

L E B R U N



Syracuse University

R I C O L E B R U N

TRANSFORMATIONS/TRANSFIGURATION

"...changing what is disfigured into what is transfigured."

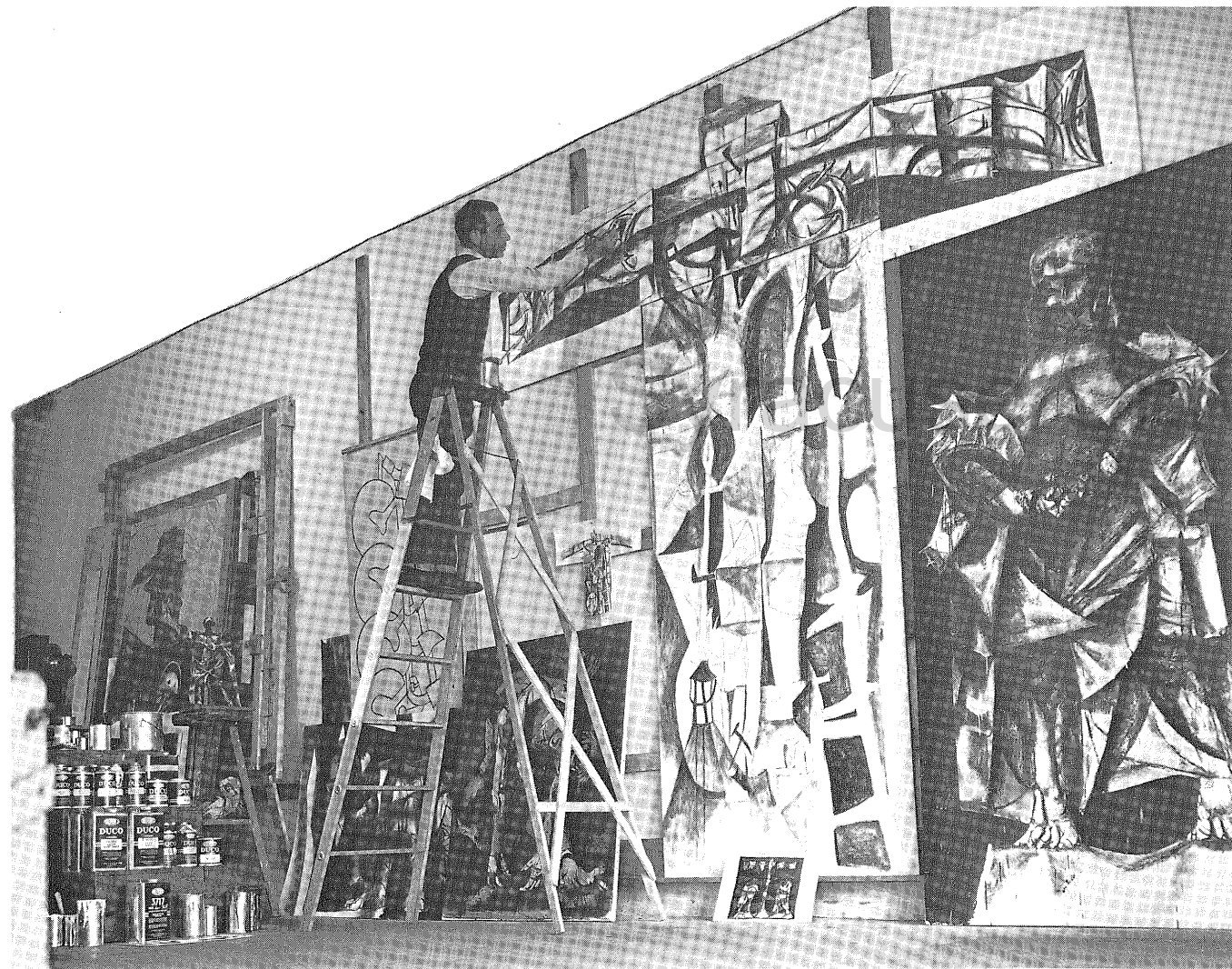
Syracuse University Galleries



Ellen C. Oppler

13 November 1983—18 January 1984

Joe and Emily Lowe Art Gallery, Syracuse University
School of Art, College of Visual and Performing Arts



Lebrun at work, 1950; William Reagh, photographer.

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For Constance, and the Memory of Rico, Charlotte and Alfred

A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

The Joe and Emily Lowe Art Gallery is proud to present the exhibition and catalogue entitled: *Rico Lebrun: Transformations/Transfiguration*, and it is pleased to acknowledge the outstanding curatorial success of its guest curator, Dr. Ellen C. Oppler, Associate Professor, Department of Fine Arts, College of Arts and Sciences at Syracuse University. Dr. Oppler's masterful selection of the artist's works and her creative orchestration of the catalogue and installation have clearly demonstrated the power and depth of Rico Lebrun's vision.

The exhibition and catalogue focus largely on paintings related to Lebrun's great *Crucifixion Triptych*, located in the lobby of Heroy Hall on the campus of Syracuse University, and highlight a new perspective for evaluating the work of this important American artist, whose concern with formal values did not eclipse the human content of his art.

Our deepest debt of gratitude goes to the artist's widow, Mrs. Constance Lebrun Crown, without whose generous and tireless support an exhibition of this scope and quality could not have been organized. She has lent superb works from the Lebrun Estate and precious pieces from her personal collection; she shared her valuable documents, photographic archives, and recollections, as did her son David Lebrun. The guest curator and her graduate assistant, Erin M. Stimmell, were able to work with Mrs. Lebrun Crown in California. While there, they were able to meet with artists who studied and worked with Lebrun. These artists, Channing Peake, William Ptaszynski, Teresa Sorce, and George Goyer were able to add valuable insights to their research.

I would also like to thank the Kennedy Galleries, New York City, and the efficient services of its chief registrar, Fred Bernaski, and his staff. A very special thank you is extended to Syracuse University staff members Ruth Ann Appelhof, curator of exhibitions; Leonard C. Eichler, registrar/preparator and Betty LaPlante, office coordinator at the Joe and Emily Lowe Art Gallery who worked steadily to make this

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Student assistants played a large role in the realization of this exhibition. The guest curator was assisted by graduate students Erin Stimmell, Mara Williams, Stephanie Buck, and Rebecca Lawton. The exhibition was installed by members of Professor Margie Hughto's first-year graduate museology practicum class.

Finally, I wish to thank the following Syracuse University administrators for their cooperation and continued support: Donald M. Lantzy, dean of the College of Visual and Performing Arts; Rodger Mack, director of the School of Art; Gershon Vincow, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences; Professor David Tatham, chairman of the Fine Arts Department; and Lois Applegate of the News and Information Office.

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Joseph A. Scala
Director
Joe and Emily Lowe Art Gallery

R I C O L E B R U N

The Paintings and Drawings: His Life

Ellen C. Oppler

Born 1900 in Naples, Italy, Rico Lebrun recalled his native place as a "town of dream and delight and also of sordid life. A town of abysmal darks and dazzling lights..."¹ He recalled especially vividly the people's fervent participation in their patron saint's annual miracle, when the petrified blood in its sacred flask was expected to liquify as a blessed sign of benevolence. To be in the midst of the people waiting for that miracle in the Cathedral of San Genaro "was a frightening and awesome experience...it was like being on the inside of a clanging bell."

*This collective and fierce will, convinced that it could change the inert into the alive, has never been to me a lost lesson. The miracle was that dead matter gave way to faith triumphant. Which goes for painting also.*²

It would take many decades of hard training and work before Lebrun could witness such miracles in his art.

As a young student, he attended several technical schools, and experienced the last year of the war (see Chronology for details). He studied at the usual provincial art academy where a "frigid sort of neoclassicism was the rule" and the pupils produced "some of the ugliest drawings" he had ever seen—horribly competent renderings of plaster casts.³ The vanguard adult painters were not much better, working in a form of Impressionism that seemed to him totally inappropriate "to the carnal and tangible quality of the town, which in fact only baroque masters of southern Italy had previously understood."⁴ Hence he frequented the museums and found inspiration in the old masters. Lebrun also felt "the backwash of futurism and cubism" filtering through to Naples, and was excited when he could hear the poet Filippo Marinetti and the painter Giacomo Balla expound their theories. He expected to become the greatest Futurist draftsman of the South.⁵

Among friends of his father (a railroad official) were university professors, classical scholars and

writers—and the young Rico considered becoming a journalist, for his gift with words was as evident as his talents with pencil and brush.

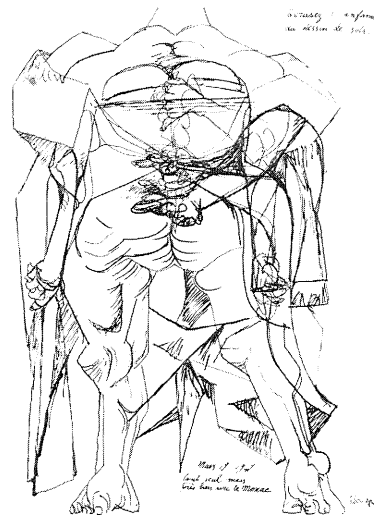
But he was prepared to earn his living as a commercial artist. As designer for a stained-glass factory in Naples that had secured a contract with Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company in the United States, Lebrun was sent to Springfield, Illinois, in early 1924. He was promoted to foreman in the new plant and instructor in stained-glass techniques, and when his contract was completed in 1925, he moved to New York City.

Lebrun became an extraordinarily successful commercial artist during the next decade, drawing advertisements and illustrations for such prestigious magazines as *Vogue*, *Fortune*, and *The New Yorker*. He was able to take two extended trips back to Italy to study fresco painting with an established artist in Rome, where he also became friends with a fellow student from the states, Lewis Rubenstein. Upon his return to New York, he continued supporting himself with commercial work, but his ambition now was to paint murals.

Many years later, a close artist-friend recalled Lebrun's amusing performance for a meeting of commercial artists, responding to a young designer's question:

*Young man (he quavered), when I was your age I had the Ivory Soap account (sententious), I taught the whole country how to wash...The last week I worked I made twenty-thousand dollars (suddenly staccato) and I quit! (pause—then simple-minded, childish, obdurate), 'cause I din' like it.*⁶

Lebrun's several attempts to put his fresco training to practice—upon returning from Rome—were ambitious but short-lived: a mural that he painted with Rubenstein on the top floor of Harvard University's Fogg Art Museum was soon walled over. His project, "Story of the Mines," was never carried out, though



He began sketching rusty old farm implements abandoned by previous owners of the ranch. These corroded plows, harrows, and wagons—scattered like found objects over the land—inspired also Lebrun to paint the first work to gain national recognition. His *Vertical Composition* is a handsome semi-abstract design created from the wheel and broken axle of an old wagon, standing on end like a mysterious totem of the earth, not unlike David Smith's sculptures of the same period and the 1950s.⁹

The *Farm Machine* (No. 1) in our exhibition is an early example of Lebrun's imaginative transformation of visual fact into personal statement. *Yellow Plow* (No. 2), actually a spring-tooth harrow, evokes the huge skeletal claws of some primeval creature, burnished by late-afternoon sunlight. As Lebrun documented with his vivid commentary (p. 19, below), he "may have moved away from the human figure, but not from anatomy.... Yes, that's when I really began to reason with the figure—when it wasn't there."¹⁰

But he needed the human form to express himself most fully, and he decided to find a theme that was universally meaningful; he found it in the Crucifixion cycle that engaged him intensely for well over three years and through hundreds of drawings and paintings. (See pp. 21-31, for his eloquent comments). Our ink drawing (No. 4) may well be his earliest idea for a Woman of the Crucifixion; it is dated *Mars 19, 1947*, and also inscribed in French. There is a funny personal comment (or a quotation to be identified?) about the drawings of damned fools, and a proud declaration: "all alone but all's well with the world."

The defiant stance of this Mary adumbrates comparable attitudes of later Women of the Crucifixion

it won him a Guggenheim Fellowship for 1935-36 and was renewed for a second year. Under WPA sponsorship he designed, and to a great extent, painted a vast mural for the New York Post Office Annex, but that, too, was later covered over. Not until 1960 was he to realize his vision of a great and enduring mural for our age, a 20th-century interpretation of Biblical message: Job as "Hiroshima Man," and Noah as a grand paternal figure, "image of hope and human strength."⁷

As instructor at the Art Students League during 1935-36, Lebrun gained another experience that became a lifetime commitment. When he first moved to California, he supported himself by teaching. Later he frequently supplemented his income by serving as a visiting professor at various institutions (see Chronology). And although teaching drained energy from his own creative work, he also thrived on these contacts with young artists, and was a renowned and inspiring teacher who left an important heritage, especially in California.⁸

The move to California in 1938 was a turning point. Visiting Channing Peake, his young friend and assistant from the WPA mural project, Lebrun settled in Santa Barbara, and began teaching in Los Angeles. He gained a strong supporter in Donald Bear, director of the new Santa Barbara Museum, who organized his first solo exhibitions and wrote most intelligently about his art. Although Lebrun returned to New York in 1943-44 and gained recognition in important group shows at the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art, he made Southern California his actual and artistic home.

In the fertile Santa Ynez Valley high up beyond the coastal range above Santa Barbara, he found the romantic American West dear to Europeans: the vast plains (that delighted the city dweller from New York and cramped Neapolitan streets), and even *bonafide* cowboys and ranchers who taught him how to ride and hunt. Channing Peake and his wife had acquired a ranch where he started breeding race horses.



(Nos. 6 and 7), usually identified as Mary Magdalenes aggressively screaming their anguish, whereas Mary, the bereaved mother of Jesus, appears gentler in her grief. Lebrun himself did not differentiate between the two Marys; they were simply grieving women. He emphasized, "I have never seen pretty sorrow," and rejected his previously elegant (and successful) draftsmanship¹¹ to scratch angry, jagged lines of pain upon canvas and paper; the woman's face is darkened, almost hidden by the insistent scrawls, as if defaced by her suffering (No. 5). The cloaked figures finally become drained of emotions, hauntingly depicted in the nearly abstract *Shell of Mary* (in Willard Straight Hall of Cornell University; not in the exhibition).

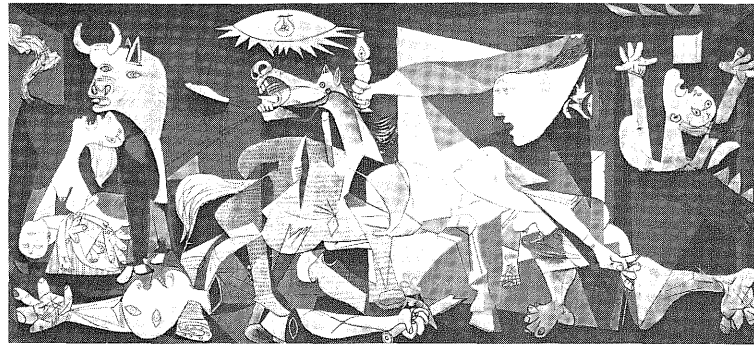
Though these paintings are still clearly figurative, the paint itself conveys emotional content—the surface is scratched, spattered, and splashed. The thinned paint is encouraged to drip blood-red down the canvas (No. 6). The pigment in *Ladder of the Cross* (No. 16) is roughed up and tortured as Christ was tortured. In the monumental *Cross* (No. 17), the figure has all but disappeared, reduced to a cipher, the suggestion of a slumping body. The traditional symbols tell the story: the crown of thorns, shroud, and nails; the warped ladder and centurion's lance; shadows of the mocking sign that proclaimed Jesus the King of the Jews; and the bright lantern that illuminated the darkness of Golgotha. Spattered and scumbled paint textures soften the austere cubistic forms; golden whites, earth-toned blacks, and unexpected accents of light blue-green enrich the somber monochrome. For many viewers, myself included, this abstracted icon is a profoundly affecting object of spiritual and aesthetic contemplation.

Close-up details of these paintings, with their formal design and energetic paint surfaces, could even be taken for early Abstract Expressionism. They testify to Lebrun's appreciation of the technical innovation and stylistic freedom of his younger contemporaries, even though critics invariably *contrasted* Lebrun with avant-garde Action Painting. The battle line between the two "opposing camps" is not as securely drawn as the critics have pretended, and Lebrun could surprise friends by vigorously defending the Abstract Expressionists.¹² What angered him most was being pigeonholed into the far corner of "content," as contrasted with "form."¹³ Lebrun declared "that when it comes to taking sides, I am on the side of painting and no one else's." He could be deeply moved by "non-content painting" and thought that it might be "more ultimately useful and real in content" than the more obviously content-laden works.¹⁴

To return to the Women of the Crucifixion, Lebrun's most memorable figures of the cycle: he recognized them as such, placing his proudest *Magdalene* under the cross, as recorded in the historic frontispiece photograph and recreated in our installation. She has replaced the divine or human figure traditional to the cross and has become the focal actor in the great drama. These women stand barefooted, digging their toes into the earth, as if determined to fight and hold their ground, their voluminous cloaks stiffened and emblematic of their fortitude. Around 1949-50, Lebrun fashioned a plaster of his *Woman of the Crucifixion*. Not cast in bronze, the sculpture has disappeared, but the sculptural image returned as a true resistance fighter, one of the heroic women of Caiazzo who tricked the Nazi soldiers (No. 48 and pp. 16-17, below).

While the women gain our empathy and admiration, the soldiers are subhuman beings. In the Natural History wing of the Los Angeles County Museum, Lebrun had been fascinated by the armored creatures there. He had studied and drawn the primordial armadillos and Matamata turtles (No. 8)

Picasso, GUERNICA, 1937, Museo del Prado, Madrid (Casón del Buen Retiro).



and transformed them into the *Turtle Soldier* (No. 9). Evil nocturnal creatures, mechanical men "armored against compassion," awoken to the miracle of the resurrection (No. 10). When Lebrun collaborated with Leonard Baskin on the woodcuts for Melville's *Encantadas* tales (No. 30), he discovered with delight this ancient legend of evil sea captains condemned to crawl over the Gallapagos Islands as cumbersome tortoises, malignant spirits within dark animal shells. The turtle soldiers had returned.

The carpenters construct the cross with enormous physical effort; they carry out their cruel assignment grotesquely, straining awkwardly, nails gripped between their teeth, sprawling comically across the horizontal beam (Nos. 13 and 14). In Lebrun's words, they appear to crucify themselves. Contrary to the writings of the gospels, they perform all the tasks of executioners: they construct the cross and nail on the sign, then take Christ down from the cross, lowering his body in the sling of the shroud (Nos. 15, 18, and 19). The multiple views of the Crucifixion narrative thus are compressed and reshuffled, and in the *Triptych*, we are given cinematic flashbacks to the construction of the cross, though the main image is the *Deposition*.

As Lebrun explained, the *Triptych* was painted in the remarkably short period of six weeks before the 1950 exhibition, specifically for the blank partition shutting off the paleontology section of the museum. He restated several main themes of already completed paintings—the *Deposition*, the sleeping soldiers who wake up become *Witness of The Resurrection* (No. 10), and the *Centurion's Horse*,¹⁵ defensively armored like the reptilean soldiers, seeming to carry a spectral rider with a skull visage. In the very center of the composition is the sharp crown of thorns: we never see Christ's face—the better to identify with his suffering, indeed, with humanity's suffering.¹⁶ A sinister face emerges out of the shadows, perhaps symbolizing all executioners, all those who commit crimes against their fellow beings.¹⁷ While this ominous face

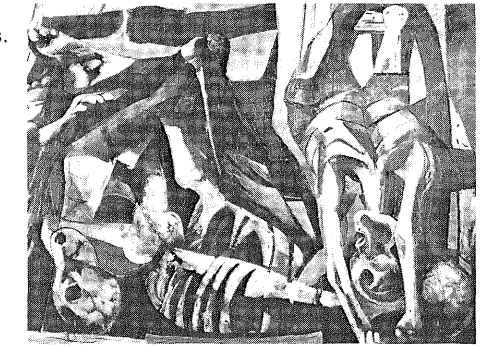
nearly vanishes in deepest shadow, a bright spotlight forms sharp, geometric planes of light and draws our attention to the left-hand panel; the sun disk has absorbed the crescent moon. An energetically crowing rooster, earlier associated with Peter's denial of Christ, now joyfully heralds the new day, the brilliant dawn of the resurrection and of a new era. It is a sign of promise and of hope.

Should the spectator, nevertheless, not associate the Crucifixion cycle with our own inhuman age, Lebrun included contemporary mementos in his 1950-51 exhibition. There were long canvases of modern weaponry: an immaculately painted machine gun; the treads of tanks, crushing bits of green vegetation, with mechanically meshed wires leaving their imprint in the soft oil paint (No. 11); and huge black tanks consumed in orange conflagration (No. 12), evoking the ultimate apocalypse—Hieronymus Bosch's vision of *Hell*.¹⁸

More specifically, Lebrun cited a contemporary view of hell on earth: Picasso's *Guernica*. Designed for the Spanish Pavilion at the Paris International Exposition in 1937, *Guernica* thereafter traveled to England and throughout America, raising funds for Spanish refugee relief. Lebrun would have seen it in Los Angeles at the Stendhal Gallery in August 1939, and again during his 1943-44 sojourn in New York, where *Guernica* remained "on extended loan" at the Museum of Modern Art. Frequently reproduced in the popular press and in art publications, *Guernica* by the late 1940s was a notorious modern painting and an influential anti-war statement.¹⁹ By alluding to *Guernica*, Lebrun could encourage his viewers to associate his *Crucifixion Triptych* with modern warfare. He especially admired *Guernica's* appeal to ordinary people, not just to art connoisseurs: "My sister tells me that there is a reproduction of it in home after home in Italy," he informed his interviewer.²⁰

Guernica, Pablo Picasso's major work, is of special meaning to us, since through it, once

24A. BUCHENWALD CART, 1955, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.



more, in the stream of true tradition, a great painter speaks to mankind of mankind's fate.

To the "purists" of painting who decry the validity of the human image in art, *Guernica* stands as a taunting reprimand. It is not a "pure" work, i.e.: It is not painting for painting's sake, but on the contrary, as it uses literary, psychological, symbolical elements, it gains impressive universality of meaning.

Without the preceding phases of cubism, dynamism, multiple-vision, this work would not have been possible. But those elements achieve a synthesis of staggering eloquence they never had as isolated idioms, because *Guernica* is the sum total of a mighty intellect and an outraged heart.

Rico Lebrun, 1959-60 (216:44)

That *Guernica* became Lebrun's exemplar is obvious, especially for the *Crucifixion*. The works share a similar grisaille monochrome and tripartite organization culminating in a central triangle; both fuse cubistic and expressionist, figurative and abstract elements. Even the large scale and dimensions are comparable (Lebrun's horizontal section is 11' 4" x 26' to *Guernica's* 11' 5½" x 25' 5¼"), and both were painted rapidly in five to six weeks for a designated space. The comparison was to haunt Lebrun for much of his life, not just in reviews of the *Crucifixion* cycle, when the stylistic debt was there, but in later criticism, when he had developed his own idiom. Already in 1941, Lebrun evidently discussed *Guernica* at length with Donald Bear, who wrote that few living artists could use it, certainly none could dismiss it. And he concluded by quoting Lebrun, who named Masaccio, Raphael, Daumier, and Picasso as his teachers, but emphasized that the difference would be recognized "between the museum pantomime and the meaningful individual adventure."²¹

There were other artistic mentors. Lebrun paid

special homage to the early 16th-century master, Matthias Grünewald, with an exquisitely colored Crucifixion drawing (No. 20) and his best lithograph (No. 21), both directly inspired by the central panel of Grünewald's Isenheim altarpiece—not unlike Picasso's variations of 1929-30. The Crucifixion theme, indeed, maintained its spell over Lebrun throughout the later 1950s.

In such paintings as *Black Golgotha* (No. 22), the Christ figure and mourners are abstracted, represented by the ladder and gestural movements speaking for the human drama. Frequently, the Crucifixion motif appears fused with images of concentration camp victims, a series of paintings Lebrun had begun in 1955. The year before his death, he created a final, splendid *Crucifixion* (No. 23); the warm colors glowing out of darkest shadow have suggested the descriptive title, *Black and Gold Golgotha*, to Lebrun's family and friends.²² Stripped of their sheltering cloaks, the mourners appear vulnerable, their bodies leaning against the protective figure of Christ; the simplified but naturalistic large forms draw us into their midst and invite our emotional participation. The harsh Crucifixions of the 1950s have been transformed into a peaceful resolution, comforting and compassionate.

Lebrun was at his best when he could submerge himself in an all-encompassing theme such as the Crucifixion; he liked to work in series of related images. He was again ready for such concentrated effort when he returned from Mexico in 1954, having worked on large sheets of wrapping paper, drawing and creating colorful and quite abstract collages. He chanced upon those horrendous newsphotographs of Nazi concentration camps being liberated by Allied soldiers.²³ Lebrun had found the very images to activate the creative process he has described so eloquently (pp. 32-33, below). This process is clearly documented from painfully realistic drawings towards generalization and artistic synthesis of "remembered" images. Our version of *Buchenwald Cart* (No. 24)



appears as a somber coda to the better-known version in the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (No. 24A, not in the exhibition), completed already in late 1955. Again, Lebrun forced himself to confront the terrible photographs and made brutally detailed drawings for several versions of *Buchenwald Floor* (No. 24B, not in the exhibition).

His thoughts now turned toward an older historical plague, the Black Death that decimated Europe in the fourteenth century, and he drew and painted variations of Francesco Traini's *Triumph of Death* in the Campo Santo of Pisa. He focused on the climactic detail of the open coffins where death has impartially claimed king and commoner, even the Pope himself (No. 25). The decaying bodies of these plague victims lend their bloated forms to the 20th-century *Victim* (No. 26), whose putrefying flesh with bloodied and livid patches remind us that the colors of death are not the antiseptic black and white of photographs. Finally, the stretched-out bodies of the victims become shadowy presences, lightly drawn, barely articulated on canvas—the event of *Dachau* (No. 27), too horrendous to be delineated clearly.

Lebrun's final, and I think most moving, commentary on the death chamber was adumbrated already in a charcoal drawing of 1955, *Buchenwald Pit*.²⁴ In 1958, he painted *Buchenwald Furnace* and *Study for Dachau Chamber* (Nos. 28 and 29) with the darkly glowing colors of incineration, and paint surfaces scratched and tortured, "the spent furnace with fragments, islands here and there, of what had been the living body" (p. 32, below). In these awesome paintings, beautiful even with their deep, luminous colors and shattered forms, the artist indeed has painted his "form of remembrance and prayer...changing what is disfigured into what is transfigured."

Several changes of scene and of pace now followed: namely, a difficult year at Yale University, where Lebrun's commitment to figurative painting and his personal way with students collided with Josef

Albers' "Prussian" personality.²⁵ But his teaching at Yale-Norfolk summer school the year before brought visits from a young sculptor and graphic artist, Leonard Baskin, who shared his interests. A return visit to Northampton produced the exhilarating experience of collaboration with a master craftsman on the *Encantadas* woodcuts (No. 30). Then another year abroad, in Rome as artist-in-residence at the American Academy, a time he used to develop his ideas for the Pomona mural.

The European sojourn strengthened Lebrun's Italian roots, his love for his native tongue and great literature, and everywhere, encounters with ancient Roman marbles and classical art. Mrs. Lebrun Crown remembers especially their delight in the marble sculptures of the Museo delle Terme—the Baths of Diocletian—dramatically spotlighted at night. Even after the enormous exertion of painting the Pomona mural in half a year, Lebrun's creative energies continued to pour into the astounding illustrations for Dante's *Inferno*. As with his written comments about the Crucifixion, Lebrun has emphasized the universality of Dante's masterpiece, and its relevance for our age (p. 36, below). And with his drawings, he has reinterpreted Dante's imagery for the modern world.

Everything he had learned during a lifetime of drawing and painting, all that he knew about the expressive power of the human body, he now channeled into these late drawings. He had achieved total mastery; form and content were one, and he knew it. Mrs. Lebrun Crown recalled that he was happiest while painting the Pomona mural and working on the Dante drawings. "He was truly able to *sing* while he was doing them! He would say, 'Pablo can't touch me now!' He knew he was on his own and it was

clear sailing.²⁶

Though liberated from Picasso's dominating influence, Lebrun maintained his dialogue with the European masters he admired. He often spoke and wrote about his special affinities with Spanish art, "its insistence on the agitation and the dramatic."²⁷ In a public lecture on El Greco and Goya, he declared: "They are my moral advisors."²⁸ His admiration for El Greco goes back to the 1930s when he sought permission to copy *The Burial of Count Orgaz* in Toledo. Goya's importance came later. The passage quoted on p. 30 below, in his book is entitled, "On Working from Goya"—in 1957-58, he drew and painted several superb variations of Goya's court portraits. He had been inspired by Goya, witness to history and the human condition, the Goya of *Los Caprichos* and *The Disasters of War*. In his Dante drawings and other late work, Lebrun also recalled the tragic and monstrous "Black Paintings" of Goya's old age.

As always, precise pen-and-ink drawings, absolutely clear anatomically and with Dante's verses carefully inscribed (No. 31), precede the semi-abstractions, the shadowy forms brushed with velvety blacks that are more appropriate to Dante's nightmare visions. Lebrun made his very personal selection of what Dantean imagery he wanted to capture. His special attention turned to Canto XXVIII and its ditches filled with the "sowers of discord" who are mutilated and split asunder (Nos. 35 and 36) in retribution for their special sins "to rend asunder what God had meant to be united."²⁹ John Ciardi, the poet and highly acclaimed translator of Dante, pointed out that it required "Lebrun's personal genius" and the revolutions of modern art that had freed artists from the bondage of "literal classical nudes," to create an imagery of "the inwardness of things as Dante had imaged it forth in poetry."³⁰ Leonard Baskin, who designed the handsome book of reproductions, added his own tribute to Lebrun as Daedalus, "the supreme artificer," who reveals man's grandeur and in the *In-*



ferno, "grandeur despoiled and debauched. Here is the immensity of drawing displayed. The fragile means charged to the building of monumental forms."

And it was Baskin who repeatedly encouraged Lebrun to turn to sculpture, for he recognized the sculptural, "monumental forms" of his late drawings and paintings. *Two Figures at Twilight* of 1962 (No. 37), for instance, close cousins to the Dante figures, evoke certain sculptural associations: the nocturnal glimpses of Roman marbles, and the fragmented human forms of Henry Moore—the sculptor whom both Constance and Rico Lebrun admired above all contemporaries. Some of Lebrun's early sculptures, such as the *Kicking Figure* (No. 39) and tragic *Mask* (No. 43) reveal also the lessons of Rodin; and *Standing Female Torso* (No. 46), with sagging breasts, depicts tired old flesh as poignantly as did Rodin's crouching old woman (*She Who Was Once the Helmet-Maker's Beautiful Wife*, 1885).

Lebrun's very last images, however, speak to us of resurrection, and the indomitable will of men and women to resist the enemy, whether it be an actual political foe (*Memorial to Caiazzo*, No. 48), some private terror perhaps (No. 49), and even death itself (*Lazarus*, No. 44). The spirit within this fragile body that breaks through the ropes and wrappings of *Lazarus* becomes a metaphor for art itself, ensuring man's immortality.³¹

Rico Lebrun's last interview, from his hospital bed, captures the strength and valiant humor of the man:

All my life, I've seen the human form as a container for drama, for all the joy and for all the tragedy, at all times for everything.... Sometimes I ask myself, why have I done the figure over and over again, over and over again? Is this a crazy thing to do? I know what the figure should be. Why the hell have I been trying to tell people what they look like? I don't know. I

Lebrun in his studio, early 1960s.

*don't know. But it comes down to wanting to tell the truth about something. An artist must tell the truth—that's it.*³²

In this exhibition and catalogue, we also are searching for the truth about this controversial artist, a fresh truth for ourselves in 1983. For Lebrun *has* been controversial. He delved into uncomfortable, often profoundly disturbing subject matter, and worked in formal modes apart from vanguard styles. Highly acclaimed in 1950, he was frequently condemned or ignored during the 1960s,³³ prompting a fair-minded critic for *The New York Times* to write in 1963:

Rico Lebrun is so obviously a major artist that his lack of wider fame seems almost a willfull repression on the part of the tastemakers. He has the impoliteness to feel strongly, respect tradition and reject novelty as invention.³⁴

Perhaps Lebrun will appear different in these pluralistic times, this so-called "postmodernist" period, when much abstract art is considered old-fashioned, when the younger artists have returned to the figure and have rediscovered expressionism.

Perhaps we will find that by stubbornly pursuing his "art and life without compromise despite fashion, rejection and hostility,"³⁵ Lebrun now appears timeless, speaking for our time—in its very broadest sense.

The works of art of our century are the mirrors of our predicament...the image of man became transformed, distorted, disrupted and it finally disappeared in recent art....And something else must be added here: the very fact that a great work of art depicts the negative side in the fight for humanity is in itself a fulfillment of a high human possibility. The courage and the honesty which underlie such works, and the creative power which is able to grasp the negativity of the content by the positivity of form, is a triumph of humanity.³⁶



Notes to "The Paintings and Drawings: His Life"

¹Rico Lebrun, *Drawings* (Berkeley, 1961), pp. 5-6 (hereafter, *Lebrun 1961*).

²*Ibid.*, p. 8.

³*Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵Rico Lebrun typescript (1959-60), 208:02 (see Bibliography).

⁶Howard Warshaw, "A Friend on the Other Side of the Mirror," in *Rico Lebrun: Drawings and Sculpture*, Arizona State University, Tempe, 20 April-1 June 1975.

⁷Peter Selz, "Notes on Genesis," in Seldis, *Rico Lebrun (1900-1964)*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1967, p. 60 (hereafter, *Lebrun 1967*).

⁸See Michael Kohn, "The Figurative Style of the Sixties: Brice, Lebrun and Warshaw," *LAIKA Journal*, Fall 1982, pp. 56-60.

⁹*Vertical Composition*, Lebrun's prize-winning painting at the Chicago Art Institute's exhibition, is featured by Alfred Frankfurter, "Two States of the Union," *Art News*, November 1947, pp. 14, 16, and 60. It has been in a private collection in Santa Barbara, as is another handsome work of that year, *Black Plow* (Mrs. Esther Bear collection; illustrated on p. 35 in *Lebrun 1967*).

¹⁰*Lebrun 1967*, p. 21.

¹¹Many beautiful examples of these 1930s and earlier 1940s drawings, that achieve a Raphael-esque purity, are reproduced in *Lebrun 1961* and *Lebrun 1967*.

¹²See pp. 32-33, 1974 interviews with Mrs. Lebrun Crown; also my September 1983 conversations with her. He especially valued Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline.

¹³An extreme example of such stereotyping would be Selden Rodman's book, *The Insiders: Rejection and Rediscovery of Man in the Arts of our Time* [1960].

¹⁴From Lebrun typescript, 309:18. He continues in his typically exuberant way:

The only tactics I have is to see with a painter's eye when a painting is a painting and when it is not. When it isn't, no content in the world will make up for it. And no content, no talk about gangsters or rabbis or Jesus or the bowery will ever make up for the refusal of the painter to question the limits of his means every day and to enlarge on the main content of painting, its actual increase of glory as matter shaped into idea. The rest is literature.

¹⁵The *Deposition* (8' x 10') is now owned by the Art Gallery of Toronto; the *Centurion's Horse* (7' x 2'8") is in the Columbus (Ohio) Gallery of Art.

¹⁶The art critic for *TIME* magazine specifically objected to the fact that "Christ's crown of thorns marks the mathematical center of the composition, but not the spiritual center," that the painting lacked compassion, and that the "anonymous ghoul...set the overall tone" (19 March 1951, reviewed during the *Triptych's* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York).

¹⁷Rodman quotes Lebrun's explanation that the "ghoulish figure of the executioner" was the man who "becomes culpable" by just getting involved, thoughtlessly; Christ's face is hidden so that "it could be taken for the face of any one of us" (*Perspectives U.S.A.*, p. 79).

¹⁸The right-hand panel, *Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1505), which Lebrun had seen in the Prado; he also owned several photographs, enlargements of this panel (Archives of American Art). On a more naturalistic plane, he had seen brush fires sweeping down the canyons in California, consuming everything in their paths.

¹⁹Although not a collector of "things," Lebrun acquired two essential books soon after their publication: Alfred Barr's *Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art* (The Museum of Modern Art, 1946) and Juan Larrea, *Guernica—Pablo Picasso* (New York, 1947), fully illustrating the painting and related studies. (Lebrun wrote his name and acquisition dates into the books, which have remained in Mrs. Lebrun Crown's collection.) For *Guernica's* exhibition history and impact on American artists, see my forthcoming anthology, *Picasso's Guernica* (Norton Critical Studies in Art History, 1984).

²⁰Paul Bird, "A Lebrun Profile," *Art Digest*, 1 May 1951, p. 7. Lebrun's own reproduction of *Guernica*, worn from handling and changing push pins, needed to be remounted on cardboard (recollection of Mrs. Lebrun Crown).

²¹Donald Bear, "Rico Lebrun," *Pacific Art Review*, winter 1941-42, pp. 8-13.

²²According to these same sources, *Black and Gold Golgotha* was painted over the *Spring Golgotha* of 1957 (No. 23A), which Lebrun withdrew from exhibition at the Boston University Art Gallery in April 1959 (even though it was reproduced in the catalogue!). Seeing it again in the context of more recent work, he evidently disliked its harshly geometric ladders and bright colors (note his comments), and decided to replace the cubistic forms with softer human images.

Lebrun, early 1960s.



²³Lebrun used several documentary sources. Mrs. Lebrun Crown recalls the "fearful issue of *LIFE* magazine" (7 May 1945) worn thin over the years; Selden Rodman reproduces a photograph from *U.S. Camera 1946* that Lebrun showed him (*Art in America*, p. 35); Van Deren Coke compares *Buchenwald Floor* convincingly with other news photos of Buchenwald (*The Painter and the Photograph*, p. 111).

²⁴Reproduced in Selz, *New Images of Man*, p. 96.

²⁵Lebrun's summary: "Things were difficult at Yale—too much snow, and too much Josef Albers" (*Artforum*, May 1963, p. 34); also Mrs. Lebrun Crown's 1974 interview, pp. 33-34.

²⁶Pablo Picasso, of course! 1974 interview, p. 12.

²⁷From the 1959-60 manuscript, pp. 204:39-40.

²⁸Quoted in the press report, "El Greco, Goya Brought to Life by Yale Tutor," *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, 22 April 1959; from Mrs. Lebrun Crown's valuable clipping file. Lebrun considered writing a book about the Spanish masters, and during the last months of his life, as he lay bedridden with cancer, he shared his ideas with his son: "Conversations on El Greco and Goya" (typescript from tapes and notes, collection of David Lebrun). It was his final loving gift to David: "I would like to make...one more door for you...just one more way for you to look at the world. I want to bring you, I present to you, Goya and El Greco as moments and monuments of the human situation."

²⁹Quotations are from *The Inferno*, John Ciardi translation, p. 234.

³⁰Ciardi's introductory essay to *Drawings from Dante's Inferno*, n.p.

³¹For the memorial service, John Ciardi wrote about Lebrun as "a compulsive creator. And one driven still harder by the dark irony of time; for certainly his powers were gathering to their fullest just at the time when death began to say no to his body" (*In Memoriam: Rico Lebrun*, 23 May 1964, Frary Hall, Pomona College (the very building whose portal bears Lebrun's *Genesis* mural).

³²*TIME* Magazine, 31 January 1964, in connection with the Newport Beach exhibition.

³³A careful review of Lebrun criticism, clearly beyond the scope of this essay, would chart these decades' changing "truths" about contemporary art styles—as in the fine, in-depth study by Piri Halasz, "Art Criticism (and Art History) in New York: The 1940s vs. the 1980s," *Arts Magazine*, Feb, Mar, and Apr 1983). Thomas Hess, for instance, managing editor of *Art News* (then the most advanced art magazine), singled out Lebrun's *Wood of the Holy Cross* in reviewing the Whitney Annual (*AN*, Dec 1948, not Gorky or de Kooning); Lebrun, Pollock, Gorky, and de Kooning, also Hyman Bloom and Lee Gatch, represented the United States in the Venice Biennale (*AN*, summer 1950); and the magazine voted Lebrun one of the "10 best artists" for 1950 (*AN*, Jan 1951). *Artforum*, the vanguard magazine of the 1960s, published an excellent interview with Lebrun (May 1963), but its managing editor attacked Lebrun in the nastiest of the negative reviews (Philip Leider, "California after the Figure," *Art in America* [sic!], vol. 51/V, Oct 63).

³⁴Brian O'Doherty, 24 April 1963, reviewing Lebrun drawings for Bertolt Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* at Nordness Gallery. In a thoughtful evaluation of the memorial exhibition at the American Academy, however, Hilton Kramer presented his negative conclusions (with the inevitable references to *Guernica*): "Reclaiming the Tragic Element," *NY Times*, Sunday, 5 December 1965. Emily Genauer, reviewing the same retrospective for the *New York Herald Tribune* (7 Nov 65), objected to much of Lebrun's dehumanized imagery, but at the end concluded, "we see the artist at his greatest" and his humanity "has a core of grandeur, of enduring strength, even of nobility."

³⁵From the obituary in the *NY Times*, 11 May 1964.

³⁶Paul Tillich, prefatory note (pp. 9-10) to Peter Selz, *New Images of Man*—the exhibition that included not only Lebrun and Baskin, but Francis Bacon, Jean Dubuffet, Alberto Giacometti, Leon Golub, and also de Kooning's *Woman* paintings and Pollock's semi-figurative black-and-white work of 1951-52.

T H E S C U L P T U R E

Erin M. Stimmell

All his life an explorer of forms in two dimensions, Rico Lebrun discovered another aspect of himself in sculpture. The idea of sculpture intrigued him much of his artistic life. He maintained a portfolio, "Drawings for Sculpture,"¹ intended for three-dimensional expression. Lebrun experimented with sculpture in the early 1950s, producing several bronze reliefs, *Minotaur*, *Bound Christ*, and *St. George and the Dragon*, as well as some plaster heads and a figure. Lebrun, however, disliked the laboriousness of working with plaster, and found the sculptural process incompatible with his need for immediate expression of his ideas. He trusted his initial response to his own work. And unlike drawing or painting, where the results of his artistic impulses were immediately perceivable, sculpture made him feel somewhat removed: the casting process distanced the final results of his work from his original idea.

Because of these technical and philosophical impediments, Lebrun's impulse toward sculpture lay fallow until his friendship in 1959 with fellow artist and sculptor Leonard Baskin helped it blossom. Lebrun's earlier experiments with collage in Mexico prepared him in subsequent years for the creation of the *Genesis* mural at Pomona College. His work from this period breathes with vitality, almost straining to be free from the constrictions of mere vertical and horizontal space. Lebrun, indeed, saw the writing on the wall, and through his close friend and colleague Bill Ptaszynski, met George Goyer, his future collaborator. Originally, Lebrun wanted someone to show him the materials of sculpture² and to weld armatures for him. At that time, Goyer was modeling his forms with wax sheets that were 1/8 to 1/4-inch thick. Rico saw this technique and the wax sheets as an extension of his work with collage, and as a way to make a kind of sculpture commensurate with his ideas.

The relationship Lebrun and Goyer established was a progressive one. As in any partnership, the mechanics of working together took time to develop.

Initially, Goyer constructed armatures from Lebrun's drawings that were sketches specifically for this purpose. But Lebrun used the armature not merely as a support for his forms, but also as a skeleton, as the bone structure—the integral internal workings of his forms. The pieces in our exhibition that most clearly reveal their armatures are the *Memorial to Caiazzo* and the *Cloaked Female Figure* (Nos. 48 and 49). Lebrun continuously moved from piece to piece within the studio, interspersing his sculptural work with periods of painting and drawing. The pliable wax was well-suited to his continuing concern with the human figure. Enamored of the body—its parts, its shapes, and its motivations—Lebrun could explore the fortunes of human form most directly through sculpture.

Once Lebrun had created the wax model, and a decision had been made to cast the work, the search began for a foundry to take on the work of casting.

Lebrun was not necessarily interested in creating a model that could be easily translated into bronze. He created from his need for expression; the forms were made with little concern for the technical difficulties inherent in rendering them permanent. The intervals of open and closed areas made delicate sections that often broke off, or were destroyed in the casting process. Thin sections of figures often were not strong enough to withstand pressure. Not many foundries were willing even to attempt the realization of these works. Those that did often made their own adjustments to the work to facilitate their involvement. Open sections were filled in and headless figures restored to the extent that any integrity, beauty, and character in the original piece were lost.

The tragedy of this sort of meddling can be easily imagined. What if *Memorial to Caiazzo*, with its exposure of both inner vulnerability and outer toughness, were a solid mass of bronze? *Bound Figure* came back from the foundry with its surface pitted and badly damaged. The result was antithetical to Lebrun's intentions. But this piece, and many

others were saved through careful analysis of the initial damage. Through photographic close-ups, damaged sections were re-sculpted, recast, and then welded to the original piece. In the case of the *Soaring Figure*, Goyer worked to repair the damage to the work, while Lebrun lay in bed and approved or disapproved of his every move. By this time, the relationship between Goyer and Lebrun had become a true collaboration.

*And that was a kind of understanding that Rico and I had—that I had for Rico. He was really into the vitality...the vitality of the piece—its own life and not based on exacting details. There were things, I think you had the sense could be lost, which happened—ruptured areas that still work. And we went on to work on the ones that didn't work to keep going with the piece. There was a good understanding of what these forms were all supposed to be doing.*³

Lebrun's first and foremost love was the vision inspired by the human form. He was not merely intrigued and stimulated by the shapes and colors of humanity; he saw more clearly *all* things through the shapes of the body. The rise of a hill, the interaction of a plow with the earth, and the configuration of a turtle made profound sense to Lebrun, the artist who learned to see through the human body.

As an artist, Lebrun could not help but want others to see as clearly as he did, whatever they might choose to see. For Lebrun, the key to more perceptive, more alive and passionate vision was contained within—in both inner and outer vision. He carried his own vision as far as he could on a flat surface with its corresponding light and dark. From lines to planes to volumes, Lebrun arrived at sculpture as his opportunity to see even more deeply into the mystery of the human form.

Lebrun's sculptural vision was as varied as his two-dimensional sight. A lifelong interest in primitive sculpture is reflected in the *Soldier* (No. 42) and the

small *Female Figurine* (No. 47), which is as fertile as any Greek Aphrodite, but definitely of her time with her proud stance (especially noticeable if viewed from the side) and indomitable individuality. The tremendous energy of *Soldier* seems impossible in eight inches of bronze—yet there it is before us. *Kicking Figure* (No. 39) isolates one action possible of a myriad of human activities. Lebrun's analysis was as meticulous as it was profound. The single action of the *Kicking Figure* was as important to him as a tribute to larger concerns.

These larger concerns are best exemplified by *Memorial to Caiazzo*, commemorating a town in Italy that German soldiers passed through during World War II. They asked the Italians which way the enemy had gone; the Italians cleverly replied, "That way," and sent the Germans off to shoot their own troops. The Germans returned to the village and executed the Italian men in revenge. As in the *Crucifixion*, Lebrun doesn't focus on the primary actor in the event he chooses to portray. Rather, the tribute focuses on the strength and courage of the women of the town—the survivors. *Memorial to Caiazzo* captures the spirit of the event with an outer cloak of resolve and toughness, but within this shield of bronze is an armature, a figure that is ultimately fragile. Openings of light within the shield reveal the vulnerability of the figure who presents herself with defiance.

Cloaked Female Figure continues the idea of an inner volume wrapped in an outer shell. The figure and cloak are seen separately from the front view, but in the back, the two ideas—figure and cloak—have become one. The binding around the figure's legs recalls a continuing concern of Lebrun's: the body and spirit entrapped within, struggling to get out. With this figure, the struggle has been a successful one. The figure emerges triumphant.

Lebrun's *Lazarus* (No. 44) carries the concept of the bound figure to its ultimate conclusion. Here, the viewer must imagine the soul of the figure as it is



Lebrun's sculpture studio, circa 1963.

revealed by the outer structure. But this outer structure is not a box, or tomb; like a membrane, the wrappings and rope containing Lazarus, reveal a figure that *must* be alive. The ropes strain and the covering bunches over a form that seems only temporarily still.

With *Lazarus*, Lebrun's ideas of the capacity for human survival crystallize in a very special way. Often accused during his lifetime of being an artist concerned only with the darker impulses of man, Lebrun in his sculpture reveals a positive, realistic wisdom. Lebrun could not turn his vision from the troubled fortunes of humanity; he could only express his faith and hope in their ultimate resurrection.

NOTES TO "THE SCULPTURE"

¹Technical and biographical information is based on interviews with George Goyer and Constance Lebrun Crown on 19-20 May 1983 by Erin M. Stimmell.

²Interview with George Goyer on 29 December 1982 by Peggy Dahl, Santa Barbara Museum of Art.

³Idem.

A note about the catalogue:

Works of art are listed by themes within time periods, rather than in strictly chronological order. Height precedes width in dimensions given in inches (largest work in feet), and followed by centimeters in parentheses.

I have let the artist speak whenever possible, for he wrote most eloquently about his own art (ECO).

You will say, Why not let someone else write for you? It is embarrassing to speak for yourself and to explain. Far less, I can answer, than to have myself explained through the words of another.

Rico Lebrun, 1961 (see Bibliography)

I would say that California, the land and the life, gave me the first true chance to bring drawing closer to objects and people outside the studio.

Later, the discovery of agricultural implements was also (as I see it now) of immense help to my painting. Previously my work had been essentially linear, and I was now impatient with the isolation of objects and figures divorced from surrounding space. Time and again, in painting and drawing alike, I had found that the figures and the objects were not properly contained and extended in space. Now the farm machinery had a quality of opened and colored structure, exactly what I had been looking for. Here I found expression in the new sense I needed. The expression was the structure: the interval, the span, was the physiognomy and the countenance. The machinery had square eyes of cobalt and ribs of cadmium red. The open works of the tractor were organs with clangor of orange blood; in the intervals of the open cage, in the furrow of the groin, sprouted the erect, green hair of the buttercup and the sage. The seeding and planting machines were made in the likeness of the locust and mantis—savage, alert, predatory. The disk harrows were vertebrate: so was the bone-white, upright structure of the axle and wheel. It was here that I also found the world of color that I understand best—color which is the story of the object. A red, damaged and made particular by use; the conditional, the related; the blaze made living and pertinent by sustained function—not the insipid, abstract birthday card, but the temperature chart of fevers and bleedings and rain and droughts.

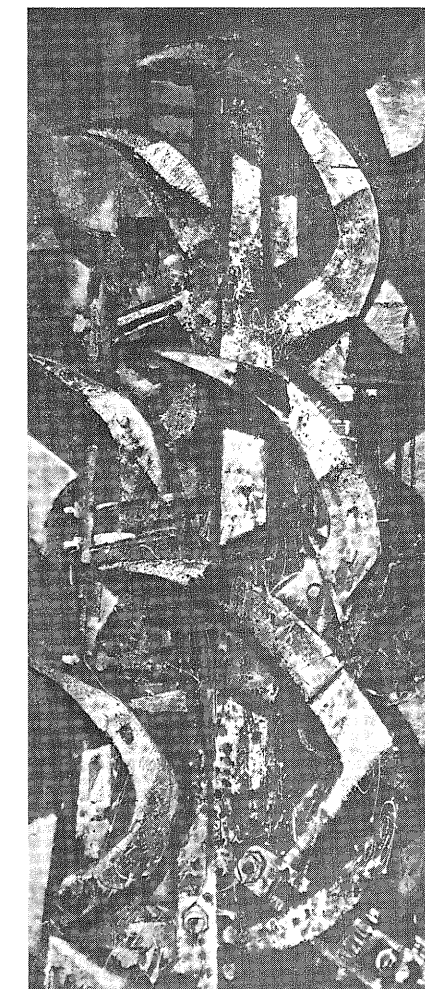
Rico Lebrun, 1961

1. FARM MACHINE NO. 1., 1947

Oil on canvas
36 × 72 (91 × 183)
Signed and dated
Michael Straight, Bethesda, MD

2. THE YELLOW PLOW, 1949

Oil on Upson board
80 × 36 (203 × 91)
Signed and dated
Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute,
Utica, NY



2. THE YELLOW PLOW, 1949

I must start with the tangible object, the concrete. My aim is to fashion its equivalent concreteness in paint and line. To point up this quality of existence necessitates elimination, invention and abstraction. Abstraction is the concrete revealed.

To abstract is an intensely human function. Some very fine works of abstraction have been said to lack humaness. Yet they were performed by humans, are human works, which is far more pertinent than their looking like humans. On the other hand, the baseness of certain literalism in art is, at times, truly inhuman.

Rico Lebrun, 1949

The Whitney's Wood of the Holy Cross is his personal "favorite" (for want of a better word)...he found a piece of charred wood in [our] fireplace one morning and carried it to his studio, where he worked on the painting—almost in a state of mystical ecstasy. He didn't stop until the painting was finished, and afterwards couldn't remember the painting process.

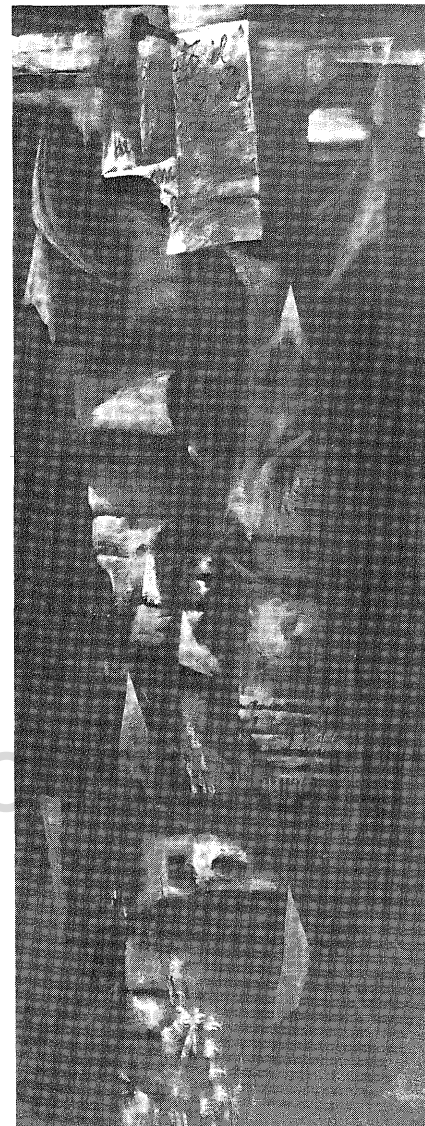
Constance Lebrun Crown, 1958

Personally I find that the contest takes on meaning only when the connotation and the structure are one....One [procedure for achieving this fusion] is to fall, so to speak, into the middle of the visual field of a canvas and, without permitting any second thoughts or footnotes to interfere, to go from beginning to end, and only then to step back and consider what you have done while on leave from balance, geometry, anatomy, and other considerations.

Rico Lebrun, 1959-60

3. WOOD OF THE HOLY CROSS, 1948

Oil and casein on canvas
80 × 30 (203 × 76)
Signed and dated
Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York City



My insistence on the limited or monochrome key is due first, to the purpose of preparing material for the camera, and second, to my preference, on large scale, for the black-and-white range as a most potent carrier of visual shock—though not necessarily the only one.

In dealing with ideas, vision and techniques for the task of communicating to the many, I hope for the day when a few of us, by using contemporary techniques (the camera, animation, the handmade montage), will finally correlate some of the facts of contemporary vision, and collectively, even anonymously, say what we feel about the world around us.

Rico Lebrun, 1950

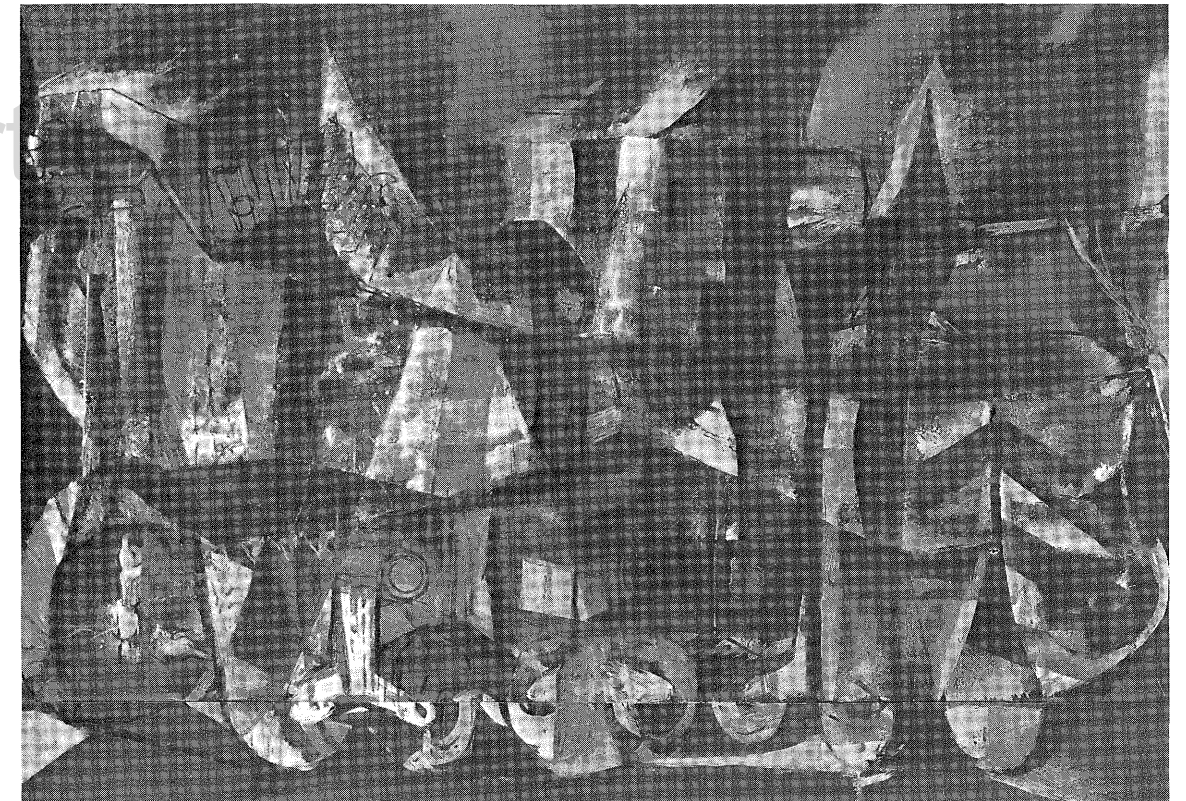
You ask me why I keep repeating the subject of the cross? My answer is when we will have definitely put an end to that chapter by treating each other and the rest of the world resolutely as human beings.

To me the repetition of the symbol comes as a necessary act; it seems that I can thus make real its daily immanence, which we try to ignore with the joke that it will not happen here, while thousands are being maimed and destroyed by malice and terror every day.

Rico Lebrun, 1959-60 (216:25)

There came a time when I needed a subject, a theme, which could be put through successive illustrative variations, as a break from the self-centered procedure into which events and personal reverses had cornered me. The choice was a natural one. When I abandoned in my youth, with a sudden revulsion, some things related to my former faith that I could not properly understand, I abandoned at the same time what that faith had of sustenance and clarity. Now, as an outcome of the war years, images related to the Crucifixion began to crowd in upon me in chains of ideas—not scattered thoughts, but a rosary, as it were, of meditation. In a way they were like a commentary on the nature of the Cross, the implements, and the actors.

Rico Lebrun, 1961



12. BURNING TANK, 1950.

The demolished tank of today's ordeal by fire is broken up by passages simulating fire.

Rico Lebrun, 1950

The crying women are, like all bereaved mothers, empty houses pierced by screams, for I have never seen pretty sorrow.

Rico Lebrun, 1950



4. MARY AT THE CROSS, 1947

Ink on paper
23¼ × 19 (60 × 48)
Signed and dated: Mars 19, 1947
Estate of Rico Lebrun, Kennedy
Galleries, New York City

5. WOMAN OF THE CRUCIFIXION, 1948

Ink and brown conté crayon on paper
24 × 19 (61 × 48)
Signed and dated
Constance Lebrun Crown

5. WOMAN OF THE CRUCIFIXION, 1948

6. WOMAN OF THE CRUCIFIXION, 1948

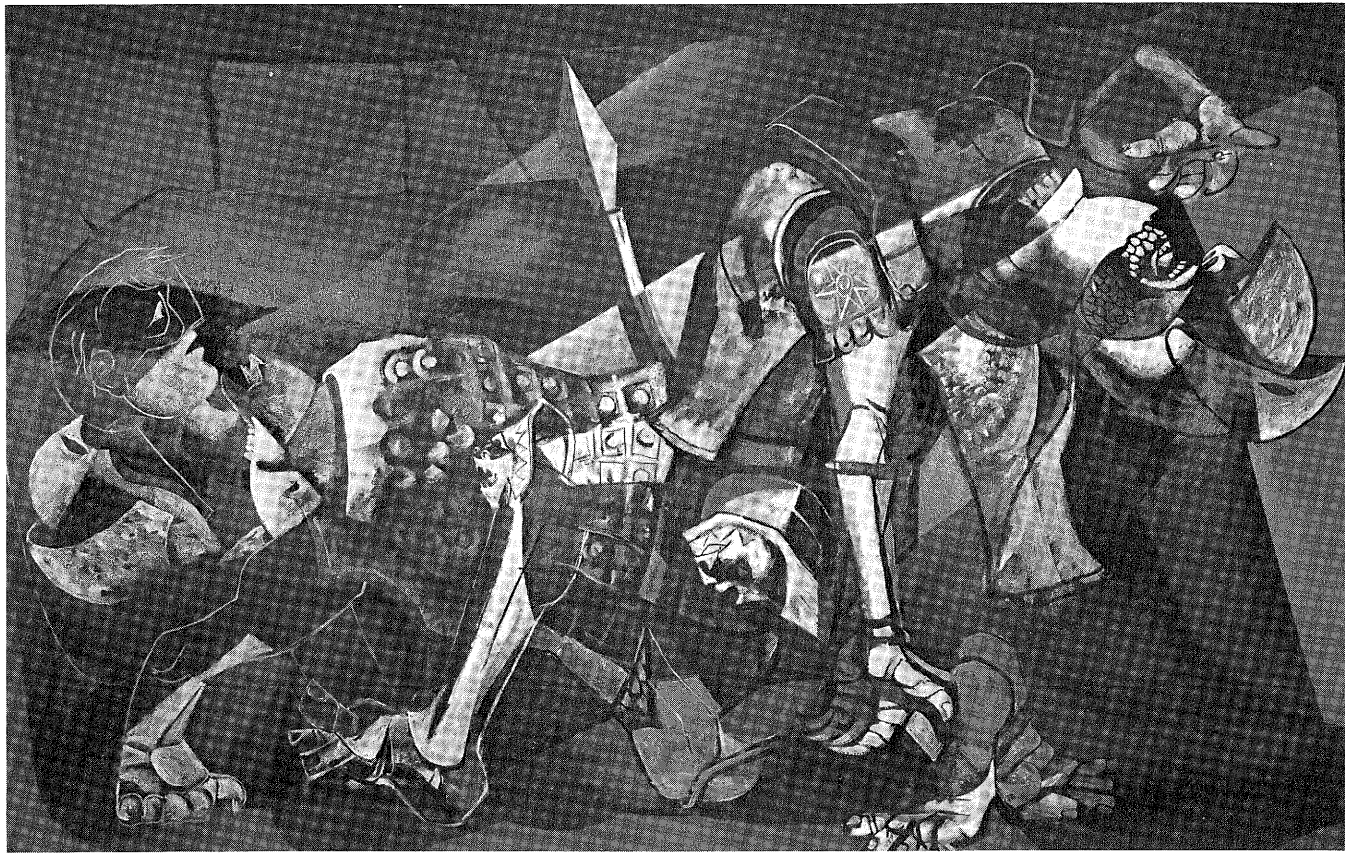
Oil on canvas
70 × 40 (178 × 102)
Signed and dated
Yale University Art Gallery,
New Haven, CT
Gift of the
William C. Whitney Foundation

7. WOMAN OF THE CRUCIFIXION,
1948-50

Duco on Upson board
96 × 48 (244 × 122)
F. M. Hall Collection, Sheldon
Memorial Art Gallery, University
of Nebraska-Lincoln



7. WOMAN OF THE CRUCIFIXION,
1948-50



10. WITNESS OF THE RESURRECTION,
1950/51

My choice of the theme, Crucifixion, was prompted by the constantly repeated history of man's blindness and inhumanity.

The soldiers, overburdened with armor like nocturnal animals, are the symbol of most of us armored against true compassion. Prejudice is cruel and extravagant....

Rico Lebrun, 1950

8. **TURTLE**, 1948
Charcoal and conté crayon on paper
19½ × 25½ (50 × 65)
Signed and dated
David Lebrun

9. **TURTLE SOLDIER**, 1949
Ink on illustration board
19½ × 29½ (50 × 75)
Signed and dated
Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York City
Rogers Fund, 1955

10. **WITNESS OF THE RESURRECTION**,
1950/51
Duco on Upson board
62 × 96 (158 × 244)
Signed and dated: 1951 (probably
later; believed to be identical with
Two Sleeping Soldiers, No. 81
of 1950 exhibit)
Syracuse University Art Collections
(SU 74.361)
Gift of Constance Lebrun Crown

11. **TREAD OF TANK**, 1950
Oil (and Duco?) on Upson board
35¾ × 96 (91 × 244)
Signed and dated
Estate of Rico Lebrun, Kennedy
Galleries, New York City

12. **BURNING TANK**, 1950
Mixed media (casein) on Upson board
35 × 50 (89 × 127)
Signed and dated
Estate of Rico Lebrun, Kennedy
Galleries, New York City

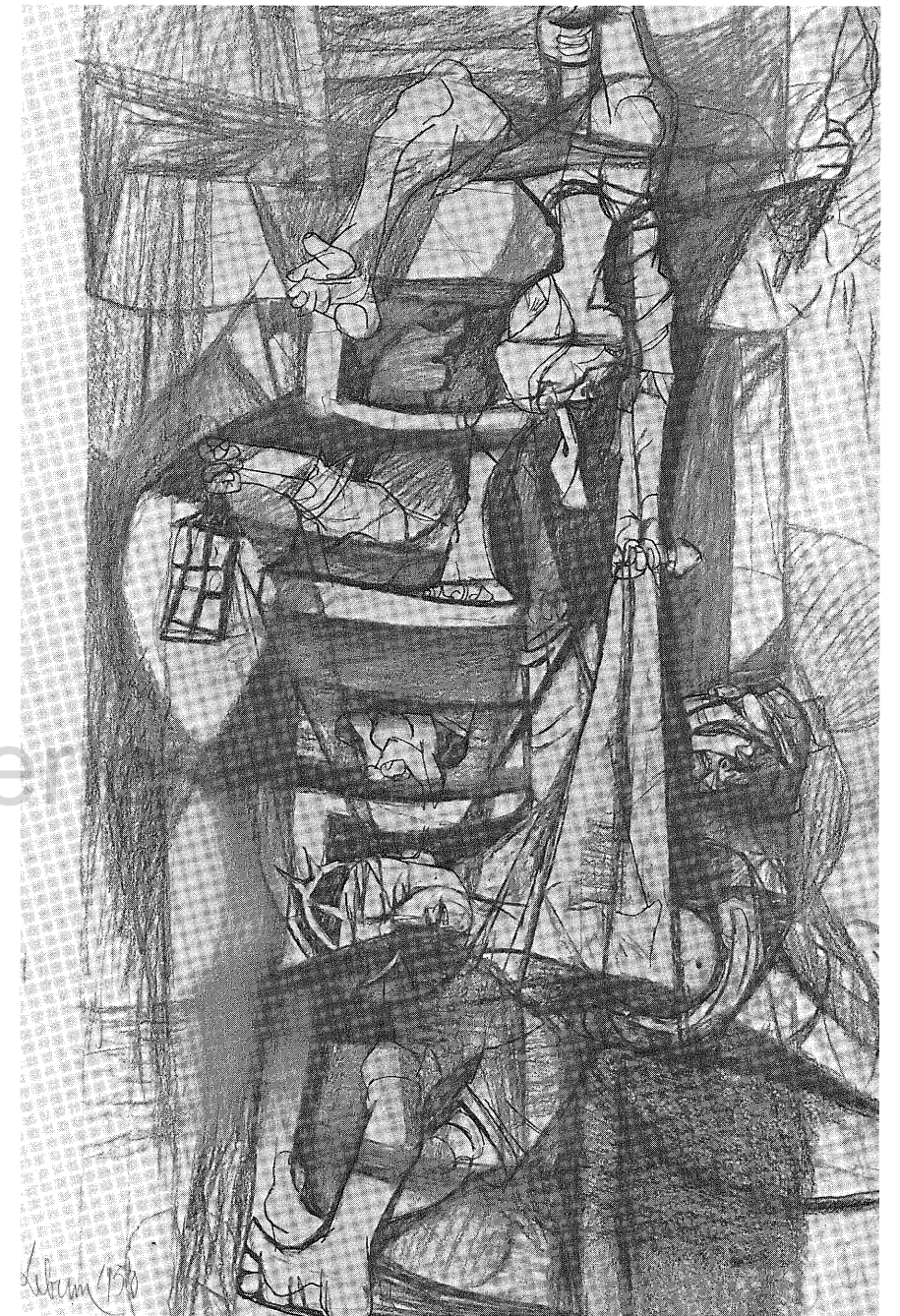
The carpenters of the cross are, as are all men who accept wages for execution, lunatics and wolves. They gesture accordingly, and finally here and there the prophecy of self-crucifixion is indicated.

Rico Lebrun, 1950

13. **CARPENTER ON THE CROSS**, 1950
Charcoal on Upson board
42 × 90 (107 × 229)
Signed and dated
Syracuse University Art Collections
(SU 74.358)
Gift of Constance Lebrun Crown

14. **CARPENTER ON THE CROSS**, 1950
Ink and casein on paper mounted on
Upson board
44½ × 88½ (113 × 225)
Signed and dated
Syracuse University Art
Collections (SU 74.357)
Gift of Constance Lebrun Crown

15. **FIGURES AT THE CROSS**, 1950
Charcoal on Upson board
60 × 40 (152 × 102)
Signed and dated
Syracuse University Art
Collections (SU 74.360)
Gift of Constance Lebrun Crown

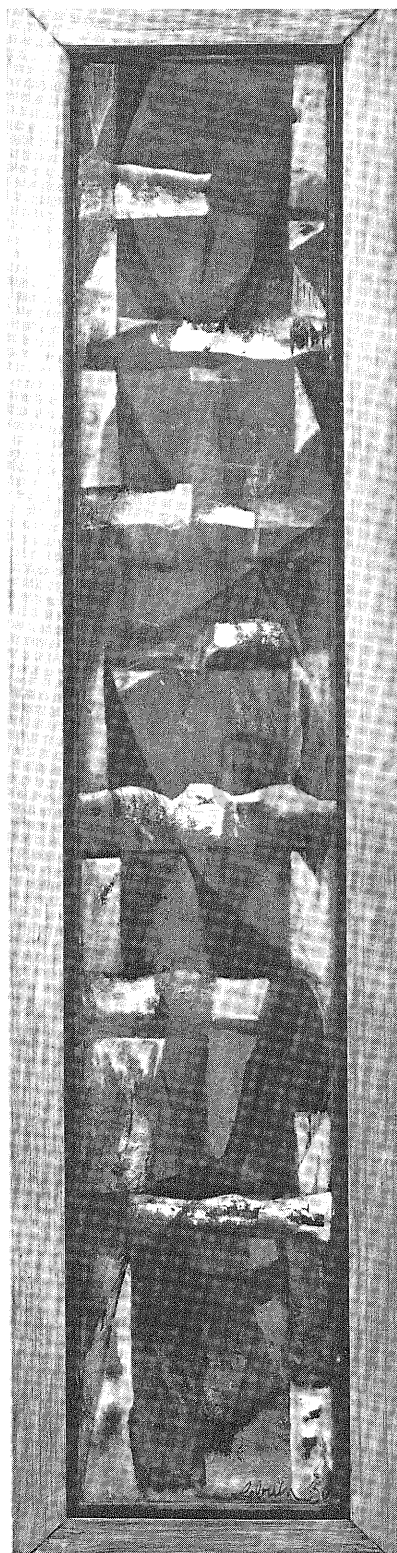


15. FIGURES AT THE CROSS, 1950

This was a period in which I could go from one picture to another as a speaker goes from one phrase to another—the wood of the Cross, the ladder, the signs, the nails, the hammer, the uniforms of slaughter, the black of mourning. I think it was Melville who had given me courage to do this when he wrote about the spade, the lance, the tow-rope.

As events had troubled the face of the earth, so did I now feel the need to trouble the plane of the picture. Far more than for aesthetic effects I worked for psychological meaning. The steps of the ladder of the Cross must have been hard ones to climb; so my rendering had perforce to be hard to read, uneven and obscure. Likewise, I wanted to paint the closeups of the other implements with which I started the cycle (shroud, hammer, nails) in the nature of an apparition.

Rico Lebrun, 1961



16. LADDER OF THE CROSS, 1950
 Duco on Upson board
 122 × 22 (310 × 56)
 Signed and dated
 Estate of Rico Lebrun



17. THE CROSS, 1950
 Duco on Upson board
 126 × 126 (320 × 320)
 Signed and dated
 Estate of Rico Lebrun

The large triptych which concluded the cycle was executed in six weeks. My assistants and I faced a technical problem, because it was impossible to assemble the triptych—it was painted in sections—in its entirety in the space we had in the studio. We solved this problem with the help of photographic montage scaled to a smaller version which we would report to the final painting. Our calculations proved correct, because there was not a single change to be made when the work was finally shown in the Los Angeles County Museum and we could see it in its entirety. Needing a medium which would dry fast because of my way of quickly and repeatedly reworking a picture, I was at this time using lacquers. I found them enormously resilient and alive as a medium. Relatively new in the equipment of the painter of today, these lacquers have not been given enough time to prove their worth as a lasting medium. . . .

If a choice must be made between durability and spiritual pertinence, no painter worth his salt would hesitate in favor of the latter.

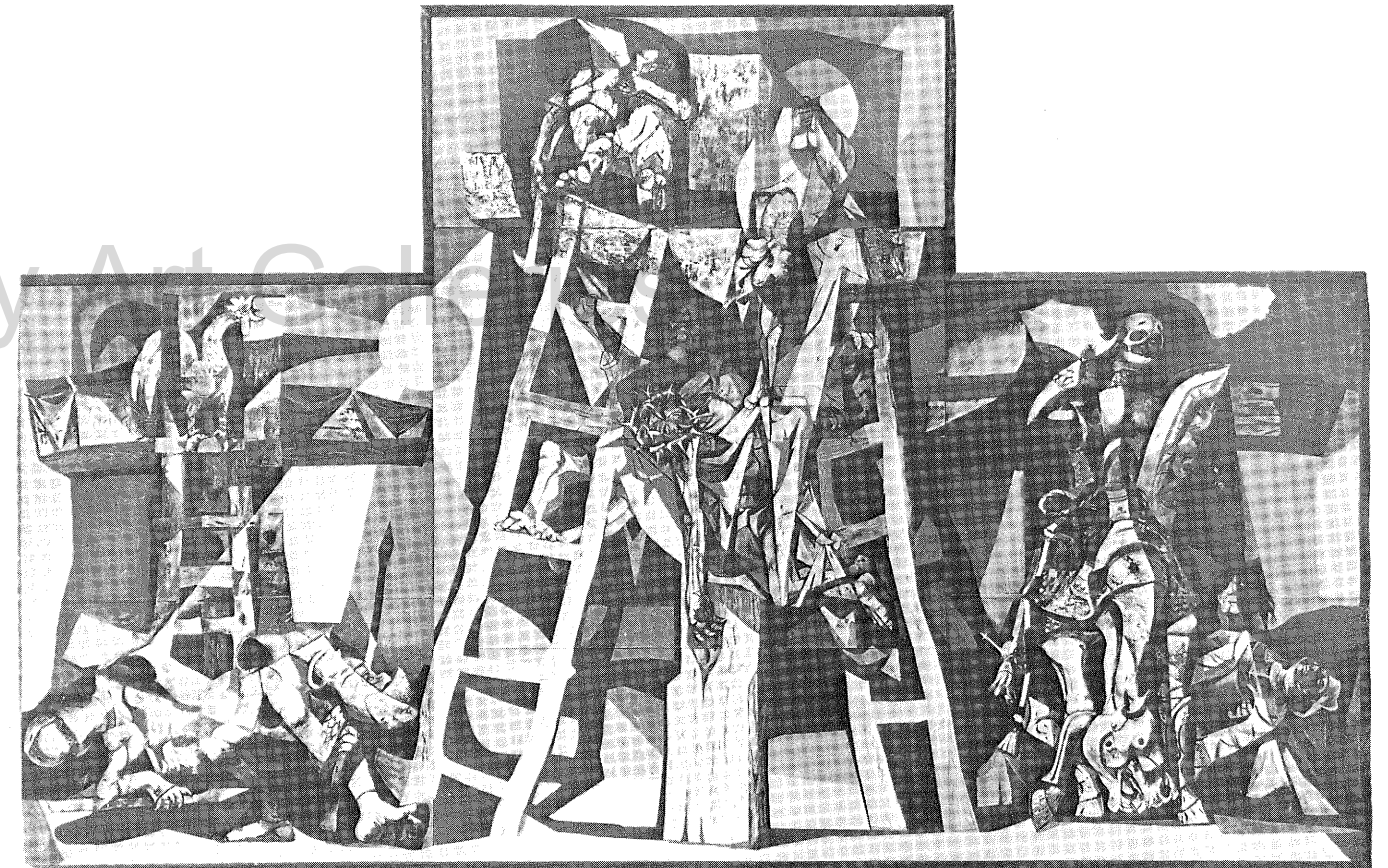
Rico Lebrun, 1961

18. CRUCIFIXION STUDY, 1949-50
Mixed media (casein, chalk, sand, Duco, oil) on Upson board
48 × 120 (122 × 305)
Verso: charcoal drawing, Crucifixion Study
Syracuse University Art Collections (SU 74.359)
Gift of Constance Lebrun Crown



19. CRUCIFIXION TRIPTYCH, 1950
Duco on Upson board
16 × 26 feet (488 × 793)
Signed and dated
Syracuse University Art Collections (SU 58.8)
Installed in William B. Heroy Geology Building in April 1979
Gift of the William C. Whitney Foundation in 1957
Exhibited in Los Angeles (Dec 1950); Museum of Modern Art, NYC (Mar 1951); Santa Barbara, CA (July 1951); San Francisco (Nov 1951).

Installed in the main reading room of Syracuse University's Carnegie Library from 1958 to 1971, then brief exhibition at the Everson Museum of Syracuse. In storage; extensive restoration work, September 1978.



Occasionally I like to select a mentor, a master, and let him guide me through a revision of one of his paintings. When I do this I forgo for a time the option of taking on nature or my own images and I adopt the image of some other man. Periodically I need to take sustenance in this way. By either understanding or misunderstanding lyrically—which is my right to do—his basic intentions, I try to see how much I can transform what he did. I try to move into his terrain, bringing my own ammunition.

I do not believe by even the most pious stretch of conscience that this belittles my own personality. It seems to me that, as in music, to take a theme already in existence and to write meaningful variations on this theme is one of the most challenging tasks an artist can face. Not mechanically and not as a virtuoso manifestation of daring, but because there are certain themes in paint—or words, or notes—which lend themselves to fresh reading and consequent new discoveries.

Rico Lebrun, 1961

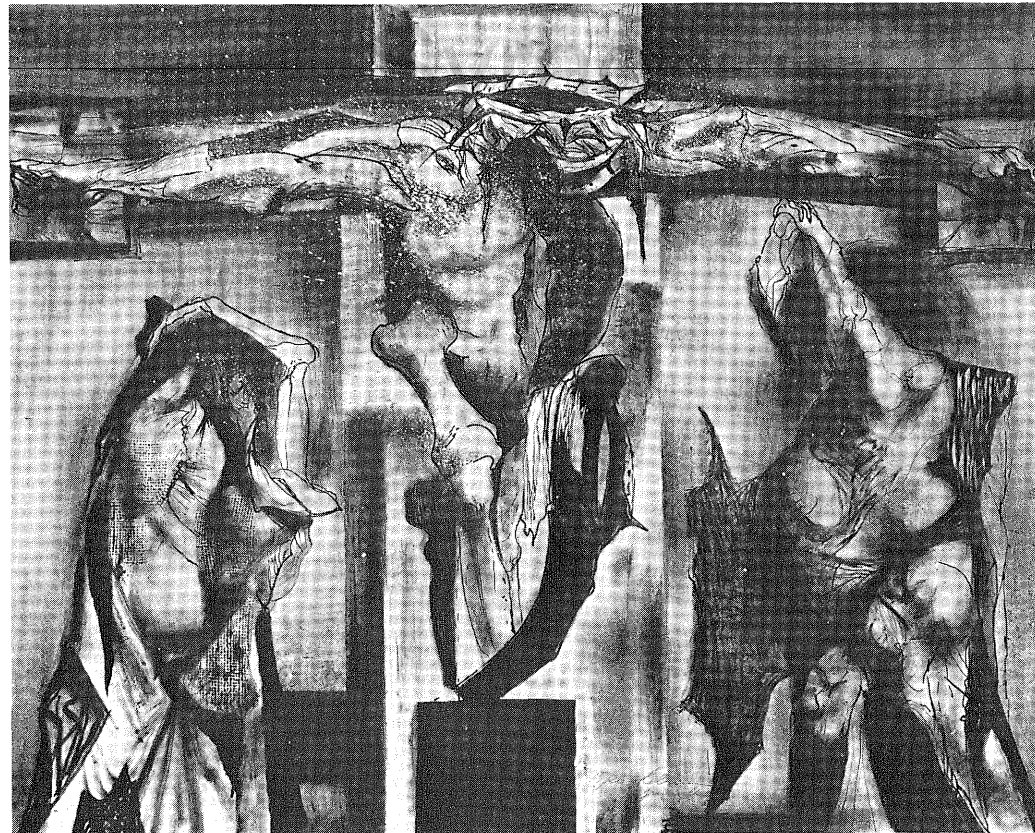
The blocking in of large masses, simulating boldness, is often a promissory note which we will not be able to honor later. It is, in fact, the story of the particular which leads properly to the general. A false reading of the particular will change the entire structure....Grünewald's arms grew from the web of arterial net to the surface, yet not as anatomy but as a river commanding the nature of the terrain. In him the minute and the particular are the true lead to the eccentric unfolding of form, the opening of the bivalve shapes, the uncoiling of a map full of relevance.

Rico Lebrun, 1961

20. CRUCIFIXION, 1958 or 1959
Ink and colored crayon on paper
12¾ × 17½ (32 × 45)
Constance Lebrun Crown

21. CRUCIFIXION (after GRÜNEWALD).
1961
Lithograph on wove paper
(15/20), 24½ × 30½ (62 × 77)
Signed in pencil
Syracuse University Art
Collections (SU 60.152)

21. CRUCIFIXION (after GRÜNEWALD). 1961



I have recently painted a new version of it [the Crucifixion], and this is a bird of a different color—and a bird of many colors, because suddenly as a legitimate reaction to the period of the Crucifixion, after having been in Mexico and seen what Mexico is like and remembering what I am supposed to be as a painter, I have come to the idea of adopting splendor rather than gloom. I don't say that I am going to pick up gay anecdotes out of existence, but my job now is to do the tragic in a splendid way.

Rico Lebrun, 1959-60 (204:15)

After Christ was taken down and the Golgotha scaffold scrubbed with whitewash, someone discovered that without the irrelevant trivia of blood and pain the Cross made a composition of "significant horizontals and verticals."

This meant nothing at all to Mary the Mother. Her sight had been made unsophisticated by experience.

To me the repetition of the symbol of the Crucifixion comes as a necessary act; I can thus make its daily immanence real and present. We try to ignore this presence; we say that it is a fable of times past. Meanwhile thousands are being destroyed by malice and terror every day.

Being Christian by birth and choice, I still have a hundred versions of the Calvary to do, in the shape of prayer, in all forms and colors; from the imperceptible white of first agony to the ultimate hues which transfigured the gibbet. Repetitive in design, the crosses span the terrain of all experience, repetitive as our zest to nail others with the tongue if not the hammer.

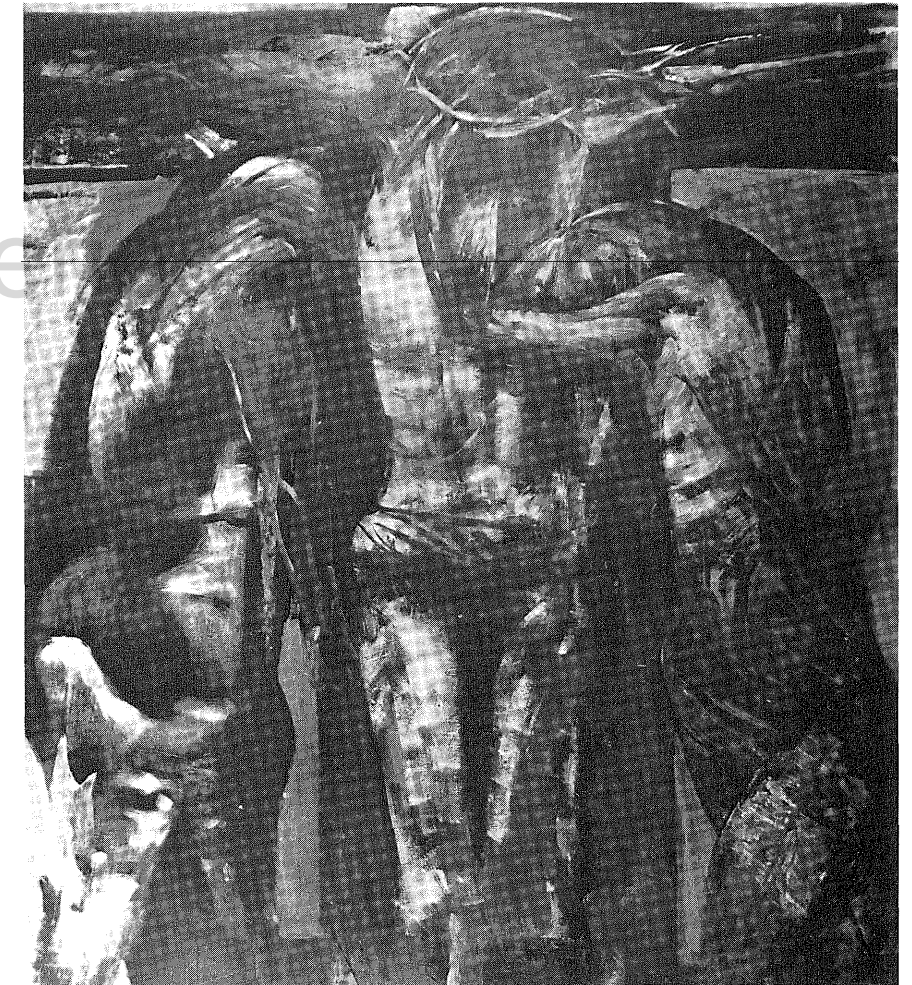
Rico Lebrun, 1961

22. BLACK GOLGOTHA, 1957
Oil on canvas
93½ × 77 (238 × 196)
Signed and dated
Estate of Rico Lebrun, Kennedy
Galleries, New York City

23. CRUCIFIXION (BLACK AND GOLD GOLGOTHA), 1963
Oil on canvas
93 × 81½ (236 × 207)
Estate of Rico Lebrun, Kennedy
Galleries, New York City



23A. SPRING GOLGOTHA, 1957



23. CRUCIFIXION (BLACK AND GOLD GOLGOTHA), 1963

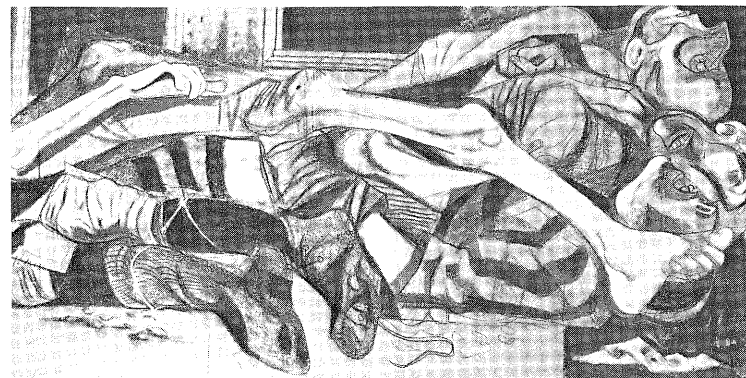
Before painting the several versions of the Pit, Buchenwald Cart, and other related themes, I did many precise and lucid drawings using the photographic documentation available on the subject as a test to maintain and amplify if possible the authenticity of brute fact. Yet after having gone through days of absorbed and almost hallucinatory recording of these awesome fragments, I remember wanting to brush the whole thing away from me: the draftsman made their sight unbearable to me as a man—a just price to pay. Afterward, the mind drifted for a while and then remembered something that was left at its bottom, remembered the upheaval of the spent furnace with fragments, islands here and there, of what had been the living body. Going to work again, I painted several versions, the truest being the ones in which I could not name the islands—pelvis, skull, whatever they had been. So the changes were part of the search to find at which degree the commemoration would read truest. The technique had to be that which answered these requirements precisely; and, in a total revulsion against craft and skill, I found that I wanted to speak out in a single shout.

Rico Lebrun, 1961

24. BUCHENWALD CART, 1956
Oil on masonite
48 × 72 (122 × 183)
Signed and dated
Samuel and June Rosenfeld,
New York City
25. STUDY AFTER TRAINI, TRIUMPH OF DEATH, 1958
Ink on paper
19¾ × 25¾ (50 × 65)
Signed and dated
Estate of Rico Lebrun, Kennedy
Galleries, New York City
26. VICTIM NO. 2, 1958
Oil on canvas
38 × 93 (97 × 236)
Signed and dated
Estate of Rico Lebrun, Kennedy
Galleries, New York City



24. BUCHENWALD CART, 1956.



24B. FLOOR OF BUCHENWALD, 1958,
Lebrun Estate.

Once they said I could draw as a bird sings. Possibly I still can. But there came a time when the image of man was so defaced that bird songs did not seem enough. If I had to lose all my virtues as a passable draughtsman for the sake of speaking truly about the unmanageable design of our condition, I would do so gladly. Talent is one thing; life another.

Bird songs indeed. And what have classical clarity and unity got to do with the dread unity of the charnel house pit? At best strangers to each other, even in passion, when alive, the dead were now one single, common body.

In working at these images I feel I am at least for a while a piece of that unity. It is my form of remembrance and prayer.

"So long as we consent to live like sheep
And never mention those who disappear."

Auden

But the answer of many to this is that to mention "those who disappear" is morbid and sentimental.

Morbid is to forget. Sentimental is to make believe that this never happened nor will ever happen again.

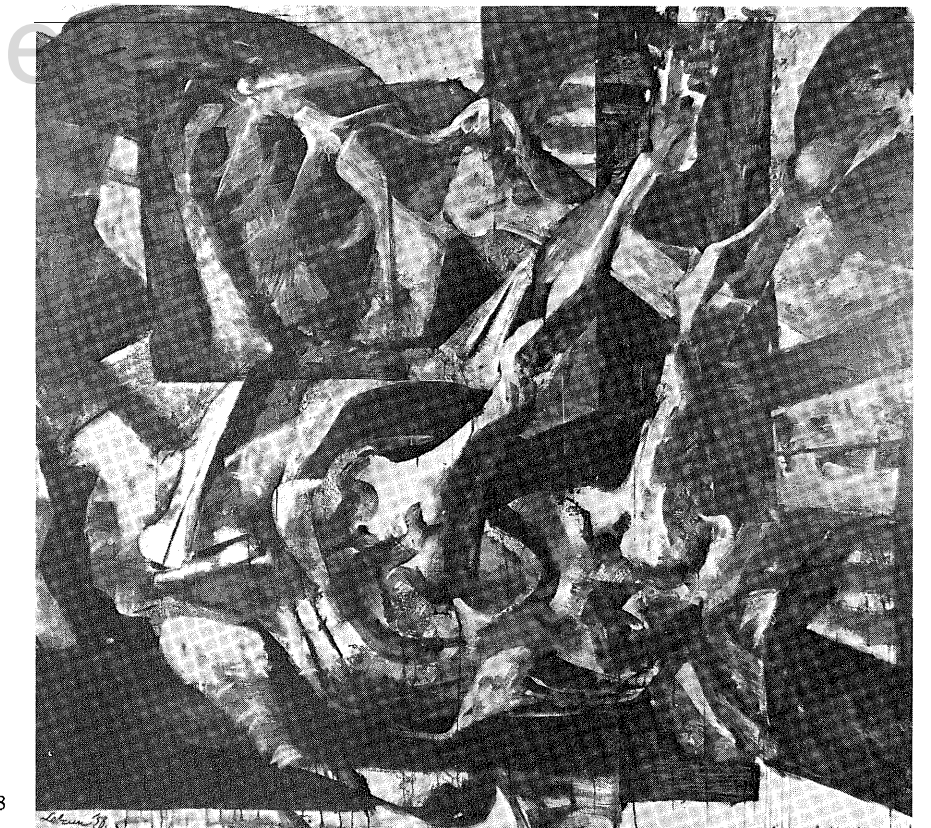
The fact is, that when their hour struck and they were dumped in the pit, the dial of their limbs marked the awful time of day. So composition is born, out of the shocked heart. First a man, second a designer, I must at this point find out that pain has a geometry of its own.

In painting these images I wanted to express the idea that the human body even when disfigured by the executioner is grand in meaning.

No brutality will ever cancel this meaning. Painting may increase it by changing what is disfigured into what is transfigured.

Rico Lebrun, 1959

27. DACHAU, 1958
Mixed media (ink, wax, and charcoal)
on canvas
75 × 86 (191 × 218)
Signed and dated
Estate of Rico Lebrun, Kennedy
Galleries, New York City
28. BUCHENWALD FURNACE, 1958
Oil on canvas
41 × 31 (104 × 79)
Signed and dated
Estate of Rico Lebrun, Mekler Gallery,
Los Angeles
29. STUDY FOR DACHAU CHAMBER, 1958
Oil on canvas
79 × 85 (201 × 216)
Signed and dated
Estate of Rico Lebrun, Kennedy
Galleries, New York City



29. STUDY FOR DACHAU CHAMBER, 1958

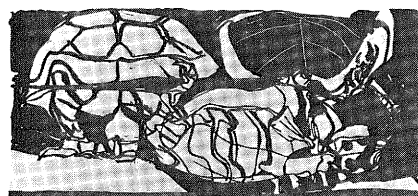
And this apparent fleetingness and unreality of the locality of the isles was most probably one reason for the Spaniards calling them the *Encantada*, or *Enchanted Group*. . .

Nor would the appellation, *enchanted*, seem misapplied in still another sense. For concerning the peculiar reptile inhabitant of these wilds—whose presence gives the group its second Spanish name, *Gallipagos*—concerning the tortoises found here, most mariners have long cherished a superstition, not more frightful than grotesque. They earnestly believe that all wicked sea-officers, more especially commodores and captains, are at death (and, in some cases, before death) transformed into tortoises; thenceforth dwelling upon these hot aridities, sole solitary lords of *Asphaltum*.

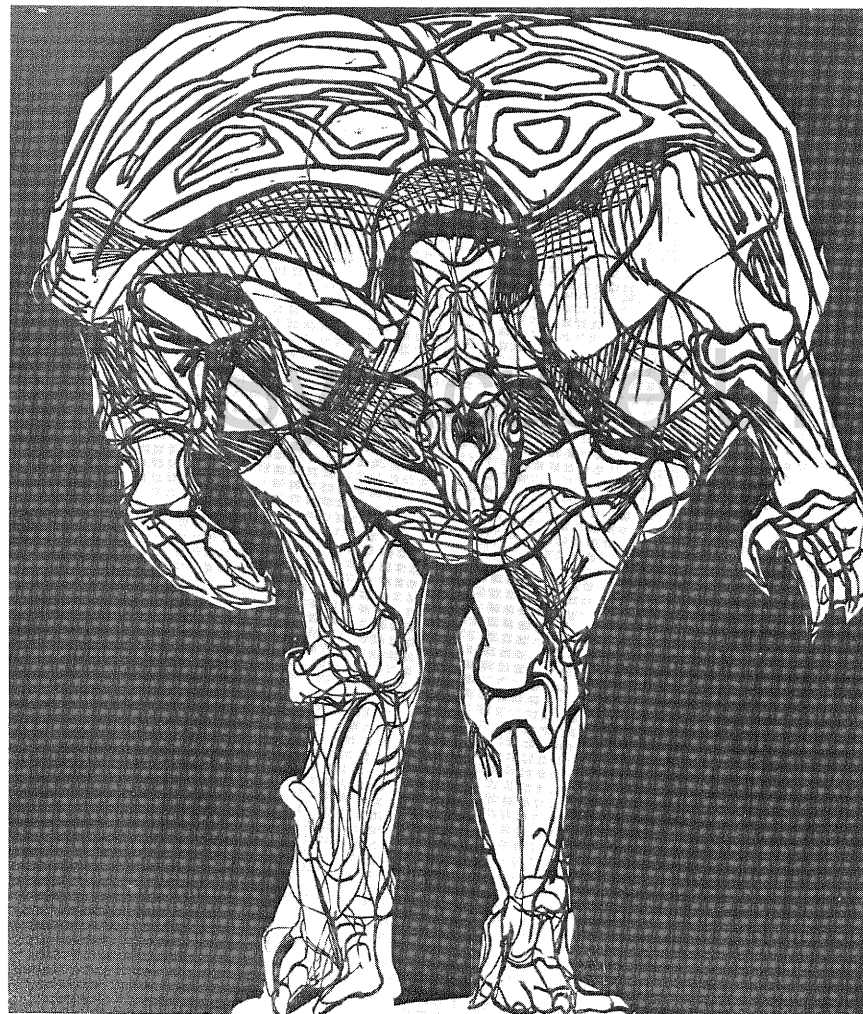
Yet even the tortoise, dark and melancholy as it is up the back, still possesses a bright side; its calipee or breast-plate being sometimes of a faint yellowish or golden tinge. . .

Enjoy the bright, keep it turned up perpetually if you can, but be honest, and don't deny the black. Neither should he, who cannot turn the tortoise from its natural position so as to hide the darker and expose his livelier aspect, like a great October pumpkin in the sun, for that cause declare the creature to be one total inky blot. The tortoise is both black and bright.

Herman Melville, 1854



30. ENCANTADAS, 1959/1961
Herman Melville: text, 1854
Rico Lebrun: drawings on cherry blocks, 1959
Leonard Baskin: woodcuts, 1959
Gehenna Press: publisher, 1961
6 woodcuts on Copperplate wove paper, 22 3/4 × 17 3/4 (58 × 45)
(text, Bembo type on Shogun wove paper)
Syracuse University Art Collections, No. 34 of 150 copies (SU 63.88)



To me the most important moments in Dante are when his speech becomes descriptive to the point of actual linear mobility. Aware as I am of the alive and elusive quality of line itself, of its changeable existence, I feel that when this quality is present in drawing the image seems to become more valid as a commentary on the human dilemma.

It seems unnecessary to say that the staggering penalties Dante devises are medieval in blood and gloom only up to a point. They can be readily translated into their less theatrical but still dreaded equivalents in our more peaceful midsts. To be a personality split by blades and then reassembled for more of the same, to be headless or brainless and speaking at the same time is, for instance, the trait of maladies psychiatry does not dismiss as medieval, though it does find them discouragingly ancient in character and obstinate in duration. Also, as we, in facing these problems, indulge, for the sake of animal sanity, in our forms of humor, Dante is not without ample touches of grossness, lusty insults, and comical cruelties almost defeated by their own truculence. These are inspiring factors for my drawings. Too, not at all convinced that sinners, who in life were denied the strength to resist evil, should be first short-changed, and then made to pay such painful tolls, I find that I bring even to the most splendid images of Dante a resisting irony towards the appalling concept of divine vengeance, and infinite pity for the Judge. And this is an aim of my drawing also; that the objects of his ire should be nobly outlined, not as slobbering dogs but as disfigured images of fundamental dignity.

Rico Lebrun, 1962

Canto XVIII • Circle Eight

Borgia of the panderers and seducers; they are sunk in filth.

And my Guide prompted then:

"Lean forward a bit
and look beyond him, there—
do you see that one
scratching herself with dungy nails,
the strumpet

who fidgets to her feet,
then to a crouch?

It is the whore Thaïs
who told her lover
when he sent to ask her,
'Do you thank me much?'

'Much? Nay, past all believing!
And with this
let us turn from the sight
of this abyss.'

31. STUDY FOR DANTE CHAPTER HEAD, 1961
Ink on paper
30 × 40 (76 × 102)
Signed with writing: Canto XXXVIII [XXVIII], Circle 8, Bolgia 9
Estate of Rico Lebrun, Kennedy Galleries, New York City

32. UNTITLED, 1963
Lithograph
17 × 12 3/4 (43 × 32)
from:
DRAWINGS FOR DANTE'S INFERNO, 1961/1963
7 lithographs on Arches wove paper
36 reproductions of signed and dated drawings; see Nos. 33, 34, and 35
John Ciardi: introduction and translation from Dante
Leonard Baskin: book design and a note on the drawings
Kanthos Press: publisher, 1963
Syracuse University Art Collections, No. 11 of 100 copies (SU 64.9)



33. RESTLESS THAÏS (DANTE'S INFERNO, Canto XVIII), 1961

33. RESTLESS THAÏS (DANTE'S INFERNO, Canto XVIII), 1961
Charcoal and ink on paper
39 3/4 × 27 1/2 (101 × 70)
Signed and dated
Syracuse University Art Collections (SU 62.20)

Canto XIII • Circle Seven, Round Two
Borgia of the suicides; they are changed into trees and bushes.

*Puzzled, I raised my hand
 a bit and slowly
 broke off a branchlet from
 an enormous thorn:
 and the great trunk of it cried:
 "Why do you break me?"*

*And after blood had darkened
 all the bowl
 of the wound, it cried again:
 "Why do you tear me?
 Is there no pity left in any soul?"*

*Men we were, and
 now we are changed to sticks;
 well might your hand have
 been more merciful
 were we no more than souls
 of lice and ticks."*

Canto XXVIII • Circle Eight
Borgia of the sowers of discord; sowers of schism abroad while they yet lived; therefore they now go split.

*Who could describe,
 even in words set free
 of metric and rhyme and
 a thousand times retold,
 the blood and wounds that
 now were shown to me!*

*At grief so deep the tongue
 must wag in vain;
 the language of our sense
 and memory
 lacks the vocabulary of such pain.*

34. **THE FIELD OF HUMAN STUMPS AND BUSHES (DANTE'S INFERNO, Canto XIII), 1961**
 Ink and wash on paper
 19 × 25¼ (48 × 65)
 Signed and dated
 Syracuse University Art Collections (SU 62.21)

35. **LONE GREAT MUTILATED FIGURE (DANTE'S INFERNO, Canto XXVIII), 1961**
 Ink wash on paper
 39¾ × 28 (101 × 71)
 Signed and dated
 The Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, MA



36. **SPLIT FIGURE (DANTE'S INFERNO, Canto XXVIII), 1962**

36. **SPLIT FIGURE (DANTE'S INFERNO, Canto XXVIII), 1962**
 Casein on Upson board
 48 × 34 (122 × 86)
 Estate of Rico Lebrun, Kennedy Galleries, New York City

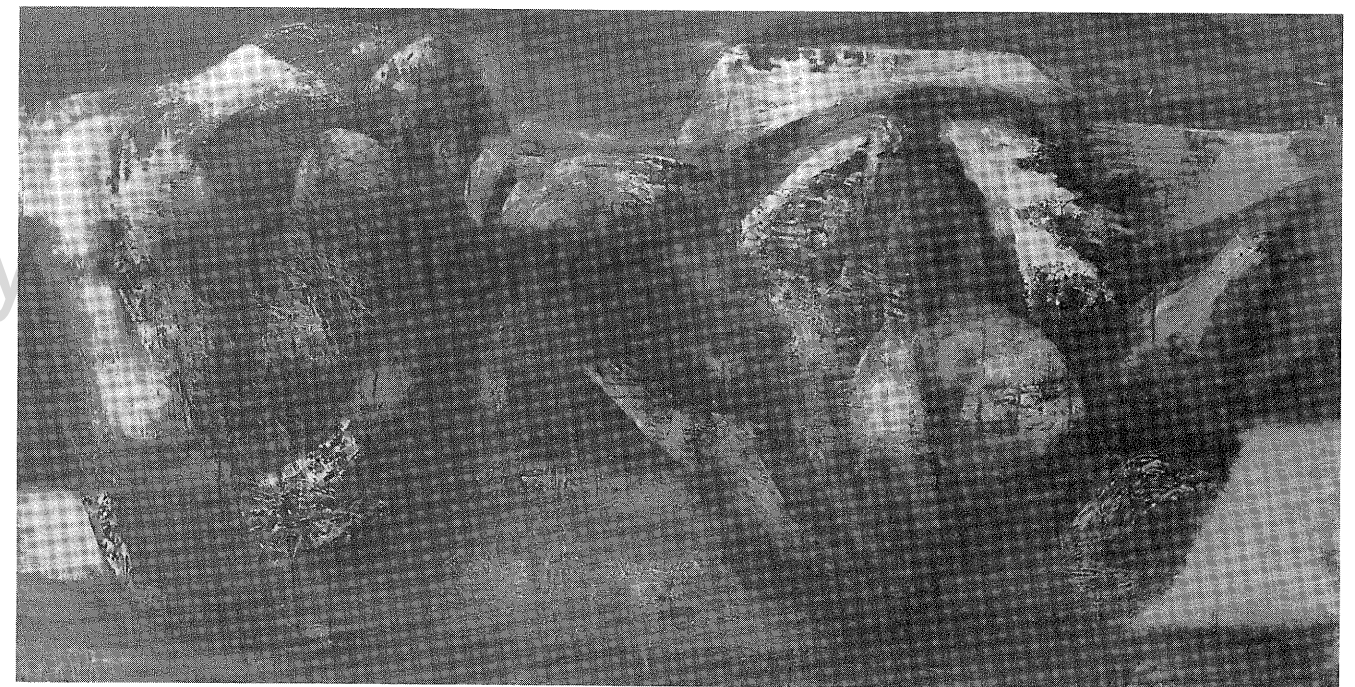
If I am, more than ever (I don't say forever), involved with dark images, this is because the island forms, the blocks of objects and bodies have, when seen at night, all the monolith semblance a form needs without the chatter of details: in other words, they are clearer to me as forms and mute drama all in one. Darkness is to me not meant to shroud but to eliminate the unnecessary, to clarify the ghost of shapes before sunshine floods them. Often I walk to work so early in the morning that garbage pails, cars, gas pumps, trees, have a look of breathless beings surprised on a terrain of solemn truce before the day comes. And when I get to the studio I sit for a while in the dark watching the animal-furniture, the easel-giraffe, the 'potamus-couch, emerge from the lagoon of the

floor. From this I had the idea of drawings for the flood; not from shedding tears over Noah's ordeal, but from being thankful to the Lord for this available Genesis in which mass, if I can watch it without flinching, slowly gets mobilized within itself, unfolds and grows. Also, thus seen, forms are condensed to basic things which can become body, triangle, bird, rock or circle by the slightest turn of the mind...a lesson against indiscriminate seeing. So then, having greeted the day with this reduced version of the Creation, I have the simple spunk of switching on the glaring mistake of the electric bulb, and of starting to draw my lesson on paper.

Rico Lebrun, February 1963

37. **TWO FIGURES AT TWILIGHT, 1962**
 Casein on board
 48 × 96 (122 × 244)
 Estate of Rico Lebrun

38. **WRAPPED FORMS, 1963**
 Watercolor on paper
 28 × 40 (71 × 102)
 Signed and dated
 Constance Lebrun Crown



37. **TWO FIGURES AT TWILIGHT, 1962**

The greatest news we have to send is that Rico, nothing daunted by the problems of painting and drawing has turned his whole being into sculpture. He adores it and it is the most natural and easy medium he has ever worked in. I suppose much of the latter is due to the years of drawing he has put in. He has so far worked in wax and has had three things cast in bronze. Works on the wax with heat and the damned thing is really alive. He actually "models" with the flame, never does any additive business. The wax is poured in thin sheets which he fashions shell-like into an approximation of what he wants, then completes the gesture with a torch. It is the most satisfying thing he has ever tackled.

Constance Lebrun Crown, 1962



44. LAZARUS, 1962-63

- 39. KICKING FIGURE, 1961-62
Bronze
7¼ × 2¾ × 1¾ (18 × 7 × 5)
Constance Lebrun Crown
(No. 2/18)
- 40. BEARDED HEAD, 1962-63
Bronze
9 × 6 × 5½ (23 × 15 × 14)
Estate of Rico Lebrun, Kennedy
Galleries, New York City
(No. 2/18)
- 41. SOLDIER AND WOMAN, 1962
Bronze relief
15½ × 18½ × 3½ (39 × 47 × 9)
Estate of Rico Lebrun, Kennedy
Galleries, New York City
- 42. SOLDIER, 1963
Bronze
7 × 3 × 2 (18 × 8 × 5)
Estate of Rico Lebrun, Mekler Gallery,
Los Angeles (No. 5/48)
- 43. MASK, 1962-63
Bronze
13 ½ × 12 × 6½ (34 × 31 × 17)
Estate of Rico Lebrun, Kennedy
Galleries, New York City
(No. 2/12)
- 44. LAZARUS, 1962-63
Bronze
38 × 13 × 26
(97 × 33 × 66) (with base)
Estate of Rico Lebrun
- 45. WOMAN WITH ARMS OVER HEAD,
1962-63
Bronze
29 × 9 × 7 (74 × 23 × 18)
Estate of Rico Lebrun, Kennedy
Galleries, New York City

I got to the stage where even the most developed drawing was not enough. I would push into the paper, scrape down, add sections of collage—but it did not seem to be responding to a new need I had. It is only very recently that I put in some serious sessions in sculpture. It has all taken place very recently, and I am very anxious to overcome the initial technical impediments which are not many and not of a very complex nature so as to be able to get to the point where I ask sculpture to show me some new possibilities, a new part of myself which I had never paid much attention to. Unless it does that, I am not really interested in translating some already existing drawings into bronze. What for? The best part of this whole game is after all the amount of vigor you bring in tackling your whole self and bringing it down to a thumping fall if that is in the cards. Getting up again is usually a wonderful excuse to start things all over as if nothing had happened before, not even your own "reputation," not even your own "importance."

Rico Lebrun, 1963

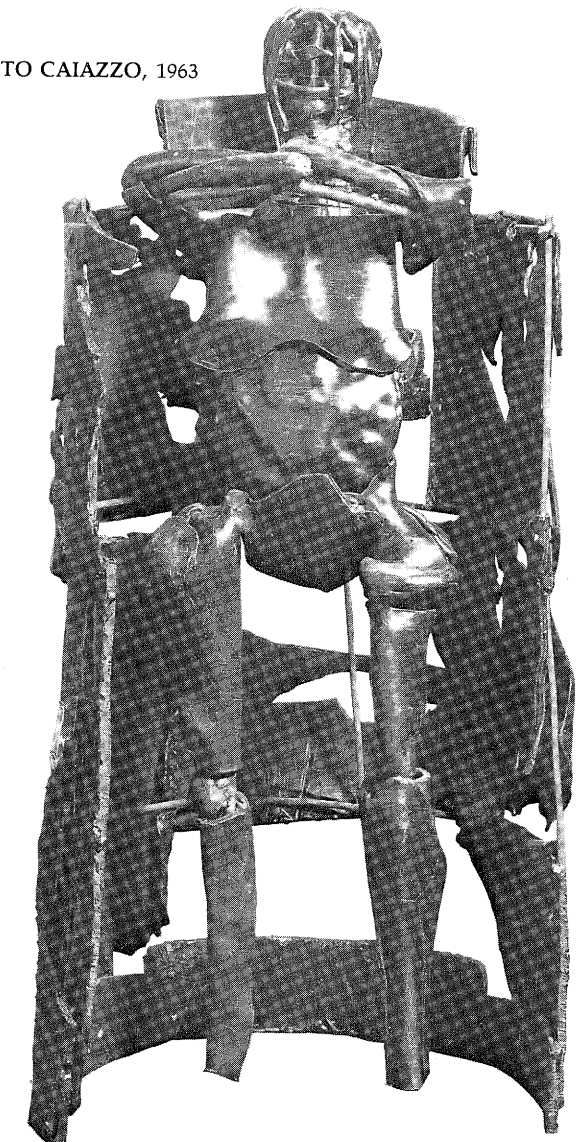


48. MEMORIAL TO CAIAZZO, 1963
(side view)

- 46. STANDING FEMALE TORSO,
1962-63
Bronze
39½ × 16 × 14 (100 × 41 × 36)
Estate of Rico Lebrun
- 47. FEMALE FIGURINE, 1963
Bronze
5 × 2 × 1½ (13 × 5 × 4)
Estate of Rico Lebrun, Mekler Gallery,
Los Angeles

- 48. MEMORIAL TO CAIAZZO, 1963
Bronze
22 × 10 × 7¼ (56 × 25 × 18)
Estate of Rico Lebrun, Mekler Gallery,
Los Angeles
- 49. CLOAKED FEMALE FIGURE, 1963
Bronze
16½ × 8½ × 4½ (42 × 22 × 11)
Constance Lebrun Crown

48. MEMORIAL TO CAIAZZO, 1963
(front view)



R I C O L E B R U N C H R O N O L O G Y

- 10 Dec 1900 Rico Lebrun, christened Federico, was born in Naples. Parents Italian-born, his father Edoardo of French descent, his mother Assunta Carione, Spanish by heritage.
- 1910-1917 Attended the National Technical School until 1914; the National Technical Institute until 1917.
- 1917-1922 Last year of World War I, served in the Italian army; 1918-1920, in the navy; also studied at the Industrial Institute in the daytime and attended free drawing classes at the Naples Academy of Fine Arts at night. Worked with local fresco painters Cambi and Luca Albino.
- 1922-1924 Designer for stained-glass factory in Naples. February 1924 was sent to newly established branch in Springfield, Illinois, as foreman of the factory and instructor in stained-glass technique.
- 1925-1930 After expiration of contract, moved to New York. Became highly successful commercial artist, ultimately doing advertisements and illustrations for *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Fortune*, and *The New Yorker*. Married Portia Novello, also a commercial artist. Returned to Italy in 1927-1929.
- 1931-1933 Second Italian sojourn; studied fresco painting with Silvio Galimberti in Rome; friendship with fellow student, Lewis Rubenstein. Traveled to Italy and to Spain; copied Signorelli's Last Judgment frescoes (especially *The Damned*, 1502-04) in Orvieto Cathedral. Returned to New York in June 1933; studio on Banks Street. Joined Rubenstein at Harvard University to work on mural at Fogg Art Museum, later walled over.
- 1934-1935 Received a Guggenheim Fellowship (1935-36) for a mural project. Taught classes in life drawing, mural composition, and fresco painting at the Art Students League of New York.
- 1936-1937 The Guggenheim Fellowship was renewed. Mural for the WPA in Pennsylvania Station Post Office Annex, *River Flood* (1936-1937), painted with assistants Gridley Barrows, now an architect, and California painter Channing Peake. After two years of work, mural partly completed, later covered over. Breakup of his marriage in 1937, went to Reno for divorce.
- 1938-1939 Channing Peake and family attracted Lebrun to California; he settled in Santa Barbara, taught at Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles, 1939.
- 1940-1941 Married Elaine Leonard (divorced from painter Jon Corbino). Taught animation at Walt Disney Studios (for *Bambi* film). In February 1940, Donald Bear, director of newly established art museum, organized Lebrun's first solo exhibition at Faulkner Memorial Art Gallery, Santa Barbara; show traveled to San Diego and San Francisco (Dec 1940).
- 1942-1943 Represented in Museum of Modern Art's "Americans 1942." Solo show in De Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco; Santa Barbara Museum of Art, and San Francisco Museum of Art. Academic year 1942-1943, visiting instructor at Sophie Newcomb College, Tulane University, New Orleans.
- 1943-44 Returned to New York until December 1944. First New York solo show, Julien Levy Gallery (Jan 1944). Included in the Museum of Modern Art's "Romantic Paintings in America," and "American Art Annual," Whitney Museum of American Art (subsequent annuals: 1948, 1950, 1952, 1957, 1958, 1960). Designed costumes for Ballet International. The painting *Bull Ring* purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- 1945-1946 Artist-in-residence at Santa Barbara Museum of Art. Early 1945, two months teaching at Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center. Included in Pittsburgh International Exhibition of Contemporary Art (again in 1952, 1955, 1959).
- 1946 His wife Elaine died; Lebrun stayed with Channing Peake and family at horse ranch in Santa Ynez Valley above Santa Barbara: *Farm Implements* series (1947).
- 1947 Instructor at newly formed Jepson Art Institute in Los Angeles. Solo show at De Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco; and Santa Barbara Museum. First prize in exhibition, "Abstract and Surrealist American Art," Art Institute of Chicago, for *Vertical Composition*. Began work on *Crucifixion* series.
- 1948 In July, Lebrun married Constance Johnson, daughter of Pasadena architect Reginald Johnson, and later adopted her son, David, born 1944. Nov 1948 Whitney Annual: *Wood of the Holy Cross*.
- 1950 Exhibitions nearly annually at Jacques Seligmann Gallery, NYC; Frank Perls, Beverly Hills, CA. Included in U.S. Pavilion at Venice Biennale in summer. Awarded second prize in the "American Painting Today" exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art for *Centurion's Horse*. In December, *Crucifixion* cycle of 116 works climaxed with *Triptych* exhibited at Los Angeles County Museum (Dec 1950—Jan 1951). After exhibition opening, the Lebruns took their first trip to Mexico (to Jan 51).
- 1951 *Triptych* shown at Museum of Modern Art (Mar); *Crucifixion* exhibition (reduced in number) in Santa Barbara (July), and San Francisco (Nov). Appointed director, The Jepson Art Institute
- 1952 Served on jury of Pittsburgh International at Carnegie Institute; received Award of Merit, American Academy of Arts and Letters for "outstanding achievement in the past five years in painting." November 1952 to Mexico: some teaching at Instituto Allende, San Miguel de Allende; worked with collage (much destroyed before returning home).
- 1953 Pennsylvania Academy of The Fine Arts' Temple Gold Medal for *Figures on the Cross with Lantern*.
- 1954-1957 In May, returned to Los Angeles from Mexico: large studio at San Vicente Boulevard shared with younger artists and students. Began work on Buchenwald series in 1955. Twice taught summer classes at the University of California, Los Angeles; also at Yale-Norfolk Summer School.

46. STANDING FEMALE TORSO,
1962-63



S E L E C T B I B L I O G R A P H Y

- 1958-1959 Visiting Professor of Art at Yale University. Friendship with Leonard Baskin; trip to Northampton for *Encantadas* (early summer 1959).
- 1959-1960 Summer at Capri with family. Artist-in-resident at American Academy in Rome; worked on commission for mural at Pomona College, Claremont, CA.
Returned to California in June; assisting Lebrun on Pomona mural, *Genesis*, in summer/fall: William Ptaszynski, Santa Barbara artist, and James Pinto of San Miguel de Allende. Mural completed in December 1960. Elected member of The National Institute of Arts and Letters in February 1960. Lebrun's book published by the University of California Press, winter 1960.
- 1961 Brief trip to Japan. Series of drawings illustrating Dante's *Inferno*. In the fall, participated in Tamarind Lithographic Workshop program, Bertholt Brecht's *Threepenny Novel*, and *Crucifixion after Grünewald* (No. 21).
- 1962 In February, trip to Mexico. Received third Guggenheim Fellowship. Regent's Lecturer at University of California, Santa Barbara.
Took up sculpture seriously.
- 1963 Lebrun became critically ill and required repeated hospitalization. Continued working on sculpture with assistance of George Goyer. Received Pennsylvania Academy of The Fine Arts Walter Lippincott Prize.
- 1964 On 9 May, Rico Lebrun died of cancer at his new home in Malibu.

- 1965 "Rico Lebrun Memorial Exhibition," American Academy of Arts and Letters, NYC, 5 November 1965—9 January 1966.
- 1967-1969 Major retrospective, "Rico Lebrun (1900-1964)," (over 200 works) organized by Henry Seldis for Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Dec 1967—Jan 1968); traveled to Mexico (Feb-Mar), Arizona (Apr-May), Berkeley (June-July), Seattle (Aug-Oct), Oklahoma (Nov-Dec), Washington, D.C. (Feb-Mar 1969).

Lebrun Statements Reproduced
in the Catalogue

- Lebrun 1949. Letter to Donald Bear cited in *Los Angeles Times* (25 Dec 1949): partly quoted by Bear, 1950; reprinted (with erroneous dating) in *Lebrun 1967*, p. 33.
- Lebrun 1950. Preface to exhibition catalogue, *Rico Lebrun: Paintings and Drawings of the Crucifixion*, LA County Museum, 1950.
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See also some additional items in the end notes.

Extensive (though not complete) bibliography in *Lebrun 1967* catalogue.

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