

MR. DE CHIRICO, A PAINTER PREDICTS AND HOPES FOR THE TRIUMPH OF MODERNISM¹ (“COMŒDIA” 12 DECEMBER 1927)

Mr. Giorgio de Chirico lives in Paris. He has settled here definitively. He thinks it is the only city where one can “pursue a career”, the only city that urges one to work, that inspires and fortifies.

He tells me that “there is no modern art movement in Italy. Neither dealers nor galleries. Modern Italian painting does not exist. There’s Modigliani and myself, but we are practically French.

Italians are often uncomprehending by nature and derisive by habit. They are hostile to any modern movement. When you show them a canvas of the new tendency they laugh, without trying to penetrate its meaning or technique”.

Isn’t there a cubist movement in Italy?

“There’s no cubist movement; there’s only a futurist movement but it hasn’t produced any works. It isn’t enough to make discourses and swing punches to right and left. In one way or another paintings and books must be created.

In a certain sense these futurists are ingenuous. I don’t like their pseudo-heroism. They appear to have taken a wrong approach, using speed, élan and power, all things that fundamentally have nothing to do with art”.

Mr. Giorgio de Chirico speaks in clear, precise phrases. Each of his words, when I transcribe it, seems a definition. They don’t have this rather dogmatic aspect when they come from the painter’s lips. Because Mr. de Chirico’s voice is very gentle, slightly hesitant, with almost timid inflexions which lend apparent complexity to the simplest words and an affable air to the toughest sentences.

“As a painter and as a modern spirit I feel more in harmony in France than in Italy.

I reproach Italy for taking an attitude of incomprehension with regard to the modern movement. This notwithstanding, the modern French school is fairly appreciated there. But not the latest modern school. The works that chiefly influence the most advanced Italian painters are those of Derain and Vlaminck.

I love the most advanced and newest things. And it is also due to my personal tastes that I do not think at all highly of Italian art today”.

Mr. de Chirico then went on to talk about intellectual relations between Italy and France.

“I cannot believe in an intense intellectual exchange. Italy would have to develop if such an exchange were to bear any fruit. But Italy is not developing in the least. Even if there is a small painting movement in Milan, for all the rest there is an awful official Italy. And these ‘official’ painters are not even serious. Bonnat is far superior. They produce something like a poor Henri Martin mixed with a poor Besnard”.

Don’t you believe in a renewed future for Italian painting?

“I hope for it. But how will it come about? Rome is a very fine city that has developed, especially since Fascism, but it has developed politically, industrially and in finance more than artistically. The future cannot

¹ English translation, interview by Pierre Lagarde published in the column “L’Italie et nous”, “Comœdia”, Paris 12 December 1927.

be predicted. I hope that art will develop in turn, and as soon as possible”.

Mr. Giorgio de Chirico is not only a painter. Over and above articles of art criticism he has written poetry in French where indubitably, as in his paintings, he is seen to be in love first and foremost with “the most advanced and newest things”, poems that have appeared in magazines such as “La Révolution surréaliste” and “La Ligne de Cœur”. I ask him which masters he acknowledges among Italian writers.

“Masters?” replies Mr. de Chirico, “but I don’t see any. There have been some good writers, like Papini and Soffici. They have fallen into decline”.

Mr. Giorgio de Chirico stands up brusquely. He goes to the window. The light strikes his grey hair, his low, tight, stubborn forehead. He turns towards me, suddenly with more of a smile in spite of the persistent grimace on his lips:

“How one feels at home, here at your home, how one perceives in both the appreciation of art, of the spirit, of the individual who creates; how one feels the respect”.

And recalling that he is also a poet, the painter Giorgio de Chirico concludes our meeting as follows:

“If our two countries lack interpenetration and exchange, it is because the Italians lack talent. Behold a man and a woman. The woman is of a marvellous, dazzling beauty. The man on the contrary has neither beauty nor charm. Turn these two beings into a couple. The man will love the woman, and the woman will love the man less. They are not made for each other. They are too different to love in an equitable manner. The man will be jealous on feeling that the woman loves him less. And he will remain so until a miracle should give him the beauty of his companion.

It is the same thing between us. France is the beautiful woman. This explains the misunderstanding, the lack of comprehension and love. But let the miracle happen, let Italy develop, let its arts develop, let people stop being amused about the attempts and successes of modern spirits, then intellectual exchange will define itself, will come forth once again, richer and more fecund...”.

Translated by David Smith