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

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, 1961

"Baroque" is an adjective frequently used to describe the work of Rico Lebrun. 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 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.

(Fig. 1) La Enorme, 1963
Syracuse University Art Galleries

...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.

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 crucification, Lebrun states:

...I have to bring some kind of metaphysical order into this violence, which in the case of the Crucifixion was very specific and in a sense illustrative. But this was really much more than 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 revelation of the mind.

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

---

**CHECKLIST**

Dimensions are in inches; height preceded with "h", width preceded with "w".
All works are from the Syracuse University Art Collection.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sculptures</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bound Christ (Fig. 2)</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>Bronze</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>la Enorme, 1963</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Bronze</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Paintings</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crucifixion Study, n.d.</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Oil, ink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minotaur, n.d.</td>
<td>Bronze</td>
<td>Oil, ink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mask, n.d.</td>
<td>Bronze</td>
<td>Oil, ink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman with Arms over Head, n.d.</td>
<td>Bronze</td>
<td>Oil, ink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpenter of the Cross, 1959</td>
<td>Oil</td>
<td>Oil, ink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpenter of the Cross, 1959</td>
<td>Oil</td>
<td>Oil, ink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpenter of the Cross, 1959</td>
<td>Oil</td>
<td>Oil, ink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Drawings</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpenter of the Cross, 1959</td>
<td>Ink</td>
<td>Oil, ink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpenter of the Cross, 1959</td>
<td>Ink</td>
<td>Oil, ink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpenter of the Cross, 1959</td>
<td>Ink</td>
<td>Oil, ink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prints</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soldier Leans on Polly, 1961</td>
<td>Litho</td>
<td>Ink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contour and Woman, 1961</td>
<td>Litho</td>
<td>Ink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mixed Media</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bound Christ</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>Mixed media</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**Selected Catalogs and Publications**

- Brecht's Threepenny Novel, 1961
- The Kanthos Press, 1963
- The Tekhne Press, 1963
- Reproductions and Lithographs, 1963

**Drawings for Dante's Inferno**

Lebrun's 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 the individual's awareness of his 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.

---

**Lebrun's Metamorphosis of Form in Power and Peace**

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 destruction. He boxes 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, marking 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 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.
Syracuse University Art Galleries

- Diana Turnbow and Gina Stankivitz

the soldiers in supported by her skeletal frame alone.

Crucifixion (Black and Gold Golgotha), figure

pain and passion. The turtle-like shells that cover physiology, but which will permeate and sustain the entire picture. "Lebrun often incorporated protheses 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 "Lebrun's presentation of the human form, indeed, merits the grand in meaning, revealing both the rational, the irrational, and the sensuous. Lebrun's 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 grand in meaning, revealing both the rational, the irrational, and the sensuous.

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 grand in meaning, revealing both the rational, the irrational, and the sensuous.

"Lebarabone 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.

Both protheses and 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 "Lebrun's presentation of the human form, indeed, merits the grand in meaning, revealing both the rational, the irrational, and the sensuous. Lebrun's presentation of the human form, indeed, merits the grand in meaning, revealing both the rational, the irrational, and the sensuous.


Rico Lebrun: Transformations/Transfiguration, 40 - 42.


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.


1961 Travels to Japan. Illustrates Dante's Inferno; works at Tamarind on Woodblock series, published by University of Califomia Press.


1964 Dies of cancer, May 9, in his home in Malibu, CA.


Selected Readings


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, Lynette Alhade, Gina Stankiewicz, Jill Taylor, and Diana Tumbow. I am proud of these individuals. They have been a joy to work with and 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 resources. We are indebted to Dr. Alfred Collette, Director; Domenic Iacono, Associate Director, David Prince, Curator, and Gaye Wright, Registrar, for their unfailing dedication and professionalism. This project also benefited 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

(Fig. 3)

 Crucifixion
(Block and Gold)
Golgotha, 1963

Syracuse University Art Galleries