

THE SAVINIO AND DE CHIRICO INTERVIEWS IN “COMÆDIA” 1927

Lorella Giudici

In the 1920s “Comœdia” was one of the main Paris dailies. Founded in 1907 by Tour de France originator Henri Desgrange, right from the start it had aimed at an unusual editorial line: to give extensive space to the arts, theatre, music and literature, also by means of a bimonthly illustrated supplement. Contributors included figures such as Apollinaire, Rouveyre and the playwright André Lang who became its editor-in-chief in 1924.

On 2 November 1927 the column “Nos hôtes” included an interview with Guido da Verona who was presented not only as author of the novel *Mimi Bluette* but also as a personal friend of Mussolini. This political-cultural approach laid the groundwork for a series of interviews with Italian figures from the world of art and culture who for various reasons had decided to live in France: Fracchia, Malaparte, de Pisis and Maraini, to name only a few.¹ Brought together in the column “L’Italie et nous”, these interviews offered Italian excellence to the transalpine public, but with a political and provocative slant. Historically it was a delicate moment of tensions and reconciliations between Italy and France, and for this reason the interviews would not remain immune to heavy attack from the Italian intellectual world.

In particular, the Savinio-de Chirico episode was to pass into history. Savinio was the first to grant an interview (published 29 November 1927) and he began with tough, direct words: “The very fact that I left the country to come and live in France is sufficient proof of what I think about intellectual Italy. It doesn’t interest me in the least. In my view Paris is the only possible city in the world, the only place where one can produce, where one feels encouraged, the only city where intelligence reigns hand in hand with the sense of art”.

Two weeks later it was de Chirico’s turn to answer Pierre Lagarde’s questions (12 December 1927) and he laid it on thick: “There are no modern art movements in Italy. Nor are there dealers or galleries. Modern Italian painting does not exist. There’s Modigliani and myself, but we are almost French. Italians are often uncomprehending by nature and derisive by habit, they show hostility to the whole modern movement”, and again, “Italians lack talent”.

It was all very well that Savinio told his friend Giuseppe Raimondi that it was a trap, that his words had been wilfully twisted: the damage had already been done.²

1 This is the complete list of interviews published in “Comœdia” in the series “L’Italie et nous”: M. Frantel, *Pourquoi l’Italie recherche ses caractéristiques profondes. Un entretien avec M. Umberto Fracchia*, 7 November 1927; P. Lagarde, *M. Curzio Malaparte ou le super-nationaliste devant le problème franco-italien*, 8 November 1927; J.-P. Liausu, *La France participera officiellement à la Biennale de Venise. Un entretien avec M. Antonio Maraini*, 10 November 1927; P. Lagarde, *Avec M. Filippo de Pisis qui a préféré la France à l’Italie*, 15 November 1927; ID., *Paris reste le tremplin du monde nous dit M. Nino Frank qui se réclame de “la tradition de demain”*, 18 November 1927; ID., *M. Rosso di San Secondo l’auteur de “La Belle Endormie” nous explique sa haine de M. Croquant*, 23 November 1927; M. Frantel, *Différences et affinités entre la France et l’Italie selon M. Prezzolini*, 28 November 1927; P. Lagarde, *M. Alberto Savinio est épris de littérature franco-italienne*, 29 November 1927; E. Audisio, *Un beau geste de Niccodemi et la création de “Maya”*, 3 December 1927; P. Lagarde, *M. de Chirico, peintre prédit et souhaite le triomphe du modernisme*, 12 December 1927; M. Frantel, *M. Henry Bordeaux retour d’Italie nous dit ce que désire notre sœur latine*, 14 January 1928.

2 In a letter of 6 April 1928, now in the Giuseppe Raimondi Fund at the Department of Italian Studies, Università di Bologna.

As a result of these interviews the de Chirico brothers were excluded from a series of exhibitions to which, moreover, they had already been invited: the exhibition *Les Italiens de Paris*, organised by Mario Tozzi at the Salon de l'Éscalier in Paris, which opened in February 1928, precisely, some said, as a consequence of de Chirico's words,³ and the XVI Venice Biennale of that year. Due to the discord that their statements aroused in Oppo they were also banned from the 1st Rome Quadrennial in 1931, which he ideated and was the general secretary of.

The free-for-all in the newspapers was even worse. Inevitably old grudges also came up, but somehow it was necessary to strike back against the discredit and polemics that the brothers had thrown on Italian art and its credibility.

As we have seen, one of the first to respond with a piece in "1927. Problemi d'Arte Attuale" was Raffaello Giolli,⁴ followed closely by Carrà who, from the pages of "Il Selvaggio", launched his attack on his friend and rival, and on Savinio: "Hardly a day passes but we read in the foreign and especially French press a few words against our country, so it is nothing out of the ordinary that our adversaries also aim their machine-guns at our Italian art [...]. Let us therefore leave the beasts to rage, even if now and then we find someone of Italian stock allied with our enemies. What does it matter if these denigrators today include two individuals who have enjoyed our friendship and help? I mean Giorgio de Chirico and Alberto Savinio who recently, from the pages of "Comœdia", spouted their inexplicable and dissembled rancour against art in Italy, which is to say against us. At the heart of their mania for casting magical horoscopes on our native art and literature, quite aside from the dull vacuity of their arguments, there lies that certain ingenuousness which, by definition, is always bluster. So what irritates us here is not that they declare the non-existence of modern Italian art: it is their servility and their flattery of the foreigner. [...] Continuing, it is further noted that if there is incomprehension between Italy and France then the blame is Italy's. De Chirico depicts France as a woman of marvellous beauty and Italy as a man who "*au contraire n'a ni beauté ni charme*".⁵

But it was Cipriano Efisio Oppo, active defender of Italianness in art and culture, who was first to make his objections heard. In "La Tribuna" he accused Savinio and de Chirico of going to Paris, after having failed in Italy, "to request protection, glory and spoiled satisfactions from the great Babylon" and to swell the ranks

3 As Tozzi himself specifies in a letter to his friend Alberto Salietti dated 15 January 1928. See N. Boschiero, *Parigi, la vita 1926-1933*, in *Savinio. Gli anni di Parigi. Dipinti 1927-1932*, Electa, Milan 1990, p. 341. Lorenzo Leoni also speaks of the matter in "1928. Problemi d'Arte Attuale" (n. 5, Milan 29 February 1928, pp. 45-48) in a piece entitled *Gli italiani a Parigi*: "The idea of putting together this group of young Italian artists who live in Paris arose immediately after de Chirico's famous interview in *Comédie [sic]*. Here is proof that de Chirico exaggerated a great deal in telling the French that there was not even one painter in Italy save himself and Modigliani. Here there are already thirteen [...] with the desire, even in Paris, to practise a modern Italian art.

"But do not fear, you, in Italy, that there is really a need to make demonstrations of this kind. You in fact know that you are very much alive, also in painting. But here there is more than one who is unaware of this and has, for example, taken de Chirico's stupid fancies literally.

"Just the other day de Chirico had a show at the Léonce Rosenberg Gallery and Waldemar George, in a Paris daily, praised this 'Italian of Paris' who has shifted the barycentre of modern art by leading it into the only domain still available to explorers and inventors, the domain of the unreal and supernatural, and who is defined as the creator of magic Realism. And this was pleasing, as a tribute to an Italian, but also displeasing for an evident ignorance of the whole Italian movement from which the figure of de Chirico emerged. It would be not a bad thing to make it clearly understood here too that the turning towards Metaphysical Painting and Magic Realism was not a sudden discovery by de Chirico but one of the most interesting states of mind of new Italian art, in the tendency centred on Carrà".

4 See, the essay by L. Giudici, *Giorgio de Chirico and Raffaello Giolli: a Painter and a Critic in Milan between the Wars: an Unpublished Story*, in this periodical.

5 C. Carrà, *L'italianismo artistico e i suoi denigratori*, in "Il Selvaggio", Colle Val d'Elsa (Si), 30 December 1927, p. 94. Moreover, next to Carrà's article an unknown hand had drawn an ironic and venomous "sketch" of Savinio.

of that "international artistic centre made up of every country's rejects".⁶

These are only a few of the many examples possible, and the affair went on for a long time. It took several years to forget the affront.

Reconciliation would take place at the XVII Venice Biennale in 1930 where Savinio and de Chirico exhibited with Tozzi, Campigli, de Pisis and Severini in the "Appels d'Italie" room. The group was presented by Waldemar George and it was Prampolini's task to cheer their spirits and receive Savinio's contrite confession: "From an interview I gave about two years ago in a Paris newspaper (an interview in which my thought and words were wickedly distorted) I take one of the few sentences unaffected by the interviewer's conjuring skill. I said that looking at Italy's current social and political success I hoped that a similar rebirth would soon come about in the field of the arts and, generally, in the Italian spirit. I did not expect that reality would respond so promptly to my hopes. This has now happened. The great Italian spirit has not only reawakened but has already begun to spread worldwide that light which from age to age has shone as a predestined rhythm. A singular fact, but all the more favourable to us and convincing; for this "renaissance" of today I am happy to predict a very great future [...]. Many of our fellow countrymen manifest an irreducible hostility towards what in Europe is called "modern art". I have no such prejudices. All the more so because for me "modern art" is the most alive and outstanding art currently practised in the world. And I would add that this hostility on the part of our fellow countrymen must by now disappear, because "modern art" is about to become, if it has not already become, the synonym of "Italian art".⁷

6 C. E. Oppo, *Fuoriuscitismo artistico*, in "La Tribuna", Rome, 20 December 1927.

7 E. Prampolini, *La sala de "L'appel de l'Italie" alla XVII Biennale d'Arte di Venezia*, in "La Nouvelle Italie", VI, n. 337, 22 April 1930.