

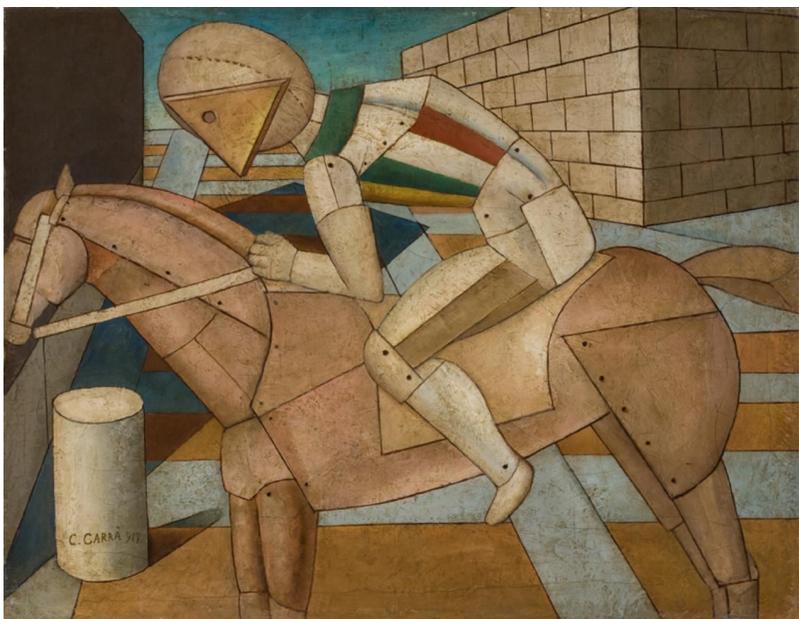
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ART REVIEW

'Metaphysical Masterpieces 1916-1920: Morandi, Sironi, and Carrà' Review: Every Object's Mysteries

The Metaphysical Painting movement in Italy drew from Symbolism, Neo-Classicism and psychoanalysis and was influenced by a range of people from Georges Braque to Sigmund Freud.



Carlo Carrà's 'The Western Knight' (1917) PHOTO: FONDAZIONE MATTIOLI ROSSI, SWITZERLAND/MIBAC/ARS, NY/SIAE, ROME

By Lance Esplund

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New York

Metaphysical Painting (*Pittura Metafisica* or *Scuola Metafisica*) refers to a representational art movement that flourished in Italy during the early decades of the 20th century around its founder and chief proponent, Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978). De Chirico's strange, melancholic street scenes, with their empty porticoes, long shadows and disarming shifts in scale, fuse ancient and modern elements, the everyday and the existential. Suggesting surreal interiors of

the psyche as much as Italian palazzos, De Chirico's unsettling paintings sowed the seeds of Surrealism and could arguably be the impetus behind many settings of "The Twilight Zone."

Metaphysical Masterpieces 1916-1920: Morandi, Sironi, and Carrà

Center for Italian Modern Art

Through June 15

De Chirico, though primary, was not the only Metaphysical painter. Drawing from Symbolism, Neo-Classicism and psychoanalysis, Pittura

Metafisica was influenced by people as diverse as Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, Henri Rousseau, André Derain, Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque and Sigmund Freud. And its painters were equally divergent.

"Metaphysical Masterpieces 1916-1920: Morandi, Sironi, and Carrà," at the Center for Italian Modern Art, highlights three of the movement's chief artists. Presented by CIMA in collaboration with the Pinacoteca di Brera, in Milan, the exhibition was curated by that museum's director, James Bradburne, and CIMA's president, Laura Mattioli. Comprising roughly three-dozen paintings and drawings, and supplemented by illustrations and ephemera, this beautiful and enlightening show demonstrates that Pittura Metafisica was much more varied and nuanced than the masterly voice of De Chirico.

It opens with De Chirico's "Metaphysical Interior With Small Factory" (1917), a depiction of an artist's studio in which a framed, finished landscape painting (an aerial view of a factory) occupies the picture's lower right corner. The "Factory" landscape provides entry into De Chirico's "Metaphysical Interior." Like a window, or doorway, the landscape opens up the "Interior," and its subject, welcoming viewers into the rabbit hole that is the artifice, construction and mystery of art.

The exhibition is then divided among Carlo Carrà (1881-1966), Mario Sironi (1885-1961) and Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964). The biggest share goes to Morandi—primarily to a superb gathering of his magical still lifes. In "Still Life" (1919), Morandi, as in De Chirico's "Metaphysical Interior," plays with artifice and space: Manipulating the dark background surrounding the forms arranged on a table, Morandi transforms areas of his painting into frame, challenging our reading of what is inside and outside, picture and frame, reality and art.

In Morandi's plain-spoken still lifes and flower paintings, forms occupy an inimitable realm. Working in sun-drenched pinks, blues, browns and creams, and looking to Piero della Francesca and Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, Morandi creates elegiac yet unassuming, timeless forms. His quotidian objects, pared down to essences, take on devotional weight. In "Flowers" (1916),



Mario Sironi's 'Venus of the Ports' (1919) PHOTO: CASA MUSEO BOSCHI DI STEFANO, MILAN/MIBAC/ARS, NY/SIAE, ROME

Roses” (1917) and “Flowers” (1918), Morandi’s petals evoke flesh, birds, bones and sexual organs; and his interiors suggest desert, ocean and sky.

Carrà—who moved from Futurism, the Italian Cubist art movement, to Metaphysical Painting—is represented here by three paintings and four drawings. As in many of De Chirico’s works, mannequins stand in for human figures. And, like Morandi, Carrà paints realms that feel between reality and dream. In “The Western Knight” (1917), a mannequin straddles a stationary horse—spinning in place, racing nowhere. In “The Hermaphrodite Idol” (1917), a giant mannequin, sitting on toy blocks, occupies a small room. Everything is as if carved out of wood, generic, childlike and artificial—disquieting if not futile.

The most enigmatic painter here is Sironi, a sculptor, designer, illustrator, painter and muralist who was also a Cubist, Futurist, Neo-Classicist and Constructivist, and whose palette and hand combined elements of Fernand Léger and Georges Rouault. Among the great under-recognized



Giorgio Morandi's 'Flowers' (1918) PHOTO: PINACOTECA DI BRERA, MILAN/MIBAC/ARS, NY/SIAE, ROME

modern artists, Sironi has been maligned because of his support of Mussolini and Fascism, but also criticized —by the Fascists— because his political murals put art above propaganda.

Eleven strong and varied paintings and painted collages, all from 1917-20, introduce Sironi's Metaphysical range, although his greatest works, I believe, are his later Constructivist compositions. That said, however, it's difficult to see Sironi outside Italy. His last major U.S. solo show was in 1953. Sironi is darker, perhaps more Gothic, than his Metaphysical colleagues. His forms are matter-of-fact yet absurd; not surreal, but disturbing and haunting in their blunt, bare, cold realism and their moonlit, nocturnal palette.

Sironi locks his forms and figures together as if they were elements of a machine, but he stresses the spaces and loneliness among objects, the solitude of crowded modernity. In "The White Horse" (1919), figure and animal are toylike and faceless—between organism and clay. Sironi retains the whole, yet emphasizes existential separation—the ever-presence of void. In "The War" and "The Yellow Truck" (both 1919), among others, he makes no distinctions among the makeup and particularities of brick, weapon, truck and flesh—between animate and inanimate objects. In these works, Sironi, like De Chirico, Morandi and Carrà, each in his own way, penetrated to the inwardness of physical forms to reveal that every object, truly observed, is mysterious.

—*Mr. Esplund, the author of “The Art of Looking: How to Read Modern and Contemporary Art” (Basic Books), writes about art for the Journal.*

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