

III BROOKLYN RAIL

Giorgio de Chirico: *Horses: The Death of a Rider*

by Ron Horning
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Installation view, *Giorgio de Chirico: Horses: The Death of a Rider*, Vito Schnabel Gallery, 2023. Artworks © 2023 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome; Photo by Argenis Apolinario; Courtesy Vito Schnabel Gallery

It's usually too soon to write off what might seem, at first glance, a great artist's less compelling work, as these small paintings would make abundantly clear if nothing else did. For more than a hundred years, Giorgio de Chirico has been revered for the so-called metaphysical paintings he made before, during, and right after the first World War. Then, in 1919 according to John Ashbery, de Chirico's painterly genius "evaporated," and he moved on to subjects radically different from the flatly painted and vividly titled empty town squares and arcades, smoking trains, vacant gloves, dressmaker's dummies, archaic busts, vanishing point vistas, and anonymous civic statues that occupied his canvases starting about 1912. Radically different on one hand, déjà vu on the other: the Italian artist who, along with the original cubists, had virtually invented the mental landscape of modernism was now painting Roman gladiators, Greek temples, still lifes of grapes and flowers, portraits commissioned by the wealthy, self portraits in Venetian carnival costume, and, as here, battle scenes and horses and riders.

Hadn't it all been done before? Not by de Chirico once he'd achieved his artistic stride, though Hector and Andromache were recurring subjects during the earlier metaphysical years. Hadn't it been done better by de Chirico's newly proclaimed masters, Titian, Tintoretto, and Rubens? No: despite their defiant materiality, pronounced brushwork, and semi rhyming subject matter, the paintings look nothing at all like the Renaissance and Baroque masterpieces they invoke and ignore. Eventually de Chirico would grow so tired of the distinctions made between his early and later work that he claimed *all* of his paintings were metaphysical, thereby both acknowledging the ongoing sporadic creation of paintings in his first mature style and refusing to distinguish between those paintings and the other paintings that came afterward for almost sixty years. This tactic wasn't enough for most of his critics, though, and so stung was the artist by the adverse—and, he believed, malicious—reactions to his later work that he devotes a large part of his *Memoirs* to castigating the critics for their cowardice

GIORGIO DE CHIRICO

and stupidity, going so far as to claim that one of them, Roberto Longhi, had the black magical ability to disappear by diving into the ground rather than come face to face with the artist who despised him. De Chirico may have felt he had more than a little in common with the hunted animals and embattled men in these paintings dated from 1926 to 1970.

But it isn't necessary to read biography into the exhibit once you identify the paintings as emissaries from a not entirely imaginary world. The clues are everywhere: in the horses themselves, wild and tamed, but also in the riders and handlers, there or not; in the sea or the river that figures in most of the canvases; in the peaks crowned by white marble temples, strongholds, and, in one painting, a block of whitewashed apartment buildings. Some markers are quite specific. If the armor and clothing are accurate, *Combat of Puritans* (1955) takes place in the seventeenth century and is probably a flashback to the sets and costumes de Chirico designed for a 1933 production in Florence of Bellini's English civil war opera, *I Puritani*.



Giorgio de Chirico, *Uomo ferito che cade da cavallo* (*Death of a Rider*), 1937-1938. Oil on canvas, 20 1/8 x 24 3/8 inches, 24 5/8 x 29 inches framed. © 2023 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome; Photo by Argenis Apolinario; Courtesy Vito Schnabel Gallery

After you take in basic locations, occasions, and characters, and start around the gallery again, you notice odd details that do relate these paintings to the earlier metaphysical paintings—a black striped zebra that's brown instead of white, for instance. In *Horses on the Seashore with Greek Temple* (1930), why is the glowing golden feather attached to the browband of the black horse with a long white mane and tail, and why is the sorrel in front saddled but riderless? Does *The Boar Hunt* (1940) really take place in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, as the clothes of the hunter on horseback, anachronistically reminiscent of Visconti's Ludwig, suggest? And in *Ancient Horses and Riders* (1930), the one painting in which a woman appears, her glowing health and Renoir-like complacency provide a striking contrast to the man in back, a drained white blank, and his featureless white horse.

De Chirico may have left his past behind, but he's brought it forward too, which is one reason the translation of *Uomo ferito che cade da cavallo* (1937-38), another war painting, as "Death of a Rider" is unfortunate, as it forgoes a more direct translation: "wounded man falling from horse." The title's key Italian word is *ferito* (wounded), and the wounded man is caught in midair, feet up as he falls on the other side of his horse, while in the boat the archer, his bow still vibrating, and the boat's poler watch and wait. You can die from your wounds or survive them, and de Chirico refuses to choose either eventuality. The painting's neither pep talk nor autopsy. The gallery could have gone along with the artist, but a single misstep shouldn't keep anyone away from this marvelous and action packed exhibit.