

THE EVOLUTION OF SCULPTURAL CONCERN:

ALBERTO GIACOMETTI

Submitted by

Lori Jean Ash

Department of Art

Art History Paper

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Master of Fine Art

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Summer, 1984

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
List of Figures . . . . .	iii
The Evolution of Sculptural Concern: Alberto Giacometti . . .	1
Endnotes . . . . .	28
Bibliography . . . . .	30

## LIST OF FIGURES

<u>Figure</u>	<u>Page</u>
1. <u>Spoon Woman</u> . . . . .	3
2. <u>Observing Head</u> . . . . .	4
3. <u>Man and Woman</u> . . . . .	6
4. <u>Reclining Woman Who Dreams</u> . . . . .	7
5. <u>Three Figures Outdoors</u> . . . . .	8
6. <u>The Palace at 4:00 a.m.</u> . . . . .	9
7. <u>Woman with Her Throat Cut</u> . . . . .	10
8. <u>Woman With Chariot I</u> . . . . .	13
9. <u>Small Figurines</u> . . . . .	15
10. <u>Walking Man</u> . . . . .	16
11. <u>Large Figure</u> . . . . .	17
12. <u>Man Pointing</u> . . . . .	19
13. <u>Composition with Seven Figures and a Head</u> . . . . .	20
14. <u>The Cage</u> . . . . .	21
15. <u>Seated Woman</u> . . . . .	23
16. <u>Bust of Diego on a Stele III</u> . . . . .	24
17. <u>Monumental Head</u> . . . . .	25
18. <u>Bust of Annette</u> . . . . .	26

## THE EVOLUTION OF SCULPTURAL CONCERN:

ALBERTO GIACOMETTI

To experience the sculpture of Alberto Giacometti is to take part in a confrontation between viewer and object. In his late works, this confrontation becomes a mutual one as the sculpted heads and figures exude their own presence and their lifelike gazes give testimony to some separate existence to which they belong. By endowing his works with this aspect of reality, Giacometti founded his own personal sculptural style and gained a permanent and unique position in the history of art. The stylistic developments which led to the realization of his late works spanned a wide range of various approaches and are the subject of this paper.

Giacometti possessed a questioning mind and an artistic intelligence which led him to raise fundamental questions concerning art. Through his travels and a brief formal education he gained a working knowledge of art through history and these historical influences were to appear in his works. His primary concern throughout his artistic life was the representation of that aspect of reality which could be confirmed by common vision. In his search for a personal means to achieve that end, he placed equal importance on natural and abstract forms. Rather than perceive these as two separate directions, he sought to integrate them and stated in 1947, "I wanted one without losing the other."<sup>1</sup>

His earliest works were representational figure drawings and busts done from life. He wrote of this early period, "though I could draw well I was lost, everything escaped me, the head of the model before me became like a cloud, vague and undefined."<sup>2</sup> He felt that it was impossible to grasp the entire figure in the close proximity of the academy classroom and that if one began on a detail, the nose for example, there was no hope of achieving the whole. This led him to limit his attention to the head of the model alone and to work from memory as well as from life. The heads and busts he sculpted in the early 1920's gradually became more stylistic and grew in sculptural quality but lost much of their descriptive sensibilities.<sup>3</sup>

As his works became more abstract, Giacometti inherited the language of cubism and later shared with his contemporaries the premise of surrealism.<sup>4</sup> The works from 1920 to the mid 1930's were reduced to simplified forms of abstract origin. Like his contemporaries, he sought to recreate the emotional intensity inherent in primitive sculpture. The influence of Cycladic sculpture appears in his Spoon Woman of 1926 (Figure 1). Pure abstract forms are assembled into a figurative arrangement of powerful simplicity.

His cubist period reaches its peak around 1928 with a series of slab-like Observing Heads. The title reveals the artist's intention of rendering a head not as an object but as a living force with the capacity for seeing (Figure 2). This idea of sculpture as a presence remained a preoccupation throughout his life.

As the figures of this period are reduced to pure sculptural symbols, Giacometti felt that he could combine these symbols, like hieroglyphs, into expressive sculptural compositions.<sup>5</sup> The results of

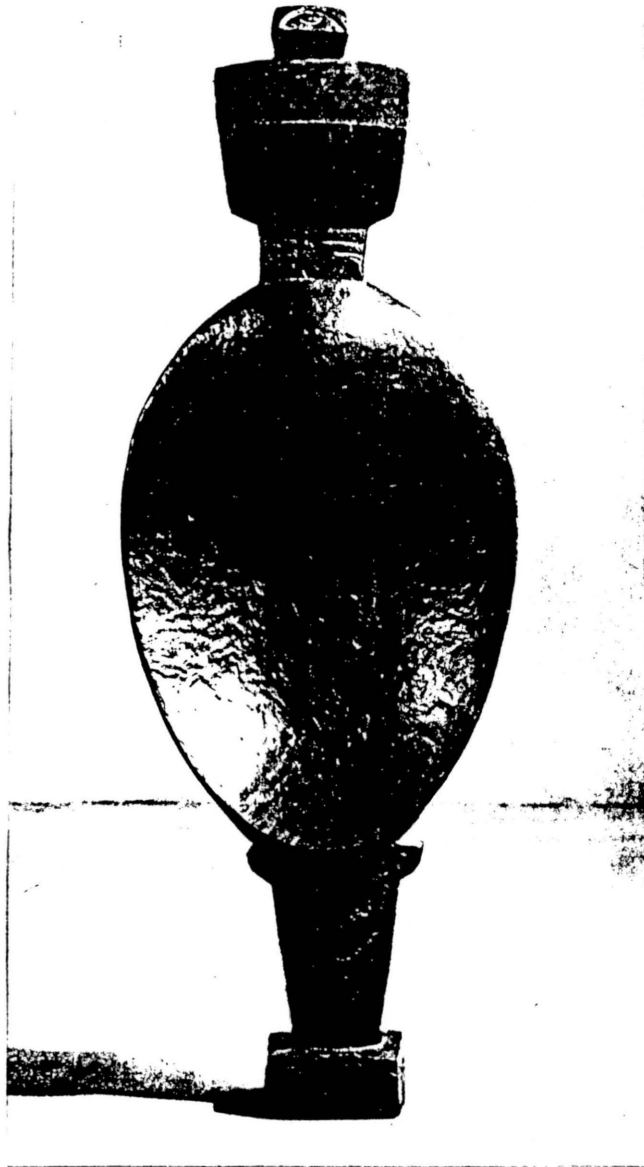


Figure 1. Spoon Woman. Bronze, 1926.

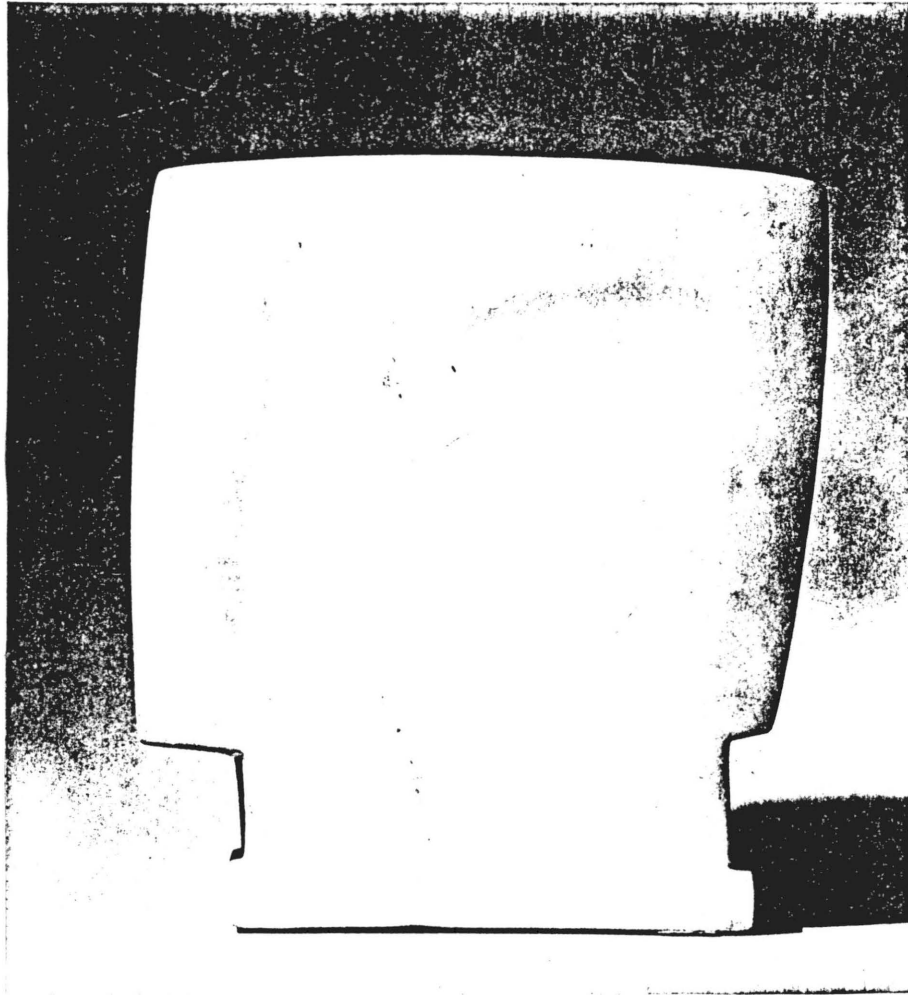


Figure 2. Observing Head. Marble, 1927-29.

his experimentation are evident in works such as *Man and Woman* of 1928 and the *Reclining Woman Who Dreams* of 1929 (Figures 3 and 4). Within a single sculptural composition natural and abstract elements are combined, illustrating the artist's desire to integrate the two.

The *Reclining Woman Who Dreams* also marks a transition to surrealism and the introduction of dream imagery into Giacometti's work.<sup>6</sup> It also marks a greater awareness and concern for the relationship of sculpture to its base. His concern manifested itself in this work and also in the *Three Figures Outdoors*, also of 1929, in which the figures are represented in a grill like construction (Figure 5). This concept is furthered in a work of 1932, *The Palace at 4:00 a.m.* (Figure 6). In this work, the base and grill are transformed into a stage setting in which his figures act out psychological dramas.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps this is the work which prompted him to consider making life-size compositions which the viewer could enter and participate in, thereby lowering the barrier between art and reality.

In yet another approach to dealing with the figure and its base, Giacometti eliminated the base entirely and created works which would lie on a table top or on the floor like any other object.<sup>8</sup> Examples of this approach are his *Disagreeable Object to be Disposed Of*, 1931, and *Woman With Her Throat Cut* of 1932 (Figure 7). His desire to integrate the object with the environment in which it is placed resulted in perhaps his most surrealistic work, *Table*, of 1933. It belongs to the world of art and also exists as a functional object of a furnished room.<sup>9</sup>

Although the idea of dissolving the boundary between art and reality was a premise of surrealism, Giacometti found that he could not

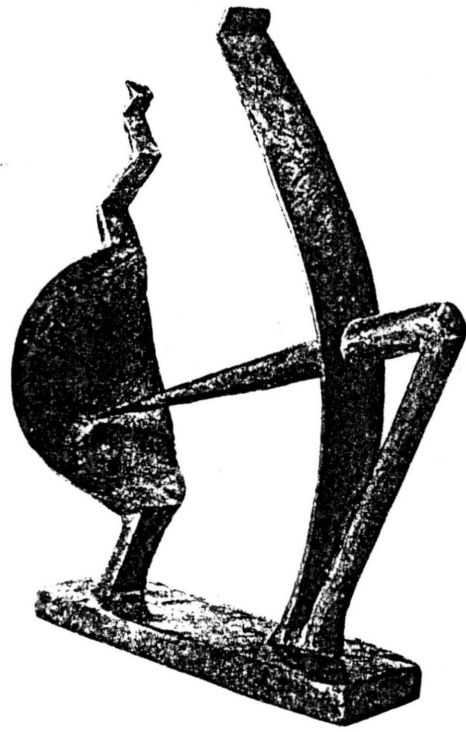


Figure 3. Man and Woman. Bronze, 1928.

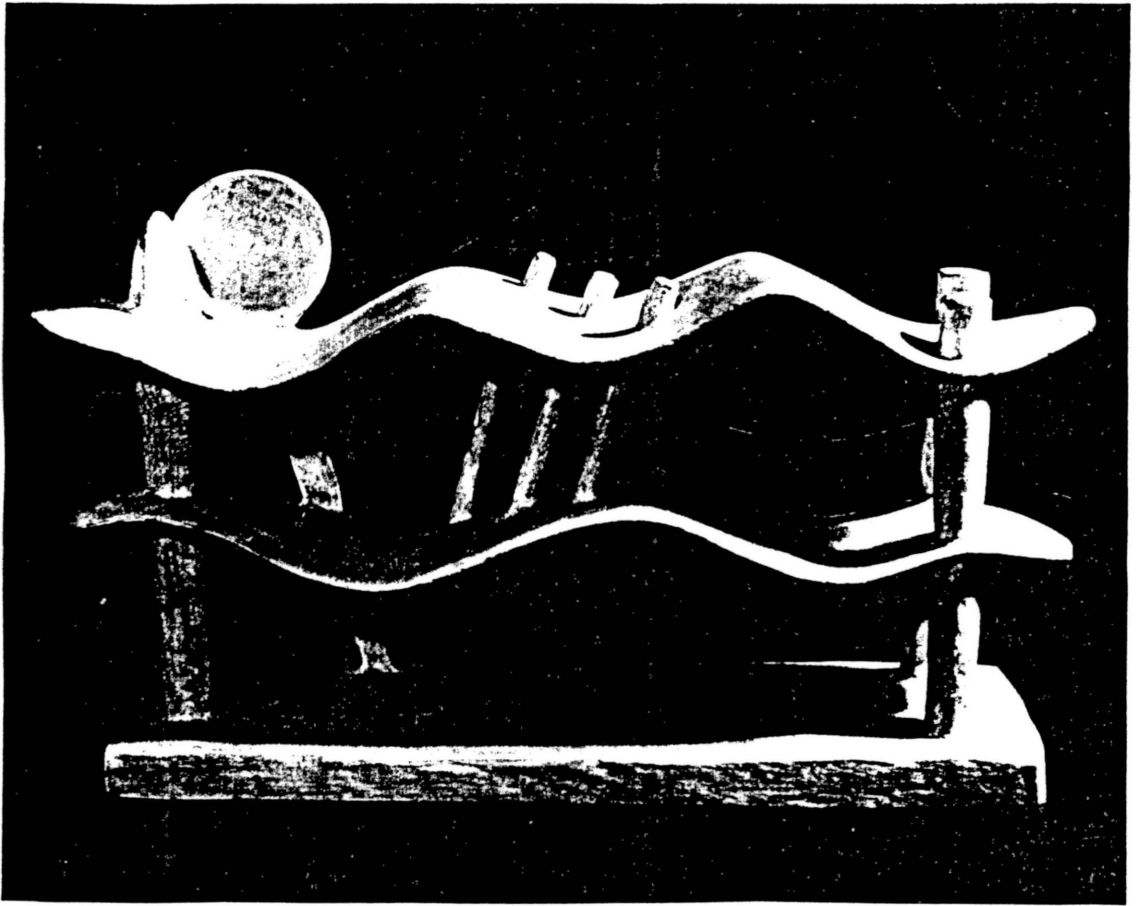


Figure 4. Reclining Woman Who Dreams. Painted bronze, 1929.

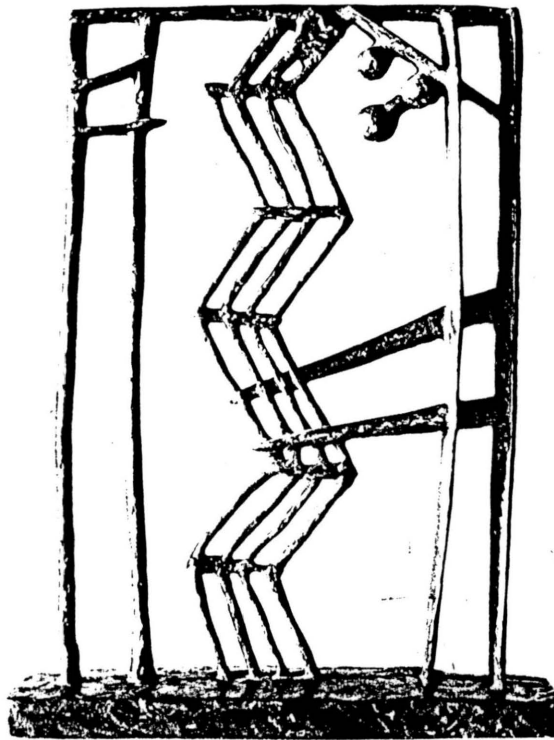


Figure 5. Three Figures Outdoors. Bronze, 1929.

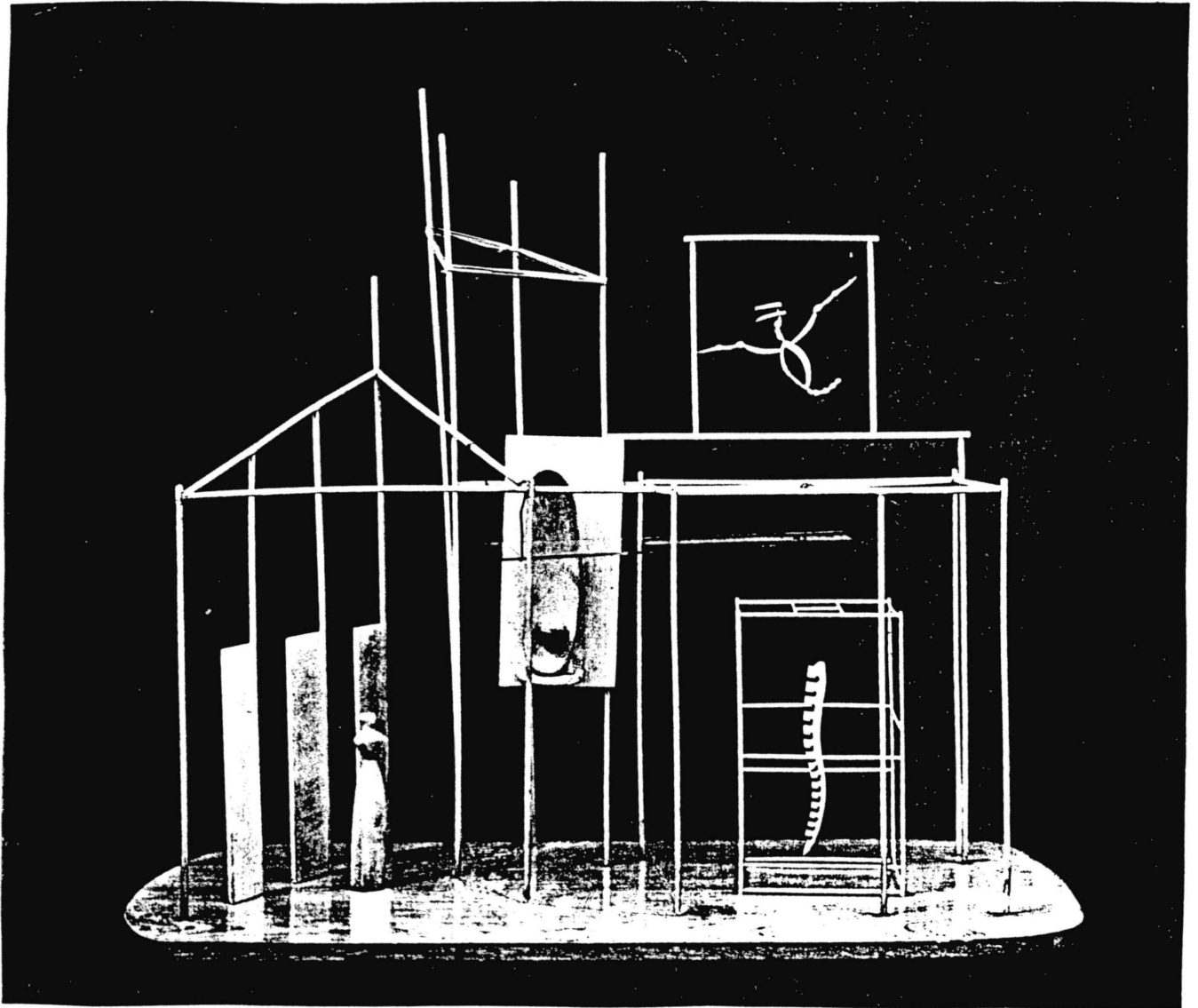


Figure 6. The Palace at 4:00 a.m. Wood, glass, wire, string, 1932.

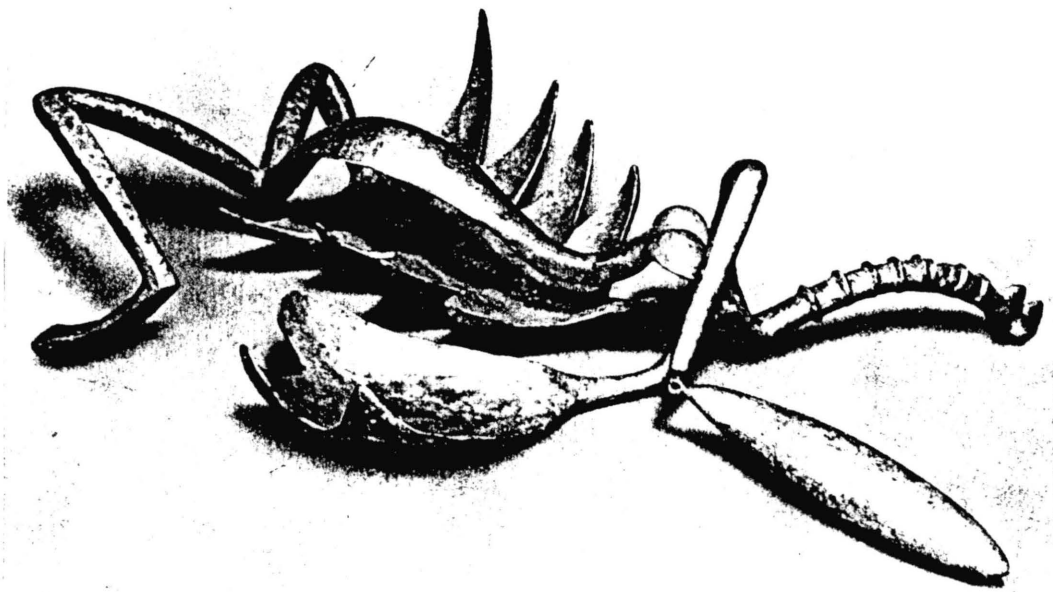


Figure 7. Woman With Her Throat Cut. Bronze, 1932.

long comply with the surrealist doctrines.<sup>10</sup> His intent to make permanent and monumental compositions was stronger than his loyalty to a particular style and he left the movement to pursue the direction which would lend a convincing reality and dimension to his vision.

Some time prior to 1935, Giacometti began to re-examine his position. While his figures and compositions gave him some part of his vision of reality, he felt that ". . . they still lacked a sense of the whole, a structure and also a sharpness that I saw, a kind of skeleton in space."<sup>11</sup> He came to the conclusion that there was little or no distinction between his abstract forms and the lamps and vases his brother, Diego, made for an interior designer.<sup>12</sup> "The objects were too precious, too classical, and I was disturbed by reality which seemed to me to be different."<sup>13</sup> This realization caused him to return to studies from life and marks a major turning point in his life's work.

Along with his desire to return to the model was the desire to make compositions with groups of figures, an idea which had appeared earlier in his Three Figures Outdoors (Figure 5). Toward that end, he felt it would be necessary to make one or two studies from nature, ". . . just enough to understand the construction of a head, of a whole figure, and in 1935 I took a model. This study should take two weeks and then I could realize my compositions. I worked from the model all day from 1935 to 1940."<sup>14</sup>

From this point on his concern was centered not on what one knows but what one actually sees. He departed from the information that we accept about the tangible volume of a head, its substance and measurable size and began to direct his attention toward the representation

of a head or figure as he actually perceived it, in purely visual terms.

Giacometti maintained that a figure, in visual terms, revealed no sense of weight, volume, or measurable size.<sup>15</sup> The figure was perceived as a unity and experienced as a sudden apparition. If this were not so, the figure would appear only as an accumulation of disorganized elements.<sup>16</sup> He noted that to see a person suddenly and as a whole revealed above all its verticality and this observation led to the extreme elongation of his figures. Elongation had appeared before in Etruscan figures and in the works of Rosso and Rodin, which seen from the sides and back did not cease to be figures. But Giacometti was concerned mainly with the figure as it is approached frontally and from a given distance. Seen from too near or from the back or sides, his sculptures did not always resemble figures. By using a rigid frontal arrangement he controlled the viewer's participation by indicating where he should stand in relation to the sculpture.

Giacometti made studies related to these ideas from 1936 to 1942. Few works survive from this period because he saw them as tentative studies and experiments and destroyed many of his works. The only surviving large scale piece from this period is Woman With Chariot I, 1942 (Figure 8). The elongated figure stands on a block supported by four wheels, a motif which had appeared in Egyptian sculpture. The wheels offer the possibility of moving the figure back and forth to demonstrate changes in its phenomenological size.<sup>17</sup>

The period from 1942 to 1946 yielded extremely small figurative sculptures on relatively large bases in which the artist sought to create a sense of the figure seen from a great distance.<sup>18</sup> The figures



Figure 8. Woman With Chariot I. Bronze, 1942.

have very little detail which reinforces the sense of distance. During this period he did some work from memory again and wrote, ". . . to my terror the sculptures became smaller and smaller, they had a likeness only when they were very small, yet their dimensions revolted me."<sup>19</sup> He began again only to arrive at the same point. He felt that a large figure seemed false and a small one equally unbearable. They became so tiny that with a touch of my knife they disappeared into dust, but had a bit of truth only when small.<sup>20</sup> The small size of these figures renders not so much actual perception as the remembered image seen from far away. The figures lose all recognizable details but maintain some of their identity (Figure 9).

These studies led him to other observations made in 1946. He realized that space does not exist only in front of a figure but surrounds it and separates it from other figures.<sup>21</sup> He observed that when he viewed a figure at a distance he also saw as much of the surrounding atmosphere as his field of vision would permit. From this he concluded that the figure seen at a distance appeared relatively thin in relation to the absolute standard of his field of vision.<sup>22</sup> As a consequence of its thinness the figure also appeared very tall. This led to even more extreme elongation in his figures.

These visual experiences gained permanent form in a series of larger, elongated, and seemingly weightless and massless figures around 1947. His new personal style was effective for both heads and full figures and was characterized by extremely attenuated and thin sculptures. The Walking Man of 1947 and Large Figure, also of 1947, illustrate a breaking away from traditional sculptural ideas and the expression of a truly personal vision (Figures 10 and 11).

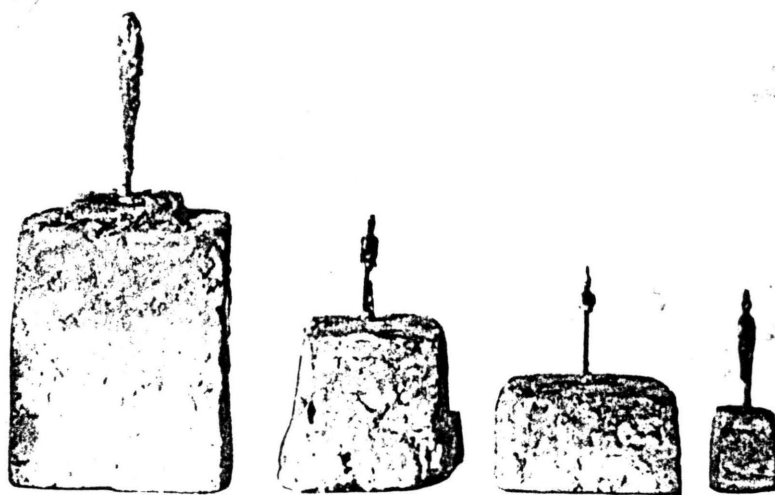


Figure 9. Small Figurines. Plaster and metal, 1945.

Figure 10. Walking Man. Bronze, 1947.

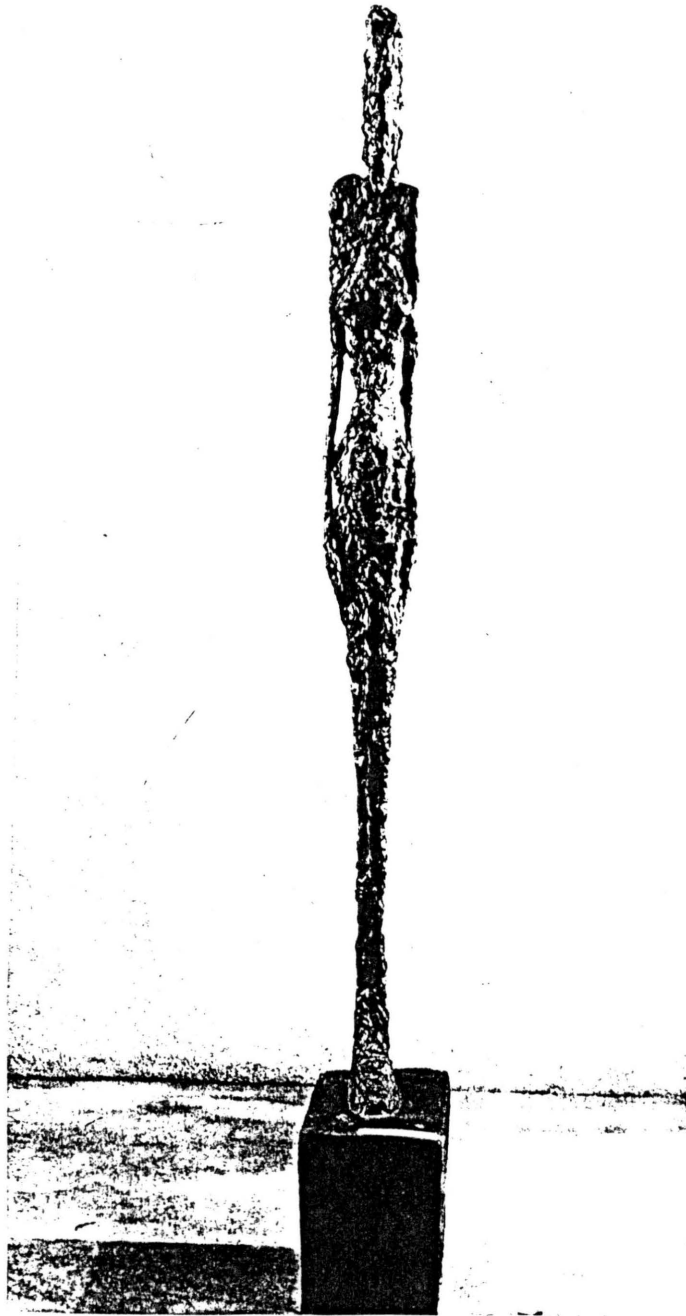


Figure 11. Large Figure. Bronze, 1947.

Never content and always seeking new means of personal expression, Giacometti challenged his new style by deliberately referring to traditional sculptural themes in subsequent works. The Man Pointing of 1947 presents his own version of the classical Greek Poseidon or Rodin's St. John the Baptist Preaching<sup>23</sup> (Figure 12).

A work of 1950, Composition with Seven Figures and a Head, gives outlet to the artist's desire to make group compositions (Figure 13). It, too, encompasses a traditional sculptural motif. The motionless female figures, in their rigid frontality, recall Egyptian burial figures or early Greek Kore. He also incorporated the classical idea of painted sculpture into this work. Giacometti wrote of this piece, ". . . the Composition with Seven Figures and a Head reminded me of a forest corner seen for many years . . . where trees with their naked and slender trunks, limbless almost to the top, had always appeared to me like personages immobilized in the course of their wanderings and talking among themselves."<sup>24</sup> The figures, however, seem isolated by their lack of detail and the rigid frontal arrangement.

Also of interest in Composition with Seven Figures and a Head is the placement of a male bust among the female figures which Giacometti referred to as a boulder among the trees. The bust represents a new concept, that of the artist as visionary. In a related work of the same year, he created The Cage and sought to express one of the faculties of man, the faculty of thoughtful contemplation or even of visionary understanding which belongs to a seer or an artist or to the artist as seer (Figure 14).<sup>25</sup>

The Composition with Seven Figures and a Head as well as the sculptures of walking men and immobile women from the early 1950's also



Figure 12. Man Pointing. Bronze, 1947.

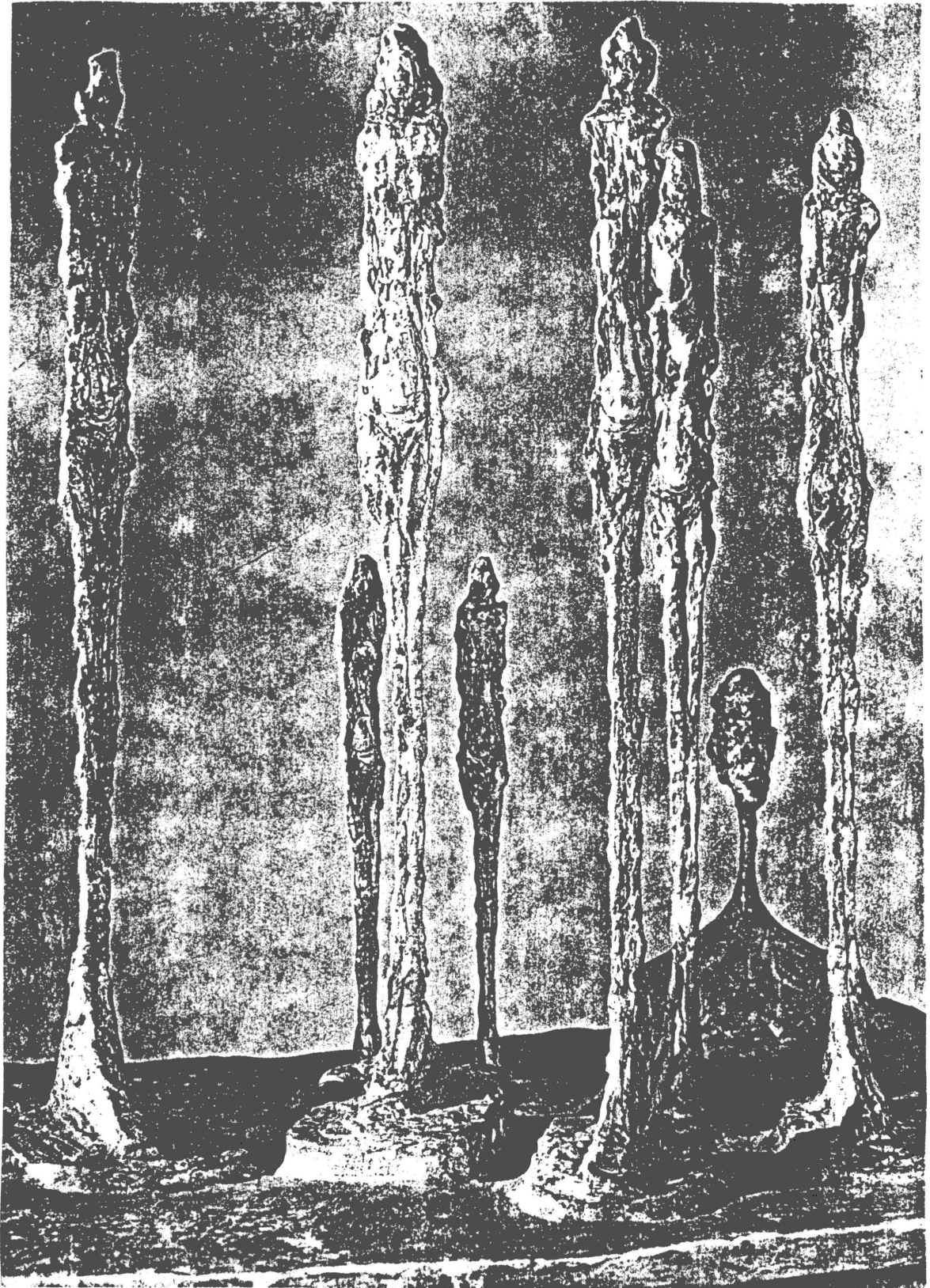


Figure 13. Composition with Seven Figures and a Head. Painted bronze, 1950.

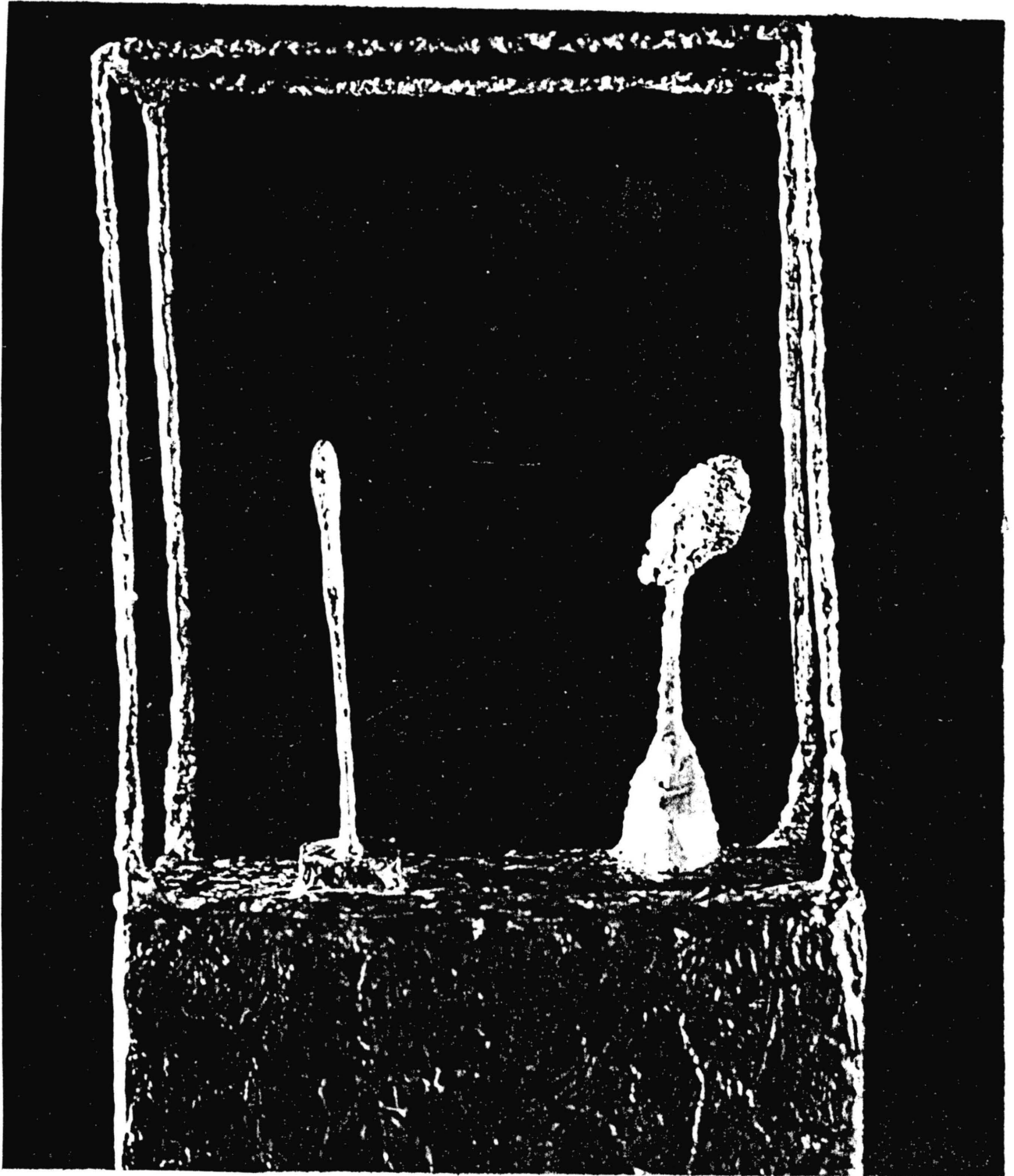


Figure 14. The Cage. Bronze, 1950.

represent a further change in the relationship of sculpture to base. No longer is the base used only as a device to indicate where the viewer should stand in relation to the work. Here it is used as an abbreviated perspective rendering of the floor on which the model was standing, thus using the base as an integral part of the sculptural image.<sup>26</sup>

In the mid 1950's Giacometti abandoned the extreme dematerialization and elongation of his figures as well as the blade-like thinness of the heads. He began to explore the possibility of sculpture as a double of reality and not merely as a function of the viewer's perception. He sought to create sculpture which would exist independently of the viewer's eye.<sup>27</sup> In this way the confrontation between sculpture and viewer would be a more mutual one. The figures became more representational, but Giacometti realized it was the eyes which gave the heads their presence. The spark of life in the gaze was real proof of existence. From the late 1950's on he concentrated almost entirely on endowing his figures with a life-like gaze, using his wife, Annette, and brother, Diego, as models. His Seated Woman of 1956, in expressing this new direction, embodied a new sculptural solidity and her own gaze (Figure 15). The Bust of Diego on a Stele III from around 1957 shows this concern for the life-like gaze and by the use of the traditional format of the stele, enhances the power and expression of the head (Figure 16). The Monumental Head of 1960 refers in its sheer size and gazing eyes to the Roman colossal head of Constantine which Giacometti had seen and sketched (Figure 17).<sup>28</sup>

Giacometti's last style was achieved around 1962 and consisted largely of busts of Annette and Diego.<sup>29</sup> At first glance these

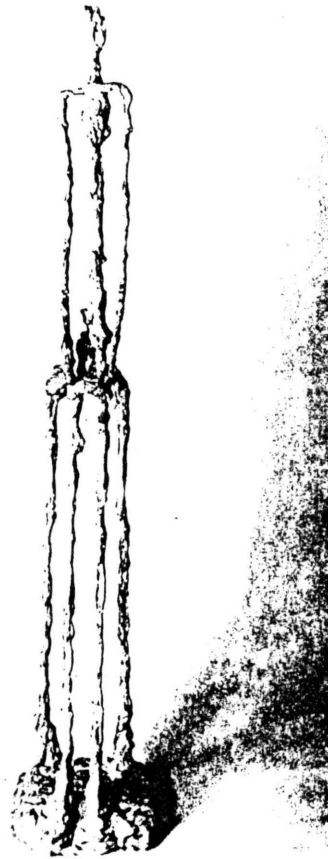


Figure 15. Seated Woman. Bronze, 1956.



Figure 16. Bust of Diego on a Stele III. Painted bronze, 1957-58.



Figure 17. Monumental Head. Bronze, 1960.



Figure 18. Bust of Annette. Painted bronze, 1962.

sculptures would seem straightforward and traditional were it not for the inescapable power of the eyes. Their piercing gaze is not directed at the viewer but seems to look beyond, connecting the sculpture with another reality. The figures no longer exist in an imaginary or stage-like space but in our own space.

Perhaps it is this separate existence, which these figures seem to portray, which is responsible for the many arguments made for Giacometti's sculpture being existential in nature.<sup>30</sup> While the sculptures may have similarities to existential ideas, it should be remembered that the intent of the artist was to give some of the credibility of a living presence to his works and not to illustrate philosophical ideas. Any symbolic content which does appear in his work must be seen as the result of the artist's striving for a figure which would exude its own presence and not as the artist's original intent. Giacometti's stylistic development forms a chain of events which illustrate his desire to give permanent form and an aspect of reality to his works while seeking to understand and explore his personal vision. "I make a head to understand how I see, not to make a work of art."<sup>31</sup>

ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Hohl, Reinhold, Alberto Giacometti, A Retrospective Exhibition, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup>Selz, Peter, Alberto Giacometti, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup>Hohl, Reinhold, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup>Hohl, Reinhold, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Selz, Peter, p. 18.

<sup>12</sup>Hohl, Reinhold, p. 23.

<sup>13</sup>Selz, Peter, p. 22.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>15</sup>Hohl, Reinhold, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Svendsen, Louise Averill, p. 13.

<sup>19</sup>Selz, Peter, p. 47.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Hohl, Reinhold, p. 23-24.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>24</sup>Selz, Peter, p. 55.

<sup>25</sup>Hohl, Reinhold, p. 28.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Svendsen, Louise Averill, p. 15.

<sup>30</sup>Hohl, Reinhold, p. 26.

<sup>31</sup>Liberman, Alexander, p. 278.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Hohl, Reinhold, Alberto Giacometti, A Retrospective Exhibition, Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York, 1974.
- Leiris, Michel, Alberto Giacometti, Galerie Beyeler, Basel, 1964.
- Liberman, Alexander, The Artist In His Studio, Viking Press, New York, 1969.
- Lord, James, A Giacometti Portrait, Doubleday and Company, New York, 1964.
- Selz, Peter, Alberto Giacometti, Doubleday and Company, New York, 1965.
- Svendsen, Louise Averill, Alberto Giacometti, Sculptor and Draftsman, Doubleday and Company, New York, 1965.