

GIORGIO DE CHIRICO¹

by Albert C. Barnes

Ten years ago, in a preface to a catalogue of an exhibition in Paris of paintings by Giorgio de Chirico², I stated that his work demonstrated the validity of the conception of modern philosophy that intelligence means the application of definite ideas to the interpretation of personal experience. The pictures offered objective evidence that de Chirico's ideas are those of a mystic poet who has assimilated the essentials of the intellectual content of the great classics of literature and painting, and has utilized them to tell us what the world of today means to him.

De Chirico cannot be classified in any of the modern schools of painting, even though what he was the first to put into painting has been abstracted by others and elaborated into a system of philosophy and a school of painting labelled surrealism. De Chirico has disavowed his legitimate title as father of the movement, just as he has always remained unidentified with the cubists, the impressionists, the fauves and the other groups. He has simply continued the efforts to express in his own way his own reaction to the world of the past and present. One need but be familiar with the work of outstanding contemporary painters, including Matisse and Picasso, to identify in their pictures ideas which were introduced for the first time by de Chirico. It is likewise true that the ideas of the leading contemporaries have often acquired new esthetic significance through de Chirico's ability to assimilate essentials and to reconstruct them in the terms of his own experience. Examples of this are his pictures of 1926 and later, in which important features of the abstract painting of Picasso were translated and incorporated as an integral part of a new and more colorful form. Similarly, de Chirico at times carries to realms untouched by Matisse, the latter's concentration upon patterns of daring color-contrasts as a source of esthetic pleasure.

De Chirico's position as one of the most important painters of our time is due to the fact that he creates out of line, color, light and space, a form which conveys its meaning without being bolstered up by sentimentalism or literalism: it speaks its own language naturally definitely and in an idiom which is de Chirico's own. It is a form that is legitimately within the great traditions because de Chirico, like his great predecessors, found in the means at his disposal, a new way to convey the values which give the old masters' work its essential significance. The present exhibit abounds in evidence upon this point: the early *Self-Portrait*, No. 2, for example, compared with Raphael's portrait of *Count Baldassare Castiglione* in the Louvre, does not suffer in strength of drawing or profound

¹ A. C. Barnes, *Giorgio de Chirico*, introduction to the exhibition catalogue *Recent Paintings by Giorgio de Chirico*, Julien Levy Gallery, October 28 - November 17, 1936, New York. The text is published with the permission of The Barnes Foundation, Merion, Pennsylvania.

² The 'de' of de Chirico, which was omitted in the original publication, has been added in this transcription.

expression of human character, it is more tightly knit compositionally and its color is deeper and better integrated in the form. This does not mean that de Chirico ranks higher as an artist than Raphael; it means that in the centuries that have elapsed since the Florentine lived³, many succeeding painters have each contributed something to make pictures more significant, and that de Chirico has utilized these contributions to give a new and fuller meaning to the Florentine form as found in Raphael.

A search for further illustrations of this same principle of enrichment of antecedent traditions by de Chirico's creative use of the means placed at his disposal by the passage of time, offers a particularly enlightening and refreshing experience to the serious student of painting. In No. 1 for example, de Chirico translates imaginatively the spirit if not the letter of Mantegna's *Parnassus* (Louvre) through the medium of equally clean-cut drawing and solidly colorful figures, placed just as appealingly in spatial relations with other compositional units, and with much more lively color, better realized movement, and entirely free from the coldness of Mantegna's stone-like figures. Picture No. 19 is another version of the same general theme but with contours loose almost to the point of diffuseness, and embellished with a Renoir-like sky which fits harmoniously into a color-scheme of brighter and more delicate tones than are used in painting No. 1. Here, as often with de Chirico, his fine mastery of the subtle use of space enables him to add much to the interest of sky, water and ground by a great variety of internal patterns formed of well-adapted proportions of line, light, color and space. Painting No. 22 is de Chirico's interpretation of a classic frieze-theme enriched by a great variety of colors and picturesque internal patterns in the individual units. Another example of this interpretation of a traditional form is found in No. 20 which recalls Poussin's *Ecstasy of St. Paul* (Louvre) in compositional arrangement and general feeling, but without a suggestion of Poussin's style, color or drawing. The movement is more active than Poussin's, and a decentralization of the main masses gives a bizarre effect radically different from the set, formal quality in Poussin's compositions.

De Chirico depicts horses so frequently that unless one identifies their varied compositional purposes, these paintings would be monotonous. One reason for this apparent repetition may be the universal tendency that whatever human beings do well they are likely to do often, in season and out of season. De Chirico probably knows that few painters ever put as much life and vigor into a picture of a horse as he does: the movement of Rubens' horses, for example, is usually rendered – more adventitiously than convincingly – by means of the familiar swirl. De Chirico's horses are drawn in the best sense, that is, integrated units of light, line, color and space work in conjunction to put into a horse the qualities that make him what he is. It is never a literal representation and, indeed, even when he renders objects literally, they are usually so related to each other that the effect is fantastic. This strange combination of literalness and fancy which characterizes de Chirico's work is evidence of the artist's ever-active imagination; and his ability to make his imaginative reconstruction of familiar objects as well as the traditional forms of painting the means to express his own individuality, is a mark of a line and well-directed intelligence.

³ In actual fact, Raphael was born in Urbino and worked on and off in Florence from 1504-1508.

Another phase of de Chirico's work that rewards careful study is his skill in the use of paint. His actual pigment is the same as that used by other painters but his color is always clear and definite, never muddy, and the exoticism of his color-ensemble is individual to himself and is an integral part of the total form. His colors are bright, delicate, fresh and dry, and their ensemble constitutes de Chirico's version of the color-form of Italian frescoes. They are well related in positive patterns in the formation of which light is as active as color, so that all the components are really color-light units. The patterns fall into two general categories, one an interrelation of predominantly vertical and horizontal elements, as in picture No. 22; the other pattern is more definitely curvilinear, with numerous swirling units, as in most of the pictures in which horses figure. These categories are separable only upon analysis and are mentioned because a study of the interplay of the two types reveals de Chirico's ingenuity in achieving a great variety of effects in color, lighting, space-composition and total organization. This phase of his work is comparable to Cézanne's habitual adaptation of the folds in napkins and tablecloths to the exigencies of particular designs.

De Chirico is important because he has something to say to all persons sufficiently sensitive and informed to take in the significance of his message. What he reveals in his interpretations of his great predecessors' messages is a grasp of the essentials of the originals, recast by their passage through a fertile imagination re-enforced by a background of classic lore and a comprehension of what the creative artists of today are telling the world through the medium of their work. His paintings is as definitely Italian as Giotto's or Titian's, and the poetry and mysticism of these artists reappear in de Chirico tempered by a strange and appealing exoticism. His personality reflects the serenity, the equilibrium, the constant and well-directed efforts of his great compatriots of the Italian Renaissance. And he has used legitimately this ancestral heritage in making meaningful his own poetic and mystic vision of the world of today.

Catalogue

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| 1. Alexandros* | 14. Picador |
| 2. Self-Portrait | 15. and 16. Flying Phantom |
| 3. The Artist And His Mother | 17. The Artist In His Studio |
| 4. 5. 6. and 7. Mysterious Bathing | 18. The Noble And The Shop-Keeper |
| 8. Colonial Mannequins | 19. Dioscures |
| 9. 10. and 11. Horses Of The Hellespont | 20. Heroic Combat |
| 12. Bucephalos | 21. Horses Of Tragedy* |
| 13. The Rebel | |

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