

THE LIFE OF GIORGIO DE CHIRICO<sup>1</sup>

Born in Volos on July 10, 1888. This small port in Tessaglia is none other than Pegasos or Jolcos of ancient times, as well as the memorable shore from which the Argonauts departed once upon a time on the quest for the Golden Fleece. Beyond all symbolism related to an impossible endeavour, it seems to us that this historical coincidence is significant. That day, the heat was so intense that unlit candles melted in their candle holders. His father, who was Italian (as was his mother), belonged to that proud race of engineers – bearded men, athletic builds, clear eyes, full of noble sentiments and ironclad ethics –, whose double physical and metaphysical aspect has been so majestically portrayed by Jules Verne in his immortal novels. As Engineer Evaristo de Chirico, whose spirit was no less adventurous than that of someone like Jonathan Smith, had come from his distant and too tranquil Tuscany, where he had moved from his land of origin, Sicily, to start construction on the first “iron horse” in those centaurian planes. Pelion’s shadow and the persistent ghosts of Chiron and Achilles surely sung to the ears of the engineer’s young son and without doubt inspired in him, from a very tender age, that mythic romanticism which would later constitute the permanent base of his painting. Can one classify Giorgio de Chirico as a child prodigy? Luckily, this seems quite unlikely. Although it is true that at an age when other boys were beginning to learn to read and write Giorgio de Chirico was already exercising his drawing hand on course sheets of paper. His father, who (following his own example) dreamt of an engineering career for his eldest son, entrusted the child with pale fingers and curly head to a young drawing teacher named Mavroudis. Under the influence of such a teacher, Giorgio de Chirico learned to correctly execute shadows with the grid system and at the tender age of seven he signed his first work: a galloping horse (note this coincidence). This painting, well framed, hung in the living room of the Austrian-Hungarian Consulate General in Volos, but after the fall of the Habsburg Empire, its whereabouts are unknown.

A few years later, Evaristo de Chirico the engineer moved with his family to Athens. Little Giorgio, whose plastic capabilities were becoming more defined day by day, was enrolled at the Polytechnic institute, which in the Greek capital was both an engineering school and the Academy of Fine Art. Here, he attended all the courses under the direction of teachers who were as varied as they were mediocre, from drawing class in which copies were made from prints, to the live model painting

---

<sup>1</sup> G. de Chirico, published in *Sélection. Chronique de la vie artistique*, VIII, signed “Angelo Bardi”, Éditions Sélection, Anvers, 1929, pp. 20-26.

class. One can't say that his passage in the Academy of Fine Art of Athens was marked by brilliant success. At the end-of-year examinations, Giorgio de Chirico, if by chance he didn't fail, he arrived last, behind certain of his fellow students who gave their teachers great hopes but whose destiny, after a success that was as school-oriented as ephemeral, never allowed them to break out of the darkest nullity. Over the course of these academic years, Giorgio de Chirico's spirit started to develop, become more poetic, more precise in his conception of aesthetics, a line which he would later come to follow faithfully. He entered the cultural domain step by little step, while the landscape of Athens (this magnificent city) strongly contributed to orienting his spirit to the romantic, enigmatic and obscure side of Greek classicism (which was its true living strength). Besides his academic studies, he painted land and seascapes illuminated by the light of dusk and some of his canvases were given the honour of being shown in the window of Mr. Rodios, a framer and art editor who at the time owned the only gallery that gave lustre to the city of Athens. Evaristo de Chirico died in 1905 on a hot May morning, in a room with closed shutters and lit by the trembling light of candles. His son was sixteen years old. Why remain in Greece? The next year he left for Munich. Thanks to the joined forces of Wagner, Böcklin and Nietzsche, Germany still exercised a great pull on debutant artists, and notoriously on those whose thirst for Romanticism outplayed the confines of Impressionism and Realist literature. After all, even before leaving Greece, Giorgio had discovered the works of painter-poets of German romanticism of the XIX century, for whom he had immediately felt a great liking, or what we could even call a certain affinity, which he never negated. We would also add, without fear of being contradicted, that Arnold Böcklin remains his all-time favourite artist. In Munich, Giorgio de Chirico entered the Royal Academy of Painting and enrolled in the courses of professor Von Hakl, an old man that no virtue had made worthy of future memory and upon whom the terrible doubt of whether he had ever held a paint brush in his hand weighed. The disciple stayed two full years in this less than heroic school. We maintain the right to consider that these three years were a great disenchantment for him. In this German land (which, before arriving there, he had considered a sort of pantheon of superior spirits) native painters, who after pronouncing an anathema under the pretext of a purely ideological modernism, dedicated themselves body and soul to this sad and muddy secessionism, which time, the great avenger, is in the process of dispensing the last traces. We may add that Giorgio de Chirico's success at the Royal Academy of Munich was as lacking in brilliance as that which he had achieved at the Royal Academy of Athens. Having accomplished his studies (if we may say so), he left Germany and went down to Italy. From this moment on, he started to feel his great responsibility as a painter. During this first Italian period he continued to work silently and to live alone, without showing his work or taking part in the peninsula's artistic movements, of which, by the way, he knew nothing about. He spent his first Italian year in Milan. During this period he painted works in which the influence of Böcklin was still all too evident. He destroyed these paintings himself. He then moved to Florence where the influence of the masters (whose work was gathered in the city's museums), his attraction to the Tuscan landscape and the natural evolution of his personal faculties, allowed Giorgio de Chirico to start discovering his path. It is to this Florentine period that works such as *The Enigma of the Oracle*, or *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon*, belong. We speak of two works

that, by their poetic power and their element of “discovery”, are worthy, even if dated 1910, of being placed on the same level of any of his later works. As previously he had discovered an enigmatic Greece, very different from that documented in school books, in the same way, after Nietzsche’s *Ecce Homo* Giorgio de Chirico set about discovering the “Italian mystery”. He liked to place this “mystery” in Northern Italy and in particular in the city of Turin. It is to the “mystery” of this Savoyard or Cavourian enigma that we owe a whole series of paintings in which solitary statues erected on very low pedestals cast their long post-meridian shadows on the vast deserted piazzas, surrounded by arcades. But despite their poetic power, these paintings, these “documents” of a new kind of painting lay hidden in a room of a house in Florence. No-one would have suspected their existence, no-one would have been aware that a painter, a new “spirit” had come to enrich the art world, if, after two years of solitary life in Florence, Giorgio de Chirico, by a fortunate impulse, had not decided to come to Paris.

On the 14th of July, 1911, he disembarked at the Gare de Lyon. Our historical consciousness obliges us to say that Giorgio de Chirico still knew nothing of the modern art movement, which at that time was going through its heroic period. From Florence he brought with him his canvases, his “Savoyard enigmas”. In Paris he started to paint again with tenacity. He exhibited at the Salon d’Automne and at the Indépendants. His work attracted the attention of various art critics. An art collector from Le Havre, Mr. Senn bought one of his works that was shown at the Salon d’Automne. But who was it that really “discovered” Giorgio de Chirico? This is a delicate problem, which we would rather not talk about. At the time, Guillaume Apollinaire was the apostle of modern art. At the Indépendants he noticed de Chirico’s canvases. Some say that these canvases were pointed out to Apollinaire by Pablo Picasso, who qualified Chirico a “painter of railway stations”. To this subject we add that in Paris Chirico had commenced practicing his profession of a searcher of enigmas and that he found in the Gare de Montparnasse as much mystery as in the monuments of Turin. It wasn’t long before these grave buildings on the face of which a clock marked two p.m., began to attract attention. Giorgio de Chirico met Apollinaire; the painter recited some verses of *Alcools* to the poet. Apollinaire showed interest in the young painter’s work and with his special capacity for intuition, he delved into its most intimate qualities. From that moment on he sung the name of this new painter to the four corners of the world. There is a painting that documents this friendship between the painter and the poet: *Portrait of Apollinaire* by Giorgio de Chirico. Hidden within this portrait was a real prophesy, which came true only two years later. Apollinaire is represented as a human-target, the skull perforated by a small bullet. During his convalescence in the Italian hospital of Auteuil, Apollinaire was marvellously obsessed with the clairvoyance of the “painter of railway stations”. By this time de Chirico’s painting was ripe to enter into “commerce”. But this is easier to write – especially afterwards – than to do. Around 1912, Giorgio de Chirico’s “commercial” initiation still required a certain amount of courage, of heroic blindness. This indispensable Theseus arose in the person of Paul Guillaume. He had not yet become the “La Boétian” dictator he is today. He was taking his first steps in art commerce. A similar destiny united the painter and editor. Mutual trust quickly became friendship. And this union – which the years have re-enforced – was blessed by Guillaume Apollinaire’s cardinal hand. In this way, in rue de

Miromesnil under the sign “Galerie Paul Guillaume”, a centre of metaphysical energy was implanted, where, until the fatale date of August 1914, one by one the *Revenants* and the big moving vans and the entire series of “enigmas” paraded through.

We have called this date fatal. It goes without saying that it defines Giorgio de Chirico's first Parisian period. The next year the mobilization of Italy called the painter to his country of origin.

Throughout the war, although a soldier (more precisely: a corporal), Chirico did not fail to fulfil his responsibilities as a painter. He worked, waiting for “better” days, on compositions based on mannequins, still-lives of geometric objects grouped in rooms lit by a spectral light, which taken together constitute the Metaphysical Painting period. The first examples of this “metaphysical” painting appeared in Rome in 1918, at the «l'Epoca» exhibition. A group formed around de Chirico. He was followed, imitated and copied by other painters of the peninsula. He was placed at the apex of the Valori Plastici group and in 1919, Mr. Mario Broglio, the promoter of this group, launched in the bookshops the first monograph on the painter “Giorgio de Chirico”. His name started to be known worldwide. His paintings were reproduced in publications in Europe and America. In Paris, Mr. Paul Guillaume, who in the middle of the war preformed an extraordinary tour de force by presenting de Chirico's painting on the stage of the Vieux-Colombier, didn't miss a chance to mention his first “pony” to people after the war. In the meantime Chirico, who continued to live between Florence and Rome, began by way of the example of his favourite painter, Arnold Böcklin, to plunge into a research on technique, which would bring such an enormous transformation to his way of painting. He renounced oil paint, as it was too vulgar and easy. He experimented with all the processes of dry tempera, moist tempera and egg tempera. Haunted by the transparency of the colour of painters such as Botticelli and Antonello da Messina, he painted exclusively with glazing technique. And, in order to get to the bottom of the “mystery” of great painting, he faithfully executed copies of Raphael's *Portrait of a Pregnant Woman* and Michelangelo's *Holy Family* at the Uffizi Gallery and at Palazzo Pitti. A few superficial art critics took the works of this period (portraits – notably portraits of the artist by himself –, still-lives, compositions) as decadence of the de Chirican “spirit”. Serious error.

It is true that for an “inventive” painter like Giorgio de Chirico, a period of research in technique couldn't be anything but transitory. Fully armed with new weapons, Chirico didn't want anything more than to reconquer “his world”. The “climate” in Paris beckoned him anew. In 1925, the director of the Swedish Ballet asked him to execute the décor for Mr. Alfredo Casella's *Giara*. For the painter it was an opportunity to re-enter the art capital. In which this time he established himself permanently and began a series of paintings of a stunning spirit and rich with matter: the sitting mannequins, the horses, the gladiators, the furniture in the valley etc., etc.

He made the acquaintance of Mr. Léonce Rosenberg, who invited him to Effort Moderne. With Mr. Paul Guillaume he resumed those relationships which the war had interrupted. Expositions, studies, reproductions, monographs arose one after another. The one by Mr. Roger Vitrac inaugurated the N. R. F. series. Mr. Boris Ternovetz's monograph (Milan) followed immediately. To Chirico, Jean Cocteau dedicated his *Mystère Laïc*. Waldmar George signed a big monograph that was all-inclusive and substantial. In this way, we arrive to the present year of 1929. An event that is more eloquent than any piece of writing.

## Angelo Bardi

The pseudonym *Angelo Bardi*<sup>1</sup> seems to have its roots in the very place in which Metaphysical Art came into being: Piazza Santa Croce in Florence. De Chirico later recalled the moment in which, sitting in this square, he had the strange impression that he was seeing everything for the first time, and how the composition of his painting “appeared to his spirit”<sup>2</sup>. In Maurizio Calvesi’s study of de Chirico’s Florentine training, there is an image which he indicates as a source of the artist’s architectonic imagery which, after the revelation he had in Piazza Santa Croce, materialised in the painting *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon*. In the painting, Piazza Santa Croce is presented frontally, with its church, the statue of Dante and the brick wall to the right. In the church facade depicted by the artist, the scholar saw an echo of fourteenth century Tuscan painting and he linked de Chirico’s image to an architectural element in a fresco by Giotto: *St. Francis Receives the Stigmata*<sup>3</sup> which is located within the church of Santa Croce itself. Situated in the *Bardi* family chapel, Giotto’s work depicts St. Francis receiving the stigmata from an *Angel* who flies above a temple which is, according to Calvesi, similar to the temple in de Chirico’s painting. It would appear likely, therefore, that the origin of *Angelo Bardi* lies within this iconographic source, a fact that indicates the place as well as the very event of the discovery of Metaphysical Art.

An analogy with St. Francis’s vision, during which a seraphim angle with three pairs of wings appeared before him, can be detected in de Chirico’s account of how an image appeared to his spirit, which he preferred to call an “enigma”, like the painting which derived from this revelation. De Chirico’s contemplation regarding St. Francis<sup>4</sup> would continue until the end of his life; in 1947 he portrayed the Saint in the painting *The Descent from (or Ascent of) Calvary* in which the Saint, with his eyes closed and his hand on his heart, takes in the importance and the meaning of what is happening behind him.<sup>5</sup> The fact that de Chirico chose this particular name for his autobiography is clearly an acknowledgment and recollection of his early and fundamentally important experience in Piazza Santa Croce – the logistical birthplace of Metaphysical Art –. His autobiography – the story of his life – is therefore signed by the very place in which his artistic illumination occurred. The purpose of using a pseudonym is that of hiding the source of a piece of writing. Here, especially thanks to Professor Calvesi’s indication, it is the image which leads us to the source of Giorgio de Chirico’s Metaphysical Art, and it carries the name *Angelo Bardi*.

*Katherine Robinson*

<sup>1</sup> Cf. G. Roos, *La vie de Giorgio de Chirico*, in «ON - OttoNovecento», 1/97, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, Naples, p. 32. Roos identifies de Chirico as the author of the biography and puts forth the hypothesis that the pseudonym *Angelo Bardi* was chosen by de Chirico as a concept of himself as a “poet-herald”.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. G. de Chirico, manuscript ca. 1912-1913, *Meccanismo del Pensiero, Critica, polemica, autobiografia, 1911-1943*, edited by M. Fagiolo dell’Arco, Einaudi, Turin, 1985, pp. 31-32.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. M. Calvesi, *La Metafisica Schiavita*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 1982, p. 58 and plate n. 5 p. 138.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. P. Picozza, *L’Arte e la Contemplazione della Perfezione Legata alla Divinità*, in *La passione Secondo de Chirico*, exhibition held in the church of San Francesco a Ripa, Rome, November 20, 2004 - 15 January 15, 2005, exhibition catalogue edited by Achille Bonito Oliva, De Luca Editori d’Arte, Rome, 2004, pp. 23-26. Giorgio de Chirico and Isabella Far were married in the church San Francescuccio in Assisi on March 5, 1952. Giorgio de Chirico is buried in a small chapel in San Francesco a Ripa, Trastevere, Rome.

<sup>5</sup> After the death of the Maestro, his widow Isabella Far donated this painting, along with two other works, to the Franciscan friars of San Francesco a Ripa. *Descent from (or Ascent of) Calvary* is a large canvas (185 x 160 cm) and can be considered the most important sacred art painting of the Maestro. *Ibid.*, p. 124.