

The de Chirico - Signorelli Correspondence

and the painter's classical debut (1918-1919)¹

by
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De Chirico is purely a metaphysical painter up until the summer of 1919, and it certainly seems that the plastic and visionary force of his scenes are not opposed to the Avant-Garde, particularly to Futurism, which in April of that year he considers an 'indisputable necessity'², and as he had written in June of the previous year, a movement that had 'immensely rejuvenated'³ new art. It is only in the second half of the year that his position changes into a search for classicism that is anti Avant-Garde, and to a 'return to the craft' of the old masters in which anything to do with Avant-Garde and in this case Futurism, becomes an aberration that 'did nothing to rejuvenate Italian painting'⁴, as he will declare in the 1919 November–December issue of "Valori Plastici". This great leap of de Chirico's came about at the beginning of that initially muggy, then cool summer of 1919 (as we will learn from the painter's letters published in this article). Strangely enough, until now no historian has bothered to thoroughly examine this important period of the artist's evolution, which is quite remarkable when one considers that the unfavourable criticism on de Chirico, ratified a couple of years later by the Surrealists, takes its cue at the very moment of his transformation into classicism and his consequent distancing from the Avant-Garde trend. In biographies of the artist, mostly meagre, if not wordy and romanticized, the period of 1919-1920, is reduced to at most a page spiked with undercover allusions, which are often loaded with an emphasis intent on disguising the tame historical and critical research, and an objective lack of information and concrete analysis. As a matter of fact, a number of exhibitions and books on de Chirico the classicist, were self-promotingly titled *The 1920's*, prudently omitting the perilous obstacle that is 1919. In short, the neglected year of 1919, crucial in the formation of de Chirico's classicism, has remained forgotten until today, and has been eluded to in generic, rather than philological treatments.

The correspondence with Olga Resnevic Signorelli, on the contrary, urges us to take into consideration this period, which has been obscure and unknown both in a philological sense and that of the connoisseur, to the extent of this striking example; amidst the mediocrity of the recent exposition on "Valori Plastici", held

¹ This text is part of a longer literary contribution on the de Chirico-Signorelli correspondence presented at the academic conference "Nulla sine tragedia gloria". *L'opera di de Chirico attraverso la storiografia contemporanea*, held in Rome in October 2000, and will be published in its entirety in the treatment by Claudio Crescentini.

² G. de Chirico, *Carlo Carrà*, "La Vraie Italie", 2, 1919 (the manuscript was sent to the magazine at the beginning of April).

³ G. de Chirico, *L'arte metafisica della mostra di Roma*, "La Gazzetta Ferrarese", 18 June 1918.

⁴ G. de Chirico, *Il ritorno al mestiere*, "Valori Plastici", 11-12, Nov.-Dec. 1919.

at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni⁵, a well-known painting of 1919 was on show, practically completely repainted (a really true 'fake' coming from the market, that had shown up at an auction some time previously), thought to be a great discovery, whilst I myself had accurately avoided showing it in an exhibition on Art in Rome between the two Great Wars⁶ a few months earlier, so as not to falsify the already ambiguously distorted image of the painter.

Reviewing the Signorelli papers, while bearing in mind the parallel pictorial facts, one can reach a quite clear, even if still spare and essential, historical picture of de Chirico's intellectual and aesthetic movements during this crucial moment in time.

The beginning of a mutation in de Chirico, even if only an intellectual one not yet translated into explicit works as such, can be pinpointed in that brief week spent in Rome in May of 1918. During that time he must have become aware of the new cultural climate of the city, also put into evidence by the reviews of the exhibition at the Galleria dell'Epoca, (in which he was participating: his presence at the opening was the reason for this first visit to Rome since the end of the war) and the reviews of the almost simultaneous exhibition that was held at the Casina del Pincio. His acquaintance with Roberto Melli, and through him, Mario Broglio (who was already working on the "Valori Plastici" magazine, with which de Chirico would later collaborate passionately), helped to sharpen this perception⁷.

The parallel exhibitions registered the pulse of a situation moving towards a substantial reform of the already dated and in a certain sense weary Secessionist and Futurist language, in the direction of a revision, still within the Avant-Garde intention, but henceforth in search of a formal tradition of classical composition. The group exhibition at the Galleria dell'Epoca (the first independent show) opened in May. There, along with de Chirico with his metaphysical paintings (for the first time in Rome) as already mentioned, were exhibited, amongst others, Carlo Carrà, who was also involved in the new metaphysical movement, Ferruccio Ferrazzi, Ardengo Soffici and Enrico Prampolini. The following month, the Casina del Pincio opened a show of young artists organized by Marcello Piacentini and Carlo Tridenti with Cipriano Efisio Oppo, Armando Spadini, Pasquarosa, Carlo Socrate, Attilio Selva, Alfredo Biagini, Ferruccio Ferrazzi and other minor artists. The critic Goffredo Bellonci acutely singled out a factor common to the two shows, the return to "an orderly art of painting": "We agree, contemporary art has not yet acquired a full awareness of the new order; but it suffices to take a glance at the two exhibitions, the del Pincio and the dell'Epoca in order to see, through the practical and programmatic chaos, with just how much anguish it searches"⁸. "Return to Tradition", "Artists of Italian Spirits and Forms", "A new Italian-ness in Painters and Sculptors" are the titles of other reviews⁹ that insistently point out the newness manifested in Roman art. The return to order was becoming an effective climate, talked about incessantly and holding Rome at the centre of the international debate of the moment.

In this regard, de Chirico wrote a letter to Soffici on the July 23rd, 1918, not only

⁵ Rome, October 28th 1998-January 19th 1999.

⁶ *Roma 1918-1943*, Rome, Chiostro del Bramante, Apr-July 1998.

⁷ De Chirico knew Melli from Ferrara, and it was he who, during the group show at the Galleria dell'Epoca (on the occasion of a dispute between Recchi, the editor of the magazine and Mario Broglio), introduced him to his Roman friend who became the future director of "Valori Plastici" (see G. de Chirico, *Memorie della mia vita*, Milan, Rizzoli, 1962, p. 105).

⁸ G. Bellonci, Alla mostra del Pincio e dell'Epoca - *Pittura in ordine*, "Il Giornale d'Italia", Rome, July 3rd 1918.

⁹ Ref. F. Benzi, *Villa Strobl-Fern tra Caffè Aragona*, "Valori Plastici" e "Novecento", in *Gli artisti di Villa Strobl-Fern*, catalogue Rome show edited by L. Stefanelli Torossi, Galleria Arco Farnese, Rome, April 8-June 10, 1983, pp. 14-19.

informing him of a personal show that he intended to put on in Rome in December (it was finally held in February, at Bragaglia's gallery), but also manifesting his intention to show a 'Woman's Head' on this occasion – a painting which with some reserve can be identified as the one that was purchased by Signorelli at the then upcoming show in Rome, the only painting sold on that occasion: "I am always working and I will surely give a personal show in Rome in December; I will also exhibit a portrait, a woman's head, that I have made here in Ferrara. We will show those Romans that when we want, we can be more classic than the classicists."¹⁰ The debate on 'classicism' had evidently begun to open a breach in the artist's ideal, and in these terms the artist proposed his first trials. The "Woman's Head" executed between June and the first half of July 1918¹¹ (which, as we will see, goes by the name of *Alcestis*) makes up the first short circuit between the world of Metaphysics and the classical idea nourished by references to Greek art (a first hint of the skyward gaze of the *Niobidi*, often revived in the painting of the "Neoclassical" period).

During the following months, from July through November, before the move to Rome, he probably painted the *Autoritratto*¹² and the *Natura morta con cascata e paesaggio*. The magazine "Valori Plastici" was issued on November 15th (the official date of release, though the actual release was later, for bureaucratic reasons), and at the end of the month de Chirico obtained the long leave that took him to Rome for good.

A curious letter from a female friend of the painter's, Anna Antonelli, helps us to introduce the significant set of de Chirico's correspondence. It is datable to the winter of 1918, probably December. In this letter de Chirico is described with what for us is the almost comical understatement of 'talented young artist'. The Signorelli family, in particular Olga and her husband Angelo, were the biggest collectors in Rome at the time. They held the most cosmopolitan cultural salon in the capital, and were above all friends and collectors of Spadini and Felice Carena, but were also close to the Futurists, in particular to the young Depero and Prampolini, and Severini (of whom Angelo was the doctor in charge while he was in Italy). The tone of the letter helps us understand how de Chirico's sporadic presence in Rome, as we have already seen, with his one week visit in the previous month of May¹³, on leave to attend the *Mostra d'Arte Indipendente* at the Galleria dell'Epoca (where he presented six paintings and a few drawings), was in effect, still without resonance, and that his work at the time must have passed practically unnoticed to the public. In fact, Mrs. Antonelli makes no mention of it in her missive, though she ought to have been prompted by de Chirico himself or by his mother Gemma, who evidently solicited the letter of "presentation".

Anna Antonelli's letter to Olga Signorelli (1918)

On the envelope, without a postal stamp: Mr. Signorelli / Via XX Settembre 68 / incontro l'Ambasciata Inglese / Città

¹⁰ G. de Chirico, *Penso alla pittura, solo scopo della mia vita. 15 lettere e cartoline ad Ardegno Soffici 1914-1942*, edited by L. Cavallo, Milan 1987, p. 91. As I was saying, this newly painted 'portrait' is identifiable with the one that would be bought by Signorelli at de Chirico's personal show at the Bragaglia gallery. It cannot be the portrait entitled *Cassandra*, as suggested to me orally by Gerd Roos, as it turns out that that portrait had already been shown in May at the Galleria dell'Epoca in Rome and de Chirico states in the July letter to Soffici that he will exhibit it in the future exhibit in Rome. The real title of the painting, as we will shortly see, is *Alcestis*.

¹¹ According to the citation in the July 23rd letter to Soffici the painting is apparently already finished, and it is certainly subsequent to the May visit to Rome, being evidently a 'response' to the cultural climate of the capital.

¹² The *Autoritratto* reproduced in the monograph of 1919.

¹³ De Chirico, of course, had already been to Rome in October of 1910, on a 'study' trip that will be of great importance for the development of metaphysical themes (see F. Benzi, *I luoghi di de Chirico*, in cat. *Giorgio de Chirico – Pictor optimus*, curated by F. Benzi and M.G. Tolomeo Speranza, Rome, Palazzo delle Esposizioni 1992-93), though this trip can be considered in a manner distinct from his visits after the war, when he will be profoundly involved in Rome's cultural scene.

Dear Mrs. Signorelli,

The painter Chirico, friend of Mr. Keelny of the English Embassy, is in Rome presently on a winter leave and would greatly desire to make your acquaintance. It is said that he is interesting and of great talent. I have tried to call you to ask if you would be willing to see him and in that case would you be kind enough to let me know. I myself have not met him, but they tell me he is a talented young artist and that he could be of interest to you.

My telephone number is 24-17.

I thank you very cordially and would be grateful for your answer.

Anna Antonelli

59 Via Marghera

It is therefore in December (seeing that in the letter there is no mention of the show that would be held in February at Bragaglia: a date that would have certainly been communicated if the exhibition had already been decided upon) that de Chirico enters into contact with Olga Signorelli. His classicism is still only episodic and conceptual and not yet formally carried into effect, and his pictorial language is strictly "metaphysical". It is during this period, and up until some time around February, that he paints some of his greatest works, *I pesci sacri* and *Melanconia ermetica*, as well as the two *Nature morte* respectively with the *salame* and the *cassata siciliana*, transitional works in which the paint thickens in the quest for an autonomous quality, enhanced with transparencies and above all a more corpulent and modulated material; even the anti-naturalistic and oneiric space, from the Metaphysics of Ferrara, is recomposed into a more plausible unity, even if not definitely classical. The show at Bragaglia, inaugurated on the 2nd of February 1919, was not a commercial success but was useful to cement the friendship with Signorelli, his only buyer on that occasion. The critic's lack of enthusiasm is well known, and Roberto Longhi expressed himself at length in one of the most unhappy and myopic pieces of his career as a contemporary art critic¹⁴. The painting that Signorelli acquired was simply expounded upon as a female portrait, but of uncertain identification¹⁵. Nevertheless, though the physiognomic characterization is strong, it is in fact a "fanciful head": an undated note conserved in the Signorelli-Cacciatore archive, probably the first of de Chirico's writings (in chronological order) in the series that we will examine, makes reference to *Alceste*. Being the only painting by de Chirico owned by the Signorelli, the reference on the note appears free from interpretive ambiguity, and provides us with a series of fruitful considerations.

Letter, presumably of the second ten days of February 1919, Rome, Tuesday

Distinguished Professor,

The exhibition has been extended until the 21st of this month, therefore I will be unable to bring Alceste to you before the 22nd.

Give my best regards to your wife,

Sincerely, de Chirico

¹⁴ R. Longhi, *Al dio ortopedico*, "Il Tempo" February 22, 1919.

¹⁵ The hypothesis of M. Fagiolo (*L'opera completa di De Chirico, 1908-1924*, Milan 1984, n. 128) that it could be of de Pisis's sister, Ernesta Tibertelli, is disproved by the lack of resemblance. S. Zanotto (*Filippo De Pisis ogni giorno*, Vicenza 1996, p. 86) supposes that it is the portrait of Maritza Mistri, a friend of de Pisis.

First of all, we can deduce the exact length of the exhibition at Bragaglia's, of which until now only the opening date¹⁶ was known, as unfortunately there was neither a printed catalogue, nor a list of the works shown.

The exhibition was planned to last 15 days, but was extended until the 21st of February to just under three weeks. Which just goes to show how the host himself, Bragaglia, held it to be unpalatable for the Roman public, which he had written in the 15th of February 1919 edition of "Cronache d'Attualità" (the Casa d'Arte magazine), as a preface to the presentation written by de Chirico entitled *Noi metafisici* (referring to the contrasting opinions of the new metaphysical art, he reports that many considered it "one of the most clever impostures of the Modernists").

If we consider that the next exhibition, that of the drawings of the fourteen-year-old Romano Dazzi, lasted the whole of the month of March and into the first days of April, we can see an astonishing discrepancy in the treatment reserved for the "difficult" art of de Chirico. Secondly, we see Longhi's malicious intention to wound (naturally to create an advantage for Carrà, who was positioning himself as the antithesis of de Chirico), in releasing his demolishing article the very day after the closure of the show (the 22nd of February) so as to not even concede the benefit of a "success by scandal".

It is worth our while to linger a moment on the discovery of the title of the painting bought by the great collector Signorelli, where we find the roots of, the first meditation on a theme that will prove quite significant for de Chirico: that of Euripides and of art as tragedy. *Alcestis* is in fact the title (and the protagonist) of a most renowned Euripides tragedy. Alcestis, daughter of Pelias, king of Iolco, married Admetus (one of the Argonauts), and consented to die in his place, but at the moment of burial Heracles confronts Thanatos, vanquishing him and tearing away Alcestis, who comes back to life. Heroine of antiquity, Alcestis recalls Euripides and introduces various themes to the new Roman de Chirico. From Apollo to the Argonauts, to the insistence of Euripides as the artist's numen who appears in *Autritratto con busto di Euripide* of 1922-23. According to Savinio, Euripides is the inventor of "tragedy as art", "mnemonic expression, intellectual, ironic and as such 'artistic' of the tragedy of life", "(mediated representation of the universal tragedy and the human tragedy) which marks the start of an intellectual art: such is ours"¹⁷. "*Nulla sine tragoedia gloria*", is the motto that elucidates the self-portrait with Euripides, positioning the Greek tragedy as an allusive and metaphoric 'metaphysical' image of the painter. Alcestis, the heroine that vanquishes death with loyalty, echoed again by Savinio in *Alcesti di Samuele*, is the image of passion and loyalty in the ideal of art.

The taking into consideration of the substantial group of paintings at the exhibition at Bragaglia's, helped ripen the idea of Broglio publishing a monograph, but for which de Chirico had to obtain a certain number of subscriptions. Mrs. Signorelli procured a number of them for him between the end of June and the beginning of July, when de Chirico writes her the first letter.

¹⁶ Thanks to a letter from de Chirico to Papini of the 4th of February 1919, published by M. Calvesi in *La Metafisica schiavitù*, Milan 1992, p. 148, in which the artist specifies the exact date of the inauguration to the previous Sunday, February 2.

¹⁷ A. Savinio, *Nuova Enciclopedia*, Milan 1991, p. 369.

¹⁸ De Chirico's mother Gemma also lives at this address, as we see by the letter she wrote to Signora Signorelli on July 13, 1919 (Signorelli-Cacciatore Archive).

¹⁹ The critique appears in "Valori Plastici", numbers 6-10, June-October 1919, pp. 27-28 (with the title *Mostre Romane*).

²⁰ See the letter of July 20 or 29, here following. De Chirico's mother Gemma writes in a letter to Mrs. Signorelli on the July 13, 1919 (Signorelli-Cacciatore Archive), that "we meet often with the Spadini's, they are dear people and good friends".

²¹ De Chirico himself, in various writings that go from the first period in Paris (1911-15) to after the Second World War, remembers how the birth of his first metaphysical painting is linked to a precise place, Piazza S. Croce in Florence, as well as to a particular state of convalescence and intestinal indisposition that rendered him "in a state of morbid sensitivity": "On a clear autumn afternoon, I was sitting on a bench in the middle of Piazza Santa Croce in Florence. Indeed, it wasn't the first time I had seen this square. I had just recovered from a long and painful intestinal illness and I found myself in an almost morbid state of sensitivity. All of nature, including the marble of the buildings and the fountains, seemed to me to be convalescing also. In the centre of the square stood a statue representing Dante cloaked in a long robe, thoughtful, bowing his head crowned in laurels slightly toward the ground, and hugging his opus to his body. The statue is of white marble, but time has given it a grey tinge, which is very pleasing. The autumn sun, warm and without love, lit the statue as well as the façade of the temple. I had a strange impression that I was seeing all things for the first time. And the composition of my painting just came to me... I like to call the resulting work an enigma". In G. de Chirico, *Il meccanismo del*

Letter, postmarked 9-7-1919

Gentilissima Signora Olga Resnevic-Signorelli / (Civitavecchia) Santa Marinella Rome, Wednesday

Dear Mrs.,

On returning from Ferrara I had the great pleasure of finding your kind letter. I also discovered the envelopes with the subscriptions that you have procured for me and I am moved by such exquisite kindness.

I am now free to work as I wish. I don't know yet if we will come to S. Marinella. My brother is leaving Saturday. I have to accompany him on his errands; tomorrow we will lunch at Spadini's. Nevertheless, and in spite of my newly obtained freedom, I cannot say that I am happy; it is hot; the temperature oppresses me and I suffer from stomach cramps; it makes me ponder on the relativity of the human condition, and the infinite vanity of everything; there is but art, wisdom and knowledge that can give us joy without remorse.

Do return to Rome soon, I miss you terribly.

Give a kiss to the girls. Greetings from my mother.

I kiss your hand,

Devotedly,

de Chirico

Via S. Niccolò 22A¹⁸

By July of 1919 a friendship had begun with Spadini, whom he often met through the common friend Signorelli. We are at the beginning of a vivacious relationship that de Chirico engages in independently of Broglio who, by the way, had instructed Melli to deliver a harsh critique of him in the review¹⁹. In the end, the protection provided by de Chirico and the kind attitude of Spadini (who in addition bought a painting from Carrà) will reverse Broglio's position toward him, and allow him to participate in the 1922 show of the group of "Valori Plastici" at the *Florentina Primavera*.

This letter is significant not only because it sheds light on the beginning of a relationship with Spadini (which at the end of the month de Chirico will describe as quite "idyllic"²⁰), but particularly because of the reference to the strange physiological concurrence of stomach pains, that tie this incubation period of the new classicism to the Florentine invention of Metaphysics²¹. The artist's state of mind is decidedly singular, caused in both cases by a physical indisposition, that produces a new "vision" in art, though in this case in a Platonic idealistic key, although ever laced with a Schopenhauerian pessimism.

Furthermore, it is at this exact moment, as he recalls in his *Memorie*, afflicted by the torrid heat (a fact noted with emphasis in the letter: just a few days later the weather cooled²²), that he executes his first attempt at copying from the classics, of a portrait by Lorenzo Lotto at the Villa Borghese museum, accompanied by Spadini: "It was the summer of 1919. Rome was very hot: there were days when a

hot wind blew on the Urbe, one of those winds from Africa... I had decided to copy a painting by Lorenzo Lotto at the Villa Borghese museum. I had never copied anything in a museum before; I talked of my project to my colleagues and friends, and they all, more or less benevolently, snickered under their breath (...). It was not easy to get started as I had neither diplomas nor permits, absolutely no title of study and these were necessary to obtain permission from the museum management. Luckily Spadini knew the director, professor Cantalamessa, and he accompanied me to him (...). As I was copying the Lorenzo Lotto painting, I often saw Spadini who came to the museum and we talked of antique painting together"²³. In the spring he had actually already painted works inspired by the ancient style, such as *Autoritratto con la madre*, included in fact in the monograph that was in the process of being printed. He was evidently influenced by both Raffaello and by a classicism of 'antique style' but not yet heedless of metaphysical impulses. The state of preservation of this painting, oxidized and riddled with deep craquelures, indicates the beginning of a reflection on ancient techniques, but as yet not truly disconnected from the solid metaphysical impasto: a situation however, that assured the canvas a dignified survival. In consequence of those alchemist meditations prompted by the museum copy and the somewhat exaggerated and inexperienced glazing, he would go on to make a series of paintings between July and November including an *Autoritratto*, *Il figliol Prodigo*, *La Vergine del Tempo*, *Natura morta con le zucche*, *Diana*, which are all enormously compromised by oxidation due to the clumsy handling of the oil painting technique. The magnificent *Autoritratto con busto antico e pennello* (dated 1919), a true manifesto of antique painting, however, is preserved somewhat better and shows a more mature (and therefore subsequent: probably nearing the end of the year) control of the pictorial technique.

A letter of mid-July, where he claims the weather had cooled, enables us to place the copy at the Galleria Borghese in the first half of the month.

Postcard, postmarked 17-7-19

Gent.ma Signora Resnevic-Signorelli / Villa Ferrero / (Civitavecchia) Santa Marinella

16-7-19

Dear Mrs.,

Thank you for your long and very kind letter, for the cigars and the candies. We have decided to stay in Rome, so please do not bother to find the two rooms which mother had mentioned²⁴. Next week we will come for a visit. In any case, do return to Rome soon, where it is cool and very pleasant.

Mother sends her regards.

I kiss your hand, Yours devotedly, de Chirico

A kiss to the girls.

pensiero, Turin 1985, pp. 31-32, manuscript 'Soby a', approx. 1912-13.

²² See the following postcard of the 17th of July, where the artist writes: "It is cool and very pleasant".

²³ G. de Chirico, *Memorie della mia vita*, Milano 1962, pp. 106-7.

²⁴ Gemma de Chirico wrote to Signora Signorelli on the July 13, enquiring if it was possible to rent something for the month of August: "Could you please enquire if two rooms could be found in a private residence without board at not too dear a price for the first of August, without commitment?" (Signorelli-Cacciatore Archive). In the same letter Gemma notes that "My son Alberto left just last night and was very sorry not to have met you"...

A following letter registers great painting activity and quite a fiery anxiety to learn the traditional technique, which was written up in the famous article *Il ritorno al mestiere* published in the number 11-12 issue of "Valori Plastici".

Letter, postmarked 20 or 29, -7-1919

*Gent.ma Signora Resnevic-Signorelli / Villa Ferrero / (Civitavecchia) Santa Marinella
Rome, Tuesday*

Dear Mrs.,

We keep postponing, week after week, our visit to Santa Marinella and I believe we will end up not coming at all. The main reason is that I am overtaken by a genuine frenzy for work and by a restlessness and desire to improve. It is true, that if I compare my work to that of my contemporary's, I find myself, without exaggeration, better than most; but I am not satisfied to compare it only with my contemporary's, and then, an atrocious doubt surfaces. But, if the lines on the palms of my hands don't lie, I hope to accomplish my definite body of work in the next twenty years that I have left.

Last Saturday I ran across the professor in the street, and we walked together for a bit, he was kind enough to invite me himself to Santa Marinella; I will go to see him one evening at home.

It is cool in Rome and the nights are beautiful.

I hope to see you soon.

Give a kiss to your dear girls for me.

I remain, Yours devotedly,

de Chirico

The idyll with Spadini is going full sail.

²⁵ In a letter of Gemma de Chirico's to Mrs. Signorelli on the September 28, 1919 (Signorelli-Cacciatore Archive), she once again goes over the decision to leave for Paris, which then would not come to pass: "Your kind and interesting letter which I received today fills me with happiness that you think of me, I too, will not forget you, even across the border... My wish would be to stay in Rome. I hope this will come true and that I may return to Rome as soon as possible".

²⁶ G. de Chirico, *Memorie della mia vita*, Milano 1962, p.98: "The show had a mediocre success. Only one painting was sold, the only non metaphysical painting in the whole show. It was the portrait of a young woman; the buyer was Professor Angelo Signorelli, who prudently, chose the least metaphysical painting of my exhibition. Professor Signorelli is the first Italian to buy a painting from me, just as Signor Oliver Stern was the first man to buy a painting from me".

Throughout September he continues to collect orders for the monograph, which evidently can't yet be published, and things (economically speaking) don't seem to be going very well. He considers returning again to Paris and leaving the languor of Rome, where painters starve²⁵. The current controversy with Carrà transpires from the sour tone he uses while talking of the article that Carrà had just published in "La Ronda" (it is probably the article entitled *L'arte parigina: Rousseau, Matisse, Derain*, in "La Ronda", n. 7, 1919), and de Chirico writes, with the prospective of leaving Italy, the warm appreciation of gratitude toward Doctor Angelo Signorelli which would echo many years later in the *Autobiography*²⁶.

Letter, postmarked 9-9-1919

Gent.ma Signora Resnevic-Signorelli / Albergo Roma / Olevano

Rome, Tuesday

Dearest Mrs.,

I have received your kind letter with the four signed cards, for which I thank you. I may no longer have the pleasure of seeing you because I am thinking of returning to Paris sometime around the 15th or 20th of October. Here in Rome I see no solution to the problem; too much indifference and ignorance; the so-called cultured public of this city is still in need of a long apprenticeship before being able to appreciate a severe and solitary art such as I conceive. I read the article by Carrà, which is good; it is of those things that can't be bad, but as far as I am concerned it is time to put an end to all these theories and to endeavor to paint better, and it is hardly with articles in "La Ronda" that one perfects or at least improves one's art form; and all these poor painters are terribly powerless. On leaving Italy I will not forget that you (you and your husband) are the only people to take a true interest in me and that the professor was the first Italian to exchange one of my paintings with some bank notes, which is one of the best forms of encouragement, much better than all the praise and idle talk.

Mother says bello. Give a kiss to your beautiful girls for me.

I kiss your hand, dear Madam, Yours devotedly,

de Chirico

At the beginning of November, instead of going to Paris, he decided to move to Milan, where initially he adapts well, and where Savinio was already situated. His mother Gemma writes a rather interesting letter to Mrs. Signorelli on the 10th of November²⁷, in which she reports that she has just moved to Milan, and is staying at the Hotel Terminus; Giorgio was initially staying at his brother's home, viale Porta Romana 76, then in via del Lauro 2. Giorgio sold the *Autoritratto con la madre* (probably to his friend Giorgio Castelfranco), on his stop-over in Florence en route to Milan ("the double portrait, the one where I am with her", entitled *Ritratti* in the monograph of 1919) painted the previous spring. At the beginning of November, De Pisis also arrives, but leaves almost immediately for Ferrara. De Chirico writes to Signorelli just a few days before Christmas, on December 22nd. His tone is calm and satisfied, but Milan will not be the city in which he is destined to stay.

Gent.ma Signora Resnevic-Signorelli / Via XX Settembre 68 / Roma

Milan 22-12-19

Dear Mrs. Signorelli

I ask your forgiveness for having waited so long before writing. I have had a lot of trouble before finding some peace of mind, especially in regard to lodging which was impossible to find. At present, according to logic and the parable of

²⁷ Signorelli-Cacciatore Archive, Rome. This is the text of the letter: 'Milan 10-11-1919 / Dear Signora, / After a pleasant voyage I have arrived in Milan where I intend to spend the winter, seeing that my children do not want me to go to Paris in the middle of winter due to the bad weather and that it is very hard to find lodging, it is difficult from that point of view even here. For the moment I am staying at the Hotel Terminus, the only hotel where I could find a room. Giorgio sends his thanks for your kind thoughts and he will write soon. I find my son Alberto in good health, and very busy. In Florence Giorgio sold the double portrait, the one where I am with him. On the day of his arrival, De Pisis also arrived, but left yesterday for Ferrara, and spoke of you often. We often spend the evenings at the home of friends of Alberto. The weather is horrid, but we go out all the same. What is going on in our beautiful Rome? Please write soon, addressed to Gemma de Chirico c/o Alberto Savinio viale Porta Romana 76. Please give my best regards to the kind professor, and a hug to your dear child, and to you, my very dear and good friend. From your fond friend / Gemma de Chirico'.

fate in every human endeavor, I am peaceful, I have an apartment with northern exposure, therefore good working light. The rest, of course will follow. I like Milan from all standpoints, it is a city made for concentration and good work, the inhabitants are sceptical, and go about their business, therefore there is a total absence of gossip, irritation, jealousies etc.

Could you please pass on to Spadini the letter that I have included as I have forgotten his address.

Please say hello to the professor and your dear girls, and best wishes for the holidays.

I kiss your hand,

I remain, Yours devotedly,

de Chirico

- Via Lauro 2 -

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English translation by Katherine Robinson