

## A LOST MANUSCRIPT ON (AND BY?) GIORGIO DE CHIRICO: ORIGINS, AUTHORSHIP, IMPLICATIONS\*

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### **Background: Ungaretti, the French Avant-Garde, and de Chirico**

Bearing the simple title, “Giorgio de Chirico” in capital letters, Giovanni Loreto’s essay is hand typed on three sheets of thin, yellowed paper. The Fondation Le Corbusier has archived the essay among “Manuscripts sent to E.[sprit] N.[ouveau], 1922-1925,” and it is catalogued in «Esprit Nouveau»’s “Annexe n. 153, A 1 – 17.” Stamped “29 DEC 1921,” the piece is inventoried between other articles from this period by Camille Schuwer (*L’irrationalisme contemporain*) and the prominent salon critic, Maurice Raynal (*Les arts: conception et vision*), neither of which seems to have been published by «Esprit Nouveau» (though several of Raynal’s pieces were featured in the journal over the years). A handwritten note at the top of the manuscript “pour illustrer...[illegible]...Ungaretti 26 dec” [“for Illustration... (illegible)... Ungaretti 26 dec”] – suggests that the editors planned to seek the advice or assistance of Giuseppe Ungaretti in illustrating the essay, perhaps with photographs obtained from the artist. This further suggests, quite simply, that they planned to publish the essay.

If anyone in Paris in 1921 would have been able to obtain photographs of paintings by de Chirico – or indeed by any contemporary Italian painter – it was Giuseppe Ungaretti. Ungaretti served as one of the most prominent liaisons between the Italian avant-gardes and Paris after World War One. Most of the Italians who numbered among Paris’s cosmopolitan ranks before the war had returned home during the conflict, particularly after Italy’s entry on the allied side. De Chirico was one of these individuals (though Italy had only been “home” to him for a few short years prior to this time).

After his residence in a Ferrara military hospital through 1918, de Chirico lived between Rome, Florence and Milan, where he overlapped with Ungaretti. In fact, de Chirico wrote to André Breton during this post-war period, “Je vois souvent Ungaretti qui me parle beaucoup de vous” [“I often see Ungaretti, who speaks a lot about you to me”]<sup>1</sup>. After the Armistice, de Chirico asked Ungaretti to retrieve paintings from his studio on Rue Campagne-Première. Upon arriving, Ungaretti briefly took

\* The author will soon be publishing the English translation of the original French manuscript.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter dated December 5<sup>th</sup>, 1921. See *Giorgio de Chirico Lettres to André and Simone Breton*, in «Metafisica» 1-2, Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, Roma, Téchine Editore, 2002, p. 146.

up residence in this same studio<sup>2</sup>. From Paris Ungaretti wrote to Ardengo Soffici in Florence, telling him of the striking canvases that de Chirico had left behind with his dealer Paul Guillaume<sup>3</sup>. Ungaretti would also eventually write to Jean Paulhan (the eventual owner of de Chirico's earliest Parisian manuscripts): "...Je loue ce hasard qui m'a permis de vous rencontrer, vous guidant vers les calmes fantasies de Chirico" ["I praise the coincidence that brought us together, and which helped me guide you to de Chirico's quiet fantasies"]<sup>4</sup>. It is thus clear that Ungaretti took a particular interest in de Chirico's early painting, seeking to propagate his friend's work among their contemporaries. Did Ungaretti deliver this essay to «Esprit Nouveau»? Or did the editors simply plan to contact him in helping them edit or illustrate it?

Already in the second issue of «Esprit Nouveau» Ungaretti had written an introduction to Italy's avant-garde literary scene, focusing on the Florentine journal «Lacerba». Extolling the work of Ardengo Soffici and Giovanni Papini – at the expense of Marinetti's more tumultuous and "muscular" Futurism – Ungaretti apprises his Parisian audience on their "compagnons de route" south of the Alps. While Ungaretti and Carrà are listed in the «Esprit Nouveau» archives as "*abbonnées*" (subscribers), de Chirico is not. It is possible that Loreto – or, as I discuss below, de Chirico himself – solicited Ungaretti as a point of contact with «Esprit Nouveau».

### **“Le sentiment de l’architecture”: «Esprit Nouveau» and de Chirico’s “architectonic sense”**

The essay's opening elegy to the "sentiment de l'architecture" in de Chirico's work seems a gambit geared to resonate with «Esprit Nouveau's» cultural agenda, and more specifically with the architectural commitments of its editors, Le Corbusier and Amédée Ozenfant. (This entire paragraph bears a scored underlining, suggesting that it was slated to be cut or re-worked). While the author feels compelled to preface this introduction with a humble caveat ("bien qu'étrangère apparemment à notre sujet..." ["although apparently off-topic..."]) de Chirico's entire Metaphysical oeuvre (1909-1919) is founded upon an eminently architectonic vision. De Chirico's more recent work, furthermore, still betrayed a fundamentally architectural (if more topographical and textured) approach to representation. Indeed, this same sentence goes on to qualify the architectural sense of de Chirico's imagery as its "sentiment le plus intime" ["most intimate feeling"].

Though to quite different ends, de Chirico and le Corbusier had combined dream and order in their respective bodies of work: both sought to develop an architectonic poetics from the precision of line and geometry, to distill a certain lyricism from the simple marvels of modernity. For all of its rationalist leanings, «Esprit Nouveau» was – like the *Bauhaus* and *De Stijl* not without its mystical and spiritual tendencies (To wit, issue number 25 of «Esprit Nouveau» includes an essay by Dr. Allendy on "Le rêve"). In a similar vein, Corbusier and Ozenfant's Purist paintings owed a great deal

<sup>2</sup> See Paolo Baldacci, *De Chirico: The Metaphysical Period, 1888-1919*, translation by J. Jennings, Bulfinch, New York, 1997, p. 295.

<sup>3</sup> See the *Carteggio Ungaretti-Soffici*, published by M. Montefoschi and L. Piccioni, Florence, 1981.

See also Maurizio Fagioli dell'Arco's essay in *Giorgio de Chirico, Pictor Optimus*, exhibition cat., Edizioni Carte Segrete, Rome, 1992 p. 116.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Giuseppe Ungaretti to Jean Paulhan, «Forum Italicum», edited by L. Rebay, Rome, vol. VI, n. 42, June 1972. Reprinted in *Jean Paulhan à travers ses peintres*, Éditions des Musées nationaux, Paris, 1974.

to Metaphysical painting and its fetishization of solid line, contour, and architectural volume. Despite the profound ideological differences between de Chirico and Le Corbusier, Loreto's essay seems to appeal particularly to the latter's sense of architecture as the domain of "the child, the savage, and the metaphysician."

In April of 1920, de Chirico had written an essay on *The Architectonic Sense in Ancient Painting*, which appeared months later in Mario Broglio's «Valori Plastici» – a prominent Italian journal that served, in the early 1920s, a role similar to that of Le Corbusier and Ozenfant's «Esprit Nouveau» (with which, not coincidentally, it participated in reciprocal advertisement)<sup>5</sup>. In this essay, de Chirico implicates his latest painterly practice – exemplified in paintings such as *La partenza degli Argonauti*, *Mercurio e i metafisici*, and his *Self-portrait* (now in Munich) – all from 1920, in a distinguished art historical genealogy, stretching from Giotto to Poussin and Claude Lorrain. Loreto's essay similarly aligns de Chirico's recent work in a tradition exemplified by Uccello and the *Quattrocento*.

Despite the close ties between «Esprit Nouveau» and «Valori Plastici» (and even «De Stijl», in which Van Doesburg reviewed the latter journal and wrote on de Chirico and Carrà), Loreto's essay appeared precisely at a time when de Chirico sought to distance himself from the so-called *Scuola metafisica* and the circles around «Valori Plastici». Upon arriving in Italy in 1915, de Chirico had embarked on a brief, vaguely collective adventure of Metaphysical sensibilities with Carrà, de Pisis, and others. Throughout the mid to late 1910s de Chirico expressed his hope (in letters to Carrà and others) of developing an Italian modernist-classicist movement. For a while, the journals «Valori Plastici» and «La Ronda» embodied such ideals. These hopes soon soured, however. De Chirico found that his singular vision of Metaphysical painting clashed with those of his fellow travelers, most notably Carrà.

Just weeks prior to the arrival of Loreto's essay to the offices of «Esprit Nouveau», de Chirico had written a letter to his professed admirer, André Breton (the two had not yet met), regarding the completion of some paintings. The plaintive, confessional nature of the letter, so typical of de Chirico's correspondence from these years, attests to the profound insecurities that plagued his work upon returning to Italy – insecurities belied by the frequent belligerence of his more public pronouncements: "... Je regrette de devoir parler avec vous des ces vulgaires questions de l'argent mais je ne sais pourquoi le destin s'achasse contre moi depuis quelques années; plus j'avance dans la vie, plus je me perfectionne et plus je sens les hommes devenir hostiles autour de moi et les circonstances défavorables et les mauvais signes tracer leur spirales mauvaises. Je vous remerci beaucoup mon cher ami pour l'intérêt que vous me témoignez; je ne suis hélas! pas habitué à cela; je n'ai jamais jusqu'à présent rencontré un homme ou une femme avec qui j'aurai pu être sincère qui m'aurait permis de nous regarder dans les yeux connaissant notre valeur..." ["I'm sorry to have to speak to you about such vulgar questions as money but I don't know why destiny has turned against me in the past few years; the more I advance in years and perfect myself, the more I feel that people turn against me and unfavourable circumstances and bad signs trace their evil spirals around me. I thank you very much, my dear friend, for the interest you have shown me. Alas, I am really not used to it! I have never, to this day met a man or a woman with whom

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, «Valori Plastici» n. 5-6, 1920. For a brief discussion of the affinities between these journals, see Cesare De Seta, *La cultura architettonica in Italia tra le due guerre*, Electa, Naples, 1998, pp. 75-76.

I could be sincere, which would allow us to look into one another's eyes and know our value...”<sup>6</sup>

In spite of his (equally frequent) deprecations of the French avant-garde, the de Chirico of the early 1920s still possessed a decided interest in the Parisian art market. In particular, he hoped to pass from the auspices of his former dealer Paul Guillaume – with whom he had since fallen out – to those of Léonce Rosenberg, whose burgeoning gallery promised a lucrative engagement. Loreto's essay would further propagate de Chirico's name in French circles. Its publication in «Esprit Nouveau», furthermore, would confirm his reputation among his pre-war peers, while justifying his recent stylistic changes in the light of a continued “architectonic sense.”

In its urgency and superlatives, Loreto's essay betrays an almost desperate need to substantiate and to validate de Chirico's dedication to painting-as-craft. The essay insists upon de Chirico's “sûreté de métier” [“sureness of craft”], upon his proximity to the work of ancient masters and to “la grande peinture” – precisely the same terms that de Chirico used to describe his own work in various essays from this period –. Such linguistic and stylistic similarities, combined with de Chirico's long-term penchant for writing under pseudonyms, suggests that “Giovanni Loreto” might have been, in fact, the painter himself.

### De Chirico's Pseudonyms

De Chirico was quite used to writing about himself in the third person. In a general sense, his essays on other artists – from Max Klinger to Giorgio Morandi, Arnold Böcklin to Gregorio Sciltian – obliquely address his own paintings. More substantially, his books *Hebdomeros* and *Monsieur Dudron* represent autobiographical novels *à clé*, in which the protagonist forms a thinly veiled, fantastical version of the author. Two of de Chirico's early autobiographical pieces were written in the third person and unsigned<sup>7</sup>. In addition to these “anonymous” autobiographical pieces, de Chirico signed essays using the name Luigi Bellini, and even created an entire literary alter-ego – that of Isabella Far – out of his second wife's person, publishing numerous pieces under her name and using her as a (fabricated) critical and philosophical sparring partner. It has also been conjectured that Giovanni Papini's 1919 essay on de Chirico – published in «La Vraie Italie»<sup>8</sup> at de Chirico's request – was the work of (or was essentially sketched out by) de Chirico himself. De Chirico's brother, Andrea Savinio, also used literary pseudonyms, the most notable being “Nivasio (an anagram of Savinio) Dolcemare.” De Chirico's consistent use of pseudonyms is in some ways a faculty of his obstinate obscurantism. To be sure, these “heteronymic” personalities perform different literary duties: if *Hebdomeros* and *Dudron* are thinly veiled alter-egos, Bardi and Bellini undertake to discuss the artist's work at an ostensible – though in fact specious – remove. It is to the latter group that I think “Loreto” belongs. One of the most interesting instances of de Chirico's pseudonymic identities is the piece, *L'art de*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, footnote n. 1.

<sup>7</sup> See *Autobiografia* and *Autopresentazione* (both circa 1918-19) in *Il meccanismo del pensiero*, edited by M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, Einaudi, Turin, 1985, pp. 74-78.

<sup>8</sup> G. Papini, *Giorgio de Chirico* in «La Vrai Italie», I, n. 2, Florence, March 1919, pp. 56-57, reprinted in *La metafisica schiarita: Da de Chirico a Carrà, da Morandi a Savinio*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 1982.

*Giorgio de Chirico* published under the name “Angelo Bardi” in the journal «Sélections» (Antwerp, 1929).<sup>9</sup> For years this essay was considered a notable piece of criticism on de Chirico, though no other extant works by Bardi were known. Both the style and content of Bardi’s essay alerted Gerd Roos to its probable authorship by de Chirico himself. Roos writes: “[G]ià nel 1929 Bardi si dimostra bene informato non solo su questo punto: la sua intera biografia è evidentemente basata su informazioni e valutazioni ottenute direttamente da de Chirico o Savinio – sempre che ‘Angelo Bardi’ non sia addirittura lo pseudonimo di un Dioscuoro (de Chirico or Savinio), in quanto prescindendo da singole frasi, si possono trarre ampi parallelismi verso i loro stessi testi. Questa biografia rappresenta in ogni caso una fonte importante, se non una confessione autentica. Non solo risultano particolarmente credibili le descrizioni quivi riportate delle aspettative, con le quali il giovane studente pervenne nel 1906 dalla provinciale Atene nella cosmopolita Monaco, ma altrettanto degne di fede sono altre affermazioni da trattare in seguito.” [“As early as 1929, Bardi appeared to be well informed on more than this point; his entire biography is evidently based on information and evaluations obtained directly from de Chirico or Savinio, unless “Angelo Bardi” was in fact a heteronym of one of the *Dioscuoro* (de Chirico or Savinio). Beyond individual sentences, ample parallelisms can be perceived in both their own writings. In any case, this biography represents an important source of information, if not an authentic confession. Not only do the descriptions reported here come across as quite believable, they also seem to match the young student’s expectations upon arrival from provincial Athens to cosmopolitan Munich. Other affirmations, which can be gathered further on, are just as worthy.”]<sup>10</sup> If Roos’s account left some doubt as to Bardi’s status, by the time of Paolo Baldacci’s monograph (1997), he is unequivocally listed and discussed as a pseudonym for de Chirico.

### **Loreto and de Chirico: Stylistic Confluences, Coincidences, Correlations**

If de Chirico did not author the present essay, then – like “Angelo Bardi” in turn – Giovanni Loreto would necessarily have possessed first-hand knowledge of de Chirico’s work, not only of the trajectory of his early Metaphysical oeuvre, but also of the painter’s latest technical experiments, down to the particular chemicals and unguents employed therein. While the preparation of his own pigments would – along with polemics against oil painting – become one of de Chirico’s pet topics in the late 1920s, 1930s and 40s, Loreto would have had to be informed of de Chirico’s recent obsession with this topic in order to accord it such prominence in his essay. In short, Loreto’s account, along with the description of de Chirico’s most recent activities – i.e. having renounced copying the old masters, concentrating on portraiture, mixing his own paints – presumes a familiarity with the artist’s latest turns. In the same vein, the piece’s tone, conveying de Chirico’s confidence in the worth and fruitfulness of such activities, suggests an intimate, personal acquaintance.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. The English translation of Angelo Bardi’s text in *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Roos continues in footnote n. 59: “An accurate and detailed analysis of the text would probably show that the author is none other than de Chirico himself; the self-acclaiming aspect of some passages is ulterior confirmation of this”. G. Roos, *Giorgio de Chirico e Alberto Savinio: Ricordi e documenti* (Monaco, Milano, Firenze, 1906-11) Edizioni Bora, Bologna, 1999, p. 69.

While it is plausible that a simple exchange of letters between de Chirico and his expositor would suffice to establish such familiarity, the absence of any record of other writings by “Loreto”, as well as the absence of any evidence of epistolary – or indeed of any other kind of exchange between de Chirico and “Loreto” – makes such a possibility dubious at best<sup>11</sup>. Likewise, the author conveys his marvel at having witnessed (or so he suggests) de Chirico’s activities as an artist among his Parisian peers in the early 1910s, working “indifférent aux sollicitations, aux tentations des différents modes...” [“indifferent to solicitations and the temptations of various trends...”] (a remark originally made in the press by Guillaume Apollinaire, of which de Chirico was particularly proud). Strange, then, that no “Giovanni Loreto” appears in any history of the French or Italian avant-gardes.

As anyone familiar with de Chirico’s autobiographical writings knows, the valedictory flourishes of Loreto’s prose by no means precludes its authorship by the painter himself. De Chirico’s anonymous “Autobiografia”, from circa 1919<sup>12</sup>, already betrays a flair for auto-encomium, as well as a relentless insistence upon the singularity of his oeuvre. Compare the following excerpts:

Autobiografia: “...stanco di Monaco e già in possesso di possibilità pittoriche non comuni...”; “uno spirito profondamente lirico e sprezzante di tutte le solite facilonerie...”; “Non si osservano in lui forti influenze subite da altri pittori...”; “lavora indifessamente”...

[“...tired of Munich and already in possession of exceptional pictorial abilities...”; “a profound lyric spirit and loathe to common superficiality...”; “The influence of other painters is not seen in his work...”; “he works untiringly...”]

Giovanni Loreto: “ce jeune artiste indifférent aux sollicitations, aux tentations des différents modes...”; “un sentiment lyrique très sincère...”; “par un lent et douloureux travail...”; “un très grand nombre d’étranges compositions, qui devaient bien peu à l’art moderne; “une scrupule extrêmement rare à notre époque...”; “infatigable chercheur”; “une profondeur que bien peu ont atteint parmi les modernes”...

[“this young artist, indifferent to solicitations and the temptations of various trends...”; “a truly sincere lyric sentiment...”; “through slow and painstaking work...”; “a great number of strange compositions, which own little to modern art”; “an extremely rare scrupulousness in our day and age...”; “an untiring researcher”; “a sureness of craft and a depth that few among the Modernists have attained...”]

In addition to these descriptive confluences, two of Loreto’s passages in particular bear a striking resemblance to other contemporary writings by de Chirico.

First, the line “le hasard (le divin hasard, comme l’appelle Nietzsche)” [“chance (divine chance, as Nietzsche called it)”] reappears almost word-for-word in de Chirico’s essay *Salve Lutetia*, published

<sup>11</sup> No mention of Loreto is made in any work by Maurizio Calvesi, Giovanni Lista, Maurizio Fagiolo dell’Arco, Paolo Baldacci, Gerd Roos, Wieland Schmied – the scholars who have most thoroughly and meticulously mined the extant archival evidence on de Chirico, from Greece to Munich, from Paris to Italy.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, footnote n. 7.

six years later in Léonce Rosenberg's «Bulletin de l'Effort Moderne» (no. 33, March, 1927): "...créations d'artistes...qui...semblent créées par un jeu de circonstances, par ce *divin hasard* déjà signalé par Frédéric Nietzsche" ["...artistic creations...that...seem to have been created by a combination of circumstances, by *divine chance*, of which Fredrick Nietzsche spoke"] (italics in the original). Second, Loreto's pronouncement that de Chirico "a été le premier peintre italien ayant vraiment *compris* la profondeur de certains villes de son pays" ["was the first Italian painter to have fully understood the profundity of certain cities in his country"] resonates nearly identically with de Chirico's first-person declaration in the combative, February 1919 manifesto, *Noi Metafisici*: "fui il primo che dimostrò la metafisica dell'architettura e delle città italiane..." ["I was the first to show the Metaphysics of architecture and the Italian city..."]. Even Loreto's casual remark regarding "cette peinture, que l'auteur lui-même a nommé métaphysique" ["this painting, which the artist himself has named metaphysical"] recalls de Chirico's more emphatic assertion in *Noi Metafisici* regarding the origins of this sobriquet: "The word *metaphysical*, with which I had already baptized my painting during the fine and fruitful years before the war in Paris..." In light of his growing distrust of Carlo Carrà, the insistence on the coining and founding of *Metafisica* became an increasingly imperative sticking-point for de Chirico. In addition to these similarities, numerous rhetorical flourishes employed by de Chirico in contemporary writings appear in Loreto's piece ("peintre ancien", "la grande peinture" ["erstwhile painter", "great painting"], etc.). Note, for example, how the author insists upon de Chirico's modernity while simultaneously calling attention to his study of the ancients. A similar dialectic is played out in de Chirico's other autobiographical writings: an admiration of the "severity" of ancient and Renaissance painting, coupled with a disdain for the atmosphere of Fine Arts academies and their "pseudo-academic official art." Turns of phrase such as "sentiment lyrique", "sens lyrique" and "solidité et de profondeur" ["lyric sentiment", "lyric sense" and "solidity and depth"] are staples of de Chirico's writings, from his first Parisian manuscripts of 1911-13 up through his essays and novels of the 1930s and 40s. The recurring emphasis of "mystère" as a key to the artist's imagery; the repeated mention of *métier*; the emphasis on deliberation of painting at the expense of "stylistics" – all of these appear, in nearly identical wording – in contemporary essays by de Chirico.

Notwithstanding its numerous orthographic errors, the French used in Loreto's essay is rather competent. Corrections have been made on the manuscript itself in black ink. Some orthographic and grammatical errors remain unmarked, however, suggesting that these changes were not made by one of «Esprit Nouveau»'s editors (These corrections could be those of the original author's since underlining [e.g. under "certaine façon"] has been made with the same ink). On a more technical level, the signature that concludes the essay does not resemble that of de Chirico: the "G" of Giovanni bears a longer stem than de Chirico's habitual "Giorgio".

Loreto's essay leaves no doubt as to its hefty ambition: the propagation of a painter "on whom the eager curiosity of Europe already hangs" ("sur lequel se concentre déjà l'attentive curiosité de l'Europe). To be sure, the essay was written (or at least concluded) at the end of a year which witnessed de Chirico's inclusion in some prominent exhibitions: in Milan (a personal exhibition featuring ten paintings and forty drawings); Geneva (a large collective show of avant-garde painting,

at which de Chirico showed five works); New York; and the well-received exhibition in Dresden, Hannover and Berlin, *Das Jünge Italien* at which de Chirico exhibited multiple works. A number of prominent critics in various countries would, indeed, soon turn their favorable attention to de Chirico in the 1920s: Pierre Courthion, André Breton, Giorgio Castelfranco, Roger Vitrac, Theodor Daubler, Albert Barnes, Bruno Ternoletz.

For the most part, however, these authors focus only briefly on his post-1919 work, returning nostalgically, as it were, to his (by then) canonical Metaphysical images. Loreto, by contrast, pauses to laud (*laude, lauretium... Loreto?*) his recent paintings as the true avatars of the *Quattrocento* and the “vieux maîtres” [“old masters”]. He points to de Chirico’s renewed painterly “scruples” no less than three times in the space of a few paragraphs. In Loreto’s insistence upon the worth of de Chirico’s recent, more formally conservative work, there seems to echo the imperious and importunate voice of de Chirico himself – whether or not Giorgio de Chirico penned this piece –. It is a voice eager to convince others – if not himself – of both the continuity of his oeuvre, as well as its return to a more inveterate sense of painterly vocation.