

Replacement of a poorly chosen backing on a split drawing by Alberto Giacometti

Florence Darbre Gubbins

Abstract

The subject of this paper is the conservation treatment of a drawing by Alberto Giacometti. The object we had before us presented irregular beige discolouration, which impaired its legibility, and after examination and analysis we concluded that originally the artist probably drew on both sides of the paper, but subsequently, for some reason, the two sides were separated by a splitting method. This process was not well done and at least one side, that which concerns this study, was reinforced with a backing paper. The poor quality of this lining paper in addition to the badly executed splitting treatment resulted, over the years, in the above problem. The goal was to determine which treatment would best restore the clarity of the drawing and render the object stable.

Zusammenfassung

Das Thema dieses Vortrags ist die konservatorische Bearbeitung einer Zeichnung von Alberto Giacometti. Das zu behandelnde Objekt zeigte eine ungleichmäßige beige-farbene Verfärbung, welche seine Lesbarkeit beeinträchtigte. Nach Untersuchungen und Analysen zogen wir die Schlußfolgerung, daß der Künstler wahrscheinlich auf beiden Seiten des Papiers gezeichnet hatte, jedoch die beiden Seiten später durch ein Spaltverfahren voneinander getrennt wurden. Dieser Spaltvorgang wurde nicht sehr gut ausgeführt und zumindest die Seite, mit welcher sich diese Untersuchung befasst, wurde durch eine Kaschierung verstärkt. Die schlechte Qualität des Kaschierpapiers in Verbindung mit der schlecht ausgeführten Papierspaltung führte mit der Zeit zu der oben beschriebenen Problematik. Das Ziel war, die beste Behandlungsmethode für die Wiederherstellung der Klarheit der Zeichnung herauszufinden und das Objekt zu stabilisieren.

Introduction

Alberto Giacometti was born on 10. October 1901 at the Borgonovo near Stampa in the Eastern part of Switzerland called "The Grisons", where he died on 11. January 1966.

He is better known for his sculptures and paintings, but was an adept of drawing. He considered the act of drawing as the foundation of any creation.

"Ce qu'il faut dire, ce que je crois, c'est que, qu'il s'agisse de sculpture ou de peinture, en fait, il n'y a que le dessin qui

compte. Il faut s'accrocher uniquement, exclusivement au dessin. Si on dominait un peu le dessin, tout le reste serait possible. Le dessin est la base de tout." [1]

He was very demanding with his materials. He mostly favoured hard, well-sharpened pencils such as 3H or 4H, although he sometimes used lithographic crayons, pens or coloured ballpoint pens, but rarely colour pencils. [2]

We know that the type and quality of paper he preferred was BFK Rives, of a light creamy colour with a surface hard enough to withstand his bold strokes and frequent erasures. [3]

In this paper, I will discuss a drawing, dated 1959, entitled "Intérieur avec figure", which measures 60 cm x 42 cm. Alberto Giacometti used pencil on BFK Rives paper. The drawing does not carry his signature, but was certified to be genuine by his brother Diego, who wrote with a ballpoint pen in the bottom left corner: "Je considère ce dessin authentique de mon frère Alberto Giacometti Paris 30 septembre 1966 Diego Giacometti".

Condition of the object before treatment

Recto

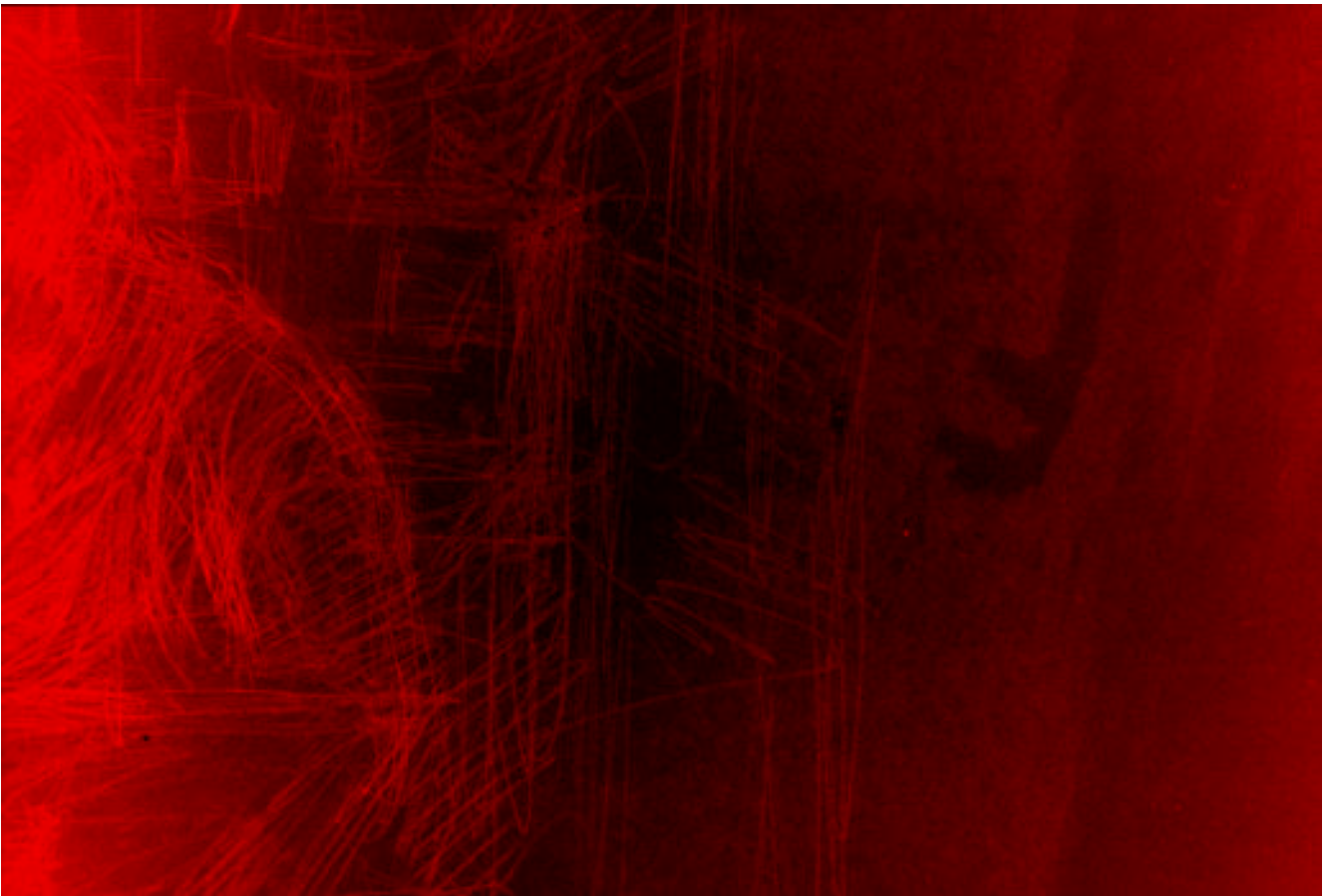
The first characteristic that stood out was a massive and irregular discolouration. The drawing lacked the sharpness and brilliance, which one would have expected. Moreover the first two letters of the word "Paris" in the authentication had been written on a different paper from the drawing, suggesting that the drawing may have been lined or previously repaired. In some places, on the right side, there were patches where the paper and pencil quality were strikingly different from the rest. On closer examination we saw a very prominent area of cream colour, which contrasted with the predominantly beige general appearance. In this area retouching of the pencil was clearly visible on the beige background.

On the surface we observed a strong hatching texture which again is not what one would have expected from a BFK Rives paper. In addition there were traces of some substance scattered on the surface, which turned out to be a film of adhesive of irregular thickness, which covered the whole surface.

Verso

When we examined the verso we immediately saw the hinges and traces of some former old hinges on the top and the bottom edge. The quality of the paper was clearly different from that of the recto and was obviously a backing sheet.

When the object was examined with a strong light from behind, huge differences in paper thickness were apparent. This led us to conclude that the beige colour came from the backing sheet and not from the surface of the drawing.



These facts made us wonder how the drawing had become so thin in places as to require a backing. We came to the conclusion judging the state of the object and from the traces of material on the surface of the drawing that, for some reason, the BFK Rives paper had been split in two, producing two sheets of paper, or two objects, or two drawings, instead of one. The result was not successful and therefore the drawing needed a backing.

The supposed splitting technique may have been the following

A sheet of lens tissue and then silk were applied to both sides of the paper with adhesive. The whole package was then pressed. At the right moment, the two layers of silk were pulled apart and with each layer a sheet of lens tissue and one of the two surfaces of the original object. Then each of the objects was backed and the silk and lens tissue removed, leaving a film and traces of adhesive on the surface. This splitting treatment was carried out between 1959, the date of the drawing, and 1966, the date of the authentication statement, which was written on the backing paper.

Analysis

The next phase was an analysis of the structure of the original, the backing and the adhesive. The results were the following:

1. Some long cotton fibres were found on the surface, supporting the lens tissue theory.
2. The BFK Rives paper consisted of cotton fibres and a low percentage of chemical wood fibres from deciduous timber. The fibres were in a poor condition.
3. The backing paper consisted of mechanical wood pulp

and straw pulp. The fibres were again in a very poor condition.

4. The adhesive was starch.

The analysis convinced us that a bleaching treatment was out of the question, as it would have further damaged the object. The only alternative, if a conservation treatment had to be performed, was to remove the backing and provide a new support. This was the treatment finally decided upon in order to improve the legibility and unity of the drawing.

Conservation treatment

A dry cleaning method commonly used, such as with a rubber or rubber powder, was impossible to use as dirt and other impurities were sealed into the paper under the remaining adhesive film used in the splitting process.

We first removed a layer of the backing paper using little moisture and a scalpel. We then cleaned the surface with a slightly moistened brush and tissue. We had to take particular care with the authentication statement in ballpoint pen. A certain amount of ink was removed with water and tissue to avoid diffusion of the ink during later stages.

The object was then placed face down in lukewarm water and a sheet of 'Hollytex' support fabric was placed on the back. The object was turned over and the face cleaned with a soft brush. Another sheet of 'Hollytex' was placed this time on the face of the object and the whole package was removed from the bath. The object was placed, supported by the 'Hollytex', face down on a hard surface.

We started removing the backing paper by peeling the corner with the authentication so that this part could be dried quickly. As

soon as possible a blotter was placed under the authentication to absorb moisture. The piece of backing with half the word "Paris" was removed and dried with a hair-drier, and kept aside. The area of authentication had to be carefully monitored so that it would not become too dry and produce tensions in that part of the object.

As it was sometimes difficult to differentiate the two papers, the work was placed on a black glass surface to facilitate distinguishing between the backing paper and the original BFK Rives paper. The object had to be kept wet all the time. It was therefore sprayed continually with Isopropanol (except the part with the ballpoint pen) and H₂O. Had this not been done there would have been irretrievable tensions. The starch used for the backing made peeling very difficult and time consuming.

After peeling off the backing paper, the object was placed on the suction table. Pulp of BFK Rives paper of the same type had been prepared to provide fibres for the new backing surface.

New backing phase

Paper fibres were applied manually working mainly in the same grain direction, like a sheet of paper, in this case, from top to bottom to avoid introducing tension problems. The added fibres were tamped down lightly with a stencil brush.

Then a thick sheet of felt was placed on the new fibres and pressed down to imprint a certain structure to the back surface.

The object was then lightly flattened, dried on the suction table with the help of a hairdrier and then left to dry completely between wool blankets. From the time the object went into the lukewarm bath, until this moment, two people had worked continuously for 20 hours.

After drying, tension in the object could be observed, so it was placed on a light table to find out where the added fibres were in excess or insufficient. Where the thickness was too much, fibres were removed with a scalpel. Then the suction table was used again to add fibres to the parts that needed more.

The hatched texture originally observed was more noticeable on the drawing after the first application of fibres. As we wanted to restore the surface texture to give it a structure more like BFK Rives paper we first had to smooth out the hatching. To achieve this we had to rework the back of the drawing, again on the suction table, with a Japanese stamping brush, stencil brush, polishing stone/agate, and bone folder. This process was repeated many times.

After this treatment the surface was again examined under raking light to identify further imperfections. The object was allowed to dry almost completely and then it was placed on a BFK Rives paper on a sheet of glass. In this position a polishing stone was rubbed very lightly in order to superimpose the grain of the BFK Rives paper on the drawing surface. The saved fragment of paper from the authentication statement was bleached with a weak solution of H₂O₂, rinsed and replaced in position.

The object was then laid flat between two BFK Rives papers and placed under foam and weights.

Conclusion

The undertaking was certainly very difficult, but we believe that the decision made to intervene and the treatments performed were appropriate in this case. The result is that the drawing looks clearer. In addition, the long-term conserva-

tion has been greatly helped since fibres of the same type as those of the original have replaced the poor quality backing.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Professor Ruth Keller of Berlin for working with me on this project.

References

- 1 "What should be said, and what I believe, is that the drawing is the only thing that matters, whether in sculpture or in painting. One must concentrate on it solely and exclusively. If one masters the drawing, all the rest should be possible. The drawing is the basis for everything." *Alberto Giacometti*. Catalogue réalisé par André Kuenzi. Fondation Pierre Gianadda. Martigny. 16. Mai – 2. Novembre 1986. p.106
- 2 *Alberto Giacometti*. Catalogue. Ibid p114
- 3 *Alberto Giacometti*. Catalogue. Ibid p114

For general reference see also

Alberto Giacometti - Biographie d'une oeuvre. Yves Bonnefoy. Flammarion. Paris, 1991

Biography

Florence Darbre Gubbins graduated with a "Licence des Lettres" in Art History and Egyptology from the University of Geneva. She owns a private studio and is at the same time the Paper and Papyrus Conservator at the Fondation Martin Bodmer, Bibliotheca Bodmeriana, in Cologny, Geneva. She was trained in the following institutions: Kunstmuseum Bern and Stadtuniversitätsbibliothek Bern.

Contact address

Florence Dabre Gubbins
Atelier de restauration
1, chemin de la Vuarpillière
CH-1260 Nyon
Switzerland
Tel. + Fax.: +41 22 362 25 49

