

ALBERTO GIACOMETTI (1901-1966)*Femme Assise (Seated Woman)*

Bronze

1956

19 5/8 in. x 5 7/8 in. x 8 7/8 in. (49.85 cm x 14.92 cm x 22.54 cm)

In the 1950s Giacometti began to focus more and more on attempting verisimilitude by concentrating exclusively on solitary seated images of his close intimate friends and family, especially his brother, Diego, and wife, Annette. He never strayed from the frontal point of view, with the person seated before him a few feet away facing squarely in his direction. He concentrated on the face, attempting to capture the life of the figure by emphasizing the eyes. This method of bringing animation to the human image is descended directly from antiquity, first in ancient Egyptian painted sculpture, then in archaic Greek. Reinhold Hohl, in his monograph on Giacometti, wrote about this period of the artist's work in his catalogue essay for the retrospective exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1974, "Giacometti... concentrated exclusively on the problem of conferring a lifelike gaze upon his sculptures, for the faculty of seeing, the spark of life in the eyes is the proof of the real existence of these heads."¹

Femme Assise is an extraordinary work purchased by Hans and Bessie Bechtler at the opening of the Giacometti exhibition at the Galerie Maeght in Paris in 1957. Alberto's wife, Annette, is the model, seated nude with her hands folded gently in her lap. Her knees and the lower portion of her body merge into the shaped seat that attaches to a low plinth. The pose and mood recall the sculptures of Egyptian scribes from the Old Kingdom, which Giacometti had studied while visiting the Paris Louvre and the vast

holdings of the Vatican in Rome. There is the same quiet solemnity, calmness of manner and alertness around the face, enhanced by the staring eyes.

Yves Bonnefoy in his extensive monograph on Giacometti praises *Femme Assise*, "... this work is a masterpiece, which deserves closer attention than it usually receives... Alberto gave her the scribe's self-confidence as well as the appearance of existing outside of time, of advancing without motion in the absolute, which distinguishes a number of ship's figureheads. The statue, moreover, has a grace in its monumentality, a fullness of form, even a sensuous charm in the depiction of the body, all of which are very rare in Giacometti's work."²

The Renaissance artist Leonardo da Vinci studied Greek and Roman sculpture from the classical period in an attempt to determine how to create a work of true and universal beauty. Like the ancient Roman sculptors Polykleitas and Lysippos, he felt that perfect proportions and symmetry were measures of beauty. In his notebook Leonardo drew the standard canon of beauty and proportion, the man within a circle and square, after the design and descriptions of Vitruvius.

This idea of perfect standard proportions in the creation of universal beauty that can be defined and measured has no place in the work of Giacometti. *Femme Assise* is the complete antithesis of this notion: the body is asymmetrical, one shoulder much lower than the other, the hands are not carefully

delineated, but are rather like mittens without fingers. The head is small in proportion to the torso and the neck is long, attenuated and tapers into the shoulders. The breasts sag irregularly, and the lower body disappears into its seat and base altogether.

The rough texture of the bronze indicates the blobs of clay Giacometti used to build up the form, adding to it, taking away from it, shaping it—the hand of the artist is ever-present, being revealed through the work itself. The patina is varied from green to brown and shades in between, enlivening the surface of the work. Compared to a classical work the sculpture is awkward and ill defined. In a letter to Hans Bechtler Alberto discussed the patina, indicating that he preferred a light one, rather than the black one that was on the sculpture at that time it was purchased. The patina was eventually changed through the efforts of Alberto's assistant and brother, Diego. The lighter patina increases the attention to the surface. Through the medium of bronze, cast from the working in clay, Giacometti has expressed his ideal, the ideal of sculpture as itself, as a lively thing independent of its source in nature. This achievement was one of the important goals of modern art. [MG]

1. Hohl, Reinhold. *Giacometti*, New York, 1974, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, p. 25.

2. Bonnefoy, Yves, *Alberto Giacometti*, Paris, 1991 Flammation p. 417.