

## FROM *THE COMEDY OF MODERN ART* TO AN ENIGMA<sup>1</sup>

Katherine Robinson

When de Chirico published the well-structured collection of his essays under the title *The Comedy of Modern Art* in 1945,<sup>2</sup> he did so with the clear intention of making known his theoretical and critical writings on art more widely known. The *Comedy* comprises of essays from 1918 to 1945 and, as a whole, constitutes a true treatise on art history: from elucidation on his own art, critique on the work of artists his contemporaries, on classical art, sacred art and the representation of nature, through to theatre performance. De Chirico's identity as the author of the collection is partially veiled by the use of a pseudonym for the essays in the second part of the book that are published under his wife Isabella Far's name. As such, he introduced the unexpected masquerade of a female figure as a source of his written work. The artist's custom of disguising his pen under another name has been amply recognised over the years. A pseudonym is however destined to a short life thanks to the acquisition of greater knowledge on the artist's thought, as well as an understanding of the motives behind such publication choices. With de Chirico, such unveiling can take place thanks to clues planted here and there that do not escape the attention of the researcher: a suggestive element or clue is always an incentive to go *beyond* appearances. Indeed, it is a way of looking at the world that is an inherent aspect of his own approach to reality and his intuitive vision that sparked the discovery of Metaphysical Art.

De Chirico published his *Memoirs* the same year. It is a moment in which he made his voice heard, sharing with the greater public his experience of a life dedicated to art, advancing at times even scalding judgement on the dysfunctions of an epoch that brought about, not only the devastation of the war that had just drawn to a close, but also what he perceived as a loss of art's fundamental principles within modernism. This protest is particularly evident in the second part of *The Comedy of Modern Art*, in texts such as *Considerations on Modern Painting*, *Desecrated Reality* and *A Discourse on Mentality*.<sup>3</sup> His current pictorial oeuvre included a number of important self-portraits characterised by a symmetry of opposites: two naked self-portraits (one sitting and one standing) and the first of his famous self-portraits in costume, the large *Self-Portrait in Black*

<sup>1</sup> Article published in the original Italian, *Dalla Commedia all'enigma*, in "Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico" n. 17/18, 2018, pp. 155-176.

<sup>2</sup> G. de Chirico e Isabella Far, *Commedia dell'arte moderna*, Traguardi-Nuove Edizioni Italiane, Rome 1945; English translation, *The Comedy of Modern Art*, in "Metaphysical Art" n. 14/16, 2016, pp. 29-161.

<sup>3</sup> Id., *Considerazioni sulla pittura moderna*, in "Stile", Milan January 1942, pp. 1-6; republished signed "Isabella Far" in G. de Chirico, I. Far, *Commedia dell'arte moderna*, cit., pp. 133-149. *La realtà profanata* and *Discorso sulla mentalità*, date to 1945 and were published under Isabella's name.

*Costume*, 1948, in which he portrayed himself in a luxurious 17<sup>th</sup> century costume borrowed for the occasion from the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma. The intense immediacy of the first two paintings, in which he bared himself as artist and man, juxtaposed with the sumptuous costume of the third one in which he immersed himself in another world and another time, characterises an articulated staging aimed at transferring essential elements of his art: from the enigma of *being* to the *mise en scène* of *The Comedy of Modern Art*.

The year 1945 was characterised, as mentioned, by an extensive literary production that also included a brief memoir, *1918-1925: Ricordi di Roma* [Memories of Rome] and a fictional work, *Une aventure de Monsieur Dudron*. At the end of the year a book appeared in France under the title *A propos de peinture* signed “E. G. Benito”, published in Paris by Publications techniques et artistiques.<sup>4</sup> The following year, in December 1946, de Chirico wrote an enthusiastic review of this book in “La Fiera Letteraria”, a weekly Roman newspaper, in which he defined *A propose de peinture* as “a truly exceptional book”, while expressing his suspicion that the author may have “read the essays included in *The Comedy of Modern Art*.”<sup>5</sup> He specifies in the review that the book is a “critique of modern painting” written with “great intelligence, with great acumen and much courage” and, in indicating its authorship, states: “the author *signs himself* as E. G. Benito, probably a pseudonym” [Author’s italics, *ed.*].

The possible use of the pseudonym “E. G. Benito” by de Chirico is an enigma that is difficult to decipher, as it is indeed the name of a Spanish artist who was a contemporary of his. Art-deco painter and illustrator Eduardo Garcia Benito was born in Valladolid in the north of Spain in 1891 and is especially known for the beautiful illustrations he executed for hundreds of “Vogue” magazine covers. The paths of the two artists crossed a number of times over the course of their private and professional lives, although no proof exists of a personal acquaintance. Both lived in Paris between 1912 and 1916 and at various intervals in the 1920s and 1930s. It is however unlikely they met during their first stay in the city as the then 21-year-old Benito was a scholarship student at École des Beaux-Arts and de Chirico was working on his own, initially with few frequentations in the Parisian artistic milieu.

The article published in “La Fiera Letteraria” was singled out by Paolo Picozza, President of the de Chirico Foundation, during the processing of material for the second volume of de Chirico’s writings due for publication [vol. 1, Bompiani 2008]. The content of de Chirico’s review immediately gave rise to the suspicion that the book was another case of his use of a pseudonym and, in consideration of the above premises, the strong doubt that the volume’s author was none other than de Chirico himself. Meanwhile, it is with amused irony that one sees de Chirico’s enthusiasm at having “found” a French ally for his fight against modernism and for the safeguarding of painting technique proficiency. Especially as he had just recently posed the question: “Is it possible – I

<sup>4</sup> E.G. Benito, *A propos de peinture*, Publications techniques et artistiques, Paris 1945.

<sup>5</sup> G. de Chirico, *Un libro francese sulla pittura moderna* in “La Fiera Letteraria”, Rome 12 December 1946; see the English translation in this periodical.

wondered – that everything must be done badly and ever worse in art today; is it possible that I have to be a ‘monomachos’<sup>6</sup> *par excellence*?<sup>7</sup> Similar to a theatrical playbill, the article in “La Fiera Letteraria” announces the debut of a new protagonist, a kindred spirit who “proves to be not only an exceptional connoisseur of paintings but also a man of elevated sentiment, a poet, an effective voice”, whilst entering the stage of an increasingly intriguing one man show.

In the book review, entitled *A French Book on Modern Painting*, de Chirico offers a number of quotes directly in French, beginning with the first chapter: *A Little History*, in which he imagines a symposium of artists active in “the year of grace 1637”: Poussin, Jordaens, Ribera, Zurbaran, Velasquez, Van Dyke and Rembrandt, ideally gathered around their older Master, Rubens. Comparing the concurrence of such great talent in a given historical moment, the author specifies that the current decadence in painting is not due to a lack of talent in his contemporaries, but rather, to the loss of rules that have been “for centuries the lynchpin of the art of painting”. The term “metier” is indicated as the book’s *leit-motiv*. “Beautiful, just and touching words” comments de Chirico, who at that time had written extensively on the decline of the art of painting owing to the loss of technique. A further passage chosen from the book accuses upcoming, profiteering merchants for having provoked an explosion of eccentricity in painting who, guided by foolish snobbism, have caused a “total distortion of taste” in the public. De Chirico concludes his praise on a note of optimism, once more fruit of “Benito’s” pen, that assigns future generations the role of resuscitating art: “The Art of the past may be dead, but uniquely due to our inability. The greatest task a new generation of artists can undertake is that of resuscitating it in all its splendour”.

The book is printed with large characters and comprises of thirty-five brief chapters, from the shortest of just two pages to the longest dedicated to *The School of Paris*. The easy to handle paperback-form provides a supple backdrop upon which a clear echo of de Chirico’s thoughts resounds in straightforward and engaging language. Much of the content is in accordance with the underlining force of *The Comedy of Modern Art* and is aimed at increasing awareness on the precious spiritual asset that art represents and the enormous harm that the loss of this asset signifies for humanity. The ethical reach of de Chirico’s reflection is even more pronounced here than in *The Comedy*, with a number of main principles presented in the *Preface*, such as, “The purpose of man is the pursuit of moral and physical ‘Beauty’”, which is indicated as a sacred objective of mankind and put in juxtaposition with another force that moves the world: the destruction of beauty and “the disintegration of all harmonious construction”. The author places this existential battle within the arena of Painting: “Some may find it rather puerile to speak of painting in connection with these two forces whose acknowledgement, as old as the world, is found in all religions.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> A Greek epithet meaning “he who fights alone”.

<sup>7</sup> G. de Chirico, *Miscellanea*, in *Commedia dell’arte moderna*, Traguardi, Nuove edizioni italiane, Rome 1945, pp. 104-108; English translation, *Miscellany*, in “Metaphysical Art” n. 14/16, 2016, pp. 85-87.

<sup>8</sup> The book’s title – *A propos de peinture* – is quoted in direct form in the original sentence: “*Cela pourra paraître à certains un peu puéril que nous parlions ici, à propos de peinture, de ces deux forces*”. In French, the term “*A propos de* [subject]” in a title is commonly used in theatre for a brief

This initial, although not-exhaustive, analysis has brought to light a multitude of significant correspondences between the Benito book and de Chirico's written work of various periods and genres, from theoretic to critical studies, treatises on artistic technique, narrative works such as *Hebdomeros* and *Mr. Dudron*, up to the polemic articles he published in daily newspapers, as we shall see. Correlations have come to light in thirty or so texts in *The Comedy of Modern Art* alone, from *We Metaphysicians* and *On Metaphysical Art* of 1919, to a dozen or so more current texts of 1945, including *A Discourse on Mentality*, *Desecrated Reality*, *On Sacred Art*, *The Metaphysics of Dance* and *Masks and Disguises*. In addition to the similarities seen in various subjects and themes treated, a clear congruence comes to light between de Chirico's reasoning and opinions expressed in his written work, and those found in the rich "pamphlet" signed Benito, which, with extraordinary synthesis, often raises the discussion to a higher level.

The theoretic elaboration detailed in *A propos de peinture* gradually reveals the heart of de Chirico's way of thinking in a complete and clear form. The book signed "Benito" is a mature treatise of the artist's reflection that can be used as a guide or treasure map with which to navigate his historical writings in order to grasp the core thought of a genius who, even though he had always written in a clear and generous way, in this book offers an unusual key of interpretation to his thoughts on art and on the destiny of humanity. The content of the small book revolves around the artist's theoretical corpus with instant connections, clear synthesis and well thought-out reasoning.

The anonymous fashion in which this rebel book was put into circulation in 1945, was not at all like a call to arms, but rather, as a vehicle to propagate ideas in a future, more comprehensive environment, much like a time capsule containing highly artistic and philosophic ideas put into orbit by a genial and engaged mind that today, more than seventy years later, appears on the horizon of our attention.

The volume's temporal contextualisation is that of the post-war period, like other essays in *The Comedy*: "Does Art have anything to do with the current tragedy? Is painting an indispensable raw material like coal, iron, oil and tin, for the possession of which peoples must fight and die? Painting was known to man before he knew iron, coal, oil and tin. Art is the first manifestation of the spirit of man. The flint axe is yet animal; the cave paintings in Altamira are already man". For de Chirico, art is certainly a basic necessity of mankind, insomuch as it a sign of man's first "awareness" and is revelatory indicator of humanity's spiritual condition. Art is compared to a long chain to which "From time to time in this long line, a man with a privileged gift adds a new value". This concept is a new synthesis, as it is not present in *The Comedy*, at least in the form of the clear metaphor of the chain, in which progress is not a question of change but rather of the acquisition of spiritual values upon a line of continuity. The author explains that the public for whom he is writing is composed of "a small number of old-fashioned dreamers" still attached to moral values created by those who have come before and which give form to the "spiritual attainment of mankind".

The two main guidelines of the discourse are accurately delineated in the *Preface* relative to

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play that treats a specific subject. De Chirico's choice of the term reveals an analogy with the title *The Comedy of Modern Art*.

Man's long and arduous passage out of darkness: Ethics and Aesthetics: "Without ethics man returns to being an animal. Aesthetics, it is true, is auxiliary to ethics, but it completes the latter by giving it visible form." Art is therefore a tangible manifestation of the mankind's conduct toward good and evil, and the expression of the spirit across thousands of centuries prior to our epoch: "from the menhir and the rough-hewn idol of primitive civilisations to the splendour of cathedrals, the path man's creative spirit has walked upon is long. It is up to us to preserve it and, if possible, to continue this bearing of witness". In the chapter *On Spirit*, composed of brief aphorisms of an extremely efficient communicative power, one reads: "Art is a need for exteriorization, the materialization of the Spirit" and, further on, "Works of art bear witness of a civilisation to the generations that follow". In order to emphasize evolution's effort over time, author "Benito" – as de Chirico had similarly done in another text as we shall see – went all the way back to Man's biological past: "Sight, hearing and speech: these appeared in nature only after an ongoing and progressive effort over the centuries, the marvellous and mysterious spectacle of which surpasses all understanding. From protozoon to man, the way is marked with this liberation". In *Zeuxis the Explorer* of 1918, de Chirico wrote: "The ancient Cretans printed an enormous eye in the middle of the skinny profiles that chase each other around their vases, their domestic tools and the walls of their houses. Even the foetus of a man, of a fish, of a chicken, of a serpent is, in its first stage, is all eye. You must find the eye in every thing". The eye is the beginning. Man would surely not relinquish the potentiality afforded to him by sight or spoken word, qualities that have allowed the spirit to communicate. Why then should he neglect or ignore the "spiritual attainment of mankind", which is also the fruit of a long journey, imparted to us by those who have come before and that has contributed to giving shape to ethics?

A concept of similar anthropological value is found in a text of the early 1940s that remained unpublished in de Chirico's lifetime and was published by the Foundation in 2006: *The Hand and Mind (on Drawing)*, in which he remarks on how the human mind managed to develop in such a considerable way thanks to the conformation of the hand, whose agility was not granted to other living beings, and which allowed man to transform an idea into a tangible object. The alliance between mind and hand: "is the factor which has made possible the rise of our civilisation and the creation of numerous works (including authentic masterpieces) and therefore the birth and existence of Art".<sup>9</sup> The loss of manual and technical ability in the modern artist, a problem spoken of in *The Comedy of Modern Art* and a central theme of the Benito book, would deprive humanity of the means with which to give form to the spiritual values it carries within. The *leit-motiv*, "metier", together with the guidelines set in place with the concepts of Ethics and Aesthetics, contribute to the definition of the artist's fundamental role, which is to: "safeguard the spiritual values laboriously acquired by the generations that have gone before us, values that do not change: one loses them or preserves them. As far as 'modern Art' is concerned, our fear is that they are in the process of being

<sup>9</sup> Id., *Il cervello e la mano (sul disegno)*, in "Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico" n. 5/6, 2006, p. 530; English translation p. 532.

lost". Modern art's "new at all costs" and negation of the past, which characterises the 20<sup>th</sup> century's early avant-garde movements, entails the risk of a loss of unique and irreplaceable values.

The chapter *Return to Nature* gives a detailed analysis of the cyclic evolution of art and how in moments of "satiety", brought about by the repetition of the same themes and conventions, artists return to the observation of nature. The author notes how Caravaggio influenced Ribera, who, in turn inspired the artists of the Spanish School up to Velazquez, master of modern naturalism, an area of research that Benito recognises as being authentic: "This is the true return to nature". According to the author, those who came after Impressionism enacted what was an excessive return to nature: "The other, the one that leads us to infancy or Negro art, goes too far. Under pretext of reacting against the commonplace, it destroys everything that has gone before us. It confuses the return to the *study of nature* with a return to a *state of nature*". The elegant play of words between "study" and "state" introduces the concept of education in contrast to the native condition of man: "While the whole of man's education has always tended to eradicate in him that which separates him from others, Romanticism invented the cult of the individual that destroyed the labour of centuries. The alleged superiority of the 'natural' man, which is to say the ideal, utopian man in possession of all virtues without ever having heard tell of any, of a sense of good and evil, of the beautiful and the ugly, but strictly by instinct, without anyone having ever taught him... such superiority is nothing but an aberration of Romanticism."

In fully recognising the book's central line of thought on the safeguarding acquired values, whilst grasping the highly philosophical dimension of its content, one realises that the author's negative evaluation of primitive influences on art is not an aesthetic judgement, but rather, a profoundly *ethical* criticism. The chapter *Black Magic* dedicated to primitive art has a very dechirichian title inasmuch as it is both intriguing and ironic. It begins with a frenetic rhythm of nouns and adjectives, like the call to dance from which no-one can exonerate themselves. The solar figures of Pan and Apollo have been usurped by the Moon, the Snake and by the Minotaur, while the "tam-tam of Africa" shakes the world and risks making cathedrals crumble to the ground. Enchantments and witchery; beauty has gone away; in its place we find monstrosity... Exclamations of appreciation abound among the "snobs, gawkers, passersby, demonstrators, simpletons, morons, eccentrics, swing dancers, the appalling and astonished, and other ephemera". This list of disparaging terms introduces another modern dilemma, which regards the disappearance of the aristocratic connoisseur of the arts and the arrival of the middle class as the new arbitrator and consumer of the art market, hence a culturally unprepared public. The theme is a prevalent one in *The Comedy of Modern Art* that also acts here in support of the author's sharp sociological critique. The stylistic use of a sequence of nouns in order to build up emphasis in a discourse is typical of de Chirico's narrative work. Various examples of this can indeed be found in both *Hebdomeros*<sup>10</sup> and in *Il Signor Dudron*. These two pages, the fiercest in all of the book, are written in a style that mimics the savage

<sup>10</sup> A passage in *Hebdomeros* captures the reader's attention in a similar way, although this time with an abundance of positive qualities: "Taking into consideration the increasing materialistic and practical orientation of our civilisation', he said to his friends, as they walked along in regular, rhythmical steps, 'It is not paradoxical to visualise from now on a social state where the man who lives only for the pleasures of the

exuberance of those who give up their intelligence and put themselves at the “service of falsehood”, of those who abandon their dignity in favour of a cultural regression that denies tradition.

During the early years of Metaphysical Art, de Chirico’s attention to man at the dawn of time gave way to very different sensations than the fervent social and faddism-oriented spasms at the centre of modernism as described by Benito. Around 1913, he wrote: “One of the strangest and deepest sensations that prehistory has left us with is the sensation of foretelling. It will always exist. It is like an eternal proof of the senselessness of the universe. The first man must have seen auguries everywhere; he must have trembled at each step he took. The wind rustles the oak leaves: it is the voice of a god which speaks, and the trembling prophet listens, his face bent towards earth”, continuing with: “I have often imagined those soothsayers tending to the voice of the waves receding from that Adamic land; I have pictured them head and body wrapped in a chlamys, waiting for the mysterious revealing oracle.” De Chirico assumed a stance similar to that of prehistoric man’s attentive ear to nature and the surrounding world. A receptive disposition such as this, linked with a meditative interior state, gave way to the youthful artist’s realisation of his first metaphysical paintings in Florence in 1910: *The Enigma of the Oracle* and *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon*.

In 1919, a few years after writing the above passage in his Parisian manuscripts, almost as an attempt to remove all doubt regarding the difference between the metaphysical artist, the archaic craftsman and the post-impressionist avant-garde, in *We Metaphysicians* de Chirico specified that the art of the latter two was an art of “impression”, while the absolute innovation “of capital importance” resided in the approach of the metaphysical artist, who: “no longer receives impressions, but rather, discovers, continuously discovers new aspects and new spectral elements.”<sup>11</sup>

If Benito’s discourse warns of the risk society is running with the loss of ethical values, arduously acquired over the centuries, de Chirico had already explained in a number of historical essays how those very values were created and brought to light by those who preceded us. In 1919, in *On Metaphysical Art*, he wrote: “A people at the dawn of its existence love the mythical, the legendary, the surprising and the monstrous, and seek refuge in these; but with the passing of time and the ripening of civilisation, they refine, reduce and model these primitive images in accordance to their clarified spirit and write their history born of original myths.”<sup>12</sup> In *Hebdomeros* (1929), in a discourse that holds true for the individual as for humanity itself, one reads: “Then gradually with age and experience, discipline, knowledge and skill prevail over instinct; we begin to have the air of top-class surgeons, we become at once subtle and forceful; a certain slow deliberation can be seen in everything we do, particularly if one thinks of the ardour of youth; but behind this slowness, in batches, in series, creations pile up one on top of the other, they form an impressive capital,

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mind will no longer have the right to claim a place in the sun. The writer, the thinker, the dreamer, the poet, the metaphysician, the observer, the fortune teller, the prophet, the scrutiniser, the reasoner, the asker of riddles, the appraiser, the seer, the seeker of new songs, the selector of paintings of the very first class, etc., etc., will all become anachronous, destined to disappear from the face of the earth like the ichthyosaur and the mammoth”. (Éditions du Carrefour, Paris 1929; English translation, The Four Seasons Book Society, New York, pp. 121-122).

<sup>11</sup> G. de Chirico, *Noi metafisici*, in “Cronache d’attualità”, 15 February 1919; English translation in “Metaphysical Art” n. 14/16, 2016, p. 30.

<sup>12</sup> Id., *Sull’arte metafisica*, in “Valori Plastici”, Rome, a. I, n. 4-5, April-May 1919, pp. 15-18; English translation in “Metaphysical Art” n. 14/16, 2016, p. 37.

unheard-of reserves”.<sup>13</sup> In *Pictorial Classicism* (1920), the artist reveals the common features that exist between modern and archaic man, whose drawing resounds through art across the eras: “thus the emotions of a Troglodyte tracing the profile of a bison on the wall of a cave are as classical as are those of a Douris, an Apelles or a Polygnotos, and nearer to our times, that of Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, Holbein and Dürer.”<sup>14</sup> The search for beauty, physical and moral, as spoken of in Benito’s *Preface*, further resounds in an essay signed “Isabella Far” of 1942, *A Discourse on the Nude in Painting*: “We are standing before the perfect human being. Art in general is vision and the expression of past and future perfection, of that perfection which we all long to attain and which was promised and preached to us by prophets as being our ultimate aim. Art is a divine flame on our earth; it is the only visible and concrete preannouncement of perfection.”<sup>15</sup>

Six months prior to the publication of the book signed “Benito”, the next-to-last text of *The Comedy of Modern Art* (June 1945), *A Discourse on Mentality*, speaks of man’s regression to an animal state when lacking in ethical values: “Humanity destitute of moral dogmas changes rapidly into a herd of wild beasts. In Europe and elsewhere moral principles have long been forgotten. Moral principles were created when man ceased to be purely animal (I say animal and not bestial for that he has remained) and if these principles were created in such remote times it is because they were necessary, as they are now and always will be.”<sup>16</sup> The concept of man’s retrogression to a brute state, a then-current concern of de Chirico’s, is passed like a racing baton directly to the *Preface* of the Benito book, published in December 1945: “Without ethics man returns to being an animal.”<sup>17</sup>

*A propos de peinture* is, above all, a treatise on the great artists of all time, with references made to eighty-six artists, from the 14<sup>th</sup> century Italian Primitives to Renaissance and Baroque masters, from Neoclassicism to Romanticism, Realism to Impressionism, up to the Avant-garde of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Only three sculptors are mentioned, Rodin, Bourdelle and Maillol, in a chapter dedicated to this art form, which, although orphaned from its mother Architecture doesn’t run the risk of the current transgression of rules that besets its sister Painting, the author concludes. Thirty or so poets and writers are spoken of, who, with sentiment and intelligence, trace models of thought in support of human expression. These literati are all of French origin, except for the Spanish art critic Eugenio d’Ors, a Catalan writer and champion of Classicism, referred to in the chapter *The Flavour of the Day*: “As for the flavour of our day, here is what the eminent art critic Eugenio d’Ors wrote in 1937: ‘It appears that the age in which much courage was needed not to be revolutionary is coming to an end’. It has lasted a long time – Benito makes clear – and for certain lofty souls has been very hard

<sup>13</sup> Id., *Hebdomeros*, Editions du Carrefour, 1929; English translation, cit., p. 65.

<sup>14</sup> Id., *Classicismo pittorico*, in “La Ronda”, n. 7, Rome July 1920, pp. 145-150; English translation in “Metaphysical Art” n. 14/16, 2016, p. 50.

<sup>15</sup> Id., *Discorso sul nudo in pittura*, in “L’Illustrazione Italiana”, illustrated with Ruben’s *The Three Graces*, Milan 11 October 1942, p. 390; English translation in “Metaphysical Art” n. 14/16, 2016, p. 121.

<sup>16</sup> Id., *Discorso sulla mentalità*, cit.

<sup>17</sup> As Paolo Picozza has noted, although published in December, the book is signed and dated “Paris, June 1945”, and was therefore written at the same time as *The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico* and *The Comedy of Modern Art*. See P. Picozza, *On the Subject of Painting, de Chirico or de Chirico? A Fascinating Enigma on the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Pictor Optimus’ Death*, in this periodical.

to get through. This, because one was repelled by seeing conformism take on the brilliant disguise of independence [...]. Once again, distinguished Professors preached the 'direct study of nature' to their flock, urged them to 'follow their mood' and to 'free their personality'; which at least had the advantage of saving the former from the chore of correcting errors. 'If I recall this nightmare here, it's the result of poorly digested Romanticism, etc., etc.'" To which Benito concludes: "Eugenio d'Ors wrote this in 1937. His judgement can be faulted only for speaking in the past tense, which was somewhat premature, but this does nothing to diminish his clairvoyance".

In the book, among the numerous French modern poets mentioned, Valéry, Jacob, Apollinaire, Salmon, Cocteau, Reverdy, Éluard, Aragon and still others, the name of André Breton, leader of surrealism, is visibly absent. A significant circumstance that bears witness to the hypothesis of de Chirico as the author of the volume, possibly as a form of disregard toward Breton's work, as the latter had done with regard to the artist's own post-1918 work. Taking into consideration that Surrealism *is* treated in the book and spoken of in respect to its position relative to other currents: "Now that Impressionism has saturated us with its confetti landscapes, Fauvism with its extremisms, Expressionism and Surrealism with their monstrosities (and I say nothing of cubism, dead from starvation)", as well as through an analysis of the technical quality of painting and its significance: "Surrealism, chronologically last in the various distractions that helped painters who wanted to forget their powerlessness, attempts to rediscover this precision, this lost honesty of execution, but although painters of this school generally possess a mastery often lacking in the others, it does not surpass that of *'art pompier'*. The only difference between these two tendencies is the choice of subject. Surrealism develops Freudian themes to which our intellectuals are more receptive, whereas the other ones settle for an elementary aesthetic more accessible to the public at large."

The book's ethical discourse takes a forefront role in contraposition to Surrealism. To a research "based on malignity and indiscreet observation"<sup>18</sup> and on the intimate condition of the individual (Freudism), the author indicates the dream of humanity as a whole: "Surrealism, the latest addition, has insisted on defining our incoherent dreams, when actually it is the dream of a human order that is to be grasped." In avoiding mention of Breton, the movement's poet and theoretician, the author focuses attention on surrealist painting, to which he assigns the succinct definition of "*art pompier*", an art that resorts artificially and rhetorically to vulgar emotionality. The only surrealist artist mentioned in the book is Dalí, to whom one can suppose this definition is chiefly addressed. De Chirico was particularly disconcerted by Dalí, who he described in his *Memoirs* as the "anti-painter *par excellence*", whose paintings are "horrible surfaces on which he traces horrible, copiously varnished colours, the mere sight of which causes nausea and saturnine colic."<sup>19</sup> He accuses the Spanish painter of having copied Picasso and to have mimicked his own Metaphysical paintings, of which he has understood nothing, to which he adds: "These paintings

<sup>18</sup> Id., "Cerebral gymnastics are being reduced to less and less movement and the brain, not having to guide the hand, stiffens, goes to sleep or finds vent in sterile and negative intelligence based on malignity and indiscreet observation which have so powerfully contributed to the universal success of Freudianism and its surrogates". In *Considerazioni sulla pittura moderna*, cit.

<sup>19</sup> De Chirico was even more *tranchant* in the *Memoirs* manuscript, where he describes Dalí as "a chicken-headed man"; in full: "They were beginning

have only been understood so far by two or three people in the world and I could not even swear to that.”<sup>20</sup>

A passage in the book by Benito brings us to the 1930s: “Salvador Dalí, having dragged in his wake much of European painting with his ‘surrealism’, is about to repeat the exploits of the conquistadores by colonising America.”

If the author of the book was truly E. G. Benito, of Spanish nationality, one must pause a minute and reflect on whether he would have used the term “conquistadores” in reference to Dalí’s growing influence in the United States. Would he call it “a new form of Spanish flu” menacing the world? Would he speak of “the *Spaniard’s* great talent” [Author’s italics, *ed.*] in reference to Picasso? While the expression of appreciation for the painter from Malaga is quite understandable, also considering Benito’s own cubist period, what could be the origin of such categorical disdain for his fellow countryman Dalí in 1945? For de Chirico, instead, such judgement does not surprise in the least.

In 1934, solo exhibitions of Giorgio de Chirico and Salvador Dalí risked taking place at the same time in New York.<sup>21</sup> Dalí’s first solo exhibition was held at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York in the late autumn of 1934.<sup>22</sup> De Chirico, on the verge of exhibiting at Levy’s gallery, changed the dates of his own exhibition to avoid it overlapping with Dalí and warned the art dealer of the hostile attitude the surrealists were showing towards him: “The Surrealists are among the most perverse of these enemies and are those who employ the most perfidious and dishonest means against me. [...] Now, I happen to know that the painter they support the most at the moment, Mr. Salvador Dalí, is going to have an exhibition at your gallery and that he has even departed for America. I know that his wife, who used to be the wife of Éluard, has gone with him. I have known this for a long time, and I am mentioning it to you now as it is one of the principal reasons why I asked to have my exhibition postponed to next year.”<sup>23</sup>

The scheduling of de Chirico’s exhibition was postponed two years and the exhibition was held in 1936, from 28 October to 17 November. De Chirico’s sojourn in New York from the end of the summer of 1936 to January 1938 was productive, with two exhibitions at Levy’s gallery, the acquisition of his work by collectors and museums, as well as other collaborations including the illustration of “Vogue” magazine covers and a design project for “Harper’s Bazar”.<sup>24</sup> It is

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to beat the big drum round the paintings of that dismal painter who answers to the name of Salvador Dalí and who, after having imitated Picasso, had begun to imitate certain elements of my metaphysical paintings which he had not understood at all; a chicken-headed man like him could not possibly have understood them”. One notes an interesting difference between the manuscript: “had begun to imitate certain elements of my metaphysical paintings” [underlining, *ed.*], and the passage in his *Memoirs*: “had begun to imitate my metaphysical paintings”. The specification was cut and does not appear in the published edition. G. de Chirico, manuscript of *Memorie della mia vita*, Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico Archives, Rome.

<sup>20</sup> Id. *The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico*, Peter Owen, London 1971, p. 128.

<sup>21</sup> Four solo exhibitions of de Chirico’s work had been previously held in New York: *Paintings by Giorgio de Chirico* 23 January-19 February 1928 and *Recent Paintings by Giorgio de Chirico* 31 December 1928-26 January 1929, Valentine Gallery, New York; *Paintings by de Chirico* 20 May-5 June 1930, Balzac Galleries, New York; *Paintings by de Chirico* 15 October-15 November 1930 Demotte Gallery, New York.

<sup>22</sup> *Dalí*, 21 November-10 December 1934, Julien Levy Gallery, New York.

<sup>23</sup> G. de Chirico, letter to J. Levy, 10 November 1934, in K. Robinson, *Giorgio de Chirico – Julien Levy. Artist and Art Dealer. Shared Experience*, in “Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico” n. 7/8, 2008, pp. 335-336.

<sup>24</sup> See A. Finholt, *Art in Vogue: De Chirico, Fashion, and Surrealism*, in *De Chirico and America*, catalogue of the exhibition curated by E. Braun,

through collaborations such as these that de Chirico and Eduardo Garcia Benito's paths could have crossed, although, without new historical information or documentary proof it is impossible to ascertain if an encounter took place. Indeed, in addition to various periods spent in Paris, both artists could have been in New York at the time, a city Benito settled in almost a permanent way in 1923. In connection to his collaboration with "Vogue", de Chirico would have most certainly become acquainted with Benito's art, if not the artist himself. In any case, it seems impossible that he could have been unaware of the Spanish artist's existence.

Forever attracted to the elegance of linear form, de Chirico would have certainly appreciated Eduardo Garcia Benito's illustration work. An artist of great talent, Benito expressed himself through a variety of styles before establishing himself as an Art-deco master in the field of illustration for "Vogue" and "Vanity Fair", two of the most influential fashion periodicals published by Condé Nast, which he worked for from 1920 to the 1940s. His refined use of line on the famous covers he illustrated, with references to Greek art and Italian Renaissance Mannerism in the feminine forms and stylised elements of nature, was surely in tune with that very "classicism" in which de Chirico identified a historical continuation essential to art. A fascinating exegesis by Teresa Ortega-Coca<sup>25</sup> on Benito's oeuvre provides an interesting reading of Art-deco, an aesthetic which, having freed itself from an excess of ornament, the kind that had also taken its toll on architecture, truly came into its own specifically through Benito's illustrations for "Vogue", in the "perfection of line, triumph of the straight line, balance of proportions, harmony of the whole."<sup>26</sup> Ortega-Coca makes a pertinent and thought-provoking observation on the transitional role played by Art-deco between the Avant-garde's negation of history and the rekindling of artistic tradition. In this light, de Chirico's choice of Benito as an artist to associate his writing with, may not have been merely incidental. Ortega-Coca writes: "In our opinion, there is a current which never enters in relationship with art-deco and that was surrealism. We believe that this has complex explanations. But basically it is that surrealism constitutes an attack on western logic, its pictorial psychoanalysis implies a serious crisis of conscience."<sup>27</sup> An additional aspect brought to light by Ortega-Coca, in which a similarity with de Chirico can be found, is Eduardo Garcia Benito's total disdain for any kind of chronological order being assigned to his work and how he dreaded being: "dated, measured, catalogued."<sup>28</sup>

The book *A propos de peinture* contains such a multitude of reflections on world of art and the development of new modalities of interaction between artists, dealers, critics and intellectuals, that the cannot be treated here. The richness of the publication's content and its intricate mediations

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The Bertha and Karl Art Gallery di Hunter College of the City University of New York, 10 September-26 October 1996. Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, Rome, Umberto Allemandi & C., Turin 1996, pp. 85-95.

<sup>25</sup> T. Ortega-Coca, *Eduardo García Benito y el art-déco*, catalogo della mostra antologica tenuta al Museo de la Pasión e Palacio Pimentel, Ayuntamiento de Valladolid, Valladolid 1999.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 80.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 75.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 36.

deserve the attention of academics and specialists from various fields of knowledge: art history, philosophy, artistic technique and even sociology. It is this latter area of study on which de Chirico's attention seems focused in 1945, showing, once more the human aspect in all things.

Only two gallery owners are spoken of in the book, Ambroise Vollard and Paul Guillaume, both of whom are accused of having invented from nothing the profession of art dealer, a new role that became essential to foreign artists full of hope who arrived in the capital that had become the Mecca of painters and only city in which to make oneself known and make headway: "Italians, Spaniards, Dutch, Ukrainians, Poles, Russians, Romanians, Finns, Norwegians, Swiss, Serbs, Bulgarians, North and South Americans, Belgians, English, Germans and a few French formed what it was agreed to call 'The Paris School'". In order to attain success, it was necessary to go through the merchants, who with the substantial influence they exercised, could make or break an artist's reputation: As Guillaume was ought to say "It's up to me who's got talent."

The only chapter in the book dedicated to a specific person is reserved for Ambroise Vollard, whose story is told in almost identical terms a few years later in an article de Chirico published in the Roman newspaper "Il Messaggero", on 14 May 1951, with the title *Memories of Paris*. A comparison of brief passages taken from the two texts demonstrates his authorship:

***Ambroise Vollard*** (*A propos de peinture*, 1945):

Ambroise Vollard, the art dealer, is perhaps the man who has most influenced the art of our age.

Vollard was a Balzacian character and it would take Balzac to portray him.

All we would like to do is provide an understanding of the role he played in "modern" painting.

Vollard arrived in Paris just when the impressionists were beginning to be "discovered". He himself would recount of how he was struck one day by the strange aspect of a painting seen in the window of an art dealer's shop. It was a moment in which he was unsure of what he wanted to do with his life and decided to go in and ask the price.

Vollard, who had arrived from Guadalupe and had never seen artworks other than cigar-box chromolithographs, was struck by the exorbitant price. He had always been told that painters lived in indigence. This contrast gave him food for thought and decided his career. He told himself it could be a good business to buy paintings from painters and resell them in a shop.

And that's how Ambroise Vollard became an art dealer.

He didn't get it wrong. Above all, he did not forget the strange aspect that had struck him in the painting he had seen, which would surely interest the public as well.

In his Creole candour he thought that Impressionism was a game of invention, a riddle, and that each painter had to find his own and could invent a new form of painting every morning. And thus he began to seek out and encourage “inventors” of painting.

*Ricordi di Parigi* (“Il Messaggero”, Rome, 14 May 1951):

More than any other, Vollard may have been the person who influenced modernist painting from its very start, therefore, the person who more than anyone else contributed to the decadence of painting. [...]

One of the strangest characters I met in the French capital during the time I lived in the city, was Ambroise Vollard.

He arrived in Paris at the time when the Impressionists were starting to be “discovered”. He himself says that, not knowing what he wanted to do with his life, one day he passed in front of a small shop of an art merchant. Curious at the sight of a strange painting hanging in the window, he asked its price. Vollard came from his home country of Guadalupe and knew nothing more of art than the chromo-lithographs on cigar boxes. He was astonished by the enormous price the merchant asked him. He had always heard that painters, like poets, lived in misery. The contrast gave rise to an idea and he decided to become an art dealer.

He thought he could make a good business out of buying paintings from artists and then selling them in a shop.

Ambroise Vollard had a special kind of intelligence, or shrewdness, about him but also a Creole naivety; and this naivety caused him to believe that Impressionism was a kind of riddle and that each painter had to “find” his own “riddle”, and invent every morning a new form of painting. He began searching for and encouraging the “inventors” of painting. The result of such a way of thinking and acting can now be seen in the current state of art.

It would be superficial to merely take note of the publication dates of the two texts and conclude that, in 1951, de Chirico simply copied Eduardo Garcia Benito who would have published a similar text six years earlier. Taking up Vollard’s story once again, with the picturesque detail of the cigar box chromo-lithographs – an ironic element the artist could not do without – was a way of further developing the topic, as we shall see. As a matter of fact, after having accused new art dealers of subverting the public’s taste through the commercialisation of Impressionist art, he accused Vollard of orchestrating the triumph of ugliness in painting through his promotion of Cézanne. From 1945 to the 1970s, de Chirico wrote hundreds of polemic articles on modern art, intellectuals and art critics, for dailies and periodicals, of which, in a dozen or so he linked

Cézanne to Vollard. In one of these he described Vollard in brilliant Balzachian style, precisely as “Benito” had suggested in 1945 – *it would take Balzac to portray him* –, painting him in all his psychological nuances, physical aspects and social postures in a long text entitled *Men and Phenomena of Modern Art*.<sup>29</sup> The connection between Benito’s text and this *divertissement* is further proof of how the discovery of this book can be compared to the unearthing of a treasure map to navigate the truly extraordinary versatility of de Chirico’s literary work.

The lynchpin around which de Chirico’s communicative intention turns is easily identified in the essay *Considerations on Modern Painting* of 1942, with 15 or so of its principal themes appearing in *A propos de peinture*. In the opening sentence of *Considerations* one reads: “In all epochs one can observe a preference for some determined quality, some determined human capacity”. De Chirico identifies this quality as “intelligence”, which, being “a gift from heaven [that] by no possible means can be acquired, intellectualism has been invented as a substitute”, an ideal typically manifested in modern art. This occurrence, together with the “progressive and complete loss of the secrets of painting technique that has been taking place for some time now”, would be the two fundamental causes of the decadence of art. The first of these causes, both in *Considerations* and in Benito, revolves around a number of new conditions including: the concept of the “misunderstood genius”, the function of art critique that is no longer carried out by men of letters, the new category of art dealership, the bourgeois milieu’s inexperience in art collecting, snobbism, and a desire for novelty and originality at all cost. The second cause is identified in a lack of technical mastery from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century on and is an argument treated in a particularly thorough way in the second half of *A propos de peinture*. Indicated as a significant problem in *Considerations on Modern Painting*, the question of painting technique is discussed in Benito with specification on materials and surfaces, on the quality of the impasto and the laying on of paint, with indications that hark back to de Chirico’s *Piccolo trattato di tecnica pittorica* [Brief Treatise on Painting Technique] of 1928, as well as to *A Discourse on the Material Substance of Paint* (1942). In one of the final chapters, Benito speaks of the technique employed by the old Italian masters up until the 18<sup>th</sup> century that consisted in the preparation of a base on which “thicknesses and transparencies play”:

“In reality the ideal method would be to find a very soft paste that slides freely under the brush; substantial enough to allow layers; that does not dry too quickly and allows a light yet rapid execution so as to be able to glaze the colour in twenty-four hours; not too absorbent to ‘drink up’ the veils, not too oily to ‘reject’ them.” (Benito 1945)

The technique as described refers with striking similarity to that described a few years earlier in *A Discourse on the Material Substance of Paint* of 1942:

<sup>29</sup> G. de Chirico, *Uomini e fenomeni dell’arte moderna*, date and publication not identified. A photocopy of the article is kept in the Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico Archives, Rome. The article is published in English translation in this periodical.

“The task of painting consists in the creation of a fabric that weaves and plays with the brush used to apply the material in layers on a surface”. [...] The grand characteristic of beautiful matter, of matter that is surely the same as that of the classical masters, consists in the fact that the brushstrokes cling perfectly to a surface that is still completely wet, they adhere to it and, I say, remain firm and fluid, without taking the soft underlying paint away”. (de Chirico, 1942)<sup>30</sup>

A strange, more recent “layer” is found in de Chirico’s *Memoirs*, published six months prior to the Benito book, which, by means of a metaphor provides us with greater clarity on his technical and theoretical research: “painting is a weaving together, an intermingling, a skilful superimposition of colours which can be compared to those ancient Oriental carpets, so beautiful and so highly prized, which were not made by machine but patiently woven by skilful artisans”.<sup>31</sup> The comparison between great classical painting and modern painting, both for de Chirico and author “Benito”, is identified in its quality. The latter passes a final brushstroke over the composition that now seems to be not only painterly but also literary: “Between classical painting and the painting of today there is a qualitative difference comparable to that of a Persian carpet of the best period and a rug from the bazaar”.

Additional elements give form to de Chirico’s metaphoric imagery, like that of a precious stone compared to a rock or, if one asks his “other” alter ego, *Il Signor Dudron*, to a pebble.<sup>32</sup> In a text on Romano Gazzera, a painter his contemporary whom he admired, he wrote: “for him [painterly] matter is like a precious stone whose value and rarity is limitless; that strong matter, transparent and beautiful, that he tirelessly searches for, finds and perfects incessantly, in order to give his painting a robust and spontaneous look that one finds in great master paintings”.<sup>33</sup>

In order to achieve good painterly quality, numerous technical indications are provided in the Benito book such as the choice of materials and how to use them, the availability on the market of pigments ground in oil, the priming of canvases with white lead mixed with linen oil, the use of Harlem and Vibert drying agents in tubes. True formulas for painters.

With subtle, sophisticated humour, the author offers two “formulas” used in modern painting in the two chapters *Formulas* and *Another Formula*. In the first, the formula consists in taking a man with good eyesight, waking him up in the middle of the night and asking him if he sees light. If he

<sup>30</sup> Id., *Discorso sulla materia pittorica*, signed “Isabella Far” in *Commedia*, cit., p. 464. In *Piccolo trattato di tecnica pittorica* of 1928 we read: “The ideal canvas is an absorbent one, upon which the paintbrush glides like on porcelain or on waxed cloth; a canvas upon which paints can dry while conserving, at least up to a certain degree and from the very first strokes, their freshness. (Scheiwiller, Milan 1928).

<sup>31</sup> Id., *The Technique of Painting*, appendix, *The Memoirs...* cit., p. 243.

<sup>32</sup> Id., “Of course the body with which a painting is made today is a material substance from a physical point of view, given that on earth every concrete and tangible body is made of matter, but the matter with which modern paintings are made differentiates itself from true painting material like a rock from a gemstone”. (*A Discourse on the material Substance of Paint*, cit. p. 106). “I cannot insist enough on the question of the quality of matter. To make the difference between good and bad painting clear to the reader, I will say that the difference that exists between a beautiful classic painting and the material in a modern painting is equal to the difference between a precious stone and a pebble”. (*Il Signor Dudron*, Le Lettere, Florence 1998, p. 101).

<sup>33</sup> Id., *Romano Gazzera*, in “Stile” Milan November 1941.

answers no, present him with two or three witnesses that affirm that there is light: “The man will hesitate, lose confidence; doubt of the evidence has been awakened in his mind; he will wonder if he has become blind.” The second formula calls for taking a sane man and have him live with crazy people: “After a certain amount of time this man’s reason will have lost its balance.” The result of these two formulas? To destroy intelligence and weaken the capacity for reason: “our age is stunned by the contagion of the absurd.”

Themes such as authorship and the signature of a work of art are central to the reflection surrounding the discovery of this book. It must also be noted that the name Giorgio de Chirico does not appear in Benito’s text and that the term “Metaphysical” is used only once in relation to the physical element of painting: “A painting, aside from and over and above the metaphysical aspect that the literati have wanted it to have, should also and before anything else be an object of value”.

The theme of authorship is more amply treated in the chapter *Signature and Property*. The chapter begins with a quote by the essayist and historian André Chamson, member of the French Academy: “[...] our trade is not a competitive one, except for the mediocre and ineffectual. Any lofty soul can only feel the fortunes of others as being a part of his own fate.” These words are in absolute accord with the thesis of the acquisition of shared spiritual values that is essential to mankind, brought to light in tangible form by talented artists. De Chirico states that talent is a gift of God: “A great artist is chosen in order for Universal and Divine Talent to manifest itself in an ideal form that is comprehensible to humanity. It is from Divine Talent, which one could also call Cosmic that inspiration reaches the artist.”<sup>34</sup> Art serves, therefore, not only to bring spiritual values to the attention of humanity as a whole, but in itself originates from something much greater than the single individual.

The concept of individualism in art forms a triad with signature and ownership in a closed mechanism. Benito specifies: “The signature is nothing but a mark of our vanity. Man becomes great only when he forgets himself.” In de Chirico’s extensive theoretic reflection in *The Comedy of Modern Art*, he does not explicitly treat the question of signature, other than the idea of how a work of genius transcends the individual artist and an epoch. In the brief “chant” dedicated therein to *Drawings by Men of Letters*, he writes: “I thought with melancholy of the drawings by Musset (there is a portrait of George Sand which could have been signed by Delacroix).”<sup>35</sup> Of Vincenzo Gemito he remarks: “a sculptor as few have been, even in the golden ages of sculpture: a poet, storyteller, philosopher, moralist, drawing artist, painter and craftsman in the highest sense of the term”. Pausing to speak of a tempera representing Christ dead, he describes it thus: “a tempera executed in a warm and impassioned painterly quality, with the paint laid on with a bravura worthy of the best Venetian masters, with certain fronds and leafy branches in the background that could have been the work of Paolo Veronese; and then there is also an extraordinary

<sup>34</sup> Id., *Considerazioni sulla pittura moderna*, cit., p. 450.

<sup>35</sup> Id., *Miscellanea, Disegni di letterati*, in *The Comedy of Modern Art*, cit., in “Metaphysical Art” n. 14/16, 2016, p. 87.

*Head of Christ*, like the terracotta of Alexander, makes us think that this was indeed the true face of the Redeemer.” These two examples are extremely interesting inasmuch as they deal with a poet who draws and a sculpture who paints, therefore expressions of talent that go, not only beyond a specific knowhow, but thanks to their exceptional quality attain a level of mastery that transcends the signature.

“The signature is a guarantee for the ignorant”, writes Benito, that is, for a public incapable of recognising the quality of a work of art that places trust exclusively in the status acquired by artists upheld by critics and promoted by art dealers. He asks the question whether art critics, primarily interested in the cult of personality,<sup>36</sup> would be able to recognise an artist’s work if presented to them without a signature. The question is relevant with regard to the book we are examining, which, published under a pseudonym in 1945, seems to launch a similar challenge to intellectuals of the time. The book was published in an economic edition by a mainstream publishing house with a large distribution base in a foreign country, therefore far from the spotlight of the art world. It doesn’t bear Giorgio de Chirico’s name, possibly to prove the public’s inability to recognise the author of a work, in this case a written work. In an extraordinary tautological operation, a book which denounces the speculation on the signature of artists taking place on the art market, foregoes its own author’s signature, who, in signing it would have drawn attention to the publication thanks to his international fame. Perhaps the choice of a “technical” publication with a large distribution base and in plain sight – with a simple and elegant green, black and white cover – was made in order for the book to remain under the radar of snobs and intellectuals. De Chirico, in fact, specifies in his 1946 review: “this is a book, which, like everything right, true and profound, works below the surface and carves its own path.”

Bait was however tossed by the use of the signature of an existing artist, E. G. Benito “a painter, (as he himself admits)”, as de Chirico writes in his review of the book in 1946, adding “certainly an intelligent and honest one at that”.

Who in Paris at the time could have recognised de Chirico as the book’s author? His literary work up to *Hebdomeros* of 1929 was well-known especially among the surrealists, who had read the artist’s essays published in “Valori Plastici” in the early 1920s at the peak of their interest in de Chirico. One must also not forget that his Parisian manuscripts of 1911-1915 had been acquired by Paul Éluard and Jean Paulhan, excerpts of which were published in “La Révolution Surréaliste”. In the present analysis, more than half of the correspondences identified between the Benito book and de Chirico’s writings published in *The Comedy of Modern Art* hark back to these years. In his presentation to the second part of *The Comedy* (whose essays are signed “Isabella Far”), de Chirico wrote: “a piece of writing can contain ideas, be constructed in a certain way and style, and especially use a system of logic that is completely the opposite to that of the person who put their signature to

<sup>36</sup> “What critics are concerned with nowadays, their pet subject, is personality. To be or not to be personal, ‘that is the question’”. The rhetorical question, whose Shakespearian origins does not escape the reader, appears in English in the original French text. This sentence in English also appears in an article published in Italian in “The Fiera Letteraria” on 30 January 1947 (regarding a book by L. Venturi) and as a concluding touch of irony in another article of the time, *Men and Phenomena of Modern Art*, published in English translation in this periodical.

it. Nobody notices or doubts for an instant that the person who signed it is not the actual writer”.

In Dadaist-flavoured action the artist published a book of highly philosophical, spiritual and technical contents in the capital city of modern painting in 1945 by means of which he undermined the mechanism of signature, from being a “guarantee for the ignorant” to being a *guarantee for the future of art*.

It has taken over seventy years to bring this book to light, revealing the true identity of its author and, with this, substantially increasing the known body of de Chirico’s literary of works and reflection on art. A time bomb which, thanks to Paolo Picozza, offers us a true display of pearls of wisdom. Much still needs to be looked into, connections need to be made and evaluations carried out, not only with regard to the mechanisms surrounding the publication itself, but especially regarding its content that retraces the historical unity that has characterised art in the West and the disintegration of this unity. A sure area of interest lies in de Chirico’s relationship to Picasso’s oeuvre, but also his rapport with Apollinaire, that emerges in subtle form and remains possibly one of the most intriguing surprises in the book.

In conclusion, the choice of the name “E. G. Benito” as the signature for a book dedicated to the safeguarding of art’s spiritual values and painting technique, remains an unsolved enigma.

Along the chain of great masters of all time, a thought by Eugène Delacroix adds depth to a particular quality that unites great artists of the past, present and future in their endeavour: “What moves those of genius, what inspires their work is not new ideas, but their obsession with the idea that what has already been said has not yet been said enough.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> E. Delacroix, *Journal*, 11-15 May 1824, “*Ce qui fait les hommes de génie ou plutôt ce qu’ils font, ce ne sont point les idées neuves. C’est l’idée qui les possède que ce qui a été dit ne l’a pas encore été assez*”, in *Eugène Delacroix: Écrivain, témoin de son temps, Écrits choisis*, Flammarion, Paris 2014, pp. 55-56.