

Alberto Giacometti: Prehistoric Art as an Impulse for the Artist's Late Sculptural Work after 1939

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Alberto Giacometti, one of the most important artists of the twentieth century, was a seeker, grounded in the Swiss Bergell valley and raised in a family of artists. His body of work did not develop in a linear way.¹ His biography influenced his phenomenological approach.² As a painter, draftsman, and sculptor, he simultaneously pursued different form and design types³ in subtly selected materiality.⁴ He achieved a new beginning for figural sculpture,⁵ initiated by August Rodin. In Paris, he found the friction he needed for his creative process, and, along with Pablo Picasso and Paul Klee, was one of the most influential artists of his era.

With a keen wit, Giacometti spent his entire life taking hold of the individual sedimentary layers of his personal and artistic development. His recourse to deeper-lying sediment, which he discovered after separating from the Surrealists up until the end

1 Selected works in Giacometti research: *Alberto Giacometti, Material und Vision: Die Meisterwerke in Gips, Stein, Ton und Bronze* (exh. cat. Kunsthau Zurich), ed. Philippe Büttner, Zurich/New York 2016; Thierry Dufrêne, *Giacometti – Genet: Masken und modernes Portrait*, Berlin 2013; Ulf Küster, *Alberto Giacometti: Raum, Figur, Zeit*, Ostfildern 2009; *L'Atelier Giacometti: Collection de la Fondation Alberto et Annette Giacometti* (exh. cat. Musée national d'art moderne/Centre Georges Pompidou), ed. Véronique Wiesinger, Paris 2007; Ernst Scheiddegger, *Spuren einer Freundschaft*, Zurich 1990; *Alberto Giacometti* (exh. cat. Nationalgalerie Berlin/Staatsgalerie Stuttgart), ed. Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Munich 1987; *James Lords, A Biography*, New York 1985; Reinhold Hohl, *Alberto Giacometti*, Stuttgart 1971.

2 Tobia Bezzola, "Phänomen und Phantasie," in: exh. cat./New York (2001/02), 30–39.

3 Selection of catalogs (as ed.) and essays by Christian Klemm: *Alberto Giacometti*, Kunsthau Zurich/Museum of Modern Art New York (2001/02); *Die Sammlung der Alberto Giacometti Stiftung*, Zurich 1990; *Giacometti, der Ägypter* (exh. cat. Kunsthau Zurich/Ägyptisches Museum Staatliche Museen zu Berlin), Munich/Berlin 2008. Christian Klemm, "Alberto Giacomettis Mikroskulpturen," in: *Kunsthau Zürich*, annual review 2009, Zurich 2010, 84–89; "Beginnendes Entschwinden: Giacomettis Zeichnen um 1935," in: Christine Stauffer (ed.), *Festschrift für Eberhard W. Kornfeld zum 80. Geburtstag*, Bern 2003, 415–430.

4 Cat. Zurich 2016, 22–43.

5 Boehm, Gottfried, "Das Problem der Form bei Alberto Giacometti," in: Axel Matthes (ed.), *Wege zu Giacometti*, Munich 1987, 39–67.



1 Alberto Giacometti, *Homme qui marche sous la pluie*, 1948, bronze, 46.5 x 77 x 15 cm, Kunsthaus Zurich, Alberto Giacometti Foundation, 1965

of the second world war, provided the ingredients for his late work after 1939. Did prehistoric art⁶ serve as a source of inspiration?

He internalized artistic concepts and copied the structure of images—from books, magazines, museums, in front of the originals, from caves, such as the Font de Gaume⁷—on every piece of paper he could get his hands on in an attempt to grasp reality.

6 I would like to thank Christian Klemm for the time he took to discuss my, at first, quite daring hypothesis and to reassure me that I was on the right track. Without my conversation with Tobia Bezzola, Thierry Dufrêne and Rémi Labrusse, I would not have persistently pursued my approach to the influence of prehistoric rock engravings on the work of Alberto Giacometti. They encouraged me to research and publish using primary sources. Philippe Büttner and Tobia Bezzola guided and motivated me to work even harder toward developing an exhibition based on the results of my research about prehistory as a modern idea.

7 Pictured in *L'Atelier Giacometti* (2007), 51, fig. 34.

Just a few lines of the internal structure were enough to allow the copied masterpieces to appear. In 1966, the year of Giacometti's death, Luigi Carluccio⁸ published the copies the artist himself had compiled along with three autographs to authenticate them.⁹ Here only a few prehistoric artworks are described and depicted. They point to a rather neglected aspect of the artist's late work from the Palaeolithic period.¹⁰ In 1948, Jean-Paul Sartre linked Giacometti with¹¹ "his adopted contemporaries, the men of Eyzies and Altamira," describing him as a man who, with his "antediluvian face reveals his arrogance and desire to place himself at the beginning of time."

From 1941 to 1945, the artist spent roughly five years in Geneva, Maloja, and Stampa in reflection. Unexpectedly he had time to sift through the sediment of his childhood, and it is on this political and personal situation that this paper focuses. His biography and work have been examined independently of material, subject, medium, and literary foundation. As early as 1927, he experimented with granite and marble; from 1931 to 1933 he created the large stone figure *Grand figure abstraite*,¹² which blatantly draws from prehistoric models in the Mediterranean region. He spent the summer of 1935 with Max Ernst in Maloja. In a letter to Carola Giedion-Welcker, Ernst wrote:¹³

Alberto and I have been seized with a fever to sculpt. We are working on large and small granite blocks on the moraines of the Forno glacier. These have been strangely carved by time, ice and the weather, and look fantastically beautiful, in themselves. Why not, then, leave the main work to the elements and be content with scratching our secrets into them, like runes...?

The sense of a European crisis in art in Paris in the 1930s led back to the beginning of human creativity and offered a new orientation.

In this essay, for the first time, contexts will be highlighted that suggest that Giacometti not only dealt with the ancient painting and sculpture in France and the

8 Posthumously published by Ernst Scheidegger publishers, *Alberto Giacometti: Begegnung mit der Vergangenheit*, Kopien alter Kunst, ed. Luigi Carluccio, Zurich 1966.

9 These copies were later enriched and republished with pages from the Alberto und Annette Giacometti Foundation in Paris. *Alberto Giacometti. Les copies du passé*, ed. Véronique Wiesinger, Lyon 2012.

10 See: *Préhistoire. Une énigme moderne*. Ed. by Cécile Debray, Rémi Labrusse, Maria Stavriniaki, exhib. Cat. Centre Pompidou (May 8 to September 16, 2019), Paris: éditions du Centre Pompidou, 2019.

11 *Die Suche nach dem Absoluten*, cat. Galerie Pierre Matisse, Paris 1948. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Essays in Aesthetics* (google books).

12 Pictured and described in *L'Atelier Giacometti* (2007), 100–103.

13 Carola Giedion-Welcker, *Plastik des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Stuttgart 1955, 242. Translation quoted in Max Ernst: *Sculptures* (exh. cat.), Castello di Rivoli, Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli, 1996, pp. 69, 71. See also: <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2013/impressionist-modern-art-day-sale-no8988/lot.279.html>

Mediterranean region but also that he was familiar with the prehistoric rock engravings in his home, formerly the Roman Rhaetia, and visited the nearby Val Camonica (Lombardy). Evidence supporting this thesis will be introduced, namely that these images provided the impetus for the creation of, first, very small and furthermore dematerialized figures beginning in 1940 (figs. 1 and 2). The prehistoric provokes signs, symbols, and artifacts to vanish into an unknown faraway place.

African artifacts showed him solutions to artistic problems during his cubist phase. The exhibition “Giacometti, the Egyptian” (2008–09)¹⁴ in Berlin and Zurich dedicated itself to his dialog with masterpieces from Egypt in the collections of the Louvre in Paris. Was prehistoric art a comparably significant source for his late work?

Vanish, Fade Away, Disintegrate

Why is prehistory as a field of research in art history so topical?¹⁵ It is the factor of time that has allowed it to emerge out of the concepts of exoticism and *arts premiers*.¹⁶ The unknown time, its almost unimaginable distance from today, allows the artifacts to fade into something unknown: into a projection timespan. In the beginning of the 20th century, museums for anthropology and natural history began making efforts to depict the lives of early humans, animals, and the geological time scale in often fantastic scenes based on the fragmentary knowledge of the time. Artistic projections of these efforts resulted, and continue to result, in fictions and ideas of an apocalypse in the past as well as future, accompanied by melancholy and anxieties about the future. Another driving force here is and was the search for an origin, one that would take us back to supposedly originary scenes, an imagined beginning. In these myths and narratives about our origins, caves took center stage as protective, shadowy spaces within the earth.¹⁷ Giacometti had already encountered vanishing, fading away, and disintegration as a child, when, after a long absence, he could no longer picture his father, and in 1937 at his sister Ottilia’s deathbed. A series of pencil drawings in a sketchbook from the estate of Bruno and Odette Giacometti in the collection of the Kunsthaus

¹⁴ See note 2.

¹⁵ See: Rémi Labrusse, *L'envers du temps* (Paris : Édition Hazan, 2019). Maria Stavrinaki, *Saisis par la préhistoire. Enquête sur l'art et le temps des modernes* (Paris : Les press du reel, 2019). *Writing Prehistory. Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics 69-70*, ed. by Maria Stavrinaki and Stefanos Geroulanos (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2018). *Préhistoire/modernité*, ed. by Rémi Labrusse and Maria Stavrinaki, *Cahiers du musée national d'art moderne*, no. 126 (Paris : Édition du Centre Pompidou, 2013/14).

¹⁶ Cf.: Elke Seibert, Klees “Little Experimental Machine” und prähistorische Malereien im Museum of Modern Art in New York (1937), in: *www.zwitscher-maschine.org*, No. 2 (2016). Elke Seibert, “First Surrealists Were Cavemen: The American Abstract Artists and Their Appropriation of Prehistoric Rock Paintings in the Thirties,” In: *Getty Research Journal*, No. 11, 2019 (9,600 words). <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/702747>. Elke Seibert, “Alfred J. Barr’s Visionary Concept of the Prehistoric and the Modern: An Inspiration for American Artists,” In: *10 American: After Paul Klee*, exhibition catalogue Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern/ Phillips Collection Washington D.C., Prestel: Munich/New York 2017, 45-53.

¹⁷ See: *Höhlen. Obsession der Vorgeschichte*, ed. by Markus Messling and Marcel Lepper, Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2019.



2 Alberto Giacometti, *La forêt*, 1950, bronze, 57 x 61 x 49,5 cm, Kunsthaus Zurich, 1963

Zurich demonstrate not only the emptiness of the two-dimensional surface but also evanescence. He portrayed his dying sister in the style of Ferdinand Hodler and lets her fade away in the drawing, making her face and upper body smaller in the distance of the white surface. She vanishes. After a difficult childbirth, Ottilia lies dying, and Alberto, plagued by a fear of death, lets her disappear.

The whiteness of the pages, however, becomes a mountain of pillows for the newborn's tiny head. Giacometti turns toward the living. Seemingly seen from a distance, the white paper surrounds a little head drawn with soft, delicate lines; it is rendered without the hard, curled scratchings characteristic of Giacometti's drawing style.¹⁸

Christian Klemm¹⁹ calls to mind a sketch by Giovanni Giacometti that depicts

18 Gotthard Jedlicka, "Giacometti als Zeichner," in: *Alberto Giacometti: Plastiken-Gemälde-Zeichnungen* (Klassiker der modernen Plastik, vol. 3), Wilhelm Lehmbruck Museum of the city of Duisburg, Duisburg 1977, 81-83.

19 Klemm, *Beginnendes Entschwinden*, 420-421.

Alberto, sick and sunken in a pillow. Page by page, Alberto draws further and further away from little Silvio. He plays with him, with gentle pencil strokes, in the tradition of his father.

It is not that the phenomenon of disappearance and perspective has not been comprehensively and convincingly integrated into the discourse in Giacometti studies.²⁰ The current paradigm shift simply expands the view to include the interconnectedness of prehistory.

The reference to the cave from his childhood, for example, was interpreted as being impactful for his experience of space: the harboring, hollowed monolith remained overlooked as an object from the last ice age. In Stampa there are still findspots with prehistoric engravings on individual rocks.²¹ These surely did not go unnoticed by Giacometti. What is special about his monolith? First of all, its color. For several thousands of years, along the mountain pass roads toward northern Italy, red-gold monoliths have been visited by people as spiritual places and engraved. They are magical places, palpable for a sensitive, highly-gifted child. He described the rocks in Stampa as “friendly”²² or “hostile” and practiced not only experiencing space but also surrounding space. In small-village life in the Swiss Alps, rocks, a certain formation in the nearby landscape, every mouth of a stream and every dip in a hillside were topics of everyday conversation: as landmarks, obstacles, weather vanes, dangers, auratic objects. For his entire life, Giacometti—despite the fact that the center of his life was in Paris—was a “villager,” acquainted with the traditions, talkative, sociable, and with a desire to travel. In recorded interviews, he talks ceaselessly, bickers, swears, comments on the remarks of his models. Although he loved to talk, he enjoyed not divulging his inspirations.

His familiarity with the monoliths of his home and prehistoric engravings can implicitly be assumed. Dufrière speaks of his unannounced turn toward very small formats: what is the missing link?

In a letter to Breton from 1933, Giacometti described one of his sensory perceptions in Stampa: a woman looks out over the village from a rise and, to him, seems to be scaled down in relation to the houses and the surrounding landscape, as though she was being viewed through a backwards telescope.²³ The vision corresponds with the well-known story about Isabel, who in 1937 on the boulevard Saint-Michel disappeared into the darkness, becoming a minuscule figure in the shadow of the night.

²⁰ For example: *Alberto Giacometti: Der Ursprung des Raums* (exh. cat. Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg/Museum der Moderne Salzburg), eds. Markus Brüderle and Toni Stoss, Ostfildern 2011; Gottfried Boehm, “Plastik and plastischer Raum,” in: *Skulptur* (exh. cat. Westf. Landesmuseums Münster), Münster 1977, vol. 1, 23–44.

²¹ Cf. Schweizerisches Steindenkmäler-Inventar (The Federal Inventory of Landscapes and Natural Monuments in Switzerland) at: www.ssdi.ch

²² Quoted in: *Alberto Giacometti: Gestern, Flugsand*, eds. Mary Lisa Palmera and Francois Chaussende, Zurich 2006, 33–34.

²³ See note 22, here 114.

However, this kind of vision, which ultimately led to a miniaturization of figures and the enlarging of the bases, was not only a question of scale. In both visions, the sky—in one, bright as day, in the other, black as night—sets the absolute measure of the surrounding environment, which turns human figures into tiny abstract figures, just like the abstract human bodies on the polished slabs of rock in the Val Camonica.

His Childhood Cave

The Swiss canton of Graubünden, located in the former Rhaetia, is studded with pre- and early historic artifacts. Giacometti recounts the discovery of a cave when he was a child:²⁴

I remember that, for at least two whole summers, out of everything that surrounded me, all I saw was one large rock located about 800 meters from the village—just this rock and the things directly related to it. It was a gold-colored monolith, which opened at the base to a cave; the entire base was hollow; water had eroded it. The entrance was low and elongated, almost as tall as we were back then. Certain areas led further inward, and at the very end, it seemed to split into two smaller caves. My father had shown us this rock one day. What a tremendous discovery! I immediately saw it as a friend ... After the discovery of the boulder, we first went about narrowing the entrance. It only had to be a sliver, just wide enough to allow us to slip through. My greatest joy, however, was to crouch in the small cave at the back; I hardly had any room in there, but all my wishes were fulfilled.

The cave, as a narrow hollow cavern, filled him with a sense of well-being, contentment, and comfort. He could make himself at home in a cave. The space challenged him and assured him that, outside of the limited area, space was limitless. His Parisian studio on rue Hippolyte-Maindron was a cave-like structure. Described by him as a “hole,” it offered the space necessary for his creative work. The artist covered the walls with carved lines, shaded studies, and sketches.²⁵ In Scheidegger’s photographs, the walls of the studio are reminiscent of the shaded horses and bison in the caves of Les Eyzies. In Font-de-Gaume and Lascaux, Georges Bataille and Giacometti explored the boundaries of this art, for which, for generations of prehistoric people, the cave walls served as a painting support and carved-in motives, signs, and markings overlap.

Giacometti grew up with the prehistoric rock carvings in Graubünden and their symbolic character must have attracted him; he treasured rock formations, the

²⁴ Quoted in: see note 19, here 33. See also *Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*, « Préhistoire », Printemps 2019, No. 147, 25-26.

²⁵ See illustrations : *Préhistoire*, 162-163.

erosion of glaciers by water. For him, they were an obvious find. The earliest that Giacometti could have discovered the impressive carvings in the northern Italian Val Camonica, listed today among UNESCO's world heritage sites, through newspapers or hearsay, remains to be researched. It can, however, be assumed that he already knew about the images by 1930 and, in Michel Leiris' circle, inspired debates in Paris. Leiris also draws a parallel between Giacometti's studio in Paris and a cave, with its prehistoric rock walls.²⁶ Alberto Giacometti's private library has been preserved at the Fondation Alberto et Annette Giacometti (Paris).²⁷ There, one finds among other things a copy of Emmanuel Anati's book "La Civilisation du Val Camonica" (Paris: Arthaud, 1960) in which the artist drew several depictions of animals as well as symbols in the style of the Val Camonica prehistoric rock engravings (see fig. 2 in my preface). We can thus safely assume that he was interested in the art of Val Camonica.

Walther Laeng first mentioned two carved rocks in Carpo di Ponte (Pian delle Greppe) in a letter to the German National Committee for the Protection of Monuments in 1909.²⁸ He noted the sight in his first edition of the Italian Touring Club Guide of 1914.²⁹ More comprehensive archaeological excavations took place in 1928/29. After 1956, Anati³⁰ built a research center and secured hundreds of findspots created over a period of 8,000 years (beginning in 13,000 BC), which are publicly accessible today as archaeological parks. Evolutionarily speaking, this represents the crossing of the threshold between nomadism and domestication. Spiritual needs were already being personalized, for example, through early depictions of farming personified by a deity on the edge of the image (the edge of the rock wall). The subjects and styles vary starkly; however, they all share the fact that the ice age artists set the small engravings of male and female figures, arms raised and in motion, in relation to the size of the rock surface.³¹ The edges of the rock delimit the image space. The inner and outer

²⁶ Michel Leiris, *Au verso des images* (Fontfroide-le-Haut : Éditions Fata Morgana, 1980), p. 98, 102.

²⁷ See Bucalo-Mussely, 91, note 11. The two-page spread illustrated in the preface of this publication was presented in the exhibition "Préhistoire. Une énigme moderne" at the Centre Pompidou from May to September 2019, although it was not explicitly discussed in the catalog text; see Debray/ Labrusse/ Stavrinaki, *Liste des documents exposés*, 298. I've understood this as a reference to my novel thesis—which was presented in a public lecture at the DFK Paris on the 24 March 2017—that Alberto Giacometti was inspired by the art of Val Camonica and probably visited the valley. My manuscript for this essay was submitted to the Fondation Giacometti in March 2017. In preparing for this publication, I also contacted the archive of the Fondation Giacometti and Serena Bucalo-Mussely.

²⁸ Friendly message from U. Sansoni, 9/15/2016; www.vallecamonicaunesco.it

²⁹ Gualtiero (Walther) Laeng, "Cemmo (Carpo di Ponte)," in: *Guida d'Italia del Touring Club Italiano*. Piemonte, Lombardia e Canton Ticino, Milan 1914, 595.

³⁰ Selection of writings by Emmanuel Anati, *La Civilisation du Val Camonica*, Paris 1960; *La Grande Roche de Naquane*, Paris 1960; *Camonica Valley*, New York 1961; *Capo di Ponte centro dell'arte rupestre Camuna, Breno 1962*; *Civiltà preistorica della Valcamonica*, Milan 1964; etc.

³¹ I would like to thank Umberto Sansoni for his explanations of the nature of prehistoric rock engravings in the Val Camonica and Graubünden. Through him, I had the opportunity to participate in an archaeological camp at the beginning of August 2016 and to understand the described fascination with the artifacts on the gold-red rocks.

structure of the individual rocks is part of the image composition and, as such, is related to nature and, conceptually, comparable with land art (figs. 3 and 4). The limited image space does not exist; the mission of the tiny figures fills the surrounding space.

Giacometti spent the war years in his homeland. Blows of fate forced him to reflect. He experienced crises. Paris was now far in the distance, and, with the invasion of the Germans, its future was uncertain. Did the historical situation provide the impulse for this return to prehistoric art? Dufrière³² analyzed the stations along the path to the artist's late style and found significant sources pertaining to the meaning of Giacometti's visions in his involuntary Swiss exile. In the following, quotations from the artist and his interpretation of the Geneva moment³³ will be presented in a varied context.

No Existentialist

For decades, the Swiss school maintained the position supported by Kelly,³⁴ Boehm,³⁵ and Bezzola:³⁶ Giacometti was no existentialist in the sense of the French philosophy. Kelly states:³⁷ "Giacometti's identity as an 'existentialist' artist is one that has endured, particularly in the perception of France after the Second World War." From her perspective, the depiction of Giacometti's micro-sculptures through initial photographs in *Cahiers d'Art*³⁸ (1945–46) was decisive for the recitation: vulnerable, lonely bodies, lost in nothingness. Yet he was far from illustrating the living conditions in post-war Paris, as he was accustomed to a modest life full of deprivation. His subject was form, as a skeptic of the sculptural ideal body. The status of the figure was to be shown.

In interviews from the 1950s and 1960s, Bezzola interprets Giacometti's "late self-interpretations [as] a form of self-criticism, telling of his work as though it were the history of his failure."³⁹ The philosophies of failure temporarily imposed themselves. Their personal relationship led to the justification of an existentialist world view. According to Bezzola's brilliant argument, Sartre, Albert Camus and Samuel Beckett saw themselves reflected in his works, while Giacometti struggled to find artistic solutions for an adequate perception of representation. His failure was a failure to solve problems of his works. Parisian intellectuals simply had shared interests

32 My thanks go to Thierry Dufrière for his curiosity and for the encouragement to search for further evidence. His lecture during our conference at DFK Paris (23–24 March 2017), and his essay in this volume were helpful in supporting my argument: "Giacometti's Geneva Period (1941–45): The Birth of New Sculpture," in: *Giacometti: Critical Essays*, eds. Peter Read and Julia Kelly, Surrey 2009, 113–126.

33 See note 26, here 113.

34 Kelly, "Alberto Giacometti, Michel Leiris and the Myths of Existentialism," in: *Critical Essays*, 151–169.

35 See note 5, here 43.

36 See note 2.

37 See note 28, here 151.

38 *Cahiers d'Art*, vols. 20–21 (1945–46), 253–268.

39 See note 2, here 31.

with him, and his writings were ambiguous. Biographical elements and the five years he spent in his native Switzerland, during which time tiny clay figures were created followed by dematerialized, elongated sculptures, were clearly and repeatedly referenced, and rightly so. The exhibition in the Kunsthaus Zurich (2016) offers astonishing evidence in support of this assumption.

Stone Sculptures

The concept of the Zurich exposition is based on Giacometti's concept of "vision" (translated from Italian as "sight" as well as "appearance" and "hallucination"/"vision") and on his conscious choice of material. It presents a unique, intimate collection of plaster figures, a legacy of the family of Bruno Giacometti, as well as figures made of plasticine, bronze, wood, along with early stone sculptures out of granite and marble. *Tête* (1925, granite, private collection, Switzerland), *Tête du père* (1927, marble, private collection, Switzerland), *Tête d'homme* (around 1927), *Tête du père* (1927, granite, private collection, Switzerland), and *Tête* (self-portrait) (1927, plaster, courtesy of Jeanne Bucher Jaeger, Paris) anticipate the search for new paths after his break with the surrealists.

A focal point of the genesis of Giacometti's late style was the large stone sculpture *Grand figure abstraite*⁴⁰ (1931–33, Burgunderstein, 240 cm tall, private collection, Fontainebleau). It was created at about the same time as *Projet pour une place* (1932, plaster, Kunsthaus Zurich); Giacometti depicted these two works on a sketchpad to scale to one another. The vertical outward movement of the large female figure out of the background presupposes a visit to the ancient art of Carnac. With this large female figure, studied from important torsos of antiquity, the woman's passive beauty, and Venus-like figures like the Venus of Laussel, which he copied around 1929, he absorbed the undertone of the late 1920s and set his sights on his subject: the human form.

For Giacometti, the choice of material, the return to the Palaeolithic period, to the ruins of the last ice age, was thus nothing new, considering the heads from his early avant-garde years. Before the background of a constantly detectable, archaic sediment in his creative work, the mysterious *Cube* (1933/34) would also open itself to a further interpretation. The execution of the 1933/34 *Cube* (plaster, Kunsthaus Zurich) and the bronze casting (1933/34, Alberto and Annette Giacometti Foundation, Paris), are the only version to exhibit more complex, ruin-like scratches, as Philippe Büttner⁴¹ has proved in the case of these monolithic figures in detail. Different materializations emphasize different aspects; the Zurich *Cube*, reproduced in the drawing *Lunaire* (1933, Adrian Maeght Collection), reminds Klemm⁴² of a boulder.

In 1933, a young, attractive Swiss artist began spending more and more time in his

⁴⁰ Cat. Zurich/Museum of Modern Art New York (2001/2002), 92, fig. 45.

⁴¹ Cat. Zurich 2016, 36–37, figs. 31 and 32.

⁴² Cat. Zurich 2016, 14, fig. 7.

Paris studio: Meret Oppenheim. After he and Hans Arp had invited the striking and highly talented woman to the surrealists' Salon des Surindépendants, she watched him work and drew *Giacometti's Ear*.⁴³ Oppenheim's sculpture *Urzeit Venus* (terracotta model with straw, 1933), was not created in 1933 without reason; that same year, avant-gardists had a chance to view prehistoric artistic concepts in Paris: the Musée de l'Homme in the Palais du Trocadéro opened a brilliant exhibition with artifacts and replicas of prehistoric paintings, which invited visitors on imaginary journeys back in time.⁴⁴ As one of the *arts premiers*, prehistoric art had been influential in the metropolis of Paris, the way having been paved by numerous articles and illustrations in journals and publications beginning in the 19th century. Giacometti's *Petite figurine*⁴⁵ (around 1935, wood, Kunsthau Zurich) could also be a prehistoric Venus.

Following the zeitgeist, Max Ernst visited the Giacomettis in Bergell in the summer of 1935. They spent the summer in the family's vacation home in Maloja so they could work with granite worn smooth by water. The surrealists' *histoire naturelle* was the topic in their think tank; they looked for stones and natural materials in a riverbed to use in their work.⁴⁶ Odette described the art laboratory:⁴⁷

Already at breakfast, Max Ernst would tell us about his surrealistic dreams. During the day, we were very busy. We rented an old cart horse and cart from the neighbors and looked for stones shaped by glacial water in the riverbed. Max Ernst would then work with and paint them—his main activity during this time. ...]We took many trips to the Forno Glacier ... My mother-in-law couldn't understand Max Ernst because he didn't work outside but rather in a studio, on a beautiful pine floor, frottaging.

43 Cf.: Meret Oppenheim: *Die Pelztasse war nur der Anfang*, ed. Thomas Levy, Bielefeld 2003, 233–234, fig. 20.

44 Cf.: Jean Jamin, *Le musée d'ethnographie en 1930: L'ethnologie comme science et comme politique. La museologie selon Georges-Henri Rivière. Cours de museologie, textes et témoignages*, Paris 1989. Rivière, G.-H./ Rivet, P./ Lester, P., *Le laboratoire d'anthropologie du Museum*, Paris 1935.

45 Pictured in: cat. Zurich 2016, 30, fig. 26.

46 See Werner Spies, *Max Ernst: Skulpturen, Häuser, Landschaften*, Cologne 1998, 74–79; Marco Obrist; *I Giacometti [...]* Fondazione Antonio Mazzota, Milan 2000, 95. *Alberto Giacometti: Im Widerhall der Berge*, eds. Museum Ciäsa Granda, Stampa, and Museum Rehmann, Laufenburg, Samedan 2006, 71, notes 12 and 13. Oral account of Julia Drost, 6/22/2016: At that time, Giacometti and Ernst were good friends but apparently grew apart afterward. After the second world war, when both were living in Paris again, famous and well off, they were no longer in contact with each other.

47 *Das Bergell: Heimat der Giacometti*, ed. by Ernst Scheidegger, Zurich 1994, 176–179: private black-and-white photos with Max Ernst during one of his surrealist performances with brassiere and whiskers. Some of his shaped rocks, carved and painted, are also shown in front of the mountain backdrop and in front of the entrance to the vacation home.

In *Le repas du mort* (The Repast of Death) [*Histoire naturelle*, fol 28],⁴⁸ from 1926, Ernst depicted the return to ancient times with a dinosaur growing out of a worn wooden plank. His stones lay in front of the entrance to the house in Maloja for years and caught the attention of guests.⁴⁹ They are reminiscent of Giacometti's early stone sculptures.

A Visit to the Caves of Les Eyzies

Of all the writings on and about Alberto Giacometti, in the words of Stefan Zweifel,⁵⁰ “he himself [remained] the unsurpassed author.” He leads us to his sediments. Carluccio reports that only one of the many copies of prehistoric art was in his book, namely that of the Venus of Laussel,⁵¹ “and yet [Giacometti] had copied the buffalo and mammoths—even entire walls of Lascaux—countless times.” A photograph from the Annette and Alberto Giacometti's foundation (see fig. 2 in my preface), in which Alberto and Annette are standing at the entrance of the Font-de-Gaume cave, documents this visit to the people of Les Eyzies in 1950, which was comprehensively contextualized by Rémi Labrusse and Serena Bucalo-Mussely.⁵²

Like Robert Motherwell, who had the opportunity to experience the ceiling paintings of Altamira by candlelight and declared “they were moving,”⁵³ Giacometti reacted to the pioneering concept of movement in the compositions in French cave painting:⁵⁴

It's totally impossible to draw movement from nature. To invent it is a mistake; forget it. Only immobility or gestures that create the illusion of movement in utter immobility. It's the same thing in sculpture; only in relief, perhaps, does the possibility of movement exist. Only this is undebatable, but try out all the possibilities later anyway. Drawings of the caves.

Drawings of the caves, caves, caves, caves.

There, and only there, is movement achieved. Look at why, find the possibilities there, but doubt.

Look at it considering sculpture, painting, relief.

⁴⁸ Pictured in: *Paul Klee und die Surrealisten* (exh. cat. Zentrum Paul Klee), eds. by Michael Baumgartner and Nina Zimmer, Bern 2016, 172.

⁴⁹ Pictured in: see note 41, here 177.

⁵⁰ Stefan Zweifel, “Giacometti's Atelier: Fetisch-Statue des Jetzt,” in: *Cat. Zürich* (2016), 209.

⁵¹ See note 8, here 23.

⁵² Rémi Labrusse, “Prähistorie und Moderne,” in: *Kunst der Vorzeit* (exh. cat. Martin-Gropius-Bau), Berlin 2016, 2 vols., vol. 1, 218–231. Bucalo-Mussely, *Préhistoire*, 90–91.

⁵³ Robert Motherwell, “Inside New York's Art World: Robert Motherwell,” 1979, http://bestplay.pk/watch/n_evtvqBawY.

⁵⁴ Quote from 1946, in: *Écrits*, eds. by Michel Leiris and Jaques Dupin, new edition Paris 1990, 188.

The profound impression, the discovery that changed everything, the discovery of a model for all genres of art, tempted Giacometti to speak in superlatives.

Amédée Ozenfant captures his exuberant rapture in his preface to his most important text, *Art*; he wanted to capture it; regarding his unexpected, moving encounter with the art of the people of Eyzies:⁵⁵

I have seen many interesting things in the world and countless delights, from Paris to Urtal, from Finland to Rome, from Amsterdam to Granada! But nothing, simply nothing, has ever shaken me so deeply, has evoked such a wonderful illumination, and such a vibrant echo deep within me; it was like a stone hitting the bottom of an abyss in which the lowered torches are extinguished. The endlessness of Cabrerets arouses our secret eternal powers, which lay buried under the debris of nothingness; it anchors our actions in our immutability, in the infallible continuity of our expressions, as soon as it touches the depths of that which is human.

The artists reflect the insecurity in contemporary European society during the inter-war period. Even in the case of epochal artworks, a latent longing for renewal was also palpable, originating from nature—primal, undeformed, and unblemished. To be able to believe in the continued existence of humanity and art, secret, eternal powers should prevail.

Val Camonica: Perspective, Scaling Down, Space

In the Val Camonica, art, the likes of which Giacometti was searching for, can be found: abstract forms, scaled down in relation to their surroundings, set in a landscape with high mountains, positioned on large, flat individual bases (figs. 8-10). Their charisma seemed worthy of the depiction of a god. “If I can achieve that outcome, then yes, you will see my little man, brought down to any size, take an appearance of the god,” as Giacometti told François Stahly.⁵⁶ Tiny gods are less commonly found in classical antiquity than in the former Rhaetia. Several indicators support this. With a great deal of expertise, Dufrière retraced the steps that led to Giacometti’s late style. Read under the premise of a paradigm shift, they are indicative of the influence of prehistoric art. In the Geneva years, Giacometti dealt with landscape as a scale for his figures the size of matches, a consequence of his recurring visions. However, they are not to be viewed in a symbolic landscape but in the real, open sphere, in a limitless space. The

⁵⁵ Quoted in the German translation of Gertrud Grohmann, *Leben und Gestaltung*, Bd. II, Aufbau eines neuen Geistes, von Ozenfant, ed. by Grohmann, Leipzig 1931, 10. See also *Les Cahiers du Musée national d’art moderne*, No. 147 (2019), 53-54.

⁵⁶ See note 22. Quoted in: François Stahly, “Der Bildhauer Alberto Giacometti,” in: *Das Werk*, 37, Winterthur 1950, 181-185.

figures are intended to become anonymous, alienated depictions—symbols. Dufrière closes by stating that Giacometti's new art in the Geneva years is linked with archaic styles. In a discussion with David Sylvester:⁵⁷ “The most important sculptures of all civilizations are rather small. Almost all of them. Whether Egyptian ... or prehistoric, they are almost all the same size. And I believe that was actually the size that instinctively was the most natural, that corresponds to the way people really see. And as people evolved, they transferred what they saw into a concept.”

He met the challenge of the new style with experimental materiality. Plasticine and plaster seemed well suited to capture fleeting impressions. Rippling, flowing, unstable materials were a key requirement for the appearance of his figures.

Early Examples of Giacometti's Late Work

The original plaster version of the *Femme au chariot* (around 1945) in the Wilhelm Lehmbruck Museum in Duisburg represents the elementary work of his new beginning, created in the studio in Maloja. The figure of a girl with a round head, widely opened eyes, and raised eyebrows is an Eve, embodying the new beginning. The contracted, round volumes of her frame are unique in Giacometti's body of work. An ivory idol (predynastic), depicted in Ludwig Curtius' *Antique Art*,⁵⁸ in the artist's private collection, illuminates the disposition and is comparably present: He modeled her after a memory of a female figure.

As is made clear by Klemm's analysis,⁵⁹ at this moment, three factors affected him: a psychological, a formal, and a phenomenological aspect. In June 1933, his father's death occurred while he was faced with a difficult personal situation. He stayed in Switzerland until the end of 1934, and his distance from Paris caused him to have even greater doubts about Breton and his circle: Giacometti returns to figurative depiction. Back in Paris, his thoughts are with his father, and in 1935, he proceeds with the model study. In 1937, his first attempts to find a modern style are inspired by ancient Egyptian models. 1937 brings the death of his sister Ottilia and is also the year he first draws from memory. Now a detachment from the experience before a living model and from formal memory is to follow in sculpture. Searching for truth, he finds the reduction of size to be the simplest way to achieve this dissolution and reinterpretation of the sculptural form: a reduction of mass in favor of vibrancy, appearance, vision. Fleeing from Paris in 1940, his separation from Isabel, the psychological stress of his exile in Switzerland due to the political situation worsen the crisis in his creative work; he destroys many of the micro-sculptures he constantly produces because they do not satisfy him. Early photos in *Labyrinth*,⁶⁰ in 1944, capture some of them and

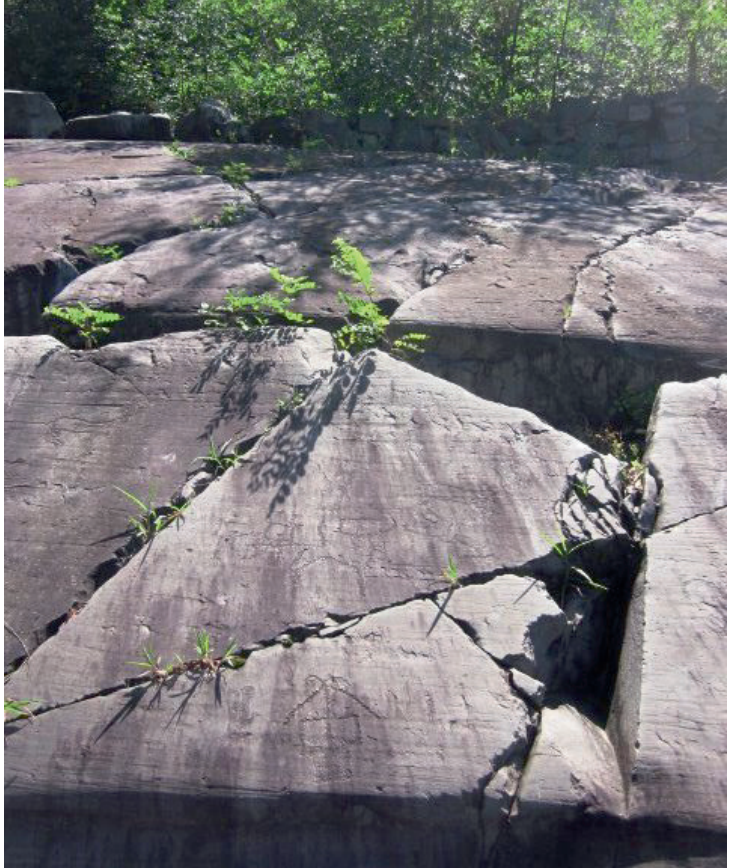
⁵⁷ See note 22, here 120–123, 125. German translation of the English quote, see note 14, here 282.

⁵⁸ Ludwig Curtius, *Die Antike Kunst, Ägypten und Vorderasien* (Handbuch der Kunstwissenschaft), Berlin 1923, 50, fig. 53.

⁵⁹ Christian Klemm, Kunsthau Zürich: *Jahresbericht 2009*, 84–89.

⁶⁰ *Labyrinth*, ed. Albert Skira, October 1944.

3, 4 Prehistoric carvings on individual rocks in the Val Camonica





5 Alberto Giacometti, *Petit buste de Silvio sur socle*, 1943, plaster, 11.4 x 6,0 x 6.3 cm, Kunsthau Zurich, Alberto Giacometti Foundation, gift of Bruno and Odette Giacometti, 2006



6 Alberto Giacometti, *Petite figurine sur socle*, around 1939/1945, plaster, 7.3 x 3.5 x 3.7 cm, Alberto Giacometti Foundation, gift of Anna und Anton Bucher-Bechtler, 2009



7 Alberto Giacometti, *Petit buste sur double socle*, around 1939/1945, plaster, 12.9 x 6.8 x 7.4 cm, Kunsthau Zurich, Alberto Giacometti Foundation, gift of Hans C. und Elisabeth Bechtler, 2009

8 Prehistoric cave engravings on a red-gold monolith in the Val Camonica



9 Two human figures, Val Camonica, Photo: Klaus Michel



establish the myth. The legendary story that he returned to Paris in 1945 with tiny plaster figures contained in just six matchboxes is regarded as the result of the crisis years.

In his search for the appropriate form for his perception, the young female, *Femme au chariot*, was preceded by works such as *Petit buste de Silvio sur socle* (around 1943, plaster, Kunsthaus Zurich) (fig. 5), *Petite figurine sur socle* (around 1939/1945) (fig. 6), and *Petit buste sur double socle* (around 1939/1945) (fig. 7). In the first phase of scaling down, he concentrated on head and upper body and opened the form; this is also the case with the small bust of Ottilia.

They reveal the idea. Giacometti shows that, up close, his small figures are comprehensible for the viewer, and only the size ratio between the base and the figure offers a point of reference. He presents acceptable solutions to his artistic problem of adequately depicting his perception from memory as well. The details of faces and heads could not be overcome in front of the models, a fact which caused him to redirect his efforts toward full figures. For him, the vibrancy of human bodies is tangible in miniature form. Working from memory, his imagination, and from visions became possible for him and led to the micro-sculptures, described by visitors to his studio in 1938/39. At the same time, the objects in the collection of the Kunsthaus Zurich, with their formally striking bases, point to the concepts of prehistoric art near his home described here, which, along with the difficult steps toward the genesis of his late style, could have also served as a legitimization.

Summary

Giacometti's sculptural works take one back to the "beginning of the time." Through his doubts of the meaningfulness of an immortal form, freed from stone, he discovered a new kind of artistic process. His path consequently led him back to archaic sculptural figures, through prehistoric art, beginning in the late 1920s and systematically executed in his exile in Switzerland between 1940 and 1945.

He set the immortalization, the stability, and permanence of traditional sculpture against the transience, intensity, power, and aura of appearance; a "temporalization" of sculpture and space.⁶¹ His conflict between the evanescence and preservation of matter was the driving force of his sculptural work on the most traditional subject in art: the human body. Matter should deteriorate, disappear, transform. This aspect is inherent to prehistoric art and must have persuaded him.

Imaginary space, uncertainty through emptiness, existence out of nowhere, on a temporal tangent to nowhere are all inherent in his groups of figures and sculptural configurations. The thin figures emerge out of the materiality of the supporting, voluminous slabs and bases, counteracting the danger of dissolution.⁶² It is not form that

⁶¹ See note 5, here 48–61.

⁶² Boehm, cat. Münster (1977), 38–39.

is eternal but perception, a conceivable notion when one encounters prehistoric art in the Val Camonica.

10 *Walking priest*, Capo di Ponte/Naquane, Val Camonica

