

“L’EUROPEO” ASKS DE CHIRICO FOR THE WHOLE TRUTH*

De Chirico is a figure of authentic strength – genuine, almost primordial, certain of his greatness, conscious of his worth, and thus an antic-conformist, outspoken and straightforward. A man of European culture, eclectic, and an enthusiast of fine music and literature, he is gifted with a sense of humour and a sarcasm that he often puts to use and that sometimes strikes the ear as harsh. This regularly increases the number of his enemies – artists, critics and dealers who cannot forgive his scorching judgments. We all remember the reactions he provoked when he expressed himself on a television programme in words anything but laudatory regarding Modigliani’s work. Contemptuous in the face of some “modern” art and some artists who have invented new techniques, he increasingly enjoys resembling the great masters of the past whose works he has patiently studied in museums in order to search out their secrets. In his daily life, his identity is quite a bit nearer to that of an authentic Renaissance man – a cultured, hospitable, amiable, and witty conversationalist. Here is the way our conversation unfolded at the Reading Room in the Hotel Continental.

L’EUROPEO: Maestro, you once told “L’Europeo” that you were perhaps the only painter never to have received a prize. Do you consider the show at Palazzo Reale to be a recognition of your work after all these years?

DE CHIRICO: I would like to consider it recognition; I suppose it is recognition; I would like it to be recognition. I don’t know. I certainly can’t psychoanalyse each and every one of the organisers of the exhibition in order to understand how sincere they are. The Biennials have never awarded me a prize or recognised me. On the contrary, they have tried to ignore me. When they organised the metaphysical art exhibition in 1948, the first after the war, I was neither invited nor informed. They grouped together the paintings of Carrà, Morandi and Sironi, I believe, and some of mine including a blatant fake without even noticing. And, at the end, they bestowed the prize for metaphysical painting on Morandi, who, poor fellow, never was a metaphysical painter, and denied it to me, the father of metaphysical painting. There was even a monetary

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prize, so I brought legal action against the Venice Biennale, which, on appeal, preferred to reach a settlement with my lawyers. So, in Italy, the country that offers the most monetary awards to artists, I have never received one. The Tor Margana Prize, the only award I have received, is a metal thing, a kind of tower.

L'EUROPEO: The work of an Italian sculptor.

DE CHIRICO: Yes, they told me. The also told me the name, but I don't remember it.

L'EUROPEO: Maestro, you are the father of metaphysical painting. When and how did it first form in your mind? Did the works of Böcklin, which you knew very well, influence you? What exactly is metaphysical painting?

DE CHIRICO: I know that in some art history books they say that Böcklin influenced my particular way of painting and that it was Apollinaire who described it as "metaphysical". Instead, neither one nor the other is true because when I went to study in Munich, Germany, Böcklin had been dead for some time, and I had no way of knowing him personally nor of being his student, which some have also said, even if I knew his work well and it had interested me due to its deep poetry. But Böcklin has nothing to do with my paintings, just as Apollinaire has nothing to do with them, because it was I who first called my painting "metaphysical". "Metaphysics" means beyond the physical, thus outside our usual visual field and our general knowledge, even though in my paintings the objects are all recognisable. The metaphysical aspect resides, rather, in the composition and in the atmosphere created by the arrangement of those objects, in the relationship among themselves and with the canvas. With regard to this kind of painting, people have spoken of empty space that creates a state of expectation and of architecture; they have tried to explain it, to analyse its fundamental and characteristic constituent elements, but this is not painting that can be explained. It is an idea, an intuition that came to me at a particular moment and that I tried to express through paintings, born as all things are born. No one ever knows why something is born, how the world was born. Empty space can mean something or not mean anything; the architecture, especially of many Italian cities, and particularly of Turin, provided me with ideas that I translated into those subjects that I call the "Italian Piazza", but beyond the idea and intuition there is no other explanation, and it is useless to ask how, when and why, although I remember that I began to paint these paintings around 1911 when I was in Italy, precisely in Florence, on the eve of travelling to Paris for the first time. The first was a painting inspired by Piazza of Santa Croce where there is, or at least there was, a monument to Dante. I continued to paint works of this kind in Paris where I stayed until 1915, when I returned to Italy to report to the military authorities and was sent to Ferrara where I was posted to an infantry depot.

L'EUROPEO: Almost all art history books say that your metaphysical painting interested Picasso immensely.

DE CHIRICO: I never knew that Picasso was interested in my metaphysical painting. Evidently, art

history books also say things that do not correspond with the truth. I met Picasso many years ago, before the other world war, around 1914, although I saw him very few times and only in passing. I never had the chance to talk about painting with him, and even after the war, those two or three times that we met in the street, we spoke of this and that, never about complicated things or held long conversations, even if I have great respect for him. I find him a very interesting artist; I am interested in his spirit, what he reveals when he draws and paints. I have noticed, though, that he has never engaged in the problem of true painting, as I have.

L'EUROPEO: What is the problem of true painting?

DE CHIRICO: The fine quality of painting.

L'EUROPEO: Then you don't recognise fine quality painting in Picasso?

DE CHIRICO: Picasso's paintings are a particular kind of painting; they are not paintings meant to express quality, but rather, ideas that come to him and that are interesting. Still, the problem of true painting that I faced with metaphysical painting and also with realist painting and that I have been concerned with since 1918, is something Picasso did not endeavour to do. Moreover, no painter other than I has either. By quality painting, I mean painting that is of fine painterly execution, made with quality technique, as painting was up to the mid-1800s. The reason for the decadence that painting has succumbed to today is the loss of craft and technique, as I wrote in my *Memoirs*. The word derives from the Greek "téchne", which means precisely "art", and I must say that the technical level of a painter is directly linked to his degree of painterly intelligence, which was huge in Rubens, extensive in all the other masters of the past, average or less than average in the Italian painters of the 1600s and 1800s and almost nonexistent in our century, except for a few exceptions. Those who possess this intelligence know immediately how to distinguish quality painting – irrespective of the subject matter, whether abstract or figurative –, which is woven and composed by a skilful superimposition of colours comparable, perhaps, to ancient oriental carpets, so beautiful and so precious. In 1918, to study the ancient masters who possessed the utmost degree of painting intelligence, I began to visit museums expressly to research the quality of old painting. I made many copies of famous works, one of which, a painting by Raffaello that I did in Florence at Palazzo Pitti in 1923, is now on display at Palazzo Reale.

L'EUROPEO: What value do you attribute to a copy of a work of art? Can a copy be a work of art in itself? For example, can a copy by de Chirico be art in the same way a de Chirico original is?

DE CHIRICO: Copying a master serves as a way to learn the secrets of true painting. For example, any kind of paint one puts on a canvas and then dries after a certain period of time is called painting, but painting of true quality is something quite different and which unfortunately ended in the 1800s. A copy that reproduces and interprets a work of art well can also be a work of art because the copy, as far as a copy is concerned, is,

of course, a work of art. It can't be otherwise. The copy of a work by de Chirico, if it were done well, would be a good copy of my work. The issue of fakes is different.

L'EUROPEO: All right, let's talk about fake de Chirico's, since we are here to tell the whole truth. Now and then, one of your paintings that you have denounced as a fake bears your authentication or that of a notary public. How do you explain this?

DE CHIRICO: No matter what anyone says, I don't remember a single court that has declared authentic a painting that I have declared false. They can even tell me that I am guilty of homicide, but they have to prove it. If not, it's too easy. Forgers are cunning and have contrived refined methods to the point of even forging authentication certificates or of extorting them, to the point that several years ago I began to refuse to issue authentications because I happened to see some crude fakes with real authentication. You are familiar with the double-canvas system: I am brought an authentic painting for authentication, but the painting actually has a double canvas, such that my certification ends up on a blank canvas where the fake is then painted. They even forge notary stamps and authentication certificates. I know a notary who has already reported ten of these forgeries. People who find themselves the owner of a fake de Chirico naturally protest, but the strange thing is that, instead of being angry with the forger, they get angry at me, as if I were responsible for the fake, and they spread the myth that I rejected metaphysical painting and that I automatically declare fake every metaphysical painting I'm shown. Many years ago, a Milanese gallery sued me, a case that was appealed to the Supreme Court of Italy, because I had refused to authenticate a forgery of one of my paintings and had deposited it at a notary's office to stop it from circulating. This is what I used to do, but today I do something more expeditious: I have them seized by the police. At the Supreme Court, the gallery was even represented by the [famous] attorney, Calamandrei, but in vain, notwithstanding all the testimony he was able to present against me.

L'EUROPEO: Maestro, now we'd like to ask you a delicate question. Contemporaneous with your show at Palazzo Reale, a Milanese gallery is showing some paintings by your brother, Alberto Savinio. How do you judge his work? Is what some people hint at true, that your metaphysical painting was inspired by your brother?

DE CHIRICO: My brother was three years younger than I and when I began to paint the first metaphysical paintings, he wasn't painting yet. Besides his painting, my brother was a fine writer and musician, but his books couldn't have inspired me, either. You only have to read them to understand that and then he still hadn't written them. I will say, however, that Savinio's painting is very interesting especially from a spiritual point of view. He knew how to paint and made portraits that are true masterpieces.

L'EUROPEO: You went from metaphysical painting to realist painting, which some define as baroque, then to neo-classicism and then returned to metaphysical painting. Now we would like to ask....

DE CHIRICO: There are no stages or passages from one kind of painting to another, as you've

described it. I have always painted what I have wanted to paint: for example, I have been doing realistic painting, that is to say quality painting, since 1918, for more than fifty years. What modernists pejoratively call baroque, or baroque-ish, which is even worse. Baroque! But all painting is baroque after the primitives. What are they talking about? After the primitives you certainly can't paint like Giotto! If you do, it's to create a style or because you don't know any better. In my painting, on the other hand, and this is important, there is a qualitative progression due to the fact that I always seek to perfect the quality and you'll see examples of the finest quality paintings at Palazzo Reale, paintings that can rival any masterpiece of the great masters. So there's no need to differentiate between the de Chirico of yesterday and the de Chirico of today; there's no better or worse de Chirico. Metaphysical painting is a spiritual, invented, kind of painting and realist painting is quality painting that yet requires enormous intelligence, but you must remember that painterly intelligence is of a unique nature. I mean that a man can be intelligent but not understand a thing about painting and vice versa. I am lucky enough to have the gift of both kinds of intelligence: for metaphysics and things of the spirit and poetry, and for quality painting. Even quality painting has a metaphysical aspect about it, as the ability to create a painting of great quality is not given to everyone, as we can see, and calls to mind the question of spirit once more.

L'EUROPEO: We seem to understand, Maestro, that you identify painting of great quality with realist painting. Is this so?

DE CHIRICO: Realistic means that the subject of the painting is linked to reality, but the subject can be linked to reality without the painting being of great quality, as is the case for most painting of the 1800s. Painting subjects that are linked to reality involves painting a portrait or a self-portrait whilst looking at my face in the mirror, or a landscape or seascape, things that we see.

L'EUROPEO: ...even an Italian piazza?

DE CHIRICO: No, not Italian piazzas. Yes, of course they are reality, since Italian piazzas exist, but you won't find Italian piazzas like those that are in my paintings anywhere on earth.

L'EUROPEO: Maestro, we mentioned at the beginning of this conversation that we would be a bit brutal with you. Here is another delicate question: people reproach you for returning to metaphysical painting after abandoning it, for financial speculation since paintings of this kind have reached extremely high prices. Is this true?

DE CHIRICO: They reproach me because, the fact that I continue to paint metaphysical paintings annoys those, who, do effectively want to speculate in them. If not, why would they reproach me? Since we're talking about this, I want to clarify two things. The first is that I have always made metaphysical paintings, so there are no returns or departures, as the critics or dealers who invent these stories claim and that I have always done what I wanted to do, independent of those who do with history of modern art what they may. If you come to my house one day, you will find metaphysical paintings

from every period. The second is that a painting isn't a postage stamp, and giving it a value not for what it is worth spiritually and historically but for the year it was made means giving it the value of a stamp. In this case, I advise those who think this way to take up stamp collecting.

L'EUROPEO: In essence, you do not agree with the judgement of the critics according to whom the metaphysical period was your highest point of expression.

DE CHIRICO: No, those who make these judgements only want to limit my painting, to restrict its value. Immediately after WWI, I accepted the invitation from a Roman gallery to exhibit the metaphysical paintings I had painted in Ferrara. The show had a middling success: only one painting was sold, the least metaphysical of all. But what is important for me to stress is that the critique was either hostile or silent and that the most famous critic of that time published a severely critical article on page three of a Roman newspaper that was entitled "To the Orthopaedic God". So, how can you believe critique if it says white today and black tomorrow? Not only do I not believe in critique, but even the critics do not believe it. No one believes it. You just have to remember that critique began with modern art, that is, with an art of decadence, because it is an art that needs support, it needs advocates to persuade collectors to buy and to help sellers sell. Once, when there were no critics, there were popes, princes who understood painting and commissioned works, but today....

L'EUROPEO: Yes, what is the judgement that interests you today?

DE CHIRICO: The judgement of de Chirico.

L'EUROPEO: Maestro, during your long stays in Paris, you participated in shows with the Dadaists and the surrealists and influenced their emergence. Do you feel that you have a right to a certain paternity toward these movements?

DE CHIRICO: Not at all. My painting has nothing to do with either the Dadaists or the surrealists or with anyone else and I have never been part of any group, nor have I participated in collective shows with them. It was the Dada and surrealist groups that exhibited my works in shows they organized, though I never declared myself Dadaist or surrealist. Like all painters who have some value, I am an outsider. The fact is that those who write history often write it in their own way and so it is written, for example, that I established a metaphysical group with Morandi, who never was a metaphysical painter, with de Pisis, whom I met in Ferrara during my military service, and with Carrà, who limited himself to copying my metaphysical paintings when he was at the same infantry depot in Ferrara. It is also written that I influenced some painters such as Dalí and Delvaux, but if I look at their paintings I can find no affinity between what they do and what I do; or when they describe the turbulent and tumultuous art life of Paris at the beginning of the century, which isn't true at all. We were trying to survive, to live, the way people have done since time immemorial. Sometimes you met up with another painter, but that's all. As I said, I saw Picasso, Max Ernst, Derain, Breton, Apollinaire, I knew many artists, but, at least as far as I was concerned, I didn't live

in a frenzied world at all but quietly with my mother and brother. I painted, went to museums and experienced many disappointments. I had high esteem for Derain's painting. He was an artist who made works that were normal but of high quality. However, they silenced him in Paris, most likely because he painted well.

L'EUROPEO: So, in Paris you lived like that, free to paint and see whomever you wished. In Italy, during the fascist regime, did you have as much freedom or did you have difficulties? How did the regime handle your painting? Was there such a thing as fascist painting?

DE CHIRICO: Fascist painting? I never noticed. There were monuments, as well as sculpture and paintings created on commission of the fascist government. There was also a kind of fascist realist aesthetic, although the art shows of that period exhibited works that weren't fascist at all. They even exhibited Picasso. Everyone was free to paint as he wished. Artists who could be considered as fascist painters, for example, Rosai, had always painted the streets of Florence, prior to fascism, during fascism and after fascism. If you were to study how Rosai put fascist idealism into painting, your research would be in vain. It is difficult to identify a certain kind of painting as fascist, except perhaps in the subjects, such as representations of fascist events like the march on Rome or things like that. It is true, though, that during fascism, I was not here very often as I lived in Paris. In Germany, Hitler's dictatorship banned the production and promotion of modern works of art, to the point of removing them from museums. Nothing like that happened in Italy and one could paint in complete freedom. Apart from the fact that my painting has nothing to do with fascism, Nazism or communism, I must say that the fascist government never interfered with me.

L'EUROPEO: But they didn't give you any recognition, either.

DE CHIRICO: Neither did the democratic government. They are in perfect agreement on this. Certainly, I encountered some difficulties during the fascist period, but they were due to resentment, envy and sentiment of this kind that have always hounded me, like the time I executed a mural at the Milan Triennial, which didn't appear in the newspapers or on postcards sold at the exhibition, whilst the works of Funi, Sironi and Campigli did and in the end the mural was destroyed. Or like the other time at the 1934 Roman Quadrennial where I was offered a room, which Mussolini visited and was practically carried out to distract his attention from my paintings. He wanted to award me the prize that was given to Severini instead. Does fascism have anything to do with this? I honestly have my doubts if it does or could do. I don't remember being forced to paint in one way rather than another.

L'EUROPEO: Yet, Maestro, towards the end of fascism, painting groups and movements did form, such as "Nuovo Corrente di Milano", which evoked anti-fascism.

DE CHIRICO: This is the first time I've heard about that. In 1939, I left Paris and came to Milan and don't remember hearing about anti-fascist art movements. It's possible...

L'EUROPEO: But yes, they included Cassinare, Sassu...

DE CHIRICO: And what are they doing now? Fascism has been gone for quite a few years.

- L'EUROPEO: If fascist painting didn't exist, however, socialist painting does, from Guttuso to Picasso himself.
- DE CHIRICO: In what way is it socialist or communist? Because of the subjects painted, or because of the quality, or because of its merits and shortcomings?
- L'EUROPEO: The social commitment apparent in certain forms of realism is inevitably aligned by circumstance with political ideas.
- DE CHIRICO: Yes, but in the artistic field these things are without value as they have nothing to do with art. Guttuso is one of those painters who are said to be committed to an ideology; he is also a member of the communist party. I have known him for many years. His painting is interesting regardless of his political commitment because he knows how to work, he has good craft. A painting's importance lies in its quality and spirituality, in its invention and poetry. The markings, volume, form and proportions are what make a quality painting, nothing else. And this is how a work of art should be looked at. What else can I say? I have never thought about political things.
- L'EUROPEO: You are a pure artist.
- DE CHIRICO: What is a pure artist?
- L'EUROPEO: Above the crowd. Do you accept that?
- DE CHIRICO: I could accept that.
- L'EUROPEO: But someone has said that your painting is reactionary, maybe precisely because it lacks social commitment.
- DE CHIRICO: Reactionary? Because of a lack of ideological commitment? But how many painters and great masters are not reactionaries then? People like my painting, though. When a plumber comes to my home to repair a pipe or a carpenter or an electrician, they look at the paintings on the walls and they're captivated. They say, "Look at those apples, that bunch of grapes. They look real; you want to eat them. Look at the artist's portrait; it seems to be talking." People are enthusiastic about my painting, about this so-called baroque painting. They like it. They're for me. They are only relatively interested in a painting's subject and look more readily at the painting's execution, merely recognising what is represented, whether a dog, a cat, a woman, a landscape....
- L'EUROPEO: So how do you explain that one of Picasso's most popular paintings, *Guernica*, is in fact a painting in which almost nothing is recognisable at first?
- DE CHIRICO: Because it's been reproduced thousands of times, in every possible way, in essays, in newspapers, in magazines and on postcards. Anyway, I don't believe that people go crazy for *Guernica*. I mean that a certain type of civil or historic commitment that goes beyond the quality of a painting is not a problem that interests people very much. Above all, a painter must paint well. The question of whether he must align his painting with political struggle or remain above the melee is not a real problem, by which I mean a problem of art. Let me repeat: above all, the painter has the duty to paint well, to draw and paint well, because the two things are intimately linked.

- L'EUROPEO: Excuse me, Maestro, this question will seem foolish, but is it more difficult to paint a face or a mannequin?
- DE CHIRICO: A face.
- L'EUROPEO: In that case, where does the quality lie?
- DE CHIRICO: In the shaping of the figure and in the inventiveness of the work. Obviously, figuration depends on invention because one invents the figure.
- L'EUROPEO: In your opinion, if the same invention were suggested to an excellent engineer or an excellent technical designer, would the result be much worse?
- DE CHIRICO: I would have to give it a try. I'm serious. I would have to call an engineer and show him the mannequin and see what he is capable of doing. Theoretically, it is possible...
- L'EUROPEO: ...whilst, on the other hand, your self-portrait could not be remade by an engineer, it would require a painter. So we have established the difference between your metaphysical painting and life painting. The first, besides the fact of the original intuition, that is to say its genius, is theoretically repeatable by a technician, whilst realistic painting is painting...
- DE CHIRICO: ...that can only be done by someone like me who knows how to paint.
- L'EUROPEO: Maestro, are you satisfied with the prices your paintings are fetching?
- DE CHIRICO: Yes, but it isn't something that gives me much moral satisfaction because I know that it's a question of the market with its economic laws and speculation. I get more satisfaction from the quality of the works and my personal life.
- L'EUROPEO: Compared to the prices paid for the paintings of Picasso and Chagall, do you consider that you are unfairly disregarded?
- DE CHIRICO: I don't know. In these things, fairness plays no role. What does fairness have to do with it when talking about the market? The price of my paintings will be fair or unfair, but it doesn't interest me. I refuse to give an opinion about this.
- L'EUROPEO: Maestro, what do you think of abstract painting?
- DE CHIRICO: I think that an abstract painting is better than a badly painted figurative painting. Abstract paintings have the privilege of always being painted well; they represent a leap beyond painting, so you can't say that an abstract painting is beautiful or ugly, the way you can with a figurative painting. It is beyond painting, like pop art.
- L'EUROPEO: Obviously, you will give the same opinion of Art Informel, of Jack Pollock...?
- DE CHIRICO: Pollock? I don't know him. He was that American, who I believe died in a car accident. But I don't remember seeing any of his paintings. I think he also exhibited at the Venice Biennial. Wait, he was the one who painted, yes, yes, he threw colour on the canvas and then walked on it and then even called his wife to walk on it and then they both walked on it. Yes, yes, I remember, but not precisely. Do you want my opinion? But how can I judge him? These are things outside my comprehension.
- L'EUROPEO: Then let's not talk about new American movements that shun galleries and museums, that go into the outside world, dig trenches...
- DE CHIRICO: Dig trenches? Where?



G. de Chirico, *Self-portrait with the Duomo of Milan*. Drawing executed during the course of the interview granted to "L'Europeo" at Hotel Continental in Milan, published 30 April 1970

L'EUROPEO: In fields.

DE CHIRICO: And then they put frames on them?

L'EUROPEO: Or they take an old bus, a real one...

DE CHIRICO: ...but they don't pay much for it...

L'EUROPEO: ...and they put a plaster man on the running-board who's getting off...

DE CHIRICO: ...and painting made this way will be given to a lady in New York who will have it put in her boudoir...

L'EUROPEO: Excuse me, Maestro, but would you exchange one of your paintings for one by Picasso?

DE CHIRICO: An embarrassing question that I must refuse to answer.

L'EUROPEO: But do you have a Picasso at home?

DE CHIRICO: No.

L'EUROPEO: Why don't you have one?

DE CHIRICO: Why don't I have one? To have a Picasso, I would have to have bought it or he or someone else would have had to give it to me. If no one gave me one, if he didn't give me one, if I didn't buy one, then, logically I don't have one.

L'EUROPEO: All right, but don't you want to have one?

DE CHIRICO: Now I just want to go to sleep.