

walterpadovani.



Giorgio de Chirico

Vita Silente (Still Life with Grapes and Peaches)







Giorgio de Chirico
(Volos, 10 July 1888 -
Rome, 20 November 1978)

Vita Silente
(*Still Life with Grapes*
and Peaches),
1950-55

oil on canvas (mounted on cardboard);
21,5 x 31,5 cm

SIGNED: «G. de Chirico»
(upper left corner)

SPECIFIC BIBLIOGRAPHY:
unpublished (?)

The small still life presented here, signed and probably previously unpublished,¹ depicts a composition with a bunch of grapes and peaches set against the background of a barren, dusky landscape (fig. 1).

The work exhibits the most characteristic stylistic, compositional, and technical traits of a particular series of similar subjects painted by Giorgio de Chirico between the late 1940s and early 1950s. Primarily known as the father of Metaphysical painting, de Chirico was also a prolific author of still lifes. His approach to this genre, informed by a formal and conceptual revival of the techniques of the Old Masters, is associated with his so-called «neo-Baroque period»;² This phase of

fig. 1: G. de Chirico, *Vita Silente*
(*Still Life with Grapes and Peaches*), c. 1950-55.

de Chirico's artistic maturity, which followed his break with André Breton between 1925 and 1926, is marked by a deliberate and temporary departure from a blatantly Surrealist style, even from his own distinctive «oneiric-Mediterranean Surrealism» that had characterized his Parisian years.³ Notably, the present work bears strong affinities with several paintings of a similar format dating approximately between 1950 and 1955 (figs. 2, 3), as indeed stated by Paolo Picozza in the authentication that accompanies our work, registered in the archives of the Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico (under n. 152/09/23 OT).

During these same years, the importance of still life painting in de Chirico's artistic and intellectual growth emerges from an article he published on May 24, 1942, in the magazine *L'Illustrazione Italiana*. His essay, which opens with a reproduc-

¹ For Giorgio de Chirico's main catalogues, in which the work in question is never mentioned or reproduced, we refer to: Claudio Bruni (ed. by), *Catalogo generale Giorgio de' Chirico*, 24 voll., Milano, Electa, 1971-1987; Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico (ed. by), *Giorgio de Chirico. Catalogo generale*, 7 vols., Falciano, Maretti editore, 2014-2023 (with essays and catalogue's entry by Claudio Strinati, Paolo Picozza, Fabio Benzi, Maurizio Calvesi); Paolo Baldacci, Gerd Roos, Nicol M. Mocchi, *Giorgio de Chirico. Catalogo ragionato*, 3 vols. (on-going), Torino, Allemandi, 2019-[2022].

² See F. Benzi, *Le repliche, il neobarocco. Due temi per un'esegesi sull'opera di de Chirico*, in *Giorgio de' Chirico. Catalogo generale 2014-2023*, op. cit. in note 1, 2014, I, pp. 15-25.

³ Ivi, p. 19.



fig. 2: G. de Chirico, *Vita Silente*, c. 1951-52. Formerly Teramo, Galleria Rizziero.

tion of a still life by the Dutch painter Jan Weenix (1642–1719), a specialist in the genre, presents a redefinition of that very subject starting from a terminological perspective. De Chirico opposed the 19th-century Italian and French nomenclature «*natura morta*» (or «*nature morte*») with his own translation of the more fitting Dutch, German, and English terms «*stilleven*», «*stilleben*», or «*still-life*» (as well as their equivalents in other Germanic languages).⁴ His solution, brilliant yet

not entirely unprecedented,⁵ was to adopt the term «*vita silente*» («*silent life*»), an expression that captures the unique stillness of fruits, flowers, and other organic elements—their «*calm life, without noise, without movement [...] which expresses itself by means of volume, form, and plasticity*».⁶ However, according to de Chirico, conveying the imperceptible vitality of certain «*tender bodies*» could not be achieved through intellectual effort alone. It required a technical and material mastery

⁴ Giorgio de Chirico, *Le nature-morte*, in «*L'Illustrazione Italiana*», XX, 21, 1942, p. 500.

⁵ In an engraving by Coenraad Waumans, depicting the Dutch still life painter David Bailly (1584–1657), the author is described as a «*fort bon peintre [...] en vie coye*», i.e. in a «*quiet life*», a concept not dissimilar to that developed by de Chirico (cfr. Josua Bruyn, *David Bailly, "fort bon peintre en portraits et en vie coye"*, in «*Oud Holland*», LXVI, 1951, p. 148, nota 1).

⁶ de Chirico 1942, op. cit. in note 4, p. 500.



fig. 3: G. de Chirico, *Vita Silente*, c. 1948-1949. Unknown location.

of pigments and their application on canvas—the only means capable of giving form to the intangible, that «play of air» («giuoco d’aria») which envelops the fleshy contours of plants and fruit, lending them their necessary plastic prominence.⁷ Furthermore, de Chirico argued that the primary flaw of certain celebrated 19th-century still life painters, particularly Édouard Manet, was their reliance on «bad material», which ultimately undermined «all the painter’s good intentions and praiseworthy efforts».⁸ In contrast, de Chirico placed great importance on studying the ‘reci-

pes’ of the Old Masters—an approach evident in the present canvas, with its thick, oily pigment and vibrant application of color. This meticulous attention to technique is documented in a little-known painting closely related to our still life: on its front, it depicts a *Countryside with Grapes and Pears*, while on the reverse, there is a self-portrait of the artist accompanied by a note detailing instructions for preparing the canvas: «I. Casein glue with white lead powder / II. Casein glue with Venetian turpentine and charcoal powder / III. Sun-dried» (figs. 4a, 4b).⁹

⁷ *Ibidem.*

⁸ *Ibidem.*

⁹ For this painting see: S. Bosi, in *De Chirico, de Pisis. La mente altrove*, catalogue of the exhibition (Domodossola, Musei Civici di Palazzo San Francesco, 14 July – 31 October 2018), edited by Antonio d’Amico, Milano, Silvana editoriale, 2018, pp. 97-98, cat. 27a-b.



fig. 4a: G. de Chirico, *Vita Silente (front)*, c. 1950. Viareggio, Società di Belle Arti.

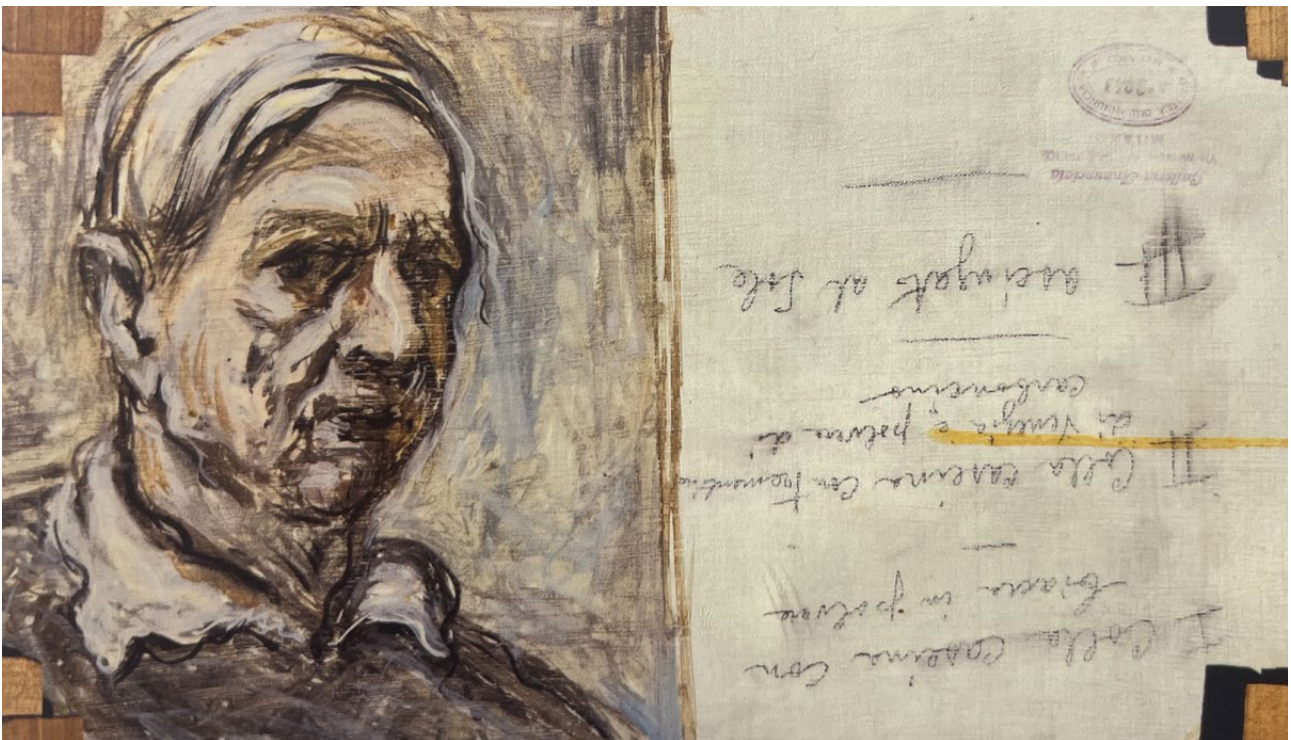


fig. 4b: G. de Chirico, *Self-portrait and Notes for the priming of the canvas (back)*, c. 1950. Viareggio, Società di Belle Arti.



Fig. 5: G. de Chirico, *Vita Silente (Still Life with Grapes and Peaches)*, detail, c. 1950-55.

Unlike the works of his illustrious predecessors, de Chirico's *Vite Silenti* are never the result of an exact, scientific observation of reality. Instead, they emerge as the alchemic transmutation of a «cultivated, veiled, and overshadowed» Nature, nurtured in the «mystery and silence of the studio», where the painter, «when he is not a prettily grumpy fellow», «always looks a bit

like a magician». And what better sorcerer than de Chirico could have depicted three elongated grapes standing upright like skittles—slightly askew, almost human, with their spherical heads—evoking, against the barren countryside background, both the memory and the uncanny effect of his famous Metaphysical mannequins? (fig. 5).



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