

MYSTERIOUS BATHS. COMMUNICATING VESSELS

Katherine Robinson

With the *Mysterious Baths* theme we cross the threshold into another of Giorgio de Chirico's imaginary worlds. In his famous explanation of the subject the artist tells how the idea of this new space came to him upon seeing light reflecting on a shiny wooden parquet floor. It is within this 'space of light' that he then proceeded to delineate the waves of a new physical realm.

The new subject matter appeared for the first time in 1934 in ten lithographs by de Chirico published alongside Jean Cocteau's ten texts in *Mythologie*.¹ Iconographically speaking, the *Mysterious Baths* theme was introduced in a direct and complete form based on a unique structural design extending across the representational space. The theme was established by the presentation of multiple scenes set in a well-defined context rather than as a single idea developed over time through a number of subsequent paintings. Five basic representational elements give the theme unity: the extended plane of the landscape, the architecture of the bathing cabins, the pools, the channels of water-parquet, and the human figures. These iconographical elements unite each image in an ideal set of scenes and moments. The individual figures and their position within the panorama define each image within the system (fig. 1 *Mysterious Conversation*, 1934).²

Differently from many of the artist's themes in which a subject recreates itself distinctively each time, with the *Mysterious Baths* theme it is possible to imagine a relationship regarding the paintings' composition, as if the individual works could be ideally assembled to form a series of variously connected pathways. The channelled system of water-parquet is not circumscribed within the image but rather, is interrupted at the margins of the canvas offering a photographically framed effect. It is quite easy to imagine the pools completing their full circumference outside the image and the channels continuing beyond the painting's borders. One could speak of 'solid ground' and 'flowing waterways' if it was not for the gentle and static atmosphere the paintings emanate (fig. 2 *Mysterious Baths*, 1935). A sense of movement can be intuitively perceived in the pulsation between pools and inter-connecting canals spreading across the pictorial plane: the terrain in which the artist's idea unfolds. The men who populate the theme can be distinguished as belonging to two separate groups: naked bathers and fully-dressed men. The differences between the individuals in the two groups are minimal and can be identified in their pose or the colour of their hair or, for the men on solid ground,

¹ Jean Cocteau, *Mythologie*, printed by Edmond Desjobert, Éditions des Quatres Chemins, Paris 1934.

² The consecutively numbered figures pertain to images found in the Italian text *Bagni misteriosi. Vasi comunicanti* in this Periodical, pp. 139-153.

the colour of their suits. This brings one to think that a sum exists which is greater than the individual parts and that the relationship between these parts is a fundamental aspect of the theme.

In 1935, among the written indications de Chirico sent to Nino Bertolotti for the installation of his personal exhibition at the Seconda Quadriennale di Roma, the artist wrote: "It would be good to group the bath and cabin paintings together."³ With regard to the installation of the group of forty-five paintings to be shown, he added: "The small paintings can be placed one above the other [...] but be careful, I have calculated a distance of 15 centimetres between one painting and another; it is imperative that these measurements are not increased or diminished."⁴ The long letter is full of precise detail regarding the care of the canvases' painted surface (some of which were not completely dry) and the placing of the works in the exhibition room. Although it is true that uniting paintings pertaining to a specific theme can be seen as a logical choice, it is interesting that the artist makes this point specifically with regard to the "bath and cabin paintings"⁵ as a final indication in a postscript.

In the paintings, the world of the *Mysterious Baths* unveils itself in a spectrum of earthy colours: brown, chestnut, tan, soft yellow and pale blue-grey (fig. 3 *Mysterious Baths* 1935 ca). Bathing cabins emerge from circular pools, connected one to the other by linearly disposed channels meandering across the wide and homogenous landscape. The objects inhabiting this world such as the swan, the beach ball, the cabin doors, the flags, and the men's neckties, are painted in primary colours. These objects occupy the visual field as a constellation of small entities of pure colour within the soft golden atmosphere that the paintings emanate. At times the sky exhibits a stronger shade of blue or the earth a brighter yellow, but on the whole the theme has a unique colour scheme, which reproduces the particular aura of a warm cloudy day. There are no intensely illuminated areas and the shadows cast by the cabins are soft and blurry. It is a neutral land, due both to its colour and to ample space afforded to the sinuous unfolding of the theme and the figures inhabiting it: bathers semi-immersed in water-parquet and young men in street clothes standing or sitting at the pools' edge. These figures, who share the open and boundless territory, seem to belong to separate dimensions.

Removed from the limitless landscape of the bathing circuit, the colour is darker in paintings where the water surface and the cabin pillars frame the swimmer, the swan and the beach ball in an intimate composition (fig. 4 *The Mysterious Swan*, 1934, The Barnes Foundation; fig. 5 *Swimmer in a Mysterious Bath*, 1974). Despite the subdued scale of brownish colour – which is due to the fact that, other than the swimmer, the swan and the beach ball, everything is represented as wood –, the composition is electrified by a concentrated traffic of zigzagging lines on the water's surface and spatially intensified by the looming structures towering over the water's surface. Wooden walls, on which pale-coloured horizontal lines are traced, hang down at angle from the pile dwellings. The lines seem to primarily exercise a visually calming effect in contrast to the optical 'noise' of the frenetic zigzag lines and the dramatic descent of the pillars into the water. With regard to the construction of the pile dwelling

³ G. de Chirico to N. Bertolotti, letter dated January 6, 1935, published in M. Fagiolo Dell'Arco *Gli anni Trenta: Parigi, Italia, New York*, Benenice, Milan 1991, p. 170.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 221-222. At the *Seconda Quadriennale di Roma*, February 1935, seven works on the *Mysterious Baths* theme were exhibited: *Mysterious Cabins*, *Mysterious Baths*, *Cabin with Red Door*, *Boat of the Mysterious Baths*, *Mysterious Swimmer*, *Mysterious Swan*, and *Two Mysterious Cabins*.

itself, the wall attached to the platform shelters the area beneath the cabin, thus creating a space that is half-inside, half-outside, like a zone of passage, or a threshold between the cabin and the 'water'. The swimmer, the coloured ball and the swan represent two-dimensional elements inserted into the scene. It is hard to imagine these figures moving forward or backward; their trajectory slides left to right and vice versa. It seems as if they could easily be taken out and re-inserted elsewhere, between the zigzagging lines of the waves. The pool and its inhabitants exist in a lesser, simpler dimension: a bi-dimensional world based on the oscillation of physical matter defined, not by nature, but by the artist's idea. The ball and the swans display primary colours: the starting point for the art of painting.

In paintings where the cabins form a line, their sequential pointed rooftops trace a zigzag motif that repeats, on a larger scale, the zigzag pattern on the surface of the water (fig. 6 *The Mysterious Cabins*, 1971 ca). The strip of sky follows suit, shaping the firmament according to the same motif. Starting from the left, the row of cabins occupies the entire width of the canvas, enfolding the composition and making the scene into a seemingly interior space, in which another interior space is perceived beyond the partly open door of one of the cabins. The precise number of the cabins is hard to define; depending on whether they are counted by their doors or by the individual constructions. Two of them are flattened by a perspective effect and another is cut in two by the right edge of the canvas. How many are there and what is their real shape? The perspective illusion is altered by the rope handrail stationed in front of them which creates doubt as to their actual size. In this painting, more than in other representations of the *Baths*, the water vibrates with naturalistic qualities such as transparency and reflection. The coloured beach ball is held in the firm grasp of the hyperactive lines that race across the water's surface. There is a strange relationship between this simple and playful object and the almost electrical ferment of the lines that hold it. A greater sense of mystery is evoked in the closed space of these paintings compared to those in which the *Baths* are portrayed in an open landscape where the sinuous paths of water and the luminosity of colour help to provide a feeling of alleviation.

If de Chirico's *Italian Piazza* is the exemplification of a subject/place, the *Mysterious Baths* theme constitutes a subject/territory represented through various configurations of the theme's principal elements in the drawings, lithographs and paintings. The pronounced 'sense of state' delineated in the *Italian Piazza* becomes a mere formal exercise in the *Mysterious Baths* theme where a multitude of tiny coloured flags perch on the rooftops, confusing any sense of geo-political boundaries or ownership (fig. 7 *The Two Mysterious Cabins*, 1934, The Barnes Foundation). If it is true that the spatial set-up of these images follows certain logic, it is the illogicality of the natural element which appears to be the theme's focal point: the mysterious water-parquet. Even the air does not seem completely 'natural', except for a few clouds floating on the horizon. The flags are ironed flat by a steady and silent wind, which 'stirs' the water as well. However, the real current from which both these elements derive their actual form obeys the law of geometry rather than the chaos of wind. In these serene images, seemingly without conflict, the only chaotic component appears to be the element in which the bathers are immersed: a regularly disposed intertwining of lines that while continuously changing direction, accommodate themselves within the circular shaped pool and around the pillars and the swimmers' bodies. The conflicts illustrated in the pictorial theme are the following: geometry as abstract form and the representation of Nature, and the artist's 'idea' and the physical laws of reality. By transforming a natural

element into an 'idea-element', de Chirico focuses his attention on these questions in an extraordinarily lyric and playful way. He then immerses the human being into this 'idea-element', taking the quest to an even higher level. This 'being', thus immersed in the artist's idea, looks out onto the surrounding world where his innocent gaze is met by elegantly dressed men, men with their feet placed firmly on the ground (fig. 8 *Mysterious Baths (The Visit)*, 1934). The heart of the theme, less obvious than the artifice of the water-parquet, consists in the substantial difference between these two groups who appear to belong to different dimensions: the bathers, to a quivering and amorphous world yet to be defined, and the men dressed in contemporary fashion, to a consolidated and stable world. The communication between these two states of being constitutes the fulcrum of the *Mysterious Baths* theme.

Round tubs standing on the ground are central elements in other drawings and paintings of the theme (fig. 9 *The Bath with a Bather and a Bourgeois*, 1936-1937). In these works with a low horizon, the figures and the architectural elements are positioned frontally and grouped together in the centre of the image in direct relationship with the spectator. The clothed man and the bather stand side by side, equal in measure and attitude. Standing in his made-to-measure bathtub – half-man and half-architecture – the bather has become a new breed of centaur. In order to enter the world of man, he brings with him the natural element from which he is inseparable, bearing himself as a mythical creature. The qualities expressed first and foremost by the fantastic image of the water-parquet are those of surface, such as reflection, current and extension. Imagining this element as volume significantly increases the mystery regarding its physical form. In order to introduce this new representation of the water-parquet, de Chirico fixes the fantastical element to the bather's physical dimension; only he can feel, if not understand, the intensifying mystery. Long stairways winding up the sides of some of the tubs make it evident that the relationship between the bather and the world is, as yet, unresolved; a sense of gradation is applied to the endeavour, but proportion is still absent from the calculation (fig. 10 *Mysterious Baths*, ca 1950-1955 ca). In the background, temples frame the element Air the same way that the pedestal-basins encase the element Water. By framing these sections of sky in the noble form of a temple, the physical quality of 'transparency' is rendered as if solid, thus becoming a participating element of the theme.

In listening to the artist's anecdote regarding the conception of the *Mysterious Baths* theme, the question of communication between the two groups comes out clearly, even if it takes a secondary position to the astonishing tale regarding the water-parquet:

The idea for the *Mysterious Baths* came to me once when I happened to be in a house where the floor had been polished with wax. I watched a gentleman walking in front of me, whose legs reflected in the floor. I had the impression that he could sink into that floor, like in a swimming pool and that he could move and even swim in it. Then I imagined strange swimming pools with men immersed in a kind of water-parquet, who stood still and moved, and at times stopped moving to converse with other men who stood outside of the pavement-swimming pool.⁶

⁶ See *Contatto Arte/Città* exhibition catalogue curated by Giulio Macchi, Pollenza, Milan, 1973. *The Mysterious Baths Fountain* was built in Milan's Sempione Park on occasion of the manifestation *Contatto Arte/Città* for the 15° Triennale in 1973.

For de Chirico to have supplied this simple and clear explanation is quite a rarity, as the artist was not prone to giving such detailed description regarding his work which is for the most part hermetic and mysterious. In his numerous theoretical texts, de Chirico writes in an extremely clear and comprehensible formal manner. However, the anecdote of the water-parquet has Pop Culture communicative power. The story is contagious; those who know it tell it immediately to people puzzling for the first time in front of paintings on the *Mysterious Baths* theme, people who, in turn, tell the story to others. The genuine and playful anecdote is thus an integral part of this theme.

The first trace of the story dates back to 1936, on occasion of de Chirico's personal exhibition at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York.⁷ In the days following the inauguration a number of reviews were published in local and national newspapers and magazines, the majority of which speak about the new series of paintings entitled *Mysterious Baths* with brief, subjective descriptions. In the article written by Martha Davidson *The New Chirico: A Classic Romantic*, published in "Art News" on November 28th, it is evident that the art critic carried out a thorough study to understand the source of the *Mysterious Baths* theme. Her article contains information evidently gathered from a direct dialogue with the artist: "The paintings in a series called *Mysterious Bathing* are curious and puzzling. Like all de Chirico's recent metaphysical paintings, they maintain the nostalgic mystery which pervaded his early works. A dream-like fiction marks these compositions in which half-submerged nudes stand in ribboned streams of geometrized water, while disinterested, clothed figures occupy places near ubiquitous dressing cabins. Apart from a feeling of suspended existence these paintings must depend on a literary transcription for an exposition of their esoteric meaning. When de Chirico was a child in his native Greece, his father, a Sicilian engineer working in Volo, occasionally took him to the baths. The boy was deeply impressed by the difference he perceived between the clothed and unclothed figures. They seemed like different species of animals in different spheres of existence. The clothed men, like overwhelming and majestic statues, towered over the swimmers, who appeared exposed and defenceless. The little cabins, with their pierced windows, were like masked heads looking on the scene. Some time later a subconscious association was formed between this childhood impression and shining parquet floors which became identified with the water of the pools. Into this "parquet water" the swimmers descend. The figures dressed in street clothes assume sculptural and massive proportions. De Chirico has interpreted modern costume in classical terms and has achieved the desired compatibility between a casual, ordinary dress and a heroic treatment."⁸

An interview curated by Berenice in the 1970s, confirms when the episode referred to by de Chirico took place. The journalist writes: "he [de Chirico] said that once, when he was a child in Volos, while watching the reflection of a guest walking across a room on a shiny parquet floor, he had the impression..."⁹ It is obvious then, that both the mysterious aspect of the baths and the bathers, as well as the spark of intuition that transformed this mystery into image, are retracable to the artist's child-

⁷ *Recent Paintings by Giorgio de Chirico*, Julien Levy Gallery, New York, October 28 – November 17, 1936. See K. Robinson *Giorgio de Chirico – Julien Levy. Artist – Art Dealer – Shared Experience* in this Periodical, pp. 326-356.

⁸ Martha Davidson, *The New Chirico: A Classic Romantic* in "Art News" November 28, 1936.

⁹ Cf. Berenice *Una intervista lunga e leggera in Incontro con Giorgio de Chirico. Ventisette poeti, ventiquattro disegni e una intervista*, curated by C. Siniscalco, Edizioni La Baitta, Ferrara 1988 pp. 110-111.

hood in Greece. Considering de Chirico executed the *Mysterious Baths Fountain* in Milan's Sempione Park in 1973 at 85 years of age, one realizes how this theme accompanied the artist over the entire arc of his life, from his initial discernment of the mystery, to the grand, solid and colourful clarity the fountain manifests, set in the park surrounded by green grass and trees (fig. 11 *Mysterious Baths Fountain*, Milan, 1973). From the first drawings and the lithographs illustrating Jean Cocteau's *Mythologie* in 1934, to the first paintings and the theme's development during the 1960-1970s Neo-metaphysical period, the *Mysterious Baths* have followed their own current, finally coming ashore in the Triennale *Fountain*. Drawn in pencil, printed in lithograph, painted in 'wood', the theme then materialized into stone in the *Fountain*, a physicalization ever closer to the dimension in which we experience the world, where we ourselves become the spectators standing beside the pools. Unfortunately, soon after the *Fountain's* inauguration in 1973 during the manifestation *Contatto/Arte Città*, vandals as well as meteorological conditions have contributed in severely damaging the fountain: a contemporary ruin and modern-day expression of the destiny of Greek statuary which, initially multicolour, subsequently lost its colour over the millennia.

Born from enigma and light, developed through matter, the *Mysterious Baths* theme gives the impression that under its surface there is much more than meets the eye. The anecdote, which has accompanied the theme over time, provides information regarding the artifice of the parquet, but is elusive with regard to the role light played in its conception. In a reflection of light, the artist perceived – with clearly metaphysical intuition – a space beyond the material substance of the parquet. The episode reveals how at a very early age, de Chirico looked at reality as an extraordinary phenomena rather than as a series of objectively established relationships. The impression stimulated an adjustment concerning the physical laws of reality within the artist's imagination and he began to intuitively fuse light and matter together. Thirty years later, de Chirico constructed a world in that 'space of light' and gave it the name *Mysterious Baths*. In the meantime however, the metaphysical 'spark' was developed in other ways: firstly through the space, light and shadows of his metaphysical images of the 1910s, and successively through the study of the 'beautiful material substance of paint' – another territory of matter soaked in light – in the 1920s. De Chirico did not believe what his eyes saw as reality and proceeded to search for an eventual underlying trick. With his investigation, he managed to take empirical reality by surprise and to penetrate, for an instant, its unwavering facade. With his paintings of the first period, de Chirico created a kind of metaphysical opening in the form of an 'image'. He then proceeded to approach the problem from a different angle during the 1920s with his Return to Craft, by dedicating his research to reality's physical matter through the material substance of paint, by which he delineated the metaphysical *means* of the image. The *Mysterious Baths* theme can be considered a bridge between the two areas of research, or rather, an allegory of the mystery of the solidity and physical substance of reality. These images, which do not resemble the formal structure of the paintings executed during the first metaphysical period, and do not present the 'beautiful material substance of paint', represent a dechirican metaphysics of concept, of the translation of phenomena, and of communication.

The great achievement of de Chirico's painting resides in the depth of echo that his visual forms generate in the mind and soul of the observer. A strange relationship exists in the light, shadow

and the compositional space found in paintings of the first metaphysical period, which produces a vision that somehow allows forms of the Eternal and the Infinite to be perceived. In witnessing this breach in reality – in the form of an image – the observer remains balanced between sudden intuitive realization and the reverberation of an ancestral memory. With his endeavour, de Chirico reached beyond the known world and traced a different perspective within our habitual paths of perception. The artist then identified other paths with his technical research: “The beautiful material substance of paint seizes our attention, holding it and opening, firstly our eyes, then our spirit, onto unlimited perspectives diffused through space: the spirit, freed from its mooring, wanders far from reality, from banality, from wickedness, from stupidity, far from the earth. The characteristic element of great painting made with a perfect material substance dwells in the limitless quality things like skies and horizons have, and it is this strange and unreal phenomenon that allows us to contemplate the infinite, a serene and playful abstraction. Great painting does not have the barriers and borders of reality. It is beautiful, eternal, and infinite, like ideal nature, which has always existed and which will always exist in our instincts, in our heart and in our spirit.”¹⁰

The *Mysterious Baths* theme also covers infinite space with its images presenting a simple and open world structured as an extended field without barriers or geo-political boundaries. A large system of connections stretches out across the plane in the homogeneous landscape (fig. 12 *Mysterious Baths*, 1934). Bathing cabins built above circular pools are distributed throughout the landscape, acting as centres or hubs, which furnish the network of channels with entrance and exit portals. An idea of ‘current’ is intrinsic to the theme’s iconological elements, in which an activity of exchange is illustrated: those on the *inside* speak with those on the *outside*. From a purely conceptual point of view, the inherent structure of the images reflects the structure of certain forms of communication which have developed over the last few decades. In this extraordinary theme we find concepts of universality, collectiveness and connectability, which are key elements in the processes we live today. Suddenly, in the idyllic and simple world of the *Mysterious Baths*, deeper and more enigmatic currents reveal themselves. From what kind of an inspirational wellspring did the artist partake of, in order to produce – in the 1930s – a series of images that emulate, in an ideal or fantastical form, the technological innovation which has transformed communication in the Twentieth century? At the time de Chirico stated: “I am continuing my research in invention and fantasy.”¹¹ Is it possible that de Chirico, endowed, as he was, with an exceptional sense of perception and capacity for decoding reality’s manifestations, could have somehow touched upon the profound course of humanity’s evolutionary development, introducing himself intuitively into the flow of the great historical revolutions relating to communication: from oral speech, to alphabetic writing and the printing press, to the imminent turning-point his century was about to be involved in with the advent of electronic communication? And through his imaginative and figurative world, he brought to light the new dimen-

¹⁰ I. Far, *Paesaggi*, article published in “L’Illustrazione Italiana” illustrated with Ruben’s *Landscape with Figures and Animals*, Milan, July 3, 1942, p. 28. Republished in *Commedia dell’arte moderna*, 2002, pp. 184-188, Now in Giorgio de Chirico, *Scritti/1 (1911-1945)*. *Romanzi e scritti critici e teorici*, edited by A. Cortellessa, Bompiani, Milan 2008, pp. 481-486.

¹¹ G. de Chirico, from the exhibition catalogue *Mostra personale di Giorgio de Chirico*, Seconda Quadriennale d’Art Nazionale, Rome, February – July, 1935, p. 91. Republished in *Il meccanicismo del pensiero*, edited by M. Fagiolo dell’Arco, Turin, 1985, p. 317. Now in Giorgio de Chirico, *Scritti/1...*, cit., p. 840.

sion in which man interacts and exchanges knowledge, information and emotion with other men? The qualitative relationships present in the *Mysterious Baths* theme, in all their homogeneity and simplicity, are ideally comparable to the structure and the functionality of Internet. It is interesting to note that in these paintings it is specifically the physical element which has been transformed – water into water-parquet –, and with this in mind, realize that it is precisely from physical matter and the constrictions of space, transport, distance, and time, that today's forms of communication have been liberated. While communication has been freed from physical and spatial constraints, in the *Mysterious Baths* theme de Chirico redeems mystery from the spatial set-up it once held in his paintings of the first metaphysical period. Mystery no longer resides around the corner, or beyond the horizon, but is characterized as a natural element, around which the pictorial theme revolves in a soft and suspended atmosphere. The bather, physically imbued in this mystery, is one with the natural element and it is presumable that for the clothed man this nature has become a mystery. Residing at the very heart of the theme is a concept which can be defined as the blurring of the 'line' representing a clear division between knowledge and the unknown, an idea which is illustrated by the water-parquet's zigzagging line. Non-liquid waves vibrate upon the surface of the channels and pools like radio signals fluctuating between two different frequencies. The dissolution of the line, which in contemporary thought no longer works as a symbol of the frontier of the known, whether physical or intellectual, is manifested plastically in the soft, fuzzy lines seen in the theme's lithographs and drawings. Mystery, no longer represented as something unknown lying beyond a frontier line, is placed in a central, less defined space, a 'here and beyond' fused together in the golden-browns tones of paint.

Mystery and communication appear to be the principal subjects of the *Mysterious Baths* theme. Mystery has always played a principal role in the Maestro's oeuvre and it seems that in this theme, he has identified communication as an opposite and therefore complementary element. An implicit characteristic of the theme, communication is chosen by the artist as the historic counterpart to mystery. In the same way that the ancient Greeks explained nature's phenomenon through the acts of the gods, with the *Mysterious Baths* theme de Chirico created a visual myth in which he ascribes communication a protagonistic role. Nevertheless, mystery can never cross the threshold of knowledge, nor can communication unveil mystery. They are two profoundly different elements, one of which is immersed in matter – mystery –, and the other in the world of man – communication –. With this fantastical series, the painter has created an allegory that transcends both of these, where one empowers the other in an interweaving of the visible and the intuitive world.

If these two groups of men are in fact in communication with one another, it is an atmosphere of listening and of reciprocal attention, rather than of voice and expression, which is perceived in these scenes. The figures look at each other, their gazes tracing a choreography of attention throughout the scenes, as a display of hand gestures is also seen: hands folded, or hidden beneath the water's surface, hands positioned casually behind the figures' backs, holding the handle of a door, grasping the oars of the wooden boat on a river of boards, as well as reaching down from under the cabin, as if to feel, more than see, the descent into the water-parquet. Rather than being decisively active expressions, these gestures participate in the general condition of attentive listening that the images evoke, in which a total absence of narrative between the individuals is noted. In one of the later paintings, perhaps one

of the last in this theme, an idea of the dynamics between the bather and the man in civilian dress is discernable (fig. 13 *The Departure to the Sea*, 1969). In *The Departure to the Sea*, the clothed man is sitting on a cube facing a bather standing waist-high in a pool of water-parquet, positioned to the right of the scene. His raised hand indicates that he is speaking, while the bather seems to be listening attentively. The composition is divided in a complicated way: the forefront of the scene is in the shade in front of a sun-lit piazza and a temple on the shore of an open sea. On the left side of the painting, the composition follows the curvature of a channel which, flowing toward the sea, passes under a bridge and another temple. Giant twisting architectural waves seem to prop up the buildings. 'Real' water flows in the channel towards the open sea which, even if only visible through a small opening between the elements that compose the scene, presents the horizon's definite line. The theme's dream-like atmosphere seems alleviated; the elements appear to be more concrete as if oriented to the telling of a story. It is very interesting to note that the complexity of the composition in no way adds to the sense of mystery evoked by the theme, but rather, allows us to make suppositions. This objectiveness can be perceived in the fact that 'directions' are defined within the scene: the clothed man speaks *to* the bather, the channel flows *to* the sea. In other images on the *Baths* theme, no indication regarding the direction of any action is given. The concept of non-definition is inherent in the heart of the theme with its zigzag line, exemplifying a constant change of direction. The mysteriousness evoked by the theme's images is also based on the total absence of a relationship between cause and effect in the scenes depicted. The exchange between the characters is predisposed, the channels are set-up, the portals are ready to function, but everything is suspended in an atmosphere in which each element fluctuates gently between a state of possible action and a condition of careful and attentive receptivity.

As water appears in its natural form in *The Departure to the Sea*, the artifice of the water-parquet is redeemed: wide boards of wood cut across the top area of the composition illustrating the profile of a parquet floor. In this painting, which can be considered the conceptual 'delta' or opening up of the idea of the *Mysterious Baths* theme, the zigzag motif unfolds: no longer a protagonist, it sketches its way across the various compositional planes, tracing a visual path on the principal lines of the objects represented: the line of shadow-light on the piazza can be traced to intersect the shoreline, which in turn can be lengthened to meet the horizon line which, traced to the left, intersects the edge of the wide board depicted above the scene, revealing a giant zigzag line in the compositional structure. At the sides of the temples, spirals on the ends of white curving columns celebrate infinity in a vertical dance. In this painting light returns to being an element of the sky and not of the ground, while communication goes back to its function of telling stories and reporting events.

If during his first metaphysical period de Chirico demonstrated his extraordinary comprehension of space, absolutely outside the limits of established canons, it can be supposed that the dimension of time was also subject to his artistic and philosophic research, and that he revealed unusual aspects of this dimension through his works and his writings. It is important to listen carefully to de Chirico's words (especially in less formal writings such as letters and interviews) as hints to the abstract structures of his thought process can be found in the choice of his words. An astonishing elucidation on the metaphysics of time is found in a letter that the artist wrote to Guillaume Apollinaire from Ferrara. De Chirico's words express his nostalgia and desire for a future reunion with the poet, an event

which unfortunately would not take place due to Apollinaire's death two years later in November 1918. Written with intense feeling, the letter is touching due to the affection and esteem the artist expresses in the poet's regard: "My dear friend, It has been almost two years now since I've seen you. The Ephesian teaches us that time does not exist and that on the great curve of eternity the past is the same as the future. This might be what the Romans meant with their image of Janus, the god with two faces; and every night in dream, in the deepest hours of rest, the past and future appear to us as equal, memory blends with prophecy in a mysterious union. Despite of this, or possibly because of this, there are times when we become sad while thinking of dear friends whom we have not seen for a very long time; you are among those, my dear Apollinaire, who my thoughts most often evoke, who I most ardently desire to meet again one day. This I hope will be soon perhaps. During the past two years I have followed from afar the events of your noble life. I heard of your promotion to officer. Guillaume has always spoken of you in his letters to me; it is he who told me of your glorious wound, your decoration and your convalescence. It is time now for you to live tranquil hours of virile rest and of serene happiness. You deserve this and even more."

De Chirico begins by establishing the structure of time as learned from the teachings of Heraclitus of Ephesus, in order to place his emotion and the affection he feels for the poet in a spiritual and intuitive context. He begins by speaking of the time that has passed ("It has been almost two years now since I've seen you.") and ends the passage with reference to the future ("you are among those [...], who I most ardently desire to meet again one day.") In the middle, he breaks down the structure of time as we know it, by proposing the past as the same as the future. He speaks of the deepest hours of sleep where past and future are shown to us as equal, where memory mixes with prophecy.

For de Chirico, Apollinaire represented hope and the future, thoughts that the artist has expressed on various occasions. In this letter, 'time' considered as a definite structure, seems to remain intact only through de Chirico's expression of affection for the poet. In the final sentence ("This I hope will be soon perhaps") an utterly fragile conception of time is expressed. This impression is even stronger in the original French in which it was written ("Cela sera j'espère prochainement peut-être"). The tenderly awkward phrase contains a sequence of words which express the notion of time: 'hope' as in a desire projected into the future, the auxiliary verb 'will' and 'soon' both indicating a future moment, to which the word 'perhaps' adds uncertainty. On what does this 'perhaps' depend? On the structure of time, or on an unfortunate turn of events, which the artist may unconsciously feel?

In his letter de Chirico speaks of Janus, the mythological Roman god who is depicted with a head with two faces, one looking to the past and the other toward the future. Janus is also known as the god of doors, passages and the change from old to new, from a barbaric state to civilisation. The legend narrates that Janus reached Rome by sea from Tessaglia in Greece, the birthplace of de Chirico. Janus is also considered a maritime god, protector of boats, navigation and waterways. He saved the Romans from the Sabines by aiming a jet of hot water at them, causing the aggressors to flee. The *Mysterious Baths* seem to evoke the spirit of mythology, rather than iconographic symbols relating to a specific legend. As a figurative artifice, the water-parquet has the quality of mythological inventiveness. But in this case the artifice derives from a revelation grasped by the artist in a natural play of light, where illusionistic qualities remain.

What is it that de Chirico wanted to portray with this new imaginary world? The artist created a unique synthesis in these paintings, which are executed with an essential and unsophisticated painting technique. The straightforward anecdote, which provides a plausible explanation for the iconographic invention, satisfies immediately the curiosity provoked by the strange water-parquet, but in a superficial way. One must pay careful attention in order to grasp the depth of concept hidden under the extrinsic evidence. Where does the mystery reside? By means of his anecdote, de Chirico, the able communicator, manages to call our attention to an issue that he held most dear: the origin of the idea and the phenomena of artistic creation. It is on the spark of invention that the emphasis is placed. By considering the significant elements that have come to light in this study, our reflection tends toward the intuitive act that inspired theme, a phenomena much more profound and complex than the artifice with which the pictorial theme was ingeniously and playfully executed. In the conception of an idea, the artist's intuition takes him beyond the perimeter of the known, to something without form or definition. In the exhibition catalogue *De Chirico by de Chirico* held in New York in 1972, the artist wrote the following caption for a late painting of the *Baths* theme: "Toward what unknown shores do all the signs I see in my spirit lead?"¹² (fig. 14 *Mysterious Baths*, 1968) De Chirico, the eternal explorer, does not ask "what the signs are" but where they lead to. The profound interior vision cultivated by de Chirico also comes to light in his theoretical texts where he speaks of the image as an inherent and privileged quality of the human mind. For over sixty years de Chirico researched, experimented and expounded on the spiritual quality of the material substance of paint. The quest the artist took on is no other than the union and continuous flow between world/matter/nature and vision/image/mind.

An astonishing painting, unique both in composition and painterly execution, celebrates the *Mysterious Baths* theme in a portrait: *The Poetical Dreamer*¹³ (fig. 15 *The Poetical Dreamer*). A mysterious mix of emotions transpires on the beautiful face of the bather, sporting a crown of bathing cabins on top of his head. A faint, enigmatic smile appears on the right side of his face while on the left side, a subtle feeling of disquiet can be perceived. The gentle eyes express a certain solemnity of thought as they gaze into the distance. The intense pathos of expression and the beauty of the painterly execution of the face are alleviated by the colourful and playful lines of the festive wreath which dances on top of the bather's head. Turned one toward the other in an internal circuit, small antenna-like flags seem to be emitting and receiving signals or messages from the industrious power station of thought below: the blue, orange, red, green and pink cabins. The intense creativity of the *Mysterious Baths* theme is exalted by the noble quality of the painterly technique achieved in *The Poetical Dreamer*. No longer a centaur, half-man half-architecture, the young bather seems to have acquired an extraordinary consciousness regarding the absolute sovereignty of the mystery of the mind and of artistic creativity.

Translated by Katherine Robinson

¹² *De Chirico by de Chirico* New York Cultural Center, New York, January 19 – April 2, 1972, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, June 16 – July 16, 1972. The exhibition included works from all of de Chirico's themes, to which the artist added a caption.

¹³ The painting is part of The Israel Museum's collection, Jerusalem, donated in 1970 by Jan and Ellen Mitchell, New York, through the American-Israel Cultural Foundation.