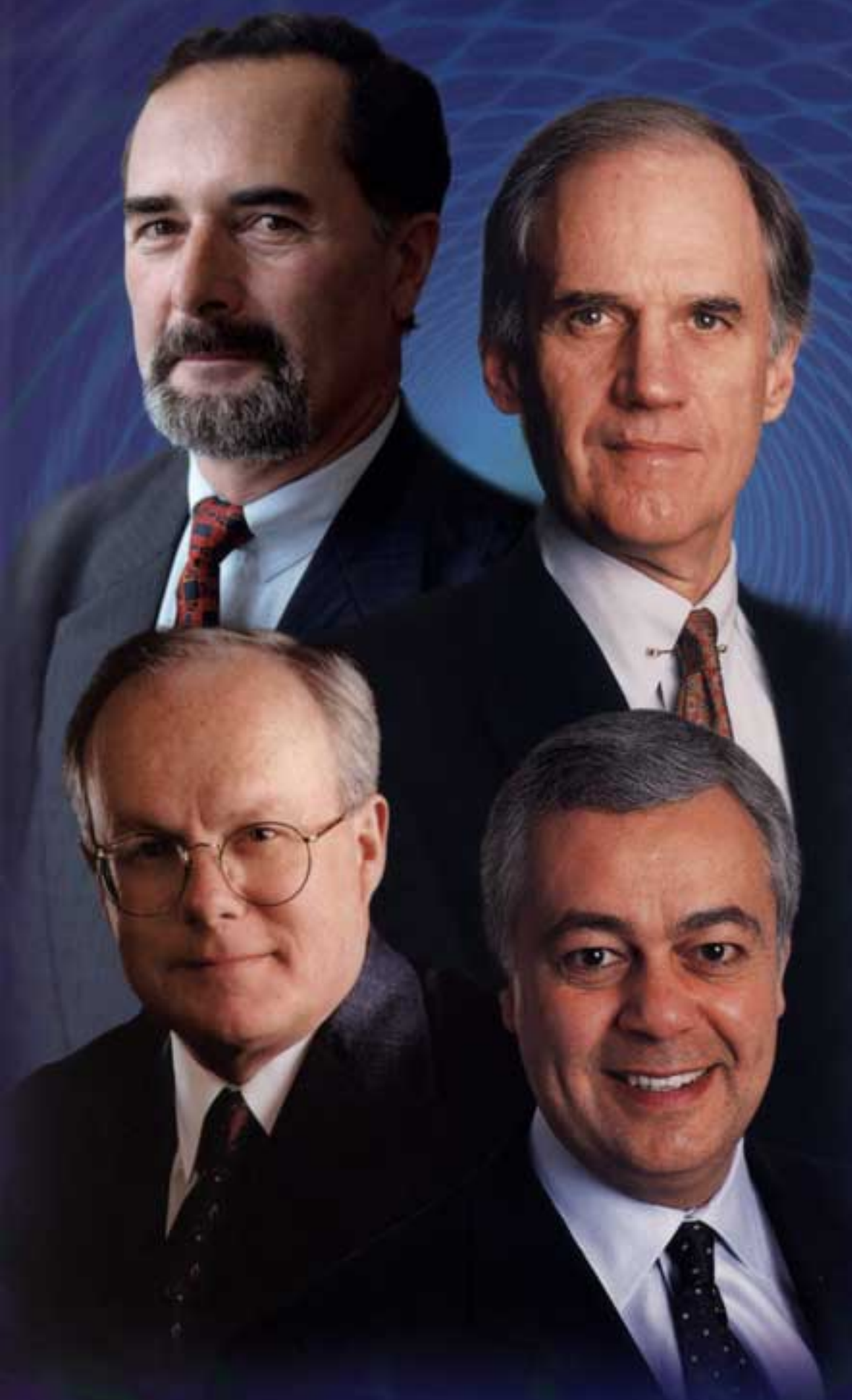


LEADERS

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And He Doesn't Even Touch The Canvas!

An Interview with Yankel Ginzburg,
 Artist, Chevy Chase, Maryland



Yankel Ginzburg

Washington, D.C., Ginzburg has been a prominent force in the contemporary art world for decades. His work has been shown regularly at leading museums and galleries in Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and North America since the early '60s, and among his most-noted solo exhibitions have been those at the Washington Gallery of Art (1968), Cairo Museum of Art (1979), and Moscow Art Academy (1992). Also acclaimed for his worldwide humanitarian efforts, he is the subject of four books – *The Art of Yankel Ginzburg* (1985), *Ginzburg: The Russian Collection* (1992), *The Art and Life of Yankel Ginzburg* (1994), and *Ginzburg Multigraph Book* (1995) – as well as Eli Nisan's film *The Art of Yankel Ginzburg* (1979).

power as a true artist will survive, but the guy who is an artist for the sake of enriching himself most probably won't.

Are you optimistic that the fine-arts market in general will bounce back?

Oh, there is no question that it will. I've seen this before. I lived in Israel for a while, and Israel is no stranger to catastrophes that affect the economy. There is no doubt in my mind that the market will return, because I can see it returning already, although people are buying art for different reasons now. Before 9/11, people were buying works of art to decorate their homes, whereas now they are buying works of art because they are afraid of putting money into the stock

Who is your target market?

My work is targeted at the high end of the fine-arts market, and when I say "high-end," I am not just referring to the price of the pieces. I'm also referring to the fact that people need to be somewhat educated in the arts in order to appreciate a Yankel Ginzburg. If a person is not exposed to the arts, my work will not speak to him. It will be above his head.

How have the events of September 11, 2001, affected your business?

Well, I have noticed that collectors have become less extravagant and more frugal since September 11, 2001. Now, while the buyers of high-end items have not disappeared altogether, they have become more cautious. That's a good development for me, because they don't acquire everything; they just acquire the works they think deserve the purchase price. So 9/11 benefited those artists who are in the upper end of the fine-arts market because it diminished the quantity of artists competing for the same dollars. Ultimately, in times like these, the guy who has the staying



Yellow Bells, acrylic on wood, 48 x 72"

market. They don't want to just sit on their money, so they buy a work of art that they have always wanted instead. Similarly, they may replace their existing furniture with antiques, which are more likely to hold their value. So that kind of buyer is gradually replacing the kind of buyer who buys a "picture" because he thinks it's going to look great above his sofa.

Where are most of your clients based?

The U.S. market is growing steadily, but most of my clients are based in Europe and Asia.

What are your paintings about, and what motivates you?

EDITORS' NOTE As Yankel Ginzburg sees it, a true artist must "have a philosophy, must be true to himself, and must be true to his own time," for "if one of those elements is missing from his work, then he's merely a painter or a sculptor." And as one of the world's leading contemporary artists, Ginzburg is "motivated by all of those elements," he asserts, but the most influential for him is the third on the list. Indeed, he considers being "true to my own time" his defining characteristic and the driving force behind his distinctive style. Specifically, "I prefer to use techniques that are created for the 21st century," Ginzburg explains, pointing to the airbrush as a practical and "symbolic" example of the modern tools of his trade. "All I have to do is put paint into a little cup in the airbrush and then press my finger on a pedal," he muses, "and the paint is propelled wherever I want it to go." Throughout the entire process, "I don't actually touch the canvas." Thus, just as "we are all a little more distanced from each other" now, thanks to the proliferation of electronic communications that accompanied the dawning of "the computer age," so the airbrush distances the artist's hands from the raw materials of his art.

Born in the Soviet Union, educated in Israel (he was the youngest student ever admitted to that country's Academy of Art), and now residing just outside

My work has evolved a great deal over time. When I first started creating works of art, I learned very quickly that an artist doesn't just paint; an artist must also have a philosophy, must be true to himself, and must be true to his own time. If one of those elements is missing from his work, then he's merely a painter or a sculptor. So as an artist, I needed to be motivated by all of those elements, and I need to be intelligent in the execution of my ideas.

Certain beliefs, be they political or scientific, are reflected in my art. Artists don't verbalize like writers, so the beliefs that have inspired a work of art are sometimes hidden. However, if somebody takes the time to read the relevant literature, they can see that, first and foremost, I believe in being true to my own time. That's despite the fact that, thanks to my academic studies, I can paint in the style of any artist from any period. Indeed, if I did that all the time, I would probably sell a lot of paintings, because people tend to buy things that are familiar to them. But I prefer to use techniques that are created for the 21st century and to create compositions that are true to my own time.

That said, I do use recognizable objects in my work, such as flowers, but they are usually intended as a metaphor for something else. Thus, the obvious is not the obvious. When you look at one of my works, you may see something that looks like a rose, but on studying it further you begin to realize that this rose has a little more character than a regular rose in a garden. It may be a little larger than life and have an almost surreal quality to it. When I paint or sculpt I'm not preoccupied with storytelling.

What role does technology play in the creation of your works?

Technology has always played an important role in the world of art. As a matter of fact, I believe that if Da Vinci or Picasso were alive today, they wouldn't be using brushes; they would most likely be working on computers. Personally, I love using my hands, but I also enjoy using technology. The equipment I use dates from the 21st century, including my airbrush, which I use because I want everybody to know that I lived in an era when a conventional brush was something that artists used only occasionally.

The airbrush is symbolic of something else too: Living in the computer age, we are somewhat distanced from the sweat and tears of labor. We have created a sterile society, in which all information is moved through electronic means rather than face-to-face. For me, my airbrush tells that story, because all I have to do is put paint into a little cup in the airbrush and then press my finger on a pedal, and the paint is propelled wherever I want it to go. I don't actually touch the canvas. So the airbrush emphasizes that I'm a product of the 20th and 21st centuries, in which life is a little more sterile than it was before. We

are all a little more distanced from each other. We no longer sit in coffee shops and argue about art; now, we exchange our points of view by fax or e-mail.

Your use of color is very distinctive. Have you always used bright, powerful colors?



Color and I Are One, sealed watercolors, 45 x 30"

When I lived in Russia and Poland, I hardly knew what bright colors looked like. It was not until I moved to Israel and the United States – and specifically Washington, D.C. – that I discovered the brilliance of color. Many people are not aware that Washington, D.C., became quite well known in the art world in the late '40s and early '50s, when the Washington School of Art was established. Quite a few famous American artists, like Morris Lewis and Jim Davis, moved to Washington because of its light, which enabled them to discover brighter, more sensitive, or more outrageous colors.

Being a follower of that movement, I moved from New York and settled in Washington. In my studio, which has good daylight exposure, I'm able to achieve half tones of colors that I would not be able to achieve elsewhere. There are literally millions of different colors, and so many possibilities for mixing them. Professionally I am an artist, but stylistically I like to think of myself as a colorist.

Do you see sculpture as a natural extension to painting?

Yes, indeed. When I was at art school, I used to ridicule my fellow students who carried around heavy sculpting equipment like chisels and hammers. I used to say to them: "Why don't you become a painter? Then you would only need to carry around a couple of brushes and a roll of canvas." Well, as luck would have it – or maybe because of my ridicule of sculptors – at the

age of 39 I was bitten by the sculpting bug, and the next thing I know I'm schlepping around heavy materials and equipment. And I'm not in shape like my colleagues who have been carrying that stuff around since they were 20 years old. But I love it. For me, sculpture is not a substitute for painting. In fact, I refer to painting as my wife and sculpture as my mistress.

Do you use the Internet to market your work?

I use the Internet for informational purposes only. I do not sell any of my work on the Internet. However, my Web site does provide the contact information for various galleries that represent me, so people are able to find out where they can go to see my work in the flesh. One of the reasons I don't use the Internet as a sales tool is that it is forbidden by my arrangements with the various galleries that represent me.

Since 9/11, quite a few galleries have closed their doors, mainly because they didn't carry enough high-quality art to survive a down cycle. I think the galleries that have survived are doing a very good job, because they not only display the works of art properly, but also help the collectors to better understand what the artist was intending to communicate. They also stand behind the art that they sell, providing services that many other galleries don't provide.



Passing Sun, acrylic on wood, 56 x 74"

When you think back to your academy days, did you ever imagine you would achieve the level of success you now enjoy?

No, never, although quite a few people predicted it. When I was 14 years old, I had the good fortune to meet one of the great masters of 20th-century art, Marc Chagall, who in just one sentence predicted that I would be one of the great artists who would follow him. That never went to my head. In fact, I thought he was probably saying it to be polite. But I found out subsequently that Chagall very rarely said things that he didn't mean, and having that lodged in the back of my mind, I suppose I always knew that I was supposed to be successful. But I never anticipated quite how successful I would become. If I had known that, I definitely would have gone to business school for a while! ●