

Part 8

Horology *in* Art

by Bob Frishman (MA)

**Giorgio De Chirico, *The Philosopher's Conquest*,
late 1913–early 1914**

Salvador Dali's melting clocks usually come to mind when we think of surrealism, but the Greek-born Italian artist Giorgio De Chirico (b.1888-d.1978) was another major figure in this early twentieth-century form of artistic expression. Modernism and metaphysics also are terms that apply to his eerily fascinating work.

De Chirico's most productive time was the decade from 1910 to 1920, and his paintings incorporate the symbolism, cubism, and dreamlike aura of some of his contemporaries. However, his scenes are uniquely lonely and bleak and often use the motifs of empty streets and arcades, passing trains, and something green and leafy. The long shadows suggest late-afternoon sun in contrast to a Cubist flattening and compression of objects.

Although the scenes are surreal, the trains reflect his father's work as a civil engineer who designed Greek railroads, and the settings are recognizable Italian sites in Turin and Ferrara where he lived during these years. During that decade, however, his intensive study of Nietzsche led to injected emotions, enigmatic moods, and deep mystery behind the props he selected. Our featured painting's title, *The Philosopher's Conquest*, overtly reflects the philosophical influences we note in many artwork names he chose, but remains enigmatic about his specific meaning.

One prop we see in several of his paintings is a clock face set into a building. We can assume that he intends a clock's traditional symbolism of time's passage and human mortality, but we also know that his society at that time had a special interest in timekeeping because of the recent imposition of standard time and the growing obsession with on time scheduling of daily events. Public time was becoming increasingly pervasive, and De Chirico must have seen many white-faced clock dials looming above him as he walked the streets.



Giorgio De Chirico (b.1888-d.1978)

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This painting, an imposing 49"x39" oil on canvas hanging at The Art Institute of Chicago, presents a clock larger than most he depicts. The street clock projects boldly into the monumental scene, above the locomotive's steam cloud and ominous shadows of an approaching couple. Another of his 1914 paintings, *Gare Montparnasse* [The Melancholy of Departure], shows the same time on its face, but others do not, and the indicated time may have a significance we do not yet understand.

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About the Author

Bob Frishman has restored and sold vintage clocks since 1980 and is a past-president of New England Chapter 8. He is a frequent contributor of articles and newsworthy items to the *Watch & Clock Bulletin*. His "Clocks in Art" program was presented at the 2011 NAWCC National Convention. He is head of publicity for the upcoming NAWCC Symposium "Time For Everyone," November 7-9, in Pasadena, CA. Bob can be reached at www.bell-time.com.