Alberto Giacometti

Norwich-based arts writer, Tony Cooper, discovers more about Swiss-born sculptor, Alberto Giacometti, whose 50th anniversary of his death is being celebrated worldwide.

And Norwich is at the forefront of Giacometti's 50th with a major new exhibition - *Alberto Giacometti: A Line through Time* - at the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, University of East Anglia, curated by Calvin Winner and Claudia Milburn.

One of the 20th century's most significant artists and widely celebrated as a sculptor, painter and draughtsman, the exhibition will be the most extensive in the UK dedicated to Giacometti since 2007. It will focus on his work and influence during the post-war period on both sides of the Channel.

Examining his preoccupation with the isolated figure, a motif that dominated his work, the exhibition will also explore a number of key themes which include the influence of ancient art on Giacometti's practice, the context of his contemporaries in post-war Paris and his impact in Britain.

Over 150 works will be on show with significant loans coming from the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Fondation Beyeler, Basel, the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Fitzwilliam Museum and Victoria & Albert Museum as well as from many private collections. These loans will complement the Sainsbury Centre's own remarkable collection of Giacometti's works which is the largest in the UK. The Centre is, in fact, renowned for its fine group of drawings acquired by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury.

Following the Second World War, isolated figures and the theme of isolation dominated Giacometti's practice. This work secured his place as one of the great modern masters of the 20th century. The exhibition will closely consider the context and cultural climate of Paris where Giacometti was living following the war, a time fraught with stress and anxiety. Notions of freedom of expression and materiality will be explored through major works by Giacometti and his French contemporaries such as César Baldaccini (usually referred to just as César), Jean Dubuffet, Jean Fautrier and Germaine Richier.

The exhibition title, A Line through Time, references Giacometti's fascination with ancient art, the timeless nature of his endeavour and the enduring resonance of his practice. His work will be shown in the context of Ancient Egyptian funerary figures, Etruscan and Cycladic figurines and West African sculpture drawn from the Sainsbury Centre's rich collections.

Giacometti's reputation grew throughout the post-war period and for the first time a major exhibition will explore the artist's influence and legacy on modern British art. His impact was significant and long lasting and the years leading up to his first major UK show (held at the ICA in 1955) will be a particular focus.

Works by such leading artists as Frank Auerbach, Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Elisabeth Frink, Henry Moore, Eduardo Paolozzi, Isabel Rawsthorne and William...

‘I’ve been fifty thousand times to the Louvre. I have copied everything in drawing, trying to understand.’
T Turnbull will be exhibited to illustrate Giacometti’s far-reaching influence in Britain.

When Robert and Lisa Sainsbury first met Giacometti in Paris in 1949 it came at a key moment for the artist and the Sainsburys developed a personal and loyal friendship with him, his wife Annette and his brother Diego. It was at this time that they acquired the painting Diego Seated (1948).

Giacometti (a close friend of Samuel Beckett, too) later drew portraits of Robert as well as the Sainsbury children, David and Elizabeth. A series of portraits of David from 1955 will be on show, too, while significant archival material documenting the close relationship between Giacometti and the Sainsbury family will be displayed including several unpublished letters that have not previously been seen.

Calvin Winner, co-curator of the exhibition, said: ‘The Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts is honoured to mark the 50th anniversary of Alberto Giacometti’s death with this unique exhibition. Giacometti was the quintessential artist-philosopher who offered a deep and profound mediation on the human condition. The benefactors of the Sainsbury Centre, Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, were both patrons and friends of Giacometti, making the Centre a fitting place to mark the anniversary of his death and celebrate his life and work.’

The eldest of four children, Giacometti was immersed in the world of fine art from an early age. His father Giovanni, a post-Impressionist painter greatly influenced by Cézanne and van Gogh as well as by the Austrian-born painter, Giovanni Segantini, well known for his large pastoral landscapes of the Alps. His godfather was the Fauvist painter, Cuno Amiet, a close friend of his father since their student days in Paris, while the Symbolist artist, Augusto Giacometti (a key figure in the world of Swiss and European painting in its transition to the non-figurative) was second cousin to both his parents.

Giacometti was born in Borgonovo (now forming part of the Swiss municipality of Bregaglia situated near the Italian border) and died at the age of 64 at Chur, the capital of the Swiss canton of Graubünden, located on the right bank of the Rhine and, reputedly, the oldest town of Switzerland. He attended the School of Fine Arts in Geneva while his brother, Diego, became an artist and his other brother, Bruno, an architect. His mother, Annetta Giacometti-Stampa, came from one of the valley’s landed families.

Moving to Paris in 1922, Giacometti studied under the sculptor, Antoine Bourdelle - an associate of Rodin - and experimented with Cubism and Surrealism. He quickly rose to prominence and came to be regarded as one of the leading Surrealist sculptors of his day. He kept good company, too. Among his associates were the likes of Max Ernst, Joan Miró, Pablo Picasso and the Swedish-born artist, Bror Hjorth, as well as the Polish-French artist, Balthasar Klossowski de Rola, simply known as Balthus.

By the late 1930s, Giacometti concentrated his work on the human head mainly focusing on the sitter’s gaze. He preferred models he was close to therefore he chose his sister and the artist Isabel Rawsthorne, then known as Isabel Delmer. This was followed by a phase in which his statues of Isabel became stretched out and her limbs elongated.

Obsessed with creating his sculptures exactly as he envisioned through his unique view of reality, he often carved until they were as thin as nails and reduced to the size of a pack of cigarettes. A close friend said of him that if he decided to sculpt you, he would make your head look like the blade of a knife.

After his marriage to Annette in 1946, his tiny sculptures became larger, but the larger they grew, the thinner they became. Giacometti said that the final result represented the sensation he felt when he looked at a woman.

His paintings underwent a parallel procedure. The figures appear isolated and severely attenuated as the result of continuous reworking. Subjects were frequently revisited. For example, one of his favourite models was his younger brother, Diego.

In 1958, Giacometti - who was awarded the Grand Prize for Sculpture at the 1962 Venice Biennale - was asked to create a monumental sculpture for the Chase Manhattan Bank building in New York. Although he had for many years harboured an

‘If only someone else could paint what I see, it would be marvellous, because then I wouldn’t have to paint at all.’

*Feature by Tony Cooper - Writer*
ambition to create a work for a public square he had never set foot in New York and knew nothing about life in such a rapidly-evolving metropolis.

His work on the project resulted in the four figures of standing women (his largest sculptures) entitled Grande femme debout I through IV (1960). The commission, however, was never completed because he was dissatisfied in the relationship between the sculpture and the site. 

Even when he had achieved popularity and his work was in great demand, he still reworked his models, often destroying them or setting them aside to be returned to years later. 

In his later years, Giacometti’s works were shown in a number of large exhibitions throughout Europe. Riding a crest of a wave of international popularity (but, sadly, in declining health) he made it to the United States in 1965 for an exhibition of his works at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

For his last work, however, he prepared the text for the book, Paris sans fin, a sequence of 150 lithographs containing memories of all the places where he had lived. Published by Cahiers dessins (Paris, 2007), the photographs were taken by Henri Cartier-Bresson with Sylvie Wuhrmann providing the preface.

Regarding Giacometti’s sculptural technique and according to the Metropolitan Museum of Art: ‘The rough, eroded, heavily-worked surfaces of Three Men Walking (II), 1949, typify his technique. Reduced to their very core, these figures evoke lone trees in winter that have lost their foliage. Within this style, Giacometti would rarely deviate from the three themes that preoccupied him: the walking man; the standing nude woman; the bust - or all three, combined in various groupings.’

‘I rediscovered the wish to make compositions with figures,’ Giacometti commented. ‘For this I had to make - quickly, I thought, in passing - one or two studies from nature, just enough to understand the construction of a head, of a whole figure. In 1935, I took a model. This study should take, I thought, two weeks and then I could realise my compositions . . . I worked with the model all day from 1935 to 1940 . . . Nothing was as I imagined. A head became for me an object completely unknown and without dimensions.’

‘Artistically I’m still a child with a whole life ahead of me to discover and create. I want something but I won’t know what it is until I succeed in doing it.’
‘All the art of the past rises up before me, the art of all ages and all civilizations, everything becomes simultaneous, as if space had replaced time. Memories of works of art blend with affective memories, with my work, with my whole life.’

Since Giacometti achieved exquisite realism with facility when he was executing busts in his early adolescence, his difficulty in re-approaching the figure as an adult is generally understood as a sign of existential struggle for meaning rather than as a technical deficit.

Undoubtedly, Giacometti was a key player in the Surrealist art movement but his work resists easy categorisation. And even after his excommunication from the Surrealist group, the end products were an expression of his emotional response to the subject. He attempted to create renditions of his models the way he saw them and the way he thought they ought to be seen. He once said that he was sculpting not the human figure but the ‘shadow that is cast’.

Although Giacometti’s output extends into painting and drawing, he’s renowned for his sculpture and best remembered for his figurative work which helped make the motif of the suffering human figure a popular symbol of post-war trauma.

In 2000, one of Giacometti’s bronze sculptures, the life-size L’Homme qui marches I, sold for about £65 million.

‘Let me know how to make only one and I will be able to make a thousand.’