

GEOGRAPHIES OF SURREALISM
THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF THE MOVEMENT:
UNITED STATES AND ITALY

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FROM NEW YORK TO ROME: EUGENE BERMAN'S 'JOURNEY TO ITALY' BETWEEN REALITY AND IMAGINATION

Ilaria SCHIAFFINI

According to birth records, Eugene Berman was born in Russia in 1899, but I believe he was actually born in Italy, at the time of his first trips to Vicenza or Venice, where he met Bérard and Leonid, Palladio and Serlio. This encounter allowed him to discover the first seed of himself and he began to shape his Italian style, which isolated him among his contemporaries but that has also given us unforgettable canvases and stupendous drawings from 1928 to the present day.¹

The words written by Corrado Cagli in 1949 for the first Italian solo exhibition of Eugene Berman (Petersburg, 1899 – Rome, 1972) confirm his deep-rooted interest in the artistic culture of Italy. This interest dates to his early studies in St. Petersburg, where the Italian spirit transpired already in his neo-Palladian architecture, and developed in Paris in the 1920s in the footsteps of Giorgio de Chirico. Here he made his debut in 1926, together with Christian Bérard, Pavel Tchelitchev and others – the “neo-Romantic” or “neo-humanist” group, as it was baptised by Waldemar George. In his American period, which began in 1935, the fantastical element characterising the revival of pictorial tradition was emphasised thanks to the critical contribution of James Thrall Soby, who saw in “neo-Romanticism” a tendency parallel to Surrealism, which had also originated in metaphysics (*After Picasso*, 1935). Soby’s association with John Everett Austin and Julien Levy was at the origin of Berman’s first institutional and, above all, commercial success. In the United States he launched a successful career as a set and costume designer for which he is still best known today.

Wishing to reconnect with his primary source of inspiration, the great civilisations of the past, from antiquity to the Renaissance and the Baroque, and to consolidate his career as an artist, Berman intensified his collaboration with Italy starting with his debut in 1949 at L’Obelisco gallery in Rome, where he settled definitively following the suicide of his wife Oma Munson in 1955.

The aim of this contribution is, on the one hand, to reconstruct the beginnings of his Italian period, which is still little explored, and, on the other, to investigate the symbolic meanings of his “journey to Italy”, taking as a case study his lithographs published in the homonymous book (*Viaggio in Italia*), which came out in 1951 with a text by Raffaele Carrieri. The survey of Berman’s exhibitions and of his main artistic points of reference in his first Italian period allow us to include him among the Surrealist and neo-Romantic wave that swept through Rome after the Second World War, of which L’Obelisco gallery was the main catalyst.

From New York to Rome: the first solo exhibition at L’Obelisco gallery (1949)

Berman’s Italian debut was carefully planned, as a letter to Fabrizio Clerici dated May 1949 reveals: “It may be ridiculous at my ripe old age – however the truth is that, although I feel spiritually Italian, I have never exhibited in Italy (apart from two or three paintings exhibited at a Biennale in Venice

¹ Cagli, Corrado, preface, *Prima mostra in Italia di Eugene Berman*, Galleria L’Obelisco, 1949. I would like to thank Giulia Tulino for her advice and research support. My sincere gratitude for allowing me to access unpublished materials in their possession goes to: Eros Renzetti of the Fabrizio Clerici Archive in Rome, Jaja Indrimi of La Centrale dell’Arte of Rome, where part of L’Obelisco collection is held, and Giuseppe Briguglio of the Corrado Cagli Archive in Rome. Also, I am really grateful to Sebastian Hierl, Drue Heinz Librarian and Lavinia Ciuffa, acting curator of the Photographic Archive of the American Academy in Rome, for allowing me to consult part of the valuable Eugene Berman collection preserved there; Claudia Palma, responsible of the Archives of the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Roma, where the other part of L’Obelisco collection is stored; the Oral History Program - Smithsonian Archives of American Art for kindly providing the interview with Berman; Irene Caravita for her help in finding Berman’s *Journey to Italy*.

around 1930 in a French section presented by Waldemar George). I feel a bit like an old singer in her fifties who finally makes her *début* on a larger stage.”²

Berman refers to his participation in the *Appels d'Italie* room of the Venetian exhibition, where Waldemar George had included the group of neo-humanist painters among the *Italiens de Paris* as part of a cultural and political plan to support Fascism. In Berman's opinion, his participation was not significant, partly because it was instrumental in a critical project that was foreign to him, and partly because of the heterogeneous nature of the group of painters who had made their debut at Druet's in 1926. Berman's "journey to Italy" coincided with his need to seek recognition for his artistic career. His 1941 retrospective exhibition in Boston, the only one held during his lifetime, had come too soon and had left him feeling unsatisfied. The longed-for reunion with his ideal homeland had the flavour of a life choice: living in the places that inspired his art, evoking remote places and characters through the vestiges of the past, would lead him to project his own daily life into a dimension suspended between reality and imagination. In the Doria Pamphili palace, where he settled in 1958, he set up his famous collection of Greek, Egyptian, Etruscan and pre-Columbian sculptures in a sort of *Wunderkammer*.³ His solo exhibition, which opened at L'Obelisco in May 1949 [Fig. 1], was introduced by a text by Cagli.

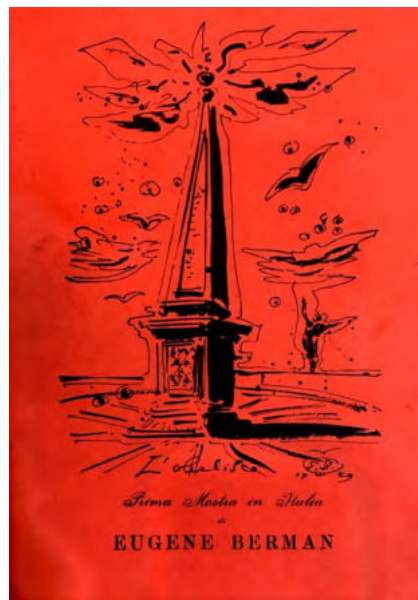


Fig.1 - Catalogue of *Eugene Berman's first Italian Exhibition*, L'Obelisco Gallery, May-June 1949

Having returned to Italy a year before, after a long period spent in the US, Cagli had displayed his works at the Galleria del Corso in October 1948, with an exhibition titled *Disegni e monotipi* (Drawings and monotypes). There were many points of contact between Berman and Cagli: in addition to their collaboration on ballets (with choreographer Balanchine and the impresario Lincoln Kirkstein), both had connections with Julien Levy's gallery, where Berman exhibited regularly from 1936 to the mid-1940s and where Cagli also held a solo exhibition in 1940. The Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, directed by John Everett Austin, which had already exhibited Berman in 1931, hosted a solo exhibition of Cagli's drawings ten years later.⁴ Cagli's admiration for the Russian

² Eugene Berman to Fabrizio Clerici, May 2nd, 1949 (Fabrizio Clerici Archive, Roma, henceforth FCA).

³ See Rosamond Bernier, "L'appartement d'Eugène Berman et ses objets", in *L'Oeil*, 1965, 124, pp.49-55; *Egizi Etruschi: da Eugene Berman allo scarabeo dorato*, Simona Carosi, Massimiliana Pozzi Battaglia, Alfonsina Russo (eds.), [exhibition catalogue], Rome, Gangemi 2017.

⁴ Fabio Benzi underlines the influence the neo-Romantic circle had on Cagli, an influence favoured by the prevalent homosexual connotation of the group, and concludes that Berman was a sort of protector and "maieute" of Cagli in the

painter is evidenced by the highly laudatory tone of his text on the latter, which sounds like a heartfelt tribute to “a painter whose life is a continuous homage to the sources of great Italian painting”.⁵

In Rome, Berman exhibited many recent works inspired by Mexican themes, created following two extended stays in the country that had been financed by Guggenheim Fellowships (awarded in 1946 and 1948). The titles of other works contained references to the Italy of the past, mainly filtered through art, architecture, history and literature – *Scena per un balletto immaginario (Rinaldo e Armida)*; *Spring music for Isabella d’Este, Ariadne* – together with memories of travel – *Monumento equestre (ricordo di Venezia)*, *Paesage napolitain, Souvenir de Vicenza*). The projection into a mythical past, observed with a loving and melancholic gaze, was reinforced by the 15th, 16th, 17th and 19th century frames, selected by gallery owners for the occasion. The exhibition went well: it was seen by many visitors from the art scene and fifteen drawings were sold.⁶

The Galleria del Corso was to remain a privileged point of reference for Berman at least until the late 1950s: not only because it was the main centre for the promotion of Surrealist and neo-Romantic artists in Italy, but also because it based part of its business on intense commercial exchanges with the United States.⁷ In December 1955, Berman again asked Gaspero del Corso to display the costumes and sets he designed for Mozart’s *Così fan tutte*,⁸ which was to be staged at the Piccolo Teatro della Scala in Milan under the direction of Guido Cantelli on 27 January 1956. Del Corso, however, directed him to Sagittarius, a sort of satellite gallery of L’Obelisco, directed by Princess Stefanella Sciarra in Rome and in New York by Count Lanfranco Rasponi. Encouraged by his friend Clerici’s debut a month earlier at the American venue, Berman inaugurated his exhibition at the Roman one on 5 December. Despite the success of the sales, when the exhibition was over, Berman told Gaspero he was disappointed by the choices made by Sagittarius, which he accused of being a nice, unprofessionally run boutique. Most of the sales had taken place before the opening thanks to his personal connections: nothing like his first exhibition at L’Obelisco.⁹

At the latter Berman held two more solo exhibitions: in 1959, *Disegni, guazzi, tempere e inchiostri*, while at the same time the Galleria San Marco exhibited his larger paintings, and in 1961 *Acquarelli, caseine, disegni, guazzi, inchiostri, pastelli, tecnicemiste*. He also introduced artists to the del Corso such as his brother Leonid (who exhibited in April 1954) and the young Leonardo Cremonini (who exhibited in December 1954), whose works he had just presented at the Pearls Gallery in Beverly Hills.¹⁰ He also wrote the text for Vera Stravinsky’s solo exhibition in November 1958. Berman was a good friend of Vera and Igor Stravinsky, the three shared Russian origins, and Berman collaborated professionally with the great composer: in 1949, the couple hosted Berman and Oma Munson’s wedding ceremony at their Beverly Hills villa. Berman also had close relations with the American community living in Rome, who supported him when he decided to settle in the capital.

US. See Fabio Benzi (ed.), *Corrado Cagli e il suo magistero. Mezzo secolo di arte italiana dalla Scuola Romana all’astrattismo*, [exhibition catalogue], Pordenone, Milan: Skirà 2010, pp. 37-38. Bedarida sees a sort of elective brotherhood with Berman in some of Cagli’s studies of 1947 for the sets of Darius Milhaud’s *Suite Française*. Raffaele Bedarida, *Corrado Cagli. La pittura, l’esilio, l’America (1938-1947)*, Rome: Donzelli 2018, p. 282.

⁵ Cagli, preface to *Prima mostra in Italia di Eugene Berman*, cit.

⁶ Berman to Gaspero del Corso, undated (but December 1955 or January 1956), in La Centrale dell’Arte Archive, Rome (henceforth CAA).

⁷ I. Schiaffini, “La Galleria L’Obelisco e il mercato americano dal dopoguerra alla fine degli anni Cinquanta”, in *Irene Brin, Gaspero del Corso e la galleria L’Obelisco*, edited by V. C. Caratozzolo, I. Schiaffini, C. Zambianchi, Rome, 2018, pp.125-144 and “It’s A Roman Holiday For Artists: The American Artists Of L’obelisco After World War II” in *Methodologies of Exchange: MoMA’s “Twentieth-Century Italian Art”* (1949), “Italian Modern Art”, Issue 3, January 2020 (<https://www.italianmodernart.org/journal/issues/methodologies-of-exchange-momas-twentieth-century-italian-art-1949/>)

⁸ Berman to del Corso, November 11th, 1955 (CAA).

⁹ Berman to del Corso, undated (but December 1955 or January 1956; CAA). Among his art collectors he mentions Hugh Chisholm, Piero Mele and L. P. Roberts. On the contrary, “at the Obelisk about fifteen drawings were sold to different people and I know that the exhibition was seen by many different people, as was the one in Venice”.

¹⁰ It is Berman who suggests to Gaspero to organise an exhibition of Cremonini. Berman judged Cremonini to be “the best of the young Italians”. (Berman to del Corso, July 25th, 1954, CAA). The Roman exhibition opened on December 2nd, 1954.

Among these acquaintances was Lawrence Roberts, a friend of del Corso's and director of the American Academy, which granted Berman a resident fellowship in 1959.

Berman and Clerici between New York and Rome

Based on this picture, Cagli's decision to introduce Berman's first solo exhibition in Italy would seem entirely consequential and natural. One might even speculate that it was Cagli who introduced Berman to the del Corso. However, it was not him, but a little more than thirty-year-old student of Savinio's, also active as a theatrical set designer and gaining increasing visibility on the American market: Fabrizio Clerici.

In a letter dated 9 May 1949, Berman congratulated Clerici for writing the introduction to his first exhibition in Italy: "And as this whole idea came from you (to organise this exhibition at L'Obelisco gallery), I am very pleased that it is also you who are introducing me to the Roman public and acting as my patron in Italy!".¹¹ The first contact between the two dated to a few months earlier, and took place thanks to Ramy Alexander, who remained one of Berman's privileged points of contact with Italy and with Clerici.¹²

Ramy Alexander was the assistant of Max Ascoli, a philosopher of law and Jewish anti-fascist forced into exile in the United States. Ascoli was involved in promoting Italian craftsmanship in the United States together with Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti. In 1945, Ragghianti set up the Commission for the Distribution of Crafts Materials (Cadma) in Florence, in partnership with Handicraft Development Inc., which was directed in New York by Max Ascoli. In 1948, Cadma was taken over by the National Craftsman Association, based in Rome, and Ramy Alexander was appointed vice-director. Among their various famous promotional initiatives were *Handicrafts as a Fine Art in Italy*, curated in NY in 1947 and *Italy at work. Her Renaissance in Design today*, a major exhibition that opened at the Brooklyn Museum in New York on 29 November 1950 and toured for three years.¹³

Going back to the contact between Berman and Clerici, on March 1, 1949, Ramy Alexander wrote Clerici a postcard from Hollywood in which he enthusiastically welcomed his success. This esteem would be confirmed by the fact that a year later Clerici was entrusted with one of the five environmental productions around which the above-mentioned *Italy at work* revolved. Alongside Clerici and the 30-year-old Roberto Menghi there were much more established architects such as Giò Ponti, Luigi Cosenza and Carlo Mollino. In the postcard, Berman added a brief comment: "Dear Clerici, myself and Ramy always talk about you and your works and scenes. I hope to meet you one of these days and see your work, and I want to come back to Italy... Best wishes for more success and many greetings".¹⁴

In fact, over the past year Clerici had become very successful as a stage designer: in the autumn of 1948 he had signed his first collaboration with the Hungarian choreographer Aurel Milloss for the European premiere of Stravinsky's *Orpheus*, staged at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice that autumn, followed by two commissions for the Teatro di Roma at the beginning of the following year, Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* and Benjamin Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia*. Even more sensational, however, was his success as an artist in the United States: the exhibition at Julien Levy's in March 1945 laid the groundwork for his inclusion in the 1948 *XX Century Italian Art* exhibition at the

¹¹ Berman to Clerici, May 9th, 1949 (FCA).

¹² In the correspondence between Berman and Clerici Ramy is repeatedly mentioned over the years, and with him Iolanda, described as "the mother of all". I have not yet been able to identify the latter. Other common acquaintances mentioned are Raffaele Carrieri and Federico Veneziani, ex-husband of Leonor Fini. Berman dedicated to Federico his *Journey to Italy*.

¹³ Claudia Marfella, "Italy at Work: Her Renaissance in Design Today, New York 1950", in *Annali delle Arti e degli Archivi, Pittura, Scultura, Architettura, Accademia di San Luca*, 1 | 2015 pp.41-48. The exhibition was curated by Charles Nagel, Meyric R. Rogers, Walter Dorwin Teague and Ramy Alexander, who in the previous three months carried out an extensive reconnaissance in Italy (ivi, p.44). See also: Elena, Dellapiana, "Italy Creates. Gio Ponti, America And The Shaping Of The Italian Design Image", in *Res Mobilis*, 7, n.8, 2018, pp. 20-48.

¹⁴ Ramy Alexander and Berman to Clerici, 1 March, 1949 (FCA).

MoMA as one of the four “Fantast” artists.¹⁵ Clerici’s art began with a visionary approach inspired by Alberto Savinio, his mentor in Milan before the war, which was enriched by his encounters with de Chirico, Leonor Fini and Salvador Dalí (he had met the latter personally at the 1948 Biennale). These ingredients were perfectly in line with the Surrealist and Neo-Romantic orientations of Julien Levy on the one hand and James Thrall Soby on the other, to whom both Clerici and Berman owed their American success.

Berman and Clerici shared a number of passions throughout their lives: an interest in architecture and decoration, which influenced their work as theatre costume and set designers, a metaphysical approach to the past, a fascination with ruins and a love of travel.¹⁶ An important common acquaintance of Berman and Clerici was Leonor Fini,¹⁷ a close associate of Clerici during her brief Roman stay in 1945. Four years later Soby defined her as the promoter of the school of Roman “Fantasts”. In the autumn of 1936, Fini and de Chirico found themselves living in New York in the same building that Berman had rented from Alexander Iolas near the Julien Levy Gallery.¹⁸ It was here that de Chirico exhibited for the first time in October¹⁹ and Leonor Fini in November: shortly after both were included in Alfred Barr’s seminal historical retrospective of Surrealism at the MoMA, *Fantastic Art Dada, Surrealism*, which opened in December 1936.

The personal relationships that also revolved around exhibitions and commercial aspects confirms the coherence of an international neo-Romantic genealogy on both sides of the Atlantic, a trend born in the United States around de Chirico’s legacy. This critical approach, structured during the 1930s thanks to the encounter of the “Harvard modernists” (Austin, Levy and Soby), was echoed by the “Fantasts” group, as they were called by Soby and Barr on the occasion of the *XXth Century Italian Art* exhibition held at the MoMA in 1949. At this point, in Italy the Galleria L’Obelisco was already playing a major role. Until the middle of the following decade, it was the main Italian reference point for the neo-Romantic and Surrealist painters exported from the United States.

Against Modernism

On 26 May 1949 Berman wrote to Clerici saying he understood the various considerations that had led “them” (presumably the gallery owners, in agreement with Clerici) to entrust Cagli instead of Clerici with the text presenting his exhibition, as was the original intention: “Corrado has always been a very good friend of mine; I am fond of him and greatly admire him, and they have decided that it is better this way – I am sure they did the right thing!”²⁰ However, he raised an objection, which he called ideological: “Corrado has moved away from our world and has turned towards an aesthetics

¹⁵ G. Tulino, “Alberto Savinio, Critic and Artist: A New Reading Of Fantastic And Post-Metaphysic Art In Relation To Surrealism Between Rome And New York (1943–46)”, in *Italian Modern Art*, 2, July 2019 (<https://www.italianmodernart.org/journal/articles/alberto-savinio-critic-and-artist-a-new-reading-of-fantastic-and-post-metafisica-art-in-relation-to-surrealism-between-rome-and-new-york-1943-46/>); Tulino, *La Galleria L’Obelisco. Surrealismo e arte fantastica, 1943-1954*, Roma: De Luca 2020, pp. 41-47; Schiaffini, “La Galleria L’Obelisco e il mercato americano”, in Irene Brin, *Gaspero del Corso e la galleria L’Obelisco*, eds. Caratozzolo, Schiaffini, Zambianchi, pp. 127-128.

¹⁶ *Fabrizio Clerici nel centenario della nascita 1913-1993*, Fabrizio Clerici Archive (ed.), Milano, Skirá, pp. 311-318.

¹⁷ In the correspondence between Fini and Pieyre de Mandiargues there are frequent references to Berman ranging from 1935 to 1944 (Leonor Fini, André Pieyre de Mandiargues, *L’ombreportée. Correspondance 1932-1945*, Paris, Gallimard - Editions Le promeneur, 2010). I thank Alessandro Nigro for the information.

¹⁸ See “Oral history interview with Brooks Jackson by Paul Cummings”, Mar. 22th, 1976, Smithsonian Archives of American Art (<https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-brooks-jackson-12916>); “De Chirico and Soby”, in *De Chirico and America*, ed. Emily Braun, [exhibition catalogue], Torino: Allemandi 1996, p.116-117. Karen Kundig questions the reliability of these memories in “Giorgio de Chirico, Surrealism and Neoromanticism”, in *De Chirico and America*, p. 109.

¹⁹ K. Robinson, pp. 313-314.

²⁰ Berman to Clerici, May 26th, 1949 (FCA).

of formal modernism, which has long been surpassed.” He also referred to “the difference between myself and Corrado concerning ideas and feelings.”²¹

It is easy to image what the considerations in favour of Cagli were: the artist, already a leading figure in the Italian artistic culture of the 1930s, had returned after his exile and become a point of reference in Rome for new non-figurative research. While he turned his personal artistic research towards abstraction, with the cellular motifs created in 1949 and the automatic prints of surrealist inspiration, he also presented himself as a sensitive interpreter of the new informal explorations in Rome: it was Cagli who presented the first abstract chains of signs by Capogrossi, who had already been his companion during the phase of plastic primordialism, at the Galleria del Secolo in Rome in January 1950. It was precisely Cagli’s modernist turn, which was moreover discontinuous and never definitive, that did not convince Berman, who remained throughout his life loyal to a figurative and metaphysical vocabulary.

His claim to be “out of synch” and unclassifiable, but immersed in his own dream world on the ruins of a vanished classicism, led Berman to reaffirm his distance from modernist research. In November 1955, Berman offered his solidarity to Clerici – who complained of an unsatisfactory personal success – and spoke against the urge “to label everything as avant-garde, use abstract formulas, etc., etc.” on the part of many museums, collectors and so-called intellectuals. In support of this, he cited a personal example involving his own American critical patron and “dear and faithful friend”: James Thrall Soby. Soby had been his first major client, met through Levy: he had bought 20-30 paintings,²² and was a loyal friend, at least until the early 1940s. In fact, Soby and Levy had a commercial partnership to support the neo-Romantic painter Eugene Berman, from 1932 to 1943²³.

Now things had changed, continued Berman in 1955: “He no longer invites me to his home, he doesn’t answer letters or questions that are merely technical and professional and he keeps my paintings, except for maybe one or two, in the cellar! The Museum of Modern Art, which has five or six of my paintings (all given to the Museum as gifts – none were purchased!) has only one on display. It didn’t even want to accept the last one, also given by Soby several years ago, and a big argument almost broke out!”²⁴ In 1972 Berman attributed this betrayal to the influence of Alfred Barr.²⁵ The neo-Romantics were less fortunate in the United States after the Second World War, and this reflected the progressive affirmation of Abstract Expressionism. The modernist critic of reference, Clement Greenberg, for instance, did not appreciate such an “impure” art for stylistic reasons, as it was grounded in figuration and, moreover, had a citationist nature; he also openly railed against the neo-Romantics’ connections to fashion and high society, not to speak out against the open homosexuality of some of them (Bérard and Tchelitchev).²⁶

The situation in Italy was somewhat different, here the debates between realists and abstractionists were intertwined with the establishment of different lines of informal research in the various Italian centres. Due to its eclectic nature, L’Obelisco was the first gallery in Italy to intercept this neo-Romantic and Surrealist wave and revival, and to support, until the end of the 1950s, a series

²¹ Ibidem.

²² Berman to Clerici, November 11th, 1955 (FCA). See also: “Oral history interview with Eugene Berman by Paul Cummings”, June 3-October 23, 1972, American Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC (henceforth OHI).

²³ Oliver Tostmann, “Collecting Modern Art in Hartford: James Thrall Soby, the Wadsworth Atheneum, and Surrealism”, in *Networking Surrealism in the USA. Agents, Artists, and the Market*, Julia Drost, Fabrice Flahutez, Anne Helmreich, Martin Schieder (eds.), Paris-Heidelberg: DFK-Universität Heidelberg, 2019, pp. 87-87. Tostmann asserts that according to Lynes, Soby had a 49 percent business interest in the Levy Gallery, “but stayed in the background.” When Soby became a member of the Advisory Committee at MoMA in 1940, he sold his interest back to Levy (ivi, note 24, p. 84).

²⁴ Berman to Fabrizio Clerici, November 26th, 1955

²⁵ OHI, October 20th and October 23th, 1972.

²⁶ Michael Duncan (ed.), *High Drama. Eugene Berman and the Legacy Of The Melancholic Sublime* [exhibition catalogue], San Antonio, Texas, The McNay Art Museum, New York and Manchester: Hudson Hill Press, p.10.

of researches into Italian fantastic art which, for various reasons, both cultural and political, had not succeeded in establishing itself in Italy before the war.²⁷

Berman's participation therefore seems entirely consequential. In his self-presentation for his solo exhibition at L'Obelisco in 1959,²⁸ the Russian artist nevertheless aimed to clarify his individual position, rejecting all the labels that had been attributed to him at different times: neo-Humanist, neo-Romantic, surrealist. In defining himself as an Italian Stendhal – or, rather, Roman, Venetian, Vicentine or Neapolitan – Berman was also defending both the great art of the past and its “poetic destruction” for the purpose of a new creation. Like the great architects of the past, Berman defined himself as an “inventor”. However, he also emphasised that he was an artist of the 20th century: whereby, for example, his “linear composition was no less precise, calculated and controlled than an abstract painting by Mondrian”, with reference to his painting of the ruins of Paestum; also, his “attention to matter, texture, organic and clay-like modelling is very similar to the search for matter and texture of young French and Italian painters”, visible in his views of coliseums, amphitheatres and other more recent paintings.²⁹ One of the critics most sensitive to a fantastic and visionary tendency in Italy, and Berman's first reference in Italy, Raffaele Carrieri, had indeed grasped this element.

From Reality to Imagination: The Illustrations for Raffaele Carrieri's *Viaggio in Italia*

While his exhibitions in Italy remained limited due to logistical difficulties until he moved to Rome in 1958³⁰, Berman worked in parallel on a number of editorial projects. His privileged interlocutor was Raffaele Carrieri, a poet, critic and journalist from Puglia who later moved to Milan. In his book *Arte Fantastica* of 1939, he was the first to attempt to define a tradition of Italian Fantastic art as a forerunner and alternative to Surrealism.³¹ Going back to the Italian Primitives of the 15th century, through Tiepolo, Arcimboldi and popular art, to Futurism and Metaphysics, Carrieri reconstructed the “plastic imagination of the Italians”, that is, the ability to render imagination concretely through shapes and colours. In his overview, Carrieri showed an insightful conception of the idea of plastic fantasy which, while including the great Italian avant-gardes, placed it beyond an alternative between modernism and tradition understood as a schematic opposition between abstraction and figuration.³²

It was Carrieri who wrote the text for Berman's first Italian editorial venture, the 1951 limited edition of lithographs titled *Viaggio in Italia*, published by Fornasetti [Fig. 2].

²⁷ Tulino, *La Galleria L'Obelisco. Surrealismo e arte fantastica*.

²⁸ Berman, “Appunti per un autoritratto”, in *Berman. Disegni guazzi tempere inchiostri 1954-1959* [exhibition catalogue], Rome, Galleria L'Obelisco, 1959.

²⁹ Berman, “Appunti per un autoritratto”.

³⁰ Berman, “Appunti per un autoritratto”. In addition to the those mentioned in the text, an exhibition of Berman's works held in 1950 at the Ala Napoleonica in Venice is reported.

³¹ Tulino, *La Galleria L'Obelisco. Surrealismo e arte fantastica*, pp.19-22.

³² See Carrieri, *Pittura e scultura d'avanguardia in Italia (1890-1950)*, Milano: Edizioni della Conchiglia, 1950. He would dedicate a monograph to Futurism in 1961, at a relatively early date for the rediscovery of the movement.



Fig. 2. *Viaggio in Italia*, text by Raffaele Carrieri, illustrations by Eugene Berman, Milan, Fornasetti 1951 (frontispiece)

In 1956 the same critic edited the second precious edition, *Mozartiana*,³³ and the introduction to the exhibition *Omaggio a Mozart* held at the Galleria L’Ariete in Milan between January and February. On the occasion of the publication of the last two works Carrieri spent six months in Berman’s “marvellous workshop”, where he was able to observe how behind each picture there was “an encyclopaedia of images, fragments and details that accumulate on the tables and in the rooms where Berman works frantically: frantically until he reaches perfection”.³⁴ Carrieri noted that: “Berman appropriates Epochs, Styles, Places, Semblances, Appearances. Through Berman’s scenic creations, Music becomes image and visible space: it becomes colour and form.” Each drawing, different from the other, became a musical variation on the theme, a stage in an inner journey through remote real and imaginary epochs.

However, it was the theme of the “journey to Italy” that presented Berman with a lasting source of artistic inspiration. His research culminated in the 1956 volume *Imaginary Promenades in Italy* for Pantheon Books, which is a sort of artistic testament to his creative relationship with the country.

On 27 March 1951, Berman wrote to Cagli that the book he was working on with Carrieri and Fornasetti would not be ready by April, but did not know what the reasons for such a delay were, as communication with them had been “very irregular and unsatisfactory”.³⁵ The letter reveals that an exhibition at the Milione with his illustrations was being also planned. It is not known how Berman came into contact with the other partners in this venture, but probably Clerici was the connection also in this case. Carrieri, Fornasetti and Clerici shared a visionary and almost Surrealist, erudite and refined *sensiblerie*, matured in Milan in the 1930s and 1940s and influenced by Savinio. Carrieri, who curated Clerici’s first solo exhibition in 1943 and his first monograph in 1955, had also exerted

³³ *Mozartiana*, original lithographs by Eugène Berman; text by Raffaele Carrieri: Milan: Beatrice d’Este, 1956.

³⁴ *Omaggio a Mozart* [exhibition catalogue], Milan, Galleria L’Ariete 1956.

³⁵ Berman to Cagli, March, 27th, 1951, published in *Corrado Cagli e il suo magistero*, p. 275.

an important influence on Fornasetti, an eccentric artist with a protean talent much admired by Giò Ponti.³⁶ Also, Carrieri, Clerici and Fornasetti had already collaborated on several editorial projects.³⁷

In *Viaggio in Italia*, Carrieri began by comparing Berman to Poussin, Callot and Claude Lorraine, who had come to Rome with an idea based on books and treatises and who, on arriving, experienced a splitting sensation, the feeling they found themselves “in the reverse of places, people and things.”³⁸ “Places had consumed Time over millennia, and everyone who arrived chose an era rather than a season. Nature favoured all sorts of illusionism.”³⁹ Thus a dual scenario opens up, where reality and fantasy inextricably reflect each other and draw the boundaries of the scene in which Berman, “preceded by the Muses and chased by woodworms, visits the Provinces of Silence and Restlessness.”⁴⁰ In Carrieri’s poetic prose, Berman’s figures, before being characters in an imaginary tragedy, were statues which, once thrown out of the rooms for which they were conceived, mourned their lost divinity by covering their faces with their hair so as not to be recognised. This is how the author interprets the figures with their backs turned or their faces covered, which recur in Berman’s work as emotional echoes of a sentiment that dominates his work: melancholy.⁴¹ Other variations of this sort of Warburgian *pathos formeln* are the wayfarer, the sleeping man or the figure protecting himself from adversity, embodied in *Viaggio in Italia* by the silhouettes of the rivers in Bernini’s Piazza Navona Fountain [Fig. 3].⁴²



Fig. 3. *Viaggio in Italia*, text by Raffaele Carrieri, illustrations by Eugene Berman, Milan, Fornasetti 1951, pp. 12-13

Carrieri sees in Berman’s work an unequivocal similarity with de Chirico’s solitude of signs and with the idea of painting as revelation. “In Eugenio Berman’s Italian evening, as in de Chirico’s metaphysical evening, anything can happen... Eugenio Berman’s images, like those of de Chirico, have no logical sequence. They do not follow one another: they manifest themselves from the inside out. They are revelations.”⁴³ Different times and spaces are stratified in the scenes reconstructed by

³⁶ Patrick Mauriès, *Fornasetti. La follia pratica*, Turin: Allemandi 1992, p. 89.

³⁷ For the Fornasetti editions Raffaele Carrieri had introduced *Bestiario* by Fabrizio Clerici and Leoncillo Leonardi (1941), and the portfolio *Dieci litografie di Fabrizio Clerici e uno scritto di Alberto Savinio* (1942). In 1951 Fornasetti would edit *Lunario dell’anno 1951* by Fabrizio Clerici.

³⁸ Carrieri, *Viaggio in Italia*, Milano, Piero Fornasetti, 1951, p.8.

³⁹ Carrieri, *Viaggio in Italia*, pp. 8-9.

⁴⁰ Carrieri, *Viaggio in Italia*, p. 12.

⁴¹ Duncan, *High Drama*.

⁴² Carrieri, *Viaggio in Italia*, pp. 12 and 14.

⁴³ Carrieri, *Viaggio in Italia*, pp.15-16.

Berman, as Irene Brin also noted following in the footsteps of Julien Levy.⁴⁴ Cagli also highlighted the peculiar temporality in Berman's work, full of admiration. It resonated somehow with Cagli's reflections on the fourth dimension: "What I would like to honour above all here, more than his inventions and his mastery, more than his vast mythology of melancholic and desperate beings, is this aspect, unique to Berman, which reveals itself in the avoidance of time or in making time and many different times a support that hold up the spirit of a mental, heroic and enamoured painting."⁴⁵

In Carrieri's erudite poetic walk along Berman's sources of inspiration, that is a fitting counterbalance to the artist's real and imaginary wanderings,⁴⁶ the writer also traces the cursive spatiality of the sign to a series of antecedents, from Guardi through the Impressionists to Matisse. Carrieri draws a musical comparison, according to which "Berman dialogues with Guardi in the 'pizzicato' register; again, Guardi is the harp and spinet, while Berman is a contrabass in a metaphysical key."⁴⁷ The rarefied nature of the sign is particularly evident in Berman's *Capricci*, a genre that in painting as in music indicates an unusual, bizarrely imaginative composition. The two *Capricci* included in the illustrations of *Viaggio in Italia* translate his favourite architecture into short dynamic strokes, almost into dots that seem to compose themselves over time, one point after another, only to unravel in an airy, impalpable vision [Fig. 4].⁴⁸



Fig. 4. Eugene Berman, *Capriccio*, in *Viaggio in Italia*, Milan, Fornasetti 1951, p. 48

⁴⁴ Irene Brin writes: "at the time of his first trips to Italy Berman was discouraged, because in each canvas he wanted to collect far more things than he could see, through his window, from a single point of view. Then he tried a different strategy: he drew from observation what interested him and then transported the different elements in pictures, using mainly his memory. It was de Chirico, as Julien Levy noted, who suggested he try this method: 'De Chirico, in his innocent, somnambulist way, had been able to arrange in a single painting apparently disparate elements of space and time'": Irene Brin, "Eugène Berman e l'Italia", in *Domus*, VII, 1949, p.33. See also Julien Levy, *Eugene Berman*, New York and London: American Studio Books, 1946, p.VII.

⁴⁵ Cagli, preface to *Prima mostra in Italia di Eugene Berman*.

⁴⁶ Berman, *Imaginary Promenades in Italy*, New York, Pantheon Books 1956.

⁴⁷ Carrieri, *Viaggio in Italia*, p.19.

⁴⁸ Carrieri, *Viaggio in Italia*, figg. pp. 48 and 51.

Back to Reality

Combining the different architectural typologies of his repertoire inspired by ancient treatises (Vitruvius, Serlio, Pacioli, Alberti, Palladio and others) with repeated travels to Italian cities, Berman rearranged the memory of the places he visited into fantastic visions. With a sort of *Ars combinatoria* comprising bell towers, palaces, fountains and statues, he sketched visions that were real and imaginary at the same time, plausible in their details and unreal on the whole. The result is a sense of familiarity one has looking at squares, palaces or statues, that is never complete; in other words, the effect is a disturbance that makes it impossible to fully recognise experiences. Berman was well aware of this, and in 1956 he wrote: “To paraphrase an expression often used in the presentation of movies: Any similarities between these drawings and specific places, sites and monuments which the viewer may be tempted to identify is almost purely accidental.”⁴⁹ However, a fundamental means of activating Berman’s creative imagination is travel, the experience of seeing the remains of the grandiose past come alive on the spot, which triggers a journey in time. This was in fact the profound motivation for his “journey to Italy”, made permanent by his move to Rome. His creative procedure shows how important seeing places first hand was developed by Berman during his first stay in Mexico: he photographed places of interest and assembled the photos in albums, adopting a method for collecting and cataloguing already experimented with in his repertoire of set designs.⁵⁰ In this case, however, as Berman points out, inspiration from life was not fundamental, it was enough to travel in museums and books.⁵¹ In order to create Art, on the other hand, it was necessary to romantically activate a *Sehnsucht* starting from ruins, from what remains of them today; it was necessary to breathe in the “aura” of the past in order to trigger the recovery of those lost moments. Romanticism, however, experiences comebacks depending on historical circumstances. Travelling to Italy had become fashionable again during the Second World War, also and perhaps above all for international visitors. The image of Italy as an open-air repository of a magnificent civilisation that had been destroyed, as the world had been devastated by the Second World War, was widespread in American perceptions. As early as 1940 Soby wrote about Berman: “Under the terrible reality of the war, the Romantic revival gains in force and relevancy. Berman’s landscapes of ruin, which once seemed to belong to another world, are now the bitter theme of contemporary newsreels.”⁵²

The idea of reconstruction, or of an Italian Renaissance, was also the basis for the various policies of American cultural support that culminated in the Marshall Plan, and touristic interest in Italy was once again driving international Grand Tours. One example is *Rome and a Villa*, the book written in 1952 by the American Eleanor Clarke during her stay in Rome and illustrated by Berman.⁵³ The images convey Clarke’s “long journey through time, space and events” in the eternal city with an unquestionably personal touch. With its monumental stratification, the city evokes historical figures from different eras, as well as travellers of the past and present, who mingle with today’s folkloristic inhabitants in a crowd that is chaotic and surprisingly vital. Gaspero del Corso and Irene Brin were among the first to notice this interest on the part of the Americans at the time when Berman’s volume was published. In January 1952, the exhibition *Viaggio in Italia* inaugurated at L’Obelisco: among the twenty authors chosen, all of whom were Italian (apart from the Slovenian Music), the name of Berman stood out. He also had the honour of illustrating the cover with *Souvenir d’Italie* [Fig. 5].

⁴⁹ Berman, *Imaginary Promenades in Italy*.

⁵⁰ Lindsay Harris, “The Photographic Archive As Self-Portrait: The Eugene Berman Collection”, in Barbara Cinelli and Antonello Frongia (ed.), *Archivi fotografici e arte contemporanea in Italia*, Milano: Scalpendi 2019, 167-183.

⁵¹ OHI 19th October, 1972.

⁵² James Thrall Soby, *Introduction*, Farmington, Conn., October 1940, clipping pasted in the scrapbook *Eugene Berman. Imaginary Rome II* (AAR Photographic Archive).

⁵³ Schiaffini, “It’s A Roman Holiday For Artists”.

The Tower of Pisa seen from above, animated, placed next to the cathedral and other fragments of Italian palaces and squares, resembled a touristic invitation to take part in the Grand Tour to visit the country and its capital, where the gallery would be awaiting its clients and where Berman would have chosen to settle, making Italy the centre of his life and work.



Fig. 5. Eugene Berman, *Souvenir d'Italie*, cover of the exhibition brochure *Viaggio in Italia*, L'Obelisco Gallery, January 1952

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