were shown in the 1926 Salon des Tuileries, along with works by Léger, Mondrian and Brancusi. An explosion of purely Surrealist works followed—objects in boxes and cages, strange game boards and symbolic constructions that begged for Freudian interpretation.

In 1930 Giacometti constructed an object that astonished even the Surrealists. After seeing the sculpture, titled Suspended Ball, in a Paris gallery, Dalí described it as follows: "A wooden ball with a female notch floats suspended on a violin string over a moon scythe form whose blade almost touches the groove." The piece, later characterized by one art historian as "an erotic machine ...for the disconnection of the sexes," was purchased by Breton, who invited Giacometti into the Surrealists' inner circle. For the next few years, the artist turned out abstract expressions of anxiety, aggression and ambivalence. In 1936 the Museum of Modern Art acquired one of his most complex and ethereal constructions, The Palace at 4 am—a wood sculpture, similar to a miniature stage set, that featured symbolic images of Giacometti, his mother and a recent lover. In 1940, the influential American collector Peggy Guggenheim purchased a piece that she thought resembled "a strange medieval animal." It was titled Woman With Her Throat Cut.

The first half of the Museum of Modern Art exhibition focuses on Giacometti's Surrealist work. "Going through the first part of the show," says MoMA's Anne Umland, "you realize that even if his career had stopped here Giacometti would still have been one of the major artists of his time." But for all the growing recognition of his work, the real significance of these pieces was in how they altered the history of sculpture itself. Many of the objects were placed directly on the floor without any base. Others, like the game boards, turned the base itself into the sculpture. Although some of these ideas had been explored by Brancusi, and sculptures with moving parts were also being made by a young American in Paris named Alexander Calder, Giacometti's work seemed startlingly new.

Yet the artist himself characteristically feared he was on the wrong path. As he began to work again with heads and figures, he made so much of the difficulty that his sense of failure—along with his striking, almost dissolute appearance—became his trademark. In his remarkable book Giacometti: A Biography in Pictures, the historian Reinhold Hohl quotes Anatole Jakovsky, a writer of the day: "No one else has expressed

the anxiety of the present as he has. He is the man who burns. I have seen his face always pale, his eyes blazing, his hair charged with electricity, attracted by celestial gravitation."

If Giacometti doubted he could copy what he saw, he was in good company. The Impressionist Pierre Auguste Renoir was irritated by the slowness of his own perception. "At the start I see my subject in a sort of haze," he admitted. "I know perfectly well that what I shall see in it later is there all the time, but it only becomes apparent after a while." Edgar Degas reworked his drawings endlessly, on sheets of tracing paper, and even Giacometti's contemporary Henri Matisse sometimes revised drawings until the paper was furrowed with erased lines. But throughout Giacometti's artistic struggles, it was the example of renowned Postimpressionist Paul Cézanne—who had wrestled with the same questions and persevered to leave an indelible mark on the way we see the world—that kept him going. The 30th anniversary of Cézanne's death was commemorated in 1936 with a museum exhibition in Paris. Although Giacometti had long been familiar with Cézanne's paintings, it seems no coincidence that only a year later he painted one of his first masterpieces—a Cézanne-like still life with apples. Or rather, it began with a few apples set on a sideboard, and then he removed all but one, remarking, "there was more than enough to do with one."

For 30 years, Giacometti lived in the same studio and bedroom in a run-down corner of Montparnasse. Even when fame brought New York dealers and rich French collectors to his door—and sales brought enough money to stuff under his bed and give away—he lived frugally. His brother Diego became his indispensable aide, overseeing the casting of bronzes, and sometimes rising early to salvage a new plaster sculpture the artist had labored over all night, before he could wake up and destroy it in the morning, as he was apt to do. "One starts by seeing the person who poses," Giacometti once explained, "but little by little all the possible sculptures of him intervene. The more a real vision of him disappears, the stranger his head becomes."

As Giacometti gouged, squeezed and scraped away at the plaster, his busts and figures kept shrinking. In a typical example of the way he worked, wrote his biographer and friend, James Lord, Giacometti "started with a figure about 18 inches high, representing a nude woman with her arms at her sides. . . . After several months of work, the figure had shrunk to the size of a pin, standing in precarious isolation upon a pedestal several times its own height."

As Giacometti's sculptures were shrinking, the threat of war was growing. Picasso, who had met Giacometti in Paris, invited him to his studio to observe the progress on his monumental mural Guernica, in which the dismembered anatomies of Cubism matched the realities of war. Giacometti would see such brutality with his own eyes soon enough; as he and Diego fled a besieged Paris in May 1940, they encountered scenes of carnage along the road where a column of refugees had been strafed. The brothers returned to Paris, but Giacometti left in December 1941 for Switzerland. Diego stayed behind to take care of the studio and remained in Paris until the end of the war.

In Geneva, Giacometti found a studio on the top floor of a cheap hotel, where for the next three and a half years he resumed his Parisian habits of daily struggle relieved by late nights in local cafés. The longer Giacometti stayed in Geneva, the smaller his sculptures became. "It was a mystery to me," he said. "All my figures stubbornly shrank to one centimeter high. Another touch with the thumb and whoops! — no more figure." A friend who visited the studio saw a washstand around which stood a group of sculptures. "The sizes of the figures were so tiny," he said, "that the sink, in comparison, looked like an ocean (or at least like Lake Geneva)." The publisher Albert Skira recalled: "One morning after the war had just ended I visited Alberto in his hotel room. He was to return to Paris the next day. I asked him: 'Have you shipped your sculptures yet?' He

replied: 'No, I'm taking them with me.' He pulled six matchboxes from his pockets. In them was the work of those years."

Among the many wonders at the MoMA exhibition, these tiny figures may be the most astonishing. Giacometti constantly referred to them as failures, but even at a distance, they appear as complete as a marble statue by Michelangelo, and somehow more real. Yet as you approach them, the figures seem to maintain their distance and remain incredibly small. Looking at them is to meet Giacometti as a genius who knew exactly what he was doing. "I want a figure which can be grasped with a single glance and in its totality," he told a friend in Geneva.

It was also during the Geneva years that Giacometti met the young woman he would later marry. Annette Arm, who fell in love with him despite his closeness to and dependence on his mother, his attraction to brothels, his obsession with his work and the anxieties of his psyche, was as vivacious as Alberto was dour, but she seemed to idolize him. From her parents' point of view, writes Lord, "Alberto Giacometti was a shabby, unsuccessful, eccentric, poverty-stricken artist well into middle-age [he turned 42 in 1943 the year they met] whose only source of support was an aged mother." But Annette would have followed him to Paris if he'd let her. Instead, he returned alone, had a brief affair with an old flame, and went on working.

Annette kept after him, however, and the following year she arrived to share his life and his studio. For her first evening in Paris, Giacometti took her to dinner at the Café des Deux-Magots with Picasso and fellow artist Balthus. Moving into the studio was a little less glamorous. Simone de Beauvoir, who said of Annette, "She devoured the world with her eyes," described how Giacometti lived. His house, she wrote, "is enough to frighten anyone. In a charming little forgotten garden he has a studio, drowning in plaster, and he lives next to this in a kind of hangar, vast and cold, with neither furniture nor food. . . . He works very hard for fifteen hours at a stretch, above all at night, and whenever he goes out his clothes, his hands and his thick, matted hair are covered with plaster."

Giacometti had insisted that Annette not change the way he lived, and she left things as they were. But of course she changed everything. She introduced him to intimacy and believed in him, for better or worse. She became his model, his muse and, after a few years, his wife. She sat, or stood, for days that stretched into years, enduring along with Diego the task of meeting the artist's demanding gaze and coping with his anxiety and outbursts of rage and distress. Annette's features lent themselves to Giacometti's fascination with Egyptian sculpture, and as she posed, Giacometti could see in life what he had sought in his copies from antiquity.

The Egyptian influence, and Annette's, is evident in the striking series of tall, thin standing women with arms tight against the body that soon populated Giacometti's studio and for which, along with his equally elongated, straight-legged men, he is best known. "In 1945 I swore to myself that I didn't want to let my figures get smaller and smaller," he said. "But now the following happened: I could maintain the height, but they started to get narrow, narrow . . . tall and as thin as a thread." These somber, startling figures, cast in bronze, were soon augmented by a rush of new work—a spectral woman standing on a chariot; a group of strangers passing in a city square; a hollow-mouthed head of a man stuck on a rod; a spindly, falling figure with arms outspread, as if leaping into the void. As people absorbed images of the Nazi Holocaust in the years after the war, these works were easily taken to be expressions of alienation and despair. But while Giacometti could talk like an existentialist philosopher, his art was always more instinctive than intellectual.

In his postwar paintings and drawings of Annette and Diego, of friends like Jean-Paul Sartre and Henri Matisse, playwright Jean Genet and composer Igor Stravinsky,

Giacometti produced a series of extraordinary portraits unlike anything else in modern art. The figures in these portraits seem on the verge of dissolving into the space around them, their edges and contours eroded by the artist's destructive brush strokes. "Giacometti showed that space is an emotional, emotive, intuitive experience," says Valerie Fletcher, a curator at the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and organizer of its 1988 Giacometti exhibition.

Throughout his life, Giacometti drew constantly, often with a ballpoint pen on handy newspapers or magazines. His pen flowed, blurring outlines as his perceptions kept changing, representing what he called the "lines of force" in a face or figure; and he slashed across forms in vertical and horizontal strokes that embedded an image in the indeterminate space that so intrigued him. "I can't draw," he said. "So I go on drawing." (When he was working on a portrait of the 84-year-old Henri Matisse, the elder artist said much the same thing: "Nobody can draw! Nobody will ever be able to draw! I have tried my whole life...and I have never managed it!")

Beginning in about 1956, Giacometti produced some of his most hypnotic sculptures and mesmerizing paintings, but remained as unsatisfied as ever. He spent three years trying to make portraits of a Japanese philosophy professor and paid the scholar's way back and forth between Tokyo and Paris, until he became one of the most expensive models in the history of art. Giacometti also became infatuated with a prostitute called Caroline, whom he met during nocturnal visits to his favorite cafés, and painted her portrait repeatedly for years. In painting Caroline, he seemed to see a transcendent vision, almost a goddess. There's an intense gaze in these and other late portraits that is haunting. Yet his last sculptures and paintings of Annette are among the most profound, modern and vibrantly alive of his work, with their crosshatched lines that obliterate, swirling strokes that animate, and gestural painting that blurs the distinctions between his figures and the space they inhabit. Almost as moving are his final portraits of Diego, the brother who remained in the background and put off his own flowering as an artist until after Giacometti's death. Diego eventually won recognition as a distinguished designer of furniture and ceramics.

"It seems impossible to do it!" Giacometti cried shortly before he left Paris in December 1965. "To make a head as I see it. It seems impossible to do that. Between now and tomorrow, though, I've got to manage." The next day he departed for a hospital in Switzerland complaining of exhaustion. A month later, on January 11, 1966, he died of complications from heart disease. He was 64 years old. At his funeral in Stampa, his family and friends were joined by a host of admirers, his dealers and European museum officials. Caroline was there, despite Annette's objections. Returning to Paris, Diego retrieved his brother's last plaster sculpture, the bust of an old friend. He had it cast in bronze and placed it on Giacometti's grave, next to a figure of his own—a small bronze bird.

There is an image by an unknown photographer of Giacometti gazing at his Head of a Man on a Rod, much as Hamlet contemplated the skull of poor Yorick. Like Hamlet, Giacometti was a romantic spirit confronting the realities of a harsh and uncertain world. "Art interests me very much, but truth interests me infinitely more," he once said. What he left us is the truth of his difficult vision. "I always have the impression or the feeling of the frailty of living beings," he mused. "And it is in their frailty that my sculptures are likenesses." And yet, seen together in this centennial exhibition, they are far more than their frailty. They transcend time.