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norman gorbaty & the legacy of disegno
Gorbaty’s works are anything but literal transcriptions of material existence. Rather, they offer a disegno.

About whatever thing, wishing to signify that it is beautiful, the spark of intellect that heralded artists’ attempts to commune with the divine through care and means without compromising aesthetic integrity is evidenced by Gorbaty’s still lifes. The quietude of his still Life with Lemons and Teacup (fig. 2), for example, elevates humble, everyday objects from the realm of the prosaic to the domain of the spiritual. On par with Francisco de Zurbarán’s (1598-1664) Still Life with Lemons, Oranges and a Rose of 1633 (Pasadena, Norton Simon Museum of Art), this homage to the Spanish’s Baroque masterpieces suggests the presence of something divine; above all through the inclusion of a carefully syncopated trio of citrus fruits (three being a sacred number and the sting, a lemon-like fruit, being closely associated with several Jewish rituals, including Sukkot). Gorbaty’s delicate renderings of dry-stack stone walls (fig. 6), too, are apt metaphors for the precariousness of human existence. Despite appearing strong and fortified, they — and we — can be toppled by unseen forces both external and internal without warning. In a similar vein Gorbaty’s still lifes, like the finest Dutch “flower pieces,” communicate physical beauty’s transient nature — and, by extension, the fragility of life itself. At the same time, they captivate through the sheer veracity of the artist’s pen; a touch so masterful and delicate that it brings to mind the elegant, refined “trompe l’oeil” of the late 16th-century Academy of Saint Luke in Rome, shows not only the allegorical male figure of Masters and their enduring concern with disegno, but two “plaques.” These read: “LUX INTELLECTUS ET VITA OPERATIONUM” (the light of intellect and the life of activity”) and, underneath this, “SCINTILLA DIVINITATIS” (the spark of the divine”). Kristina and the life of activity”) and, underneath this, “SCINTILLA DIVINITATIS” (the spark of the divine”). Kristina Herrmann-Fiore, “Allegorical Drawings by Federico Zuccaro and Cherubino Alberti,” Giuditio, Disegno, and Della Pittura 20, no. 3 (Autumn 1982), 248.

This idea of disegno as both process and product resonates strongly throughout the graphic oeuvre of a modern master, Norman Gorbaty (b. 1932). Though figurative in nature, Gorbaty’s works are anything but literal transcriptions of material existence. Rather, they unfold before the viewer to reveal a world that is both perceived and imagined, a reality that is intuitive and metaphysical in equal measures. The artist’s cityscapes, for instance, are much more than artistic renderings of built spaces. They are carefully balanced patterns of light and dark — symphonies of positive and negative space — that speak to the fundamentally human condition. Through careful referencing of “hatch marks,” or fine parallel lines laid in patient rows, Gorbaty not only coaxes the urban landscapes of Paris, Florence and Rome from their paper grounds but also conjures up the essence of the human spirit. These works exemplify the quintessence of nature with all its complication, but, like the Capriccios, disegno, magisterial control, a dramatic tempest releasing its pent-up fury over the majestic lagoon. By bending his characteristic hatchings into agitated arcs, the artist elicits the sublime sensation of whipping wind and pelting rain. St. Mark’s Square, meanwhile, looms on the horizon; an apt counterpoint to the raw beauty and unselfconscious power of nature.

This same capacity to convey essence and meaning without compromising aesthetic integrity is evidenced by Gorbaty’s still lifes. The quietude of his Still Life with Lemons and Teacup (fig. 2), for example, elevates humble, everyday objects from the realm of the prosaic to the domain of the spiritual. On par with Francisco de Zurbarán’s (1598-1664) Still Life with Lemons, Oranges and a Rose of 1633 (Pasadena, Norton Simon Museum of Art), this homage to the Spaniard’s Baroque masterpieces suggests the presence of something divine; above all through the inclusion of a carefully syncopated trio of citrus fruits (three being a sacred number and the sting, a lemon-like fruit, being closely associated with several Jewish rituals, including Sukkot). Gorbaty’s delicate renderings of dry-stack stone walls (fig. 6), too, are apt metaphors for the precariousness of human existence. Despite appearing strong and fortified, they — and we — can be toppled by unseen forces both external and internal without warning. In a similar vein Gorbaty’s still lifes, like the finest Dutch “flower pieces,” communicate physical beauty’s transient nature — and, by extension, the fragility of life itself. At the same time, they captivate through the sheer veracity of the artist’s pen; a touch so masterful and delicate that it brings to mind the elegant, refined “trompe l’oeil” of the late 16th-century Academy of Saint Luke in Rome, shows not only the allegorical male figure of Masters and their enduring concern with disegno, but two “plaques.” These read: “LUX INTELLECTUS ET VITA OPERATIONUM” (the light of intellect and the life of activity”) and, underneath this, “SCINTILLA DIVINITATIS” (the spark of the divine”). Kristina Herrmann-Fiore, “Allegorical Drawings by Federico Zuccaro and Cherubino Alberti,” Giuditio, Disegno, and Della Pittura 20, no. 3 (Autumn 1982), 248.

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