



## Reconstructing form and void: A study of existential notions in Alberto Giacometti's sculpture

Paramita Chakraborty

Assistant Professor, Department of Painting Specialization, Government College of Art & Craft, Calcutta, West Bengal, India

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.66856/ijhssr.2026.12.4.12363>

### Abstract

This essay studies the development of Alberto Giacometti's sculpture within the changing relationship among shape, space, and the human state. Beginning with his early training under Bourdelle and his experience with Brancusi, it traces his ongoing engagement with Surrealism and the development of a distinctive artistic morphology. He expressed a sustained exploration of the human look through deformation, fragmentation, and diminution of traditional forms. It is also important to note that Art is intensely bonded with the humanities and social sciences because it reveals human experiences, disposition, and social realities. Artists react to the sociocultural, historical, and cognitive contexts of their time through their artistic practice. Giacometti's work, notably, proposes a path to question human presence, seclusion, insight, and the conditions of the present era. The study explores the impact of primeval art, natural surroundings, and the unconscious on Giacometti's practice. Works such as *Spoon Woman*, *The Couple*, *Suspended Ball*, *The Palace at 4 A.M.*, and *Woman with Her Throat Cut* demonstrate how a contour of a sculpture becomes associated with emotional stress, longing, motion, and dream. His departure from the Surrealist group in 1935 marked a major shift, although Surrealist notions still reverberated in his later oeuvre. His post-war sculptures receive particular focus, in which seclusion, estrangement, tenuousness, and increasingly ambiguous contemplation shape the human figure. Works such as *Invisible Object*, *Head of a Man on a Rod*, *City Square*, *The Chariot*, and *The Forest* transformed into a delicate presence suspended between life, reality, survival, and closure. Although Giacometti rejected Sartrean existentialism, his work engaged greatly with uncertainties of life, death, love, and human loneliness, making form and the abyss vigorous expressions of the unstable landscape of human existence.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, surrealism, deformation of shape, human isolation, emotional trauma, after effect of world war

### Introduction

#### Learning from Bourdelle, Finding One's Roots, Contemporary Literature, and the Destabilizing Influence of Surrealism

Just as the Surrealist movement broke new ground in the world of fine arts, it also left a profound and multifaceted impact. Alberto Giacometti (1901–66) was no stranger to this impact. Trained at the Genevan École des arts et métiers (1919) he came to Paris in 1922 and began studying under the tutelage of Auguste Rodin's student Antoine Bourdelle (1922–27). During this time, he came under the influence of the sculptor Constantin Brancusi. After a time, wishing to find his own roots, he left the sphere of Brancusi's influence, and found himself heading towards Surrealism. At the same time, as Surrealism was composing the world of literature and art, its influence started finding a place in Giacometti's work. It is also important to note that art is intensely bonded with the humanities and social sciences because it reveals human experiences, disposition, and social realities. Artists respond to the sociocultural, historical, and cognitive contexts of their time through their artistic practice. Giacometti's work, notably, proposes a direction to question human presence, seclusion, insight, and the conditions of the present era.

#### The Appearance of Post-Surrealist Elements after the First World War: Finding His Own Style despite the Influence of Rodin and Brancusi

The First World War had a profound impact on Giacometti's work, which contributed to the gradual emergence and development of a post-Surrealist idiom in his work. By *Self-Portrait* (1921) and *Torso* (1925) he had

shaken off the influence of Bourdelle and Rodin and found his own language. However, a tendency toward Brancusi's idiom could still be found in *Torso*. Notable are the destruction of geometric form, the location of the human form despite an indistinctness, and the dissolution of form. Understanding the human form as the expression of identity through any man-made object—this was the question raised by the artist through his works *Self-Portrait* and *Torso*.

#### The Influence of Primitive Art, Nature as the Source of Art, and Representations of the Unconscious

Just as primitive art greatly influenced Cubism, a similar influence can be found in the work of Giacometti. *Spoon Woman* and *The Couple* move towards an increasing two-dimensionality, moving away from the three-dimensionality of sculpture. Just as worshipped idols offer a three-dimensional form, the works exhibit an inherent frontality. *The Couple* is quite relief-like in nature. Among the works less influenced by his mentors, *Spoon Woman* has the strongest adherence to traditional form. The slab-like form of primitive sculpture is particularly apparent in this work. The emergence of an archaic force in his organic forms indicates the Surrealist influences. Giacometti's sculptural forms are predominantly derived from nature, and there is an inherent symbolism in his manner of presentation. This presentation also retains the free expression of the artist's unconscious subjectivity. Thus, while the forms are derived from nature, the artist's unconscious finds expression through the inherent symbolism of Giacometti's art.

*Observing Head* (1927–29) is a sculpture in profile and an expression of an inherent two-dimensionality. *Man and Woman* (1928–29) is also a notable work of this period.

Jean-Louis Ferrier writes on this issue: “*Man and Woman* is a veritable incarnation of rape, or the sadistic dimension of a love relationship. Man is no more than the brutal erection of a desire with knife drawn. The woman is a troubling concavity, and trembling between acceptance and refusal. The forms are arched against each other in a motion that is

not an embrace, but a dance of death.” (Ferrier 410).

It is worth noting that he worked with Hans Arp and Joan Miró in support of the Surrealist movement until 1935. It was in 1935, he was removed from the Surrealist group. This expulsion may have influenced the artist to consciously break away from his Surrealist associations.



Source: <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/fr/ressources/oeuvre/SLFmYun>

**Fig 1:** *Man and Woman*.  
Bronze. 15.50 x 15.50 x 6.50 inches. 1928-29.

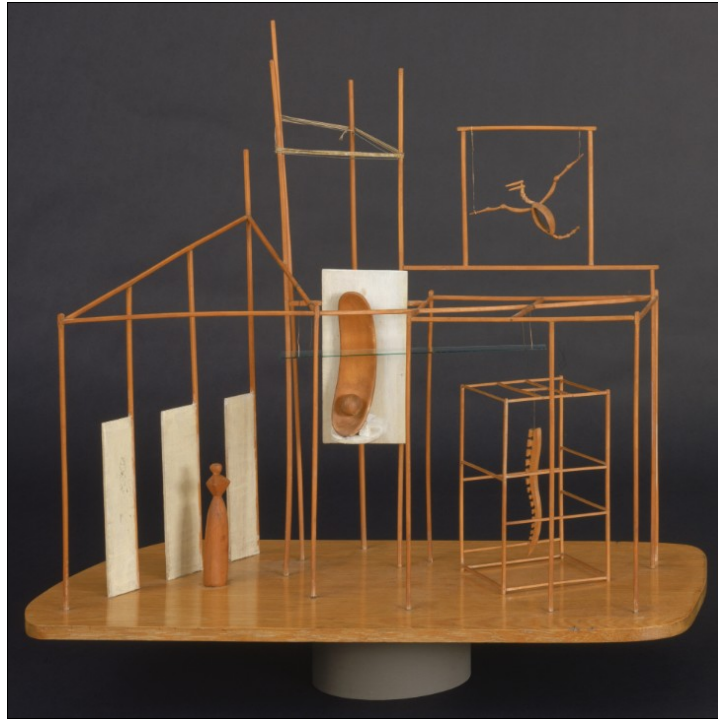
### **The Difficulty of Separating Space and Form, the Appearance of Unconscious Desire, and a Sense of Movement and Motility**

It is impossible to separate space and form in the work of Giacometti. The exterior space and the form of the object command each other's presence. This is particularly notable for his work entitled *Suspended Ball* (1930–31). Tension and excitement are inherent in its form. Instead of being frozen, it carries with it a sense of perpetual motion. Furthermore, it carries within it the impression of an unconscious desire. Whenever the artist has spoken of movement, he has also discussed the various formations of the unconscious mind. There is a strong confluence of Surrealism and abstraction in his works of this period.

### **The Palace at 4 A.M.: Molten Formality, Psychodrama, and a Web of Illusory Dreams**

Wood, glass, wire, and string tie together the structure of a residence, letting the interior and the exterior blend into each other. A prehistoric bird is perched atop the building, and a skeleton—mysteriously caged—rests inside. Giacometti had attested to the difficulties encountered in creating the piece. The work does not seek a simplistic explanation; rather, it highlights the difficult, dream-shrouded terrain of art's search for the unconscious.

In the 1932 work *Woman with Her Throat Cut*, the form of the woman is almost unnoticeable, what is noticeable, however, is its insect-like nature. Expressed through this work are love, sexuality, pain, and an obsession with morbidity. It is the artist's interpretation of the inseparability of Eros and Thanatos.



Source: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80928>

**Fig 2: *The Palace at 4 A.M.***

Wood, Glass, Wire, and String. 25 x 28.25 x 15.38 inches. 1932.

### **Isolation and Alienation as a Result of the War: Breaking Past the Shackles of Surrealism despite Its Influence Remaining**

After gradually drifting away from his Surrealist associations, the first strains of a post-war art movement can be found in Giacometti's work. In his 1934 work *Invisible Object*, the artist highlights the helplessness and isolation faced by humanity. A sense of frozenness permeates the entire work, along with a sense of human incapacity. While the work tries to move beyond Giacometti's Surrealist associations, it remains under the shadow of his erstwhile Surrealist influences.

### **Mysteriousness, Smokiness, and Eeriness as Tools to Describe the Human Condition, Though He Was a Strong Disbeliever in Sartrean Existentialism**

Among his later works, *Head of a Man on a Rod* (1947) is notable. The work consists of a severed head mounted on a pike. Though reminiscent of Rodin's project to depict each part of the human form separately, Giacometti's entirely different underpinnings give the work a smoky, mysterious, and eerie character, presenting a severed human head as a work of art. The human form almost disappears here, with the trepidation of the human heart and the uncertainty of existence becoming major themes. It could be said in this context that Giacometti's last works were also characteristic of his view on humanity; his figures standing alone or in groups, represented symbols of existential danger, rather than the specific and incommunicable reality of the isolated individual (Joachimides and Rosenthal 315). Giacometti was a staunch disbeliever in Sartrean Existentialism and had always maintained that the manner in which his audience responded to his work was more important to him.



Source: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81373>

**Fig 3: *City Square*.**

Bronze. 8.50 x 25.40 x 17.25 inches. 1948.

His later works such as *City Square* (1948), *The Chariot* (1950), and *The Forest (Composition with Seven Figures and a Head, 1950)*, are notable for his attempt to portray each human form separately. The doubt embedded in the existence of human society becomes the grammar for his later art. *Chariot* shows a strong influence of Etruscan bronze art, which was famous for their philosophy of life and death. An almost non-existent chariot driver becomes important to the commentary on existentialism. *Walking Quickly under the Rain* (1949) and *Man Crossing a Square on a Sunny Morning* (1950) portray the solitary human forms as external manifestations of his artistic subjectivity. Here, too, the solitary, fading human forms portray the mysterious complexities of human life. While *Dog* (1951) does not have any human forms, here too the artist engages with the relationship between life and death. The form of the dog situates itself between existence and dissolution.



Source: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81710>

**Fig 4:** *Walking Quickly under the Rain*.  
Bronze. 17.80 x 30 x 6 inches. 1949.



Source: <https://www.guggenheim.org/audio/track/dog-1951-cast-1957-by-alberto-giacometti>

**Fig 5:** *Dog*.  
Bronze. 17.40 x 38.11 x 6.18 inches. 1951.

Art, literature, music, dance, and theatre—they are all connected with each other. While Giacometti was engaging with existentialism, Albert Camus (1913–1960) explored similar concerns through literature. The same applies to Franz Kafka (1883–1924) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980). They belong to more or less the similar time fame. Except for Kafka, who spent his life mostly in Prague, with brief stays in Germany and Austria, the other two stalwarts, Sartre and Camus, had intellectual connections with Giacometti. Sartre was one of the deepest admirers of

Giacometti's work. Paris, one of the most recognized intellectual cities even in today's world, brought these two thinkers together and they had several meaningful conversations and exchanges of ideas in cafes and in many artistic communities. It is true that Giacometti was a firm disbeliever in Sartrean Existentialism but that did not prevent them from sitting in cafes and having constructive conversations. Giacometti and Camus had connection with each other, too, and their idea about existentialism brought them onto the same intellectual platform.

## Conclusion

### **The Frailty and Tiredness of Life: The Manifestation of His Personal Life in His Work. His Gaze as Isolation—Was It Because of His Eyesight?**

The tiredness, frailty, and existential precariousness come back repeatedly as themes in Giacometti's work, and there exists a strand of popular wisdom that claims that this was due to his failing eyesight. However, there is not adequate evidence to support this claim. Moreover, it is apparent that the artist's personal life has been reflected in his work through which he earned his position in history. It would be safe to assume that Giacometti's artistic influence has and may continue to inspire the works of future artists. Notably, his philosophy of life, death, and love sheds light on the mysterious unconscious questions of our existence.

## References

1. Arnason HH, Prather MF. A History of Modern Art. 4th ed. Thames and Hudson, 1998.
2. Ferrier JL. Art of Our Century: The Story of Western Art, 1900 to the Present. Longman, 1989.
3. Honor H, Fleming J. A World History of Art. Lawrence King Publishing, 1991.
4. Joachimides CM, Rosenthal N. The Age of Modernism: Art in the 20th Century. Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1997.
5. Schneider A. Alberto Giacometti: Sculpture, Paintings, Drawings. Prestel, 1994.