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Leon Golub created large-scale depictions of scenes of war and oppression. He called himself "a machine that turns out monsters."

Leon Golub, 82, painted conflict, violence

By Suzanne Muchnic
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LOS ANGELES — Artist Leon Golub, whose unflinchingly raw paintings of human depravity shattered the cool demeanor of the art world and established him as an effective champion of figurative expression, died Sunday in New York City of complications after undergoing surgery. He was 82.

A longtime critic of the abuse of power, the artist sometimes called himself "a machine that turns out monsters." He painted unflattering portraits of world leaders — including Ho Chi Minh, Fidel Castro, Augusto Pinochet, and Richard M. Nixon — and churned out series on the horrors of war and dictatorial governments.

To make his life-size images of brutality all the more real, he developed a method of scraping off paint and creating blistered, scabrous surfaces on unstretched canvases that resemble distressed skin.

But the creator of these horrific images was known as a gentle, happily married man, a dedicated teacher and a profoundly honest, compassionate artist who aimed to shake up a complacent public by painting his view of the human condition.

"He made a unique contribution," Joanne Heyler, director/chief curator of the Broad Art Foundation in Santa Monica, Calif., said yesterday. The foundation has compiled a large collec-

tion of Mr. Golub's paintings.

"He represents a certain kind of art-making that has a clear purpose and is very sophisticated," Heyler said. "He was a strong-willed individual and a humanist at the same time."

Art historian Robert Storr, a former curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, has described Mr. Golub's work as "heroic paintings of nonheroic subject matter."

Born in Chicago in 1922, Mr. Golub studied art history at the University of Chicago, earning his bachelor's degree in 1942.

When he talked of his formative years, he credited an encounter with Pablo Picasso's famous antiwar painting "Guernica" — at a 1937 traveling exhibition in Chicago — with making him think about art as a powerful means of expression.

After serving in the US Army from 1943 to 1946, Mr. Golub enrolled at the Art Institute of Chicago on the GI Bill and met his future wife, artist Nancy Spero.

Initially attracted to each other by their interest in socially critical art, they were married in 1951.

Mr. Golub became a leader among Chicago's figurative artists in the 1950s, and he made a big splash in New York in 1959 in the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition "New Images of Man."

But his work was out of step with the reigning styles, and he was sharply criticized by the New York elite. Longing to expand his

horizons, and stung by the reception to his work in New York, he and Spero moved to Paris in 1959.

"We felt that New York was not capable of accepting us on the level that our work called for," Mr. Golub said in a Los Angeles Times interview in 1994, when he and Spero were installing a joint retrospective exhibition of their work that inaugurated the galleries of the American Center in Paris. "Our idea was that maybe one could internationalize oneself, be part of a wider world art scene."

But after five years in Paris, they had a change of heart, moved to New York and stayed put — through thick and thin.

Mr. Golub won grudging respect for his work, but paid most of the family's bills by teaching, primarily at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

Then suddenly, in the early 1980s, when figurative art and political themes gained critical favor, Mr. Golub became a star. Seen as a precursor to the hot new style of Neo-Expressionism, his work was in demand at prestigious museums and international exhibitions.

Since then, his work has been featured at the Whitney Museum's "Biennial Exhibition" in New York and an international traveling retrospective organized by the Irish Museum of Modern Art.

Besides his wife, Mr. Golub leaves three sons, Stephen of Swarthmore, Pa., and Philip and Paul of Paris.