

## “IN THE IMMENSE DESERT OF THIS BIG CITY” DE CHIRICO IN MILAN 1919-1920

*Elena Pontiggia*

At the beginning of November 1919 de Chirico went to Milan where he remained until April 1920, at which time he moved to Florence, although in the months that followed he returned to Milan, as we shall see. Even if this period was brief it was anything but irrelevant and was, as often occurs in the capital of Lombardy, enveloped in a blanket of fog.

De Chirico's Milanese period has not only suffered the same devaluation that his entire post-metaphysical period has been subject to (a devaluation that is one the Twentieth century's greatest misunderstandings), but this period has also been put on the sidelines by contingent circumstances. De Chirico does not talk about this moment in his *Memoirs* (nor in other, shorter biographical writings for that matter) thus circumscribing the years 1918-1924 to a distinct Roman season, interrupted only by brief trips to Florence<sup>1</sup>. Even when present day historians dutifully write about an all-encompassing “Valori Plastici period”, they have dealt with the moments the artist spent away from Rome more as compendium. With regard to the present state of research, the period we are taking into consideration is one of the most overlooked areas in de Chirico's vast epistolary. From November 1919 to the end of 1920, or more precisely mid-1921, only twelve letters written by the Pictor Optimus remain (a trifle if we consider the fifty-odd letters of 1918 alone). Of these, only five were sent from Milan<sup>2</sup>. This scarcity of information does not help either.

But, let us start at the beginning. “I have begun work again, here in Milan”, de Chirico wrote to Rosai on November 6th 1919<sup>3</sup>. The artist had just arrived in the city a few days earlier. He stayed in a house where his brother had been staying for a few months in 76 Viale (now Corso) Porta Romana. This house no longer exists as it was destroyed by bombing in WWII. De Chirico was already familiar with the city of Milan, having spent time there in 1906, when he became enthusiastic about Previati and Segatini at the World's Fair celebrating the Simplon Tunnel. He also returned

<sup>1</sup> The Milanese period 1919-1920 is mentioned only once in a vague remark in de Chirico's *Memoirs* with regard to Castelfranco: “I met him in Milan, immediately following the war”, G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico*, P. Owen, London, 1971.

<sup>2</sup> The “Milanese” letters are the following: two addressed to Rosai, dated Nov. 6 and the second half of November 1919 (see L. Cavallo, *Giorgio de Chirico. Romatico e Barocco*, exhibition catalogue Galleria Farsetti, Milan, 2001 curated by M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, Florence 2001, p. 14); two addressed to Sofici dated Nov. 7 and Dec. 8, 1919 (see G. de Chirico, *Penso alla pittura, solo scopo della vita mia*, edited by L. Cavallo, Milan, 1987, pp. 105-106); one to Olga Signorelli, dated Dec. 22, 1919 (see F. Benzi, *Il carteggio de Chirico-Signorelli e gli esordi classicisti del pittore*, in G. de Chirico *Nulla sine tragoedia gloria*, Proceedings of the European Study Conference, curated by C. Crescentini, Rome 2002, p. 120). I would like to thank Almerica Aimè and Paolo Baldacci for their kind help in obtaining this material.

<sup>3</sup> De Chirico to Rosai, Novembre 6, 1919, in Cavallo 2001, p. 14.

briefly to Milan in the summer of 1908, and spent a brief period there between spring 1909 and January 1910 with his mother and Savinio, in which he studied, painted and drew intensely. The period we are presently examining is also one of intense work, despite the fact he had to share a room with Savino, a poorly lit room at that. He painted continuously, standing in front of the easel from six to eight hours a day, concentrating mainly on figure painting. He wrote to Rosai: “We must work with ardour and seriousness, and follow the principles of our masters in order to give Europe an example of an art that is severe and deep; for this reason we must go back to the human figure, draw extensively and apply both method and discipline”<sup>4</sup>.

### Self-portrait with Statue

The first work we know with certainty that was painted in this period is a *Self-portrait* (fig. 1). On December 8th 1919 de Chirico mentioned the painting to Soffici: “I’ve made a good self-portrait, with a statue in the background”<sup>5</sup>.

At the time, the artist also wrote a fundamental text *Il ritorno al mestiere* (a return to craft), which was published in the November-December 1919 issue of «Valori Plastici», thus contemporary to the painting. One could even say that the words in this programmatic writing could be a direct comment on the *Self-portrait*. Let us give it a try. The subject of the painting is the human figure (de Chirico writes “The big question [...] is the figure [...] Some painters [...] the most bold and daring, tackle even the human figure”<sup>6</sup>). The artist works in his studio and doesn’t waste time attending an academy (“There is a lack of schools and teachers [...] Art academies exist [...] but alas, what kind of results is obtained there!”). In his room there is no live model to study, but only a plaster cast of a classical sculpture (“We invite painters to *the statue*... in order to learn the nobility and religion of drawing... Let the painter stay in a room where there is nothing other than marble and plaster statues...”). There is more: in his hand the artist holds a small bowl in which he mixes his pigments (“It would be a good thing for painters to recuperate the good habit of making their canvases and mixing their paints by hand”). Ready at hand, he has two clean and perfect paint brushes for different uses (“When Ingres painted, he had more than one hundred top quality, perfectly washed and dried paint brushes at his disposition”). De Chirico is immersed in an obscurity that could be considered symbolic (“the dawn of laws and canons has not yet arrived”). The painter represents himself in front of the easel, although he isn’t actually painting; he is reflecting on his craft and urging a return to craft. The ostentatious and elucidative way with which he holds (but does not use) the brush, the absence of the palette, his gaze turned, not to the canvas, but to the spectator, are elements that suggest, not the act of painting, but rather a meditation on painting.

If de Chirico’s *Self-portrait* is a work painted as a manifesto – almost as a visual version of the *Return to Craft* –, he did so without forgetting the knowledge-related truths discovered through Metaphysics,

<sup>4</sup> De Chirico to Rosai, mid-November 1919, *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> De Chirico to Soffici, in Cavallo 1987, p. 106.

<sup>6</sup> All of the quotes from this period and the subsequent period are taken from G. de Chirico, *Il ritorno al mestiere*, «Valori Plastici», I, n. 11-12, Rome, November-December 1919, later published in *Il meccanismo del pensiero*, edited by M. Fagiolo dell’Arco, Turin, 1985, pp. 93.

starting with Heraclitus's teachings, according to whom "the world is full of demons". The entire painting is enveloped in a fantastic aura in which every element is placed next to its opposite, its shadow, its Egyptian Kha. Beside the flesh and blood painter is a lifeless statue, beside his hand the simulacra of a glove, beside the paintbrush and the canvas ready for use there is another paintbrush and another canvas. It is no coincidence that de Chirico, while proclaiming himself "*Pictor classicus sum*" (thus placing himself among the founders of a modern classicism) also proclaimed in the same text: "With his laws, man raises himself once again as a spirit before man"<sup>7</sup>. De Chirico is careful not to eliminate the atmosphere of revelation and apparition, the hermitic, melancholic and enigmatic elements and the fantastical evocativeness, which are at the very heart of Metaphysical Art. His classicism is not an "overcoming", but rather, a new angle.

### A Subterranean Eden

Is this the *Self-portrait* de Chirico exhibited in the only show in which he participated during this period in Milan: a collective exhibition at the Galleria "Arte" in March-April of 1920? Presented by Margherita Sarfatti, this little-known exhibition brought together the work of eighteen artists. It was, in fact, a trial run for the Italian *Novecento*, inasmuch as it united Sironi (who showed his urban landscapes for the first time), Funi, Bucci, Dudreville and Marussig, as well as a bouquet of painters and sculptors from Martini to Carrà, da Carpi to Zanini, to de Chirico himself. These are artists who from 1926 on participated in many exhibitions curated by the Sarfatti movement. The *Pictor Optimus* showed only one painting. The collective show's modest exhibition catalogue, recuperated in the Tosi archives, has a laconic indication: Giorgio De Chirico, 27. *Portrait* (fig. 2). Although in the introduction, Margherita Sarfatti gives us a further hint. With regard to the painting she speaks of "seventeenth century firm body fullness" with which the artist is "in love"<sup>8</sup>. The definition can seem surprising if one considers the negative connotation attributed by de Chirico, shortly thereafter, to seventeenth century Italian art, by considering it the prelude "to all the decadence of present day painting"<sup>9</sup>. The truth of the matter is, de Chirico's position was related to Caravaggio and Caravaggio-ism. Quite the contrary, with regards to theme and composition in works like *Natura morta con zucche* (Still-life with Pumpkins), 1919, the artist is not very far from certain Baroque still-lives. The same is true for *Ritorno del figliol prodigo* (Return of the Prodigal Son, fig. 3), painted during his Milanese stay in which an echo of his beloved Poussin can be found.

In any case, there are only three "portraits" from this period that can bring seventeenth century "fullness" to mind. Of course, it can not be excluded that the painting de Chirico showed at Galleria "Arte" is a work that has since been lost. We are dealing here with three *Self-portraits* of 1919 (the painting-manifesto cited, fig. 1, a small portrait, fig. 4, and the self-portrait "in an oratory pose" with

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> M. Sarfatti, *Prefazione*, in the exhibition catalogue *Prima esposizione*, Galleria "Arte", Milan, March 20 - April 15, 1920 (Tosi archives, Bergamo). About the same time, in *Il Convegno* (n. 4, May 1920), Raimondi wrote that de Chirico had "an ability with landscape and historical painting and was familiar with seventeenth and eighteenth century European painting", G. Raimondi, later published in M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, *G. de Chirico. Il tempo di "Valori Plastici" 1918-1922*, Rome, 1980, p. 96.

<sup>9</sup> G. de Chirico, *La mania del seicento*, *Valori plastici* 3, 1921, later published in *Il meccanismo...*, cit., p. 105.

the right hand raised in the foreground, fig. 5): all three portraits emerge from a semi-shadow, inspired by certain Titian and Raphael portraiture, although it is possible to mistake it with Caravaggio style. As we have seen, de Chirico considered the version “with a statue in the background” as worthy<sup>10</sup>. In any case, when one takes the total and compact silence of the period’s critique into consideration, one might think it was the smaller portrait that he showed: the only one that, due to its small size, could have passed unnoticed in the crowded exhibition, and could, do to its vague “heroic” traits, have been attributed the general indication as *Portrait* in the catalogue. At any rate, his participation in the show can be considered a complete checkmate. Not only concerning the *Ritratto* – whichever one it was –. The critics were indifferent (Somarè, Giolli, Vincenzo Bucci, Giacconi all wrote about the collective show without mentioning de Chirico) and with his Seventeenth century “style”, he once again lost a duel with Carrà. At “Arte” Carrà exhibited two mannequins, *La figlia dell’Ovest e Il figlio del costruttore*, in order to credit himself as the founder of Metaphysical Art three months after the publication of his book by the same name in which de Chirico was not even mentioned (*Pittura metafisica*, Vallecchi, December, 1919). It wouldn’t be until a year later that the Pictor Optimus reacted by showing a series of metaphysical masterpieces, defined in the catalogue as “works of youth, 1908-1915” at the same Galleria “Arte” in 1921, in order to douse any doubt regarding the originator of the movement. It should be noted that Margherita Sarfatti who, even though she did not know de Chirico very well in 1920 (and was probably disoriented by a presumed seventeenth century look in his work), was well aware who the real father of Metaphysical Art was. In praising Carrà and dedicating a long analysis to his works, she expressly notes that he followed “the example of Giorgio de Chirico”<sup>11</sup>.

At any rate, regardless of the discouraging greeting he received, the Pictor Optimus remained close to the Galleria “Arte” and admired their programs and projects, expressively describing the gallery as “a subterranean Eden”: “The Galleria ‘Arte’ is a delightful place; one could almost call it a subterranean Eden... the shows they organize periodically are certainly among the most interesting and intriguing”<sup>12</sup>. In a later writing, he added: “For a year now, the Galleria ‘Arte’ has been fervently active in promoting the most interesting and representative young artists. In short, the Galleria ‘Arte’ is the only gallery that attempts to produce an art movement in Milan like those that have existed for years in major European centres”<sup>13</sup>. It is some praise for someone like de Chirico, who was not inclined to handing out compliments. And is even more of a compliment when one considers what the gallery actually was. It was a basement in Via Dante, at the corner of Via Giulini, which in order to enter, one had to go through an electrical appliance shop that gave onto the street. The gallery was composed of three small underground rooms that Vincenzo Bucci, the critic for «Corriere della Sera», had

<sup>10</sup> De Chirico to Soffici, December 8, 1919, in Cavallo 1987, p. 106.

<sup>11</sup> M. Sarfatti, *Considerazioni sulla pittura a proposito dell’Esposizione “Arte”*, «Il Convegno», I n. 3, Milan, April 1920, p. 72. The confusion persisted all the same. When Sarfatti wrote up de Chirico’s solo show in 1921, she once again stated his role as founder, but attributed the name “Metaphysical Painting” to Carrà. M. Sarfatti, *Giorgio de Chirico*, «Il Popolo d’Italia» Milan, February 3, 1921. As this was the dominant opinion in Milan after Carrà’s book came out. Somarè, writing about the show, was the only one who correctly spoke of “the kind of painting de Chirico named Metaphysical”. E. Somarè, *Esposizioni di Milano: Galleria Arte. Mostra personale del pittore Giorgio de Chirico*, in «Il Primato Artistico Italiano», III n. 3, Milan, March-April 1921, p. 32.

<sup>12</sup> G. de Chirico, *Esposizione Sinodico, Graziosi, Zizzoli alla Galleria “Arte”*, «Il Convegno», I, n. 5, Milan, June 1920, later published in *Il meccanismo...*, cit., p. 214.

<sup>13</sup> G. de Chirico, *Mostra del pittore Gigliotti Zanini alla Galleria “Arte”*, «Il Convegno», Milan, I, n. 11-12, December 1920, *ibid.* p. 219.

baptized “Galleria degli ipogei” (the hypogeal gallery), but in reality, it smelt of mould, paint and sawdust, and on nights when there were no inaugurations, these rooms were always deserted<sup>14</sup>.

Supported by the industrialist Amleto Selvatico, a friend of Margherita Sarfatti, who owned the store and basement, the gallery represented a strange experiment: directed by a peculiar individual, Mario Buggelli (a writer from Monza, son of a protestant priest and old friend of both Bucci and Dudreville), it was managed directly by artists and the eventual profits were destined to young painters and sculptors. Given this premise, it goes without saying that the gallery closed within a year. And yet, even in that brief period of time, it managed to organize various fundamental exhibitions, such as the first Milanese solo shows of Arturo Martini and de Chirico and the first solo show of Funi, as well as planning a Sironi exhibition, which did not come into being. The Pictor Optimus was one of the only people to grasp the neuralgic importance of those awkward rooms, and among critics and observers, he was the only one who, with visionary acuteness, realized that it was of European scope. But just how did he get into contact with the gallery? Not through Sarfatti, whom he did not know on a personal level. It was thanks to Natale Mazzolà, Arturo Martini’s lawyer friend.

At this point, we must backtrack a few steps. In December of 1919 de Chirico and Savinio left the house in Viale Porta Romana and moved with their mother to n. 2 Via Lauro (fig. 6), not far from Brera. “We have finally found a good quarter where we have a well-lit room perfect for painting”, de Chirico wrote to Soffici on December 8<sup>15</sup>. Savinio’s letter to Soffici the next day acts like an echo, as he too informs him of the news: “Starting tomorrow, I am going to live with my brother and my mother in n. 2 Via Lauro [...] My brother is working hard. Until now he shared a room with me; but in the new apartment it will be easier for him to paint.<sup>16</sup>” A famous lawyer of the day also lived at n. 2 Via Lauro, Riccardo Luzzatto, a Garibaldi veteran who was part of the Expedition of the Thousand and was elected deputy of the Kingdom. One of Luzzatti’s clients, Amleto Selvatico was a courageous supporter of the Galleria “Arte” and one of the lawyers practicing in his studio, Mazzolà, who lived with his wife in the mezzanine of the building. Mazzolà recounts: “We saw the de Chirico brothers cross the courtyard; they lived with their mother in an apartment in the same building. Sad and keeping to themselves, they lived quite modestly, without particular means<sup>17</sup>”. It was Mazzolà who initially suggested de Chirico’s name, for the collective exhibition in March 1920, and then for his solo show in 1921, a fact he remembers simply as: “I proposed De Chirico and Buggelli took care of the show<sup>18</sup>”.

### The “Milanese Geographic Sentiment”

De Chirico continued to paint, concentrating on figure. “I’m working on other paintings with figures”, he wrote to Soffici in December 1919<sup>19</sup>. *The Return of the Prodigal Son* was most probably

<sup>14</sup> V. Bucci, Da Bucci a Rigetti, «Il Corriere della Sera», Milan, April 4, 1920, p. 2; G. Titta Rosa, Fantasia di Zanini, «l’Italia Letteraria», Rome, December 18, 1932.

<sup>15</sup> De Chirico to Soffici, December 8, 1919, in Cinquantanove lettere ad Ardegnò Soffici, edited by M.C. Papini, «Paradigma», n. 4, Florence, 1982, p. 370.

<sup>16</sup> Savinio to Soffici, December 9, 1919, in Cavallo 1987, p. 106.

<sup>17</sup> N. Mazzolà, Appunti autobiografici, in E. Manzato, N. Stringa, Il giovane Arturo Martini, exhibition catalogue (Treviso 1989-1990), Rome, 1989, p. 178.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> De Chirico to Soffici, December 8, 1919, in Cavallo 1987, p. 106.

among these works. He began collaborating with two periodicals of a classical leaning, «Il Primato Artistico Italiano» and «Il Convegno», both of which came into being at the time: the first in October 1919 and the second, February 1920. In «Primato», as it was called for short, de Chirico published two texts: *La scuola di pittura presso gli antichi*, (the painting school of the ancients) in which he stressed the necessity of a return to order, and *Considerazioni sulla pittura moderna*, (considerations on modern painting), which was a long piece consisting of three parts like a triptych, in which he concentrated, among other things, his principal considerations concerning Milan<sup>20</sup>.

Although, before examining these *Considerazioni*, we might ask ourselves just what it was in Lombardy art that made the greatest impression on him. Of modern painting, he certainly didn't fancy Futurism, nor could he like the Verism and painterly styles of the late nineteenth century, like that of Gola, with whom Milanese painting was identified at the time: "In what is meant by Milanese art (of course only with regard to its more vulgar side), a certain affinity can be found between the horrible and overwhelming production of pseudo-art that is made up here and certain unhappy aspects of this northern city, like the bars in the Corso, the peripatetic at Biffi's and the uprisings of the working class"<sup>21</sup>.

Concerning ancient art, however, he wasn't interested in the most famous works, the city's so-called tourist attractions, the Romanesque, the Duomo or Leonardo's *Last Supper*. Rather, while pursuing his interest in Raphael he fell in love with *The Marriage of the Virgin* at the Pinacoteca of Brera (fig. 7) in which he discovered a mysterious Apollonian and Greek dimension: "Raphael's *The Marriage of the Virgin* remains one of the most complete and profound works of all painting. It might also be the most Greek painting that exists; I use the word Greek in its hermetic sense. It is the most mysterious work *par excellence*, a mysteriousness in the paint itself in which no trace of process can be gleaned, mysterious in its composition and construction in which the inexplicable and occult elements of ancient myth seem to be concentrated, the mystery of the Greek divinities, omni-present..."<sup>22</sup>. An echo of the *Marriage* (fig. 10) can be found in his work of the period: in the small figures conversing in the background in *Sala di Apollo* (1920, fig. 8); in the rhythmic, geometric floor tiles in *Mercury and the Metaphysicians* (1920)<sup>23</sup>, or in *Lucrezia* (1921, fig. 9): a motif found in these two paintings only, as de Chirico usually creates the base upon which the figures stand as continuous space, or with a series of oblique lines converging toward the background.

De Chirico also observes Milan's Neoclassical season with interest, to which he dedicates his essay in «Primato». It is an emblematic essay that anticipates both the one by Carrà in «Valori Plastici» (*Canova e il neoclassicismo*), as well as Muzio's piece in «Emporium» (*L'architettura a Milano intorno all'Ottocento*) (architecture in Milan in the Seventeenth century)<sup>24</sup>. In Lombardy Neoclassicism, de Chirico individuates the particular presence of a "Milanese geographic sentiment" or a sense of equi-

<sup>20</sup> G. de Chirico, *La scuola di pittura presso gli antichi*, «Il Primato Artistico Italiano», n. 2, Milan, February 1920; Id. *Considerazioni sulla pittura moderna*, «Il Primato Artistico Italiano», n. 5, July 1920; n. 7, September-October 1920; n. 4-5, 1921, later published in *Il meccanismo...*, cit., pp. 127-146.

<sup>21</sup> G. de Chirico, *Esposizione del Gruppo Romano alla Famiglia Artistica*, «Il Convegno», I, n. 4, Milan, May 1920, *Ibid.*, p. 207.

<sup>22</sup> G. de Chirico, *Raffaello Sanzio*, «Il Convegno», I, n. 3, Milan, April 1920, *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>23</sup> The work is on the back of the painting *Figliol prodigo* (1924), and has been shown only just recently. See *De Chirico* exhibition catalogue curated by P. Baldacci and G. Roos (Padova 2007) Marsilio, Venice, 2007, pp. 148-149.

<sup>24</sup> C. Carrà, *Canova e il neoclassicismo*, «Valori Plastici», II, nos. 9-12, Rome, September-December 1920; *Canova e il neoclassicismo (parte II)*, «Valori Plastici», III, n. 1, January 1921; *Canova e il neoclassicismo*, «Valori Plastici», III, n. 2, February 1921; G. Muzio, *L'architettura a Milano intorno all'Ottocento*, «Emporium», n. 317, Bergamo, May 1921.

librium, clarity and tranquillity characteristic of the city's spirit: "It is interesting to observe the difference between Italian Neoclassicism – more specifically Milanese – and that of the French. In Milanese Neoclassicism I believe that the city's architectural aspect has played a strong role: the layout of the city, the logic and balance of its lines. Milan does not seem to be a city made for the evolution of paradoxical spirits. The calm and balance emanating from its walls, monuments, piazzas, and horizons, are what makes spirits mature through equilibrium and clarity, and thus reach depth"<sup>25</sup>.

From this perspective Milan appears to de Chirico like a small Athens, just as *The Marriage of the Virgin* seemed to him a "Greek" work of art. In order to clarify his conception, he quotes a few verses from Parini's *Vespro (L'uscita del Signore e della Dama, vv. 4-10)* that describe a majestic sunset, when the sun's rays leave our hemisphere, abandoning the Italian fortresses: a subtle, suggestive image, run through by an almost metaphysical atmosphere that couldn't but please the creator of *Melancholy of an Afternoon*. In any case, the Pictor Optimus's sources are often unsuspected. De Chirico underlines the "tranquil nostalgia" in these verses and recalls that years before (probably at the time of his first Milanese stay, or shortly after), he had copied them on a notebook, with the title *Milanese geographic sentiment*: "Finding this note once again and thinking about it, I convinced myself once more that I hit the nail on the head with my definition of the above cited verses as "Milanese geographic sentiment". In these verses, in fact, there is all the nostalgic tranquillity of the poet and the thinker [...] who sees the globe rotate [...] comfortably sitting in his old armchair in his quiet home, well defended by strong a gatehouse, in the middle of a flat and geometric city, shielded against the hostility of the elements and of men"<sup>26</sup>.

### The «Convegno» Period

If it is to «Primato» that de Chirico entrusts his thoughts on "Milanese geographic sentiment", it is in another periodical of the city, also of classicist bearing, that he leaves his deepest mark. It is «Il Convegno», a monthly publication founded by Enzo Ferrieri, the first issue of which came out in February 1920<sup>27</sup>. The Pictor Optimus collaborated with the review since the beginning, and wrote regularly throughout 1920, not only with his famous articles on Renoir, Gauguin, Raphael, Böcklin, Klinger and on Carrà's *Pittura metafisica*, but also committing himself to writing the column *Note d'arte* of which was entrusted principally to him and dealt with an ongoing critique of Milanese exhibitions (the only exception being Soffici's exhibition in Florence)<sup>28</sup>. His collaboration gave the publication a particu-

<sup>25</sup> G. de Chirico, *Considerazioni della pittura moderna. Parte II. I neoclassici milanesi*, «Il Primato Artistico Italiano», II, n. 7, Milan, September-October 1920; reprinted in *Il meccanismo...*, cit., pp. 137-8.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>27</sup> See "Il Convegno" di Enzo Ferrieri e la cultura europea dal 1920 al 1940. *Manoscritti, immagini e documenti*, edited by A. Stella, Università degli Studi, Pavia 1991; as well as A. Modena, *La contrada dell'arte, in Botteghe di editoria tra Montenapoleone e Borgonuovo. Libri, arte, cultura a Milano 1920-1940*, edited by A. Modena, Milan 1998. I thank Anna Modena for kindly assisting me in finding these texts.

<sup>28</sup> In the fundamental anthology *Il meccanismo del pensiero*, the reviews written by de Chirico are published with brief bibliographical references that are inexact at times. We will clarify them here, not as an overzealous philological exercise, but rather in order to allow us to follow the artist's movements more closely. In «Il Convegno» de Chirico published the following *Note d'arte*: *Esposizioni alla Galleria Pesaro* (n. 1, February); *Pelizza da Volpedo*, (n. 2, March); *Esposizioni alla Galleria Pesaro: Aldo Carpi-Domenico Trentacoste* (n. 3, April); *Esposizione del Gruppo Romano alla Famiglia Artistica; Mostra individuale di Emilio Gola alla Galleria Pesaro; Esposizione annuale della Società per le Belle Arti* (n. 4, May); *Mostra degli artisti belgi, alla Galleria Moretti; Mostra Piranesi, al Castello; Esposizione Sinopico, Graziosi, Nizzoli alla Galleria "Arte"* (n. 5, June); *La mostra personale di Ardengo Soffici a Firenze* (n. 6, July); *Mostra Glicenstein, Balla, Costetti alla Galleria Moretti; Mostra della R. Accademia di Belle Arti di Milano* (nos. 8-9, September-October); *Mostra del pittore Gigliotti Zanini alla Galleria Arte* (n. 11-12, December).

lar accent. After his departure from Milan in spring of 1921, the magazine continued to publish articles on current art events but did so without the incisive polemic that the *Pictor Optimus* had provided.

Two unpublished letters attest to the care with which de Chirico attended to the writings for the review. The letters, dealing with the article on Previati, which was to come out the same month, were sent to Enzo Ferrieri from Florence in August 1920. On August 19th, he wrote: "Here is the article on Previati. I have written it with care and love and it seems to me that it contains things that one would search for in vain in other articles written about this painter. But it is necessary that you publish it in this number, otherwise it will be a bit late. You will have no trouble finding reproductions of his paintings in Milan, publish at least four and don't forget *Re Sole* and *Danza delle ore*"<sup>29</sup>. In the letter de Chirico expressly asks Ferrieri to allow him to correct the proofs of the article. He also asks him to send his compensation, which was one hundred lira per article, an amount of money he needed at the time as he confessed to being in a "financial quandary" due to Broglio's tardiness in paying what had been agreed upon. He adds, "I have sworn to never work with him again" and claims he no longer wishes to take care of the monograph on Luca Signorelli that was to come out in the «Valori Plastici» publication<sup>30</sup>. He wrote again to Ferrieri a few days later, after he was sent the Previati article proofs: "I have removed and changed the part that you found scandalous, that is, the part about the crazy nature of the people of Ferrara; I have also taken out the word "crazy" in reference to Previati; I hope you will be happy, but please do not suppress anything else or this article will end up like the one on Gauguin that was slapdash and without nerve"<sup>31</sup>.

A quick consultation of «Il Convegno» will give us more information. By checking the dates of the exhibitions that the artist wrote up in the magazine, one can see that de Chirico interrupted his stay in Florence (where he moved in April 1920, as a guest of Giorgio Castelfranco) at least twice to return to Milan. At the time, one couldn't write about an exhibition without actually seeing it (something that happens today...) as the accompanying catalogue – in the rare event there was one – was usually no more than a pamphlet with the names of the works, an introductory page of critique and at most, a couple of miserable black and white images. In any case, de Chirico wasn't one to judge by word of mouth. It must not be forgotten that exhibitions in private galleries lasted only two to three weeks, which helps to circumscribe the dates of his visits. On the other hand, it could happen that the actual release date of the periodical be slightly late.

Let us see. In May of 1920 de Chirico published in «Il Convegno» a "sentence with no hope of appeal" on Gola's solo show inaugurated April 2nd, which he could have seen before leaving for Florence. However, he must have returned to Milan during the first half of May in time to condemn the *Esposizione Annuale della Permanente* (April 17th - May 16th) and to review, with little enthusiasm, the shows of Spadini, Oppo and other Roman painters. Unless one imagines another trip from Florence, it is probable that de Chirico remained in Milan until the beginning of June, when he visited the Piranese show, which opened on June

<sup>29</sup> De Chirico to Enzo Ferrieri (Florence, August 1920), unpublished letter stored in the Centro Manoscritti Autori Moderni and Contemporanei, Università di Pavia.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*.

3rd, as well as two collective shows just before that: Sinopico, Graziosi, Nizzoli at the Galleria “Arte” and the Belgian artists’ show at Galleria Moretti at the former Caffè Cova. After this, he left for Florence from where he sent an article on the big Soffici exhibition in via de’ Benci (opened May 27th to June 15th) and where he remained the whole summer. He came back to Milan in October, during the last ten days of the month<sup>32</sup>, in time to review the *Esposizione Nazionale di Brera* (September 8th – November 9th) and the Glicenstein, Balla e Costetti exhibition. “I’m coming to Milan on the 19th or 20th of October and I plan to stay for the winter” he wrote to Ferrieri in August with his show at “Arte” scheduled for November<sup>33</sup> in mind. The exhibition was actually postponed and the artist stayed in the Lombardy city only until mid-November, when he saw Gigliotti Zanini at “Arte”, which was held during the central weeks of the month (right before Martini’s show, inaugurated on November 27th, which he didn’t in fact manage to see and hence did not write about). Due to a lack of letters and documents, it is impossible to better define these dates, although such definition is of prime importance. What is interesting here, moreover, is to note how the Florentine stay was not in fact a solid block of time, interrupted only by one trip to Rome in October<sup>34</sup>. Even though de Chirico’s contacts in Milan were few and far between (it is no coincidence that he called the city “an immense desert”<sup>35</sup>), it did not make him an isolated artist. Besides the other collaborators at «Il Convegno» in Milan, he saw Botempelli (in July 1920, Savinio lived with him). In addition to meeting up with Carrà, with whom his relationship had cooled, he had the opportunity to see other artists who gravitated around Galleria “Arte”: Gigliotti Zanini, whose work he had appreciated for some time, in which an evident influence of the Pictor Optimus was found; Funi, who in 1920 went through a strange de Chirican phase, from *Matematicus* to *Natura morta con conie e sfere*; possibly Martini, who at the time was very close to Carrà, and who, upon moving to Vado Ligure expressly asked Mazzolà to obtain a catalogue of de Chirico’s solo show for him. There is no information that the Pictor Optimus saw Sironi, who had also just gone through a metaphysical season. And, as we have already said, de Chirico did not visit the principal Milanese salons: that of Margherita Sarfatti and that of Umberto Notari. On the other hand, we do know that Giovanni Muzio was among his friends. Sixty years later as an old man, the great architect reminisced “about the cups of tea consumed at Signora Gemma’s”<sup>36</sup>, in 1920, the year he was planning the Ca’ Brutta.

### The Solo Show at Galleria “Arte”

The exhibition that de Chirico inaugurated on January 29th 1921 at Galleria “Arte”, initially programmed for November 1920, was to be the last act of his Milanese period. The artist prepared the exhibition carefully; working for almost a year, especially while he was in Florence where he executed new

<sup>32</sup> A contractual document with Broglio, signed by de Chirico at that time, is dated “Florence, October 14, 1920”. The actual contract, stipulated on October 23, 1919, was renewed and bears the date “October 23, 1920” although without the specification of place. See Fagiolo dell’Arco 1980, p. 33 and 84. The departure for Milan must have occurred immediately afterwards.

<sup>33</sup> De Chirico to Enzo Ferrieri, Florence, August 19th, 1920; in a letter to Olga Signorelli dated April 14, 1920 he speaks of “an exhibition I will have in Milan in November”. See Benzi 2002, p. 121.

<sup>34</sup> “I will come to Rome in October” wrote de Chirico to Spadini. See Fagiolo dell’Arco 1980, p. 88.

<sup>35</sup> The expression, which gives this article its title, is found in G. de Chirico, *Esposizione Sinopico, Graziosi, Nizzoli alla Galleria “Arte”*.

<sup>36</sup> G. Muzio, from an unpublished interview with Ezio Francesco Grisanti (1980), whom I thank for sharing its contents with me.

paintings for the show. To the dark, “seventeenth century” works that had had little success at the Galleria “Arte”, he substituted works of a bright manner with a transparent paint quality: an Apollonian, “Olympic” manner as he himself defined them and which constituted his most recent achievement<sup>37</sup>. Although, his undertaking did not consist merely in a study on expressive technique, nor the copies of the masterpieces executed in the museums of Florence or the long uninterrupted months of concentration on canvas and paper. The entire show was actually built on a poetic declaration<sup>38</sup>.

In the first place, the greater presence of drawings exhibited (forty drawings compared to twenty-six paintings) was already a programmatic premise: an attempt “to return to drawing as art work in and of itself”<sup>39</sup> in line with classical art theory that considers drawing as the individuation of prime form, of the eternal eidos of things. With regard to the paintings, with his “Works of Youth (1908-1915)” de Chirico reasserted his paternity of Metaphysical Art: an affirmation that was particularly needed in Milan, where only that of Carrà was known. With the “Recent Works (1919-1920)”, on one hand, with the copies of Michelangelo and Dosso the artist confirmed the importance of craft, and on the other, with his paintings focusing on the themes of Niobe, Meleager, Oedipus, Mercury, of Parnassus and of the Argonauts, he reasserted himself as a “pictor classicus”, confirming once again the value of myth and a communion with the ancients. All of these concepts (the Olympic proclivity, the primacy of drawing, the paternity of Metaphysical Art, pictorial classicism) were picked up in the catalogue’s presentation, which the artist wrote himself. In fact, he had not wanted the involvement of an art critic (although it would have been easy for him to ask Broglio, Botempelli or Castelfranco), as he preferred to certify the difference in identity that existed between the artist and the intellectual, between painting and thought, between execution and ideation, in short, between the poet and the intellectual. What de Chirico is saying is, there is no Art that is not “thought on Art” and he who most deeply understands the work of art, is not the critic – as the Romantics believed –, but the artist himself. How did the Milanese circle react to de Chirico’s one-man show? It is often repeated that the only comment was that of Somarè, who spoke of it in «Primato». In reality, while daily papers such as «Corriere della Sera» in which Ometti wrote, «La Sera» that Gialli collaborated with and «Il Secolo», all ignored the exhibition (affording space rather, not only to an official painter like Sartorio, but also to a protagonist of the avant-garde like Depero, who was exhibiting work in Milan during those weeks); «Il Convegno» didn’t review it, possibly out of an excessive act of fair play, as it was the solo show of one of its principal collaborators; and «Rassegna d’Arte» gave only a brief anonymous announcement (“A small exhibition of paintings by Giorgio de Chirico is being held”)<sup>40</sup>; others such as «Il Popolo d’Italia», «La Perseveranza» and a magazine that circulated at the time called «Il Secolo Illustrato» did otherwise. In «Il Popolo

<sup>37</sup> G. de Chirico, *Prefazione*, in the Galleria Arte exhibition catalogue, Milan, January 29 - February 12 1921.

<sup>38</sup> The exhibition catalogue shows the following list: Works of Youth (1908-1915): 1. *Self Portrait*, 2. *Self Portrait*, 3. *Portrait of a Lady*, 4. *Enigma of the Oracle*, 5. *Morning Meditation*, 6. *Afternoon Meditation version I*, 7. *Afternoon Meditation version II*, 8. *The Toys Destined by Fate*, 9. *The Apparitions*; Recent works: (1919-1920), 10. *The Prodigal Son*, 11. *The Virgin of Time*, 12. *Self Portrait*, 13. *Portraits*, 14. *Copy from Dosso Dossi (detail)*, 15. *Self Portrait*, 16. *Portrait of a Lady*, 17. *The Young Woman who is Loved*, 18. *Sleeping Niobe*, 19. *Oedipus e la Sphinx*; 20. *Parnassus (unfinished)*, 21. *Mercury and the Metaphysicians version I*, 22. *Mercury and the Metaphysicians version II*, 23. *Salute to the Departing Argonauts*, 24. *Copy from Michelangelo (The Holy Family)*, 25. *Meleagros*, 26. *The Philosopher and the Poet (unfinished work of youth)*. The list is published in Fagiolo dell’Arco 1980, p. 57.

<sup>39</sup> G. de Chirico, *Prefazione*, cit.

<sup>40</sup> *Esposizioni*, «Rassegna d’Arte antica e moderna», Milan, 1921, p. 143.

d'Italia», Margherita Sarfatti dedicated a long article to the show in which she praised de Chirico's "unique tempera" and the originality of his expressive course: a course that had eluded the avant-garde and anticipated Carrà's Metaphysics, as well as the "neo-classical" movement and painting with "idealistic content". The author, although looking carefully at the artist's recent works (for example, it is thanks to her that we know that *Meleagros*, since lost, was a "strong virile head"), cast a shadow of doubt with her praise, by accusing Metaphysical Art of a lack of "human emotion"<sup>41</sup>. Even Somarè advanced the same reserve on de Chirico's painting, criticizing Metaphysical Art as a "very abstract consideration on things, stripped of all human meaning"<sup>42</sup>. Thus it is in Italy that the accusation of an excessive cerebral approach was born, an accusation that would weigh heavily on the artist. Here we have it: if Breton brought about de Chirico's death in 1917 by not understanding what he created afterwards, here in Italy – in the same, but opposite way – the artist was granted life, because what he had created prior to that moment remained misunderstood.

But the most scalding accusations the artist had to put up with were not the comments inserted into Sarfatti's and Somarè's chorus of appreciation, nor Giacconi's general sarcasm in «Secolo Illustrato» where he liquidated his work as literature: "The 'spiritual' side of De Chirico's work is confused, asthmatic and greyish. It is true that he looks Aloft, but he does so with near-sightedness [...]. It all smacks of literary superficiality, and De Chirico, in the middle his works, seemed to me more of a mediocre collector of antiques than the 'lord of the castle' he makes himself out to be"<sup>43</sup>. No, the most insidious and provocative attack was the one that came from «Perseveranza», hitting the artist in what he most believed in: craft, his rallying cry and the very heart of his poetics. In the daily paper, a certain "B" (Bonapace?), while expressing some appreciation for the drawings on show, accused him of not knowing how to paint. "B" proclaimed that de Chirico "undeservingly attributes himself with the title 'painter' [...] He misuses the paintbrush in some of his paintings, which for the most part look like the experiments of a student, who in his free time attempts to use the paints his father or mother gave him for Christmas", and ends by saying that he misses the ancient masters who really knew how to paint and didn't "waste time theorizing in magazines"<sup>44</sup>. It was the same criticism ("talk less and work more") that de Chirico had afforded Carrà in the review of his book *Pittura metafisica* a few months earlier, which now, (possibly purposely so), was used against him<sup>45</sup>. The Subterranean Eden, as the Pictor Optimus had baptised the Galleria "Arte", turned out to be not much of a paradise for him after all, at least from a consensus point of view. But at the time, de Chirico had already left Milan. He would return to live there only in the Thirties.

<sup>41</sup> M. Sarfatti, *Giorgio de Chirico*, cit.

<sup>42</sup> E. Somarè, *Esposizioni...*, cit., p. 32.

<sup>43</sup> A. Giacconi, *Esposizioni milanesi*, «Il Secolo Illustrato», IX, n. 4, Milan, February 15th, 1921, p. 106.

<sup>44</sup> B. (Bonapace?), *De Chirico alla Casa d'Arte*, «La Perseveranza», Milan, February 2, 1921.

<sup>45</sup> G. de Chirico, *Carlo Carrà. Pittura Metafisica*, «Il Convegno», I, n. 7, Milan, August 1920, reprinted in *Il meccanismo...*, cit., p. 195.