



HOLOCAUST

VINCENT CAPRARO

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COVER: *The Jews of Vught*

FRONTISPIECE: *The Holocaust Sketchbook*

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James Beck

CAPRARO'S NIGHTWATCH

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Vincent Capraro is a *rara avis*. A true New Yorker by birth, temperament, language, and culture, this painter has passed most of his three score and ten years within viewing distance of the Manhattan skyline and has watched it change — for the better? Capraro developed as an artist immediately after World War II, when the Abstract Expressionist movement was fermenting in the studios around Eighth Street. Following three years as a pupil of Hans Hofmann, Capraro went off to Fellini's Rome for an influential six-year span. Unlike many painters of his same generation, he found the non-objectivity of the art that was exploding around him (and that quickly became the established, and virtually official, International Style) inappropriate for the expression of his vision. Never an individual who made artistic or stylistic

decisions on the basis of convenience, Capraro has retained a deep and unshakable independence and individuality — to the extent that some may take him to be inflexible. He was prepared to go with the flow — not the flow of Madison Avenue and Fifty Seventh Street, but Capraro's flow, which he has never compromised. What best defines Vincent Capraro and his art, in fact, is his insistence upon independence. Thus, while “in” New York for a half-century as an artist, he remained disenchanted with Establishment Art and watched the favored styles, from Op to Pop to Neo-Geo, come and drain down minimally. He insisted on his own predilection, an impassioned devotion to landscape and figural compositions that risked being misread as retrogressive.

In a wooded spot beside the Hudson

River less than twenty miles from the Museum of Modern Art, Capraro set up a studio and living quarters some thirty years ago, where he still draws and paints. He obtains inspiration from nature, from artists of the past who speak most intimately to him, and from political and social events that have touched his soul.

Always a remarkable draughtsman, Vincent Capraro approaches the problem of rendering the human figure from the bones outward, like certain old masters. Painters like Goya, Rembrandt, and (especially in the case of landscapes) Courbet and the Barbizon School have influenced the language in which his pictures are formulated. In other words, he pays homage to segments of the past that are sympathetic to his being, as artists of every epoch have done with regard to their own past. He imitates neither the images nor the inventions of this heritage, however;

rather, Capraro's way of seeing, of presenting, is compatible with and heir to some of the finest achievements of the Western, and especially the Baroque, tradition. Once all this is said, one must quickly add that this painter is inescapably contemporary. His approach to pure pigment is so free that it becomes mystifying when seen close up; his handling of the oil medium — a craft in which he is so demanding that he grinds his own colors — is that of a virtuoso. He operates close to nature and is inevitably conditioned by his immediate environment, with the sun reflecting off the wide river and filtering through the nearly oppressive growth all around him; yet all Capraro's figures, inviting landscapes, and passionate drawings are also a continuing and expanding commentary upon art itself.

The dimension that has emerged gradually but emphatically in recent years is his recognition of human suffering, generated

by an awareness of the horrors of the Holocaust. Triggered by literary accounts of a particular incident (as Picasso had been over the bombing of Guernica, or Goya over earlier ravages of war in Spain), Vincent Capraro began to draw his visions with a swift and brilliant stroke, with no further purpose than to record a shared agony. With an unwavering independence and integrity, he allowed these images to filter in and out of his consciousness; finally he began to paint the subject, emerging with Rembrandtesque monumentality in a single massive *Nightwatch*. It was the logical result of the irrationality of the events he had been pondering, without appeal to a current, movement, style, or specific audience. Precisely this independence and doggedness provided him with the platform to produce a picture of immense honesty and power, the fruit of a half-century of wisdom.



Tom L. Freudenheim

HOLOCAUST DRAWINGS

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The history of the Holocaust, as of Holocaust-related art, has been recorded for some time. It continues to be written and rewritten, considered and reconsidered. In a field so emotionally burdened, art is not always easily recognized as a central issue. Nevertheless, while we generally agree upon the role of art as a barometer of psychic and physical cultural pressures, we have only gradually begun to see the expansive dimensions of the Holocaust in this regard.

This bears remembering as we look at Vincent Capraro's Holocaust drawings. On the one hand, they constitute a response to specific historical events; on the other, they elevate themselves, and us, into another more universal realm. In that sense, these drawings share a quality that we recognize in the work of other artists, from

Goya to Picasso. Capraro's drawings may move into that realm of "works that extend far beyond the moment of their creation and signal to us across the centuries that a decisive, irrevocable, and irreversible change has taken place in man's course on earth, in his consciousness, in his regard of himself and his hopes, duties, and destiny."¹

The option for the generation of such feelings in art seems even more available in our own time than in earlier centuries, with our century's unique witness to tragedy. And while the foundations of Western Christological art may insistently include the visual language of suffering, only a few modern artists have conveyed those sensibilities with much success. That probably derives in part from a detachment in modernism, coupled with this century's

repeated discomfort at representational modes. Even much of the art created in camps during the Holocaust tends to be place-descriptive and genre-based, rather than clearly assertive of the profound anguish of the moment.

Capraro's drawings are strange, both for the time of their creation² and for the ambiguity of what we read in them. They bear comparison with two other singular groups of Holocaust-inspired drawings, the Dachau and Buchenwald works of Rico Lebrun,³ and the cluster of grotesque personages in Mauricio Lasansky's so-called "Nazi drawings."⁴ Each artist owes a great deal to Goya and to that artist's engagement with conveying a sense of brutality and his outrage at what man is capable of inflicting. Each also moves backward, to the powerful influences exerted by a drawing tradition that derives from Northern and Iberian

traditions for Lasansky,⁵ and from strong Italian traditions for Lebrun.⁶ Capraro's vision partakes of all of these traditions, although perhaps the strongest links back are to Rembrandt, Tiepolo, and Goya.

But if Capraro's work is in homage to anything, it seems less the recollection of the art traditions to which he is so firmly bound, than the distress at events not experienced, not even clearly recalled, but still desperately calling for expression. Capraro does not say, with Goya, "Yo lo vi" ("I saw this"),⁷ but rather asserts his need to tell us something of which he (and we) know. There is even a subliminal suggestion that these are events of which we would rather not know. Artistic expression of this sort is familiar in our own century even prior to Holocaust utterances. George Bellows read of the German massacres at Dinant in Belgium late in World War I, and felt

compelled to paint a series of paintings depicting these events. And we remember that Picasso read about, but did not experience, the 1937 bombing of Guernica, which inspired his masterpiece of that name.

Vincent Capraro's drawings retain their power over us precisely because they can be read in so many ways. On the one hand, we are told that these drawings are a response to a specific event, the Holocaust. But along with a specificity of emotional engagement, Capraro presents the viewer with a universality that holds metaphorical power for all genocide, all brutality. This he shares with all those artists who have tried to engage us in suffering and martyrdom. And ultimately he reminds us forcefully of the artist's traditional role as visual poet, endowing with new meaning that which we must not, and cannot, forget.

Notes

¹ Fred Licht, *Goya. The Origins of the Modern Temper in Art* (1979), p. 116.

² Capraro created these works in 1961, while living in the Ansonia Hotel in New York. (I lived across the street that year.) It was immediately after the post-World War II cries of "Never Again!" and prior to the strange "rediscovery" of the Holocaust as a major historical event in the 1970's.

³ James Thrall Soby, *Rico Lebrun Drawings* (1968), and Peter Selz, *New Images of Man* (1959).

⁴ Mauricio Lasansky *The Nazi Drawings* (1966).

⁵ Lasansky was born in Argentina in 1914 and has lived in the U.S.A. since 1943.

⁶ Lebrun was born in Italy in 1900, lived and worked in the United States, and died in 1964.

⁷ As in his *Disasters*, No. 44.



WORKS ON EXHIBIT

The Jews of Vught

OIL ON CANVAS

16 x 8 ft. (4.88 x 2.44 m)

1991

Cover Illustration

This large painting commemorates an incident that took place at Vught, a concentration camp established in 1942 near s'Hertogenbosch in the southern Netherlands. Here the Nazis built the "Black Hole," a cell measuring 8 feet by 12 feet (ironically, less square footage than the area of Capraro's canvas). Sixty-seven women were imprisoned in this cramped space for thirteen hours, resulting in death for nineteen women, insanity for three others, and hospitalization for thirty survivors. Capraro has presented the horror of the event elliptically, through the reactions of five witnesses, including three anguished men and a crouching woman. Overpainted with glazes that will become more transparent over the years, a fifth figure will emerge more clearly as a witness in Time.

The Holocaust Sketchbook

MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER

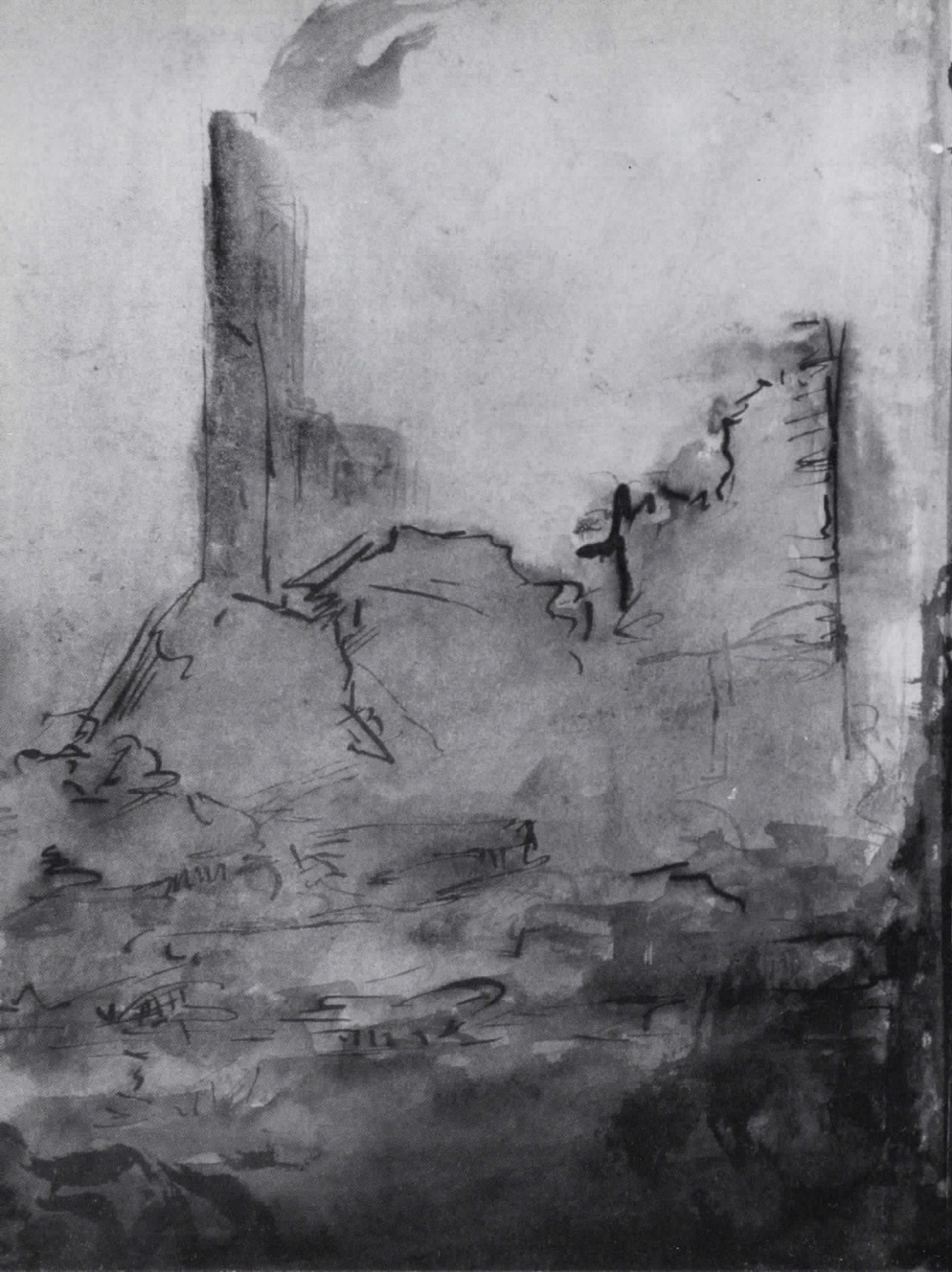
11 x 14 in. (27.9 x 35.6 cm)

1961

Frontispiece, Pp. 3, 4, 7, 9, 10

Although completed in 1961, this sketchbook has never before been publicly exhibited. Capraro's musing on the irrationality of the Holocaust and his personal abhorrence of fascism (fortified by his military service in World War II) were catalyzed by his concern over man's inhumanity to his fellow man into an outpouring of imagery. Filling both sides of the sketchbook sheets with ink and watercolor, deployed by quill pen and brush (and sometimes his own hands), Capraro created a space of compassionate private consciousness, where memories of historical outrages and echoes of old masters surreally interact and collide. The sheets are here reproduced at approximately half scale.





CHRONOLOGY

1919

Born November 9 in Manhattan, New York City, to Domenic Capraro and Teresa Bloisi Capraro, who had immigrated from Italy.

1938-42

Attends City College of the City University of New York; participates on championship basketball team coached by Nat Holman; graduates 1942.

1942-45

Enlists in U.S. Marine Corps for World War II and attains rank of captain during service in the Pacific.

1946-49

Attends Hans Hofmann's School of Fine Arts in Greenwich Village, where fellow students include Larry Rivers, Wolf Kahn, and Paul Resicka.

1949-55

Departs New York City to live in Rome, Italy; studies under Professor B. Guzzi at the Meschini Institute; exhibits at the Venice Biennale (1952) and the Museum of Modern Art, Rome (1953).

1955

Returns to live and work in Manhattan.

1959

Executes nationally-publicized mural for residence of prominent architect Edward Durrell Stone; exhibits at Iolas Gallery and Grippi "G" Gallery, New York City.

1960s

Executes Holocaust drawings (1961); exhibits in New York City at Kingworthy Gallery (1961) and Hirschl & Adler Gallery (1962).

VINCENT CAPRARO

1965

Moves to Piermont-on-the-Hudson, upriver from New York City.

1980s

Exhibits at De Rempich Gallery, New York City (1984, 1987).

1992

Exhibits Holocaust-inspired work at the Knesset and Yad Vashem, Jerusalem.

Collections

Philadelphia Museum of Art
Many private collections

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PHOTOGRAPHY:

Terry Tierney

