

## IMMORTALITY TO GIORGIO DE CHIRICO

*Paolo Picozza*

*“...and then, who says I am not immortal?”*

In his editorial contribution to “Valori Plastici” in 1919 Giorgio de Chirico wrote: “Today more than ever before Italy needs an art periodical to clear up misunderstandings, put things in their correct place and give every artist and every work of art the place it deserves”.

For many reasons the *today* Giorgio de Chirico spoke of is still current. Unfortunately, after almost a century a number of old misunderstandings persist, such as the timeworn attempt to demonize de Chirico saying that he distorted his personal history, or accusing him of being mixed up in ambiguous matters regarding the forgery of his work. Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico is proud to answer to such controversy, even with the voice this *art periodical* provides and does so uniquely by the power of an intellectual process free from prejudice, and by holding high its moral duty of clarifying that which the Maestro had hoped to make clear.

Light and shadow therefore, but perhaps more light than shadow: if today, thirty years after the artist’s death, we take stock of the incommensurable spiritual legacy the Maestro from Volos left us, and also take into consideration the work achieved by the many scholars who have helped to make his oeuvre known, we can see that the fog has lifted and a clear image of the authentic artist and extraordinary man that is Giorgio de Chirico has finally come to light. As always, it is with the sincere intention of bringing clarity to de Chirico’s life and oeuvre that we present this new issue of “Metafisica” in occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of his death. In addition to the significant and original studies, especially those by young scholars, this issue contains documents of true and inestimable cultural value and constitutes a point of departure for further exploration and contemplation on Giorgio de Chirico’s art.

The Foundation continues its arduous endeavour to contrast a persisting phenomena of defamation in which, along with the intent of creating scandal, a core of mercantile interest can even be identified. This effort is undertaken with the only invincible weapons that exist, which are those of Art and Culture. By furthering research and offering readers *original material* as instruments for the forming of autonomous critical judgement, creative debate between scholars can be stimulated. With regard to this last point, it is important to note how a group of specialists of different training and different, if indeed not contrasting opinion, has formed over the past decades and has channelled interest toward

innumerable aspects of de Chirico's oeuvre. Almost all great art historians and art critics – let alone artists – have unfailingly come across some element or detail in de Chirico's oeuvre or his thought and have endeavoured on a continuous, intense dialogue with the artist, which is rich with ferment.

The text that Salvatore Quasimodo, Nobel Prize winner for Literature, wrote about Giorgio de Chirico is pertinent even today. This extraordinary artistic, spiritual and cultural biography on the artist and his epoch, written in 1966 and published in 1968, is almost unknown. Presenting it today signifies shedding the light of these two great Italian minds onto Twentieth-century consciousness: the writer and the painter. The poet recognized de Chirico as he who: “succeeded in taking hold of our memory with the literary and emotional breadth of artists from the past”. He speaks of the real obstacles that de Chirico had to face and the spiritual strength with which he overcame them: “Perhaps de Chirico's metaphysics are the journey of a hero who must succeed at tests of courage, a descent into the springtime Hades, as takes place in Hesoid's poetry, a dock for the reality-as-dream sailing ship to the island of the Beyond”; and: “Melancholy is an intelligence which is compelled to cohabit the earth with vulgarity: this is how de Chirico understands the meaning of the Superman, namely in its unique value. The talented artist is the solitary dialectic amongst assaults organised by the aesthetic spoilers; he lives within the struggle to overcome the intentional obstacles of his mediocre companions who seek to interrupt and ruin his every monad-initiative with schools and trends.”<sup>1</sup> It was with great sensitivity and vision that Quasimodo declared in 1966 (in full Neo-metaphysical season): “De Chirico is master of himself and it would be unjust and superficial to divide his creative season into descendent and ascendant periods, in early and later styles: the metaphysical bridge has not crumbled with his more ‘real’ figurative art of today.” The poet also foresaw the psychoanalytic burden projected upon de Chirico's person *even then*: “We do not deny the weight of adolescence that bears upon one's individual fate but we also want to measure the grade of ‘importance’ that early memories attain in the adult. One cannot reduce de Chirico to a sort of psychiatric clip-board case as some would like to”. As we have seen recently, this burden continues to obscure the lens with which to observe, discover and understand the Great Metaphysician, just as Quasimodo had perceived forty years ago.<sup>2</sup>

With this new issue we confirm the intuition expressed in the opening issue of our Periodical according to which Giorgio de Chirico constitutes a true *discipline of research*: magnetically attracting and bringing bright intellectuals together in an a force field in which thought is renewed. The force of attraction that the artist's work exercises has generated an evident and significant convergence of art historians, regardless of personal cultural origins.

The Foundation, whose position is one of impartiality, is extremely satisfied to see so many scholars show interest in de Chirico, even when they hold different positions and diverse viewpoints.

<sup>1</sup> See G. de Chirico's comment on the awarding of the Nobel Prize in Literature to Salvatore Quasimodo: *Poesia e Pseudopoesia. Scemenza mondiale ed esterofilia italiana* (Poetry and pseudo-poetry. Worldwide foolishness and Italian xenophilia). “Last year the Nobel Prize in Literature, which is the greatest award for literature, and much more important than the Goncourt award, was awarded to the Italian poet Quasimodo: it would have been better if the gentlemen in Stockholm had indeed never done so! Quasimodo was almost scalped, cut into slices, even volatilised by the anger and the spite of the greater part of our writers and most of our intellectuals. The spectacle was not only comic, but rather shameful and even sad. Every Italian with the least amount of dignity and patriotic feeling should have been happy to hear the news that the most important prize for poetry had been awarded to an Italian, especially as the award came from a foreign country.” “Candido”, Milan, February 26, 1961.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed his foresight proved correct as even recently there are scholars who continue in the wake of André Breton to give a totally deviating vision of the great artist's personality and oeuvre.

The amplitude of attention that the artist enjoys has also contributed to isolating those who, under the influence of a retrograde surrealist attitude, still persist in supporting a reductive image of Giorgio de Chirico bound exclusively to his first Metaphysical period. Today, this take on the artist appears absolutely ridiculous inasmuch as the subject has been amply treated and clarified once and for all. In line with that which I sustained in the first issue of this periodical in 2002<sup>3</sup>, the well-respected scholar Maurizio Calvesi has demonstrated through the power of fact or rather *through images* the concept that “de Chirico’s Metaphysical Art is one period only, from 1910 to 1978, whilst the keys to its interpretation are numerous: with regard to the artist’s freedom and the scholar’s liberty<sup>4</sup>”, with the exhibition of the unmistakable title “*La Metafisica Continua*” (Continuous Metaphysics), held in February 2008 at Palermo’s Galleria Civica.

The acquired awareness of this clear and simple truth that the Fondazione has endorsed for a long time, has been confirmed both by Calvesi’s *La “Metafisica continua”* and by later exhibitions such as *De Chirico e il Museo* (de Chirico and the Museum) (2008-2009), currently running at Rome’s Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna. This exhibition traces the first steps regarding the delicate theme of de Chirico’s rapport with the Old Masters. At the beginning of 2009 Museo Carlo Bilotti will host *La magia della linea, 110 disegni di de Chirico dalla Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico* (The Magic of Line, 110 drawings by de Chirico from Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico), an exhibition of drawings, many of which have never been shown before, curated by Elena Pontiggia. The full scope of de Chirico’s lifetime work will be illustrated in a striking fashion with the grand retrospective exhibition *La Fabrique des Rêves*, expressly desired by Fabrice Hergott, the director of Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, and curated by Jacqueline Munck, to be held from February 13 to May 24, 2009 in which works from every period of the Maestro’s long and extraordinary artistic output will be shown.

The effort of highlighting the entire corpus de Chirico’s painting, carried out by the Foundation and by others over the years has opened up new queries and areas of research. This interest has also been seen in the art market where appreciation of the artist’s work from lesser known periods, compared to the first Metaphysical period, has increased substantially even economically.

Bringing to light unexplored aspects of de Chirico’s oeuvre in order to promote further study is the goal and driving force behind the emblematic cultural project *Immortalità a Giorgio de Chirico* (Immortality to Giorgio de Chirico) in celebration of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Maestro’s death and the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth (July 10, 1888 – November 20, 1978). The project, designed by Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico in synergy with the municipality of Rome and Professor Achille Bonito Oliva, is animated by numerous high-profile cultural initiatives and important events programmed to take place over the course of 2008-2010.

In addition to the above mentioned exhibitions dedicated to the *Pictor Optimus* under the sponsorship or aegis of the Foundation, we would like to recall *Giorgio de Chirico e il segno* held in Civitanova Marche, *La famiglia de Chirico – I geni della pittura* curated by Silvia Pegoraro at Museo

<sup>3</sup> P. Picozza, *Giorgio de Chirico Today: The Discipline of Research*, in “Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico”, n. 1-2, Milan, 2002, pp. 12-15.

<sup>4</sup> M. Calvesi, *Giorgio de Chirico and “Continuous Metaphysics”*, in “Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico”, n. 5-6, Florence, 2006, p. 32.

di Francavilla, *Giorgio de Chirico il Metafisico ovvero il teatro degli enigmi* in Ravenna, *Trenta disegni* curated by Carmine Siniscalco at Studio S Arte Contemporanea in Rome, and *Omaggio a de Chirico* curated by Toni Porcella at Ca' d'Oro in Piazza di Spagna. (Giorgio de Chirico and the mark; The de Chirico family – geniuses of painting; Metaphysician Giorgio de Chirico or the theatre of enigmas; Thirty drawings; Homage to de Chirico). The latter, *Omaggio a de Chirico*, highlighted the artistic heritage that the Maestro left to numerous artists who, having found in his oeuvre an original source, have carried on fundamental aspects of his vision, making de Chirico an essential bridge between the past and the future.

In 2010, the year that marks the centennial anniversary of the creation of *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon* and therefore the birth of Metaphysical Art, Palazzo delle Esposizioni will hold a large exhibition entitled *La Natura secondo de Chirico* (Nature according to de Chirico), aimed at investigating the multi-faceted relationship between de Chirico and Nature. The exhibition will be curated by Achille Bonito Oliva.

If the common denominator of these events can be identified in the research-orientated characteristic they share, the other important and parallel aspect of these exhibitions and cultural manifestations regards the interdisciplinary approach (another theme that the Foundation holds dear) of the artist considered as a “tree”, the multiple poetic ramifications of which lead in different and often unexpected directions and touch upon different areas of critical assessment, aesthetics, historical research, pictorial technique and so forth.

These initiatives trace a vast and articulated range of action regarding both exhibitions and editorial events in which the long awaited and indispensable publication of the *Opera Omnia* of de Chirico's writings *Scritti/1 (1911-1945). Romanzi e scritti critici e teorici* (novels, critical and theoretical texts) by Bompiani, could not be missed. This first volume, edited by Andrea Cortellessa, was presented by the town councillor of cultural policy of the city of Rome, Umberto Croppi and by Achille Bonito Oliva at Campidoglio (Capital Hill) in Rome on November 25, 2008 with the participation of Andrea Cortellessa, Francesco Poli, Elisabetta Sgarbi, Vincenzo Trione, and myself. The publication provides scholars with an indispensable tool of study, while for the occasional reader interested in the artist's thoughts and fantastical world, it offers unprecedented surprises.

Analogously, the first volume of Giorgio de Chirico's *Letters (1895-1925)* edited by Elena Pontiggia for Silvana Editoriale, under Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico's patronage, will be published in 2009. The letters written by the artist over this arc of time trace his movements, his personal ties and the professional relationships he maintained during his stay in the cities of his artistic formation and maturity: Athens, Munich, Paris, Ferrara and Rome. Including the letter written to his father, a true ‘demonstration’ of calligraphic dexterity at the age of seven, the passionate news bulletins sent to Fritz Gartz and Dimitris Pikionis, his friends from the Munich Academy of Fine Art and the sincere and constructive letters to the principal players of European culture at the time, such as: Guillaume Apollinaire, Paul Guillaume, Giovanni Papini, Ardegno Soffici, Tristan Tzara, Carlo Carrà, André Breton, Mario Broglio and Léonce Rosenberg.

The presentation of all of de Chirico's poems, many of which are unpublished, completes and enriches our editorial program.

This issue of “Metafisica” contains other extraordinary documents such as a text written by Paul

Guillaume for the unique exhibition of Giorgio de Chirico's paintings held at Paris's Vieux Colombier theatre. The text was presented on stage, after which it seems to have been forgotten. Soby went to great lengths to find the text in the 1940s but without success. It was eventually discovered among the documents on exhibit at Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris and recuperated by the Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico.<sup>5</sup> In November 1918, Paul Guillaume prophetically declared: "In many of his paintings Giorgio de Chirico has shown a new Italy. His compatriots may be grateful to him for this one day. It may also be that his name will become eternal." The recovery of de Chirico's letters to Guillaume Apollinaire constitutes an additional and significant event, which will provide important testimony to the fertile relationship between the artist and the poet. Another important friendship that the artist enjoyed comes to light thanks to the correspondence between de Chirico and Fritz Gartz, his classmate at the Munich Academy. This epistolary material is especially important for its contribution in understanding the chronology of de Chirico's first paintings and therefore the birth of Metaphysics in Florence in the summer-autumn of 1910. In order for scholars to be able to evaluate this delicate question for themselves, the letters, transcribed in German, are also published for the first time with full English and Italian translations and photographic reproductions, as to avoid manipulative interpretation.

Lastly, we believe the publication of papers from two great archives, those of the great New York gallery owner Julien Levy from the Jean and Julien Levy Foundation for the Arts, and an initial part (up until 1925) of de Chirico's correspondence to Léonce Rosenberg held at Paris's Centre Pompidou, will open wider and increasingly fascinating perspectives on de Chirico's oeuvre.

In our opinion, the documents and studies published in this issue, together with the exhibitions and the events spoken of, are testimony to the oft-mentioned unity of multiplicity characteristic to Giorgio de Chirico's research and to the morphology of this central character who profoundly marked the destiny of Art and Culture during the Twentieth-century and beyond.

The Foundation will know it is on the right path if the various endeavours aimed at shedding light on the Maestro's oeuvre prove to be in direct relationship with one another, and if each of these ventures poses new questions and opens new horizons for research. Such a result will further confirm the initial hypothesis whereas the study of Giorgio de Chirico's work constitutes a *discipline of research*: in a fertile circularity that proceeds from an *object* of research to a *method* of research.

Journalist Berenice once asked the artist: "Mr. de Chirico, are you afraid of dying?"<sup>6</sup>, to which the Maestro answered with a brief and revealing statement that shows the depth of his reflection on existence: "Everyone is afraid of death. What surprises me is that nobody is afraid of what happened before birth, which in my mind is a mystery no less disturbing than that which awaits us after death. *And then, who says I am not immortal?*"

Rome, December 2008

*Translated by Katherine Robinson*

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<sup>5</sup> I would like to thank Katherine Robinson for this discovery.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Berenice, *Una intervista lunga e leggera*, in *Incontro con Giorgio de Chirico. Ventisette poeti, ventiquattro disegni e una intervista*, edited by C. Siniscalco, Edizioni La Baitta, Ferrara 1988, p. 140.