

# BRUNO CIVITICO

*American Classicism*



THE BO BARTLETT CENTER  
COLLEGE OF THE ARTS, COLUMBUS STATE UNIVERSITY

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## BRUNO CIVITICO'S AMERICAN CLASSICISM

*By David Carbone*

**D**uring the 1960's a number of important figurative painters rejected the prevalent modes of abstraction, painterly expressionism, photography and consumer culture as a way of moving toward self-realization. They brought their knowledge of abstraction to working from life and began to re-examine the assumptions previous realists had readily accepted. In addition, the traditional discipline of figure drawing had essentially withered during the post-war era, a correlative effect of the growth of university art departments, fueled by the G.I. Bill. This was also a bi-product of the academization of abstraction. Furthermore, without a coherent American culture to draw from, each artist realized that he or she would have to forge a "personal tradition," creating a unique lineage of artists across time and cultures. This generation would re-invent objective approaches shorn of the sentimentality and bathos of illustration, social realism or semi-surrealism in order to successfully compete with the best abstraction.

Toward the end of the decade, Bruno Civitico began exhibiting post-painterly realist figures in New York. Throughout his career, Civitico's forms tend toward an extreme sculptural tactility—the presence of things—which holds the key to the expressiveness of his work. His earliest works showed a sympathy for the closely observed perceptual representation of Philip Pearlstein, building form through large shapes in pale-toned values. This way of modeling is distinctly modernist: opaque paint strokes in both the lights and shadows, painted in sharp focus on a large scale in a pared-down environment. This initially placed his work alongside other similarly "cool" figurative painters such as William Bailey, Gabriel Laderman, and Alfred Leslie.

A generation younger than the rest, Civitico quickly distinguished himself by developing an overt modernist classicism, quite unlike the kitschy classicism of the late nineteenth century. He boldly drew on Picasso's laconic neo-classical figures, stripping them of their lumpen comedy and instilling their simplified pink and grey bodies with a lyric animation in scenes of bathers by a lake. Civitico's work had quickly moved from perceptual observation to synthetic invention, set in landscapes

suffused by a soft luminosity that kept shadows close to the objects that cast them. His simplified descriptive brushwork dispensed with superfluous detail, delivered in a thick paste of direct touches, like Neil Welliver's contemporary landscapes. This emphasis on the painting itself as an object, draws attention to its underlying harmonic structure and intervals, to the modulation of space and light: essentially to its sense as a whole. This idyllic order—the painting's "music"—comes out of a distinct classical sensibility, an off-shoot of the counter culture to set against the brutality of the time.

In a canvas of 1972, before a cleared pasture of New England farmland: a comely naked youth holding reed pipes sits on a tree stump, absorbed in thought: the god Pan. Well, not quite the god of the Greeks, he has none of the usual attributes of a faun or a satyr, but he does claim music, and implicitly, its irrational potential to transform us, much as the painter is a transformer. It may be a symbolic portrait of Civitico the artist, a declaration of his ambition: to depict both the dream of Arcadia and its corresponding "trouble in paradise," inspired by retelling tales from Ovid, for his generation.

Throughout the seventies—his time in Portsmouth, New Hampshire—Civitico set many of his mythic tableaux in rooms of the colonial house that he had restored, connecting his classical impulse to the Puritan simplicity of the Federalist period: an American Classicism. Despite an increased attention to realist detail, Civitico composed with a keen attention to the interlocking relationships of large planes of tone derived from his study of works by Juan Gris, the "classical" cubist. This is especially evident in two of his most luminously sensuous depictions of Danaë and Io.

One of Civitico's most austere works, "The Testament of Eudamidas," is inspired by Poussin's famous work on the theme of moral responsibility. The story is taken from Lucian's dialogue of Stoic philosophy on friendship, "Toxaris." Civitico's modern version pays tribute both to his parents and indirectly his artist friend and mentor, the painter-theorist Gabriel Laderman. Civitico posed his father, as Eudamidas on his deathbed, dictating his will to a scribe, bequeathing responsibility for his mother and

daughter, depicted on the far side of the bed, to two close friends, who will subsequently rise to their moral charge.

What is startlingly fresh here, is Civitico's depiction of the room where the scene is played out. While the wall on the right runs straight back, setting the interior as rectangular, Civitico curves the space from the right to the left so that everything depicted recedes obliquely, as if we, like the artist, have just entered the room and are taking in each moment, turning our head and eyes to survey the scene. Thus, Civitico is directing our exploration of the painting as a subjective experience. Entering the room moments before him, Civitico painted his girlfriend, bending forward as she approaches the bed, casting a foreboding shadow across the floor and onto the body of Eudamidas.

This way of mapping space is in accord with our bi-cameral vision and is central to the "new" in realism and was much discussed and written about by Laderman, whose name appears in a dedication to him held by the scribe in the far end of the room, depicting the artist himself. This work gives us a sense of Civitico's seriousness: a moral tale, not unlike a fairytale, in its pictorial conception.

In the mid-eighties, Civitico left New England for Charleston, South Carolina where he settled into another house near the harbor from the 1830's: this time it was a spacious neo-classical villa and an environment more suitable to an American born in Italy. Here, in this congenial southern atmosphere he has continued his subject pictures, portraits, landscapes, still lifes and his major commission, the Clemson University mural on the performing arts.

A recent painting, on view at the the exhibit's entrance, features a still life of three objects representing idealized geometric forms, set before an interior window that opens into another room and beyond through a second window to a flowering hedge. The objects are set out on a ledge, in an iconic format, suggesting a transformation from a solid sphere to a ball of twine, revealing voids in the shape of pentagons which come together as a solid in the third object, a dodecahedron; if the sphere represents ideas of completeness and acceptance it transitions to an idealized symbol

of the universe and Divine will. As we move from the sill of symbolic forms, and peer at and through the glass, we notice a severe distillation of realism that signals a more complex abstract meditation. In the window glass, distortions of the room, reflections of a bright window behind us play against two landscapes on the far wall; the effect produces a visual "stream of consciousness," not unlike cinematic montage. On the side wall above the fireplace Gabriel Laderman's painting "Homage to David" (1969) holds a place of honor. Echoing the composition of David's famous "Death of Marat", it was painted to honor the martyrdoms of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. Civitico has produced a superlative meditation on the transience of his life in art, its relation to Nature's illusions and underlying reality: it's a masterly summation. As a retrospective view, it is unique in the history of allegorical still lifes.

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Drawing is a way of thinking. It is a means of learning to understand through a creative act, in a unique process of contemplation, what it is that one sees or imagines. In drawing from life, a person comes to understand the endless varieties of natural beauty, especially in the diversity of human beings. Ultimately, drawing leads to empathy; as we draw, we forget ourselves and pay attention to something or someone and come to identify with what we see.

The drawings in the present exhibition are grouped in four sections: portraits, male figures, female figures and composition studies. The works range across decades of his working life and reflect some of Civitico's diverse pictorial interests. The mastery of these studies and sketches allows no erasure; all changes are part of what the artist shares with us, his process of analysis and conception, his felt thought.

In the earliest drawing, an adolescent self-portrait, the form of the head has an extreme sculptural presence with a minimum of modeling and a sense of independence and inwardness. In two seated figures, the highly sensitive use of red chalk, or conté crayon shows Civitico's ability to capture light revealing form in one, and the subtle modulation of atmosphere in the other.

In two essentially linear drawings, we are presented with a profile descending from Roman coins and in the other the contemplative motif of reading.

Careful articulation of anatomical knowledge is brought to our attention in the drawings of men because muscle, sinew and bone are generally more evident there than in women's bodies. A figure, drawn in black chalk, seated in profile and squared up for transfer to a painting brings a classical relief pose up to date, by reconceiving it from life. A three-quarter back view is a re-visitation of a mannerist pose full of complex foreshortening, wherein Civitico criticized his accomplished initial effort by making a quick second study to re-emphasize the inherent rhythms of the body that were somewhat obscured in the fuller analysis. These are poses that represent abstract personages, like river gods. Two other studies, one in red chalk and the other in pencil show Civitico's mastery of realist precision in relatively quick sketches. More quotidian and simply realist, such poses might have been used in paintings as bathers by the water's edge.

Unique in this group is a standing figure seen from the back, where the anatomical detail has been suppressed by a subtle modulation of light that shapes the figure into abstract form. One might even hazard a guess that this last figure seems androgynous, a study for an Adonis, or perhaps a slim hipped girl?

Yet there can be no ambiguity about the nubile figure in black chalk, a study for a Danaë, ripe with erotic tension. Two recumbent figures in red chalk, one facing us, the other turned away, show a careful realist examination of each body's subtle gesture, with the comparable freshness of a Watteau. Another red chalk drawing in a seated twisting pose returns us to the large shape-planes of a modernist classicism. The earliest drawing, in this group, shows a woman bending forward at some task. It is squared up for transfer to canvas and signals, in its planar relief, one of Civitico's sources, the 19th century French muralist Puvis de Chauvannes, from whom it may be a study.

Composition drawings are rarely made as an end in themselves, instead they embody steps along the way toward the realization of a painting. Often

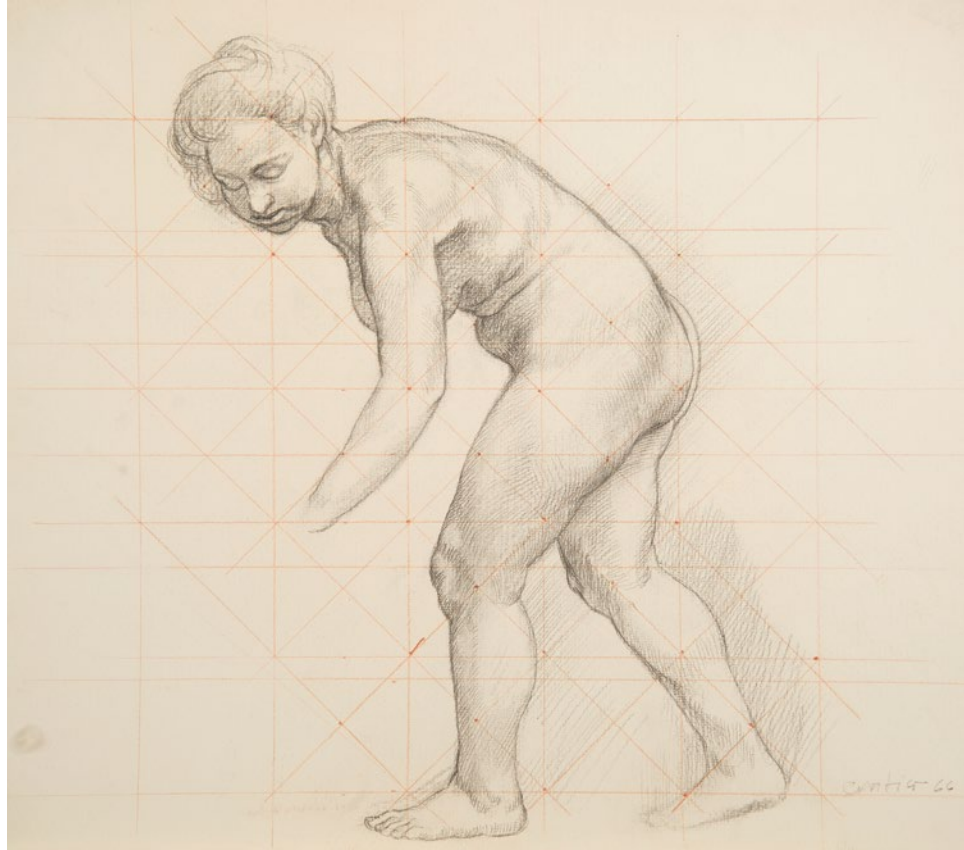
they are done in ink and wash to help focus the artist's purpose. Here we have selected five distinct types. One is a breezy sketch in ink of three women bathers set before a lake; even so, it suggests a moody atmosphere, like Corot's Cliché-verres. Another sheet holds two separate scenes, as a theatrical set designer might focus on the stage-like spaces between buildings and figures where some drama has yet to be set forth. In a third scene full of motion, the artist blocks out a group of figures circling in a Dionysian revel, done in a shorthand of broad masses and broken touches. Yet another drawing depicts a sylvan discovery and enables Civitico to judge the image's affect before taking it to canvas.

Less dramatic and less polished, but surely the most ambitious drawing here, Civitico has portrayed some two dozen figures in an Arcadian gathering, squared up for transfer. Here the intricate space of the picture is made from the complex interplay of the figures' gestures, creating a continuous arabesque that takes us around and through this imagined world, much as a choreographer creates a dance in space and time. It has been arrived at after numerous sketches and studies like the ones described above. Despite all the beautiful drawings that I have described before, it is this work, a final preparatory study, that embodies an achieved ambition of skill, intellect and vision that few figurative artists ever imagine, let alone reach.

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*David Carbone is a painter, critic and curator living in New York City. He has shown his work across the country and written for various print and on line publications. From 1992 to 2005, he could occasionally be heard on NPR's Morning Edition with David D'Arcy. He is a member of the Association Internationale des Critiques d'Art and Emeritus Professor of art at the University at Albany.*







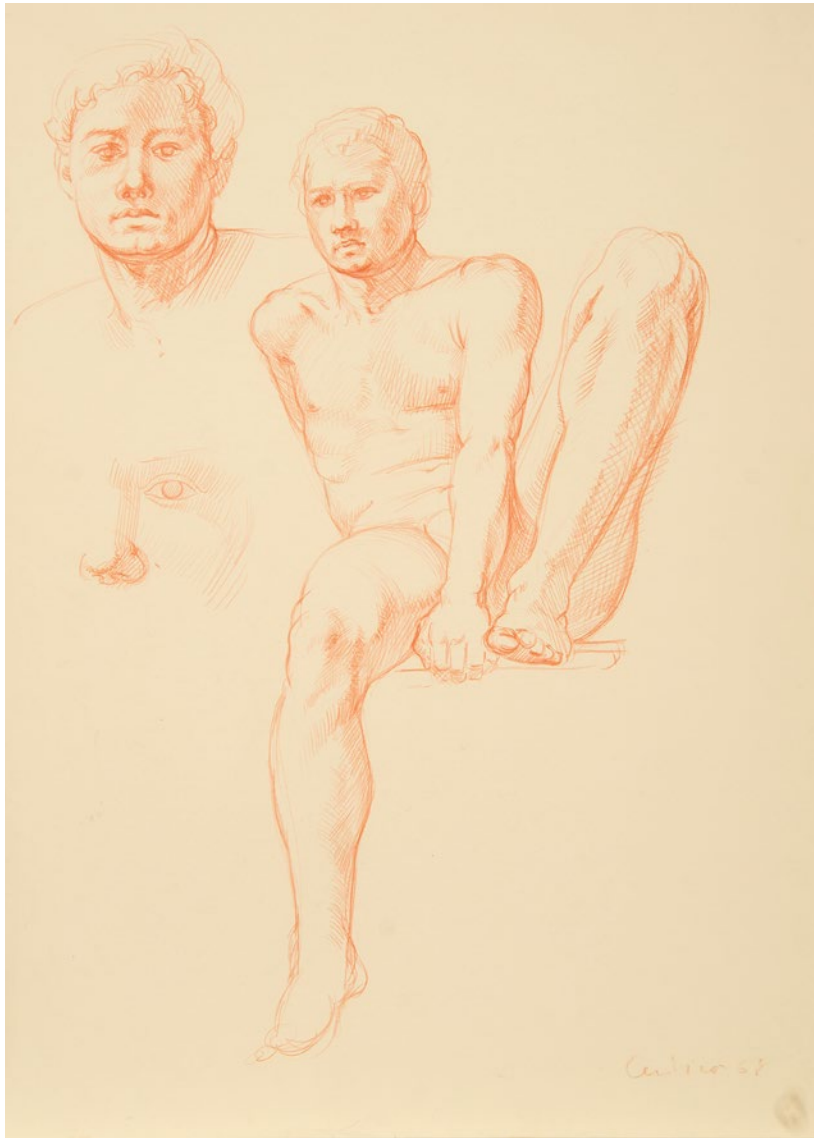




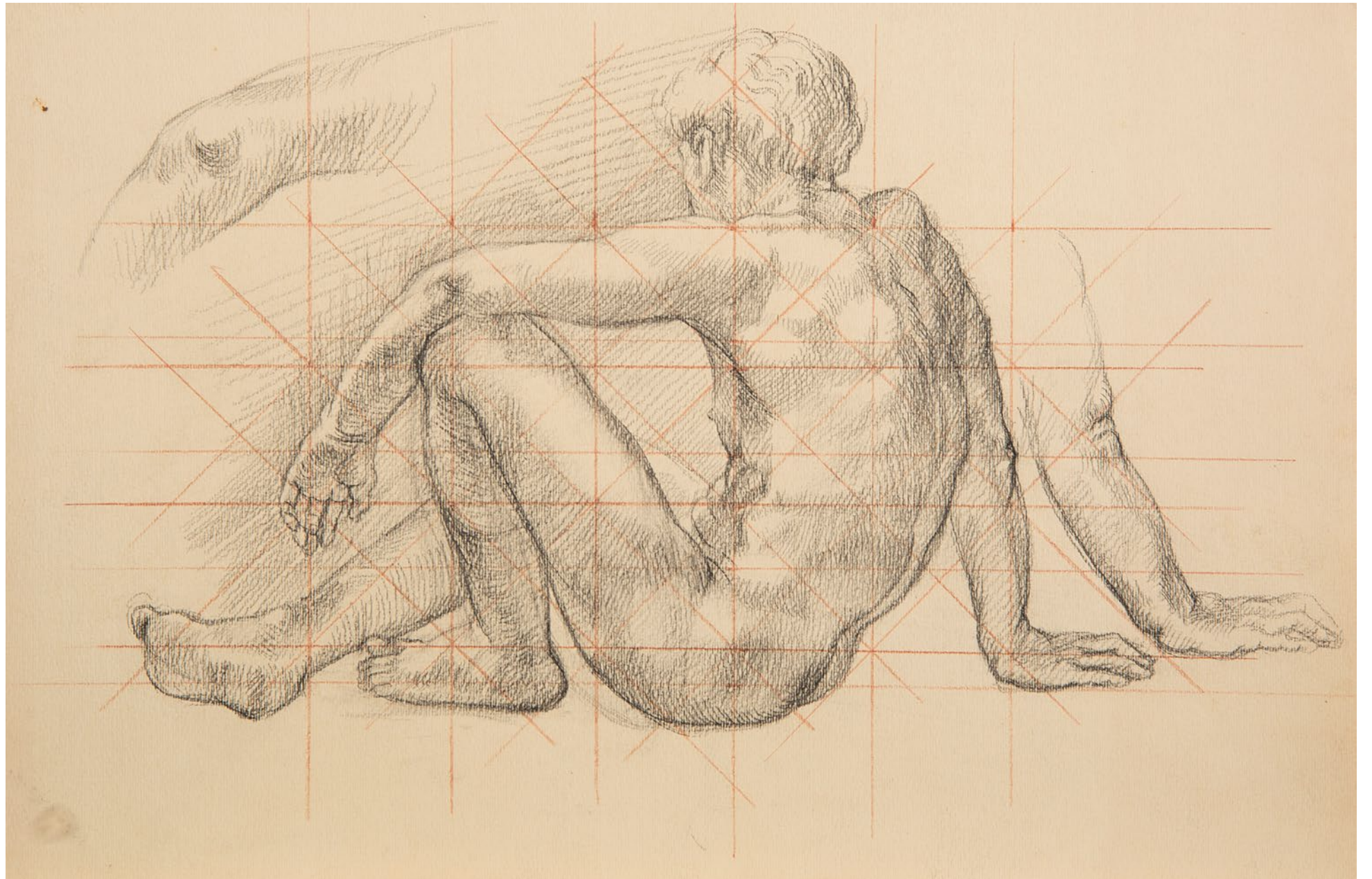










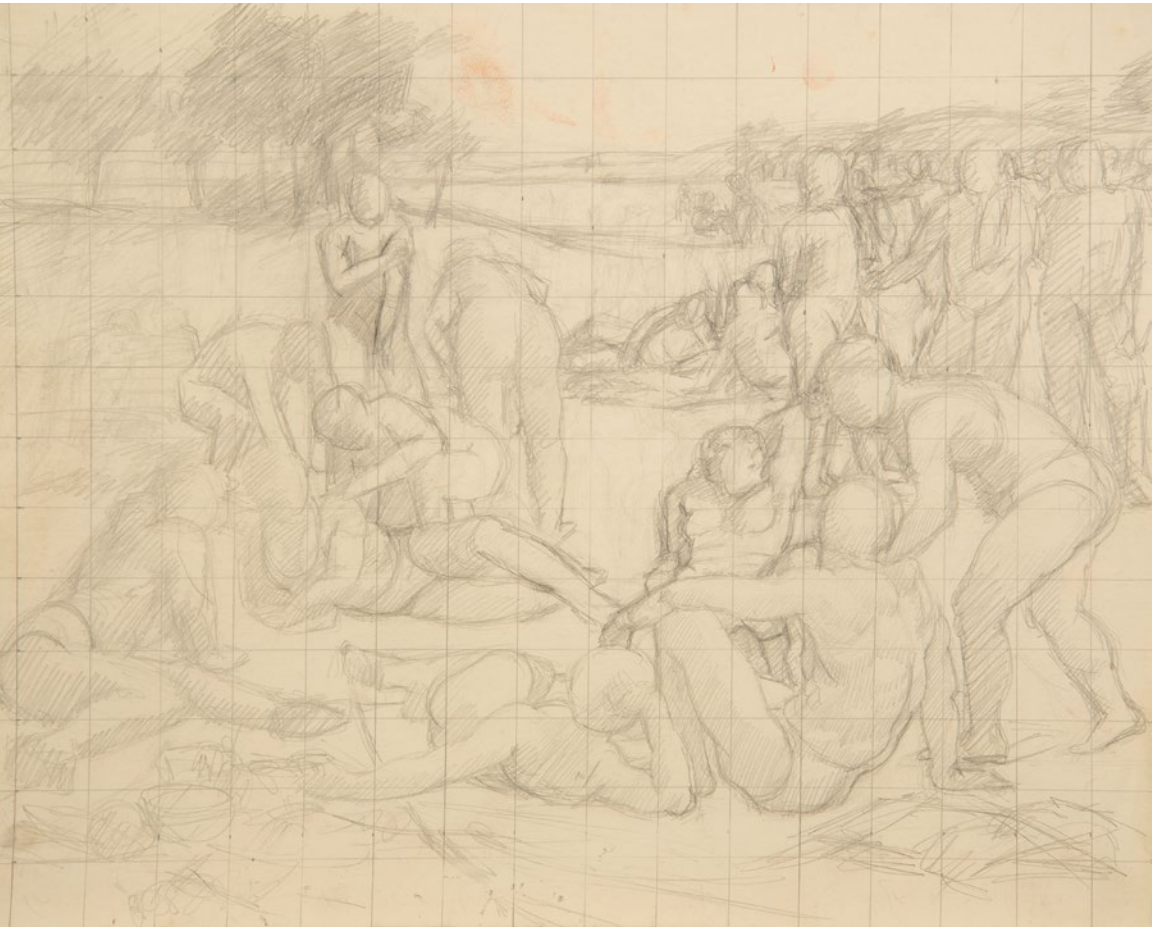












## IN MEMORIAM

Bruno Civitico  
1942-2019

Bruno Civitico was one of the leading artists and apologists for the revival of Classicism that emerged in the last decades of the 20th century. Civitico painted a wide range of subjects, including the classic themes of the figure, still life, and landscape, with styles ranging from perceptual realism, through classicism, to a highly individual Neo-Baroque Mannerism. His ability to render space was further accentuated by the use of multiple perspectives of his gently cubist inflected works. Whether a simple still life or an imaginative classical allegory, Civitico's works are the result of a dialogue between the past and the present, with each illuminating the other.

Bruno Civitico was born in Digano D'Istria, Italy in 1942 and died in Charleston, South Carolina in 2019. He emigrated to the United States with his parents at age nine, eventually earning a BA in Fine Arts from Pratt Institute and an MFA from Indiana University. He taught at Princeton University and The University of New Hampshire and moved to Charleston, South Carolina in 1987 to pursue painting full time. A recipient of an Ingram-Merrill Grant, The Louis Comfort Tiffany Prize for Painting, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, and a Guggenheim Fellowship, Civitico's many contributions to contemporary art are well documented in Charles Jenks *The New Classicism in Art and Architecture*, John Wards *The New Realism*, as well as countless articles and exhibition catalogs. In addition to his work as an artist, Civitico was the curator for an important exhibition that chronicled the influence of the new painting on American Art. *Landscape Painting 1960-1990: The Italian Tradition in American Art* was the featured exhibition at the 1990 Spoleto Festival USA at The Gibbs Museum in Charleston, South Carolina, illuminating the work of many of his peers and former students, both well known and under recognized.

Bruno Civitico's legacy is perpetuated through his writings, his many paintings in public and private collections across the country, and the work of his many students who have become teachers and prolific painters themselves.



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