

ANIMALS FIRST – GIORGIO DE CHIRICO AND HIS LOVE OF DOGS IN LIFE AND ART¹

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Giorgio de Chirico, Friend and Protector of Dogs

As an artist Giorgio de Chirico was an extraordinary precursor and innovator, but less is known about his active role as a leading precursor of animal rights movements and the defence of animals, as polemicist and creator of dog shelters and accommodation.

Giorgio de Chirico never ceases to surprise us with unexpected aspects of his artistic and compassionate character: towards 1960, under the pseudonym, Isabella Far (his wife), previously used for other texts, he wrote a long lecture in defence of dogs, which was read by Nilla Pizzi at a conference: “The protection of animals is first and foremost an expression of civilisation. The more civilised a country is, the more it spontaneously and naturally manifests man’s sense of duty – civilised man that is – to protect and defend the weak. Animals notably come under the category of the weak, since they are beings dependent solely on the will of man. This should not be forgotten. Protection of the weak is not only a sign of kindness but, even more, a sign of moral education. One might even say that it is the ABC of moral education.”²

“Unfortunately, those involved in animal protection in Italy today still find themselves in the role of pioneers”, continues de Chirico who, like many great artists and writers was a dog and cat lover and played a significant role as forerunner in animal protection, given his proactive concern for animals, dogs in particular, of which he was a loving protector. De Chirico held an important position in the “Dogs Defence League” with whom he planned a Dog Village, and he supported shelters where dogs were rescued for subsequent adoption. Moreover, an actual canine colony numbering more than 20 dogs was lovingly kept and cared for at his villa in Via Misurina, Rome, as borne out by photographs of himself with his wife Isabella (fig. 1).

“Let us not forget that the dog, especially in foreign countries, is an important being, closely linked to the life of its friend and owner, and is treated as such.”

In all likelihood de Chirico’s love of dogs may be traced to his childhood and to the influence of his father Evaristo, whom the painter recalls as an animal lover in his *Memoirs*: “he was an engineer and also a gentleman of olden times, courageous, loyal, hard-working, intelligent

¹ Article published in the original Italian, *Anzitutto gli animali. Giorgio de Chirico e l'amore per i cani tra vita e arte*, in “Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico” n. 17/18, 2018, pp. 367-374.

² The lecture, held in the Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico Archives, is published here in English translation for the first time.



fig. 1 Giorgio de Chirico and Isabella with their dogs, Rome 1961

and good. [...] he had various capacities and virtues: he was a very good engineer, had very fine handwriting, he drew, had a good ear for music, had the gift of observation and irony, hated injustice, *loved animals*, treated the rich and powerful in a respectful manner, and was always ready to protect and help the weak and the poor” [Author’s italics, *ed.*].³

In this memory of his father one reads the same virtue regarding the defence of the weak and the love of animals, something to which the artist actively dedicated himself throughout his lifetime.

De Chirico’s passion for animals was therefore linked to his beloved and forever mourned father. In a touching moment in his *Memoirs* he recalls his childhood dog who, due to carelessness on the part of the family’s servants, was sadly killed: “We had brought with us from Volos a mongrel dog, a poor dog that had taken refuge in our house during the time of the Greco-Turkish War. Originally this dog was called Leone, but then he was given the name of Trollolo, which stuck to him. He was extraordinarily gentle and intelligent and even now, after so many years, when I think of Trollolo I feel sad. We all liked him very much, but the one who liked him best of all was myself, for then as now I was the gentlest and most intelligent of all. During my father’s long and painful illness Trollolo in the middle of the night would sometimes go to

³ G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico*, Peter Owen, London 1971, pp. 15-16.

a large terrace which stood at the side of our house and where a kind of long balcony had been added. There, Trollolo would howl for a long time with his muzzle raised to the vast Attic sky, full of stars. My mother was very upset by this howling, but these lamentations did not presage the death of my father. They were only the expression of the sad heart of poor Trollolo who suffered because his master was suffering.⁴

At this point it seems quite natural that the painful loss of Trollolo was recalled by de Chirico, many years later, with much sadness: “During our last stay in Kefissia I had a great sorrow. Our dog, our good Trollolo, whom we had left with the servants at our house in Athens, disappeared. Usually we took him to the country with us, to the inn, but this time, I don’t know why, he was left in the city. While wandering around outside the house he was picked up by dog-catchers and then killed; and those wretched servants, on whose heads I called down the curse of heaven, did nothing to save him. When we came back from holiday and I did not find Trollolo I was overwhelmed with deep sorrow and despair and I spent a whole sleepless night weeping and thinking of that dear creature.”⁵

As if he wanted to make up for that loss, de Chirico went on to save and care for dogs (and cats) all his life, as we also learn from Enrico Emanuelli (1941) in connection with the artist’s drawings for the *Apocalypse*:⁶ “It was the dragon of the Apocalypse, it was a vision of the angel on the water with two high flames for legs, yet de Chirico talked about it in the same voice he had used somewhat earlier while talking about one of his cats and one of his dogs, both found on the streets of Florence and Milan, saved, cared for and loved”.⁷ The dog and cat must moreover be the same ones Isabella saved during the bombing of Milan in 1942, as recorded in his *Memoirs*: “I met Isabella on the stairs on her way down to the cellar with our dog and cat.”⁸

The Archives of the de Chirico Fondazione include documents regarding donations and for dog shelters and payments veterinary fees, demonstrating that this care was never lacking in the course of the painter’s life.

In the abovementioned lecture, de Chirico speaks with clarity and involvement about the sad situation of abandoned dogs and about the tax that forced lonesome elderly people to part with the one remaining friend they had for company: “These animals, so intelligent and faithful, often find themselves in the distressing situation of abandonment, obliged to wander, starving and frightened and predestined, if no charitable person intervenes to adopt them, predestined as I say, to end up in the municipal dog pound where they will be put down after a few days. [...] Those who are not

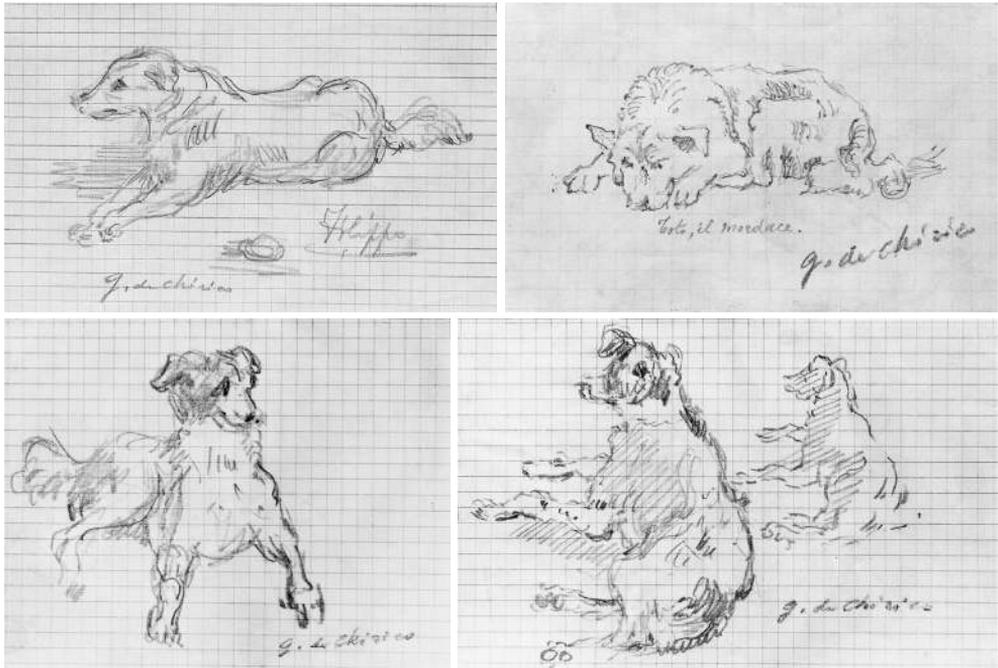
⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 44-45.

⁶ *L’Apocalisse*, with 20 lithographs, Edizioni della Chimera, Milan 1941.

⁷ E. Emanuelli, *La camera di de Chirico*, in “La Sera”, 26 March 1941, cited by Elena Pontiggia in her essay *L’Apocalisse di de Chirico* in the exhibition catalogue *Giorgio de Chirico. L’Apocalisse e la luce*, Chieti, Palazzo de’ Mayo, April-July 2012, Silvana Editoriale, Cinisello Balsamo 2012, p. 15.

⁸ G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico*, cit., p. 153.



figs. 2-5 G. de Chirico, drawings of his dogs, Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, Rome

members of the ‘Dogs Defence League’ are unaware of just how many old people, left alone in life and with a dog as their only friend, live in terror of losing it and tremble at the idea of seeing it carried off to the municipal dog pound. And there, at the pound, one sometimes witnesses sights that are far from edifying: elderly women and men distressfully counting the few coins in their pockets, fearful of not having enough to redeem their dog. Why a small mongrel owned by a poor person should be seen by the Taxman as a luxury item is a mystery I cannot unravel. It is therefore evident that the question of the dog tax should be re-examined to eliminate senseless cruelty and upsetting situations that could be easily avoided.”

These words of de Chirico’s, which also recall dramatic scenes from Vittorio De Sica’s masterpiece *Umberto D.*, reveal the level of sensitivity of a man who, behind his many masks, always showed exceptional sensitivity and concern towards the “weak”, just as his paintings and writings were exceptional, this represents one more piece of the puzzle for a fuller understanding and knowledge of his complexity as man and artist.

Giorgio de Chirico, Dogs and Great Painting

De Chirico’s great passion for dogs could not but be reflected in his work. In the impassioned depiction of dogs in his paintings, he also found a refined and important space for dialogue with the art of past epochs, especially in a period when his interest was drawn to Great Master Painting

with research into executive techniques and trade secrets, but also with copies and revisiting of great works by painters who had preceded him over the centuries.

De Chirico's drawings of dogs, today in the de Chirico Foundation's Collection, are particularly intense and lively and very likely include some animals from his own "stable" such as *Filippo* or *Toto the biter*. Executed with refined swiftness, necessary in portraying animals from life, and with love, as we see from the touching intensity



fig. 6 G. de Chirico, *Horses Frightened by the Barking of Dogs*, early 1950s

of expressions in which the eyes are brought to life with few precise strokes of vibrant synthesis (figs. 2-5), these endearing drawings sit well with a passage from his essay, *A Discourse on the Mechanism of Thought*, written by de Chirico in 1943: "We presume that animals have the same technique of thought as human beings, which means that animals think by the same means of images; but with animals the form of image changes according to their physical particularities. Dogs must mostly think by means of olfactory images for their sense of smell is so extremely developed that it almost touches upon clairvoyance. The fact that a dog senses the return of its master while he is nowhere near close enough for the animal to actually see or hear him is remarkable and very mysterious."⁹

For de Chirico, the representation of the dog was also one of the many and important points for comparison with art history's many beloved masters, from Pisanello Mantegna, Piero della Francesca, Titian, Velázquez, Fragonard and Delacroix, Géricault to Courbet.

De Chirico's love of animals illuminates, among other things, his interest in representing horses (sometimes almost as self-portraits), in several paintings they are specifically accompanied by dogs, perhaps with Delacroix in mind and in any case in reference to a fairly widespread iconography of hunting scenes in the painting of previous centuries (fig. 6).

Of special importance in this context are the works dedicated to Baby, the beloved Great Dane, who was cause for worry as we see in a letter to Alberto Magnelli (9 March 1937) begging him to find out about the dog which, upon departure for New York, de Chirico had entrusted to an antique dealer named Ostins from whom however he had received no news.¹⁰

⁹ Id., *A Discourse on the Mechanism of Thought*, in "Documento", May 1943; English translation in "Metaphysical Art" n. 14/16, 2016, p. 145.

¹⁰ G. de Chirico, Letter of 9 March 1937 to Alberto Magnelli, published in M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, *Giorgio de Chirico. Gli anni Trenta*, Skira, Milan 1995, p. 352: "Dear Mangnellone, [...] Please do me a great favour: 1) telephone this gentleman with whom we left our dog Baby and ask him for news; we've already written to him about ten times without getting a reply. He is an antique dealer called Ostins, a friend of the Bellini family, who promised to take Baby to a place near Nice where his sister lives [...]. We are very worried, having received no word about our dog that we are very fond of".



fig. 7 G. de Chirico, *Baby*, 1934, Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, Rome

De Chirico portrayed the magnificent Great Dane several times, in particular around 1934, in an oil painting conserved in the Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico Collection (fig. 7) and a painting of the same period in which Isabella Far is depicted as Diana sleeping (fig. 8).

As Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco has written, Isabella is “captured asleep, in the guise of Diana, with the faithful harlequin Great Dane Baby, also sleeping. Baby makes a number of appearances in this period, as in a painting bought by Albert Barnes for his museum in Marion, Pennsylvania. No chance occurrence, it is a model we find in the canvases of Gustave Courbet, the realist.”¹¹

In the Diana-Isabella painting de Chirico creates an elegant “caprice” of references to great painting, to classically and his personal history, where Diana the Huntress is painted in the celebrated pose of Ariadne sleeping, a figure so important to his first metaphysical period. References to Titian's Venuses, to Courbet and Greek statuary are thus united in a vision at once ironic, cultivated and timeless, where the metaphysical mystery is concealed behind the fiction of an unreal realism that represents a land of myth beyond time and history, a space similar to that of the painting depicting the dog Baby as if in an eternal return of great painting in which dogs were protagonists of the glory and splendour of the courts that commissioned masterpieces from great painters.

Thus Baby and Isa feature in yet another picture of 1934 where they are depicted together in

¹¹ M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, in *Giorgio de Chirico. Gli anni Trenta*, Skira, Milan 1991, p. 189.

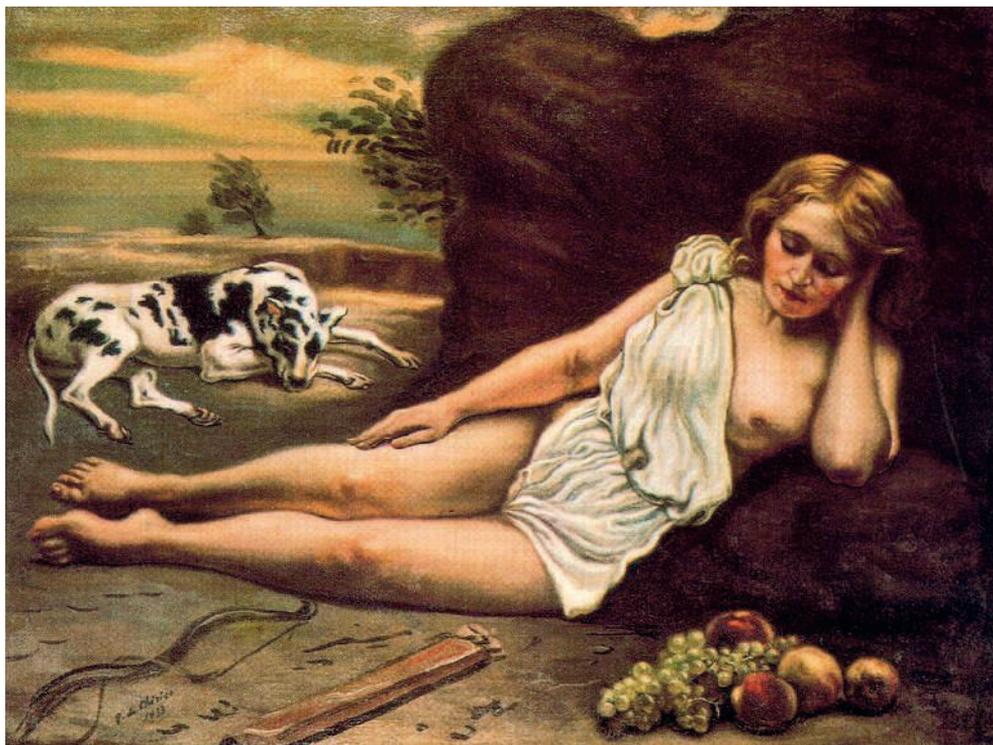


fig. 8 G. de Chirico, *Diana asleep in the Woods*, 1933, La Galleria Nazionale, Rome

the painter's "small realistic atelier" in Paris,¹² a work of great compositional sophistication, and highly touching for the loving relationship of direct communication between the Great Dane and the female figure (fig. 9).

A view of gentle and serene family life, the painting is at the same time an elegant, complex and ironic tribute to great painting and to de Chirico's own artistic history, showing in a mirroring mechanism the structured *mise en abîme* of pictures within a picture, where the canvas *Alexandros* (1934 ca.) on the easel serves almost as a stage-set for de Chirico himself, the only figure in the painting that is actually looking towards the spectator, by way of a self-portrait hanging on the left wall, in which he is depicted with the figure of his sleeping wife.

The play of drapes, staircases and (self)-portraits, together with the figure of the dog, can be seen as an ironic, complex and affectionate reference to a cornerstone of art history – Diego Velázquez' *Las Meninas* (fig. 10) – of which it appears to be a playful variation, where the dog is no longer in the foreground as in the Spaniard's painting but emerges from the curtain on the stairs in the background, like José Nieto Velázquez in the great Prado canvas, while the easel on

¹² *Ibidem*.



fig. 9 G. de Chirico, *Isabella in the Paris Studio*, 1934 ca.



fig. 10 D. Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

the left in front of de Chirico's self-portrait seems, once more elegantly, to paraphrase the Master of Seville's masterpiece.

Velázquez is indeed found among the narrow constellation of great painters cited as a reference for his own painting in de Chirico's writings, as for example in *Mr. Dudron*: "For Mr. Dudron, an ideal [painterly] material had to be soft and fluid, but at the same time firm and solid; consequently, his favourite painters were Veronese, Tintoretto, Velázquez and Rubens."¹³

In the same novel, Isabella Far speaks of great painting, standing before one of the Spaniard's works: "Now, fine painting is never colour that has dried but *fine coloured matter*. That's what Isabella Far said to me one day in a museum, before a Velázquez painting."¹⁴

Isabella and Baby the Great Dane thus became actors in one of de Chirico's many gestures of homage to the history of great art and to one of his most beloved masters; a grand dressing-up where a simple family scene conceals complex plays of exchanged looks and citations in a tribute which blends two of de Chirico's great passions – painting and dogs – in a splendid fusion that reveals the whole of his extraordinary depth as man and artist.

Translated by David Smith

¹³ G. de Chirico, *Il Signor Dudron*, Le Lettere, Florence 1998, p. 10.

¹⁴ *Ibidem.*, p. 7.