



Fig. 1. View of Venice, ca. 1980



Fig. 2. Still Life with Lemons and Teacup, ca. 1981



Fig. 5. Stone Wall, ca. 1974



Skull of a Hassid, ca. 1972

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norman gorbaty & the legacy of disegno



Fig. 3. Sketches, ca. 1972



Fig. 4. Elf, ca. 1972

[A]bout whatever thing, wishing to signify that it is beautiful, one says that it has **disegno**.

~ Ludovico Dolce, *Dialogo della Pittura*, 1557

At first blush the Italian word *disegno*, or “drawing,” appears deceptively simple. Literally translated, it refers to a two-dimensional image (“*un disegno*”) composed of line, contour and shade. It also suggests the physical act of drawing (“*disegnare*”). In 15th-century Florence, however, *disegno* had a much more nuanced meaning; one that comprised not only graphic skills but also the intellectual impulses expressed by painters, sculptors and architects through their art. This changing conception of the term is palpable in Renaissance tracts and treatises, including *Della Pittura* (“On the Art of Painting”), authored by Leon Battista Alberti (1404-72) in 1435. In this text, the great humanist and architect treated *disegno* as the handmaiden to what he called “*compositio*,” a prescriptive term demanding proportional harmonies and the just disposition of component parts to create a unified, idealized whole.¹ By the 16th century, these two concepts had been fully elided. *Disegno* had evolved from the physical act of image-making to something far nobler: it represented the spark of intellect that heralded artists’ attempts to commune with the divine through carefully considered, mimetic exercises.²

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 imitative and metaphysical in equal measures. The artist’s cityscapes, for instance, are much more than artful recapitulations of built spaces. They are carefully balanced patterns of light and dark – symphonies of positive and negative space – that speak to the fundamentally human impulse to create order from chaos. Through carefully controlled “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 same works equally capture the quintessence of nature with deft complexity. In his *View of Venice* (fig. 1), for example, Gorbaty depicts, with 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 unrestrained 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 masterpiece 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 etrog, a lemon-like fruit, being closely associated with several Jewish rituals, including Sukkot). Gorbaty’s delicate renderings of dry-stack stone walls (fig. 5), 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 virtuosity of the artist’s pen; a touch so masterful and delicate that it brings to mind the elegant, refined drawings of the Renaissance master Fra Bartolommeo (1472-1517).

Gorbaty’s caricatures display a related capacity for capturing the essence of life and human existence in all of its iterations, from the sublime to the ridiculous. The artist’s figural studies, for instance, convey not just the physiognomy of his subjects but also their dispositions and emotive states, which range from the tranquil to the deeply agitated, from the enraptured to the moribund. In this the artist follows a tradition that dates back to at least the final quarter of the sixteenth century, when the Bolognese classicists Annibale and Agostino Carracci (1560-1609 and 1557-1602, respectively) began creating drawings of those whom they wanted to immortalize, and sometimes mock, by exaggerating identifying characteristics and features. Like the Carracci before him, Gorbaty has experimented with crowding multiple images onto a single page, conveying prescient messages about both individual subjects as well as the larger panorama that is humanity. His cacophonous image of repeated heads (fig. 3), for instance, artfully surveys the ages and stages of mankind while delivering up a potent reminder of Death’s inevitability through the skulls that dominate the lower left quadrant of the field. Gorbaty’s *Elf*, (fig. 4) with his dark, hooded

eyes and ambiguous expression, communicates a similarly somber mood, despite the character’s rather amusing attire and jaunty stance. The network of dense cross-hatchings, used by the artist to create an abstract black background, only heightens our discomfiture as we grapple with the deeper meaning of this cavernous void, this dark chasm. Even more harrowing is the artist’s *Skull of a Hassid* (front cover). Is Gorbaty in this image – a visual tour-de-force – referencing the Holocaust, grappling with his own spirituality, seeking the essence of human mortality or all of these things? In a sense, the answer is not as important as the questions that such a powerful image elicits. As with the visionary master Francisco Goya (1746-1828) in his *Caprichos* (*The Caprices*, 1797-98) and *Los Desastres de la Guerra* (*The Disasters of War*, 1810-20) Gorbaty displays a patent willingness to probe the human psyche; to look life’s inevitable sorrows, as well as the atrocities that mankind can inflict upon itself, squarely in the eye.

Regardless of the genre – landscape, still life, portraiture or caricature – Norman Gorbaty reveals, through his drawings, a graphic talent that is richly complemented by an arch sensitivity to the creative capacities of both hand and mind. In this he rivals the Old Masters and their enduring concern with *disegno*, understood in the broadest possible sense. Gorbaty himself acknowledged his commitment to *process* on the frontispiece of one of his early sketchbooks. There, quoting Willa Cather, he inscribed: “The End is nothing; the road is all.” In this the artist allies himself to the pantheon of Western civilization’s greatest artists, from the Renaissance and the classical Baroque to the Enlightenment and beyond; artists who quested to reveal and interpret the mysteries of life through carefully constructed works of art that privilege, in equal measure, spirit and materiality.

JILL DEUPI, J.D., Ph.D.
 Director
 Bellarmine Museum of Art

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¹ “First one ought to make sure that all the members agree well. They will agree when in size, function, kind, color and other similar things they correspond to a unified beauty.” L.B. Alberti, *Della Pittura*, ed. L. Mallé (Florence, 1950), 10.

² A ceiling fresco, executed by Federico Zuccaro (ca.1542-1609) for the “Sala di Disegno” in the foundational building of the late 16th-century Academy of Saint Luke in Rome, shows not only the allegorical male figure of *Disegno* but two *trompe l’oeil* “plaques.” These read: “LUX INTELLECTUS ET VITA OPERATIONUM” (“*Disegno* is the light of intellect and the life of activity”) and, underneath this, “SCINTILLA DIVINITATIS” (“*Disegno*, the spark of the divine”). Kristina Herrmann-Fiore, “*Disegno* and *Giudizio*, Allegorical Drawings by Federico Zuccaro and Cherubino Alberti,” *Master Drawings* 20, no. 3 (Autumn 1982), 248.