

De Chirico or the Painting

by
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First shown in Milan and then in other European galleries, this exhibition of about 200 works by Giorgio de Chirico provides us with the opportunity to resolve a number of critical problems and to soften up schematized criticism, not only with regards to de Chirico, but also for all painting of the last sixty years.

De Chirico's reputation for having an exceptional personality is the result of biased and predisposed opinions. The personality of this artist (that goes beyond compare) has been torn to pieces: he is either black or white. The connection between the universally accepted aspect of mystery and magic in his works and the creative ability with which he painted has never been taken into consideration. Indeed, it is said that the "mystery" of de Chirico is not his pictorial strength.

The first proof of the wrongheadedness of critical theories on de Chirico has been offered in this show, in the room with his series of self-portraits and portraits. In the direct confrontation of portraits from '18, '19, '20, '22, with *Autoritratto nudo seduto* (Nude, seated Self-portrait), or with *Autoritratto con la corazza* (Self-portrait with armour), we can see that de Chirico honours painting with the same energy, and lets us take part in the same intrinsic mystery. The key to understanding the whole of de Chirico and the reason for his importance lies, as he said for years, with painting.

"Painting" is a difficult word, but not in the sense that to understand it one needs to be initiated into who knows what type of mysteries. I would say, instead, paradoxically, that it is easier to understand de Chirico and his true importance if one does not come with any preconceived notions. For those so-called experts, the term seems to be well defined: the specific nature of "painting" has been reduced and compressed into a few formal limits (as, for example, those coming from the poetics of the impressionists and onwards).

The impressionists and a century of French cultural hegemony have made significant contributions to Modern art; however, this is also responsible for having provoked and facilitated, in modern critical behaviour, a series of distorting taboos.

Reviewal of *De Chirico* exhibition, Palazzo Reale, Milan, April-May 1970, "Rinascita" no. 43, Roma, Oct. 30 1970, p. 16.

Even earlier artists are now seen through the eye of the *nouvelle critique*. One now looks at Piero, Fra' Angelico and Grünewald with an eye that has been trained by Cézanne about what is good and what is bad. Cézanne taught us many things but painting is not defined by Cézanne alone.

With the growth of new critical instruments there was a concomitant growth in mystification. This is the road that the majority of Italian critics took. The first collections were put together in Milan where it was decided who was to be included and excluded, and in the wake of which came Morandi. The painter or critic who did not agree to this reductive codification of the term "painting" was, more or less, shown the door. So much so that we could say that the faculty of looking at paintings for what they really are and what they say has been lost.

If we consider the above in the context of a common figurative language of art born from the Greek tradition, it will be impossible to give a correct reading and to discover the authentic values inherent in Asiatic, African, or Oceanic art. Any approach to art with such values can only be informed by issues of fashion or by an "archaeological" spirit: however we look at it, they are values that are one-sided and reductive.

It used to be said that de Chirico invented the metaphysic period, but that Carrà was "more a painter". It would have been possible for those uninitiated to the arcane meanings of the term, to understand this judgement.

It used to be said "Yes to Scipione! But Mafai is more the painter." Or, Casorati is interesting but not much of a "painter." It used to be said: Picasso is good, but Braque is "more the painter".

And one would distinguish a Cubist Braque from a Cubist Picasso (even if both were painted in the same year) on the basis of "painting." Yet both of them were painting in black, white and ochre, in opposition to the rhythms of impressionistic colouring – perhaps they were capable of transforming those rhythms into forms. Indeed, it is on the analysis of form (looking very carefully, and obviously after many years of having studied the many paintings of these two artists from those and successive years) that we can begin to distinguish Braque and Picasso within a good margin of error. (And, just for the record, our metaphysical painters did not try to paint anonymously, as did the Cubists).

When we consider the metaphysical paintings, as they are properly called, by de Chirico (that is, those from 1915-1920), and those by Carrà from the same period, along with Morandi's still lifes from the same period, it is obvious that we must undertake three different discussions. And it does not seem to me that such an effort has been made. In fact, the term metaphysic was not applied to Morandi (de Chirico was right to deny him this tag), or to Carrà, while both of

them set out to paint by mixing together elements of Giotto and the Futurists with an undeniably strong impetus. For this reason they should be really referred to as "magic realists"; as well as for their closeness to the "Novecento", a calling that was most coherent in Carrà, and as such, makes him the most qualified to be called the movement's initiator.

As an author of very beautiful paintings, Morandi included in his works the head of a mannequin, or the casing of an alarm clock or pure geometrical forms (trapezoidal boxes, cylindrical tubes, etc.), and he avoided any type of Romantic allusions. His roots were, and always remained, traditional. Morandi's paintings are all about the balance and order in the counterweights and tonal harmony. In a certain sense, he is the painter closest to Mondrian, and he was critically aware of this (I have studied his paintings since I have tried to "paint" a type of "essay" about him).

Take Morandi away from via Fondazza and he would have been a painter like Mondrian: just as Mondrian was a "series" painter. But reductive Italy conferred upon him the habit of a Franciscan monk, which Morandi knew how to manipulate intelligently. When we speak of Metaphysics, we can only speak of de Chirico really. It is his idea: informed by his readings in youth, his passion for Greek philosophy and then later for Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, the dream of original Greek culture and his monastic studies. De Chirico is Metaphysics, and it is from him, from his very depths, that we get the first Romantic brush-stroke, as it were; he is the first to break through the crystallization of the avant-garde that came after the Impressionists and he would open up the road for the Surrealists, for Ernst, etc. It is also the first that would go unrecognized by Occidental Europe.

When de Chirico states that the question surrounding true painting is "painting of great quality" he is saying something that is both simple and obvious. But it is not so simple or obvious. If de Chirico, when he is painting "things" well in the metaphysical vein using statues, skies, walls, lanes, smoke, etc., had instead "painted" a literary idea badly, he would have been expressing nothing, that is, none of his images would have had meaning.

It is obvious that a painter *has ideas, but he does not paint ideas*. A painter only paints things. And it is only in the way that he has painted that ideas may emerge. Thus, de Chirico's "apology" or defence for technique does not consider abstract dexterity, but rather the capacity of the painter to express himself, to conceive *with strength and power* the things before him. In other words, "technique" is linked to pictorial intelligence.

The true question is in the method, or one could say, in the moral attitude with which the painter confronts the "realm of appearances." The fact that these "appearances" are, in de Chirico, being *continually threatened* by a sense of mystery (of the unexpected) is another issue to be studied. The most important issue to confirm for a painter, and here we are speaking of Beato Angelico or Van der Weyden, of Caravaggio, Rubens or Cézanne, is the relationship expressed in

their *imitative tension* or, more specifically, the degree and validity of the imitation: the very intensity with which the painter restitutes, in its completeness, the object painted.

With Monet, or Cézanne, the imitation concentrates on specific problems: the object immersed in light with its own specific rhythm, or its own weight; its corporeal nature (visual awareness in the Impressionists, volumetric awareness in Cézanne and the Cubists).

To this is added the extra problem of removing any type of sentiment or romanticism from the operation of painting ("the logic that corrects emotion"). Confronted with this, de Chirico adds an extraordinarily fresh concept, one that is again ingenuous: imitation. (It is no accident that Apollinaire linked him to Douanier Rousseau).

It is also in the metaphysical period that the very geometrical elements (triangles, trapezoids, cylinders, spheroids, etc.) – those which can induce, even reasonably, a thought in the Cubist direction – are always brought back to objects (boxes, squares, stovepipes). Nowadays unfortunately, the pleasure of looking at Caspar D. Friedrich, or Böcklin, can only be had because it is fashionable now to reconsider them.

This is deeply anti-cultural; that one has to be with the current or against it is completely incomprehensible to me. Incomprehensible because we are not talking about dividing painters up into "calligraphers" or "painters of contents" as was once said, but instead we must understand the efficiency which with these painters execute their craft, the sense of fullness with which they confront the art of presenting the things themselves. The fundamental element that coheres and legitimizes every one of de Chirico's works is his pictorial execution. There are periods of de Chirico where he hits upon a happier association of images, while at other times he aims directly at popular taste, including his "American calendar."

It would be interesting to find (for internal motives) analogies with some pictures of Courbet, with certain dazzling snow landscapes, or with *Dame au pot-doscapbe*. Not that I definitely want to establish parallels, but rather a similarity of behaviour.

This is the intrinsic bond between the exciting contemplation of truth and the pictorial means used to exalt the things themselves and the truth. There is also a certain desired shamelessness that should not be forgotten in the relationship with Courbet. Indeed, I would say if we were to look at the deepest roots of painting, we can see many analogies: certain clean skies, certain whites and turquoises; also, certain deep shadows that wrap around the objects. Let us take a look, for example, at the excellent painting *L'isola di S. Giorgio a Venezia*.

This is a 1947 painting by de Chirico that is horrible according to the know-it-alls, yet we can see with what glory of painting the city itself is exalted, in its light and its singular luxury.

It is this very painting that I wish to cite because it represents, as it still does today, something scandalous. If we think of painting with preconceived ideas that are either spurious or reductive in nature, as happens with current critical opinion, we are forced to renounce the joy that this painting provides. The true quality of de Chirico is to be seen in a painting like this one and another "test" painting in this show (with regards to de Chirico's "horrible" paintings): *l'Autoritratto nudo seduto*. (Nude, Seated Self-Portrait).

It is well-known that the solemnity and grand nature of this painting were not understood at all when it was first shown to the public (if I'm not mistaken it was at an exhibition of de Chirico at the Circolo di Stampa "Press Club", in 1950 or 1951). In fact the painting provoked the same derision and (irritation) that met his *Autoritratto con la gloria* (Self-portrait with glory).

Obviously, this judgement came from the same so-called *experts*.

I have said that these two paintings are the true and proper tests that prove the intrinsic power of de Chirico and that they are part and parcel of his regular style. This is true in the way he represents a "view" according to all the rules of art such as giving pleasure, of having that true-to-life aspect along with the apparently easy and most banal appeal of art.

This is also true of the image of *Malinconia di una strada* (The Melancholy of a Road) (1914) and the *Pesci sacri* (Sacred Fish) from 1919. Speaking of this famous painting we should note that de Chirico also painted *Natura morta con zucche* (Still Life with Pumpkins) in the same year, 1919, where the "mystery" is not suggested by the association of unusual elements, but rather it comes out in the pictorial quality with which the pumpkins are depicted. Even in this instance, the plasticity, the volume, colours, etc. are rendered through a courageous use of the most traditional of techniques: deep, transparent shadows which make the shapes turn, frank brushstrokes in clear colours that light up those things most hit by the light.

With these dates in hand, the schematic critic must recognize that there is no difference in quality between the way in which those pumpkins are painted and the way in which the herrings in *Pesci Sacri* are painted. This said, let us have the courage to extend this analysis to paintings from thirty years later, such as *l'Autoritratto nudo seduto* from 1943 and *l'Isola di San Giorgio* from 1947 (approximately).

We have seen that in the last thirty years of paintings de Chirico seems to have been looking for more "seductive" themes, by making use of flattery and effects that would easily make an impression on the vast public. We have seen his shows decorated with silk and velvet draping; his paintings set in ostentatious gold frames for a desired, à la Umberto I effect.

We have also seen paintings that are not very beautiful, paintings that are mere exercises using a showy and masterly-like technique. But it is necessary to add that something happens to me, even in those rooms where the "experts" pass by sniggering. I always notice one or two pieces, or more, in which the very

same quality of painting to be found among these less successful pictures rises above itself to make its mark, managing to avoid a saccharine, handicraft quality so as to infuse the objects in the painting with integrity and truth. Thus an elevated sense of mystery comes out: the very same recognizable mystery that belongs to the true tradition of "metaphysics".

I must also note that among the readapted (after twenty or thirty years) metaphysical paintings - those paintings which are among his least successful for their forced nostalgia and polemical nature - I can still glimpse some that are very beautiful, and at the same artistic level (and perhaps because they are unconsciously different) to those coming from the "golden years". But de Chirico knew and saw this better than anyone else. Indeed, in this Milan show, he has chosen paintings from approximately 1935 on that are, except in some rare instances, his most successful; where the resonance of truth and the expressive power are at their most.

The feeling that this show generates is extremely active. Of course the viewer is forced to ask himself, as is said, if it is not the power of the first "metaphysical" rooms that provides such vitality to the rest of the works. Or, if instead, we are not dealing with an all-too-easy application of traditional schemes (often accompanied by de Chirico's taste for paradoxical declarations) that does not permit us to see the paintings as they really are, regardless of their fascinating, explicit sense of mystery, and of course, their desire to flatter conventional tastes of the bourgeoisie.

It may seem strange that I, of all people, should let myself get involved in a discussion that is purely based on "forms", thereby obscuring, as has been done so far, the contents, the human meanings, while concentrating on, to quote Flajano's title, the "game" alone, and not the "massacre".

But let us not repeat things that have been superseded by now. If we return to Courbet for a moment we will find a useful example. Certainly Courbet gave us weighty, "social" paintings. And there is (and how much so!) his life of being a socialist and a Communard. But his socialism lies in his realism, in his painting, in the way he gives flesh to women, freshness to a wood, and the softness of the flower petals.

To reconsider those values of painting that have a realistic vein, we must let ourselves be guided by the hand of the artist in order to see more intensely what is visible. This is the only way in which the painter shows us the invisible. It is in this guiding of our ability to see, to penetrate, to know, that the artist's philosophy lies: the way in which the artist expresses his philosophy.

We must ask ourselves at this point (and it is asked of us today at this show) what exactly is de Chirico's philosophy? What worldview is he expressing, and what type of audience is he seeking? We are led to ask what it is that the painter is say-

ing. How is he engaged, especially since it was only yesterday when the honour of the artist was based on his disengagement? A discussion concerning the artist's engagement, or about communicating to the bourgeoisie – and being consumed by this – could equally be aimed at de Chirico or Morandi. But with Morandi this is not done, because the critic, more or less consciously, distinguishes between the bourgeoisie as a social class, and bourgeoisie as an intellectual class.

This accusation also starts off from a barricade of what we can call a "linguistic" nature with regards to the "myth of the craft" ("exterior gastronomy") but this does not refer to a "linguistic breakdown", but instead it is a demonstrative "suggestion". (Even the Twentieth Century has been re-interpreted as a "linguistic" operation against the ahistorical nature of de Chirico's craft).

However, was not the great discovery by the surrealists their very understanding of the craft of painting, at least fundamentally, as ahistorical?

When de Chirico says not to look at the surfaces of a painting, but *behind* the surface, he is unmasking the formalism of conventional criticism. The identification of the "surfaces" with form-language-structure is the most usual but also the most vulgar thing to do.

Only a vulgar mind can find contradictions between the elevated consciousness of pictorial craft and the claim that the viewer must not be distracted by the real-life quality of the images to get at what is "behind" the painting, but that he must be led by the linguistic invention of the work. Indeed, it is the very relationships between the surface and what is behind the picture that creates the "pictorial" phenomenon.

It is an undeniable truth that the public likes de Chirico. It is also true that his themes, that the things he paints are only things, objects, nudes, skies, flowers, woods. It would be both silly and absurd to claim that de Chirico is painting reality and of man's adventures. He is up to something else instead. His intentionality is purely visual; everything for him becomes an object, even "eternity", ahistoricism, Greek myths, etc... Obviously! De Chirico is rather more of the school of Rubens than that of Rembrandt. But no one thinks of reproaching Rubens for not being like Rembrandt.

To confuse de Chirico with regime architecture, and to speak of the "Fascists of Surrealism" citing Piacentini, and del Debbio, and the relationship between de Chirico and the 20th Century makes no sense.

The thing that links de Chirico to the Surrealists, to the point where they adjudged him to be their precursor, their master, and much more so than the much heralded sense of "mystery" (which is the result in the end) is the way in which he makes free use of pictorial language.

That de Chirico was aided in this by Böcklin and by the Academy of Munich, openly hostile to impressionistic reduction, has very little importance. After the first Italian period of 1910 (circa) Böcklin's influence on de Chirico remains in certain landscapes only.

There is a new way, or if we like, a more traditional or more integrated way to confront the relationship between the representation and the thing itself.

To conclude these notes in defence of painting, I will say that, in an epoch of experimentation, of hypotheses on how to work that almost die in the moment that are hypothesized, de Chirico is the only Italian painter of this Century to speak of things without being alienated by them, to speak through things, to give new words to men, even objectively about our times and new things about Italy, in the very presentation of them as a place from which we should not distance ourselves. In my opinion, de Chirico, along with Picasso, is the only modern painter who is worthy of sitting on Helicon with the Muses and with the old master painters.

English translation by Mark Newman