

Reprinted with permission from:

FineArtConnoisseur

800.610.5771 or International 011-561.655.8778.

[CLICK TO SUBSCRIBE](#)

TODAY'S MASTERS™

Max Ginsburg: A Realist Takes Stock

BY PETER TRIPPI



It is always a pleasure to celebrate an artist's achievements while he or she still moves among us, and this is especially true for those realists who spent much of the 20th century ignored or derided because they opted not to ride the modernist wave. Such celebrations grow in impact when they take the form of a museum retrospective, which is exactly what's on deck this year for the painter Max Ginsburg (b. 1931). Stretching in date back to 1956, more than 50 of Ginsburg's works will be on view at New York City's Salmagundi Club (July 18-August 5), and then more than 80 at the Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio (September 15-November 11). Fortunately, those unable to experience this rare display can enjoy the accompanying 192-page book, which illustrates 150 Ginsburg works in total.

Ginsburg agrees with the Romantic poet John Keats that "truth is beauty," and he has always sought to paint realistically for three specific reasons. "First of all, I enjoy the beauty of the human form," he says. "This beauty also gives me a positive feeling about humanity. Also, I derive an aesthetic pleasure in skillful realistic drawing and painting. And last, I believe that realism can communicate ideas more strongly, and it is this communication of ideas that is extremely important to me." Most provocatively, Ginsburg believes that the public "identifies with my work because it is familiar in content and realistic in form," far more meaningfully than it does with "cutting-edge" artworks. This fact is masked, he says, by the simple fact that most members of the public "have not seen painting about real life, or at least seen it skillfully done."

AGAINST THE ODDS, A CAREER IN ART

Though Ginsburg's career path has not been easy, it benefitted early on from the fact that his father was the talented painter Abraham Ginsburg (1891-1984). Having emigrated from Odessa to New York in 1912, Ginsburg *père* graduated from the National Academy of Design in 1922, then studied painting in Europe. Max was born in Paris during his parents' travels, but when he was two the young family moved to Brooklyn. The boy also had his first art lesson at two; after slapping paint on a portrait his father had just completed, he was promptly spanked and realized, he says, that



STRETCHING CANVAS

1956, OIL ON CANVAS, 30 x 25 IN.

COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



“becoming an artist would be a difficult road fraught with danger.”

The younger Ginsburg studied art at New York City’s famed High School of Music and Art and then Syracuse University; even in the late 1940s, however, the traditional realism imparted by his father at home was considered old-fashioned in these institutions. Though he began exhibiting fine art regularly after his discharge from the U.S. Army in 1955, Ginsburg earned his living in commercial art from 1955 to 1960, a full-time teaching post at New York City’s High School of Art and Design from 1960 to 1981, and then

Cool

1971, OIL ON CANVAS, 22 x 28 IN.

PRIVATE COLLECTION

as an illustrator from 1980 to 2004.

This was not an unusual scenario for artists of Ginsburg’s generation, yet few attained his degree of success in the field of book publishing for both adults and children. In the new publication are essays by his former art directors from Warner Books and Harlequin Enterprises, though his illustrations — always painted in oils — also appeared regularly in the *New York Times*, *TV Guide*, and other leading periodicals. The advent of computer-generated techniques a decade ago changed illustration forever, though by then Ginsburg had already come to hunger for more control of his imagery, from conceptualization to completion.

Teaching was especially meaningful to Ginsburg, from whom more than 2,000 individuals have learned traditional drawing and painting skills during his long career at the High School of Art and Design, in the School of Visual Arts’ illustration department, and more recently at workshops nationwide, particularly the Art Students League of New York. Not surpris-



UNION MEETING

1976, OIL ON CANVAS, 28 x 47 IN.

COLLECTION OF THE TRADE UNION SEIU1199



79TH & BROADWAY
1979, OIL ON CANVAS, 38 x 62 IN.
PRIVATE COLLECTION

ingly, the new book contains essays written by four distinguished former students — Steven Assael, Garin Baker, Warren Chang, and Costa Vavagiakis — though surely others would have contributed had there been sufficient space.

CAPTURING REAL LIFE

At the heart of Ginsburg's art is his lifelong awareness of the underdog, of average people, of people overlooked by mainstream society. This sensitivity originated during his Depression-era boyhood in the Jewish neighborhood of Boro Park, which bordered an Irish Catholic area. Anti-Semitism was a fact of life there, as was racism against African Americans and other non-Caucasians. Ginsburg's pharmacist mother helped launch a trade union in the hospital where she worked, an experience that opened his eyes to the fact that working people are often treated unfairly.

As a child witness to the rise of totalitarianism and the horrors of World War II, and as a college student active in the civil rights and peace movements of the early 1950s, Ginsburg gravitated toward social realist art, and was influenced by the Ashcan School and WPA movement. Given these contexts, it is hardly surprising that the Dayton International Peace Museum devoted a 2009 exhibition to a group of hard-to-behold images, for which Ginsburg drew inspiration from both the Iraq War and such historical chroniclers of war as Goya, Kollwitz, and Picasso.



As a New Yorker, Ginsburg says he feels “a personal and deep connection to this rich, energetic, and beautiful city with its amazingly diverse population,” and believes that images of its reality speak directly to viewers no matter where they live. Today he is best known for his richly colored and expertly composed scenes of New Yorkers immersed in daily life — at leisure, buying food or sundries from street vendors, begging for alms, or using public transportation. Like Bruegel, Rembrandt, Daumier, and Millet before him, Ginsburg depicts these people frankly, but always with a compassion that avoids caricature or sentiment. He has developed a particular forte in scenes of workers, caretakers, and activists on the march at rallies and parades, so it made perfect sense when he was invited to exhibit such works at Manhattan's Martin Luther King, Jr. Labor Center in 2008.

Ginsburg's scenes of New York City street life remind some viewers of the French painter Jean Béraud (1849-1935), who deftly captured pedestrians and passengers moving through the busy streets of late-19th-century Paris. Both artists seemingly take everything in, yet, unlike

THE FRIENDS (ILLUSTRATION FOR BANTAM BOOKS)
1981, OIL ON CANVAS, 40 x 22 IN.
NEW BRITAIN MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, CONNECTICUT



Bus Stop
2010, OIL ON CANVAS, 50 x 72 IN.
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

mere cameras, their eyes delete or minimize irrelevant details so viewers can focus on what really matters: the dynamics among people going about their lives, interacting while somehow enveloped in their own spheres.

Ginsburg offers subtle insights into how New Yorkers treat each other — not just at rallies and pick-up ball games — but in the very way they brush past, or regard each other obliquely while waiting at crosswalks. He is a late-20th-century *flâneur* who reads both expression and body language, then relays these silent messages to viewers willing to notice.

To compose and paint canvases with so many figures, with so much architecture, with so much movement, is harder than it looks, of course. And after selecting and orchestrating the most telling moment, Ginsburg proves himself a superb draftsman, colorist, and handler of paint: everything and everyone is convincingly palpable, yet the brushstrokes dissolve just so when we lean in to admire closely. This is a man who enjoys moving paint around, and to experience that joy an inch from the canvas is a pleasure denied to those inspecting the laborious flatness of photorealist pictures.

In the context of an art world that has studiously avoided anything political since the most serious culture wars subsided in the mid-1990s, the moral implications of Ginsburg's scenes also make an impression. Setting aside his works inspired by the war in Iraq, which hardly require explication, we perceive in his street scenes an egalitarian humanity that now strikes some as old-fashioned progressivism in the spirit of Raphael and Moses Soyer. While Eric Fischl's deftly painted New Yorkers register as limousine liberals who must surely come from Central Casting, Ginsburg's are folks we really might encounter on the sidewalk. The hot dog vendors, the subway passengers, and even the homeless people elicit neither pity nor Bolshevik glorification; rather, we get a warts-and-all look at the "average" people who keep the city ticking, yet have no real power.

This is the reality never seen on television or in state legislatures: most Americans look and act like these folks, yet few of our society's institutions reflect or serve them. In our champagne-and-klieg light

era, to even acknowledge this mediocre majority is not just politically progressive, but perversely provocative. Max Ginsburg possesses the same technical gifts as his near-contemporary Rackstraw Downes, whose compelling paintings of the city's banal margins are critically acclaimed and avidly collected, so it must surely be Ginsburg's discomfiting humanism that has kept the limelight off him these many years. Were he still around, Jean Béraud might agree. Ultimately, his frank street scenes were overlooked in favor of the Impressionists' more reassuring boulevards and gardens, yet one still cannot understand their generation's Paris without also consulting Béraud. Surely the same is true for Max Ginsburg and 20th-century New York, and he will ultimately be celebrated for sticking to his aesthetic guns.

Just as important are Ginsburg's lack of bitterness about the relegation of social realism in the recent past, and also his corollary desire to see it shown today alongside — rather than instead of — the cutting edge. "While I obviously prefer realism to what is called 'modern art,'" he explains, "no one has the right to deny another form of expression and its development. This is what was done to realism, through the galleries and the art schools and colleges, in the last century, and this was criminal. Freedom of expression is a right for all forms of art."

Amen. ■

PETER TRIPPI is editor of *Fine Art Connoisseur*.

Information: *Salmagundi Club*, 47 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10003, 212.255.7740, salmagundi.org; *Butler Institute of American Art*, 524 Wick Avenue, Youngstown, OH 44502, 330.743.1107, butlerart.com. Those interested in acquiring works by Ginsburg should contact his representatives, *Cavalier Galleries* (Greenwich, CT) and *Gallery Henoeh* (New York City).