

The Scholar's Playthings (1917), 72.75, G376
Giorgio de Chirico,
oil on canvas



THE PAINTING

Six oddly-shaped “boxes” and a painted dowel cast illogical shadows on the surface of a curved or tilted table (?) inside a room with a long corridor framing a glimpse of green. On three boxes are painted highly-detailed, fairly realistic images in bright colors: a factory (or depot or hospital?) against a blue green sky, anatomical details of the arm’s circulatory system, and a color-coded(?) medical chart of the head and upper body.

The logical linear perspective of the background makes all the more perplexing the impossible shadows and irregular shapes of the foreground and the multiple vanishing points disorient the viewer. “This cloning of multiple viewpoints acts in a way analogous to Cubism. It jams the sense of illusionary depth

and delivers the surface to the rule of the flat shape, which was a quintessential modernist strategy." (Hughes)

The title implies the images refer to de Chirico's art education: drafting triangles to aid drawing, anatomy for painting the human figure, the color "wheel" on a stick, the example of architecture.

In his MIA Arts Bulletin article, "A Metaphysical Interior by Giorgio de Chirico," Evan Mauer writes that the painting reflects de Chirico's wartime experience stationed in Ferrara. ("The Scholar's Playthings.") (Note: the gallery label says he was stationed in Modena, though all my other sources state it was Ferrara.)

Because of his disabling illness, de Chirico eventually held a desk job and lived in his own apartment, giving him time to wander the streets of the city he considered quite beautiful and shop (or window shop) the "remarkable metaphysical and strange shapes" of items such as pastries.

Mauer concludes that the building, which may reference the Piastrini depot where he was originally stationed, a convalescent hospital where he was treated, or a war profiteer's factory, is probably a "generalized image...which represented ...vivid and emotional experiences ... [of] the army, his health and the injustices of war."

He also believes the dowel is a medical lecturer's pointer, not a croquet stake as biographer James Thrall Soby asserts. Mauer posits that the charts refer to de Chirico's unpleasant experiences with the feckless doctors treating him rather than the charts found in drugstore window displays, Soby's theory.

Writing in 1919, de Chirico explained the triangle was a "mystical and magical symbol," evoking "a sense of uneasiness and even fear" (Carrà, cited by Mauer in "The Scholar's Playthings"). The two yellow draftsman's templates above the building, the four triangles on the tile, and various triangular planes created by surfaces and shadows create a chaotic and disorienting effect.

The square, however, was a more positive symbol: "In like manner the square has always obsessed my mind. I always saw squares rising like mysterious stars behind every one of my pictorial representations" (Carrà, cited by Mauer in "The Scholar's Playthings").

As a metaphysical painter, de Chirico wanted to capture the discovery of "the mysterious aspects of objects." He described art as "the fatal net that catches these strange moments in flight, like mysterious butterflies, unnoticed by the innocence and distraction of ordinary men." ("The Scholar's Playthings.")

THE ARTIST (July 10, 1888 – November 20, 1978)

Pre-surrealist Giorgio de Chirico, a proponent of Pittura Metafisica (Metaphysical Painting) also called Magic Realism, said, "To become truly immortal, a work of art must escape all human limits: logic and common sense will only interfere. But once these barriers are broken it will enter the regions of childhood vision and dream." ("Magic Realism")

"Much of the impact of de Chirico's pictures derives from the restrained clarity of his style. He achieved this by rejecting the formal innovations of much modern art since Impressionism and instead opting for a frank, realistic manner that allowed him to depict objects with simplicity. The result was a style that,

rather like René Magritte's, is rich in evocative mystery despite the straightforward character of the depiction." " (Giorgio de Chirico." The Art Story.org.)

"De Chirico's innovative approach to these pictures - an approach rather like that of a theatrical set designer - has encouraged critics to describe them as 'dream writings.' They are, in other words, disordered collections of symbols. And this points to their difference from the so-called 'dream images' of later Surrealists such as Salvador Dalí, which appear to want to capture the contents of a dream as if with a camera." (Giorgio de Chirico." The Art Story.org.)

LIE AND ART (Note: De Chirico wrote essays and updated his autobiography throughout his life, often revising the facts about himself and his work as it served his moods. Conflicting details abound.)

- Giorgio de Chirico was born in Volos, Greece, to parents of Italian ancestry (from the Italian diaspora within the Ottoman Empire). He was close to his brother, Andrea (later known as Alberto Savinio), also talented as a painter and writer.
- His father Evaristo, a railway construction engineer, supported his sons' talents, sending Giorgio to study with the Swiss painter Gilleron. Evaristo died while Giorgio, just 17, was completing his studies at the Higher School of Fine Arts in Athens; he failed his exams, most likely due to his sudden loss.
- His mother Gemma channeled her energy into encouraging the boys' achievements. She took them to Florence and then to Germany to further their schooling.



- The family moved to Munich, where Giorgio entered the Academy of Fine Arts. He was fascinated by Max Klinger's odd scenes (above, right).
- His early work shows the influence of Swiss symbolist Arnold Böcklin (above, left).
- De Chirico felt an affinity for Böcklin's paintings of otherworldly architecture and myth. Indeed, de Chirico was fascinated by myth (the Argonauts were said to have sailed from Volos; he and Andrea likened themselves to Castor and Pollux) and in Greece he was accustomed to ancient classical ruins in the midst of an otherwise 19th century setting

- In 1910 he dropped out before graduating and joined his mother and brother now living in Milan. He made his way to Florence where he studied Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, whose philosophy of “parallel reality” informed the themes of metaphysical painting. He painted Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon (right), his “first attempt to penetrate the reality concealed behind the everyday, where the commonplace reveals its true essence.” (“Giorgio de Chirico.” MoMA)

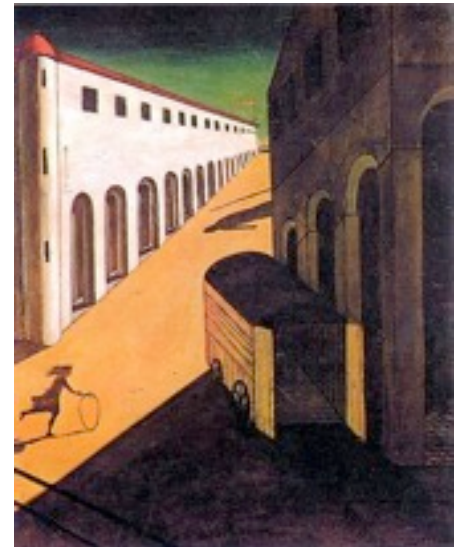


- In 1911 Giorgio and his mother joined Andrea in Paris. He was too ill to paint for awhile, resulting in his showing only three paintings, including Enigma, in the Autumn Salon in 1912.
- His dreamy city scenes “were ecstatically hailed by painters and poets from Picasso to Paul Eluard; before long de Chirico became the darling of the Surrealist Movement.... Dali, Ernst, Tanguy, and Magritte all came out of early de Chirico, and in the 1920’s George Grosz and other German painters used de Chirican motifs to express their vision of an estranged urban world.” (Hughes))

- His lonely piazza scenes began to feature Ariadne, with whom he identified based on Nietzsche’s reading of Ariadne: the symbol of the soul anticipating the super-hero. (Marrone)

- He also played with perspective, creating strange spaces with high walls and long diminishing arcades.

- He sold his first piece during the Autumn Salon of 1913. He fell in with the poet Apollinaire, who tagged his style “metaphysical” and introduced him to Picasso, Derain, Brancusi, and others. Apollinaire liked de Chirico’s enigmatic scenes and his well-known esteem likely made de Chirico’s reputation.



- In 1915 the brothers returned to Italy for military service, joining a regiment stationed in Ferrara. Giorgio continued to paint.

- He fell ill (he is said to have suffered from intestinal ailments or a nervous condition and possibly migraines or epilepsy) and in 1917 was admitted to the military hospital where he met the former Futurist Carlo Carra`, who incorporated aspects of de Chirico’s style. Out of this collaboration came Metaphysical Painting (“Pittura Metafisica”) with a focus on the importance of time and memory in creating a new art that did not reject history.

- “In de Chirico’s paintings of this period, such as the Grand Metaphysical Interior (1917) (right)... the colours are brighter, and dressmakers’ mannequins, compasses, biscuits, and paintings on easels assume a mysterious significance within enigmatic landscapes or interiors.” (“Giorgio de Chirico.” Encyclopædia Britannica)



- In 1919 de Chirico mounted his first one-man show in Rome. The reviews were hostile and “triggered a major crisis of confidence. He began to concentrate on more conventional scenes and classical figures inspired by antique statuary and Renaissance painting. Oddball elements persisted, but the metaphysical spirit, the disquieting strangeness and suggestiveness, the delving into the psyche and the sense that what could not be said in words might yet be expressed in enigmatic images, was lost.” (Conway)
- He also was moved by a Titian painting in Rome’s Galleria Borghese. This sparked his interest in Renaissance and Baroque painting techniques, marking a new direction in his work.
- In the early 1920’s de Chirico associated with composer Casella and playwrights such as Pirandello and became involved in theatrical projects.
- By 1926 de Chirico broke with the Surrealists, who wanted him to return to his early dream-like subjects and style. His new mannequin series (right) feature “blank heads... with muscular limbs and elongated torsos, composed of geometrical instruments or architectural elements and suggesting the exposure of inner experience, memory and myth.” (“Giorgio de Chirico.” MoMA)
- In 1929 de Chirico wrote Hebdomeros, a “dream-like collection of impressions and situations [which] functions as a literary companion to his metaphysical paintings. By this time De Chirico had distanced himself from the Surrealists, yet Hebdomeros is still considered one of the finest examples of Surrealist literature.” (“Giorgio de Chirico.” The Art Story.org.)
- His early paintings strongly influenced the surrealist movement, providing inspiration for such prominent artists as Max Ernst, Salvador Dali, Rene Magritte, and Philip Guston. (Giorgio de Chirico.” WikiPaintings)
- “Metaphysical painting had no clear antecedents: with its invention de Chirico's position as one of the most original and influential of 20th-century artists was assured....The painter's life was in many ways a catalogue of wrong turns and setbacks, many of them self-inflicted. Undoubtedly he suffered at critical moments from incomprehension, but by constantly rewriting his own biography, marketing his own copies of earlier works, denouncing as fakes genuine paintings for reasons of personal antipathy towards their owners, he himself did much to confuse his public and his collectors. And the miasma of uncertainty that came to surround his oeuvre provided an ongoing field-day for fakers, making him possibly the most counterfeited of last century's artists.” (Conway)
- “Besides the art world proper, de Chirico's influence can be seen on everything from the Italian filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni's shots of desolate cityscapes and urban anomie to the environments and packaging for the videogame Ico for the Playstation 2. And the novelist V.S. Naipaul has borrowed the title of one of his paintings, The Enigma of Arrival (1911-12), for one of his own books.” (“Giorgio de Chirico.” The Art Story.org.)



TOUR POSSIBILITIES

Mostly Modern
Modern Art to 1950
Highlights of the Target Wing
Math and Art
Highlights, 1850 to the Present

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

1. The painting appears to be of an interior, a room. How would you feel if you found yourself in this room? What do you see that makes you say that?
2. If this room were a set for a play, how might the characters react to the space, the props?
3. Which parts of the painting seem most logical to you? Which most perplexing?
4. In what ways could the objects qualify as the “playthings” of a scholar?

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