

# Open Windows 5

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We present the fifth issue of *Ventanas*, which includes an homage to Gerrit Dou on the 400th anniversary of his birth; an analysis of the patron and muse Misia Sert on the occasion of the loan of her portrait to the recent exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay; a study on the influence of the collector Gustave Arosa on Gauguin, based on the testimony of Emilio Castelar; and, finally, an explanation of how the recent identification of the sitter for Giacometti's *Portrait of a Woman* allows us to become more familiar with the artist's creative process.



# 400th Anniversary of the birth of Gerrit Dou

“Wonderful, lively, strong [and] powerful”

Joachim von Sandrart<sup>1</sup>

Dolores Delgado

Anonymous

*Gerrit Dou*, 18th century. Print from Antoine-Joseph Dezallier d'Argenville, *Abrégé de la vie des plus fameux peintres*, Paris, 1745

## Introduction and biography

Gerrit Dou, also known as Gerard Dou, was born on 7th April 1613 in Leiden, where he became enormously popular, particularly among the social elite, and lived for the whole of his life. Leiden, whose university was founded in 1575, was a large commercial centre which attracted intellectuals and painters (including Aertgen [1498–1568] and Lucas van Leyden [1494–1533]), engravers, and stained-glass window designers, among these Gerrit's own father, Douwe Jansz, himself a glazier and engraver. Dou was originally employed at his father's workshop but went on to train under Pieter Cowenhorn, a stained-glass painter, until, when still only fifteen years of age, he was apprenticed at Rembrandt's workshop, where he remained for three years until his master moved to Amsterdam in 1631. Although in subject matter, composition and use of *chiaroscuro* [figs. 1 and 2], Dou's early work reflects the influence of his first master, also evident is the influence of Jan Lievens, with whom Rembrandt associated. Gerrit Dou founded the Guild of St Luke (*Fijnschilders*) in his native city.

Dou's early work reveals the influence of Rembrandt, particularly where themes and the treatment of light are concerned. His *œuvre* consists mainly of self-portraits, pictures of hermits and scenes of women playing musical instruments [fig. 3]. In time he developed the style which brought him fame and fortune and is characterised, as we shall see in more detail, by the exquisitely meticulous, illusionist and refined technique that evolved in the course of his lifetime. By twenty-eight he had won acclaim as a master and, thanks to his first patron Pieter Spiering (the son of François Spiering, a well-known Delft tapestry-maker who was also an ambassador and financial adviser to Queen Christina of Sweden), had members of the royal family among his patrons. Cosimo III de' Medici of Florence also owned paintings by Dou, while on the occasion of his ascent to the throne, Charles II of England was presented with works by Dou by governments of states such as Holland. Johan de Bye became a patron of Dou's at a later stage in his career. In this respect one story goes that Dou's exquisite technique and delicate images caused such amazement that de Bye decided to exhibit the artist's paintings in a room opposite Leiden Town Hall and charge admission to see them. As a letter written in 1780<sup>2</sup> by the Duke of Rutland's agent proves, the prices of Dou's paintings were so high that only members of the upper classes could afford them. Dou, who had no children, died a wealthy man and was buried in Sint Pieterskerk on 9th February 1675.



Fig. 1  
Rembrandt  
*An Old Woman Reading*, 1631  
Oil on panel. 60 x 48 cm  
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum



Fig. 2  
Gerrit Dou  
*Old Woman Reading*, c. 1631–32  
Oil on panel. 71 x 55.5 cm  
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum



Fig. 3  
Gerrit Dou  
*A Woman Playing a Clavichord*,  
c. 1665  
Oil on panel. 37.7 x 29.8 cm  
London, Trustees of the Dulwich  
Picture Gallery



Fig. 4  
Gerrit Dou  
*Self-portrait*, c. 1665  
Oil on panel. 59 x 43.5 cm  
Boston, private collection



Fig. 5  
Gerrit Dou  
*Self-portrait*, c. 1665  
Oil on panel. 48.9 x 39 cm  
New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 1913, 14.40.607



Fig. 6  
Gerrit Dou  
*Still Life with Book and Purse*,  
1647  
Oil on panel.  
22.9 x 17.8 cm  
Los Angeles, University  
of California, The Armand  
and Hammer Collection,  
Fisher Gallery

### Themes, style and technique

Dou's achievements in enriching pictorial language and extending artistic themes not only made him an innovative artist but also won him a large number of followers and disciples, particularly important in this respect being Frans van Mieris the Elder (1635–81) and Gabriel Metsu (1629–67). Initially Dou had mainly painted pictures of hermits and elderly people consonant with the themes and compositional techniques used by Rembrandt and it was only when his master moved to Amsterdam and Jan Lievens to England that he received a number of commissions (possibly due to the absence of both) and began to develop a style of his own, adding innovations to his themes. His first paintings were oval portraits with neutral backgrounds and diffused light entering the picture from the left, and from the 1640s genre scenes—the subject most characteristic of his work. However, he was also interested in religious themes and self-portraits [figs. 4 and 5], finding in the latter a means to bear witness to his social status, as he was eager to demonstrate the artist's role in society and stress his importance as a communicator of ideas.

Dou was one of the first artists in Holland to depict everyday activities, many involving women, and often presented them as examples of moderation, virtue and spirituality. Sutton said that Dou's paintings were like metaphorical abstractions and were precisely what distinguished the artist from his contemporaries.<sup>3</sup> Dou's genre scenes implicitly allude to the pleasures of the senses and the ephemeral, reminding the spectator that life is merely transitory. Ronni Baer<sup>4</sup> suggested that Dou's personages invite the spectator to view the artistic phenomenon as a reflection of the transience of life. With meanings more complex than meets the eye, these paintings often include allusions to the brevity and transience of life and to contentment in old age. Moralistic intentions also underlie his pictures in the form of references to virtue.

In time Dou began to specialise in small formats, painting on board in preference to canvas. He brought a modern approach to conventional themes with his use of light and compositional techniques and in the process achieved the illusionism that is so characteristic of his work. His initial training with his family's stained-glass business may have been instrumental in the development of this painstaking approach to his paintings. Furthermore, he sometimes used magnifying instruments to capture greater detail and often adjusted planes, while *trompe l'oeil* plays an essential role in his work [fig. 6]. Dou's form of illusionism is closely related to his themes, as the two are complementary.

Portraits of members of the professional classes, such as astronomers and physicians, are also common in Dou's work. He



Fig. 7.  
Gerrit Dou  
*The Doctor*, 1653  
Oil on panel.  
49.3 x 37 cm  
Vienna, Kunsthistorisches  
Museum, Gemäldegalerie



Fig. 8.  
Gerrit Dou  
*The Doctor*, c. 1660-65  
Oil on panel. 38 x 30 cm  
Copenhagen, Statens Museum  
for Kunst



Fig. 9  
Gerrit Dou  
*The Stallholder*, 1647  
Oil on panel.  
38.5 x 29 cm  
Paris, Musée du Louvre, 1215



Fig. 10  
Gerrit Dou  
*A Poulterer's Shop*, c. 1670  
Oil on panel. 58 x 46 cm  
London, The National Gallery,  
NG825



Fig. 11  
Gerrit Dou  
*Old Woman with a Jug at  
a Window*, c. 1660-65  
Oil on panel.  
28.3 x 22.8 cm  
Vienna, Kunsthistorisches  
Museum, Gemäldegalerie



Fig. 12  
Gerrit Dou  
*The Dutch Housewife*, 1650  
Oil on panel.  
26.1 x 20.7 cm  
Paris, Musée du Louvre, 1218

depicted these as scientists, including books in the painting in allusion to their quest for knowledge. As an allusion to the theme of perseverance [figs. 7, 8 and 13], the figures in some of his paintings are shown working at night. His pictures of physicians portray all three types characteristic of the 17th century: the qualified doctor; the tooth-puller/surgeon; and the folk practitioner. However, unlike some of his contemporaries, such as Jan Steen, who made fun of them all, Dou always portrayed them as tastefully dressed and evoking wisdom. He thus made his themes more meaningful through references to *vanitas* and the eternal struggle between science and divine will.

Gerrit Dou also portrayed musicians as personifications of the pleasures, delights and sensuality of life. Another aspect in which he took great interest and that is evident in a number of his paintings was the *paragone* of the arts: a firm believer in the supremacy of painting, he demonstrated this view through his highly refined technique. As we have said, illusionism is strongly present in his oeuvre in the form of technical artifices which make figures and objects seem to project out of the pictorial plane via windows [figs. 3-6], and curtains that serve as frames to draw the spectator into the scene. At some point between 1645 and 1650 Dou began including windows and window ledges in his paintings as a form of barrier between figure and spectator. In this respect, *The Stallholder* [fig. 9] gave rise to what has since become known as Dou's "window niche" paintings, which feature scenes from everyday life seen through arched windows [figs. 9 and 10]. These may also contain curtains drawn back to reveal an interior scene of domestic or everyday life [see figs. 3-5]. Dou began using this method very early in his career and it may be connected with the contemporary habit of placing curtains in front of paintings to protect them from dust and sunlight. One of Dou's favourite themes in the 1650s was of cooks or other females performing household chores in kitchens amid pleasant surroundings exemplifying feminine virtue. In pictures of this kind Dou finally reduced the number of figures to one, usually female [figs. 11-15].

In due course Dou turned his attention to lighting and contrasts of light and shadow (having inherited this interest from his master) and their effects. At the beginning of his career he often used *chiaroscuro* in his paintings and in his late period introduced artificial light from lamps or candles to create a nocturnal environment, the effect of which was to infuse his images with a greater degree of mystery [figs. 12-14]. Furthermore, Dou's use of artificial sources of light underscored his obvious artistic virtuosity. Candles and oil-lamps had already been used by Flemish artists as sources of light at the centre of compositions and in this respect Dou<sup>5</sup> can be said to stand between Rembrandt, who was more concerned with light than with colour or form, and Gerard van



Fig. 13  
Gerrit Dou  
*Astronomer by Candlelight*, c. 1665  
Oil on panel. 32 x 21.2 cm  
Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum



Fig. 14  
Gerrit Dou  
*Young Woman with a Lighted Candle at a Window*,  
c. 1658-65 Oil on panel.  
26.7 x 19.5 cm  
Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza  
132 (1930.21)

[\[+ info\]](#)



Fig. 15  
Gerrit Dou  
*Old Woman with a Candle*, 1661  
Oil on panel. 31 x 23 cm  
Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz Museum

Honthorst, whose light sources (generally out of sight) were harder and colder [fig. 16] than Dou's, which were more evocative and romantic.

There was little change or development in Dou's style throughout the course of his career as a whole. From the start he used a variety of green, ochre, lilac and flesh tones in conjunction with an enveloping *chiaroscuro*, although as time passed he used these ever more freely. Characteristic of his work is a meticulous representation of materials with barely distinguished and ever freer brush strokes, the texture of his fabrics (as with his curtains, whether of silk or brocade) and attention to detail verging on perfectionism. Thanks to technical analysis his painstaking method of working is known to have depended little on preparatory drawings and much more on applying delicate brush strokes over and over again to the surface. The result is a collection of small works with exquisite surfaces and highly convincing, wonderfully rendered *trompe l'oeil* effects applied to very attractive themes, reflecting Dou's mastery as a painter and providing insight into his spiritual and inner self.

#### Dou's reputation and appraisal by the critics

As Wheelock<sup>6</sup> pointed out, it is curious how tastes change in different periods and how an artist of Dou's calibre, so highly-praised in his day and the centuries immediately after, should slip into oblivion in the 19th century. Yet it was precisely his achievements, his exquisite technique and stylistic and thematic innovations which led him to be regarded by 19th-century critics as a cold, impersonal artist, and even as peculiar. In a treatise of 1675<sup>7</sup> the historian Joachim von Sandrart (1606-88) told how he had visited the artist at his studio and went on to describe Dou as punctilious for protecting his palette, brushes and paints from dust and dirt by storing them in a chest. He added that Dou would sit in silence waiting for the dust to settle before opening the chest and taking out his utensils, safe in the knowledge that they were clean. In a catalogue raisonné on Dutch painters, John Smith also discussed Dou's meticulous method of working.<sup>8</sup> Subsequent researchers continued in the same vein, with the result that in his biographical dictionary of Dutch artists of 1842, Johannes Immerzeel<sup>9</sup> described Dou as a "rare genius" and "gifted"; Thoré<sup>10</sup> described him as a master of small compositions, thus demoting him in category; and Wilhelm von Bode compared him unfavourably with Rembrandt. By this time Dou's reputation was that of an artist with talent, albeit shallow and incapable of capturing human depths. It was not until the 1990s that experts once again made a study of Dou. Jan A. Emmens<sup>11</sup> was among the first to stress the importance of his work and point out the philosophical concepts of Antiquity reflected in it. From then on



Fig. 16  
Gerrit van Honthorst  
*The Procuress*, 1625  
Oil on canvas. 71 x 104 cm  
Utrecht, Centraal Museum

interest in his oeuvre revived. At a 1989 exhibition in Amsterdam, the art historian Peter Hecht<sup>12</sup> wrote that Dou's artifices, like his windows and niches or backgrounds draped with fabrics, were ways of creating transitions within the pictorial plane whose purpose was to draw the spectator into the work. He also pointed out the pleasure and delight inherent in admiring works of art of this kind. The year 2000 saw an exhibition jointly organised by the Dulwich Picture Gallery of London and the National Gallery of Washington, whose catalogue contained the most recent research into Dou's work.<sup>13</sup> Wheelock<sup>14</sup> remarked on the irony of the fact that Dou had been an artist who had put his soul into his art and had inspired subsequent generations of artists, yet had finally been dismissed as insensitive or soulless. So it was that Dou once more became acknowledged as a master outstanding for his fastidious, refined technique, study of the effects of light and shade, meticulous research into composition and command of illusionism.

## Notes

- 1 Joachim von Sandrart, *Teutsche Academie der edlen Bau-, Bild-, und Mahlerey-Künste*, 4 vols. Munich, G. Hirth, 1925, p. 195.
- 2 Quoted in Willem Martin, *Het leven en de werken van Gerrit Dou*. Leiden, S. C. van Doesburgh, 1901, p. 157.
- 3 Peter C. Sutton, *Pieter de Hooch: Complete Edition*. Oxford, Phaidon, 1980, p. 49.
- 4 Ronni Baer, "The Life and Art of Gerrit Dou", in Ronni Baer (ed.), *Gerrit Dou 1613-1675*. [Exh. cat. Washington, National Gallery and London, Dulwich Picture Gallery, 2000; The Hague, Mauritshuis, 2001]. New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 2000, p. 36.
- 5 Justus Müller Hofstede: "Artificial Light in Honthorst and Trebruggen: Form and Iconography", in *Hendrick ter Brugghen und die Nachfolger Caravaggios in Holland: Beiträge eines Symposiums aus Anlass der Ausstellung "Holländische Malerei im neuen Licht, Hendrick ter Brugghen und seine Zeitgenossen" im Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum Braunschweig vom 23 bis 25. März 1987*. Braunschweig, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, 1988, pp. 18-26.
- 6 Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., "Dou's Reputation", in Ronni Baer 2000, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-13.
- 7 Joachim von Sandrart, *Teutsche Academie der edlen Bau-, Bild-, und Mahlerey-Künste*, 2 vols., Nuremberg, 1675-1679.
- 8 John Smith, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch, Flemish, and French Painters*, 9 vols., London, Sands, 1829, vol. 1.
- 9 Johannes Immerzeel, *De Levens En Werken Der Hollandsche En Vlaamsche Kunstschilders*, 2 vols., Amsterdam, 1842.
- 10 Théophile E. J. Thoré (William Bürger), *Les Musées de la Holland*, Paris, 1858, p. 5.
- 11 Jan A. Emmens, "Natuur, Onderwijzing en Oefening. Bij een drieluik van Gerrit Dou", in Joshua Bruyn [et al.] (eds.), *Album Discipulorum F.G. van Gelder*, Utrecht, Haentjens, Dekker & Gumbert, 1963, pp. 125-36; and Jan A. Emmens, "A Seventeenth Century Theory of Art: Nature and Practice", in *Delta: A Review of Arts, Life and Thought in The Netherlands*, Amsterdam, Delta International Publication Foundation, 1969, pp. 30-40.
- 12 Peter Hecht (ed.), *De Hollandse Fijnschilders Van Gerard Dou tot Adriaen van der Werff*, [Exh. cat., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, 18 November, 1989-25 February, 1990], Maarssen, G. Schwartz/SDU, 1989.
- 13 See Ronni Baer 2000, *op. cit.*
- 14 Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., "Dou's Reputation", in Ronni Baer 2000, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

# Anatomy of the Muse: In Misia's Footsteps

Clara Marcellán



Fig. 1  
Pierre Bonnard. *Misia Godebska*, 1908  
Oil on canvas, 145.5 x 114.5 cm  
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid  
[\[+ info\]](#)

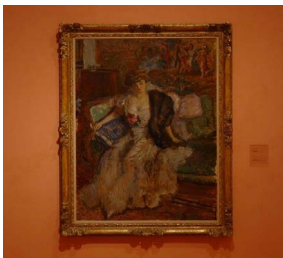


Fig. 2  
Rooms in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2012

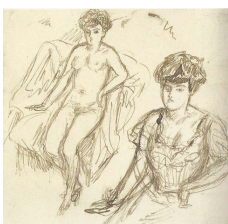


Fig. 3  
Pierre Bonnard  
*Double portrait of Misia*, 1906  
Pen and ink drawing,  
140 x 147 mm.  
Private collection



Fig. 4  
Pierre Bonnard  
*Misia with Roses*, 1908  
Oil on canvas,  
114 x 146.5 cm.  
Private collection

Maria Zofia Olga Zenajda Godebska: Misia Godebska. Misia Natanson. Misia Edwards. Misia Sert. All are the names of Misia (1872–1950), the Belle Époque muse known as the “Queen of Paris.” The Musée d’Orsay revisited her reign in an exhibition during the summer of 2012 in which one of her portraits painted by Pierre Bonnard and belonging to the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza was on display [fig. 1]. That event allowed us to become more familiar with the woman who usually observes us imperiously from her wall in Room 33 [fig. 2].

A brief summary of her biography places Misia at the very centre of the cultural life of her age. She was born in 1872 in St. Petersburg, the daughter of the Polish sculptor Cyprian Godebski and his Belgian wife, Sophie Servais, who died in childbirth. Misia was raised near Brussels by her maternal grandmother, surrounded by musicians like Franz Liszt. She learned to play the piano under Gabriel Fauré and continued her studies in Paris near her father’s new family. In 1893, she married her cousin Thadée Natanson, the editor of the art and literary magazine *La Revue blanche*, and she became the muse of the artists, writers and musicians associated with that publication. Around 1904, she divorced her husband to marry the millionaire businessman Alfred Edwards. Their marriage lasted for five years, during which Misia became a patron of the arts in addition to her status as a muse, supporting Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes. In 1920 she wed for the third and last time, to the Catalan painter Josep Maria Sert. She died in 1950, surrounded by friends like Coco Chanel and Jean Cocteau.

## Misia by Bonnard

The best way to reconstruct Misia’s path is to follow her footsteps through the literary and artistic creations of her contemporaries. In her early twenties, the wife of Thadée Natanson hosted gatherings in their country house in Villeneuve-sur-Yonne. Their illustrious guests accompanied them for long periods that resulted in portraits of Misia reading, writing and playing the piano, and poems dedicated to her. Bonnard, who remained close to Misia over the course of her subsequent marriages, has bequeathed to us a considerable gallery of paintings related to her, among which the portrait in the Museo Thyssen stands out prominently since, as Guillermo Solana has remarked, it is one of the most ambitious.<sup>1</sup>

The incubation of *Misia Godebska* begins with a curious drawing dated 1906 that was also featured in the exhibition at the Musée d’Orsay [fig. 3].<sup>2</sup> In the drawing Bonnard added a nude sketch to the figure of Misia clothed, one of the few occasions in which she agreed to pose that way.<sup>3</sup> This double portrait in pen and ink is halfway between the composition in the Museo Thyssen and another canvas he painted of her in 1908, *Misia with Roses*, now in a private collection [fig. 4]. In that painting, the artist



reproduced her pose in the drawing exactly, while in the Museo Thyssen's canvas it appears inverted. And, while in *Misia with Roses* the sitter is distracted by the lapdog cavorting beneath the side table, in *Misia Godebska* she appears lost in thought, with an expression more like that of the drawing. Bonnard focuses one's attention on her powerful, full figure, which he adorns with a fur stole and an aigrette in her hair.

Bonnard's Misa in this portrait appears surrounded by the signs of luxury that her marriage to Alfred Edwards permitted. Behind her one can make out the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century tapestries that adorned her parlour in their residence on the rue de Rivoli, for which Misa commissioned four panels by Bonnard to complement them.<sup>4</sup> As Misa later recalled, around 1910, "Edwards having allowed the lease of the rue Rivoli to lapse, as he never set foot in it, I settled down in a lovely apartment on the Quai Voltaire. Bonnard painted a very fine mural for my big *salon*, and soon I was able to bring all my friends together there."<sup>5</sup> This work she commissioned presided over her private salon at the Quai Voltaire until 1915, when she sold the panels and they ended up separated among different owners. This was not the fate of her portrait, however, which Misa probably kept until the end of her life.<sup>6</sup>

### Misia, icon of elegance

In addition to the Misa portrayed in the intimacy of her home, there is the public Misa, whose appearances came to be events of some importance. As a result of her marriage to Alfred Edwards, she gained access to the *beau monde*, to the world of haute couture and fine jewellery, and she began to appear frequently in the society pages. After she had visited the theatre in 1907, a newspaper reported on her dress in great detail: "Mme. Alfred Edwards. [...] In her hair, bluish-grey feathers; marvellous pearls, incomparable diamonds, magnificent rings on every finger, and what a bracelet! [...] Without gloves. With such jewellery, she is the height of chic."<sup>7</sup> The aigrette in her hair mentioned here is probably the one she is wearing in the portrait now in this museum [fig. 5], though because of the painter's technique, it practically disappears amid the sumptuousness and sensuality of the entire composition.

In addition to the anecdotes surrounding the objects belonging to her, Misa is also linked to the history of fashion with pieces like the necklace she commissioned from Cartier in 1934, thirteen strands of spherical ruby beads tied to two palmettes likewise adorned with rubies by means of a silk string falling down her back.<sup>8</sup> Her name can turn up in the least expected of places. Coincidentally, for instance, we encountered her not long ago in the exhibition *Cartier* held at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza from October 2012 to February 2013. One of the objects presented on that occasion, a platinum cigarette case, bears Misa's signature on the inside of the lid, along with those of

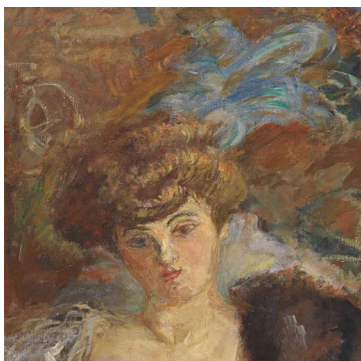


Fig. 5  
Detail showing the aigrette that Misa  
is wearing in Bonnard's portrait



Fig. 6  
Cartier cigarette case, 1931  
Platinum, baguette-cut diamond,  
10 x 7.75 x 7.25 cm.  
Sold to Baron Adolph de Meyer



Fig. 7  
Horst P. Horst, Misia in the Gallerie dell'Accademia  
in Venice wearing clothes designed by Chanel, 1947.  
Horst Estate, Miami

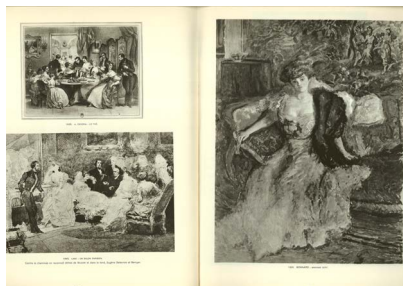


Fig. 8  
Reproduction of Bonnard's portrait of Misia,  
together with images of salons, in *Un siècle  
d'élégance française* (pp. 102-3)

other friends of the owner [fig. 6]. Among them is Coco Chanel, one of the people closest to Misia after they met in 1917.

Misia introduced Chanel into her circle of artist friends when she was still a promising young fashion designer, and as a result, Chanel was soon collaborating on the creation of costumes for the ballet and the theatre. Both women would later compete in matters pertaining to patronage and, despite temporary periods when they grew further apart, they would over the years support each other in their sentimental difficulties, illnesses, and other setbacks. In her mature years, Misia allowed her friend to look after her, and she assisted Chanel on numerous projects—the launching of a new perfume, a trip to Hollywood... She also showed off Chanel's mythical designs, with an effect not dissimilar to that of being the subject of paintings [fig. 7]. Accordingly, the final image of Misia on her deathbed was in fact the work of her friend the designer, who dressed her and applied her makeup. Once more, Misia became a work of art. Curiously, the attire Chanel chose for her, a white dress and a rose on her breast, recalls her appearance as she was immortalized forty years earlier in the portrait now in the Thyssen Museum.

During her life, Misia had already entered the history books as an icon of elegance. In 1943, Nicole Vedrès published *Un Siècle d'élégance française*, in which she included the work by Bonnard that occupies us here [fig. 8]. The elegance that Misia symbolized is defined in the book's prologue in the following way: "But elegance alone endures, by virtue of qualities stronger than anything hereditary, stronger than any habit of the eye or of the spirit: For it is an art of the *personnage*, and in this country there are always those born to renew it, to invent on their own persons what others compose on canvases or on walls."<sup>9</sup>

### Between reality and fiction

The image of Misia—her public persona and the way in which she was represented in the press or in such texts as those we have already cited—intermingles with the fictional characters she inspired. On 7 December 1908, a play by Thadée Natanson and Octave Mirbeau, *Le Foyer*, premiered at the Comédie Française. According to the catalogue published by the Musée d'Orsay on the occasion of *Misia, Reine de Paris*, the work was based on Natanson and Misia's divorce following the pressures and trickery of Edwards, who was obsessed with making her his wife.

In 1906, Edwards himself had written the comedy *Par ricochet*, in which he allegedly presents the stratagem with which he managed to get Misia to separate from her first husband in order to marry him. The work was staged that same year, with the unfortunate outcome that the lead actress, Geneviève Lantelme, became Edwards's lover, leading to his split with Misia in 1907.

Marcel Proust, who referred to Misia as “a monument of history,” would create two characters inspired in her for *À la recherche du temps perdu*: Madame Verdurin and Princess Yourbeletieff. Proust characterizes Misia’s relationship with Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, which she discovered and took under her wing in 1908, thus:

and when, with the prodigious flowering of the Russian Ballet, revealing one after another Bakst, Nijinsky, Benois, and the genius of Stravinsky, the youthful sponsor of all those new great men appeared wearing on her head an immense, quivering aigrette that was new to the women of Paris and that they all sought to copy, it was widely supposed that this marvellous creature had been imported in their copious luggage, and as their most priceless treasure, by the Russian dancers [...].<sup>10</sup>

Her close friendship with Diaghilev led to fruitful collaborations among the writers, artists, designers and musicians of her circle—as we have noted, she was a consummate pianist herself—resulting in revolutionary performances.

In 1914, Jules Case published his novel, *Le Salon du Quai Voltaire*, which may well have been inspired in the salons of Cécile Sorel and Misia Godebska, as a contemporary review suggested, since both women resided on that street along the Seine. In one passage, he describes the parlour of one of the characters, which recalls Misia’s:

[Among his latest acquisitions] other canvases by very young painters were plentiful. Their colours and line perturbed the eye and the spirit. He looked at them little and pointed at them with an offhand gesture. He protected these bold Neo-impressionists in the same way that he extolled the Symbolist poets, whose works, luxuriously bound, were lined up behind the gilded lattice of a delightful display cabinet.<sup>11</sup>

The dramatization of her life would persist into her later years, when her popularity began to wane. Jean Cocteau, a protégé of Misia’s since 1910, found inspiration in the trio she formed with her third husband, the Spanish painter Josep Maria Sert, and his mistress Roussie Mdivani, a Georgian-Russian sculptor, for characters in Cocteau’s *Les Monstres sacrés*. The work was premiered in 1940 at the Théâtre Michel in Paris.

### **An enduring character**

Misia, immortalized in every possible way, was highly cognizant of the construction of her *personnage*, her “character.” When Josep Maria Sert, her great love, died in 1945, Misia, now half blind and dependent on morphine, related her life to the journalist Boulos Ristelhueber, with whom she would live until her death. Certain lacunae are conspicuous, for example her relationship with Chanel or other episodes that she

censors. The Spanish edition, which appeared in 1983, was translated and annotated by her nephew by marriage, Francisco Sert. This edition rectifies many of the (probably intentional) imprecisions, omissions and adjustments to her biography that appear in the French original, from 1952.<sup>12</sup> In his preface, Francisco Sert identifies one of the keys to understanding the way in which Misia herself constructed her character: to live projected onto others. Her willingness to invite others to paint her, dedicate musical compositions and poems to her, dress her up, and to talk about her—in short, her ability to construct a character for herself—had a playful dimension that Misia recalled in the following terms: “It is with a slightly amused smile that I evoke the image of the carefree and tremulous young woman that I was at that time, hung as I am now on the walls of the Hermitage in St. Petersburg or appearing in the catalogue of the Barnes Collection in Philadelphia.”<sup>13</sup> Misia would continue to smile if she saw herself today on the walls of the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, and she would have been even more amused to wander through the exhibition, *Misia, Reine de Paris*.

## Notes

- 1 Remarks from a lecture Solana gave on *Misia Godebska* at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza on 25 April 2009, part of the lecture series “Retratos de mujer en el Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza” (Female portraits in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza).
- 2 See the catalogue entry in Isabelle Cahn et al., *Misia, Reine de Paris*, exh. cat. (Paris: Musée d’Orsay; Gallimard, 2012), p. 174.
- 3 Renoir’s insistence that Misia appear with a lower neckline in his portraits is well known, and in her memoirs she laments not having posed nude for the Impressionist painter. See Misia Sert, *Misia and the Muses: The Memoirs of Misia Sert* (New York: J. Day, 1953), p. 82. The French original was published as *Misia* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952).
- 4 Gloria Lynn Groom, *Beyond the Easel: Decorative Painting by Bonnard, Vuillard, Denis and Roussel, 1890–1930*, exh. cat. (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2001), pp. 176–78.
- 5 Sert, *Misia and the Muses*, p. 113.
- 6 The first indication of another ownership appears in the Sotheby’s auction catalogue from 28 June 1961, where the portrait is described as “the Property of a Gentleman” with no further indications about its provenance. After the auction it ended up in the possession of the Spencer A. Samuels and Co. gallery, and Baron Thyssen acquired it in 1970.
- 7 Viscountess Odette, “Carnet Mondain,” in *La Revue Diplomatique*, no. 52, 29 December 1907, p. 12.
- 8 Misia provided the precious stones for this piece, which La Maison Cartier mentions in its catalogues and essays on its pieces inspired in South Asian motifs from the 1930s. See Judy Rudoe, *Cartier, 1900–1939* (Paris: Somogy Éditions d’Art, 1997), 164; and Hans Nadelhoffer, *Cartier* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007), p. 175.
- 9 Nicole Vedrès, *Un siècle d’élégance française* (Paris: Éditions du Chêne, 1943), p. 11.
- 10 Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 4, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, rev. D. J. Enright (New York: Modern Library, 1992), p. 193.
- 11 Jules Case, *Le Salon du Quai Voltaire* (Paris: Société d’Éditions Littéraires et Artistiques, 1914), p. 137.
- 12 Misia Sert, *Misia*, trans. Francisco Sert (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1983).
- 13 Sert, *Misia and the Muses*, p. 44.

# Emilio Castelar, Gustave Arosa and Paul Gauguin

Andrea van Houtven



Fig. 1  
Félix Nadar  
Nadar's friend Gustave Arosa in  
a series of preparatory portraits  
for a sculpture, ca. 1865  
Albumen print  
14 x 12.8 cm  
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

“En [su] casa, donde las paredes relumbraban a los toques metálicos de las fuentes hispano-arábigas y a los relieves mágicos de nuestros antiguos bargueños; con los versos de Racine y de Lope a la continua en los labios; ora dibujando los bajo-relieves de la columna troyana, ora componiendo las porciones maltrechas de un mueble viejo; dado a las letras y a las artes en aquel museo regocijante, como un sultán oriental en el harem se da entre las esencias de sus pebeteros a los ensueños de su amor ...”<sup>1</sup>

Emilio Castelar

These lines are taken from Emilio Castelar's *Historia del año 1883*, and the person described reciting couplets as he busies himself with his artworks and objects, surrounded by the many examples of Spanish ceramics and furniture displayed at his home in Saint-Cloud, is Gustave Arosa (1818-1883) [fig. 1], perhaps best-known today as Paul Gauguin's legal guardian in the years following the death of Gauguin's mother Aline in 1867. While scholars have long recognized that Arosa had a significant impact on Gauguin's development as an artist, seen in Gauguin's frequent artistic borrowings from the collotypes Arosa published and the paintings in his collection [figs. 2 and 3], he has never been properly documented, and a number of primary sources and texts on Arosa such as this one by Castelar have been largely ignored. This is unfortunate, since Arosa is an interesting personality in his own right—as a collector of paintings and drawings (primarily Delacroix but also Courbet, Daumier, Corot, Jongkind and Pissarro, among others) and ceramics, a pioneer of early photomechanical reproduction and host to numerous Spanish exiles and visitors who came to Paris—and the more we know about him, the better we can understand the ideas, culture and circumstances which helped set the stage for Gauguin's transition from young sailor to successful stockbroker to one of the most remarkable artists of his time [fig. 4].

Emilio Castelar [fig. 5] was a close friend of Arosa's son-in-law Adolfo Calzado, and travelled often to Paris, where he lived in exile for close to a year in 1866-67 and returned regularly over the following twenty years; he was a frequent visitor at Arosa's home in the *quartier Saint-Georges* and at his *casa museo*, as Castelar called it, in Saint-Cloud. Castelar repeatedly expressed his appreciation for Arosa in the letters he wrote over a number of years to Calzado as well as in these pages from his chronicle of the year 1883, written as an homage to Arosa who had died in April of that year; Gauguin, on the other hand—the great-grandson of a Spanish-Peruvian aristocrat and the grandson of the early socialist and author Flora Tristán, whom Castelar would have heard of but whose politics he most likely wouldn't have agreed with—is never mentioned and thus may not have made much of an



Fig. 2  
Paul Gauguin  
*Bouquet of flowers, fol. 1r*  
of the *Album Noa-Noa*  
(Album Gauguin Paul -1-)  
Graphite pencil, pen and grey  
ink, and watercolour on paper,  
315 x 232 mm  
Département des Arts  
Musées du Louvre,  
Paris

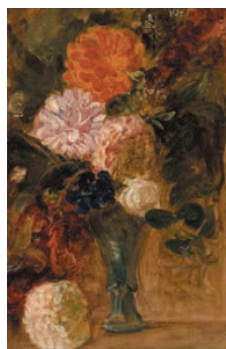


Fig. 3  
Eugène Delacroix  
*Still Life with Dahlias, ca.*  
1883  
Oil on canvas  
50 x 33 cm  
Philadelphia Museum of  
Art, Philadelphia. John G.  
Johnson collection, 1917  
This work was formerly in  
Gustave Arosa's collection.



Fig. 4  
Paul Gauguin  
Self-Portrait, ca. 1875-77  
Oil on canvas, 46.7 x 38.4 cm  
Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Cambridge.  
Gift of Helen W. Ellsworth in memory of Duncan S.  
Ellsworth '22, nephew of Archibald A. Hutchinson,  
benefactor of the Hutchinson Wing



Fig. 5  
Eugène Pirou  
Emilio Castelar, ca. 1899  
Photograph  
New York Public Library, New York

impression on him, if in fact Castelar ever met him on any of his visits.

As a man of letters, it is not surprising that Castelar was drawn to this aspect of Arosa's personality and that he depicts him as someone whose literary inclinations were as passionate as his appetite for paintings, ceramics, photography and beautiful objects. Arosa, as one would expect, had a respectable library of books: an inventory of his belongings drawn up at his death lists approximately 4,000 volumes (and there were probably more) in library of the modest *hotel particulier* that he had built on the rue de Prony, close to the Parc Monceau, in 1879. These were modern editions of European literature for the most part, from Michel Lévy Frères, the Bibliothèque Charpentier, the Bibliothèque Elzevirienne, Editions Lemerre, just to cite a few.<sup>2</sup>

Further on in the text, Castelar more fully describes Arosa's literary preferences, and reveals something about his frame of mind following the Franco-Prussian War:

"Gustavo prefería entre los antiguos poetas a Lope, Calderón y Shakespeare, como entre los modernos a Victor Hugo y a Zorrilla; pero, a fuer de buen francés, tras la guerra franco-prusiana borró al gran poeta sajón de su calendario, diciendo que los triunfos y predomios de las razas germánicas eran debidos al continuo loor sin tasa prodigado a sus obras, aún la más imperfecta, por los heleno-latinos, verdaderos dispensadores de la inmortalidad, y llevado a ciegas de tal sentimiento patriótico, ponía las correctas, pero artificiosas tragedias romanas de Racine, como Germánico, sobre las profundísimas de Shakespeare que han resucitado a César, Antonio y Cleopatra."

There are two points that must be made in order to understand this passage. First, for most of the nineteenth century, the view that Shakespeare was Anglo-Saxon or Germanic in nature was rather commonplace.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, it is hard to fathom that Castelar would qualify the tragedies of the great classical French playwright Jean Racine as "correct" or "contrived," and furthermore, Racine never wrote a tragedy based on the story of Germanicus Julius Caesar. Yet one of Racine's lesser-known rivals, Edmé Boursault (1638-1701), more closely fits Castelar's description and did write such a tragedy.<sup>4</sup> Assuming, therefore, that there is a mistake in printed text and that the intended reference is to Boursault, and not Racine, would Castelar have us believe that the otherwise highly discriminating Gustave Arosa, out of his great patriotism toward France, was so strongly affected by the Prussian invasion that he came to value the works of a second-rate, derivative French classical playwright over Shakespeare? Well,

perhaps; but more importantly, this anecdote illustrates how Arosa shared with many of his French contemporaries the belief that they had been victims of their own naiveté, and that Prussian imperialist ambitions and military capability had been facilitated by the candid, uncritical, even deferential attitude that the French had taken for decades towards German culture.

Soon after Mme de Stael published her *De L'Allemagne* in 1813-1814 as an alternate narrative to Napoleon's campaign of defamation against Germany, countless French intellectuals and artists of the Romantic generation began to extoll the virtues of their neighbors in contrast to their own flaws and shortcomings. If French morals had become corrupt, the Germans were a loyal, virtuous people of pure and simple values; where the French delighted in pleasure and lightness, German literature was by turns profound, learned and disciplined or the product of a nation of poets with their heads in the clouds, of suffering young Werthers more inclined to turn upon themselves rather than others and the clichés went on and on.

Even though by the 1830's figures such as Edgar Quinet and the German expatriates Heinrich Heine and Ludwig Börne began to question these assumptions and criticize French *Teutomania*, their warnings went largely unheeded, and decades later, in the wake of the Franco-Prussian conflict, unable to accept the trouncing that had taken place on French soil, in some quarters a *mea culpa* of sorts rose to the surface, where the French defeat was interpreted as a consequence of their own enduring willingness to believe in the idealized construct of German society and culture that they had nurtured for over fifty years.<sup>5</sup> From Castelar we can surmise that this was one of the ideas that was being voiced and debated in the Arosa household when Gauguin arrived in its midst, in the late spring of 1871, having avoided most of the conflict while he completed his military service in the navy.

The Prussian army had occupied the town of Saint-Cloud made it its *de facto* headquarters, and in mid-October 1870 French forces retaliated by shelling the town and palace from their stronghold on the nearby Mont-Valérien. The destruction was widespread, and is reflected in a series of haunting photographs that Arosa made of the ruined homes of his friends and neighbors in Saint-Cloud.

While the extent of the damage to Gustave Arosa's house and to his collection of ceramics must have been serious, it must not have come close to the total devastation depicted in these photographs.<sup>6</sup> Marie Heeregaard, the young, impressionable friend of Gauguin's future wife Mette Gad, wrote to her father that the Arosas had lost a lot during the war and as a result couldn't stand the Germans.<sup>7</sup> But by the spring of 1873 at the latest the family, accompanied by Gauguin, was once again spending weekends in Saint-Cloud and Gustave was busy adding to the collection of his *casa-museo* with the purchase and

commission of several works by Pissarro, who would later take Gauguin under his wing.<sup>8</sup> These were the years that relations between Gauguin and his former tutor were at their closest, and although he would later rebel against the bourgeois culture of that environment, the images of the works of art he encountered there accompanied him all the way to the South Seas.

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**Notes**

- 1 Emilio Castelar, *Historia del año 1883* (Madrid: Oficinas de la Ilustración Española y Americana, 1884), p. 249.
- 2 I am currently preparing a publication on the inventory and new aspects of Arosa's art collection.
- 3 See for example, Lynne Walhout Hinojosa, "Shakespeare and (Anti-German) Nationalism in the Writing of English Literary History, 1880-1993," in *English Literature in Transition*, no. 46, 2003, p. 228.
- 4 Boursault's *Germanicus* premiered in 1673 and was first published in 1694 by Jean Guignard. A play of the same title by Nicolas Pradon (1632-1698) premiered in 1694, but it was never published.
- 5 Much has been written about the French nineteenth-century fascination with Germany. See for example, Ian Allan Henning, *L'Allemagne de Madame de Staël et la polémique romantique. Première fortune de l'ouvrage en France et en Allemagne (1814-1830)* (Geneva, Slatkine Reprints, 1975), and Louis Reynaud, *L'influence allemande en France au XVIIIe et au XIXe siècle* (Paris, Hachette, 1922).
- 6 Gustave's mother apparently recorded in her diary on February 17, 1871, that news had reached them the house had burned and the collection of ceramics had been destroyed; Maurice Malingue, *La vie prodigieuse de Gauguin* (Paris, 1978), p. 26.
- 7 Victor Merlhès, ed., *Correspondance de Paul Gauguin* (Paris, Fondation Singer-Polignac, 1984), no. 1, dated 21 November 1872 (translated into French): "... une soirée chez des gens qui sont un peu espagnols et qui s'appellent A'Rosa, des gens que ont beaucoup perdu durant la dernière guerre et qui, pour cette raison, ne supportent plus de voir des allemands (...)" In a subsequent letter (*ibid.*, no. 5) she writes that the Arosa's house in Saint-Cloud "à été brulé durant la dernière guerre...."
- 8 J. Pissarro and C. Durand-Ruel Snollaerts, *Pissarro, Catalogue critique des peintures*, vol. II (Paris, Wildenstein, 2005), p. 142, no. 160; p. 178, no. 190; p. 180, no. 214, and pp. 195-198, nos. 238-241.



# Giacometti and *Portrait of a Woman*

Marta Ruiz del Árbol



Fig. 1.  
Alberto Giacometti,  
*Portrait of a Woman [Rita]*, 1965.  
Oil on canvas, 86 x 65 cm.  
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid  
(AGD 1412)

[\[+ info\]](#)



Fig. 2  
Giacometti with *Portrait of James Lord*,  
1964



Fig. 3  
Ernst Scheidegger, Giacometti with  
his mother in Stampa, 1960

Who is that older woman sitting before us, with her stern countenance and hieratic pose? And what ties did she have to Alberto Giacometti, the portrait's creator? The identity of the sitter for *Portrait of a Woman*, now in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza's collection, remained in obscurity for years and was only recently revealed as a result of research conducted by the Fondation Alberto et Annette Giacometti [fig. 1].

Her name was Rita, and she was the Giacomettis' cook at their family home in Stampa, a small town in the Swiss Alps. This information, made public in the Fondation's online catalogue raisonné, helps us locate the place where the portrait was executed and reconstruct in detail the creative process behind it and the point in Giacometti's life and artistic career at which he created it.<sup>1</sup>

## Getaways to Switzerland

'At the end of the month, I'll go to Stampa. And there I can do some drawings. I can do still lifes and some figures. The woman who keeps house for me there will pose. She has posed before. I want to do some drawings', Giacometti told his friend James Lord on the day they parted company in October 1964.<sup>2</sup> Written a few months before Giacometti created the Museo Thyssen's *Portrait of a Woman* and at the apex of his career, Lord's *A Giacometti Portrait* helps us understand the great sculptor and painter's working method near the end of his life. The artist and the American writer had just spent eighteen days together, which would result in two magnificent portraits: one in paint, the other in words [fig. 2]. We encounter an artist tormented by the same obsessions and insecurities that had dogged him from the beginning, when he was a young apprentice in Switzerland working under his father, the painter Giovanni Giacometti. And, at the book's conclusion, we also learn that, when he bid Lord farewell, Giacometti announced his intention to visit Switzerland to meet with the protagonist of the work we are considering here.

Though Giacometti had settled in Paris in 1922, he regularly visited Stampa throughout his life, alternating between the French capital—with its endless days of work, its cafés, the strolls along its great boulevards—and his summer sojourns in that remote corner of the Graubünden canton. Those imposing mountains and the valley in which the winter sun never shone and which had marked his childhood continued to reappear in his work and always comprised an important part of the artist's imagery.

His visits, furthermore, were an occasion for him to reunite with his family. From his youth, Giacometti had shown an interest in representing the human figure, and his siblings, Ottilia, Hugo and Diego, and above all his mother, Annetta, who was accustomed to posing for his father, were his first models [fig. 3]. Later, when he would



Fig. 4  
Alberto Giacometti, *Rita*, ca. 1965  
Oil on canvas, 70 x 50.2 cm.  
Fondation Alberto et Annette  
Giacometti, Paris, inv. 1994-0626  
(AGD 1410)



Fig. 5  
Alberto Giacometti,  
*Woman sewing with work on the  
table at Stampa*, 1954.  
Pencil on paper, 414 x 303 cm.  
Private collection (AGD 643)

return to his hometown his mother and Ottilia—until her early death in 1937—continued to serve as two of his principal models.

In the canvas at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza and in another at the Fondation Alberto et Annette Giacometti [fig. 4], the family's cook appears to have substituted for his mother as a summertime model. By 1962, his elderly mother's frailty now made it impossible for her endure the long sessions posing for her son, and she had died months before the artist portrayed Rita in 1965. In *A Giacometti Portrait*, as we have seen, Lord recalled that the artist, referring to the cook from Stampa, confirmed that that sturdily built woman had already sat for him in the past. Though she has not been identified as the model for earlier works, it is possible she may turn up in one or more of the many drawings from Stampa in which Giacometti depicted female figures in interiors [fig. 5].

What seems clear is that Rita posed for the first time for a painting between late 1964 and early 1965. She should not be confused with another Rita, whose last name was Gueyfier and who entered Giacometti's life in the late 1930s to become one of his favourite models once he returned to working with sitters after his expulsion from the Surrealist group. In contrast to those interwar years, when Giacometti was focussing almost exclusively on sculpture, the second Rita, the one from Switzerland, turns up in the last stage of his career, when painting had attained a status comparable to that of sculpture in his oeuvre.

### Giacometti the painter

'I make paintings and sculptures, of course, and have done so always, from the first time I drew or painted, in order to sink my teeth into reality, to defend myself, to feed myself, to grow; [...] to be as free as possible: to attempt—with the means that today are the most characteristically mine—better to see, better to understand what is around me', Giacometti remarked in 1957.<sup>3</sup> He argued that both mediums had always been complementary tools for the various objectives of his artistic creation. While sculpture allowed him to explore concepts alien to painting such as the notion of a void, canvas offered him the possibility of analysing a figure in relation to the space surrounding it.

His beginnings as an artist working alongside his father and his godfather, Cuno Amiet, both renowned painters in Switzerland at the turn of the century, were in the medium of painting. And, though he began to experiment with sculpture already during the years he studied painting in Geneva and certainly turned emphatically to that medium once he arrived in Paris in 1922, he nevertheless resorted to paper and canvas in his regular visits to Stampa and Maloja, where for many years he had no workshop. He produced his only paintings from the period between 1925 and 1945 on his summer trips to Stampa and Maloja, where his family had inherited a house.<sup>4</sup> When he took up painting again after the



Fig. 6  
Alberto Giacometti,  
*The artist's mother*, 1950.  
Oil on canvas, 44.2 x 31.9 cm.  
Private collection (AGD 1744)



Fig. 7  
*Rita in the kitchen in Stampa with Alberto Giacometti*, sometime before February 1965. Archive of the Fondation Alberto et Annette Giacometti, Paris, inv. 2003-1726.

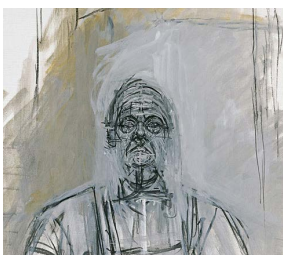


Fig. 8  
Detail of *Portrait of a Woman [Rita]*, 1965

Second World War, it was his mother in particular who became the subject of his new canvases [fig. 6].

Back in Switzerland in the autumn of 1964 and in 1965, Giacometti executed what were probably his last paintings.<sup>5</sup> He did not choose his brother, Diego, his wife, Annette, or his lover, Caroline, for this task but the woman who kept house for him in Stampa, producing these two portraits of Rita—one that is smaller and more closely framed [fig. 4] and the other larger, which is now in the Thyssen collection [fig. 1].

#### Last works

In a photograph from early 1965, we find Rita and Alberto in the kitchen together [fig. 7]. The copper cookware and the electric water heater frame the scene, in which both are seated at a table full of medicines. The homely atmosphere reflects the degree of familiarity between the two, at the same time that it hints at what Giacometti was undergoing at that stage in his life.

Though at no point did Giacometti ever remarked on the matter to his friend James Lord, a year earlier, in 1963, he had suffered a grave illness. After leaving Paris that October in 1964, the artist visited the cantonal hospital in Chur where the doctors confirmed that there were no new signs of the cancerous tumour that he had had extracted the previous year. Nonetheless, they diagnosed him with a case of extreme exhaustion. The art world must have intuited his weak health, for in the remaining year of his life—he died on 11 January 1966—there was a succession of homages, prizes and exhibitions held in his honour. Giacometti travelled far and wide during the following months. For the first time he crossed the Atlantic to attend his solo retrospective at MoMA and later he travelled to Humlebæk, Denmark, where the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art exhibited an important selection of his work.

Though the numerous trips and commemorations inevitably kept Giacometti from producing as much as he had in previous years, his works from 1965, like the portrait of Rita here, reveal his undiminished creative power, evident in the painting itself but also in the intensity with which he continued to work. The process behind the execution of his portrait of James Lord, which he produced immediately prior to the work that concerns us here, involved long sessions with the sitter, followed by evening sessions with Caroline which lasted well into the early morning. Each day over the course of its creation, the artist approached the work as if for the first time, and this led him to modify the paintings and sculptures repeatedly. We might imagine Giacometti before Rita, experiencing a similar back-and-forth between moments of clairvoyance and moments of frustration over the course of a single day's work. As a result, his paintings accumulated layers that sometimes indicated progress but that, more often than not, appeared to lead towards the destruction of what had been accomplished so far.

### The head: an element that ties everything together

‘Little by little he was painting out what he had previously done, undoing it, as he said. Presently he took one of the fine brushes [...], concentrating on the head. He was constructing it all over again from nothing, and for the hundredth time at least’, Lord recounts of their last session together, a pattern he had observed throughout the process of the painting’s creation.<sup>6</sup> Just as in the portrait of the American writer, the multiple layers that compose and surround Rita’s head in the Thyssen portrait reveal the numerous sessions the artist must have shared with his housekeeper [fig. 8]. The process is even more evident in the version at the Fondation Alberto et Annette Giacometti, in which the layers of grey cover almost the entire canvas. Giacometti struggled again and again to find a pictorial solution that would correspond to his visual perception. And yet, again and again, he confronted the profound impossibility of representing things just as he saw them.

The entire work began and ended with the head. Indeed, his obsession with representing the head was what precipitated his break with the Surrealist group in 1935. For Giacometti, the head was the element that connected everything: the axis around which, once it was defined, he could construct the surrounding space and move on to other areas of the canvas that up to that point he had only worked out sketchily. At the same time, his dissatisfaction with the results would lead him perpetually and single-mindedly back to that part of the sitter’s body. In order to continue working, therefore, on occasion he would cover the area of the head with broad white or grey brushstrokes that eliminated all his previous work, so that he could begin from scratch with a fine brush, working out the lines of the portrait anew.

### Masks

With those layers of interminable retouching—which lends a relief-like character to many of his works—Rita’s features become an amalgam of criss-crossing strokes, in ‘a mask that makes her identity inaccessible’.<sup>7</sup> The artist himself said as much when he remarked, regarding the matter of any possible connection between his portraits and the sitter’s inner being, that ‘I have enough trouble with the outside without bothering about the inside’.<sup>8</sup> In the presence of his model, all familiarity vanished, and the person became for him like a stranger, someone he seemed to be seeing for the first time. Whether it was his brother Diego, his wife Annette, or some other of the models that posed for him for years, once he had set his easel before them, he began to analyse them in such a way as to capture their *structure*. Like Paul Cézanne, a painter whom he admired, Giacometti attempted to unravel that structure of the person sitting for him, in a process of concentration that nevertheless led him to perceive his subject differently each time. After long sessions in which



Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Giacometti in Stampa*, 1964

the model posed immobile, the final outcome of that analysis was a portrait lacking any social or psychological connotations.

For this reason, the figure of Rita, situated in the centre of the composition and with her hands resting on her lap, could not originally be identified. Although she seems to have posed wearing the same apron she has on in the photograph above [fig. 7], nothing in her stern, expressionless attitude reveals her social status or her role within the family's life. Like the master from Aix-en-Provence, again, Giacometti does not reveal in his works the relationship he shared with his models nor the intimacy forged between them during the portrait sessions.

The rigidity and static quality of his figures are counteracted only by the succession of lines that make up his compositions: solid, assured strokes despite the insecurity the artist claimed to experience and that is otherwise evident solely in his tenacious reworking of certain areas of the canvas; dynamic lines that create perspectives whose point of origin is always, of course, the head—that part of the painting that was never finished, seemingly abandoned at some point in the process of creation.

Tout cela n'est pas grand'chose, toute la peinture, sculpture, dessin,  
écriture ou plutôt littérature.  
Tout cela à sa place et pas plus.  
Les essais c'est tout,  
Oh merveille!

Alberto Giacometti,  
October 1965.<sup>9</sup>

*Portrait of a Woman* [Rita], signed and dated in 1965, came soon after into the possession of Pierre Matisse, Giacometti's dealer in the United States. Somewhat later, after the artist's death, it was acquired by the Claude Bernhard gallery in Paris, from whence it finally joined Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza's collection in 1988.

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## Notes

- 1 See *Alberto Giacometti Database*, <http://www.fondation-giacometti.fr/>. The work in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza is given the catalogue number AGD 1412. Descriptive titles supplied by the database's editors are listed in brackets in the AGD.
- 2 James Lord, *A Giacometti Portrait* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1965), p. 65.
- 3 Giacometti's reply to Pierre Voldboudt's survey, 'A chacun sa réalité', *XXe Siècle*, no. 9 (June 1957), pp. 21–35. Reprinted in Alberto Giacometti, *Écrits* (Paris: Hermann, 1990), p. 77.
- 4 Valerie Fletcher, 'La pintura de Giacometti', in Kosme de Barañano, *Alberto Giacometti*, exh. cat. (Madrid, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía; Madrid: Lunweg, 1990), p. 70.
- 5 In 1965 he also painted a portrait of Jacques Dupin; there is no work dated 1966.
- 6 Lord 1965 *op. cit.*, p. 62.
- 7 Paloma Alarcó, *Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza: Pintura Moderna* (Madrid: Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2009), p. 466.
- 8 Lord 1965 *op. cit.*, p. 24.
- 9 "It all amounts to little: all the painting, sculpture, drawing, writing, or rather literature. It all has its place and nothing more. The attempt is everything. A wonder!" Handwritten text, transcribed as it appears on page 128 of a copy of Françoise Sagan's novel, *La Chamade* (Paris: Julliard, 1965); it first appeared in print in the poetry review *L'Éphémère*, no. 1 (1967), p. 102.