Enigma Variations: Philip Guston and Giorgio de Chirico. Santa Monica Museum of Art September 9 – November 25, 2006

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'Image Ridden' - Enigma Variations: Philip Guston and Giorgio de Chirico

At ease in his jacket and tie, his eyes wide with conversation, Philip Guston stands – in a photograph from 1948 – with his head seemingly cradled in the lap of the Madonna from Michelangelo's *Doni Tondo*. Or rather, he stands before a version of the painting dutifully copied by Giorgio de Chirico and hung unselfconsciously on the walls of his smart Piazza di Spagna apartment. Guston's presence at de Chirico's Roman home consummated a long-term admiration, an apprenticeship from afar. He first encountered de Chirico's work in Los Angeles through his friend Lorser Feitelson – a latter-day 'post-surrealist' whose own work revealed the thorough assimilation (and transformation) of de Chirico's metaphysical painting. In 1932 Feitelson took Guston to the home of Walter and Louise Arensberg, where he saw de Chirico's large-scale canvas, *The Soothsayer's Recompense* (1913) – an encounter that would echo throughout his entire career. In the period immediately preceding the triumph of abstraction in America – a triumph in which Guston played more than a bit part – Guston resided at the American Academy in Rome, traveling throughout Italy and studying Old Master painting. De Chirico himself would assume, in turn, the dimensions of a Master painter for Guston: the latter's 1973 canvas, *Pantheon*, pays homage to de Chirico as the sole modern counterpart of more ancient luminaries, Piero and Masaccio, Tiepolo and Giotto – his name echoing theirs in a chorus of sonorous Italian 'o's [fig. 1].

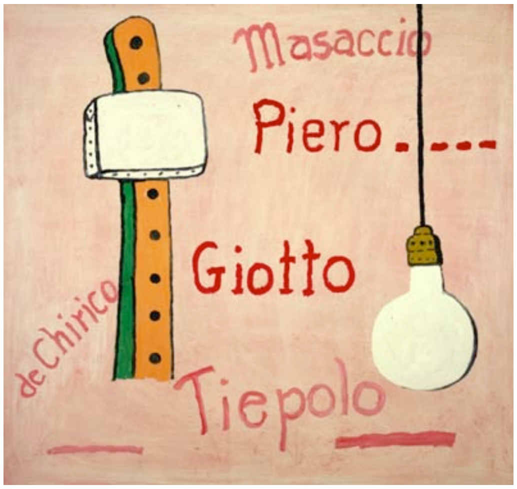


Figure 1: Philip Guston, *Pantheon*, 1973, oil on panel, 45 x 48 inches, The Estate of Philip Guston, courtesy McKee Gallery, New York.

Guston's is not the only pantheon of early and late modernism in which de Chirico looms large. De Chirico's influence upon the trajectory of twentieth-century modernism – albeit a frequently fraught and antagonistic influence – has been prodigious on both sides of the Atlantic. He has been the unwitting (and usually unwilling) 'godfather' of numerous movements and stylistic tendencies, by turns surrealist and fascist. A painter such as Howard Lerner – indebted to de Chirico by way of Guston – reveals the higher mathematics of de Chirico's legacy, its evolution over several generations. In 1937 the critic Waldemar George claimed that de Chirico's presence in twentieth-century figuration was rivaled only by that of Picasso. This is an arguable declaration. Yet compared to the amount of Anglo-American study devoted to many of his peers – from Picabia and Duchamp, to Malevich and Mondrian – the scholarship on de Chirico remains comparatively minimal. Part of this reticence lies in a lingering wariness regarding de Chirico's later career.

By presenting a range of de Chirico's work – both early and 'late' – alongside works by Philip Guston, *Enigma Variations* not only makes an important intervention into the study of Guston's work, but also helps to reframe aspects of de Chirico's fated late production. As an artist touched by what Robert Rosenblum once called de Chirico's 'Long American Shadow,' Guston stands out as one of the only individuals to have responded to nearly every chapter of de Chirico's fitful production, including his latter-day pastiches. Even Guston's eventual penchant for cartooning was not as inimical to de Chirico's patrician metaphysics as it may seem: de Chirico completed several caricatures for the satirical wartime periodical based in Ferrara, *La Ghirba*, some of which reveal a popular, satirical spirit not far from the *Krazy Cat* and *Mutt and Jeff* comics that Guston turned to in successive years.

But *Enigma Variations* has scrupulously limited its selection to works by de Chirico which Guston saw or would likely have seen, whether at the Arensberg home, in Italy, or in retrospectives and other collections. A consideration of Guston's works vis-à-vis those of de Chirico not only raises questions of influence, but sets into relief the polemics that their respective careers have stirred up. Indeed, the exhibition tacitly, but convincingly, proposes a significant parallel between de Chirico's renunciation of his own, early style from the 1920s onward, and Guston's equally controversial renunciation of abstraction late in his career. As co-curator Michael Taylor noted in a conference before the show's opening, art historical scholarship (particularly in the United States) has yet to come to terms with the fact that the term 'late de Chirico' in fact comprises a vast scope of time and tendencies, of stylistic departures and returns.

De Chirico's abandoning of metaphysical compositions in favor of self-imitation and kitschy mythopoetics famously earned him a series of *damnatio memorae* from his erstwhile enthusiasts, the surrealists grouped around André Breton. Pundits took turns lamenting and lambasting de

Chirico's cynical turn. Many critics writing about de Chirico's work in the 1930s and 40s acted as if his post-1919 production simply did not exist – as if it were simply too bitter a pill to swallow. Guston's apostasy took the more dramatic form of a single exhibition: his 1970 show at the Marlborough Gallery in New York City, where he revealed his renewed dedication to figuration. Numerous friends recoiled in horror at his new work. Lee Krasner is said to have stopped speaking to Guston after this show. Morton Feldman's essay in *Art in America* the following year cast Guston's transformation under the portentous rubric, 'After Modernism' – a designation that conjures up de Chirico's own unfathomable Judas kiss to early twentieth-century innovation.

But what was scandalous about Guston's Marlborough show was not simply that his new canvases were figurative. It was the nature of that figuration: at once tortured and tongue-in-cheek. His Ku-Klux-Klan figures seemed to both reprise his former oeuvre and to caricature those same works. They looked, in some respects, like a caricature of figuration itself. In de Chirico, Guston found an artist who could pastiche both his own former imagery and the canons of Western art without remorse. Guston's return to figuration undeniably occured under the sign of de Chirico's work - its insistence upon the ineluctable condition of language as the prisonhouse of consciousness and vision. Already at a 1960 roundtable with various artists, including Robert Motherwell, Guston quipped impatiently, 'There is something ridiculous and miserly in the myth we inherit from abstract art. That painting is autonomous, pure and for itself, therefore we habitually analyze its ingredients and define its limits. But painting is "impure." It is the adjustment of "impurities" which forces its continuity. We are image-makers and image-ridden.'[1] Guston's guilt at pursuing abstraction in the wake of increasing international strife and misery contributed to his figurative return. But so too did the lesson he drew from de Chirico's images: that figuration could generate its own metaphysical pleasures, anxieties, and incantations, alongside the humdrum march of modernity.

These parallels have their limits. For all of the literary wit (or pedantic affectation) of de Chirico's 'later' work – whether his equine neo-Baroque, his Gladiatorial reveries, or his self-citing neo-metaphysics – his career has always been haunted by the specter of his early paintings, or, rather, by their subsequent renunciation and perversion (by himself and by others). Guston's late work, by contrast, ushered in his own unapologetic sea-change. Despite the innovations of Guston's abstraction, despite the political mordancy of his early murals and their echoes in his later work, there is an inevitably *ex-novo* feel to his late figuration: a sense that these were the true 'fatality' (to use a term dear to de Chirico) towards which his career marched. For better or worse, it is his post-1970 production for which Guston is and will be remembered – the body of work that, both despite and because of its lumbering intractability, has left the deepest mark in the history of modern painting.

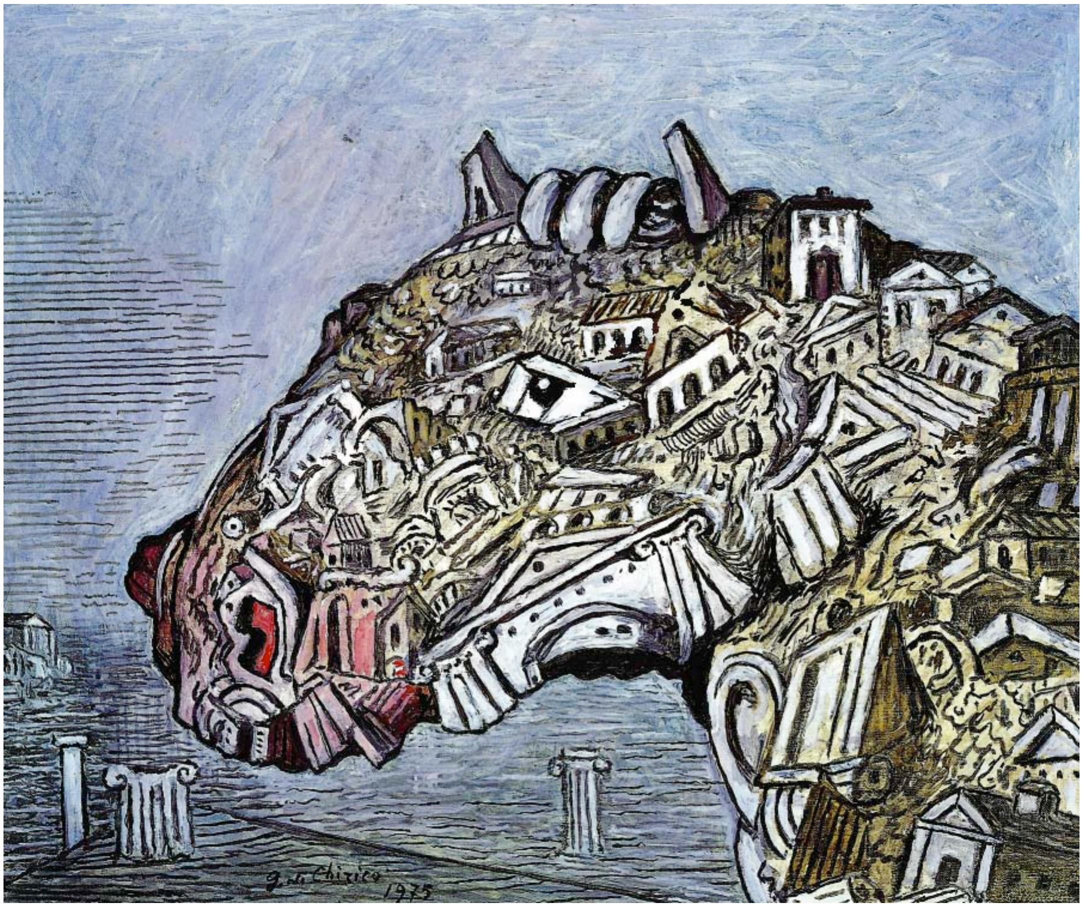


Figure 2: Giorgio de Chirico, *Head of a Mysterious Animal*, 1975, oil on canvas, 19 ½ x 23 1/3 inches, Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art.

While it outlines the sway of de Chirico's work on Guston's early and late production, *Enigma Variations* sets forth an attendant argument for the variety of de Chirico's contested oeuvre. Even in its careful and controlled scope, the exhibition manages to include a fifty-year range of 'late' de Chirico, from his 1925 *The Poet and His Muse* (part of the Arensberg Collection and of great influence upon Guston) to his *Head of a Mysterious Animal* (1975), pullulating with ruins and volutes (in defiance of the early de Chirico's distaste for archaeological materialism) [fig. 2]. The inclusion of paintings from de Chirico's last decade of work – *Head of a Mysterious Animal* (1975), *Sun on an Easel* (1973), and *The Return of Ulysses* (1968), in addition to two late gladiator paintings, *Gladiators After the Battle* (1968) and *The Invincible Cohort* (1973) – also underscores the (surprising) overlap of de Chirico and Guston's late careers, and affords a comparison of their respective, albeit brief, coterminous production.

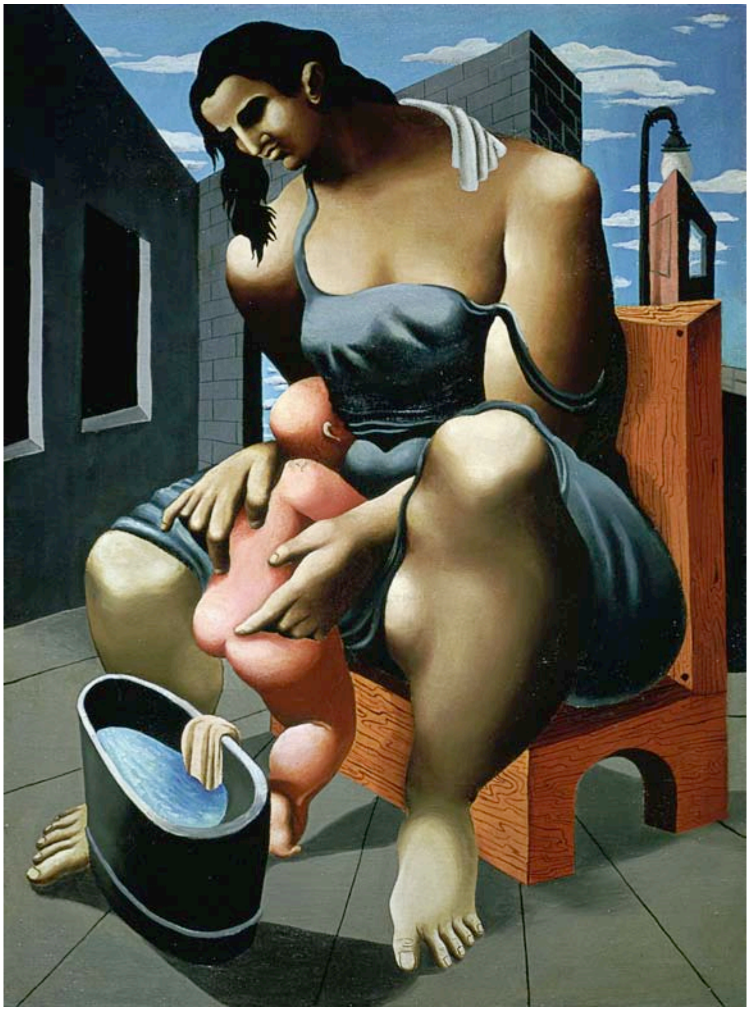


Figure 3: Philip Guston, *Mother and Child***,** 1930, oil on canvas, 40 x 30 inches, private collection, courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Guston was born in Montreal, June 27 1913: the year of de Chirico's first solo exhibition. It was with these early metaphysical works, painted in Paris, that Guston first engaged as a young painter. Like that of many of his American and European peers, Guston's painting from the period between the World Wars invoked metaphysical space as a theater of disaffected ideologies. With her weirdly outsized calf and unlikely décolletage, the central figure of his *Mother and Child* – in the show's first gallery – offers a peculiar take on a familiar motif [fig. 3]. The pair are set into a post-de Chiricoesque space that, by 1930, had inspired numerous painters' conflations of ineffable angst and absolute calm: from George Grosz to Jean Lurçat, Nicolas de Lekuona to Victor Brauner. Guston's collaborative mural from this period, *The Struggle Against Terror* (executed with Reuben Kadish in Morelia, Mexico) owes as much to de Chirico's compositions as to Orozco or Siquieros. Sadly missing from the show is Guston's drawing for *The Conspirators* (1930), which further illustrates his early adaptation of de Chirico's idiom to decidedly local, political content.

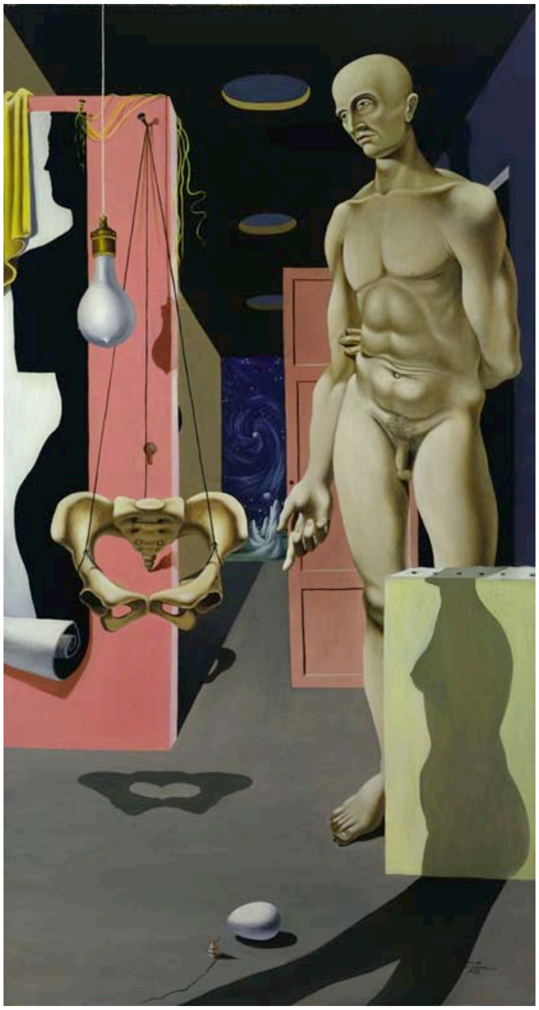
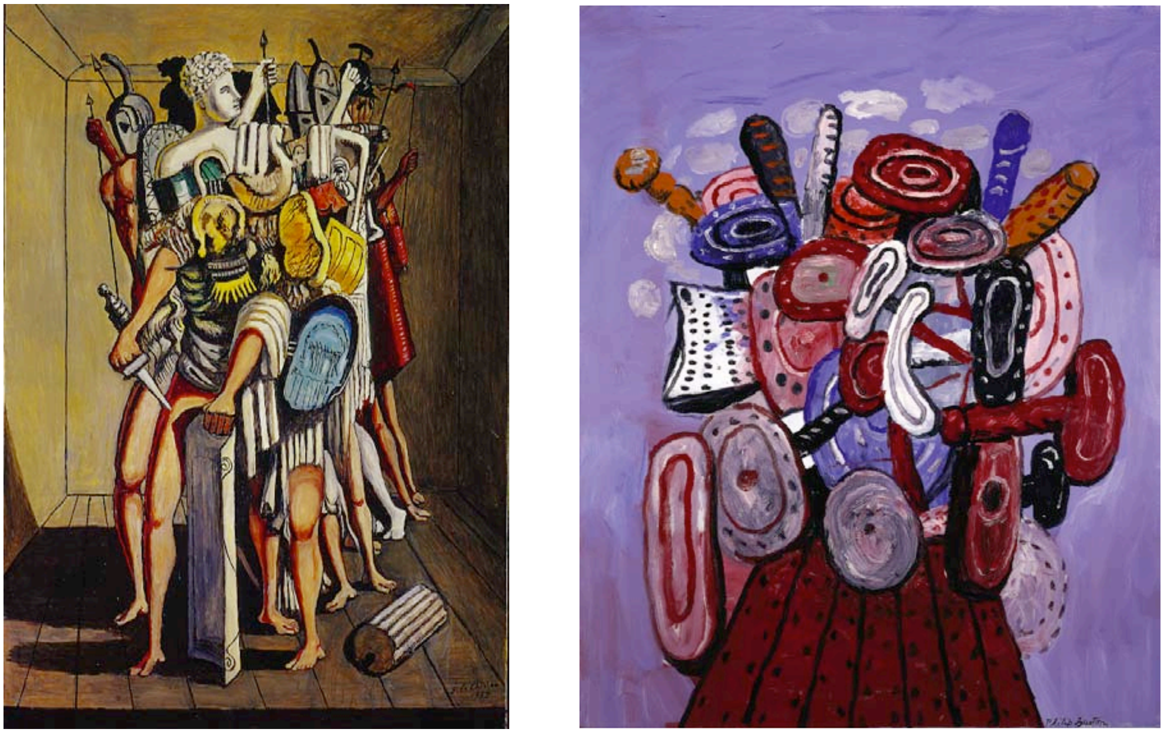


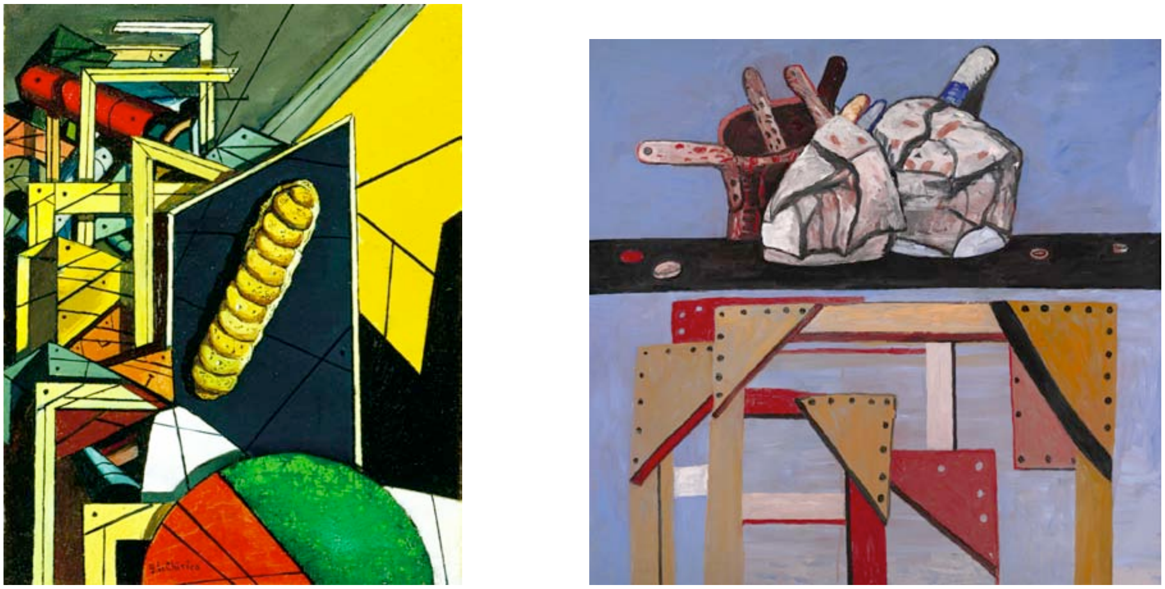
Figure 4: Philip Guston, *Nude Philosopher in Space Time*, 1935, oil on canvas, 45 ¾ x 24 ¾ inches, private collection, courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Still, the limited number of images in the show is one of its great strengths. The juxtaposition of Guston's *Nude Philosopher in Space Time* (1935) [fig. 4] next to de Chirico's *The Scholar's Playthings* (1917) perfectly illustrates Guston's reading (and misreading) of the early de Chirico. The subtle inclusion of a nipple on a hanging light bulb in order to rhyme with the shadow of a female breast; a swirling blue cosmos and moonscape plastered on the room's back wall; a diminutive pyramid wrapped in string next to a solitary egg: such *bizarreries* exaggerate the true spirit of metaphysical painting, which insisted upon the banality of objects and space as their most strange, spectral aspects. Guston's later images, too, are populated with a recurring stock of cryptic, quasi-autobiographical signs: light bulbs, clocks, disembodied eyes, paint-brushes. Yet these objects often approximate more closely the spirit of de Chirico's trains and engineering tools. As in Guston's *Letter to a Friend* (1977), these simple objects imbue the canvas with elliptical, literary allusions, rooted in a decidedly personal narrative.



Figures 5 and 6: Giorgio de Chirico, *The Invincible Cohort***,** 1973, oil on canvas, 46 ¾ x 32 inches, Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, and Philip Guston, *Ramp*, 1979, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches, University of Iowa Museum of Art, Gift of Musa Guston, courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Many of Guston's paintings from the late 1970s, such as *Ramp* (1979), present their wares against a plain, dimensionless background. Guston's incline takes its cues from similar uses in de Chirico's canvases, from his 1914-15 *The Duo*, up through *The Invincible Cohort* (1973), both on view here [figs. 5 and 6]. The ramp's recession serves as a metonymy for, and an exaggeration of, perspectival space. But Guston's 'ramp' doesn't get very far into space or up the picture plane: it culminates abruptly in a cluster of lumpy forms. Guston is not invested in the believability of these objects and their commingling in space. These singular things – an unwieldy wheel, an abandoned book, a stray shoe – never let us forget their simultaneous identity as *painted* objects. *Letter to a Friend* dispenses with any gravitational coherence whatsoever. Singular objects – a torso, the lip of a garbage can, a clock, a smoking cigarette – float against a gray picture plane, striated with visible brushstrokes. Even Guston's *Table and Stretchers* of 1978 – one of his most obvious homages to de Chirico's paintings-within-paintings – sets his canvas stretchers against an absolutely flat, sky-blue background. Whereas de Chirico's *Homesickness of an Engineer* (1916), piles up its collection of stretchers in a shallow but teeming corner, Guston frees his objects of any particular position in space [figs. 7 and 8]. They hover square with the picture plane, and, along with the paint cans and brushes set on a ledge above them, call attention to their own fabrication on the canvas's surface. If one of Guston's interests in de Chirico's images lay in that 'their forms seem to have never been painted,' his late works - in which paint is most often applied in frank, thick swathes - betrays none of this sleight of hand.



Figures 7 and 8: Giorgio de Chirico, *The Homesickness of the Engineer*, 1916, oil on canvas, 12 ½ x 9 ½ inches, The Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Virginia, Anonymous Gift, and Philip Guston, *Table and Stretchers*, 1978, oil on canvas, 65 x 68 ¼ inches, Yale University Art Gallery, Bequest from Estate of Musa Guston, courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art.

To be sure, de Chirico's paintings from the 1950s, 60s, and 70s abandoned the hard-edged linearity of his earlier canvases for looser brushwork and more slack compositions. But even at their 'lumpiest,' de Chirico's figures and objects still cast shadows, still inhabit a receding plane. His *The Invincible Cohort* (1973), with which Guston's *Ramp* is understandably juxtaposed, presents its inexplicable heap of bodies and trophies in an enclosed room. While de Chirico's images never serve up the relationship between figure and ground in entirely straightforward terms - the binary of that relationship is never sacrificed – it is the physical premise upon which de Chirico's metaphysical system depends. De Chirico's *Sun on an Easel* (1973), also included in the show, offers a further case in point [fig. 9]. If questions of interior and exterior, reality and representation, have been subject to metaphysical prodding, it is the putative physical presence of 'real' space that make such prodding possible to begin with. In other words, de Chirico never renounces a conviction in some fundamental, experiential plausibility of his scenes, in their physical and spatial sense. For, it is only in the apparent order of the world, he would say, that we find its obverse: a marvelous and inexplicable non-sense.

One assertion in the show's press release I disagree with: a remark that de Chirico and Guston respectively 'sought to reinvigorate painting.' Both de Chirico and Guston's later imagery is anything but vigorous. De Chirico's gladiators, his entropic archaeologists, and his 'Mysterious Baths' enervate painting, rather than innervate it. The gladiators in de Chirico's *The Invincible Cohort*

(1973) appear, as it were, rather 'vincible'; their cloaks are hardly distinguishable from the stray, fluted column that hangs at their feet. These figurations bear a certain acceptance of their own inertia and immobility (plastic or material, representational, and historical). If de Chirico and Guston clung stubbornly to figuration it was to a figuration that admitted – perhaps even embraced and celebrated – its stodginess, its increasing (art) historical obsolescence. It sought, I think, to make that stodginess over into something worthwhile by virtue of a withering irony, and perhaps an attendant sense of persecuted defiance. That said, if de Chirico's 'bad,' late paintings – in all of their permutations and variations – never quite shrug off the ghost of his metaphysical works, Guston's 'bad,' late paintings were the summation and denouement of his oeuvre. Guston's increasing diffidence towards 'modern art' differs significantly from de Chirico's vitriolic rejection of 'so-called modernism' (as the artist himself became fond of calling it).

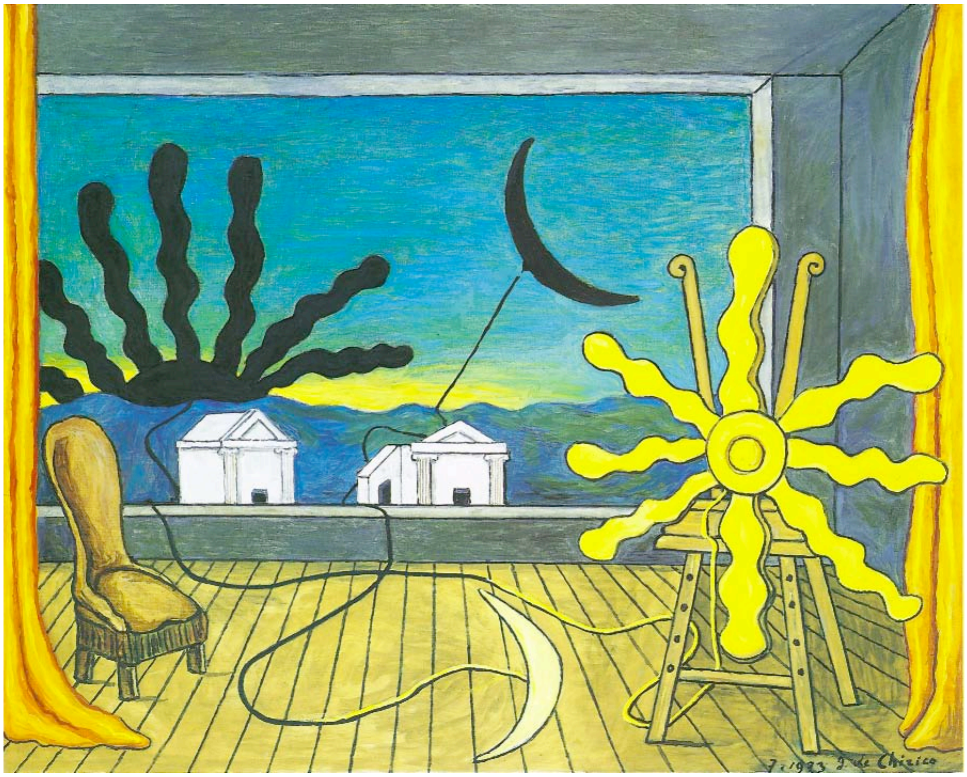


Figure 9: Giorgio de Chirico, *Sun on an Easel*, 1973, oil on canvas, 25 x 31 ½ inches, Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art.

This is a small quibble with an otherwise compelling and incisive show, rounded out by a small but helpful catalogue, featuring essays by the two curators: the first by Lisa Melandri on the context of de Chirico's early impact on Guston, and the second by Michael Taylor on the relationship between Guston and 'late' de Chirico (featuring a few illuminating archival photographs). Rarely does an exhibition featuring two major painters succeed in conjuring up such a lively play of images with a small number of canvases (twenty-six, in all). This derives in great part from the show's dynamic hanging. Rather than proceeding with a plodding juxtaposing of canvases one-for-one, the curators have staggered paintings by each artist in small groups, ordered chronologically. In this way, pairs or clusters of works by one artist gain some momentum of their own before being inevitably compared to their opposite number. Strains of influence and assimilation seem to ricochet between and among canvases, across rooms and around corners, rather than simply seep from one image to the next, like a processional slide show. For all of their frequent iconographic echoes and conceptual sympathies with de Chirico's metaphysical pantheon, Guston's enigmas look, in the end, quite different. De Chirico never renounced the belief in his imagery – even at most effete, its most decadently self-referential – as a window onto his own peculiar genius. Guston's humble triumph, by contrast, was to make self-doubt somehow hold up as the stuff of painting. His canvases have not lost their whiff of endearing uncertainty.

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[1] Cited in Michael Auping, *Philip Guston Retrospective*, New York and London, 2003, 37.