

**ON THE SUBJECT OF PAINTING: DE CHIRICO OR DE CHIRICO?
A FASCINATING ENIGMA ON THE 40TH ANNIVERSARY
OF THE *PICTOR OPTIMUS*' DEATH**

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The year 1945 was a particularly fruitful one for the *writer* Giorgio de Chirico, who was fifty-seven years old at the time. This prolific season was preceded, in painting, by a self-portrait in which the artist portrayed himself chastely naked. In November 1944 he wrote a brief pamphlet entitled *1918-1925: Ricordi di Roma* [Memories of Rome], which went to press on 3 January 1945 and was followed by the publication an excerpt from the autobiographical novel in French, *Une aventure de Monsieur Dudron*. De Chirico also published two (or rather three, as we shall see shortly) fundamental volumes that same year: *The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico* and *The Comedy of Modern Art*.

Self-portraits, autobiographies and painting technique theory converge on a single objective in 1945: the self-definition of the artist as an individual who has acquired the intellectual and technical mastery of art.

De Chirico's *Memoirs* set the objective of identifying and indicating a future for art, starting from a historically informed study of society at the time. In other words, the artist challenged the existing system head-on to ensure the possibility of a better one. As I have previously written, de Chirico's *Memoirs* constitute a "political" biography and were received as such and contested in such a way that the publisher was forced to withdraw the book from circulation.

The Comedy of Modern Art instead constitutes a treatise on art theory and historical criticism. The guiding principle throughout the book is that painting is intended as an absolute value, as a means of metaphysical revelation. The volume delineates metaphysical painting theory in an assessment of the 20th century art system conceived as an intellectual platform of modern social and political ideologies.

In the *Comedy* – especially in the part attributed to his wife Isabella Far – de Chirico launched a frontal assault on modern painting. An attack which had already begun years before, with the essay *Considerations on Modern Painting* published in "Stile" in January 1942. The heated controversy fostered by de Chirico particularly targeted Italian critique, a milieu that had not forgotten the overwhelmingly negative judgement he made in an interview published in the French daily newspaper "Comœdia" on 12 December 1927, in which he stated: "there is no modern art movement in Italy. Neither dealers nor galleries. Modern Italian painting does not exist. There is

Modigliani and myself, but we are practically French”,¹ costing him the exclusion from the Venice Biennial for more than a few years.²

These two fundamental publications by de Chirico, especially his *Memoirs*, are characterised by the same element of controversy found in many of his writings.

In addition to these works, it is reasonable to think – since numerous indications point to this conclusion – that de Chirico, whilst writing his *Memoirs* and organising his essays for *The Comedy of Modern Art*, had at the same time thought about the creation of a third book, written in French, entitled *A propos de peinture*.

Indeed, it is no coincidence that all three works, finished and ready to be published by June 1945, and were all printed within the year’s end. As Jole de Sanna noted, “In 1945 [de Chirico’s] editorial work is appreciably profuse”.³

Dated *Paris, juin 1945*, the volume *A propos de peinture* was published in Paris by Publications Techniques et Artistiques under the authorial name of Benito in December of the same year.

The work, written in such a way as to be easily comprehensible, was designed to disseminate in France (therefore beyond the borders of sterile Italian provincialism) de Chirico’s ideas on the decline of painting and the decadence of modern art, which had found such fertile ground there.

On its cover, the book is attributed to Benito, which in the frontispiece is elaborated as E.G. Benito (using only the initials of the first names).

There is however no record of how the publication was received in Paris. It was de Chirico himself who made mention of it in Italy. On 12 December 1946, the artist published a two-column review in “La Fiera Letteraria”, entitled *A French Book on Modern Painting*.⁴ It was the first time, as far as we know, that de Chirico reviewed a book written by “someone else”. In his review of the volume he notes pessimistically: “I do not know how extensively Mr. Benito’s book has been read; certain that, both in Paris and outside it, the ‘modernists’ and all those who, in one way or another, are linked to the mafia and the freemasonry of so-called ‘modernism’, will do everything to boycott it, in order to not discuss it.”

In reading his review one is amazed at the markedly laudatory tone that de Chirico uses in favour of the contents of the book and its author: “A truly exceptional book [...]. It is a critique of modern painting, composed with much intelligence, acumen and courage.”

Additionally: “It is the first time that a book published in France proves to be so intelligent and courageous on exposing the decadence and immorality of French artistic circles” concluding with: “Mr. Benito proves to be not only an exceptional connoisseur of paintings but also a man of elevated sentiment, a poet, an effective voice in contrast to all those lame and sterile ‘intellectuals’ who today speak on painting.” The article draws to a close with a recommenda-

¹ See Interview by P. Lagarde, in “Comœdia”, 12 December 1927, English translation in “Metaphysical Art” n. 14/16, 2016, pp. 401-402.

² As emerges from the documentation conserved in the Venice Biennial Archives published in G. Chierici, *Giorgio de Chirico e Venezia 1924-1936*, in “Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico”, n. 17/18, 2018, pp. 255-351.

³ See J. de Sanna, *Postfazione*, in *Commedia dell’arte moderna*, Abscondita, Milan 2002, p. 258.

⁴ G. de Chirico, *Un libro francese sulla pittura moderna* in “La Fiera Letteraria” il 12 dicembre 1946.

tion, advising those who deal with the art of painting to make it their own “bedside table book”.

Those who are familiar with de Chirico’s writings or have read some of his interviews are aware that when he speaks about himself and his work, he uses seemingly exaggerated adjectives. The artist states quite simply, that he is a genius, and that he is endowed with an exceptional intelligence and is perfectly aware of having such qualities, gifted to him by the Creator Spirit. These considerations lead us to believe that the enthusiastic praise expressed towards the author named “Benito” and towards the content of the book *A propos de peinture*, are nothing but praise that de Chirico is directing to himself and his work, with the primary purpose of promoting the book and spreading its ideas, to the point of suggesting that it should become a “bedside table book”. The discovery of de Chirico’s very own copy of *A propos de peinture* at his bedside in today’s House-museum, is a dechirichian coincidence in all respects. The book, listed in an inventory of the artist’s private library, was found on a shelf at the head of the single bed in his small, unadorned room, which in its simplicity and candour has the air of belonging to a monk. The book is lightly marked in pencil in different points with underlining and asterisks.

It seems de Chirico enjoyed planting various riddles throughout the 1946 review, leading the reader to believe him to be the book’s true author (i.e. an exceptional connoisseur of painting) and by “suggesting” that the content and thoughts expressed are, in all events, his own (so much so as to suggest that Benito must certainly have read his essays published in 1942-1943 in “L’Illustrazione Italiana”).

However, de Chirico’s review of the book requires further analysis.

That we are dealing here with an “unusual” book can be inferred from a statement by de Chirico himself, who curiously affirms in his review that, whilst the author “signs himself as E.G. Benito” it is most “probably a pseudonym”. Despite attributing the authorship of the book to E.G. Benito, de Chirico minimises the author’s claim on the work by stating that it is quite probably a pseudonym. The issue is not without significance, as E.G. Benito was a Spanish painter who had also lived in France and may have personally known Giorgio de Chirico, perhaps during the latter’s stay in New York in 1936-1938 (as both of them worked as illustrators for the fashion magazine “Vogue”).

The content of the book is based entirely upon a paraphrasing of Giorgio de Chirico’s ideas and writings, albeit with a literary style that is not completely his own.

This correspondence of content however does not exclude that the work could have been written by an author other than de Chirico, who, whether in agreement with him or not, sought to synthesise the *Pictor Optimus*’ thoughts for informational purposes. This could be an indication of the reception of Giorgio de Chirico’s ideas in France.

It seems more likely however, that Benito, who seems to have actually been in France in 1945, consented, for editorial reasons, to have his surname used for the publication of de Chirico’s work.

It can also be hypothesised that de Chirico, in his total commitment to carrying out the battle for the rebirth of great painting – victim of the advent of modern art – opted for the pseudonym of a painter renowned in France for having illustrated the covers of major fashion magazines. So here we have de Chirico, willing to sacrifice his own ego in order for his ideas to be accepted. Ideas that perhaps, if directly traced back to their true creator, would not have been positively received.

What is surprising in reading the book *A propos de peinture* is the understated approach the author uses to uncompromisingly dispute the modern art system; a subtleness for which he renounced using the particularly strong or even rash expressions that he often used in his Italian writings and interviews.

It seems de Chirico may have wanted to promote a thorough critique without generating the public's refusal and for this purpose avoided expressing critical opinions towards the French idol Henri Matisse, who had previously been the object of his negative judgment. In his review he is in fact quick to point out that the author of the work was probably “forced to adopt a minimum of diplomacy” as he “has a family to maintain” and adds with seeming benevolence: “I understand and forgive him”.

In my opinion, de Chirico revisits and newly presents his thoughts on modern art in a complete and concise way in the book, whilst developing other ideas. Particularly so in the last part of the volume, where he delves into the theme of the Art of Painting with such great care and technical precision as to be rather demanding on the average reader to whom this popular and informative publication was intended.

But aside from the contents of *A propos de peinture*, of which there remains little doubt as to its provenance (with unmistakable *Pictor Optimus* DNA revealed), it may be useful to analyse some elements that at first inspection appear to conform to de Chirico's methods.

It is known that de Chirico, in all his literary works, had the habit of affixing the words “the end” at the conclusion of a manuscript or, more often, the date on which the work was completed, or even, as in the second part of his *Memoirs*, the date he began writing. This peculiarity can also be found in *A propos de peinture* which ends with the indication of the place and final date of the book's creation: *Paris, June 1945*.

From another point of view, it is worth noting that de Chirico has repeatedly resorted to using pseudonyms, such as Giovanni Loreto, Angelo Bardi, Marzio Numido, Coluccio Buonafede and, of course, Isabella Far. A fitting example involves his use of the name Giorgio Castelfranco, in signing a piece – written by de Chirico himself – for the presentation of his exhibition at Galerie Rosenberg in 1925. In this case de Chirico considered it appropriate that his exhibition in Paris be presented by an illustrious art critic.

It can therefore be concluded that, albeit with some critical elements and despite the use of a literary style that is markedly different from de Chirico's (though the artist has used several, depending on the theme at hand), the work can be attributed to him.

Careful analysis suggests that the entire book was penned by de Chirico as there is nothing that does not intimately belong to his thought or reflect his personal experience, or do anything other than manifest his strongest and clearest ideas.

I conclude by drawing attention to an additional clue that the author “casually” inserted in the book in order to reveal to the reader the true identity of the author, just like a guilty party who wants to be caught. In the scathing chapter entitled *The Art of Portraiture*, the author debates on photography as a substitute for the art of painting. Extraordinary and amusing is the reference to a hypothetical photograph of Napoleon, “a small, plump man who, like his brother, Prince Jerome, would have reminded us of our uncle Gustav disguised for a masquerade ball”. And to Gustav, who was the youngest son the artist’s grandfather Giorgio Maria de Chirico and his father Evaristo’s younger brother who died in Florence on 18 July 1928, de Chirico dedicated a poignant poem.⁵

Could it be that even Eduardo-Garcia Benito had an uncle with the same name?!

Translated by Marco Mona

⁵ See G. de Chirico, *On my Uncle’s Death*, in *The Collected Poems of Giorgio de Chirico*, “Metaphysical Art” n. 14/16, 2016, n. 79, p. 245. Original title, *Sur la mort de mon oncle*, published in “Sélection. Chronique de la vie artistique et littéraire”, Antwerp, December 1929.