



*Figure*, 1951

Alberto Giacometti (Swiss, 1901-1966)

Oil on canvas

20 3/8 x 43 5/16 in. (52 x 110 cm)

### VISUAL ANALYSIS

In Alberto Giacometti's stark 1951 painting *Figure*, a lone male figure stands surrounded by a square border in the center plane of the canvas, gazing directly out at the viewer. The man looks quickly sketched or outlined, and his gaunt, *linear* form is reminiscent of Giacometti's signature, elongated figure-shape sculptures. The brushstrokes simplify and altogether omit specific detail, yet the general shapes of a hat, coat, and shoes seem to be visible. The face is barely recognizable; the artist has scribbled over it in white, giving it a disturbingly anonymous and mysterious quality.

It is difficult to put the man in either a definitive time or place—very little is discernable in the background, save the barest outlines of what may be a window or the interior of a building. Perspective is distorted and not used in the traditional sense. Overall, the picture is extremely two-dimensional and flat, as well as fully *monotone*. Giacometti has used various shades and densities of gray, along with some pure black and white, to create an aura of isolation and despair; the figure projects a startling loneliness standing in this environment devoid of bold color. The background, also, is a study of different textures and washes of faint color layered and built on top of each other—visible brushstrokes, a rough, tangible surface, and thick, built-up paint all contribute to this very atmospheric and intense environment.

### FUNCTION/Form & Style

A sense of solitude is implied by the color scheme, positioning of the figure, and the seemingly-random construction of the background. Additionally, the skewed perspective and recession of space imply a literal and psychological imbalance,

- What feelings does this painting evoke when examined closely? What techniques has Giacometti used to create this mood?
- Who is this man? Is he a stranger, or someone that Giacometti knew? Why or why not?
- Why is it that Giacometti's painting looks so flat? Think about materials used, application of materials, etc.
- Does Giacometti's piece remind you of any works by Matisse, Picasso, or Braque? How might Giacometti have viewed or been influenced by these artists?

contributing to this sense of instability and isolation. Giacometti's use of lines, scribbles, and random brushwork seem to evoke an *ephemeral* nature—implying movement or unrest in his figure. The flattened, compressed look of the painting is characteristic of many works produced in the first half of the 20th century, part of a larger trend in Modernist painting. Giacometti experimented with this aesthetic throughout his career and through all different kinds of mediums, especially sculpture.

Giacometti's figures heavily echo figural representations from other cultures, as a result of the Primitivism movement that had become so popular in early 20th century Modernist art. African art, in particular, caused Giacometti to rethink the human figure entirely—to “simplify, abbreviate, and even deform anatomy.” He began to use geometric forms to pare down detail. There is also

a sense of movement or kinetic energy that can be found throughout his work.

## CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE

*Figure* falls into the larger context of paintings that Giacometti was creating between 1946 - 1952—he often painted singular figures in an interior space. The recognizable style of his forms (in all mediums, but especially sculpture) carries many psychological connotations—his figures are not only solitary, but are often physically frail and vulnerable. In the past, many critics have interpreted this as implying the vulnerability of humanity, especially since they were created directly after the damage of the two World Wars. Giacometti's sculptures undeniably struck a chord with the critics and viewers of post-war and post-Holocaust Europe.

Starting in the late 19th century, Modernism, and the rejection of

## VOCABULARY

**Avant-garde:** (French) Meaning “before the guard” or “vanguard”; denotes artists and movements considered shocking, experimental, or radical during their time.

**Ephemeral:** Lasting a very short time; short-lived; transitory.

**Existentialism:** Term used to describe the views of many philosophers, including the group of French writers Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir. Generally, existentialism pertains to a view that the individual's experience is unique, entirely free, and therefore, that people are responsible for their own lives. The view is often associated with a sense of dread, absurdity, or melancholy which follows from recognizing one's own existence, utter responsibility and the lack of order in the world.

**Linear:** Of or pertaining to the characteristics of a work of art in which forms and rhythms are defined chiefly in terms of line.

**Monotone:** Sameness of tone or color, sometimes to a boring degree.

**Surrealist:** A movement focused on the expression of personal, sometimes unconscious, desires, and a move beyond rationality. Surrealists often employed dream analysis, free association, or hypnosis during the creation of their work.

## OHIO ACADEMIC CONTENT STANDARDS

Study of this work and its related classroom activities meets some or all of the following K-12 benchmarks:

- **Language Arts:** Acquisition of Vocabulary; Communications: Oral and Visual; Concept of Print, Comprehension Strategies and Self-Monitoring Strategies; Information, Technical, and Persuasive Text; Literary Text; Research
- **Mathematics:** Geometry and Spatial Sense; Mathematical Processes; Measurement
- **Sciences:** Science and Technology
- **Social Studies:** Economics; Geography; History; People in Societies; Skills and Methods
- **Visual Arts:** Analyzing and Responding; Connections, Relationships, and Applications; Historical, Cultural, and Social Contexts; Valuing the Arts/Aesthetic Reflection

traditional modes of representation, became an overwhelming current in the arts. Modernism can be a tricky term to define, as it encompasses multiple political, cultural, and artistic movements. Briefly—in terms of artists like Giacometti, working after the first wave of Modernist visual culture—it could partly be described as the use of new ideas and technology to elaborate on or question the legacy of geniuses like Cézanne and Gauguin, in both aesthetic technique and subject matter. The introduction of several *avant-garde* movements, led by artists like Matisse, Picasso, and Braque also pushed Giacometti to experiment with different styles and to challenge his own imagination and boundaries.

In the 1940s, Giacometti also became occupied with ideas of *Existentialism*, a philosophical movement that believed “individuals create the meaning and essence of their lives, as opposed to deities or authorities creating it for

them.” Giacometti was friends with popular Existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre and Samuel Beckett. Exposure to these ideas could also explain Giacometti’s preoccupation with the use of gray in paintings and drawings like *Figure*.

### ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Alberto Giacometti was born in 1901 to a family of artists in Switzerland—both his father and godfather were well-known Swiss artists. He received traditional, classical artistic training at boarding school, as well as at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and Ecole des Arts-et-Metiers. During his studies, like many of his famous contemporaries, Giacometti became fascinated by art of African descent, as well as by ancient Byzantine, Egyptian, and Mesopotamian art. He was also heavily influenced by the sculptor Auguste Rodin. Eventually, he settled in Paris, the heart of the *avant-garde* Modernist movement at the time. In 1925, Giacometti began to abandon the traditional academic styles he had

### CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

**LANGUAGE ARTS:** Read and discuss a scene from Jean Paul Sartre’s *No Exit*, his most famous Existentialist play. What ideas are evident in his writing that could correspond to Giacometti’s *Figure*? (*High School*)

**SOCIAL STUDIES:** Look at a range of works (any medium) by European artists that are dated after the First and Second World Wars. How do different movements and artists deal with the aftermath of war? How do responses differ in the post-WWI and post-WWII eras? Examine such movements as Dada, Surrealism, and Abstract Expressionism, and works such as Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937), Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* (1915) (also in the AMAM collection), and Giacometti’s *Head of a Man on a Rod* (1947). (*Middle and High School*)

**SOCIAL STUDIES:** Modernist and *avant-garde* artists often objectified the women they portrayed. Examine Giacometti’s representations of women. Did he portray women differently than men, aside from the obvious physical differences? Why or why not? (*Middle and High School*)

**VISUAL ARTS:** Try painting or drawing a picture using only one color. How will this limited palette effect technique, subject matter, and your style of painting or drawing? (*All Ages*)

been taught, and decided to go the route of the avant-garde, creating work that stemmed directly from his imagination. Giacometti became one of the most important *Surrealist* sculptors and also experimented with Cubism for a time. Around 1935, he stopped creating sculptures in the Surrealist style, believing that he needed to get back to "reality," and he began to work with the human figure intensely. This break with the Surrealist movement lost him the support of many dealers and artist friends, but ultimately resulted in the thin, roughly textured, elongated figures he is known for today. His work after World War II brought him considerable acclaim and recognition, culminating in museum and gallery exhibitions throughout the 1950s.

Giacometti is considered conservative and fairly traditional compared with most of the avant-garde artists of his time, especially following the emergence of Abstract Expressionism and the New York School in the 1950s. However, Giacometti was a consistently creative and prolific artist throughout his life, and was one of the few who continued to insist upon a return to the figural and the representational.

From 1956 to 1957, Giacometti experienced a breakdown, which was a result of his increasing anxiety and self-doubt. This loss of confidence, or loss of direction perhaps, is visible in works from this time, although afterward, his work in all mediums grew stronger. Alberto Giacometti died in 1966.