

Germaine Richier, from Montpellier to Montpellier

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Room Germaine Richier

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The post-war years,
between figuration
and abstraction

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English translation by Susan Schneider

Germaine Richier was only two when her family left Grans to settle in Castelnau-le-Lez, on the outskirts of Montpellier, where she would spend her childhood and youth in the family estate, the Prado. Sculpture quickly became her main centre of interest when she entered the Ecole des Beaux-Arts of Montpellier, enrolled for “drawing by imitation” in 1920, “all classes” in 1923 and finally “art history, decoration, sculpture” in 1925. She studied under the sculptor Guigues of Montpellier, to whom we owe a *Head of a Woman** in green serpentine stone. This former assistant to Rodin taught her the technique of direct carving which she would use little in her later work. As Guigues was director of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and curator of the Musée Fabre – both institutions housed in the same building – we might assume that he encouraged the pupils to study the collections assiduously. Yet in the early 1920s, the examples of sculptures that Germaine Richier might find there were essentially academic.

Awarded first prize with Youth, she graduated in 1926 and “went up to” Paris in the autumn. As the only private student of Antoine Bourdelle, creator of the *Head of Apollo** and an allegorical figure, the *Head of Eloquence**, she discovered the art of working from a life model, which marked a decisive shift in her practice. Set up in her own studio on the avenue du Maine in 1929, and then from 1933 moving to one on the avenue de Châtillon where she would remain for the rest of her life, she worked freelance from this date. It would now be her turn to take in pupils, including César Baldaccini, otherwise known as César.



Germaine Richier in front of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts de Montpellier during the winter 1920-21

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The *Loretto* is doubtless one of the most important works from this “realist” period, during which Germaine Richier increasingly created studies from life, busts and nudes. While this part of her work falls well within the scope of statuary of the interwar period and testifies to her mastery of her art, it already harbours a grating note. Teenage grace finds itself at variance with the bald head, scrawny almost rickety torso and the feet firmly anchored to the ground. The bodily disproportions convey an expressionist force that transcends the classical model, and the rigorous balance of the pose breaks with the harmony of the *contrapposto*. Germaine Richier devised her own idiom and gave herself over to an initial exploration of the expressive potential of the human body, the territory in which her whole oeuvre would evolve.

War broke out while she was in Zurich with her husband, the Swiss sculptor Otto Bänninger. She decided to stay there and opened a studio that would receive many pupils. The war years marked a turning point for Germaine Richier. The *Fencers**, dating from 1943, appeared as the pivot between the realist period and the rest of her oeuvre, remaining at the same time true to the teaching she had received, bearing the mark of her preoccupations with motion and heralding the imitated postures of animals and insects that were to ensue. While their stability is reminiscent of the *Loretto*, the frozen action is a portent of the disequilibrium to come. “I am not looking to reproduce movement but rather the thought of it. My statues should give the impression that they are both motionless and that they are going to move”, stated Richier.

In 1944, Germaine Richier began to incorporate the animal world into some of her human creations with the *Grasshopper*, followed by the plant world with the *Forest Man* in 1945. The inspiration came from her childhood in the countryside of the Languedoc region and its insects, which she would enjoy observing and playing with. This marked the beginning of a new series that critics termed “hybrid creatures” – disturbing at times and sometimes

* An asterisk indicates that the work mentioned is displayed in the room

peaceable, these works take the human being back to his origins, conveying equally well the violence of his urges and the permanence of his place in the cosmos.

1946 was an exceptionally productive year for Germaine Richier, as she completed three major works : the *Spider I**, the *Praying Mantis** and the *Bat**. In the *Spider I**, which joined the museum's collections thanks to a gift from the Association des Amis du Musée Fabre, Germaine Richier broke new ground by incorporating metal wires into her work. This invention would allow her to extend her sculptures spatially and to materialize lines of force, a device that recurs in particular in the *Ant* in 1953.



Germaine Richier at work on the *Fencer* with her model, in her studio, in Zurich, in 1943
Archives Françoise Guiter Archives / © Françoise Guiter / ADAGP

In the *Bat**, Germaine Richier uses a lowly material, oakum, for the first time : dipped into plaster, then strained and stretched out, it becomes a kind of gauzy netting which evokes the delicate nature of the membrane covering a bat's wings. Richier decided not to apply a patina to the sculpture for once, but to retain the natural state of the bronze which, when cleaned, is gold in colour. This technique, which recurs in the 1950s with *Cicada*, *Tauromachy* and the *Six-Headed Horse*, reveals another of the artist's preoccupations – that of reintroducing colour into sculpture. This therefore heralds the inlaying of coloured glass and painted plasterwork of the *Chess Board* created in the last few years of her life.

On her return to France in 1947, Germaine Richier's works were greeted with an increasing popularity. In 1950, she was commissioned to produce a crucifix for the Church of Notre-Dame-de-Toutes-les-Grâces, on the Plateau d'Assy. As one of the greatest manifestoes of post-war religious art, the church brings together all that is most important in modern art, including mosaics by Fernand Léger, stained glass by Bazaine and Rouault, ceramics by Chagall and Matisse, and paintings by Bonnard. Germaine Richier's *Christ*, quite bare in style, sparked an intense controversy ; it was removed in 1951 and would only be replaced and listed as a national monument in 1971.

One of Germaine Richier's last works, the *Mountain* (in the Cour Richier), is a recent addition to the Musée Fabre collections through a loan from the Musée National d'Art Moderne. In many respects, it represents the culmination of all of the artist's experimentations. Arranged around empty space, as in the wire sculptures, it depicts the battle of two creatures as in the *Fencers*. The obese and hollow body is reminiscent of that of Nardonne, Rodin's model who posed on numerous occasions for Germaine Richier. The thin figure evokes the praying mantis of the hybrid creature series. Also to be found here is the full, disproportionate foot fixing the sculpture to the ground, as in the *Loretto* of her early career.



Germaine Richier in her studio, in Paris, in the summer of 1956
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After an exhibition at the Musée National d'Art Moderne in 1956, Germaine Richier fell sick and stopped working for the first time. She went to live with her sister at the Domaine de la Tour d'Aling near Arles. She died in Montpellier on 31 July 1959 at the pinnacle of international fame. Museums in Antibes and Zurich, the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark, the Tate Modern in London, the Fondation Maeght in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, the Akademie der Künste in Berlin, the Pavilion of the Musée Fabre in Montpellier and the Peggy Guggenheim Foundation in Venice have since devoted important exhibitions to this sculptor who made a major contribution to twentieth-century art.