



fig. 1 Portrait of Gemma de Chirico, fine '800, Rome, Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico

“CARISSIMA MAMMA”. LETTERS OF THE DE CHIRICO FAMILY (1924-1936)

Elena Pontiggia

The Fondazione Giorgio and Isa de Chirico has recently come into the possession of some de Chirico family correspondence, as copies, from a private collection: eighty-eight unpublished documents altogether, including letters, postal cards, illustrated postcards, and various papers, all handwritten (with one exception). All the letters, written over the period between 1924 and 1936, were sent by Giorgio de Chirico to his mother, Baroness Gemma Cervetto, apart from two from the artist to his brother, two from Savinio to his mother and four from his wife, the theatre actress Maria Morino.

Four distinct “nuclei” can be identified over the twelve year period that has been referred to above, amongst this collection of de Chirico correspondence. The first, between 1924 and 1926, includes letters sent from the Vichy Thermal Baths (July 1924); from Paris, where he stays briefly in November 1924 to help at the *Giara*; from Rome (September 1925); and again from Paris, where the artist settles in December 1925, while his mother and Savinio join him the following July.¹

The second nucleus, from 1929, can be divided into two sections: the first, letters sent from Monte Carlo, where de Chirico stays at the end of April, to finish off the scenes and costumes for *Le Bal* by Kochno; the second, correspondence from Paris, where the artist works over the summer to the Rothschild’s niche.

The third nucleus, from 1932 to 1933, is the most numerous, and is sent to Gemma from Italy, or to be more precise (if the first letter from Milan is excluded) from Florence, where de Chirico spends most of 1932. Here, in April, he holds an exhibition at Palazzo Ferroni, the exhibition space dedicated to contemporary art opened by the antique-dealer Luigi Bellini and curated by Roberto Papi. In 1933, the artist divides his time between Florence, where for the Maggio Fiorentino *I Puritani* is staged, for which he designs the scenery and costumes; and Milan, where he creates the great fresco for the Galleria di Pittura Murale, created by Sironi for the V Triennale.

The last nucleus is made up of a small sequence of letters from 1934, sent to Paris by Gemma, who, at that time, lived with Savinio in Milan. So it is a rich source of correspondence that serves as a testimony as to how de Chirico, even when far away, never forgot his mother, to whom he wrote regularly.

¹ De Chirico also went to Paris in May 1925 for his exhibition at Rosenberg’s, but there is no trace of this journey in the correspondence dealt with here. This essay has been translated from Italian by Anna Morris.

Savinio's (or Betti's, as he was affectionately known at home) two letters are dated August 1924 and August 1929, and they are also addressed to his mother who, as was the fashion at the time, spent her holidays at the spa. Finally, the two letters from the *Pictor Optimus* to his brother, are dated 3 April 1926, when Savinio was officially entering into the world of painting, and February 1934.

Added to this central nucleus of papers, are three appendices, of which we will simply describe the content. The first is a short letter dated 1890 from little Adelaide (Giorgio's and Alberto's older sister, who died at a young age the following year) to his father Evaristo. The second includes three letters, sent to Gemma respectively by a financial operator, Giorgio Castelfranco, and Sergio Solmi. The third contains five documents of various kinds, that is, economic summaries and lists of furniture and personal effects, drawn up by Gemma and de Chirico.

Amongst this set of eighty-eight papers, which the Foundation is not currently authorized to publish in full, here we will give account of the main letters, at least in synthesis. They cannot be compared to the major letters for their scholarly importance to the main letter exchanges already known, like those with Gartz, Carrà, Soffici and others. However they are significant for certain information that will certainly interest scholars but also, more in general, art lovers and those who love the extraordinary (a banal adjective, but we cannot find a more suitable one) family of the Dioscuri. They are, even more so, for their rarity. From the numerous de Chirico's letters that survive, in fact, very few are family correspondence, *ad familiares*. In the recent volume that brings together the letters exchanged between 1909 and 1929, of the 463 papers published, only two of those are by the artist to his mother and his brother, and just two are from Savinio to de Chirico.² To those can be added, as a sort of incipit, the short letter sent to the future *Pictor Optimus*, still a child, to his father, Evaristo in 1895.³ Nothing else.

So why is it that there are so few, one could ask? Someone said that the significance of a collection of letters depends on the quality of the sender and the intuition of the receiver. It is not always so, but certainly various figures, such as Apollinaire, Papini, Breton, Éluard, to recall just a few of the names of the contemporary artists and intellectuals to whom de Chirico precociously writes in the 1910s and 1920s, they discern, early on, the expressive heights he has reached and keep his papers for years. The *Pictor Optimus*, however, did not keep any of his correspondence. "I am not inclined to preserve: I am the anti-collector par excellence. Sometimes I meet friends who have kept a postcard of

2 De Chirico's letters to his mother and Savinio are in G. de Chirico *Lettere 1909-1929*, edited by E. Pontiggia, Silvana Editoriale, Cinisello Balsamo 2018 pp. 360-361. Savinio's letters to his mother and brother are in P. Italia, *Il pellegrino appassionato. Savinio scrittore 1915-1925*, Sellerio, Palermo 2004 pp. 397-399; 403-404.

3 De Chirico, *Lettere*, p 159.

mine from thirty, forty years ago, and this fills me with amazement”, he would say.⁴ Savinio’s attitude is similar.

Gemma’s behavior is different, on the other hand, as she preserves, with maternal affection, the letters that her offspring send her when they are far away and when, more rarely, she leaves to undergo the thermal health cures. With a delicacy and an all-female sensibility, she values the letters for that which they really are: proof of the affection towards her, even when they hold within them echoes of some tension or some misunderstanding. And we can imagine how many times she read and reread them, in her Parisian house or Roman home.

The «Metaphysical Art» journal reader knows Gemma Cervetto well, on whom in the monumental bibliography of de Chirico and Savinio there is no shortage of references, testimonies and anecdotes.

Perhaps the information that is least clear is her date and place of birth, usually referred to as Smirne or Constantinople in 1852. They are dates about which it is difficult to be certain. Some help can be had from her passport, kept at the Fondazione Giorgio and Isa de Chirico, where it can be read that she was, “born in Constantinople on 19.4.1858”. This date, compared to the previous and more widely known date, is congruent with her death certificate of November 1937 (a copy of which is preserved at the Fondazione), which declares her death: “she died at 79 years old”. Of course, at that time, passports were not as reliable as they are nowadays, because the statements provided by the applicants were not verified and therefore there is always a margin of doubt about the veracity of the information. Nevertheless, 1858 seems consistent as the date of marriage between Gemma and the Baron and engineer Evaristo de Chirico which was probably held in 1885 (at twenty seven, a woman was already considered old to marry), with the birth of Savinio in 1891 (when Gemma, if it was indeed 1852, would have been thirty nine years old, an advanced age for the time); and above all with her travels alone in the 1930s (in 1936 when she returns to Italy for the last time from Paris, she would have been 84 years old, considering the date above: a more critical age than that of an 84 year old today).



G. de Chirico, *Portrait of the Mother*, 1911, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea

4 G. de Chirico in *Incontro Giorgio de Chirico. 27 poeti 24 disegni e un'intervista*, edited by C. Siniscalco, La Buatta, Matera; Ferrara 1988, pp. 101-102.



G. de Chirico, *Self-portrait with Mother*, 1921, Rovereto, MART / VAF Stimmung Collection

In any case in 1905, with the death of her husband, the Baroness found herself in a challenging situation at that time, as head of the family, with two children who were still studying. She will accompany them first to Munich, then to Milan, Florence, Paris and will join them in Ferrara during wartime. Giorgio, who was deeply attached to her and painted her portrait many times, repeatedly admires her courage and determination openly. In his lyrical prose *Agosto 1911*, recalling their tiring transfer from the city of the Lily to the city of the Eiffel Tower, he writes: “And the mother, sole consolation./ The fragile and sweet mother, but always courageous when needed”⁵

In these letters we find another indirect testimony of her courage when, in the early 1930s, she has to face alone, at an age when she is no longer in her youth (in 1932 she was more than seventy years old, whatever her date of birth may be) many moments of solitude. It was a condition that her children sought as much as possible to remedy, but often without success, because their work as artists took them far away. De Chirico feels, with growing anxiety, the criticality of the situation. “It is impossible for you to remain so alone in Paris in an apartment”, he writes to her on 21 April 1932. “I am very sorry that you are alone now in Paris and with this heat on top of it”, he writes again in August. “Of course, we will have to make sure that over the next years you don’t remain so alone”, he returns to repeat ten days later. “Your gift, like your wishes, moved me greatly, especially thinking that you are alone in Paris; but that should not happen again”, is the sentiment that he expresses at the end of the year. The situation, however, for the moment does not improve. “I can no longer bear the idea that you are so alone”, the artist complains again in May 1933. The situation will be resolved provisionally the following year, when Gemma goes to live for some time with Savinio and Maria in their house in Via Plinio in Milan.⁶

De Chirico, however, cannot be close to her even at the moment of her death that arrives on 1 June 1937, because at that time he was in New York. However, as testimony

5 G. de Chirico, *Manoscritti Éluard*, in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1 (1911-1945)*. *Romanzi e scritti teorici e critici*, edited by A. Cortellessa, under the direction of A. Bonito Oliva, Bompiani, Milan, 2008, p. 966.

6 G. de Chirico to Gemma, 21 April 1932; Id. to Gemma, 17 August 1932; Id. to Gemma 27 August 1932; Id., to Gemma 31 December 1982; Id. to has Gemma 26 May 1983 (the date of this last letter is deduced from the reference to the first representation of *I Puritani* that is put on 25 May 1983).

of their deep, almost visceral bond, he tells of a presentiment in a dream of her loss. He recounts in *Memoirs*:

One night I had a dream; I dreamt that I was in Greece, in the countryside near Athens [...] Between the trees I saw the back of a little church [...] Suddenly my mother appeared among the olives and I walked towards the little church. I wanted to go and meet her, but I could not move; I wanted to call out to her, but my voice failed me; my heart filled with worry and anguish [...] I saw my mother pass like a shadow near the apse of the little church, come up to the side and then disappear. I woke up troubled and weeping and with the terrible thought that my mother had died at that moment: in fact, when ten days later I read the letter from my brother in which he told me that our mother was alive no longer, I compared the date of the letter with that of my dream and, taking into account the difference in time between the United States and Europe, I realised that *this was really the case*.⁷

There are many other elements that make these letters fascinating on a psychological and human level. We see, above all, a de Chirico afflicted, in the 1930s, by an almost bohemian economic desperation, difficult to imagine for an artist who is by then famous throughout Europe. It surprises and moves the reader, for example, to know that in 1932 he did not go to Venice to see the Biennale, where he was present with sixteen works in the section of the Italians in Paris, because he did not have, “enough money”.⁸ In reality at the beginning of the decade the consequences of the Wall Street Crash were being felt and also the father of Metaphysics was experiencing a challenging moment because he had to provide for his mother, his wife Raissa whom he had married in 1930 when their relationship was already in crisis and his new partner Isabella Far. In his letters you can sense his distress in coping with the challenging economic situation with Gemma in particular, in his role as the eldest son which resulted in his having to take on greater responsibilities towards her that he had to face practically alone.

In the first half of the 1920s his economic situation is precarious but not particularly worrying. “I am sending you five hundred lire, the problem is that the franc loses value constantly and I cannot send you a fixed sum on a set day. But for now I will send you money in this way, depending on how much and when I earn. Anyway, as I have already written to you, I will not let you run out of money”, he writes to his mother from Paris on 29 December 1925. “The French market is livelier than the Italian one and my

7 *The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico*, Da Capo Press, New York 1994, p. 135 *passim* (Author’s emphasis) (first ed.: Astrolabio, Rome 1945).

8 G. de Chirico to Gemma, 21 April 1982.

prospects are rosy despite some contingent difficulties. I am enclosing a cheque for 500 lire. Sending francs is not easy because it can only be done with a bank where I have a deposit”, explains the artist to Gemma in January 1926. “Don’t worry about the question of money because I will send it to you every month, I cannot specify the amount yet, but I think if I can install myself here to work I will be able to earn a lot“, he reassures her over the same period.⁹

Amongst other issues, Gemma also relies on him for practical tasks, such as ordering and sending her a new dress,¹⁰ or searching for a house in Paris. Burdened by so many commitments that he faces, the artist, every now and again, tries to remind her that he needs tranquillity to concentrate on his work: “I am very busy, I have too many of my own things to think about. I already wrote to you about this, I can help you financially but for other things I beg you and I beg you to leave me free and calm”, he vents, in a one-off.¹¹

More often though, de Chirico takes on the affectionate paternal attitude towards his mother, who is not an easy person. In July 1924, when he goes to Vichy to treat his persistent ailments, he recommends the spa to Gemma: “Next year it might be good for you to come to Vichy too, the cost of living is lower here; it is overall more pleasurable; you are treated better here and better served and you eat better than in Italy”, he writes to her.¹²

In January 1926, when Savinio marries Maria and the couple are forced to live apart because they cannot afford a house (only in later months will they go on to live with Gemma) the *Pictor Optimus* wisely attempts to lower his mother’s reservations and hostility towards her young daughter-in-law:

I don’t see anything horrendous in Betti being engaged or married. If he is hiding, I think that rather than being cynicism as you say, this is out of weakness

9 G. de Chirico to Gemma, 29 September 1925; Id. to Gemma, in late January early February 1913; Id. to Gemma, late January-early February 1926 (the date of these last two letters can be deduced from de Chirico’s address, who is at the “Hôtel Central” where he is staying, when he arrives in Paris. In late February the artist will move to the Hôtel Beauséjour, in Rue des Saints-Pères).

10 “I have not yet sent you the dress because there was something to adjust. I think it will be finished tomorrow so I will send it to you the day after tomorrow”, de Chirico writes to his mother on 10 May 1926. “I have just sent the dress in a cardboard box and wrapped in waterproof paper. I have insured the package for 1000 Francs. I hope it arrives without a hitch”, he reassures her two weeks later. “It is already a week since I sent the dress and I have already written to you that I made the collar a little dirty so that I can declare it as a second-hand dress”, he returns to tell her on 26 May. This intervention was aimed at avoiding paying the taxes.

11 G. de Chirico to Gemma, 27 June 1916.

12 The letter, the first in chronological order from the whole correspondence, is dated “Monday, 18 July.” The year is missing but it has to be that of 1924. The only one in the 1920s in which the artist goes to Vichy (cf. de Chirico, *Lettere*, p. 318). Gemma, meanwhile, was instead at Rocca di Papa as we know from a letter of Savinio’s.

and modesty [...] But try to be purer and more serene in your way of thinking and your judgements [...] why do you have this fixed idea that every woman who is attracted to one of your offspring must be a monster. Why do you see the lowest instincts always. Be towards Bettì, like towards every man and every woman, less judgemental, less hostile, and a little friendly and you will see that everything will go better. I have always suffered because of this mentality that you have and I repeat these things to you again in the hope that you change. It is above all in your own interest that you do

he writes to her about the same time.¹³

When, in the spring of 1926, Gemma wants to settle in Paris, de Chirico's advice is based on realism and prudence. "I believe it would be better if you came in the autumn as I said right at the start. Either that, or all three of you should come. Because if you come on your own in May I am afraid I won't be able to help you to find an apartment etc.," he writes to his mother on 19 March. And on 26 May: "There are no empty apartments available here and you know what the transport costs. I am not earning much here but I am finding my place and not swimming in gold yet. And what would Bettì do in Paris. It would be good to go about things with more prudence and wait for the most favorable moment before facing a big bill; write to me and ask Bettì to write me clearly about what you want to do".

Four days later, still even more worried, he repeats:

I must tell you clearly that it seems to me that you are being extremely foolish to leave the house in Rome so hastily; I cannot understand what you want to do, you have nothing. Bettì doesn't earn anything and you go to the crazy expense of shipping furniture from Rome to Paris. What do you imagine it will cost? And here in Paris where exactly do you want to put this furniture? In your situation it would have been much more prudent if you had stayed in Rome and that only Bettì came to Paris to see if he can do something with the publishers. But he hasn't written anything to me, I do not know anything and you write to me that you have no money and that you are preparing to send the furniture. I just do not understand your intentions.

In the early 1930s, however, the economic situation worsens, to the point of becoming unsustainable. "I am sorry if I have not yet sent you money. I have not sold any paintings in Brussels and I haven't yet been paid for the others here. But as soon as I can I

13 G. de Chirico to Gemma, January-beginning of February 1926.

will send it to you”, the artist explains at the beginning of 1932, as he is passing through Milan after a short trip to Belgium. But Gemma at that time cannot pay the rent. “Ask the landlord to be patient for a few days; this week I will maybe send you money by telegraph. I hope you are well; don’t worry about me because I am in good health and if it weren’t for these difficulties in finding money I would be even better. But you have to be patient and wait for better times”, de Chirico writes in an attempt to reassure her, on his arrival in Florence.

And a dozen days later he repeats to her, frankly:

If I have sent you so little up until now it is because I just couldn’t do otherwise. Since I have come to Florence I have only collected 1500 lire and there are many bills and debts to pay in Paris. This week I should still collect something: I will do everything I can to send you at least 1000 lire. But what do you want, I am doing all I can and more, sending you that little that I earn with great effort and I always remain without a penny in my pocket and have to be a parasite on my friends, I really don’t know what other way I can act. I don’t know why everyone thinks that I should always, at all occasions, continually have money available; you know very well that when I earned I gave you everything you asked for [...] In the meantime, to let me breathe, you could pawn your jewelry; I know you have a sacred horror of it, but what can we do, as I have already told you in some cases we have to take control of ourselves. Anyway be calm and do not worry, I will always do everything possible to help you.¹⁴

At times he lets himself be overcome by a feeling of exasperation sharpened by the impotence he feels in the face of the joint complaints of Gemma and Raissa: “You carry on tormenting me and keep me in the anguish of the letter; it is only then that I will be able to work a lot and send a lot of money”, he writes to his mother in 1932. And further: “Here are 800 lire, tomorrow, or Saturday at the latest, I will send you 700 more; between you and Raissa you have sworn, it seems, to make me go crazy and spend up to the last cent these few thousand that I have earned with such difficulty. Carry on; when I have nothing left, of course I will have [nothing] to give”.

And again:

You and Raissa, you always drive me crazy; it appears that I am a banker loaded with gold; when it comes to Betti you always say that he is in great straits; but oh what do you think I roll around in 1000 lire notes? It takes winches to pull out

14 G. de Chirico to Gemma, 2 January 1932; Id. to Gemma, 12 January 1932; Id. to Gemma, 23 January, *passim*.

one hundred lire from someone's pocket so I really beg of you, do not continue to persecute me with this kind of letter because I really can't stand it anymore. And Bettì why doesn't he try to do something for you too; he could at least host you in his house for as long as these difficulties last so at least you would not have to pay the rent.¹⁵

The works de Chirico paints in this period, overall, do not arise from quiet concentration but amidst the worries of a difficult situation that the artist, with his accentuated sensitivity, lives through with deep tension.

The letters of 1924-1926

To give a clearer account of the facts of greater historical and critical interest, however, it is necessary to proceed chronologically. The first letter of de Chirico to his mother in this set of correspondence, if one excludes that of 28 July 1924 from Vichy, cited above, brings us to Paris. The artist reached the French capital on 2 November 1924, some time before the performance of *The Giara* by Pirandello, set to music by Alfredo Casella, for which he had designed the sets. "Today I finished the sets and the first performance will take place next Wednesday. I hope I have done something good despite the boring and banal subject", he tells Gemma in mid-November.¹⁶ His judgment is merciless, we can guess that he did not like the verist quality of the work, even if *The Giara* already contained the central Pirandello themes that would interest him: the ambiguity, the game of roles the paradox of the impossibility of judging who is right and who is wrong. In any case, with the frankness typical of his private considerations, he is not enthusiastic about the play translated into music by Casella.

In the letter, on the contrary, he expresses a positive opinion about "the environment of Breton", which he considers "very nice" and in which he finds "the lyrical and playful ardour from the time of Apollinaire".¹⁷ Curiously Breton, talking of de Chirico to his companion Simone in this period uses the exact same adjective about de Chirico, "There is something very nice in him. He does not talk about his research into technique with me, but I know that he talks about it with Aragon and Morise. And everything is more lovely than I can manage to convey to you".¹⁸

15 G. de Chirico to Gemma, 27 June [1932]; Id. to Gemma, n. d. [but 1932]; Id. to Gemma, n. d. [but 1932].

16 G. de Chirico to Gemma, dated, "Paris, Saturday" [but 15 November 1924]. The date of the letter can be deduced by the reference to an imminent show, that is performed at the Champs-Élysées Theatre, Paris, Wednesday 19 November, so the letter can be dated the 15 of that month.

17 *Ibid.*

18 A. Breton to Simone in *A. Breton: La Beauté Convulsive*, catalogue of the exhibition (Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou,

At that moment, the harmony of the Metaphysical Painter with the Breton group is still alive, even if his favourable judgment does not extend to Paul and Gala Éluard, nor to Max Ernst, who lived with them in a *ménage à trois*. “I was with the Éluards for two days but I decided not to live with them despite their insistence, amongst Max’s frescoes and their exaggerated kindness and the eccentricity of the wife, there is no space to figure out and think about one’s own affairs”, he confides to Gemma on 15 November.¹⁹

We find confirmation of his reservations in Breton’s letters to Simone, which also inform us of the acquaintance of Dioscuero with the surrealists. On 7 November, we read in that correspondence that de Chirico goes with the poet (and with Aragon) to the Théâtre Moderne, and the next day he goes to visit him in his house in Rue Fontaine. Then, on 11 November, four days before the letter we are talking about, the whole “Breton circle” meets up. The founder of Surrealism recounts the following to Simone:

Everyone was there: de Chirico, Masson, Ernst, Aragon, Morise, Boiffard and Vitrac. Corrive is away. Maybe de Chirico will stay in Paris to take care of his exhibition at Rosenberg’s. I see him and every day I get to know him a little better. He can’t stand Gala and he doesn’t miss an occasion to say it. I was surprised to see that contrary to what I thought, he has a lot of doubts about Éluard and he does not like his poetry. (He says that he never has an interesting image and he finds it narrow and sentimental even if quite pure). He finds that his behavior as a man leaves even more to be desired (because he does not divorce he says to himself he cannot love her, it is impossible. For everything else he is crazy, that is, the opposite of you and Aragon. I do not like crazies. And then this absolute lack of curiosity...)²⁰

Breton’s account, therefore, confirms the letter of November 15 and in turn shows us that de Chirico had not refused Gala’s and Paul Éluard’s hospitality simply for contingent reasons (the impossibility of the ability to concentrate in that invasive and talkative environment) but because he judged them harshly from an artistic and psychological point of view.

In the same letter, the Dioscuero also talks about the solo show at Rosenberg’s. Here he mentions Breton, “I decided to do an exhibition in Paris before returning to Italy but it was not easy to find a room. Rosenberg was unwell but today I saw him and he

²⁵ April-16 August 1991), Éditions du Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1991, p. 173.

¹⁹ G. de Chirico to Gemma [15 November 1924].

²⁰ A. Breton to Simone in *A. Breton: La Beauté Convulsive*, cit p173. On the relationship between Breton and de Chirico, see J. de Sanna, *Giorgio de Chirico-André Breton: Duel à mort*, in «Metaphysical Art», 1/2 (2002), pp. 62-87.

is willing and happy for me to hold an exhibition in his gallery. Only that I will not be able to do it before next December. It lasts 21 days”.²¹ On 10 November, in fact, de Chirico had signed a contract with Léonce Rosenberg to exhibit in his gallery. Initially organized for 15 January, as stated in the document preserved in the Rosenberg Archive,²² the exhibition is then postponed until May 1925. Finally, in the letter de Chirico writes that he is happy because Savinio “has made arrangements with Mondadori” but it is not clear what he is referring to because it does not appear that the author of *Hermaphrodito* published or collaborated at that time with the Milanese publishing house.

A few months pass and, in another letter, datable to September 1925,²³ we find instead a reference to the collection of Emanuele Fiano. The Roman lawyer was interested in *Natura morta con anguilla* [“Still Life with eel”] (“he wrote to me asking if I still had that still life with fish”, the *Pictor Optimus* informs us). It was painted in tempera, executed in 1923-1924, which had belonged to Giorgio Castelfranco, and will subsequently be exhibited in the de Chirico, Carrà and Rubaldo Merello exhibition at Galleria Pesaro in 1926.

Fiano had a vast collection of works of art. As early as 1927, Cecchi dedicated an article dedicated to his collection, naming de Chirico as being among the artists who were part of it when it was sold in 1933,²⁴ including the Dioscuro’s “petrified” *Autotiratto* [“Self-portrait”] and two still lifes, of which Somaré, when presenting the entire collection, remarked on “the discreet bizarreness which is asserted only by virtue of the good painting that expresses it”.²⁵ We do not know if Fiano completed the purchase but a subsequent letter (“we should not press Fiano too much about whether he wants ‘the fish’; if he wants them he will buy them; I have already warned him that I have to exhibit them in Milan” de Chirico will subsequently write to Gemma)²⁶ leaving a margin for doubt.

On 21 September 1925 the artist speaks again of his brother: “Betti is in Milan, he wrote to me a few days ago and asked me for the manuscript of the Ulysses that I sent him”. It is the play *Captain Ulysses* by Savinio (1925) for which de Chirico designed the

21 G. de Chirico to Gemma, 15 November 1924.

22 G. de Chirico to L. Rosenberg, letter-contract, 10 November 1924. Fonds Léonce Rosenberg, Galerie L’Effort Moderne, Paris, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, MNAM-CCI, Centre Georges Pompidou.

23 The letter is only dated “Rome, Monday”, but it can be identified as September 1925, when Gemma was at Salsomaggiore for the thermal spa treatments, because a subsequent postal card from Savinio, written on 21 September (postmarked) is addressed to “Signora Gemma de Chirico/ By Post/ Salsomaggiore”.

24 E. Cecchi, *La raccolta Fiano*, in «Dedalo», 73 (1926-1927), p. 724.

25 The Fiano Collection, with a text by Enrico Somaré, Galleria Pesaro, Edizioni dell’Esame, Milan 1933, p. 77. *L’Autotiratto* is in *L’opera completa di de Chirico, 1908-1924*, presentation and critical and philological apparatus by M. Fagiolo dell’Arco, Rizzoli, Milan, 1984, no. 239.

26 G. de Chirico to Gemma, 10 January 1926.

sets and it was due to be performed that same year, but in reality, it was published in 1934 and performed in 1938. It is likely that Gemma communicates Pirandello's approval of this work to her oldest son because, in a subsequent letter, de Chirico comments: "That which you told me about Ulysses and Pirandello does not surprise me, they are things that inevitably happen with us".²⁷

At the beginning of December, the *Pictor Optimus* leaves Italy to settle in Paris. He writes to his mother immediately about his arrival, specifying that he is staying in the Hôtel Central, "I have not finished putting my paintings in order. But I think the day after tomorrow, Monday, I will be able to show them to Rosenberg. There are also other people who are interested in my painting" he adds.²⁸

The relationship with the powerful collector of the Rue de La Baume gallery, however, is not the only one. On 10 January 1926, de Chirico tells his mother:

I work a lot and I'm always at the hotel but I hope to look for a studio soon. I have resumed relations with Guillaume and I think he is willing to buy my new works. In May he will put on an exhibition of my latest things; Rosenberg is also very well disposed and in the spring he will exhibit my paintings in London. In general, here, they are all well disposed and it is enough to work and have talent to succeed. I do not have to sign contracts with anyone at the moment, nor is it in my interests to do so.²⁹

The day before, in reality, the artist had signed an agreement with Paul Guillaume who had been his art dealer since 1913, even if he also continued to be associated with Rosenberg. "I confirm that I have just sworn on the Madonna and that I am committed to my honor to reserve for you for a year starting today the first choice on the paintings that I will paint in this period. I reserve for you the right to buy exactly half of my production at the rate of 40 francs multiplied by the canvas measurements index, i.e. for example, 1000 francs for a 25-point canvas", he had written in a contract letter, tinged with some irony.³⁰

27 G. de Chirico to Gemma, 21 September 1925; Id. to Gemma, 24 September (?) 1925. This last letter is dated only "Rome, Thursday", but from the sequence in the papers it can be linked to the end of September, and possibly, the 24, the only Thursday after 21.

28 The letter, dated only "Paris, Saturday", must be from either 5 or 12 December, not the following Saturdays given the absence of Christmas wishes. De Chirico had already stayed at the Hôtel Central the previous May of the same year, when he had stayed in Paris for the Rosenberg exhibition (de Chirico, *Lettere*, p. 334). The letter cannot be from that period though because de Chirico writes, "for now I'm at the hotel", a sign that his stay in the French capital was only brief.

29 G. de Chirico to Gemma, 10 January 1926.

30 G. de Chirico to P. Guillaume, 9 January 1926, in de Chirico, *Lettere*, p. 358.

De Chirico will exhibit at Paul Guillaume's not in May but in June. The solo exhibition will be presented by a critic *sui generis*, the American collector Albert Barnes, a billionaire who had made a fortune with the invention of the antiseptic Argyrol, before the advent of antibiotics. As for the London exhibition organized by Rosenberg, which the artist mentions, it is an event about which there was no news and that does not even appear in the recent well-documented survey of de Chirico's relations with the Anglo-Saxon world.³¹ (The event is actually "postponed due to a strike", as the artist will write to his mother on 10 May 1926. At the beginning of that month in fact, a general transport strike in England which also affects French exports, paralyzes the two countries. Nothing more is known of the exhibition.)

Again, in the letter of 10 January 1926, we find the first version of the essay *Giorgio de Chirico* written the following year, strongly insisted upon by Jean Paulhan. In 1925 he had become director of the «Nouvelle Revue Française», which published the monograph. Its author, the playwright and poet, Roger Vitrac, was one of the founders of Surrealism (Breton had also mentioned him in the letter to Simone cited previously) but he was now in dissent with the movement. Vitrac's text, which introduces 29 paintings by de Chirico, first focuses on the metaphysical works, but then gives more space to the works executed in the 1920s that Breton and co. loathed. It is no coincidence that the text ends with a post scriptum which is a sort of *excusatio non petita*, addressed in filigree to the surrealists, "Nothing authorizes me to doubt the recent work of de Chirico. Nothing. On the contrary, the study above, as we have seen, prevents me from taking a stand".³² It is not clear from these words why Vitrac could not "take a stand", but in reality the writer, at the beginning of the essay, had argued that for artists like Picasso and indeed de Chirico it was not possible to give a critical reading because every single work was a revelation. Each and every one of their works had infinite meanings, in addition to the literal one, just like Rimbaud had said of his own poems.³³ Vitrac was referencing an anecdote, well-known to the French public, but little known in Italy. Perhaps it is appropriate to recall it here. Once Rimbaud's mother asked her son what he wanted to say in one of his pages and the poet answered: "I wanted to say what I said in this sense and in every sense [*littéralement et dans tous les sens*]."

Besides the subtle distinctions made by the author, however, the monograph *Georges de Chirico* is valuable at that time and the letter of 10 January confirms a fact that has never been sufficiently highlighted, that is, that it was conceived by Jean Paulhan. "He

31 V. Noel-Johnson, *De Chirico and the United Kingdom (c. 1916-1978)*, Maretti Editore, Falciano (RSM) 2017.

32 R. Vitrac, *Georges de Chirico*, Éditions de la N. R. F., Paris 1927, p. 11.

33 Id., p. 4.

encouraged the publisher to create the manuscript, indeed he told him that if he did not, he would have resigned from the N. R. F., de Chirico will later explain to Savinio.³⁴ From a letter dated January-February 1926 we deduce, instead, the interest the *Pictor Optimus* had in that period, for landscape. “Tell Betti, that I want him to send me as soon as possible a reproduction of that Roman landscape in that issue of «La Bilancia»; I mean the one of the landscape with rocks behind the house and the flying figure. Tell him to send me those drawings and sketches of trees; there are some in those folders that are in my room”, he writes to Gemma.³⁵ «La Bilancia» was a magazine of “thought and poetry” as it explained in the title. It was published in Rome over only two issues in 1923. In the first issue, the Metaphysician had published the piece *Pro technica oratio* emphasizing the importance of craft. What interests us the most in the letter, however, is that the artist describes *Villa Romana* (a 1922 painting, the composition of which is set on a large modern building crowned with statues) as a “landscape” in accordance with the desire to have back and reconsider his sketches of trees.

A letter dated 24 February 1926, instead, takes us back to the American and English world with conflicting judgments. The Dioscuro had sent a *Self-portrait* and a *Ritratto con la madre* [“Portrait with Mother”] to the “Exhibition of Modern Italian Art” (the first great exhibition of modern Italian art in the United States, opening in January 1926 at Grand Central Art Galleries in New York). De Chirico had some fears about the commercial outcomes of the initiative. “I’m afraid that with those American paintings those rascals make some mess”, he confides to his mother. Things are better instead in relation to England. “In a few days an article with photographs will come out in the English Vogue. If there is any proposal for the Brighton paintings [...] do not write to me but deal directly with the order so as not to waste time”, adds de Chirico in the same letter. In the first issue of the English avant-garde magazine «Ray-Art Miscellany», in fact, a reproduction of *La partenza del poeta* [“The Poet’s Departure”] is printed, a metaphysical painting of his from 1914,³⁶ while the “Exhibition of Modern Italian Art” that opens at the public art galleries of Brighton, February-April 1926, also includes his works *Contadina romana* [“Roman Peasant”] and the *Self-portrait* (1925) now at GNAM in Rome.

Incidentally, we can read another psychological fact between the lines. “It is better not to send anything to Venice”, the artist observes in the same letter. Evidently Gemma had asked him if he was going to participate in the Biennale of that year and his answer

34 G. de Chirico to A. Savinio, 3 April 1926.

35 G. de Chirico, January-February 1926. The letter is only dated “Paris, Wednesday”, but the printed address, that is still that of Hôtel Central, dates it to the first two months of that year. In late February, de Chirico moved to the Hôtel Beauséjour, in Rue des Saints-Pères.

36 Noel-Johnson, *De Chirico and the United Kingdom*, p. 243.

seems to underestimate, if not reject, the then very prestigious event. “There is no need to exhibit all over”, he affirms intolerantly. In reality, that year the *Pictor Optimus* had not been invited to exhibit and talking with his mother, (without distorting the facts, a quick check of what he writes shows that his statements are never made up) he tried not to worry her.

In this same period, Savinio turned to painting systematically and his brother affectionately encourages him. “I would be curious to see your drawings, could you not send me one? Of course if you could draw or paint you would find a lot to do here. There is a great interest in new and modern things”, he writes to Betti on 3 April. The letter precedes that of 24 April 1926, the only one from de Chirico to Savinio that was known up until now, in which he finally receives the drawings and comments enthusiastically.

They are very beautiful and impressive. I have shown them to some people and everyone was amazed. I think an exhibition of your drawings would have great success. You must not mix with the surrealists. They are stupid and hostile people. With Guillaume or Rosenberg we can do something. Continue to work and if you have some others send them to me. Only, I suggest you avoid certain colors which are a bit raw and vulgar like carmine red and pure blue; mix in some grey with each colour and soften the shapes a little. In the meantime, I will put the best ones in a frame.³⁷

Like the valves of a shell, the known letter of 3 April, when juxtaposed with that of 24 April, shows us how attentive, almost in a paternal way (we must not forget that Savinio was orphaned at 14) de Chirico followed the artistic forays of his brother. Moreover, he continued to also be interested in his literary exploits. “Paulhan told me he would like something of yours for «Commerce». You would do well to write to him and keep his friendship alive because it could be very useful, especially to you”, he informs him in the same letter. He is referring to the magazine «Commerce» (founded in 1924



G. de Chirico, *Self-portrait with Brother*, 1924, private collection

37 G. de Chirico to Savinio, 24 April 1926, in de Chirico, *Lettere*, p. 360.

by Paul Valéry, Léon-Paul Fargue, Valéry Larbaud and directed by Marguerite Caetani), for which Paulhan was an influential collaborator.

The last letter of 1926 is sent from Plombières, where de Chirico sojourns in September. “I am undertaking my health cures here because all those other cures the Parisian doctors prescribed for me did nothing for me and I could not continue in that state. I am feeling better, but based on what the doctor who is treating me here tells me, it is only after two to three months that one truly starts to feel the benefits from this regenerative experience”, he confides to his mother.³⁸ The letter is dated simply “Plombières 19 Sept[ember]” but it is clear that it is from 1926 when read in relation to other texts. “Please do me the kindness to not forget about me. I want to take care of myself so that I can resume my art work”, the artist writes to Rosenberg from the spa town in the same period. And also: “I am feeling better and the countryside is wonderful. I will be back in Paris on the first [October]. I can’t wait to get back to my work.”³⁹

The 1929 Letters. A Hypothesis about Angelo Bardi

We now come to the third nucleus of the correspondence. A letter from de Chirico to his mother dated 27 April 1929 contains a sentence that deserves reflection. The artist pleads with Gemma to give “500 [francs or lire] to Betti as compensation for the biography he has written.”⁴⁰

There is no known “biography” – evidently a de Chirico biography, because it is he who oversees the fee – written in this period by Savinio. However, it could be the *Vie de Giorgio de Chirico*, signed “Angelo Bardi” and published in the *Giorgio de Chirico* issue in «Sélection. Chronique de la vie artistique», no. 8, which came out in Antwerp in December 1929.⁴¹

Ten months earlier, the *Pictor Optimus* had made an agreement with André de Ridder, a Belgian poet and art critic responsible for that monographic issue. “I received your letter. We agree. I will give you two 25 [point] canvases in exchange for the 68 photos and ‘tributes’ added to the text by Courthion”, he wrote to him on 4 February.⁴² In addition to a set of photographs, the book for which he undertook to deliver two

38 G. de Chirico to Gemma, September [1926].

39 G. de Chirico to L. Rosenberg, September 1926 (pmk); Id. to L. Rosenberg 15 (Sept.) 1926 (pmk) in de Chirico, *Lettere*, p. 365. De Chirico also stays at Plombières in 1928, but on different dates (id., p. 411).

40 G. de Chirico to Gemma [27 April 1927]. The letter is dated, “Montecarlo. Saturday”. The date can be deduced by a reference to a bank transfer to be made to Gemma by the artist who, as we know from the papers addressed to Rosenberg, had asked the gallery owner for it that same day (cf. de Chirico, *Lettere*, p. 423).

41 *La vie de Giorgio de Chirico*, now in de Chirico, *Scritti/I*, pp. 830-837.

42 G. de Chirico to A. de Ridder, 4 February 1929, in de Chirico, *Lettere*, p. 418.

paintings included the *Vie*: a French poetic text, poetic in both its clarity of style and the accuracy of the information, that the editors of Antwerp had followed up with one more dry and notary-like “Notice bio-bibliographique sur Giorgio de Chirico”. Gerd Ross has observed:

The life of Bardi is the first, and is the only text for decades, which deals with the youth of the artist and his training in Athens and Munich. For the first time, substantial information is given on these topics, and others, available only in this text. It is not a list of facts, facts and dates, but a real 7-page essay on various aspects of de Chirico’s life and art, which in the magazine’s advertisement was presented as a “study”.⁴³

It is well-known that the artist always signs his autobiographical notes with another name. As has been clarified by Gerd Roos,⁴⁴ Angelo Bardi is a pseudonym, behind which hides such a well-informed person, to have been identified, with convincing reasons, as de Chirico himself. The name Angelo Bardi, after all, contains within it a reference to a concept of announcement and messenger, that is also contained in Chirico, from the Greek *kérux*, meaning herald.

In the light of references that we find in the letter of 27 April, it can be supposed that the text was written by Savinio, the only one – apart from his brother – who knew and could interpret the story with such clarity the events of de Chirico’s life and his poetics. The hypothesis attributing it to him, however, has already been put forward (although subsequently ruled out) in Roos’ essay.⁴⁵

As demonstrated by the German scholar, the text contains information that at that date no one could have known. No one, except for de Chirico or Savinio, who was also knowledgeable about the facts. But, what the mysterious biography reveals, is impossible to summarize without destroying the beauty of the linguistic fabric, or the liveliness of its details. Let it just be said that *La vie de Giorgio de Chirico* starts from

43 G. Roos, *La vie de Giorgio de Chirico*, in «Otto/Novecento», 1, (1997), p. 23.

44 *Ibid.* The English translation of this text was also published with a note by K. Robinson, in «Metaphysical Art», 5/6, (2006), pp. 496-500.

45 Roos notes in his essay, about the author of the *Vie de Giorgio de Chirico*: “The problem of identity becomes more curious if we consider that the text contains much information and apparently marginal details that only de Chirico or Savinio could have come by” (*La vie de Giorgio de Chirico*, pp. 23-24). And also: “It is a characteristic of the literary method of Savinio, but in general also of his brother, that of supporting the character description of a person with anecdotal episodes. This practice, exemplified by the biographies of *Narrate, uomini, la vostra storia* (1942) is based on the factual appropriation of a saying by Friedrich Nietzsche: ‘With three anecdotes it is possible to portray a man’. These examples show that such precise information of elements so typical of a ‘family mythology’ can only originate from the two brothers” (id., p. 27).



G. de Chirico, *Portrait of the Artist with Mother*, 1919, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou

the artist's childhood in Thessaly, a land of myths inhabited by "the ever-present ghosts of Chiron and Achilles".⁴⁶ It then refers, equally succinctly, to his adolescence in Athens, the death of his father, the departure for Munich, the love for the Germany of "Wagner, Böcklin and Nietzsche", his attendance at the Bavarian Academy. It then continues up to his Florentine period, recalling *L'enigma dell'oracolo* ["The Enigma of the Oracle"] and *L'enigma di un pomeriggio d'autunno* ["The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon"], ("two works dated 1910 but which, for their poetics and innovation, are worthy of being considered on the same level as the later canvases") and the paintings "with solitary statues erected on very low pedestals" that contain "a Sabaudian or Cavourian enigma".

The author then writes of the arrival of de Chirico in Paris in 1911, his meeting first with Apollinaire and then with Paul Guillaume, the "indispensable Theseus", who has the courage to commercially sell his paintings and allows him to establish a "powerhouse of metaphysical energy" in his gallery. Further, he recounts the artist's return to Italy when the country enters the war, the season of «Valori Plastici» and his exploration of painting technique. He does not miss the opportunity to take a dig at the surrealists who devalue his recent painting: "Some superficial critic wanted to read into the works of this period (portraits – famously self-portraits of de Chirico – still lifes, compositions) a decadence of the Dechirican 'spirit'. Grave error". At the end, the author recalls de Chirico's definitive return to Paris, the "capital of the arts" in 1925.

Can the style of the biography reveal something more about its paternity? Let us read the opening lines:

Born in Volo on 10 July 1888. This small port in Thessaly is none other than the ancient port of Pagasos or Jolcos, that is, the memorable shore from which the Argonauts set out on their search for the Golden Fleece. Apart from any symbolic pretensions, this historical coincidence seems to us to be rich in resonances. That day was so intensely hot that the candles, although unlit, melted in their candlesticks. Like his mother, his father is Italian, and he belonged to that proud

⁴⁶ All quotations are taken from the Italian translation (by S. Tusi and K. Robinson) of the *Vie de Giorgio de Chirico*, in de Chirico, *Scritti/1*, pp. 1033-1039.

race of engineers – bearded men, with athletic physique, full of noble sentiments and an iron morality – whose double physical and metaphysical aspect was so masterfully painted by Jules Verne in his immortal novels.⁴⁷

The text, as can be seen, is anything but incompatible with Savinio's style. He too in *L'infanzia di Nivasio Dolcemare* links his birth to a torrid day when the candle wax melted. Of course, it could be objected that the same reference to candles is also found in de Chirico's memoirs: "All this took place in Athens in about 1891; I had been born three years earlier at Volos, the capital of Thessaly, on a torrid July day, while the candles melted in their candlesticks and the heat of summer was intensified by a hot wind blowing over the city; it came from Africa, and that the Greeks called it *livas*".⁴⁸ The objection, however, is a false problem if we think that the detail of the melting of the candles at the birth of the Dioscuri, in all probability, told to the two brothers by Gemma or Evaristo, must have belonged to their common memory, if not to their family lexicon. In conclusion, is there some other meaning that can be attributed to the phrase, "give the 500 to Betti [...] for the biography he wrote", besides what we have conjectured? For the moment it does not come to mind. We are faced, whichever way we look at it, with another enigma of the Master of enigmas: a question that, in any way that it is answered, concerns a splendid page from literature, at the same time profound, ironic and imaginative.

Having finished this long digression, let us return to the papers that interest us here. In the letters of April-May 1929 we witness live, as we would say today, the preparations for *Le Bal* by Boris Kochno, the Russian ballet by Diaghilev, staged on 7 May at the Monte Carlo Theatre with the legendary dancer Serge Lifar, with music by Vittorio Rieti, the choreography by Balanchine and the sets and costumes by de Chirico. The artist arrived a few days earlier in the Monegasque town and finished the work at a fast pace. "We have been here since yesterday afternoon. Unfortunately it is raining, and the weather has been rather awful today. I had lunch with Diaghiliev [Diaghilev], Rietti [Rieti] and Lifar. I started working on the scenery and I hope everything will go well", he writes to his mother in the last week of April. "The ballet is postponed until 7 May, consequently I have to stay here for longer than I had anticipated. There is a lot to do for the sets and without me they would certainly have made something that would have been poor. Next Wednesday or Thursday I hope to have finished, so that I can rest

47 Id., pp. 1033-1039.

48 *The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico*, p. 14.

a little bit and see the countryside that I haven't had time to see yet", he informs her a little later on.⁴⁹

The day after the première the artist writes to his mother once again. "The ballet performance went well. The only issue is the costumes that need to be finalized with more care and this will be done for the première in Paris on the 28. They were made too hastily here. We will be in Paris Saturday evening (I need to rest for at least two days)".⁵⁰

In July, when Gemma goes to Vichy for the usual spa treatments, she naively wonders why the *Le Bal* is not being put on there. He reassures her: "It is logical that they are not putting my ballet on in Vichy. In these places they do not put on anything other than 'pompiere' ballets. Today or tomorrow that magazine, "Bifur" will come out with a passage from my book, I will send it to you as soon as it does". A long excerpt of *Hebdòmeros*, his autobiographical novel, is in fact published in the second issue of the Parisian magazine which comes out on 25 July.⁵¹

Finally, thanks to a document dated August 1929 we can identify, with accuracy, the time of execution of the fresco by de Chirico for the Rothschild house, which, before these papers, had been known about only from one photograph, reproduced in the magazine «Art et Industrie» in October of the same year.⁵² "I have postponed my holidays until the end of the month because Rothschild has written to me telling me that I can start the job he asked me to do. But since the wall is not ready I will not be able to start until next Monday and it will take at least 8 days' work to complete", writes the artist to his mother.⁵³ The French banker Robert Rothschild (1880-1946), who was one of his collectors, had in fact invited him to fresco an aedicule in the garden of his home in Paris. The work, now lost, depicted a scene of horses by the sea. The magazine wrote: "The niche [in the aedicule] is decorated with a large fresco by de Chirico with two horses that seem to trample the stone of a broken Doric column with their hooves".⁵⁴ If the date of «Art et Industrie» represented the *terminus ante quem* for the work, the letter represents its *terminus post quem*.

49 G. de Chirico to Gemma, n. d. [but 20-25 April 1929]; Id. to Gemma, 27 April 1929.

50 G. de Chirico to Gemma. The letter, dated only "Monte Carlo Wednesday" is dated 8 May, as can be deduced from the reference to the première of the ballet, which took place the previous day.

51 G. de Chirico to Gemma, n. d. [but 22 July 1929]. The day of the letter, which is dated only "Paris Monday" is deduced from date of the «Bifur» magazine and from the only possible Monday of that period.

52 See *De Chirico: Gli anni Venti*, catalogue of the exhibition (Milan, Palazzo Reale, 7 March-18 April 1987), edited by M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, Mazzotta, Milan, 1987, p. 240.

53 G. de Chirico to Gemma, dated "Paris Monday" [but August 1929].

54 «Art et Industrie» (October 1929).

The Letters of 1932-1934

The 1932 letters from de Chirico to his mother open with those references to economic difficulties of the time, which we have already mentioned. The artist finds himself in Florence and puts his trust in the exhibition at Palazzo Ferroni to make some economic gains. “I exhibited at the Palazzo Ferroni, in an art gallery opened at that time by the antique dealer Luigi Bellini who, during the period and also later, showed a great deal of interest in me and was very friendly towards me”, he recalls in his *Memoirs*.⁵⁵ The sales of the exhibition do not entirely solve de Chirico’s financial woes, who, in addition to providing for Gemma, Raissa and Isa, has to bear the expenses of the Parisian home which has not yet been given up.

I have been rushing around since yesterday in search of money. I finally managed to get 2000 lire, of which I will send you 1500. The other 500 I have to send to Raissa. At the exhibition I have sold two paintings so far and there is some other sale in sight but you will understand that they do not pay for them until the exhibition is over and now everyone needs their ears pulling to pay up. From these 1500 lire which make about 2000 francs keep something for yourself and then give the landlord 1500, a little for yours, a little for my apartment. Tell Betti that he needs to give leave of my apartment, I cannot continue to pay 2000 francs a month unnecessarily [...] Tell the landlord I will pay the rest soon.

is the concerned report that he sends to his mother shortly after the opening of the exhibition. He also attaches a review of the event, probably that of Raffaello Franchi, followed by that of Aniceto Del Massa.⁵⁶

The situation, as is evident, is tiring. In some of de Chirico’s letters from this period, there is also a hint of resentment towards Savinio, by whom de Chirico feels to be left alone. But he continues to try to help him in his work. These are the months in which the preparations for the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, the first edition of which is in 1933, are underway. The event is immediately characterized by the involvement of a vast array of artists for the scenery. De Chirico prepares that of *I Puritani*, Casorati those for the *Vestale*, Sironi those for *Lucrezia Borgia*. Savinio, however, is still little known as a painter and it is not easy to get him a theatrical assignment. “I do not think it is possible to have Bettì create some of the scenery for the maggio musicale [...] but I will try to organize an exhibition here in Florence for him, an exhibition that would naturally not

55 *The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico*, p. 125.

56 G. de Chirico to Gemma, 14 April 1932. The attached review is probably R. Franchi, *Mostra De Chirico a Firenze*, in «L’Italia letteraria», 10 April 1932. In a letter of 21 April, he attaches the article by A. Del Massa, *Giorgio de Chirico e l’opera sua*, in «La Nazione», Firenze, 11 April 1932.

cost him anything other than the expense of the transportation of the paintings”, writes the *Pictor Optimus* to his mother.⁵⁷

The correspondence also gives us insight into the artist’s intolerance towards the paintings of trampling horses that were continually requested of him. “I work and do many nudes of women with whom I hope to put an end to this ‘trail’ of horses”, he had already told Gemma in August 1929 or more likely, 1930.⁵⁸

Two years later he is more determined to stop: “I also do several landscapes, I would like to introduce a new genre because I don’t want to carry on eternally with those horses”, he relates to his mother in August 1932. Shortly afterwards however, he clarifies: “I also do paintings of horses; in fact now I do everything and I think it is the best thing to do a little of everything. Over the past few days, I have been, several times, to paint landscapes from life. It is a new genre for me and I hope it will be successful in my next exhibitions.”⁵⁹

A letter dated 31 August gives us, however, news about *Signor Dudron*, the novel that de Chirico had begun to write in Paris. An extract of this fascinating text, the whole text will only be published posthumously, is published in 1834 in the magazine «Le Voyage en Grèce». In the letter we find the first traces of it and the year it was started, which is most probably 1931 since for the whole of 1932 the artist was in Italy.

Could you do me a favor? In the room where I was working and slept I left two notebooks when I left. They were on that shelf where there were glass containers with color powders. Inside one of these notebooks there was a novel that I had begun and, in the other, poems. If you could please find them, maybe in the cellar, you will make me a great pleasure to send them to me because here I could have them translated and published at a publisher who would pay me a few thousand lire. I had asked Castelfranco to bring them but he told me that you could not find them; but with a little patience you could track them down he recommends. A few days later Gemma will send them on.⁶⁰

57 G. de Chirico to Gemma, 17 August 1932.

58 G. de Chirico to Gemma, August 1929 or 1930. The letter is dated “Paris Thursday”. The summer months are deduced from the reference to a “completely deserted” Paris. As for the year, the page talks about Savinio’s first daughter, Angelica (born on 31 August 1928), who is growing. The letter could therefore be from 1929, but the reference to Raissa’s stay in Ville Chrysanthèmes at Juan-les-Pins, the famous village near Antibes, also loved by Picasso, suggests 1930, because Raissa stopped in Berlin in the summer of 1929.

59 G. de Chirico to Gemma, 17 August 1932; id. to Gemma, 27 August 1932.

60 G. de Chirico to Gemma, 31 August 1932. “I have received the manuscripts and I thank you; they are just the right ones”, writes the artist in an undated postcard, but subsequently dated 13 September 1932 (pmk).

Again, in a letter dated 25 November 1932, we learn of the bad outcome of the exhibition that de Chirico had held at the Galleria Milano the same month. The failure is perhaps amplified by the artist to stem the insistent requests for money, especially from Raissa. “The exhibition went badly, actually really badly, indeed. I sold almost nothing. I sold something after the exhibition was over, but once I deduct the expenses for putting on the exhibition, I hardly have anything left”, he writes to Gemma. We also learn about the date of the commissioning of his fresco for the Galleria della Pittura Murale, designed by Sironi for the V Triennale in Milan, which opened in May 1933 in the Palazzo dell’Arte: “I have found some work for the end of winter, a panel for the exhibition of decorative art”.⁶¹

In a letter written in May-June 1933, shortly after the first performance of *I Puritani* which was staged on 25 May, we read that the artist was preparing to meet Mussolini. “Now I must also go and meet Mussolini. Do me a favor. You need to look for all the volumes published about me that are in Paris, because I would like to take them to Mussolini.”⁶² Perhaps the idea of turning to Il Duce was that of Carlo Delcroix, the president of Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, a man who had been seriously mutilated in the war (he had lost his eyes and arms in a heroic battle on the frontline) and had been made an official of the kingdom. De Chirico, as the same letter informs us, had seen him shortly before. However, it does not appear that the artist was received by Mussolini. A few months later, in September, he is still asking for an audience with Il Duce to regain the passport that had been confiscated because of Raissa. He is preceded by a recommendation from Margherita Sarfatti, which, however, is of no use. He will get his passport back only thanks to an intervention by Bottai.

A letter dated 13 June 1933 recounts that de Chirico had concluded an agreement with the Kunstmuseum of Zurich for a solo show, that was to be held from 14 September to 8 October. “I have arranged an exhibition in Zurich for the month of September but you must not say a word to anyone and especially do not write about it to Bettì, otherwise, if Raissa finds out, who knows what trouble she’ll get me in”, he writes to his mother.⁶³ The artist sets off for Milan with Isabella on 11 July. He was thinking of spending time there to work in the Swiss city, but life is too expensive and forces him to return to Paris after a few days.

Every now and then, beyond the news concerning the art world, references to general news events filter into the correspondence. On 6 February 1934, serious riots broke out in Paris, in front of Parliament, to protest against a millionaire scam hatched by a French

61 G. de Chirico to Gemma, 25 November 1932.

62 G. de Chirico to Gemma, n. d. [but after 25 May 1933].

63 G. de Chirico to Gemma, 13 June 1933.

banker Alexandre Stavisky. The news resonates significantly with the Italians and all the Italian newspapers report and comment on it. The «Corriere della Sera» reports: “Paris under the nightmare of yesterday’s tragic conflicts. 30 dead and 300 injured”.⁶⁴

De Chirico hastens to reassure Savinio and, indirectly, his mother who were worried about him. “I immediately replied to your telegram that I was fine. I thought you might be anxious because of the news published in the Italian newspapers, which is, perhaps, somewhat exaggerated. Now, however, everything is calm”.⁶⁵ He also adds a maxim that is somewhat reminiscent of the morality of Renzo Tramaglino, (“I’ve learned not to get mixed up in riots...”): “if you stay at home and don’t meddle in demonstrations there is no danger”. It is a moral determined by the desire to avoid further worries for his elderly mother, but fundamentally, it also corresponds to de Chirico’s conception of life has his own attitude alien to romantic *beaux gestes* and focused exclusively on his work. Already, twenty years previously, he had not shared the interventionist enthusiasms of artists and intellectuals about his fellow travellers. The war had seemed to him, above all, a great waste of time.

64 7 February 1934, p. 7.

65 G. de Chirico to Savinio, 10 February 1934.



G. de Chirico, *Self-portrait*, 1925, private collection