

THE LACHAISE FOUNDATION

575 Madison Avenue, 10th floor
New York, NY 10022-2511

Marie P. Charles, Trustee Frederick D. Ballou, Trustee David Boit, Trustee
Elizabeth A. Fleming, Trustee Paula R. Hornbostel, Director & Trustee Ronald D. Spencer, Trustee



Front view



Back view

Gaston Lachaise
Male Torso, 1930
Alabaster
5 ½ inches high
LF 89

Collection Middlebury
College Museum of Art,
Middlebury, VT

Literature

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, *Gaston Lachaise 1882–1935: Sculptures and Drawings*, 1963, no. 89, not ill.

Exhibitions

Gaston Lachaise Sculptures & Drawings, Los Angeles County Museum, March 12, 1963 – January 19, 1964, traveled to The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, February 18 – April 5, 1964.

Notes

Male Torso, 1930, is a rare, small work in alabaster depicting a simplified male torso with upraised arms. The subject matter, appearance and material are characteristic of Lachaise and the abundant toolmarks provide insight to the artist’s working methods and artistic process and can be compared with other direct-carved works from his oeuvre.

The artist likely carved this torso during the beginning of his late period, a time busy with commissions involving the male figure. It is a myth that Lachaise depicted only the female figure, though he did admit ‘Woman’ to be his preferred subject. Between 1927 and 1933, Lachaise made six major sculptures of the male nude figure. At work on one, he wrote to Isabel in 1934, “I do not know and love the male figure as the ‘Woman,’” (Gaston Lachaise to Isabel Lachaise, Beinecke Library, Yale University, November 11, 1934).

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Career and Commission

Starting in the 1920s, after his first one-man exhibition in 1918 and a major commission for the ATT building (lobby frieze at 195 Broadway in New York, still extant), Lachaise began a series of portraits, a subject familiar to him since his early days as an artist. He made them in clay, plaster, bronze, marble and alabaster of friends, artists, and literary figures, many male, from E. E. Cummings (1925) (LF 141) to Alfred Stieglitz (1925–27) (LF 152) to John Marin (1927) (LF 68) but a good number of them female, from Augusta Hartman (1923) to Marianne Moore (1924-25) to Georgia O’Keeffe (1925–27).*

More commissions followed. Architects who had worked with Lachaise turned to him for personal work. Arthur Meigs commissioned a portrait of his horse Madrigal; Welles Bosworth commissioned reliefs of the Four Seasons for his home in Locust Valley, NY; and Philip L. Goodwin, who would design the 1939 Museum of Modern Art in New York, commissioned no less than seven projects of Lachaise, including a bronze radiator cap for his car, a peacock fountain for his home in Syosset, NY—on loan from the Lachaise Foundation to the California State University, San Bernardino—and a male acrobat carved of ivory now at Yale University Art Gallery.

Goodwin’s most significant commission of Lachaise: to render the male nude, specifically a life-size portrait of his 19-year-old assistant, Gregory Slader. Lachaise made several versions. The carved marble original dated 1927 is in the collection of the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, Connecticut; the life-size bronze, copyrighted 1928, was in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum (since deaccessioned) and a smaller work known as *Baseball Player*, 1928, is privately owned. The male figure being a relatively new subject for Lachaise, he executed many drawings during the process, which are today in collections world-wide. In early 1928 Lachaise included a bronze cast of the “Athlete” in his solo exhibition at Brummer Gallery on 57th street in New York City. The critic Harvey Perkins called it “a most remarkable bronze figure of an athlete, naturalistic but powerful, mass receding into mass, as solid and as beautiful as an Egyptian column.”

At about this time Lachaise began work on a monumental male nude, which he references in his personal statement published in *Creative Art* in 1928:

Of late a vision of the form of “Man” is growing more clear and precise to me. I must begin to attempt to realize it. Undoubtedly he will be the son of “Woman”.

(“A Comment on my Sculpture,” *Creative Art*, August 1928, pp. xxiii-xxvi.) In 1930, one year after the crash of the stock market, Abby Rockefeller made sure that this “Man,” later known as *Heroic Man*, was included in a group exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, then just a year old. A female reporter wrote that the work, not yet in its final state, “contains all the elements of a thrill, surprise and final delight that an important work of art should call for.” (Margaret Breuning, *New York Evening Post*, Dec 6, 1930). Casts of the final version were acquired by Walter Chrysler (now at the Chrysler Museum); Nelson Rockefeller (now at Kykuit, the Rockefeller Estate in Pocantico Hills, NY); and the New Orleans Museum of Art. The Foundation’s cast, traveled to Museums in Europe and is on loan to LongHouse Reserve in East Hampton, NY, chosen in 2014 by Jack Lenor Larsen.

In 1931, E. E. Cummings was visiting Lachaise’s studio at 55 West 8th street and commented on the modernity of his friend’s work. Lachaise repeated the comment to Isabel:

“[I]n seeing the things in the studio [Cummings] said ‘it is good to see something ‘still alive’ he said in France they repeat themselves helplessly. Picasso is now an old priest.’”

(Gaston Lachaise to Isabel Lachaise, July 13, 1931, Beinecke Library, Yale University).

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Rockefeller Center Reliefs

In 1932, Lachaise designed four large limestone reliefs for the western addition to 30 Rockefeller Plaza, the R.C.A. Building (Radio Corporation of America), 1250 Avenue of the Americas, Rockefeller Center, New York, NY. They were: "The Gifts of Earth to Mankind," "Genius Seizing the Light of the Sun," "The Conquest of Space," and "The Spirit of Progress." Each relief included the representation of at least one male figure, and each was reviewed by the Art Advisory Committee, which included the architects, (Corbett, Reinhard, Harrison & Hood); the engineers (John R. Todd); the developers (Nelson Rockefeller), and the Museum Directors, Edward Forbes of Harvard; Fiske Kimbell of Philadelphia; Paul J Sachs of Harvard; and Colonel Arthur Woods, President of Rockefeller Center, Inc. Four more male figures make up the pair of reliefs for 45 Rockefeller Plaza commissioned in 1934.

1933 World's Fair, Chicago

For the 1933 Century of Progress exhibition in Chicago Lachaise completed a giant portal for the Electricity building celebrating technological innovations. The central figure is a large man with arms raised and wearing headphones from which he is detecting radio waves.

Lincoln Kirstein

A discussion of the male figure in the oeuvre of Lachaise must include Lincoln Kirstein, one of Lachaise's key supporters and the executor of his estate. Kirstein's knowledge of the sculptor began at least as early as his college years. In 1929 while at Harvard College, Kirstein included Lachaise in an exhibition organized by the Harvard Society of Contemporary Art. He also published Lachaise's work in the *Hound and Horn*, a literary quarterly he founded at Harvard. In 1932–33 Lachaise made a full-figure nude portrait of Kirstein. The source of the pose was a small Egyptian statuette of the god Amun, "the hidden one," c. 945–712 BC, which Kirstein and Lachaise had seen together in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In his introduction to Lachaise's retrospective exhibition (MoMA, 1935), Kirstein observed that Lachaise "admires the clarity, precision and anonymity of the Egyptian stone carvers, craftsmen who were capable of taking human models, private or king, and elevating them into godhead, the cut stone becoming not only a portrait but an expressed fragment of divine vitality, an idol worthy of worship." (MoMA 1935). This poignant description applies aptly to the small carved stone torso of a male figure which is the subject of this essay.

In 1933 Lachaise was commissioned to make a portrait of the painter George L. K. Morris. He made a handsome marble bust and a bronze, full-figure nude portrait with a tennis racket. Both are in the collection of the Frelinghuysen-Morris House and Studio in Lenox, Massachusetts. From the full-figure portrait, Lachaise crafted a stunning 7 ³/₄ inch high male torso (LF 75) (ill.), which is a near exact replica of the back of the figure. We know of one example of this torso (Collection of the Renee and Chaim Gross Foundation, NY, recently exhibited in *Artists and Immigrants 2022*).

Not unlike the bronze torso, the delicate, expressive torso in alabaster is undoubtedly the product of his inspiration surrounding his work on the idealized male portrait. It can be seen as a distillation and synthesis of his many projects depicting the male figure but on an intimate scale.

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Work in Alabaster

Alabaster was a material Lachaise used throughout his career, reserving it for his most valuable clients and precious subjects. As early as the spring of 1919, E. E. Cummings in his review of a Penguin Club exhibition mentions an alabaster relief by Lachaise. Another alabaster relief, perhaps the same, is listed as being in the collection of the artist, Robert W. Chanler (list located at the Beinecke Library at Yale University). In the mid-twenties Lachaise crafted a 6-inch alabaster statuette, "Venus" (LF 50) for the dollhouse of his friends, the Stettheimers (Museum of the City of New York) and a sleek female torso owned until his death by Alfred Stieglitz (LF 336) (Collection of the Art Institute of Chicago). Alabaster, too, was the cool stone of choice for Lachaise's portrait of Georgia O'Keeffe— a kind of wedding portrait, celebrating her 1924 marriage to Stieglitz (LF 60) (Metropolitan Museum of Art). With the proceeds of the sale of one of her paintings, O'Keeffe purchased a stunning alabaster by Lachaise, *Nude Bending Backwards*, signed 1928 (LF 185) in the Collection of the Harvard University Art Museums. Also in alabaster: another relief (LF 59); a portrait of Urling Sibley Iselin, 1927 (LF 279); two sleeping seagulls, one in the Collection of the Cleveland Museum (LF 61); a mask of his niece Marie Pierce, 1928 (LF 327); a portrait of Timothy Seldes, 1931 (LF 90); and a portrait of Edward Warburg, 1933 (LF 102).

The myriad toolmarks visible on this small torso are signs of Lachaise's hand and working method. Lachaise had a dozen or more rasps, and the tiny little lines visible in the surface of the torso recall the marks on the original plaster model of *Torso of Elevation*, coming from the clay original on which he would have used a rasp. The plaster was exhibited in his lifetime in his 1935 Retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and most recently at the [Portland Museum of Art where it was exhibited alongside the artist's tools](#), where it was accompanied by an interactive multimedia instructive video with commentary by Harvard Art Museums' conservator Tony Sigel. A link to a video of the video, with additional biographical introduction is available by clicking on the above link.

Lachaise's Aim

Coming on the heels of his elegant manner of the 1920s, which was marked by controlled modelling and perfection of finish, Lachaise's later style was characterized by a "creative preoccupation with segments of the . . . figure . . . to emphasize sculptural volumes," "but also," as Lachaise told a reporter in 1935, "to call attention to that which is important." In this interview Lachaise touched on his aim and artistic process. "What I am aiming to express is the glorification of the human being, of the human body, of the human spirit, with all that is daring, of magnificence, of significance...My method is sublimation and amplification of what is significant."

Male Torso & Cummings

In this alabaster *Male Torso* Lachaise draws our attention to the part of the body he loved best. As a reporter stated: "He thinks the torso the most expressive and important part of the human body." (*Time* July 23, 1934). In the small alabaster torso are the characteristic raised arms, conveying jubilation or simply physical activity, such as the pitching of a baseball or the receiving of radio waves. Slightly abstract, it is a potent reduction of mass to pure form, elegance, and expression. This is a fantastic example of what E E Cummings was trying to capture when he called Lachaise "The man through whose touch a few cubic inches become colossal," (*Creative Art Magazine*, August 1928).

Linda Nochlin on Lachaise

In her short essay on Lachaise, published in conjunction with an exhibition of drawings by Lachaise at the New York Studio School, the art historian Linda Nochlin writes of the "ecstatically raised arms" of a woman in a drawing owned by Agnes Rindge Claflin, her mentor at Vassar.

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Influence of Ancient Art, Rodin and Brancusi

Key to an understanding of Lachaise is understanding his appreciation of the art of others, from the ancient Egyptians and Hindu sculptors to Auguste Rodin and Brancusi. "His visits to the Louvre taught him more than he learned at the École des Beaux Arts," Gallatin wrote. (A. E. Gallatin, "Gaston Lachaise," *The Arts*, vol III no 6, June 1923). The *Winged Nike of Samothrace* combined with the Asian art he admired at the Musée Guimet and the smooth polished surfaces of Brancusi, inform his unique 20th century vision. His step-son, Edward Nagle, wrote this in an unpublished essay entitled "Lachaise and Houdon" c. 1933:

Lachaise analyzed the heterogeneous America which Walt Whitman catalogues. Into [his] figure [of] Woman he placed Indians, cowboys, cowgirls, the dancers Genee Pavlova, St Denis, Isadora Duncan, our seashore and mountains, our cities, but also the accumulative power of all great sculpture, to which we are heirs, the Cro Magnon Venus as well as the Venus de Milo, the Minoan Snake Goddess, the Roman Matron, Houdon's Diana, Siva, Budha, and the love of a great heart."

Lachaise described his artistic principle. "My method is sublimation and amplification of what is significant. My work is my work. I am not ashamed of it. I will not hide it. You might as well ask me to put pink ribbons on it. . . I will not break any bones to achieve effects. The flesh could be distorted, but no bones must be broken." (Interview with the artist, *New York Herald Tribune*, January 1, 1935).

Lachaise often reduced the full figure to its parts, settling most often on the torso. For example, from *Kneeling Figure* (LF 111) Lachaise produced a torso. Perhaps inspired by his predecessor, Rodin, whose work he admired, he reduced the figure to its simplest form. The Harvard Art Museums has the first bronze cast (LF 96), where the lip of the proper right leg is upraised, lifted directly from the original pose. As he developed this torso, as he did with other works, (eg. *Classic Torso*, LF 70, in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum), Lachaise made the legs symmetrical, and refined the finish, approaching the sleek polish of Brancusi which he admired. Similarly, the sleek, white, polished marble *Torso* 1924 (LF 336) at the Art Institute of Chicago has a Brancusian elegance and simplicity. This female torso was owned by Alfred Stieglitz until his death and, though larger, suggests the finish Lachaise may have been aiming for in his male torso.

Gilbert Seldes on Lachaise

Lachaise ends his brief autobiography, hand-written for Gilbert Seldes who was writing an article on the artist for the *New Yorker Magazine* in 1931, with these words: "stone, granite, marble, clay, bronze etc . . . all seem to come to this—overcome their resistance. They will respond. Overpower their forces; They will smash. Inside of this it is up to the artist to carve and to model. Small theory again. Everything depends on the result and the result depends on what a man has to say."

This original small carved male torso, described once as unfinished, and once inventoried as female, is the only example known to the Foundation. While it bears similarities with work from the late twenties, it was given the date of 1930 by Madame Lachaise, the artist's widow, and included in the 1963–64 exhibition *Gaston Lachaise: Sculptures and Drawings* which opened at Los Angeles County Museum and traveled to the Whitney Museum of American Art in NY.

Here follow a few drawings that relate to his commissions involving his exploration of the male figure. I have chosen several with upraised arms. Other drawings of the male figure by Lachaise may be found in the National Gallery of Australia; Harvard University Art Museums, MA; the Museum of Modern Art, NY; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY; the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, CA; Princeton University Museum, NJ; the Weatherspoon Art Museum, NC; the Wadsworth Athenaeum, CT; the Whitney Museum of American Art and Yale University Art Museum.

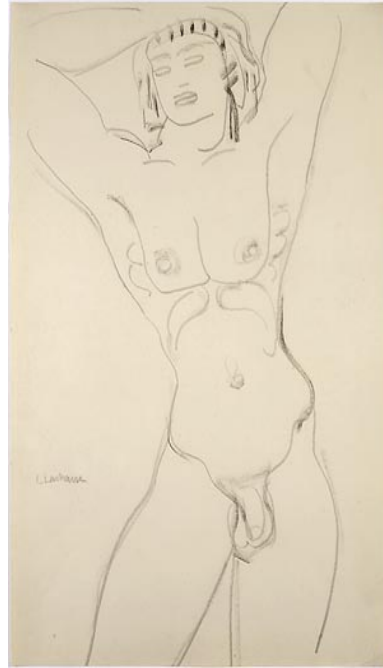
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The Hound & Horn, 1932,
July–September vol V, no. 4.



GLD 1 Lachaise male nude drawing,
on the market

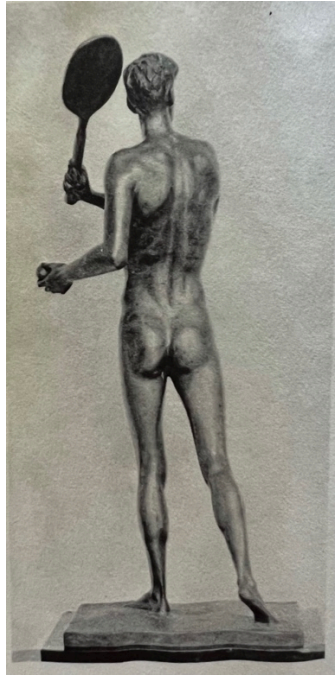


JBP 307 *Male Nude with Arms Raised*,
Lachaise Foundation

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LF 99 *Boy with a Tennis Raquet*,
George L K Morris, 1933



LF 75 *Male Torso (Foy)*,
Collection Renee & Chaim Gross Foundation, NY

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Addenda

In 1924 A. E. Gallatin published a monograph on Lachaise. He observed: "It is worthwhile to recall the opening sentences of Walter Pater's essay on the poetry of Michelangelo, in which he enumerates some of the elements which are common to all vital art, for they make an excellent avenue of approach to a correct understanding and appreciation of the art of Gaston Lachaise. Pater tells us that one is in variably surprised and excited in the presence of a true work of art, but we must be charmed as well, he continues, and the strangeness must be a lovely strangeness, such as the blossoming of the aloe." Two years later the music critic Paul Rosenfeld noted: "The state of abundance lies about all sculpture by Gaston Lachaise. Bellying molds of somber marble, nickel, and bronze pasture the eye on gravities and amplitudes. Lachaise's sculpture shows numerous instances of happy abstraction . . . the woman fulfilled in giving life," ("Habundia," *Dial Magazine*, 1926, p. 217).

In 1934, as he was designing reliefs for 45 Rockefeller Plaza, Lachaise wrote to Isabel, "Aimée I am sorry that you are still mad at me. I am sure that you are fully justify to be so. I am having a debauch of work. I am undressing all my male friend[sic] . . . Nison . . . 'geege'. . . Kirstein will come next week—I am using the advantage of "models," as a starting base for this work—the bottom of it, is that I do not know, and love the male figure as the "Woman". [Gaston Lachaise to Isabel Lachaise, Beinecke Library, Yale University, November 11, 1934]

Helen Appleton Read reviewing Gaston Lachaise's retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, wrote... "such eternal and elemental themes as fecundity and the life force are expressed in such monumental conceptions... any fears that art is moribund would seem to be groundless." (*Brooklyn Eagle*, February 10, 1935).

Here is a link to another male nude, dated 1930–31 in the National Gallery of Australia Canberra.
<https://searchthecollection.nga.gov.au/object/105903?keyword=Gaston%20lachaise&includeParts>.

And to an entry on Gregory Slader, Athlete, LF 99, written with the help of Virginia Budny, Lachaise scholar.
<https://www.christies.com/privatesales/rockefeller-plaza-the-rise-of-modernism-in-the-metropolis#slideshow-section>

Text by Paula R. Hornbostel, Lachaise Foundation Director and Trustee

*others include: Antoinette Kraushaar (1923); Margery Spencer (1923–24); Elsie Plaut Kahn (1924) Eda Hartman Boyle (1925); Hildegard Lasell Watson (1925); Helen Teschner Tas (1928); Aline Meyer Liebman (1929) Georgette Ouzounoff, Mrs Mrs. Rockefeller's dressmaker (1932); Evelyn Gerstein Garfield (1934); Katherine Warren (1933); Marian Seldes and Alice Seldes (1931); Juliana Rieser Force (1934); and Christiana Councilman Morgan (1934–35).