

## ROSENBERG AND DE CHIRICO

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### Correspondence of 1925

Correspondence between the great art dealer and Giorgio de Chirico dating from 1925 to 1939<sup>1</sup> is preserved in the Rosenberg Archive in the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris.<sup>1</sup> The material conserved here is essential for us to reconstruct the work of both men, but it is also invaluable in helping us understand their complex relationship. For de Chirico, Rosenberg was a gallery-owner of primary importance yet he was also a friend, critic and patron. It should be pointed out that the correspondence gives us a partial point of view and contributes to throwing light above all on the more professional aspect of their acquaintance.

The documents are kept in two large folders: the second contains the letters written between January 1926 and December 1939, the frequency of which became increasingly sporadic with the passing of the years. Meanwhile the *corpus* that makes up the first folder refers solely to 1925 and its contents almost exclusively concern the exhibition that de Chirico held at Léonce Rosenberg's gallery in Paris during the month of May<sup>2</sup>. All the letters that the painter wrote to the dealer that year are published in this paper. In the brief text that accompanies these letters, I will try to throw light on the stages that mark the birth of an exhibition and to analyse the consequences of the event.

The first document that we find in the archive of the Pompidou Centre is not a letter but a contract. This contract was stipulated between Rosenberg and de Chirico on the 10<sup>th</sup> November 1924 and it relates to a solo exhibition of the artist from Volos at the L'Effort Moderne gallery<sup>3</sup>. The 15<sup>th</sup> January

<sup>1</sup> Fond Léonce Rosenberg, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Centre du Documentation et de Recherche du Musée National d'Art Moderne, Box 10 and 11. De Chirico's letters to Léonce Rosenberg from 1925 are transcribed in French and translated into English in this Periodical, pp. 623-644.

<sup>2</sup> The exhibition was held at Léonce Rosenberg's 'L'Effort Moderne' Gallery in Paris, at 19 rue de la Baume, in the VIII arrondissement, from 5 to 30 May 1925.

<sup>3</sup> Fond Rosenberg, 9600.133. The text of the document reads:

"Between Messieurs Georges de Chirico, artist-painter in Rome and on the other side Léonce Rosenberg, art publisher, 19 rue de la Baume, Paris, the following is agreed:

Monsieur de Chirico will exhibit between twenty and twenty-three paintings at the "L'Effort Moderne" on the ground floor, for twenty-one working days, from [15 January' crossed out] 5 May, with the following conditions:

1<sup>st</sup> Monsieur de Chirico will pay for the costs of printing the invitations and catalogues

2<sup>nd</sup> He will compensate "L'Effort Moderne" for lighting, surveillance and staff by means of a sum of five hundred francs.

3<sup>rd</sup> He will grant "L'Effort Moderne" a remittance of 30%, a luxury tax included in the sum of the sale of his paintings during the exhibition.

In double copy, Paris 10<sup>th</sup> November 1924

Read and approved Léonce Rosenberg

Read and approved Georges de Chirico."

1925 was initially picked as the opening day, but in the document the date has been crossed out and replaced with the correct date. The gallery owner and the painter must have immediately realised that it would have been absolutely impossible to organise an exhibition in two months. Moreover, as we will see, the timing was nonetheless tight even though the inauguration was postponed to 5<sup>th</sup> May. De Chirico undertook the responsibility of printing the catalogue and invitations, and the costs involved in keeping the exhibition open, and he granted Rosenberg 30% on any earnings relating to sales of works.

The first missive was a postcard written from Rome on 12<sup>th</sup> January 1925. The *Pictor Optimus* asks if a thousand copies of the catalogue will be sufficient and invites Rosenberg to publish several reproductions of his paintings in “Bulletin de L’Effort Moderne”, thus showing how he was always heedful of the role played by reviews and the circulation of ideas that accompany and support an artist’s work. He also expressed his concern about the success of the exhibition for which, he assured Rosenberg, he was working a great deal. From these few lines we can already perceive the painter’s great interest and high expectations for the Paris exhibition. The gallery owner replied to him two days later by return of post: he confirmed that a thousand copies would be enough, but that they would need at least 1,500 invitations. He added that he would very gladly publish the photographs in the next issue of his review, but that de Chirico should send them soon. On a final note he reassured him that the gallery was growing day by day and that he was doing everything possible to make the exhibition a great success. De Chirico hastened to send four photographs on 26<sup>th</sup> January. Rosenberg wrote on 31<sup>st</sup> January that he had received them and that they would be published in the next issue of the “Bulletin de L’Effort Moderne”. He also made clear that the catalogues and invitations should be available by 15<sup>th</sup> April in order to be able to publicise the exhibition adequately.

In an undated letter<sup>4</sup>, the *Pictor Optimus* sent the critical essay of the catalogue which the dealer found to be “perfect”. As far as this aspect is concerned, we should refer to the illuminating article by Giovanna Rasario<sup>5</sup>. In this article she shows that, despite the signature being that of Giorgio Castelfranco, the author was in fact de Chirico himself, not new to writing about himself using the names of others<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Fond Rosenberg, 9600.138 C4.

<sup>5</sup> G. Rasario, *Le opere di Giorgio de Chirico nella Collezione Castelfranco*, in “Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico”, n. 5-6, Rome, 2006, pp. 221-276. See this article also for an investigation into the works exhibited at Rosenberg’s gallery: as far as the metaphysical works are concerned, the author has actually conducted a study aimed at distinguishing originals from signed copies.

<sup>6</sup> Although de Chirico’s manuscript and pages of the catalogue in which the essay is published are reproduced in Rasario’s essay, it is opportune to reproduce the text here in order to give the reader the most complete documentation possible regarding the collaboration between the painter and Rosenberg in 1925: “The *sense of illusion* is what is most remarkable in Giorgio de Chirico’s work, inasmuch as it is an indispensable element of all art and the principal of everything. Forms, real or fantastic, confidently and precisely positioned in space, compose an architectural unity by which each element becomes necessary to the whole painting. Adhering to the object, the light brings out the exact lines of its contours, thus creating a clear and accessible image, which our spirit welcomes with the sudden joy we attain from all fully realized creations.

Giorgio de Chirico has never set limits *a priori* to his inspiration.

What initially struck his essentially modern spirit was the magical aspect of the straight and powerful architecture of certain cities, on serene days under a dense sky lying low on the horizon. Men perceive the statues’ stillness as they rush through the streets like phantoms chasing a precise but unexplainable objective: the darkened skies are bathed in a strange and powerful eclipsed light.

He then lived the joy of the Roman hills where plants blossom in the sun in the richness of a happy land; where groups of houses gather together to sleep in the shade of the trees, or reach down, geometric and luminous, across the large foothills in a distant and sweet repose, almost like a vision detached from the world and from life.

A portraitist, Giorgio de Chirico has always taken care to grasp the human figure at the moment of its most intimate resemblance. He groups the figures in order to give the painting a sense of vastness and to make it more solemn. He places a statue beside a portrait in order to create a seductive contrast between its inalterable serenity and the pathetic vivacity of the human figure. Lately, the mysterious meaning of dreams has imposed itself once more on his spirit: in a neutral light, in an atmosphere in which distant planes become blurred, the ghosts of far-off eras return to him.

But everywhere and always in Giorgio de Chirico’s work, from the very first paintings to the most recent, we find the same faculty for revealing the newest and most surprising characteristics in his limpid and noble tone that elevates them to the power of myth. G. de Chirico [cancelled] G. Castelfranco.”

This choice must have been read as a further sign of the great interest and extreme care with which the artist was preparing his Paris exhibition.

There is no evidence of any letter sent during the month of February, but correspondence in March was once again intense. With the opening day drawing near, the tone of the missives changed radically. Optimism was replaced with tension and organisational problems took a central role. On 22<sup>nd</sup> March, the dealer asked de Chirico to send the catalogues and invitations to Paul Eluard, as agreed, because time was running out. In order to reassure him, he informed him that the solo exhibition of the American painter Eugène MacCown (opened at that time at 'L'Effort Moderne') was having considerable success and all the works exhibited had already been sold. On 6<sup>th</sup> April, he wrote again to complain that he had still not received anything. On 11<sup>th</sup> April, Rosenberg sent a registered letter in which he showed that he was decidedly irritated because he had received two crates of paintings which weighed more than 270 kilograms, despite the fact that he had clearly told the *Pictor Optimus* not to send anything. He therefore emphasised that he did not want to foot any of the expenses for the exhibition and asked de Chirico to issue orders to the couriers so that he would not have any more nuisances or have to shell out any money. Five days later, he wrote again to forcefully repeat the same concepts. During this time lapse, we strangely find no reply from the Volos artist, who normally used to reply promptly to the gallery owner. On 25<sup>th</sup> April, it was Giorgio Castelfranco who forwarded a letter in which he reassured Rosenberg that all the expenses would be taken care of by him and that de Chirico would be arriving in Paris shortly in order to personally take care of everything. Castelfranco enclosed a list of all the works shipped, with the relative prices in francs declared to customs<sup>7</sup>.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> May, on the eve of the *vernissage*, the gallery owner wrote two messages in which he repeated, once again, what he had expressed in his previous letters. But above all he complained

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<sup>7</sup> Fond Rosenberg 9600.145 Cl. Below is the text of the letter written by Giorgio Castelfranco to Léonce Rosenberg on 25<sup>th</sup> April 1925:

"M. Rosenberg

Allow me to reply to you on behalf of M. de Chirico, since I have arranged the shipping of the two crates of paintings that have arrived with you.

Arrangements have been made so that all costs are my responsibility.

I am including a note of the titles and the prices, here they are obviously much lower than the real prices, but they are the prices that can be declared to the customs officials.

In any case M. de Chirico will leave for Paris shortly: you can expect him and he will carry out all the necessary steps.

Yours

G. Castelfranco

*Portrait de l'artiste avec buste de Mercure* (Portrait of the Artist with Bust of Mercury) 600

*Paysage avec chevaliers* (Landscape with Horses) 600

*Portrait de l'artiste* (Portrait of the Artist) 600

*Oreste avec Electre* (Orestes with Electra) 600

*Grenades avec buste ancien* (Pomegranate with Antique Bust) 400

*Poissons* (Fish) 500

*Paysage romain* (Roman Landscape) 850

*Hector et Andromaque* (Hector and Andromache) 850

*Les muses inquiétantes* (The Disquieting Muses) 750

*Guerriers romains* (Roman Warriors) 350

*Intérieur métaphysique* (Metaphysical Interior) 450

*Portrait de l'artiste et de sa mère* (Portrait of the Artist and his Mother) 600

*La mère de l'artiste* (The Artist's Mother) 400

*Lucrece* (Lucretius) 1050

*Portrait de l'artiste* (Portrait of the Artist) 600

*Violon* (Violin) 500

4 cadres modernes (4 modern frames) 300'

that he had received far too few catalogues and an insufficient number of invitations, less than half of the minimum required. And as if this were not enough, he had received everything extremely late: thus, after having repeatedly reassured the painter over the previous months, he now declined any responsibility if the exhibition did not prove to be a success.

In reality things did not go badly as had been feared. In three letters written in the second half of May (15<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>), Rosenberg communicated to the painter that he had sold *Grenades avec buste ancient (Pomegranate with Antique Bust)*, *Homère (Homer)* and *Violon (Violin)*, and that he had received an offer for *Legionnaire roman dans le pays conquis (Roman Legionary in the Conquered Land)*. Furthermore, at the end of the exhibition he felt it would be opportune to keep several works which he felt he could sell, amongst which *Les tragediens d'Eschile (The Tragedies of Aeschylus)* in particular. This prediction would be confirmed shortly and, in a postcard dated 3<sup>rd</sup> June, de Chirico shows his pleasure about this. Of particular interest was the communication written by the gallery owner on 30<sup>th</sup> May: Rosenberg wanted first of all to put paid to the birth of any argument, by clarifying that Paul Guillaume had never said that he was scandalised by the prices of the *Pictor Optimus* paintings; he had simply found the price of *Les tragediens d'Eschile* a little high. He then added that Dr. Barnes of Philadelphia was interested in buying *Interieur métaphysique (Metaphysical Interior)*<sup>8</sup>. In the aforementioned postcard of 3<sup>rd</sup> June, de Chirico replied with regret and concern that the work was not for sale because it belonged to Paul Eluard, who had kindly loaned it on occasion of the exhibition. However, he asked Rosenberg to inform Barnes that three other paintings of the same genre and period were available.

The letters written in the following months principally concerned the sale and payment of works which de Chirico continued to send to Paris. On 23<sup>rd</sup> September, he confirmed that he had shipped a crate with about twenty paintings, a considerable number considering that only twenty-three works had been exhibited at the exhibition at 'L'Effort Moderne'. This time, mindful of recent experience, the painter did not forget to specify that the crate was sent at his cost. The last missive written by de Chirico to Rosenberg, a postcard dated 13<sup>th</sup> October, does not concern work but is very intimate and personal. As he had already done in an undated letter that was most likely written during the second half of May, the painter expressed friendship and gratitude to Rosenberg, above all for his considerable and continuing encouragement. To reciprocate, he promised that as soon as he arrived in Paris he would paint a full-size portrait of him or a family member if he so preferred.

### **The critical dimension of Léonce Rosenberg**

These letters, in which it is principally business that is dealt with in a tone which is often rather aseptic, could generate misunderstandings if they are not adequately contextualised. These misunderstandings do not necessarily deal with de Chirico (whose character has been and will continue to be studied in depth) but rather perhaps with Léonce Rosenberg. The latter in fact emerges from the

<sup>8</sup> Rasario 2006, p. 244.

correspondence as an able and decisive dealer. However, this profile is rather restrictive given that Rosenberg was also a perspicacious critic, a refined collector and a distinguished intellectual. His interest in the art of the avant-garde, in cubism and in de Chirico should not be seen as merely a good nose for business.

The decorative cycle produced for his new house, acquired in 1928 in the elegant, residential 16<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris, is emblematic of his taste and his thinking, making reference to precise theosophical<sup>9</sup> and philosophical foundations. Rosenberg asked “his” painters to produce a series of canvases, entrusting a room to each one. The following were summoned: Fernand Léger, Auguste Herbin, Jean Metzinger, Georges Valmier, Jean Viollier, Francis Picabia, Emmanuel Rendon, Max Ernst, Gino Severini and Alberto Savinio. Eleven canvases were entrusted to de Chirico; these paintings were destined for the drawing room, rechristened the *Sala dei gladiatori* (*The Hall of Gladiators*) by virtue of the theme. The decorative task desired by the gallery-owner between 1928 and 1929 boasts a rich bibliography and it has been diligently documented in studies by Christian Derouet and Maurizio Fagiolo dell’Arco<sup>10</sup>.

Undoubtedly less famous, particularly in Italian studies, but no less important for reconstructing Rosenberg’s deep and articulate critical thought, is his essay dedicated to the Cubist painting of 1920, *Cubisme et tradition* (*Cubism and Tradition*)<sup>11</sup>. This essay can be considered his most structured and richest critical piece. In this text, Rosenberg tackles the issue of modern art in a systematic way, providing a definition of it and explaining what he thinks is its deep meaning. This reflection departs from the contraposition, typical of any era, between the conservatives and the representatives of what the author calls “action”. A high spiritual value is given to tradition whilst the conservatives are the people who, believing that they are defending tradition, take shelter in tired, codified formulas. Amongst the exponents of the new artistic trends, on the other hand, there is a type of artist who throws himself against the establishment in order to obtain his own success: such artists are defined as “demolishers”. Their role is seen positively, in that they prepare the ground for those who follow them, or rather for those artists able to create a new tradition and make modern art which materialises the Beautiful: in other words the “Constructors”. For Rosenberg, in the 1920s, this mission was fulfilled by the Cubist painters, who were unfairly accused of making anarchic art because they had

<sup>9</sup> Alberto Savinio’s testimonies about this are interesting: “Léonce Rosenberg loved painting, and particularly Cubist painting. I believed that Monsieur L.R. loved Cubist painting for aesthetic reasons and taste but one day I discovered that Monsieur L.R. fervently practised theosophy, and he found the symbols of his faith in Cubist painting”, and again: “One day I asked him why he liked painting by the Abstractionists. (the Abstractionists of 1920: Gleizes, Metzinger, others). He confessed that he was a theosophist and that he found symbols that were dear to him in these geometric paintings”. In *Scritti dispersi, tra guerra e dopoguerra*, edited by L. Sciascia e F. de Maria, Milan 1989, pp. 662-663, 1034-1035. The two quotes come respectively from *Villeggiare in casa con un quadro impressionista*, in “Corriere d’informazione”, 12-13 March 1948, and from *Sorprendenti motivi per cui piacciono i quadri*, in “Corriere della Sera”, 4 September 1949.

<sup>10</sup> For the decoration of Rosenberg’s house, the following studies (amongst others) are of fundamental importance: C. Derouet, *Un problème de baroque tardif à Paris*, in *Giorgio de Chirico*, exhibition catalogue, Munich 1982-1983, Paris 1983, pp. 111-135; and M. Fagiolo dell’Arco, *Casa Rosenberg*, in *Les Italiens de Paris. De Chirico e gli altri a Parigi nel 1930*, exhibition catalogue, Brescia 1998, pp. 91-107; see also the recent technical description dedicated to the *Gladiatori* by B. Avanzi in *Italia Nova. Une aventure de l’art italien 1900-1950*, exhibition catalogue, Paris 2006, pp. 139-143.

<sup>11</sup> L. Rosenberg, *Cubisme et tradition*, Editions de ‘L’Effort Moderne’, Paris 1920. The text also appeared as an introduction to the exhibition catalogue *La jeune peinture française. Les Cubistes*, held in 1920 at the Galerie Moos in Geneva. He published another paper on the same subject the following year: L. Rosenberg, *Cubisme et empirisme*, Editions de ‘L’Effort Moderne’, Paris 1921. The text also appeared in the review “De Stijl” in Leiden, in four parts, between 1920 and 1921 (no. 12 of 1920 and nos. 1, 2 and 3 of 1921). *Cubisme et empirisme*, however, takes on a completely different form: it is not a critical essay like *Cubisme et tradition*, but rather deals with a series of reflections, aphorisms and quotations, that are in any case useful for reconstructing Rosenberg’s opinion.

subverted the rules of the representation of reality that had been valid since the Renaissance period. On the contrary, he presents them as creators of a new order. It is up to them, and in general to the genus of constructors, to find lost tradition and make this tradition live again in forms as yet unknown.

These propositions, i.e. the idea of the birth of a new order and the rebirth of tradition in a modern key, can be applied to the work of Giorgio de Chirico, perhaps even more so than to the Cubists. Right from the start of their introduction we understand the reasons why Rosenberg became a convinced supporter of the Volos painter.

The crucial theme of the essay concerns the essence of art itself which, being such, must “create” and not “imitate”. The ultimate aim is not to reproduce nature but to give life to a creation of the spirit. We see the author’s opinion in full in a central passage in which he refers to the activity of Cubist painters:

Instead of recreating an aspect of nature, they try to create the plastic equivalents of natural objects and the pictorial result produced in this way becomes an aspect that is created by the spirit. Construction realised in this way does not have a comparative value but a strictly intrinsic value or, to use a platonic expression, it is “beautiful in itself”<sup>12</sup>.

It is not therefore the reconstruction of an aspect of nature but the research of “plastic equivalents of natural objects”. For Rosenberg, art is not an imitative action but an activity of the spirit and, with regard to this, he declares the philosophical system on which he bases all his theoretical structure: the artistic construction is “beautiful in itself”, making an explicit reference to Plato’s thinking. In particular, he makes reference to a specific Platonic discourse, the *Philebus*, and in order to confer force to his own thesis he cites a lengthy passage that is opportune to transcribe here<sup>13</sup>:

*Protarchus*: Then what pleasures, Socrates, should we be right in conceiving to be true?

*Socrates*: True pleasures are those which are given by beauty of colour and form, and most of those which arise from smells; those of sound, again, and in general those of which the want is painless and unconscious, and of which the fruition is palpable to sense and pleasant and unalloyed with pain.

*Protarchus*: Once more, Socrates, I must ask what you mean.

*Socrates*: My meaning is certainly not obvious, and I will endeavour to be plainer. I do not mean by beauty of form such beauty as that of animals or pictures, which many would suppose to be my meaning; but, says the argument, understand me to mean straight lines and circles, and the plane or solid figures which are formed out of them by turning-lathes and rulers and measurers of angles; for these I affirm to be not only relatively beautiful, like other things, but they are eternally and absolutely beautiful, and they have peculiar pleasures, quite unlike the pleasures of scratching. And there are colours which are of the same character, and have similar pleasures; do you now understand my meaning?

<sup>12</sup> L. Rosenberg, *Cubisme et tradition*, cit., p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> Plato, *Philebus*; *With a Revised Text*, ed. by Edward Poste, Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2004, p. 120

In the second half of the 1910s, when the *Return to Order* was getting a foothold and spreading throughout Europe, Platonic thinking (whether interpreted correctly or misunderstood) underwent a period of great critical fortune in the artistic world<sup>14</sup>: in 1916, Amédée Ozenfant published (in the review “L’Elan” which he founded) the full translation of *Philebus*, which Léonce Rosenberg had in fact introduced him to. And once again it was the great dealer, in an interview published in an issue of “Valori Plastici” of 1919, which was entirely dedicated to Cubism, who put forward his point of view on modern French art and his personal interpretation of platonic philosophy<sup>15</sup>. What is more surprising, however, is that the text which appeared in the Italian review contains lengthy excerpts of the essay examined here, published in France, only a year later. In fact, what we read in “Valori Plastici” is an embryonic draft, an initial idea of *Cubisme et tradition*, in which all the guiding ideas are anticipated. Even if the essay of 1920 was never translated into Italian, Rosenberg’s thinking was well known in Italy and de Chirico would certainly have known about him for a great amount of time before the exhibition was held at ‘L’Effort Moderne’ in Paris in 1925.

*Translated by Rosamund King*

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<sup>14</sup> For this see the essay by E. Pontiggia, *L'enigmatico classicismo. Il Ritorno all'Ordine in Europa (1919-1925)*, in *Il Ritorno all'Ordine*, edited by E. Pontiggia, Milan 2005, pp. 123-185.

<sup>15</sup> L. Rosenberg, *Introduzione*