

Giorgio de Chirico, the First Surrealist in Mexico?

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The historiography of the arrival of Surrealism in Mexico has focused mainly on the personalities of André Breton, Antonin Artaud, César Moro and Wolfgang Paalen, specifically about the latter's time in Mexico and the controversy caused by the 1940 "Surrealist International Exhibition" at the Mexican Art Gallery. However, the first contacts with a painting described as surrealist—by both critics and the Mexican painters themselves—were made with the canvases of Giorgio de Chirico in the late 1920s, although by then the Italian master had distanced himself from the French movement. As you will see throughout these pages, the connection with de Chirico was established primarily in the approach of Mexican artists who were in Europe at the beginning of the 1920s. This coincided with the movement of a *return to order* in the development of Mexican Muralism, which through a Renaissance nostalgia largely marked the choice of fresco. Later, around 1928, a new generation of Mexican painters, who sought not to imitate Rivera's narrative work, found a source for the development of a figurative painting in de Chirico's enigmatic landscapes that would account for Mexico as a tragic country, wrapped in a fantastic, almost magical, atmosphere.

The first news about de Chirico in Mexico came indirectly from Europe through the painter David Alfaro Siqueiros, who lived on the old continent from 1919 to 1922. This allowed him to come into contact with several artistic expressions or schools related to the new classicisms spearheaded by himself and Picasso, and known as the "return to order." In fact, Siqueiros' stay in Europe was similar to the life of the *Valori Plastici* magazine, in which de Chirico was constantly featured. The main reason why this publication ended up serving as the official voice of Metaphysical Painting is because it had great reach when it was sold in bookstores throughout Europe and in places as far away as Japan.

Despite the fact that his initial destination was Paris, David Alfaro Siqueiros

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settled in Barcelona in 1919. The Mexican muralist found the Catalan capital to be an ideal site for the development of his magazine *Vida-Americana* (1921), a main reference to the Mexican art scene's approach of new classicisms, particularly with "Metaphysical Painting" led by Giorgio de Chirico and postulated by the Surrealists as an antecedent of their works.

Through a manifesto in his magazine, Siqueiros addressed the young creators of his continent and made evident his desire to express himself and at the same time Americans as "NEW SUBJECTS,"¹ in welcoming all movements "that have returned to painting and sculpture its natural plastic purpose."² In order to achieve this, the Mexican muralist called for artistic programs that were apparently as opposed to each other as the "REVALUATING work of 'classical voices'"³—alluding to various movements such as the return to order or to Metaphysical Painting—along with the futurist call to "Let's live our wonderful dynamic time!"⁴

Although in *Vida-Americana* Siqueiros himself used futuristic strategies such as the riotous manifesto as well as praise for technology, he differentiated "FUTURISM that brings new emotional forces"⁵ from "that which ingenuously tries to crush the previous invulnerable process."⁶ This position is similar to other receptions of Futurism in America that did not agree with the anarchic and destructive action that Marinetti advocated for,⁷ but instead identified with the renovating "constructive, developmental and modernizing will"⁸ that was desired in Latin America. On his way to form a Latin American avant-garde, Siqueiros found what one could call various versions or readings of Futurism that would permeate his own.

In fact, as recorded by the Italian magazines that were from the same period of *Vida-Americana*, such as *Lacerba* (1913-1915) or *Valori Plastici* (1919-1922), David Alfaro Siqueiros's proposal was contemporary to a time when Futurism presented changes, and in which discussions of the future of Italian art between Futurism and a return to classicism were presented. This is shown by the presence of Carlo Carrà and Gino Severini in *Vida-Americana*, initiators of the Futurist movement in the pictorial field, who later left this movement to take refuge in representations of a classical nature which reveal, as Severini wrote, that "the composition and the construction of a painting has fixed laws that do not vary through the ages."⁹ Siqueiros precisely presented this phrase by Severini together with another by Georges Braque in *Vida-Americana*, with another from the Italian that had already appeared in the second/third number of *Valori plastici* (corresponding to February and March 1919). Due to his intimate contact with various avant-garde magazines of the time, Siqueiros had likely extracted it there.

This contact is due to the fact that fleeting manifests and magazines abounded in the Catalan environment. Many were distributed by the *Laietanes* Gallery, which had a section of books and various publications by the poet Salvat-Papasseit who, in addition to publishing the *First Futuristic Catalan Manifesto*, had



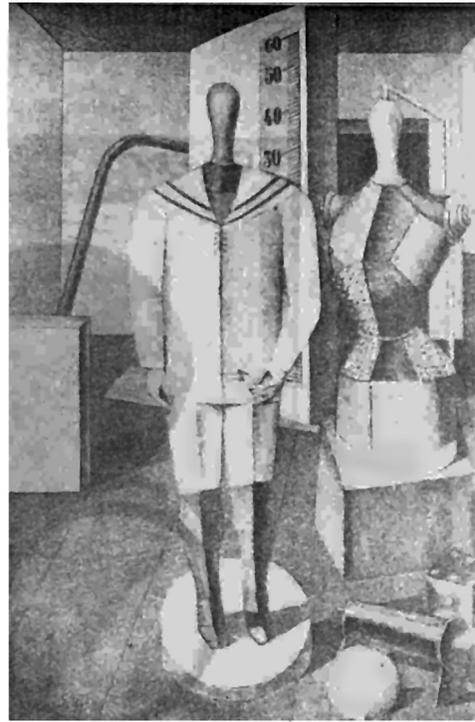
Fig. 1. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Retrato de W. Kennedy*, reproduced in *Vida-Americana*, 1921, ink on paper, Archives of the Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, Mexico City, Mexico

developed a significant role as editor, director and publisher in short-lived magazines such as *Arc Voltaic* and *Proa*, as well as in the most famous *Un enemigo del Poble*. *Vida-Americana* bears great similarity to the latter publication in its gathering of articles and images by avant-garde artists related to the new classicisms, such as the case of the Uruguayans Rafael Barradas and Joaquín Torres García. Works by these two artists appeared in *Vida-Americana*; Siqueiros probably did not meet them during the *Charruas'* stay in Barcelona, but through Salvat-Papasseit's magazine.

Precisely for Siqueiros' adventure, Papasseit's editorial work was of utmost importance, since some of the avant-garde landmark magazines such as *391*, *L'Esprit nouveau* and the aforementioned *Valori Plastici* were distributed by the *Laietanes* Gallery bookstore. Indeed, Siqueiros' first exposure to the debate between avant-garde trends and those of the return-to-order was through the printed material he was able to learn about in the bookstore, run by Papasseit.

The most notable relationship of the Mexican muralist's work with *Valori Plastici* is through a Siqueiros drawing prepared and published in *Vida-Americana* (Fig. 1). In it the central figure is a living mannequin wearing glasses and a suit, just as

Carlo Carrà dressed his metaphysical automat with modern garments, and differing from the robes of the sibyls or ancient poets with which de Chirico adorned his



MADRE E FIGLIO

CARLO CARRÀ

Fig. 2. Paintings by Carlo Carrà, reproduced in *Valori Plastici* # 7-8, Year 2, 1920, ink on paper, particular collection

figures. Siqueiros' image is directly connected with the metaphysical interiors of both Italian painters, although the closest relationship is with Carrà's *La madre y el hijo*, in which, within a room, a figure is dressed as a sailor, while in the background another mannequin appears (Fig. 2). Although it has a female bust, it seems to be closer to a display figure or to try on clothes with, in the same way as in Siqueiros' drawing.

A series of objects also appears in Carrà's space; among them one with a Ruhmkorff coil and a ruler stands out. The incorporation of scientific elements in metaphysical works in Ferrara was the product of the relationship of the physicist Giuseppe Bongovanni with De Chirico and Carrà at the Villa Seminario military hospital during the First World War; both painters called Bongovanni "the astronomer" for familiarizing them with these devices for measuring celestial and terrestrial phenomena. While de Chirico's inclusion of scientific instruments acquired mystical references (such as the triangular shape of the squares) or mythical ones (such as the thermometer associated with the god Mercury), in Carrà the

futuristic spirit alludes to the world of machines—such as the aforementioned power generating coil—but in the silent context of mannequins and metaphysical muses instead.

At this point, the position of de Chirico's brother Alberto Savinio is relevant in relation to the figure of the mannequin. While in opposition to the emotionally stripped electric puppets that Marinetti talked about, Savinio on the other hand posited a being that had a steel antenna instead of a head and a photographic tripod for legs, but a huge heart.¹⁰ Like *Pinocchio*, the metaphysical automat is capable of making moral decisions and, above all, of sensing a higher reality.

As the painter himself suggested in his autobiography many years later, Siqueiros represented the scientist William Kennedy Dickson and not a tailor in his drawing.¹¹ In reality, what Dickson “wove” were moving images produced by a kinoscope, a technological mechanism that produces a light prism in the lower corner of Siqueiros' work and that suggests movement in the plastic arts like that of the Futurists or the simultaneism of Delaunay. Siqueiros, similar to Carrà, opted for a fusion of Italian artistic movements, between a metaphysical entity capable of intuiting a more advanced world and its realization in the light produced by a scientific device.

Long unknown, the identity of the figure in Siqueiros' work was revealed by the Mexican researcher Natalia de la Rosa in her study of the links to Europe in Siqueiros' figures. Her research led her to the publications of the critic Élie Faure, who considered cinema as the paradigmatic artistic manifestation of his time. He wrote articles on cinematography that included the kinoscope, which had been patented by Thomas Alva Edison but was actually built by Dickson.¹²

Of interest in Siqueiros' recovery of the *return to order* through different European publications such as *Valori Plastici* in *Vida-Americana*¹³ is that it was not merely a transportation and translation of texts, as for example, one on Cézanne taken from *L'Esprit nouveau*, or the text quoted from Severini. This recovery actually involved an appropriation—for an American public but one located in Europe—of the movements in which they participated and of works carried out by artists from the new continent in the context of the international avant-garde that was associated with the new classicisms. In *Vida-Americana*, works were reproduced by Mexicans Diego Rivera, from his move from Cubism to Classicism, as well as by Marius de Zayas, who introduced modern art to New York. It also included images of the aforementioned Uruguayan creators of the Catalan avant-garde, Torres García and Rafael Barradas. But *Vida-Americana* also was disseminated in Mexico along with Siqueiros' manifesto, “Three Calls of Current Orientation to Painters and Sculptors of the New American Generation,” which reached various groups of Mexican artists who were marked by Siqueiros' words and by images in his magazine that led to familiarity with de Chirico in Mexico, despite the fact that his work was not reproduced in this magazine.

The first reference to the Italian painter in “Aztec lands” dates to December 30, 1921, when the poet Manuel Maples Arce posted his *Comprimido estridentista* to some walls in the center of Mexico City, which concludes with a “Vanguard Directory” (*Directorio de Vanguardia*) in which the names of various artists appear who had collaborated in the most important international avant-garde magazines of the first decades of the twentieth century, such as Carrà and de Chirico, who by then had published in the aforementioned Roman magazine *Valori Plastici*. It should be noted that the reason for mentioning approximately 200 creators in such a directory was the international legitimation of the Stridentism movement; errors in the spelling of the characters listed were the product of “the imprecision and scarce data I had at that time,” as Maples Arce himself pointed out.¹⁴ In retrospect, it is difficult to know precisely the Mexican writer’s understanding of the theoretical and iconographic postulates of Metaphysical Painting; however, this sum of names refers to the purpose of Stridentism as a Mexican synthesis and reformulation of the latest in the art of the old continent, and that thanks to Siqueiros it could be known in Mexico.

However, it was not until 1925 and in *Revista de Revistas* that the first mention of de Chirico appeared, at a point of confluence with the surrealist movement. On May 17, 1925, Edmond Jaloux’s article, “Literary Novelty in the World: a manifesto of super-realism” was translated and presented to the Mexican public. Although its title notes that the analysis concerns surrealist literature, Jaloux compares the poetry of Robert Desnos, which he considered to be the most gifted of the movement, to an apocalyptic vision “corrected by Picasso and Chirico.”¹⁵

Despite the fact that the Stridentists were the first creators to name figures such as Giorgio de Chirico and Carrà on the national scene, they ended up being his former colleagues in the cultural project led by the Minister of Education José Vasconcelos and ultimately his enemies, the Contemporaries, who showed greater interest in the appropriation of Surrealism and various literary and art movements that were developing in Europe and the United States. For the first time in Mexico, seven paintings by the Italian painter—dated around 1925, that is to say after his strictly metaphysical stage—were reproduced in the *Contemporáneo* magazine number three, accompanied by a selected text by Jean Cocteau entitled “Fragments about de Chirico. From *Le Mystère Laïc*,” presumably translated by Xavier Villaurrutia, who had already in the previous edition of the magazine related work that the Mexican painter Agustín Lazo had sent from Europe to that of the Italian master. In fact, during this period Lazo came into contact with de Chirico’s work in both France and Italy.

The intellectuals who became known as The Contemporaries¹⁶ through the magazine, specializing in literature and art that they edited under that title between 1928 and 1931, sought to establish and educate (visually) a new audience in disseminating innovative aesthetics and a novel sensibility. This was achieved by criticism of art that was of a poetic nature—carried out primarily by Villaurrutia,

Jorge Cuesta and José Gorostiza—in addition to the dissemination in Mexico of the work of artists associated with Surrealism such as de Chirico, Dalí, Miró and Man Ray, hitherto not so well known in these lands. Although the group of Contemporaries was led by writers, they connected under these ideas with plastic artists who participated in the creation of sets, costumes and illustrations for their different projects that came from the magazine *La Falange* (1922-1923), passing by the publications *Ulises* (1927), *Forma* (1927-1928), and then *Contemporáneos* (1928-1931)—and in some cases until *Examen* (1932), *Artes Plásticas* and *El hijo pródigo* (1943-1946).

The list of plastic artists who collaborated with the Contemporaries is long, but we can distinguish from this large group those who carried out works of character and unusual environment where the Mexican is combined with an imprint of fantastic character, and in some cases mixed with a new Classicism. The list is headed by Agustín Lazo, Julio Castellanos, Emilio Amero, María Izquierdo, Rufino Tamayo, Roberto Montenegro, Manuel Rodríguez Lozano, Carlos Orozco Romero, and Antonio Ruíz. During the period of emergence of the aforementioned magazines, particularly between 1925 and 1930, it is possible to glimpse their first approach to the Metaphysical Painting, specifically with the work of de Chirico, although in his later stages there are residues of his contact with the Italian movement (Rodríguez Lozano); in other cases they continue dialoguing with it (Izquierdo, Montenegro), or the assimilation is veiled by a link with other tendencies (Tamayo).

It is a somewhat paradoxical situation that it was The Contemporaries who decided to revalue and appropriate the work of a foreign artist such as de Chirico, if it is recalled that in 1922, José Gorostiza, reviewing the first poetry collection by the stridentist Maples Arce, *Andamios interiores*, disqualified him for using imported lyrics.¹⁷ This criticism would have to be reversed with the passage of the Contemporaries from their faithful link to the Mexican style in the magazine *La Falange* to their total openness to the avant-gardes in the publication *Contemporáneos*. The Contemporaries did not consider themselves a cohesive group; nevertheless they were attacked as a front for their contact with international culture and for the homosexual orientation of some of the participants, which caused them to be seen as alien to the nationalist and virile culture that the muralists promoted from the scaffold, loaded with pistols and grouped in an artists union in which they referred to themselves as art workers. Away from and in some cases affected by revolutionary violence, The Contemporaries found new artistic horizons in the work of their



Fig. 3. Jesús Guerrero Galván, *Uno de los otros, uno de los nuestros*, March 1934, published in *Choque*, press organ of the Alianza de Trabajadores de Artes Plásticas, Mexico

European and North American peers, and beyond the theme of the Mexican Revolution and the process of national reconstruction.

For Maples Arce, the emergence of the magazine *Contemporáneos* “was the time of Proust and Gide’s insistent publicity, in whose work the comedy of the ‘maricones’ and the cynicism of the pedophiles were covered.”¹⁸ This accusation of the poet from Veracruz stemmed from the fact that *The Contemporaries* dedicated themselves to introducing “echoes of the great Spanish tradition—Gongora, Quevedo and Sor Juana—and foreign authors such as James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Paul Valéry, or André Gide, who set the foundations of a new classicism” like de Chirico and Picasso in painting.¹⁹

The group that defended an art of a nationalist nature, among them Maples Arce, organized the Public Health Committee in 1934 to demand from the Chamber of Deputies that the government be purged of counterrevolutionaries, and thus expel the *Contemporaries* from their work—for example, from the diplomatic service, and jail for child molesters, foreigners and for reading Gide and Cocteau.²⁰ In March of the same year 1934, in which Stalin postulated “socialist realism,” Jesús Guerrero Galván published the cartoon *Uno de los Otros, Uno de los Nuestros*, where he referred to the fact that his group was seeking a proletarian emancipation represented by Diego Rivera in overalls, sitting on a scaffold, reading Marx and

painting a worker immersed in the modern life of the factories (Fig. 3). This was opposed to the Contemporaries, considered bourgeois, and as represented by Agustín Lazo, dressed as a *dandy* in his study who creates figures influenced by the images of de Chirico (like the column, the mannequin, a horse or synthetic architecture), accompanied by a phrase by Picasso and a book by Gide referring to dialogues about homosexuality.

In addition to Gide, precisely among the authors' works chosen by the Contemporaries to translate and to present in Mexico was Jean Cocteau, specifically his work *Orpheus*, an update of the myth of the Greek musician, through a modern, self-centered and famous artist who is hated by a younger generation.²¹ Strangely enough, in the third number of *Contemporáneos*, fragments of Cocteau's analysis of de Chirico's work *El misterio laico* were also translated, precisely in 1928, the year of de Chirico's great disagreement with the young surrealists, and in which they tried to boycott his new production, since it did not correspond to the strange motifs of Metaphysical Painting they hailed, particularly its conjunction of modern elements and ancient ones as if in a dream. However, now the Italian master opted for an exploration of the myth of Mediterranean style. Cocteau was also attacked by the Surrealists for this text.

As pointed out, already in the previous number of *Contemporáneos*, that is, the second, Luis Maristany shows the influence of Cocteau's text on the Mexican poet in Xavier Villaurrutia's notes on Agustín Lazo, and, of de Chirico's painting on Lazo's:

Villaurrutia had published a short work, 'Fichas sin sobre para Lazo,' whose relationship with *Le mystère laïc* is undeniable. Some of the Mexican 'cards' —although published before—already supposed a reading of Cocteau's text. The fragmentary form, in notes, is identical; and the fact that Villaurrutia's writing revolved, also freely, around the work of Lazo—the Mexican painter of his generation closest to Chirico—confirms the assumption that it is a twin text to that of Cocteau and provoked by it [...] Villaurrutia's 'cards' seal and reinforce a series of crossed parallels, of aesthetic affinity between the four names. Such a relationship is formulatable through the propositions: Cocteau-Chirico, Villaurrutia-Lazo and Cocteau-Villaurrutia, Chirico-Lazo.²²

This relationship between the Mexican painter and de Chirico dates back to a stay he made in Paris around 1925, where Agustín Lazo came into contact with the poets Max Jacob and Robert Desnos, so he likely updated his friend Villaurrutia on literary mechanisms of Surrealism, since he began to practice with automatic writing and the analysis of his insomnia in Mexico.²³ It was in this environment that Lazo encountered de Chirico's paintings and writings through the surrealist filter, which led

Villaurrutia, in the second edition of *Contemporáneos*, to describe his friend's work as a "painting that dreams," comparing it with that of de Chirico, whom he describes as the most seasoned and capable in the Parisian movement of bringing a dream to a canvas:

Describing a dream graphically makes him a surrealist. Composing a painting with elements of the dream makes him a painter. Chirico is a surrealist, but not all surrealists are painters. A surrealist may not be a good painter. A good painter is always surrealist. An altarpiece painter describes a miracle. A good painter executes it. Lazo brings into a canvas the scenery of a dream that seems to have just come out of a mirror.²⁴

Both Villaurrutia and Lazo were aware of the distance between Breton's group and the Italian-Greek painter, whom they nevertheless considered as the most important and assiduous plastic artist of Surrealism:

Surrealism tries to reintegrate its meaning into painting, filling it with emotion, life and mystery; forcing it to have an object and cutting with pure paint, useless scaffolding of the real one. I think with de Chirico it has lost his best painter. It has Picabia and Miró that for me have the defect of expressing themselves too much in hieroglyphs and repeating itself very often.²⁵

Although Lazo was introduced by Max Jacob to the Parisian circle of Surrealism, he actually met the poet in mid-1925 in Florence; for the Mexican painter Italy marked "his first encounter with the work of Giorgio de Chirico, future tributary of his own and to which he will be linked forever."²⁶ In Italy in the spring of 1925, Lazo visited the towns of Florence, Padua, Siena and finally "the eternal city" where he attended the Third Biennial of Rome. There he witnessed a retrospective of Boccioni, a solo exhibition from Carrà and another group exhibition with the work of de Chirico.²⁷ Describing this experience in a letter to Carlos Chávez, Lazo noted that "the people here believe me crazy when I say that I like those horrors."²⁸

During a second European stay in May 1927, Lazo sailed for France where he became part of a group of Latin American intellectuals together with Carlos Mérida, Germán Cueto, Miguel Covarrubias, the poet Carlos Pellicer, as well as the Mexican consul Enrique Freyman. In addition to the group in Paris, Lazo also became friends with other creators close to the surrealist movement such as Luis Cardoza y Aragón, Desnos and César Moro. He reunited a decade later with César Moro in Mexico in the context of the Surrealist Exposition and together they translated some texts by de Chirico for the magazine *El hijo prodigo* in 1945. In a

photograph made during Lazo's stay in 1927 in his studio in Paris, it is possible to observe the works he was completing at the time and which again refer us to an iconography that leads to the paintings of de Chirico. Behind Lazo, on his left, appears the work *Tomb*, whose theme and recumbent foreground figure has been described by James Oles as a revisiting of Christian iconography of the descent from the cross, along with the classical setting (column and robes) as well as the volumetric and almost cartoonish style of figuration. It refers us to the works that de Chirico began in 1925 in Paris, particularly his series of gladiators.

Lazo remained in Europe until 1931; in August 1927 he related to Carlos Chávez about his new travels on the old continent and his conviction that upon his return, he would make a new art in Mexico. In the same letter, Lazo expressed his admiration for creators of various arts, among them the main representatives of Italian metaphysics, and hence the importance of maintaining a relationship with the cultural work on the other side of the Atlantic:

In music I will never forget the great emotions of Satie and Stravinsky, in painting Braque, Picasso, Derain, Matisse, Paresce, Chirico, Peguin, Carrà, etc., then the part that I have most carefully observed, the theater, apart from the new Achievements of Diaghilev, the Atelier directed by Dullin [...] We have virgin ground to explore there and I believe in the advice and experience of people who have done work before us and with all the American nuances you want, but deep down we will be western.²⁹

In addition, in 1928, Lazo was interviewed in Paris by a correspondent of *Universal Ilustrado*, Febronio Ortega. He offered statements on the artistic environment focused on the postulates of Surrealism, as the movement capable of reintegrating painting "HIS SENSE, filling it of emotion, of life, of mystery."³⁰ Thus his admiration for de Chirico above the other plastic artists of the group is clear, as able to reveal something intangible, enigmatic, beyond purely pictorial exercises.

It was precisely during Lazo's stay in Europe that Villaurrutia, in the July 1928 edition of *Contemporáneos*, wrote the aforementioned notes on Lazo's work that refer to visual puzzles that the painter began to assemble with unrelated materials, and linked them primarily to the enigmas that de Chirico's aesthetic proposed:

The painter has his favorite tools [...] goes out into the street and writes down a truncated phrase, a mistake, a game [...] and then in his workshop, with the help of all these, he invents a painting [...] a miracle. A good painter executes it [...] Lazo casts the scenery of a dream in canvas [...] Lazo's painting is as clear as two and two is three.³¹

Already in the next edition of *Contemporáneos* in which the fragments of Jean Cocteau's text related to de Chirico was published, the chosen statements indicate the revealing effect of something new that the Italian painter wanted to impose upon his work and that Villaurrutia also found in Lazo's work: "The public guesses a reality behind Chirico's apparent unreality."³² Likewise, due to the conjunction of disparate elements, reference is made to the enigmatic character of de Chirico's work, which little by little also characterized Lazo's work: "In a canvas of de Chirico, objects have not met [...] the frames, the arcades, the shadows, the equestrian statues, the vegetables; everything is suspicious."³³

The translation of Cocteau's notes is not attributed to an author, which is why Villaurrutia had been assigned to it, although Lazo himself could also have done this work; as Oles has suggested, it is more likely that the reproductions of de Chirico's works that accompany Cocteau's text and that corresponded to works elaborated from 1925 were sent by Agustín Lazo, with what could be considered the visual introduction of de Chirico in Mexico, especially of his post-metaphysical paintings rejected by the Surrealists. After the text's dissemination, de Chirico would become the artist with the greatest impact among the the Contemporaries circle of painters. Not only would the circle recover de Chirico's work of the metaphysical period, but also the aforementioned postmetaphysical work of his that had been rejected because of its mediterranean airs.

During this period Lazo prepared a series of watercolors presenting "indeterminate or absurd episodes" which due to their lack of meaning are related to Surrealism, and especially to de Chirico's metaphysical painting.³⁴ As Oles points out, they are works that reference a distressing psychological intensity due to their subjects, such as fear, escape, or death.³⁵ These watercolors were presented at the 1932 Lazo exhibition on Avenida Madero, and described by Villaurrutia as:

Scenes of adventure, mystery or crime that we live in our dreams [...] in the most unexpected intrigue and being coersions and accomplices of an act prohibited by reality and punished by reason [...] an unsolvable puzzle [...] to enter this particular world that Agustín Lazo has captured in the nets of his paintings [...] the silent language of painting is capable of stopping the ungraspable and making the indescribable visible [...] something that it is not based on common sense or immediate utility [...] unexpected realities, unforeseen [...] the most poetic conflicts and the most complex enigmas of lives, spaces and times.³⁶

In one of those watercolors, *Las doce menos cuatro*, in the foreground a young man in a suit is facing away from us, and is carrying a small package towards a long corridor that opens in ascending, escaping perspective, as in metaphysical painting and Sur

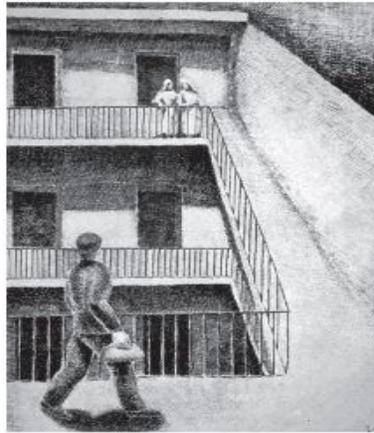


Fig. 4. Agustín Lazo, *Las doce menos cuatro*, ca. 1930-32, ink and watercolor on paper, unknown location

realism, particularly because of the long, austere wall on the right, which also recalls the unadorned architecture of de Chirico (Fig. 4). In the background, leaning against a railing, are two strange, veiled women in long dresses, and whose features cannot be distinguished, thus presenting themselves to be as mysterious as the series of dark bedrooms behind them. As Oles points out, the place may refer to neighborhood rooms, such as those that Lazo and Villaurrutia occupied in Donceles street, which were rented by students. Writers such as Novo and Elías Nandino reported that they served as spaces for encounters between young homosexuals and thus could hide their identity.³⁷

The simplicity of the architecture in these watercolors also references Lazo's role as a set designer, a profession he perfected "under the direction of Charles Dullin at the Théâtre de l'Atelier in Montmartre," where he stood out for his simplicity on stage.³⁸ Much of the synthetic space of Lazo's watercolors refers to rooms with enigmatic side exits, populated by anonymous characters in strange but plausible attitudes, as in *Exhumación*, where four men are depicted carrying a body wrapped by a sheet, unusually tied with a rope, while near the door a mysterious woman with a basket looks out as if to prevent an unexpected arrival. The strangeness of the setting is accentuated by the absence of objects that refer to a specific space, as it is perceived as an abandoned room with the presence of only two armchairs. As action unfolds in almost empty rooms, these become metaphors for closed spaces that show no obvious relationship to the modern world, especially in the absence of electricity; the only indications of the modern are offered by the costumes of figures, such as the two men clad in blue suits and gray fedora hats in *Entrada al misterio*. It is not understood why they are in an uninhabited and dark

room, above all because it seems that the exit causes more amazement than the grimness of the place. These are mysterious places that undoubtedly remind of de Chirico.

Before André Breton's arrival in Mexico, in March 1938 Lazo published an "Overview on Surrealist Activities" in *Cuadernos de arte* #2, which at the time was the featured essay by a Mexican painter on the movement of French origin. In it Lazo considered de Chirico to be the most important surrealist painter.³⁹ In order to define the artistic mechanisms of surrealist poetics, Lazo referred to Reverdy's words, which seem to reference the method of the conjunction of signs used in literature by Lautréamont and in painting by de Chirico; the quote refers to Breton's belief in a higher reality, based on certain unexpected forms of association resulting from states such as sleep, madness, the absurd, the incoherent, the lapse or the hyperbolic.

The image is a pure creation of the spirit, it cannot be born from a comparison, but from the approach of two realities, more or less distant. The further and fairer the relations between approximate realities, the stronger the image will be, the greater its emotional power and the greater its poetic force.⁴⁰

After reviewing the literary mechanisms of Surrealism, especially the automatic writing initiated by Breton, Lazo pointed out that it generates unusual images that link visual representation with poetic thought, in its magical power to generate a new figuration that, for Surrealists—and despite the antecedents such as Goya's *Caprichos*—Picasso and de Chirico were their most important modern representatives, especially the Italian. Lazo considered that de Chirico's work became part of Surrealism, due to its realistic invoice in which, however, the sense of the images escape:

Chirico arrives with an entirely traditional technique inherited by his Italian ancestry [but] totally new in its internal composition [...] Picasso, Max Jacob and Guillaume Apollinaire are the first to notice this order within the chaos that seems to have no account of harmony, of balance and proportions, in the first works of Chirico. They are the first to [...] appreciate the element [of] 'flight' in their compositions: flight of ideas, flight of images, flight of trains that are impossible to reach.⁴¹

Although the publication refers to all the members of the surrealist contingent, there is no doubt about the space and esteem that Agustín Lazo accorded to the figure of de Chirico, by placing him as the watershed of a new style that subsequent painters of the surrealist movement would emulate and appropriate.

The system implanted by Chirico, endowing the imagined world with a solidly realistic aspect, which gives it external validity before the less expert gaze on pictorial matters, is closely followed mainly by Max Ernst and René Magritte.⁴²

Lazo reproduced the most works from de Chirico in this article, three altogether (*El vaticinador*, *La conquista del filósofo* and *Misterio y melancolía de una calle*). To explain the work of the Italian master, he translated fragments from de Chirico's own texts: not those published between 1919 and 1921 in *Valori Plastici*, but rather those that were part of his youth, the 1913 manuscripts, most of them poetic and in the possession of the Surrealists. The aforementioned selection seems to relate de Chirico's work, without mistake, to the dream world.

For a work of art to be truly immortal, it must be completely beyond human limits: common sense and logic will be absent. This is how you will approach the dream and child mentality.⁴³

It should be noted that at the time of the surrealist group's closest proximity to de Chirico,⁴⁴ the latter published for the first edition of *La Révolution Surréaliste* in 1924, the text entitled *Sueño*, relating to a dreamlike encounter with his father.⁴⁵ In addition, as James Thrall Soby points out, at Breton's request, the Italian artist agreed to change the titles of some paintings to bring them closer to the phenomenon of *dorveille* (*duermeyela* or wake-sleep). Although in reality, both Chirico and his brother Alberto Savinio left in writing that his work was related to moments of clairvoyance during the vigil, which should not be confused with dreams.

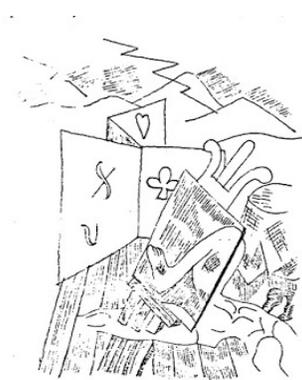
Despite differences with the Surrealists, de Chirico's enigmatic settings, as we have seen, were an important source of inspiration for painters such as Ernst, Dalí and Magritte, but in addition his works provided a method of conjunction of objects without apparent relationship, to Mexican artists close to the Surrealists, such as Lazo, but also to others such as Rufino Tamayo, María Izquierdo or Roberto Montenegro. Tamayo traveled to New York for the first time in 1926 in the company of the composer Carlos Chávez, who is one of the references on the contacts that Mexican painters such as Tamayo or Lazo had with foreign avant-gardes. In addition to coming into contact with the rest of the New York art scene, in the Big Apple Chávez and Tamayo had Duchamp, Reginald Marsh and Stuart Davis as neighbors, thanks to the caricaturist Miguel Covarrubias. And not to forget, all they learned through the galleries and the museums there, images that until then Tamayo had only seen through low quality reproductions.⁴⁶ Thanks to this experience, Tamayo "was able to see de Chirico's originals from 1926 in New York, since he began to make himself known there from 1914, initially through Alfred Stieglitz 291 Gallery."⁴⁷

Studying the first decades of Tamayo's production, Raquel Tibol concluded that, after the trip to New York, it was de Chirico's enigmatic work, which exerted the greatest attraction on him, guiding him to the construction of a series of exercises in the manner of metaphysical painting, in which the proximity between strange objects generates environments of pathos and poetry.⁴⁸ One example is *Los caracoles* (1929), which brings together in a closed setting, possibly a middle-class interior, various suspended objects of dissimilar sizes and little correspondence—ears, cigars, a rope and a spotlight whose anchoring is not apparent. As Juan Carlos Pereda suggests, they have been summoned only for their geometric structure and for the poetic charge that expresses the proximity of such dissimilar objects. Despite the fact that some objects like the blue spotlight refer to Tamayo's interest in the country's modernization processes, the predominant presence of snails may be interpreted as a general meaning of the painting, as is the case with works of the *italian metaphysics*. In addition, this was the time when Tamayo was romantically related to María Izquierdo; in both their art, all kinds of objects full of mystery began to appear, such as sculptures that appeared to be alive, broken columns or fragments of trees that marked the depth of the painting, or located in enigmatic semi-industrialized landscapes, deserted villages in ruins or claustrophobic rooms, to which they add unbelievably enlarged modern objects. All is part of this couple's appropriation of the mystery and recurring enigma of metaphysical painting.

For his part, in 1926 Roberto Montenegro was related to the Contemporaries, the moment in which this painter “lets his fantastic vein flow,”⁴⁹ and when he prepared his first works that have been described as surrealist: *Adioses* (1930) and *El hijo pródigo* (1930). In the latter he uses a rare symbolism to allude to the biblical theme of homecoming: the desolate stage and a ruined room crowned with a clock and a book refer to de Chirico's aesthetics. The enormous naked torso without a logical context that forms a kind of totem through fragments, undoubtedly evokes Dalí's first works under the metaphysical influence, which is the case of *Aparato y mano* (1927). The cracked and stacked forms on which the nude rests have as antecedent the biomorphic forms of the production of Yves Tanguy, one of the first Surrealists delighted by the enigmatic allegories of de Chirico's work. It is to be recalled that some of the first reproductions in Mexico of the work of De Chirico and Dalí appeared, respectively, in *Contemporáneos* magazine numbers 3 (August 1928) and 23 (April 1930).

In 1945, Montenegro painted *Homenaje a Chirico*; although apparently late, it demonstrates the Mexican painter's awareness of the relevance of the Italian master in figurative painting of the twentieth century. Although the work is again far away from a true appropriation and reinterpretation of metaphysics, it is undeniable that it is fully infected by structural elements of Italian art, such as the arches, the mannequin and the horse with anthropomorphic attitudes.

The writers of *Contemporáneos* also fell under the *dechiriqueano* influence. In



Figs. 5 and 6. Xavier Villaurrutia, illustrations for the text *Dama de Corazones*, 1928, Ediciones Ulises, Mexico

Xavier Villaurrutia's poetic series *Nocturnos* (1933), one dedicated to Lazo and the other to Manuel Rodríguez Lozano, he developed a mysterious and strange lyric, invaded by silence, death and melancholy. *Nocturnos* is a work linked to the "avant-garde aesthetics and grazes on the borders of Surrealism,"⁵⁰ particularly as it relates to the strange environments and objects painted by de Chirico, since in the *Nocturnos*, as Vicente Quirarte points out, "the figures without blood that go through their texts are reminiscent of the insomniac women of Paul Delvaux or Giorgio de Chirico and find their Mexican plastic equivalent in the paintings of Lazo and Rodríguez Lozano."⁵¹

In his 1928 publication of *Dama de Corazones*, Villaurrutia accompanied or illustrated it with a series of his own drawings (Figs. 5 and 6), including a self-portrait which, for Teresa del Conde, shows serious contacts with the iconography of metaphysical painting:

It does not omit its physiognomic imperfections and it is represented with the disarticulated hands of the body [...] In fact, this resource is taken from the metaphysical school (Chirico, Carrà, Pisces) that Villaurrutia surely knew well, although we tend to describe this as surrealist-type drawings.⁵²

Another series of drawings dating from 1935 that Villaurrutia presented at the 1940 International Surrealism Exhibition in Mexico, again makes clear references to de Chirico. These include the mysterious environment and a lack of global meaning of the image, within which a bust on fragments of a column and

the severed torso as of Greek sculpture stand out, in a room that through a series of doors expands and extends to infinity. Both as a poet and as a draftsman, and as a partaker of a long tradition that includes Miguel Ángel, Blake, Cocteau and de Chirico, Villaurrutia presented himself as a “poet of adventure and order, of the avant-garde and of the new classicism,”⁵³ in regard to his ability to renew tradition from new unusual compositions, and in clear resemblance to the Greek-Italian painter.

More so than the Surrealists, the technique of assembling unexpected elements and a tension in the depiction of space formed a strong link between both the painters and the writers of *Contemporáneos* and de Chirico since unlike the French movement, the Contemporaries did not intend to make social revolution, or, “those struggles seemed earthly to them”⁵⁴; their rebellion instead had to do with a poetic subversion. Could we qualify them then, as Cardoza did, as a bourgeois Surrealism?—in which the Contemporaries artists expropriated Surrealism and neutralized it “by virtue of the creative, dissolving or assimilating genius of the Mexican.”⁵⁵ What is of interest is that this was by way of de Chirico, the first artist related to Surrealism, whose works were presented in *Contemporáneos*, despite the fact that at that time, the Italian was heading toward another path, as I have indicated. Despite their link to surrealist poetics, in reality the Contemporaries had a greater correspondence with de Chirico. This is an important and little researched topic. And, that their development of fantastic and/or mysterious scenarios are not attempts to capture the dream world, but rather, are manifestations of the poetic accounts and personal visions of what the Contemporaries considered could be the expression of a Mexican identity that went beyond the historical narratives or the political criticism developed by other artists linked to the discourse of the muralists. Thereby the Contemporaries are undoubtedly closely linked to a notion of an Orphic memory raised by the de Chirico brothers, as a way of approaching elements of the national heritage, by means of unusual visions; to paraphrase de Chirico, as if these elements were seen with different eyes for the first time.

Translated by Alexander Largaespada and Claudia Mesch

- 1 David Alfaro Siqueiros, "3 Llamamientos de orientación actual a los pintores y escultores de la nueva generación americana," *Vida-Americana. Revista norte centro y sudamericana de vanguardia* (1921):
2. Archive of the Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, Mexico. The uppercase lettering is from Siqueiros.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Nelson Osorio, *El futurismo y la vanguardia literaria en América Latina* (Caracas: Centro de Estudios Rómulo Gallegos, 1982), 23.
- 8 Raúl Bueno, "La máquina como metáfora de modernización en la vanguardia latinoamericana," *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* #48 (1998): 28.
- 9 Gino Severini, "Cubismo," *Vida-Americana, Revista norte centro y sudamericana de vanguardia* (1921): 2. Archive of the Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, Mexico.
- 10 Alberto Savinio, "Drama de la ciudad meridiana," translated and reproduced in Olga Sáenz, *Giorgio de Chirico y la Pintura Metafísica* (México: UNAM, 1990), 137.
- 11 David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Me llamaban el Coronelazo* (México: Grijalbo, 1977), 142.
- 12 Natalia de la Rosa, "Vida-Americana, 1919-1921," *Art@s Bulletin*, #3 (Fall 2004): 34.
- 13 *Vida-Americana* contains reproductions of articles from magazines such as *Les Soirées de Paris*, *Nord-Sud*, *La Revue Musicale* and *L'Esprit Nouveau*.
- 14 Letter from Manuel Maples Arce to Guillermo de Torre, Mexico, April 6, 1922, 2 typed pages; National Library of Spain, number MSS 22826/75; reproduced in Carlos García's, "Manuel Maples Arce: correspondencia con Guillermo de Torre, 1921-1922," *Literatura mexicana* Vol. XV, No. 1 (México: UNAM, Instituto de Investigaciones Filológicas, 2004).
- 15 Edmond Jaloux, "La novedad literaria en el mundo. Un manifiesto del super-realismo," *Revista de Revistas* (May 17, 1925), 19.
- 16 The list of those who do or do not belong to this denomination has become almost endless, each new study on the Contemporaries proposes its own list; so this study decides to focus on critics and artists.
- 17 Evodio Escalante, "Contemporáneos y Estridentistas en el estadio del espejo," *Los Contemporáneos en el laberinto de la crítica* (México: El Colegio de México, 1994), 394.
- 18 Manuel Maples Arce, "Sovereign Youth," (1967) quoted in Luis Cardoza y Aragón, *El Río. Novelas de caballería* (México: UNAM, Landucci, 2003), 382.
- 19 Vicente Quirarte, *Ojos para mirar lo no mirado* (Valencia: Unidad Politécnica de Valencia, 2011), 32.
- 20 Guillermo Sheridan, "'Contemporáneos': Revista Mexicana de Cultura," *Los contemporáneos y su tiempo* (México: Secretaría de Cultura, Mito de la Caverna, 2016), 218.
- 21 In May of 1928 the Teatro Ulises presented *Orpheus* to negative reviews, which in Rivas Mercado's opinion was the result of a lack of understanding of the play.
- 22 Luis Maristany, "Mes mesonges c'est verité, sévérité, sévérité même en songe. Notes on Cocteau's presence in Villaurrutia," quoted in Enrique Franco Calvo, "Xavier Villaurrutia y la crítica de arte," *Los Contemporáneos en el laberinto de la crítica* (México: El Colegio de México, 1994), 135.
- 23 Olivier Debroye, *Figuras en el trópico. Plástica mexicana 1920-1940* (México: Océano, 1984), 131.
- 24 Xavier Villaurrutia, "Fichas sin sobre para Agustín Lazo," *Contemporáneos* #2 (July 1928): 119.
- 25 Febronio Ortega, "Lazo y sus opiniones sobre la pintura moderna," *El Universal Ilustrado* (December 6, 1928).
- 26 Rafael Vargas, "El surrealismo y los Contemporáneos," *Los contemporáneos y su tiempo* (México: Secretaría de Cultura, Mito de la Caverna, 2016), 386.
- 27 James Oles, "Agustín Lazo: Las cenizas quedan," *Agustín Lazo* (México: UNAM, 2009), 27.

- 28 Agustín Lazo a Carlos Chávez, undated letter from 1925; *Epistolario* (México: FCE, 1989), 62.
- 29 Ibid., 80.
- 30 Febronio Ortega, "Lazo y sus opiniones sobre la pintura moderna," *El Universal Ilustrado*, December 6, 1928.
- 31 Xavier Villaurrutia, "Fichas sin sobre para Lazo," *Contemporáneos* #2 (July, 1928): 117-121.
- 32 Jean Cocteau, "Fragmentos sobre Chirico," *Contemporáneos* #3 (Agosto, 1928): 261.
- 33 Ibid., 262.
- 34 As stated by Renato González Mello, seminar on Mexican Painting, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, May 26, 2017.
- 35 Oles, 57.
- 36 Xavier Villaurrutia, *Exposición Lazo*, exhibition catalogue, 1932. Lazo Archives, Andrés Blaisten Collection.
- 37 Oles, 21.
- 38 Ibid., 56.
- 39 Agustín Lazo, "Reseña sobre las actividades sobrerrealistas," *Cuadernos de arte* #2 (México: UNAM, 1938), 3-8.
- 40 Agustín Lazo, "Reseña sobre las actividades sobrerrealistas," *Cuadernos de arte* #3, 1938.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Giorgio de Chirico, "VIII," Éluard-Picasso manuscripts in María Teresa Méndez, *Modernidad y tradición en la obra de Giorgio de Chirico* (México: UNAM, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 2001), 210-211.
- 44 Between 1920 and 1924.
- 45 The title of the text is interesting for its obvious relations with the Bretonian group. Unlike their rejection of his painting, the literature of Giorgio de Chirico was well accepted by the group, despite references in other articles to dream, and the distance from his metaphysical art.
- 46 Adriana Domínguez, "Fragmento de un camino," *Rufino Tamayo. Construyendo Tamayo, 1922-1937* (México: INBA, CONACULTA, Museo Tamayo, 2013), 85.
- 47 Teresa del Conde, "Rufino Tamayo: las palabras de los otros," *Textos dispares. Ensayos sobre arte mexicano del siglo XX* (México: UNAM, Siglo XXI, 2014), 142.
- 48 Raquel Tibol, "Tamayo and his flight from reflection to dream," *Rufino Tamayo: From Reflection to Dream 1920-1950* (Mexico: Fundación Cultural Televisa, 1995), 18-19.
- 49 Justino Fernández, *Arte moderno y contemporáneo de México* (México, UNAM, 1952), 49.
- 50 Ibid., 40.
- 51 Octavio Paz, *Xavier Villaurrutia en persona y en obra* (México: FCE, 1978), 56.
- 52 Teresa del Conde, "Postscriptum, Xavier Villaurrutia as a cartoonist. Una aproximación," *Los Contemporáneos en el laberinto de la crítica* (México: El Colegio de México, 1994), 136.
- 53 Vicente Quirarte, *Ojos para mirar lo no mirado* (Valencia: Unidad Politécnica de Valencia, 2011), 48.
- 54 Cardoza y Aragón, 406.
- 55 Ibid., 423.