

GERMAINE RICHIER (1902-1959)

La Regodias (Renée Régodias)

Bronze proof, unnumbered
Lost wax cast by M. Pastori between 1939 and 1947
Signed (at the base of the neck): G. Richier
Founder's stamp (at the back of the neck): CIRE PERDUE M. PASTORI GENÈVE (LOST WAX M. PASTORI GENEVA)
H. 40, W. 17, D. 27 cm

Provenance

- Switzerland, Hermann Hubacher Collection (1884-1976)
- By inheritance

Bibliography

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- *L'histoire du buste au XXe siècle autour de Bourdelle et depuis ses élèves* (*The History of the Bust in the 20th Century with Bourdelle and Later his Students*), Paris, Bourdelle Museum, May 5, 1964, n°144 (Bronze proof, Nelly and Werner Bär Collection, Zürich).

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Recent Exhibition of this proof

- 2023 *Germaine Richier*, Paris, Centre Pompidou, 1er mars – 12 juin 2023 ; Montpellier, musée Fabre, 12 juillet – 5 novembre 2023

"*Germaine made really beautiful busts. Really, really, really beautiful*." César[1]

Germaine Richier did the bust *La Regodias* when she was 36 years old and living in Paris, where she was teaching and showing regularly at the Salon des Tuileries and the Salon d'Automne, and beginning to attract attention. She had had her first solo exhibition in 1934 at the Max Kaganovitch Gallery; in 1936, she won the Blumenthal Prize[2] and the following year, a gold medal at the International Exhibition in Paris. She created a number of busts at this time, still in a classical style but beginning to show hints of her later development.

Bust and method

A student of Antoine Bourdelle between 1926 and 1929, Germaine Richier took advantage of his classical and yet visionary teachings, such as, "from time to time, restrict your field of observation. Do busts, many, many busts. It's really the best thing that you can do."[3] She followed this advice throughout her entire career, indicating that they were, for her, like "playing scales." They attracted her because of the "discipline of application"[4] that they required. "The portrait imposes the discipline of a vertical axis against a horizon. Furthermore, in all sculpture, I find it necessary to fix a vertical line and a horizontal one in order to bring out the various diagonals. That's why I use a plumb line."[5] This discipline is brilliantly illustrated in the *La Regodias* bust, which displays a distinct elegance through the relationship between the vertical axis accentuated by the long neck and a horizontal axis created by the figure's pronounced direct gaze; this creates a tension that is highlighted by the balance of the composition and emphas the diagonals that give the face its fine distinction.

Richier based her work upon a methodical approach to the natural, which she called "the analysis of forms,"[6] using a system of triangulation that she learned from Bourdelle. Echoing canonical Greek sculptures that constructed the body along mathematical proportions, Richier used precise points to establish a base that she then embellished with her own vision. This method, long established in sculpture studios that use a *mise au point* technique to enlarge sculptures or to direct carving, is the equivalent to the grid method used by painters.[7] The pattern of triangles constitutes a pattern of reference points that allows the artist to faithfully transcribe the forms. Germaine Richier used this technique for her busts as well as for her standing figures, adapting it in an original way by tracing the pattern directly on the living model or on

drafts in clay or plaster, using "laundry bluing,"[8] visible in photos from the period.[9] Many of her drawings also feature the pattern of triangles. Her sculptures that incorporate threads, such as *Diabolo, The Clawed One*, and *The Ant*, which she did in the 1950s, expand upon and empha the idea that the method of construction is a mode of expression in itself. There's a drawing of *La Regodias* shown with the pattern of triangles,[10] which she must have drawn after the sculpture, as it's dated 1939. This is a drawing undoubtedly made based on the sculpture and, more precisely, based on a plaster that also shows this pattern of blue lines like a spider's web across the face.[11]

Richier frequently drew her sculptures, using the practice to further her vision. For the sculptures themselves, she worked directly on a clay or plaster model, without a preparatory drawing: "the model is already complete in itself, and the work is then nothing but a repetition."[12] The human being was always at the center of her work. Every morning, a model came to her studio to pose. Renée Régodias, who lent her face to this sculpture, was a professional model. "I'm working with … Renée Régodias. The bust seems rather good … "[13] the sculptress wrote to a student in a letter dating from the beginning of 1939. "I invent more easily when looking at nature; its presence renders me independent."[14]

Singular Vision

However, what interested her most was to take off from the base that she'd methodically constructed according to the model, that "organic truth,"[15] deviating from that nature and transcribing it into her own vision. "Sculpture rests upon geometric volumes. Geometry both brings things together and maintains their connections—counterbalancing any excesses. […] But I make the compass lie.[16] In this way, I can avoid creating things as they actually are. It's a way of being creative and having my own geometry."[17] Though, in *La Regodias*, the artist's "own geometry" doesn't deviate as much from the real as it does in many of her works done from the 1940s on, various audacious aesthetic gestures are nonetheless already present.

The treatment of the surfaces includes striations and scratches, as well as areas where material has been removed, techniques that she would later use systematically. The hair and neck show energetic treatment, through the addition of curls and subtractions, scratches, scarifications … giving the whole the appearance of matter in motion, a treatment that transmits the artist's overflowing energy. The face, finely modeled, also shows light scratches and some compass points left visible. On the other hand, the left side of the face is less refined at the levels of the eye, the eyebrow, and the mouth, creating a

lively asymmetry. Germaine Richier left visible traces of the development of the work, like Rodin and Bourdelle did before her. But once again, she pushed the principle just a little further by destroying or roughing up finished parts of the sculpture. To do this, she used what she called "swords," tools that allowed her to slice, tear, or pierce the material. A few years earlier, Richier had done a bust that was radical in its abstraction, the *Bust #12*, is striated across its entire face. The face of *La Regodias* is, by contract, faithful to the facial features of the model; the abstraction of the vision in this case, emanates from the interior.

The exaggerated length of *La Regodias*' neck introduces the deformity and strangeness that characterize the language of the artist. The elegance of the model's head is emphad and almost deified by the "neck-column" on which it rests. Although straight, the neck angles slightly to the side and stands out because its curved planes are nonetheless cleanly and audaciously cut. More than a neck, it's an element of organic architecture. The composition finds its source in the work of Antoine Bourdelle, who, on several occasions, did busts with similarly long necks, such as *Femme au long cou* (*Woman with a Long Neck*), 1904, and *Madeleine Charnaux au chignon* (*Madeleine Charnaux with a Bun*) 1917.[18] With his *Head of Apollo* (1900-1909), Bourdelle worked extensively on the poise and expressivity achieved by positioning the head on a long neck,[19] which he then replaced with an architectural base,[20] a work that offers another good example of the quest that these artists were pursuing. Later, Richier would dramatically extend this work on the support with her *l'Aigle* (*The Eagle*) 1948, whose head rests directly on the supporting pole. *La Regodias* is a clear step in this direction, which is further evidenced by a version in plaster of the head without the neck mounted directly on a pole.[21] While with his *Head of Apollo*, Bourdelle created a powerful, dominating figure, the effect of *La Regodias* is instead a mixture of grace and strangeness.

Out of the face of a woman of her time, Richier created an aloof and inaccessible figure that seems to carry a secret rooted in the depths of time. Jean-Louis Prat[22] compared it to the *Nefertiti* in the Staatliche Museum in Berlin. Like that queen from Antiquity, *La Regodias* has a regal carriage to her head and a regularity and precision to her facial features. The two works also share a crisply defined profile, a slight, enigmatic smile, a neutral expression, prominent cheekbones, a broad, open forehead, a fixed gaze, almond eyes, and an asymmetrical look (the *Nefertiti* has lost an eye while the left eye of *La Regodias* is much stranger than the right one). And like that ancient queen, *La Regodias* seems mysterious and impenetrable, beyond the reach of the world of men.

The Diffusion of the Model

Germaine Richier was proud of *La Regodias.* Among the many busts that she created before the war (some thirty), the only ones that remain are the ones that she was satisfied with; she destroyed the others after the war. Done in Paris in 1938, a plaster version of *La Regodias* went with Richier into exile in Switzerland during the war.[23] From 1939 to 1946, Richier lived in Zurich with her husband, Otto Bännigner (1897-1973)[24]. A 1944 photograph taken by Christian Staub shows her in her Zurich studio with *La Regodias* in plaster positioned on top of a cast-iron stove. During the war, she stored the bronze version of the bust with the founder Pastori. The foundry was begun in 1919 in Carouge, near Geneva, by Mario Pastori, who had just moved there from Milan. Germaine Richier worked with him between 1939 and 1947.[25]

While in Switzerland, Richier and her husband frequently saw Hans Arp, Alberto Giacometti, Marino Marini,[26] Fritz Wotruba, and local sculptors such as Hermann Hubacher (1885-1976). Hubacher, who was a close friend of the couple, acquired the sculpture presented here, no doubt directly from the artist. He also acquired a proof in plaster of *The Toad* (1940). The sculpture remained in the family, though unfortunately they don't seem to have any archives with information detailing whether their ancestor acquired the work through purchase, gift, or exchange with the artist. There were great Swiss collectors buying contemporary sculpture at the time; Werner and Nelly Bär acquired Bänniger's *La Zone* in 1937 and a bronze of *La Regodias* from Germaine Richier in 1942. A 1965 catalogue of their collection, which includes Richier's *La Regodias* in bronze, documents the range and quality of the works gathered by these important collectors of sculpture.[27]

The Edition

Two plasters of the model are known. In the catalogue for the Richier exhibition at the Peggy Guggenheim Museum in Venice in 2006-2007, an old photograph shows the original plaster of *La Regodias* (location unknown)[28]; it can also be seen in a photograph of Richier in her Zurich studio, taken in 1944 by Christian Staub.[29] There also exists a studio plaster of *La Regodias* without a neck in a private collection. The head is posed directly on a pole and is marked with the geometric pattern of blue lines.[30] It was molded from the clay original and represents a stage in the development of the work. It was shown in 2006 in Venice and in 2014 in Bern, next to a finished bronze proof of the model.[31]

According to the artist's family archives, *La Regodias* was done in an edition of 12, but only two of them were cast during the artist's lifetime, both by Pastori.

The one presented here is one of those two; the other is the one in the Bär Collection. This proof is, therefore, an exceptional and rare example of the Richier's pre-war work. It was exhibited as part of the major monographic exhibition dedicated to the artist at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2023.

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[1] Excerpt from an interview with the sculptor César (1921-1998) in *Hommage à Germaine Richier*, Odermatt-Cazeau Gallery, February 28-April 25, 1992, p. 7.
[2] The Blumenthal Prize was an award given between 1919 and 1954 to painters, sculptors, decorators, engravers, writers, and musicians by the Franco-American Florence Blumenthal Foundation, a philanthropic organization created by Florence Meyer Blumenthal (1875-1930).
[3] In *L'histoire du buste au XXe,* exhibition catalogue, Paris, Bourdelle Museum, May 5, 1964, non-paginated, text held in the Bourdelle Museum.
[4] Statement made by Richier recounted by Yvon Taillandier in *XXe siècle*, #4, June, 1959.
[5] *Id.*
[6] In 2014, Bern, p. 21 (text by Daniel Spanke).
[7] This technique is more generally used by geometers for cartography as well as in digital animation.
[8] Statement by Françoise Guiter recorded in *Transmission/Transgression*, 2018, p. 196.
[9] In 1996, Saint-Paul-de-Vence: see for example a photograph by Brassaï showing the model Nardone posing nude with the geometric pattern painted on her body, p. 16; studio photographs, p. 164 and p. 202.
[10] *Untitled (Regodias)*, 1939, pencil on paper, 32 x 24 cm, private collection, In. 2014 Bern, #16, repr. p. 71
[11] *La Regodias*, 1938-1939, plaster, 55 x 16 x 25 cm, private collection, In. 2014, Bern, #15, repr. p. 73.
[12] Germaine Richier, cited in 1996, Saint-Paul-de-Vence, p. 33.
[13] Citation in 2006, Venice, p. 54 (translated from English).
[14] Germaine Richier, cited in 1996, Saint-Paul-de-Vence, p. 33.
[15] *Ibid.*
[16] Here, Germaine Richier borrows an expression from Bourdelle, cited in. *Germaine Richier*, ed. by Angela Lammert and Jörn Merkert, exhibition catalogue from the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, Cologne, p. 154: "It's great to use a compass, he liked to say, but you have to be able to make it lie."
[17] Germaine Richier cited in 2014, Bern, p. 22 (text by Daniel Spanke).
[18] In 1998, Paris, Bourdelle Museum, p. 46-47.
[19] https://www.bourdelle.paris.fr/fr/oeuvre/apollon
[20] https://www.bourdelle.paris.fr/fr/oeuvre/tete-dapollon
[21] In 2014, Bern, p. 73 (see note 11).
[22] Curator of the exhibition, he organized a retrospective of the work of Germaine Richier in 1996 at the Maeght Foundation (which he ran from 1964 to 2004), in Saint-Paul-de-Vence.

[23] In 2019, Antibes, p. 124-125.
[24] Swiss sculptor, whom she met in Bourdelle's studio and married in 1929.
[25] In 1996, Saint-Paul-de-Vence, p. 193.
[26] In 1945, Marino Marini did a portrait of Germaine Richier (Galleria d'Arte Moderno, Milan).
[27] 1965, Zurich, p. 189.
[28] In 2006, Venice, p. 55, photograph by Bernès and Marouteau, Françoise Guiter archives.
[29] See note 23.
[30] In 2006, Venice, p. 57.
[31] See photograph from the exhibition in Bern, p. 66-67.