

GIORGIO DE CHIRICO *DURING THE WAR**(Luigi Bellini) Giorgio de Chirico*

*1<sup>st</sup> sheet:* Giorgio de Chirico and his wife showed up at my house one foggy morning, sometime around the end of October 1942. Our friendship goes a long way back and I am always happy to be able to host my renowned friend and spend a bit of time with him. I had, at the time, been expecting a visit from him. Milan had undergone a violent bombing by the American air force; anyone who could left the bombed capital to seek refuge in central Italy; Genoa and Turin had also been abandoned by many of their inhabitants. In the streets of Florence, my hometown, I heard all kinds of accents and dialects, from the north as well as the south. Giorgio de Chirico settled in at my house; he had brought a great number of rolled-up paintings with him and he set himself keenly to work. He told me of his adventures in Milan and how he had managed to get out of the city. We had had many warning alarms - he told me - but without serious consequences, then one day, the 23<sup>rd</sup> of October to be precise, I went out in the afternoon to run some errands around town. When I go out on errands, I have the habit of coming back home the same day; I differ from André Derain in this regard; I have been told that when people call on Derain at home, an elderly maid who has been with the painter for many a year, invariably answers: "Mr. Derain is not at home, Mr. Derain has gone out to run some errands". Now, at times it happens that a tenacious and imprudent person answers back: "Ok, so I'll wait until Mr. Derain returns"; but the maid, without raising an eyebrow, comes back with: "Oh no, my dear sir, that would be quite impossible, because when Mr. Derain goes out on errands he sometimes stays out for days at a time".

*2<sup>nd</sup> sheet:* Having finished my errands, I was returning home to my apartment located in via Gesù, near the corner of via Montenapoleone, which is the most elegant street in Milan and comparable to Paris's rue du Faubourg Saint Honoré. It was late in the afternoon and western sky was coloured with the purple-reds of an autumn sunset. I was crossing Piazza della Scala where the famous Milanese theatre is found and from which

the square takes its name, as the Place de l'Opéra in Paris does, when I heard the lugubrious wailing of the sirens; they had sounded a bit late that day; they sounded when the danger was already upon our heads; in fact, I instinctively looked up and to the east I saw big machinery shining in the fading evening light and saw these flying sharks slowly descending towards the northern side of the city. The sound of the artillery shells detonating rung out and I also heard the heavy, dull and deep sound of the bombs exploding. I started running towards home; I recalled that I had left Isabella in bed as she wasn't feeling well; I was worried. When I got home I met Isabella who was descending with our dog and cat, pushed along by the other tenants, who were also in a rush to get to the basement of the building and shaken by the sound of the explosions which were coming nearer and nearer. This time the bombing lasted a long time. When we left the shelter it was night. I went out into the street; the air smelt of burnt rubber and the entire horizon was reddened by fires; I thought of paintings and also of colours I had seen in my life, and which represent Napoleon wrapped in furs, astride a chair in a square covered with snow while looking upon Moscow burning in the distance; I also thought

*3<sup>rd</sup> sheet:* of composer Boito's opera Nerone, the negative influence of which had as a consequence on Verdi - the immortal author of Rigoletto and Trovatore - the writing of two completely failed operas: Othello and Falstaff. I love to listen to Giorgio de Chirico talk. His exceptional spirit, his acute sense of judgement concerning men, events and things, have always interested me greatly. Only a few days had passed since he had been living with me and already a number of paintings had been made; a marvellous self-portrait, in which he dressed himself in a sixteenth century costume with a red cap upon his head; it is a portrait painted with a mastery and firm touch worthy of Velasquez. There were also with some still-lives with objects and fruits, with vast landscapes opening up in the background, like those painted by the Flemish; and the characteristic compositions with Phrygian knights and fighting warriors in tragically romantic scenes, in which it is the quality of the work itself that is the principal concern of the painter.

Unfortunately Giorgio de Chirico couldn't stay in Florence very long; after staying with me for a while, he moved into a beautiful villa located at the foothills of the famous hills of Fiesole and San Domenico, which add such charm to Florence. But the armistice came about and the Germans occupied the city.

A few ferocious fat men took control and the S.S. arrived, like phantoms

who had nothing human about them, prototypes of killers, who, as the keen observation made by Kessel described, had glaucous eyes with a fixed stare and a stony complexion. Giorgio de Chirico left Florence and went to Rome to hide. He entrusted me with a number of paintings and a few sculptures that he had made during the war. He has an intense abhorrence of the Germans, whom he calls: the most sadistic and hysterical people of the world.

Luigi Bellini

*Translated by Katherine Robinson*