

THROUGH METAPHYSICAL ART*

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Colleagues and dear friends, good morning.

The annual Journals of Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, “Metaphysical Art”, has brought together a considerable number of contributions this year. One particularly developed aspect regards the twofold level, the double track along which research on Giorgio de Chirico constantly moves: the philosophical, speculative and theoretical side, and the technical side with a strong accent on problems inherent to the quality of painting technique. Right from the start, and subsequently over the years, the theoretical and speculative part has been subject to meticulous critical examination, while the technical question too has always lain at the heart of dechirichian studies, investigated chiefly from the viewpoint of the artist’s “return to craft”.

This issue balances these two aspects in a highly interesting way. The theoretical side has always carried enormous weight with de Chirico, however, careful re-examination of the discussion on “technique” that he repeatedly tackled might lead to substantial clarifications regarding the passionate controversies that have persistently arisen around his figure. The book supplies interesting testimony to this end. In addition to historical documents, the volume also comprises of legal documents, including a fully transcribed legal judgement on the recurrent matter of fakes, which brings to mind a singular parallelism between the historiography of the *Pictor Optimus* and that of Caravaggio, the “accursed” artist *par excellence*. In fact both stand out for the dimension of conflict and the constant aggression among experts with mutual accusations of incomprehension, incompetence, inability, bad faith, fraud etc. There is of course a difference, indeed there are many; but there is no doubt that within certain limits one might legitimately uphold the assertion that to the extent Caravaggio was a determining factor in the language, iconology and social impact of the 17th century, so was de Chirico for 20th century painting. And then, analogously, just as great Spanish, Flemish, French and other painting was as if born of a rib of Caravaggio, it certainly cannot be denied that the rib of metaphysical painting engendered equally international and acclaimed phenomena. Another analogy, not without historiographic interest, is also worth pointing out: the first major influence exerted by both these great masters of painting was on French cultural life.

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Caravaggio became “Caravaggio” because his supreme works in San Luigi dei Francesi were a direct and powerful link with the French community in Rome where, in the centuries to come, the Academy of France was to take root; while in France discussion of Caravaggesque language would carry through right up to the art of Courbet and the new 19th century realism.

Similarly, de Chirico’s relationship with surrealism was fundamental and deeply altered the development of 20th century French figurative culture. This bridge thrown between Italy and France has extended to our own time (and is dealt with in the book) to the entire western world, reaching as far as the United States and Russia.

And on the subject of this concept of dechirichian universality we also think of Alberto Savinio, and it is highly interesting how the core of the first controversy that aroused the interest of historians and the passion of the public was precisely the question of “precedence”: to what extent, for example, did Alberto Savinio influence Giorgio de Chirico’s theories, and how much weight did his musical experience carry, for example, in determining the complex formation of his multifaceted painter-musician-writer personality? Paolo Picozza, speaking of the two brothers, recalled what we might call the “musical question”, referring to the time in Munich when Alberto Savinio took lessons which brought him into contact with one of the most interesting composers of the age: Max Reger, a notable figure in highly refined Bavarian circles where the outstanding figure for us today was certainly Richard Strauss, especially with regard to his first widely celebrated operas such as *Salomé* and *Electra*, written in that crucial phase of the early 20th century. The period when Arnold Schönberg was getting ready to publish the *Theory of Harmony*, dedicated to his revered maestro Gustav Mahler, which was destined to become a sort of milestone in the inquiry into the expressive potentialities of the musical medium itself, and such as to also serve as a model for other artistic techniques towards expansion of aesthetically connoted languages. Although it is impossible to state that Reger had a decisive influence on Savinio, who actually took few but productive lessons, the fact remains that the authority of the composer and teacher must have been clear, a man who set himself as a kind of “bridge” between the great tradition of German music deriving from Bach – which relived through Reger in new and unaccustomed forms – and the equally elect tradition, recent but deeply rooted, that ensued from the romantic teachings of Brahms. This cultured and impassioned attitude led Reger to adhere with conviction and acute creativity to that symbolist dimension which was expressed in painting above all by Arnold Böcklin, also venerated by Giorgio de Chirico, in an interesting convergence of interests between the father of Metaphysical Art and perhaps the most learned and at once utopian exponent of the Munich school.

In fact Giorgio de Chirico recounts that when he accompanied his brother to lessons at maestro Reger’s he would wait for him in the anteroom where he repeatedly had the opportunity of studying, with growing interest, magnificent reproductions of works by Böcklin. These were put to concrete use by Max Reger who at that time was planning a great musical composition inspired by the artist, subsequently published, after long elaboration, with the title *Four Symphonic Poems from Böcklin*, a work well worth considering today, parallel to the evolution of de Chirico’s figurative thought within Munich circles and beyond. This reflection allows for a look at the crucial argument discussed in our Journals, defined above as the “double track” and intended as theoretical reflection

and technical reflection, which are always closely interconnected. My contribution to the publication focuses mainly on the former aspect and proceeds, as such, from speculative outlook by investigating the way in which Giorgio de Chirico employs the term “metaphysics” and by recalling the moment of its advent. It has been extensively demonstrated how this term enjoyed wide circulation in contemporary Germany, France, Greece and Italy, in innumerable declensions that would then qualify scholars in this area of research to talk of direct derivation, with consequent interpretative controversies such as de Chirico’s use of the term metaphysic and the meaning he intended in connection to painting, from the meditations of Giovanni Papini, indubitably a crucial figure in the culture of the age.

In any case the fact remains that whatever “borrowing” might have led de Chirico to define his painting as “metaphysical”, the ambition to give the term a breadth at once speculative and technical is unequivocal.

Metaphysical means “beyond physical things” and, paradoxically, any definition of “metaphysical painting” could appear senseless, speculatively speaking, since paint is a physical thing. The contradiction is all too evident. The only possible metaphysical painting under a conceptual profile is therefore... “conceptual” painting! Understood as that which prescind from the “thing”, a principle which moreover lies at the heart of one of the principal directions taken by contemporary art theory.

Today when faced with certain artistic forms of a behavioural and, precisely, conceptual nature many say: “this is not art”. But this objection could be tied in with de Chirico’s own theoretical presupposition regarding the genesis of metaphysical painting. In line with his presuppositions de Chirico might have said: “of course, of course it isn’t art”, since in its intimate theoretical essence metaphysical painting aspires to be something different from figurative art in itself because art is a “thing”. In effect, de Chirico at the start had adumbrated the idea of separateness between the essence of a thing and the art that reproduces it. Indeed he speaks of art as revelation. De Chirico did not set himself up as critic of himself but as theoretician of himself, actually insisting on the way of revelation, and he says it and repeats it, putting himself forward as the man of the New. In his view, even the so-called avant-gardists (though he did not use these terms) were doing what had always been done, albeit in a different manner. Metaphysical Art was something else, precisely because it assumed the form of a kind of revelation. De Chirico thought that a gleam of this idea could be found only in Albrecht Dürer and in very few others. Why did he say this? He doesn’t explain clearly, but we should keep in mind that Dürer was the first and perhaps the only painter to depict himself in the guise of Christ the Redeemer, a sin of supreme pride but highly interesting. He is the only one who elicits from the beholder’s mind the idea that the artist is comparable to the deity because, like the deity, he creates and absolves. De Chirico expresses a similar concept when he arrives at the idea of Metaphysical Art: the artist’s trade is creation. But creation, precisely, is the trade of the Deity. God is an artist. The great 16th century master Giorgio Vasari said the same thing in the introduction to his *Lives*, although he did believe that the divine art *par excellence* was sculpture since God, to create Man, moulded a three-dimensional form and breathed life into it. The sculptor cannot achieve such things, but he approaches divinity when he sculpts. This came from Vasari, who was a painter. The great treatise writers of the centuries before Vasari, however, did not

bother with questions of this kind but kept far more to the concrete, to the manufacture of the artistic “thing”, like the renowned 14th century writer Cennino Cennini, the foremost expert on technique who taught everyone how to paint, specifying the materials to use and the results to aim for.

And strangely enough, in the 1930s when de Chirico shifted more and more from theoresis to a sort of operational pragmatism, with one eye to the past and one to the future which led him to the “Mysterious Baths” theme, he re-examined the question of Metaphysical Art with a different mentality. During that period he was increasingly interested in reclaiming painting technique – understood more in Cennini’s than in Vasari’s sense – even though his attention was concentrated on 17th century painting and on Renoir. The great French painter had studied a translation of Cennino Cennini’s treatise and drawn a series of deductions on which de Chirico focused in a great broadening of outlook that continued until the end of the “second chapter” of his extremely complex and controversial parabola, marked by the Second World War.

The present Journals offer extensive documentation of the artist’s process of development, his great anxieties and even his failures. But it is precisely here that its importance lies, a publication that helps us retrace the various phases of the *Pictor Optimus*’s tormented life, highlighting contradictions and triumphs of which historical research still has much to discover and study in depth with view to fully restoring the essential truth, our main objective, with regard to de Chirico’s career.

Translated by David Smith