



GERMAINE RICHIER (1902-1959)

The Toad

Plaster

Unsigned

H. 22, W. 29, D. 30cm

Provenance

- Switzerland, Hermann Hubacher Collection (1885-1976)
- By inheritance

Bibliography

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- Cassou, Jean, *Richier*, ed. du Temps, coll. "Sculpteurs Modernes" ("Modern Sculptors"), Paris, 1961.
- *Germaine Richier*, Zürich, Kunsthau, June 12 to July 21, 1963, n°8, p. 18 (bronze proof, Nelly and Werner Bär Collection).
- *Germaine Richier*, Arles, Réattu Museum, July 7 to September 30, 1964, no reproduction (bronze proof, n°2).
- *Sammlung Werner und Nelly Bär*, Weinfelden Mühlemann Verlag, Zürich, 1965, p.195, repr. (bronze proof, Nelly and Werner Bär Collection).
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- *Germaine Richier*, Humlebaeck, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, August 13 to September 25, 1988, n°1 p. 33 (bronze proof).
- Morris, Frances, *Germaine Richier (1902-1959)*, in *Paris Post War: Art and Existentialism, 1945-1955*, London, Tate Gallery, June 9 to September 5, 1993, p. 161.
- *Germaine Richier, retrospective*, Saint-Paul-de-Vence, Fondation Maeght, April 5 to June 25, 1996, p. 34-35, repr.
- *Germaine Richier*, Lammert texts, A., Lichtenstern, C., Merkert, J., Berlin, Akademie der Künste, 1997.
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- *Giacometti, Marini, Richier, La figure tourmentée (The Tormented Figure)*, under the direction of Lévêque-Claudet, Camille, Lausanne, Regional Museum of the Fine Arts, January 31 to April 27, 2014, 5 Continents Edition 2014.
- *Germaine Richier, Retrospective*, Bern, Musée des Beaux-Arts, November 25 to April 6, 2014; Kunsthalle Mannheim, May 9 to August 24, 2014, p. 86-89, repr. (bronze proof, Germaine Richier Family Collection).
- Andral, Jean-Louis, Da Costa, Valérie, *Germaine Richier, la Magicienne*, Antibes, Picasso Museum, October 6, 2019 to January 26, 2020; The Hague, Beelden aan Zee Museum, March 14 to June 7, 2020.

Exhibitions of the model during the artist's lifetime

- *René Auberjonois, peintures et dessins (paintings and drawings), Germaine Richier, sculptures*, Winterthur, Kunstmuseum, November 28 to December 31, 1942, n°173.
- *Plastiken: Marino Marini, Germaine Richier, Fritz Wotruba – Zeichnungen: Rodin, Maillol, Despiau*, Berne, Kunsthalle, June 9 to July 8, 1945, n°27, repr. (plaster original).
- *Sculptures of Germaine Richier, Engravings of Roger Lacourière*, London, Anglo-French Art Centre, September 8-30, 1947, n°3 (bronze proof).
- *Germaine Richier*, Genève, galerie Georges Moos, March 23 to April 11, 1947, n°10.
- *Germaine Richier*, Paris, Galerie Maeght, 1948, n°8.
- *Winterthurer Privatbesitz II*, Winterthur, Kunstmuseum, August to November, 1949, n°287, p.32 (bronze proof).
- *Die Plastiksammlung Werner Bär*, Winterthur, Kunstmuseum, September 16 to November 11, 1951, n°74.

- *Germaine Richier*, Antibes, Picasso Museum, July 17 to September 30, 1959, n°27 (bronze proof, private collection).

"Nature is not a model, but an example. The order and rhythm of natural energies have been known since time immemorial by an accumulation of experiences that constitutes an ancestral wisdom, transmitted by each generation. Ancient wisdom includes many myths that reveal the presence of the sacred within things, as well as ways to exercise, by returning to sources, a sort of mastery over natural forces. By going back to archetypes, man can recreate the world." Antoine Bourdelle[\[1\]](#)

Germaine Richier spent her 1939 summer vacation in Switzerland with her husband, Otto Bänninger (1897-1973).[\[2\]](#) When war was declared at the beginning of September, they decided to remain living in Zurich from 1939 to 1946. During their time there, they frequented other artists in exile, including Hans Arp, Alberto Giacometti, Marino Marini,[\[3\]](#) and Fritz Wotruba, as well as local sculptors, such as Hermann Hubacher (1885-1976), who was the first owner of the piece presented here. As she had been doing in Paris, Germaine Richier established a studio in Zurich and took in students. She was soon enjoying a great success, participating in exhibitions and attracting the interest of important collectors.

A Transitional Work

The Toad is the first of Richier's works that references the animal world, a theme that she would later develop extensively in her sculpture. *The Toad* is a transitional work created in a context of historic upheaval. The declaration of war, her choice of exile, and her new environment all contributed to the evolution of her vision. A native of Grans, a Provençal village, she seems to have spent her early life in a symbiotic relationship with nature. She loved observing insects, plants, and stones beneath the blazing sun of southern France, and her character seems to have been forged by the harshness of life in that climate, where the extreme dryness makes the lives of plants and animals always precarious. She was also strongly influenced by local beliefs and legends. Years later, while living in Paris and Switzerland, she had her brother send her things from the village and its surroundings, such as insects and olive branches. Richier's studio looked like a cabinet of curiosities: " ... in it, you'd find the skeleton of a bat with outstretched wings, petrified plants, stones, a book on ants—all sorts of fragments of nature picked up in the countryside of the Midi." [\[4\]](#) Her art frequently showed the influences of her childhood experiences. But her fascination with nature and its forms is also marked by anxiety, even fear. Her sculptures helped her to exorcise those fears and anxieties. "I'm afraid of

nature; it's menacing,"[5] she once commented to her friend Hermann Hubacher.

The Toad, because it's so strange, implies that she had a disquieting view of the world—one that resonated with the very threatening political atmosphere of the time. It was the first of the long series of "hybrid figures"[6] that punctuate her work. Through these figures, she tried, by fusing different realms of life, to express the instincts and impulses that they share. The animal represents the monsters that we all have hiding inside us, the impulses and instincts lurking in our subconscious; it's an artistic function that goes back to the medieval bestiary—and no doubt farther. Animals have a strong evocative, symbolic, and even fantastical power, which Richier manipulated with skill and originality.

An animal of the evening, inhabiting the dark, damp corners of the world, the toad is associated with water and the moon, as well as with the yin principle in Chinese philosophy. For the Maya and in east Asia, it is a rain god. In the west, it appears in fairy tales as a symbol of repulsive ugliness and is associated with witches. In a general way, it evokes the feminine principle. Richier often chose animals or insects whose symbology is ambivalent and paradoxical, suggesting that extremes, such as attraction and repulsion, grace and violence, and birth and death, are a fundamental fact of life. For instance, in 1944, she did *The Grasshopper*, a symbol of devastating fecundity, but also, in ancient China, the symbol of numerous progeny. *The Mantis* (1946) is graceful, but devours her mate after sex. *The Spider* (1946) suggests the illusory fragility of its web. In Freudian psychoanalysis, it's associated with the fantasy of origins. In 1999, the artist Louise Bourgeois, an heir of Germaine Richier, did her famous spider titled *Maman (Mother)*. Richier's chosen animals were pitiless, voracious predators; toads devour their prey whole and alive.

Animal Attitude: Movement and Architecture

With this sculpture, we first encounter the interpenetration of animal worlds through the title, as what is presented is a normally proportioned human body, close to the "organic truth"[7] of the model. But when you look a bit more closely, you notice several disturbing aspects of the work. The theme of metamorphosis, which runs through Richier's work, finds its first expression here, where it's still subtle, though it becomes more pronounced from 1944 on, starting with *The Grasshopper*. "It has only the four extremities and a human face, which is also true for *The Mantis*, *The Spider*, and *The Ant*. They are all caught at the precise moment of metamorphosis, at the very instant of their coming to life (...) they seem to be 'crouching on the boundary between

worlds.'[\[8\]](#)'[\[9\]](#)

In the art of the 20th century, "the principle of metamorphosis is informed by two semantic reservoirs,"[\[10\]](#) Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Goethe's work ("he strove to understand the variety of forms from the perspective of their unity, which is to say that he took every form in nature to be a metamorphosis of an original form. This theory is the basis of the science of morphology.")[\[11\]](#) Various details of *The Toad* emphasize the metamorphosis that's taking place. The hands and the feet, rapidly executed, seem almost webbed, while the gaze is asymmetrical (as in *La Regodias*), created by a horizontal line to the left and a vertical line to the right, and the legs are fully bent, the body crouched, and the buttocks enlarged.

It's above all the general posture that suggests a toad. In fact, she has adopted the position of an amphibian awaiting its prey, with one leg ready to pounce and the other extended in a walking position (a toad walks while a frog leaps). The palms of her hands are raised, which is the normal position for digitigrades (animals who walk on their fingers). She is caught suspended at the precise point at which the observant animal is motionless but ready for action.

"The genuflection is full of a latent dynamic, displayed, in particular, by the uncomfortable position of the left foot, its nails gripping the ground, and that of the heel, raised up under the buttocks. Exactly like a toad, crouching, and ready to spring—that gesture alone is enough to fuse the human and the animal. Richier would use this blend of defense and latent attack in almost all of the hybrid sculptures that she did later."[\[12\]](#) Richier's figures are never static; their poses evoke motion, or the instant just after. Germaine Richier is a direct descendent of Rodin when it comes to this question of the representation of movement, which is related to that of metamorphosis through the notion of the impermanence of things. Rodin referred to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* when, in a discussion of the "condensed" movement of his sculpture *The Walking Man* (c. 1900), he explained that the sculptor must not represent a form as it is at a given instant, but must instead indicate the passage from one state to another.[\[13\]](#) As Germaine Richier phrased it: "I don't try to reproduce a movement; I instead try to make the viewer think of it. My statues should give the impression that, though they may be still, they're about to move."[\[14\]](#) To achieve this, the artist sometimes puts her figures in uncomfortable poses that are nonetheless in perfect balance. *The Escrimeuse (The Fencer)* of 1943, which displays the same type of morphology as the woman in *The Toad*, is a perfect example. In that sculpture, as in *The Toad*, the construction is taut and true.

Germaine Richier constructed her forms based on a traditional method known as triangulation, which she learned from Antoine Bourdelle. This geometric method consists of creating a network of points according to a trigonometric system. The result gives the impression that the different extremes of the body are linked by lines of tension, integrating the empty space around the sculpture into the composition. Later, in the 1950s, she made these lines of tension literal through the use of taut wires in works such as *Diabolo*, *The Clawed One*, and *The Ant*; in *The Toad*, these lines may be invisible, but their effect is the same. However, other traces of the process of construction have been left visible in order to function as vectors of expression; vestiges of seams underscore the figure's architecture, and the right hand and foot and the hair are only roughly blocked in. Furthermore, the artist freely deformed or exaggerated parts of the body to better translate her vision. The back of *The Toad* is too long and calls to mind the continuous curve of the amphibian's back, and the joint between the left thigh and pelvis suggest unformed, undefined flesh.

Distribution and Editioning

Hermann Hubacher (1885-1976), a Swiss sculptor, was a good friend of Germaine Richier, one could even say a confidante, as on many occasions, both in letters and in conversations, she shared with him her thoughts and reflections on her sculptures. There is no doubt that he acquired *The Toad* directly from the artist. It stayed in his family, though unfortunately, the family doesn't seem to have any archival records that document how their relative acquired the piece—whether as a purchase, a gift, or an exchange. Be that as it may, it's not rare for sculptors to share their works among friends by casting them in plaster. For example, Antoine Bourdelle gave plaster proofs of his *Head of Apollo* (1900-1909) to various friends, including André Gide, Elie Faure, Gabriel Thomas, and Anatole France. As far as *The Toad* is concerned, another plaster of the work, in the Kunstmuseum in Bern,[\[15\]](#) came from the collection of Marcel Perincioli (1911-2005),[\[16\]](#) a Swiss sculptor who worked in Germaine Richier's studio from 1943 to 1944. The existence of this second example supports the idea that she shared the work with her artist friends by making casts in plaster. It is not currently known whether or not other plaster casts of the work exist.

Shortly after doing this version, Richier began to edition the work in bronze. In the early 1940s, she was showing regularly in museums in the country[\[17\]](#) and attracting the attention of serious collectors of sculpture. Werner and Nelly Bär, great Swiss collectors who were buying contemporary sculpture at the time, acquired a proof of *The Toad* in 1944. The quality and importance of the collection assembled by these outstanding connoisseurs of sculpture can be

judged by a 1965 catalogue of the collection, which includes both a bronze of *The Toad* and one of *La Regodias*, acquired two years earlier.[\[18\]](#) Other important Swiss collectors Hulda and Gottlieb Zumsteg also acquired a bronze proof of *The Toad*, but theirs has a patina of ochre and earth tones reminiscent of the lacquered plaster one in the Bern Kunstmuseum. This proof was given to the Kunsthhaus in Zurich in 1946 by the buyers' son Gustav Zumsteg.[\[19\]](#)

After its success in Switzerland, the work was shown elsewhere in Europe. In 1947, the Anglo-French Art Centre in London organized an exhibition titled *Sculptures of Germaine Richier, Engraving Studio of Roger Lacourière*, in which a bronze of *The Toad* was exhibited.[\[20\]](#) The following year, it was included in an exhibition of the artist's work at the Maeght Gallery in Paris.[\[21\]](#)

The bronze edition included twelve proofs,[\[22\]](#) three of which are currently held in public collections, one in the Kunsthhaus in Zurich,[\[23\]](#) one in the Kunstmuseum in the Hague,[\[24\]](#) and one in the Worcester Art Museum (Massachusetts, USA).[\[25\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) In Bourdelle, Antoine, *Écrits sur l'art et la vie* (Writings on Art and Life), Paris, 1955, p. 63.

[\[2\]](#) A Swiss sculptor that she met in Bourdelle's studio and married in 1929.

[\[3\]](#) In 1945, Marino Marini did a portrait of Germaine Richier (Galleria d'Arte Moderno, Milan).

[\[4\]](#) Cited in 1966, Saint-Paul-de-Vence, p. 70; extract from Lebovici, E., "L'Atelier de Germaine Richier, vu par Pierre-Olivier Deschamps" ("Germaine Richier's Studio as Seen by Pierre-Olivier Deschamps"), *Beaux-Arts Magazine*, #73, November 1989.

[\[5\]](#) A statement made by Germaine Richier and reported by Hermann Hubacher in "Die Zürcher Zeit de Bildhauerin Germaine Richier" ("The Sculptor Germaine Richier's Time in Zurich"), in 1963, Zurich, p. 9.

[\[6\]](#) The phrase, coined by her husband René de Solier in 1953 was later used by the artist herself to describe the evolution of her work. In Selz, Peter, *New Images of Man*, New York, MoMA, Sept. to Nov. 1959, p. 129: "This form seems to have evolved until it has reached a stage that I'd call 'hybrid'" (extract of a statement by Germaine Richier).

[\[7\]](#) Expression used by Germaine Richier in 1996, Saint-Paul-de-Vence, p. 33.

[\[8\]](#) Lammert, A. in 1997, Berlin, p. 32-45.

[\[9\]](#) In 2014, Bern, p. 23, article by Daniel Spanke.

[\[10\]](#) Sotzek, Corinne Linda, "Entre humanité et animalité—aspects de la métamorphose dans l'œuvre plastique de Germaine Richier" ("Between Humanity and Animality: Aspects of Metamorphosis in the Artistic Work of Germaine Richier"), in 2014, Bern, p. 39.

[\[11\]](#) *Ibid.*

[\[12\]](#) Jean-Louis Prat in 1996, Saint-Paul-de-Vence, p. 34.

[13] This idea is developed in Spanke's text, in 2014, Bern, p. 16.

[14] Cited in 2019, Antibes, p. 105.

[15] Inv. Pl 82.009. Given to the museum in 1982.

[16] Plaster bought from the artist in 1949.

[17] She participated in exhibitions at the Kunstmuseum in Bern in 1945 (*The Toad* was shown as number 173) and in 1949 (number 287), at the Kunsthalle in Bern in 1945 (plaster original of *The Toad* shown, #27), then in 1948; at the Kunsthalle in Basel in 1948, etc.

[18] 1965, Zurich, p. 189. The bronze proof of *The Toad* was resold in 1977: Sotheby's, 1977, lot 85.

[19] [Inv. 1946/0009](#).

[20] 1949, London, #3, not reproduced.

[21] 1948, Paris, #8, not reproduced.

[22] According to the artist's family's archives.

[23] See note 18.

[24] [Inv. 0330321](#). In July, 1961, the Gemeentemuseum in the Hague acquired a bronze proof of *The Toad* from the collection of an American named G. David Thompson (shown at the exhibition *Collectie Thompson uit Pittsburgh* in the same museum from February 17 to April 9, 1961). In 2019, Antibes, p. 98.

[25] [Inv. 2015.51](#). Cast by Valsuani, acquired in 2015 from the Manuel K. and Ina R. Berman Collection, recent pedestal.