

León Ferrari, Provocative Argentine Conceptual Artist, Dies at 92



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By **Douglas Martin**

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León Ferrari, an iconoclastic Argentine conceptual artist who marshaled ceramics, sculpture and poems as “revolutionary weapons” against war, government and religion, died last Thursday in Buenos Aires. He was 92.

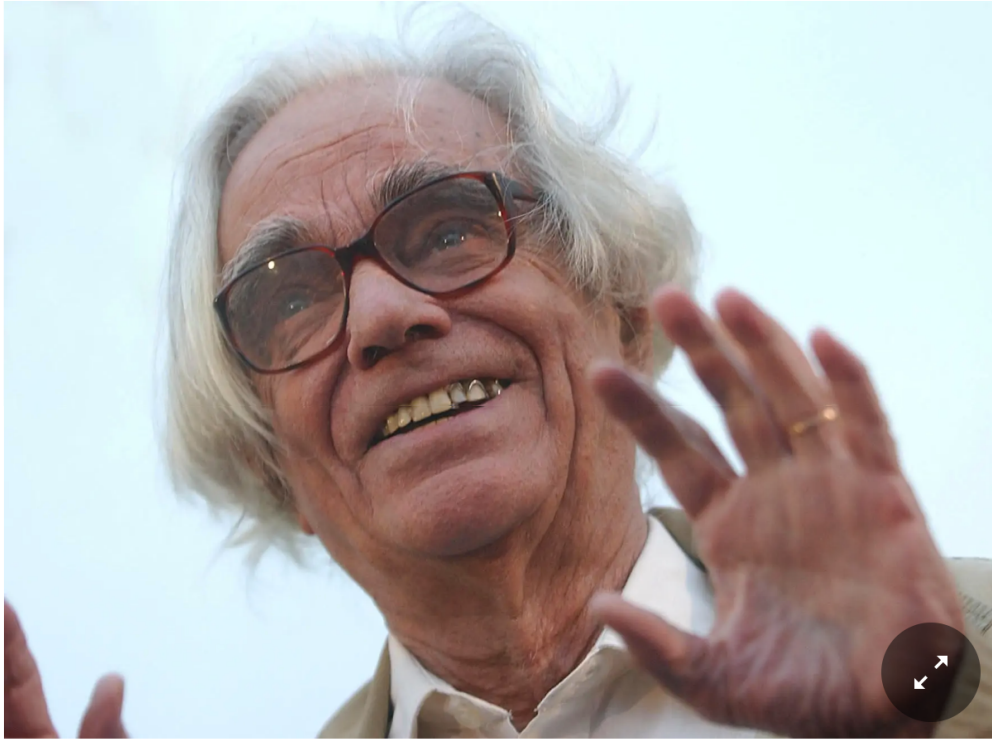
The Sicardi Gallery in Houston, which has shown his work, announced the death.

In 2004 in Buenos Aires Mr. Ferrari displayed statues of the Virgin Mary in a blender, little saints in baby bottles and Christ figures in a toaster to demonstrate his belief that people are force-fed religion. Archbishop Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Buenos Aires, now Pope Francis, called the exhibition blasphemy and demanded that it close. After public protests that included violent attacks on the artworks, it did.

Mr. Ferrari died only hours before Pope Francis, in a sermon in Rio de Janeiro, warned youths not to “put faith in a blender.” A Catholic Church spokesman said the speech had nothing to do with Mr. Ferrari or his blender piece.

Mr. Ferrari began his artistic career as a ceramicist, then became an abstract artist. As his political and moral beliefs strengthened, he said, he grew passionate about using his talent to challenge what he considered illegitimate authority. Perhaps his most famous piece, “Western Civilization and Christianity,” depicted a nearly life-size Christ being crucified on an American fighter plane in Vietnam.

The recipient of several prestigious artistic awards, Mr. Ferrari professed not to care if some considered his work more polemical than artistic.



León Ferrari in 2001. Raul Ferrari/Tam, via Associated Press

“The only thing I ask of art is that it helps me express what I think as clearly as possible, to invent visual and critical signs that let me condemn more efficiently the barbarism of the West,” he wrote in 1965. “Someone could possibly prove to me that this is not art. I would have no problem with it, I would not change paths, I would simply change its name, crossing out art and calling it politics, corrosive criticism, anything at all, really.”

Mr. Ferrari castigated the Argentine government for human rights abuses well before the military took full control in 1976. Fearing reprisal, he went into exile in Brazil from 1976 to 1991. His son Ariel was abducted by the military and is presumed dead.

One of Mr. Ferrari’s first works on returning to Buenos Aires was a collage of clippings about charred bodies found during military rule. Its purpose was to criticize the news media for not reporting on murders committed by the military government. He titled the piece “We Knew Nothing About It.”

“León Ferrari hasn’t left; he’ll stay with us,” said Estela de Carlotto, president of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, a group formed to try to locate people who disappeared under the military regime. “He left us with so much that, happily, he’ll never be forgotten.”

Mr. Ferrari's works have been exhibited in hundreds of galleries and museums around the world. In 2009 a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York featured pieces by him and the Brazilian artist Mira Schendel. MoMA has some of his works in its permanent collection.

In 2007 Mr. Ferrari received the Golden Lion award as best artist at the Venice Biennale. The Konex Foundation, which gives awards to outstanding Argentine cultural figures, named him his country's best conceptual artist for the five years ending in 2006. At his death he was working on a Guggenheim Fellowship to study sex and violence in Christian art.



"Western Civilization and Christianity" (1965), in Buenos Aires, shows the crucified Christ on an American fighter jet. Natacha Pisarenko/Associated Press

León Ferrari was born in Buenos Aires on Sept. 3, 1920. His father, Augusto, was an Italian artist who painted religious frescos and helped restore and build churches. He advised his son not to choose an artistic career because of poor financial prospects, so León studied engineering at the University of Buenos Aires. He made repeated trips to Italy, where he worked as an engineer, studied ceramics and made abstract art.

In 1960 he had a show of his abstract art in Buenos Aires. By 1965 he had changed course to do political art and made his sculpture of Christ being crucified on a fighter plane. He did almost nothing but political works until he left for Brazil in 1976. He published a manifesto in which he wrote, “Art is not beauty or novelty; art is effectiveness and disruption.”

While in Brazil he reverted to abstract art to earn a living. His few shows during his exile were in Brazil.

Mr. Ferrari is survived by his wife, Alicia Barros Castro de Ferrari; his sons Mariali and Pablo; his sister, Susana Ghioldi; and seven grandchildren.

Mr. Ferrari started a club for “the impious, heretics, apostates, blasphemous, atheists, pagans, agnostics and infidels.” Whether it had members other than Mr. Ferrari is unclear, but one of his best known artworks suggests that he more than fulfilled any possible membership test.

The piece was a reproduction of Michelangelo’s “Last Judgment” on a wall of the Sistine Chapel. He placed his version at the bottom of a cage containing two pigeons and let droppings rain through a template to form a cross shape atop the reproduction of the masterpiece.

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