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Metaphysical Masterpieces 1916—1920: Morandi, Sironi and Carrà

by **Hearne Pardee**



Carlo Carrà, *Il cavaliere occidentale (The Western Knight)*, 1917, Oil on canvas, 52 x 67 cm, Fondation Mattioli Rossi, Switzerland. © 2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.

Metaphysical painting deploys a stock of devices—mannequins, mirrors, shadows, and geometrical objects—developed by Giorgio de Chirico in the strange, philosophically oriented paintings he created in Paris before World War I. Designed to suspend everyday awareness, it also reacts against the progressive avant-garde of the early 20th century. There's a postmodern impulse in de Chirico's irony, his fusion of classicism and nascent surrealism. Less known are other artists who contributed to *pittura metafisica* after the War, but *Metaphysical Masterpieces 1916 – 1920: Morandi, Sironi and Carrà* offers stunning, rarely seen works by three of the most prominent.

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Occasioned by delays in the renovation of the Palazzo Citterio in Milan, where many of the works will eventually hang as part of the Pinacoteca di Brera's 20th century collections, this fortuitous encounter of exceptional drawings and paintings is historical in the broadest sense. Responding to the trauma of war, with Italy in economic and political turmoil, the painters largely abandon the aggressive stance of Futurism and expose a vulnerability and inwardness that inspires some of their most interesting work.

A general mood of melancholy isolation prevails. Dynamic exuberance is replaced by methodical composition, as though fastidious fabrication could generate visions. Released from military service in 1917, Carlo Carrà was seeking new direction in the naïve realism of Henri Rousseau and the sturdy modeling of Giotto when he met de Chirico at a military facility for shell-shocked veterans in Ferrara. De Chirico's *Metaphysical Interior (with Small Factory)* (1917), which opens the exhibition, offers a literal take on the fragmented, abstracted planes of Cubism and Futurism, depicting wood panels tacked onto misaligned stretcher bars, arrayed in a studio interior around a painting of industrial buildings set in conflicting perspectives. All is portrayed with such clarity and conviction that the internal contradictions assume the force of a higher formal order—questioning, as dada artists did in more radical ways, any naïve faith in rationality. The handmade construction of Carrà's *The Western Knight* (1917) with its pegs and sutures, answers de Chirico's irony: an arrested freeze-frame in which the dynamic forward movement of Futurism is immobilized and compressed. Carrà's other paintings here have more in common with the naïve otherworldliness of Sienese painting than with Giotto, a fusion of neoclassicism and the surreal. In them, de Chirico's mannequins assume symbolic personas—the female head in *The Engineer's Lover* (1921), as if animated by the viewer's desire, proposes a union of science and sensuality in a lunar landscape. Her reverie resonates with the altered state of *The*



Giorgio de Chirico, *Interno metafisico con piccola officina* (*Metaphysical Interior with Small Factory*), 1917, Oil on canvas, 46 x 36 cm, Fondation Mattioli Rossi, Switzerland © 2019 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.

a lunar landscape. Her reverie resonates with the altered state of *The Drunken Gentleman* (1916), while *The Hermaphrodite Idol* (1917) poses awkwardly in a claustrophobic interior; Carrà's self-conscious attention to negative spaces and the architectural frame recalls Giorgio Morandi's deliberate delineation of the spaces between objects.

Morandi, also released from the military due to illness, followed Carrà and de Chirico's work from Bologna, where he responded to de Chirico's by abandoning the tentative, shallow relief of his first willowy figures and still-life objects in favor of a more severe, sculptural style. Intensely focused, he uses strong linear outlines and earth colors with clearly defined darks and lights in complicated, enigmatic arrangements of frames, empty boxes and cut-out shapes; *Still Life with Ball* (1918) transforms the canvas itself into a transparent box, fusing positive and negative spaces in a metaphysical object. Another still life depicts a mannequin with a black head, seen from behind, as though contemplating the composition in which it is implicated; perception is displaced, disembodied. But along with these philosophical conundrums come more straightforward compositions of objects and spaces on table-tops, as though in response to the neoclassical influence of the conservative journal *Valori Plastici*. Morandi sets objects up vertically in military array, arranges them lying down in one-point perspective, or composes them on a round table, where the interplay of curvilinear forms recalls the roundness of Carrà's mysterious figures. Morandi's series of isolated vases of flowers, influenced by the naïve realism of Henri Rousseau, culminates in the compressed, conical mass of *Fiori* (1920), which radiates the subdued luminosity of the compositions of tightly grouped vessels for which he is best known.

Mario Sironi, who settled in Milan after his release from the army, worked longer than the others under the sway of Futurism's internal dynamics, extending its emphasis on the city and machinery in dense, dark imbroglios. Using newspapers as a collage substrate for his paintings grounds them in the everyday and endows them with the grittiness of urban life in the postwar era. Informed by his commercial work as a graphic designer and illustrator—the show includes prints of twenty covers he made in 1920 for *Italian Factories Illustrated*—Sironi's dramatic paintings of isolated trucks and automobiles in dark, empty squares echo de Chirico's melancholy. But if his mannequins, like Carrà's, assume virtual life and neoclassical robustness, the statuesque prostitute in *Venus of the Ports* (1919) and the spectral figure with empty eyes in *The War* (1919), allude as much to the physical conditions that led to the Fascist revolt as to metaphysical anomie; they lack the high irony and broad perspective which lends the other works in the show their special interest.



Giorgio Morandi, *Natura morta (Still Life)*, 1919, Oil on canvas, 56.5 x 47 cm, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan, Courtesy of MiBAC, © 2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.

In fact, Sironi broke with the group in 1920, impatient with *Valori plastici*'s devotion to the past. In 1921 he began producing propaganda for Mussolini, extending the radical political impulse of Futurism and evoking an older version of modernism. Carrà and Morandi were also drawn into the Fascist orbit, but remained more cloistered, Morandi maintaining his profound quietude and Carrà engaged in what has been called “mythological realism.” Might they have better articulated an alternative, postmodern vision? Cultural conservatism doesn't necessarily entail right-wing politics, and neoclassicism actually had support from wealthy leftists. With its restricted focus, *Metaphysical Masterpieces* cultivates de Chirico's uneasy suspension of time and avoids these political complexities. It leaves us tantalized by the possibility that art might bring clarity to darkening times not unlike our own.

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