

## METAPHYSICS

Curated by Ester Coen

Scuderie del Quirinale, 27<sup>th</sup> September 2003 - 6<sup>th</sup> January 2004, Rome

*Jole de Sanna*

The exhibition at the Quirinale established two avenues of attention: works and studies. In both of these, Giorgio de Chirico took the front seat.

The works – conspicuous, opulent, abundant for each of the painters in the exhibition – were being seen for the first time in Italy. This author and the numerous visitors found themselves to be both satiated and appreciative. With regard to the installation of the works, the curator Coen broke with an exhausted custom and tried to redefine that moment of the modern dawn known as Metaphysics. She did not re-propose the hybrid, completely Italian sequence about the route that started from Ferrara, with the exchange of opinions between a group of painters and poets. She continues with the journal «Valori Plastici» in which the same artists arrange to meet, with the task contrary to the previous “return backwards”, until André Breton moves from Paris and, without batting an eyelid, adopted de Chirico as the father with the paintings that preceded both «Valori Plastici» and Ferrara. And Surrealism was born.

The exhibition registers, in the early paintings of de Chirico (the ‘Enigmas’ and the ‘Piazza squares’, which were painted in Florence and Paris), the origin of a different form that was produced within the avant-garde, but was not so because it was already conceived in the classical womb, both for the issues that it dealt with and its structure. At the same time, however, it was no longer the decadent painting to which the avant-garde was opposed. All this being and not being, the strength that it draws from science and the human conscience, is Metaphysics. The detour upon the stylistic axis that it produced was such as to act as a decoy for artists who, yes, were at Ferrara doing military service, but were also at home in Ferrara, such as Filippo De Pisis, ready to intervene with his means as both reporter and poet and also as painter, even if he shared and understood the new precept. His works are very well chosen.

The Surrealists, who in reality were artists endowed with a brain and judgement like individuals, and not as football players on André Breton’s team,

were noticed when they made painting a metaphysical event, a different, strange and at times important event, like certain “unexpected effects” by René Magritte and Max Ernst. The exhibition presents, amongst other things, *La révolution la nuit* (1923) by Max Ernst, with which modern historiography dates the origin and continuity of the surrealist - Giorgio de Chirico relationship.

In the same way, Coen collects reliable historic documents of the time, by Jean Cocteau in the catalogue, to reformulate the picture of witty remarks made later by of the two protagonists, Picasso and de Chirico. She places them opposite each other, but once again a unifying aim escapes them. How far away Cocteau is now! Cocteau, general critic, intent on dancing around his two favourite artists, especially the de Chirico of *Mystère laïc* (Lay Mystery), oozing with pleasure and emotion; and we, differently from then, when an entire culture closed ranks around the best, we instead, here we are, enclosed in an unrelated environment, with almost only the spectacular event of an exhibition at our disposal to dedicate our thought to its quality. It was precisely this type of dissociation that the main author of the catalogue essays, Hans Belting, asserted in 1983 in his *La fine della Storia dell'Arte* (The End of Art History). It is not without significance that he directed his gaze upon de Chirico after having perceived the disappearance of art history in connection with late-conceptual works, such as, the similarly entitled work by Hervé Fischer quoted in that essay. Belting ran into de Chirico at the moment in which the metaphysical image was launched, and in his correspondence with Apollinaire. With his surgeon's instruments sharpened on medieval art, he appraised both the calibre and the stereometric extension of the new image. But time, or should I say destiny, awaited him precisely at the point in which he – who was emerging from a trial of nerves such as with the idea regarding the end of art history – tackled an artist who had fought “beyond” Metaphysics in all his work in order to rescue art from that very death sentence. De Chirico *after* Ferrara persisted like a steep hill to be climbed, in order to also regain his own personality as a citizen of art. And we are waiting to see what happens.

I believe that the exhibition was there for this purpose.

*Translated by Carolyn Cotchett*