



Hudson River Museum Pairs Zakanitch with Collection Highlights

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by Susan Hodara

YONKERS, N.Y. – Recently at the [Hudson River Museum](#), artist [Robert Zakanitch](#) sat in a gallery talking about Minimalist art. Yet the paintings that surrounded him—part of his solo exhibition titled “Robert Zakanitch: Garden of Ornament”—were anything but. They filled the walls with lushly colored flowers exploding from vibrant vases or teeming in pulsating fields, along with dozens of friendly critters: rabbits, butterflies, an array of birds, a pair of squirrels daydreaming about acorns, a ladybug labeled “Madame Bug.”

A 1995 [Guggenheim Fellow](#) whose work is in collections at, among others, the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#), the [Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden](#) and the [Brooklyn Museum](#), Zakanitch, 82, began painting in the mid-1960s as an Abstract Expressionist and then a Color Field artist. These movements, he explained, reveled in the physical nature of materials and touted abstraction over representation. When abstraction veered into Minimalism, the results, Zakanitch felt, were often joyless. “I wanted more,” he said.

That was when he discovered what he called “the third door.” At the time, he said, artists had only two choices—two doors to walk through: abstraction or representation. Zakanitch’s third door was ornamentation: the interplay of line, form, color and scale that invited elements of both representation and abstraction.



“Soaring Gardens Crow (Green)” by Robert Zakanitch, 2001. Watercolor on paper, 34 x 46 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

By the mid-1970s, Zakanitch had become a key figure in the Pattern and Decoration movement, which drew inspiration from the designs found in Byzantine mosaics, Islamic tiles, Iranian carpets and, closer to home, handiwork—tatting, embroidery, quilting—typically done by women. For Zakanitch, hardware stores and flea markets replaced museums and galleries, and linoleum became his muse.

At the museum, Zakanitch described his particular enchantment with the floral patterning on linoleum floor tiles, imagery that he made his own in many iterations. “Garden of Ornament,” organized by Laura Vookles, chair of the museum’s curatorial department, occupies two galleries

with 25 works spanning 25 years. The exhibition opens with four elaborate and brightly hued paintings of flowery tureens. Each has thick, nearly sculptural applications of acrylic paint. “I was trying to extend the paintings off the canvas,” Zakanitch said.

In *Ms. Austen Regrets*, the tureen is lavender, festooned with yellow blossoms on curvy green stems. Its handle is formed by a woman (presumably the novelist) clad in pointy red shoes and a pink skirt sporting an ornate black floral configuration. Blocky letters around the image’s borders read: “Ms. Austen regrets she’s unable to lunch today/R.S.V.P.”



“Ms. Austen Regrets” from the “Tureen” series by Robert Zakanitch, 2007. Acrylic on canvas, 68 x 48 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Text appears frequently in Zakanitch’s paintings, adding to their whimsy. *In Quest of the Holy Snail* has an index finger pointing at a tiny insect, accompanied by the words “ici! La Bestiole!” Nearby, the word “whooh” hovers above an owl, identified by the underlined “owlet.”



“In Quest of the Holy Snail” by Robert Zakanitch, 2010. Gouache on paper diptych, 96 x 72 inches, overall. Courtesy of the artist.

In Quest of the Holy Snail is one of three selections from Zakanitch’s series “A Garden of Ordinary Miracles.” At eight by six feet they are large, all gouache on paper, all depicting a (highly stylized) vase with (highly stylized) flowers. They are, the artist said, 21st-century interpretations of a 17th-century Dutch masters theme. “I wanted to see how it would turn out being that I went through a history that they didn’t,” he said, meaning the 20th century, which he referred to as “a giant laboratory for the deconstruction of painting.”

Vases with flowers by other artists are on view elsewhere at the museum, where visitors can explore the use of floral imagery in all sorts of 19th- and 20th-century art and design. “Floral Arrangements: Highlights from the Collection” in the Permanent Collection gallery is an exhibition of more than 40 objects. These include paintings, drawings, photographs and prints as well as intricately beaded handbags, colorful ceramic vases, a black silk evening coat embroidered with gold chrysanthemums and a mimosa-themed rug designed by Henri Matisse. Across the grounds, inside the museum’s 1876 Gilded Age mansion, Glenview, floral motifs adorn carved woodwork, stenciled friezes, furnishings and tiles.

For Zakanitch, flowers, as well as tureens, little animals, even Jane Austen, are part of a vocabulary of civility that permeates his oeuvre. It is a word he mentioned often that day in the gallery. "My work is always about civility," he said. "It's a choice I made, because we live on this war planet, and I am trying to change it."

Other words he used, like "humaneness" and "healing," confirmed his commitment to making paintings that combat negativity and bolster the richness of emotional experience. "I really want you to feel a sense of joy and caring and compassion and empathy," he said.

And beauty. "I became very unapologetic for making beautiful paintings ... ," he said. "I think they evoke the beauty in all of us. Whether we want to believe it or not, we are extraordinary human beings."



"Chicken Iris" by Robert Zakanitch, 2008. Gouache on paper diptych, 96 x 72 inches, overall. Courtesy of the artist.

BASIC FACTS: "Robert Zakanitch: Garden of Ornament" and "Floral Arrangements: Highlights from the Collection" are on view June 3 through September 17, 2017 at the Hudson River Museum, 511 Warburton Avenue, Yonkers, NY 10701.

An exhibition tour of "Garden of Ornament," the first of three programs in a collaboration between the Hudson River Museum and nearby [Wave Hill](#), a public garden and cultural center, will be led by Vookles and Wave Hill's horticulturalist Matthew Turnbull on June 24 at 2 p.m. For details about the exhibitions and other related programming, visit the museum website <http://hrm.org/>.

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