

RICO LEBRUN

The Expressionist Figure

JOE AND EMILY LOWE ART GALLERY

School of Art and Design

College of Visual and Performing Arts, Syracuse University

December 11, 1994 - January 22, 1995



(Fig. 1) *La Enorme*, 1963

Design is for me the speech of form tried and altered by vicissitudes. And because of this, the human figure is my favorite subject; I prefer its vertical, horizontal and oblique gestures to all other propositions of abstraction, being convinced that they are the richest and most alive in every sense.

— Rico Lebrun, 1961¹

"Baroque" is an adjective frequently used to describe the work of Rico Lebrun.² Historically, the term "baroque" describes the art and culture of 17th Century Europe, during which time two distinct and often competing styles developed. A classicizing style emerged that established drawing as its foundation and favored a rational compositional structure that utilized a system of horizontal and vertical interplay. The other style appealed directly to the senses through color, texture, the interplay of light and dark, and the use of diagonals and dynamic forms. Dramatic scale is often a hallmark of such work.

Applied to the work of Lebrun, "baroque" is an eloquent modifier. His association with the baroque is immediately apparent in his painting through the employment of monumental scale, powerful forms, and dramatic figures. Further examination reveals Lebrun's skill as a draftsman and his enthusiasm for the plasticity of the material. The art of Rico Lebrun is "baroque" in its synthesis of form, material, and emotion.

Lebrun's work demonstrates the baroque tension between the rational form and the sensuous experience. Drawing is Lebrun's architecture, and the naked line is its most essential element. Lebrun multiplies lines into planes, and planes into shapes; abstract concepts are disclosed in the tangible material of art. This synthesis of concept and material moves beyond the mere illustration of a form to become a palpable object. Lebrun's work reveals a steady metamorphosis from drawing to painting, a linear two-dimensional surface to a textured, relief surface, and finally evolves from a sculptural painting to a fully realized three-dimensional form.

Syracuse University

Lebrun's metamorphosis of form is exemplified in his painting, *La Enorme*, 1963 (Fig. 1) and his relief bronze, *Bound Christ*, 1963 (Fig. 2). In *La Enorme*, Lebrun simultaneously treats the canvas as a two- and three-dimensional surface. Areas of surface loss and distress are both illusionary and deliberate. Lebrun's application of paint reveals an art that is conscious of its own creation and deterioration. He bares the underlying support of the painting through both additive and subtractive processes. In *La Enorme*, Lebrun plays with the material nature of paint and delights in adding mass to build the surface. Lebrun exploits the liquid nature of paint by allowing it to run down the canvas. Texture is created by the absence of paint as well as by the active removal of portions of the painted surface. Lebrun incorporates his fundamental commitment to drawing in the gouged outline of the figure's thigh, making the drawing the final, rather than the preliminary statement of the process.

Lebrun's treatment of canvas and paint easily translates to relief sculpture. In effect, *Bound Christ* (Fig. 2) is a painting in bronze. The relief is created by incising the surface of the wax model. The texture of the bronze results from the manipulation of the surface of the wax model. Drips in paint equate to gouges in bronze. Although small in size, the scale of *Bound Christ* rivals *La Enorme*.

For Lebrun, the material of the human body -- flesh and blood -- symbolically correlates with the materials of art: paper, board, paint, and bronze. The physical body is fundamental to an individual's awareness of his or her own existence. Lebrun endows his art with permanence through his use of the human form in conjunction with themes that have been tragically constant from the past to the present, and, we must assume, into the future. The body becomes a visual icon of the human capacity to participate in brutality, endure suffering, and offer compassion. Repeated numerous times throughout his writing is a statement that forcefully speaks of Lebrun's commitment to that which is most essentially human:



(Fig. 2) *Bound Christ*, 1963

*... I wanted to remember that our image, even when disfigured by adversity, is grand in meaning; painting may increase it by changing what is disfigured into what is transfigured.*³

Lebrun masterfully endows the human form with a sense of the universal by depicting the immediacy of human experience in stark form. Speaking of his multiple depictions of Mary, the mother of Christ, at His crucifixion, Lebrun states:

*The crying women are, like all bereaved mothers, empty houses pierced by screams, for I have never seen pretty sorrow.*⁴

Although Lebrun recognizes experiences distinct to male and female, he avoids illustrating gender through the depiction of sexual organs. Rather he employs suggestive attributes such as long hair, a garter belt, or armor. Lebrun emphasizes an intensely personal connection to the physical body that speaks of humanity. Through distorted and even dismembered forms, Lebrun makes concrete the human struggle to understand passion. Reflecting on his decision to focus on the theme of the Crucifixion in his work, Lebrun stated:

... I have to bring some kind of meta-physical order into this violence, which in the case of the Crucifixion was specific and in a sense illustrative. But this was really much more than a commentary on the Crucifixion; it was a commentary on the world of form as I had known it, related

*to a peaceful world, and all of a sudden torn apart by a revulsion of the mind.*⁵

The critic Donald Goodall recognized that Lebrun developed an "anatomy not equated with

CHECKLIST

Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width, precedes depth. All works are from the Syracuse University Art Collection. — n.d. means no date.

Crucifixion Study, n.d.
Mixed media
10 1/8 x 17 7/8
1986.597

Minotaur, n.d.
Bronze
16 3/4 x 5 x 1 3/8
1986.661

Mask, n.d.
Bronze
13 1/4 x 12 1/4 x 6 1/2
1986.663

Woman with Arms over Head, n.d.
Bronze
29 x 8 x 6
1994.86

Carpenter of the Cross, 1950
Ink and casein
44 1/2 x 88 1/2
1974.357

Head of the Magdalene, 1950
Ink and chalk
12 x 9 1/4
1986.649

Two Heads, Magdalene and Mary, 1950
Ink
23 x 9 1/2
1986.652

Head of Crying Mary II, 1950
Ink
20 x 20 1/8
1986.653

Witness of the Resurrection, c. 1951
Duco brand paint
62 x 96
1974.361

St. John after Grünewald, 1954
Ink
25 x 18 7/8
1986.654

Mexican Bullring, 1954
Ink wash
80 1/2 x 94 1/2
1986.671

Growing Giant, 1957 or 1962
Casein and oil
96 x 48
1986.603

Crucifixion (from Grünewald series), c. 1958
Lithograph
24 1/2 x 30 1/2
1960.152

Two Nudes, 1958
Ink
26 x 20 (irregular)
1986.632

Exploding Figures, 1958
Ink
12 5/8 x 9 1/4
1986.657

Seated Nude, 1958
Collage
96 x 48
1986.676

Anatomy of Golgotha, 1959
Oil and ink wash
83 x 86
1986.602

Christ on the Cross with Two Figures, II, 1959
Ink and chalk
19 x 25
1986.615

Small Prophet, 1959
Ink
6 1/2 x 6 1/2
1986.656

untitled (Bertholt Brecht's *Threepenny Novel*, 1934), 1961
Lithograph
22 1/4 x 30 1/8
1961.61

Restless Thais (Dante's *Inferno*, Canto XVIII), 1961
Charcoal and ink wash
39 5/8 x 27 1/2
1962.20

Field of Human Stumps and Bushes (Dante's *Inferno*, Canto XIII), 1961
Ink
19 x 25 3/4
1962.21

Floating Figure, 1961
Oil
98 x 48
1986.608

Soldier Leans on Polly, 1961
Ink
21 7/8 x 29 5/8
1986.616

Centaur and Woman, 1961
Lithograph
12 1/2 x 16 1/8
1986.618

Dark Figures, 1961
Lithograph
28 7/8 x 35 7/8
1986.621

Study for Dante's Inferno, 1961
Ink
19 x 25 (irregular)
1986.633

Beggars Fighting Like Beasts, 1961
Ink
39 3/4 x 27 7/16
1986.641

Study for Dante Chapter Head, 1961
Ink
29 3/4 x 40
1986.658

Lazarus, 1962
Bronze
38 x 13 x 26
1985.343

Split Figure (Dante's *Inferno*, Canto XXVIII), 1962
Casein
84 x 48
1986.601

Infanta, 1962
Oil
96 x 34 1/2
1986.607

Submerged Figure, 1962
Mixed media
92 x 48
1986.610

Two Studies -- Forest of Suicides, 1962
Ink
39 3/4 x 35 7/8
1986.624

Soldier and Woman, 1962
Bronze
15 1/4 x 18 3/8
1994.85

Encantadas (Herman Melville, 1819-1891)
The Gehenna Press, 1963
Woodcut
Sheet: 22 5/8 x 35
1963.88

Drawings for Dante's Inferno (Dante Alighieri, 1265-1321)
Translator: John Ciardi
The Kanthos Press, 1963
Reproductions and Lithographs
Sheet: 17 3/4 x 26
1964.9

Standing Female Torso, 1963
Bronze
39 1/2 x 16 x 14
1985.344

La Enorme, 1963
Mixed media
96 x 48
1986.606

Crucifixion (Black and Gold Golgotha), 1963
Duco brand paint
94 x 81 1/2
1986.614

Bound Christ, 1963
Bronze
17 x 5
1986.640

Bearded Head, 1963
Bronze
5 1/2 x 6 1/4 x 8 1/4
1986.662

physiology, but which will permeate and sustain the entire picture."⁶ Lebrun often incorporated prostheses or exoskeletons to further underscore the human body's capacity to function as a symbol of pain and passion. The turtle-like shells that cover the soldiers in *Witness of the Resurrection*, 1951, provide the armor for their cruelty and ignorance of compassion. The exoskeleton formed around the hip of the carpenter in *Carpenter of the Cross*, 1950, can be interpreted as a device that compensates for the workman's body that is destroyed as he constructs a cross that will indeed destroy another.⁷ Finally, the exaggerated hip bone of the grieving woman on the left in *Crucifixion (Black and Gold Golgotha)*, 1963 (Fig. 3) is a crutch synthesized into the interior of the body to support her muscular structure so stressed by the weight of her sorrow that it can no longer be supported by her skeletal frame alone.

Indeed, as Lebrun has stated, the human figure *is* grand in meaning, revealing both the rational, the irrational and the sensuous. Lebrun's presentation of the human form, indeed, merits the label: "baroque." Lebrun combines both premeditated and spontaneous manipulation of the artist's materials to develop and translate the abstract into the tangible. What is human in conception becomes human in form, and this metamorphosis encapsulates the experience of the individual.

— Diana Turnbow and Gina Stankivitz
Graduate Students, Graduate Program in
Museum Studies

Notes

1. Rico Lebrun, *Rico Lebrun: Paintings and Drawings, 1946-1961* (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 1961) 12. Statement originally published in Peter Selz, *New Images of Man* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961).
2. Lebrun, *Statement of the Artist*, unpublished manuscript, Special Collections, Bird Library, Syracuse University, n.d., 3; also *Thoughts on Lebrun*, anonymous manuscript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 1-3.
3. Lebrun, *Rico Lebrun Drawings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961) 19.
4. Lebrun quoted by W.R. Valentiner in *Rico Lebrun: Paintings and Drawings of the Crucifixion*, preface, Los Angeles County Museum, 1950.
5. Lebrun, *Statement of the Artist*, 11-12.
6. Donald B. Goodall, "Interview with Rico Lebrun," *Art Digest* 29 (Oct 1, 1954) 17.
7. Lebrun speaks specifically of the carpenters' self-destruction: "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: Paintings and Drawings of the Crucifixion*, preface.

Chronology

This chronology is an abridgement of Oppler's comprehensive chronology; see *Rico Lebrun: Transformations/Transfiguration*, 40 - 42.

- 1900 Rico Lebrun born December 10 in Naples, Italy.
- 1910-14 Attends National Technical School.
- 1914-17 Attends National Technical Institute. World War I begins 1914.
- 1917-20 Serves in Italian armed forces. Attends Naples Academy of Fine Arts and learns fresco painting.
- 1922-24 Stained glass designer, Naples. Transferred to Springfield, IL to become foreman and instructor for company branch. Fascist Revolution begins in Italy.
- 1925-29 Moves to New York City; works as commercial artist. Clients include: *Fortune*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Vogue*. Marries Portia Novello; returns to Italy, 1927-29 and then to New York. Stock market crashes in 1929.
- 1930-33 Travels to Italy and Spain. Studies fresco painting in Rome; copies Signorelli's *Last Judgement* frescoes (1502-04) in Orvieto Cathedral. Returns to NYC in 1933; works on mural at Fogg Art Museum.
- 1935 Receives Guggenheim Fellowship for mural project. Teaches life drawing, mural composition and fresco at Art Students League, NYC.
- 1936 Guggenheim Fellowship renewed. Starts WPA mural, *River Flood*, Pennsylvania Station Post Office Annex. Spanish Civil War begins.
- 1937 Divorces Portia Novello. Picasso creates *Guernica*.
- 1938-39 Settles in Santa Barbara, CA. Teaches at Chouinard Art Institute, Los Angeles. World War II begins.
- 1940 Marries Elaine Leonard. Teaches animation at Walt Disney Studios for *Bambi* film. Faulkner Memorial Art Gallery, Santa Barbara, CA organizes Lebrun's first solo exhibition; show travels to San Diego and San Francisco.

- 1942 Solo exhibitions: De Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco; San Francisco Museum of Art and Santa Barbara Museum of Art. Included in Museum of Modern Art's *Americans 1942*. Visiting Instructor, Sophie Newcomb College, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.
- 1944 Returns to NYC. First solo exhibition in NYC, Julien Levy Gallery. Also in Museum of Modern Art's *Romantic Paintings in America* and Whitney Museum of American Art's *American Art Annual*.
- 1945 Returns to California. Artist-in-residence, Santa Barbara Museum of Art. Exhibits in Pittsburgh International Exhibition of Contemporary Art (also 1952, 1955, 1959).
- 1946-47 Wife Elaine dies. Becomes instructor at Jepson Art Institute, Los Angeles. Begins work on *Crucifixion* series.
- 1948 Marries Constance Johnson; later adopts her son, David.
- 1950 Frequent exhibitions at Jaques Seligmann Gallery, NYC, and Frank Perls in Beverly Hills, CA. Lebrun's *Crucifixion Triptych* exhibited at Los Angeles County Museum of Art (now housed at Syracuse University). Leaves for Mexico.
- 1951 *Crucifixion Triptych* shown at Museum of Modern Art, NY. Appointed director of Jepson Art Institute.
- 1952 Receives Award of Merit from American Academy of Arts and Letters, NYC. Returns to Mexico.
- 1954-55 Returns to Los Angeles. Begins work on *Buchenwald* series.
- 1958-59 Teaches at Yale University. Collaborates with Leonard Baskin on Melville's *Encantadas*.
- 1960 Artist-in-residence, American Academy in Rome. Returns to California to begin mural at Pomona College, Claremont, CA. *Rico Lebrun's Drawings* is published by University of California Press.
- 1961 Travels to Japan. Illustrates Dante's *Inferno*; works at Tamarind on *Crucifixion after Grünewald* and Bertholt Brecht's *Threepenny Novel*.

- 1962 Travels to Mexico. Awarded third Guggenheim Fellowship. Begins sculpting and teaches at University of California, Santa Barbara.
- 1963 Becomes ill; requires hospitalization.
- 1964 Dies of cancer, May 9, in his home in Malibu, CA.
- 1965 *Rico Lebrun Memorial Exhibition*, American Academy of Art and Letters.
- 1967 *Rico Lebrun (1900-1964)*, retrospective, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Exhibition travels throughout U.S. and Mexico.
- 1983 *Rico Lebrun: Transformation/Transfiguration*, exhibition at Lowe Art Gallery, Syracuse University (November 1983-January 1984).

Selected Readings

- Anon. "No. 3 Rico Lebrun." Manuscript. Archive of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., n.d.
- Baskin, Leonard. "A Note on the Drawings of Rico Lebrun." *Drawings for Dante's Inferno*, 1963.
- Bear, Donald. "Lebrun Paints a Picture." *Art News* (Dec 1950): 36-39+.
- Langsner, Jules. "Rico Lebrun, Interim Report." *Art & Architecture* 74 (June 1957): 20.
- Lebrun, Rico and Daniel Catton Rich. *Illustrations for Dante's Inferno, Drawings by Rico Lebrun*. Exhibition Catalogue. Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, MA (March 22-May 6, 1992) and Joe and Emily Lowe Art Gallery, Syracuse University, NY (May 16-June 15, 1962).
- Oppler, Ellen C. *Rico Lebrun: Transformations/Transfiguration*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University, 1983.
- Seldis, Henry J., ed. *Rico Lebrun (1900-1964)*. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1967.
- Selz, Peter. "Retrospective for Rico Lebrun." *Art in America* 55 (November 1967): 116.

See additional items in the notes.

Acknowledgements

This exhibition is the result of a team effort. At the core of this team is an exceptionally talented group of students who are enrolled in the Advanced Curatorship course: Warren Bunn, Patricia Crawford, Heather Lee, Linda Maguire, Lynda Shield, Gina Stankivitz, Jill Taylor and Diana Turnbow. I am proud of these individuals. They have been a joy to work with and they have enriched my life as a teacher, curator and director.

The staff of the University Art Collection has, as always, been generous with time and resource. We are indebted to Dr. Alfred Collette, Director; Domenic Iacono, Associate Director; David Prince, Curator, and Gary Wright, Registrar, for their unfailing dedication and professionalism. This project also benefitted from the help and advice of the Bird Library staff, especially those individuals in Fine Arts and Special Collections.

The installation of the Lebrun exhibition falls not only on the shoulders of the students in the Advanced Curatorship class, but also on the Practicum I class, under the direction of Bradley Hudson, Lowe Gallery Registrar/Preparator and Adjunct Professor. We are grateful to him for his organizational skills and energy.

The exhibition publicity and publications benefit from the design skills of Richard Wolfman, Senior Graphic Artist, Electronic Publishing Center, and the watchful eye of Jean Hart, Office Coordinator, Lowe Gallery and the Graduate Program in Museum Studies. We are grateful to the Museum Studies Graduate Student Organization and to the Graduate Student Organization for their financial assistance. Without this support, the exhibition brochure would not have been produced.

Professor Emeritus Ellen Oppler exerted a tremendous influence on this exhibition through her scholarship. Her catalog, *Rico Lebrun: Transformations/Transfigurations* (Joe and Emily Lowe Art Gallery, Syracuse, 1983) helped and inspired us in numerous ways.

Finally, and most importantly, we are indebted to Mrs. Constance Lebrun Crown and David Crown for their generosity and exceptional gifts to the Syracuse University Art Collection. Their belief in this institution has enabled us to fulfill the University's vision of developing a creative and intellectual environment where students, staff and faculty can work together to advance our understanding and generate opportunities for learning.

— Dr. Edward A. Aiken
Director, Joe and Emily Lowe Art Gallery
Chair, Graduate Program in Museum Studies

Syracuse University Art G

(Fig. 3)
Crucifixion
(Black and Gold
Golgotha), 1963



LOWE
JOE
AND EMILY
LOWE
ART
GALLERY

SCHOOL OF ART & DESIGN ■ COLLEGE OF VISUAL AND PERFORMING ARTS ■ SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY