



Rico Lebrun

American, born Italy, 1900 - 1964

## *The Ragged One*

1944

oil on canvas

overall: 116.8 x 91.4 cm (46 x 36 in.)

framed: 134.6 x 106.7 x 6.4 cm (53 x 42 x 2 1/2 in.)

Inscription: lower right: Lebrun 1944

Gift of Michael Straight 1974.87.2

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### ENTRY

*The Ragged One* was executed as Rico Lebrun was establishing his reputation as a West Coast figurative painter and shortly before he accepted a position as artist-in-residence at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in California. This was a critical time in the artist's life as he became increasingly affected by the human suffering and destruction wrought by World War II. For the remainder of his career, Lebrun concentrated on difficult, challenging themes, such as the crucifixion of Christ, the Holocaust, and Dante's *Inferno*.

Masterfully interrelating flesh and cloth, this painting of a hooded, partially dressed woman is representative of Lebrun's work of the early 1940s, when he painted various figures living on the fringes of society. It adheres closely to Lebrun's 1941 preparatory sketch, with the distinctive gestural and material qualities of the ink and chalk drawing translated into the lively brushwork and facture of the oil painting. [1]

James Thrall Soby noted the linear precision of Lebrun's drawing style from this period and praised his "neo-baroque eloquence." [2] The concise draftsmanship and monumental quality of the image reflect the influence of the early 1920s classical, sculptural style of Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881 - 1973). The subject's tattered appearance also invites comparison with the etchings of female beggars by Jacques Callot (French, 1592 - 1635) from his series *Les Gueux* (c. 1622/1623).

Despite the woman's elusive psychological state and physical vulnerability, she retains her human dignity. One of Lebrun's biographers drew attention to this redemptive aspect of his work: "By presenting us with the majestic ruins of man's

form, an essential and convincing humanism drives home to us his conviction that whatever physical, psychological and mortal tortures are inflicted on the human form, its innate dignity and the unfulfilled promise of the human spirit cannot be annihilated.” [3] Lebrun’s early patron Donald Bear observed that the artist’s representations of social outcasts were a “vehicle of criticism, deeply rooted in the knowledge that even in degradation of mental and physical despair there is still an intense significance in all fragments of life and feeling.” [4]

Robert Torchia

July 24, 2024

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## NOTES

- [1] This drawing is illustrated in James Thrall Soby, *Rico Lebrun Drawings* (Berkeley, CA, 1961), 7.
- [2] James Thrall Soby, *Rico Lebrun Drawings* (Berkeley, CA, 1961), vi.
- [3] Henry J. Seldis and Peter Selz, *Rico Lebrun (1900–1964)* (Los Angeles, 1967), 13.
- [4] Donald Bear quoted in Henry J. Seldis and Peter Selz, *Rico Lebrun (1900–1964)* (Los Angeles, 1967), 20–21.
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## TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The fine plain-weave fabric support is unlined and remains mounted on its original stretcher. The artist applied a thin, wash-like ground layer after the fabric had been stretched. [1] The paint was thinly applied, first with dark washes, around a thick outline brushed in with black paint. The highlights were added next in thick, opaque applications. The highlights were made warmer or cooler with glazes to create modeling. An abandoned composition with a standing female figure and a fallen horse is present on the reverse of the present image [fig. 1]. The paint application in this work is similar to that of the painting on the front. Examination with infrared reflectography yielded no evidence of artist changes or underdrawing in the primary composition. The painting is in excellent condition. The surface is coated with natural resin varnish that has become uneven in appearance.

Michael Swicklik

July 24, 2024

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## TECHNICAL COMPARATIVE FIGURES



**fig. 1** Rico Lebrun, *Standing Female Figure and Fallen Horse* (reverse of *The Ragged One*), c. 1944, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Michael Straight, 1974.87.2

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## TECHNICAL NOTES

- [1] The priming was applied after the fabric was stretched. Although it covers all of the tacking margins, it was likely artist applied, because it also covers all of the tacks attaching the fabric to the stretcher.
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## PROVENANCE

(Sylvan Simone Gallery, Los Angeles); Michael Whitney Straight, Bethesda, Maryland; [1] gift 1974 to NGA.

[1] Per 13 September 1974 letter from Michael Straight in NGA curatorial files, the painting "was purchased from Sylvan Simone in Los Angeles shortly after Lebrun's death...".

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## EXHIBITION HISTORY

1967 Rico Lebrun 1900-1964, Sylvan Simone Gallery, Los Angeles, 1967-1968, unnumbered catalogue, as *The Tattered One*.

1996 Loan for display with permanent collection, Baum Gallery of Fine Art, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, 1996-1997.

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1980     *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1980: 193, repro.
- 1981     Williams, William James. *A Heritage of American Paintings from the National Gallery of Art*. New York, 1981: 229, repro. 230.
- 1992     *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 226, repro.
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