

Diego Giacometti at the Musée Picasso: poetic furniture to tease the senses

The 'Diego Giacometti at the Musée Picasso' exhibition, on display until November 5th 2018, is an opportunity to explore the story behind the special commission awarded to Diego Giacometti to design the furniture for the Picasso Museum when it opened in October 1985. The Musée Picasso is currently renewing its furniture, and the exhibition is also the ideal occasion to discover the museum's new benches, designed by the ECAL/Ecole Cantonale d'Art de Lausanne, and the company Tectona.



Diego Giacometti (1902 – 1985), not to be confused with Alberto Giacometti (his older brother), was the designer/sculptor behind the furniture displayed at the opening of the Musée Picasso. Frequently overshadowed by his brother, Diego Giacometti mixed artistic ambition with a craftsman's modesty and patience. Dominique Bozo – the first director of the museum – was keen to entrust the creation of the furniture to an expert craftsman. At over 80 years old, Diego Giacometti required some persuasion before he eventually decided to accept the challenge. Between 1982 and 1984, the artist created around 50 lamps, chairs, benches and coffee tables for the museum, each of which was designed to match the concept of the room in which it would later be placed. Today, the Musée Picasso reveals this design process in an exhibition featuring snapshots and archives which present trials, sketches and original plasters never before unveiled to the public. The pieces were 'tested out' in the museum before being cast in bronze. Other models, such as the chandeliers in the first floor rooms, were made of resin. White resin was used as it was lighter on the ceilings and matched the walls of the room.

Diego Giacometti preferred white, which he used both for the animals he made in his workshop and for the grand staircase of the hotel on Rue de Thorigny. The corollas of the ceiling lamp curl up to the end of its long branches, leading to a sister suspension, from which leaves grow. A dove and an owl can be found nestled among the marble of the museum, while powerful torches adorn the walls like totems bearing three bells. Indeed, Diego Giacometti seems intent upon disguising the functional aspects of these sculptures. Through an accentuated artistic interplay, he decorates the space in a natural style. The lines of his art, along with his lighting and pictorial

sculptures, organize the museum space. As requested by the first director of the museum, Dominique Bozo, he links the building's classical architecture to the works of Pablo Picasso. The outcome is the fruit of precise measurement: Diego Giacometti, like a surveyor, checked the size and volume of each element against the dimensions of the building. On the bronze of the chairs, vegetation grows, intertwines and separates like thin lianas, displaying an order initially invisible to the viewer's gaze. The ensemble is reminiscent of Etruscan or Ancient Egyptian art, creating an 'aerial geometry'.

Plaster was Diego Giacometti's preferred material, after he discovered it while collaborating with decorator Jean-Michel Franck in the 1930s. For the ceiling lamp and leaf-pattern chandelier, he opted for resin, a much more recent technique offering two main advantages: it preserved the whiteness of the plaster while reducing the weight of the lamp. Bronze would have been too heavy for the ceilings of the Hotel Salé. These two lamps testify to Diego Giacometti's interest in plants. The benches, chairs and torches evoke the Roman furniture uncovered during the excavations in Pompeii. More than a direct influence – Diego rarely visited museums – this kinship is the result of his almost instinctive taste for simplicity. Diego often had the chance to observe his furniture *in situ*, at the Maeght couple's house, for example, where he was always welcome. Struck down by an embolism in the summer of 1985, he never saw the Musée Picasso, which was inaugurated in the fall.

In the Hotel Salé, a heritage building described as "the largest, the most extraordinary, if not to say the most extravagant of all the great 17th century Parisian

hotels”, visitors can enter the master’s workshop by proxy. For a long time, Diego shared Alberto’s studio in the Montparnasse district. He worked as his brother’s assistant, contributing to the moldings and patinas of his sculptures, and sometimes posing for them. Following the death of Alberto Giacometti in 1966, Diego devoted himself to his own creations. Overworked in his activity, he did not keep any records, managing the numerous orders he received orally and without preliminary estimates. Hubert de Givenchy, avant-garde decorator Jean-Michel Franck and Romain Gary, to name a few, all placed orders with him. He created sets of furniture for the Musée Chagall in Nice, as well as for the Maeght Foundation in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, using the unique decorative vocabulary which emerged from his studio.



After visiting this small exhibition and retracing their steps up the large staircase, visitors will rediscover the perfect lines sketched by the ceiling lamp on the golden arabesque decorations, its flowers illuminating the museum like so many fireflies. This truly is the language of a 'craftsman-poet'. The new benches are also visible as visitors emerge from the exhibition. After reopening in 2014, the museum asked the ECAL/Ecole Cantonale d'Art de Lausanne to design seating for its spaces. The selected design was 'Tie' by Isabelle Baudraz, whose eleven-slat benches are designed in such a way as to allow them to be interlocked to create different shapes. These oak seats are therefore fully modular and can be changed for each exhibition, as the museum is now far more active than it was thirty years ago.

While the exhibition is a must-see for history lovers who wish to explore the Hotel Salé from a new angle, it should be avoided by visitors in search of the spectacular. The concept and layout of the exhibition are designed with the intention of displaying the designer's work in all its simplicity, poetry and purity. Indeed, the whole exhibition is imbued with the modesty and spirit of Diego Giacometti.

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