

About Giorgio de Chirico

Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978) was exalted as a visionary for his early Metaphysical paintings in which he used distorted perspectives and strange juxtapositions to create a haunting, dreamlike reality. His close friend and critical champion, the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire, first admired the poetry and mystery of his early paintings, which later influenced the Surrealists, who embraced his efforts to convey a world in which all sense of unifying logic was abolished. In 1919 de Chirico's work underwent a fundamental transformation as he began to explore the techniques and subject matter of the Old Master paintings in Italian museums. His former supporters vilified the paintings that followed, condemning as banal and academic his pictures of horses at the seashore or gladiators preparing for combat. However, in the words of Marcel Duchamp, "posterity may have a word to say" about these controversial works, which are reconsidered in this exhibition in terms of the continuity of de Chirico's overall achievement. De Chirico's work had a profound impact on modern and contemporary art, with artists as diverse as Salvador Dalí, Yves Tanguy, René Magritte, Philip Guston, Francesco Clemente and Andy Warhol acknowledging a debt to his artistic vision.

Born in Volos, Greece, to parents of Italian origin, de Chirico received a classical-humanist education and took his first drawing lessons at the Polytechnic Institute in Athens in 1900. In 1906, following the death of his father, Evaristo, the family moved to Munich, where its neoclassical architecture would inform de Chirico's later paintings of deeply shadowed arcades and city squares. In Munich he attended the Academy of Fine Arts, becoming acquainted with the work of the Swiss-German painter Arnold Böcklin and the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche and Arthur Schopenhauer. He settled in Italy in 1909, living in Milan and later Florence. In 1911, shortly after he was ordered to report for military duty, de Chirico and his mother fled to Paris. Denounced as a deserter, de Chirico was tracked down in February 1912 and ordered to report to the nearest military district, Turin. He served with the 23rd Infantry regiment for four days before fleeing

again for Paris. It was at this time that he began a series of paintings on the theme of the abandoned heroine, Ariadne, who is often depicted reclining in a sun-drenched piazza reminiscent of the vast, open squares of Turin.

In Paris from 1911-15, de Chirico became friendly with many of the great artists of the modern movement, including Constantin Brancusi, André Derain, Amedeo Modigliani, and Pablo Picasso, who he met at the weekly salons hosted by the avant-garde poet Guillaume Apollinaire. A contract with the art dealer Paul Guillaume provided de Chirico with a monthly stipend of 120 francs in exchange for six paintings per month; after World War I Guillaume sold these paintings for forty to fifty thousand francs apiece, leading to a bitter rift between de Chirico and his dealer. In 1915 Italy offered amnesty to all military deserters, allowing de Chirico to return home with his brother Andrea (a musician, writer, and artist who worked under the pseudonym of Alberto Savinio), to join the war effort. He was stationed in Ferrara, where he made a number of exquisite pencil drawings in which the figure of Ariadne took the form of a reclining mannequin.

In Ferrara in 1917 de Chirico met the artist Carlo Carrà, with whom he articulated a “metaphysical” style of painting that incorporated strange objects, enigmatic juxtapositions, and distorted perspectives to create an illogical, dreamlike reality. Although the Metaphysical School was short-lived, its ramifications were felt in such subsequent art movements as Dada and Surrealism. At the end of the First World War de Chirico began his practice of copying old master paintings, beginning with works made after paintings by Titian and Lorenzo Lotto in the Borghese Gallery, Rome. This process led to de Chirico’s return to Renaissance and Baroque painting techniques, such as egg tempera and litharge. The work that resulted was a curious hybrid of classicism and modernity, which ultimately led to his increasing estrangement from the Parisian art world, with its emphasis on avant-garde innovation. The Surrealists shunned de Chirico’s subsequent evolution, so much so that the poet André Breton publicly attacked the artist at his solo opening at the Galerie Léonce Rosenberg in 1925, denouncing his recent works as “degenerate.”

In the mid-1920s de Chirico branched out as an artist. He began designing costumes and sets for theatrical productions, a practice he would continue throughout his lifetime, and his first novel, *Hebdomeros*, was published to great critical acclaim in 1929. His work in the 1920s reflects the changes in his personal life. In 1925 he met his first wife, Raissa Gurievitch Krol, who shared de Chirico's passion for ancient Greece. Their marriage, however, was short-lived. In 1930 de Chirico met Isabella Pakszwer, a Polish-Russian woman, who encouraged his investigations into the techniques of the Old Masters and his frequent attacks on modern art. They married in 1951, and remained together until his death of a heart attack in 1978.

While de Chirico never recaptured the acclaim afforded by his pre-1919 work, his subsequent career was marked by continual experimentation and rediscovery. In the decades that followed he invented a wide range of new subjects, often working on them simultaneously, which included the vast *Piazza d'Italia* series, the *Mysterious Baths*, and topographical paintings of Venice and Naples. For all of his and others' claims to the contrary, de Chirico remained a profound presence in 20th century art, his serial approach to painting foreshadowing the work of such contemporary artists as Andy Warhol and Mike Bidlo.

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