

GIORGIO DE CHIRICO AND THE MYTH OF ARIADNE

curated by Michael Taylor

Philadelphia Museum of Art

(3rd November 2002 - 5th January 2003)

Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art, London

(22nd January - 13th April 2003)

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Curated by Michael Taylor for the Philadelphia Museum of Art, this exhibition is the first far-reaching show to be held in an American museum following the fundamental exhibitions curated by James Thrall Soby and William Rubin for MoMA of New York.

One remains in awe of shows such as these, which set important precedents. They are exhibitions which have influenced the modern vision of art from an American point of view. And perhaps, it is only the Americans who have a clear idea about de Chirico's role in modern history. With regard to the artist, let us consider the ambiguous and self-interested politics of the Europeans (without even touching upon the Italians!).

In fact, the show followed an ambitious exhibition held at Germany's Nordrhein-Westphalen museum in Düsseldorf the previous year, which was not without equivocal aspects and "a sensational inquiry" concerning the "true inventor of Metaphysics".

Once again the United States of America seized the steering-wheel of history. This time round, in my opinion, the curator should have responded to the query:

Given that, in its strictest sense, the historical analysis must assume that aspects such as the chronology of events and de Chirico's interpersonal and inter-stylistic relationships with others are already established as fact (or at least formally supposed as fact), how do you see an exhibition that puts forward new material of interest?

Answer: With regard to de Chirico, I move with an iconographic edge by taking a subject, the figure of Ariadne, and putting together all the concepts that I manage to discover about it. Literary comparisons (Ovid features in the catalogue's epigraph), anthropological and philosophical contrasts (the Mediterranean myth of Ariadne), as well as historical-

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artistic comparisons (the immemorial presence of Ariadne in the realm of art when sexual love and dream throw out a challenge to intellect and reason).

As Ariadne is never absent from the illustration of this dilemma (starting with the Attic vase to the Hellenistic Vatican Ariadne, to Italian Mannerism, up until the height of the 19th Century), the English-speaking curator (and follower of Ernst Gombrich) prepared himself a veritable feast. His catalogue essay is a vast and thorough examination on the theme, which uses necessary bibliographic apparatus.

The research enters a genuine labyrinth when dealing with the formulation of the Ariadne subject as a theme within the wider context of the 'Italian Piazzas' theme. If, as the subject itself states, Ariadne is the face of the enigma that puts Theseus' life in danger, you can be sure that de Chirico does not ignore the true stature of the woman. Within the piazzas, Ariadne is the quintessence of enigma and also of complexity, the principal complexity is undoubtedly the succession of the Ariadnes. The dates: which one is the first Ariadne? Imagine if a theorist of absolute time, one who does not believe in calendar time, could allow one to trace the true chronology of the Ariadnes. Given the feverish activity of the artist at the time of the Ariadnes (between 1912 and 1914), the oversight of just a couple of months (I am not talking in years), would be such that the numbers would never add up.

Therefore, the order established by Taylor (which starts with the Hellenistic model of Ariadne (Museo Pio Clementino, Vatican), the Estorick Collection's *Melanconia*, followed by *Mélancolie d'une belle journée*, *La lassitude de l'infini* etc.), could work just as well, if not better, by reversing the order with the Estorick's *Melanconia* as the last of the Ariadne series. Some people, such as Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco, are quite convinced of this.

The labyrinth winds an increasingly narrower maze of passageways around us when our painter runs into the company of great (as well as unprincipled) companions of modern adventure, who are, for the most part, linked to the avant-garde or art market. We are faced with the problem of replicas, which are either true autographs or presumed as such. The exhibition dedicates the 'Ariadne's return' section to this issue, which starts with *Memory of Italy* (The Israel Museum, Jerusalem), a replica of the Estorick's *Melanconia*. It was exhibited in order to make a direct comparison with the latter as a replica executed in Paris immediately before World War I, ie. 1914. We were about to say that technical reasons persuade one to consider the Estorick's *Melanconia* as dating precisely to

this year. In the catalogue all the differences between the two are pointed out, which ultimately become inconsistencies if one thinks that the two works were completed within days of one another. *Memory of Italy* was sold by Maurice Raval to Herbert and Nannette Rothschild in 1954 using Tristan Tzara (a Dadaist who was close to André Breton) as the middleman and guarantor. It is the catalogue's author himself, who, in considering the differences-inconsistencies between the two works, concludes (on p. 125) that probably the second and more unfinished work, was actually a first attempt executed in 1912-1913 and that therefore the Estorick's *Melanconia* is the final version and datable to 1914. What do we make of that?

A similar problem, albeit of a different nature, arises with a sketch for *La récompense du devin*, the absolute masterpiece of the exhibition (Philadelphia Museum of Art collection): the drawing is similar to the painting's X-ray image, although not enough to move the confluences of the straight lines, which are, in reality, essential to the symbolism inherent to the painting's geometric construction. One asks oneself whether the sketch had not been executed after the X-ray had been taken or even by simply examining the painting's composition carefully.

The exhibition offers the first complete look at the entirety of the 'Ariadne Piazzas' painted by de Chirico. It seems to me an ethical choice, one which finally overcomes the prejudices involved in isolating "one" de Chirico to the detriment of "other" de Chirico's. It is, in fact, an open-minded view to the paths followed by the most versatile artist of the last century, which finally breaks away from the historiographical mummification that has plagued us. The union with Andy Warhol, the first American to have understood the sense of "resumption", or repetition in de Chirico, is poetic.

Finally, the catalogue gives credit to Matthew Gale once again for having left behind the usual clichés surrounding de Chirico, with a shower of hypothesis' about Ariadne with regard to Guillaume Apollinaire (*Le musicien de Saint-Merry*, 1913), and concerning political choices (Apollinaire's father's cousin, Lorenzo Mabili, was a neo-romantic hero killed during the Greek-Turkish war). At any rate, it is with an open mind that he approaches the artist's universe.

Translated by Victoria Noel-Johnson