

## FROM MURAL PAINTING TO “EMPLASTIC OIL”: DEVELOPMENT AND DIFFUSION OF DE CHIRICO’S TECHNICAL RESEARCH BETWEEN THE 1930S AND 1940S<sup>1</sup>

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Within the cultural climate of the general European “Return to Order”, Giorgio de Chirico stood as a theoretician of a particular and personal “Return to Craft”. Beginning in 1919, he developed a coherent theoretical philosophy expressed in a systematic series of written works. This effort culminated in his 1928 *Piccolo trattato di tecnica pittorica* (Small Treatise on Painting Technique), a manual composed deliberately in the manner of the “ancients”. In a previous article I analysed the conditions, dynamics and implications of this intellectual journey (1919-1928).<sup>2</sup> With the present contribution I intend to focus on the excursus undertaken by the artist after the publication of his *Small Treatise* up to the end of the Second World War (1930-1945). This period sees de Chirico developing new stylistic and iconographical ideas, while still pursuing his complex theoretical and practical research into painterly materials, technique, “craft” and “tradition”. In addition, I shall show how this passion influenced various artists through the essays de Chirico published in Italian magazines, and in particular through his aforementioned treatise on painting technique. This interest is also revealed at times through the exchange of ideas and precepts with other artists, which often occurred through written correspondence.

De Chirico accomplished yet another stylistic transformation towards the end of the 1920s in Paris, where he returned in 1925. Still lifes and nudes imbued with Renoir’s naturalism were presented for the first time in his solo exhibition of 1931 in the Galleria Milano. Simultaneously, his painterly rendering also underwent a transformation, with the oil paint becoming pastier in emulation of Renoir’s technique. In the still lifes of these years, later renamed *Vite Silenti* (silent lifes)<sup>3</sup>, the palette is lighter, whilst the colour forges airy compositions through rapid and vibrant brushstrokes. The artist’s wife Isabella, whom he met in Paris around 1930, recalls de Chirico’s technical exploration of this period in a monograph from the 1960s:

He painted women seated on the beach with the sea as a background [...]. They were paintings done with an oily material that the artist prepared in his own studio following a specific formula. They were

<sup>1</sup> The text has been abbreviated for the English translation.

<sup>2</sup> See S. Vacanti, *Giorgio de Chirico and the “Return to Order”*, *The Importance of Artistic Training between Athens and Munich*, in “Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico” n. 5/6, Le Lettere, Florence, Pictor O, Rome 2006, pp. 433-460.

<sup>3</sup> The term seems to have been first used in G. de Chirico, *Metafisica dell’America*, in “Omnibus”, 8 October 1938; republished in G. de Chirico, *Il meccanismo del pensiero. Critica, polemica, autobiografia, 1911-1943*, M. Fagiolo dell’Arco ed., Einaudi, Turin, 1985, pp. 349-356; now in G. de Chirico *Scritti/1 (1911-1945). Romanzi e Scritti critici e teorici*, A. Cortellessa ed., A. Bonito Oliva dir., Bompiani, Milan 2008, pp. 858-868.

painted with minute brushstrokes that produced a vibrating effect; the white body of the seated woman in the foreground was animated by a peculiar play of brushstrokes, executed in light tones, holding just a small amount of pigmentation, whose luminosity was somewhat reinforced by the frequent use of white. This technique was quite similar to that used by Renoir [...] there are certain aspects that suggest that they used similar ingredients and that they prepared the canvas in analogous manners.<sup>4</sup>

These features are evident, for instance, in the 1932 painting *Reclining Bather*<sup>5</sup> (fig. 1), which probably depicts Isabella. It is important to note that the paintings of the early 1930s were executed in the techniques described in the third part of the *Small Treatise on Painting Technique*, dedicated to oil painting.<sup>6</sup> The most rapid method used at the time, which we may call "Impressionist" is found in the last part of the treatise where he suggests the use of poppy oil diluted with essence of turpentine, which facilitates a shorter drying period.<sup>7</sup> The Impressionists also preferred poppy oil to the commoner linseed oil, because the former conveyed the clarity and luminosity sought after in "en plein air" painting.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, they opted for a lean binder to obtain a matt effect, which they favoured to the typical shine of academic varnished painting, as well as the use of a support on which an absorbent preparation had been applied. This lean binder was realised with volatile solvents such as turpentine essence (the method also recommended by de Chirico).<sup>9</sup> De Chirico's stylistic references, however, do not invoke generic Impressionism, but specifically Renoir's production of the 1880s and 1890s – works painted by the French artist after his trip to Italy, during which he internalised the lessons of classical painting.<sup>10</sup>

The affinities with Renoir's paintings of the 1880s - 1890s are probably also motivated by a similar reflection regarding technique. Indeed, in 1883 Renoir read the *Libro dell'arte* (Book on Art) by Cennino Cennini<sup>11</sup>, to which he added a preface in the second French edition in 1911.<sup>12</sup> This preface is recognisable as one of the first twentieth century texts in which the importance of "craft" is emphasised, placing Renoir in his mature age as a defender of "tradition" and a precursor of "Return to Order". In Renoir's text, atelier training acquires an aura of spirituality: through discipline, the

<sup>4</sup> I. Far, *Giorgio de Chirico*, Fabbri, Milan 1968, p. 9. It should be noted that the author is actually de Chirico, who created a pseudonym for himself and wrote under his wife's name beginning in 1945, when she appeared as co-author of *Commedia dell'arte moderna* as Isabella Far.

<sup>5</sup> G. de Chirico, *Bagnante coricata*, 1932, oil on canvas, 71.5 x 135.5 cm, Rome, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna. The painting later appeared with the title *Nudo di donna sulla spiaggia* (Female Nude on a Beach) or *Il riposo de Alcmena* (Alcmena's Rest). See *Giorgio de Chirico nelle collezioni della GNAM: 78 opere dal 1909 al 1975*, exhibition catalogue, GNAM, Rome 1994, pp. 48-49; *De Chirico e il museo*, M. Ursino ed., Electa, Milan 2008, p. 110.

<sup>6</sup> See G. de Chirico, *Piccolo trattato di tecnica pittorica* (1928), J. de Sanna ed., Scheiwiller, Milan 2001, pp. 44-61.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 46, 48, 56.

<sup>8</sup> Traditional linseed oil yellows easily, even though it is more siccativ, while poppy oil is clearer and tends to yellow less. See *Art in the Making: Impressionism*, exhibition catalogue edited by D. Bomford, J. Kirby, J. Leighton, A. Roy, Yale University Press, New Haven-London 1990, pp. 76-82.

<sup>9</sup> See V. Jirat-Wasiutynski, H. Travers, A. Roy, *Absorbent Grounds and the Matt Aesthetic in Post-Impressionism*, in *Painting Techniques History, Materials and Studio Practice*, edited by A. Roy and P. Smith, contributions to the Dublin Congress, IIC, London 1998, pp. 235-239.

<sup>10</sup> See *Renoir: la maturità tra classico e moderno*, exhibition catalogue, K. Adler ed., Skira, Milan 2008.

<sup>11</sup> See C. Cennini, *Il libro dell'Arte*, F. Frezzato ed., Neri Pozza, Vicenza 2003. Written between the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the fifteenth centuries by the painter Cennino Cennini, it is the most well known treatise on artistic techniques from the late Middle Ages. It is considered a repository of the technique of Giotto's school, as Cennini was a student of Agnolo Gaddi in Florence. B. Tosatti, *I trattati medievali di tecniche artistiche*, Jaca Book, Milan 2007, pp. 113-127.

<sup>12</sup> C. Cennini, *Le Livre de L'Art ou Traité de la Peinture*, H. Mottez, ed., preface by P.-A. Renoir, Paris 1911. The first French edition had been edited in 1858 by Victor Mottez, a student of Ingres. The preface by Renoir was actually a letter written in 1910 to Victor Mottez's son, Henry Mottez, which appeared in June 1910 in the magazine "L'Occident". The letter was then reprinted in the second French edition of Cennini's treatise by Henry Mottez. (See P.-A. Renoir, *Lettere e scritti*, edited by E. Pontiggia, Abscondita, Milan 2001, pp. 17-22).

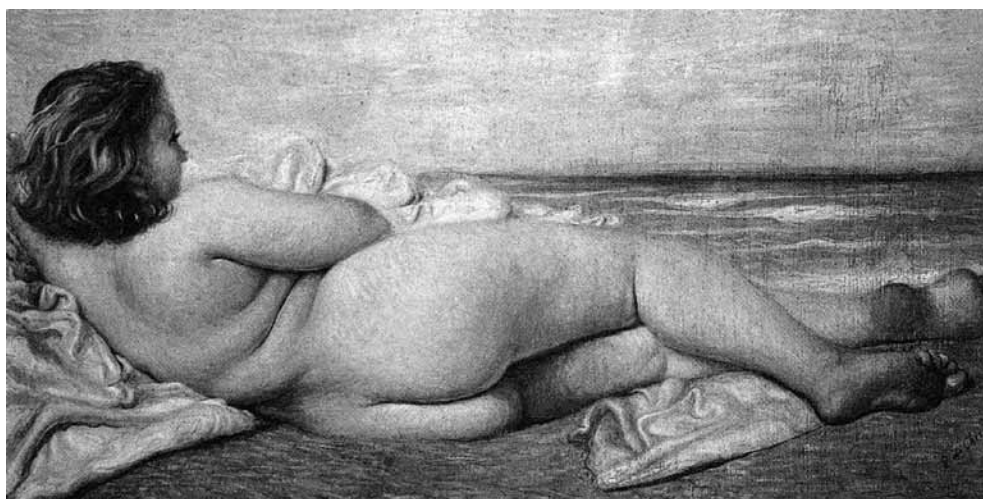


fig. 1 G. de Chirico, *Reclining Bather (Female Nude on Beach or Alcmena's Rest)*, 1932, oil on canvas, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome

training imparts to students an in-depth knowledge of "craft". The latter includes being able to fashion brushes and colours manually and prepare supports with a skilled layering of plaster and glue. Conversely, the text criticises modernisation and the use of industrially produced artistic materials. The same criticisms may be found in dechirican texts from 1919 up until the publication of the *Small Treatise* and beyond. These ideas, however, earned de Chirico hostility among a number of critics and artists. Finally, it should be remembered that de Chirico had written a text on Renoir in 1920, in which he lauded the French artist's masterly technique.<sup>13</sup>

The economic crisis of this period might also explain de Chirico's move towards a more marketable, rapid and synthetic technique, which was light and luminous and characterised by subjects that vaguely recall the impressionist tradition or by the classical theme of still life. The unfortunate economic situation also led de Chirico to participate once again in the Italian art scene, where a very important opportunity was offered by the 1932 XVIII Venice Biennale.<sup>14</sup> Thereafter, between the end of 1932 and the beginning of 1933, he and Isabella moved to Florence and stayed with their friend the antique dealer Luigi Bellini, where the artist continued to dedicate himself assiduously to painting. In the meantime, he exhibited in various Italian cities, including Turin where, at his exhibition at the Galleria Il Faro (18 February – 2 March 1933) he met Romano Gazzera<sup>15</sup>:

<sup>13</sup> G. de Chirico, *Augusto Renoir*, in "Il Convegno", February 1920, pp. 36-46; now in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1...*, cit., pp. 349-357.

<sup>14</sup> Here de Chirico exhibited as part of the group of *Italiens de Paris*. See *Les Italiens de Paris. De Chirico e gli altri a Parigi nel 1930*, exhibition catalogue edited by M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, C. Gian Ferrari, Skira, Milan 1998.

<sup>15</sup> From 1938 onwards, Romano Gazzera (Ciriè, province of Turin, 1906 – Turin 1985) devoted himself exclusively to painting, after practising law for some years. He held his first solo exhibition in 1941 at the Galleria Asta di Milan. In his youth, he was most influenced by the Italian tradition and Spanish seventeenth century masters and painted mostly portraits. After 1950 his colour palette lightened and his works acquired an aura of serenity and irony; in his later years he focused on landscape. See. C. Jourdanet, P. Levi, *Gazzera*, Bolaffi, Turin 1978.



fig. 2 G. de Chirico, *Italian Culture*, 1933, wall painting in tempera in the Hall of Ceremonies at Milan's V Triennale (work destroyed)



fig. 3 De Chirico at work at Milan's V Triennale in 1933

Romano Gazzera at that time was still a lawyer, but when I saw some of his paintings and drawings in his house I immediately realised that this was a man of genius with a great understanding of painting. I told him that he must definitely give up his profession as a lawyer and dedicate himself to painting.<sup>16</sup>

Gazzera, who at that time painted solely for pleasure, decided a few years later to abandon his profession and, in part thanks to de Chirico's encouragement, to devote himself exclusively to art. He paid considerable attention to the issue of technique in a discussion that lay at the heart of his relationship with de Chirico. The two artists exchanged letters brimming with advice on painting procedures, including formulas for paint binders and for canvas preparation. This correspondence represents an interesting testimony to de Chirico's research into "craft" and his development after having written the *Small Treatise*.

In 1933 the main Italian art event in which de Chirico participated was undoubtedly Milan's V Triennale. Opening on 10 May 1933, the exhibition took place in the new Palazzo dell'Arte designed by Giovanni Muzio in Milan's Sempione park. The theme of the exhibition focused on the new idea that saw decoration and modern architecture combined through mural painting. This initiative was sponsored by Mario Sironi, member of the Executive Board with Gió Ponti and Carlo Alberto Felice. The V Triennale also enjoyed Mussolini's full support: about thirty artists were invited to create temporary mural paintings on allegorical themes embedded within the broader perspective of the Fascist rhetoric.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> See G. de Chirico, *Memorie della mia vita*, Astrolabio, Rome 1945; II ed. Rizzoli, Milan 1962; English translation *The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico*, Peter Owen, London 1971, p. 126.

<sup>17</sup> In addition to the de Chirico brothers and Sironi, the main artists were: C. Cagli, M. Campigli, C. Carrà, R. de Grada, F. Depero, A. Funi, G. Mucchi, E. Prampolini, A. Severini, G. Usellini. See E. Longari, *Sironi e la V Triennale di Milano*, Ilisso, Nuoro 2007.



fig. 4 A. Savinio, *Creta*, 1932, tempera and oil on canvas, Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Rome

were symbols of Florence, Bologna and Rome, whilst the scene was peopled with poets, literati, painters, sculptors and musicians, with details reminiscent of the costumes that he was then preparing for Vincenzo Bellini's *I Puritani*, commissioned by the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino. The painter so recounts the undertaking:

During this period I executed a large mural painting at the Palazzo della Triennale in Milan. I executed it very quickly and in extremely difficult circumstances, using the egg tempera process, and this painting cost me the sum of 150 lire in eggs alone. [...] My mural painting gave rise to much envy; it was not reproduced in the newspapers or even in the illustrated leaflets [...]. After the exhibition had ended, all the paintings in this room were destroyed, probably because they did not dare, owing to possible scandal, to destroy just mine.<sup>19</sup>

In reality, all the works were later destroyed because they were originally intended to be temporary. From a practical standpoint, Sironi's first great attempt in mural painting was ultimately a failure as all works displayed alterations before long.<sup>20</sup> The problem partly arose because of the limited time allotted to execution and also due to the lack of proper technical preparation in mural painting by any of the artists (including de Chirico). Indeed, the technique of "buon fresco"<sup>21</sup> had

<sup>18</sup> See M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, *op. cit.* 1995, pp. 140-142.

<sup>19</sup> G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs...*, cit., p. 127.

<sup>20</sup> See G. Germani, *La pittura murale italiana nel Novecento: tecniche e materiali*, in *Le pitture murali*, edited by C. Danti, M. Matteini, A. Moles, Centro Di, Florence 1990, pp. 103-120.

<sup>21</sup> Originally, fresco was carried out with mineral pigments which are simply diluted in water and is secured by the carbonation of calcium hydrate. With significant regional variations, it is, since antiquity, the most well known technique for mural painting. The systematic procedure prescribes a

been replaced by more rapid procedures, such as silicate painting, which was employed even by Sironi and Carrà.<sup>22</sup> Gabriele Mucchi, one of the painters involved in the initiative, was the first person to denounce the conditions of the paintings, pointing out that none of the works could be truly defined as a "fresco".<sup>23</sup>

The V Triennale's experiment saw de Chirico and his brother Alberto Savinio working in close contact: Savinio had received a commission for a mural painting named *Africa italiana* (Italian Africa), the iconography of which, however, is unknown as it was not reproduced in any magazines of the time.<sup>24</sup> It may be assumed that Savinio, like his brother, employed tempera for his mural painting, since he had begun using this technique in paintings on canvas sometime after 1930. His works shown in solo exhibitions in Italy between December 1932 and March 1933 were all executed with tempera as was also noted by a critic of "Il Popolo d'Italia" in a review from that period.<sup>25</sup> He probably employed oil tempera, a technique inspired by his brother's theoretical formulations: de Chirico had indeed consecrated this type of tempera in the *Small Treatise*. To this effect, Savinio's 1932 painting *Creta*<sup>26</sup> (fig. 4), conserved in Rome's Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, is interesting: the restoration report reveals that its technique was oil and tempera on canvas.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, Corrado Cagli selected tempera for the execution of his V Triennale mural painting, *Preparativi alla guerra*<sup>28</sup> (Preparations for War) (fig. 5), for which he was probably assisted by Afro Basaldella. Gabriele Mucchi used egg tempera<sup>29</sup> as well, influenced in part by de Chirico and Savinio.

In his previous mural paintings, Cagli had often experimented with tempera, because the fresco technique advocated by Sironi was laden with connotations and value judgements that Cagli did not share. This is evident in the open polemic laid out by Cagli in his article *Muri ai pittori* (Walls



fig. 5 C. Cagli, *Preparations for War*, 1933, wall painting in tempera in the atrium of Milan's V Triennale (work destroyed)

division of work in several "giornate" [a single day's work, ed], allowing the artist to paint on the plaster while it was still wet: "a fresco" (while fresh). In order to transfer the drawing onto the wall the artist uses cartoons and the "spolvero" procedure. Readiness and confidence are required for fresco painting. See M. Faldi, C. Paolini, *Glossario delle tecniche pittoriche e del restauro*, Ed. Palazzo Spinelli, Florence 1999, p. 21.

<sup>22</sup> This type of paint was developed between nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Germany, principally in Munich where studies on the stability of painting materials were carried out. See B. F. Miller, *Painting Materials Research in Munich from 1825 to 1937*, in *Painting Techniques History, Materials and Studio Practice*, edited by A. Roy, P. Smith, Contributions to the Dublin Congress, IIC, London 1998, pp. 246-248.

<sup>23</sup> G. Mucchi, *Lettera sulla tecnica dei pittori della Triennale*, in "Quadrante", Milan, October 1933.

<sup>24</sup> See E. Cristallini, *Alberto Savinio, in 1935. Gli artisti nell'Università e la questione della pittura murale*, exhibition catalogue edited by E. Coen, S. Lux, Multigrafica, Rome 1985, p. 121.

<sup>25</sup> *Le mostre d'arte a Firenze. Savinio*, in "Popolo d'Italia", Milan, 14 December 1932; cited in P. Vivarelli, *Alberto Savinio, Catalogo generale*, Electa, Milan 1996, p. 17.

<sup>26</sup> A Savinio, *Creta*, 1932, tempera on canvas, 73 x 59,6 cm, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome. See *Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna. Le collezioni: il XX secolo*, S. Pinto ed., Electa, Milan 2007, p. 198, n. 14.19.

<sup>27</sup> Record card n. 591, Archivio del Laboratorio di Restauro, Superintendent of the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna di Roma; 1992 report by M. G. Castellano.

<sup>28</sup> The 30 square-metre work was painted in the vestibule on the new Palazzo dell'Arte. See E. Boccia, A. Gullotta, *Regesto sulla pittura murale, in Corrado Cagli: mostra antologica*, exhibition catalogue edited by G. Cortenova, De Luca, Rome 1989, pp. 119-121.

<sup>29</sup> G. Mucchi, *Le occasioni perdute. Memorie 1899-1993*, L'Archivolta, Milan 1994, pp. 231-232.



fig. 6 Afro, *Self-portrait*, c. 1935, tempera and oil on canvas, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome

to Painters).<sup>30</sup> The text, published in May 1933, ignited a passionate debate on mural painting, whose other key moment occurred in December 1933 with the publishing of the *Manifesto della pittura murale* (Manifesto on Mural Painting)<sup>31</sup> signed by Sironi, Campigli, Carrà and Funi, in "La Colonna".<sup>32</sup>

Young Afro Basaldella proves an interesting case in the context of the 1930s discussion on mural painting. The restorations carried out by the Superintendence of the Autonomous Region of Friuli Venezia Giulia on his mural paintings in his native city Udine<sup>33</sup> reveal a predilection for oil tempera. This choice can only be understood in the context of the technical-formal debate of those years and of Afro's association with Corrado Cagli. Indeed, as far as is known, Afro never used "fresco", probably due to Cagli's influence. The latter drew Afro close to his artistic vision of *primordio*, guiding him away from the ideological use of fresco that was inherent to the Italian Novecento, in particular Sironi. Contemporary critics had also noticed Afro's preference for oil tempera as is evidenced in Luigi Aversano's

review of Afro's 1937 solo exhibition at Rome's Galleria La Cometa.<sup>34</sup> It seems therefore possible to accept the thesis of Teresa Perusini<sup>35</sup>, according to which in those years the artist used oil tempera in his easel paintings (fig. 6) as well as in his mural paintings. Perusini also hypothesised that Afro's methods originated in the reading of de Chirico's *Small Treatise*.

During the 1930s the issue of technique became fundamental for the rebirth of mural painting, as is demonstrated by the controversy over the poor condition of the works at the V Triennale. The choice of technique was as crucial a matter as the problem of the relationship between Art and Architecture, and as the subject matter itself. Hence, an ideological bridge seems to link the debate over "craft" of the early twenties, first enkindled by de Chirico during the "Valori Plastici" period, with the research of the early 1930s. However, the culture of the 1920s, which was rich with technical principals and references to tradition, would go on to acquire ideological nuances in the 1930s.

<sup>30</sup> C. Cagli, *Muri ai Pittori*, in "Quadrante", Milan May 1933; republished in *Il Cagli romano: anni Venti-Trenta*, exhibition catalogue E. Crispolti ed., Electa, Milan 1985, pp. 74-75.

<sup>31</sup> M. Sironi, *Manifesto della pittura murale*, in "La Colonna", Milan, December 1933; republished in M. Sironi, *Scritti e Pensieri*, E. Ponteggia, ed., Abscondita, Milan 2002, pp. 43-46.

<sup>32</sup> See *Muri ai pittori. Pittura murale e decorazione in Italia 1930-1950*, exhibition catalogue edited by V. Fagone, G. Ginex, T. Sparagni, Mazzotta, Milan 1999.

<sup>33</sup> See P. Casadio, I. Reale, *La riscoperta delle tempere murali di Afro nel collegio dell'ONB a Udine*, in "Bollettino d'Arte", no. 58, 1989, pp. 73-86.

<sup>34</sup> L. Aversano, *Afro Basaldella a Roma*, in "La Panarie", no. 75, Udine, May-June 1937; cited in A. Masi, *1929-1942: Afro Basaldella dalla formazione agli anni romani*, in *Afro: il colore dal paesaggio all'astrazione*, exhibition catalogue edited by Archivio Afro, G. Mercurio, Skira, Milan 2003, p.140.

<sup>35</sup> See T. Perusini, *Le pitture murali di Afro Basaldella tra il 1936 ed il 1955: analisi storico-tecnica e problemi di conservazione*, in *Architettura e materiali del Novecento: conservazione, restauro, manutenzione*, Atti del Convegno di Studi (Bressanone, 2004), edited by G. Biscontin e G. Driussi, Edizioni Ardacia Ricerche, Venice 2004, pp. 249-260.

It thus steered the rehabilitation of the ancient techniques of "Great Italian Art" toward the implementation of a more generic "artistic Italianism". This was the framework for Sironi's rediscovery of fresco<sup>36</sup>, and also for Severini's research on mosaic<sup>37</sup> and for Ferrazzi's studies on the "encausto"<sup>38</sup> – although the latter's investigation had fewer rhetorical connotations.

The "encausto" technique had assumed special significance after the resumption of the excavations in Herculaneum and Pompeii and the publication of Amadeo Maiuri's treatise on the *Villa dei Misteri* in 1931.<sup>39</sup> The beauty and almost perfect state of conservation of these paintings impressed many artists, who thus indulged in various more or less scientifically accurate attempts to identify the original technique of the works: some were even under the illusion that the legendary "encausto" had been used.<sup>40</sup>

Alberto Savinio was among the artists influenced by Pompeian paintings. In the articles he wrote between 1933 and 1934 on the cultural page of "La Stampa" he addressed the problem of painterly technique from an ideological point of view: he juxtaposed tempera, which he deemed the ultimate "Italian" technique, to oil paint, which he had recognised as having northern origins. Having first discussed the issue in 1933<sup>41</sup>, Savinio returned to the subject the following year in his essay *Tempera e Fresco*, where he was more adamant and used a wide range of arguments to support his thesis. In order to claim the "Italianness" of tempera, he made reference to an article previously published in "La Stampa" by the restorer Michele Pozzi<sup>42</sup>, who defined the execution technique of Pompeian mural paintings as a kind of "tempera" based on wax, and not as a fresco:

In *La Stampa* of the 15<sup>th</sup> of this month professor Michele Pozzi demonstrates that the exquisite paintings of Naples and Pompeii are not fresco, but tempera. [...] I am therefore convinced more than ever that if we truly crave a rebirth of great Italian painting, we must re-establish not only fresco, but also

<sup>36</sup> It should be noted that, internationally speaking, Sironi's theory – together with David Siqueiros' manifestos in Mexico – remains one of the most successful attempts to restore mural painting's original social connotation, albeit with obvious technical and stylistic differences. It has been ascertained, however, that he did not employ traditional fresco in the strictest sense of the meaning, but rather, made use of a mixed technique, with finishes completed in tempera once the paint was dry. See M. Cordaro, *Approfondimenti analitici sulla tecnica di esecuzione e sulle vicende conservative del murale di Sironi, in 1935. Gli artisti dell'Università...*, cit., pp. 71-72.

<sup>37</sup> Severini, who began studying ancient treatises, then progressively moved to more rapid techniques, such as modern silicate mural painting. He was, however, one of the great advocates of the rebirth of mosaic. He used this technique in his panel for the V Triennale, *Le Arti*, which is the only surviving work from the exhibition. See G. Maschera, *Severini e il mosaico*, Longo, Ravenna 1985.

<sup>38</sup> Beginning in c. 1930, Ferrazzi's research was experimental, qualified by resistance tests whose results were verified over time. These are minutely described in his unpublished notebooks (See G. Colalucci, *I Diari di lavoro di Ferruccio Ferrazzi*, in "FMR", n. 21, 2007, pp. 73-96). In Ferrazzi's work, the rediscovery of the "ancient" loses its nationalistic aims and becomes a personal search for the classical spirit through the medium of technique.

<sup>39</sup> A. Maiuri, *Pompei: i nuovi scavi e la Villa dei Misteri*, Ministero della Educazione Nazionale, Direzione Generale delle Antichità e Belle Arti, Libreria di Stato, Rome 1931. Amadeo Maiuri (1886-1963) directed the Regional Board of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, the National Museum of Naples, and oversaw the excavations of Herculaneum and Pompeii from 1924 to 1961. His activity was complemented by timely publications on the results of these investigations, which were both of great scientific value as well as of popular appeal.

<sup>40</sup> The encaustic technique consists in the use of wax as a paint binder together with a heat source employed to spread the colours. In the middle of the eighteenth century, when the sites of Herculaneum and Pompeii were first discovered, a philologically weak interpretation of some passages of Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* and of Vitruvius' *De Architectura* generated a proper branch of study known as *encaustica*. The debate, which often involved fantastical interpretations of Pompeian technique, continued into the twentieth century. (See S. Bordini, *Materia e immagine: fonti sulle tecniche della pittura*, De Luca, Rome 1991, pp. 115-223). Today, thanks to a more precise philological reading of Vitruvius, it has been confirmed that Roman mural paintings were executed with fresco; this also explains their luminosity. (See P. Mora, *Proposte sulla tecnica della pittura murale romana*, in "Bollettino Istituto Centrale per il Restauro", Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, Rome 1967, pp. 63-84).

<sup>41</sup> A. Savinio, *Torre di guardia: realtà – cornici – tempera e olio*, in "La Stampa", Turin 8 September 1933; republished in *Alberto Savinio*, exhibition catalogue by P. Vivarelli and P. Baldacci, Mazzotta, Milan, 2002, p. 215.

<sup>42</sup> M. Pozzi, *Gli "affreschi" di Pompei non sono affreschi*, in "La Stampa", Turin, 15 July 1934.



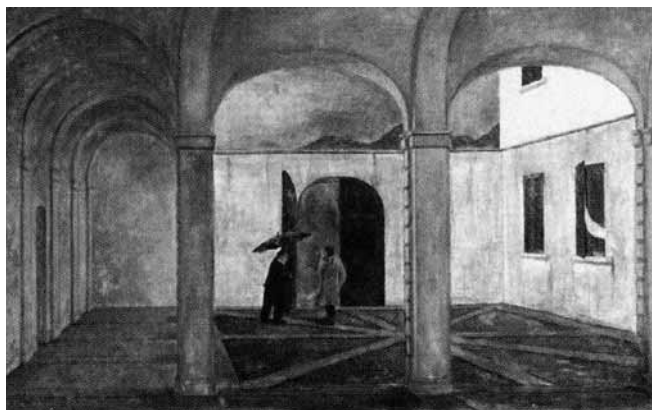


fig. 7 G. Usellini, *The Storm*, 1930, oil tempera on panel, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome

tempera; we must especially abolish oil paint, a paint of gothic creation, a fierce enemy of "Italian" painting [...]. As for me, I abandoned oil paint four years ago in favour of tempera that I have modelled after Pompeian paint [...].<sup>43</sup>

Savinio defines Pompeian paint as wax tempera, and thus as "encaustic tempera"<sup>44</sup>. This interpretation evokes the formula for encausto outlined by de Chirico in his *Small Treatise*, where it was unsurprisingly referred to as *Tempera a cera o incausto a freddo* (wax tempera or cold encausto).<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, Savinio's praise of tempera as the symbol of an "artistic Italianism" and as antithetic to oil paint, an "enemy" of northern origins, may be traced back to theories proposed by de Chirico ten years earlier. In the text *La mania del Seicento* (The Craze of the Seventeenth Century), de Chirico juxtaposed oil tempera, which he considered the utmost technique of the Italian Renaissance, to the "muddy" oil of the seventeenth century Flemish painters.<sup>46</sup>

De Chirico's ideas on "craft" and his practical precepts circulated widely through his essays and especially through the dissemination of the *Small Treatise*. Thanks to de Chirico's influence, many artists became passionate about experimenting with painterly material at the turn of the decade. Amongst such painters was Gianfilippo Usellini, one of the youngest participants in the V Triennale "decoration workshop"<sup>47</sup>. An exponent of the Milanese Novecento art scene, the youthful artist used oil tempera on panel from his debut at the beginning of the 1920s. In the 1930s he began dedicating his time to mural painting and experimented with the ancient technique of encausto. Usellini's poetic vision was expressed with a metaphysical connotation of both the everyday and the vision-

<sup>43</sup> A Savinio, *La nuova teoria sulle pitture pompeiane - tempera e affresco*, in "La Stampa", Turin, 21 July 1934; republished in M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, *op. cit.* 1995, pp. 144-146.

<sup>44</sup> See D. Fonti, *Tutte le tecniche dell'Argonauta*, in Savinio, *gli anni di Parigi, dipinti 1927-1932*, exhibition catalogue edited by M. di Carlo, P. Vivarelli, Electa, Milan 1991, pp. 45-57.

<sup>45</sup> G. de Chirico, *Piccolo trattato...*, cit., pp. 38-42.

<sup>46</sup> G. de Chirico, *La mania del Seicento*, in "Valori Plastici", Rome, March 1921; now in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1...*, cit., pp. 334-339.

<sup>47</sup> Gianfilippo Usellini (Milan, 1903 - Arona, 1971) developed his vocation at the beginning of the 1920s in Milan's art scene. He did not take part in the Milanese Novecento group, but was stylistically and thematically in tune with their idea of modern classicism. In 1933 he became interested in Sironi's theories on mural painting and participated in the V Triennale, where he painted *Le quattro età* (The Four Ages of Man). See *Gianfilippo Usellini 1903-1971*, exhibition catalogue, E. Pontiggia, ed., Leonardo, Milan 1994.

ary, nourished by his love for the Old Masters. He shared de Chirico's ideas on "craft" and his fascination with fifteenth century painters (fig. 7). Furthermore, as recounted by art historian Elena Pontiggia, Usellini's friend, the painter Aligi Sassu, testified to his having read his *Small Treatise*.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, statements made by restorers who had worked on a number of his paintings as well as the recollections of his assistant Vincenzo Ferrari, reveal that, like de Chirico, Usellini enjoyed using veiling in painting.<sup>49</sup> Ferrari also describes the written correspondence between the two artists, which must have stimulated Usellini's interest in experimentation:

I saw two letters that were friendly yet argumentative in tone because de Chirico asserted that he was the only one to have rediscovered the fifteenth century tempera technique. Usellini, instead, never claimed any primacy; he had simply invented an oil tempera with egg, linseed oil and final varnish.<sup>50</sup>

De Chirico returned to using oil paint in 1925, after a period spent in Italy from 1920 to 1924 in which he had employed "oil tempera", the use of which he supported with a coherent and articulated activity of theoretical analysis. The mural painting project at the V Triennale was an isolated occurrence in his career. With the exception of the aforementioned account relating to the V Triennale from his *Memoirs*, the technique and materials used in mural painting are not mentioned in any of his writings, not even in his *Small Treatise*. The artist thereafter pursued research in new directions; he employed oil and experimented with successively oiler techniques during the 1930s and 1940s, which lead to the production of the so-called "emplastic oil", which will be discussed later on. This new research took place in Paris, where de Chirico resided once again from the end of 1933 onwards. Although he encountered a situation that had worsened somewhat, in which his dealers had ceased all activity, de Chirico resumed his research with enthusiasm:

In spite of this disastrous situation I continued to perfect my technical research. I made great progress especially in the field of priming methods, assisted by Isabella's brilliant intuition [...]. With Isabella I spent whole afternoons at the Bibliothèque Richelieu searching in old treatises and writings on painting which had appeared at times when people still knew how to paint, for the secrets and forgotten science of the art of the brush. I also came to know restorers, experts on technique, among whom there was the painter Maroger, who at that time had given lectures on technique and had put on the market a medium sold in small tubes bearing his name.<sup>51</sup>

Jean Maroger, painter, restorer and technical advisor at the Louvre, had studied the technique of the brothers Van Eyck in depth, in an attempt to discover their secret, which in his opinion consisted in the unison of glue tempera's transparency and short drying time with oil paint's resistance

<sup>48</sup> See E. Pontiggia, *Usellini pictor classicus: I maestri, il mestiere, la pittura morale*, in *Usellini e il Lago maggiore*, exhibition catalogue, M. Rosci ed., Mazzotta, Milan 1996, p. 22.

<sup>49</sup> See M. Dolcetti, *La tecnica esecutiva della pittura di Usellini*, in *Gianfilippo Usellini 1903-1971*, cit., p. 202.

<sup>50</sup> Interview granted to me by Vincenzo Ferrari on 26 July 2006.

<sup>51</sup> G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs...*, cit., pp. 127-128.

and elasticity. He first made the results of his investigation known to the Academy of Science in 1931 and then again in 1933. He was thus able to commercialise his renowned medium, which supposedly shared the same characteristics as the one invented in the fifteenth century by the Van Eyck brothers. Thereafter he also published a noteworthy manual on painting technique, in which he described the techniques of the Old Masters.<sup>52</sup> Maroger's research was also known by Gino Severini, another great master of the Italian Return to Order. Like de Chirico, Severini was interested in perfecting his technique with the substance developed by the French restorer:

But then, recently in Paris, my friend Raoul Dufy told me he used a medium that, when mixed with oil paint, presents all the characteristics of Van Eyck's celebrated paint. And he introduced me to the inventor: the painter Maroger.<sup>53</sup>

According to Severini's book, Maroger's medium was an emulsion composed of an aqueous solution of animal or vegetable glue together with linseed oil – cooked at 200° C with a manganese-based siccative – mixed while hot with Mastic resin (an oil varnish).

During this new sojourn in Paris, de Chirico underwent yet another iconographical transformation: in 1934 the first group of *Bagni Misteriosi* (Mysterious Baths) works was presented in ten lithographs in the dossier *Mythologie* with texts by Jean Cocteau. The theme was thereafter depicted in a series of seven paintings, including those sent in 1934 to the Roman II Quadriennale. An entire room was dedicated to de Chirico here, who explained his new works in the catalogue:

The forty-five paintings here exhibited are part of my artistic production of the last two years (1933-34). I am still pursuing research in invention and in imagination. The paintings *Mysterious Baths* are part of these investigations [...]. Today more than ever I am interested in the question of "craft" and of painterly *quality*. My efforts as a painter are dedicated above all to this problem.<sup>54</sup>

This interest also comes to light in the artist's correspondence with his friend the painter Nino Bertolotti.<sup>55</sup> A few weeks before the inauguration of the Roman Quadriennale, de Chirico, unable to leave Paris, wrote to Bertolotti asking him to take care of the mounting and maintenance of his paintings:

[...] if it happens that paint has chipped off somewhere on one of these three paintings, please repair the damage with a veiling; some light brushstrokes with a soft paintbrush and with paint diluted in

<sup>52</sup> J. Maroger, *The secret formulas and techniques of the masters* (1948), Hacker Art Books, New York 1979.

<sup>53</sup> G. Severini, *Ragionamenti sulle arti figurative*, Hoepli, Milan, 1936, pp. 4-7.

<sup>54</sup> G de Chirico, *Mostra personale di Giorgio de Chirico*, in *Seconda Quadriennale d'Arte Nazionale*, exhibition catalogue, Tumminelli, Rome 1935, p. 91; now in de Chirico, *Scritti/1...*, cit., p. 840.

<sup>55</sup> The painter Nino Bertolotti (Rome, 1889-1971) debuted on the wake of a generic Divisionism, and thereafter became close to the Roman Secession. In 1919 he participated in the Return to Order movement and frequented the artists and literati who met at Caffè Aragno in Rome. In 1929 in Paris he became close friends with de Chirico, with whom he exchanged letters until at least the mid 1930s. See *Bertolotti, opere 1919-1939*, V. Rivosecchi ed., De Luca, Rome 1990.

a mixture of oil and turpentine will suffice. With regard to the varnish, please pay special attention to the four big paintings [...] it is better not to varnish the other paintings; if in these four paintings there are parts which appear too opaque, please use some *Vernis à retoucher* (Lefranc or Vibert), but be careful not to use a paintbrush, but carefully blow on them with a vaporiser.<sup>56</sup>

The praxis of veiling with equal parts of poppy oil and essence of turpentine is advised in the last section of his *Small Treatise*, devoted to oil painting, in which the use of the vaporiser is also recommended.<sup>57</sup> The *Vernis à retoucher Vibert* is instead mentioned in the first part of the treatise, dedicated to painting instruments, where de Chirico suggests using it as a temporary varnish in cases where one can not afford the necessary waiting time before applying the finishing varnish.<sup>58</sup>

Amongst de Chirico's controversial paintings from the Quadriennale was the *Autoritratto nello studio di Parigi*<sup>59</sup> (Self-portrait in the Parisian Studio) (fig. 8), which symbolizes better than any other work the centrality of "craft" promulgated by de Chirico in his presentation in the catalogue. The self-portrait indeed acts as a manifesto for the new course undertaken in his painting. De Chirico depicts himself here intent on painting a female nude in his studio, a place portrayed as the *locus* for solitary work, a microcosm for discoveries and creations. Furthermore, the classical head discernible on the floor (probably that of Apollo), evokes his programmatic texts from the "Valori Plastici" movement, in which he advised artists to copy plaster casts in order to "Return to Craft".<sup>60</sup>

De Chirico's correspondence from the first half of the 1930s (still largely unexplored) demonstrates his incessant research in paint binders, with a particular interest in methods for executing the preparatory layers of the canvas. He dedicated a paragraph on this aspect in the first section of the *Small Treatise*, in which he differentiated between absorbent, semi-absorbent and non-absorbent preparations<sup>61</sup> specifying that he preferred absorbent preparations executed with the traditional method of chalk and glue. Typically, he also suggested the preparation of a particular emulsion,



fig. 8 G. de Chirico, *Self-portrait in the Parisian Studio*, 1935, oil on canvas, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome

<sup>56</sup> Letter dated 6 January 1935, published in M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, *op. cit.* 1995, p. 170.

<sup>57</sup> See G. de Chirico, *Piccolo trattato...*, cit., pp. 38-59. The vaporiser is an instrument used today in painting and in restoration to apply varnish, fixative and sometimes paint (airbrush) in spray form.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18. Vibert or Lefranc is the same thing, as Jean Vibert was the inventor of the touch-up varnish and he worked for the French company Lefranc, which produced it. (See J. G. Vibert, *The Science of Painting*, Percy Young, London 1892, pp. 91-95). This product was invented in the nineteenth century, to treat areas of the painting where the binder had dried, in order for work to be resumed easily. Its use as a temporary protective layer suggested by de Chirico in the *Piccolo trattato* is thus improper, although it was quite widespread amongst "modern" artists and causes restoration problems.

<sup>59</sup> G. de Chirico, *Autoritratto nello studio di Parigi*, 1935, oil on canvas, 130 x 76 cm, Rome Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna. See *Giorgio de Chirico nelle collezioni della GNAM*, cit., pp. 54-55; *De Chirico e il museo*, cit., p. 108.

<sup>60</sup> See G. de Chirico, *Il ritorno al mestiere*, in "Valori Plastici", November 1919; now in de Chirico, *Scritti/1...*, cit., pp. 277-285.

<sup>61</sup> He claims that this is how industrially produced canvases commonly sold by paint merchants were distinguished. See G. de Chirico, *Piccolo trattato*, cit., pp. 9-13.

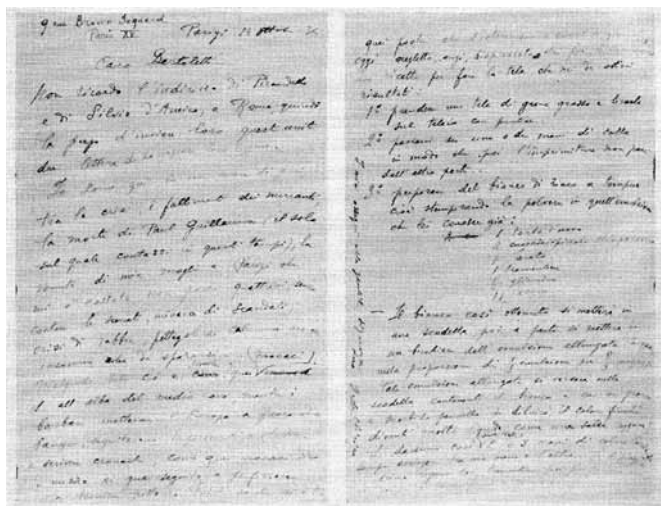


fig. 9 Letter by de Chirico to his friend Nino Bertolotti, Paris, 14 October 1934

which should be applied on the last layer once it has dried, in order to facilitate the sliding of the paintbrush on such an absorbent surface. However, because de Chirico was driven by a continual need to experiment, in the following years he proposed different formulas both for preparatory layers and for paint binders in letters sent to colleagues and friends. In a missive sent from Paris to Carlo Carrà on 27 May 1931 he recommended a binder for a preparatory layer composed of various ingredients measured, like in a food formula, with “a soup spoon” or “a coffee spoon”: zinc white, Spanish white, calcium carbonate, linseed oil, damar or mastic varnish, milk, gelatin glue, glycerine and honey. This mix was to be applied on the canvas twice and, once it had dried, was to be smoothed with sandpaper and then covered with a layer of milk.<sup>62</sup>

Another dechirican practice for the execution of the preparatory layers may be found in a letter sent from Paris to Romano Gazzera on 10 August 1933. An unspecified “Blanche method” is advised:

Would you like to experiment with a different method? Take a piece of canvas for oil, the usual one, and cover it with white mixed with a small amount of black; dilute this extremely pale grey with turpentine essence and a few drops of Courtrai siccativ; this layer will dry in two days after which you may paint on it with J. E. Blanche’s method<sup>63</sup>, wetting it first with oil; you can always go back to the bare canvas as long as you wet it first; the painterly material remains quite beautiful.<sup>64</sup>

On 14 October 1934, de Chirico wrote again from Paris to his friend Bertolotti suggesting yet another preparation method (fig. 9):

<sup>62</sup> See *Giorgio de Chirico, Ventisette lettere a Carlo Carrà*, by M. Carrà, in “Paradigma”, n. 4, 1982, pp. 301-321.

<sup>63</sup> He is certainly referring to Jacques Emile Blanche (1861-1942), a known portraitist from the Parisian Belle-Epoque period.

<sup>64</sup> See M. Fagiolo dell’Arco, *op. cit.*, 1995, p. 144.

As I know that you are one of the few interested in this subject, which is neglected today [...] I will send you an excellent formula for the preparation of the canvas: 1° take a coarse canvas, and pull it on the frame using tacks; 2° cover it with one or two coats of glue so the priming will not pass through to the other side; 3° prepare some zinc white tempera by dissolving the powder with the emulsion that you already know: 1 egg yolk, 2 small spoonfuls of poppy oil, 1 of vinegar, 1 of turpentine, ½ of glycerine, 1 of water. Place the White thus obtained in a bowl, and in a separate glass place some emulsion diluted in water, using 1/3 emulsion and 2/3 water. Pour the emulsion thus diluted in the bowl containing the White, and with a large and soft paintbrush dilute the colour until it becomes very liquid (as in a lean sauce). Paint two or three coats of this mixture over the canvas, allowing it to dry between one coat and the next. First paint thinly with turpentine, then use pastier oil paint, but always use light movements and veiling [...].<sup>65</sup>

De Chirico was coherent in his obstinate polemic against those "modern" artists who had lost all knowledge of "craft" and who did not feel the need to perfect their painterly technique. In another letter from the same year, he shared a formula for oil tempera with the Surrealist painter Leonor Fini<sup>66</sup> whose skills he evidently appreciated (Fini was originally from Trieste but had lived in Paris since 1931). After having listed the ingredients for the oil-protein emulsion that constituted his oil tempera (egg yolk, cooked linseed oil, turpentine essence, vinegar, glycerine and water), he explained how to proceed:

Put these substances [...] in a bottle and shake well. Grind the colours with this emulsion [...]. To paint, dilute the emulsion with a bit of water. During pauses cover the paint left on the palette with a wet rag.<sup>67</sup>

In 1936, weary of the Parisian climate, de Chirico decided to go to New York. When he and Isabella returned to Italy in January 1938, they again found a challenging state of affairs.<sup>68</sup> At that time the gallerist Vittorio Barbaroux was editing a significant and revealing *Referendum* on contemporary art and on the relationship between Avant-garde and Tradition on the Milanese newspaper "L'Ambrosiano".<sup>69</sup> From February to August 1938 Carrà, Casorati, de Chirico, Arturo Martini, Severini, Fini and others participated in this debate. This generation of artists was caught between the Historical Avant-garde's dismissal of the past and their own need to refresh and strengthen the relationship with "tradition". De Chirico's answer was amongst the first published:

<sup>65</sup> The letter is published in *ibid.*, p.169.

<sup>66</sup> Born of an Argentinian father and a Triestine mother, Leonor Fini (Buenos Aires, 1907 – Paris, 1996) spent her youth in Trieste and she taught herself painting. Thereafter, she held her first solo exhibition in 1929 in Milan, where she was a student of the Novecento artist Achille Funi. In 1931 she moved to Paris and here she got to know Surrealism. She was an artist of great sensibility and culture, and expressed a personal imaginary world through sophisticated formal means. She also illustrated literary works and realised costumes for cinema and theatre. See *Leonor Fini: l'italienne de Paris*, exhibition catalogue by M. Masati Dan, MR, Trieste 2009.

<sup>67</sup> Letter of 16 January 1934, in M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, *op. cit.* 1995, p. 171.

<sup>68</sup> See G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs...*, cit. pp. 165-166.

<sup>69</sup> Founded by the journalist, writer and editor Umberto Notari, the Milanese newspaper "L'Ambrosiano" (1922-1944) was an open apologist of the Fascist regime and a counterpart to the "Corriere della Sera". It was also one of the first illustrated newspapers to give ample space to articles dedicated to art reviews, culture and science, besides news stories. Carlo Carrà wrote for it as an art critic. See *Gli anni Trenta: arte e cultura in Italia*, exhibition catalogue, Mazzotta, Milan 1982, pp. 58-65.

Tradition to me means a painterly temperament united with craft, clairvoyance, a high poetic and moral sense of life and of the world, and a willingness to avoid all loopholes and to consistently better the quality of one's painting.<sup>70</sup>

During this period the artist also toyed with the idea of teaching his "craft" in public institutions. He addressed the minister Bottai on the matter and later attributed the negative response he received in his *Memoirs* as such:

[...] Bottai was the protector of all illiterate people in the art world and a strong supporter of all imbecility and snobbery of the Parisian type.<sup>71</sup>

While de Chirico kept exhibiting regularly, the political situation in Italy took a downward turn and in September 1938 the so-called "Measures for the Defence of the Race" were issued. Uneasy due to Isabella Pakszwer's Jewish ancestry, the couple left Milan again for Paris. Here, the artist tirelessly resumed his technical research, in the midst of which he experienced a "third revelation". After having undergone his first revelation in 1910 in Florence's Piazza Santa Croce, de Chirico had had a "second revelation" in the 1920s in Rome's Villa Borghese Museum, an event that reconciled him with Renaissance painting and inspired him to experiment with oil tempera. A third revelation, which occurred in the Louvre and instigated new and important research, is recalled in his *Memoirs* as such:

One afternoon at the Louvre we were standing in front of a portrait by Velázquez and talking about the mysterious materials used by the Old Masters [...]. Isabella suddenly said "This is not paint that has been dried, but beautifully tinted matter". Isabella's words were a revelation to me [...]. At the same time I met a restorer named Vandenberg who specialised in the restoration of Flemish paintings and who worked at the Louvre. He showed me in his studio a kind of whitish oily substance, a kind of pomade with which he diluted his colours [...] Vandenberg, however, did not want to give me the formula for his oily substance [...]. I understood, however, that it was an emulsion of oily resinous substances, with gums, or with glue and water [...]. I began to make emulsions of my own [...]. This was the first step towards the conquest of great painting [...]. Some of my paintings, which I painted with this new technique, were noticed and praised by various, particularly competent people, including the well-known painter and restorer Maroger [...].<sup>72</sup>

The incident must have occurred sometime in the autumn of 1938. Thereafter, de Chirico began experimenting once again with oil-protein emulsions<sup>73</sup> as he had done earlier on with oil tempera.

<sup>70</sup> G. de Chirico, *Risposta al referendum*, in "L'Ambrosiano", Milan, 23 February 1938; now in "Metafisica" n. 3/4, Le Lettere, Florence, Pictor O, Rome 2004, pp. 473-474. There were five questions, identical for everyone: "1) What does Tradition mean to you? 2) How do you consider the present state of European Contemporary Art? 3) What were the considerations that most urged you to leave the "Avant-garde"? 4) What does the nineteenth century mean to you? 5) What is the value of young art? Who do you consider to be the best young artist?"

<sup>71</sup> G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs...*, cit., p. 140.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 148-149.

<sup>73</sup> The mixture of protein substances (egg, casein, animal glues) or polysaccharides (vegetable gums) with oils forms an emulsion. This is a heterogeneous system in which an unmixable liquid is dispersed in the form of very tiny drops into another liquid called the disperser. The emulsion is there-

He now used a much oiler binder containing resin. He no longer aimed to reproduce the "light and luminous" material of the Renaissance, but rather, to imitate the effects of Baroque painting, particularly the work of Velázquez and Rubens. New research on this "miraculous" emulsion progressed during the course of a prolific correspondence with the Torinese Romano Gazzera, who wrote:

[...] Neither de Chirico nor I invented it, although by frequently communicating our findings to each other we managed to make [the emulsion] fluid and amenable for painting. This research dates to the day when I read in a magazine that a certain Maroger, chemist at the Louvre, analysed a piece of painting taken from the corner of a canvas by Rubens and found therein traces of Arabic gum mixed with oil paint. He carried out similar researches on other Old Masters and deduced that they had used an emulsion of oil with an aqueous solution of gum and casein [...]. As a matter of fact, Maroger sold tubes of this emulsion that were named after him. In practice, however, these tubes were unusable in painting.<sup>74</sup>



fig. 10 G. de Chirico, *Horseman with a Red Cap and a Light Blue Mantel*, c. 1938, oil on paper mounted on cardboard, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome

De Chirico used his emulsions to produce paintings which were iconographically and stylistically influenced by seventeenth century models, as is exemplified by the small painting *Cavaliere con berretto rosso e mantello azzurro* (Horseman with a Red Cap and a Light Blue Mantel)<sup>75</sup> (fig. 10) now in the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome. He displayed the fruits of his work in 1939 at the III Quadriennale in Rome. He did not, however, obtain the desired result as he was only able to show three paintings, which were almost entirely ignored.

Around the end of 1939, the de Chirico's returned to Italy and from 1940 to 1942 he and Isabella lived between Milan and Florence, where they were guests of the antique dealer Bellini during the summer months. By this time de Chirico was definitely committed to painting in a "Romantic and Baroque" style, which he used until the 1950s. The artist was particularly devoted to perfecting painting with emulsion, which provided him with liberty of execution, of modelling and of shading, as well as giving him the freedom to impart airiness and nobility of the material substance of the paint. He continued to furnish technical details to Romano Gazzera, to whom he wrote from Milan:

fore characterised by an instability, which can be in part contained by a colloidal stabilising substance called an emulsifier. Such emulsifiers include, for instance, casein, Arabic glue or egg yolk. See M. Matteini, A. Moles, *La chimica del restauro. I materiali dell'arte pittorica*, Nardini, Florence 1989, pp. 58-88.

<sup>74</sup> Gazzera, exhibition catalogue, edited by L. Budigna, G. Maserba, Arti Grafiche Ricordi, Milan 1965, p. 112, footnote 6.

<sup>75</sup> G. de Chirico, *Cavaliere con berretto rosso e mantello azzurro*, c. 1938, oil on paper glued to cardboard, 47x36 cm, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome. See *de Chirico nelle collezioni della GNAM*, cit. pp. 58-59.



I am happy that the emulsion is going well. You are right, we must keep it secret [...] try this formula which seems to give better results in oiliness, pastiness, and transparency, etc. Take one small spoonful of cooked linseed oil, and add two spoonfuls of carpenter glue drop by drop while stirring. In the evening, put some strong glue to soak in water. The next day melt it in a double boiler and add a bit of vinegar.<sup>76</sup>

During these years, de Chirico also attempted sculpture for the first time. In 1940 while in Florence, he produced his first terracotta works with the restorer Alietti. The subject matter of these sculptures sum up the creations of many years of artistic activity. His ideas on the subject were clear, and he expressed them in his programmatic text *Brevis pro plastica oratio*, in which he states:

If a sculpture is hard it is not sculpture. Sculpture must be soft and warm, and it must have all the softness and the colours of a painting: a beautiful sculpture is always painterly.<sup>77</sup>

His first works were executed in clay, an easily malleable material that the artist could mould and shape similarly to the stroke of a pencil on paper. His approach to sculpture was a natural development of the material research that characterised his painting; herein lay de Chirico's need to colour his small terracottas like the "Ancients" had.<sup>78</sup>

Whilst the critics seemingly rejected his work, de Chirico continued to denounce the entire art world, strongly condemning "modernist painting". The early years of the Second World War were prolific in terms of artistic production and theoretical research, which de Chirico revealed in interviews and written works, in which he related the perfecting of his aesthetic. In an article *Considerazioni sulla pittura moderna* (Considerations on Modern Painting)<sup>79</sup> of January 1942 de Chirico stated that the true painter is not obliged to "finish the painting", legitimising thus the free and loose brushstrokes that characterised his 1940s production. This position contrasted dramatically with the idea of finiteness in painting that he had endorsed in the past. The same year he published *Discorso sulla materia pittorica* (Discourse on the Material Substance of Paint), in which he declared once again his faith in "beautiful painting". The text demonstrates de Chirico's philosophical belief in an inextricable fusion between material and image:

This painterly material, which is the substance of painting, is composed of two elements that are equally important and absolutely inseparable: physical substance and metaphysical substance. These two elements complete each other and, when they are of superior quality, create a masterpiece by way of their absolute harmony.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Letter from 1940, published in *Gli anni Trenta*, cit., p. 301

<sup>77</sup> G. de Chirico, *Brevis pro plastica oratio*, in "Aria d'Italia", Milan, Winter 1940; now in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1...*, cit., pp. 890-892.

<sup>78</sup> The reactions to de Chirico's first sculpture exhibition held in March 1941 in Milan's Galleria Barbaroux were conflicting. For dechirican sculpture see: *De Chirico scultore*, G. dalla Chiesa ed., Mondadori, Milan 1988; *Il grande metafisico: G. de Chirico scultore*, exhibition catalogue, F. Ragazzi ed., Electa, Milan 2004.

<sup>79</sup> G. de Chirico, *Considerazioni sulla pittura moderna*, in "Stile", Milan, January 1942; reprinted in "Il Corriere Padano", Ferrara, March 1, 1942; now in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1...*, cit., pp. 433-455.

<sup>80</sup> G. de Chirico, *Discorso sulla materia pittorica*, in "Il Corriere Padano", Ferrara, 5 April 1942; republished in "L'Illustrazione Italiana", Milan, 26 April 1942; now in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1...*, cit., pp. 456-467

In July 1942 he published *Preghiera del mattino del vero pittore* (The True Painter's Morning Prayer)<sup>81</sup>, in which his polemic against the Italian art world takes on a sarcastic tone. The writings of this period, for the most part first published in "L'Illustrazione Italiana", were later assembled in 1945 in the volume *Commedia dell'arte moderna* (The Comedy of Modern Art) together with a collection of older texts.<sup>82</sup> De Chirico's wife Isabella, to whom he attributed his most recent theoretical reflections, appeared as a co-author to the book. Although the artist's decidedly traditionalist orientation of the early 1930s was partly due to Isabella's influence, it is de Chirico who, with subtle mockery, transformed his wife into his double, a literary fiction he would use again in future publications.



fig. 11 G. de Chirico, *Self-portrait as Painter in Red Costume*, c. 1942, oil on canvas, private collection

In the autumn of 1942 de Chirico returned to the international scene by way of the Venice Biennale, from which he had been absent for more than a decade. Here, he exhibited his new "baroque" paintings in a vast Hall, but once again the critics did not appreciate these works<sup>83</sup>. The oil emulsion works shown at the Biennale were the last de Chirico would produce; thereafter, he sought alternative mediums in his tireless pursuit of perfection of the material substance of paint. The works executed with emulsion paint had indeed displayed drawbacks. This is evidenced in the correspondence between de Chirico and Cipriano Efisio Oppo, Secretary General of Rome's 1943 IV Quadriennale, who, having written to the artist to report that the painting *Autoritratto come pittore in costume rosso* (Self-portrait as Painter in Red Costume)<sup>84</sup> (fig. 11) was slow to dry received the following answer from de Chirico:

[...] the paint remains sticky for about a year due to the emulsions added to it. I am, in fact, now looking for a solution to this problem.<sup>85</sup>

The 1942 painting, signed "Pictor Optimus", belongs to an eloquent collection of self-portraits in historical costume completed during the 1940s and 1950s. In *Self-portrait as Painter in Red*

<sup>81</sup> G. de Chirico, *Preghiera del mattino del vero pittore*, in "L'Illustrazione Italiana", Milan, 19 July 1942; now in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1...*, cit., p. 427.

<sup>82</sup> G. de Chirico - I. Far, *La Commedia dell'arte moderna*, Nuove Edizioni Italiane, Rome 1945; second edition by J. de Sanna ed., Abscondita, Milan 2002; now in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1*, cit., pp. 265-571.

<sup>83</sup> See *G. de Chirico romantico e barocco: gli anni Quaranta e Cinquanta*, exhibition catalogue by L. Cavallo, M. Fagioli dell'Arco, Fassettiarte, Milan 2001.

<sup>84</sup> G. de Chirico, *Autoritratto come pittore in costume rosso*, c. 1942, oil on canvas, 66 x 51 cm, private collection. See *Giorgio de Chirico: La fabrique des rêves*, exhibition catalogue, J. Munck ed., Paris Musées, Paris 2009, p. 210, n. 112.

<sup>85</sup> Letter of 9 May, 1943, reprinted in F. Benzi, *Materiali inediti dall'archivio di Cipriano Efisio Oppo*, in "Bollettino d'Arte del Ministero per i Beni Culturali e Ambientali", n. 37-38, May-August 1986, p. 188.

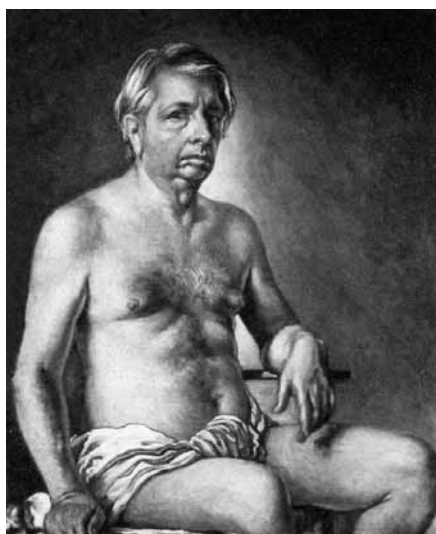


fig. 12 G. de Chirico, *Naked Self-portrait*, 1942-1943, oil on canvas, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome

*Costume*, de Chirico depicts himself holding the tools of the trade and thus appears to celebrate the arduously attained discovery of the emulsion that he presumed to be the coveted secret of the Baroque Masters. Having noted the drying problems of emulsion painting, de Chirico began experimenting anew to resolve these issues. The result was the invention of another paint binder: "emplastic oil". These experiments took place in Florence in Bellini's home, where the de Chirico's had moved after the first bombardment of Milan in the autumn of 1942. His new research is thus remembered in the *Memoirs*:

It was the first large-scale bombardment of Milan [...] a few days later we set out for Florence. Meanwhile autumn came [...]. In Florence we stayed as guests for the whole of the winter with our friend Luigi Bellini the antique dealer. [...] In Florence I continued to work. The new technique I was using achieved better results than those produced with emulsion. It was with emplastic oil that I painted my famous self-portrait in the nude, which is perhaps the most finished painting that I have carried out so far.<sup>86</sup>

The second edition of the *Memoirs* reveals the formula for the new paint binder. The original 1945 edition was updated in 1962 with new recollections and a small section entitled *Tecnica della pittura* (Painting Technique). In this section, under the entry *Alcuni diluenti per la pittura ad olio* (Some Diluents for Oil Painting) he describes how to produce a varnish with seven parts of raw linseed oil and one part of litharg<sup>87</sup> mixed over low heat. He explains that he learnt the method from Jean François Mérimée's 1830 book on oil painting<sup>88</sup> published in Paris in 1830, and adds that the mixture must have been used by French and Italian painters from the eighteenth century. He then writes:

To use this varnish, put it on the palette or in a can and dilute it with raw linseed oil in order to make it fairly fluid. The advantages of this emplastic oil are that brushstrokes of highly diluted paint do not run and do not lose their outline, and it is possible to place one stroke over another one without the second one cancelling out or displacing the first one. The principal quality of this varnish is its oiliness; it is the oiliness which allows each brushstroke to cling to the preceding ones by a suction effect; it is the same phenomenon as that of a suction cup.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>86</sup> G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs...* cit., pp. 153 and 156.

<sup>87</sup> Litharge (PbO) was known by ancient Egyptians and used as a siccativ: it accelerates the processes of oxidation and polymerization of the binder (oil or varnish), and thus allows it to quickly pass from a liquid state to a solid state. (See L. Traversi, *Le vernici*, in *Preparazione e finitura delle opere pittoriche*, by C. Maltese, Mursia, Milan 1993, pp. 156-157.) Since Antiquity the most common siccatives have been oxides of lead and of manganese, such as those of Harlem and Courtrai. These were substantially employed throughout the nineteenth century and up until the time in which de Chirico writes.

<sup>88</sup> J. F. L. Mérimée, *De la peinture à l'huile*, Huzard, Paris 1830 (facsimile reprint Puteaux, EREC, 1981).

<sup>89</sup> G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs...* cit., p. 239.

The importance of veiling and the need for a rapid technique for applying the paint are emphasised here. The latter must be achieved with a fluid brushstroke, which, however, must not diminish the plastic effect. It was for this reason that de Chirico pursued his search for a new medium, to which end he read historic treatises such as Mérimée's book, where the term *huile emplastique*<sup>90</sup> is used as a second name for litharge varnish, mainly termed *Vernis des Italiens* Mérimée argues that this varnish had been utilized in Italy since Antiquity and that it was both very siccative and did not drip, as liquid veilings had a tendency to do.<sup>91</sup> De Chirico recalled the painting *Autoritratto nudo*<sup>92</sup> (Naked Self-portrait) (fig. 12), as being "the most complete painting I have executed so far", painted, as it was, with his "emplastic oil". The work was later included in Isabella Far's bequeathment to Rome's Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna.

The concentrated artistic and theoretical work of these years is recorded with great irony in his second fascinating novel *Il Signor Dudron* (Mr. Dudron). The writing of this book was long and tortuous, and its final version was only published posthumously.<sup>93</sup> The text represents one of the fruits of de Chirico's literary enterprise, which began in 1929 with the metaphysical masterpiece *Hebdomeros*. Conceived as a unique mix of biography and art theory, his second novel brings to light a new realism imbued with narrative and ironic implications. The protagonist is the painter Dudron, de Chirico's alter-ego, whose story plays out the author's theoretical examination of the issue of the material substance of paint.

Having already enabled de Chirico's revelation on "beautiful matter" whilst standing before a Velázquez painting at the Louvre, Isabella also found herself playing the role of the philosophical Muse to whom de Chirico-Dudron posed their questions in the novel. Through these discussions the author develops the themes around which the final version of the work is centred: "beautifully tinted matter", the problem of "craft" and technique, and the anti-modernist polemic. Compared to the *Small Treatise* the text contains additional information related to the results of the research carried out by the author with Isabella in the 1930s in Parisian libraries.

In a significant episode of the novel, de Chirico ironises about painterly emulsion in a scene where Dudron is invited to dinner and his host tells him:

"I am getting ready to make mayonnaise [...], it is an extremely delicate operation but you shall see what a masterpiece I am going to create." I approached the table with foreboding. My friend cracked the eggs and added the olive oil in small quantities all the while mixing with a fork: "it's the principal

<sup>90</sup> The term *emplastico* is found in the Italian and French dictionary and originates from the Greek word *emplastikos* (ready to mould). It refers to a substance that has the same characteristics as poultice, which is consistent and agglutinating and easily adheres to surfaces. The definition of "emplastic oil" as a paint binder does not appear in the literature on the history of artistic technique, except in Mérimée and in de Chirico, who transforms its meaning.

<sup>91</sup> See J. F. L. Mérimée, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-67.

<sup>92</sup> G. de Chirico, *Autoritratto nudo*, 1942-43, oil on canvas, 60.5x50 cm, Galleria Nazionale d'arte Moderna, Rome. Although the painting is signed "G. de Chirico 1945", it seems more plausible that it was painted in 1942-43. During this period de Chirico was living with Bellini and was experimenting with emplastic oil, as recorded in his *Memoirs*. The figure was originally nude. The loincloth was added for the exhibition at the Royal Society of British Artists in 1949 in London. See *Giorgio de Chirico nelle collezioni della GNAM*, cit., pp. 64-65; *De Chirico e il museo*, cit., p. 107.

<sup>93</sup> The first fragments of the novel were published in 1940 in two Italian magazines, whilst the first edition was published in 1945 in Paris. It was probably after this date de Chirico introduced the figure of Isa as inspirational Muse, through whom he gave the theoretical discussions in the novel. He continued to work on the novel, without ever producing a definitive version. It was finally published posthumously by Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico. See G. de Chirico, *Il Signor Dudron*, edited by P. Picozza, J. de Sanna, Le Lettere, Florence 1998. Now in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1...*, cit., pp. 161-263, 943-946.

of the emulsion, - he said while whipping the eggs with his fork - you know that emulsion in painting is one of those mediums that provide material with oiliness, preciosity, fluidity, in short that allure and that mystery the Old Masters knew and that today's painters have forgotten. *In emulsione veritas!*" But I noticed that his expression became troubled as he looked at the budding mayonnaise. He stopped stirring the mixture a moment [...] anguish appeared on his face. I approached to look in the bowl and saw a yellowish liquid full of lighter bits like coagulated material; they looked like small icebergs in a saffron-coloured sea. My friend suspended the operation<sup>94</sup>.

The metaphorical and surreal anecdote expresses de Chirico's idea of the daily toil of "craft". The painter is like a modern alchemist in a "painting kitchen", who vigorously experiments with ingredients and dosages. Disillusioned with the results of emulsions, de Chirico thenceforth concentrated on a more siccativ medium with a litharge base, which he named "emplastic oil".

As a mature artist felt the importance of transmitting his knowledge on painting. Accordingly, Dudron becomes the supreme guarantor of the laws of art, and de Chirico thus articulated, in the form of a novel, an ideal course of study for his potential disciples. The theory in the novel was culled from de Chirico's theoretical essays first published in Italian magazines between 1940 and 1945, which then culminated in the *Commedia dell'arte* with the co-authorship of his wife Isabella Far. She is indeed the character who frames each essay with theoretical content incorporated in the novel. This literary fiction is further employed by de Chirico in numerous other theoretical essays whose authorship he attributed to his wife. This urge to impart his knowledge is also recalled in his *Memoirs*, in which the artist remembers having asked the minister Bottai to teach in the Academy (in 1938):

I knew that in Italy there were painters full of talent and good will: Pietro Annigoni and Romano Gazzera. I thought it would be a good thing to have a group of students and teach them what I had learnt during long years of hard work [...].<sup>95</sup>

In addition to Gazzera, other young artists in Italy attracted de Chirico's attention at the time - artists he considered to be among the few practising naturalistic painting and were interested in the technical improvement of "craft". Among the latter were Pietro Annigoni<sup>96</sup>, Gregorio Sciltian<sup>97</sup> and brothers Antonio and Xavier Bueno<sup>98</sup>, who in the period following the Second World War founded

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, cit., pp. 54-55.

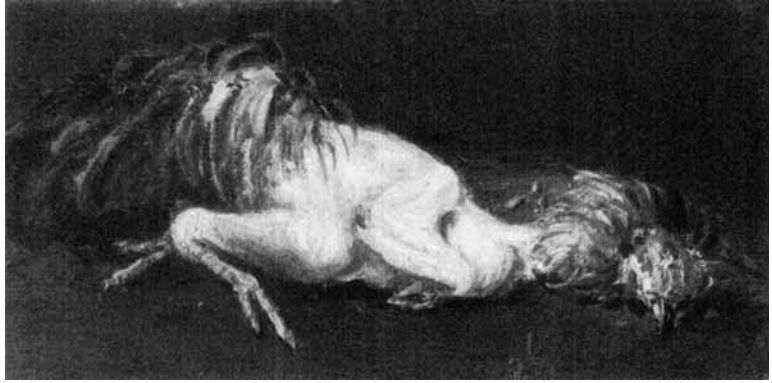
<sup>95</sup> G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs...*, cit., p. 139.

<sup>96</sup> Pietro Annigoni (Milan, 1910 - Florence, 1988) was a student of Felice Carena at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence. His works, which may be inserted within European Magical Realism, were presented for the first time in 1932 in a solo exhibition. He was admired by Ugo Ojetti and Giorgio de Chirico. He lived in London for some months every year, as his paintings were appreciated by the British public. See *Pietro Annigoni: l'uomo, l'artista, il territorio*, exhibition catalogue, edited by L. Gierut, G. Grilli, Prato 2003.

<sup>97</sup> Gregorio Sciltian (Nakicivan, Armenia, 1900 - Rome, 1985) received his artistic training in St. Petersburg. After adhering initially to the Avant-garde, he returned to a classical figuration inspired by the Novecento at the beginning of the 1920s. After a period of travelling, he settled in Rome, where he held his first solo exhibition in 1925 at Casa d'Arte Bragaglia. Over the years his paintings approached Caravaggesque and Flemish forms. See *Sciltian: opera omnia*, by R. Civello, Hoepli, Milan 1986.

<sup>98</sup> The two brothers Xavier (Vera de Bidasoa, Spain, 1915 - Florence, 1979) and Antonio (Berlin, 1918 - Fiesole, 1984) were the sons of a correspondent for the Spanish newspaper "ABC" in Berlin. They studied art in Geneva and Paris and thereafter settled in Florence in 1940, where they exhibited

fig. 13 R. Gazzera, *Plucked Chicken*, 1938, oil on canvas, private collection



the group *Pittori moderni della realtà* (Modern Painters of Reality). These artists benefited from their relationship with de Chirico who appreciated and encouraged them. This is evident in the influence he had on each of them regarding their search for an expressive technique, as will be discussed further on.

After meeting de Chirico in 1932 in Turin, Gazzera pondered at length the art and technique of the Old Masters, which, he believed, were often ignored by modern artists. He thus decided to prepare the basis for a new expressive conquest. Thanks to de Chirico's support, he devoted himself more and more assiduously to painting, and finally closed his law office and dedicated himself entirely to painting in 1938. Having long admired the masterpieces of the Renaissance in Europe's great museums, especially those of Spanish painters such as El Greco, Velázquez and Goya, he developed his own style and exhibited for the first time in a solo show in Milan's Galleria Asta in November 1941. Here something extraordinary occurred: on the day of the opening, all the paintings were purchased by the most prominent Milanese collectors, thus initiating the "Gazzera phenomenon". The exhibited works (fig. 13) evidently earned him admiration both from the general public and connoisseurs thanks to their fine painterly quality. These paintings were executed with the fateful emulsion invented in those years with de Chirico. The latter also praised Gazzera in an article, where he emphasised their shared passion for technique:

I met him in Turin where he works at the top of a historic building [...]. Up there, in that observatory he paints, draws, experiments with varnishes, temperas and emulsions, and meditates profoundly on the problems of painting [...]. Gazzera's merit is his true and sincere love for great painting. He "feels" beautiful material [...]. This sacred and inextinguishable love which we both possess for the beauty of painterly material sealed our friendship.<sup>99</sup>

for the first time in 1941 introduced by Annigoni, with whom they then founded the group *Pittori moderni della realtà* (Modern Painters of Reality) (1947-1949). After 1950 they began personal investigations: Xavier delved into a dramatic and sombre realism of Spanish imprint, while Antonio was devoted to geometric and neo-figurative experiences. See M. de Micheli, *Xavier Bueno*, Florence 1976; *Antonio Bueno. Mostra antologica*, exhibition catalogue by E. dalla Noce ed., Rome 1987.

<sup>99</sup> G. de Chirico, *Romano Gazzera*, in "Stile", Milan, November 1941; now in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1...*, pp. 890-902.



fig. 14 G. Sciltian, *Self-portrait*, 1941, oil on canvas, private collection

Moreover, it is with Gazzera that de Chirico organised the provocative *Antibiennale* in Venice in 1950, in protest against the abstract tendencies of the contemporary art promoted by the official Biennale.<sup>100</sup>

The young artist Gregorio Sciltian (fig. 14) was the subject of an essay de Chirico published in "Stile" in 1941, in which he emphasised the "spectacular element" of Sciltian's painting, specifying that this formulation referred to the "vividness" found in his figures, for which he deserved to be called "[...] the ultimate [artist] of harmonious plasticity"<sup>101</sup>. The Armenian artist met de Chirico in the 1920s in Rome and was fascinated by his paintings, from which he culled technical lessons. Many years later Sciltian published his *Trattato sulla pittura* (Treatise on Painting)<sup>102</sup>, the theoretical section of which is influenced by de Chirico's theoretical reflection on "craft", while the technical section is strongly inspired by the *Small Treatise*. The opening passages are formulated with the same terminology and concepts found in dechirican texts from 1919 onwards:

[...] I always went against the flow; I always fought relentlessly against the Tower of Babel built by Modernism, because I saw the expression of decadence and of a tragic annihilation in it.<sup>103</sup>

For this reason Sciltian wrote a treatise "without philosophical pretensions" that clarified his artistic ideas and was dedicated to those painters who, like him, had decided "to recover the glorious lost tradition".<sup>104</sup> With this end in mind, he described his analysis of numerous historical manuscripts and treatises from Cennini to Armenini and so on, in the search for useful, practical advice. He - like de Chirico - favoured French and German writings from the seventeenth century, particularly *De la peinture à l'huile* (On Oil Painting) by J. F. L. Mérimée. Oil painting was Sciltian's preferred medium, which he considered "the greatest result ever achieved by the art of painting".<sup>105</sup>

De Chirico first praised Annigoni's artistic qualities after the latter's solo exhibition in 1932 in Luigi Bellini's exhibition space in Palazzo Ferroni, where most works were painted with oil tempera. Annigoni's early production (fig. 15) - which he signed "Canonicus" - was carried out at a time in which he travelled extensively throughout Europe and shared with German New Objectivity an

<sup>100</sup> In 1948, the Venice Biennale hosted an exhibition on Metaphysical Art, which, however, greatly privileged de Chirico's works from the 1910-1920 period at the expense of his recent production, an event that greatly annoyed de Chirico. See de Chirico, *The Memoirs...*, cit., p. 191.

<sup>101</sup> G. de Chirico, *Sciltian*, in "Stile", Milan, April 1941; now in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1...*, pp. 896-898.

<sup>102</sup> G. Sciltian, *Trattato sulla pittura. Estetica, tecnica*, Hoepli, Milan, 1980. This text is a new edition revised and expanded from the earlier works: G. Sciltian, *Pittura della realtà. Estetica e tecnica*, Hoepli, Milan 1956; G. Sciltian, *La realtà di Sciltian. Trattato sulla pittura*, Hoepli, Milan 1968.

<sup>103</sup> G. Sciltian, *op. cit.*, p. VIII.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. IX.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

assimilation of Northern Renaissance that must have made an impression on de Chirico. In the *Memoirs* Annigoni is often mentioned as one of those young artists worthy of esteem, who, not by coincidence, worked in Florence like Xavier and Antonio Bueno:

In that period in Florence I came to know two young Spanish painters, the Bueno brothers, young men full of talent. The painter Pietro Annigoni, a gifted and highly serious artist, also lived in Florence. [...] he understands and studies painting technique and realises the importance of it. There is no doubt that as far as painting is concerned Florence provides a much more serious and moral atmosphere than Rome.<sup>106</sup>

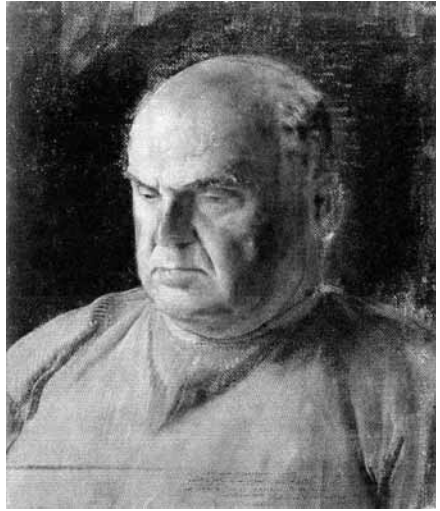


fig. 15 P. Annigoni, *The Father*, 1934, oil tempera on canvas, private collection

In this text de Chirico refers to the period between late 1942 and the beginning of 1943 when, after the bombardments in Milan, he and Isabella moved in with the antique dealer Bellini in Florence. The two Spanish brothers had arrived in Italy in 1940 and gone to Florence, where they were impressed by the great masterpieces of the past held in museums and churches. Partly due to the onslaught of the war, their sojourn, originally planned for a few days, became permanent. In Florence they settled in a studio in Via degli Artisti and befriended Pietro Annigoni, who presented them in a show at the Galleria Ranzini in 1941. Thereafter, they became acquainted with Giorgio de Chirico, who on many occasions expressed his appreciation of them. In 1947 the brothers, along with Gregorio Sciltian, Pietro Annigoni, Alfredo Serri, Giovanni Acci and Carlo Guarienti signed *Il manifesto dei Pittori Moderni della Realtà* (The Manifesto of Modern Painters of Reality), which was strongly supported by de Chirico. The group exhibited on various occasions during the second half of the 1940s, aiming to promote an art aligned to figurative tradition, in opposition of the various "Art informel" movements.<sup>107</sup>

Many more artists shared with de Chirico a fascination for the Old Masters and for technical research during the 1930s and the 1940s. Two painters in particular, who were lesser known to the general public but appreciated by specialists, should be considered. The first is the fresco painter Amedeo Trivisonno<sup>108</sup> from Molise. His work emerged in part from Italian Classicism of the 1930s

<sup>106</sup> G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs...*, cit., p. 154.

<sup>107</sup> The establishment of the group was promoted by Gregorio Sciltian and by the critic Orio Vergani. In Florence, which became their operating centre, they founded the journal "Arte", directed by Antonio Bueno, of which only three issues were published in 1949. De Chirico also collaborated in the journal. In the Manifesto they declared the necessity for a painting based on the "illusion of reality" and renounced all painting after Post-Impressionism. Albeit with divergent developments, all seven artists executed paintings with extreme attention to form and inspired by the lucid interpretations of Flemish, Italian and German Renaissance art. The last exhibition of the group, however, took place in 1949 in Florence. See *I pittori moderni della realtà (1947-1949)*, exhibition catalogue, M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, ed., Vallecchi, Florence 1984.

<sup>108</sup> After having studied in Rome and Florence, beginning in 1926 Amedeo Trivisonno (Campobasso, 1904 - Florence, 1995) decorated churches in Molise with fresco. In 1936 he was invited to teach fresco at the Accademia dei Belle Arti in Naples. Thereafter, having returned to Campobasso, while still teaching, he exhibited and decorated churches with mural paintings. After having taught in the Italian institutions of Cairo, at the end of the 1960s





fig. 16 A. Trivisonno, *Portrait of his Wife Maria Rosaria*, 1941, oil on canvas, private collection

and 1940s, although Trivisonno synthesized the "Return to Order" with nineteenth century tradition, which was still actively present in Southern Italy. His affinities to the "Valori Plastici" and the Italian Novecento, therefore, do not stem from cultural or stylistic motives, but rather from an analogous interest in returning to "craft".<sup>109</sup>

Trivisonno was deeply fascinated by Old Masters, particularly by Renaissance painters, in whose work he recognised perfection of form, technique and subject matter, aspects that became a model for his own artistic development. From his early youth he was fascinated by painting technique and the material substance of paint, and devoted himself early on to fresco. In his easel painting (fig. 16), his language was enriched through his readiness to experiment with different mediums, such as tempera and oil painting, even attempting ancient painting techniques such

as encausto. In the 1940s, having returned to Campobasso, he decided to take lessons in chemistry in order to better his understanding of the dynamics of materials employed in painting. Thus, after years of research and earnest experimentation, he developed an emulsion for oil painting whose results were so satisfactory that he sold it at a local paint shop.<sup>110</sup>

It is here that we see the convergence of Giorgio de Chirico and Amedeo Trivisonno's research. Both were passionate theorists of painting technique, studying the Old Masters with the objective of nourishing their experimental research of formulas and blends, a quest further aided by bibliographical and documentary sources. Trivisonno, who showed great interest in de Chirico's painting, felt an affinity with his technique, as he also experimented with a painterly medium based on emulsion at the end of the 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s. In those years Trivisonno kept a journal on his progress based on the experimentation of various technical methods. He even named the different binders he invented, and faithfully transcribed the historical formulas from which he took inspiration.<sup>111</sup> After a trip to Venice in 1942 for the Biennale, he noted in his journal (fig. 17):

I saw de Chirico's work. I was relieved by the thought that I am not too far off. Some veils are obtained with water. Some yellow-brownish drippings suggest the use of glue in the emulsion. The

he moved to Florence where he settled with his family. See *L'opera pittorica di Amedeo Trivisonno: una pagina dell'arte italiana del Novecento*, exhibition catalogue edited by L. Caramel, M. Fagjoli, N. F. Pascarella, E. Pontiggia, Ed. Lampo, Campobasso 1998.

<sup>109</sup> See E. Pontiggia, *Amedeo Trivisonno. Il disegno*, in *Amedeo Trivisonno. Cartoni d'affresco 1927-1939*, exhibition catalogue, E. Pontiggia, ed., Polistampa, Florence 2000, pp. 17-22.

<sup>110</sup> See M. Trivisonno, *Note biografiche*, in *Ibid.*, pp. 69-77.

<sup>111</sup> Between 1942 and 1949 the artist would write in this journal methodological indications of the phases, times and methods of execution of his works, together with his different observations. The notebook is now held in the private archives of the family in Florence. See R. de Benedittis, *Appunti per una pittura veloce, magra e luminosa*, in *Amedeo Trivisonno. Appunti e disegni*, exhibition catalogue edited by R. De Benedittis, Ed. Enne, Campobasso 1998.

mixtures are extensive and the brushstrokes free. His layering is obtained with ease. The outlines of the colours are sharp, oily and do not disturb the underlying paste. I noticed the presence of water, because only with water is it possible to merge different colours; almost to polish them, I would say. There is also a considerable amount of oil. I am convinced that egg is also present, due to a certain number of small bubbles, which also occurred in my work when I painted with 4 on 24.6.42.<sup>112</sup>

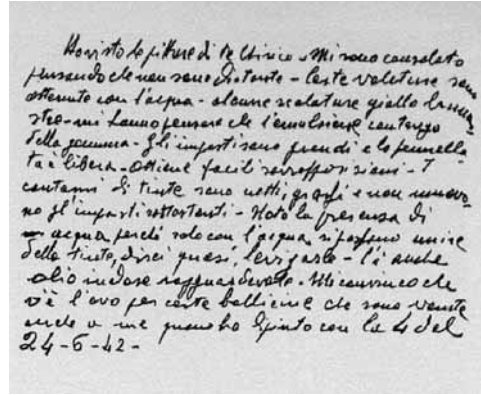


fig. 17 Memo by A. Trivisonno of 29 July 1942 on his work agenda

As a matter of fact, in a 1959 letter to one of his daughters Trivisonno referred to this research and to an exchange of opinions that occurred between himself and de Chirico:

From 1938 onwards he wrote and spoke about a certain painterly material. At the same time, he had converted to classical painting from an abstract painting constructed of dressed mannequins, perspectives, landscapes, looming myths and even abstruse concepts. [...] And since I too was a researcher in painterly material [...] I contacted him and met him in a café at Piazza S. Fedele in Milan, where we exchanged ideas and experiences [...].<sup>113</sup>

The meeting presumably took place at the beginning of October 1942 at the Caffé Cova of Milan, which at the time was in Piazza della Scala, although Trivisonno, not knowing Milan well, got the addresses mixed up. Passionate about his research, Trivisonno evidently felt in competition with de Chirico. Trivisonno had confided to de Chirico his own secrets on "craft", and was therefore embittered when he wrote on 9 October 1942:

[...] other small experiments lead me to appreciate the 3 ISA more than de Chirico's emulsion [...].

Adding the next day:

I realize that I gave de Chirico a value that he was looking for. I regret that. How should one learn to be clever?<sup>114</sup>

<sup>112</sup> The memorandum is dated 29 July 1942. See *Amedeo Trivisonno, Appunti*, cit., p. 47.

<sup>113</sup> M. Trivisonno, *Note biografiche*, cit., p. 76.

<sup>114</sup> Amedeo Trivisonno, *Appunti*, cit., pp. 62-63.

Finally, the Friulian painter Luigi Zuccheri<sup>115</sup> also merits mention. Of aristocratic origin, he devoted himself to painting only after resisting strong family pressure. He studied privately, away from the art academies and from the main nuclei of Italian Avant-garde. Nonetheless, during a long stay in Paris around 1930, Zuccheri became attracted to Surrealism. This experience together with his literary studies must have encouraged his deep capacity for the fantastical. His painting is in appearance descriptive, faithfully adhering to Nature, which is a constant theme of his: vast expanses of fields under cloudless or tempestuous skies with birds ready to migrate in the foreground, or the depiction of courtyard animals as resigned prisoners; fish from the rivers of Friuli and Venice's Laguna are also sometimes depicted. His paintings might recall encyclopaedic illustrations, but on closer examination reveal elements of a transcendent reality (fig. 18). They evoke certain works of Savinio, De Pisis and de Chirico, but also the Old Masters, such as Brueghel the Elder and Hieronymus Bosch, who had inspired many other fantastical visions in European painting in the period between the two World Wars.<sup>116</sup>

Between 1940 and 1943, Zuccheri underwent a strong spiritual crisis brought on by the Second World War, which he translated into a stylistic metamorphosis. During this period he also experimented for the first times with the properties of paints and varnishes. Zuccheri indeed abandoned the more "modern" oil technique for the "historic" egg tempera technique. He began by rediscovering and studying ancient books on paint formulas, an exercise that further refined his research<sup>117</sup>, thus emulating the journey undertaken by de Chirico twenty years previously, when the latter championed the revival of "oil tempera". The two artists finally met after the end of the war and initiated an active friendship centred around discussions on the secrets of tempera, also communicated in letters.<sup>118</sup>

Around 1947 Zuccheri bought a small property on the hills near Florence, where he soon developed close friendships with scholars, collectors and other artists. Sometime between 1947 and 1948 Zuccheri met de Chirico at the home of Primo Conti, and thus initiated a relationship decisive for his artistic maturation. It should be noted that it was in Florence in the very same period that de Chirico assisted in the founding of *Pittori moderni della realtà*. Zuccheri was in fact the artist with whom de Chirico shared the greatest amount of similarities, whose allure he felt intensely and whom he esteemed for his particular interest in painterly technique. Many years later, at the death of the Friulian artist, de Chirico wrote:

I admired [Zuccheri] for his passionate research into all the secrets of tempera, which is the origin of all painting [...]. I often met him in Venice during my stays there and I spent considerable time in his studio discussing with him the secrets and advantages of tempera. He would tell me about his formu-

<sup>115</sup> Luigi Zuccheri (Gemona del Friuli, 1904 - Venice, 1974) took up painting after interrupting his literary studies. During a stay in Paris (1929-30) he became interested in Surrealism, without, however, forming a solid connection. Displeased with the painting of his youth, he retired to Friuli; between 1933 and 1943 he devoted himself to technical and painterly research. He held his first solo exhibition in Trieste in 1939, which came to nothing due to the artist's disillusionment with his own work. He took up painting again in the post-war period, still as a secluded painter in silent polemic against his times. See *Luigi Zuccheri*, exhibition catalogue, G. Perocco ed., Arti grafiche Friulane, Udine 1988.

<sup>116</sup> See M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, *Dizionario per Zuccheri*, in *Zuccheri*, edited by M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, G. Vallese, Mondadori, Milan 1990, pp. 7-9.

<sup>117</sup> See G. Vallese, *Zuccheri, la maniera e il capriccio*, in M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, G. Vallese, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-43.

<sup>118</sup> As seen in the unpublished correspondence from 1952 to the death of Luigi Zuccheri in 1974, de Chirico encouraged his friend with notable expressions of esteem. I thank Professor Giulia Vallese for this information.



fig. 18 L. Zuccheri, *White Duck with Robin and Apples*, 1940s, oil tempera on canvas, private collection  
 fig. 19 Frontispiece of Luigi Zuccheri's volume on tempera painting, published in 1966 by Vanni Scheiwiller

las and in my presence dissolve colours with egg yolk, gum or other ingredients that he was experimenting with and perfecting. From this continuous study and research emerged all the fresh and lively creations that can be admired in his numerous works [...].<sup>119</sup>

In the wake of Zuccheri's passionate research, which made him feel closer to Venetian Old Masters and to his anti-modernist friend de Chirico, he also wrote a brief treatise: *Del piturar a tempera* (On Tempera Painting) (fig. 19).<sup>120</sup> The small volume was published by All'insegna del Pesce d'Oro in 1966, a publishing house directed by Vanni Scheiwiller, the son of Giovanni, who had edited and published de Chirico's *Small Treatise* in 1928. Zuccheri's formula book was even more unique because it was written in Italian, Venetian and English. This was made possible through Scheiwiller's great admiration of Zuccheri's work. Indeed, the publisher did everything possible to publicise the painter's precious creations and his deep knowledge of tempera through various refined illustrated booklets. De Chirico spoke of these volumes, which constituted a necessary part of his library, in the aforementioned commemorative text:

[Zuccheri] wrote a very intelligent and profound treatise, which I jealously conserve.<sup>121</sup>

The evidence discussed so far demonstrates how influential de Chirico's research was on painting technique and materials, even many years after his *Small Treatise* was published. This influence had a strong effect on many young artists, both in aesthetic-theoretic terms and by way of a shared course of experimentation through the exchange of advice and painting formulas.

After the War, de Chirico and Isabella settled definitively in Rome, where the artist pursued a Baroque style of painting, which, according to the critics, was a regression. He steadfastly focused his

<sup>119</sup> The commemorative text of 1974 is transcribed in M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, G. Vallese, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

<sup>120</sup> L. Zuccheri, *Del piturar a tempera, Sei ricette di Luigi Zuccheri scritte in veneziano, italiano, inglese*, All'insegna del Pesce d'Oro, Milan 1966. The small volume, written in Italian with translations into Venetian and English, contains six formulas, each one accompanied by a colour reproduction of a painting by the artist.

<sup>121</sup> M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, G. Vallese, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

research on the "beautiful material substance of paint" and emulated Old Masters who excelled in technique, favouring the spectacular virtuosi of rapid and fluid brushstrokes from the seventeenth century onwards: Titian, Tintoretto, Rubens, Van Dyck, Velázquez, Fragonard, Delacroix, Renoir, and still others. This interest continued up to the end of the 1950s and caused incomprehension and hostility amongst critics, to whom de Chirico answered with his customary sarcasm and sometimes with an embittered polemic.

*Translated by Beatrice Crosti*