

KUNST UND BAU AMTSHAUS I

1922–1926

Frescoes at Amtshaus I (“Blüemlihalle”)
by Augusto Giacometti

The city of Zurich has rarely commissioned an artwork as large as the fresco paintings at Amtshaus I. Yet the crucial factor behind this decision was not a predilection for magnificent art. In fact, it was rather the city's aim to support local artists in need by offering them employments. Besides, the entrance hall at Amtshaus I was very dark, thus paintings on the lobby's walls would brighten up the space that had once been a basement. Its poor lighting had outlived the conversion of the onetime municipal orphanage into an office building. These modifications began in 1911, and in their course the old cellar became a vestibule to which an anteroom was attached. The original edifice had been designed by Gaetano Matteo Pisoni in classicist baroque style, and was inaugurated in 1771. During the years preceding World War I, Gustav Gull integrated Pisoni's structure into the complex of administrative buildings he erected on both sides of Urania street. In order to convert the former basement into Amtshaus I's main entrance, first the hill surrounding the building had to be ablated. In 1922, the city of Zurich invited six artists to hand in proposals for the painting of the walls and the vaulted ceiling of the vestibule. Augusto Giacometti (1877–1947) won the competition unambiguously. Praising his 'brilliant artistic approach', the jury were convinced by 'the powerful colours' of Giacometti's design, and they considered it 'an excellent invention' that his wall paintings would represent various crafts and professions. The winner of the competition was obliged to hire a team of 'skilled, unemployed painters' who would take on the project's execution, while the artist himself was only to assume 'the artistic direction and supervision' during the realisation of this epic work. Giacometti was born in Stampa, and had definitely settled in Zurich in 1915. Thanks to this major commission, he became one of the city's most prominent artists. For his staff, Giacometti selected his student Franz Riklin who was trained as a psychiatrist, and two painters who had already been working independently: Jakob Gubler and Giuseppe Scartezzini. In one of the ceiling's buttress arches, an

Italian inscription accounts for their cooperation: 'AUGUSTO GIACOMETTI MI IDEO. JAKOB GUBLER, FRANZ RIKLIN E GIUSEPPE SCARTEZZINI MI DIPINERO. LUGLIO 1923 – MARZO 1924'.

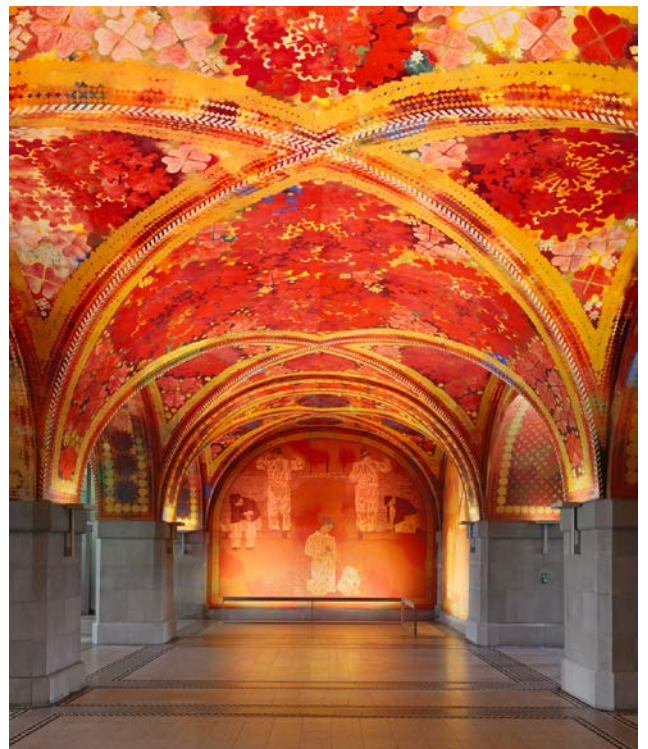
Right from the start, Giacometti's principals understood that he set out to transform the new vestibule into a unique space of colours. The municipal office for construction work also endorsed his idea to complement the four wall paintings in the actual lobby by adding two more in the anteroom. The six wall paintings were realised by Giacometti himself. However, the budget had its limits, too, and he had to give up his plan to use gold. Still, the reds and oranges dominating his paintings acquire an exceptionally intense luminosity, and its impact on the viewer feels almost sacred. Such an experience could be intimidating, yet the paintings seem to embrace us, like a warming skin or a velvety rug. This is an effect of the soft and undulated surfaces typical of fresco technique. In this medium, pure pigments are applied on wet, fresh lime plaster, and instead of hard-edged marker lines, only hatching is used to separate forms and colour patches. Actually, not the entire hall was painted in fresco. Artistic staff and plasterers alike had only little experience in the practice of this technique, and they proceeded much slower than had been expected, hence time and again they took to painting in secco. This was a rather imprudent move, as was to become manifest soon; secco technique allows for painting on dry plaster but the layers of paint have a rather poor adhesion on that undercoat. In the lobby's southwestern corner, we can detect a more refined hatching technique, indicating that Giacometti himself had painted that group of vaults. The largest part of the paintings, however, was realised by his assistants.

The paintings on the ceilings and in the vaults are purely ornamental. Their synergy derives from a set of geometrical patterns that may either float freely, or come in stringent lines. The motifs are recurring, with subtle variations that appear to be organic. In the vaults, each arris is lined by a band of white rhombuses. They are bordered by further

straps, among them the frieze of ochre laurel leaves framing the painted areas in the vaults. Some less defined motifs, like rosettes, stars, and crosses may recall flowers, but they might just as well show celestial phenomena. There are even interlocking circles with jagged edges that look like cogwheels. Anyhow, 'Blüemlihalle' ('The Hall of Little Flowers') seems an inappropriate title for Giacometti's work, though this name has been popular for a while now. Today, Augusto Giacometti is rightfully acknowledged as one of the pioneers of abstract art. Already when living in Paris, around the turn of the century, he had largely abandoned representational painting. Inspired by his teacher Eugène Grasset, Giacometti gave up his naturalistic approach, and learned to transfer his nature studies into ornamentations following the art nouveau style. Grasset also encouraged him to delve into the laws of colour, and his teacher's motto 'Il faut faire de belles choses' remained a guideline throughout Giacometti's life.

The six wall paintings in fresco resume the basic colour tone of the ceiling paintings, yet their symbolic character is clearly setting them apart from the opulent decor of the arches. On the walls, we see figures, painted flatly and in light colours. It had been Giacometti's intention here to capture the full array of human activities in the region of Zurich: on the paintings in the anteroom, female reapers and winegrowers reference the fertile farmlands spreading around the town. Inside the hall, two opposite corners are adorned with frescoes. One depicts masons and a stone carver, paired with carpenters to their right, who were to represent the craftsmen's trades fundamental for the city's life. The two paintings opposite that corner address the realm of science and intellectual professions, showing an astronomer with a telescope, and a magician pointing at Pythagoras' theorem. Both figures allegorise the human aspiration to understand the world's organisation, and to identify the laws underlying those systems.

Only after Augusto Giacometti's death, the public learned that he had been a Freemason, and had joined Zurich's lodge Modestia cum Libertate in 1919. This fact may indeed account for many symbolic features in Giacometti's art. Yet it remains difficult to tell up to which extent his silhouetted figures are representing Masonic ideas, and how much of their design is indebted to art nouveau. Indisputably, Giacometti, born in Bergell, achieved in this work a splendid materialisation of the vision once uttered by Hermann Herter, then Head of municipal construction works and architecture: 'Zurich — a city of colours'.



During World War II, the entrance hall was converted into a storage space, and the frescoes were damaged so severely that Giacometti considered them to be 'lost'. The painting of the hall had actually cost 'a neat sum of money', he bitterly wrote in view of the damages, but now he regretted 'that the whole affair hadn't been three-times as expensive'.

Caroline Kesser, 2016

ART Augusto Giacometti (1877-1947), frescoes in the entrance of the Amtshaus I ("Blüemlihalle"), 1922-1926, fresco technique (al fresco and al secco)

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