

DE CHIRICO AND THE UNITED KINGDOM (C. 1916-1978)¹

Alexander Adams

Since its first appearance at the Paris Salon d'Automne in 1912,² the Metaphysical painting of Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978) – which combines evocations of a classical past, paradoxical Modernist pictorial space and an acute personal melancholy – has attracted considerable attention. However, by the time British art lovers first encountered the Italian's paintings in the inter-war period, he had already refashioned himself as a classical artist. In 1919 de Chirico turned his back on Modernism in the wave of *appel de l'ordre*, as avant-gardists returned to classical conventions. Henceforth, he espoused reverence for Old Masters and scorned Modernism as pathological and dead. While conservatives were lauding his traditional technique and classical allusions, avant-gardists were promoting his Metaphysical paintings as visionary ground-breaking precursors to Surrealism.

This large volume (the result of a decade of research) documents the split reception de Chirico's art received in Great Britain through exhibitions, publications and public acquisitions. Victoria Noel-Johnson, formerly of the Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, Rome, has compiled transcripts and facsimiles of published texts and private and business correspondence. Annotations and introductions provide context, with sections dedicated to numerous mono illustration of relevant art works, correspondence, newspaper articles and catalogue covers and pages. The artist made at least four recorded visits to Britain (1935, 1938, 1948, 1949) with other trips in the 1920s, details of which are unknown. Letters and memoir extracts by the artist are included, as is correspondence from Isabella Far de Chirico, the artist's second wife.

Noel-Johnson provides an overview of the artist's relationship with British critics, public and institutions. This is followed by summaries of the collecting and promotional activities of Edward James, Roland Penrose, E.L.T. Mesens, Peter Watson, Eric Estorick and a few others. The author summarises important events in the artist's reception in Britain, including the solo exhibitions in London at the Alex. Reid & Lefevre Ltd. (1938), the Royal Society of British Artists (RBA) (1949) and Wildenstein (1975-1976). The other case study is the 1962 Tate fakes controversy.

In 1962 the painter was made aware that paintings attributed to him were hanging in the

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² This date is erroneously indicated as 1911 in "The Jackdaw" edition.

Tate Gallery. The artist held a press conference in Rome, during which he denounced three of the paintings to be fakes and demanded they be withdrawn and destroyed. The museum was in an awkward position, caught between the artist and the owner who had loaned the paintings. The lender was Edward James, who had a superb collection of Surrealist art. The Tate's collection of Surrealism was weak and it consequently relied upon James's generous loans to fill the gap. Matters were further complicated when conductor Igor Markevitch announced he actually owned one of the denounced paintings. Jean Cocteau had given Markevitch the painting (*Holy Friday*) which Markevitch had merely lent to James. A legal wrangle involving the four parties ensued. The paintings were ultimately returned to James; subsequently, they entered the art trade when James dispersed his collection.

The bulk of the volume is occupied by transcripts, summaries and reproductions of around 550 documents, divided by decade. The ordering is generally clear; when it comes to summarising or editing of relevant extracts of texts, readers rely on Noel-Johnson's knowledge of her subject.

During the 1930s and 1940s the artist's work was exhibited and sold by Zwemmer on Charing Cross Road, E.L.T. Mesens's London Gallery and the Mayor Gallery, 18 Cork Street. Press articles display the degree of information (and misinformation) that was current in Britain about the artist. The canard that the artist denounced his Metaphysical period is repeated, the relationship between Metaphysical Art and Surrealism is explained to varying degrees of accuracy and the artist's name is frequently misspelled.

The British public were more accepting of de Chirico's art after his 1910-1918 (Metaphysical) period than were the more Modernist-minded French and Italian publics. When de Chirico was honoured with a solo exhibition at the RBA in 1949, it was de Chirico the classical and baroque painter who was seen, with all the work dating from 1920-1949. The exhibition was widely covered and considered successful. De Chirico was unhappy that this success was not reported in the Italian press, considering the prejudice against his recent art to be the cause of the snub. The artist was well aware that Modernism and Surrealism had struggled to gain general acceptance in British cultural life and tailored his public speech at the RBA and attendant press interviews to appeal to the conservative British.

Even in London, de Chirico had to suffer the undermining tactics of the Surrealists. He decried their modishness and they mocked his classical pretensions. Sometimes when de Chirico exhibited new art, the Surrealists would instigate parallel exhibitions of his more popular Metaphysical work to overshadow the official exhibitions. During the run of de Chirico's acclaimed RBA exhibition, there was a small unsanctioned exhibition of his Metaphysical paintings at the London Gallery.

Mischievousness entered criminal territory when Surrealists, including Max Ernst and Oscar Dominguez, faked de Chiricos. This book reproduces some of the fakes that plagued de Chirico.

On at least two occasions these fakes were exhibited at the Tate Gallery. Several are obvious but others are persuasive and attractive. For various reasons – not least his practice of antedating late paintings to the early sought-after Metaphysical era – the artist had become considered an unreliable authority on authenticity.

Through the private correspondence of Penrose, James and Estorick we see how numerous excellent Metaphysical de Chiricos were dispersed to foreign collections. The cautious and financially limited Tate Gallery allowed masterpieces to go abroad year after year. By the time the trustees realised that the Tate needed a museum-quality Metaphysical-period painting, prices had risen to over \$300,000. The first Metaphysical de Chirico to enter a British collection was *The Melancholy of Departure* (1916) in 1978, bought by the Tate Gallery the year the artist died.

There are many curiosities within these pages, including scant details about “Chirico-Picasso”, held at Zwemmer Gallery in 1937; to date it is the only time the two painters exhibited side-by-side in a two-artist exhibition. There are numerous fleeting references to art by de Chirico appearing in group exhibitions and listed in summary catalogues. The landmark 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition is also covered, with portions of the catalogue transcribed. The many transcriptions of articles and catalogue essays allow researchers access to rare and fragile publications. There is private correspondence from significant figures relating to exhibition loans, purchases, provenance and authenticity. The collection covers sources generally held in public records and thus does not include privately owned correspondence, invoices and so forth. Noel-Johnson expressly states that this volume is extensive but not complete.

De Chirico and the United Kingdom (c. 1916-1978) is an unparalleled source for those researching de Chirico’s art and the early reception of Metaphysical and Surrealist art in Britain. More generally, it provides a window on to the contentious reception of Modernism in Britain. The layout and ordering is logical, though the book lacks an index. Regrettably, this important volume is marred by minor typesetting and proofreading errors. Overall, it can be highly commended as a work of scholarship.