

Lebrun, Rico

Also known as

Lebrun, Federico

American, born Italy, 1900 - 1964

BIOGRAPHY

Rico Lebrun was born in Naples, Italy, on December 10, 1900. After a year as a telephone lineman in the Italian army during World War I, Lebrun completed his second year of compulsory military service in Naples while enrolled in the Industrial Institute and taking evening drawing classes at the Naples Academy of Fine Arts. In 1922 Lebrun became a designer for a stained-glass factory in Naples, and when the factory opened a branch in Springfield, Illinois, in 1924, he was sent there as a foreman. Having fulfilled his one-year contract in Springfield, Lebrun moved to New York in 1925 to work as a commercial artist. His illustrations appeared in magazines such as *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and the *New Yorker*. While in New York, Lebrun married a fellow commercial artist, Portia Novello. Despite his success in the commercial realm, Lebrun resolved to pursue a career as a fine artist and took several trips to Italy in the early 1930s to study fresco painting, including a monthslong project copying frescoes by Luca Signorelli (Cortonese, 1445/1450 - 1523) in the cathedral of Orvieto. After returning to New York in 1933, he executed a number of murals in fresco, culminating in a Works Progress Administration commission for the Pennsylvania Station Post Office Annex entitled *River Flood*. He received Guggenheim fellowships in 1935 and 1937, and he also took a position teaching at the Art Students League in 1936.

Lebrun's marriage ended in 1937, and in 1938 he moved to Santa Barbara, California, and taught at Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles. In 1940 he taught animation at the Walt Disney Studios and was involved in the production of *Bambi*. That year he married Elaine Leonard. After his first solo exhibition in 1941 at the Faulkner Memorial Art Gallery in Santa Barbara, and another in 1944 at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York, Lebrun achieved national recognition. Throughout the 1940s his work was exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art purchased one of his paintings. After the death of his second wife in 1946, Lebrun moved to Los Angeles and began teaching at the Jepson Art Institute. In 1948 he married sculptor and photographer Constance Johnson and later adopted her son, David.

After World War II he produced more than 200 preparatory drawings and paintings of the Crucifixion for his 16-by-26-foot *Crucifixion Triptych* (Syracuse University), completed in 1950.[1] Lebrun then sought a period of rest in Mexico. He made his first trip there in 1950, and he returned for extended periods over the next eight years to teach and draw inspiration from the landscape and people of Mexico, often working in collage. During the mid-1950s he created a series of paintings responding to press photographs of the Buchenwald and Dachau concentration camps. In 1958 Lebrun was a visiting professor of art at Yale University, and in 1959 he was appointed artist-in-residence at the American Academy in Rome. In 1961 he completed his last major mural commission, *Genesis*, for Pomona College in Claremont, California, and began a series of drawings illustrating Dante's *Inferno*. After trips to Japan and Mexico, he received another Guggenheim fellowship in 1962. He was just beginning to work in sculpture when he died of cancer in his Malibu, California, home on May 9, 1964.

Lebrun was fascinated by death and destruction, focusing on themes such as the Crucifixion, war, genocide, and the nuclear holocaust. But his often monochromatic works have a redemptive message, which is also expressed in the artist's notes and letters. Lebrun was an expert draftsman who distorted human anatomy for expressive purposes, sometimes to the point of abstraction. His mature, slightly surreal style began to emerge in the late 1930s and was influenced by the great Renaissance and baroque painters of his native country, as well as the Spanish masters El Greco (Greek, 1541 - 1614), Francisco de Zurbarán (Spanish, 1598 - 1664), and Francisco Goya (Spanish, 1746 - 1828). Lebrun was well known on the West Coast in the 1940s and 1950s but diverged widely from his contemporaries in Southern California, remaining firmly rooted in the European tradition.

[1] For a discussion of these works, see Ellen C. Oppler and Erin M. Stimmell, *Rico Lebrun: Transformations and Transfigurations* (Syracuse, NY, 1983).

Robert Torchia

July 24, 2024

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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To cite: Robert Torchia, “Rico Lebrun,” *American Paintings, 1900–1945*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/constituent/1474> (accessed July 27, 2024).