

## DE CHIRICO AND SACRED ART

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What is sacred art? Can we really speak of sacred art or does it only belong to history, as the legacy of a world of the past? Have not modern and contemporary art, which have asserted their full autonomy from any sort of extra-artistic principle, made it impossible to become bound to a presupposition like the Sacred? And finally, if we can find an answer to these questions, what role does sacred art play in de Chirico's art, and what is his opinion in this regard?

The first question deals with the order of fundamental, metaphysical questions, and as such is not easy to give an answer to. Is sacred art a specific category of art in general, and is such a categorisation possible? Or instead, is this art form not, if it truly is art, indistinguishable in terms of its true being from what art in general is? We already know that the distinction of various genres of visual arts, like various literary genres in literature, has been falsified by completely new, promiscuous art forms with respect to past genres, to the extent that at a certain point it is even difficult to distinguish between painting and sculpture (Rauschenberg), between painting, photography and cinema (Warhol), between theatre and happenings, to say nothing, then, within the same context, of forms of infratexts and hypertexts. However, this is not a problem that concerns the possible categorisation of sacred art, because sacred art can belong to or break away from the various art forms, and thus undermine the very act of differentiation itself. From the very start, we see sacred art manifested through the images and simulacra of god created in literature, poetry (sacred hymns) and in a variety of sacred music genres, in the painting that adorns temples and the earthly dwellings of princes and men of the church, and in sculpture. Such creation attests to his earthly presence, thus becoming religious objects for veneration. Architecture also takes on countless forms in the construction of the sacred space of god, thus creating contact between heaven and Earth, and not simply in building a dwelling place for him, but by placing it on Earth so that it might clearly be seen as an opening towards the heavens: with the altar placed so that the eyes of the faithful look eastwards, towards the light, the divine source of life, and the exit westwards, where the sun sets, and with it so does life, going with us as we return to the womb of the Earth. It is in the western part of churches, in fact, that the fleeting transient remains of life are replaced and memory of them is preserved, until they come back to life and shine again.

Nevertheless, the play of architecture does not end with the mere identification of signs and tracing out the lines of the earthly abode of the sacred, nor in embellishing its external vestiges in unison with painting and sculpture. It does not simply structure the space of the god so that this struc-

ture allows for an intimate dialogue with the divine, involving everyone who enters this dwelling place. Architecture also gathers the traces of man's life that he wants to leave on Earth after his departure, from the mausoleum, in the grandiose forms of the pyramids and the entire subterranean cities of the Chinese emperors, down to Greek and Roman mausoleums and the chapels of kings, emperors, *condottieri*, popes and men of the church, middle-class citizens and common people. In the passage from grand, city-like tombs to the more modest chapels of today, sacred architecture finds itself caught in a state of imbalance between city planning on the one hand, and landscape art on the other, where it becomes (or perhaps has always been) an art form that conceives of man's space in coherent accord with the *All* and in harmony with the life of Nature.

This passing of sacred art from one form to the other of what we conceive of as forms of different artistic and literary genres, today seems to do away with any possibility of categorising, and with this, any possibility of identifying sacred art, to the extent that it ends up as an empty name. If however, we cannot pin the concept of sacred art down as an art genre to which it should belong, it seems that we might be able to try to do so as far as the content is concerned. For this reason sacred art has come to be considered as *art of the Sacred*, or as the whole of all of those art forms that have the Sacred as their subject.

Here, however, we come up against a dangerous misunderstanding that consists in taking something for an object that is not an object – that is, the Sacred. It is not the object that is represented, the likeness of the god or the dwelling place of the god, or the event, the historical picture that is illustrated. In that way, sacred art would not be a genre of art, but rather, what we usually call genre works, art on commission, known above all in Christian art, especially in the art of the papal and ecclesiastical courts. De Chirico saw all of this very clearly, and in his essay on sacred art, *L'Arte sacra* (attributed to Isabella Far)<sup>1</sup>, he rebuts this way of understanding sacred art, because true art, in as much as it is the art of universal genius at work in the artist, transcends simple occasional art or patronage. De Chirico even went so far as to say that true art, even pagan art, was sacred art. All scenes of life and pagan religiousness, he states, go hand in hand with representations of scenes with the Holy Family, or the Old and New Testament. Thus, it is something else that moves sacred art; it is the intentional principle that constitutes its *raison d'être* and the vivifying spirit that enlivens the representation from within. It is the artist's way of searching for the vestiges of the divine in his own world, and to let his need for the absolute overflow therein. It is this that has given origin to sacred art from the very beginning. It is the moment when song – as the simple expression of joy for the world and life – bursts out in thanks and praise, whilst searching for notes that are more consonant to the full expression of such feeling. Or even in the expression of pain, when tears are shed in the search for help or comfort, and at the same time notes are sought so that this cry of mourning or help might be as clear and well modulated as possible, out of respect and veneration for the one to whom this address is made. The same thing happens with dance, when joy and pain urge the whole body to move, and the human soul, or the soul of the artist, seeks and finds those forms of movement that are most appro-

<sup>1</sup> See G. de Chirico - I. Far, *L'Arte sacra*, in *Commedia dell'arte moderna*, Traguardi, Nuove edizioni italiane, Rome 1945, pp. 216-219. Now in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/I* (1911-1945). *Romanzi e Scritti critici e teorici*, A. Cortellesa, ed. A. Bonito Oliva, dir., Bompiani, Milan 2008, pp. 522-527.

priate to conveying all of the different expressions of joy, gratitude, anguish and tragic suffering. And it is this search that turns the simple expression of feeling into artistic expression, as well as religious expression, as these two belong together, so much so that Hegel rightly spoke of artistic religion.

De Chirico, too, thought the same about sculpture and the visual arts, as we know from his first Paris manuscripts<sup>2</sup>: primeval Greek man attributed the turbine of the wind, the rustle of foliage, the crash of thunder and the streak of lightning to the gods. Thus the original sensation of the Greek artist was to use his hands to shape the face of his god, whose presence he felt; his will was to make this face visible, to have it in front of him, to communicate with it and find explanations for the enigmas of existence and destiny. This is exactly the theme of the great painting *The Enigma of the Oracle*.

The real problem emerging here, and that we are inquiring into, is whether sacred art should be understood at this point as the beginning itself, as the root of art, and hence whether true art – great art – must indeed be understood as sacred art. Basically, this is Hegel's thesis; for us, art has something of the past about it because it is no longer understood as religion, it is no longer experienced as authentic divine service, or no longer concerned with the Absolute. It is in the passage from classical art (that was still, as symbolic art before it, an artistic religion) to Romantic art that art becomes something of the past. The reason for this is that Romantic literature has taken the artist's speculation beyond the concept of art as beauty and focused, rather, on his own artistic-expressive problems, making them the principal objective and the object of the work of art itself.

This thought is at the basis of de Chirico's harsh and in the end obsessive dispute against modern art and what he called "Modernism". Art ceases to be art when it forgets the long, hard process of work, refinement and education, which is necessary for the artist to achieve his work, a process aimed at reaching that expressive ability that makes authentic expression of feeling possible. But this is precisely why art is not simply feeling, and sacred art, if it must be called art, cannot simply be understood as the expression of religious feeling. It dictates instead the acquisition of a skill, and work and effort to make progress towards the achievement and in the refinement of one's work, which is at the same time morally uplifting.<sup>3</sup> For the artist, the reward for this work and this effort is nothing other than the feeling of being closer to divine mystery, to fulfilling the divine genius acting within him.

In de Chirico, too, we thus find the conception of Genius that, through Kant, penetrated the whole of Romanticism and then continued unchanged and unscathed for the entire nineteenth century, even going so far as to enliven the ideas of Van Gogh and Gauguin, Cézanne, Matisse, etc. Despite his diffidence or even hostility towards Van Gogh and Cézanne, de Chirico shared these ideas, which they explicitly professed. He could very well be scandalised that a painting by Matisse had been placed in a church in the south of France<sup>4</sup>, however, in Matisse we find the same consciousness of the artist who works on a piece of sacred art that we find in the artists that de Chirico

<sup>2</sup> See G. de Chirico, Paulhan manuscripts (1911-15) in *ibid.*, pp. 649-659.

<sup>3</sup> See G. de Chirico - I. Far, *op. cit.*, p. 218. In *Scritti/1*, cit., p. 525.

<sup>4</sup> In an interview of 1951 (folder 176, Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico Archives): "In southern France some paintings by Matisse have been hung in a chapel, and they are truly horrible. I wonder how the faithful can be forced to pray beneath an image of Christ or the Madonna so outrageously deformed, and seemingly painted by someone who has never picked up a paintbrush. The ecclesiastical authorities in Rome have already revolved and protested violently. We hope that they continue, not only to protest, but also to strictly forbid this defacement". In *La Passione secondo de Chirico*, exhibition catalogue, A. Cortellesa, ed. A. Bonito Oliva, dir., De Luca, Rome 2004, p. 32-33.

so admired, like Raphael, Tintoretto, Correggio, Murillo<sup>5</sup>, and others. Where is the difference with respect to what these artists do, or with respect to what he himself would do? Is it only a question of different taste, or of different skill?

We know that the parish priest of a church in Brittany rejected Gauguin's crucifixion, the *Yellow Christ*, which the painter had wanted to give to the parish for the main altar of the church. The priest thought it was too ugly, despite the work's intense expressive power. In this painting Gauguin portrayed himself in Christ's face, and it is even referred to as the *Self-portrait as the Yellow Christ*. The artist, who was going through a very difficult moment in his life, identified himself with Christ on the cross in this work, an intention which is not the simple portrayal of a religious theme, but something more: it is obviously not a crucifixion, but a self-identification with the story of the crucifixion as a primary event that the artist felt was being repeated in his own life.

In any case, the primary event is not just any event. For him, who had been touched by it, it is an extraordinary, exemplary event – an event that belongs to another order of history that we call, in fact, sacred, or salvific history, the history of salvation; and precisely what allows us to identify the true nature of sacred art: *sacred art consists of this participation in sacred history*, as the history of the salvation and redemption of mankind, and not in simply rendering it in an object of representation (art of the Sacred).

Therefore, sacred art basically presupposes two things: an event from sacred history and a desire on the part of the artist to participate in this sacred history, to participate in it as a human being and as an artist, which in this case are indissolubly linked. It is, in fact, the artist as man of faith who participates through his work in this sacred history as the history of salvation: a history in which his art is his own personal contribution. Sacred art is thus not art of the Sacred, or simply art on commission, but the art of the man of faith who participates in this history, and who as artist participates in one more way, by contributing to the interpretation, to deepening it and hence to the continuous revelation of the mystery, in this case the mystery of suffering, death, redemption from evil, and finally salvation.

The example of Gauguin who repeats this self-identification in other works, like the *Green Christ* and *Gethsemane*, or *Christ in the Garden of Olives*, is not an isolated example. In the past, Grünewald had undertaken a similar action of self-identification with the crucifix, and now we know that de Chirico had also tried something like this.

The artist left behind a drawing of a *Self-Portrait as Christ on Calvary* (1946), which was originally a *Study for the Ascent of Calvary*. But in the painting *The Descent from, or Ascent of Calvary*, (fig. 1) de Chirico did not use this drawing. He no longer painted himself in the figure and face of Christ, and he let this idea fall by the wayside. Evidently, he had changed his mind about the painting, and wanted to do something different, which is interesting for our understanding of his conception of sacred art. In the painting we have the figure of Jesus in the background, on his knees or lying on the ground, holding himself up with his right hand and raising his left hand, in the act of

<sup>5</sup> See G. de Chirico, *Raffaello Sanzio*, "Il Convegno", Milan-Rome, a. I, n. 3, April 1920. Now in *Scritti/I*, cit., pp. 358-367.

fig. 1 Giorgio de Chirico, *The Descent from, or Ascent of Calvary*, 1947, oil on canvas, Franciscan community, San Francesco a Ripa Grande, Rome



either blessing the onlookers or asking for help from on high – we cannot tell. Behind him stand men stripped to the waist, raising his cross. In the foreground instead, another man with his hands tied behind his back is led to Calvary. One Roman soldier watches him and another on horseback escorts him; both are armed with lances. Another man may be untying this man's hands so that he, too, can be crucified. In front of the soldier on horseback, we can make out the figure and face of St. Francis, wrapped in his habit, filling up the lower right hand corner of the painting. We know it is him not only because of the habit, but also because of another drawing that de Chirico had sketched, again for this painting.<sup>6</sup> Above him we can make out a face, but it is cut in half by the right edge of the painting; this may be de Chirico's face.

Thus the Master of enigmas in the end wants to conceal himself behind the painting, or better, behind the representation. It is no longer the meaning of the painting that must remain hidden, as in early Metaphysical Art, but rather, contrary to the intention behind the artist's self-identification with *Christ* in Gauguin, the artist himself becomes a viewer pure and simple – almost extraneous – with regard to the representation of sacred history. Why, we might wonder, did de Chirico abandon his self-identification with the falling Christ in the ascent to Calvary? Why has he introduced the figure of St. Francis and why has he separated the scene so distinctly into the foreground scene, with the

<sup>6</sup> See Giorgio de Chirico, *Self-portrait as Christ on Calvary (Study of a figure for the Ascent of Calvary)*, 1946, 22.5 x 30 cm.

authentic ascent to Calvary, in short, the history of a sinful, suffering humanity that must go down the path of universal history (the evildoer followed by St. Francis, mercy and forgiveness), from the background scene, with the story of the crucifixion of Jesus as the foundation of sacred history?

Perhaps the reason for this can be found in the text de Chirico wrote commenting upon his illustration of the *Apocalypse*: “As I have already said, the artist is allowed to ‘move’. From point A, which represents the known world and from point B, which represents the unknown world, and from the mutual exchange of good and evil, but more evil than good, running between these two points, I change my position completely, and with my Faber number 2 pencil, with my trusty sharpener, my *Elefante* brand rubber and my notebook of drawing paper, I go and situate myself at a third point C. From this point, finding myself in the safety zone of ‘relativity’, I enjoy the pleasure of the observer, the viewer and the creator. The ‘errors’ and ‘unexplainable differences’ disappear. The points, assisted by lines, join each other; the lines closed by points feel safe; each sign of the mysterious shorthand is at home and happy. And this is how the spectacle of drawing comes into being.”<sup>7</sup>

De Chirico’s reflection on the matter must have been the following: artistic representation, whilst within the realm of sacred art, is no longer simply enigmatic, instead, it must grasp the authentic, sacred meaning of history, and it must contribute to increasing it with its own interpretation. What is represented is thus no longer a simple ascent to Calvary, a scene from history, but a fundamental moment in the history of salvation, which remains in the background of the painting almost “behind the scene” of what is represented. This is what is being said here regarding the relationship of the foreground, the known world or the surface of the scene, to the unknown world, the world of the meaning of the story, or of the divine taking place. The artist can go from one world to the other, in that he represents, and at the same time asks himself about the meaning of what he represents, but he does not identify himself with either of the two points [of view], since only in this way is it possible for him to take part in both points of view and compare them: that is to say, only in this way is it possible to represent the meaning of sacred history, its revisitation and reinstatement, or repetition in the history of the artist and his world. In order to be able to do this, the artist must not simply identify with what is represented, whether from one or from the other part of the painting: whether from profane history (the known world) or from sacred history (the unknown world, because the object of faith alone). He must instead abstract from this immediacy of fact and of life. He must compose and interpret in order to represent the mystery: but he can no longer, for this reason, make himself the object of representation, by fully identifying himself with it and its mystery. He must instead withdraw, just as he must withdraw from historical destiny, and make of himself a pure observer of the mystery that he represents and takes part in. It is this superior self-knowledge of the artist that leads him to assume the role of the viewer and withdraw from the represented scene, so that he can grasp its meaning entirely while representing it.

De Chirico even has a name for the artist’s superior self-knowledge, in which he feels “observer, viewer and creator” at the same time: he calls it the “safety zone of *relativity*”<sup>8</sup>. The two points of

<sup>7</sup> See G. de Chirico, *Perché ho illustrato l'Apocalisse*, “Stile”, Milan, n. 1, January 1941. Now in *Scritti/1*, cit., pp. 893-895.

<sup>8</sup> It is possible that de Chirico had Einstein’s *Theory of Relativity* in mind; on this see R. Schiebler *Giorgio de Chirico and the Theory of Relativity*, Lecture at Stanford University, October 1988, now in “*Metafisica*” n. 1/2, Téchne Editore, Milan 2002, pp. 211-222.

view – the one of the immediate gaze onto the known world, and the one of faith, which leads to the unknown world – never coincide, although they are not erroneous or fictitious. However, they never coincide for point C, either. Point C is the point of view of observation, which compares both, but not through his observation, because point C is also a relative point of view. With the phrase “as I have already said, the artist is allowed to move”, his discourse on sacred art concludes, and despite this, in this zone of relativity, he can compare the two worlds, living in one and in the other, and at the same time, neither in one nor in the other: he is three things, viewer of the history of the world, viewer of the sacred history of salvation and, last but not least, viewer as artist: but then the points join up by themselves, and he is witness to sacred history, in this relativity of his.

Here de Chirico truly shows that he is a contemporary or even post-modern thinker. In fact, what constitutes the fundamental reason for Heidegger’s and Gadamer’s *philosophy of finiteness* as opposed to Hegel’s thought (considered the end point of all modern thought), is precisely the refusal to believe that the observer’s point of view, which emerges in Hegel in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* as the point of view of comparison between immediate and reflected consciousness, is, in fact, an absolute point of view. Once this road has been taken, the epilogue with absolute knowledge is inevitable. Thus, it is precisely the position on sacred art that closes this eventuality, or this final, inauspicious landing place of modern thought.

The presupposition of sacred art is, in fact, the continuous opening to sacred history for the artist who takes part in it without simply making it an object of representation. Artistic representation becomes the moment when the artist, personally engaged in human history or universal history, takes part at the same time in another history – sacred history or the history of salvation, irreducible to the first and hence taking part in the latter from a relative point of view. His participation as artist in both of these histories is possible only as point C, which is sacred art itself, the artist’s making/doing as “divine service”: it is service rendered to the Sacred as art, hence as sacred art.

This last “point of view” or this last approach, is hence also relative, and that is why sacred history itself, and not simply the history of the art of the Sacred, still remains open: open for making art, which is continuous interpretation of *kerygma*, or the divine message, while being confronted with universal history, or while confronting sacred history as the history of salvation. In this sense, the artist’s service is a service rendered to the divine and at the same time to humanity: it is sacred history and at the same time universal history.

Hence we can thus recapitulate the main points concerning the issue of sacred art in de Chirico’s *œuvre*:

1. *Sacred art* is bound up with *sacred history*, as much as it is also bound up with the will of the single artist, to his work of learning and maturing his stylistic means, to his education, the purity and perfection of great art inspired by genius;
2. Sacred art is certainly great art, or if we will, true art, the authentic art of genius, or authentic art *tout-court*, while its opposite would be unauthentic art, or what he calls “false art”<sup>9</sup>, which is arti-

<sup>9</sup> See G. de Chirico-Isabella Far, *op. cit.*, p. 218, in *Scritti/I*, cit. p. 524: “In art, when it is truly a question of art, everything is allowed, but what is absolutely forbidden to do is make false art, to construct, as is the custom today, false and bizarre artistic theories, which persist only because of people’s incomprehension, of the real value, and the lack of intelligence of most them”.

face pure and simple, mere concern for one's own stylistic means or to apply one's expressive means to a theme: art as reflection pure and simple, the death of art. But that does not mean that authentic art, true art is only sacred art. Great art is the art of universal genius, which makes the artist feel the presence of the divine, or through which the artist is capable of feeling the presence of the divine, but it is outside the realm of the events of sacred history;

3. Thus the difficulty of categorising sacred art, both from a subjective point of view, or one of feeling, as well as from an objective point of view, or one of content. Sacred art certainly belongs to a religious tradition, which might be Christian, which was the painter's own, hence the one he knew best: but which is not, however, the art of the Sacred. In any event, the history of a religious tradition is the unquestionable basis of his sacred art, but sacred art is fundamentally defined by the artist's twofold participation in it: as artist and as man of faith, united in the point of view of the relativity of the viewer;

4. In the last years of his life, the defence of this tradition was a fixed point for de Chirico, even in the context of his "anti-modernist" debate. Now, we can acknowledge the futility of this polemic, since in any case we cannot simply order the emergence of authentic art and prohibit unauthentic art. Both are subject to judgment, but in any event, one can only act as viewer, or at best as buyer. Again, even if de Chirico's indignation at the installation of Matisse's paintings in the church in Provence brings to mind the refusal of the parish priest in Brittany to accept the *Yellow Christ* for the main altar of his church, we would not necessarily be subject to revocations of the Inquisition if he were to ask prelates or patrons of the Church of his time, or even the Vatican, to be cautious about or prohibit the purchase of "modernist" paintings. Instead, we would take it simply as the rejection of a kind of art that de Chirico held to be unauthentic since it failed to comply with the canons of tradition. In this, he forgot that he was indeed one of the first painters of the twentieth century to cause a crisis in these canons.

However, we must not blame him for wanting to defend his conception of sacred art, but rather give him credit for having believed in the function that sacred art had had in the past, and can still have as inspiration for great art. Thus, if to the interview question: "What do you think of the exhibition of Sacred Art?" he answered: "I think it is blasphemy and a disgrace and if churches began to look this way, no one would go any longer; the faithful would find more worthy places to worship God"<sup>10</sup>, we must not think that an injustice is being done if today his sacred art is thought of and studied.

*Translated by Clarice Zdanski*

<sup>10</sup> See *L'art moderne et l'église* (folder 176, Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico Archives), dated 18 November 1952: "Ce que je pense de l'exposition de l'Art sacré? Je pense que c'est une blasphémie et une honte et si les églises prenaient cet aspect personne n'irait plus là dedans; le fidèles trouveraient des endroits plus dignes pour vénérer Dieu."