

“Man Pointing” by Alberto Giacometti: A critical analysis.

“Man Pointing”, or “Thin Man” is one of Alberto Giacometti's best known pieces of artwork, helping to carve his reputation as a superb sculptor. This piece was finished almost over-night in 1947. During the postwar period, this and many other pieces of his work such as “L’homme qui Marche”(The Man who Walks) and The Chariot gained popularity because his personal style reflected "Existentialism," which at that time struck a chord with the current philosophic views that were fashionable within society. Similar to several other of his pieces, it is a sculpture that evokes "space through a figure which marks the limits of its presence with an extended, space-encompassing arm."



The piece is not one of Giacometti’s largest, yet is a considerable size, measuring 69.5"x35.5". It is made from bronze, and unlike many famous figure sculptures, Giacometti elongates and thins the limbs and body until it appears almost like a beanstalk. The man stands upright and his legs appear almost wire-like. They are disproportionately lengthy compared to the torso, which seems frail and skeletal. Meanwhile, the outstretched arms are eerily thin and long and this serves to add a striking contrast to such a monolithic piece. A small and narrow neck precariously supports the statue's head just as a golf tee supports a golf ball. The whole structure looks somewhat fragile, as though it could collapse at any moment. The theme of support is also quite relevant. If we look at the base of the model, it is large, bulky; the figures feet are embedded in it, as if constraining it.

The pose struck by the figure is like that of someone who has seen something, and is gesturing for others to come and look at it. Whatever has been seen, though, is to interesting or astonishing for the figure to look away. Of course, this gesture could also be conceived as calling troops into battle, or a traffic policeman. With both arms outstretched, it allows the piece to achieve an aesthetic combination of form and balance.

The general appearance of the figure is remarkable yet simple. A closer look, however, reveals a dramatic texture that compensates for the lack of physical bulk. Giacometti uses a rough surface to vivify this figure and to provide a stunning optical effect. Looking closely, I am reminded of an asteroid's surface. This rough look adds to the feeling that the figure portrayed is poor, hungry, and desperate. His face is gaunt, his ribs sticking out of his chest. Both the eyes and the nose are distorted and elongated like the body. The eyes connote a look of confusion or sadness. Meanwhile, his mouth, which is somewhat agape, connotes a look of surprise or astonishment. The contour of the face, which is somewhat ovular, jagged and crater-like, creates shadows that serve to bring out the depth of this piece.

All good artists transfer their emotions and 'soul' into their pieces of work. The figure was given a sleek and skeletal attribute in order to eliminate all dispensable weight while retaining only the essential elements that the artist wanted to convey. By keeping physical bulk to a minimum, he focuses more on his inner feelings and his raw emotions.

If an artist's work is truly an embodiment of his emotions, then there are several clues that point to Giacometti as a man who felt removed, distant, and alienated from society. This tall and thin figure is distorted and seems very frail and fragile. Whether you're looking at this piece close-up or from a distance, the piece seems nearly invisible. It seems as if the piece could even dissolve or disappear from sight. Finally, the stark use of empty space connotes a feeling of loneliness and confusion.

Originally a student of Surrealism, Giacometti's presence was strongly felt. However, in the years prior to the war, he began to make a transition away from this art form to working with models, in sculptures and in paintings. Declared a heretic by fellow Surrealists, he went underground and continued to try to develop his newly adopted style. But success did not come easily. "To my horror, the sculptures became smaller and smaller...a large figure seemed to me untrue, a small one intolerable, and often they became so small that with one touch of my knife, they disappeared into dust." Several more years of experimentation, refinement and frustration had passed when his vision became crystallized. His sense of reality had completely changed. "People and objects became mere blobs without meaning. It was a completely unknown sight. I had the impression that reality had completely changed. It was something never seen before."