De Chirico’s *Archaeologists* and the Ruins of Rome

Giorgio de Chirico, an Italian artist of the twentieth century, saw the world in terms of archetypes of classical mythology and used the iconography of these archetypes in his work. The myths of antiquity were the means by which de Chirico mediated the world around him. I argue that in the series of works known as the *Archaeologists*, de Chirico engages conceptually with the legacy of classical antiquity not as metaphor, but as a means of negotiating an understanding of the material nature of the relationship between the past and present.

It was during his first visit to Rome in 1924 that de Chirico developed the forms of the *Archaeologist* series, which would continue to appear and reappear in both painting and sculpture throughout his career. The *Archaeologist* figures are composite anthropomorphic forms. They have a mannequinesque physique, but at the same time are sculptural and even architectural. Their rotund torsos are composed of architectural and landscape fragments of ancient Rome. Visible are fragments of marble sculpture, columns, and veneers of ancient Roman buildings. The brickwork of the superstructure of these buildings is exposed as its marble facing has deteriorated. Beneath the brick foundations of the architectural members are discernable landscape elements of Rome itself, including the earth of the hills of Rome and the waters of the Tiber. De Chirico’s appropriation of antique iconography into the new context of a dream-like space imbues theses images with a quality of timelessness, and yet, simultaneously calls attention to their temporality.

Notions of fragmentation and decay, both literal and metaphorical, are themes present in the *Archaeologist* series. For de Chirico, the fragment was not only an index of the past, but that of the present as well. The fragmentary figures and landscapes of the *Archaeologist* series recall the imagery of a scene provided by Pliny the Elder in *Natural History* (36.101). Pliny describes an imaginary vision of the city of Rome, eight hundred years in the future. Pliny imagines a scene from the future of the ruins of the buildings of Rome gathered together and placed in one great heap (*universitate vero accervata et in quondam unum coiecta*). Pliny’s vision of an accumulation of debris in the future Rome provides a meditation on the nature of the relationship between time and the material world. De Chirico’s *Archaeologist* series provides a visual explication of processes fragmentation and decay, but also, accumulation and creation. Just as in Pliny’s visualization of the future of the material remains of the city of Rome, the *Archaeologist* figures are physical forms created by the accumulation of crumbling fragments and debris of the material monuments of the past. For de Chirico, the past and the present were not so far away from each other, but it is in the *Archaeologist* series, however, that de Chirico dissolves utterly the boundary between past and present. With the *Archaeologists*, de Chirico not only represents the iconography of classical antiquity, but he reassembles it as a means of constructing a new conceptualization of time, materiality, and mythology.