

A Making of Reality

Pittura Metafisica in De Chirico and Morandi

At a moment in their respective artistic careers, both Giorgio De Chirico and Giorgio Morandi adhered to *Pittura Metafisica* (metaphysical painting). They were two exponents of this artistic style, which had a profound impact on Western art at the turn of the 20th century. The influence that *Pittura Metafisica* had on later developments of contemporary art, including historical avant-garde, surrealism, and conceptual art, is more far reaching than commonly acknowledged. But what is *Pittura Metafisica*? This lecture addresses this question. It proposes an answer by illuminating the relationship between this style and key notions of Western art theory and philosophy of art. Whereas since Plato art has been generally seen as an imitation (*mimesis*) of nature, with their paintings, De Chirico and Morandi aimed at creating a new and more authentic (way of seeing) reality.

In the *Republic*, Plato offered the most famous version of his theory of art. For the Athenian philosopher, art is a mere imitation of natural objects, that is, of things that we find in the world: landscapes, animals, humans, and so on. Since Plato considers empirical reality as modelled on the world of Ideas, art is two times removed from the Truth. In his view, a painting of a bed is a copy of a copy: it imitates an empirical bed, which is already an imitation of the Idea of a bed. This argument grounded Plato's dismissal of art as deceitful and, more generally, informed Western artistic theories and practices so profoundly that accuracy in naturalistic representation appeared to many as the ultimate goal of art history. Towards the end of the 19th century, artists started to challenge what appeared as an essential link between art and imitation. Pictorial abstraction as well as Duchamp's provocations all shook this assumption. And it is within these developments that one should understand the deeper significance of *Pittura Metafisica*.

The term "metafisica" (metaphysics) already reveals the shift that De Chirico and Morandi were looking for. "Metafisica" is a philosophical notion identifying a subfield of the discipline dealing explicitly with the ultimate components of reality. It investigates the nature of being. *Pittura Metafisica* enacts a particular metaphysical conception that is alternative to the view that dominated Western philosophy. Influenced by the writings of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, De Chirico and Morandi create a representation of a world carrying within itself the revelation of a deeper wisdom: a prophecy of those hidden meanings lying behind empirical reality and the logic of the ideas. That is a world stripped of humans, where things appear in their fundamental presence. This silent and yet tangible landscape whispers the enigma that we all need to face: human life has no ultimate significance. We come to this world with the only perspective of dying, and there is no higher consolation than a tacit acceptance of our paradoxical condition. *Pittura Metafisica* is an attempt to represent this inconsolable truth.