

GIORGIO DE CHIRICO GLADIATORS 1927-1930

NAHMAD CONTEMPORARY | Booth B1

INDEPENDENT 20th CENTURY



GIORGIO DE CHIRICO'S GLADIATORS: AN AMBIGUOUS SATIRE OF MODERNITY

By Silvia Loreti

"Gladiators! This word contains an enigma." So wrote Giorgio de Chirico, the Greek-born, German-educated, and Paris-based Italian artist, around the time he painted his *Gladiators* canvases, presented at Independent 20th Century by Nahmad Contemporary. And enigmatic these fighters are indeed: looking at them today it is difficult to imagine they could be interpreted, as they were in the 1930s, to be paeans to Italy's Fascist regime, with its cult of an athletic, virile antiquity.

The gladiators' flabby musculature and inexpressive, or literally blank, faces resist association with militant action; rather they elicit a sense of apathy, impotence, and futility. Compressed into modern, domestic interiors, they misappropriate the expansive and idealized athletic male body of classical statues such as the *Borghese Gladiator* (fig. 1) or romanticized academic depictions of the theme. De Chirico's use of quick, swirling brushstrokes evokes the play of light on the surface of sculpted muscles as reproduced in photographs and plaster casts, emphasizing the inauthenticity of these figures' classical pedigree.

In fact, their closest ancient precedent is to be found not in heroic sculpture, but in Roman floor mosaics such as the fourth-century *Gladiator Mosaic* in Rome's Galleria Borghese (fig. 2). De Chirico visited that museum assiduously in the early 1920s (he had begun to make copies of its Old Masters in 1919), and could have not failed to notice this impressive, cartoon-strip-like scene in its entrance hall. It has been noted that the recumbent fighter in de Chirico's *Gladiators/The Futile Victory* (1927) closely resembles the dead figure named ASTIVUS in the mosaic.



Figure 1. Bronze statuette, 17th century, based on the ancient *Borghese Gladiator* sculpture from the first century BC, Louvre, Paris. The *Borghese Gladiator* is a Hellenistic marble sculpture of a swordsman or warrior, made by Agasias of Ephesos, an ancient Greek sculptor. Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Figure 2. *Gladiator Mosaic* from the fourth century AD. Collection of the Borghese Gallery, Rome.



Giorgio de Chirico
Gladiateurs / L'Inutile Victoire (
Gladiators / The Futile Victory), 1927
Oil on canvas
18.25 x 15 inches (46.36 x 38 cm)

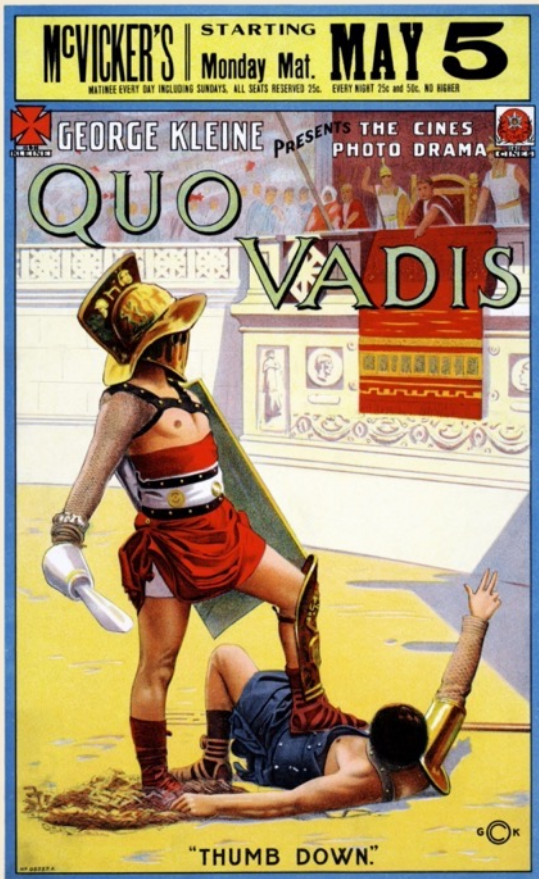
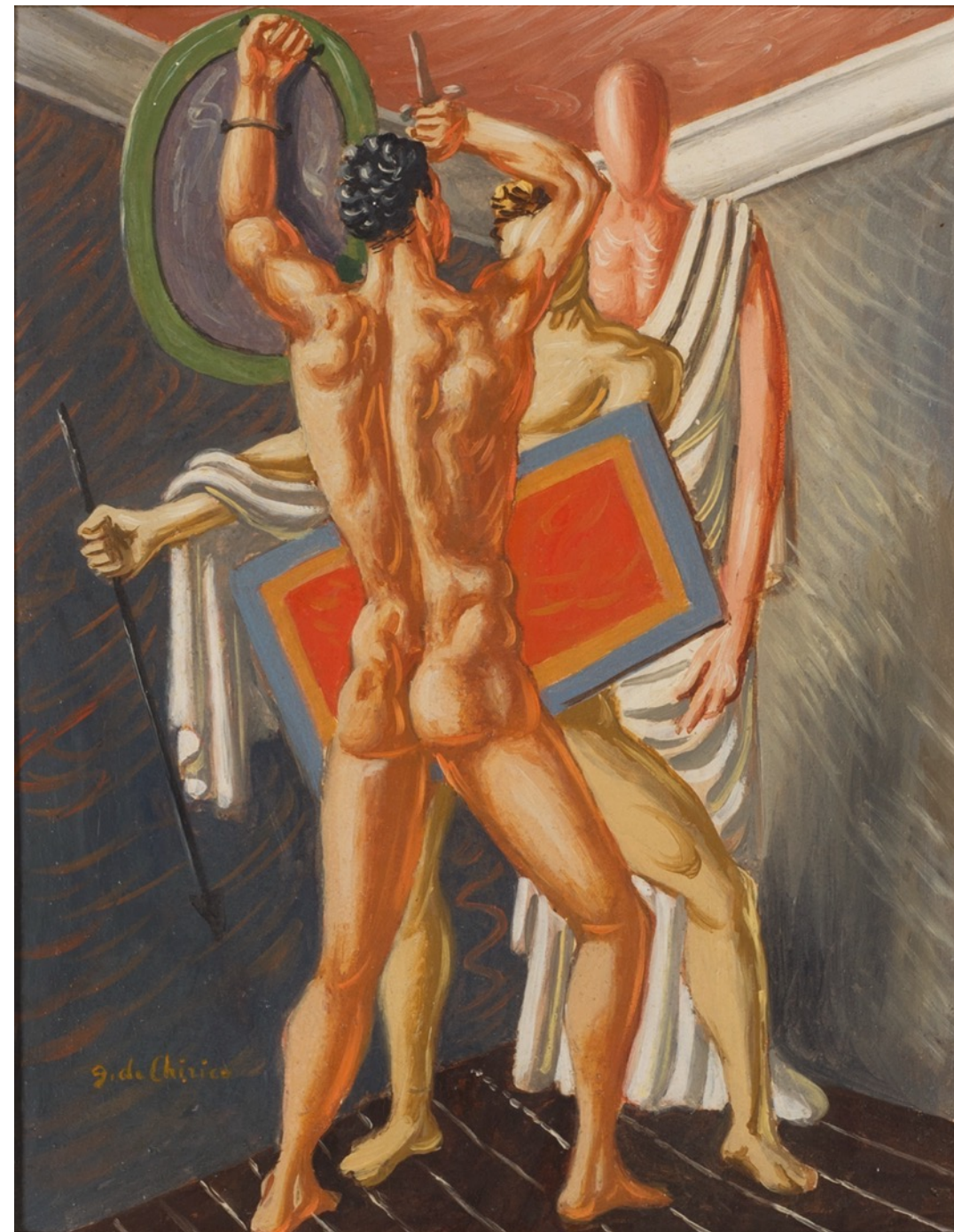


Figure 3. Motion picture poster for Enrico Guazzoni's film *Quo Vadis?*, 1913

Other significant likely sources for de Chirico, this time modern, are epic movies such as *Quo Vadis?* (1913; fig 3) and *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1925) that, similarly to the mosaic, have an unrealistic, cartoonish quality. These movies, together with their publicity posters, anchor the *Gladiators* series firmly to interwar popular entertainment and its Art Deco aesthetics.

Through clumsy bodies and dispassionate expressions, de Chirico presents the ancient gladiators as inept characters that are at odds with the classicism extolled by Fascist ideology. Ultimately, with his serious yet bizarre *Gladiators*, the ever polemical de Chirico seems to have depicted a veiled satire of modernity that most certainly included Mussolini's politicized use of ancient Rome. But what, we may ask, was his immediate target?



Giorgio de Chirico
Gladiatori (Gladiators), 1928

Oil on panel
13.75 x 10.5 inches (34.93 x 26.67 cm)



Giorgio de Chirico
Gladiatori (Gladiators), 1928
Oil on canvas
51 x 38.25 inches (129.86 x 97 cm)



De Chirico painted the series in Paris between 1927 and 1930. He had returned to the city in 1925 after spending a period of ten years in Italy, where, despite his call for a “return to the craft” of Old Master painting, his work had encountered critical and commercial hostility. In Paris, by contrast, his earlier *Metaphysical* paintings (1911-19) and more traditional recent works were enjoying great success thanks to the interest of the newly formed Surrealist group and of two important avant-garde dealers, Paul Guillaume and Léonce Rosenberg. Guillaume championed de Chirico’s early work and supported the young Surrealists, who had already begun to challenge the artist’s turn to tradition. Rosenberg attempted to synthesize the avant-garde and classicizing tendencies of modern art through his gallery, L’Effort Moderne.

The success of de Chirico’s solo show at Rosenberg’s gallery in May 1925 prompted his move back to Paris. Encouraged by the dealer, he started a period known as his “second Metaphysics”, in which his signature character, the mannequin, was renewed through the *Archaeologists* and *Philosophers* series, and alternated with entirely new motifs, including the *Gladiators*.

Figure 4. Giorgio de Chirico’s *Hall of Gladiators* at Léonce Rosenberg’s apartment on Rue de Longchamp, Paris, 1929. Published in French Vogue, October 1929.

In 1928, together with other artists of L'Effort Moderne, de Chirico took part in the decoration (soon dispersed) of a grand apartment that Rosenberg had rented in Paris's 16th arrondissement. The artist was assigned the entrance hall, called the *Hall of Gladiators* (fig. 4), for which he created 11 canvases on the theme. They included *Gladiators and Wild Beasts*, one of the works presented at Independent 20th Century.

The subject had been suggested by Rosenberg who, along with promoting a modernist brand of classicism, practiced boxing in the footsteps of the Dada poet-turned-boxer Arthur Cravan. Other avant-garde figures shared Rosenberg's passion for the sport, among them Pablo Picasso. In 1925, the Surrealist leader André Breton had celebrated Picasso as an essential reference for Surrealist painting alongside de Chirico, rekindling the Italian's sense of competition towards his fellow artist, whom he had known since 1913. Coincidentally, the build, stance, and white loincloth of the central figure in *Gladiators/The Futile Victory* (1927) evoke Picasso's pose as a boxer in a famous photograph taken in his studio in 1915-16 (fig. 5), at a time when Rosenberg counted as one of his few buyers.

Given this context, it is likely that de Chirico's floppy gladiators parodied the dominant masculine culture of the interwar avant-garde as embodied by Picasso and championed, in different ways, by Rosenberg and Breton, not to mention Mussolini. De Chirico had become increasingly polemical towards the French avant-garde during his time in Italy and his appropriation-cum-rejection by the Surrealists only worsened his attitude towards modern art. As opposed to the macho image of Picasso, the belligerent spirit of Rosenberg, the heterosexual ideals of Breton, and the militant virility of Mussolini, de Chirico's *Gladiators* are unabashedly indolent, unfit, unproductive, and emasculated.

Figure 5. Pablo Picasso posing as a boxer in his studio on Rue Victor Schoelcher, Paris, 1915-16.





Giorgio de Chirico

Gladiateurs et Fauves (Gladiators and Wild Beasts), 1928

Oil on canvas

17.75 x 63 inches (45 x 160 cm)



De Chirico's experience of the theater and his work for the ballet during this period might have raised his sensitivity towards the cultural construction of gender and the ambiguous masculinity of the classical athletic body. In 1914 he had collaborated with his brother, the musician, writer and painter Alberto Savinio, and the poet Guillaume Apollinaire on a drama featuring the mannequin or "faceless man", an androgynous character with an indeterminate sexuality. Another, more recent theatrical collaboration with Savinio had introduced de Chirico to his future first wife, the actress and archaeology student Raissa Gurievitch. Also in the 1920s, de Chirico created sets and costumes for the *Ballets Suédois* and the *Ballets Russes*.

In their proportions and mannerism, the *Gladiators* resemble modern dancers more than fighters, and although gendered as male, their sexuality is, like the convoluted brushstrokes that build them, far from straight. Their interactions are choreographic, as in *Gladiators* (1928), tenderly playful, as in *School of Gladiators* (1927), or meditative, as in *Warriors and Philosophers* (1928) and *School of Gladiators* (1928). De Chirico's titles imply they are friendly students rather than aggressive opponents. It was probably their sense of camaraderie that, above all, appealed to Rosenberg, who had fought in the First World War and saw his gallery as a militant collaboration between himself and his (by and large male) artists.

Giorgio de Chirico

Scuola di Gladiatori (School of Gladiators), 1927

Oil on canvas

21.63 x 18.25 inches (54.93 x 46.36 cm)



Giorgio de Chirico
Scuola di Gladiatori (School of Gladiators), 1928
Oil on canvas
21.67 x 18 inches (55 x 45.72 cm)



De Chirico, for his part, had enrolled with little conviction in the Italian army, and spent the war years convalescing in a hospital. For him, art was an intellectual pursuit and the privilege of a few enlightened minds. He had collaborated closely with his brother, who had an important role in the development of his Metaphysical painting, and more recently with the former Futurist painter Carlo Carrà. However, the Surrealists' appropriation of Metaphysics and their growing disapproval of de Chirico's later work had pushed him to think of himself, increasingly, as a solitary genius. He mistrusted dealers, who had often frustrated his expectations and whom he accused of disloyalty. While he signed contracts with both Rosenberg and Guillaume, he often made and sold paintings on the side.

Considering de Chirico's tense relationship with the avant-garde at this juncture, it seems likely that the enigmatic nature of his *Gladiators* conceals a tongue-in-cheek satire of contemporary trends in modern art. From an aesthetic point of view, the paintings counter the period's preference for a classical brand of Cubism. More significantly, they intimate a moral commentary on what de Chirico considered to be the opportunistic practices, narcissistic costumes, and ambivalent values of the avant-garde. In so doing, his *Gladiators* are proto-postmodernist manifestos—apparently regressive ciphers used to expose the limits of supposedly progressive values.

Giorgio de Chirico
Guerrieri e Filosofi (Warriors and Philosophers), 1928
Oil on panel
27.5 x 23.25 inches (69.85 x 59 cm)

Text by Silvia Loreti, an independent scholar and curator specialized in modern art. She holds a PhD from the Courtauld Institute of Art, London and was a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacies (University of Manchester, University of Essex and Tate) and in Analysis and Management of Cultural Heritage at the IMT School for Advanced Studies Lucca. She was assistant curator in Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York and at the Galleria Borghese, Rome.

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