

Vincent Capraro: An Appreciation

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“It takes one to know one!” At first hearing, that may sound simply pejorative; but when applied to the life and work of Vince Capraro, it takes on a positive spin. He was a man who devoted himself obsessively to deconstructing and understanding the methods used by those artists we casually refer to as “old masters” of European painting. There was nothing casual about this for Capraro. Rather than simply emulating their techniques, he selectively appropriated bits and pieces of their working methods and materials for his own purposes. That the body of work he produced may be seen as unfashionable in light of today’s capricious and ever-shifting contemporary art interests does nothing to diminish one’s sense of Capraro’s technical mastery. Indeed, it’s reassuring and more essential than ever to celebrate and support the diminishing number of artists whose mastery of traditional techniques keeps those skills alive for future generations who just might want to rediscover them to reinvigorate their own creativity. This is especially important at a time when too many of the art training programs (in both studio art and the history of art) focus on contemporary art as though it emerged *ex nihilo*.

A studio visit with Vince Capraro combined unexpectedly shifting (and a tad confusing) warm and gruff interactions with the awe-struck guest along with opening books on masters such as Raphael or Rembrandt to make a point about drawing, underpainting, small passages seen only in close ups, glazes and colors. One of my happiest memories is of having Vince explain something complex on a black-and-white photo in one of his vast array of art books, discussing it as if I could understand it in the color that he knew was there because he was intimately familiar with the original work of art. Ironically, this experience also helped me

understand and appreciate the achievements of the great copyists and forgers, who also needed these skills.

Capraro, on the other hand, applied his depth of knowledge to create an incredibly ambitious *oeuvre* that ranged over subject matter as important and majestic as many of the paintings themselves. It's likely that his immersion in traditional European art, with its frequent focus on religious and mythological themes guided him toward some of his grandest works. So his interest in addressing the Holocaust feels totally in tune with a Catholic Italian-American New Yorker of his generation. And it ranks him with two of the other great American artists of that generation who dared to take on such formidable subject matter: Italian-born Rico Lebrun (1900-64) and Argentine-born Mauricio Lasansky (1914-2012). Capraro's Holocaust-themed works share an important sensibility with much of western religious (generally Christian) art: the suggestion of a specific time-based narrative that floats up to a sensation of timelessness. In the greatest Crucifixion or Pietà paintings one views an historical moment from afar and simultaneously is personally present at that event, because so much great art is about the challenge of helping to viewer to reexperience what is being depicted. The same eerie feeling of ambiguity about being anchored in an explicit moment permeates other images, such as the majestic American Indian figure. But there are also messages — perhaps even pleas — inherent in some of these paintings: attention must be paid, not just to the technical prowess of a master painter, but also to the potential meanings of the images. Just as the imagery is often suffused with the hints of *sfumato* (a not-so-subtle reference to Leonardo, *et al*), the messages or lessons come in multiple shades, which the viewer gets to tease out alone, because ultimately we experience art in solitude.

There's also a buoyant, and even joyous, aspect of Capraro's work that references his beloved predecessors: landscapes and skyscapes. Surely he had memorized the range of Italian cloud formations in the work of Mantegna and Titian and Tiepolo. But the ebullience in Capraro's clouds have more of the billowy weightlessness of Ruisdael and Constable. The landscapes

suggest a special affinity to Dutch 17th century painters, with an emphasis on how the horizon is seen. While Capraro may have proudly appropriated the technical challenges imposed by his beloved predecessors, his paintings retain all the marks of an original and idiosyncratic vision. It's the capriciousness and shortsightedness of the art world — and perhaps also a bit of Vince's charming, if irascible, stubbornness — that has kept this remarkable painter mostly out of sight for too long.

Tom L. Freudenheim has served as director of several museums, including the Baltimore Museum of Art, Worcester Art Museum, and London's Gilbert Collection. As Assistant Secretary for Museums at the Smithsonian Institutions, he had oversight responsibility for all the national museums. An art historian with degrees from Harvard College and New York University's Institute of Fine Arts, he also was director of the Museum Program at the National Endowment for the Arts. Currently he serves as president of the American Federation of Arts and writes regularly for the *Wall Street Journal*, *Curator: The Museum Journal*, and other publications.