

Leon Golub, Painter on a Heroic Scale, Is Dead at 82

By HOLLAND COTTER

Leon Golub, an American painter of expressionistic, heroic-scale figures that reflect dire modern political conditions, died on Sunday in Manhattan. He was 82 and lived in Manhattan.

The cause was complications after surgery, said his son Stephen, a professor of economics at Swarthmore College.

Born in Chicago in 1922, Mr. Golub received a graduate degree from the Art Institute of Chicago in 1950; the following year he married the artist Nancy Spero. At the time Abstract Expressionism was considered by many to be the advanced style of the day. But from the start Mr. Golub was an artist in the figurative tradition, which was also thriving in the work of American artists as diverse as Ben Shahn and David Park.

Mr. Golub's interest in art of the past was broad and eclectic, running from African and pre-Columbian work to Greek and Roman sculpture and the work of Jacques-Louis David. His own painting was firmly rooted in a critically engaged version of Western humanism and in the tradition of history painting.

His subject was Man with a capital M — as a symbol of social and spiritual ambition, often irrational and destructive, depicted in paintings of monumental scale.

In the early 1950's he painted single, frontal figures that seem to be



Suzanne Plunkett/Associated Press

Leon Golub at his 2001 retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum.

long to a mythical race of shamans or kings. In the 1960's he produced a series, called "Gigantomachies," of battling, wrestling figures. They were based on classical models, including the Hellenistic Altar of Pergamon. But there was nothing idealized about them. Half abstract, they suggested knots of raw gristle and blood, an effect amplified by Mr. Golub's habit of scraping down the first layer of paint on a canvas, sometimes using a meat cleaver, to leave the final surface abraded and

pitted.

By this time he had switched from oil paints to acrylics, a step that allowed him to work more loosely and quickly. The fleetness of his brushwork became an effective counterweight to the increasingly specific brutality of his subjects.

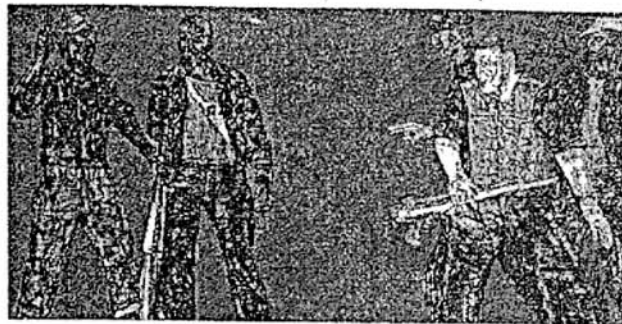
In the "Assassins" series (1972-73) he exchanged mythological for modern figures in scenes of Western soldiers attacking Asian civilians that made direct references to the Vietnam War, which Mr. Golub vehem-

ently opposed. His "Mercenaries" series in the 1980's focused on images of military and paramilitary violence, suggesting that this had become a global condition.

In the 1990's paintings of skeletons and snarling dogs had an apocalyptic tone. At the same time he returned to classical themes, as in a 1994 painting of Prometheus, and introduced texts and autobiographical elements. His last show of new work was this year, at Ronald Feldman Gallery in SoHo; it was called "Erotica" and was of female nudes.

Mr. Golub and Ms. Spero lived in Paris from 1959 to 1964, then moved to New York City. Although they were stylistically different as artists, they were mutually influential and supportive as thinkers and had adjoining studios in Greenwich Village.

Active in left-radical causes and forthright in his opinions, Mr. Golub expressed conflicted feelings about the New York art establishment. He wanted to steer clear of it, and yet wanted to have his work acknowledged and visible. His art was out of sync with Minimalism and Conceptualism in the 1960's and 70's, but he was celebrated as a pioneering figure during the Neo-Expressionist phase in the early 80's and sustained attention through the early 90's, when there was a strong focus among younger artists on political work.



"Mercenaries IV," on linen, and part of a series from the 1980's, was typical of Mr. Golub's work in showing men in violent situations.

A career survey, "Leon Golub: Echoes of the Real," was organized by the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin in 2000; a reduced version of the show traveled to the Brooklyn Museum in 2001. There were also smaller surveys at the New Museum for Contemporary Art in SoHo in 1984, the Malmo Konsthall in Sweden in 1993, and Bucknell Art Gallery in Lewistown, Pa., in 1999.

Mr. Golub was included in significant group exhibitions from the 1950's onward, most recently in Documenta XI in Kassel, Germany, in 2002. His art is in the permanent collections of major museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Tate Gallery in London. He is

represented by Ronald Feldman Gallery and Andrew Roth in Manhattan, and since 1979 by the Rhona Hoffman Gallery in Chicago. He taught at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan and at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

In addition to Ms. Spero and his son Stephen, of Swarthmore, Pa., he is survived by two other sons, Philip and Paul, both of Paris, and by six grandchildren.

When asked in a 1991 interview in the journal *Meaning* what kept him motivated in a career that extended over half a century, Mr. Golub replied, "Schizoid splits — desperation to euphoria," and, "daily working practice." Asked about his continuing and future goal he said, "To head into real!"

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