

GIORGIO DE CHIRICO'S DRAWINGS: THEORY AND TECHNIQUE

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“[...] I am obviously speaking of drawing as I would of the alphabet as one must know how to draw to be able to paint, just as knowledge of the alphabet is necessary to be able to write”.

Giorgio de Chirico¹

De Chirico's drawing, understood in the twofold sense of graphic work and a tool of inquiry, appears in a variety of forms and techniques, for which reason its role cannot be defined in a univocal manner.

In 1921, in the introduction to an exhibition that included a nucleus of works on paper, de Chirico had wished for the return of drawing “as an artwork in and of itself, fine and clean, thrilled and thrilling”.² Although the artist thus affirmed the autonomy of drawing as form of expression, it is equally true that it stands as an intermediate passage between idea and painting.

Ever since his “revelation” in Florence in 1910, de Chirico had placed emphasis on the mental and instantaneous nature of creation. The first metaphysical painting destined to change his vision of the world derived from the observation of something tangible (Piazza Santa Croce, Florence), which had however appeared to his mind as the image of the *composition of the painting*.³

In paintings of the early metaphysical period, black profile lines allow us to perceive both fields of colour and lines. These lines are functional to its construction; by contouring the objects, they shift these from the real to a mental dimension and vice-versa.

Setting out from the same graphic logic, works on paper and on canvas are therefore a translation of thought as both are based on the concatenation of images. In 1943 de Chirico stated: “For a long time now I have been perfectly aware that I think in images or representations”.⁴ The image translated into line is, for Giorgio de Chirico, as for the first known civilisations, a universal language shared by every living being. The image at the moment of its expression has supremacy over the word, which is “infinitely slower than the image” and is a founding principle of the first characters of logographic writing systems.⁵

1 G. de Chirico, *L'arte sacra*; in G. de Chirico, I. Far, *Commedia dell'arte moderna*, Traguardi-Nuove Edizioni Italiane, Rome 1945; now in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1 (1911-1945). Romanzi e Scritti critici e teorici*, a cura di A. Cortellessa, Bompiani, Milano 2008, pp. 525-526. English translation, *Sacred Art*, in this periodical.

2 G. de Chirico, introduction to the catalogue of his personal exhibition at Galleria “Arte”, Milano, 29 January-12 February 1921; now in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1...*, cit., pp. 774-776.

3 The resulting painting is *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon*, 1910, with various temporal stratifications: the Basilica with its neo-gothic façade built in the 19th century is transformed into a classical building, and the statue of Dante, erected in 1865, into a Hellenistic sculpture. As de Chirico wrote two years later in 1912: “I then had the strange impression that I was seeing everything for the first time. And the composition of my painting came to me...”, G. de Chirico, *Méditations d'un peintre. Que pourrait être la peinture de l'avenir*, Paulhan Manuscripts, now in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1...*, cit., p. 650.

4 G. de Chirico, *Casella*, in “Rassegna musicale”, 1943; now in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1...*, cit., pp. 914-917.

5 These concepts are dealt with by the artist in G. de Chirico, *Discorso sul meccanismo del pensiero*, in “Documento”, Rome, May 1943; now in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1...*, cit. pp. 534-539. English translation, *A Discourse on the Mechanism of Thought*, in this periodical.

aspect of the gigantesque or voluminous". If this is so, all representation must be considered the achievement of simplicity free from all veneer.

For de Chirico, the lines and markings proper to drawing are essential elements in painting. It was precisely "a perfectly straight line, gentle curve or an exact spiral"⁸ that would accompany the artist from his youthful apprenticeship to maturity.

The manuscript entitled *Note dal libro sui disegni* [*Notes from a book on drawing*] is datable to the 1940s and includes a thorough examination of the use of drawing in various historical periods, and was perhaps intended as a preparatory summary for a wider ranging treatise never completed. The manuscript recalls Renaissance instruments from Leonardo da Vinci to Rodler.⁹

These notes contain a small perspective sketch of a portico, which, at three decades from its introduction as a recurrent element in the Italian Piazza theme, is still a subject of interest and study. In the drawing (fig. 1), starting from the left, one identifies the front of a portico, a vertical dotted line defining the picture plane and the observer's point of view on the horizon line. These lines evoke the perspective construction of Leon Battista Alberti who, in his *De Pictura*, introduced a method for perspective representation to be used by painters: in this way a perspective scheme could be created on a sheet separate from the painting support (fig. 2). An artist could thus compose the image he would later depict on a large scale, leaving few constructional traces during the subsequent passage to the support to be painted.¹⁰

Seen in this light, de Chirico's sketches can be considered a preliminary construction for a painting, serving to imagine the outcome. Once the artist verified "the perspective effect" on paper, he could then transfer it to the canvas with more or less rigour. Setting out from de Chirico's sketch of the front of the portico, one may proceed to construct the building in perspective by following Alberti's method (fig. 3).

The paintings are fruit of these preliminary aspects and preserve their memory inasmuch as certain passages can be reconstructed graphically and also in reference to the fact that de Chirico depicted similar elements on chalkboards in a number of paintings. *The Double Dream of Spring* of 1915 (fig. 4), which presents the theme of a painting in a painting, represents the transition from open space representation to the subsequent indoor scenes that will occur in the Ferrara Interior theme. The painted canvas in the centre

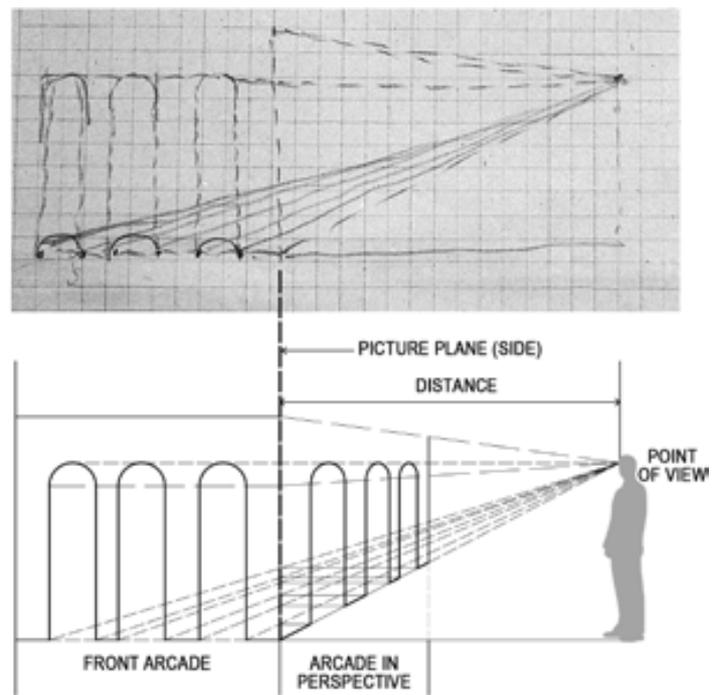


fig. 3 Hypothetical construction of a portico in perspective according to de Chirico's diagram

⁸ The quotations are from G. de Chirico, *Classicismo pittorico*, in "La Ronda" n. 7, Rome, July 1920; now in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1...*, cit., pp. 308-313. English translation, *Pictorial Classicism*, in this periodical.

⁹ De Chirico mentions Hieronymus Rodler and his perspective representation instrument based on a grid. See D. Spagnoletto, *op. cit.*, pp. 91-92.

¹⁰ See P. Roccasecca, *La finestra Albertiana*, in *Nel segno di Masaccio: l'invenzione della prospettiva*, edited by F. Camerota, Giunti, Florence 2001, pp. 65-67.

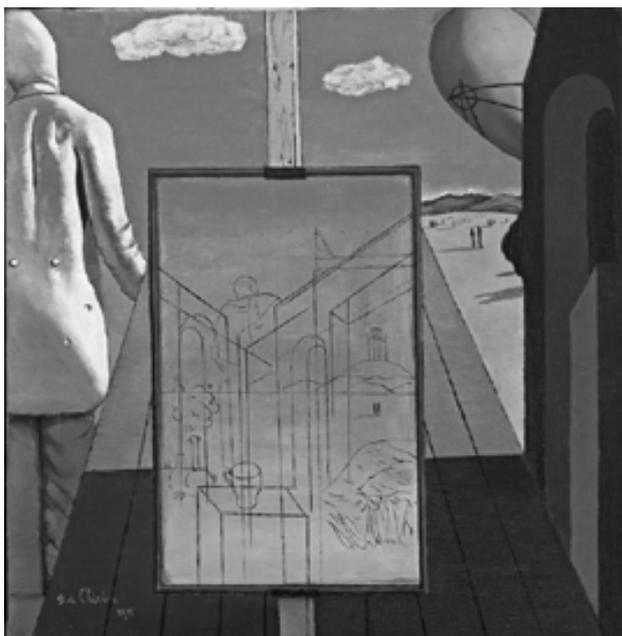


fig. 4 G. de Chirico, *The Double Dream of Spring*, 1915, MoMA, New York

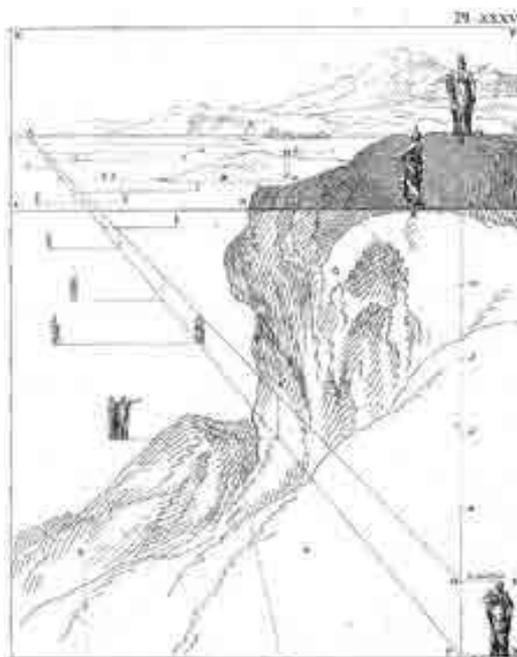


fig. 5 P.-H. de Valenciennes, *Éléments de perspective pratique à l'usage des artistes*, Paris 1799-1800

highlights how the structure of lines contributes to defining the painted image and how painting can be analysed as drawing. The background on the right is populated by a series of figures set at varied distances from the plain to the foothills of the mountain range. Once again, an influence seems to come from another textbook for artists that was popular in the early 19th century: *Éléments de perspective pratique à l'usage des artistes* (1799-1800). The author, French landscape painter Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes, details a method for inserting human figures in perspective. De Chirico appears to reproduce a detail of one of the graphic plates in support of this method (fig. 5).

De Chirico was very familiar with the methods of representation, the rules of perspective and their evolution in art and in theoretical treatises. He used these however according to his own sensitivity and ability to rework the rules in order to paint metaphysical space.

A chronological presentation of de Chirico's drawings allows one to see that most of the works on paper from the Parisian period (1911-1915) form part of the Éluard-Picasso Manuscripts that include texts which are the first theorisation of Metaphysical Art. Of various sizes, these drawings appear to be spontaneous, preparatory sketches for paintings.¹¹ Some of the sketches relate to works that were actually painted while others develop themes and views not directly referable to works on canvas. Generally in those years, with few exceptions – one of which we shall shortly return to, *The Autumnal Arrival* – the drawings have a spontaneous quality and feature a freeness of line (fig. 6). In the drawing of this phase, creative urgency comes before the exact definition of form, even though one depends on the other for various reasons.

11 The 29 drawings were executed on 25 sheets of paper of various sizes (including an envelope). The smallest sheet presents *Le Vainqueur* (study for *The Philosopher's Conquest*) measuring 13.7x10.5 cm.; the largest is the Study for *Melancholy of a Beautiful Day*, (16.2x27 cm.). See also F. Benzi, *Alcune note sul disegno di de Chirico*, in *Giorgio de Chirico. Pictor Optimus*, edited by M. Calvesi, Carte Segrete, Rome 1992.

From 1915 and throughout the war years, the artist's works on paper become more detailed and with a more steady and accurate line, often drawn with ruler and setsquare. These same drawing instruments were significantly represented in paintings of the Ferrara period, where they seem to evoke the technical means used by the artist in the realisation of the work, thus conferring further meaning to the representation.¹² De Chirico's Metaphysical Interiors can indeed reveal his system of representation. It is also highly probable that de Chirico fixed the sheet of paper to a panel in order to have full compositional control, as shown by the frequent marks of thumbtacks at the corners of the drawings.

During the ideational phase, de Chirico seems to have focused on certain distinctive lines: the first of which is the balanced partitioning of the composition based on the median axes and/or on a squared grid, and secondly, the perspective effect he desired to achieve. For various reasons these stages are verifiable in drawings on paper since the small format allows one to easily check and measure the distances between the various elements. Whereas in painting, diagnostic inquiries cannot always illustrate eventual graphic traces covered by paint.

Indication of some of the operations carried out in the definition of a painted work may be found in three drawings of 1917 and 1918.

In *Metaphysical Consolations* of 1917 (fig. 7), the artist applied varying pencil pressures: although drawn lightly, the naked eye can make out two straight lines executed with a ruler halfway between the height and breadth of the sheet. This practice is also repeated in the trapezoidal box where the biscuits are placed. De Chirico also marked constant distances in the form of pencilled dots according to which certain elements of the image are aligned. The drawing may therefore proceed by: "tracing necessary angles and curves at fatally



fig. 6 G. de Chirico, *Study for Arcades*, 1913-1914, Musée Picasso, Paris



fig. 7 G. de Chirico, *Metaphysical Consolations*, 1917, Galleria nazionale d'arte moderna e contemporanea, Rome



fig. 8 G. de Chirico, *The Poet's House*, 1918, Galleria nazionale d'arte moderna e contemporanea, Rome; the box on the floor presents a grid work diagram used to transfer an image from a drawing to a larger surface

12 See D. Spagnoletto, *op. cit.*: "The artist is not only referring here to the objects that populate his Metaphysical Interiors; there is actually more, which can be interpreted as a further explanation of the construction of the artwork. The set-squares and fine sticks are not only represented objects but actually the very means employed by the artist to create a scheme to guide one's vision", p. 89.



figs. 9a G. de Chirico, *The Duo*, 1917



fig. 9b G. de Chirico, *The Duo*, 1917, detail; the artist marked regularly distanced points to create a perspective plane converging at the same point

predestined points”¹³ employing what he would later write about with regard to Greek painting. The artist probably did not draw a grid work by crossing straight lines passing through points so as not to leave signs of construction for a drawing conceived, in and of itself, as finished work of art.

A grid appears however in *The Poet's House* of 1918 (fig. 8) where it serves the artist for the execution of a large scale reproduction of an image previously defined in smaller proportions. Once again, the grid often determines the layout of the compositional elements in the paintings.¹⁴

The Duo of 1917 (figs. 9a, 9b) sheds light on how perspective is constructed: de Chirico fixed points at equal distance on a reference line and, slightly higher, the vanishing point, thus obtaining the floor-like deck of a ship, an element often found in his work. It seems clear that the artist wished to create a framework of perspective rules, whereas the rest of the composition follows different points of view and vanishing points with a dynamic change in the observer's position.¹⁵

In the spring of 1919, de Chirico published *On Metaphysical Art* in “Valori Plastici”, in which he writes:

“The absolute awareness of the space an object occupies in a painting and the space separating one object from another establishes a new astronomy of things that, by the fatal law of gravity, are attached to this planet. The meticulously accurate and prudently calculated use of surfaces and volumes constitutes the rules of metaphysical aesthetics.”¹⁶

As happens in reading the artist's texts, the general and poetic considerations have precise references to his artistic production. In this case de Chirico confirms his attention to the “space” that objects occupy and to their “distance” on the surface. He considers them fundamental principles of metaphysical aesthetics.

13 G. de Chirico, *Il Classicismo pittorico*, cit.: “In Greek painting, lines and markings tracing necessary angles and curves at fatefully predestined points are the carriers of an inexplicable emotion which either goes straight to the mark or gets lost on the way”.

14 For the implications in the execution of a number of metaphysical paintings between 1910 and 1914, see D. Spagnoletto, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-101.

15 *Ibidem*, pp. 117-121, an examination of the perspective structure of *The Red Tower*, 1913, allowed for various structures in the painting to be highlighted. The operation is of a rigorously perspective nature, which is to say an “inverse” operation: the restitution of perspective carried out on the porticos. This was possible, and is the demonstration thereof, as the artist's presupposition coherently followed a perspective construction.

16 G. de Chirico, *Estetica metafisica*, final paragraph of *Sull'Arte metafisica* in “Valori Plastici”, April-May 1919; now in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1...*, cit., pp. 87-88. English translation, *Metaphysical Aesthetics*, in this periodical.

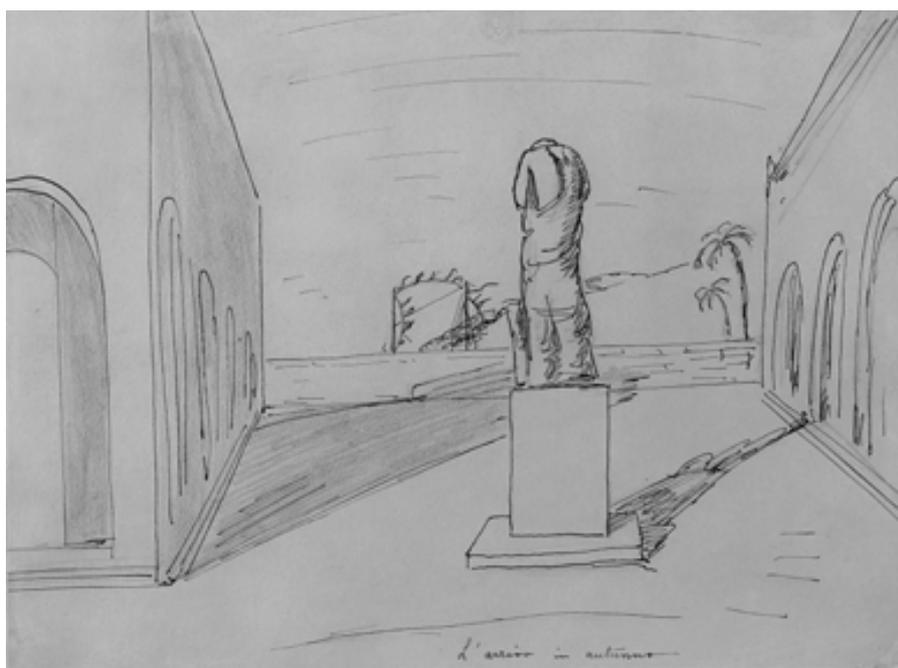


fig. 10 G. de Chirico, *The Autumnal Arrival*, 1913, Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art, London

The Autumnal Arrival

Prior to his stay in Ferrara, one does not see individually completed works in de Chirico's graphic production. A rare example is found in *The Autumnal Arrival*, of 1913 (fig. 10), which is linked to the cycle of the Italian Piazza paintings executed in Florence and Paris. In the drawing, the architectonic masses of porticos with arches delimit the space on both sides of the composition, which contains a mirror image of the statue in *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon* (fig. 11). In the layout of the elements and the shadows, the composition is related to *The Arrival (Afternoon Meditation)* of 1913 (fig. 12). The drawing and the painting are the only cases in which the light comes from behind the spectator.

The drawing in question was executed in pencil and then traced over with Indian ink making the outlines of the architecture and other elements emerge, with a regular density of line. The pencil was then used to fill in the shadows.



fig. 11 G de Chirico, *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon*, 1910



fig. 12 G. de Chirico, *The Arrival (Afternoon Meditation)*, 1913, Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia

For de Chirico, the few defining lines of the entire representation and are essential to the construction of the image. In order to understand the compositional process, it was of exceptional importance to be able to carry out a direct analysis of the drawing, conserved in the *Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art* in London.¹⁷

There are no visible lines of a grid drawn with a ruler in *The Autumnal Arrival*. However, in measuring the drawing, a squared compositional structure was identified. The sheet of paper is the size of a standard commercial drawing pad: 23x30.5 cm. From the analysis (fig. 13), it came to light that the artist subdivided the space with a regular gridwork of 5 cm without marking the paper. Various elements of the composition are set within a symmetrical layout centered on the horizontal and vertical central axes. A remaining fraction of space measuring 0.5 cm., determined by the vertical subdivision of the sheet in 6 units, is positioned at the centre of the composition.¹⁸

Vertically set within this subdivision are: the frontal façade of the left portico, the left edge of the statue's pedestal and the right side of its base, as well as the whole right portico. Whilst the median horizontal axis M determines the top of the wall at the back of the piazza, which then curves toward the left as occurs in a few paintings. Two smaller central horizontal strips correspond to the height of the ship's masts (the upper strip) and the base of the small wall (the lower one). The horizontal lines of the grid mark the top of the statue and the bottom of its base, and coincide with base of the right portico in the distance.¹⁹

In this diagram (fig. 14), one also sees how de Chirico defined the perspective representation: the left portico converges at vanishing point V1 at the edge of the second module; the perspective of the right portico converges at point V2, at the half-way mark of the second module from the right. Points V1 and V2 define the horizon that coincides with the horizontal median axis.²⁰ The non-convergence of points V1 and V2 in a single point – in accordance with the rules of perspective – determines the non-parallelism of the two buildings. This means that the two porticos diverge towards the background, dilating the space of the piazza.²¹

What appears to be a rapid sketch, uncertain and evanescent, reveals the rigour of a composition planned beforehand in accordance with a process that can also be found in his paintings.²²

What is the meaning of such much concealed exactness? De Chirico, in fact, creates a perfect structure in order to harmonise the various parts, calibrate empty and full spaces and control the perspective representation.

A drawing may however stand temporally before or after the execution of a painting, giving, at the same time, form to an idea or fixing, instead, an idea and making it a tool of inspiration for a new invention. Two paintings of 1912 come to mind: *Morning Meditation* and *The Enigma of Arrival and of the Afternoon*, in

17 A special thank-you to Roberta Cremoncini, Director of the Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art, for having granted me permission to study the drawing. For an introduction to the history of the collection, see *The Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art*, edited by R. Cremoncini, Gangemi Editore, Rome 2007.

18 De Chirico “consumes” this extra space as a vertical strip in the middle of the page, which allowed him to develop a vertical grid of equal units (30 cm [6 modules measuring 5 cm. each] + 0.5 cm. = 30.5 cm.) to the left and right of the central axis.

19 The main module is 5 cm.; other elements can be individuated in fractions of 0.5 cm.

20 Similar structures have been identified in paintings of the same periodo such as *Melancholy of a Beautiful Day* and *The Red Tower*, both of 1913, by Jole de Sanna in her pioneering study of the mathematical and geometrical elements at the base of Metaphysical Painting. See J. de Sanna *Metaphysical Mathematics* in “Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico”, n. 3/4, 2004, pp. 111-131.

21 The trapezoidal structure of this piazza is a frequently employed in the Italian Piazza theme. For the perspective study of *La tour rouge* and the Renaissance reference models, including Piazza del Campidoglio in Rome, see D. Spagnolotto, *op. cit.*, pp. 112-115.

22 *Ibidem*, pp. 93-101.

which a proportionally equal rhythm of vertical lines reveals a similar structure.²³ This could be explained by the artist's use of a drawing, even subsequent to one of the two compositions.

One might maintain that drawing, over and above its temporal position with regard to painting, always retains its primigenial nature.

The geometrical elements shown so far deal with the compositional genesis of an artwork, and even when the artist goes against the rules, overturning them, he sets out from a deep knowledge thereof. It is emblematic how great artists can disregard rules in spite of possessing theoretical knowledge. Indeed, Piero della Francesca in the fresco cycle *Storie della Vera Croce* is inconsistent in applying the rules of perspective, yet he was the first – and rigorous – writer of a treatise on perspective!²⁴

The image arises from that which is controlled and controllable, but then develops in accordance with the poetry and apprehension proper to Metaphysical Art. The works reveal this and the artist speaks of it:

“The indefinite, the scarcely hinted at, the veiled, spring from the definite, from the framed, from the enclosed.”²⁵

Translated by David Smith

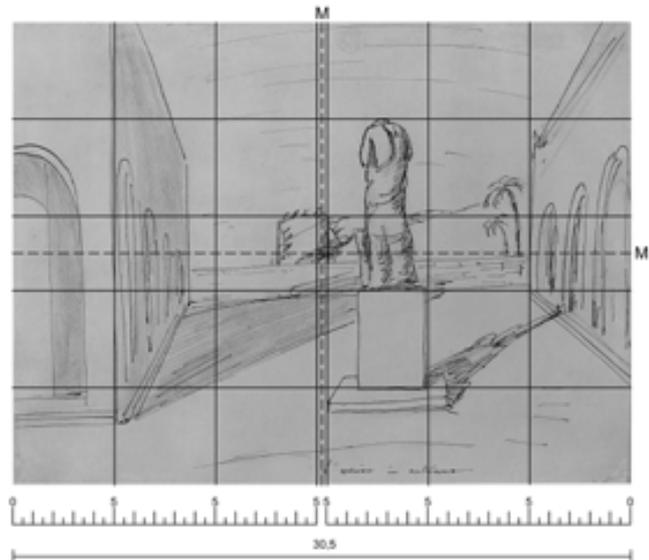


fig. 13 G. de Chirico, *The Autumnal Arrival*, division of the composition in equal modules

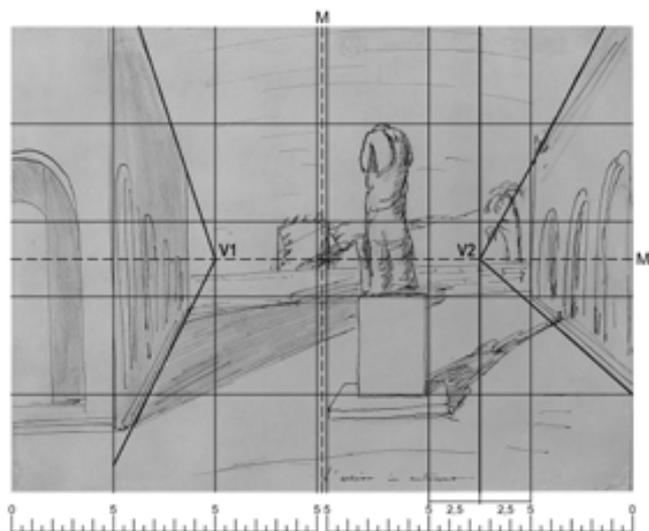


fig. 14 G. de Chirico, *The Autumnal Arrival*, perspective diagram according to the modular structure

²³ *Ibidem*, pp. 96-98.

²⁴ The frescoes are situated in the main chapel of the Saint Francis Basilica in Arezzo. The treatise on perspective cited is *De prospectiva pingendi*.

²⁵ G. de Chirico, *Casella*, in “Rassegna musicale”, 1943; now in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1...*, cit., pp. 914-917.