

From: *Alberto Giacometti*, curated by J. Gachnang, R. Fuchs, C. Mundici, exhibition catalog (Rivoli-Torino, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 6 December 1988 - 26 February 1989), Fabbri Editori, Milano 1988, pp. 67-68.

## ***Giacometti and the old masters***

**Laszlo Glozer**

«Oh, I see a marvellous beautiful picture; but it is not mine, it is nobody's»: this sentence is enclosed in brackets in a text by Alberto Giacometti which is filled with sentences in brackets. It contains notes jotted down following a conversation - about space - which is strangely pretentious, not unlike an ugly poem. In brackets there are comments, fine points, doubts. But what is between brackets also bears fully on the scale. «Would I be able (and yet I am not sure I want to) to make a sculpture or a picture the way I want to? (but can I really say what I want?) Had I been able, I think, I would have made them long ago».

Doubt and the torment of doubt always accompanied Giacometti's activity. What he attained in the field of art was the fruit of his yielding himself to suffering: his sculptures with those trifling details, his figures are the outcome of countless disconnected, worthless strokes. They represent Giacometti's incessant attempts to reach a definition of his own existence.

Giacometti's portraits are mostly about people he had known for a long time. Models played a special role in the artist's biography, as well as in the long process of elaboration of the images and the sequences of images. And it was precisely time and temporal relationships, though they could be easily worked out in detail, which were nullified in the portraits he made. In its projection the figure gets caught in space: it can be located there, in the intense and painful realm of the imagination, like an individual pushed backward to the verge of namelessness. The individual can no longer fight back because, as all the other elements in the painting, he is an outcome of the same, undisguised gestures of the painting process. The hatched marks of the writing still retain their reality undiminished, as long as the writing as a whole is perceived as an image. We are left with a twofold effect, the defenceless staging of a primarily formal conflict between the motif and the means adopted for the representation. But at the same time this figurative problem which looms so large means imposing an ideal weight on the images, it is transformed, through the openly held «fatal» discussion on the image (for *the* image above all), into an existential parable. The «hic et nunc» of the figurative scene is given - through the painter's query, which permeates every stroke, «is it possible or is it not possible?» - a disquieting shadowy dimension, and those that are depicted in Giacometti's portraits - all of them «marked» - end up by converging. They are tied, to one another and to the painter, as the images express, with growing intensity, the question of the common denominator «the person».

The portraits, as well as Giacometti's subsequent works - his sculptures, paintings, graphic works and a selection of his drawings - are known. What has recently emerged from the fine publication produced by Ernst Scheidegger with an essay by Luigi Carluccio are the paintings the artist made from other people's models, his «meetings with the past». Strictly speaking, they are copies. Giacometti made copies all life long: at his parents' house in Stampa, from his father's art books (Dürer and Rembrandt), in the early '20s, at the Louvre, Egyptian sculptures, then Sumerian material. After that, it looks as though his choice of models went on without following any particular criterion. The 144 sheets in this collection can be regarded as a bizarre history of art

worldwide.

Needless to say these «copies» are no mere duplicates and only a few of them, dating back to the '20s can be termed «studies». In many ways they are also «portraits». Indeed they are portraits in one particular respect: save for a few exceptions, Giacometti selected - from portraits, or paintings (or details of a painting) - the individuals and fashioned them into figures. He reproduced them with his own means, with his intricate lines: new portraits emerged, charged with Giacometti's existentialism. Cimabue's Saint Francis has lost his golden background, and has lost his innocence: he has been endowed, and it shows through the marks on his face, with a conscience, the conscience of Rembrandt's introspective mankind and of the world in which Pasolini's Francesco dwells. The fresco of the Lower Church of San Francesco in Assisi has been remodelled into a Giacometti-portrait reflecting the world, and the same has happened to Dürer's Kaiser Maximilian, to Van Eyck's canonist Van der Paele, to Rembrandt's mother and to Cézanne's self-portrait.

Actually, the metamorphosis is modest. Under Giacometti's hand, Velázquez's portrait of Innocent X - the one to which Francis Bacon added a screaming mouth from Ejzenštejn's *Potëmkin* - remains close to Velázquez. The pencil hatching brings to mind the tender splendour of the oil model, it is suggestive of Velázquez's masterpiece. Similarly, Konrad Witz (active in the mid 15th century) is analyzed as a Gothic-dissolving builder of spaces, Rubens (his *Rape of Leukippos' Daughters*) is addressed with tangles of diagonally running lines: the individuality of the original models, the style of their time are preserved in Giacometti's copies. He catches the innermost intention of the artist.

Yet Giacometti strove to set himself free from historical constraints. Oceanian masks and Egyptian sculptures have the gaze of those whom Giacometti portrayed in the '50s. Sesostris III, of the middle kingdom, 12th dynasty, from the Cairo Museum, is sketched immediately alongside Cézanne's self-portrait. And as to Cézanne's work, it is so transformed by Giacometti that it comes close to Romanesque sculpture (which was also copied by the artist). Titian's white-haired Pope Paul III is shown without his nephews, only his head is portrayed at the feet of Rembrandt's *Danae*. This extravagant combination looks natural, logical, just like the bringing together, on another sheet, of a Renaissance Ceres and the artist's mother, who, sketched freely, looks actual the same way as the 16th century work which is fleetingly recalled to mind at the same time.

In these casual exercises by Giacometti, his artistic nature overflows into other people's works, such as those we have just mentioned. It seems as though they are here - far this day - understood, and humanized, and thereby, for a moment, held in equilibrium, - «It is not mine, it is nobody's». They become timeless though they are rooted in the tradition. In this respect these drawings by Giacometti represent a departure from his original work. In the «copies» Giacometti pours his existential dilemma into the structure of works by others - a structure which, though he discovers it and reorganizes it with sensitive discernment, still retains its substantial integrity. In his own paintings this support, which stands in the way of Giacometti's «search for the absolute», is not present.

(«Süddeutsche Zeitung», 28-29 December 1968 © Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1974).