

DE CHIRICO IN FERRARA. METAPHYSICAL ART AND THE AVANT-GARDE: BRIEF REFLECTIONS

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The exhibition *De Chirico a Ferrara: Metafisica e avanguardie* (Palazzo dei Diamanti, Ferrara, curated by Paolo Baldacci and Gerd Roos, organization and catalogue Ferrara Arte, 14 November 2015–28 February 2016) was undoubtedly an epochal one. The high level of the loans and the intelligent presentation of the works made it a fascinating and decidedly useful exhibition, both for expert scholars and for the broad public. The possibility of seeing the most important metaphysical works of the Ferrara period united together is, in itself, an immense joy for every art lover. If there are no doubts about the importance of de Chirico's Metaphysical Painting and on the formidable influences it had, first in a narrow circle of friends such as Carrà and de Pisis and later in universal projection towards Surrealism, the question of credit and debit between de Chirico and his initial followers (especially Carrà) is more complex and in some respects debatable. The chronological succession of the various moments of this difficult and controversial phase is gone over in the catalogue with philological, stylistic and iconological analyses. However, the question of the true motivations that drove de Chirico and Carrà to move initially in harmony, but immediately afterwards in sharp contrast, remains unresolved. This circumstance would cause repercussions in later historiography in relation to the events and artworks of the period. In this sense it is moving to see de Chirico's great masterpieces side-by-side, from *The Amusements of a Young Girl* to *The Troubadour* and *The Disquieting Muses* and so many other decisive works present in the exhibition. De Chirico's intrinsic painterly quality at this point on his parabola, as crucial as any other point ever, is really sublime, and the exhibition allows one to grasp this fully. De Chirico went on to theorise that Metaphysical Painting (his own, but after all he considered metaphysical painting, and with good reason, only his own) almost leaves painterly quality aside in favour of visual form excluding all material fussiness with regard to the painting as an object. But in reality (this is one of his magnificent contradictions – whether voluntary or involuntary is of little importance) de Chirico pursued throughout his life the myth of painterly quality and a famous testimony to this is his masterly *Piccolo trattato di tecnica pittorica* [Brief Treatise on Painting Technique] of 1928. The Ferrara period metaphysical paintings are actually very beautiful even from a strictly technical point of view, and the density of content and meaning emanating from these works finds its perfect equivalent in the painterly quality, which is as great as the conceptual substance of the works. The Ferrara exhibition is indeed a definitive testimony to this. The still intact, superb freshness of the chromatic substance emanating from these works glows more than ever and is an unequivocal sign of a highly developed technical competence. This leads to an authentic feast of colour, accentuated by the amazing “perspective arrangements” with which de Chirico formulates a figurative world that seems to speak of melancholy, disquietude, solitude and distance. And hence the comparison with Carrà is inevitable, also because of the clear and consequential arrangement of the exhibition layout and is disconcerting still today. Carrà, taking up de Chirico's themes with care and respect for textual quotation, seems to border on the abyss of absurdity in claiming a preposterous primogeniture (almost repeating the Picasso-Braque case) when one

looks directly at the dates and the artwork. The exhibition well highlighted how Carrà's painterly approach was manifested in the Ferrara phase with deficiency verging on voluntary excess. One could almost speak of an extreme chastity of the image, in an almost penitential key, with regard to his reinterpretation of de Chirico's vivid themes. With an approach free from prejudice, one need only study Carrà's whole career, prior to and following the Ferrara phase, to see clearly that a sort of pessimism, gloominess and difficulty prove intrinsic to his style and imagery. With the passing of years, Carrà's painting became increasingly "dirty" and earthy, with spent colours, dangerously verging on the typology of the "Sunday painter", not without talent, but moving further and further from the speculative dimension as he settled down into a strange mental inactivity. Carrà, in truth, was and will remain among the great painters tormented by a sort of structural defect that resulted in a dark and agonizing poem of frustration and sorrow; he was an artist that in some respects had considerable appeal but who was too far from any sensual consolation to the extent of appearing unsociable and surly, a true poet characterised by uneasiness and bafflement. Thus Carrà would seem to have set himself in front of the young de Chirico when they were together in Ferrara, facing together metaphysical themes, which, however, were an invention of de Chirico's. Carrà imitates, copies and seems to despair over it. Some formidable works of his emerge, like *The Western Rider*, but his true personality is not found there. The same goes for the personality of the young Count de Pisis, another artist that the exhibition fully highlights, introducing important and beautiful works by him, as well as disclosing his lacunae and weaknesses. De Chirico, seen again in the Ferrara exhibition, is both an epic and lyric chorister and his art is a construction of the world, no less than what Picasso and Braque had experimented with by that time with the cubistic experience. Here an old and now historicised clash is presented again, the one between de Chirico and Carrà, which was destined to considerably condition the future developments of that complex and anxious phenomenon definable in terms of "Metaphysical Painting", finally highlighted in the exhibition by direct comparison between the works of both artists.

Another problem that comes to light in the Ferrara exhibition is the relationship between the two brothers, Giorgio and Alberto. Beyond Alberto's consolidated and interesting musical and writing activity (the latter is also true for Giorgio), he was only to undertake a new pathway oriented towards painting ten years later, in the middle of the 1920s in Paris, and this explains the absence of works by him in the exhibition. In the catalogue, the abundant attention granted to Savinio fruitlessly moves the discussion away from the exegesis on de Chirico's work. Savinio's work has an importance in its own right that the curators do not specifically identify, preferring to assign him generic importance related to de Chirico's art. No theoretical element or document is provided in support of this hypothesis, rhetorically echoed by the other scholars that wrote in the catalogue, presumably to provide uncritical support for this thesis expressed on various occasions by the curators who have indeed contested Giorgio de Chirico's rightful claim for the conception, realisation and development of Metaphysical Art.

But in the Ferrara exhibition, de Chirico towers up like a kind of prophet that, in saying everything he has to say, leaves a boundless road open in front of him, the further developments of which he himself can only have had a glimmer of. The exhibition at least in part reveals these to us, especially in focusing on the relationship with Dali and, less forcefully, with Magritte.

In effect, among the merits of the Ferrara exhibition there is that of having proposed in a key of new awareness the question, as crucial as others, of de Chirico after the French experience, which lead to Surrealism. Surrealism seems to owe everything to de Chirico, extolling him beyond all limits to then cast an anathema

against him. In that period, but also much later (unfortunately the relevant texts are entirely lacking in the catalogue) de Chirico speaks of himself as a benefactor of Humanity and here the model seems almost to be that of a physician whose discoveries are essential for the wellbeing of life. De Chirico saw himself in this way, and therefore as obliged to vindicate the precedence of his discoveries against an obtuse world trying to stop him at every step. The exhibition brings to light many moments of this endless diatribe that caused much sorrow for de Chirico and still divides his exegetes in their claims of discoveries relating to his work. This is a problem that, as is well-known, in the course of time has led to clashes in the sphere of de Chirico scholarship. This would not be particularly serious (being a situation shared by many others in the field of art history studies) except for the risk implied for future researchers who will have to be adequately and seriously informed.

However, from the Ferrara exhibition and the catalogue, which is rich in data (not particularly new, nevertheless), a number of negative results emerge of such clashes and diatribes, which in the last few years have set Fondazione Giorgio and Isa de Chirico on opposite fronts with Baldacci and Roos. The moment has perhaps come, in the name of knowledge and respect for historiographic methodology, to reach a turning point, starting precisely from an event like the Ferrara exhibition, which has deserved and deserves strong applause from all those who love de Chirico's work in its entirety, not only his early period, and want to be informed correctly on the progress of research. Of course nobody maintains – and least of all the Foundation itself – that it must be the absolute and sole depositary of all truth, a sort of Supreme Court with regard to the results of research, a unique and intangible centre of exactness of historical memory relating to the *Pictor Optimus*. But maintaining the opposite, as Baldacci-Roos would like, is also far from viable because the right and the duty to perform the functions proper to a Foundation were legitimately and historically sanctioned by the free and conscious wish of the artist, in this case of the artist's widow, Isabella Pakszwer Far. The Foundation's activity has led, from 1986 to today, to a series of events the results of which all can profit by. We speak here of cultural experiences, judicial investigations, journalistic chronicles, all of which supported by documentary research, as well as the publication of unpublished written work by the artist, the production of systematic catalogues and consultations extended to a wide community of researchers, certainly not all in agreement but reciprocally confident in the production of well-founded research.

On the occasion of the Ferrara exhibition, a series of problems has re-emerged of the greatest and most significant historical importance, which one hoped would have been finally resolved. Debated at length in the historiographic sphere, the issue relates to the exact chronological phases of the discovery of Metaphysical Art, conceived by de Chirico and realised in painting with the founding work, *L'énigme d'un après-midi d'automne*, painted in the autumn of 1910 in Florence. Years ago in his 1997 monograph, Baldacci altered the timing of this event and the date of this painting, backdating it by one year, to 1909, with the peculiar premise that de Chirico lied with regard to his artistic illumination to overshadow the merits of his brother, who, according to Baldacci, was the true inventor of Metaphysical Art or at least *magna pars*. The perturbing new historical (and moral) contextualisation by Baldacci, also upheld by Roos, aroused great uproar among de Chirico scholars that led to a renewed analysis of the historical moment in question. The historical truth of the discovery of Metaphysical Art in Florence in 1910 – absolutely evident and avowed innumerable times by the artist himself – has been newly corroborated in full respect of historiographic methodology and through a careful reading of the relative documentation. Such substantiation is further backed up by precise evaluation of de Chirico's autobiographic and theoretical-artistic writings. This notwithstanding, the painting, together with *L'énigme de*

l'oracle, from the same moment, appears in the Ferrara catalogue with the date "1909". Accordingly, anyone unfamiliar with de Chirico's work is in this way prohibited from acquiring correct and relevant knowledge on it. The catalogue, fruit of the collaboration of authoritative researchers, unfortunately seems to be oriented by Baldacci and Roos' personal agenda of revenge against Giorgio de Chirico as well as against the Foundation, which will never cease defending and re-establishing the truth of the artist's history.

In recent times the appeal, in ultimate analysis, to common sense has not been very effective and naturally it is de Chirico scholarship that has suffered. Is this an important matter, both in itself and in relation to the work done by the curators for the Ferrara exhibition? It most certainly is, and it is precisely such importance that should cause them to set aside resentment as a historical research tool once and for all and replace it with the dialectical strength of ideas and by precise philological data on sources, archive documentation and on the artist's bibliography.

The historical problem in itself is fascinating and fundamental but there is the risk, instead, of turning it into gossip and making it irrelevant if there is too much insistence on detail and hypothesis, losing sight of the true meaning of things. It is on this point that the de Chirico Foundation can and must claim its right, not to unilaterally proclaim itself the Supreme Court, but to proclaim intrinsic philological authoritativeness that belongs to it by right, this term here being used in the most meticulous sense possible. The Foundation rightly asks Baldacci and Roos to correct the historiographic error they have made and in future to recognise the correct date 1910 for the works *L'énigme d'un après-midi d'automne* and *L'énigme de l'oracle*.

The curators remark that Ferrara was the place of a decisive turning point, however, we will add that de Chirico had already identified the essence of Metaphysical Art many years before. Hence in Ferrara we should speak not so much of epiphany but rather of a sort of final sudden flash of intuition within a concept already conceived and structured in that very direction. In other words, the substantial "discovery" had already taken place. However, the identification of new and amazing pathways setting out from that discovery found in the Ferrara phase a crucial and irreplaceable moment. In this turn one can see a sort of evangelical announcement full of future implications and ever-greater arduous and audacious consequences. That the Ferrara period played a significant role in this is surely and incontrovertibly true: one need only reflect on the immortal 1918 painting *The Disquieting Muses* for perfect confirmation of these deductions. The relationship between the Ferrara Renaissance dimension (which is an enigma by itself and a source of lasting fascination under whose spell Giorgio fell without opposing any resistance) and the new art, was experienced by de Chirico with apparent naturalness and displayed boldness, whilst he created a panoramic and spellbound stage on which he set his mannequins, as mute and faceless characters. It is here that we find the immense enigma of de Chirico in its purest state. Are those mannequins really actors on a stage? *The Disquieting Muses*, after all, seem explicitly to be exactly this. Closed within themselves and therefore expressionless, these mannequins are the supreme paradox for those who face the world both as an actor and spectator.

If we think that a few years prior to this, Benedetto Croce had worked out the aesthetic theory which led him to define art as a synthesis of intuition and expression, we can entertain the thought that de Chirico seemed to rebel precisely against this idea, destroying "expression" and giving a totally and exclusively open space to "intuition". But, once again, it is something other than this, as de Chirico is a true rationalist but with irrational content. Is Croce derided by him? Is Metaphysical Painting a secret parody of Italian philosophical idealism, at that time predominant and authoritative? Probably not, but de Chirico's strong and convinced adhesion to Nietzsche and German philosophy, including the essential precedent of Schopenhauer,

obviously says something on the *Pictor Optimus*' intentions, a very Italian painter, though born in Greece, nurtured on classicism, in actual fact trained in Munich, Florence and Paris, and moving only later into the daily, professional and social reality of Italy during his stay in Ferrara. Nietzsche and Croce were absolutely incompatible and anyone who sided, to use a sporting term, with one of them, would probably not have been able to side analogously with the other.

It is certainly striking to think that the meeting between de Chirico and Carrà occurred at Villa del Seminario, the military hospital for treatment of nervous disorders brought on by the war. It is clear that de Chirico and Carrà were there as the result of special treatment from the authorities (although de Chirico in actual fact suffered from serious and recurrent intestinal troubles), and therefore exclusion from active conflict is to be seen in this light. Nevertheless it is interesting to think that Ferrara Metaphysical Art emanated from this paradoxical (one would almost say surreal) situation.

The exhibition also shows how many derivations and further developments were essentially prompted by the Ferrara Metaphysical Art season, not all of which turned out however to be incisive, although they do hold noteworthy historical-critical interest. Certainly, Salvador Dalí in his urgent and pressing relationship with Metaphysical Art is one thing, whilst Giorgio Morandi, truly sublime and high-level, as well as a personal interpreter of that season (and the exhibition presents prestigious masterpieces by the great artist from Bologna), is another. Various situations regarding Georg Grosz, Raoul Hausmann, René Magritte and Max Ernst, artists in whom a metaphysical component exists, and a strong one at that, although the horizon of expression and contents takes on very different connotations in comparison to those presented by de Chirico in the landmark Ferrara phase.

These ramifications, although very interesting, must not make us lose sight of the essential point of this exhibition: focusing on the metaphysical "intention" and its meaning on the stylistic, iconographic and iconological plane. And these aspects are concentrated in de Chirico.

The dialectics of logical and illogical, enigma and mystery, the possibility of understanding and the impassable limit to this possibility, is consolidated in his work ever more in the brief but sublime Ferrara season. The optimal opportunity this exhibition gives us for a glimpse at this crucial moment should or could convince the most competent and impassioned de Chirico scholars to tone down certain outdated notions and return to the sacrosanct channel of scientific debate and love for knowledge, shared by everyone but experienced rather badly by some, with serious disadvantage.

Translated by Denis Gailor