

# About an early Painting by Giorgio de Chirico: *Procession on a Mountain*

A contribution to the study of the artist's juvenile production

by  
Leo Lecci

For over ten years various art critics have studied *Processione su un monte* (Procession on a mountain), one of Giorgio de Chirico's early paintings. During this period it passed from a private collection in Brescia to the Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea of the same town. At the end of the 40's Bruno Grossetti, owner of the Galleria Annunciata in Milan – there is still the label "Galleria Annunciata / Milano / n. 1544" on the reverse of the canvas –, purchased the painting on the French antiquarian market and sold it to the Brescian art collector Giulio Scalvini. In 1985 Mrs. Carmen Ascensio, the widow of Scalvini, bequeathed it – together with other 15 works of art – to the Brescian Museums.<sup>1</sup>

All art critics involved in the study of *Procession on a mountain* agree in referring it to the artist's juvenile production, although the artist signed and dated it (G. de Chirico / 1908, top left) many years later, maybe after the Second World War.

In many circumstances Maurizio Calvesi suggested different dates and interpretations for the painting. Reviewing the exhibition *Arnold Böcklin e la cultura artistica in Toscana*, held in Fiesole in 1980,<sup>2</sup> he referred the work to 1908; two years later, in his fundamental study *La Metafisica schiarita*, he suggested to postpone the date of the execution of the painting to 1910, recognizing in the synthetic figures and in the landscape an immediate influence of the works of Paul Gauguin that de Chirico might have seen during the impressionist exhibition organized in Florence between April and May of the same year.

More than ten years later, in the catalogue of the exhibition *De Chirico – La Nuova Metafisica*, held in San Marino in 1995, Calvesi recognized in *Procession on a mountain* the influence of the painting *Al Rosario* (To the Rosary) executed in 1908 by Camillo Innocenti and exhibited the following year in Venice at the eighth edition of the Biennale. In the same text he indicated the painting of Gino Rossi as probable source of the synthetic style and of the red-brown tonality of de Chirico's painting: in September 1909, while the Venetian Biennale probably visited by de Chirico was still open to the public, five works by Gino

<sup>1</sup> See *Dai neo-classicisti ai futuristi e oltre. Proposte per una civica galleria d'arte moderna e contemporanea*, edited by R. Stradiotti, Brescia, 1989 pp. 139-178. P. Baldacci, *De Chirico 1888-1919. La Metafisica*, Leonardo, Milan, 1997, p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> M. Calvesi, *C'è un Böcklin di serie B*, "L'Espresso", Milan, september 7, 1980. M. Calvesi, *La Metafisica schiarita*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 1982.

<sup>3</sup> See G. Roos, *Giorgio de Chirico e Alberto Savinio. Ricordi e documenti. Munich, Milan, Florence 1906-1911*, Bologna, Bora 1999.

<sup>4</sup> See Cat. *Quinta Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della Città di Venezia*, Venezia 1903 and V. Pica, *Artisti contemporanei: Charles Cottet*, "Emporium", n. 104, Bergamo, August 1903.

<sup>5</sup> The letter sent from the address Milano, Via Petrarca 13 appeared in M. M. Lamberti, *Il contesto delle prime mostre, dalla fine del secolo alla guerra mondiale. artisti e pubblico ai Giardini*. Cat. Venezia e la Biennale. I percorsi del gusto, Palazzo Ducale, Venice, 1995, pp. 41-42.

<sup>6</sup> M. Calvesi, *Periodo pre-metafisico*. Cat. Giorgio de Chirico Pittor Ophimus. Pittura, disegno, teatro, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome, 1992, pp. 95-96.

<sup>7</sup> See G. Roos, 1999, pp. 242-244. Nevertheless the above-mentioned letter sent from Milan, Via Petrarca, in December 1906 might reopen the question. In fact Roos affirms: "the date of the removal in Via Petrarca is still to find out" (p. 182).

<sup>8</sup> In the catalogue of the Seventh Biennale de Chirico doesn't appear among the exhibitors and no document in the ASAC refers of a refusal of his works by the admission jury.

<sup>9</sup> The etching appeared as *Evening prayer in Bretagne*, which was actually the title of another engraving presented by Cottet at the Biennale 1907, see V. Pica, *L'arte mondiale a Venezia nel 1907*, Bergamo 1907, p. 249. Besides the paintings *Portrait of Miss J.L.B.*, *Avila* and *Wild Sea*, Cottet exposed at the Seventh Biennale four engravings: *Boats in the barbour*, *In the Sea Lands*, *Evening prayer in Bretagne*, *Requiem in Bretagne*; see Cat. *Settima Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della Città di Venezia*, Venice 1907, pp. 51, 81.

<sup>10</sup> See in the ASAC the list of the works of art sold during the Seventh Biennale.

Rossi were to be seen in the Ca' Pesaro exhibition. Paolo Baldacci (1997) accepted the comparison with the painting by Innocenti but he proposed anticipating the execution of *Procession on a mountain* to the summer 1909. In fact Baldacci refused the idea of de Chirico visiting the Ca' Pesaro exhibition, because it would imply the artist coming back to Venice in September, after having been already there in summer for visiting the Biennale, as proved by recent studies.<sup>3</sup>

Actually the closest models of de Chirico's canvas seem to be the painting *The Evening Office in Bretagne* by the French painter Charles Cottet (Puy-en-Velay 1863 – Paris 1925) and its specular coloured etching *In the Sea Lands* (an exemplar is kept in the Galleria Internazionale d'Arte Moderna di Ca' Pesaro in Venice): these two works had been exhibited in Venice at the Biennale, in 1903 and in 1907 respectively. In particular the silhouettes of the nuns seem to be exactly like those of the French canvas, while all the differences with the Innocenti's painting observed by Calvesi are elements that may be found in Cottet's works: the addition of "a third couple in the lower part and the profile of some tiny figures of parishioners along the ridge".

It is unlikely that de Chirico, who in 1903 was only fifteen years old and was still living in Greece, would have visited the Fifth Edition of the Biennale, nevertheless he could have later seen a reproduction of the *Evening Office in Bretagne* in the catalogue of the Biennale 1903 and in the August issue of "Emporium".<sup>4</sup>

Anyway de Chirico's attention for the Biennale in the following years is not only deducible from the fact that in 1906 he had become an art student at the Munich Academy, but proved: in a letter of the 15<sup>th</sup> December 1906 the young artist asked the direction of the exhibition for the regulation in order to take part in the following edition of 1907, the one in which Cottet – as said above – presented his etching *In the Sea Lands*.

The letter is kept in the Biennale Archive in Venice (Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee, La Biennale di Venezia).<sup>5</sup>

It's no use entertaining again the supposition – almost a certainty for Calvesi,<sup>6</sup> later rejected by Roos – of an Italian Journey of de Chirico in the summer 1907 including a visit to the Biennale and, consequently, of a direct observation of Cottet's etching. On the ground of Roos' studies it results, in fact, that in the years preceding the First World War de Chirico visited the Biennale only once, precisely in 1909,<sup>7</sup> even though at the end of the 30's the artist wrote: "I remember the pre-war times, when I used to go and visit the Biennali together with my mother".

Anyway, although staying in Munich, de Chirico was certainly aware of what happened in that exhibition in which he thought to take part, even without actually doing so.<sup>8</sup>

A reproduction of Cottet's etching appeared that year in the volume published by the art critic Vittorio Pica after each edition of the Biennale,<sup>9</sup> while seven exemplars were sold during the exhibition.

Three of them were purchased, respectively, by the Italian king, by the queen-mother and by Sir Giulio Salom, who gave it to the Galleria Internazionale d'Arte Moderna di Ca' Pesaro.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore *Wild Sea*, one of the three paintings presented by Cottet, was awarded the gold medal.

In any case it was certainly easy for an art student to inquire into the production of an internationally well-known artist such as Cottet, who was a habitu  of the Biennale and was in high-favour with both public and critics.

On the contrary, the one who could have directly seen Cottet's etching at the Biennale 1907 is Camillo Innocenti, since he took part in the same exhibition with some of his works.<sup>11</sup> It's therefore plausible that the subject of Cottet's work had as well inspired Innocenti's *To the Rosary*, executed in 1908 and exhibited the following year in Venice at the eighth edition of the Biennale, even if Innocenti in a letter to Primo Levi wrote he had painted it from nature in Osilo, in Sardinia.<sup>12</sup>

Source of the synthetic style of *Procession on a mountain* could therefore be Cottet, an artist who, in the opinion of contemporary art critics, was very close to Gauguin, and not only for the communal Breton subjects.

In the above-mentioned article published in "Emporium" and dedicated to Charles Cottet, Vittorio Pica wrote: "... as far as the colour is concerned Cottet sagaciously refused the anaemic dyes of the impressionist palette, but he looked at impressionist models for his synthetic drawing and for his proposal to fix the movement in an instant. More than one of his paintings reminds us of the eccentric, although incomplete, genius of Paul Gauguin".

It confirms what Geerd Roos wrote about the stratigraphic cultural background of the young Giorgio de Chirico. His cultural preparation, in fact, revealed itself much wider than it was ever thought to be, and it goes far beyond the interest in the cultural life of Munich and in the paintings of Arnold B cklin.<sup>13</sup>

Undoubtedly *Procession on a mountain* reveals some influence of B cklin – for instance in the treatment of the rocky landscape or in the idea of the birds above the mountain<sup>14</sup> – but it is far from any B cklinian work in the conception and in the execution which draws it near the first metaphysical works realized by Giorgio de Chirico in the summer 1909: those small paintings (*Procession on a mountain* measures cm 50 x 50) that in a letter of the 26<sup>th</sup> January 1910 to his friend Fritz Garz Giorgio de Chirico describes with the following words: "During this summer I realized some paintings which are absolutely the most profound of those ever existed. (...) My works are small (the biggest measure from cm 50 up to cm 70) but each one of these represents an enigma, each one has a poetry, an atmosphere, a promise in it, you wont find in any other painting".<sup>15</sup>

In the light of this the execution of *Procession on a mountain* should be referred to the summer 1909, according to Baldacci, but the source of its inspiration shouldn't be seen in the painting by Innocenti but in the works of Cottet.

<sup>11</sup> At the Seventh Biennale C. Innocenti presented four paintings: *Dressing up, Aching little paw, White and Blue, The Golden Angel*, see Cat. *Settima Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della Citt  di Venezia*, Venice 1907, p. 85.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. Maurizio Calvesi 1995, p. 20, n. 2.

<sup>13</sup> See G. Roos, *Giorgio de Chirico und der lange Schatten von Arnold B cklin*, in Cat. *Arnold B cklin, Giorgio de Chirico, Max Ernst. Eine Reise ins Ungeheure*, edited by G. Magnaguagno, J. Steiner, Kunsthaus, Zurich 1997, p. 204-247.

<sup>14</sup> As already observed by E. Coen (see Coen 1981, p. 146). On the contrary Calvesi saw in the birds "a reference to Camillo Innocenti's painting" and rejected Coen's suggestion (see Calvesi 1995, p. 20).

<sup>15</sup> G. Roos, *Giorgio de Chirico e Alberto Savinio*... cit., p. 313.

<sup>16</sup> M. Calvesi 1995, p. 20.

The work of Cottet must have aroused the interest of the protomethaphysical de Chirico not only for its synthetic solutions but also and above all for its *sombre* and evocative atmosphere, which was a direct expression of the mystical and symbolic poetics of the French painter. As noted by Calvesi, *Procession on a mountain* interlaces with “the beginning of the Metafisica even in its content, with those “mysterious” figures, muffled and seen from behind”.<sup>16</sup>

*Leo Lecci is Fellow on Art History at Università degli Studi, Genova*

*English translation by Paola Valenti*