



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Leon Golub, 1965

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Leon Golub in 1965. The interview was conducted by Bruce Hooten for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. This is a rough transcription that may include typographical errors.

Interview

BRUCE HOOTON: Where did you go to school?

LEON GOLUB: I have a History of Art degree from the University of Chicago which dates from 1910. Then I went into the army. In 1946, under the G.I. Bill, I went to the Art Institute of Chicago for four years. I have a B.F.A. and M.F.A. from there.

MR. HOOTON: Was that when [Robert] Indiana was there? Did you know him there—Indiana?

MR. GOLUB: No. He must have been, since he's probably younger than I am—he must have been there later. That's what I would assume. Or he could have been there earlier if he had not been in the army, I don't know. I have no idea.

MR. HOOTON: Who did you study with in Chicago?

MR. GOLUB: I studied with Kathleen Blackshear, a composition course which was really a history of art course in a combined way—sort of an experimental course. Figure drawing with Robert Leventhal and painting with Paul Wiegardt.

MR. HOOTON: You're from Chicago, aren't you—born there?

MR. GOLUB: Yes. Lived there all my life except for army service and subsequently teaching at Indiana University and being in France.

MR. HOOTON: Somebody was saying that [Max] Beckmann had a great influence on the Midwest and very little on the East, you know.

MR. GOLUB: Well, he wouldn't have had much influence in Chicago, although he knew people like Hugo Weber. He had an influence as an Expressionist, perhaps. Oh, I thought you meant in a personal way.

MR. HOOTON: No, just in terms of his style, because he was teaching out there.

MR. GOLUB: Well, he was teaching in St. Louis, actually. In a sense, there was no notoriety in respect to that in terms of Chicago. People weren't aware of his teaching there except incidentally. But there was a strong emphasis among my friends and myself in terms of Expressionism, primitive art. The whole viewpoint that we were interested in really was different from the New York viewpoint, which was in terms of artists who'd come, let's say, during World War II, had lived in New York and influenced many of the New Yorkers, and there was more art for art's sake. Or at least a

continuation of French cultural interests. The Chicago people, those I was associated with, there were others as well, were more interested in primitive art and a wilder, at least we thought it was, you know, kind of Expressionism.

MR. HOOTON: That was true in Indiana, too.

MR. GOLUB: Well, when I went to Indiana, of course, this was in '57. I went as a teacher so the situation was different. But in terms of my formative days, the so-called Chicago School, you see—some people called it the Monster School—it had emphasis on exaggerated or violent human emotions.

MR. HOOTON: Did you ever know Bill Payton in Indiana?

MR. GOLUB: Surely. He was a student of mine for a short time. He was influenced by—he wouldn't have been influenced by me in any chance—what he did was—I can't think of his name now. He taught at Indiana previous to me. What's his name?

MR. HOOTON: Oh, that's right, I know—he shows at ACA.

MR. GOLUB: Yes, and he teaches now at one of the eastern women's colleges.

MR. HOOTON: That's right, I know who you mean—paints a monkey on his head? [Alton] Pickens.

MR. GOLUB: That's right—Pickens. He had a strong expressionist and figurative influence on his students.

MR. HOOTON: Yes. I once told Payton, I'm sorry to say that, I said, "You don't understand. The Expressionists were very sophisticated people—they weren't primitive people at all. They weren't wild and woolly, they were highly sophisticated. Not that they weren't crazy."

MR. GOLUB: Some of them actually were. [Oskar] Kokoschka must have been to some extent to have had a doll that he lived with—you know—used to take to dinner with him all dressed up. He had this mannequin especially made for his own convenience.

MR. HOOTON: Wonderful!

MR. GOLUB: I know, it is wonderful, but it's highly disturbed behavior.

MR. HOOTON: You were talking about your techniques. That you're trying to get an aged quality when you're putting the paint on. You rub it down with a solvent then you build it up again?

MR. GOLUB: Yes. I'm interested in certain qualities of time. I'm interested in trying to recapture, and in a sense re-do in a contemporary way—that is, I'm trying to discover a contemporary violence through my work. But I'm also trying to relate this to certain traditional ideas—to what I think are very normative notions of art. I'm very strongly influenced by classic art by late Greek and Roman art—and so I want something I would like to believe is very much of the moment. But I want it to have some relationship, which can be seen in the work itself, to classic art, and therefore I'm very much influenced by things like *Pergamon*, late Roman sculpture, portrait busts, and so on. In fact, I sometimes copy it, you know. I will take a figure out of one of these things. I may change part of the position. I may keep part of the position. For example, in this painting right here—the man holding the child on his shoulder—that comes from the *Arch of Trajan*. The only thing I kept from the original sculpture was that arm. In which he had his arm by his shoulder, supporting the child resting, sitting

on his shoulder. The rest of it I changed. But that much alone is enough to relate it in my mind. Actually, somebody who was here once and didn't know the source of this thought it looked like a metope—the way the figures were isolated and flattened against the background. They're in the front plane is pushed forward with only an indeterminate background, so that the background is timeless. At the same time there is no background—like bas-relief in that sense.

MR. HOOTON: Some of them actually did remind me of the frescoes in Pompeii—the encaustic.

MR. GOLUB: Yes, I particularly like the use of pigment. That is, my putting on a certain kind of stroke and working it in, and then by eroding it, erasing it and putting it on again—rubbing it back and forth, it gets this kind of look that Pompeii actually appeared to me. I'm very consciously aware of this. I would like it to have that quality. I saw Pompeii for the second time. First in I saw it in '56 and then I saw it this last summer—the summer of '64, and it was even more exciting the second time—the encounter.

MR. HOOTON: You lived in France for five years?

MR. GOLUB: Yes.

MR. HOOTON: Until recently?

MR. GOLUB: Yes.

MR. HOOTON: In Paris itself?

MR. GOLUB: Yes. I had a large studio there.

MR. HOOTON: What section?

MR. GOLUB: Well, I lived in the Porte Dauphine section. We lived in an old hôtel particulier on the ground floor. It was really quite a grand old house with a garden. But I had a studio in another part of Paris, near Montmartre.

MR. HOOTON: Up in the hills?

MR. GOLUB: Well, just before the hills begin. I still have the studio, but my Parisian dealer is using it as a storage depot at the moment.

MR. HOOTON: Did you know any French artists?

MR. GOLUB: In a very casual way—not intimately.

MR. HOOTON: I guess you speak French.

MR. GOLUB: In a so-so fashion.

MR. HOOTON: Did you go to the cafés much?

MR. GOLUB: Oh, I used to sit around there some.

MR. HOOTON: Sometimes there's a little bit of [Jean] Dubuffet, one could say very fast. Do you think he had any influence?

MR. GOLUB: On my work do you mean? Well, it probably did at one point. When did I first see Dubuffet's work? It was very early. And I think I was influenced by the kind of rough textures and his primitivism and the art brut and the gestures of this sort of painting. But the influence was more toward a kind of attitude than it was specifically in terms of work. It was an influence I believe. Then, I shifted to other preoccupations. You see, Dubuffet was interested always in the scatological, you know. He's interested in showing scurrying humanity and he distorts it so that it gets either obscene or insect-like or a comical sort of thing. I was always interested from the very beginning in a tragic notion of man—that is, man leads a somewhat fated existence and he encounters great obstacles; how he conducts himself in terms of these frustrations and obstacles and whether he can surmount them. This is one of the reasons I turned to classic art. I felt one could find exemplars there which indicate procedures by which man confronts himself—man sees himself. In a certain sense Dubuffet was very interested in the scurrying of humanity and I am, really, interested in the isolation of certain kinds of confrontations. So that there was a meaning at a particular moment but it wasn't really able to sustain itself in terms of my interest in his work.

MR. HOOTON: Did you go through a [Pablo] Picasso stage?

MR. GOLUB: Well, possibly. Very probably, actually, during school days. Dubuffet, Picasso, Beckmann, Near Eastern art, African art—all kinds of totemic sorts of things. I think probably I was influenced, although, it might be hard to show it in terms of any specific painting, but I was very strongly influenced by seeing the *Guernica* which was exhibited many, many years ago, probably before I was in art school or before I went into the army. It was exhibited at the Arts Club in Chicago and it struck my imagination very powerfully. [José Clemente] Orozco too. I was very much influenced by Orozco in these kinds of ways, too. But I would say equally between Beckmann, Dubuffet, Orozco, Picasso. In a certain way I feel like that I don't wish to deny any influences; I'm sure they're very evident, but in a certain way I feel very much separated from Western art as we see it today. Because in a sense it comes out of a late Renaissance "art for art's sake" notion of art.

I'm really interested in a different concept of art, although the interest this kind of concept has developed very slowly. I only became aware of it as the years went on. I'm sort of interested now in what I would call a kind of public art which relates to an earlier interest I had in what I might call a ritualistic art. The ritualistic art would show, let's say priests. Priests in terms of the Near Eastern concept. The Hittite or Hebraic notion of a priest—that is, someone who enacts the ritual in terms of man. Then it shifted in my mind from this rather mystical notion of a priest, witch doctor or something of this kind, into a somewhat more secular notion. You see, at the time I was doing priests, actually. I was doing paintings of Shaman, or witch doctors, too, so it was a sort of common interest. That's why I'm making the paintings as large as they are—to give the notion of a kind of dramatic public art. This big painting on the floor is some scene which in a way could be considered a pedimental thing. It could be a pediment or frieze for some sort of temple, if we had temples. Unfortunately, we don't have temples, you see, so there's no place for it. You know, there are museums, but there is no specific place for these paintings that have a meaning. Also, the painting is more personal, which is due to my being what I am: a 20th century artist. It's more personal and more subjective. I would regret this in some ways, it's less objective in this sense, in reference to people than Greek art would be.

In Greek art there was a tradition that artists would follow from generation to generation which would change all the time and change in terms its function, public and private. But always the artist was in some kind of relationship to this, you see. That is, he was expected to tell something about the drama of the internal and external history of the Greek world. But today the artist is really on his own. I make this, somebody else puts stripes on a canvas, somebody else does something more Surrealist, somebody else will do something in relationship to popular culture, and so on. I mean

there are so many things going on all at once and each artist is on his own. And so, society makes very few demands and the artist is a free agent.

MR. HOOTON: It's a free country—you can paint any way you want to, as they say.

MR. GOLUB: And you can starve any way you want to starve.

MR. HOOTON: Starve any way you want—yes.

MR. GOLUB: Many privileges open to one. Sorry, that was sort of corny.

MR. HOOTON: It's sort of extraordinary, the whole concept. Do you think [Jackson] Pollock actually was a public artist in that sense?

MR. GOLUB: Well, that's a sort of interesting question. Anything fairly big becomes public in a curious way simply because it can't be shunted to the side too easily. So the public has to encounter it. So in that sense he's a public artist and also because he was probably preoccupied with things that were underneath the surface. But in a certain way he is also a highly rhythmical, decorative, ornate artist as well, you know. He's also a very private artist. But maybe he is a complete public artist—maybe more than I am. See, I don't know—I'm only saying this because as you asked me, I could visualize that someone could say that the nature of public art would take this form today. It's a very possible viewpoint.

MR. HOOTON: I was thinking, in a sense, that he worked not unlike you in many ways. He would actually get into the picture and work on it.

MR. GOLUB: Yes. And the thing would be larger than himself. Anything that's greater than oneself must refer to something. So, perhaps.

MR. HOOTON: Do you know many of the artists in New York?

MR. GOLUB: I know some. In a certain way I know a fair number, but I don't know any of them well, any more than I know any of the French artists well. You see, what I'm interested in lies counter to many of the preoccupations that are current, and to be really intimate with people you have to really have common interests. You have to speak of something—you can't avoid your interests. And, if the interests are contradictory or very far separated, then there isn't much one can say. Of course, you find in New York that artists often know each other who have different styles. This is often the case when they've known each other for fifteen, twenty years. Just as in Chicago I'm on a much more intimate basis with painters whose style is much different from own simply because I've known them so long. There's a tolerance that's set up between these styles. Both live and permit the other one. But in New York this will not operate for me for a long time.

MR. HOOTON: When I was figurative years ago my friends were still of the abstract group. Now after ten or fifteen years, there's no fight between us whatsoever.

MR. GOLUB: I didn't know you were a painter.

MR. HOOTON: Oh, no, no—not a painter. I published a magazine called *Drawing* years ago.

MR. GOLUB: Oh, I see, I see.

MR. HOOTON: It was basically figurative and I rebelled against the Arts Club, intellectually rebelled,

and so I decided to set up a figurative magazine—trying to make art public again. Trying to show that the artists could look at a scene in everyday life and describe it.

MR. GOLUB: Yes, of course. Many New York artists have since followed that notion.

MR. HOOTON: Paul Georges is an example of one who did that. Took all the aspects of Abstract Expressionism and transformed them into a figurative art. But it's nothing quite like yours.

MR. GOLUB: Well, we start from different premises—different background, certainly. I was never interested in Abstract art. I've never done it. I wouldn't ever make the claim that the source of this is any kind of Abstract art. As far as I can tell, it isn't.

MR. HOOTON: Is this first, large canvas you've ever done?

MR. GOLUB: By far. It's 24X9 1/2 feet. It may not work out. If it doesn't work out I may have to junk it and start again. I don't really know what will happen. There are a lot of technical problems in terms of the surface and how the figures will be worked out in terms of each other and whether the thing will have a really viable surface. I don't know. I won't know for another six or eight weeks.

MR. HOOTON: When you were in the army, were you in combat?

MR. GOLUB: No, I was a draftsman—map maker in the Corps of Engineers.

MR. HOOTON: You weren't involved in combat as such?

MR. GOLUB: No, no, not at all.

MR. HOOTON: And the combat doesn't look as though it's made up of something physical.

MR. GOLUB: It's a metaphysical combat. That's what I would want it to be anyway. In a way it's the whole notion of struggle, you see. And, in a way, the notion of fate. That is, what happens to you, to a person—to man. What he encounters, what he becomes—it sounds corny in words. I feel like it would be better in painting, you know.

MR. HOOTON: Did you ever go to Mexico and see Orozco's work?

MR. GOLUB: No. Just from reproductions.

MR. HOOTON: Actually your head is what everyone remembers, or that's what I guess when you've had that new figure show.

MR. GOLUB: Yes, I had a great many figures. That was based on the *Dying Gaul*.

MR. HOOTON: What other painters are there in Chicago?

MR. GOLUB: Well, actually the person I was closest to for a while was a sculptor named Campoli. We shared a studio. He was in that figure show also. [Cosmo] Campoli, Ted Hallock, Dominic Romeo, George Cohen. More or less in this vein, and there were many other painters who worked in other areas. I could go through the list of what they used to call the Old Monsters—I could give you maybe 20 names.

MR. HOOTON: And also Baskin was sometimes considered part of that.

MR. GOLUB: I have never met him. Most people, I'm sure, have not met him. But he could be related one way or another. He deals with, I imagine one might say, a kind of torment—bitter, tragic humanity at one level or another. Whether it's a similar area or not, it's really hard to say.

MR. HOOTON: [Octave] Landuyt. L-A-N-D-U-Y-T?

MR. GOLUB: Oh, that's a Belgian painter? I don't know his work. I've seen a few reproductions, but yes, I've heard the name.

MR. HOOTON: Selden Rodman was very interested in that group. Has he ever seen your work?

MR. GOLUB: No, no. I know Rodman was interested in people like Ben Shahn. It had a certain social. He has a certain kind of humanistic bias in terms of this, you know. I don't know whether this would interest Selden Rodman or those people or not. What I want to get is a very awesome, severe or austere art. That is what I hope to get. A kind of absolute art. Pushed as these figures are pushed to a certain point to become a kind of absolute expression—implacable expression. I used to use the word vulnerability. I want to express a certain vulnerability—I want it to have a kind of heroic stance, but I want them to have pathos. If they just had heroic stance done today they'd really be monsters—like Hitler's army. All the fake heroes which have no sense in terms of reality. But if they're really vulnerable and if they pathos they can then be related to a more significant notion of contention and strife. And if they can be related to what history has shown about these things, their validity might be really made evident in this way. Not that level which I aim to do it.

MR. HOOTON: Not actually an anti-hero, though.

MR. GOLUB: I don't really know, you see. They're not anti-hero in the sense that they're like [Samuel] Beckett's heroes, who have crumbled into heaps on the ground, crawling all over the surface of the earth. In a way you might say the little base figures there are very Beckett-like in certain ways. They look like visual equivalents of some of the characters.

MR. HOOTON: In the shape trash cans.

MR. GOLUB: But I want these people to have much more form. If I'm looking at Greek sculpture I'm looking at the perfect norm of what man is supposed to be like. Naturally, very few men do correspond to this. It's just an ideal. It's very far from a lump on the ground. It's just an ideal that is practically unreachable. If you can show this in terms of its vulnerability—this kind of enactment of myth, this sort of a notion—the way people are really operating still. We see all the changes that take place in the modern world. We go out into space—we have all kinds of new philosophies and sciences. Man has really changed his image. Man is not the man he was one hundred years ago, two hundred years ago. And yet it seems to me that underlying this there are certain continuities, certain kinds of ultimates. They even seem unchangeable. I would like to use, in a sense, this notion of Greek art as an ultimate. Then I change it and erode it and restore it any which way I will, but they still have a basis one can discover in it—its source. Its source being greater than I, myself. Therefore, I'm really taking on a different function in nature. But that's sort of a big claim but—

MR. HOOTON: Actually, the faces are rather handsome, I think.

MR. GOLUB: They're based again—the Greek ideal. I tend to give them classic noses, classic chins, all kinds of things of that kind.

MR. HOOTON: Basically they are handsome. I mean, they don't seem evil. They're not incapable of it, perhaps, but they don't seem evil.

MR. GOLUB: Sometimes they're violent, though. Many times they're very violent.

MR. HOOTON: But violence is not evil.

MR. GOLUB: No. See, the technique is one of continually redoing. On a canvas like this I may actually lay down coats of paint, a series of colors. In this particular case, it would be red oxide, blue, white, purple, black, and so on. I might put down a series of colors like this for several days. Then, I remove the paint and then build up the same colors again. Then, I remove the paint again and I will do this for a long period of time until I manage to get the expression I actually want, which is always an act of recognition. At this particular moment, I find that it works. The process is somewhat curious in the fact that it's highly controlled and yet full of hazard and chance at the same time. I want something dealing with figures and I want them to be very exact in their positions, their gestures and expressions, but at the same time I want to arrive at it through a series of relatively uncontrolled developments which gradually move toward control. So there's a lot of chance that operates in it, which may be part of their contemporary feeling, or it may not. It's very possible—starting a canvas, one improvises as one goes. I used to improvise even more than I do now. I would change the positions a great deal. For example, that painting there which now has two men and a child, originally had one man and two children. The man was running with the child on his shoulders and there was another child fleeing behind him. I simply took that paint off, rather laboriously removed it, and then restructured the canvas on that basis.

MR. HOOTON: What does the child imply?

MR. GOLUB: Well, it's a gesture of surprise, or like Oban.

MR. HOOTON: Reflex.

MR. GOLUB: Right. That's right, it's a reflex gesture. Whereas the man's gesture is open. The man's gesture of the lower hand is a sort of reflex stopping—and the other one is aggressive. Like many of the drawings I've made—as in this canvas here—there's often one hand which is threatening and the other hand which is defensive, with the figures between two poles. What can we even say about some of the canvases, when there are two men fighting, you can't even tell because if it's a fallen figure and another figure's rushing at it, you can't really tell if the figure is rushing to attack it or to help it. At that time, it becomes ambiguous.

MR. HOOTON: And actually these three figures are fighting.

MR. GOLUB: It's sort of vague in terms of words and no picture to see, but in any case. I kind of graphically, that is, in terms of subject matter, those men are fighting over there. This man is attacking this man here.

MR. HOOTON: He's about to swing.

MR. GOLUB: Yes, he's swung his arms in a very violent gesture. It's more of a slap, to be honest and he is knocked down. There are two groups of two, with this man rushing in to help him, to attack this other man. This one's going to attack this man, therefore making this group of two a group of three. One man hovering over a fallen figure on top. This man in the far right being struck. The very moment is sort of gesture of call, of alertness, trying to alert his confederates at the moment. I want this to stuff to operate today. I want it to be of the moment. I want to have the exact contemporaneous feeling, as all artists want this. They want their work to be of today—of now, to speak the language, you know, which is our language: to speak to our times, to be expressive in this

way. I really think this kind of painting is contemporary. Contemporary even in so far as some of its elements can be traced back to a thousand years, it's still contemporary. It has a certain metaphysical anguish and power. In a way, I want it to be lyrical too. There are contradictory modes. In so far as this is a much more lyrical painting than that one is. The way the paint is put on—the technique—the proportions are much more controlled and tranquil and the gestures, in way, are more open and relaxed even though they're violent and in motion. There's much more of an irrational quality in terms of the handling of the paint, the wildness of the gesture, the destruction of the paint in one than the other—so that even within similar paintings the attitude is really quite different.

MR. HOOTON: They seem almost to want to break out of the canvas, in a sense.

MR. GOLUB: In a certain way. It's much more violent. That's right, much more violent.

MR. HOOTON: And that design, in the arms and the legs, the way it makes an X, spreading out into the whole thing.

MR. GOLUB: That's right. Much more harmonious.

MR. HOOTON: All of it goes into the hand, moves around to the other arm to the knee.

MR. GOLUB: Yes, that's very true.

MR. HOOTON: Like the Laocoön, more of that kind of. The violence is all contained, by mistake and by evident planning.

MR. GOLUB: Perhaps the first oil painting I made when I went back to art school was a Laocoön. Although, I don't have it any more.

MR. HOOTON: Somebody bought it? Or you destroyed it?

MR. GOLUB: That one I destroyed. It was a very unsatisfactory painting.

MR. HOOTON: It's always a shame, I would say, when an artist destroys something.

MR. GOLUB: You see, now—I started art school in '46—now in '65 I might like having that painting again, but I didn't like it in 1950.

MR. HOOTON: That's true. I went to art school too, back in '46, '47. After, I decided that I wasn't really an artist, I was more literary. That I didn't have that feeling for paint that I was supposed to have. And, I destroyed everything.

MR. GOLUB: And then, too, paint handling in one period of time may be considered something else in another period. It's this sort of touch, you know. The kind of textured brushstroke is not in such good repute today among many artists, as we saw at the *Op* show.

MR. HOOTON: What I called the Contraceptive Eye.

MR. GOLUB: It's possible. [Laughs]

MR. HOOTON: They call it "the responsive eye." I thought it was "the receptive eye," but it really was "the responsive eye." I find it rather boring, but really see it that night.

MR. GOLUB: I didn't actually either. I'll have to return and look at it. It does show the tremendous scientific preoccupation that people have today and the capacity artists often have to really limit themselves in extraordinary ways. To get a strong expression through great limitation. That is, a canvas—or whatever it is—that has a rhythm, let's say parallel lines or checkers is done very, very carefully—perfectly. He has reduced experience to this and he makes it as strong as he can. Very typical modernist reduction. What it really signifies I do not know. It's find that I don't. I'm preoccupied with the assumptions behind my work and it's really hard to get into their world. But it exists—it's all around us. Of course the galleries are fanatical in following whatever the latest fad is. They drop people—get new people.

MR. HOOTON: Really like show business.

MR. GOLUB: It's become a business. It's become such a fantastic, spectacular, kind of operation that it is necessary that the art world now move in an accelerated way. That's what seems to be happening. Or else it's sort of the notion that interests people.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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