

Eugene Berman. Modern Classic



by Bruno Manfredini

The exhibition *Eugene Berman. Modern Classic*, curated by Sara De Angelis, Denis Isaia, Peter Benson Miller, Ilaria Schiaffini, based on an idea by Vittorio Sgarbi and Elisabetta Scungio, is on view from September 27, 2025, to March 1, 2026, at MART, Rovereto. The catalog, with texts by Vittorio Sgarbi, Denis Isaia, Elisabetta Scungio, Sara De Angelis, Gloria Galante, Romina Laurito, Lorenzo Mantovani, Peter Benson Miller, Martina Rossi, Luca Scarlini, Ilaria Schiaffini, Giulia Tulino, Ester Garasto, Eros Renzetti, Gabriele Quaranta, Lindsay Harris, is published by Silvana, Milan.

Eugene Berman (1899-1972) was one of those erudite and eclectic artists who, in the 20th century, did not stand out as lovers of the new but rather of the *déjà vu*, of a remembered or dreamed elsewhere. Figures like him combine the professional capable of extraordinary technical virtuosity with the dandy lost along paths that seem to lead nowhere. The 20th century saw many such personalities, starting with Giorgio De Chirico and Alberto Savinio, and including Corrado Cagli, Fabrizio Clerici, and Leonor Fini, to name but a few with whom Berman had significant relationships, as the exhibition reveals. But many others could be mentioned, starting with those who joined him in the *Néo-Romantiques* group, which arose in Paris in the 1920s on the initiative of the critic Waldemar George, and including Balthus and Domenico Gnoli, who do not appear in this exhibition but could very well be there in spirit. The definition of “modern classic” used here in Rovereto sums up well a certain

taste for the outdated and the dreamlike which, in the years between the two world wars, took on multiple names and identities: *Metafisica*, *Valori Plastici*, Surrealism, Magical Realism, *Retour à l'ordre*, *Neue Sachlichkeit*.

Berman is a prime interpreter of this climate. With a surrealist streak and an archaic, magical-mythical twist, he reinvents the genre of the *veduta* by combining ancient ruins, characters and boundless skies with an 18th century affability. This neo-Baroque style is the hallmark of his long and prestigious career as a theatre set designer. He is the heir to Bernini and Tiepolo, a friend of Stravinsky and a collaborator with the Metropolitan Opera in New York and La Scala in Milan. He has also illustrated magazines such as "Vogue" and "Harper's Bazaar". Thanks to the talent of great set designers like Berman, the idea of decoration, banned in architecture, did not completely disappear from 20th century artistic culture. Berman's cultural nomadism is integral to his biography, comprising an uninterrupted sequence of travels, stays and encounters. Born to a Russian Jewish family in St. Petersburg, he found himself in exile in Paris after the October Revolution, where he studied at the Académie Ranson. He then moved to the United States, where he married actress Ona Munson (1903–1955), who played Belle Watling in *Gone with the Wind*. From 1958, he lived in Rome.

The agreements signed by Berman during his lifetime with the American Academy in Rome and the Italian government safeguarded his artistic and documentary heritage (including a remarkable collection of artistic, archaeological, and ethnographic artifacts), which is now divided between the Academy itself and the National Archaeological Museum of Agro Falisco and Forte Sangallo in Civita Castellana, near Viterbo. Civita Castellana Archaeological Museum has already exhibited his materials to the public from January to June 2025, and this exhibition in Rovereto further broadens the perspective, summarizing all of Berman's activities and documenting his dense network of relationships with painters, sculptors, architects, musicians, directors, photographers, and critics. This is a rare opportunity to get to know an exquisite artist, brimming with ideas and visions, on a par with other great exiles, wanderers, and curious minds who enlivened the culture of the last century.

Homepage: Eugene Berman, Arno River Mouth, 1968-69, oil on canvas, Civita Castellana, National Archaeological Museum of Agro Falisco and Forte Sangallo.

Below: Eugene Berman, L'offrande aux nuages, 1940, oil on canvas, Zelenina Collection.

