

## OBITUARIES

# Leon Golub, 82, Painter

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Special to the Sun

Leon Golub, who died Sunday at age 82, was one of the most important American figurative painters of his time. His outsized allegories of violence, army men, assassins, and victims bore searing witness to war. Even though he maintained a nearly continuous presence on the New York art scene since in the early 1950s, Golub endured decades of neglect before his work was rediscovered in the latter part of the century, as the art world began to favor figurative art.

Perhaps it was the sheer brutality of Golub's paintings that made them difficult for the art establishment of the late 1950s to accept. A native of Chicago, he was associated with its "Monster" school of painting, often called the "Monster Roster." These artists were dubbed the "pre-rationalites" because of their rejection of post-Medieval Western art. A distinct primitivism runs through Golub's entire oeuvre, but his mastery of the figure was a product of his study of Renaissance and Graeco-Roman art.

Golub was championed in the late 1950s in New York by Museum of Modern Art chief curator Peter Selz, who included Golub's work in the well-attended group show "The New Images of Man." But Golub fell from favor under MoMA chief curator William Rubin, who once publicly sniffed "badly painted" while standing in front of one of Golub's works.

Never one to shrink from a fight, Golub mailed Rubin a fiery response labeling the curator "a big slob," "a bully-boy," and "a sap." The falling out set the stage for Golub's departure from New York; he and his wife, the artist Nancy Spero, decamped for Paris, where they lived from 1959 to 1964.



A MASTER Leon Golub in 1999.

The couple's European years allowed them to study art history in France and Italy, but did little to stimulate Golub's interest in fashionable styles like non-figural and geometric abstraction or formalism. He became somewhat marginalized in the shadows of the reigning styles of the art world during the 1960s, Minimalism and Conceptualism.

After returning to New York, Golub painted his "Gigantomachies" and "Combats" series, made up of large-scale, unstretched canvases depicting faceless men in a state of ceaseless struggle. In these works Golub perfected his scraping technique, using a meat cleaver and other tools to rub pigment into a raw canvas and then scraping away the built-up layers. This resulted in a characteristically mottled and pitted surface, which emphasized the violence of the imagery.

His series of Vietnam paintings,

done between 1972 and 1974, signaled a period of more personal political involvement and contained more references to current events than his earlier works did. These large-scale, cinematic canvases depicted U.S. soldiers brandishing their weapons at unarmed Vietnamese farmers.

Golub joined a number of anti-war groups in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, protesting United States involvement in Vietnam and Latin America. In a 1970 interview with the well-known critic and chronicler of the art world Irving Sandler, Golub said, "Power is expressed in terms of violence and conflict; this is my subject matter."

Two additional series, "Mercenaries" (begun in 1975) and "Interrogations" (begun in 1981) explored the themes of voyeurism and hidden violence. These compositions usually included three or four rigid figures placed in a flattened-out space. The uniformed, gun-toting, cigarette-smoking torturers smile at the viewer or look bored or blank, and the torture victim has a bag over his or her head or is turned away from the viewer. These works suggested that the viewer had more in common with the torturer than the tortured.

From 1976 to 1979, Golub painted portraits of powerful world leaders such as Pinochet, Kissinger, and Franco, all affecting deadpan expressions. He hung them next to one another in rows. From the 1980s until his death, he created fragmented allegories incorporating pornographic imagery, cynical fragments of text, and heavy-handed images of dogs, eagles, and skulls. Although his feelings of outrage and repulsion were never completely hidden, Golub seemed to think that blame for the world's ills should be handed around to everyone, himself included.

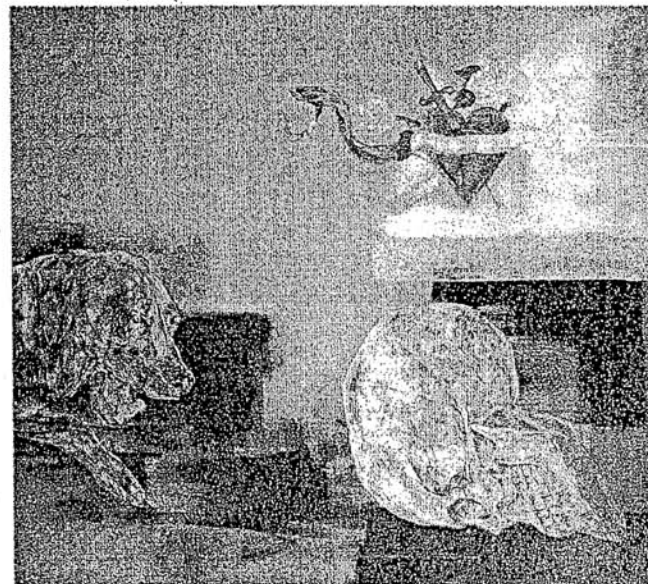
By the time Golub's art was celebrated in a giant retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 2001, his place in art history had been firmly established. Golub's paintings called attention to things most people choose to ignore, yet they were never simply didactic. He was always concerned about formal issues and paint surfaces. At the same time, his paintings deal with big issues: the amoral behavior of humankind, the inevitability of death.

Educated at the Art Institute of Chicago, Golub won a Guggenheim Foundation Grant in 1968 and the Na-

tional Institute of Arts and Letters award in 1973. He taught at a number of schools, including the School of Visual Art and Rutgers, where he held a named chair from 1983. His influence can be seen in the work of such artists as Julian Schnabel and Eric Fischl.

### Leon Albert Golub

Born January 23, 1922, in Chicago; died August 8, at New York University Medical Center after undergoing abdominal surgery; survived by his wife, Nancy Spero, sons Stephen, Philip, and Paul, and six grandchildren.



Leon Golub, 'All Bets Off' (1995).

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