

INTERVIEW WITH DE CHIRICO
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Giorgio de Chirico was born in 1888 in Volos, capital of Thessaly, Greece, to Italian parents. His father, an engineer, was commissioned by the Greek government to build the railway. His mother descended from Genoese bourgeoisie. From a very early age de Chirico demonstrated an innate gift for drawing and received his first lessons from a clerk who worked for the railway company. In 1899 his father was appointed director of the Greek railways. The family settled in Athens and young Giorgio saw the first international Olympic games. He attended the Liceo Leonino, where children of the Italian colony were educated, and more importantly, the Fine Arts section of the Athens Polytechnic.

MARCHAND: What was your first attempt at painting?

DE CHIRICO: I decided to paint a still life. I had set up three lemons... but I wasn't ready, I had only heard about oil painting. I thought that oil painting was done with oil. So I got some olive oil that we kept in the dining room. The problem is that olive oil has the property of never drying, and even after three months if I touched the lemons the yellow came off on my fingers.

MARCHAND: So how did you discover oil painting?

DE CHIRICO: Ah, I gave up, when I saw that these lemons wouldn't ever dry, I asked a painter... he was an old painter, an elderly gentleman who sometimes gave lessons and specialised in seascapes, marine subjects. I asked him, "How is oil painting done?" and this gentleman said "with oil" and I, very worried, said "certainly, but which oil?" and he replied "linseed oil". Linseed oil was a revelation for me. Oil painting is done with linseed oil!

MARCHAND: In fact, after learning drawing and the use of charcoal you joined the painting class. What did you learn from your teacher Jacobidis?

DE CHIRICO: The painter Jacobidis was a portraitist along the lines of Bonnat; he moved from one easel to the next... he gave advice.

* Meetings filmed in Rome, during March and October 1971

- MARCHAND: Your father died in Athens. As a young adolescent at the time, how did you deal with this suffering?
- DE CHIRICO: I felt great pain. My father died in Athens and is buried there.
- MARCHAND: Your mother decided to leave Greece for Munich. Before arriving in Munich you had a brief stay in Venice. What memory do you have of this first visit to Venice and its museums?
- DE CHIRICO: A very poetic memory of the city. The museums struck me too, but at the time I didn't understand painting as I understand it now. I didn't understand the masterpieces of the old masters, or I understood them as everybody else does.
- MARCHAND: Why did your mother take you to Munich?
- DE CHIRICO: Because Munich had the reputation then of being a city where painting was highly developed. There was the Munich Secession which would later influence the Salon d'Automne in Paris. Then it also had the reputation of a city where the academy was very important... the painting academy of course.
- MARCHAND: At the Fine Arts Academy you took a course in drawing for several months and then moved on to painting. Was it different from the Athens Polytechnic?
- DE CHIRICO: No difference really. The system was the same. The teachers moved among the easels, gave advice... and then went away.
- MARCHAND: Arnold Böcklin, *Island of the Dead*. What did the discovery of Böcklin mean to you then?
- DE CHIRICO: That picture struck me when I saw it in a Munich museum. I was struck both by the poetical and fantastical side and by the quality of the painting.
- MARCHAND: That was when you discovered Nietzsche's writings.
- DE CHIRICO: More than a philosopher Nietzsche is a kind of visionary poet... and what I found in Nietzsche is something that I perceived myself. It was this sort of mystery of autumn. Especially in October in certain Italian cities, above all Turin, where there are arcades, piazzas... which gave rise to the series that I call Piazzas of Italy.
- MARCHAND: Why did you go to Paris in 1911?
- DE CHIRICO: I went because my brother had been there for some time and had written that it was the city where they understood young talents, in a word the city where they understood art... so I packed my bag and went.
- MARCHAND: Were you influenced by your brother? I believe you loved him very much?
- DE CHIRICO: Yes... no, I wasn't influenced by my brother, nor do I think that I influenced him. Each worked on his own account, without mutual influence.
- MARCHAND: How did a young man of 23 get to know Apollinaire?
- DE CHIRICO: I'd been told that he was very interested in young painters, in modern painting in general, so I wanted to meet him. I went two or three times to his flat where he received once a week. Derain came too... I recall André Derain and also Max Jacob. And many intellectuals, writers and painters who were in Paris at the time.

- MARCHAND: Would you mind talking about Apollinaire... about the effect he had on you?
- DE CHIRICO: He actually had no particular effect. He was very kind to me. He also wrote positive things about my painting. Apart from this I really didn't know him well... because it was the eve of the First World War... and he enlisted... he left for the front and I didn't see him again because I'd already gone back to Italy when he was wounded, and then he died.
- MARCHAND: To go back to 1913... what do you remember of the exhibitions at the Salon d'Automne and the Salon des Indépendants, where you first showed your works and had a certain success?
- DE CHIRICO: Yes, at the time I in fact exhibited at the Salon d'Automne... twice there and twice at the Indépendants. At the Salon d'Automne I had a portrait, a portrait of a woman, and another picture... a kind of Italian Piazza but not exactly... there was a tower, and all in all it was the subject of the Italian Piazza... and then also – I think – a self-portrait, I don't know. I had good write-ups and I sold the first picture of my life... the first picture, sold at the Salon d'Automne. It was a man from Le Havre – I believe – I still remember his name, Olivier Sens. He came to my house saying he had seen a picture of mine and wanted to buy it but thought it was slightly expensive... and then he invited me to lunch. I had lunch with him... I agreed to the price he wanted to pay and then I thought he could have achieved the same result without inviting me to lunch. This is what I recall. At the Indépendants I exhibited twice but didn't sell any pictures.
- MARCHAND: That was when you developed the painting that would later be called “metaphysical”. Why this term, which has become world famous, and where does it come from?
- DE CHIRICO: I called this painting “metaphysical” on the basis of the etymology of the word itself. “Metaphysical” means “beyond physical things”, and in fact what I thought I was expressing was something that went beyond the tangible, that which directly touches our senses.
- MARCHAND: From 1909 to 1914 the art scene in Paris was dominated by cubism, which would disappear in the storm. What did you think of cubism in those days?
- DE CHIRICO: It never interested me much. It's a bit like Freudian thought, don't you agree? Just as Freudian thought bases everything on sexuality, cubism bases everything on cubes. It's too easy to reduce the problem in this way [*laughs*].
- MARCHAND: And Picasso?
- DE CHIRICO: Picasso is a very interesting artist, he interested me at the time, but I don't think because he was a cubist.
- MARCHAND: Can you go into greater depth about Picasso, for example: what do you see in him worthy of a master and what do you see instead as due to fashion and the age?
- DE CHIRICO: Picasso was an inquisitive spirit who expressed things that were in a certain sense

curious and also very right and impressive. Looking at that whole series of large women by the sea is highly interesting, and also his drawings, all his illustrations... bullfights, toreros, all his echoes of Greek mythology; he did a great many drawings on these themes, and also paintings. I find everything he does interesting because he's an inquisitive spirit and has something to say, unlike the situation today.

MARCHAND: The 1914 war broke out immediately and you returned to Italy. You went to live in Ferrara.

DE CHIRICO: I didn't actually live in Ferrara... after a medical examination I'd been declared unfit for the trenches. So they put me in an office in Ferrara. That's why I ended up there.

MARCHAND: In Ferrara you painted the pictures called "Metaphysical Interiors". What inspired them?

DE CHIRICO: Biscuits that I used to see in shop windows, especially in the Jewish quarter. There were windows with these amusing biscuits. So I bought and then painted them, glued on paper.

MARCHAND: At the same period another painter – Carrà – came under your influence...

DE CHIRICO: Yes.

MARCHAND: Meaning that he saw your "Metaphysical Interiors", was literally seduced by them and set about doing them himself.

DE CHIRICO: Yes, not only the Interiors but also figures: the mannequins.

MARCHAND: And then he distanced himself from you completely – I believe.

DE CHIRICO: Well... for a short time he did this metaphysical painting and some people, due to both ignorance and malignity, credited him with inventing it. Whereas everyone knows that I am the creator of metaphysical painting.

MARCHAND: The "Archaeologists" date to the end of this period.

DE CHIRICO: It was an idea that came to me looking at certain figures of gothic sculpture on cathedrals. When they are seated they have a very majestic air because they have a large torso and short legs, and since they never stand up one always has the impression that they are very majestic. That's where I got the idea of doing these figures with the upper part of the body highly developed and with short legs... because it gives a sort of grandeur to the figures themselves.

MARCHAND: In all the periods of your painting there is a real attachment to statues. Can you explain this exceptional attachment?

DE CHIRICO: Yes, because statues for me are like a kind of ghost of man. I really like the statues of politicians or national heroes that we find in public squares. I feel they're better when they stand on bases or pedestals, but very low ones because they lose value when they're too high. It's important that the monumental statue should give the impression of blending in with people's life, with the life of passers-by, those who are around the monument.



G. de Chirico, *The Archaeologists*, 1927, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome

This painting hung on the wall above the sofa where de Chirico sat during the interview, which he indicated whilst discussing the *Archaeologists* theme. The work forms part of the Isabella Pakszwer Far donation in 1987 of 24 paintings from the artist's collection to Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome



I noted that by leaving the eyes closed a male or female head, but especially male, resulted in very curious expressions. Painting gladiators or ancient figures, precisely, these curious expressions of the characters I depicted with eyes closed, expressed what I wanted to express. It's a form of egg and is eyeless, but sometimes with arabesques, sometimes with signs. I began doing them long before, in Paris back in 1914 I'd painted mannequins with heads like that. I may say that I put them mainly on the figures that I call "Troubadours", "Hector and Andromache" and I've put them on figures like the ones in the painting behind me, here, they've also got egg-shaped heads.

MARCHAND: In those years there was a highly important phenomenon in your life: it was at Villa Borghese that you had the revelation of what painting truly is. Can you tell us about it?

DE CHIRICO: Actually I was greatly impressed by a Titian painting on show there. I then understood that all the painting being done today was not really painting, be it decomposed or composed it was never painting. So I started doing copies of the old masters. In Rome... in Florence... and then I also got interested in their techniques, I consulted numerous treatises on painting, both ancient and modern... and in the end I tried to give a certain quality to my painting, but in any case this is an activity I've always pursued and still do.

MARCHAND: In the final analysis, what is great painting?

DE CHIRICO: Great painting is painting done well. It's only that on the subject of "done well" it is hard to express oneself. It's always a question of quality, one could compare it with cloth... between modern painting and the painting of the masters there's the difference that exists between pure woollen cloth and cloth made from paper.

MARCHAND: Of which classical painters, your masters, do you make copies?

- DE CHIRICO: I've copied all the masters, the Italians, the Flemish, the French. But the master who has always interested me, greatly interested me, is Rubens. I also copied the 18th century French masters... the Spanish... in a word all the old painters painted well. Rubens particularly interested me because he has this enormous freedom in execution, a great mastery... yes, a great freedom.
- MARCHAND: You wrote a book in French about Courbet where you define him as romantic. Why?
- DE CHIRICO: Because he was, it isn't my fault! *[laughs]*
- MARCHAND: Among 19th century painters are you especially familiar with Courbet?
- DE CHIRICO: Yes, I like him a lot because there's something in him, he was a man who didn't have much luck. He died relatively young, he had problems about the event of Place Vendôme... I don't know what he did... he had to flee to Switzerland... and he died there. However what mainly interests me is his painting, which is truly well done from all points of view, and moreover there's a poetic background.
- MARCHAND: At the 1923 Rome Biennial you exhibited a certain number of paintings. Wasn't it then that Paul Eluard bought several of your canvases?
- DE CHIRICO: Yes, in fact he came to Rome with his wife and said that he had come for me and wanted to see only me. I tried showing him the Coliseum, "no, I came for you!". He came to lunch and stayed awhile, then he went back and locked himself up in the hotel, leaving the next day to come and see me. I wouldn't have done the same thing. *[laughs]*
- MARCHAND: He was very young at the time...
- DE CHIRICO: That's not a good reason. I wouldn't have done it even at eight years old!
- MARCHAND: Did you have an inkling of the advent of fascism in Italy?
- DE CHIRICO: Yes, somewhat, because I noticed people's discontent. There had been problems in Turin, the communists had killed some people, I don't know, some workers, I don't know, something happened. I believe that fascism was encouraged chiefly by industrialists who, fearing the rise of communism, had backed it, given money to favour the birth of fascism.
- MARCHAND: Did you see Mussolini's friends entering Rome?
- DE CHIRICO: Yes, I was able to see fascism entering Rome... such inhuman episodes took place... I remember they painted the head of a communist, he was bald, with the Italian colours – green, white, red – and made him stand on a balcony in the centre. Things like that... I mean there was nothing really dramatic... I don't think they killed anybody.
- MARCHAND: And why did you go to Paris in 1925?
- DE CHIRICO: I don't know, always the same I think. As I said, it was the centre of art... one was drawn towards the Tour Eiffel! *[laughs]*
- MARCHAND: What atmosphere did you find in Paris artistic centres?
- DE CHIRICO: No special atmosphere. I was in contact with Paul Guillaume who died shortly afterwards, then I was in contact – I'm talking about work contacts, they were buying my

pictures – with a dealer called Léonce Rosenberg and another called Bernheim Jeune, and yet another Rive Gauche dealer whose name I've forgotten.

MARCHAND: Can you tell us about the 1926 show at the Léonce Rosenberg Gallery?

DE CHIRICO: Ah yes, at the time the surrealists had turned against me since they were unhappy that I'd come to Paris because they'd bought my metaphysical paintings from Paul Guillaume and hoped that I would die during the war or would never come back to Paris. What's more, they hoped to give me a reputation similar to that of Douanier Rousseau: they spoke about me as a sort of hallucinated young man who had lived a few years in Paris and created some very rare pictures which they alone possessed. When I showed the new paintings at Léonce Rosenberg's they were very put out and they organised a sort of show of caricatures of these works in the window of the gallery they had on the Rive Gauche, in rue Jacques Callot. At that time in Rosenberg's there were still pictures of horses by the sea and things like that. So they had bought toy horses and set them behind a blue sheet of paper representing the sea and... in a word a parody of the paintings... but the most amusing thing was that although they aimed to damage my exhibition at Rosenberg's they actually provided me with advertising: because after seeing this parody people rushed to Rosenberg's to buy my paintings! *[laughs]*

MARCHAND: On the subject of the role of the horse in the canvases of this period: how do you interpret it?

DE CHIRICO: It's very simple. I think it's a highly decorative animal that always goes well in a picture. After all, many painters, old masters, painted horses... Rubens painted battles on horseback, Delacroix...

MARCHAND: You moreover didn't have only the theme of the archaeologists but also painted numerous other fantastical subjects. For example the pictures featuring gladiators. Would you like to say something about these?

DE CHIRICO: I may say that these gladiators always made a strong impression on me, always, since I began to understand what gladiators were. I don't know, I find the gladiator a most dramatic figure, one who faces death, who must die. Gladiators rarely survived, don't you think? Yes, some got as far as old age. They ended up by training other gladiators, teaching at the gladiators' school. But it was very rare. Generally they died in the arena. The gladiator has always made an impression on me for the dramatic aspect, in a word, of his fate.

MARCHAND: The furniture in the valley...

DE CHIRICO: The furniture in the valley is an idea that came to me when I saw furniture – I think in Paris. In fact in any city, also in other countries, you come across these shops that sell inexpensive furniture and display it outside on the pavement, beds, armchairs. These are objects we are accustomed to see inside a house. Seen outdoors they have a strange effect, so I thought of actually setting them in the countryside *[laughs]* rather than on the pavement. So I started painting pictures of furniture which I called

“Furniture in the Valley”.

MARCHAND: Jean Cocteau really stood up for your painting in those years, he even wrote a book.

DE CHIRICO: *The Lay Mystery*.

MARCHAND: *The Lay Mystery*. What do you think of this book?

DE CHIRICO: I've never really trusted books written about me because the writers say things that in my view don't correspond to reality. Anyway he was very kind to me, he wrote a book and then took interest in me, spoke well of me.

MARCHAND: What was the reaction in certain intellectual circles, especially among the surrealists, to Cocteau's defending your painting?

DE CHIRICO: Ah, I don't know. They probably thought he was mistaken, but I don't know, I don't recall anything in particular, specific reactions.

MARCHAND: In the first period of your stay in Paris and before the surrealists distanced themselves, you went to some meetings at Breton's. Can you tell us about them?

DE CHIRICO: There was Breton who walked around the studio, reading Lautréamont – I believe – and then he said “Long live the Ocean, I salute you Ocean”, he had friends, followers, who were sitting in armchairs and on sofas, and this reminded me of a picture by an Italian painter in Trieste museum, I think his name is Balestrieri. It depicts a gathering of thoughtful young men and women sitting on sofas and in armchairs. A mask of Beethoven is hanging on the wall and in the background there's someone playing the piano and another the violin and it reminded me... these meetings at Breton's reminded me of this picture in Trieste which is called *Beethoven*.

MARCHAND: Can you tell us what Robert Desnos did at these meetings?

DE CHIRICO: Ah yes, he said he fell into trances, and when that happened they brought him pen and paper so he could write down what he saw. I remember one time he wrote “I see reverberations, reverberations, reverberations...” I remember at least this...

MARCHAND: In those same years you wrote a book, *Hebdomeros*. Would you like to talk about the genesis of this book, and above all what gave you the idea of writing a book?

DE CHIRICO: Actually before writing the novel *Hebdomeros* I'd written several essays, then I put down on paper some ideas I had in the spirit. *Hebdomeros* is a sort of fantastical recitation which has no logic but has the advantage that one can open it at any point and what one reads is always interesting.

MARCHAND: In your opinion, where does the need to write a novel come from?

DE CHIRICO: From the fact that first and foremost it's far easier to write than to paint and less tiring, and then one can say much more with a pen on paper than by painting a picture. If I wanted to paint scenes from *Hebdomeros*, I don't know, it would take me at least six months... and then it would tire me a lot.

MARCHAND: Quite aside from your opposition to Freudian thought it appears that the book is written in collaboration with the unconscious, your unconscious.

DE CHIRICO: No, it's a highly conscious book, it doesn't have anything to do with Freud. Besides, Freudianism... yes, the fashion of Freudianism had already begun. I never took much



Lionello Balestrieri, *Beethoven*, 1900, Museo Revoltella, Trieste

interest in Freud... I consider it a science... if we want to call it a science... which is above all indiscreet, and I believe that its success is due to this indiscreet aspect of seeking to guess what is concealed within a person, a bit like gossip, the success of gossip! *[laughs]*

MARCHAND: During the Italian period, in 1930, you went back to the desire to improve technique and painted realist pictures... don't you think the Italian environment was helpful each time you returned to realism? What's your opinion?

DE CHIRICO: No... I would've gone back to realism even if I'd been in Paris. I don't think the Italian environment urged me towards realism... there's no reason.

MARCHAND: In effect, shortly afterwards you began the "Mysterious Baths", which are an invention.

DE CHIRICO: Yes.

MARCHAND: And what inspired them?

DE CHIRICO: A shiny wooden floor, because I'd noticed that a wooden floor highly polished with wax, rubbed with wax, reflects internally when one walks on it and one has the impression of entering into it... so I got the idea of doing these baths which are at once water and wooden floor.

MARCHAND: You sailed for the United States: what was your first impression on arrival?

DE CHIRICO: I had the impression that everything was soft, like rubber, even the policemen's truncheons... I had an impression of softness... and then that the country was, what are those islands called... the Azores? One really has the impression of landing in a new world. But I liked New York, its architecture, its skyscrapers, and the view from the port made me think a lot about very ancient cities... Babylon for example. Interesting, but when you are in the city it is less interesting.

MARCHAND: In New York you saw Dr. Barnes, who you already knew from Paris.

DE CHIRICO: Yes.

MARCHAND: Tell us about him.

DE CHIRICO: He was a friend of Paul Guillaume's and had bought several works from him, mine included. I'd also done his portrait in Paris. In New York I saw him once or twice and he invited me, so I went with my wife and some friends to see his museum... he was an odd man: he had an obsession about enraging his fellow citizens and countrymen, he didn't like Americans, or at least so he would have you believe, so to enrage them he was very kind to black people... every Sunday he invited all the blacks of Philadelphia, with their families, to come to the museum, and then there was a great handing out of sandwiches, rum and cakes, and these unhappy black people had to look now and then at a painting by Cézanne, by Van Gogh, which didn't interest them at all, but in the end they ate, they drank at this ceremony every Sunday. *[laughs]*

MARCHAND: Could you tell us about Barnes's taste in painting?

DE CHIRICO: I don't believe he knew a great deal about painting. After all, like all collectors... well almost all... there are certainly some who understand painting... one shouldn't exaggerate.

MARCHAND: Back in Europe you abandoned the theme of invention and concentrated on the quest for painterly quality, following the example of the old masters.

DE CHIRICO: Yes. I'd actually done the same thing in the past, much earlier.

MARCHAND: It appears that in this period you were more strongly criticised and misunderstood. How do you explain this?

DE CHIRICO: It's because people today are, or want to be, on the side of what is called modern painting, and since modern painting is a kind of painting that is not painting, then of course anyone doing real painting disorients them and they are ready to sentence him to death... *[laughs]* *thumbs down!* Like at the circus... or for gladiators!

MARCHAND: Now that we can see sixty years of your painting, one has the impression, contrarily, of a kind of unity in your oeuvre. How would you define this deep unity?

DE CHIRICO: I don't believe that an artist's oeuvre needs any unity; even where it doesn't exist, that doesn't mean anything; it need only have value. It doesn't matter if there is no unity among the works.

MARCHAND: You've done a whole series of self-portraits in period costume. What do they mean to you, the period costumes you wore?

DE CHIRICO: Because they are far more picturesque than modern clothes... a pretext for painting. Modern apparel isn't interesting to paint, don't you agree? It's monotonous. Ancient clothing supplies far more possibilities for painting and showing what one is capable of.

MARCHAND: You have written that the nude self-portrait is perhaps your most powerful work: why?

DE CHIRICO: Because it's well painted, not my fault!

MARCHAND: When did you begin to be attracted by sculpture?

- DE CHIRICO: I began doing sculpture in Florence during the last war. I was in Florence and I started doing sculpture. I did terracotta works and continued doing them afterwards, in Rome, and then I started having them cast, first in plaster then in bronze, for practical reasons because terracotta is very fragile and easily broken if it is dropped. I actually prefer terracotta to bronze... but in any case one can do interesting bronzes. The ideal sculpture is in marble, but of course the meaning and especially the knowledge of working marble have long been lost. Now there are few who know how to work marble – they make tombstones in cemeteries – but today's sculptors in general do not work in marble. In my view the ideal sculpture is made in marble.
- MARCHAND: And if a government commissioned a great sculpture for a square, would you accept?
- DE CHIRICO: Yes, of course, if we could reach an agreement... In bronze.
- MARCHAND: What are the specific problems you find in sculpture?
- DE CHIRICO: I actually find it easier to do, I mean sculpture in marble is certainly more difficult... but a sculpture in clay, which is composed mounted on a frame, I find simpler than painting.
- MARCHAND: To put it another way, it's the hand that guides you more easily in comparison with painting.
- DE CHIRICO: Yes. It's less complicated because there's only one material to work with, to the extent that if one isn't satisfied there isn't the impression of having resolved what one wanted to resolve...
- MARCHAND: For a long time critics divided your work in two parts: metaphysical painting and then all the rest, whereas today one tends on the contrary to consider your oeuvre in its unity. Do you think in this sense that critics have made some progress?
- DE CHIRICO: No. I believe they still consider the two parts... it's a question of the art market, because the dealers who have the metaphysical pictures are always trying to convince people that they are the best. A question of market I think.
- MARCHAND: And if you had to speak of your work now, not as critic but as artist, how would you define it?
- DE CHIRICO: Excellent.
- MARCHAND: Why?
- DE CHIRICO: Because I find it very good. *[laughs]*
- MARCHAND: In your *Memoirs* you quote a sentence from Baudelaire: "Unhappy the man but happy the artist who is obsessed by the desire for perfection".
- DE CHIRICO: Yes, I think he was right. The artist must always be obsessed by the desire for perfection.
- MARCHAND: Has this made you unhappy as a man?
- DE CHIRICO: No, no influence at all. Nothing has made me unhappy. There are things that disturb me, but to talk about unhappiness would seem exaggerated.
- MARCHAND: *[says nothing]*

DE CHIRICO: [*smiling*] I can breathe, deeply! Ah... shall we go on?

MARCHAND: Yes.

DE CHIRICO: Well, one has to smile! Unfortunately it's somewhat boring, a long time to wait, or maybe I'll be dead, all in all I carry out exorcisms to make you believe that it isn't this way. Well... I can only bless you...

Translated by David Smith