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Hidden figures: Giacometti's 'Women of Venice' at Tate
Unseen in public for half a century, the artist's most famous series is restored in a revelatory new show at Tate

Jackie Wullschlager



Alberto Giacometti in his studio in 1951 © Giacometti Foundation

“I keep coming back to these women. Around them space vibrates . . . They give me this odd feeling: they are familiar, they walk in the street, yet they are in the depths of time . . . They take their distance and keep it . . . Nothing is any longer at rest. Perhaps because each angle (made with Giacometti's thumb when he was modelling the clay) or curve, or lump, or crest, or torn tip of metal are themselves not at rest . . .”

This is Jean Genet, Giacometti's closest writer friend, who in the weeks before the 1956 Venice Biennale watched the twists and turns in the creation of the artist's most famous series, “Women of Venice”. Moulding clay on a single armature, Giacometti during an afternoon might submit each figure as it grew, shrunk, was flattened, eroded or rounded to 20 or 40 metamorphoses. None was final, but at certain points he asked his brother Diego to cast a version in plaster, then remodelled the clay.

Eventually Giacometti selected 10 plasters: six for Venice, four for a concurrent show in Bern. In photographs of the biennale, the “Women” line up like sentinels, each frontal, erect, emaciated, with flayed, gritty surfaces. Most were subsequently cast in bronze and are often exhibited, but the luminous, fragile, eloquent plasters, with penknife incisions and red and black paintwork, have not been seen in public since 1956.

It is Tate’s terrific coup to borrow the Venice plasters, specially restored, from the Giacometti Foundation for a once-in-a-lifetime showing. These gaunt, stately figures, with small heads, pinched waists, the upthrusting bodies infused with a vitality contradicted by the oversized feet emerging from oddly sloping pedestals, are the centrepiece of Tate Modern’s Alberto Giacometti, opening next week. They make this retrospective — although it follows important exhibitions within the last decade at the Pompidou, the Beyeler and the Fondation Maeght — uniquely revelatory.



'Women of Venice' No III (1956) © Collection Fondation Alberto et Annette Giacometti

We mostly know Giacometti in bronze. Tate emphasises instead his radical investigations into materiality and texture in soft, slow-to-harden media: clay, plaster, plasticine. From teenage precocity — the classically posed, painted “Head of a Child (Simon Bérard)” and the austere “Head (Large Head of the Artist’s Mother)” (1917-18) — through youthful 1920s experiments such as the scratched, bespectacled caricature “Head of the Father” and the distorted features and red lips of “Head of Woman (Flora Mayo)”, Giacometti’s plaster works announce from the start his freewheeling, risk-taking approach.

Throughout, process carries its own authority: the final plaster, a slender-necked portrait of Giacometti’s wife “Bust of Annette VII” as a quivering mass of pitted, recessed surfaces, is as improvisatory as the first. “Every time I work I am prepared to undo without the slightest hesitation the work done the day before,” Giacometti once explained. “Basically I now only work for the sens-ation I get during the process.”



'Women of Venice' No IV (1956) © Collection Fondation Alberto et Annette Giacometti

Plaster implies provisionality; in mixed-media works particularly, it suggests vulnerability. In “Hours of the Traces”, a white plaster heart suspended on a trembling wire thread beats time like a pendulum; above, a plaster crescent and moon hang on a guillotine frame. A deformed plaster head is about to be decapitated by a wood-and-metal contraption in “Flower in Danger”. A plaster ball dangles tantalisingly out of reach of a curved wedge, within a metal cage, in “Suspended Ball”: a symbol of erotic frustration that was André Breton’s favourite Giacometti.

These 1930s works belong to surrealism, but share none of Miró’s or Ernst’s whimsy and gaiety. “I work to please the dead,” Giacometti said. The current of violence hits a peak in the savage, jagged abstract forms of “Woman with her Throat Cut”. Famously, in the 1930s and early 1940s, Giacometti’s figures struggled to exist at all. “Very Small Figurine” (1937-39) — “not only is this woman small, but she’s damaged; not only is she small, but still she wants to look like someone; what’s more, for me it’s a portrait” — is four centimetres high.



'Women of Venice' No V (1956) © Collection Fondation Alberto et Annette Giacometti

Giacometti's wartime oeuvre fitted into matchboxes. A seminal experience after the war — when, seeing prostitutes at a Paris nightclub, he realised “the distance which separated us, the polished floor, seemed insurmountable in spite of my desire to cross it, and impressed me as much as the women” — inspired “Four Figurines on a Stand” (1950-65), a quartet of tiny female figures mounted on a slab supported on tall legs.

Larger attenuated, fugitive figures, begun in the late 1940s — the battered plasters “Medium Figure III” and “Woman Leoni” are here alongside “Three Men Walking” — are similarly about looking from afar, detachment, alienation. Giacometti restored “an imaginary and indivisible space to statues”, Sartre wrote. “He was the first to take it into his head to sculpt man as he appears, that is to say, from a distance.”

“Women of Venice” is central to this achievement, at once revisiting the fleeting 1940s pieces and anticipating the monumental hieratic 1960s sculptures: “Tall Woman I” and “IV”, “Walking Man I”. Picasso accused Giacometti of repetition, but the point is variation within sameness, implying both transience and the unknowability of the other.



'The Hand' (1947) © Collection Fondation Alberto et Annette Giacometti

The “Women”, all based on multiple memories of studies of Annette, and also recalling Egyptian statues, are each subtly different in height, voluptuousness, coiffure, pose of arms — sometimes tightly pinned to the body, sometimes allowing sinuous gaps between limbs and curve of the bust — and how light and shadow falls on scarred, irregular surfaces.

The “Women” powerfully demonstrate Giacometti's belief that “sculpture isn't an object, it's an interrogation, a question. It can't be finished or perfected.” Every Giacometti exhibition acknowledges this great visionary of existential doubt as saviour of postwar figuration, holding on to the figure by refusing to make definitive statements. Tate pushes further, setting out to ground that sensibility in experiments in materiality which, says curator Frances Morris, “anticipated the interest of a generation of younger artists who . . . deliberately turned away from the techniques of the traditional sculptor's studio, to explore more malleable and evocative materials”.

This Giacometti, tailored supremely to Tate's wider concerns, connects especially with the mixed media formal/informal installations of Louise Bourgeois, the only artist with a solo

display in Tate's Switch House, and with Rebecca Warren's disintegrating clay figures — a link the catalogue highlights. (Warren's show inaugurates the new Tate St Ives in October.) It is a repositioning resonant with sculpture's current collapsing material hierarchies, and compelling above all as the most high-profile example so far of Morris's mission as Tate Modern director: what she calls "the urgent need . . . to find broader and more inclusive histories" in reinterpreting the 20th century's giants.