

GIORGIO DE CHIRICO  
(PUBLISHED IN «DER CICERONE»)<sup>1</sup>

*Giorgio Castelfranco*

In order to characterise the various artistic trends that follow one after the other and counterpose one another, painters, critics and art lovers in Italy have a habit of using catchphrases taken from the political history of last century Europe.

After many stumbling revolutions, a few years ago “reaction” was what one spoke of. Today the pacific and more promising word “restoration” is used.

In all of this there is more than one unfruitful, although understandable, element of disquiet. It is certainly a strong reaction against French impressionism and its forms, which are akin to our quite modest realism here at home.

It is the resurrection of an art, which in painting wants to direct itself once more toward the Dramatic and the Fantastic, and which tries to reach by means of its composition the accurate execution and lyric interpretation of the model.

An art which, inasmuch as it is contrary to a completely anti-classical realism, we could definitely call classic, even though one must keep in mind that this art desires and searches for the Characteristic and the Pathetic, which are aspects that are not usually connected with the concept of classicism.

From this new Italian school emerges the personality of a painter who, from both a temporal point of view, as well as for his artistic value, occupies the foremost place – Giorgio de Chirico –.

He did not switch sides to classicism, as many have done today. He has never taken any other route, nor has he ever allowed himself to be taken by current modes. At twenty years of age he already aimed at reaching the maximum clarity of form, a fantastic reality with a pathetic impact, but of a pathos that resides within form itself and does not come from the content.

De Chirico is not a narrator; he is a creator of scenes in which, through his sensitivity, he knows how to animate the architectural forms and landscape elements.

Let us observe the mystery of *An Autumn Afternoon* (illustration). The artist had recently returned from Greece, where he had lived in his youth. The architecture of the temple and the building on the right can remind one of Piazza Santa Croce in Florence. The artist did, in fact, mention that it was here that he had his first idea. But there is no longer anything Gothic here, nor Italian

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<sup>1</sup>Published in «Der Cicerone» in 1924, with six illustrations on three plates, XVI, n. 10, Leipzig, 1924.

Renaissance, nor of Pericles's Greece, which he had left behind in Athens. Rather, the profundity full of mystery and limpidness of some of the works of his initial Greek period, when the feeling for beauty neither dominated nor penetrated life. In the forefront on the right, two small figures can be seen, a youth leaning on the shoulders of his companion, crying, he gently follows him: the personification of the tacit, inconsolable sadness of the scene.

This is the first work of Giorgio de Chirico worthy of notice: a feeling for that which is fabulous and fantastic, already obvious here, has developed further and has led him to those paintings he calls metaphysical. Here the fable-like aspect disappears, leaving place to the illogical. Nothing is represented that is truly understandable. It is the construction of a world entirely outside of reality which acquires its own inner reality through the concordance and consonance of its elements.

In *The Disquieting Muse* (illustration), the most significant work of this period of the artist, the Fantastic element concentrated in the figures in the forefront – statues and mannequins –, takes hold of all of the forms, passing on the daringly straight stick, on the strong amputation of the scene's wooden boarding like that of a stage, on the white factory buildings to the left, with the chimneys' simple geometric shapes and on the adventurous Medieval castle immersed in an intense red light placed so powerfully in evidence that makes it seem like it is advancing upon us menacingly.

The Fantastic element is especially achieved through the use of the colours, which are marvellously deep and brilliant; for the most part they are very intense dark tones.

Real colours would not have fit in this fantastic transfiguration, they would have needed adapting; for this reason the green-blue of the sky finds justification in the bright red of the castle and in the brown of the stage boards. The necessity of every single element in the painting is thus produced; this is what its reality consists of.

He who admires the painting can not, in front of a painting such as this, abandon himself to normal sensations such as being moved, delighted, fearful or something similar, because here he does not find himself in front of reality, of something taken from life, but is captured by a profound stupor which, the longer he looks, turns into a sensation of beneficial calm.

Giorgio de Chirico, who created and developed these new illogical and fantastic elements, did so without repeating himself; when ulterior lyric and plastic motives drive him to representation, he becomes transformed.

He returns to the study and representation of the human figure where, on one hand he is stimulated by learning and representing that which is characteristic, and on the other, the statuary element that he, aspiring to maximum clarity, recomposes in a deep space, saturated with other forms. The compositional domain that he acquired with his fantastic and illogic painting of past years becomes significant once more. We see him on the same path even with regard to colour. In Italy so very much has been said about the style of Caravaggio and Giorgione, but in the midst of this universal enthusiasm for the Seventeenth century and the periods that influenced it, only de Chirico has known how to benefit from and elaborate these stimuli in a personal manner, which means representing them in a modern way, by creating forms upon which a calm and strong light flows,

which in contrast with the shadow emerges in the full harmonic accord of the colours.

In the self-portrait with female bust (illustration) one can see how de Chirico's art derives from classicism, but just look at the impact of the lyric meditation and sadness in the majestic and harmonic feminine face and the closed, immobile expression of the artist, with a powerful and deep gaze. From this time on, Giorgio de Chirico has remained faithful to his essential being, which is both classic and romantic together; the illogical no longer seduced him. Only his technique and material has changed. He particularly felt attracted to creating clear and fully modelled forms again. He turned his attention to landscape, the beauty of which lies in the multiplicity and the harmonic union of forms and colour. The foliage of a tree, the passing of light clouds like feathers in the sky, the reflection on the glass of a window. One could say that his inspiration became more powerful and joyful, he felt the need to perfect his drawing and to create a painting technique all his own, which unites the great power of light with softness. He found this in tempera mixed with glue, egg or resin. But to reach this, years of fatigue were necessary, years that demanded patience, trials and study, from which works of notable value were born, even if these were years of preparation and changes. Only in 1922 did he give us *Roman Landscape* (illustration), in 1923 *Departure of the Travelling Horseman* (illustration) and the *Self-portrait with bust of Mercury* (illustration). In both the cityscapes one can admire simple and beautiful architectural forms, taken from buildings that really exist; landscape backdrops and the clear calm light of happy winter days which transport us into a dreamlike state of being, of sweet, pleasant protection far from earth, as we have already mentioned while talking about a previous work, *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon*. We recognise a great lyric talent which here, appears to us enriched and tested.

With increased dramatic power and greater determination in the drawing and in its characterisation, with the self-portrait with bust of Mercury he returns to the conception of a portrait of 1919, thus putting in his self-portrait the unpronounceable tragic pathos of the creator, who with a fixed, intense stare looks into life and listens intimately to the divine voice.

These few lines and this brief mention of the paintings which best characterise him show Giorgio de Chirico's artistic development to date. He has travelled a long road in 35 years. He has had no maestro among his contemporaries and fellow citizens and has conserved his independence from external influences; he has created alone, in a gigantic élan of spirit and fantasy.