

DE CHIRICO'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE REDISCOVERY OF THE ANCIENT ENCAUSTIC TECHNIQUE IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

Salvatore Vacanti

Interest in the ancient technique of encaustic painting was rekindled in Italy between the 1920s and 1930s, in parallel to the debate on the return of mural painting which had its grand season during the fascist period.¹ Although the phenomenon is generally linked to the attention mural painting was newly afforded following resumption of archaeological digs at Herculaneum and Pompeii in the late 1920s, technical art manuals had indeed been making ongoing reference to the technique since the 18th century, when debate on the mysterious procedure had actually begun. In fact, the first finds at the Campania excavations, which captured the interest of scholars and artists and led to the mistaken conviction that the discovered works had been done with the ancient encaustic technique, date to halfway through that century. This gave rise to so-called “encaustic painting”, an actual discipline, resulting in a continuum of studies and experiments which, in the 18th century as in the 20th, always set out from the same presupposition: the interest surrounding Pompeian painting came about as a result of sensational new archaeological finds. Although we now know that murals of the Roman age are chiefly frescoes and not encaustics, at the time misunderstanding about Pompeian painting technique was widespread.²

Giorgio de Chirico, who from 1919 evinced a renewed and driving interest in the great masters of the past, and especially in the recovery of traditional artistic techniques, bears witness to this singular phenomenon of encaustic revival in his well known *Piccolo trattato di tecnica pittorica* (Small Treatise on Painting Technique) of 1928. The summa of de Chirico's knowledge of painting technique and the high point of that new direction known to all as “return to craft”, this text shows, above all in the chapter dedicated to Encaustic technique, the variety and complexity of the Maestro's reading, which however was reprocessed in a personal key, also arriving at some bizarre conclusions. It will therefore be useful to sketch a historical outline of the question before proceeding to analysis of de Chirico's significant contribution.

¹ See S. Vacanti, *Il recupero dell'encausto nell'arte italiana durante il ventennio fascista. Teoria, sperimentazione, ideologia*, in *La Ricerca Giovane in cammino per l'arte*, Proceedings of two days of study (Viterbo, 9 May 2008 and 19 May 2010), scientific coordinator M. Andaloro, edited by C. Bordino and R. Di Noia, Gangemi, Rome 2012, pp. 117-135.

² The question has been resolved in favour of fresco in the most recent studies, by Paolo Mora in particular, on the basis of a philological reading of Vitruvius which also explains the brilliance of the Roman works that have come down to us. Roman painting was therefore done on damp plaster with a mixed technique of fresco and tempera. The presence of wax, often detected in analyses, rather has to do with the so-called “encaustic finish” and with restoration procedures carried out in the past. See P. and L. Mora, P. Philippot, *La conservazione delle pitture murali*, Editrice Compositori, Milan 1999, pp. 109-122.

According to interpretations still in good standing today, antique encaustic colours were mixed with melted wax and other components then applied to the support by means of a heat source. It was widely used in antiquity until the 7th century AD, as may be seen from the oldest Roman icons. Information comes mainly from Pliny the Elder and Vitruvius, but also Plutarch and John Chrysostom; nonetheless, references to technical details are sometimes divergent due to the difficulty of interpreting the sources.³ The hypothesis of its use in murals is questionable so we must speak more properly of “encaustic finish”, a practice noted by Vitruvius. The sources always refer to encaustic as easel painting, and in fact the works in which it was certainly employed include funerary portraits from the Egyptian region of Fayyum.⁴

Around the mid 18th century, following suggestions deriving from the finds in Herculaneum and Pompeii and with the conviction that the splendour of these paintings was imputable to the use of encaustic, certain passages were reread and sometimes distorted, mainly from Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* and Vitruvius's *De Architectura*, in search of the correct procedure. Interpretation of the passages from Pliny has always been controversial. The latter maintained that in antiquity there existed two methods of encaustic painting with a hot iron, prior to the advent of warship painting when a third brush technique was introduced. Broadly speaking, the first method involved a sort of heated iron spatula for modelling and fusing the paints (pigments mixed with Punic wax) that were applied to the surface of the work in small portions. The second method seems to have consisted in engraving ivory tablets with a sharp, heated stylus (*késtron* for the Greeks, *vericulum* for the Romans, as de Chirico notes); but it is unclear whether in this case the accepted meaning of encaustic was simply due to the use of heat (without involving wax). The third method consisted in melting Punic wax over a fire and mixing it with the paint which was then applied to ships with large brushes: a paint, says Pliny, “which remains unaltered by sun, seawater, rain or wind”⁵. This historic phrase is more-over duly recalled by de Chirico when he deals with the subject in his *Small Treatise*.

In this case the wax-based binder was kept in a liquid state by the proximity of a source of heat, a method which – according to 18th century exegetes – would also be used for murals, thus explaining the excellent preservation and brilliance of the Pompeian paintings. Having learnt in our own times that painting in the Roman age employed the fresco technique, the presence of wax detected in analyses should be identified rather with the so-called “encaustic finish”, meaning a final varnishing as mentioned by Vitruvius.⁶

The method described consisted in brushing liquefied wax diluted with oil onto a dry wall, after which a container full of hot embers was applied causing the wax to penetrate the wall thoroughly.

³ See L. Vlad Borrelli, *Restauro archeologico: storia e materiali*, Viella, Rome 2003, pp. 243-245; S. Rinaldi, *Storia tecnica dell'arte. Materiali e metodi della pittura e della scultura (secc. V-XIX)*, Carocci, Rome 2011, pp. 50-51, 113.

⁴ The Fayyum funerary portraits, chronologically distributed from the 1st to the 4th century AD, are wooden panels which were inserted into the mummies' bandages and which represented the face of the deceased with extraordinary realism. The colours are laid on a whitish primer in encaustic and sometimes in tempera. See E. C. Doxiadis, *La tecnica dei ritratti*, in *Fayum. Misteriosi volti dall'Egitto*, exhibition catalogue edited by S. Walker, M. Bierbrier, Leonardo Arte, Rome 1997, p. 27.

⁵ Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, XXXV, 41.149. On this question See C. Merucci, *I leganti*, in *Preparazione e finitura delle opere pittoriche*, edited by C. Maltese, Mursia, Milan 1993, pp. 48-52.

⁶ Vitruvius, *De architectura*, VII, 9, 3. On this question See L. Traversi, *Le vernici*, in *Preparazione e finitura*, cit., pp. 150-152.

Subsequently the wall was rubbed with a clean cloth and polished with the aid of a candle, in a manner similar to the technique employed for marble statues (*gànosis*).

Initially the debate on encaustic painting was restricted to France where research was promoted by Anne Claude Philippe de Tubières, Count De Caylus, who distinguished himself with his research in a competition held by the Paris Académie des Inscriptions et des Belles-Lettres⁷, as did Jean Jacques Bachelier.⁸ These early studies, in which Denis Diderot also took part⁹, gained a place for *Encaustic* among the illustrated articles of the famous *Encyclopédie*, which in enlightenment Europe also contributed to upholding the revaluation of arts and crafts.¹⁰ Albeit slowly, the debate spread to Italy where at the end of the century the fundamental text by Spanish monk Vincenzo Requeno was published¹¹, to which were added studies by Lorgna, Tommaselli and Astori who, between 1784 and 1787, controversially set in opposition various types and interpretations of wax and heat-source painting.¹²

Requeno's work brought together analysis of the sources (though often misunderstood), study of ancient remains and, being himself a painter, direct experimentation. The text is mentioned several times by Giorgio de Chirico in the *Small Treatise* as the main reference for his own experiments with encaustic, though he erroneously dates it to the 17th century. The work is divided into two essays: in the first, dedicated to the painting of the Greeks, Requeno aimed to demonstrate that encaustic was the chief method practised by the ancients, while in the second he illustrates the technique, premising certain considerations on the defects of oil painting to which he opposes the perpetuity of Greek and Roman methods. Re-proposal of the ancient encaustic technique in late 18th century Italian treatises was in fact also linked to a negative appraisal of oil painting, due to the more rational analysis of the alterations it undergoes with time.¹³

Studies of encaustic painting continued into the 19th century, in tandem with the development of historiographic research into artistic techniques through reading of the sources and observation of the physical-chemical components of the works. At the turn of the century a new course developed fuelled by the research of historians and chemists on the sources of antique techniques, in the belief that these would help renew artistic creativity. It was chiefly circles close to the Munich Academy of Fine Arts that showed the most interest in the recuperation of techniques fallen into disuse such as tempera and encaustic. This interest, however, did not cause a slowing down of the progressive use of the new industrial materials.¹⁴

⁷ A.-C.-P. De Tubières Caylus, *Mémoire sur la peinture à l'encaustique et sur la peinture à la cire*, in *Mémoires de l'Académie des Inscriptions*, book XXVIII, Paris 1755.

⁸ J.-J. Bachelier, *L'histoire et le secret de la peinture à la cire contre le sentiment du Comte de Caylus*, Paris 1755.

⁹ D. Diderot, *L'histoire et le secret de la peinture en cire*, Paris 1755. This article, initially for the *Encyclopédie*, was later published anonymously in volume II of the *Année Littéraire*.

¹⁰ On this question See M. T. Caracciolo, *Una querelle tra Parigi e Roma: la riscoperta della tecnica antica dell'encausto dal Conte de Caylus all'abate Requeno, in Roma triumfante? L'attualità dell'antico nella Francia del Settecento. Proceedings of the Int. Study Convention, Rome 9-11 March 2006*, edited by L. Norci Cagiano, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Rome 2007, pp. 125-143.

¹¹ V. Requeno Y Vives, *Saggi sul ristabilimento dell'antica arte de' Greci e de' Romani Pittori*, Giovanni Gatti, Venice 1784 (2nd ed. Parma, 1787).

¹² A. M. Lorgna, *Discorso sopra la cera punica*, Verona 1785; G. Tommaselli, *Della cerografia*, Verona 1785; G. Astori, *Della pittura colla cera all'Encausto*, Venice 1786. On this question See C. Nenci, *L'encausto tra teoria ed empiria nell'Italia tardo settecentesca*, in *Artisti lombardi e centri di produzione italiani nel Settecento: interscambi, modelli, tecniche, committenti, cantieri*, edited by G. C. Sciolla, Edizioni Bolis, Bergamo 1995, pp. 213-219.

¹³ See S. Bordini, *Materia e immagine: fonti sulle tecniche della pittura*, De Luca, Rome 1991, pp. 118-122.

¹⁴ See P. Bensi, *Materiali e procedimenti della pittura italiana tra Ottocento e Novecento*, in "Ricerche di Storia dell'arte", 1984, n. 24, pp. 75-81.

Ancient encaustic technique found an enthusiast in the Swiss painter Arnold Böcklin, a great experimenter of the day and a fundamental inspiration for Giorgio de Chirico's art.¹⁵ In an ongoing comparison with ancient works and sources, he had devised a binder based on cherry gum and, after his 1863 visit to Pompeii and Naples, developed a wax and resin based technique with which he worked during his stay in Rome. His studio assistant in Rome, Rudolph Schick, refers to this procedure in his notebooks, calling it "encaustic". It appears that Böcklin created these works in paints mixed with resin (perhaps sandarac) and vegetable gum, subsequently heating the surface and spreading beeswax dissolved in essence of turpentine. The surface was then reheated in such a way that the paint binder fused with the wax above. The resulting surface was then polished with a warm cloth.¹⁶ Nevertheless, in this case we should rather call it "encaustic finish", the treatment described by Vitruvius as a protective coating also for marble sculpture. Ernst Berger's monograph on the Böcklin's technique deals extensively with the latter's interest in Pompeian murals and his experimentation with procedures aimed at recovering the old encaustic technique.¹⁷ De Chirico must have read these pages with avid curiosity and great profit, as evinced by the mention of Böcklin's encaustic painting *Sappho* (fig. 1), though he mistakenly refers to it as belonging to the Schack collection in Munich.¹⁸ The booklet by Berger (who was a painter, scholar of ancient techniques and teacher at the Munich Academy between the late 19th and early 20th century) is explicitly referenced in de Chirico's *Memoirs* as an important reference for understanding the trade secrets of his beloved Böcklin.¹⁹ Berger in effect refers to an encaustic painting entitled *Sappho*, giving Rudolf Schick's notebooks as his source, correctly specifying it as a work located in Basel²⁰, where indeed it remains today. The Basel *Sappho*²¹ was moreover studied by Hermann Kühn who held it to be an actual encaustic painting in the execution of which the paints had been mixed with a wax and resin based binder and applied hot with a spatula.²²

The 19th century panorama of research into encaustic painting was completed with studies published at the end of the century by the Italian Giuseppe Viglioli and the Frenchmen Henry Cros and Charles Henry²³, justly acknowledged by de Chirico in his *Small Treatise*. Subsequently, at the beginning of the 20th century, the main figure to deal with the question in Italy was a restorer, Tito Venturini

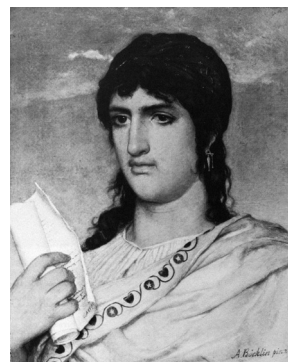


fig. 1 A. Böcklin, *Sappho*, 1862, encaustic on canvas, Basel, Kunstmuseum

¹⁵ See S. Vacanti, *Giorgio de Chirico e il "ritorno al mestiere". L'importanza della formazione artistica tra Atene e Monaco*, in "Metaphysical Art. Journals of the Giorgio and Isa de Chirico Foundation", N° 5-6, Le Lettere, Florence 2006, pp. 404-432.

¹⁶ See H. Kühn, *Technische Studien zur Malerei Böcklins*, in R. Andree, *Arnold Böcklin Die Gemälde*, Basel-Munich 1977, pp. 106-127.

¹⁷ See E. Berger, *Böcklins Technik*, Munich, G. D. W. Callwey, 1906, pp. 75-84.

¹⁸ See G. de Chirico, *Piccolo trattato di tecnica pittorica*, edited by J. de Sanna, Scheiwiller, Milan 2001, p. 40.

¹⁹ G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico*, Peter Owen, London 1971, p. 114.

²⁰ See E. Berger, *Op. cit.*, p. 79.

²¹ A. Böcklin, *Sappho*, 1862, encaustic on canvas, 56,5x45,5 cm, Basel, Kunstmuseum. See R. Andree, *Arnold Böcklin Die Gemälde*, Basel-Munich 1977, p. 263, n. 148.

²² See H. Kühn, *Op. cit.*, p. 112.

²³ G. Viglioli, *Del modo di dipingere a fresco su l'intonaco greco-romano*, Parma 1885; H. Cros, C. Henry, *L'encaustique et les autres procédés de peinture chez les anciens. Histoire et techniques*, Paris 1885.

Papari²⁴, who dedicated most of his work to Roman wall painting and reconstruction of the mysterious encaustic method. Nevertheless, his essays, which evince careful reading of both French and Italian 18th century scholars, demonstrate that he shared their erroneous interpretation of Pompeian painting as encaustic, upheld by a series of arbitrary readings from Pliny and Vitruvius.²⁵ It should be pointed out that in the early 20th century the item *Encaustic* was found in the leading manuals of artistic technique, including those by the Italian divisionist painter Gaetano Previati²⁶, and serve today as reference to the current taste and artistic methods in Italy at the turn of the century. Even in Maurizio Ebici's *Enciclopedia artistica*, a handbook for painters and decorators published by Calcaterra in Milan in 1903, one finds an entry for encaustic painting which deals, however, with a readymade commercial liquid (with a list of its ingredients) used for mixing paints for wall painting.²⁷ The booklet is proof of the market availability at the beginning of the century of products made to achieve the visual effect of Pompeian wall painting, which at the time was thought to be encaustic. As had happened in the past, inventions were developed not from a philological recuperation of ancient technique, but rather, in order to imitate an opaque and luminous painterly effect. In line with this we find a section dedicated to encaustic in the 1912 handbook of artistic technique by Frenchman Charles Moreau-Vauthier, later translated and published in Italian by Ugo Ojetti, with partial re-elaborations and an introduction by Giulio Aristide Sartorio²⁸. The latter proved to be a passionate experimenter, interested in the reuse of techniques from the past, who also worked in a non-philological method, as shown by his *Fregio* for the new hall of the Parliament which was executed with a unique procedure similar to encaustic with a mixture of poppy oil, purified wax and turpentine.²⁹ The adoption of this technique reflects the influence of Nino Costa's 19th century wall paintings in Rome's Galleria Sciarra; Sartorio was, in fact, very active in the circle of "Cronaca Bizantina" and other artistic groups promoted by Costa.³⁰

"Encaustic" was among the headings in a 1921 manual by Max Doerner³¹, who did not agree with the mainstream opinion of the period, which was also shared by the Munich Academy where he taught for many years. Doerner maintained that the Pompeian paintings were frescoes, thus approaching the theory we now know to be true.

²⁴ See M. Merlonghi, *Tito Venturini Papari*, in *Restauratori e restauri in archivio*, edited by G. Basile, vol. 1, Nardini, Florence 2003, pp. 165-170.

²⁵ See T. Venturini Papari, *La pittura a encausto e l'arte degli stucchi al tempo di Augusto*, Rome 1901; Id., *Il rinnovamento ultimo degli encausti*, Rome 1902; Id., *Per l'arte della conservazione delle antiche pitture*, Rome 1905; Id., *Il coenileum o azzurro d'Egitto*, Rome, 1910; Id., *La pittura ad encausto al tempo di Augusto*, Rome 1928.

²⁶ G. Previati, *La tecnica della pittura*, Turin 1905. See also S. Bordini, *Scienza, tecnica e creatività artistica negli scritti di Gaetano Previati*, in "Ricerche di Storia dell'Arte", n. 51, 1993, pp. 40-51.

²⁷ M. Ebici, *Enciclopedia artistica. Manuale del pittore e decoratore industriale*, Ditta Luigi Calcaterra, Milan 1903.

²⁸ C. Moreau-Vauthier, U. Ojetti, *La pittura: i diversi processi, le malattie dei colori, i quadri falsi*, with an introduction by G. A. Sartorio, Istituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche, Bergamo 1913.

²⁹ The large *Fregio* in Montecitorio composed of 50 panels and measuring 105 metres long and just under 4 metres high was executed by Sartorio between 1908 and 1912. The panels were painted in his studio and later installed on site. In addition to encaustic technique he also made use of the latest photographic methods: to simplify his work, he projected slides of small sketches on the canvases to transfer the composition's structure without resorting to the usual grid drawing technique. See *Il fregio di Giulio Aristide Sartorio*, exhibition catalogue edited by R. Miracco, Leonardo International, Milan 2007.

³⁰ On the wake of the English Pre-Raphaelites during the second half of the 19th century, the Roman painter Nino Costa proposed a return to Medieval craftsman techniques, but remained on a theoretic level without undertaking a philological study of the procedures of the Italian primitive painters. See S. Rinaldi, *Da Hayez a Sartorio, passando per Nino Costa. Tecniche pittoriche a confronto*, in *L'occhio, la mano e la macchina. Pratiche artistiche dell'Ottocento*, edited by S. Bordini, Lithos, Rome 1999, pp. 87-106.

In 19th and 20th century, both in technical treatises as well as in achieved works, the mysterious and ancient technique of encaustic painting was re-invented in various forms as a result of personal interpretations of passages from Pliny and Vitruvius. This approach appears as early as Count Caylus' research as well as the entry found for "Encaustica" in the *Encyclopédie* of Enlightenment France.

As aforementioned, interest in encaustic painting was rekindled in Italy between the 1920s and 1930s, giving rise to a phenomenon of artistic revival triggered above all by the sensation of the new archaeological digs in Campania, directed by Amedeo Maiuri, in the second half of the 1920s. His finds at the Villa dei Misteri³² Pompeian wall painting strongly attracted the attention of artists, whose curiosity was aroused regarding its technique, which led certain painters and restorers to indulge themselves in attempts at its recovery, that varied in their level of methodology.

It was a debate in which Giorgio de Chirico's reflections and experimental research also took a significant place, even prior to the work of Ferruccio Ferrazzi who, from the 1930s, would be the leading exponent of the encaustic renaissance. It should however be noted that several years before the advent of this revival and the writing of de Chirico's text, the Neapolitan painter Maria Zaffuto, a knowledgeable but little known figure, had taken an interest in the matter and actually published a brief but detailed monograph (fig. 2) on encaustic painting in 1924.³³ Active in Rome in the decorative arts sector during the fascist regime, she used encaustic on panels which were often part of more extensive ornamental apparatus for public and private architectures. A former pupil of Venturini Papari at the School of Ornamental Arts in Rome, Zaffuto (whose text is backed up by practical experiments) substantially reprised his theories based on the conviction that encaustic was the secret of Roman painting.³⁴

Several years later the same theoretical and practical approach would characterise Giorgio de Chirico's handling of the subject in his *Small Treatise on Painting Technique*. The artist devoted an entire paragraph to it in the second section of the book, the part dealing with tempera technique, for reasons that will be made clear below. De Chirico went back over the excursus of studies carried out on that ancient and mysterious technique, demonstrating knowledge of sources such as Pliny and Vitruvius as well as the long diatribe that was protracted from the 18th century studies of Count Caylus to the 19th century research of Cros and Henry, by way of the fundamental contribution of Requeno that however the artist erroneously dates to the 17th century. Yet he seems to have been unaware of



fig. 2 M. I. Zaffuto, *L'encausto*, Fiamma, Rome, 1924

³¹ M. Doerner, *Malmaterial und seine Verwendung im Bilde*, Munich 1921.

³² See A. Maiuri, *Pompei: i nuovi scavi e la Villa dei Misteri*, Ministry of National Education, General Directorate of Antiquities and Fine Arts, State Library, Rome 1931.

³³ M. I. Zaffuto, *L'encausto*, Edizioni della Fiamma, Rome 1924. On the painter Maria Immacolata Zaffuto (Naples, 1888 - Rome, 1943) see P. P. Pancotto,

³⁴ See S. Vacanti, *Il recupero dell'encausto nell'arte italiana*, cit., pp. 118-119.

the more recent debate triggered in Italy by the restorer Venturini Papari (or maybe preferred to say nothing about it) who in the early century was the absolute protagonist and had a number of followers, first and foremost his pupil Maria Zaffuto. In his own investigation, although aware of relative arbitrariness in the exegesis of the sources, de Chirico aligned himself with the theories handed down from the 18th century onwards, maintaining like many others that Roman painting was a shining example of ancient encaustic.

Etymologically speaking the definition cold encaustic is a paradox inasmuch as the word encaustic already contains the verb burn (καίω). But I have written it in this way to better specify the close kinship and, I should almost say, perfect similarity which this tempera, invented by a 17th century Spanish monk, has with the encaustic of the Greeks and Romans. Perhaps the encaustic of the ancients is superior to wax tempera in solidity, if one thinks of how Roman and Pompeian paintings have lasted, but with wax tempera one obtains equally beautiful painting and especially that so mysterious grain and that deep softness which makes this method of painting stand out among all others.³⁵

Various atypical aspects emerge from the extrapolated excerpt. The technique practised by de Chirico in fact ranks encaustic with an oil tempera emulsion, mixing the pigment with a wax-based binder and then painting without the use of heat which, as the etymology moreover bears out, was its distinctive feature in antiquity. But after evident experimentation backed up by study of the sources, the artist arrived at a conclusion as pragmatic as it was disorienting, which he explains further on in the text:

For we moderns encaustic painting is too complicated. Some painters and scholars of ancient techniques had tools similar to the ones depicted on vases or in Pompeian paintings made for them and succeeded in obtaining a result more or less the same as that of ancient encaustic technique; but due to the excessive difficulties to be overcome they did not continue with their experiments.³⁶

For these reasons, then, Giorgio de Chirico concentrated on the so-named “cold” method developed by Vincenzo Requeno, which in fact was none other than an imaginative and scarcely philological variant of encaustic. In his writings the Spanish monk put forward a total of six procedures for “encaustic” painting, including the one reprised by de Chirico to obtain, precisely, a binder that would remain in a liquid state even at room temperature and therefore be easily laid on by brush without the use of hot irons or sources of heat, hence the paradoxical definition “cold encaustic”.³⁷ Thus conceived, de Chirico’s technique was therefore a “wax tempera” whose formula:

³⁵ G. de Chirico, *Piccolo trattato di tecnica pittorica*, cit., p. 38.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

³⁷ See V. Requeno Y Vives, *Saggi sul ristabilimento*, cit., Second Essay, chs. V-XVII, pp. 134-203.

consists in an emulsion of wax, water and laundry soap. Like oil, wax is not water soluble; but just as oil becomes emulsifiable with water by means of egg yolk, so does wax by means of fatty substances, especially the potash contained in laundry soap.³⁸

His *Encausto a freddo* technique is dealt with in a special paragraph of the section on tempera painting. All the other formulas for tempera painting described in the *Small Treatise* however are oil tempera emulsion in which the oil binder is emulsified with egg. Whereas in this case the emulsifying agent is white Marseilles soap. De Chirico maintains that with this particular binder one must paint only on rigid supports such as panel and cardboard:

[...] and this not because the tempera in question is fragile but because the painting on completion must be rubbed with a wax solution, so a solid surface is needed on which heavy pressure can be exerted.³⁹

Contrarily, Requeno employed this technique on canvas supports, as we find in his text:

On white canvas and without primer I painted, with that soapy mixture, a St Francis de Sales one ell in height.⁴⁰

Priming of the support for *cold encausto*, in de Chirico's view, must be carried out as for paintings done with the other temperas he describes, which is to say a complex layering of Spanish white and animal glue, with a final application of two coats of an emulsion of egg yolk and linseed oil. The artist explains that lastly, having left the painting to dry for a couple of days, he would heat the surface and varnish it with virgin wax melted in bain-marie in essence of turpentine. And he concludes by adding:

then it is left to cool for half an hour. Following which one heats the paint slightly and then vigorously rubs the entire painting with a clean, woollen cloth that has been warmed first, until it begins to gleam. In this way a very fine and precious substance is obtained which looks somewhat like ivory. Furthermore, the rubbed-in wax penetrates the pores of the paint and by softening the outlines gives that touch of being tender and mysterious (*troublant*⁴¹ as the French say) which makes Pompeian painting so evocative.⁴²

This treatment is highly reminiscent of the encaustic finish described by Vitruvius in *De Architectura* and also employed by Böcklin: de Chirico thus coupled two procedures that scholars

³⁸ G. de Chirico, *Piccolo trattato di tecnica pittorica*, cit., p. 40.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁴⁰ V. Requeno Y Vives, *Saggi sul ristabilimento*, cit., Second Essay, ch. IX, p. 154.

⁴¹ The literal translation is: 'disquieting'.

⁴² G. de Chirico, *Piccolo trattato di tecnica pittorica*, cit., pp. 41-42.

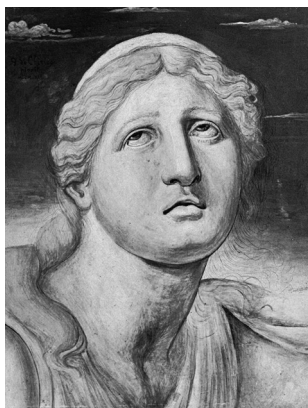


fig. 3 G. de Chirico, *Niobe*, 1920, encaustic (wax tempera) on panel, private collection

had been discussing since the 18th century, using wax both as a paint binder and in the final polishing. Whereas Requeno, when the paint was dry, brought a source of heat close to the back of the canvas in such a way as to definitively fuse the tones of the painting.⁴³

Having thus executed his works, it is likely that de Chirico might also have varnished them in order to counter the opacifying effect of the wax and achieve the brilliance of his other oil tempera emulsions.

In the text the artist further declares that he has “quite often painted” with this personal version of encaustic technique, yet without explicit reference to specific works. If we look up the general catalogue of his artistic production, edited by Claudio Bruni, the specific definition “encaustic” figures for one painting only:

Niobe, 1921, encaustic on panel, 34.5x27.5 cm.⁴⁴ The same picture, in the subsequent catalogue of his work (1908-1924, edited by Fagiolo dell'Arco) is described as *Niobe*, 1920, tempera on cardboard, 35.5x27.5 cm, private collection⁴⁵ (fig. 3). The painting in question is one of those that de Chirico exhibited at the so-called *Primaverile Fiorentina* of 1922⁴⁶, the last collective show by the Valori Plastici group and moreover mentioned by the artist in the *Small Treatise* under the heading *Tele, tavole e cartoni* (*Canvases, panels and card*)⁴⁷, recalling that he had exhibited almost exclusively works painted on rigid supports.

It is important to note that the definition “tempera” found in the bibliography is often legitimated from the look of the painted surface, so this painting, like other 1920s works by de Chirico, may be indicated as such without suggesting a wax-based binder was used. When all is said and done, he himself defines his *cold encausto* as a “wax tempera”. By the same token, a rigid type support under simple visual examination may be interpreted as cardboard when it might actually be a very thin panel. In short, many of the artist's works of the 1920s could have been done with his personal *cold encausto* procedure, but this is fairly hard to verify since specific scientific analyses are not always available.

⁴³ See V. Requeno Y Vives, *Saggi sul ristabilimento*, cit., Second Essay, ch. IX, p. 154.

⁴⁴ See C. Bruni Sakraichik, *Catalogo generale Giorgio de Chirico*, with the collaboration of G. de Chirico and I. Far and the consultancy of G. Briganti, Electa, Milan 1974, vol. IV, book 1, n. 274.

⁴⁵ See M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, *L'opera completa di de Chirico 1908-1924*, Milan, Rizzoli, 1984, p. 162, n. 170.

⁴⁶ The exhibition, held in Florence at the Palazzo del Parco di San Gallo from 8 April to 31 July 1922, was the brainchild of the Florence Fine Arts Society and entrusted to Sem Benelli. It aimed to offer an exclusively Italian artistic overview, also setting itself against the Venice Biennale. The exhibition catalogue states that de Chirico had 21 paintings and several drawings on show whose identification, from the list of titles, has been debated. They comprised mainly of oil on canvas paintings from his first metaphysical period, including the *Enigma of the Hour*, together with some works done after 1920 on canvas, panel and card. These last however were fewer in overall number than the artist recalled. See M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, *Giorgio de Chirico: il tempo di "Valori Plastici" 1918-1922*, De Luca, Rome 1980, pp. 72-77; E. Greco, *de Chirico alla Fiorentina Primaverile (1922)*, in *Origine e sviluppi dell'Arte Metafisica*, Proceedings of the Convention, Scalpendi, Milan 2011, pp. 159-208.

⁴⁷ G. de Chirico, *Piccolo trattato di tecnica pittorica*, cit., p. 26.

After 1930, research into encaustic painting aroused great enthusiasm in a number of artists in Italy, prompted no doubt by new archaeological finds, but in all likelihood they referred not only to the traditional sources mentioned herein but also to Giorgio de Chirico's fundamental *Small Treatise*. On this subject Alberto Savinio's reflections in the wake of the contemporary discoveries at Pompeii are significant. Having debuted as an artist in 1927, he changed from oils to the exclusive use of tempera around 1930, also by virtue of his brother's experience, appreciating the technique above all for the preciousness of the glazes.⁴⁸ Between 1933 and 1934, he tackled the question of technique in ideological terms in an essay published on the third page of "La Stampa", postulating tempera as the Italian technique par excellence as opposed to "Nordic" oil painting.⁴⁹ And lastly, in a well known article of July 1934, to vindicate its Italianness he cited the discoveries at Pompeii, referring to a piece published in the same paper the previous week in which the technique of the rediscovered paintings was defined as wax-based tempera.⁵⁰

The interpretation of Pompeian painting as "wax tempera" clearly harks back to the procedure put forward by de Chirico in the *Small Treatise*. Savinio meanwhile stepped into the debate on the mural decoration of government commissioned architecture, expressing his own specific ideological viewpoint. In the meantime mural painting had in fact gained a footing in the great decorations of public buildings that proliferated in the 1930s under the fascist regime, and the question of technique became as crucial as the art-architecture relationship and the question of content.⁵¹ Within this framework lies Sironi's reflection on the recovery of fresco⁵², a technique whose wholly Italian origins he exalts, analogous to the rediscovery of mosaics promulgated by Severini⁵³. The encaustic technique in turn was charged with nationalistic meaning because, in line with the most widely shared conjectures, it was linked to ancient Roman painting and became one of the alternatives to fresco.

Among the artists interested in encaustic painting in the 1930s were two outstanding exponents of the Roman school – Ferruccio Ferrazzi and Corrado Cagli – whose avenues of research were free of rhetorical implications. Ferrazzi in particular developed a thoroughgoing rapport with Roman painting⁵⁴, carrying on ceaseless experimentation that would make him the leading advocate of encaustic which he (like many of his day) erroneously believed to be the key to the splendour of Pompeian painting. He began his research around 1930, meticulously described in notebooks that

⁴⁸ See D. Fonti, *Tutte le tecniche dell'Argonauta*, in Savinio, *gli anni di Parigi, dipinti 1927-1932*, exhibition catalogue edited by M. di Carlo and P. Vivarelli, Electa, Milan 1991, pp. 45-57.

⁴⁹ The question is dealt with for the first time in A. Savinio, *Torre di guardia: realtà - cornici - tempera e olio*, "La Stampa", Turin, 8 September 1933 (reprinted in *Alberto Savinio*, exhibition catalogue edited by P. Vivarelli and P. Baldacci, Mazzotta, Milan 2002, pp. 203-222).

⁵⁰ A. Savinio, *La nuova teoria sulle pitture pompeiane - tempera e affresco*, "La Stampa", Turin 21 July 1934 (reprinted in M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, *Giorgio de Chirico. Gli anni Trenta*, Skira, Milan 1995, pp. 144-146). The pre-eminence of Pompeian painting recurs over the years in Savinio who once more reflected on it in certain writings of the forties (See D. Fonti, *Alberto Savinio: scritti sull'arte. Antologia*, in *Alberto Savinio*, cit., pp. 203-222).

⁵¹ 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.

⁵² In actual fact, from investigations carried out during restoration of some of Sironi's murals it came to light that, far from a methodological recovery of true "fresco", the artist had used a mixed technique with dry-applied tempera finishes. See A. Alessandri, *Mario Sironi. Il dipinto murale nell'Aula Magna*, in 1935. *Gli artisti nell'Università e la questione della pittura murale*, exhibition catalogue edited by E. Coen and Lux, Multigrafica, Rome 1985, pp. 72-75.

⁵³ See G. Mascherpa, *Severini e il mosaico*, Longo, Ravenna 1985.

⁵⁴ See F. Ferrazzi, *Dell'encausto, in L'encausto* di Ferruccio Ferrazzi, exhibition catalogue, Pisa 1971; *Ferruccio Ferrazzi dal 1916 al 1946*, exhibition catalogue edited by B. Mantura, M. Quesada, De Luca, Rome 1989.



fig. 4 F. Ferrazzi, *Ninetta piccola*, 1935, encaustic on terracotta panel, Rome, Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna

have remained unpublished⁵⁵. He created great murals with the encaustic technique but also distinctive portraits of his family, on small portable supports such as terracotta tiles (fig. 4).

In parallel, Corrado Cagli's personal experimentalism led him to freely reprise the artistic practices of the great Italian tradition, which for him dealt with the poetics of "primordium"⁵⁶, whilst changing from easel painting to murals. In this field he revolutionised the traditional approach by breaking the work up into portable chambered wooden panels, painted in the studio and then applied to the wall, probably as early as the V Triennial in 1933: one reason behind this choice was the need to save his works from destruction, since the fascist censors did not appreciate his interpretive freedom. Moreover, on that occasion he was able to work in close contact with the de Chirico brothers, and it is probably no accident that the technique he employed was precisely the egg tempera that is so extolled in the *Piccolo trattato di tecnica pittorica*, as seen in Gabriele Mucchi's fundamental testimony.⁵⁷

Thenceforth Cagli almost always did his mural decoration works on portable panels painted in "encaustic tempera": substantially an egg tempera with a final wax polishing.⁵⁸ In this sense we may refer to a recent study carried out subsequent to restoration of seven panels in the Pordenone Gallery of Modern Art (fig. 5), part of the cycle Cagli did for the Italian Pavilion at the 1937 World's Fair in Paris, works that were saved from destruction.⁵⁹

But more than anyone else it was Gianfilippo Usellini who practised the encaustic technique, in the wake of suggestions received from de Chirico whose *Small Treatise* had been precious reading for him right from the start.⁶⁰ Since the 1920s he had been interested in the "return to craft" and in de Chirico's oil tempera emulsion technique, and he used encaustic for the first time in 1934 to decorate the Great Hall at the Government Building in Sondrio, instead of the fresco technique envisaged for the project.⁶¹ His practice of encaustic painting was actually arbitrary, like that of many others, consisting of a simpler "encaustic finish" tempera painting with a final layer of hot-applied wax.

⁵⁵ See G. Colalucci, *I Diari di lavoro di Ferruccio Ferrazzi*, in "FMR", N° 21, 2007, pp. 73-96.

⁵⁶ This development was founded above all on an innovative interpretation of dechirichian Metaphysical Painting, filtered through adherence to the theories of Bontempelli who was highly influential on the artist also due to their kinship. See F. Benzi, *Corrado Cagli, tra primordium e Scuola Romana*, in "I Beni Culturali", n. 6, 2005, pp. 15-22.

⁵⁷ G. Mucchi, *Le occasioni perdute. Memorie 1899-1993*, L'Archivoltò, Milan 1994, pp. 231-232.

⁵⁸ The unusual term is probably linked to impressions absorbed during a trip to Paestum at the end of 1932, when in all likelihood he visited Pompeii too. See S. Vacanti, *Il recupero dell'encausto nell'arte italiana*, cit., pp. 128-129.

⁵⁹ See R. Portolan, *Corrado Cagli, il restauro*, in *Corrado Cagli all'Expo di Parigi del 1937: le tavole del Museo Civico di Pordenone*, exhibition catalogue edited by G. Ganzer, Pordenone 2004, pp. 30-37.

⁶⁰ See S. Vacanti, *From Mural Painting to "Emplastic Oil": Development and Diffusion of de Chirico's Technical Research between the 1930s and 1940s*, in "Metaphysical Art – The de Chirico Journals", n. 9/10, 2011, pp. 160-182.

⁶¹ See S. Pighi, *Il ciclo degli encausti di Sondrio*, in *Gianfilippo Usellini 1903-1971*, exhibition catalogue edited by E. Pontiggia, Leonardo, Milan 1994, pp. 203-204.

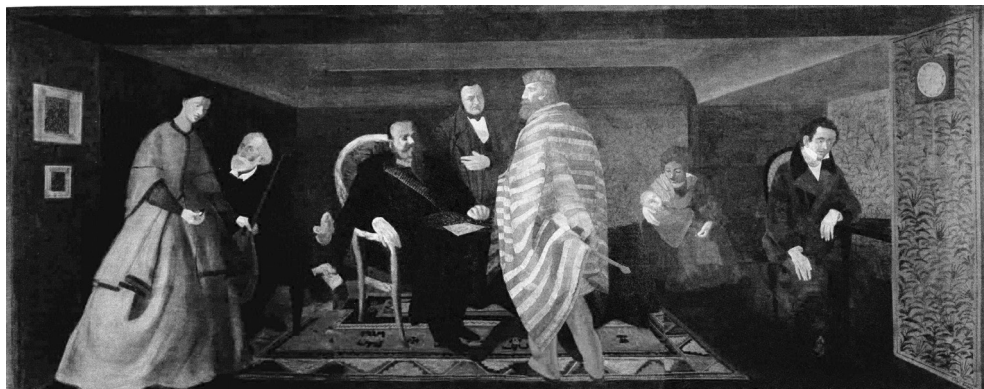


fig. 5 C. Cagli, *Verdi, Vittorio Emanuele II, Cavour, Garibaldi, Leopardi*, 1936-1937, encaustic tempera on chambered panel, Pordenone, Galleria d'Arte Moderna

This is borne out by his assistant, the artist Vincenzo Ferrari, who nonetheless informs us that in some easel works Usellini actually did employ the original encaustic method, for example in *Cane barbone* (*Poodle*) of 1934⁶² (fig. 6). The dog appears to be portrayed from life but is transfigured into a symbol of majestic wisdom, with an intent gaze and long hair on the chin like a philosopher's beard. Ferrari reveals to us how his master, with the passion and expertise that always distinguished him, used the authentic encaustic method to achieve the precious glazes of the dog's coat:

[...] he laid a layer of grey under and black over, using wax in the binder and then employing a heated metal spatula with which he went back over the colour impasto to enliven the tones and positively exploit the half-tones. In this way he achieved subtleties that could not have been achieved with the brush [...]⁶³

In those same years, encaustic continued to be treated in art manuals with alternatively old and new hypotheses that took earlier sources into consideration, among which, Giorgio de Chirico's *Small Treatise*. The most significant text dealing with artistic techniques published in the 1930s was the one by Leone Augusto Rosa and was most probably destined to art academy students. A vast and complete panorama regarding both practical and historical information was provided in the volume.⁶⁴ Rosa dedicated ample space to encaustic technique, retracing the history of its success from the flourish of research that occurred during the 18th century, regarding which he noted the scarce philological criteria in the interpretation of ancient sources. The method he considered to be the most conform to the results achieved in Pompeian painting is that of Venturini Papari, whose work he speaks

⁶² There are two versions of this painting, one of 1933 and the other of 1934; regarding the latter See *Gianfilippo Usellini 1903-1971*, cit., p. 181, n. 26, where it is described as: tempera on panel, 97x113 cm, Milan, private collection. The work was shown at the 1937 World's Fair in Paris.

⁶³ Vincenzo Ferrari interviewed by the present writer on 26 July 2009.

⁶⁴ L. A. Rosa, *La tecnica della pittura dai tempi preistorici a oggi*, Società Editrice Libri, Milan 1937.



fig. 6 G. Usellini, *Cane barbone*, 1934 encaustic on panel, Milan, private Collection

of in detail. He makes no mention however of the elaborate commercial products serving as surrogates for encaustic or cold encaustic methods, such as the ones de Chirico proposed on the wake of Requeno's research. With regard to tempera, in addition in dealing with 19th century and current experimentation, he focused mainly on the methods found in de Chirico's *Small Treatise on Painting Technique*.

During the mid-20th century, reference to encaustic technique is found in Maria Bazzi's *Abecedario pittorico*.⁶⁵ The author examines the question from various angles and contemplates both classical hot encaustic as well as egg tempera and wax emulsions, picking up on de

Chirico's suggestions. A new technique called *New Encaustic Painting* referred instead to the evolution owed to the emission of new commercial products on the art market. In the meantime further scientific experimentation had taken place resulting in deepened knowledge of Roman painting, which would progressively solve the question of practical technique.⁶⁶ In particular, thanks to Paolo Mora's research, the conclusion was arrived at that encaustic painting was not used in wall painting in Roman times, in Pompei or elsewhere, and that Fresco was indeed the technique employed.⁶⁷

Translated by David Smith

⁶⁵ M. Bazzi, *Abecedario pittorico*, Longanesi, Milan 1956.

⁶⁶ S. Augusti, *La tecnica dell'antica pittura parietale pompeiana*, in *Pompeiana. Raccolta di studi per il secondo centenario degli scavi di Pompei*, Macchiaroli, Naples 1950, pp. 1-41; E. Aletti, *La tecnica della pittura greca e romana e l'encausto*, L'Airone, Rome 1951; M. Cagian de Azevedo, *Encausto ed encausticatura nella pittura murale romana*, in "Bollettino Istituto Centrale per il Restauro", Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, n. 11-12, Rome 1952, pp. 199-202.

⁶⁷ P. Mora, *Proposte sulla tecnica della pittura murale romana*, in "Bollettino Istituto Centrale per il Restauro", Ist. Poligrafico dello Stato, Rome 1967, pp. 63-84.