

# GUGGENHEIM BILBAO

Press release



Opening on October 19

## Alberto Giacometti. A Retrospective

Sponsored by:



I am pleased to present the exhibition *Alberto Giacometti. A Retrospective*, which the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, with the sponsorship of Iberdrola, is dedicating to one of the greatest sculptors in all of history and one of the most important artists in the 20th century.

I encourage the public to immerse themselves in the Museum's galleries on a tour that summarizes more than four decades in his career through 200 pieces—including sculptures, paintings, and works on paper—which pay homage to Giacometti's creative spirit and his tireless quest for the truth.

The show bears faithful witness to the artist's constant evolution from his earliest works associated with Cubism and Surrealism—defined by their greater symbolic content and more abstract features—to his slender, rough figures on multiple scales.

Giacometti was characterized by the depth of his approaches and his reflective potential, and he cultivated friendships with intellectuals and writers like Simone de Beauvoir, whose portrait is present here via two busts; Jean Genet, portrayed in an oil painting in this exhibition; and Jean-Paul Sartre, who referred to Giacometti as the "existentialist" artist par excellence.

Organized in conjunction with the Fondation Giacometti in Paris, *Alberto Giacometti. A Retrospective* has travelled to the Musée national des beaux-arts de Québec and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, and it will allow visitors to explore the quality of the paintings and drawings by this brilliant Swiss artist, along with his sculptures, including numerous works wrought in plaster and bronze.

The show in Bilbao is one of the rare occasions in which visitors have the chance to see *Women of Venice* all together, the exceptional set of female figures that Giacometti began to create as his contribution to the 1956 Venice Biennale.

Iberdrola's continuous support of major shows organized by the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, like this retrospective, is one of the initiatives through which we seek to contribute to promoting art and culture in the communities in which Iberdrola operates. I hope that many visitors are able to enjoy this wonderful exhibition, which, thanks to the extraordinary work of its curators and the Museum managers, I would dare to call one of the most interesting exhibitions this season for all art lovers all over the world.

Ignacio S. Galán  
Chairman and CEO of Iberdrola

## *Alberto Giacometti. A Retrospective*

- Dates: from October 19, 2018 to February 24, 2019
  - Curators: Catherine Grenier and Petra Joos, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. Associate curator: Mathilde Lecuyer-Maillé
  - Exhibition organized by the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao in collaboration with the Fondation Giacometti, Paris
  - Sponsor: Iberdrola
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- “Seeing, understanding the world, feeling it intensely and expanding our capacity for exploration to the maximum.” Alberto Giacometti.
  - Giacometti’s creative drive spanned from his youthful works from the 1920’s, through his post-Cubist and Surrealist periods, until his return to figuration in 1935, which would become a mainstay in his artistic output until the end of his life.
  - The Swiss artist believed that the eye was only sharpened by reduction, a premise which became a hallmark of his oeuvre.
  - The exhibition will enable visitors to see all eight plaster sculptures from the exceptional set entitled *Women of Venice (Femmes de Venise)*, a set created for the 1956 Venice Biennale.

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents *Alberto Giacometti. A Retrospective*, an exhaustive exhibition of more than 200 sculptures, paintings, and drawings by Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966), one of the most influential artists of the 20th century, throughout 40 years of his artistic output. The show offers a unique perspective on the artist’s oeuvre, with a particular focus on the extraordinary collection of art and archival materials conserved by the Fondation Giacometti in Paris, which was assembled by the artist’s widow, Annette. *Alberto Giacometti. A Retrospective* is organized by the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao in conjunction with the Fondation Giacometti of Paris. Sponsor: Iberdrola.

Alberto Giacometti was born into a family of artists in Switzerland in 1901. His father, the well-known Neo-Impressionist painter Giovanni Giacometti, who is depicted in three head sculptures by the young Alberto, first initiated him into painting and sculpture. In 1922, he moved to Paris to further his artistic training. Four years later, he moved into the studio where he would remain until his dying days, a rented space just 15 x 16 feet on Rue Hippolyte-Maindron near Montparnasse. In this narrow, tiny space, Giacometti created a highly personal vision of the world around him.

The human figure is a core subject in Giacometti's works. Over the years, he created works inspired by the people around him, essentially his brother Diego, his wife Annette, lovers, and friends. "Sculpture, painting and drawing have always helped me to understand my vision of the outside world, especially the face and the human being as a whole. Or put more simply, my fellow beings, and especially those who are close to me for one reason or another."

Giacometti's ideas on how to approach the human figure have become essential questions in contemporary art for subsequent generations of artists.

The exhibition *Alberto Giacometti. A Retrospective* underscores the artist's interest in malleable materials like plaster and clay. While many creators limit themselves to using plaster as an intermediate working material as they produced a work—after shaping the object in clay but before rendering it in bronze—Giacometti often used this material for both the initial shape and the definitive form of the object. A good example of this is the exceptional set of eight plaster sculptures entitled *Women of Venice* which will be presented at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao for the second time since it was created for the 1956 Venice Biennale, and which was displayed at the Tate Modern in London in 2017 after being restored by the Fondation Giacometti of Paris.

## EXHIBITION TOUR

### Gallery 205. The encounter with Cubism in Paris

Giacometti moved to Paris in 1922 to study with the sculptor Antoine Bourdelle at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. He soon discovered the post-Cubist works of Jacques Lipchitz, Henri Laurens, Constantin Brancusi, and Pablo Picasso, which led him to abandon his classical training and adopt the formal vocabulary of neo-Cubism with a highly personal style centered on the human figure.

The ancient Greek sculpture from the Cyclades that Giacometti had the occasion to view in the Louvre urged him to explore sculpture's relationship with the plane. He often went to the Musée d'Éthnographie du Trocadéro and regularly read avant-garde magazines like *Cahiers d'art* and *Documents*, which reflected the taste for non-Western art in vogue at that time. In 1927, he synthesized these influences in *Spoon Woman* (*Femme cuillère*, 1927), one of his first mature works.

*Spoon Woman* (*Femme cuillère*, 1927) is the most monumental, totemic work from this period. Created in plaster and later cast in bronze, it interprets the characteristic geometry of Cubism, the stylized forms of African art, and the formal simplicity of European modernity. With its large, concave abdomen which evokes an uterus, the sculpture is visibly inspired by the anthropomorphic ceremonial spoons from Africa's Dan culture and is an homage to fertility.

The abstraction of Giacometti's sculpture became increasingly complex and reached its peak in flat sculptures devoid of volume whose polished surfaces appear to be lightly engraved or sculpted, as in *Woman [Flat II]* (*Femme [plate II]*, 1928–1929), *Woman [Flat V]* (*Femme [plate V]*, 1929) and *Gazing Head* (*Tête qui regarde*, 1929), the latter a flat, slightly concave plaster sculpture which evokes an eye that is barely perceptible. The Swiss artist believed that the eye was only sharpened by reduction, a premise which became a hallmark of his oeuvre until the end. This work exclusively addresses vision itself: the act of seeing adopts the form of an image. Giacometti's friend, the sculptor Henri Laurens, said of this piece: "the flattened plaster head is a true head". These flats were displayed in Paris in 1929 and garnered the interest of prestigious artists and intellectuals like Georges Bataille, André Breton, and Salvador Dalí.

## Gallery 206. Surrealism

The epicenter of the artistic and literary current of Surrealism, which emerged in 1924 and remained active until the end of World War II, was Paris. Surrealism strove to eradicate modern Rationalism through the power of the imagination. Influenced by psychoanalysis and myth, the Surrealists believed that by delving into the subconscious, one could reveal complex inner worlds around sexuality, desire, and violence.

Giacometti embraced the inquiry into language and dreams advocated by the Surrealists and officially became a member of André Breton's group in 1931. This Surrealist influence took shape in original, dream-like creations which represent inner worlds through striking images.

Giacometti's highly personal style sparked the interest of prestigious artists and intellectuals. Dalí regarded *Suspended Ball* (*Boule suspendue*, 1930–1931) as the prototype of the Surrealist "object with a symbolic function" with violent or erotic content. *Disagreeable Object* (*Objet désagréable*, 1931) is the most emblematic sculpture within this vein of work and fits in perfectly with the fantasies of brutality that populate the writings of Georges Bataille. The work rests on its back in complete balance, challenging the usual rules of sculpture by doing away with the base. Giacometti continued to make these object-sculptures until 1934; they often verge on abstraction yet somehow retain a link to the human figure.

The work *Woman with Her Throat Cut* (*Femme égorgée*, 1932) perfectly captures Giacometti's affiliation with Surrealism in the early 1930's. The artist was fascinated by the ways that this movement penetrated into the subconscious and introduced complex themes like the opposing states of agony and ecstasy or the human and the inhuman, as well as motifs that inspire both attraction and repulsion at the same time, such as the shape of insects.

### Gallery 207. The “Cages” and the delimitation of space; streets and squares

In 1935, Alberto Giacometti distanced himself from the Surrealist movement and went back to working with a model. His brother Diego and Rita Gueyfier, a professional model, posed for him on a daily basis. The sculptor explored different modelling techniques and went from working by geometric facets to doing it in a more expressive way, while his interest in the model was also clearly visible in his return to painting.

In the 1940's, during World War II, Giacometti began to create elongated, skinny figures with blurred outlines which suggested the human figure seen from afar. He claimed that making large figures seemed false to him and that only when he represented them long and slender were they faithful to his vision of humanity.

Giacometti once again used the motif of the box in countless works from the early 1950's, including *Figurine between Two Houses* (*Figurine entre deux maisons*, 1950). The box graphically alludes to different concepts related to Existentialism, such as confinement, isolation, and the anguish that can be associated with the act of existing. This same idea underlies his “cages” works, a theme with which he had experimented during his Surrealist period. In *The Nose* (*Le Nez*, 1947), the tip of the nose literally pierces the frame around the work and juts outside it.

In *The Forest* (*La forêt*, 1950), Giacometti assembles a series of elongated figures anchored to the base in such a way that they somehow resemble a forest. They are standing, tree-like, close to each other yet not touching. The relationship among these elongated arboreal figures is created through the negative space in which they cohabitate. This and other similar works with a single figure or groups of figures express the ideas on which Giacometti was reflecting at that time: the conviction that we can feel isolated even in crowded places like streets or squares, in open spaces.

### Galleries 202 and 209. Tiny sculptures

Between 1938 and 1944, Giacometti's sculptures kept getting smaller, and thus the distance between the viewer and the human figures rendered by the artist increased. During the war, Giacometti moved to Switzerland, and there he spent a lot of time with his nephew Silvio, whom he taught history as he sculpted his figure time and time again in a hotel room that he had transformed into a studio. This gave rise to a series of sculptures like *Small Bust on a Double Base* (*Petit buste sur double socle*, 1940–1941) and other figures rendered from life, such as *Silvio Standing*, *Hands in Pockets* (*Silvio debout, les mains dans les poches*, 1943).

Many years later, Silvio recalled Giacometti's process as he posed for his uncle, sometimes for 15 minutes at a time, others for an hour. One day the artist made a figure, and the next day he went back to it, reducing a sculpture that had been twice as tall to no more than eight or ten centimeters. In this way, we know firsthand how Giacometti rejected or reduced his works, synthesizing them into ever smaller forms.

The artist explained his evolution with these words: “By working from life, I managed to make minuscule sculptures just three centimeters tall. I did this much to my own dismay. I didn’t understand it. I started large and ended small. I only found the minuscule to be a true likeness. I understood it later: you can’t see a person as a whole until you step back and they become minuscule.”

### **Gallery 209. Existentialism: Elongated, stick-like figures**

Sartre defined Giacometti as “the perfect existentialist artist, halfway between nothingness and being”.

He started creating his most famous works in 1945: extremely elongated, slender figures in which he revealed his new curiosity about space and the distance between the model and the artist. Giacometti had returned to Paris, and the shift in scale allowed him to express the anxiety stemming from the trauma of the war. “After the war, I was fed up and I swore that I would not let my statues become even an inch smaller. And then this happened: I managed to keep their height, but the statues become extremely slender, rod-like, thin.”

When Giacometti was chosen to represent France, his adopted country, in the 1956 Venice Biennale, the artist reflected on how he could show his work in that space. He wanted to make new pieces to exhibit alongside his older ones and created a series of works that he called *Women of Venice* (*Femmes de Venise*). This exhibition is an extraordinary opportunity to view all eight sculptures together; they have been on display in the recently opened Giacometti Institute in Paris since last June and are travelling to Bilbao for this show.

Regarding this process, Giacometti said: “The last of the states was no more definitive than its predecessors. They were all provisional [...] all the heads and standing figures are different states.”

### **Gallery 208. Inquiry into scale**

This space contains a set of works that summarize the different scales that Alberto Giacometti worked in after 1938. During his Surrealist period, prior to this one, Giacometti had begun to explore countless variations in the shape and size of the base of his sculptures, which was an integral part of the works themselves. In 1957, he summarized his inquiry into scale and the human figure in *The Leg* (*La jambe*, 1958), a monumental piece perched on an extremely tall base. Its size and fragmentary state are reminiscent of ancient sculpture, an influence we can also find in a series of stelae whose elevated bases, which resemble columns, are crowned by busts of men, such as in *Large Head* (*Grande tête*, 1960).

Likewise, *Walking Man* (*Homme qui marche*, 1960) is Giacometti’s most famous work and one of the most famous sculptures of the 20th century. Since the 1930’s and the gait exquisitely captured in *Walking Woman* (*Femme qui marche*), Giacometti had focused on representing the act of walking, drawing inspiration from the tradition of Egyptian statues.

Giacometti was aware that he saw the woman solely as a disproportionate, immovable sculpture, as the symbol of an idol of existence, whereas the man moves forward with a steady gait, in motion.

### **Galleries 202, 203, and 208. Paintings and drawings**

Giacometti's paintings primarily include portraits of the people closest to him, such as his brother Diego, his wife Annette, his last lover Caroline, and several intellectual friends. In the sittings, he subjected his models to long working sessions and asked them to remain perfectly still in the futile quest for a complete likeness.

This exhibition allows us to glimpse Giacometti's evolution as an artist. There are subjects in his work which can be found throughout his entire career, and portraits are unquestionably one of them. Through portraits, Giacometti explored the sense of isolation even in crowded places. The figure and the individual, the true cornerstones of his oeuvre, are also timely, relevant subjects in the 21st century.

After 1957, he started to paint his portraits by layering color upon color and brushstroke upon brushstroke, suggesting an almost sculptural world, yet the artist still believed that he failed to represent reality. "My paintings are unaccomplished copies of reality. And in my work, I realize that the distance between what I do and the head that I want to represent is always the same." This frustration meant that he threw himself in his work with an obsessive intensity, and that sometimes he destroyed or redid his works. Jacques Dupin describes the process as follows: "Yes, it is mine [my face], but also the face of another person who, from a distance, emerges from the depths and recedes as soon as we try to catch it. The infinite question of the model ultimately strips him of everything he knows to reveal what he doesn't know, the unknown released from the depths."

Generally speaking, his portraits reveal a terrifying stillness with unfinished backgrounds of earth tones and greys bisected by vertical and horizontal lines which frame the works and allude to the sculptural lines of cages, of confinement. Giacometti said: "Suddenly, I had the sense that all events were happening simultaneously around me. Time became horizontal and circular, it was space at the same time, and I tried to draw it."

Gallery 202 shows different studies of heads in ink on paper from the early 1960's. These drawings allow us to see Giacometti's practice, his obsessive way of working on the face in his drawings, endlessly trying to capture the look, the glimmer of life in the eyes of each individual. To him, the look, the way the eyes can penetrate into the spectator's space, was crucial.

After experimenting with Surrealist and abstract drawing techniques, the artist went back to the most traditional technique: painting from life, which he practiced until his death. The compulsive sketches that the artist made every day are an exercise in the quest for truthful representation.



## DIDAKTIKA

Part of the Didaktika project is the didactic spaces and special activities which complement each exhibition and provide tools and resources to facilitate an appreciation and understanding of the works on display.

This educational space explores the places where Alberto Giacometti worked: from the light-drenched, spacious studio in his hometown of Stampa in the Bergell valley, which he inherited from his father in 1933, to the tiny, somber studio in Paris on Rue Hippolyte-Maindron in Montparnasse, which he moved into in 1926 and where he remained for almost 40 years. It includes excerpts from the 1966 documentary by Ernst Scheidegger with extraordinary images of the artist in his studio.

Below is a list of some of the activities being held around this exhibition.

### **Lecture: Alberto Giacometti** (October 25) -TBC-

Catherine Grenier, Director of the Fondation Giacometti in Paris and one of the curators of the exhibition *Alberto Giacometti. A Retrospective*, will offer her unique view of the artist's importance and extensive output.

### **Modelling workshop** (November X and X)

Workshop to discover how Alberto Giacometti worked with materials like plaster and clay, and to learn about the relationship between his sculptures and everyday objects. The participants will make their own sculptures over the course of both sessions.

### **Shared reflections**

Tours conducted by Museum professionals.

- Curatorial vision (October 24) with Petra Joos, Exhibition Curator.
- Key concepts (October 31) with Marta Arzak, Associate Director of Education and Interpretation.

\*Sponsored by the Fundación Vizcaína Aguirre.

## CATALOGUE

The exhibition *Alberto Giacometti. A Retrospective* is accompanied by a generously illustrated catalogue whose numerous texts and essays address aspects related to the artist and his milieu spanning 40 years.

### **Cover picture**

Alberto Giacometti

*Standing Nude on a Cubic Base (Nu debout sur socle cubique)*, 1953

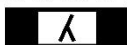
Painted plaster

43.5 x 11.7 x 11.8 cm

© Alberto Giacometti Estate / VEGAP, Bilbao, 2018

Exhibition organized by the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao in collaboration with the Fondation Giacometti, Paris

**FONDATION-  
GIACOMETTI**



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Alberto Giacometti

*The Nose (Le Nez)*, 1947

Bronze

80.9 x 70.5 x 40.6 cm

© Alberto Giacometti Estate / VEGAP, Bilbao, 2018



Alberto Giacometti

*Walking Man I (Homme qui marche I)*, 1960

Bronze

180.5 x 27.0 x 97.0 cm

© Alberto Giacometti Estate / VEGAP, Bilbao, 2018



Alberto Giacometti

*Suspended Ball (Boule suspendue)*, 1930–1931

Plaster, painted metal, string

60.6 x 35.6 x 36.1 cm

© Alberto Giacometti Estate / VEGAP, Bilbao, 2018



Alberto Giacometti

*Woman with Chariot (Femme au chariot)*, ca. 1945

Plaster, wood

154.5 x 32.4 x 35.3 cm

© Alberto Giacometti Estate / VEGAP, Bilbao, 2018



Alberto Giacometti

*Spoon Woman (Femme cuillère)*, 1927

Plaster

146.5 x 51.6 x 21.5 cm

© Alberto Giacometti Estate / VEGAP, Bilbao, 2018



Alberto Giacometti

*Standing Nude on a Cubic Base (Nu debout sur socle cubique)*, 1953

Painted plaster

43.5 x 11.7 x 11.8 cm

© Alberto Giacometti Estate / VEGAP, Bilbao, 2018



Alberto Giacometti

*Head of a Man on a Base (Tête d'homme sur socle)*, ca. 1949–1951

Painted plaster

22.3 x 7.5 x 9.5 cm

© Alberto Giacometti Estate / VEGAP, Bilbao, 2018



Alberto Giacometti

*Gazing Head (Tête qui regarde)*, 1929

Plaster with traces of pencil

40.0 x 36.4 x 6.5 cm

© Alberto Giacometti Estate / VEGAP, Bilbao, 2018



Alberto Giacometti

*Three Walking Men [Small Square] (Trois hommes qui marchent [petit plateau])*,

1948

Bronze

72.0 x 32.7 x 34.1 cm

© Alberto Giacometti Estate / VEGAP, Bilbao, 2018



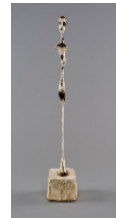
Alberto Giacometti  
*Four Women on a Base (Quatre femmes sur socle)*, 1950  
 Bronze  
 73.8 x 41.2 x 18.8 cm  
 © Alberto Giacometti Estate / VEGAP, Bilbao, 2018



Alberto Giacometti  
*Tall Thin Head (Grande tête mince)*, 1954  
 Bronze  
 64.5 x 38.1 x 24.4 cm  
 © Alberto Giacometti Estate / VEGAP, Bilbao, 2018



Alberto Giacometti  
*Standing Woman (Femme debout)*, ca. 1961  
 Painted plaster  
 46.0 x 7.6 x 11.2 cm  
 © Alberto Giacometti Estate / VEGAP, Bilbao, 2018



Alberto Giacometti  
*The Couple (Le Couple)*, 1927  
 Plaster  
 60.4 x 37.7 x 18 cm  
 © Alberto Giacometti Estate / VEGAP, Bilbao, 2018



Alberto Giacometti  
*Head-Skull (Tête-crâne)*, 1934  
 Plaster  
 18.4 x 19.9 x 22.3 cm  
 © Alberto Giacometti Estate / VEGAP, Bilbao, 2018



Alberto Giacometti  
*Caroline Seated Full-Length (Caroline assise en pied)*, ca. 1964–1965  
 Oil on canvas  
 136 x 95 x 7 cm  
 © Alberto Giacometti Estate / VEGAP, Bilbao, 2018



Alberto Giacometti

*Women of Venice (Femmes de Venise)*, 1956

Plaster and painted plaster

Between 108 and 138 cm tall

Fondation Giacometti, Paris

© Alberto Giacometti Estate / VEGAP, Bilbao, 2018

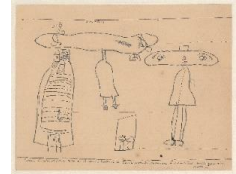
Alberto Giacometti

*Copy after children's drawings made in chalk on Boulevard Villemain sidewalk (Copie d'après des dessins d'enfants faits à la craie sur le trottoir du Boulevard Villemain)*, 1932

Ink on paper

17.2 x 22.6 cm

© Alberto Giacometti Estate / VEGAP, Bilbao, 2018



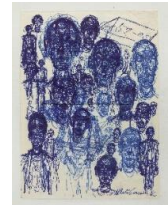
Alberto Giacometti

*Men's Heads (Têtes d'hommes)*, ca. 1959

Ballpoint pen on paper

18.3 x 13.6 cm

© Alberto Giacometti Estate / VEGAP, Bilbao, 2018



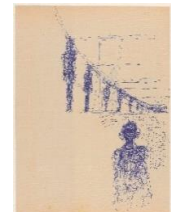
Alberto Giacometti

*Annette Naked Standing and Standing Women in Perspective (Annette nue debout et femmes debout en perspective)*, ca. 1955

Blue ballpoint pen on paper

54.6 x 54.9 cm

© Alberto Giacometti Estate / VEGAP, Bilbao, 2018



Alberto Giacometti in his studio, Paris, July 1954

Photograph by Sabine Weiss

© Sabine Weiss



Alberto Giacometti, 1951  
Photograph by Gordon Parks  
©The Gordon Parks Foundation

