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Pacific Standard Time: Open your eyes to John McLaughlin

Some of his work can be seen in 'Crosscurrents' at the Getty, but the progenitor of great postwar art in L.A. merited a major solo retrospective.

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Rico Lebrun was probably the most famous Modern American artist working in Los Angeles in the decade following World War II. Yet, when the J. Paul Getty Museum opened “Crosscurrents in L.A. Painting and Sculpture, 1950-1970” on Saturday, kicking off the mammoth, region-wide survey of Los Angeles art dubbed Pacific Standard Time, Lebrun’s paintings were nowhere to be seen.

Reputations rise and fall. Lebrun arrived in L.A. in 1938, worked at the old Chouinard Art Institute and got a job teaching Disney animators how to draw convincing animal motion for “Bambi.” The same year that the movie was released, New York’s Museum of Modern Art selected him for “Americans 1942: 18 Artists From 9 States.” It was the first of six legendary survey exhibitions organized by Dorothy C. Miller, the nation’s most influential curator, to introduce adventurous Modern American art to a cautious public.

But Lebrun turns out not to be the artist who deserves the stellar ranking as L.A.’s first artist of authentically international stature. That accolade goes to John McLaughlin (1898-1976). He was mostly self-taught, but McLaughlin’s unprecedented work marks the beginning of great postwar art in Los Angeles.

Three paintings are in the Getty show. McLaughlin’s art is as different from Lebrun’s as paintings might possibly be.

Call Lebrun’s style Modernist Baroque. An Italian immigrant, born in Naples in 1900, the dashing handsome, charismatic artist crafted darkly adept paintings and drawings on grand historical themes — Judith’s revenge against the vicious Assyrian general Holofernes; humanity’s epic fall in Genesis; the fresh horrors of the Holocaust. He shrouded Cubism’s fractured forms and Expressionism’s agitated urgency within the Old Master tones of Spanish painting, especially Goya.

McLaughlin’s paintings are pure, clean abstractions. Forget fractured space, tortured figures and portentous gloom.

Shapes are geometric, mostly rectangles like the canvas or paper support. Paint application is smooth, uniform and flat, edges crisply defined. Black, white, gray and neutral taupe are common, but so are limpid hues — especially sky blue, vivid yellow and crimson, plus an occasional green. The colors are a distinctive variation on Mondrian’s enthusiasm for the endless possibility available from the primaries.