

BACKSTAGE WITH DE CHIRICO

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At the beginning of 1912 de Chirico executed a sequence of three paintings by which, through a particular coherency regarding their composition, he created a temporal accord. The temporal element is not due uniquely to the fact that they were painted in succession – a first, second and third – but rather to a guideline woven into the spatial set-up summoning the observer to a quest.

The direction of the wind in *L'énigme de l'arrivée et de l'après-midi* indicates that the boat beyond the brick wall is setting sail. The disposition of the two figures in the piazza illustrates the recent casting off. The first one, on the left, has turned his back on the boat that has set sail, while the other, troubled by the recent separation, stands burdened by the presence of the unknown. If this is the departure, when will the aspired “arrivée” occur and the safe return take place? The unknown resides beyond the boat’s sail, which can be defined as the “screen or curtain” of nature. By separating the two forces of nature, the force that bears down and the force that yields, the sail creates movement. The root of the Italian word for stage curtain “sipario” comes from the Greek word “sipharos”, which in fact means sail. If the sail were furled nothing would happen, no movement would be possible, analogous to the “curtain” separating man from the unknown.

De Chirico offers a new dimension in this painting. The individuation of a form, which functions as a guideline, allows the observer to participate in a journey across time. The warm light of a late “après-midi” casts a shadow on the wall on the right of the piazza. The shadow, in the shape of a scalene triangle with a point cut off, directs our attention to another painting, the second of the three paintings under consideration. This shape is analogous to the truncated pyramid of the staircase in *La méditation matinale*, though reversed.¹ The scalene triangle in *L'énigme de l'arrivée et de l'après-midi* is a mere shadow while in *La méditation matinale* it

¹ See J. de Sanna, *Metaphysical Mathematics*, in this periodical, p. 125.



L'énigme de l'arrivée et de l'après-midi, 1912



La méditation matinale, 1912

has become a stone staircase, as immovable as the figure leaning upon it, in wait of the return. Even the marble statues are hunched over in waiting. De Chirico casts the shadow of the future into the present. In this painting the light comes from the left and evokes an atmosphere of early morning. The sun is up but has not yet dried the humidity that hangs in the shadows still heavy with sleep on the piazza. It is a fleeting moment, the premonition of a long day of unrelenting sunshine to come. The title “matinale” indicates a beginning. It is in fact the beginning of a wait. A period of waiting that in *La méditation automnale* – the third painting of the group – stretches into a dimension that is infinite, in a piazza that has



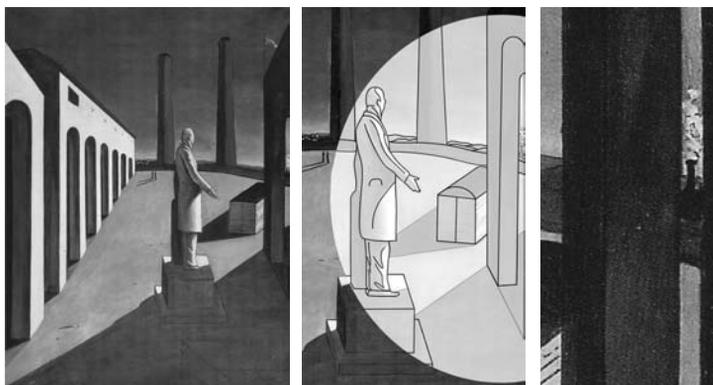
La méditation automnale, 1912

been abandoned by all. This piazza is static and extreme, the white is white and the black is black. There are no half measures. The title itself lengthens the measurement of time, from the span of a day, “matin”, “après-midi”, to that of a season, “automnale”. By heightening the intensity across these three paintings,

the artist illustrates the human being’s perception of time in a direct undertaking with the unknown. In *La méditation automnale*, this period of waiting has been extended beyond any conceivable expectancy. The margin between the two porticos is closing, the extension of sea framed between them is lessening and the possibility of “return” is becoming more limited. The portico in shadow will be the first to close in on the observer.

This first indication is like a convocation or invitation to participate in a process. In the work that follows, de Chirico employs iconographic and spatial elements in a function that goes beyond the painting in which they are found, in order to open a pathway between one painting and another.

er. These elements become “active” outside of the paintings in which they are located by readying our eye for a new perception and thus an extended study. The individuation of such elements makes the spectator participant to the artist’s reflections concerning time as well as the material spaces he utilises. Guided by the artist’s constructive intention, this extra-pictorial dimension resides in the observer.



L'énigme d'une journée, 1914

Another journey, guided by a clearly recognizable iconography was set in motion in *L'énigme d'une journée*, painted in 1914. In this painting, the statue of Cavour provides the first hint, with his arm outstretched towards the base of the portico on the right-hand side. This portico has only one open arch, through which a small sliver of sky can be seen above a brick wall. In this tiny space de Chirico has inserted a small train in a frontal position, which in the painting does not measure more than 8 cm, puff of smoke included. This strange little train seems to have nothing to do with the rest of the composition: its purpose is another.² In fact, its mission here is that of ambassador, to guide our attention to a similarly positioned train in another painting. Occupying the least space possible, its presence activates the skilled orchestration of the artist, leading the mind on a new inquiry. An identical train is found in *Le voyage émouvant* of 1913 where it is surrounded by architectural elements that come forward in sharp perspectives. Cavour's hand gives the indication to look under a portico, not the portico in *L'énigme d'une journée*, but rather that of *Le voyage émouvant*. A study published by Matthew Gale in 1988 in «The Burlington Magazine» revealed the existence

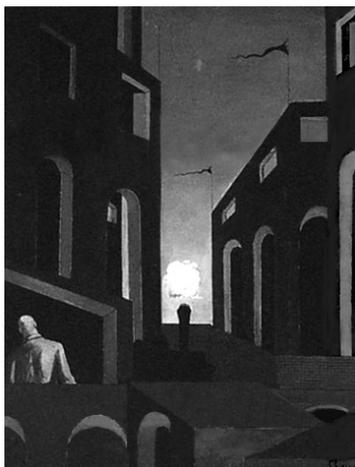


Le voyage émouvant, 1913

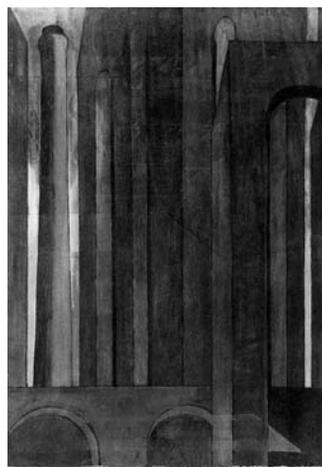
² Ibid. for the study on the painting's structure.

of an underlying drawing entitled *L'énigme cavourien*, which represents the head of the statesman Cavour.³ By means of a frontal train propelled headfirst de Chirico takes us, together with Cavour, on a voyage back to the start, to his head below the portico in *Le voyage émouvant*.

Le voyage émouvant was executed in 1913, and, as demonstrated in the article *Metaphysical Mathematics* in this periodical, was purposely painted on top of the *L'énigme cavourien*.⁴ When the artist painted *L'énigme d'une journée* in 1914, he introduced a temporal-physical key to guide us back to two aspects of his previous work: to the different moment of its execution and the existence of the underlying drawing. This intriguing mechanism is found in other paintings of the period. In *La joie du retour* of 1914 we find Cavour once again, this time positioned inside an architectural setting. His arm is stretched to the side, as an indication to look under something, and once again, this “underneath” is not in the same painting but in another. Here, it is the double frontal archway just below him that will act as our guide. The same double archway is found in *La surprise* of the same year. In this case also, an underlying painting was revealed by x-ray and was published by Michael Taylor in the catalogue of the Philadelphia exhibition.⁵



La joie du retour, 1914



La surprise, 1914

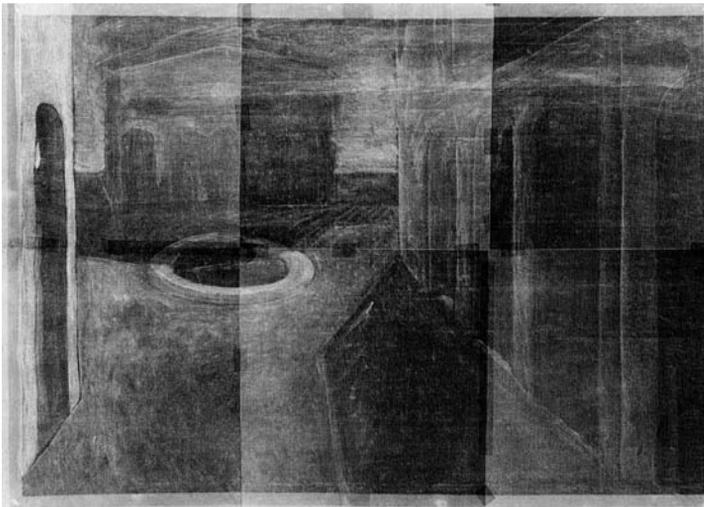
In *La surprise*, de Chirico weaves a tight composition of both full and empty spaces, in which the elements that compose it manage to remain clearly distinguishable. The sky, framed by two high archways, is channelled in a single direction: vertical. Its sole purpose seems to be to define the smokestack as independent from the architecture that surrounds it. The tower's dominating position, which is paradoxically almost suffocated, and the brilliance of its vermilion red colour give it an incandescent

³ A preparatory study exists with the same set-up as the drawing on the canvas. See M. Gale, in *The Uncertainty of the Painter*, in *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 130, London, April 1988, p. 272. The study is reproduced in this periodical, p. 155.

⁴ See J. de Sanna, *Metaphysical Mathematics*, in this periodical, p. 157.

⁵ See M. Taylor, *Giorgio de Chirico and the Myth of Ariadne*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2002, p. 42-43.

quality. It does not matter what it is that fuels it, nor the fact that it produces no smoke. It is the ideogram of fire, the element. The sky has lost its open space, and fire, its burning process. And thus, they are offered to us as pure signs. This spatial structure ties fire proportionally to the sky, to air. The architecture, composed of dizzily high archways, dominates the pictorial space. In constant tension, this geometry of rock illustrates the force of gravity in a vertical compression. It is not clear, however, in which direction these forces pull: up, down, towards the spectator or to the inside of the painting itself? Though it is also a strong vertical line, the smokestack does not seem to participate in this multidirectional pressure. It stands autonomous, absolutely secure in its primordial function of transforming energy, not organizing it. The architectural mass weighs heavily, due not only to its being made of rock or for the sense of grandeur it expresses, but also for its indefinable purple-brown, dark grey earthy colour. It is a physical shadow, produced not from a lack of light, but rather from the positive factor of an energy that is expressed not in light but in other forces. In this painting everything acts in the first person: it is the elements that declare themselves. Nothing seems to bear this load of weight and energy: there is no horizon. The only possible, though

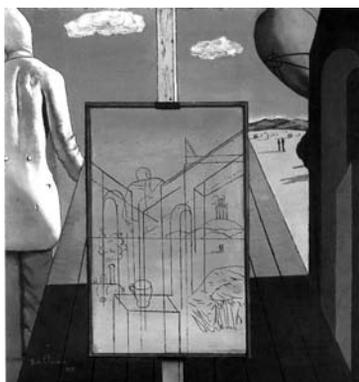


The painting underneath 'La surprise'

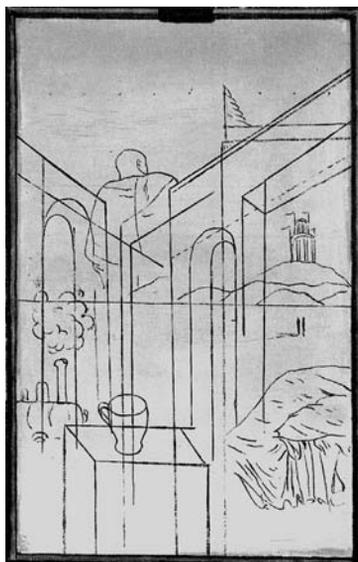
rather precarious, footing or support is found at the bottom right-hand corner: a horizontal ledge that is actually part of an underlying painting. We are now in a position to look below: as revealed by x-ray, the painting underneath is turned horizontally and represents an Italian piazza with a pantheon, a portico and a fountain in the centre. Through air, fire and rock, we finally reach water. It dwells under great pressure below a mas-

sive quantity of rock, framed in a space built by man under the gaze of a clock. The forces raised by de Chirico in the painting on top, encounter a human dimension in a space in which order is determined by time, in the painting underneath. The piazza (human order) sustains the universe that soars above it. This is the real “*surprise*”: air, fire, earth and water, a recipe for the Universe upheld by man, painted by the artist.

Another manifestation of the meander orchestrated by de Chirico between one painting and another takes place in *Le double rêve du printemps* of 1915. In Jole de Sanna’s study *Metaphysical Mathematics*, the framed image in the centre of this painting is indicated as the synopsis of the piazzas with Ariadne and *L’après-midi d’automne* as the masterwork and final



Le double rêve du printemps, 1915



achievement of his study of the Italian piazzas.⁶ *Le double rêve du printemps* unites all of the elements⁷ that have played a role in the artist’s study over the course of time since the first piazza *L’énigme d’un après-midi d’automne* in 1910. The scene, a landscape with curved horizon, hills, and tiny figures in the distance, has a portico on the right-hand side from behind which Theseus peers. On the left, Cavour appears with his back turned to us. Positioned at the centre of this scene is the framed “palimpsest of the Italian piazza”⁸, inside which are found: architectural construction lines, a tholos with flags, two small figures, a train, a supine Ariadne and the ever important cube, on which a teacup is placed. This cup represents water, the fountain, an element necessary to the completion of the Theory of the Piazza. All of the perspective lines converge upon the Voyager, who thus bears the vanishing point, which becomes not

⁶ See J. de Sanna, *Metaphysical Mathematics*, in this periodical, p. 162.

⁷ See J. de Sanna, *Mathematical Ariadne*, in this periodical, p. 260.

⁸ See J. de Sanna, *Metaphysical Mathematics*, in this periodical, p. 199.

only the culmination of a vision, but with him the possibility of a vision into a space beyond. This theory is written on a blackboard made of sky, in a space without substance. The construction of the piazza has become theory, pure mathematical formula.⁹ Resolved on a theoretical level, it has detached itself from the physical world and resides above the inclemency of the material world in the form of an intellectual patina, establishing itself with extreme elegance in a space and time that are absolute.

In this game of “follow the leader” Cavour provides yet another indication: his right hand reaches under the structure of boards positioned as a perspective stage set, which props up the framed theoretical piazza. This time he tells us to look underneath not a portico but a piazza. And it is the piazza par excellence that he indicates: *L'après-midi d'automne*, underneath which a portrait of a classmate from the Monaco Academy of Fine Arts has been discovered.¹⁰ In *Le double rêve du printemps* de Chirico completes the transcription of the Theory of the Piazzas, and with Cavour's helping hand opens an almost archaeological journey that carries us back to the start of his research. *L'après-midi d'automne* is an absolute masterpiece, a conclusive note of the piazza study. The title



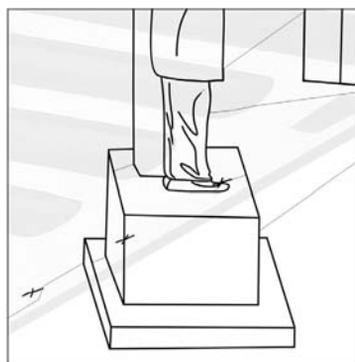
L'après-midi d'automne, 1913

of the painting is the same as that of the first piazza, *L'énigme d'un après-midi d'automne*, with the exception of the word “énigme”. With the resolution of the Piazza Theory, is de Chirico telling us that the enigma has been resolved? In this “après-midi”, the enigma has taken on an almost corporeal presence. It hangs in the atmosphere of the painting as an active element. Its presence, almost tangible, is so strong that it seems to have no need for a name, a linguistic identity. We have been carried back to a pre-linguistic stage of sensation. The painting emanates a primordial force, like a return to the origins. Rather than searching for a possible answer to the enigma, de Chirico immerses us more deeply in the *question itself*. And to this question it is impossible to give an answer; though it should be borne in mind that the right question is the true answer to the unknown.

Like a line in elliptic geometry that describes a great circle and returns to

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 162.

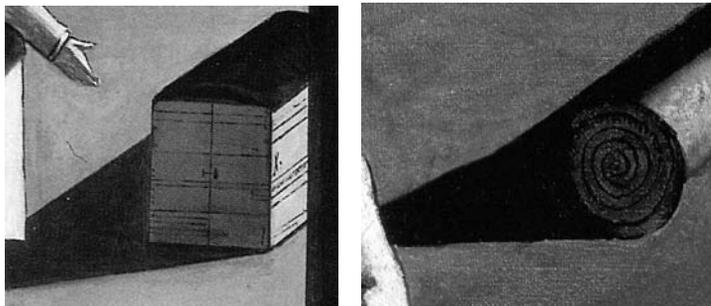


its point of departure, in this study we come once more upon *L'énigme d'une journée*, which drew the observer under a portico. This painting bears de Chirico's metaphysical sign, the "X"¹¹ repeatedly traced along the top of the portico. In the article *Metaphysical Mathematics*, the geometric investigation demonstrated Lobačevskij's principle (a plane carried by two points through space) by superimposing a polygon the same shape as the portico on the sunlit plane of the piazza.¹² After this inversion, the small "X"s on the portico fall into place along the edge of the shadow cast by the portico on the right. The first "X", which is now the last, falls precisely on the foot of the statue. If we were taken under a portico to search for a head, which

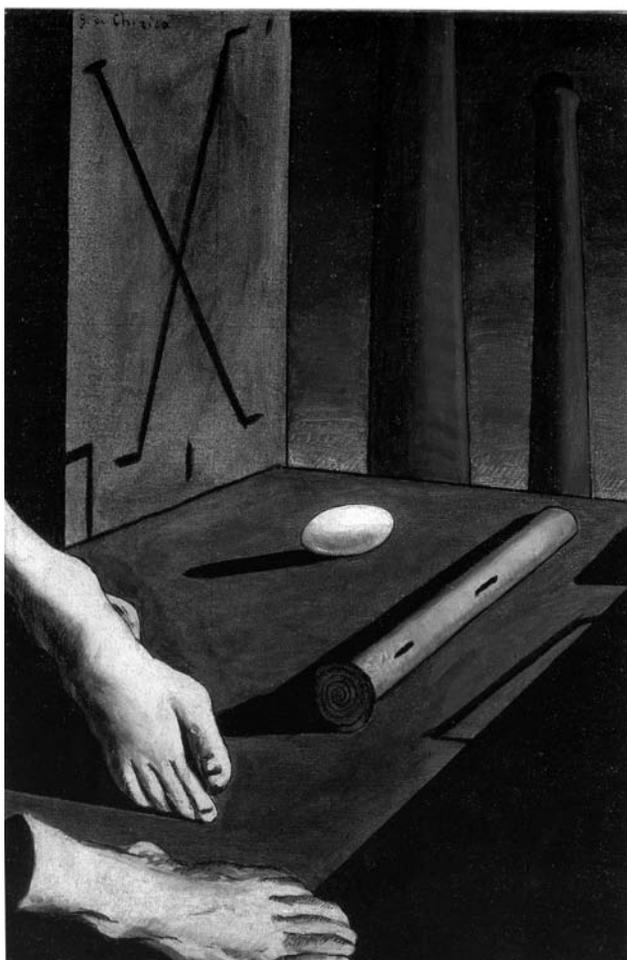
direction might a foot be an indication of? Up above? Or ahead in time? Marked with an "X", the foot carries us off to a kind of toolbox of artistic thought in orbit around two smokestacks: *Portrait de l'artiste*, painted in the late spring of 1914. They are the same two smokestacks from the first painting seen from a different viewpoint: we are in orbit. The spatial box seems more like a box in space in which the artist has weighed anchor, the two marble feet that held him to the earth. Crossed left to right, they too form an "X", like the large "X" inscribed on the solid above them. The right foot, lightweight and smooth, seems to pivot on its longest toe, while the left foot, oscillating and shaded, is poised above an undefined, unknown space. An egg – unstable and fragile by nature – is soundly positioned at the centre of the composition and sustains the compositional space around it, thus demonstrating the force and stability of its symbol: creation and potentiality. Wherever one's gaze travels over the canvas, it returns to the egg. The ochre-yellow scroll casts a shadow that has the same shape of the shadow of the yellow wagon in the first painting (the fourth corresponding element). Its construction seems to be lacking

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.



a certain logic. We would like to read it as a tube or a scroll, the spiral base of which should necessarily be equal to the diameter of the yellow cylinder, though its base is noticeably wider. This object expresses “space”



Portrait de l'artiste, 1914

in a language spoken by the artist, where the verb has a geometric form, in a syntax where the judgement of logic and illogic is premature. We are in a space that is presumably under construction, in a “spatial palette”. The lower corner of the solid on which the “X” is marked rests on the ankle of the marble foot. De Chirico makes two structural lines converge upon an object to centre the attention on factors of great importance to mankind. It is a “perspective” on the bidimensional plane of the painting’s surface where the third dimension resides in the meaning it brings into focus: in the painting *Portrait de Guillaume Apollinaire* two edges of a solid and in *Le revenant I (Le cerveau de l’enfant)* a window frame converge onto the shoulder of a male figure, attributing to man, to the male, an ethical value: the fusion of strength and responsibility, whilst in *La statue silencieuse* to identify the female quality, the artist has the lines distinctly converge on Ariadne’s hip. The same occurs, though in a more structural way, in the paintings *L’après-midi d’Ariane* and *La récompense du devin*, as revealed by the mathematical studies.¹³ The meaning is evident: creation.

In *Portrait*, a kingdom of artistic intelligence and invention in motion, we have already explored movement and space. The lines that converge on the marble foot indicate time: two feet are needed to count the pace. The human being is the pendulum of life, his bearing the measure. We look upon a painting entitled *Portrait of the Artist*, expecting to see the face, the bust of the artist, yet what we see in this “three-dimensional portrait” is only the third dimension, depth. The artist’s inner world lies open before us, with a pair of feet in the forefront. The face of the artist is not there; the face is that of the spectator, looking out from within. The two viewpoints, of artist and spectator, coincide for a moment.

With these iconographic references and clues, de Chirico offers the spectator a new dimension, actively involving him in a quest that has as its guideline the logic of the elements chosen. The first three piazzas executed in Paris were defined in a subjective, emotional setting. As the artist proceeds, he creates an objective structure inside his work, in which he invites us to take part and to move along his path of creation.

¹³ Ibid.