

STEINBERG, SAUL.
THE NEW YORKER. NEW YORK,
1945–2000.
(HAROLD, WILLIAM, ROBERT,
TINA, DAVID, EDS.)

An Exhibition

“For more than fifty years, Saul Steinberg was *The New Yorker’s* nonpareil sketcher, observer, spy and—though he would have thought the word dingy and depressing—its chief cartoonist, too... But then he disliked being called an artist, too, since it called to his mind the salon-swindle of ‘exciting’ objects and collectors’ manias. ‘All of those drawings, whimpering at night in the wrong houses,’ was his dry description of the consequences of selling pictures to collectors, rather than publishers.”* Whatever he is, this exhibition, naming *The New Yorker’s* consecutive editors, collects some two hundred of his published contributions, presented as is: magazines, collected through time, some slightly yellowed and hung with that irrevocable library smell (Longview Public Library, October 22, 1955), others, mint (V.G.+, no marks, no ears, no creases), and en-sleeved with breathy fandom.

If there is a way to think about Steinberg without thinking about the magazine itself, its distribution, advertising, reputation, the dense thicket of Marshall McLuhan adage (old clothes upon old bones), and the bloodless and goofy-footed ghost of Walter Benjamin, then we are blind to it. We can’t imagine how you could see Steinberg’s stenographic line without seeing the page it is on. “Everything has a message,” Steinberg noted, “even the smell of museums. In Europe, museums smell of town halls and grade schools; in America they smell like banks.” The circulatory system has a message, the page has a message, the ads

have a message, the neighborhood of fiction and news has a message. And all of it makes for juxtapositions as eerily apposite as anything the French surrealists or a blender could come up with. Libido-heavy Masterpiece pipe tobacco banners and pre-ironic ads for J.L. Hudson Vycron® polyester pant-suits running opposite a Steinberg, a Sylvia Plath poem, and a paragraph where Harold Rosenberg pours cold gravy over some poor painter’s heart. But perhaps we’ve left it soft. Sailed in, coveted the shell and neglected the pearl. So we’ll drop this spoon in hopes that you’ll think sometimes of other lovely things.

As a matter of biographical fact, Saul Steinberg (1914–1999) was a misfit. Born in Romania, European to the bone, he made little of his origins; “pure Dada,” he called his native land. He studied and made his artistic beginnings in Italy, receiving in 1940 a doctoral degree in an architecture he never practiced. Steinberg was shaken out of a congenial life by the turbulence of politics and war, and cast to America in the 1940s where he lived strung up between the uninteresting and unfortunate binary of Artist v. Cartoonist.

There are teachers and students with square minds who are by nature meant to undergo the fascination of categories. For them, zoological nomenclature and taxonomy are everything. But good thinkers, the ones that outlive their own historical circumstances, are always much more complicated than the rhetorical truths we have about them. And that’s what we like most about Steinberg. We like the absence of the-world-as-represented-by-anybody-else.

Exhibition Checklist

What does it mean for an artist of this sort, an artist for whom art is not “an aesthetic pursuit,” and for whom the museum is not a congenial atmosphere, to have a retrospective in an art museum? It is a question that weighs on Steinberg these days. “A retrospective is some sort of mistake,” he says. “The retro itself is pejorative—retrograde, retroactive—looking back is a mistake, a taboo. The most famous example of a retrospective (looking back) victim is the wife of Lot (fleeing Sodom) who, by looking back, became a pillar of salt. The pillar of salt means your transformation into a monument. I know all the time this is not the wisest thing.”

Yet he has found a way of coming to terms with this alien enterprise by regarding it as yet another of his “emigrations.” “It’s history,” he says. “It forces you to save yourself from it by the most uncomfortable of situations—running uphill.” And the image of Saul Steinberg running uphill to escape his own monument may in the end be the quintessential Steinberg parody. †

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Entrance

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Carroll, Lewis. *The Annotated Alice: The Definitive Edition*. Introduction and notes by Martin Gardner. New York: W.W. Norton, 1999.

Gombrich, E.H. *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1960.

Gombrowicz, Witold. *Ferdynand*. Trans. Danuta Borhardt. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000 (originally published in 1938).

*Gopnik, Adam. "Saul and the City." In *The Guardian* (Nov. 26, 2008).

Kafka, Franz. *The Complete Stories*. New York: Schocken, 1995.

"Alas," said the mouse, "the world is growing smaller every day. At the beginning it was so big that I was afraid, I kept running and running, and I was glad when at last I saw walls far away to the right and left, but these long walls have narrowed so quickly that I am in the last chamber already, and there in the corner stands the trap that I must run into." "You only need to change your direction," said the cat, and ate it up.

Kramer, Hilton. "Farewell Saul Steinberg, a Mordant, Comic Artist." In *The New York Observer* (May 24, 1999).

† Kramer, Hilton. *The Revenge of the Philistines: Art and Culture 1972–1984*. New York: The Free Press, 1985.

Miller, Dorothy, Ed. *Fourteen Americans*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1946.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Bend Sinister*. New York: Henry Holt, 1947.

Who will bother to notice that Pankrat Tzikutin, the shabby old pogromystic (Chapter Thirteen) is Socrates Hemlocker; that "the child is bold" in the allusion to immigration (Chapter Eighteen) is a stock phrase used to test a would-be American citizen's reading ability; that Linda did not steal the porcelain owl after all (beginning of Chapter Ten); that the urchins in the yard (Chapter Seven) have been drawn by Saul Steinberg; that the "other rivermaid's father" (Chapter Seven) is James Joyce who wrote *Winnipeg Lake* (ibid.); and that the last word of the book is *not* a misprint (as assumed in the past by at least one proofreader)? Most people will not even mind having missed all this; well-wishers will bring their own symbols and mobiles, and portable radios, to my little party;

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Smith, Joel. *Saul Steinberg: Illuminations*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.

Smith, Joel. *Steinberg at the New Yorker*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2005.

Steinberg, Saul. "Straight from the Hand and Mouth of Steinberg." In *Life* (Dec. 10, 1965).

"The purpose of the drawing is to make people feel that there is something else beyond the perception. That is essentially what I am playing with — the voyage between perception and understanding. People who see a drawing in *The New Yorker* will think automatically that it's funny because it is a cartoon. If they see it in a museum, they think it is artistic; and if they find it in a fortune cookie, they think it is a prediction. So, part of my purpose is to shake these prejudices in order to make people look at a drawing for what it is and try to understand it. I try not to make people reason, but I try to make them jittery by giving them situations that are out of context and contain several interpretations."

Steinberg, Saul. *The Art of Living*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949.

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Steinberg, Saul with Aldo Buzzi. *Reflections and Shadows*. New York: Random House, 2002.

Tillich, Paul. *My Search for Absolutes*.

Drawings by Saul Steinberg. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967.

Updike, John. "On Saul Steinberg (1914–1999)." In *The New York Review of Books* (June 24, 1999).

Weaver, Giles. "Further Notes from the Underground." In *The Phoenix* (1970).

Wallace, David Foster. *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays*. New York: Little, Brown, 2006.

What Kafka's stories have, rather, is a grotesque and gorgeous and thoroughly modern complexity. Kafka's humor—not only not neurotic but *anti-neurotic*, heroically sane—is, finally, a religious humor,

And it is this, I think, that makes Kafka's wit inaccessible to children whom our culture has trained to see jokes as entertainment and entertainment as reassurance. It's not that students don't "get" Kafka's humor but that we've taught them to see humor as something you get—the same way we've taught them that a self is something you just have. No wonder they cannot appreciate the really central Kafka joke—that the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle.

STEINBERG, SAUL. *THE NEW YORKER*. NEW YORK, 1945–2000. (HAROLD, WILLIAM, ROBERT, TINA, DAVID, EDS.) is coordinated by Robert Snowden and Scott Ponik. With lots of ☒ ✻ ✎ ☐ by Hope Svenson. Special thanks to Leslie Vigeant and Amanda Clem.

June 16–August 10, 2012
Thursday–Saturday, 12–8pm

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