

Paradoxical Primitivism in the Early Art of Giorgio de Chirico (1911-17)

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In *Primitivism in Modern Art*, Robert Goldwater examines the tendency of nineteenth and twentieth-century European artists to seek inspiration from so-called "primitive sources."¹ These sources include exotic art, prehistoric art, the art of children, and native European folk art. Goldwater points out that many modern artists rejected the academic tradition based on the standards of the High Renaissance as incompatible with the goals of modern artistic expression, and that they often turned to primitive art for fresh inspiration in the hopes of developing a new visual language.

European avant-garde artists since the late nineteenth century sometimes adopted the early art forms of their native lands as sources for their primitivism. Giorgio de Chirico, for instance, used fourteenth and fifteenth-century Tuscan art as a source for his paintings from 1911-17.² Ironically, de Chirico's "primitive" source was a seminal part of the Renaissance tradition rejected by many of his avant-garde contemporaries: he appropriated elements in the formal vocabularies of Proto and Early Renaissance art and inverted their emphases and intents to develop a modern visual language expressive of twentieth-century experience. Thus, de Chirico's early primitivism can be termed "paradoxical" in two ways: both in its source of inspiration and in its unusual adaptation of selected techniques from this source to express modern concerns and values.

Most of de Chirico's theoretical and autobiographical writings were produced after 1917, when he began to develop increasingly academic tendencies in his art.³ A few manuscripts by de Chirico from 1911-17 attest to the profound impact that Proto and Early Renaissance Tuscan art had on the young man.⁴ Furthermore, many of the paintings from this precociously innovative period of de Chirico's artistic career give compelling evidence of the influence of these sources on his art.

De Chirico was born in 1888 in Greece of Italian parents. In 1909, he moved to Milan where he lived until he settled in Florence the following year. The sojourn in Italy was a voyage of discovery, enlightening him to the richness of his native cultural inheritance. De Chirico's intense identification with Italy is indicated by his responses on paper-work for later gallery exhibitions of his art: in the blank space designating "place of birth," he would sometimes write "Florence, Italy." His choice of the most important city of the Italian Renaissance as his fictive birth-place is significant. The art and culture of Florence made a powerful impression on the young artist. There, he spent countless hours haunting museums, churches and piazzas. He was particularly affected by the paintings of Proto and Early Renaissance Tuscan masters such as Giotto, Uccello and their followers.

In viewing Proto and Early Renaissance masterpieces

virtually side-by-side in the churches and museums of Florence, young de Chirico was fascinated by the ambiguities that he perceived in their divergent representational methods. For example, what interested him most in Giotto-esque⁵ paintings was not their emotionally expressive figures, but rather their distinctive treatment of space. Conversely, de Chirico appears to have been intrigued by the figurative aspects in Uccello's Early Renaissance masterpieces. In his early writings, de Chirico often mentioned these artists. However, the direct influences of these sources on his art did not become apparent until after his departure for Paris in 1911. Though invigorated by the heady artistic climate of his new environment, he brooded about the adopted homeland he had left behind. In spite of his proclaimed nostalgia for Italy, he remained in Paris for nearly five years.

One of the recurrent motifs in de Chirico's art from this early period was self-portraiture. Certain aspects of a self portrait of 1911 (Figure 1) refer directly to conventions of Early Renaissance formal portraiture (Figure 2). Both compositions include illusionistically painted framing devices; also, the crisp profile view of de Chirico's *Self Portrait* appears to intentionally replicate that of Uccello's subject. Both faces are cool and aloof and lack any expression of emotion.

Other early paintings by de Chirico exemplify more subtle forms of imitation. In a painting from the "Italian piazza series" of 1914, *The Enigma of a Day* (Figure 3), intense sensations of solitude and apprehension are produced through a deliberate misapplication of the rules of linear perspective. No rationally imposed order is apparent: the orthogonals overlap and multiple vanishing points appear. An analogous effect of perspective is apparent in the architecture of the Giotto-esque painting in Figure 4. Although architecture is an important feature in both compositions, the expressive emphasis of the Giotto-esque composition is on the human drama depicted; the architecture serves to frame and extend the primary action of the human forms that occupy the frontal plane. A feeling of disorientation is not produced because the composition is anchored by its primary focus—the human drama and emotion of the scene. De Chirico's painting has no such anchor. Instead, our attention is riveted by the spatial distortions of his composition.

De Chirico stressed that which is incidental in Giotto's style for the expressive intent of his own painting. Jean-Paul Sartre wrote that "de Chirico revealed to us a nature that was haunted and yet had nothing of the supernatural about it" and that the artist "painted the life and sufferings of stones." However, the emotionally expressive aspect of this painting does not so much lie in the stone figure in the foreground as it is rendered by a psychologically

disturbing distortion of space. De Chirico's inversion of his archetypal models' expressive emphases served to convey his mood of ambiguity and alienation.

De Chirico perceived a duality in the nature of the world and in all objects. He wrote that

[E]very object has two appearances: one, the current one, which we nearly always see and which is seen by people in general; the other, a spectral or metaphysical appearance beheld by some rare individuals in moments of clairvoyance and metaphysical abstraction, as in the case of certain bodies concealed by substances impenetrable by sunlight yet discernible, for instance, by X-ray or other powerful artificial means.⁷

He felt that the task of the artist, as one of those "rare individuals" with extraordinary powers of perception, was to reveal the hidden, "metaphysical" aspects of the world — through the "powerful artificial means" of his representational technique.

De Chirico admired a similarly perceptive sense of mystery and ambiguity in the art of Giotto. He wrote of Giotto's treatment of architecture as follows:

And the perspectives of buildings seem to rise full of mystery and misgiving, corners conceal secrets, the work of art ceases to be a terse episode, a scene limited by the actions of the figures presented, and it all becomes a cosmic and vital drama which envelops men and constricts them within its spirals, where past and future merge, where the enigmas of existence, sanctified by the breath of art, are divested of the entangled fearfulness that man — outside the world of art — imagines; only to assume the eternal, peaceful, consoling aspect of a work of genius.⁸

In this revealing passage, de Chirico is also describing the effect produced by his own early paintings — with one crucial difference. Where fear of the unknown was minimized in Giotto's art with its concentration on the human drama, de Chirico's art stimulates and reinforces those fears and a sense of foreboding is experienced.

De Chirico's expressive inversion of Proto and Early Renaissance representational techniques is also illustrated in his series of "claustrophobic interiors" and oppressive city-scapes of 1915-16. The artist left Paris in 1915 to enlist in the Italian army during World War I, but was soon transferred to work in a hospital in Ferrara because of "nervous disorders." His overwhelming feelings of disorientation were expressed in his paintings from this period (Figure 5). The example bears a bitterly ironic title reflecting de Chirico's dismay over the violent circumstances responsible for his precipitous return to his adopted homeland: *The Joy of Return*. A comparison with a detail from a fourteenth-century Giotto-esque painting (Figure 6) illustrates his indebtedness to his archetypal models.

De Chirico exploited certain elements of Uccello's pictorial technique in his "still-life series" of 1914-15 (Figures 7 and 8). Like Uccello, de Chirico placed toy-like objects along perspective orthogonals. Uccello's rationally organized composition reflected Early Renaissance ideals of order and harmony, whereas, de Chirico's deliberately skewed perspective expressed contemporary feelings of disorientation and ambiguity. In viewing these two paintings together, one is reminded of de Chirico's vision of the world as

an immense museum of many colored toys which change their appearance and that, like little children, we sometimes break to see how they are made on the inside, and disappointed, realize that they are empty.⁹

A painting from the "mannequin series" of 1915-1917, *The Seer*, contains numerous distorted references to the artistic and humanistic tradition of the Early Renaissance. It depicts an armless, eyeless mannequin who sits before the hopelessly contradictory orthogonals of an ambiguous perspective line drawing (Figure 9). Several arcs and angles in the drawing are labeled with symbols which are reminiscent of the medieval fascination for alchemy and numerology. A draftsman's right-angle stands tantalizingly near to the Seer, but he is, of course, incapable of using it.¹⁰ The building in the background could be a simplified, stylized version of a medieval Italian basilica — but it has no door through which a man could enter to seek solace. The Seer is alone amidst the trappings of a civilization that can have no potential value or meaning for him — alone, that is, except for the unseen statue whose presence is indicated by a dark, menacing shadow. The rough wooden platform upon which the Seer and his accouterments are situated resembles the temporary, makeshift stages that are still erected in Italian piazzas for performances of medieval and Renaissance plays. It is on this stage that the Seer is presented — to the pity, derision or scorn of passers-by.

The objects that surround the Seer on his lonely platform symbolize the productivity, confidence and optimism of an earlier epoch. Medieval and Renaissance tools, mathematical formulae and religious faith have become useless symbols mocking his impotence. The painting suggests that inadequacy does not necessarily reside in the objects or in the concepts that they represent, but rather in the Seer himself, who is helpless to employ them. The essential optimism of the Renaissance was grounded in the conviction that man is inherently capable of making correct choices based upon his rational ability to impose order upon his world. Through his paradoxical inversion of Renaissance representational techniques and expressive intent, De Chirico reveals the twentieth-century loss of this optimism.

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- 1 Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1986 edition). Goldwater's use of the term "primitive" is descriptive, not normative.
- 2 James Thrall Soby (in James Thrall Soby, *Giorgio de Chirico* [New York: MOMA, 1954]) and Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco (in *De Chirico* [New York: MOMA, 1982]) have alluded to correlations between de Chirico's early art and the art of Early Renaissance Italian artists. It has also been suggested that de Chirico may have been inspired by Italian Mannerist and Baroque artists. My purpose in this article is to focus on specific examples and to more fully examine some of the ways in which de Chirico seems to have appropriated certain representational techniques from the styles of Giotto and Uccello.
- 3 1917, a critical year in de Chirico's artistic career, was marked by his vituperative break with the "scuola metafisica" which was founded by de Chirico himself and Italian artist Carlo Carrá. De Chirico became increasingly bitter and antagonistic towards Carrá and other modern artists, and even referred to works by many of his contemporaries as "trash." In these later writings, he often paid homage to sixteenth-century masters like Michelangelo and Raphael as inspirational sources in an apparent effort to identify his own art with the tradition of the High Renaissance. Many scholars agree that de Chirico's art after 1917 degenerated to an increasingly imitative, academic style. The reason for this change in the man and his art is not clear. De Chirico's *Memoires*, Margaret Crosland, trans. (London: Peter Owen Ltd., 1971) provides fascinating insight into the mature de Chirico's point of view.
- 4 De Chirico's manuscripts from the collection of Paul Eluard are particularly illuminating. Some of these are reprinted in Appendix A of Soby. Many of the manuscripts by de Chirico in this collection were written from 1911-17.
- 5 De Chirico would have been most familiar with Giotto's fresco cycles in the church of Sta. Croce in Florence. (In his writings, he frequently mentions the great deal of time he spent both in the church and the piazza of Sta. Croce.) Unfortunately a major flood in 1966 severely damaged these fresco cycles and few good reproductions from before the disaster are available. It is for this reason that I use examples from the Upper Church of San Francesco in Assisi to illustrate many of my points. If de Chirico saw these frescoes he certainly would have taken them to be painted by Giotto (as the controversy surrounding their authorship has only arisen in recent years). Furthermore, Sta. Croce, like San Francesco in Assisi, is a Franciscan basilica, and the few fragments that remain of Giotto's fresco cycle in the Florentine church bear marked similarities to the style and theme of the Giotto-esque frescoes in the church at Assisi.
- 6 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Literary Essays* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957) 59.
- 7 Fagiolo dell'Arco 68.
- 8 Soby 109.
- 9 Soby 246.
- 10 De Chirico's father was a railroad engineer and this fact is often used by critics to explain the frequent appearance of drafting tools and trains in the artist's paintings.



Figure 1. De Chirico, *Self Portrait with Tower*, 1911-12. Collection Carl van Vechten, New York.



Figure 2. Uccello, *Portrait of a Young Man*, n.d. Chambery Museum.

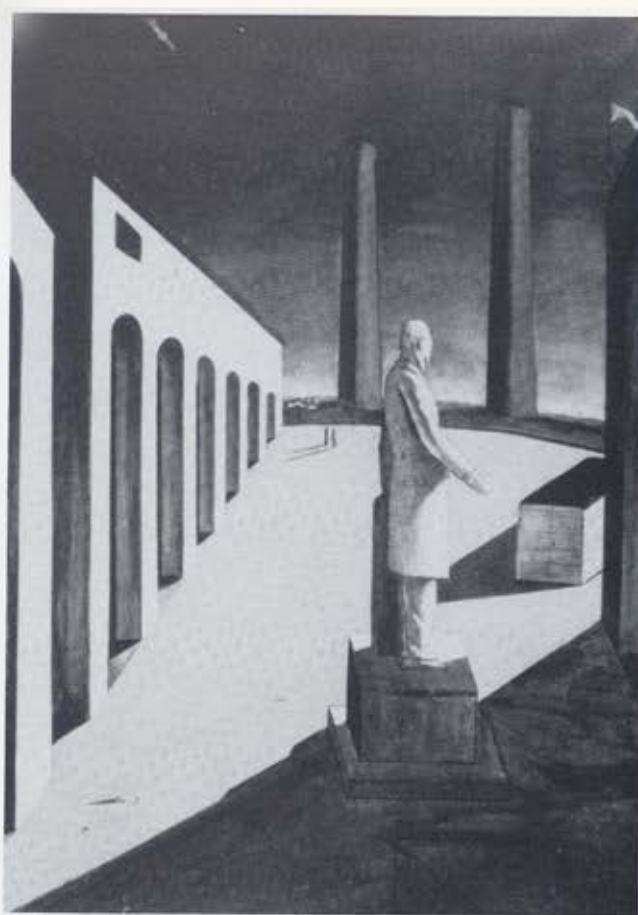


Figure 3. De Chirico, *The Enigma of a Day*, 1914. Private Collection, New Canaan, Connecticut.



Figure 4. School of Giotto, *St. Francis' Renunciation of Worldly Goods*, ca. 1296, Upper Church, San Francesco of Assisi.



Figure 5. De Chirico, *The Joy of Return*, 1915. Collection Mrs. L. M. Maitland, Brentwood, California.



Figure 6. School of Giotto, *St. Francis Casting the Demons out of Arezzo* (detail), ca. 1296, Upper Church, San Francesco of Assisi.



Figure 7. De Chirico, *The Evil Genius of a King*, 1914-15. Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Figure 8. Uccello, *The Rout of San Romano*, 1456-60. London National Gallery.

Figure 9. De Chirico, *The Seer*, 1915. Private Collection, New Canaan, Connecticut.

