

## Information on

Eugene Berman  
American, born in Russia, 1899–1972  
*Cassandra*, 1942–43  
Oil on canvas, 50 1/8 x 39 1/8 in.  
Gift of Robert L. B. Tobin  
1982.79



## Subject Matter

The story of Cassandra appears in *The Iliad*. According to legend, Apollo, the god of the sun with power over other gods and humans, fell in love with Cassandra, daughter of King Priam. To win her favor, Apollo conferred upon her the gift of foretelling the future on her promise to yield herself to him. Angered when Cassandra refused to fulfill her part of the bargain, Apollo could not withdraw his divine gift so he took from her the power of persuasion. Cassandra could foretell the future, but no one would listen to her. When she tried to warn the Trojans to “beware of Greeks bearing gifts”, they would not heed her warning and were defeated when the Greeks sent a huge sculpture of a horse filled with Greek soldiers into the city of Troy. Berman’s painting shows Cassandra as she watches the flames of the destruction of Troy.

While the pose of Berman’s Cassandra is particularly appropriate to her story, a central female figure was a device he used often; several works during the period 1940–46 show a woman with her back to the viewer, looking into the canvas or off toward the horizon. Often these women are mythological figures in a high tragic vein.

Arched forms around Cassandra echo the shape of her head. The drapery and her garments repeat the soft tendrils of her hair, which are a counterpoint to the hard, jagged edges of the wooden structures. Bones and other natural objects, possibly implements of divination, rest on the wooden structure behind her. Berman’s signature—E.B. in an oval—appear attached to the front of the wooden structure.

## About the Artist

Russian-born painter and stage designer Eugene Berman was the son of a banker father and an artistically inclined mother. After his father’s death in 1907, he spent five years, with his brother Leonid, in schools in Germany and Switzerland. With his mother’s remarriage to his father’s brother, he returned to St. Petersburg. Fascinated by theatre and dance at an early age, Eugene attended productions of Mozart operas and the Ballets Russes, including performances by the dancer Vaslav Nijinsky who lived in the same building as Berman’s family. Through family friend who was an architect, Berman developed an early interest in all things Italian: architecture, art, opera, and ballet. The inclusion of Italianate architecture in his paintings is a hallmark of Berman’s style.

After the Soviet revolution, Berman fled with his family to Paris in 1918. Enrolling at the Académie Ranson, he became friends with a group of painters that were later called the Neo-Romantics. With financial support from his family, Berman traveled throughout Italy, seeking out works by Italian Renaissance masters and refining his drafting skills through sketchbook drawings of everything that interested him without concern for how or when these sketches would become a painting. When he returned to Paris, he painted transmuted memories, often retaining the somber blue palette that he used in half nocturnal reveries. Many recognized his paintings of dim interiors and melancholic piazzas as the strongest works of the Neo-Romantic painters.

In 1936, because of the political advances of Adolf Hitler and Nazism in Europe, Berman immigrated to the United States, where curators and dealers were captivated by the Neo-Romantics. He executed a series of mural decorations, beginning with his apartment. After a lifetime of making drawings and models for imaginary stage settings, as well as incorporating theatrical architecture in his paintings, Berman became an acclaimed theatrical designer for classical ballet and opera, working for, among others, the Metropolitan Opera Company.

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**About the Artist** continued

In the early 1940s, Berman painted a series of heroines from classical mythological, many with their backs to the viewer, symbols of mourning surrounded by destruction yet transcending their plight. The model for these images was Ona Munson, an actor he met in 1937 and eventually married. When she committed suicide, Berman returned to Rome where he lived the rest of his life.

**Quote from the Artist**

*Almost everything today requires re-examination, re-discovery of values and new experimentation, even when the acknowledged purpose is to go back for inspiration to a formality of art forms created in previous epochs... Never before did we have so much material to confront us, to confuse us, and to drive us to despair.*

Quoted by Michael Duncan in catalogue for *High Drama: Eugene Berman and the Legacy of the Melancholic Sublime*, from *Saturday Review*, October 27, 1957, p. 47.

**Strategies for Tours**

**Primary Grades (ages 6–8):** What do you see? What do you think this painting is about? What feelings do the colors give you? If the artist had used different colors [green, yellow, or blue], what would the effect be? [Tell the story for students.]

**Upper Elementary (ages 9–11):** [Begin your discussion with your back to the group. Ask what would make it easier for them to hear and understand what you are saying.] Why would the artist choose to turn Cassandra away from the viewer? What do you see that makes you say that? [Tell Cassandra's story.]

**Middle School/High School (ages 12–18):** [Use questions above.] Think about times when you have not been listened to. How did you feel about that? [Tell Cassandra's story.] How must Cassandra have felt when the Trojans did not listen? Since Berman was a designer of stage sets, look at the painting for ways the space in this painting are like a stage design

**Adults:** What do you see? Does anyone know the story of Cassandra from *The Iliad*? [Let them tell the story, and fill in details if necessary. Discuss Berman's life and career as a stage designer.]

**Sources Worth Consulting**

Duncan, Michael, and Blake, Jody. *High Drama: Eugene Berman and the Legacy of the Melancholic Sublime*. San Antonio, Texas: The Marion Koogler McNay Art Museum; and Manchester, Vermont: Hudson Hills Press, 2004.

Levy, Julien, ed. *Eugene Berman*. New York: American Studio Books, n.d.

Tobin, Robert L. B. *Eugene Berman and the Theatre of Melancholia*. San Antonio, Texas: McNay Art Museum, 1984.