

Giorgio De Chirico

The Disquieting Muses, 1916

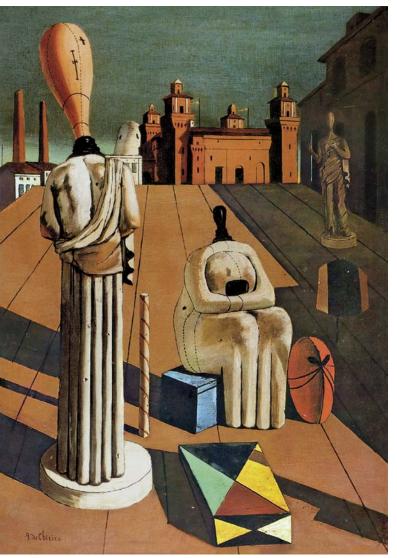
The painting *The Disquieting Muses* shows a piazza with the Ferrara ducal castle in the background as well as two factory smoke stacks and a low group of houses. On the right a building with a loggia recalls classical architecture.

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 the-atrically and romantically shadowed*.» On the other he was attracted by the shop windows in town where he saw, «*abso-lutely 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.



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