

MYSTERIES SURROUNDING DE CHIRICO'S SIGNATURE

Jole de Sanna

In recent times, Giorgio de Chirico's persona has been dealt a good lashing. A considerable number of fakes of recent make have been channelled into the commercial market, and along with these recent fakes a number of old fakes, produced at the same time as the original paintings, from 1926-1927 onward, have been reintroduced into this commerce, along a similar design. This scheme enacts an elementary logic: given that over the course of his life, the artist repeated some models of his invention such as the Italian piazza, the tower, the Great Metaphysician, the Prodigal Son and the Mysterious Baths, one need only pick up on his example and repeat the same action oneself. If we continue along this line of reasoning, we can also perfect our objective: since, inside the compact corpus of his personal iconography, de Chirico repeated some of his themes with the intention of exalting the aspect of invention itself, why not try to stretch the principal of invention as an appanage of artistic creation and declare - we declare it and that should suffice - that he is not the author of this invention but, if anything, just a vehicle of a third party.

Neither of these terrible acts of censorship concerning the work and thought of this great Italian artist are new. This kind of treatment was constantly inflicted upon him from 1919 onwards. He was the inventor of the metaphysics of the Italian piazza, the mannequins and the Ferrara Interiors. It was precisely through the repetition of an iconographic idea that he invented a truly metaphysical means to bring forth profound and mysterious philosophical meaning and form. It could be said that he drew once again from the vigour of the ancient icon, which, through repetition continuously renews itself. In a way, what he did was transfer the meaning of the ancient

metaphysical icon from the *Mater Dei* to a metaphysical icon of the modern world, into something like a *copyright*. Italian painters - colleagues he met in WW1 barracks - were attracted to the density of invention and to the preponderant success de Chirico had achieved in Paris and elsewhere. Without wasting any time they lay claim to the invention: Carlo Carrà wrote a book entitled *Metaphysical Painting* to testify that he, and not de Chirico, was the inventor of Metaphysics. This seems to have inexplicably escaped the attention of a critic of Guillaume Apollinaire's standing, and of all of Paris, for that matter. By silencing de Chirico's right to authorship, it became legitimate from that moment on for anyone to reproduce the exterior form of Metaphysics and the corresponding philosophic deliberation.

The battle regarding the fake paintings and the fake ideology concerning the meaning of Metaphysics, in which de Chirico was engaged from 1946 onwards, is well known. Nevertheless, in 1948 the Venice Biennale bestowed the award for metaphysical painting upon Giorgio Morandi, while a fake de Chirico was proudly displayed in the exhibition. Evidently the artist's efforts were of little use: the public institutions themselves had been activated to silence him.

A historical lawsuit initiated by de Chirico in 1947 concerning a painting of an Italian piazza constitutes a defining point in the strategy of de Chirico forgery. The Roman court of law, basing itself on the expertise of professionals, some of whom were components of the 1948 Biennale jury, imputed that not the painting but de Chirico himself was a fake for having discredited the painting. In 1955, the artist won the case in the Court of Appeal and the painting was declared false. But in the meantime a procedure had been perfected: institutions, critics and of course a good copyist were sufficient to replace the artist's brushes and mind. The *copyright* was a brand that could be taken away from the artist and, if the artist objected, it was he who was at fault. Years passed, and de Chirico fought, both winning and losing in court. He won in the only court that counts, however, that of art. The generation of artists who succeeded him from Magritte onwards understood and affirmed the principal of invention and the "repetition of theme" undertaken by de Chirico. Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol and more recently Georg Baselitz, Giulio Paolini and Luciano Fabro have demonstrated the value of repetition on the basis of the "offcut", which, by re-launching thought obtains a vision that is at any rate, different. Today, it now seems that all this has been in vain. In the last few years the old fakes that de Chirico had taken to court have worked their way out of storage, along with many more new fakes. The painting of the 1947-1955 trial was re-proposed, and for the occasion, a bogus forum of legal - but perhaps

not art - experts lent a hand to the heirs of the 1948 Biennale critics by rising up to ask how long a judgement of forgery can last. They actually asked: "Is it fair that it last forever?" The recent exhibitions held in Italy: Arezzo, Cherasco, Modena, Arona, and finally the Giorgio de Chirico and Savinio show in Dusseldorf, exhibited de Chirico masterpieces alongside a number of fakes - paintings declared as such by de Chirico. These fakes were repeatedly re-presented to de Chirico as authentic by being shown at exhibitions, published in magazines and monographic works on the artist, and finally sanctified by museum acquisition. It is well known that the acquisition of a work by a museum has often served to validate a "good" fake and also to boost the fame of an artist whose total production was insufficient to satisfy public expectation. This is true for artists from Leonardo to Van Gogh. But in this case we are speaking about paintings that are stamped *fake* on the photographs kept in de Chirico's personal archive. Today, the importance of the critic's exegesis or that of the museum buyer is no longer sufficient in order to accuse de Chirico of having lied: technical proof as well as other documentation that has come to light has proven de Chirico right. This documentation is mainly concerned with the early period fakes, first seen in catalogues alongside authentic paintings and which gradually worked their way into exhibitions under the guise of "recently rediscovered works". To deal with the new fakes, a technical verification is all that is required. A monographic work or a museum that displays a fake beside masterpieces (such as those exhibited by the Nordrhein-Westfalen museum), forces the visitor to jump between the heights of genius and the low cunning of someone who copied what they understood of de Chirico, which generally speaking is very little. Such an event is a substantial insult to the artist's intelligence and especially to that of the spectator. From an Italian point of view, the historiography in the Dusseldorf exhibiton is perfect. Just as it was possible in 1919 for Carrà to establish his precedence in the invention of Metaphysics, compared with de Chirico who merely became famous with his metaphysical paintings, Alberto Savinio was awarded the same merit, while his brother Giorgio supposedly limited himself to painting metaphysical paintings. In the first of these two cases, all that is needed is common sense, in the second, a simple reading of the Metaphysical texts written by Giorgio de Chirico suffice.

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Translated by Katherine Robinson