

CATALOGO RAGIONATO DELL'OPERA DI GIORGIO DE CHIRICO
VOL. I. TOMO 1: 1908-1912
edited by Paolo Baldacci and Gerd Roos

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The first “booklet” of the “first volume” of a new Catalogue Raisonné of Giorgio de Chirico’s artwork has been recently published in Italian.¹ For those who are familiar with the great metaphysical painter’s oeuvre, the authors of this book, Paolo Baldacci and Gerd Roos, are infamous figures. The former is an art dealer whose history is somewhat disquieting: he was previously a University teacher of Ancient History, a position he abandoned for incidental reasons regarding his role as a manager of an art gallery that had not been without unsettling incidents.² He has even been sentenced for fake de Chirico works.³ Although he affirms that he had wanted to dedicate himself exclusively to studying Art History, his primary profession has been and still is a commercial one. The second is a “scholar” without any university or museum affiliation, whose only concern is de Chirico and whose only livelihood derives from his role as Baldacci’s assistant in an association called *Archivio dell’Arte Metafisica*.

In former times, an affiliation of this kind would have had no access to the Art History world, but in times when dictatorships and the Shoah are spoken of favourably without consequence, even this seems possible. Similar to sorcerer’s apprentices and rather inconsistent, it is as if anatomical enthusiasts were to concern themselves with medical science. However, and this is the most disturbing aspect, a number of academics – possibly through oversight – have found hospitality in the so-called Archive’s “scientific” committee.

Let us stick to examining the volume. Its presumption is to “philologically” reposition de Chirico’s immense corpus of work. At present, it does little more than repropose, in a different form, what had already been compiled by Baldacci in a dated volume, *De Chirico – The Metaphysical Period 1888-1919* (Bulfinch, New York 1997), which essentially retraced and expanded on *La Metafisica – Museo documentario* (exhibition catalogue edited by M. Calvesi [President], E. Coen and G. Dalla Chiesa, Ferrara 1981) and Fagiolo dell’Arco’s 1984 volume, *L’opera com-*

¹ P. Baldacci, G. Roos, *Catalogo Ragionato dell’opera di Giorgio de Chirico*, Vol. 1/1: opera tardo romantica e la prima metafisica 1908-1912, Allemandi, Turin 2019.

² See G. Briganti, *I nuovi falsari*, in “la Repubblica”, 6 September 1984; Id., *Non passo e chiudo*, in “la Repubblica”, 18 September 1984; *Furibonda polemica per un Bonzaghi “diventato” Carrà*, in “Il Giornale dell’Arte”, Turin May 1987.

³ See *The Constants of History, Old and Recent Falsification of Giorgio de Chirico’s Artwork – Paolo Baldacci: A Case Study*, in “Metaphysical Art” n. 11/13, 2014, pp. 321-345.

pleta di de Chirico 1908-1924 (Rizzoli, Milan 1984). However, basing himself on rediscovered correspondence between de Chirico and his German friend Fritz Gartz, Baldacci misinterpreted – due to an inability to navigate its chronological and palaeographic trappings – the invention of Metaphysical Art, which he changed to 1909, in Milan, rather than 1910, in Florence (accusing de Chirico of methodically lying from the very beginning). As an incomprehensible consequence of this, he went so far as to state that the Metaphysical Art was the joint invention of de Chirico and his brother Savinio. Even though these affirmations have been contested in numerous academic essays that have restored the matter to its true date, this interpretation has bizarrely remained unchanged and the authors engage in sophisticated acrobatic exercises (Sophism being the only patrimony of ancient Greece that Baldacci continues to make use of from his university days) in order to justify their previous version of events, which originated solely from the misreading of the abovementioned epistolary. A clinical case to be sure.

In the volume's brief Forward and in the Bibliography, the name of Maurizio Calvesi, author of numerous, fundamental studies on de Chirico, has been purged (as is also the case of other authors). Indeed, the bibliography of that which presumes itself to be "philological" catalogue, actually ends in 1955. The introductory text is without footnotes, such that the critical acquisitions of decades of studies are obliterated in what amounts to a waste of the reader's time as no references are provided. Affirmations somewhere between the apodictic, the ridiculous and the absurd are mixed with objective data, in such a way as to make it impossible for the average reader to discern opinion from that which is historically sound. Here are a few examples: "[regarding] *The Enigma of the Oracle* and *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon* [...], we know that Giorgio had the revelation of the second of these in Florence in October on his return trip from Rome [...]. For that which concerns their execution, the only thing certain is that the two paintings were already completed by the beginning of December 1909" (p. 18). In reality, "the only thing certain" is what de Chirico himself affirmed, that is, that the execution of the two paintings occurred during his extensive stay in Florence in 1910, between the end of summer and the autumn. The date 1909 arose, as already mentioned, from the misreading of the letters to Gartz; however, the evidence of this error today has not prompted a philological adjustment. Indeed, further proof is sourced from a reassuring letter of 15 December 1909 to the Venice Biennial in which de Chirico asks to participate in the exhibition. For the authors "the letter [...] indicates that some time prior to December 15th the two Enigmas were already painted" (p. 40). However, the painter makes no mention of any paintings in the letter and at that time was painting instead in his new böcklinesque-style. Indeed, what comes to light is a manipulation of history that is embarrassing even for a denier. Further mystifications find ground in this setting: a drawing executed in 1918 by Alberto Savinio, which echoes a painting by Giorgio de Chirico, is claimed to be of 1909-1910 in order to justify a collaboration between the brothers regarding the invention of Metaphysical Art. The 1918 date of the drawing was corroborated by Filippo

De Pisis, who gave a precise description of it and referred it to the Ferrara period⁴ (when he frequented the brothers daily), whilst the owners of the drawing – friends of Savinio – personally indicated the execution date as 1918.

All of this without the slightest objective fact in its favour, but rather, for “sensational” purposes. I am convinced that to the reader of this review this will all appear as incredible. However, it is completely true and not even the worst of it. Forced to admit the correct dating of the abovementioned letters to Gartz, the authors were compelled to operate grotesque contortions in order to preserve their point of view. When de Chirico finally spoke explicitly of his new metaphysical paintings on 26 December 1910 (the correct date of the letter, discovered by Paolo Picozza, that the authors had mistakenly brought forward to December 1909 and were later forced to acknowledge), they wrote: “The sentence ‘this summer I painted paintings that are the most profound [...]’ can be explained as it indicates that the creative phase in its entirety began in 1909 and continued in the spring and summer with the second version of *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon* and with drawings and projects that for the artist conceptually had the same value as a finished work” (p. 52). One must take note that in their misinterpretation of what de Chirico clearly wrote (that is, that he composed his first metaphysical paintings precisely at the end of the summer of 1910, as he always maintained and as confirmed by the letter itself), they went so far as to misinterpret the extremely clear indication “in this summer” and invent – out of the blue – a second version of the founding painting of Metaphysical Art, repainted a year later. Not to mention the “drawings” and “projects” cited, of which no historical and documentary traces exist.

This argumentation induces us to analyse the catalogue’s information entries in the second part of the volume. I have previously noted how, in Baldacci’s 1997 book, supposed provenances were mixed with real data.⁵ Now, a specific information entry is made for this imaginary painting (pp. 170-171), on the pretext that de Chirico exhibited “youthful works of 1908-1915” at the Galleria Arte Milano in 1921, of which two versions of *Afternoon Meditation*. Given that the artist often changed the titles of his works (practically at every exhibition), instead of asking which two paintings these referred to (the titles of both paintings had been changed), a double, or copy, of the first metaphysical painting, *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon*, was artfully created. Two years later at the Roman Biennial of 1923, the artist once more grouped paintings of different dimensions and techniques together (but with analogous themes) under a single title (and with the same system: *The Departure of the Adventurer*: 1st and 2nd version; in the same exhibition two paintings are entitled *Orestes and Electra*, without differentiation of the version in the title). This seems to pertain to the freedom of every artist. The authors of the book instead maintain

⁴ See F. De Pisis, *La cosiddetta “Arte Metafisica”*, in “Emporium”, XLIV, 11, November 1938, p. 257.

⁵ See F. Benzi, *Giorgio de Chirico. La vita e l'opera*, La nave di Teseo, Milan 2019, p. 19: “book’s philological reconstructions of individual paintings are also unreliable in their blending of real and supposed data, thereby preparing the ground for further dubious authentications in the future”.

(with no apparent reason) that it must be a question of two almost identical paintings. However, looking into the paintings' provenances, one notes, in my opinion, what could plausibly be considered a parallel version exhibited in 1921 in the work *The Enigma of the Arrival and of the Afternoon* (early 1912), has been purposely excluded from the debate with an expedient lacking any reference but given instead as actual fact. On p. 158 under the heading on the painting's "History", one reads: "Artist study, Paris; bought by Paul Guillaume [probably by 1914-1915], Paul Guillaume Gallery, Paris; bought by Marie Peignot [Mme. André Peignot] on an unknown date [probably already in 1914-1915, in any case prior to November 1920]. Marie Peignot Collection [still in 1945, as seen in the publication of the painting in the periodical "Vrille" in 1945], Paris", etc. We must emphasise that there is no proof that this painting was acquired by Paul Guillaume and that although it is declared that Mrs. Peignot acquired the work "on an unknown date", this date turns out to be "in any case prior to November 1920", hence, certain. Why? Because in this way its exhibition in Milan in January-February 1921 with title *Afternoon Meditation* could not have taken place. In the volume's general philological mayhem, this appears as an exquisite refinement. Without mentioning that Guillaume did not buy de Chirico's early metaphysical paintings, which instead remained in the artist's possession until the 1920s and even later; furthermore, the very first publication of the painting by Savinio in "Vrille" in 1945 could also be indication that de Chirico himself had possibly sold the painting to Mrs. Peignot, probably sometime around the mid-1920s.⁶ However, this is a supposition and is given here as such, whilst the authors' supposition is developed as certainty. A certainty that opens the road for a painting that does not exist, or that will be invented.

In addition to a number of nonsenses (p. 96, where the key in *Serenade*, positioned on the stele of Janus, becomes a "key that opens the doors of time", while it suffices to read de Chirico's novel *Hebdomeros* to discover its phallic symbolism, in a sentence that liberally paraphrases this painting: "on the huge milestones that bore the likeness of two-headed Janus surmounted by a male sex organ"). These are, for the most part, harmless and include the appropriation of discoveries made by others, passed over in silence. We must also take note that the paintings of de Chirico's entire böcklinesque-style production, instead of being correctly dated to the second half of 1909, are down-shifted to 1908 with indication of the precise month in which they were executed. Why? We are not given to know: the motivations are found in the Introduction's lucubrations, which are based on pure supposition and methodologically ignore the real philological data found in Giorgio de Chirico's writings: with no incongruities.

⁶ See letter by de Chirico to Pierre Roy, Rome, 20 June 1925, in which he writes: "my respects to Mrs. Peignot, who has been so kind to me", in *Giorgio de Chirico: Lettere 1909-1929*, edited by E. Pontiggia, Silvana Editoriale, Cinisello Balsamo 2018, pp. 341-342.