

# GERMAINE RICHIER (1902-1959)

## *Sava Alexandra*

Bronze, probably Mario Pastori
Lost wax cast, without foundry stamp
Signed (on the lower left side of the back): G. Richier
82,5 x 50 x 37 cm

## Provenance

- Switzerland, collection Otto Bänninger
- Switzerland, a pharmaceutical company's collection since 1958

## Bibliographie


- 1946 ARTICLE : Gasser, Manuel, « Germaine Richier », Werk Kunst Architektur Künstlerisches Gewerbe, 33rd y., n°3, mars 1946, ill. (**un bronze dans l'atelier de l'artiste**)
- 1947 EXPOSITION : *Germaine Richier*, Genève, galerie Georges Moos, 23 mars – 11 avril 1947, n°13, non repr.
- 1961 MEMOIRE : Milhau, Denis, *Germaine Richier : étude et essai de catalogue de l'œuvre sculpté*, sous la direction de Jean Cassou, mémoire de recherche approfondie, École du Louvre, 1962, n°188.
- 1963 EXPOSITION : *Germaine Richier*, Zürich, Kunsthaus, 12 juin-21 juillet 1963.
- 1996 EXPOSITION : *Germaine Richier, rétrospective*, Saint-Paul-de-Vence, Fondation Maeght, 5 avril - 25 juin 1996, p. 44-45, n°13, repr. (**Épreuve en bronze, Kunsthaus Zurich**).

- 1997 EXPOSITION : *Germaine Richier*, textes de Lammert, A., Lichtenstern, C., Merkert, J., Berlin, Akademie der Künste, 7 septembre – 2 novembre 1997, n°17, repr. (**Épreuve en bronze, Kunsthaus Zurich**).
- 2006 DA COSTA : Da Costa, Valérie, *Germaine Richier, un art entre deux mondes*, éditions Norma, 2006.
- 2014 EXPOSITION : *Giacometti, Marini, Richier, La figure tourmentée*, sous la direction de Camille Lévêque-Claudet, Lausanne, musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts, 31 janvier – 27 avril 2014, 5 Continents Edition 2014, repr.p.25 (**épreuve en bronze, fonte Godard HC1**).
- 2023 EXPOSITION : Coulondre, A., sous la direction de, *Germaine Richier*, Paris, Centre Pompidou, 1er mars – 12 juin 2023 ; Montpellier, musée Fabre, 12 juillet – 5 novembre 2023, p. 99, repr. (**Épreuve en bronze, Kunsthaus Zurich**).
- 2023 CATALOGUE : *Germaine Richier*, « L'Objet d'Art » Hors-série, n°165, mars 2023, p. 31, repr. (**Épreuve en bronze, Kunsthaus Zurich**).
- 2024 CATALOGUE RAISONNÉ : Guiter, Françoise, *Germaine Richier, vie et œuvre, catalogue raisonné, tome 1, 1916-1946*, SilvanaEditoriale, 2024, p.446, n°92.

## A sculpture from the Swiss period

The model of Sava Alexandra was created by Germaine Richier during the war. She was living in Zurich with her husband, the sculptor Otto Bänninger, who was originally from that city. It was a period of intense creativity for the young sculptor, who was laying the foundations for her artistic expression. In 1944, when this seemingly classical figure emerged, she had already been creating a series of hybrid and fantastical figures for several years, representing a symbiosis between the human and animal worlds. During this period, her universe became more complex and gradually gave way to an austere, violent expression, marked by tears and deformations. But alongside this dark and tortured body of work, Germaine Richier continued to create busts and figures with a softer emanation, which remained close to organic truth. In this vein of her work, her founding influences are easily discernible: the teachings of Bourdelle, the imprint of Rodin, her interest in Italian Quattrocento and Renaissance art, medieval sculpture, and even ancient Egyptian art.

*Sava Alexandra* depicts a young teenage girl in the form of a bust, her arms raised and her hands clasped above her head. Her face is delicately turned to the left and her torso is slightly twisted in the same direction. The youthful features of her baby face are finely detailed but reveal certain peculiarities characteristic of Richier's art: the asymmetry of the eyes, with one pupil full and the other hollow, recalls the enigmatic gaze of La Regodias (a very beautiful, haughty portrait from 1938); the full, well-defined mouth, with its

slightly upturned corners, gives her a vaguely mischievous expression. Could this barely sketched smile be reminiscent of that of the Angel of Reims, given that we know the artist appreciated this medieval sculpture? It is also worth noting that his friend, the sculptor Marino Marini, created a portrait of her as the Angel of Reims during the same period![1]

The bust continues exaggeratedly in its lower part, the modeling does not end, it fades into the supporting pillar of the modeled work, literally including it. This creates a visual distortion: the disproportionately long bust resembles a trunk. However, hybridization with the plant kingdom is imminent, since it was in 1945 that the *Homme-forêt* appeared, the quintessence of the work's sylvan character.

## Vegetal and architectural emanation

Although *Sava Alexandra* does not show any clear signs of metamorphosis, she evokes the myth of Daphne. In addition to this bust-trunk, the long, slender arms resemble branches, or even planks, as the modeling is absent and uneven in places, revealing the rough and raw forms of the underlying structure. Finally, the skin seems to be made of bark. Valérie Da Costa speaks of the "vegetation of form"[2] and refers to a lesser-known myth that also comes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which echoes Richier's universe and particularly our figure of *Sava Alexandra*. It is about the mourning of the Heliades, who were turned into poplar trees, and the gradual stages of their slow and inexorable transformation. Here is an excerpt: "The white Lampetia was held to the ground by a root that suddenly sprouted. As the third was about to tear her hair out, she was left with leaves in her hands. One felt her legs held by a trunk, the other her arms painfully turning into long branches."[3].

From another perspective, this exaggeratedly long bust, which absorbs its supporting pillar, evokes the column statues of antique and medieval traditions, similar to Rodin's reinterpretations: Marie Fenaille on a column or Torso of Balzac on a scalloped sheath. *Sava Alexandra* can be likened to a caryatid supporting a structure, or to a term, a type of statue that only has a human figure and ends in a shaft at the bottom[4]. However, to our knowledge, the sculpture has not been presented on a column base. The pedestals of the model, generally rectangular parallelepipeds in stone, are however different each time, when they are not absent... Here, the pink marble pedestal is thicker than the others but seems to have been embedded halfway up in a wider pedestal (judging from presence the slight longitudinal parting).

## A skinned woman between the heavens and earth

From a purely visual perspective, the folded arms frame the face and give the composition a strong sense of integrity by closing it off. The model is both firmly anchored to the ground in its lower part, with its column-like torso, and embraces the air in its upper part: the folded arms framing the face include a void on either side, a visual effect that foreshadows the figures with metal wires she created in the second half of the 1940s (for example, *Araignée I*, 1946). The imprisoned void is part of the composition and literally expresses the artist's exploration of geometric tensions and the play of oblique lines. André du Solier refers to these as “sculptures with holes.”[5].

A former student of Bourdelle, Richier retained from his teaching a highly structured conception of sculptural form. She worked with a plumb line and surveyor's tools, and her geometric method was well known, consisting of drawing triangular marks directly onto the model's skin and then transferring them to her plaster or clay. *Sava Alexandra* stands on a powerful vertical axis around which a subtle play of obliques and a slight dynamic twist are articulated. An impression of unstable immobility emerges, a trait commonly found in the sculptor's work. “...portraiture imposes a discipline of the vertical axis and the horizon. In fact, in any sculpture, I need to find a vertical and a horizontal line that highlight the oblique lines. That's why I use a plumb line...” [6]

Between these tension lines, light is caught by the rough surface. The uneven, hard, rough modeling attracts the eye and frightens the hand: “you don't caress a statue by Germaine Richier.”[7] The lumps of clay are roughly applied and juxtaposed, gaps in the material create crevices, and striations scratch the surface: all characteristics that reveal violence or at least vehemence in the act of creation. This expressionist style reflects the troubled political period: Europe is at war. As with Giacometti and Fautrier during the same period, the thick, turbulent material conveys the torments experienced by humanity.

## A nod to Bourdelle

However, the sculpture entitled *Sava Alexandra*, named after the model[8], is one of the few whose title does not refer to an element of nature during this period. The work could be a dialogue with Bourdelle, the master from whom Richier studied in Paris from 1926 to 1929. Indeed, Sava Alexandra's pose echoes that chosen by the sculptor in his study drawings for the bust portrait of

Germaine Richier. These watercolors and ink drawings are kept at the Musée Bourdelle (studies: inv. MBD4518; unfinished sketch: MBD5195; second and third sketches: MBD5197) and show the young apprentice in bust form, her arms wrapped around her head. The void here is filled by what appear to be vine leaves framing and crowning her face. As if premonishing the future developments in his protégée's work, Bourdelle creates here a connection between the plant world and the figure. The sculptor had a close relationship with his young student Germaine Richier: she was the only woman present in his private studio on the Impasse du Maine; he nicknamed her “my nightingale” because she used to sing while working in the studio. “Everything I know, I learned from Bourdelle,” said Germaine Richier[9].
Furthermore, *Sava Alexandra* can also be compared to *Urne* (inv. MBBR2129), a full-length figure with a slight twist, arms raised above the head, which Bourdelle created in 1927-1929, at the end of his life, when Richier was working in his studio.

## Life of the model and its publication

A bronze of *Sava Alexandra* was photographed in Richier's studio in 1946 and reproduced in Werk magazine[10]. That same year, the Kunsthaus in Zurich acquired a copy of the model. In 1947, a proof appeared in a monographic exhibition at the Moos Gallery in Geneva[11] ; the work was then featured in numerous exhibitions devoted to the artist, most recently in a major retrospective at the Centre Pompidou in Paris and then at the Musée Fabre in Montpellier in 2023.[12].

In his thesis devoted to *a study and catalog essay of Germaine Richier's sculpted work in 1961*—just after the artist's death—Denis Milhau lists *Sava Alexandra* under number 188 and indicates that it is one of three editions. Our bronze is certainly one of the three referred to by the author, as he was in contact with Otto Bänninger, Germaine Richier's ex-husband, from whom our proof originates.

Charles Otto Bänninger (1897–1973) was a Swiss sculptor whom Germaine Richier met in Bourdelle's studio. Originally from Zurich, he practiced figurative sculpture, which lent itself well to monuments, for which he received numerous commissions in his country. The couple settled in Switzerland from 1939 to 1945; at the end of the war, Richier returned alone to Paris. She remained on very good terms with Otto Bänninger until the end of her life and continued to confide in him, as evidenced by their extensive correspondence and her regular visits to Switzerland.[13].

Our bronze was sold by Otto Bänninger to an important Swiss company that sponsors the arts in 1958. It came to us directly from this corporate collection.

The bronze does not bear a foundry stamp or numbering. We know that the artist did not usually number the casts she made[14]. It appears that some of hes later casts also do not bear a foundry mark, such as *La Chinoise**[15]* which was exhibited at the Centre Pompidou, and *Crapaud*, which is kept at the Kunsthaus in Zurich (inv. 1946/0009). These last two sculptures, without foundry stamps, are Pastori casts according to the 2024 catalogue raisonné[16]. Furthermore, it should be noted that the catalogue raisonné assigns numbers to these old casts, whereas the sculptures themselves do not bear any numbers. This is also the case for No. 92, *Sava Alexandra*, which leads us to believe that our bronze is theoretically 2/8, cast by Pastori[17].

To summarize, based on the catalogues raisonnés of 1961 (Milhau) and 2024 (Guiter), we can say that there are 9 or 10 bronzes of *Sava Alexandra*.

- 2 or 3 bronzes made during the artist's lifetime[18]:
  - including one Pastori cast, unnumbered, kept at the Kunsthaus in Zurich, acquired directly from the artist in 1946 (inv. 1946/0003).
  - and our bronze, probably cast by Pastori.
- 4 posthumous bronzes made by the Susse foundry (n°3/8 – 4/8 – 5/8 et 7/8)
- 2 posthumous Thinot casts (n° 6/8 et 8/8)
- 1 posthumous Godard cast (n°HC1)

Our bronze of *Sava Alexandra* therefore has an ancient provenance; it is probably a Pastori casting. It is the only one, or one of only two bronzes, made during Germaine Richier's lifetime and still available for inclusion in a private or public collection.

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[1] 2023 EXPOSITION, p.261 : Marino Marini, *Tête de Germaine Richier*, 1945, bronze, H. 27,2 cm, Villa Medici, Rome.
[2] 2006 DA COSTA, p.26.
[3] 2006 DA COSTA, p.49.
[4] The origin of these statues can be traced back to the cult of Terminus, the Roman god and guardian of boundaries. The son of Jupiter, he was initially represented by a large square stone or a tree stump, then given a head placed on a pyramidal boundary marker that served as a boundary for individuals or the State.
[5] In. Jean Paulhan, René de Solier, *Germaine Richier*, Paris, éditions Hautefeuille, 1957 : « L'une des découvertes de Germaine Richier peut être nommée *sculpture trouée*, à la frontière de plusieurs règnes ou domaines – de l'humain au géométrique. »

[6] Cité in 1961 MEMOIRE, p.224 : « Germaine Richier : on fait toujours la même sculpture » propos recueillis par Y. Taillandier – XXe siècle n°4 juin 1959.
[7] Pierre Descargues in. 2006 DA COSTA, p.69.
[8] In Zurich, a model came to pose in his studio every morning. The model may in fact have been Charlotte Muhlethaler, as the facial features closely resemble those of the bust entitled *Charlotte* from 1942 (no. 81 2024, CATALOGUE RAISONNE: it may be Mrs. Muhlethaler) and the morphology of the bust is reminiscent of *Torso II*, also known as *Muhlethaler*, from 1941 (No. 79, 2024 CATALOGUE RAISONNE). Germaine Muhlethaler (1916-2013) was a French-Swiss woman who was a member of the Resistance during the war and was very active around 1942 in helping French Jews flee to Switzerland. She moved in the same circles as Richier and later became a member of Jean Paulhan's circle of readers, who was close to Richier... Could these be the features of someone in his family?
[9] Citée par Paul Gruth dans Le Figaro littéraire, 7 avril 1956. (Propos rapportés dans L'Objet d'Art, hors-série n°165)
[10] 1946 ARTICLE, n°3.
[11] 1947 EXPOSITION, n°13 non repr.
[12] Which features the bronze cast from the Kunsthaus Zurich. (2023 EXPOSITION, p.99)
[13] We know that she spent the summer of 1950 in Zurich with Bänninger; she proposed that they officially end their marriage in April 1951; she wrote to her mother: "Friendship, true friendship remains" (Françoise Guiter archives); in the following years, she continued to make occasional visits to Switzerland; the divorce was finalized on April 14, 1954, but the correspondence continued. (2023 EXHIBITION, pp. 270-272)
[14] Richier's numbered sculptures are generally posthumous casts commissioned by the artist's heirs.
[15] 2023 EXPOSITION, p.80.
[16] 2024 CATALOGUE RAISONNÉ, p.548, n°68 : *La Chinoise* et n°70 : *Le Crapaud*.
[17] This art foundry was established in 1919 in Carouge (near Geneva) by Mario Pastori, who had recently arrived from Milan. Germaine Richier worked with him between 1939 and 1947.
[18] According to the catalogue raisonné compiled by Denis Milhau in 1961, there are three proofs, all of which were made during the artist's lifetime / according to Françoise Guiter's catalogue raisonné, there were two Pastori casts made during the artist's lifetime.