

LETTER BY GIORGIO DE CHIRICO TO DIMITRIS PIKIONIS, 1912

“So you are Greek then!” De Chirico the Modern Greek – a Contribution

During the author's research for her PhD in History of Art, which focuses on the influence of modern Greek culture found in de Chirico's work, she came across the only document (known to date) written in modern Greek by the artist. It is a letter addressed to his Greek friend Dimitris Pikionis, dated 1912¹ – a fervid period for the painter, who found himself in Paris where he was working on his first true metaphysical paintings. It is philologically interesting for historical-artistic research but at the same time [it provides us with] a trace of daily life, a testimony to friendship and an intellectual society born in the shade of the Metsobion Politechnion arcades of the Hellenic capital.

The architect and painter Dimitris Pikionis² is part of the variegated convoy of memories which make up Giorgio de Chirico's *Memorie della mia vita* (The Memoirs of My Life). The two youths knew one another since 1904 when they met at the Polytechnic of Athens, where Giorgio studied at the Academy of Fine Arts and Dimitris, who was a year older than him, followed an engineering course. It is a friendship that was taken up again in 1909 in Munich (“Yesterday evening, returning in a carriage to the boarding house where I was staying, I heard a voice from behind whilst I was climbing the stairs: ‘Excuse me, are you Mr. Pikionis?’ In the evening dark, I recognised Giorgio de Chirico”³) and then, above-all, in Paris, thanks to the fortunate meeting of 1912.

De Chirico recounted: “In Greece, I knew a young student called Pikionis; he studied engineering and architecture but outside of school, he drew and painted: he possessed an extraordinary intelligence, a profound metaphysical intelligence. I met him later in Paris.”⁴ And, once again, when he talked about Isabella Far (“the most profoundly intelligent person that I have met in my life”⁵),

¹ The date has been determined through the addressee's memoirs, the Greek architect Dimitris Pikionis.

² Dimitris Pikionis (Piraeus 1887 – Athens 1968) studied at the Polytechnic of Athens where he graduated in engineering in 1908. At the end of 1908, he was in Munich where he studied painting until 1909. Due to his economic situation, he left for Paris, where he was forced to abandon painting in order to become an architect. In 1912, he returned to Greece. In 1925, he was elected Professor of Architectural Planning. His teaching became incisive for the new generation of Greek architects. From 1935-1937, he published, together with a group of painters, the art and architecture magazine “To trito mati” (The Third Eye). During these years, he started to enjoy an in-depth study into popular Greek tradition. Between 1951 and 1957, he undertook his most important work: the area layouts of the Acropolis, the Filopappou Monument and the Church of Saint Dimitrios Loumbardiaris. In 1961, he was elected a member of the Academy of Munich and in 1965 of the Academy of Athens. For a critical biography, see M. Santoro, *Dimitris Pikionis biografia critica*, in *El siglo de Giorgio de Chirico. Metafisica y arquitectura*, exhibition catalogue, curated by V. Trione (IVAM, Valencia, 18 December 2007 – 17 February 2008), Skira, Milan 2007, pp. 426-428.

³ Pikionis continues: “It was a great joy for both of us, and it is superfluous to say that we spend the few days he was here together discussing art [...]. He showed me some copper engravings made at the Academy of Fine Arts workshop where he studies [...]. He intends to leave shortly for Milan, [staying] in a family home, where he will have a large studio. He has also spoken to me about Bouzianis [...]. He is the most serious of Greek painters’ he told me [...]” D. Pikionis, *Keimena*, curated by A. Pikionis, Morfotiko Idrima Ethnikis Trapezis, Athens 1987, pp. 36-37.

⁴ G. de Chirico, *Memorie della mia vita*, Bompiani, Milan 2002, p. 58.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

he emphasised: “until now the most intelligent people who I remember were the Greek architect Pikionis, who I knew in Greece when I was a boy and whom I later met again in Paris, and my brother Alberto Savinio.”⁶

The relationship between the two artists goes beyond a simple anecdote: there are many convergences and resonances.⁷ Both were prodded by the fertile pain of *nostos*; both awaited, as Savinio writes, for common visions to be abandoned by “the rigidity of pose”⁸ and demonstrated their unusual (metaphysical) appearance; both drew upon “high” and “low” elements, the museum and the popular small image without discrimination and hierarchies; both worked in the sign of Mnemosyne, as to be able to consider the whole *corpus* of their entire work an autobiographical *sub species*. And then there is architecture, the fatal sign which acts within the enigmatic material of dechirican paintings. In Pikionis, it [architecture] is a true profession, which engraved and changed the real landscape of his native Greece, translating upon it that *Stimmung* which he so loved to discuss with our Master de Chirico. And if de Chirico, with his refined conceptual operation of backdating paintings, has caused, on several occasions, a problem for critics and scholars, a similar difficulty also surrounds Pikionis in Greece: there are very few drawings, projects and paintings which are dated with certainty. Similarly to how it was left by the artist [Pikionis], his archive is subdivided by themes and sources of inspiration, both of which could have had long periods of gestation, even decades worth.

Et quid amabo nisi quod rerum metaphysica est? (And what shall I love if not the enigma?): for de Chirico and Pikionis, Metaphysics is not, by definition, a concept that is captured within linear time.

In 1958, Dimitris Pikionis wrote his *Note autobiografiche* (Autobiographical notes). The text not only confirms the level of friendship and esteem shared between the two artists, but testifies to the crucial moments in which Metaphysics, as a pictorial genre, took form in the dechirican *iter* (journey). “The time to return was drawing near (at the start of 1912) and during the last month of my stay in Paris something happened that was of great importance for me [...]. I was travelling by bus [...] when a person got on and sat right in front of me: it was Giorgio de Chirico [...]. He talked to me about Böcklin, saying that he was – as he had also said about Nietzsche – the only true Metaphysical painter [...] he told me that during an autumn day, under a clear sky (“clear” was precisely the word that he used) [...] he found Nietzsche’s book in which he formulates his theory of the Eternal Return. Afterwards, he had found confirmation of that enigmatic cosmology in the works of Heraclites. He invited me to his house. I was the first in Paris to whom he showed his products of metaphysical theory⁹ [...]. A few days afterwards, I received a letter from him, in Greek, which started like this: ‘Dear friend, I feel the need to see you and speak with you because something new

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ The relationship between de Chirico and Pikionis is the key area of study of the author’s PhD entitled *L’ellinikòta di Giorgio de Chirico. L’esperienza della Grecia nell’opera del Pictor Optimus*. With regard to the role played by modern Greek art and culture on de Chirico’s work, see M. Santoro, *Dalla Grecia il museo “domestico” di Giorgio de Chirico*, in *De Chirico e il museo*, curated by M. Ursino, Rome, Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna, 20 November 2008 – 25 January 2009, Electa, Milan 2008.

⁸ A. Savinio, *Ascolto il tuo cuore, città* (1944), Adelphi, Milan 1984, p. 37.

⁹ Pikionis wrote that de Chirico showed him *Self-Portrait, Et quid amabo nisi quod aenigma est?* (1911), and from his description, these are the paintings he likely saw: *Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon* (1910), *Enigma of the Hour* (1910), *The Enigma of the Arrival and the Afternoon* (1911-1912), *The Delights of the Poet* (1912) and *The Lassitude of the Infimite* (1912).

is happening in my life [...] [...] We often met up with each other and spent many hours discussing the metaphysical light that shed upon the existence of de Chirico's theory [...]. By the end, it appeared, also to us, the enigmatic hour of separation [...]."¹⁰

The letter by de Chirico quoted here was discovered in Athens by the author at the home of Pikionis' daughter, Agni, who manages her father's archives.¹¹ It is an invitation from de Chirico to his friend to meet him and demonstrates his perfect command of the language, which was already deducible from the naturalness with which the artist (and his brother Andrea) often inserted Greek words and ways into his writings.

The Greek used is, as obligatory at the time, an erudite Greek, of Byzantine ascendance. It was recognised as the official language of the Greek State and was very different from the spoken language.¹² De Chirico's Greece, in fact, was a 19th century Greece split by the "issue of language" which wrote in *katharevousa* "the language of liturgy, officialdom, purists [...] pompous [...] lifeless"¹³ and spoke the demotic or *Maliarà* "the young and unprejudiced [language] [...] [which] has hosted all neologisms, all barbarisms"¹⁴, as neatly put by Savinio in *Narrate, uomini, la vostra storia*. The translated text is reproduced below:¹⁵

Thursday evening

Dear friend,

I feel the need to see you and speak with you because something new is happening in my life.

If you would like to, we could dine together tomorrow evening in a *Crémèrie* and stay there until twelve o'clock in a café or elsewhere.

I will wait for you at 5 o'clock in the afternoon on the pavement near the bar of the *Bernheim* like yesterday.

If it is not possible to come, I ask that you write a *pneumatique* [telegraph] to me before midday tomorrow.

Hail dear friend.

G. de Chirico

Rue de Chaillot 43.

¹⁰ The *Note autobiografiche* (Autobiographical notes) were translated and published by M. Centenni; see D. Pikionis, *Autobiografikà simiòmata*, 1958, in A. Ferlenga, *Pikionis 1887-1968*, Electa, Milan 1999, pp. 29-35.

¹¹ Drawings, architectural projects and paintings by Pikionis are conserved at the Architectonic Archive of the Benaki Museum, Athens.

¹² It was not until 1976 that the linguistic reform took place with which the demotic, spoken Greek, became the official language and, therefore, was also adopted in the written form.

¹³ A. Savinio, *Lorenzo Mabili*, in *Narrate, uomini, la vostra storia* (1942), Adelphi, Milan 2005, p. 138.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

¹⁵ The author wishes to thank Agni Pikionis for having made available her father's archives.

With the exclusion of a few, negligible errors – understandable given that nearly seven years had passed since his definitive departure from Greece – the letter is grammatically very correct. It is characterised by a certain *gravitas* towards the end, which refers to a use of liturgical formulae¹⁶ which are also present in Pikionis' texts (like many scholars of the time). It also responds well to de Chirico's taste for mottoes, the rhetoric turn of phrase, and *araldico* (heraldic) charm.

Χαῖρε, ἀξιότιμε φίλε.

Hail, dear friend

The *Monomaco* (the solitary combatant) *speaks* – to quote a 1922 article by de Chirico – : the *μονομάχος*, the “gladiator”, is discharged.

Michela Santoro

Translated by Victoria Noel-Johnson

¹⁶ The letter concludes: Χαῖρε, ἀξιότιμε φίλε (“Hail, dear friend”), a phrase which directly recalls the hymn to the Madonna in the orthodox rite: Χαῖρε κεχαριτωμένη Μαρία ὃ Κύριος μετὰ σοῦ (“Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you”).