

GIORGIO DE CHIRICO - A HANDWRITTEN NOTE (APPENDIX)

In the summer of 1946, de Chirico denounced the showing of 20 fake paintings in an exhibition held in June at Galleria Allard in Paris, in which, twenty of the twenty-eight works on show were fake “metaphysical” paintings by the surrealist painter Oscar Dominguez. The mercantile aspect of the surrealist situation came blatantly to the fore in the Allard exhibition and represented yet a further act against the artist by the surrealists following the extensive program of defamation carried out from the mid-1920s on.

De Chirico published numerous articles in Italy on the Allard episode and also sent a declaration to the French daily newspaper “Combat” in Paris. On 27 July 1946 an article entitled *Chirico nous cable de Rome: “On expose des faux Chirico”* [De Chirico cables us from Rome: “They are showing fake de Chirico’s”] was published and included a postscript by the journalist Jean Neuvecelle, a newspaper correspondent based in Rome. A small handwritten note related to this event that de Chirico had addressed to Neuvecelle seems to contain a clue regarding the book *A propos de peinture*: “Dear Friend, please be kind enough to return the Benito book that I lent to you. I read the piece in Combat, and found it a bit tendentious, and not quite how I had explained the question to you. All the best, G. de Chirico”¹ (fig. 1). The note is held in the *Russi in Italia* Archive² in Rome, where its recipient is registered as the Russian symbolist poet and philosopher Vyacheslav Ivanov, whom de Chirico became acquainted with at the Signorelli family’s cultural gatherings in Rome in the early 1920s.³ In light of the article published in “Combat”, it is evident that de Chirico had written, not to Ivanov, but to his son Jean Neuvecelle, a frequent contributor to the newspaper and expert on Vatican matters.⁴ Ivanov was, in fact, over 80 years old at the time. In reading de Chirico’s declaration and Neuvecelle’s postscript, translated here, one better understands the artist’s displeasure regarding the latter’s take on the Allard situation:

¹ “Cher ami, ayez l’obligeance de me rendre ce livre de Benito que je vous ai prêté. J’ai lu votre morceau dans Combat, un peu tendancieux, et pas tout à fait comme je vous avez [sic] expliqué la chose. – Bien à vous, G. de Chirico”.

² Consultable online: <http://www.russinitalia.it/inediti.php?id=7>

³ See T. Goryacheva, *De Chirico and Russia: Contacts, Connections, Influence*, in *Giorgio de Chirico - Metaphysical Visions*, exhibition catalogue edited by G. Mercurio, 19 April-23 July 2017, Tretyakov State Gallery, Moscow, Antiga Editore, Treviso 2017, p. 113. On the subject of the handwritten note the author writes: “Their relationship [between de Chirico and Ivanov, *A/n*] that would last for years precipitated multiple discussions on a variety of subjects, including the policies of Mussolini’s Italy (which is indirectly corroborated by a postcard de Chirico sent to Ivanov)”. That the name “Benito” on the card referred to Benito Mussolini is implausible as, if de Chirico had effectively been referring to Mussolini, he would certainly not have used his given name “Benito”.

⁴ See Y.-M. Ajchenbaum in *A la vie à la mort, Histoire du journal COMBAT 1941-1974*, chapter *Un an après la libération de Paris*, where one reads: “From Rome, Neuvecelle, son of the Russian poet and erudite Viatcheslav Ivanov, regularly sends both political and cultural articles... The entire editorial staff at rue Réaumur suspects him of being a Vatican spy. But what does it matter! His culture, his wit and his knowledge of Italy make him a gracious correspondent and always very astute” (le Monde- Éditions, Paris 1994, p. 202).

fig. 1 G. de Chirico, handwritten note, 1946, Russi in Italia Archive, Rome

***De Chirico cables us from Rome:
“They are showing fake de Chirico’s”***

The famous Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico sends us the following message from Rome:

ROME, 25 July. – Last month a gallery in Paris organised an exhibition of paintings with my signature but which were actually all forgeries. I have received from Paris the reproductions of nineteen of these images and I am awaiting more photographs. This enormous fraud has obliged me to take legal action against the guilty parties. These forgeries are awkward, crude and stupid imitations, especially those pertaining to the period I named “metaphysical”; the others are relative to the “stylised horses and ruins” period.

Even in America and now also in Italy, there are fake de Chirico paintings circulating with fake signatures on them that have probably been made by using a tracing technique, which have the same characteristics of the ones recently shown in Paris. Given the large number of forgeries that exist of my work, I warn those who own paintings of mine and are not absolutely sure of their authenticity, that I will proceed to have all canvases that are falsely attributed to me confiscated through legal channels. I must add that I am quite surprised that in the centre of Paris they managed to organise an exhibition of paintings – the falseness of which is evident even to the blind – without anyone noticing or raising the slightest objection or doubt.

⁵ Article by G. de Chirico with post scriptum by J. Neuvecelle, *Chirico nous câble de Rome: “On expose des faux Chirico”*, in “Combat”, Paris, 27 July 1946.

Thank you for the space you will afford this letter, etc.

Giorgio de CHIRICO
28 via Mario de Fiori, Rome

Our correspondent from Rome, Jean Neuvecelle, adds:

The adventure that happened to de Chirico gave him occasion to publish indignant protests in various Italian newspapers and to go to war with the so-called Avant-guard of the City of Lights. The making of forgeries has caused de Chirico to believe that a premeditated action is being conducted by the “modernists” against his efforts to bring art back to “the domain of nobleness, beauty, dignity, seriousness.” He accuses “these modernists who only search for thrills and revelations of being incapable of concerning themselves with the most important element of a painting: the pictorial element.” Now settled in a small apartment in the old quarter of Rome, de Chirico is often subject to criticism by young Italian painters who, with the vehemence of neophytes, accuse him of betrayal, of turning towards “*art pompier*” and indulging in “egocentric brushstrokes.”

Conspiracy! replies de Chirico, intrigue of the forces of decadence against well-being and craft!

And, between two exhibitions, he philosophises and *publishes theoretical pamphlets* [Author’s italics, *ed.*].⁶

Instead of focusing on the Allard gallery scandal, Neuvecelle chose to angle his contribution on de Chirico’s protest against the decadence of modern painting, as if this had something to do

⁶ Original French text, *Chirico nous câble de Rome*: “On expose des faux Chirico”: Le célèbre peintre italien Giorgio de Chirico nous câble de Rome le message suivant: ROME, 25 juillet. – Une galerie parisienne a fait, le mois dernier, une exposition de tableaux portant ma signature, mais qui, en réalité, étaient presque tous faux. J’ai déjà reçu de Paris les reproductions de dix-neuf de ces tableaux et j’attends d’autres photographies. Il s’agit là d’une formidable escroquerie qui m’oblige à entreprendre immédiatement une action judiciaire contre les coupables. Ces faux sont des imitations grossières, gauches et stupides de mes toiles, surtout de celles appartenant à l’époque que j’ai appelée “métaphysique”; d’autres se rapportent à l’époque “chevaux stylisés et ruines”. En Amérique également, et maintenant même en Italie, circulent de faux Chirico, portant une fausse signature, probablement calquée, et qui présentent les mêmes caractéristiques que ceux qui ont récemment figuré à l’exposition parisienne. Etant donné le grand nombre de contrefaçons de mes œuvres, j’avertis tous ceux qui possèdent des toiles de moi sans être absolument sûrs de leur authenticité, que je ferai procéder, par la voie légale, à la saisie de toute toile qui me serait faussement attribuée. J’ajoute encore que je suis très étonné que l’on ait pu organiser en plein Paris une exposition de tableaux – dont la fausseté saute aux yeux même d’un aveugle – sans que personne s’en soit aperçu ni ait soulevé la moindre objection ou le moindre doute. Je vous remercie de l’hospitalité que vous accorderez à cette lettre, etc. Giorgio de CHIRICO, via Mario de Fiori, 28, Rome. A ces lignes, notre correspondant à Rome Jean Neuvecelle ajoute: L’AVENTURE arrivée à Chirico lui a fourni l’occasion de publier des démentis indignés dans plusieurs journaux italiens et de partir en guerre contre les “soi-disant milieux d’avant-garde de la Ville Lumière.” La fabrication des faux fait croire à Chirico qu’une action préméditée est menée par des “modernistes” contre ses efforts pour ramener l’art “sur le plan de la noblesse, de la beauté, de la dignité, du sérieux.” Il accuse “ces modernistes, qui ne cherchent que frissons, que révélations et qui sont incapables de s’intéresser au fait le plus important dans le tableau: le fait pictural.” Depuis que Chirico s’est installé dans un petit appartement de la vieille Rome, il est d’ailleurs souvent en butte aux critiques de jeunes peintres italiens, qui lui reprochent avec la véhémence des néophytes d’avoir trahi, de tourner vers le pompérisme et de se complaire dans “les coups de pinceau égocentristes”. – Conspiration! réplique Chirico, intrigues des forces de la décadence contre la santé et le métier! Et entre deux expositions, il philosophe et publie des pamphlets théoriques.

with the surrealists' action. The argument concerning de Chirico's effort to save great painting is a valid one, but is out of context regarding the specific event of the sale of fake paintings in Paris, an orchestrated and purely fraudulent operation causing moral damage to the artist's oeuvre. Neuvecelle goes even further off topic by giving voice to the critique expressed by young Italian painters, a completely alien and vaguely offensive subject. In this light, de Chirico's reaction: "I read the piece in *Combat*, and found it a bit tendentious, and not quite how I had explained the question to you", is perfectly understandable.

De Chirico's battle against the forgery of his work and his effort to safeguard quality painting are two battles that he began to fight with all his might in the 1940s and would continue to fight for the rest of his life. With regard to the first of these, he took pen in hand and wrote frequent protests in the press. As for the second, in addition to the publication of *The Comedy of Modern Art*, he got down in the trenches with a publication signed with a pseudonym in order to raise awareness and save the values of art that he felt were being ravaged by the modernists.

In his note to Neuvecelle, de Chirico asked for the restitution of the "Benito" book he had lent him, which the former had evidently read, possibly influencing his contribution which was focused more on the artist's fight to save the quality of painting and less, unfortunately, on the subject of the battle in progress against the forgery taking place in Paris. The journalist would probably also have read *The Comedy of Modern Art*, from which he could have gleaned the same conclusions, but the coincidence between the argument of his postscript published in "Combat" and the content of the Benito book – besides the significant fact that de Chirico had lent it to him – is somewhat revealing.

Neuvecelle concludes, in fact, that de Chirico "philosophies and publishes theoretical pamphlets".