

The Man on the Money

The 100 francs bill is almost a synonym for money in Switzerland. The face on that bill belongs to Swiss painter and sculptor Alberto Giacometti, who cared little for money and even less for Switzerland.

Youth on the Rocks

Alberto Giacometti grew up in Stampa, a little village in the rocky Bergell valley, where most people speak some Italian dialect and where the mountain tops block off the sun completely for a number of weeks in winter, casting freezing shade over the valley. If you stroll around there today you will find plates in honor of Giovanni Giacometti (Alberto's father) and Augusto Giacometti (Alberto's uncle), both of them painters of some renown, but it is very hard to find anything in memory of Alberto Giacometti, whose fame and importance as one of the foremost modern artists of the 20th century worldwide is undisputed among experts. The only sign of the man you will find in the region is a plain and simple stone and bronze affair of a grave on the cemetery of Borgonovo bearing the inscription: Alberto Giacometti, scultore e pittore 1901–1966.

Money for a Book

As a young man Alberto attended a boarding school in Schiers. The train ticket home cost quite some money at the time, so Alberto did not see his family very often. On one occasion his father sent him the money for the fare. Instead of buying his railroad ticket Alberto used the money to purchase an expensive book on the French sculptor Rodin. And then, with bundle and book on his back, he started hiking back home. *Mind over matter* was his maxim even then, and he would not change his mind about that for the rest of his life.

A Studio in Paris

As a young man Alberto moved to Paris to become a painter and sculptor. He obviously knew exactly what to do with his life, and doubts about his career choice seem to have been rare. Alberto rented a cheap little place in Rue Hyppolite-Maindron, which was to function as his studio for the rest of his life. There were no windows in the walls, just a small skylight and a door. Water and toilet were in the corridor and in winter the place was not much warmer than the street outside. For more than 40 years Alberto lived and worked in this shabby den, supported first by his parents and later by his wife Annetta, whom he said he had only married because otherwise she would have committed suicide.

Even though there came a time in his life when he started selling his paintings and sculptures, he never had an ear for his wife's wish to move into a good apartment and he never changed his life style. Amid a dusty mess of brushes, paints and sculpturing knives, piles of pulverized plaster and an increasing number of wads of money bills Alberto obstinately carried on his life as usual. He never took any money to the bank or worried about financial matters at all. He painted long hours till deep into the night, then washed a little and brushed the dust off his clothes and went for a night cap. He bought new clothes once or twice a year and always the same type of pants, shirt, jacket, tie, scarf and shoes. He drank masses of coffee and smoked most of the time, but he did not acquire any property or indulge in expensive food or drink.

When he was at work there was no disturbing him. Picasso was probably the most famous contemporary of his who had to learn the lesson. The two artists met and got on well with each other till one day Picasso decided to knock on Alberto's door to ask him over to his studio to come and look at his new work. Alberto slammed the door on him and told him to get lost and couldn't he see he was working. Another famous visitor of Alberto's was Samuel Beckett, with whom he spent several nights in the studio creating a simple and leafless plaster tree for the first staging of Beckett's play, 'Waiting for Godot', which, by the way, was recently voted international play of the century.

Alberto's studio is still there today and from the outside it looks almost the same as 60 years ago. There is a new coat of paint on the wall and the door has been replaced. But the houses on the left and on the right are all gone. The place is inhabited and it is surrounded by new buildings. If you look for a plate with his name on it, however, you will waste your time. There is nothing. The two places Alberto spent his life in do not officially and materially remember the man.

No Travelling Man

Alberto rarely left Paris and if he did it was mostly to visit his mother and to spend the occasional holiday in Stampa, where he kept on working in his father's studio. He didn't really change his daily routine on vacation. At one point in his life he was invited to contribute a sculpture to a big exhibition in Basel. Alberto dusted his jacket and rode the train to Basel. His sculpture was planned to be placed at the center of a yard. Alberto was cordially welcomed and shown into the yard. When asked where he had his sculpture he reached into one of his pockets and brought out a large matchbox. He opened the box and produced a tiny, pin-like sculpture on a small pedestal. As he proceeded to put it down in the middle of the yard he was politely asked to stop fooling around, whereupon he left Switzerland swearing he would never exhibit in this country anymore – and he didn't. At the time of this anecdote he just couldn't prevent his sculptures from becoming smaller and smaller no matter how large he had planned or begun them. A few years before his death Alberto exhibited some sculptures in New York. Some of them were much taller than himself. The creature that looks forlorn, small and lost in this modern world of New York in the photos of that time is the maker of the sculptures, Alberto himself. His art had become gigantic in various meanings of the word and his works have by now traveled around the globe many times.

As Hardheaded as they Come

Depending on one's view Alberto was a man who unerringly went his way without making any compromises or he was simply a stubborn man of the mountains. He was hard-working and diligent, ambitious and disciplined, willing to sacrifice everything for his artistic vision. Both his hard head that looks as if it had been carved out of stone and his famous figurines change hands and wallets daily now via the Swiss 100 francs bill. But the same stubbornness that made him succeed brought about his premature death. Suffering from a severe cold he did not mind the medical advice of a doctor friend and preferred to let the cold develop into a fatal pneumonia. When he finally agreed to be taken to a hospital it was too late. Alberto died, surrounded by his wife and his mysterious lover Caroline, who disappeared forever after the funeral in Stampa. This woman, by the way, was a young and pretty member of the Paris underworld and the only person to ever receive large sums of money from Alberto, e.g. to buy clothes or a red sports car. Money makes the world go round and, twisted as it may be, perhaps there is a very good reason why Albert's portrait is on the 100 francs bill today, even though wealth and money never seem to have been on his mind very much.

1. Essay Questions

- a. Write a personal response to the life and personality of Alberto Giacometti.
- b. Compare the life of an artist to the life of an ordinary citizen.
- c. To what extent do you think the state should support its artists?
- d. Why do you think Alberto did not build his career in Switzerland?

2. Comprehension Questions

- a. What does the text tell you about Alberto's relationship to other famous people?
- b. Why did Alberto refuse to exhibit his work in Switzerland?
- c. Why is it somehow strange for Alberto's face to be on the Swiss money today?
- d. In what way was Alberto's attitude different towards his wife on the one hand and to Caroline on the other?

3. Word Formation

- a. to grow noun: _____
- b. memory verb: _____
- c. simple verb: _____
- d. to buy noun: _____
- e. to know noun: _____
- f. doubt adjective: _____
- g. warm noun: _____
- h. property verb: _____
- i. to replace noun: _____

4. Give synonyms of or paraphrase the italicized elements:

1. ... Giacometti, whose fame and importance as one of the foremost modern artists ...
2. Alberto used the money to purchase a book ...
3. ..., supported first by his parents and later by his wife ...
4. Picasso was the most famous contemporary of his ...
5. There is a new coat of paint on the wall ...
6. ... he just couldn't prevent his sculptures from becoming smaller ...