



Edward E. Boccia

Postwar American Expressionist

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Curated by
Rosa Berland

Catalog for an exhibition at the
John D. Calandra Italian American Institute

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Visionary painter, poet, and fine-art professor Edward Eugene Boccia

(1921–2012) made approximately 1,500 works in his lifetime, including an innovative series of more than fifty monumental panel paintings that take as their subjects religion, mythology, the crisis of war, and an increasingly commodified world as well as autobiographical narratives about love, desire, and grief. The artist intended that his work serve a philosophical and religious function, and as such it represents a current of American painting not often studied in the history of twentieth-century visual practice.

Through the presentation of nearly thirty paintings, drawings, and sketchbooks (1957–1996) never before seen in New York City, this exhibition offers a view into the artist's practice and raises questions about how overlooked yet eminently creative and influential Italian American visual artists in the mid and late twentieth centuries offer a new way of looking at American experience.

While he began his early artistic training in New York City at the Art Students League and Pratt Institute, Edward E. Boccia was closely connected to inner circles of the postwar artistic and academic community in St. Louis, Missouri. Boccia had been recruited early in his career by Ken Hudson, who was instrumental in bringing other important artists to Washington University of St. Louis such as Philip Guston, Stephen Greene, and Max Beckmann. Renowned St. Louis collector of German Expressionism and philanthropist Morton D. May counted the young Boccia among his favorite contemporary artists, writing in 1967 to Ogden M. Pleissner, director of the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation:

I have been collecting Mr. Boccia's work for seventeen years. This includes literally hundreds of drawings and over 100 paintings. Among these are all of his triptychs, nine in number, which I consider to be his major contribution. They are majestic expressions of Boccia's drive for the fulfillment of self and world. They are epic, hieratic and cryptic. In a way, each triptych serves as a sum-total of this artist's evolving vision. His canvases that are not triptychs—and there are many because he is prolific—seem to find their ultimate destiny in each successive triptych. He has told me that he is nearing the completion of his tenth triptych, which I hope to see soon. It is interesting to note that he sometimes refers to these three-paneled compositions as symphonies— that is, symphonic in form and orchestration. (Morton D. May to Ogden M. Pleissner, April 21, 1967, Archives of the St. Louis Art Museum).

While we can trace some of the monumental scale and expression seen in Boccia's later work to the regional influence of the famous Midwestern mural painter Thomas Hart Benton, it was fellow Italian American artist Jon Corbino

who had taught Boccia at the Art Students League about the successful synthesis of heroic scale, gesture, and sculptural rendering. Joseph Stella's great paintings of the Brooklyn Bridge also inspired Boccia to begin taking apart his early abstract pictures and reassembling images that he intended to convey a spiritual energy. "Immediately upon walking up to it, the painting began to move. All of it was moving together as one spirit. It completely changed my view of painting in that moment. My entire schooling in painting fell away and I saw painting completely differently. I felt a mighty presence. I knew then that my painting would never be the same" (Boccia, paraphrased in a letter from Hillary Kapan to Rosa Berland, January 4, 2017).

It was not precisely the specifics in the painting that mattered, but the dynamics of the structuring in space that conveyed something of what he often called "The Great Mystery." "He also made clear that the bridge was, as an image, not the focus, but rather, the energy within it, an energy which he could now understand in the abstract and as a vital force, and not requiring traditional rendering. In fact, he said, it was the sacred within the image that sent me in a new direction. It opened me to a new way of thinking of painting, a new way of being a painter. It broke down—no it dissolved away—my barriers to abstraction and dynamic structuring" (H. Kapan to R. Berland, January 4, 2017).

And while we know how important Max Beckmann's work was to Boccia's development, if we are able to elucidate some of Boccia's struggles, we can see an element of what Joseph Campbell referred to as the hero's journey, or a venture into a miraculous world of devotion. However, these images and stories are told in the language of faith and the Italian tradition of the Mannerist and Baroque eras, through the lens of a diasporic experience with Catholic faith. This is an enduring theme—a sanctuary from his own struggles and those of the world, and an expression of the great tragedies and sacrifices found in life as modeled in the figures of Christ and God.

Nonetheless, in Boccia's work the meanings of these symbols, motifs, metaphors, and allegories are never transparent. The mystery found within each work holds your attention and draws you in, its narrative rarely simple, a chimera of sorts. Morton D. May wrote:

Certainly, for the past twenty years Mr. Boccia has searched, experimented, discovered and developed a unique world of imagery. He is now charging his work with extended maturity and great power. Many times in the past, when other artists pursued various popular "isms," Mr. Boccia held to his choice of a dynamic pictorial form. He maintains this kind of courage today. His forms are always imbued with emotion and define universal rather than subjective experiences. The rejection of popular idioms comes as a result of

deep creative compulsions and a commitment to the world as one having hope albeit in the midst of despair. (Morton D. May to Ogden M. Pleissner, April 21, 1967, Archives of the St. Louis Art Museum)

As a whole, this group of paintings, drawings, and sketchbooks expresses the artist's deep connection to the heritage of centuries of Italian artistic techniques. For many of the oil-on-canvas works, the artist used the Renaissance technique of monochrome underpainting to create three-dimensionality. His sketchbooks reveal the use of gestural drawing, a study of sculpture, the preparatory drawings allowing a genesis of new pictorial language inflected both by Modernism and by historic Italian artistic technique. In each work on view, we can study the practice of an artist whose way of working was one of intense experimentation with the formal qualities and atelier practices of Renaissance, Baroque, and Modernist artists to create expressive work that is both autobiographical and spiritual.

—Rosa Berland, Curator
Honorary Director of The Edward E. Boccia Artist Trust, St. Louis

About the Artist



Boccia in the studio, 1960

Edward Eugene Boccia was born to Italian parents in Newark, New Jersey, on June 22, 1921. From an early age, he loved to draw. He studied at the Newark School of Fine and Industrial Art, as well as at the Art Students League and the Pratt Institute in New York City. Boccia enlisted in the 603rd Engineer Camouflage, a specialized division during World War II, known as the Ghost Army, which created visual subterfuge to deceive the Nazis. During this time, Boccia continued to draw and sketch, and fellow Ghost Army soldier Arthur Singer wrote to his wife in 1944 of this work: "I've seen a lot of work that Contreras, Sihvonen, and Boccia have done—they are three of the best artists in the place and do amazingly sensitive work."

After the war, Boccia obtained a BSc (1948) and an MA (1952) from Columbia University in New York City. While studying for his MA, the artist served as dean of the Columbus Art School in Ohio, where he also taught painting and drawing and was an integral force in the dissemination of the Bauhaus methodology. In 1951, he began as assistant dean at the School of Fine Arts, Washington University, St. Louis, a school known for its famous faculty, including the recently departed Guston and Beckmann. Boccia taught at the university for more than thirty years, fostering generations of artists while continuing to develop his own body of independent work.

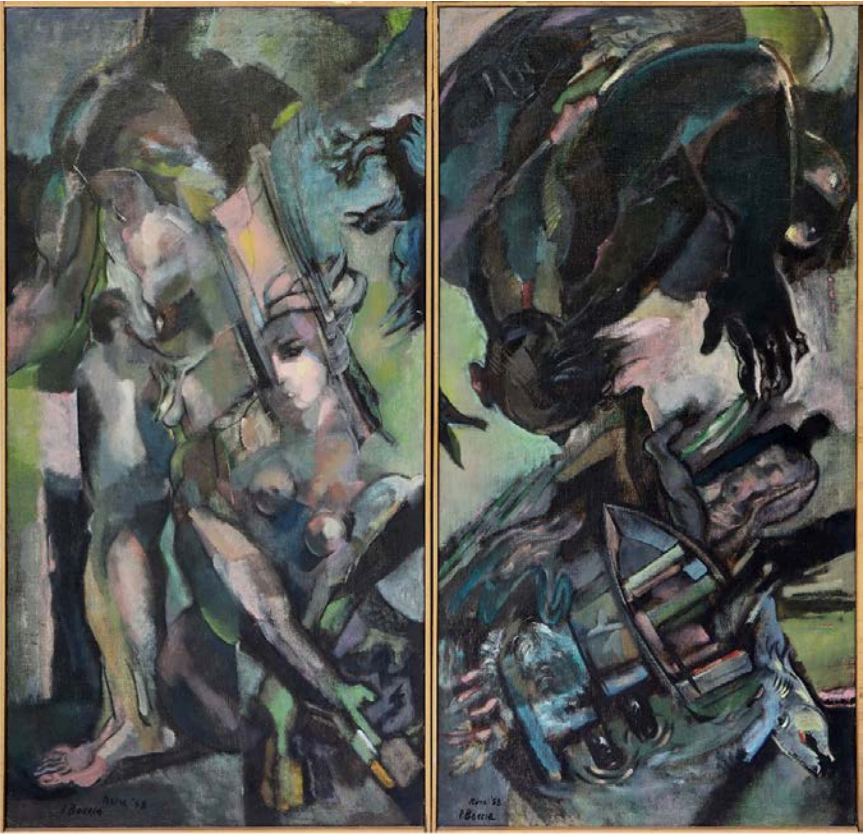
Of his influence, Petruta Lipan, director of Museums and Galleries at St. Louis University, notes that the artist was "a significant member of the Expressionist movement, known for masterfully reconciling tone and color."

During his lifetime, Boccia's work was avidly collected and today is found in more than 600 private collections as well as at international museums, including the Museu De Montserrat, Montserrat, Spain; the National Gallery–Alexander Soutsos Museum, Athens, Greece; Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri; Wilbur D. May Museum, Reno, Nevada; NSU Museum, Fort Lauderdale, Florida; The Lowe Art Museum, Coral Gables, Florida; Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University of St. Louis, Missouri; Saint Louis University Museum of Art, St. Louis, Missouri; Museum of Contemporary Religious Art, St. Louis, Missouri; University Museum of Contemporary Art, Amherst, Massachusetts; Hood Museum of Art, Hanover, New Hampshire; Walsh Gallery, South Orange, New Jersey; Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art, Manhattan, Kansas; Ackland Art Museum, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; and the Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, Texas.

Thank you to everyone who has supported the development and installation of this exhibition, including: Silvina Arismendi; The Art Students League of New York; Aleks Berland; Dr. Kevin Berland; Lisa Berland; Rosangela Briscese; Dr. Alice Boccia; Stephanie Cassidy; Lisa Cicchetti; Siân Gibby; Hillary Kapan, Scott Kerr, McCaughen and Burr, St. Louis; Steven Leible; Stephanie Ruggiero Markovic; Audrey Michlig; Tiffany Miller; Rosaria Musco; Ksenia Nouril, Carmine Pizzirusso; Dr. Joseph Sciorra; and Dr. Anthony Tamburri.

Inquiries about individual artworks may be directed to the Edward E. Boccia Artist Trust at <https://edward-boccia.com/>.

Selected images



Dreams of a Sea Myth, 1958



Self Portrait, 1958



Death in Sorrento, 1969



Five Disciples, 1977



Last Supper, 1977



St. Jerome, 1989



Bathers by the Sea, Homage to Max Beckmann, 1995



The Flesh Eaters, 1996

Exhibition Checklist

1. *The Flesh Eaters*, 1996

Oil on canvas triptych

6 x 9 feet

The Edward E. Boccia Artist Trust,
St. Louis

2. *Bathers by the Sea, Homage to Max Beckmann*, 1995

Oil on canvas

44 x 30 inches

The Art Students League of New York

3. *St. Jerome*, 1989

Oil on canvas

48 x 32 inches

Molloy University, Rockville Centre,
New York

4. *Old Glove, No. 1*, 1983

Pen and ink on paper

14 x 18 inches

The Edward E. Boccia Artist Trust,
St. Louis

5. *Old Glove, No. 2*, 1983

Pen and ink on paper

14 x 18 inches

The Edward E. Boccia Artist Trust,
St. Louis

6. *Glove with Bones and String, No. 4*, 1983

Pen and ink on paper

14 x 18 inches

The Edward E. Boccia Artist Trust,
St. Louis

7. *Glove Turning into a Hand, No. 6*, 1983

Pen and ink on paper

14 x 18 inches

The Edward E. Boccia Artist Trust,
St. Louis

8. *Glove with a Profile, No. 7*, 1983

Pen and ink on paper

14 x 18 inches

The Edward E. Boccia Artist Trust,
St. Louis

9. *Iron Glove, No. 8*, 1983

Pen and ink on paper

14 x 18 inches

The Edward E. Boccia Artist Trust,
St. Louis

10. *Last Supper*, 1977

Oil on canvas

46.5 x 72 inches

The Art Students League of New York

11. *Five Disciples*, 1977

Oil on canvas

42 x 36 inches

Private Collection, New York

12. *Death in Sorrento*, 1969

Oil on canvas

40 x 52 inches

The Edward E. Boccia Artist Trust,
St. Louis

13. *Padanaram Summer, Study Triptych*, 1969

Ink, gouache, and oil pastel on paper

18 x 23.5 inches

The Edward E. Boccia Artist Trust,
St. Louis

14. *After Ribera V*, 1968

Mixed media, pastel, and ink on paper

24.5 x 24.5 inches

The Edward E. Boccia Artist Trust,
St. Louis

15. *Connubial Years*, 1967

Oil on canvas

44 x 22 inches

Private Collection, New York

16. *Rome Memory*, 1959

Charcoal on paper

31 x 41 inches

The Edward E. Boccia Artist Trust,
St. Louis

17. *Dreams of a Sea Myth*, 1958
Oil on canvas diptych
5 feet 9 inches x 4 feet 9 inches
McCaughen & Burr Fine Arts, St. Louis

18. *Self Portrait*, 1958
Oil on canvas
49 x 29 inches
The Edward E. Boccia Artist Trust,
St. Louis

19. *Artist Sketchbook #1*, 1957
Mixed media on paper
The Edward E. Boccia Artist Trust,
St. Louis

20. *Artist Sketchbook #2*, 1958
Mixed media on paper
The Edward E. Boccia Artist Trust,
St. Louis

21. *Artist Sketchbook #3*, 1958
Mixed media on paper
The Edward E. Boccia Artist Trust,
St. Louis

22. *Artist Sketchbook #4*, 1959
Mixed media on paper
The Edward E. Boccia Artist Trust,
St. Louis

23. *Artist Sketchbook #5*, 1959
Mixed media on paper
The Edward E. Boccia Artist Trust,
St. Louis

24. *Artist Sketchbook #6*, 1962
Mixed media on paper
The Edward E. Boccia Artist Trust,
St. Louis

25. *Artist Sketchbook #7*, 1967
Mixed media on paper
The Edward E. Boccia Artist Trust,
St. Louis

26. *Artist Sketchbook #8*, 1985
Mixed media on paper
The Edward E. Boccia Artist Trust,
St. Louis



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