

# Giacometti and *Portrait of a Woman*

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Fig. 1.  
Alberto Giacometti,  
*Portrait of a Woman [Rita]*, 1965.  
Oil on canvas, 86 x 65 cm.  
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid  
(AGD 1412)

[\[+ info\]](#)



Fig. 2  
Giacometti with *Portrait of James Lord*,  
1964



Fig. 3  
Ernst Scheidegger, Giacometti with  
his mother in Stampa, 1960

Who is that older woman sitting before us, with her stern countenance and hieratic pose? And what ties did she have to Alberto Giacometti, the portrait's creator? The identity of the sitter for *Portrait of a Woman*, now in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza's collection, remained in obscurity for years and was only recently revealed as a result of research conducted by the Fondation Alberto et Annette Giacometti [fig. 1].

Her name was Rita, and she was the Giacomettis' cook at their family home in Stampa, a small town in the Swiss Alps. This information, made public in the Fondation's online catalogue raisonné, helps us locate the place where the portrait was executed and reconstruct in detail the creative process behind it and the point in Giacometti's life and artistic career at which he created it.<sup>1</sup>

## Getaways to Switzerland

'At the end of the month, I'll go to Stampa. And there I can do some drawings. I can do still lifes and some figures. The woman who keeps house for me there will pose. She has posed before. I want to do some drawings', Giacometti told his friend James Lord on the day they parted company in October 1964.<sup>2</sup> Written a few months before Giacometti created the Museo Thyssen's *Portrait of a Woman* and at the apex of his career, Lord's *A Giacometti Portrait* helps us understand the great sculptor and painter's working method near the end of his life. The artist and the American writer had just spent eighteen days together, which would result in two magnificent portraits: one in paint, the other in words [fig. 2]. We encounter an artist tormented by the same obsessions and insecurities that had dogged him from the beginning, when he was a young apprentice in Switzerland working under his father, the painter Giovanni Giacometti. And, at the book's conclusion, we also learn that, when he bid Lord farewell, Giacometti announced his intention to visit Switzerland to meet with the protagonist of the work we are considering here.

Though Giacometti had settled in Paris in 1922, he regularly visited Stampa throughout his life, alternating between the French capital—with its endless days of work, its cafés, the strolls along its great boulevards—and his summer sojourns in that remote corner of the Graubünden canton. Those imposing mountains and the valley in which the winter sun never shone and which had marked his childhood continued to reappear in his work and always comprised an important part of the artist's imagery.

His visits, furthermore, were an occasion for him to reunite with his family. From his youth, Giacometti had shown an interest in representing the human figure, and his siblings, Ottilia, Hugo and Diego, and above all his mother, Annetta, who was accustomed to posing for his father, were his first models [fig. 3]. Later, when he would



Fig. 4  
Alberto Giacometti, *Rita*, ca. 1965  
Oil on canvas, 70 x 50.2 cm.  
Fondation Alberto et Annette  
Giacometti, Paris, inv. 1994-0626  
(AGD 1410)



Fig. 5  
Alberto Giacometti,  
*Woman sewing with work on the  
table at Stampa*, 1954.  
Pencil on paper, 414 x 303 cm.  
Private collection (AGD 643)

return to his hometown his mother and Ottilia—until her early death in 1937—continued to serve as two of his principal models.

In the canvas at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza and in another at the Fondation Alberto et Annette Giacometti [fig. 4], the family's cook appears to have substituted for his mother as a summertime model. By 1962, his elderly mother's frailty now made it impossible for her endure the long sessions posing for her son, and she had died months before the artist portrayed Rita in 1965. In *A Giacometti Portrait*, as we have seen, Lord recalled that the artist, referring to the cook from Stampa, confirmed that that sturdily built woman had already sat for him in the past. Though she has not been identified as the model for earlier works, it is possible she may turn up in one or more of the many drawings from Stampa in which Giacometti depicted female figures in interiors [fig. 5].

What seems clear is that Rita posed for the first time for a painting between late 1964 and early 1965. She should not be confused with another Rita, whose last name was Gueyfier and who entered Giacometti's life in the late 1930s to become one of his favourite models once he returned to working with sitters after his expulsion from the Surrealist group. In contrast to those interwar years, when Giacometti was focussing almost exclusively on sculpture, the second Rita, the one from Switzerland, turns up in the last stage of his career, when painting had attained a status comparable to that of sculpture in his oeuvre.

### Giacometti the painter

'I make paintings and sculptures, of course, and have done so always, from the first time I drew or painted, in order to sink my teeth into reality, to defend myself, to feed myself, to grow; [...] to be as free as possible: to attempt—with the means that today are the most characteristically mine—better to see, better to understand what is around me', Giacometti remarked in 1957.<sup>3</sup> He argued that both mediums had always been complementary tools for the various objectives of his artistic creation. While sculpture allowed him to explore concepts alien to painting such as the notion of a void, canvas offered him the possibility of analysing a figure in relation to the space surrounding it.

His beginnings as an artist working alongside his father and his godfather, Cuno Amiet, both renowned painters in Switzerland at the turn of the century, were in the medium of painting. And, though he began to experiment with sculpture already during the years he studied painting in Geneva and certainly turned emphatically to that medium once he arrived in Paris in 1922, he nevertheless resorted to paper and canvas in his regular visits to Stampa and Maloja, where for many years he had no workshop. He produced his only paintings from the period between 1925 and 1945 on his summer trips to Stampa and Maloja, where his family had inherited a house.<sup>4</sup> When he took up painting again after the



Fig. 6  
Alberto Giacometti,  
*The artist's mother*, 1950.  
Oil on canvas, 44.2 x 31.9 cm.  
Private collection (AGD 1744)



Fig. 7  
*Rita in the kitchen in Stampa with Alberto Giacometti*, sometime before February 1965. Archive of the Fondation Alberto et Annette Giacometti, Paris, inv. 2003-1726.



Fig. 8  
Detail of *Portrait of a Woman [Rita]*, 1965

Second World War, it was his mother in particular who became the subject of his new canvases [fig. 6].

Back in Switzerland in the autumn of 1964 and in 1965, Giacometti executed what were probably his last paintings.<sup>5</sup> He did not choose his brother, Diego, his wife, Annette, or his lover, Caroline, for this task but the woman who kept house for him in Stampa, producing these two portraits of Rita—one that is smaller and more closely framed [fig. 4] and the other larger, which is now in the Thyssen collection [fig. 1].

#### Last works

In a photograph from early 1965, we find Rita and Alberto in the kitchen together [fig. 7]. The copper cookware and the electric water heater frame the scene, in which both are seated at a table full of medicines. The homely atmosphere reflects the degree of familiarity between the two, at the same time that it hints at what Giacometti was undergoing at that stage in his life.

Though at no point did Giacometti ever remarked on the matter to his friend James Lord, a year earlier, in 1963, he had suffered a grave illness. After leaving Paris that October in 1964, the artist visited the cantonal hospital in Chur where the doctors confirmed that there were no new signs of the cancerous tumour that he had had extracted the previous year. Nonetheless, they diagnosed him with a case of extreme exhaustion. The art world must have intuited his weak health, for in the remaining year of his life—he died on 11 January 1966—there was a succession of homages, prizes and exhibitions held in his honour. Giacometti travelled far and wide during the following months. For the first time he crossed the Atlantic to attend his solo retrospective at MoMA and later he travelled to Humlebæk, Denmark, where the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art exhibited an important selection of his work.

Though the numerous trips and commemorations inevitably kept Giacometti from producing as much as he had in previous years, his works from 1965, like the portrait of Rita here, reveal his undiminished creative power, evident in the painting itself but also in the intensity with which he continued to work. The process behind the execution of his portrait of James Lord, which he produced immediately prior to the work that concerns us here, involved long sessions with the sitter, followed by evening sessions with Caroline which lasted well into the early morning. Each day over the course of its creation, the artist approached the work as if for the first time, and this led him to modify the paintings and sculptures repeatedly. We might imagine Giacometti before Rita, experiencing a similar back-and-forth between moments of clairvoyance and moments of frustration over the course of a single day's work. As a result, his paintings accumulated layers that sometimes indicated progress but that, more often than not, appeared to lead towards the destruction of what had been accomplished so far.

### The head: an element that ties everything together

‘Little by little he was painting out what he had previously done, undoing it, as he said. Presently he took one of the fine brushes [...], concentrating on the head. He was constructing it all over again from nothing, and for the hundredth time at least’, Lord recounts of their last session together, a pattern he had observed throughout the process of the painting’s creation.<sup>6</sup> Just as in the portrait of the American writer, the multiple layers that compose and surround Rita’s head in the Thyssen portrait reveal the numerous sessions the artist must have shared with his housekeeper [fig. 8]. The process is even more evident in the version at the Fondation Alberto et Annette Giacometti, in which the layers of grey cover almost the entire canvas. Giacometti struggled again and again to find a pictorial solution that would correspond to his visual perception. And yet, again and again, he confronted the profound impossibility of representing things just as he saw them.

The entire work began and ended with the head. Indeed, his obsession with representing the head was what precipitated his break with the Surrealist group in 1935. For Giacometti, the head was the element that connected everything: the axis around which, once it was defined, he could construct the surrounding space and move on to other areas of the canvas that up to that point he had only worked out sketchily. At the same time, his dissatisfaction with the results would lead him perpetually and single-mindedly back to that part of the sitter’s body. In order to continue working, therefore, on occasion he would cover the area of the head with broad white or grey brushstrokes that eliminated all his previous work, so that he could begin from scratch with a fine brush, working out the lines of the portrait anew.

### Masks

With those layers of interminable retouching—which lends a relief-like character to many of his works—Rita’s features become an amalgam of criss-crossing strokes, in ‘a mask that makes her identity inaccessible’.<sup>7</sup> The artist himself said as much when he remarked, regarding the matter of any possible connection between his portraits and the sitter’s inner being, that ‘I have enough trouble with the outside without bothering about the inside’.<sup>8</sup> In the presence of his model, all familiarity vanished, and the person became for him like a stranger, someone he seemed to be seeing for the first time. Whether it was his brother Diego, his wife Annette, or some other of the models that posed for him for years, once he had set his easel before them, he began to analyse them in such a way as to capture their *structure*. Like Paul Cézanne, a painter whom he admired, Giacometti attempted to unravel that structure of the person sitting for him, in a process of concentration that nevertheless led him to perceive his subject differently each time. After long sessions in which



Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Giacometti in Stampa*, 1964

the model posed immobile, the final outcome of that analysis was a portrait lacking any social or psychological connotations.

For this reason, the figure of Rita, situated in the centre of the composition and with her hands resting on her lap, could not originally be identified. Although she seems to have posed wearing the same apron she has on in the photograph above [fig. 7], nothing in her stern, expressionless attitude reveals her social status or her role within the family's life. Like the master from Aix-en-Provence, again, Giacometti does not reveal in his works the relationship he shared with his models nor the intimacy forged between them during the portrait sessions.

The rigidity and static quality of his figures are counteracted only by the succession of lines that make up his compositions: solid, assured strokes despite the insecurity the artist claimed to experience and that is otherwise evident solely in his tenacious reworking of certain areas of the canvas; dynamic lines that create perspectives whose point of origin is always, of course, the head—that part of the painting that was never finished, seemingly abandoned at some point in the process of creation.

Tout cela n'est pas grand'chose, toute la peinture, sculpture, dessin,  
écriture ou plutôt littérature.  
Tout cela à sa place et pas plus.  
Les essais c'est tout,  
Oh merveille!

Alberto Giacometti,  
October 1965.<sup>9</sup>

*Portrait of a Woman* [Rita], signed and dated in 1965, came soon after into the possession of Pierre Matisse, Giacometti's dealer in the United States. Somewhat later, after the artist's death, it was acquired by the Claude Bernhard gallery in Paris, from whence it finally joined Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza's collection in 1988.

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## Notes

- 1 See *Alberto Giacometti Database*, <http://www.fondation-giacometti.fr/>. The work in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza is given the catalogue number AGD 1412. Descriptive titles supplied by the database's editors are listed in brackets in the AGD.
- 2 James Lord, *A Giacometti Portrait* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1965), p. 65.
- 3 Giacometti's reply to Pierre Voldboudt's survey, 'A chacun sa réalité', *XXe Siècle*, no. 9 (June 1957), pp. 21–35. Reprinted in Alberto Giacometti, *Écrits* (Paris: Hermann, 1990), p. 77.
- 4 Valerie Fletcher, 'La pintura de Giacometti', in Kosme de Barañano, *Alberto Giacometti*, exh. cat. (Madrid, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía; Madrid: Lunweg, 1990), p. 70.
- 5 In 1965 he also painted a portrait of Jacques Dupin; there is no work dated 1966.
- 6 Lord 1965 *op. cit.*, p. 62.
- 7 Paloma Alarcó, *Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza: Pintura Moderna* (Madrid: Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2009), p. 466.
- 8 Lord 1965 *op. cit.*, p. 24.
- 9 "It all amounts to little: all the painting, sculpture, drawing, writing, or rather literature. It all has its place and nothing more. The attempt is everything. A wonder!" Handwritten text, transcribed as it appears on page 128 of a copy of Françoise Sagan's novel, *La Chamade* (Paris: Julliard, 1965); it first appeared in print in the poetry review *L'Éphémère*, no. 1 (1967), p. 102.