

GIORGIO DE CHIRICO
AT THE ACQUAVELLA GALLERY

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The de Chirico revealed by his latest paintings, which are now on view at the Acquavella Galleries along with specimens of earlier work (through March 31), is surprising only as an objective fact, but not in the perspective of his whole development, which was always colored by an ambiguous and guilty but thoroughly logical hostility to all truly modern painting since Courbet.

At the beginning of his career de Chirico was struck by the German Swiss painter Böcklin, whose work is one of the most consummate expressions of all that we now dislike about the latter half of the Nineteenth Century; however, I cannot believe there was not some perversity, half-concealed from himself, some desire to shock his peers and betters, in this admiration of de Chirico's – a desire that sprang perhaps from his despair of equalling the profound matter-of-factness of the Impressionists and of Cézanne and Matisse. Like many a Twentieth-Century Italian, with the glorious past behind him and the glorious present elsewhere – in Paris, London, Berlin – he clowned out of a historical instinct that he himself was half unconscious of.

But de Chirico still was and is a gifted painter, as he demonstrated in some of the pictures he painted before 1919. Although they show portents of the bankruptcy to come and signal across a decade to that retreat of avant-garde painting which began with the Surrealists in the late Twenties, these canvases have a substance and plastic quality that justify, in plastic terms, this last serious attempt to save literary easel-painting. They will survive because they are *sui generis*. Though certain aspects of their design and subject matter owe much to Cubism, they do not exist within the same order of criticism, and must be treated as a point of exception and not approached with the demands we make on the great and *typical* painting of the first twenty years of the century. They are one of those *tours*

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de force that, like Michelangelo's frescoes, founded a misguided school.

As a colorist, de Chirico was in this period a last emissary of Mannerism, three hundred years behind Delacroix in its use. The emphasis of his gift lies in his draftsmanship, and his best works are tinted drawings in which color does not interfere or speak in its own right. (Thus his most prominent disciples – Dali, Ernst, and Tanguy – are likewise draftsmen, but so exclusively so that they cannot handle color at all, and in their painting it gets in the way of the drawing.)

De Chirico's deep space, foreshortenings, and exaggerated perspective announce, in spite of himself, the absolute flatness of Mondrian. It is the latter who drew the correct conclusion from the Italian painter's early work, not Dali. The early work parodies the perspective of the Quattrocentist masters and the means in general by which the Renaissance attained the illusion of the third dimension; and because it parodies, it destroys. From his tangential position de Chirico, by an exaggeration that amounted to ridicule, helped the Cubists exile deep space and volume from painting. See only how completely schematic and second-hand is his delineation of depth, how flat all surfaces in these early pictures, how the shading and modelling are applied in undifferentiated patches, like a decorative convention, and how light is handled as if in a shadow box.

Having performed this parody, which was in the nature of a final summing up and relegation of all the problems that had occupied Western painting between Giotto and Courbet, de Chirico had no place left to go. Failing or unwilling to understand either what he had done or the character of painting since Manet, he could find nothing to replace that remnant of the Renaissance which he had destroyed. His destruction had been too exclusively negative – unlike the Cubists, whose attack on the third dimension had of itself generated something equally positive to take its place: a new conception of pictorial space.

De Chirico went on into the Twenties continuing to parody, this time Davidian neo-classicism, sculpture, architecture, literature. This was the period of broken columns, toppled statues, pale horses, and whitewashed gladiators, but handled with baroque or romantic technique. The objects of the parody and the painterly means were both irrelevant. The literary effects themselves were boring, while the loose brush-stroke, the thicker paint, and the warmer colors were just so much inert machinery. His draftsmanship, now that it had abandoned the original inspiration of Mannerism and Nineteenth-Century popular illustration, became as weak as his color. De Chirico had lost touch completely. It was not even easel-

painting; it was elementary interior decoration.

This was not, however, de Chirico's last word. He has now performed one more parody. These very latest, post-1939 paintings of his, more or less literal *pastiche*s of Rubens, Delacroix, Géricault, Chardin, Courbet, and the baroque still life reduced in scale and simplified, are frontal attacks on the *malerisch* or "painterly" school, to which de Chirico's own Florentine temperament, with its leaning toward hard, cool colors, firm modelling, and clear contours, seemed so directly opposed at the beginning of his career. Here, nevertheless, he has aped the heated, swirling effects of the baroque and romantic masters. The results that in their hands took days or weeks to be achieved are simulated and mocked in a few hours of slapdash, *alla prima* painting (though it should not be overlooked that baroque and romantic painting was fast and broad by definition). All that is added to the originals is a curious detachment and nostalgia toward the subject matter, an emotion that is the only overt testimony to the fact that these pictures were painted in the Twentieth Century.

De Chirico admires Delacroix, Rubens, Courbet, *et al.*; he could not have imitated them so successfully – up to a point – did he not. He seems to be saying: this is the finest fruit of the painting of the *old* past, and now it is all over with; here is an anthology of ironic reminiscences – in any case, the end, the finish, the funeral; and as for myself, all I can do is comment on other painters.

These pictures are of no importance whatsoever in the development of painting. They are not even *tours de force*; they are just stunts. But this does not prevent a few of them – *The Folly of Horses*, *Departure*, and the Chardinesque *Still Life* – from coming off on their own terms and so revealing de Chirico's gift for unity again, after a lapse of twenty-five years, during which nothing he did came off, on its own or any other terms. And negligible as this stuff is at its best and symptomatic as it may be of a real degeneration and of an impotence to react cogently to modern life, still it has some reality as a gloss on the history of painting, an illustrated lecture on the ABC's of baroque painting. Irrelevant as painting inside painting, it is sheer cultural evidence, a kind of funeral oration more affecting than anything that could be put into words.