

Giorgio de Chirico

Birth of the Mannequin

*It is quite comforting that, instead of a cblamydia,
pines on his torso rise in a pyramid,
He bears on his trunk his subconscious destiny.*

*Pendulum that stops, (misplaced suitcase), nonsensical journey,
(mirror that is turned over), suitcase that is misplaced – turned over mirror
and in the anti-chamber the One who waits,
and who bears on his torso the colour of our times.*

The above are two fragments of a poem called *Antibes* that I wrote in the Midi of France (South-western France) about eleven years ago. These fragments relate to a painting made in the same period called (City) *Southern Mannequin* and this painting, which represented a short-legged person with a monumental torso in a sitting position, and where maritime pines elevated the complicated anatomy of their branches and the parasol of their fronds in dark, warm shade of green.¹

When I abandoned the idea of representing the mannequin standing (alone or coupled with another mannequin) because, despite their undeniable metaphysical sense - these mannequins were related too closely to the poetry of the puppet and to that of the Duo in the old Italian melodrama - I was struck, one day while visiting (the Milan Duomo) a Gothic cathedral, by the strange and mysterious impression made on me, which certain (gothic) figures, representing seated saints and apostles.

They were characters one could only imagine seated. ('Gothic apostle can't stay standing'). Their majesty, their solemn immobility were, somehow, unfathomable. The very short legs, covered by the folds of their clothing formed a sort of base, of indispensable foundation but only to sustain the torso-monument, and the arms naturally stretched out in proportion to the torso, but this never took a heartrending, painful, abnormal and monstrous aspect as it often happens today with painters when they want to transform and deform nature.²

Above, left: "Seated person in an armchair, who cannot stand in an insane, impossible, incorrect position".

¹ This canvas was reproduced, slightly mutilated on its sides, in "XX^e Siècle" with a wrong title which is not mine.

(n. by ed.) The magazine quoted is "XX^e Siècle", n. 1, march 1, 1938, where the painting is entitled *L'arbre généalogique du rêve*.

² And cause their work to awaken, in whomever beholds it, not pleasant sentiments and sensations, as should be evoked by all real works of art, but provoke instead a kind of deep uneasiness and disgust.

These seated characters are humanized in their own way and have something warm, good and nice about them, like the donkey or the bull and certain dogs. However, there is a particularly ghostlike and enigmatic meaning that emanates from the seated character. Thus, during a meal, the most mysterious diners for a spectator watching the scene, not sitting at the table (amid them) but from a certain distance (from the table), are those in front of him, whose torsos appear above the line of the table. They are truly torsos, in the good sense of the word - marble torsos, fragments of statues; they are placed on the table; they are the patron saints of the place. The others, who face away from the spectator and who naturally show their bottoms and legs fully or partially, are less mysterious; they can get up, walk around, they can even leave the room, go down stairs, open doors, go out into the street, communicate with the outside world, enter life's grand illusion, in short, live!! This is forbidden to their brothers facing them who are condemned to an immobility that stays on the great planes (of eternity) where one can shift the angle of his gaze and think backwards in time.

What confers this mysterious solemnity to my seated mannequins is precisely this absence of legs; they are there, but it is as if they were not. Thus the character, though seated in an armchair or on a step-ladder, has the same metaphysical power as the character sitting at a table, who lacks the other half of the body; or the character that we see in a car (King Pharaon, Joller King, Sovereign King, Prime Ministers, in a limousine in a parade). It is really curious to notice how in a horse-drawn carriage or automobile the character that is (the most) the least mysterious is the driver because in some way he blends with, he melts into the vehicle; the true ghosts are the others that are seated in it.

The seated mannequin is destined to inhabit rooms, but corners of rooms mostly; the open air doesn't suit him. This is where he feels at home; where he flourishes and generously displays the gifts of his ineffable and mysterious poetry. High ceilings don't suit him: he needs low ones - no vaults and no open air. This mysterious side of rooms and their corners that I have expressed in my paintings is also a higher plane phenomenon of metaphysical interest; but to talk about this now would bring us too far and, as we say, there are moments when we are philosophers (I am also adding: poets and painters) only when we remain silent.