Giacometti’s The Palace at 4 A.M. (1932-33) as a Stage Design

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Alberto Giacometti’s construction The Palace at 4 A.M. (1932-33), is composed of three spaces, each containing a different event taken from various periods in the artist’s life. Simultaneously juxtaposing several spaces and times is a traditional convention in both art and theatre. For example, altar paintings (triptych or polyptych) in which several scenes are presented together but separated from each other by frames.

Each one represents another scene in another place and time Simone Martini, Annunciation, 1333, or the mansions of the medieval theatre, in Hubert Cailleau, The stage at Valenciennes, 1547.
Giotto, who is considered to have influenced Giacometti, used a similar method in his painting, depicting houses that look like mansions, with an open fourth wall and sometimes an opening between the room and the porch, thereby creating two open spaces – interior and exterior.


However, whereas Giotto presented simultaneously two spaces but only one event, Giacometti presented simultaneously several spaces and events that occur at different times – similar to the medieval stage.

Giacometti, *The Palace at 4 A.M.*, 1932-33, Wood, glass, wire, string, 62.5x70.6x39.5 cm, MoMA, N.Y.
The architectural structure of *The Palace at 4 A.M.* is not only the frame that contains the ‘actors’, but is, in itself, the ‘action’ – the embodiment of the relationship between Giacometti, his mother and his departed lover. The fragility of the wire construction represents the troubled quality of the artist’s relations with his lovers and his family, transmitting to the audience a non-verbal and somewhat subconscious communication. However, although the fragile character of the work is communicated subliminally by its structure, the key to the work is extremely personal. Consequently, Giacometti’s comments on *The Palace at 4 A.M.* in the *Minotaure* (no.3/4, 1933) are highly significant. He does not fully explain his sculpture, but his words are endowed with a poetic quality, charged with associations that add additional layers to the work.\(^1\) (Giacometti, 1933, p.46)

According to Giacometti, *The Palace at 4 A.M.* is a metaphor about love relations, stemming from the memory of an affair that had lasted about six months and ended about a year before he created this work. Throughout that time, he claims, they did not see the day-light, days and nights bore the same color, as though it was all taking place early in the morning. “During those nights”, he stated, “we used to build a fantastic palace... a highly fragile palace made of matchsticks”. Building a “fantastic palace”, like building “castles in Spain”, suggests a hopeless dream, and so too is a matchstick palace, which is in constant danger of collapse. Indeed such was Giacometti’s description of that impossible, fragile relationship: “One wrong movement and a whole section of the tiny construction fell apart. We always built it anew.” Did the couple really spend their nights building a matchstick palace, or is this a metaphor about building a relationship between lovers? While perhaps a pessimistic description of Giacometti’s attempts to establish a relationship, it also implies that, despite everything, the lovers had to keep rebuilding this flimsy construction time and again, much like Sisyphus condemned to roll the stone daily to the mountaintop, only to see it roll back down.

Giacometti emphasizes the dreamlike atmosphere of the early morning, for the dream was an important part of the Surrealist perception, which was influenced by Freud. In dreaming the traumas and problems arising from the unconscious, seep into the conscious mind in the form of symbols, apparently meaningless due to the dreamer’s suppression, and therefore the dream contains illogical, fragmented and inconsistent situations occurring simultaneously in time and space. To express this dream-like reality, *The Palace*, like all the Surrealist objects, is an assemblage - a cluster of elements that individually appear meaningless, but whose ultimate significance is retrospectively revealed by the totality. *The Palace* meets Dalí’s criteria of the Surrealistic object, that is, it contains mutually contradictory objects and situations existing side by side, located in a non-consecutive space, in a stream of time that flows impossibly back and forth.\(^2\) (Dali, 1975)

The wooden platform of the construction stands on a wooden base, made especially by Giacometti.

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\(^{1}\) Giacometti, *The Palace at 4 A.M.*, 1932, Ink drawing, MoMA.
Both the platform and the base create a clear partition between the mundane reality that exists outside the work, and the dreamy autonomous reality of the Palace, which functions like stage reality. *The Palace* even looks like a constructivist stage. Hohl argues that the dramatic atmosphere and theatrical composition of *The Palace* were influenced by a reproduction of Popova’s 1922 stage design for *The Magnanimous Cuckold* beneath, in Meyerhold’s theater in Moscow, and that Giacometti also drew from a photograph of a stage design by Tairov for Ostrovsky’s 1924 play *The Storm*, in Moscow’s The Kamerny (chamber) Theater. (Hohl, 1972, p.83) 

The sense of theatrical reality is also strengthened by the enforced position of the spectator, who views the work as if seated in the gallery. This position is essential for an understanding of the work.
When seen from the front the stage appears to be divided into three cages, each of which has a space of its own. But when seen from above, the cages clearly appear to interpenetrate, representing the interpenetration of relations between Giacometti, his lover and his mother. This is also why Giacometti removed not only the 'fourth wall', but also the 'fifth' - namely, the ceiling - enabling all the components and the architectural relations to be seen simultaneously from the front and from above.

Giacometti located himself in the central cage that resembles the scaffolding of a tower, inside which hangs a kind of elongated bowl, containing a ball. The location does not indicate his self-importance, but rather the reverse - it stresses his subordinate position by being compressed, physically and psychically, between the other two cages. He also voiced his subordinate status in *Minotaure*, in which he hardly referred to the central cage or to himself, except in a short sentence at the end, stating that he had nothing to say about himself, but that he recognized himself in the red object (which is the bowl containing the ball).
The ball in Giacometti’s work frequently represents a child or a foetus. Here the foetus image is strengthened by the fact that the ball is held in a womb-shaped bowl, its fleshy red color being very prominent amid the monochrome sculpture. Giacometti is thus represented not as an adult but as a foetus, or a child fleeing back to the womb. The metaphor of escaping to the womb recurs several times in Giacometti’s biography: in his childhood he spent much of his time hiding in a small cave under a rock; at a later stage he used to tunnel into the shrubbery to hide; and he described repeatedly in his memoirs the sense of warmth and great happiness he felt whenever he could snuggle inside such a hiding place, especially on one occasion when he dug himself a hole in the snow and curled up in it. (Lord, 1986)

The central construction is described by Giacometti as: “the scaffolding of a tower, which may be unfinished, or perhaps broken, since its entire upper part is destroyed”. This description of an unfinished or destroyed tower recalls the artist’s reference to the matchstick palace, repeatedly collapsed and rebuilt by himself and his lover. Giacometti the foetus is the nucleus of the adult Giacometti, and the ruins of the tower are his life’s ruins, amid the ruined palace representing his devastated loves. But hope is there too - perhaps the tower is not destroyed but merely unfinished, and just as he and his lover kept rebuilding their matchstick palace, he might he restore his ruined life.

The immediate source of his problems is found in the right-hand cage - it is the love affair of a year ago, the one that inspired the work. “I don’t know why the palace is occupied by a spinal column inside a cage,” Giacometti wrote, as though it was a ghost that had chosen to inhabit the palace and he had nothing to do with the matter. Nonetheless he goes on: “It was the spinal column sold to me by that woman, on one of the first nights when I met her (his lover) on the street”. Nor does Giacometti know what the bird skeleton is doing in there, but hastens to explain that it was, “one of the birds that she saw the night before the morning when our shared life collapsed.” The spinal column thus seems to symbolize the beginning of the affair, while the bird skeleton is associated with the event that took place when the relationship ended. The bird skeleton is shown rising out of the cage in which the love had briefly flourished, passing into a kind of picture-frame that has preserved the love affair as a grotesque, two-dimensional memory.

Giacometti denies knowing the meaning of the objects, yet promptly interprets them. However, his interpretation also requires elucidation, and must not be taken at face value. Indeed, his commentary does not decipher his work, but adds additional layers to it, becoming part of the sculpture. Giacometti is no more able to explain his objects in a straightforward manner than a prose analysis of a poem can fully elucidate it. He therefore uses poetic language to describe the sculpture: “Bird skeletons hovered high above a pool of clear green water, in which swam skeletons of very delicate white fish, inside a large roofless hall, amid the cries of joy at four in the morning”. The description is so vivid that Giacometti seems to be describing an event or a vision retained in his memory and charged with feeling. It may have had to do with the love affair, or been a memory from his childhood surroundings, a landscape that awakened nostalgia blended with joy and sadness, like the joyous cries of the bird skeletons.

The description matches the right-hand cage: the spinal column looks like a fish spine floating in the roofless hall, the pond of clear green water is represented by the glass panel hanging over the spine cage, and the bird skeleton hovering above. The glass panel crosses from the right-hand cage to the left-hand one, forming a kind of bridge between the cage of his lover and the home cage (the left-hand one), which contains the image of his mother. This is a highly significant link, because it suggests that his mother was the real source of Giacometti’s difficulties in forming love relations.

The home cage, shaped like the outline of a prism, contains a female figure that Giacometti identified with his mother as he remembered her from his early childhood. Behind her are three flats resembling stage wings, which Giacometti identified with the curtains he saw at home when he first opened his eyes. The roof is a steep triangle, recalling a child’s schematic way of drawing a house. It invokes an association of a tiled roof and heightens the sense of domesticity.
To understand better *The Palace*, we must consider the process that the artist had undergone since 1928, when he joined some Surrealist artists. Even before becoming an official member of their group his work had begun to show their influence and that of Freud’s ideas. Indeed, his work between 1928 and 1933 presents a kind of self-analysis: by drawing the materials from the depths of his mind, and trying to uncover the most profound and unconscious layers of his sexuality, he found that every exposure brought insight, which in turn enabled deeper exploration. This subject is dealt with extensively in my doctoral dissertation, *Linear Sculpture Between the Wars* (in Hebrew). Though I’m not a proponent of psychological analysis, here the Surrealist Giacometti’s own interpretation of his work points to this approach. Obviously it must be treated with caution, since it was made after the fact and is generally held to be a manipulative interpretation. Nevertheless, even if the interpretation was deliberately misleading, it becomes part of the work. Each stage of Giacometti’s awareness was clearly expressed in his sculptural work. Before 1928 his series sculptures of *Man and Woman* showed no reciprocal relations, even mutual disregard. Their only contact arose from the break-up of the figures and their recombination, which mixed their sexual attributes. The confusion of sexual attributes is also associated with Freud’s ideas, as well as Giacometti’s uncertainty about his sexual identity. These matters are elaborated in Markus, “Sex and Gender in Giacometti’s Couples” (Markus, 2001a). His encounter with the Surrealists was a liberating experience for Giacometti, and he began to externalize qualities that had previously been pent-up and unconscious. It especially released his sexual aggression.

Giacometti himself often spoke of the fact that violence between the sexes had occupied a prominent place in his thoughts and reveries since childhood. Every night before falling asleep he would fantasize about killing two men and raping and killing two women. (Lord, 1986, p.15) In his mind, violence was his only association with the opposite sex: “The woman did not yield until her physical resistance broke down; the man raped her”. (Ibid., p.77) At one of the Surrealists’ question sessions in 1933 he was asked: “How did they use to choose women then?” He replied: “You hid yourself as evening fell, and when the girl passed you jumped on her and raped her”. (Hohl, 1972, p.251)

Giacometti avoided any kind of commitment and fled from any woman who tried to attach herself to him. (Lord, 1986, p.78) Suffering from psychological impotence, he could have easy sexual relations only with prostitutes. (Ibid., p.77-78) Only after he began to give expression to his sexual aggression in his work did Giacometti realize, or understand intuitively, that his sexual and emotional problems had an Oedipal origin. In the next phase he began to tackle the figures of the father, mother and child, with the child being threatened by the father and protected by the mother, who also separated between the two. (Markus, 2001b)

Giacometti’s mother was the dominant person in the family, and his relations with her were always those of dependence. Lord illustrates the particular relationship between them in a family photograph in which mother and son are shown gazing at each other over the heads of other members of the family, their looks expressing love, partnership and comprehension. (Lord, 1986, pp.17-18)
Yet there was an ambivalence about the relationship, since the mother’s dominance blocked Giacometti’s path to his father, albeit perhaps unintentionally. His memoirs hint at his hidden resentment towards her, perhaps also because he suspected she had separated him from his father. His relations with his father were likewise very complex. On the one hand, the father was a subordinate figure in the family, while on the other he was a famous painter in Switzerland, and was at the time considered a greater artist than his son. Thus, Giacometti regarded him as a rival, both in the relations with his mother and professionally. Nonetheless he needed the approval of his father as an artist. The latter, however, disliked his son’s Surrealist work and claimed he had lost his way as an artist. The more Giacometti attained recognition and success, the more critical his father became. (Ibid., p.128)

Lord states that Giacometti’s relations with his family were especially good, and that the entire family interaction appeared perfect; though he notes that there was something unnatural about this perfection. The childhood idyll had created an unreal world in which there was no discord and no anger - an illusion that creates an unrealistic concept of relations and makes it difficult to cope with real life.(Ibid., p.12) This idyllic picture, however, seems to me to be a little exaggerated, and fails to take into account the complex relations with the parents - for which Lord himself provides ample evidence - and leaves the brothers’ psychological difficulties unexplained: both Giacometti and his brother Diego suffered from severe emotional problems, grew into men full of complexes and obsessions, and had difficulties in making commitments to anyone outside the family, especially women. Is there such a thing as a ‘normal’ family, in which no one is ever angry, no one ever yells - much less an Italian family, even if it is in Switzerland? In my opinion this apparent idyll suggests that the channel for discharging tensions was blocked, concealing an absence of communication and an inability to express emotions. There is a hint of this in the figure of the mother in The Palace, which shows her lacking arms. This could be regarded as a stylistic choice of creating a monumental, idol-like figure; nevertheless, given that The Palace contains Freudian signification and expresses childhood traumas, we cannot ignore the emotional aspect. The mother being shown without arms might imply that she was less than generous with the physical contact so essential to a child’s emotional security. It may thus be a clue to the psychological problems of the Giacometti brothers.

Giacometti referred to the image of his mother in The Palace by the word ‘statue’, rather than ‘figure’ or ‘object’, as he usually called his Surrealist sculptures: “On the other side stands a statue of a woman in which I discover my mother, exactly as she is imprinted on my very earliest memories”. The word ‘statue’ expresses the figure’s classic quality - massive, balanced and serene, a self-contained and remote image, standing like a Greek caryatid, without arms, and the skirt, column-like, hides the lower body and becomes a part of it. This is a rigid and severe mother who demands the highest standards from her sons - just as she appears in Giacometti’s memoirs, and also between the lines in Lord’s biography of the artist.

Concerning his mother, Giacometti wrote: “The long black dress, reaching the floor, made me uneasy by its mystery: it looked like part of the body, which made me feel fear and confusion. All the rest is gone, slipped from my memory”. The mother’s skirt is the small child’s refuge, where he or she can hide and feel sheltered, yet it also conceals a mystery, the sexuality of the mother, something that may not be acknowledged and which arouses fear and confusion. Giacometti’s unease is made clearer by his description of his mother’s dress as black – a color that does not appear in this sculpture, but only in Giacometti’s imagination; in one of his statements about the woman he used to rape in his dreams she wore a black dress.(Krouss, 1988, p.520)

Here, for the first time, Giacometti acknowledged his libido, his sexual attraction to his mother. Repressing his feelings for his mother, he divided women into two categories - saints and whores.(Lord,1986, p.77) He could have emotion-free sexual relations with the prostitutes, or have an emotional relationship with the saints (provided that they did not desire him - he detested those who clung to him), but was unable to have sex with them, for fear of impotence. Every ‘saintly woman’ was in a way a reflection of his mother, which meant that sex with her was impossible, an act of incest and an admission of his sexual attraction to his mother. Once Giacometti had acknowledged this attraction, he was able to free himself from it.

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The Palace at 4 A.M. summarized a period in his life during which he underwent a kind of self-analysis. Externalizing his aggression via sculpture was his catharsis. It liberated him, enabling him to delve deeper into his childhood traumas, his Oedipal complex and libido. The Palace at 4 A.M. was the final stage in the analysis, in which Giacometti acknowledged his Oedipal relations with his parents and understood the connection between his dependence and his inability to sustain meaningful love relations with women. It is no coincidence that in the same year, 1933, he published a revelatory book about his childhood, entitled Hier, sable mouvants (Yesterday, Shifting Sands), which, according to Lord, shows that Giacometti had finally learned to live with himself. (Ibid., p.146)

References

A. Giacometti, 1933, ’Le palais a 4 heures’, Minotaure, No. 3/4 Paris, p.46. (Unless otherwise stated, all the quotes from Giacometti are taken from this source.)
R. Markus, 2001a, ”Sex and Gender in Giacometti’s Couples”. Assaph:Studies in Art History, 5, Tel Aviv University, pp.81-102.