

Giorgio De Chirico

*The Disquieting Muses*, 1916

The painting *The Disquieting Muses* shows a piazza with the Ferrara ducal castle in the background as well as two factory smoke stacks and a low group of houses. On the right a building with a loggia recalls classical architecture.

By presenting a series of **incongruous kinds of perspective** De Chirico mixes together the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and our recent times. Indeed a constant theme in the artist's *oeuvre* is the **conjunction of everyday life with references to art history**.

This dual level of attention is apparent even in the way the artist was struck by **Ferrara**. On the one hand he saw it as an «**extremely metaphysical**» city, able to reveal the «*ends of the great Medieval night*» with «*the ancient walls so theatrically and romantically shadowed.*» On the other he was attracted by the shop windows in town where he saw, «*absolutely metaphysical and strange sweets and biscuits.*»

A colourful box, similar to the ones used for sweets, appears in the foreground of this painting. However nothing of the city's everyday vitality has been made apparent; here Ferrara is merely a symbol of a city that had once had a powerful aristocratic court but is now reduced to **a shell emptied of everything except its own memory**.

**Fig. 1** Giorgio de Chirico, *The Disquieting Muses*, 1916. Oil on canvas, 97x66 cm. Milan, Mattioli Collection.



In fact the image is constructed to confer **a sense of unreality** on the scene, setting itself up as a space for mental representation. The unnaturally high horizon seems to make room for an immense theatrical stage. The bright reds, the green sky and the lengthening shadows all allude to a summer sunset. Here, however, it is not only daylight that is disappearing but rather an entire culture, symbolized by both the sculptures and the setting.

### Muses who do not Console

Starting in 1914 De Chirico began painting the theme of **vaguely human figures emptied of any life or meaning**. These often took the form of mannequins (perhaps this was tied to the ovoid forms he had seen in **Brancusi's** Parisian studio, like in *Hector and Andromache*) seen almost as prototypes of robots.

The two foreground figures appear to be combinations of different traditions and functions. The one standing has a mannequin's head attached to a muscular back recalling classical sculpture, while its dress references the vertical grooves of a Doric column. By contrast some of Picasso's figures are recalled in the proportions of the seated mannequin whose stitching suggests its body is more of a rag doll than a marble statue. Its head has been unscrewed and placed next to its legs. Simultaneously **serious and facetious, aulic and everyday**, the painting joins opposites in an inhospitable world.

As the sun sets on the West, on the culture that originated in the Mediterranean Basin, the Muses become **disquieting and disorienting figures**. The Graces who had once comforted another Italo-Grecian, Ugo Foscolo, are by now very far removed indeed.

**Fig. 2** Giorgio de Chirico, *Hector and Andromache*, 1917. Oil on canvas, 90x60 cm. Milan, private collection.

