

## DE CHIRICO, BÖCKLIN AND KLINGER

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In 1920 Giorgio de Chirico wrote two short essays on Böcklin and Klinger, which he published respectively in the months of May and November, in Milan, in the magazine «Il Convegno».

It is not necessary to underline that these are two of the artists that de Chirico loved best, and in whose work he found not only an important source of incentive for his own artistic training, as he has always been the first to admit, but also ideas and references which return frequently in his subsequent painting. Wieland Schmied, among others, has convincingly argued that de Chirico, Italian by blood if not by birth place, had learnt to “read” Italy through the eyes of artists of German tongue – like Böcklin and Klinger – while he derived the idea of the *Italian Piazza* through reading Friedrich Nietzsche. Thanks to these influences de Chirico rediscovers his ideal Italy, and perhaps even Greece as the cradle of myth.

The influence of Böcklin is clearly noticeable in the initial phase of de Chirico’s art, as in fact is that of Klinger: for example in the battles and tales of centaurs, a theme explored by both. It later returns in a clearly visible manner in the neo-romantic period which begins immediately after the First World War. On closer inspection, however, influences from both artists return continually, sometimes years apart and in the most differing periods: in the metaphysical period, in several mythological themes, pre- or post-metaphysical, in the *Mysterious Baths* series, and in several other *topoi* which are less easy to define. Perhaps it has not yet been emphasised sufficiently that the painter from Volos found in the work of these artists not only a gold mine of iconography, of irrational suggestion, reaped from their images in the ways described repeatedly in the articles cited, but that he was also inspired by their use of a series of psychological mechanisms, their inventive scene-making, and the spatial construction of a painting. These influences do not only appear when there is a clear reference to one or other of the artists, but in various phases of his artistic journey. Central among these is the metaphysical period, the most modern and innovative one, as well as the most discussed, which, incidentally, coincides with the moment in which de Chirico finds himself most directly in contact with the European Avant-garde. Let us defer considerations on the ambiguous relationship between de Chirico and the Avant-garde, a matter which raises so many contradictory responses. On the one hand it is difficult to deny that there was a mutual exchange between de Chirico and the Avant-garde, but at the same time it is certain that he never wanted any part of it, not even ideologically.

In any case, I believe de Chirico’s role as a solitary anticipator of certain movements is beyond doubt (in particular Surrealism); just as it is impossible to deny the acclaim he received from some of the

most radical branches of the Avant-garde, such as Dadaism, both in Zurich and in Germany. What remains to be seen is how de Chirico managed to exalt the ideas drawn from the work of Böcklin and Klinger, granting them a sense of novelty – so obvious as to be recognised internationally – considering that their work, although of high quality, was certainly not cutting-edge, even within a symbolist context, but was characterised by strong links to Romanticism.

On this point, the theorist de Chirico actually had a different view, as can be seen from the polemic he mentions in his article on Böcklin. In his book on «Valori Plastici», Paolo Fossati quotes de Chirico's explicit reaction to Meier-Gräfe, who was the first to bring up the problem of the “literariness” of Böcklin's art – a quality that many attribute to Romantic painting, and a negative characteristic of which de Chirico himself was later to be widely accused.

In the last few years art critics have greatly emphasised the role – previously denied or willingly overlooked – played by Symbolism in the birth of Modernity. It has, of course, also been realised that it is very difficult to make everything classed under this heading actually co-exist in the same context: for example the placing of artists such as Böcklin, Klinger and Moreau alongside painters like Gauguin, Ensor and Munch.

Indeed, this is the reasoning behind the *theory of two Symbolisms*: a more advanced one, characterised by extremely new formal techniques (already heralding Expressionism), and a more conservative one, based rather on the academic “trade” and even on a realism *sui generis*, which, incidentally, de Chirico explicitly admired.

Clearly, this matter is not well expressed in such terms as the reason for the difference in the means of expression is mostly linked to generational reasons. For example Böcklin and Moreau, along with many of the English Pre-Raphaelites (and also Puvis de Chavannes), were born in the 1820s, in the middle of the Romantic movement; while Redon, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Ensor and Munch were born in the years between 1840 and the early 1860s, and thus experienced the Impressionist movement as a strong reference point that they were eventually forced to bypass in order to find and/or affirm their own identity.

To a different extent, as in the case of Max Klinger who was born in 1857 just one year after Freud – a noteworthy fact, I believe – there are formal choices involved which can appear anomalous, but which take on a precise meaning in the special relationship between the visionary ability of the artist and the illusionism of the painting technique employed.

In this context, Klinger willingly finds himself pivoted between the world of internal visions and that of actual reality: these two worlds co-exist in his art and in some cases become blurred. De Chirico seemed to fully appreciate Klinger's extraordinary ability as an engraver to convey “impossible” scenes with all of the characteristics of reality, as sometimes occurs in dreams. The painter from Volos appeared to admire, therefore, this characteristic of creating worlds which were impossible, or invisible, but in their own way, “real” – even if later on he would champion the use of a “retinal art” (to borrow a term from Duchamp). In this way, Klinger can be considered a sort of *trait-d'union* between the generation of Böcklin and that which emerges at the school of Von Stuck, who taught at the Academy of Munich during the years of de Chirico's apprenticeship.

And curiously enough de Chirico, born in 1888 and a few years younger than artists like Picasso,

Carrà or Boccioni, finds himself closer, from a generation point of view, to Duchamp (1887) and Max Ernst (1890) – that is, closer to the Dadaists and future Surrealists. Indeed, Ernst, Tzara, Breton and subsequently Magritte and Dalí, pay such homage to de Chirico as to leave no doubt regarding the role he played in forming the sensibility of this generation of artists.

Returning to Böcklin and Klinger's "traditional" methods of painting, it is also important to consider what would have been the *average* perception of painting in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the kind of language used. For the public of the time, this perception was certainly very different from ours. Today's public, when visiting modern and contemporary art museums, is confronted by the *wisdom of hindsight*: in order to give greater clarity to the panorama of a certain era, curators of the most up-to-date museums have had to eliminate many presences (of artists then famous but now unknown), rightly emphasising the names of those (such as the Impressionists) who changed art history, yet at the time were not known to the public at large but appreciated by a limited elite of experts. Böcklin and Klinger expressed themselves in an artistic language that the public of the time could understand without difficulty, even if it is clear that they did not always appreciate the aspects of it that so appealed to de Chirico, and which today, in a certain sense, we can admire through the filter he provides.

The strange union of Symbolism and Realism that we have noted in Klinger's work, and which now seems in some ways contradictory, actually appeared to many late nineteenth-century painters an ingenious way of marrying "external gaze" and "internal gaze" or *second sight*. See also the late works of Segantini, in which the landscapes (today we would say the "locations") were chosen with care, in high mountainous regions, and painted from life; to then be peopled with fantastical characters and images of a symbolist persuasion.

Remaining within the context of Italian Divisionism/Symbolism, it is worth noting the attention that de Chirico gave to certain works by Previati, such as the landscape with a train passing on a high bridge, especially considering the symbolic value that trains take on in de Chirico's early metaphysical phase. Indeed it should be noted that the power of metaphysical works is, in most cases, fruit of the incongruous juxtaposition of presences which are every-day, banal, "anti-painterly" in a certain sense, as a modern train would have seemed to many. And certainly in that unusual work by Previati the exaltation of modern technique is married to a fantastical setting in a way that must have greatly appealed to the painter from Volos. In his *Au coeur du fantastique*, Roger Caillois seems to express just the same kind of sensation that de Chirico tried to communicate through his painting, and that he would sometimes find in the painting of others. Caillois in fact talks of a painter who "wants only to express or represent an atmosphere, a relationship, a scene that he has in his mind and by which he is moved without knowing why, that he believes meaningful without being sure of its true weight. He attempts, therefore, to communicate his impression, hoping that the spectator will be touched by the same confused revelation, by a similar enchantment, not less mysterious, nor less breathtakingly seductive. The unexplainable is thus accepted, perhaps undergone with a secret pleasure that nonetheless remains linked to the need for an explanation, maybe even stimulated by this hope; even if this need for clarity is somewhat marred by the non-confessed suspicion that precisely such clarity could be fatal to the enchantment".

Following this indication, and although these articles by de Chirico are a precious font of information on the relationship he establishes, over time, with Böcklin and Klinger, it is his actual painting – perhaps based on the writings – that gives us the most important information.

Basing ourselves on a number of aspects of de Chirico's work in relation to that of Böcklin and Klinger, often explicitly quoted in the articles, it is possible to deduce a series of aspects common to all three artists:

- the singular value ascribed to the sculptures represented in the paintings;
- the staging of the scene whereby the spectator's attention seems to be pulled *out* of the picture, and his mind thus forced to imagine something beyond what is actually represented;
- the sensation of estrangement incurred by incongruous objects and presences, distant and disconnected from each other, stimulating subconscious fantasies;
- the representation of “impossible” occurrences, staged realistically in every-day contexts.

De Chirico confers a very particular value to the sculptures that populate his deserted squares in his early metaphysical phase. Even though they are sometimes accompanied by human characters (generally seen from afar and therefore indistinguishable)<sup>1</sup>, the author's attention is clearly placed upon the inanimate presence of the statue, which thus – fiction within fiction – takes on a dominant value. The fiction within fiction becomes real, just as two negations cancel each other out.

Böcklin was the first to confer, in a few of his paintings, an intensely unnerving expressive power on images of statues which, thanks to the value and the position that they took on within the composition, came to interpret a fundamental role, from a psychological viewpoint, in the economy of the tale. On another level, equally important in the forming of de Chirico's sensibility, it is worth noting how Böcklin made known characters *live a real life* through ancient statues: Centaurs, fairies, Satyrs, who people his canvases as though they were real beings captured by the camera of some naturalist in search of the unusual.

What we have here, to some extent, are statues *that transform into living beings*: indeed in his self-portraits de Chirico often chose to represent himself as something between a man and a statue; and his *Niobe* is a particular example of this metamorphosis from marble to living flesh. This *humanisation* of the ancient, which gives myth an *everyday* quality and makes it contemporary to modern man, is particularly appreciated by de Chirico, whose childhood spent in Greece made him very familiar with the images and meaning of ancient mythology. Ancient myths which he goes on to recreate within himself, with an entirely personal meaning, thanks to the cues received in Munich. New themes therefore, including, as emphasised by the artist himself, the relationship to memory and dream. On the other hand, given that de Chirico's viewpoint in this field is not psychoanalytic at all but above all philosophic and literary (particularly influenced by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche), it is worth remembering the Greek writer Apollodorus, who maintained in his *Interpretation of Dreams* that in a dream there is no difference between seeing “Artemis in the flesh or her statue”,

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<sup>1</sup> These small men seem to be the inspiration for the little bourgeois characters that populate some of Magritte's works – and of course those that often appear in the background of paintings by Dalí.

given that even “mortal statues have the same meaning as the vision of gods in flesh and bones”. The statues are thus archetypes with the same value as, or a value corresponding to, the person represented, or the ultimate meaning they are supposed to represent.

With regard to the particular role the statue plays in the storytelling of a painting, an example that I believe no-one has ever referred to is found in Böcklin's *Forgotten Venus* (fig. 1), a canvas painted around 1860. In this work by the Swiss painter, a statue of Venus embellishes an ancient fountain surrounded by reeds and other water-plants. Curiously, the passive role played by Venus, hidden within the vegetation, seems to magically reverse itself, until the spectator has the feeling that it is *she* spying on him rather than the other way around. This sensation is probably partly due to the fact that the statue is not immediately visible, but once discovered becomes the unrivalled protagonist of the scene – a scene which thus turns out to be neither inanimate nor deserted. In this way the statue, a fictitious character, takes on a central, vital, and disquieting role within this fantasy.

In other works in which the sudden appearance of a Satyr seems to scare a shepherd, or to take on a role like that of Venus in the fountain, Böcklin seems to make use of a similar mechanism: in these cases, however, the mythological creatures are living characters, albeit grotesque.

Another image in which Böcklin practices a similar psychological technique is the *Sanctuary of Heracles* (1884). Here two soldiers, on the left, are kneeling in front of the sanctuary, whose interior is hidden from the spectator by the end of the *themenos* (or sacred enclosure) curving around it. Under the leafy branches of the ancient trees growing within, we can glimpse the head of a statue, seen against the light, which further tempts us to imagine what we can *not* see – the inside of the sanctuary –. Once again, the statue takes on a leading psychological role, distinctly superior to that of the “living” figures of the soldiers, who appear simply as extras. Curiously, moreover, the profile of a third soldier who seems to be off-guard echoes that of the statue, thus linking the two extreme points of the picture along an imaginary diagonal line. The fact that the “logical” centre of the picture remains hidden *behind* the stone wall brings us to the second point indicated above: the use of devices to direct the spectator's attention towards precise points within the picture, or *outside* of the picture. As I have already had occasion to note<sup>2</sup>, the mechanism of *displacement* or *withdrawal* is a technique which Böcklin used frequently in his major works. The Swiss painter induces the viewer to imagine a situation which is not actually represented, by way of a simple device already used in several of Casper Friedrich's paintings – in which a character gazes *beyond* the limits of the frame, or towards a point which remains hidden to the spectator. Indeed, in the case of the *Sanctuary of Heracles* we are inevitably led to wonder *what it must be like within the themenos*, which remains hidden behind the wall (which is described with impressive precision). The head of the statue is just a fragment of an almost entirely hidden form, a synecdoche heavy with meaning, which inevitably puts us in a state of reverie *after* our anticipation is frustrated by the wall that hides the heart of the theme promised by the painting's title. The statue's head thus becomes the last point of exploration of the picture, the statue *in toto* being “completed” only within our

<sup>2</sup> See A. Altamira *Miti romantici*, Vita & Pensiero, Milan, 2004, and volume VI of *Arte nel Tempo* Bompiani, Milan, 1991, as well as *Il Secolo sconosciuto* Rossella Bigi ed., Milan, 1997.

imagination. The painting in this way becomes a sort of tool capable of setting off a creative process which the spectator must then carry out on his own.

It is significant that in a previous painting (c. 1880) with the same theme, Böcklin chose to represent the sanctuary from the *front*. In this case it was the darkness that made it impossible to see clearly within. In the same way, however, the light sets off the silhouettes of the “sacred oak-trees of Dodona”, which de Chirico mentions in his article, demonstrating a good knowledge of the painting and, to my mind, precisely because of the singular function of the big wall that acts as a screen, the 1884 version. It is worth noting that around this time (and Klinger himself shows his fascination in an etching that re-works a theme from Böcklin) the painter from Basel seems obsessed with structures of semi-circular or horse-shoe form<sup>3</sup> (e.g. *The Chapel*, fig. 2, or *Ruins by the Sea* or *Isle of the Dead*), which although open do not allow us to peruse within, being immersed in shade, hidden by vegetation or by one side of the wall. It is possible that these structures – open, but closed from view – foretell a future function of de Chirico’s archways in perspective.

Jean Clair, assuming an imaginary Freudian diagnosis, suggests a typically metaphysical *imagerie* which ceaselessly expounds “the signs of impotence”. He cites, for example, the bunch of bananas in *L’incertitude du poète*, whose repeatedly multiplied phallic symbol “has up and died before of the smooth cold marble Venus”, in front of shaded archways, just as the cannon in *La conquête du philosophe* aims towards a similar set of arches, without hope of reaching its target. As we have already seen in Böcklin’s work, these “dark chasms”<sup>4</sup> are recurring fantasies about a kind of femininity, which is, at the same time open, unfathomable and probably dangerous.

Another of Böcklin’s fortunate “inventions” (in line with the second point in our sequence), are the faceless figures with their backs turned to us that gaze into the distance, like Odysseus in *Odyssée and Calypso* (1883), or the widow accompanying her husband’s coffin in *Isle of the Dead*. In the first of the two works, the narrative emphasis is placed – and largely spent, with regard to the pictorial function – on the naked figure of Calypso on a red drape, which provides the only touch of colour in a painting of dull, brownish tones. Yet the viewer’s attention is inevitably drawn to the figure who is turned away, leading us to speculate on the desperately longed-for end to his return voyage. In this case, that which is openly exhibited is much less interesting than what is subtly implied.

De Chirico indeed appears to have fully learnt this lesson from Böcklin, and explores an extraordinary variation on the theme in his painting *Enigma dell’oracolo* (1910), in which the figure of the priest, seen from behind, gazes out of the sanctuary (*displacement*), while at the opposite side a curtain partly conceals a statue, allowing us to see nothing but its head (*withdrawal*). The two techniques just analysed are thus combined. I think it is safe to say that de Chirico’s work does not simply quote or parody Böcklin’s, rather, with his particular “genius of catachresis”, he re-works and

<sup>3</sup> See Weinger’s writings on this subject: “The symbols of a higher reality have often been seen within geometric forms. Could this be simply because we find in them an *a priori* function of our perception?”. De Chirico, quoting him, states that “The arch of a circle, used as an ornament, can be beautiful... In the arch there is still something unfinished, something that leaves space for a sense of foreboding...” Wieland Schmied notes that, in Weinger, the beauty of the open arch “constitutes a rejection of the circular movement closed upon itself: the latter is not only without sense, but even borders on the immoral...”

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. Rimbaud, *Voyelles*.

merges the two themes within a territory which is more familiar to him, and already the site of new developments. Past analyses have often been limited to noting (at times with a certain amazement) the elements that de Chirico quoted and borrowed from Böcklin. It is time to start viewing this operation as a sort of mental *collage* in which de Chirico takes command of a series of Böcklin's motifs and uses them as building blocks for a new language, which, by virtue of the unexpected fusing of its elements makes it absolutely new and revolutionary.

In this context it is symptomatic that right in the centre of *Enigma dell'oracolo* there is a brick wall, stiff and opaque like Böcklin's stone *themenos*, in the shape of a golden rectangle, as noted by Jole de Sanna in the last edition of this periodical. In this case, however, the wall hides nothing, revealing instead the grim indifference of matter itself. In fact, it acts as a shield, displacing our attention to the left and to the right. To the left the Priest-Odysseus performs a similar function to Böcklin's Odysseus (taking us, through his gaze, *out* of the visible scene and *beyond*); to the right, the statue (which indeed appears to be a Hercules) is half-hidden by a curtain – as it is by the *themenos* in the painting by the Basel artist. It seems he is trying to make us look into an *internal* space, existing but forbidden from view.

The way de Chirico plays with vision (*outside* of the picture, or *beyond* certain limits imposed by the artist himself) follows Böcklin's lesson, but augurs a science of amazement that is completely new. If Fagiolo dell'Arco spoke (in reference to *L'Enigme de l'heure*, 1911) of a quasi-plagiarism of Böcklin with regard to the archways, I would speak, rather, about a kind of paraphrasing and an increase in the density of meaning (as in the two cases referred to)<sup>5</sup>, absolutely necessary in creating that deeply “interior and cerebral” art that Apollinaire heralded in the first works by de Chirico, “the only living European painter not to have been influenced by the young French school”. Indeed the “strong” elements of de Chirico's work of this period derive from Central Europe, an area that is given little attention to in France. But as we have seen, de Chirico's shift is not merely geographic: the citation from Böcklin is transformed into a new text, terser, more magical, and certainly less literary. In any case, de Chirico, like Picasso, does not hide when he “steals”, because he knows that the sincere homage to another painter is automatically transubstantiated in the new effect achieved.

As already mentioned, throughout the phase of the so-called *Italian Piazza* de Chirico plays with the ambiguous presence of the statues that inhabit the monumental spaces of his cities, built like the wings of an entirely mental theatre: a theatre or architecture of the mind, not *scenography* – as de Chirico lamented in writing to the director of «Paris-Midi» about some superficial reviews of his work. Indeed, those who consider de Chirico a “scenographer” have not understood the depth of his philosophical meditation: in this regard Wieland Schmied notes the relationship between the monuments in de Chirico's *Piazza's* and Schopenhauer's observation on “statues placed on low pedestals”. The German philosopher said that it was delightful to observe how in Italy “some marble figures are the same size as the people passing by, and seem to walk with them”. De Chirico also considered the

<sup>5</sup> Indeed if the vegetation visible in Böcklin's picture is in a certain sense “literary”, its total elimination in de Chirico's work gives emphasis to an entirely new sense of geometry and architectonic melancholy, in accordance with Weininger's texts cited in note 3.

statues to be a like doubles of real people, and notes how surprising it would be to catch them in daily poses: standing at the window, smoking a cigarette, or sitting in an armchair.

Although a digression from the main theme, it is worth underlining once more (and here the acute observations of Fagiolo dell'Arco and Eugenio La Rocca are of relevance) how de Chirico often employs statues as the doubles of themselves: not only through the use of derivations, copies, and images taken from catalogues and plaster casts from original museum pieces, but by reinterpreting them time and again in ever more audacious variations. De Chirico takes on Weininger's observation that "psychic phenomena possess greater reality than physical ones". As such, the *Ariadnes* of his *Italian Piazzas*, are seen as if in a dream: to paraphrase de Chirico himself we could say that "they are and they are not" the ones we know. They are in fact re-lived through memory, and through the particular atmosphere of the moment.

Perhaps it is for this reason that the painter goes on to substitute these monuments with presences foreign to the architectonic context of the piazza (such as plaster casts), just when his strange use of space seems to merge the notions of the void and the claustrophobic space of the *Still lifes*, eventually replacing the plaster casts with mannequins.

There is in fact quite a sudden jump from the model of the monument in the piazza to the introduction of academic plaster moulds (the Apollo in *Chant d'amour*, 1914) and statues of the artist's invention, like the "character" on the left in *Le double rêve du printemps* (1915), which is already, significantly, flanked by a mannequin. From 1913/14 onwards de Chirico began using the artificial forms of work models that painters used to keep in their studios, as protagonists for his pictures: plaster casts and mannequins. Sixteenth and seventeenth century painters, for instance, after sketching the face would finish off the portraits, or the figures of the painting's main characters, by working from a mannequin draped in robes, which thus becomes a double for the real character.

In the case of metaphysical paintings, however, the mannequin substitutes the character, and steals the show from him becoming he, himself the protagonist and sole interpreter of the scene, a "spectral" presence of the *character* represented, an ironic and oneiric double of a real one. In this great tragic-comic intuition of de Chirico's we can see the beginnings of the twentieth century tendency toward analytical and self-referencing painting.

Furthermore, and possibly the result of some kind of habit, a second choice of elements, implicitly and potentially active in releasing the artist's imagination, are chosen and intended as the props of spectacular effect, capable of making everyday objects "talk", objects such as gloves, bread rolls, spools of thread, thermometers, biscuit moulds, which in de Chirico's metaphysical *Still lifes* seem to take on a new, two-fold significance. First of all these objects, placed in an entirely new syntactic combination, take on a different meaning from their everyday one. It is precisely the breaking of the logical connections that link their presence to a daily context – connections that are absent or wilfully denied – rather than the eroded memory of their original function, that prompts the need for a new means of interpretation.

Moving on to the third point in the list (the use of incongruous presences to solicit a subconscious reaction), the glove in *Chant d'amour*, as none have neglected to point out, should clearly be placed in relation with the homonymous series of engravings by Klinger, which de Chirico describes in great

detail in his article on the German painter/engraver. To my mind, however, there is another of Klinger's works that should be compared to *Chant d'amour*, from a structural point of view: the *Invocation in Rescues of Ovid's victims*<sup>6</sup> (fig. 3). Here, only the joined hands of an off-stage character can be seen, probably those of Klinger himself, given the engraving tools lying on the table, invoking a sort of Herma, to be found at the top left of the image. The face of the bust is seen in profile, and seems almost suspended in the smoke from a candle burning on the (real) desktop. On the latter an imaginary landscape evoked by the poet's writings seems to unfold. The dialectic that forms between the head – incongruously juxtaposed on a landscape materialising from the darkness of a closed room, an interior/exterior – and the hands at the lower right, recalls the silent dialogue between the Belvedere Apollo and the hanging glove, which in turn evokes the ghost of a hand. It is obvious that despite its wilfully “common” appearance, partly due to the material of which it is made (rubber, deep pink in colour) and which links it to the banal, everyday world, de Chirico's glove endeavours to represent a ghost-like, oneiric presence – a metaphysical one, to be precise –. It is perhaps a substitute for his own person, a kind of absent self-portrait. This interpretation seems to be further confirmed by the following extract from Savinio's *Hermaphrodite*: “A little while ago, as I came back... I took off my glove and pinned it to the wall. A hanging glove maintains the form of an empty hand: in that corpse of a hand I watch my destiny, which is no longer anything but a deflated leather skin”. For the de Chirico brothers, the glove represents a *presence*, and should thus be considered a sort of double of an absent character. But the “leather skin” that Savinio speaks of could conceal an even more tragic thought: consider for example the limp, empty self-portrait by Michelangelo at the Sistine Chapel.

At the time Apollinaire merely commented that this kind of glove was one of the season's novelties at the big department stores. This comment confers on the *Chant d'amour* glove an unusual link to Pop Art, making us think of analogous uses of consumer objects, for various reasons, by artists of that era. Duchamp is one such artist, and it is impossible to miss the similarity, also in chronological terms, between his *Chocolate grinder* or his *Bicycle wheel* and the work in question. At any rate, the precise words of Apollinaire were: “Mr. Giorgio de Chirico has just bought a rubber glove, which is one of the most striking items for sale. Copied by the artist, it is destined to make his future paintings more moving and terrifying than are his previous works. And when asked about the fright this glove might cause, he mentions the still more horrifying toothbrush, the latest invention of dental science, which he calls the most recent and perhaps most useful of all arts”.

It is interesting to consider the adjectives Apollinaire uses to describe the glove and the effect it has on the painting: *striking, moving, terrifying*. This not only seems to further stress the difference between the glove and the head of Apollo, between ancient and modern, between common objects and museum artefacts. It also imbues the scene with a strong dramatic tension, even though this feeling appears to be caused only by the *friction* generated (more than the *rapport* established) by the objects in the foreground (the head of Apollo, the glove and the ball); the tension is further increased by their relation to the train and the archways in the background. The objects are exhibited, says

<sup>6</sup> I believe that Pia Vivarelli outlined this relationship in the catalogue of the important de Chirico exhibition she curated in 1981 (*Giorgio de Chirico 1888-1978*. Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Roma, 11 November 1981 - 3 January 1982. Catalogue ed. De Luca Editore, Roma 1981).

Paul Zanker, “like signs from a new, mysterious *revelation*”, a revelation which for de Chirico paradoxically takes on both a sense of *déjà-vu* and of never-seen-before. This alienating sensation is thus created by the unity/disjunction of the objects<sup>7</sup>.

In this context I believe there are some new ideas or ways to read the painting, which are not sufficient to unravel the symbolic knot at the heart of this enigmatic work (by its nature unexplainable), but nonetheless could offer some new criteria for interpretation. Let us consider first of all de Chirico’s mixture of ancient and new, of sacred and profane, which, just as in his brother Savinio’s writings, appears to be both deep-rooted and recurring. In relation to *Chant d’amour*, for instance, the following comment by Savinio comes to mind: “In Greece, you know, like at Upim, you can find everything”. It is strange how, like in his brother’s painting (note the accuracy of Apollinaire’s theory), Savinio’s comment places mythology next to modern department stores<sup>8</sup> with such apparent ease.

In his novel *Hebdomeros* Giorgio de Chirico uses an image that is both surprising and wilfully rash: “A magical word shone in space like Constantine’s cross, repeating itself all the way to the horizon like a toothpaste advert: *Delphoi! Delphoi!*”. This is all the more striking as it brings up Apollinaire’s comments on the art of dentistry, which come straight after his musings about the glove. To be sure, the glove cannot be considered any less compatible with the Belvedere Apollo than can a toothpaste advert and Constantine’s famous vision (“*In hoc signo vinces*”).

Fagiolo dell’Arco considers the hypothesis that the irreverent union of the plaster cast and the glove could be an attempt to discredit the figure of Apollo, which, according to Savinio, was seen by the two brothers as “the vainest of the Gods” and even thought to “resemble a golf-player”. Fagiolo dell’Arco goes on to hypothesise about the representation of a poet (Orpheus), rather than the God of poets – perhaps with an allusion to Apollinaire himself (Apollo/Apollinaire) which could even have suggested the title of the piece.

On the other hand it is clear that for de Chirico the sacred can be accompanied by the profane, and, furthermore, the profane can even become an image of the sacred, or be linked to it without scandal, without damage<sup>9</sup>.

For his part Paul Zanker points out that if “the statues and plaster fragments remind de Chirico of that world of origins which he imagines to belong to the Greek”, this world in turn belongs to the “sentiment de la préhistoire” (“a feeling of the prehistoric”), the title on a page of notes written by the artist dating back to 1913. Poetry and philosophy, myth and prophecy, “the sanctuaries and statues, *all of them* belong to the *Sentiment de la préhistoire*”. Thus de Chirico’s Greece is not the classical one in the strictest sense – he said himself that he was the least Greek of painters – but it is

<sup>7</sup> In *Meditazione di un pittore*, de Chirico writes that “when a revelation is caused by looking at a composition of objects, the work that appears in our thoughts is closely linked to the circumstances that brought about its birth. One is like the other, but it is a strange kind of similarity – as exists between two brothers, or between the image of someone we know as seen in a dream or in reality; it is, and at the same time it is not the same person; it is as though there had been a gentle transfiguration in the characteristics, in the features.”

<sup>8</sup> According to Apollinaire the desire to include the “fearful” glove found in department stores in one of his following works was consciously planned.

<sup>9</sup> De Chirico himself declares that a work of art, *in order to overcome human limitations*, must abandon logic and common sense: “in this way”, he claims, “it will approach a dream-like state and the mental attitude of a child”. Immediately afterwards he remembers that while reading *Così parlò Zarathustra* he experienced “a sensation that I had already felt as a child while reading *The adventures of Pinocchio*. A strange similarity that reveals the depth of the work.” De Chirico once more shows no hesitation when placing Nietzsche alongside Collodi, a comparison that would seem inconceivable to many.

a mediated image of a *prehistory* of the world which coincides, for each of us, with a world of memories and in particular of childhood. Let us not forget that de Chirico tells of how Metaphysics derives from a childhood feeling of his: of having observed illustrations representing a deserted world in the tertiary period when man had not yet appeared on earth. In *Sentiment de la préhistoire* de Chirico writes “It is the most ancient, the deepest, that is the most new”. That which is brought out of the depths, although ancient, thus becomes a novelty, a revelation.

Childhood, therefore, gets mixed up with prehistory to the same extent that prehistory does with Metaphysics, as well as with the beginnings of the new art: a perception that de Chirico shared with many leaders of Avant-garde groups in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Naturally Marinetti, who went on to pioneer the machinist movement, was among them: “We are the primitives of a new sensibility”. But perhaps the most acute observation on the relationship between prehistory and modernity is made by Tristan Tzara, who, perhaps not surprisingly was an admirer of de Chirico. In the foreword to a book of poetry by François Villon, Tzara states: “One could say that our time period, which commenced with Romanticism, has violently placed itself in opposition to the classical period that preceded it. It is true though, that it has found a viable echo in the Middle Ages, especially through Poetry and Greek-Latin art, where its aesthetical tendencies are confirmed through references to the biblical period and in protohistoric elements...”

It is in yet another context that Tzara talks so impressively about prehistory, saying: “A (new) myth is formed through primitive, blunt methods: the power of the poster. Advertising has crept into the models of a religious sentiment now extinct...” And furthermore: “What apparently absurd force absorbs this strange blooming of commercial symbols? There is no phenomenon in modern life which has managed to tie such tight binds to the human spirit as this strange monster: advertising”.

If we follow these tracks as indicating a train of thought, we see that de Chirico’s *Greece-prehistory-childhood* is complimented by Tzara’s *prehistory-advertising*. In any case we have also seen how, according to Apollinaire, the link between *Greece* and *department stores* was perfectly in tune with de Chirico and further confirmed by the painter’s *vision-advertising* image described in *Hebdomeros*. It is thus probable that *all* of these elements eventually become interchangeable in de Chirico’s work, while also being present to some extent in the cultural panorama of the era – at least within the most cutting-edge intellectual circles. We can thus imagine a world of ideal references in which, under the supervision of the strictest Gods, these metaphorical objects distribute themselves; objects from department stores, from billboards (such as the dark glasses on the statue’s nose in *Portrait de Guillaume Apollinaire*, 1914) and even from the world of carnival booths, for example the man-target in the *Portrait de Guillaume Apollinaire*<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> On the subject of Fagiolo dell’Arco’s interpretation of the relationship between de Chirico and Apollinaire (see for example his text in the catalogue of the de Chirico exhibition at the Haus der Kunst in Munich and at the Pompidou Centre, 1982-83), it is worth noting two things. The first relates to the silhouette-target which appears in the background of the portrait of the poet (and in fact represents the real portrait): in his memoirs the painter mentions that the profile reminds him of target-practice carnival booths, in which the winners would receive prizes of little clay pipes. Apollinaire was in the habit of smoking a small pipe of this kind, as testified in drawings of the time; for example one by Picasso (published in the above-mentioned catalogue). It is clear that de Chirico, using complex mental links, tries time after time to describe an atmosphere, a sensation, a memory. In the case of the portrait of Apollinaire it seems to be the pipe itself, absent from the painting, which determines the decision to represent Apollinaire in the form of a target-practice board. In the same picture appears the image of the *sacred fish*, which later became famous and underwent a series of transforma-

It is most curious how a similar accumulation of presences linked to childhood and Parisian *flânerie*, to everyday life and distant memories, can be found in a poet whom, through Apollinaire, de Chirico was sure to have known: Arthur Rimbaud. In a few lines of his *Alchimie du verbe* the adolescent poet describes a similar “metaphysical” list, whose use in the poet’s writings would be just as obscure as that employed by the painter from Volos. To quote Rimbaud himself: “I liked idiotic paintings, paintings over doorways, scenarios, acrobat’s banners, posters, miniatures, out of style literature, church Latin, erotic books without text, our grandparent’s novels, fairytales, children’s books, old operas, simple verses, naïve rhythms”. It is clearly the heterogeneity of the various elements listed to surprise the reader, rather than any similarity between them.

Without supposing that Apollinaire knew these exact lines or that he used them within his own poetics, we can at least hypothesise that in Paris he could have picked up on such trends. This would effectively explain the kind of “up-dating” that de Chirico carries out, once he gets to France, on the huge baggage of references from Böcklin and Klinger that he has brought with him. Such references continue nonetheless to act upon de Chirico’s art at the most profound level<sup>11</sup>.

It is quite surprising how many complex references and interlacing ideas have been put forward in explanation of the peculiar alchemy de Chirico uses to transform the *imagerie* of his paintings. According to many critics, in addition to the influence of Böcklin and Klinger that we are exploring there is the influence of Rousseau’s naïve evocations, the multiple perspectives from the school of Giotto, Gauguin’s Cloisonnism with German Expressionist colours, Greek statues and the Italian Renaissance, Picasso and Édouard Riou etc. I personally feel that no artist can be completely oblivious to the moods of the time and place in which he finds himself, and it logically follows that de Chirico’s art should merge distant memories and recent ideas, giving rise to that complex alchemy mentioned above.

While, as we have already seen, the impact of Böcklin is quite clearly distinguishable in de Chirico’s work, I believe that the influence of Klinger, although subtler and less obvious, left an even deeper and longer-lasting mark on the painter from Volos.

The fourth point on our list is the representation of impossible occurrences depicted in everyday contexts, which we have, so far, only touched on. Naturally the first examples that come to mind are the scenes with mythological characters such as centaurs and mermaids, that de Chirico executes during his early phase in the form of actual copies, almost paintings adapted from Böcklin. In his article on Böcklin, de Chirico describes with great admiration the depiction of a centaur at the blacksmiths getting his horseshoes changed<sup>12</sup>. The centaur shows his hoof to the blacksmith

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tions - in this instance it is seen in the form of a cake-mould. Fagiolo dell’Arco most skilfully demonstrates how the image of the fish could derive from Apollinaire’s little poem *Le Bestiaire ou le Cortège d’Orphée*, illustrated by Dufy, and cites the verses: “/... quel poisson... / égale-t-il, et par la forme et la saveur / ce beau poisson divin qu’est JESUS, Mon Sauveur...” Note the similarity between *saveur/Sauveur* (flavour/Saviour): is this why de Chirico chooses a cake-mould (flavour) to represent the *ichthys*, the paleochristian image of Christ (Saviour)?

<sup>11</sup> In *Noti metafisici*, published in the bulletin of the Casa d’Arte Bragaglia in 1919, de Chirico himself authorises such a supposition, writing: “The suppression of logical sense in art is not an invention by us painters. The Polish philosopher Nietzsche should be recognized for this discovery, which, although first used in poetry by the French poet Rimbaud, was first applied to painting by my good self.”

<sup>12</sup> The work in question is *Centaur in the village smithy*, 1888. See the text relating to this painting in the catalogue of the Böcklin exhibition at the Musée d’Orsay, 2004.

just as a modern motorist would show his car tyres to a mechanic. The *impossible*, represented by a mythological monster, is thus contrasted by the everyday feel of the scene. Even the measured surprise of the locals watching the scene is not dissimilar to what the people of an isolated village might express upon the arrival of a car.

Nonetheless I believe that de Chirico was more significantly influenced by Klinger during the more mature phase of his work. As already mentioned, the most careful and thorough readings of the German artist's work to be found in his essay are those regarding the series of prints. The *Glove* series is described plate by plate. Apart from his interest for the central metaphor (for the iconography of the hanging glove, see for example plate number 8 (*Repose*, fig. 4), in which the object is repeated several times, so as to form a curtain, recalling a glove-maker's window), the painter's attention seems mostly focussed on plates 3 and 7. In the first of these (*Desires*, fig. 6), the protagonist – the artist himself? – is reclining on the bed, and lying on the covers is the glove, a trophy-memory-symbol of the loved one. Behind him, instead of the bare wall of his bed chamber a beautiful landscape unfolds, an ideal backdrop to his romantic day-dreaming. In this image the interior/exterior theme already encountered in the *Dedication to Rescues of Ovid's victims*, is further developed and carried off with cinematographic style. In the second image, *Fears* (fig. 5), this process is taken to its extreme, with a highly dramatic effect. Here, the sea, which had already appeared in the images *Rescue*, *Triumph* and *Homage*, reaches the foot of the bed, lapping against it and dragging with it anguished dreams and nightmares, along with the monstrous silhouette of a huge empty glove, which seems to come to a halt only upon touching the wall with its limp fingers. The sea in a room would go on to become a familiar theme in de Chirico's *Interiors* of the 1920s, while in his *Metaphysical Interiors* we can already glimpse allusions to exterior space through paintings and sudden openings. It is not unlikely that this idea, by way of either the original or de Chirico's interpretation, reached as far as Max Ernst: I am thinking in particular of the cellar scene in his episode of the film *Dreams that money can buy*. Indeed de Chirico had already realized a cinematographic vein both in the narration by means of a sequence of pictures, and in the framing of certain scenes as depicted in Klinger's etchings. In this way he also anticipated the intuition of Theodore W. Adorno: in other words, that the final destiny of Symbolism was in fact the birth of the cinematographer, not the Theatre of the Future that Wagner had imagined<sup>13</sup>. Of these images, de Chirico quotes in particular *In Flagrante* from the *Dramen* series (1883). The wealth of detail used to describe the husband leaning out of the window with his gun to murder his wife's lover, after discovering them together in the garden, is compared by de Chirico to a scene from a film.

The interior/exterior theme, as part of the oneiric dimension, comes back to de Chirico in countless forms. For example, several etchings noted by de Chirico in the *Brahmsphantasie* are essentially interior/exterior, such as the image of the pianist and harpist playing on a balcony above the sea, even if the balustrade gives the image a certain plausibility. In this series, the artist also

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. T. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*.

notes the detail of the steps going down from the balcony to the sea, a detail which will later be of inspiration to his *Mysterious Baths*.

The painter from Volos would go on to overturn Klinger's idea by creating interiors which are transferred to the outside, as in the *Furniture in the Valley* series<sup>14</sup>, a scene which has even been compared to certain images from silent movies.

### Bibliographical notes

It is obvious that the bibliography regarding the subjects discussed is too vast to be quoted in its entirety. Apart from de Chirico's writings, I have purposefully reduced the possible sources and have taken into account the catalogues of the major de Chirico or exhibitions on Metaphysics over the last quarter of a century, as well as recent Böcklin and Klinger exhibitions that have taken place in Germany, France and Italy. In particular, with regard to de Chirico: *La pittura metafisica*, Venice, Palazzo Grassi (1979), curated by Giuliano Briganti and Ester Coen; *Giorgio de Chirico*, Rome, Galleria Nazionale d'arte Moderna (1981) curated by Pia Vivarelli, with essays by the curator and by Giuliano Briganti, Bruno Mantura, Eugenio La Rocca, Umberto Carpi, Enzo Pagliani; *de Chirico*, Haus der Kunst, Munich (1982) and Centre Pompidou, Paris (1983), curated by William Rubin, Wieland Schmied and Jean Clair, with essays by Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco and Christian Derouet; *Metafisica*, Scuderie del Quirinale, Rome (2003), curated by Ester Coen, with essays by the curator and by Hans Belting, Peter Eisenman, Paul Zanker, Félix Duque.

The writings of the following authors have been especially valuable to the case made in this essay: Wieland Schmied, who has focussed in particular on the relationship between de Chirico and German philosophy; Jean Clair, current director of the Musée Picasso, eminent scholar of some of the greatest artists of the last century, such as de Chirico and Duchamp; Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco, one of greatest scholars of de Chirico, of ancient and modern art from Parmigianino, to the Baroque to Metaphysical Art; Pia Vivarelli, director of the Galleria Nazionale di Arte Moderna of Rome, Professor of History of Modern Art, current President of the Fondazione Carlo Levi; Ester Coen, University of Aquila, curator of some of the most important de Chirico exhibitions; Paul Zanker, eminent scholar of art history, with a great sensitivity towards contemporary art.

*Translated by Hannah Chapman*

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<sup>14</sup> In *Quelques perspectives sur mon art*, a text published in 1935 in one of Prague's weekly newspapers during a de Chirico exhibition, the artist offers an alternative version of the intuition that leads him to paint the *Furniture in the Valley* series. He talks of having seen some furniture in the street, left there by an antique dealer, between Rue du Dragon and Rue du Vieux Colombier. "In the middle of the noisy street", writes de Chirico, "these pieces of furniture formed a private enclave, a *loculus*, an impenetrable zone against which the surrounding noise and movement broke like a wave on the shore". It is curious, however, that just a few lines after this example of exterior/interior he brings back the internal/external question in the terms we have cited: "This furniture, which is out of context, has an atmosphere about it similar to that of the temple or elements of nature, set in a room."