

Artist Capraro, 90, still calls self 'student'

CAPRARO, from 1D

of a nearby canvas.

The oversize canvas, in black and vivid ochre hues, seems to show a turbulent horizon at a moment in Earth's creation, spitting fire and roiling lava, filled with billowing smoky clouds.

Audrey Leeds, curator of the Art Gallery at Rockefeller State Park Preserve, is bringing her friend's work to the preserve. Mainly landscapes will be exhibited there from Sunday to July 13, with framing by Renaissance Framers in Orangeburg.

Capraro, who's been studying the old masters for the lifetimes of many current artists, draws on his Italian roots and the Hudson River for inspiration. He goes outside to study the trees and light every day, still an enthusiastic student of an art teacher called Mother Nature.

"I love the light and to capture it. I don't like the types of paintings being done of the Hudson today," he said.

While damning computer artwork as junk, he praises his computer because he uses it every day to study even more about the masters and their techniques.

He also relies on the help of St. Thomas Aquinas College Librarian Ken Donohue, who gets him books on great masters. He knows Donohue because he attended nearby St. Thomas Aquinas College to learn about computers.

Capraro repeatedly comes back to the theme of being a student, saying that he works fast because of his knowledge of the old masters' techniques, and says he works not only outward but also inward in an effort to capture a mood and get the viewer to participate and react to the work.

"What inspires me is what's happening in the world today," he said.

Capraro's work also is a product of his upbringing and artistic influences. Born to Italian immigrant parents in East Harlem, Capraro grew up in the Bronx, in an Italian and Jewish neighborhood. In the 1950s, he lived in Italy for six

Manhattan's East Village. He has lived in Piermont since 1963.

Among his earliest inspirations was the anguish of the Holocaust. His sketchbook works from 1961 became an exhibit shown in 1992 at the Knesset in Israel and as the first exhibit at Vad Yashem, Israel's Holocaust museum. Those works made up his most recent exhibit, in 2006 at Yeshiva University Museum in Manhattan.

When he paints, his favorite brush is in a foam handle that is easier for his arthritic hands. But he also has done sculptures. In 2005, his nearly 3-foot bronze bust of Christopher Columbus was rededicated on the second floor of the Rockland County Courthouse. It had been on the first floor of the building since April 1972.

Some of his newer works are monochromatic, done more because it's easier for him these days than setting out the full palette.

The eternal student sympathizes with today's students, asking, "How do young people get the money to paint today? It is so expensive."

He remembers that "I never had enough money. I (still) make my

own oils and grind my own colors. I learned that in Italy," where he worked as an film extra to supplement his GI Bill stipend.

He appeared as a guard in the 1951 film "Quo Vadis." True, he doesn't like to drop names, but he does indulge in anecdotes about those days, recalling that his role got him a toe infection because his friend Buddy Baer, playing Ursus, slammed a wooden jail door onto his foot. He remembers being picked for a role by Orson Wells,

who, Capraro said, felt that everyone in Italy was an actor and the worst ones were onstage.

The old days link him to "the old guys" without whom he wouldn't exist as a painter.

"I work in the present, I'm contemporary," he said, but "if you don't know the past, you're losing half of your life."

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Vincent Capraro sits beside his paintings in his Piermont Studio. Capraro will exhibit his work at the Art Gallery at Rockefeller State Park Preserve in Sleepy Hollow on Sunday until July 13. (Photo by Emily Kratzer)