

# NEW YORKER STYLE

As an exhibition opens in London, Abby Cronin unmaskes the remarkable visions of Saul Steinberg

**R**omanian-born Saul Steinberg (1914-99) has been variously described as a writer who drew, a one-man school of architectural caricature and a satirist of modernity. He is perhaps best known as an artist for the *New Yorker*, for which he created 89 covers and numerous drawings and cartoons during nearly 60 years with the magazine. Today, Steinberg's artistic legacy is a complex amalgam of styles, sentiments and ready-made clichés ranging from the satirical and political to the humorous and surreal. He has given us a conversational, but almost wordless version of 20th-century life in urban and rural landscapes. His visual inventory includes sophisticated views of culture, religion, ethnic groups, architectural styles, social mores, war and biography. Throughout, he constantly conveys the ordinary as extraordinary.

Steinberg was born the day Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo. His youth was spent in the shadow of the first world war. As a child he drew what was in his mind. A friend at the *New Yorker*, Adam Gopnik, described Steinberg's early drawings as having "a tendency to see everything in quotation marks [with] an unexcited attitude toward the overlap of caricature, cartooning and the avant-garde... Everything looked tentative. He saw clichés as landscapes."

Nothing was permanent. How could it be given the virulent anti-Semitism he experienced in his formative years? He faced further prejudice in 1930s Milan, where he gained a doctorate in architecture and began to contribute cartoons to the humorous journal *Bertoldo*. Expelled from Italy in 1938 along with all foreign Jews, and unable to gain a US visa, he stayed in Santo Domingo until *New Yorker* editor Harold Ross helped to get him an entry visa in 1942. As a result, the only architecture Steinberg ever practised was in his drawings.

For Steinberg, the cartoonist's place was on the margins of art. He travelled with pens, pencils and sheets of drawing paper, always sketching, doodling and scribbling. He shunned canvas and was uncomfortable in galleries, but was proud to



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have his work in museums. He collected birth certificates, photos, diplomas, passports, paychecks, obituaries and official stamps, which he used in his art to represent life experience. These were reminders of multi-layered lives.

As an émigré, Steinberg viewed America as an outsider. Everything was new. He had nothing to lose by interpreting it through visual caricature and puns and his caricatures exposed the gap between the idealised image of America and its reality. He produced a huge number of cartoons, drawings, and puzzle-play pictures. His ingenious maps tell stories in comic cartographic terms. A staunch admirer of popular culture, he conjured out of thin air visual amalgamations of the world around him. Throughout his life he remained an outsider and his sense that life is a surreal masquerade illuminated his subjects.

In 1942, shortly after receiving his US visa, Steinberg registered for the draft. The following year, now a citizen, he reported for naval intelligence training in Washington as a psychological warfare artist. He captured the horrors of war in the Battle of Cassino in 1945 and recorded how Allied bombing reduced the German-occupied mountaintop abbey and most of its art to rubble. By applying a dense skein of strokes, he shows Cassino as a vignette fixed in history, like the bomber plane in its web of background line. Its busy texture conveys a siege in terms of human, cultural and historical disaster.



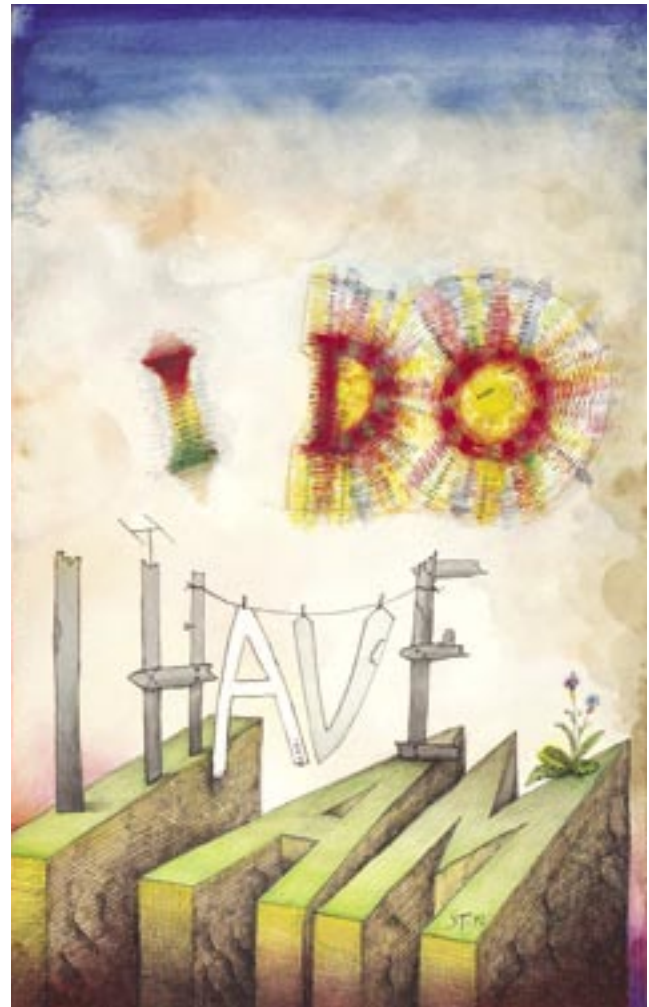
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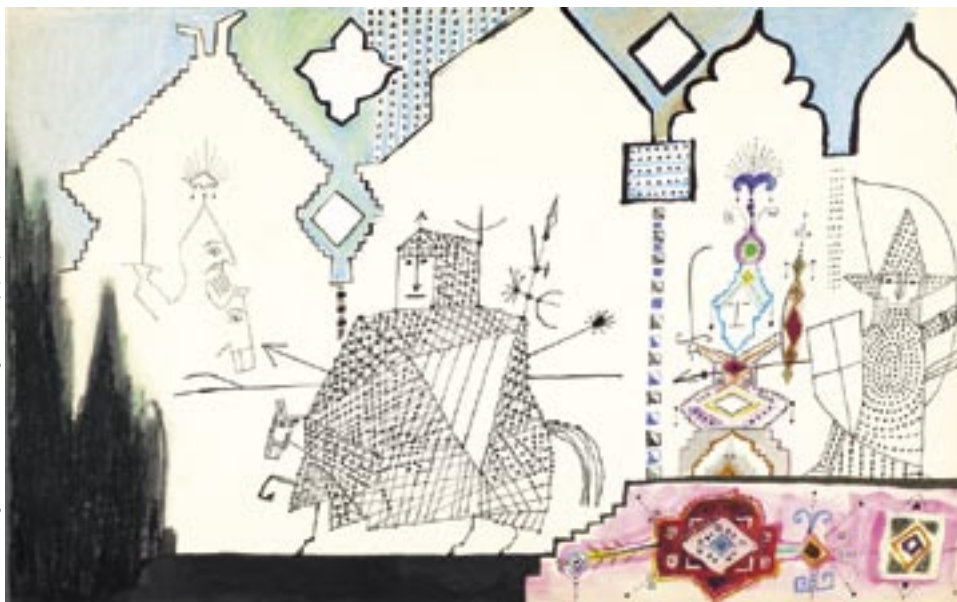
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1  
**'Santa Claus as Christmas Tree',**  
Christmas card design, 1949

2  
**'Artist', 1970** (pencil, coloured pencil,  
ink and rubber stamps on paper)

3  
**'I Do; I Have, I Am', New Yorker cover,**  
31 July 1971 (ink, marker pens, ball-  
point pen, pencil, crayon, gouache,  
watercolour and collage on paper)

4  
**Untitled (drawing table), 1950**  
(ink, coloured pencil, graphite  
and collage on paper)

5  
**Curtain design for Rossini's *The***  
***Count Ory*, 1958** (ink, watercolour  
and coloured pencil on paper)

6  
**Mask (one of six made between**  
**1959 and 1965)**



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**7**  
**Pineapple, 1970 (pencil, coloured pencil, collage, watercolour, ink and rubber stamps on lithographically imprinted paper)**

**8**  
**Library, 1986-87 (pencil and mixed media on wood assemblage)**

**8**

**9**  
**'Wilshire & Lex', 1994 (crayon, watercolour and wax on paper)**

**10**  
**'The Sketchbook Table', 1974 (ink, rubber stamps, pencil, acrylic, coloured crayon, wood and paper collage mounted on board)**

**11**  
**'Techniques at a Party', 1953 (ink, coloured pencil and watercolour on paper)**

Later Steinberg was assigned to “morale operations” and spent time in North Africa, China, Calcutta and occupied Italy. His political cartoons from this period were published in a book entitled *All in Line* in 1945. The section “war” includes his anti-Fascist cartoons, which mock rather than demonise Hitler and Mussolini. The final sections on China, India, North Africa and Italy provided American readers with a view of victory. *All in Line* was a bestseller and publicised Steinberg’s art and enhanced his reputation. When the war ended, however, he was eager to turn his attention to peace time scenes and subjects.

Throughout his career, Steinberg continually expanded his artistic techniques. When experimenting with photography in the late 1940s, he began to create hybrid photo-cartoons. “The Woman in Tub” was created by drawing on the surface of the bath and then photographing it. His line drawings also became more florid and evolved into what became his signature calligraphic style. The sidewalk and subway cartoon studies have an almost three-dimensional quality. “Three Liberties” (1949-51) depicts stylised competitive girls confidently riding subways and strolling Manhattan’s streets. In post-war New York these exaggerated women represented a new freedom and independence, perhaps even Liberty itself – both statue and way of life – secure on their strap-hanging way to work.

From the late 1940s to the 1960s, Steinberg delighted in depicting everyday views of America’s mass culture. At first glance the work is humorous, but a darker and satirical undertone is present. They aren’t really funny; the humour comes from the way they connect thoughts in the viewer’s mind. He drew popular pageantry: patriotic parades, gun-slinging cowboys, gas stations, vaudeville stages, baseball studies and much more. In “The American Corrida” Uncle Sam, the matador, confronts a feathered Indian in the centre of a stadium. Is this an allegorical bullfight, a view of American history as blood sport? The protagonists are watched by patriotic icons: Abraham Lincoln, an American eagle, George Washington, the Statue of Liberty and Santa Claus, plus a cast of characters familiar in many of his works (a cowboy, mouse, rabbit and cheering crowd).

By contrast, he also drew charming themed cartoon cards. In “Santa Claus as Christmas Tree” (1949) Calder-inspired lines unite casually to form a tree decorated with birds, magical squiggles and floral elements beneath Santa’s smiling head. This Santa is warm, eccentric and possibly a fantasy uncle bearing gifts. Commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art and Brentano’s Books, this venture was so successful that he produced a series of Santa-themed Christmas cards. They also paid handsomely.



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Steinberg's *New Yorker* cover of 20 October 1975, entitled "Twenty Americans" presents a catalogue of types arranged like characters in a masquerade. Have they been dressing up for Halloween? What has happened to images of happy-go-lucky carefree Americans? Why are Uncle Sam, Pocahontas, the Statue of Liberty, the (academic) eagle and Santa Claus staring at us as though they are part of a police line-up, together with a gangster, riot cop, astronaut, cowboy and the artist himself? Mr and Mrs John Doe (America's solid citizens) are drawn on graph paper, while the sheik, showgirls, hippy and snowman appear as if in disguise. This is Steinberg's more critical vision of America. In 1975 the country was experiencing domestic and foreign crises – the anti-war and civil rights movements and the end of the Vietnam war. These 20 Americans look frightened; perhaps they are worried that glory and freedom belong to the past.

In "Techniques at a Party" (1953), Steinberg portrays sophisticated urbanites at the same party, at least physically, but they are not communicating. The impression is of people with separate identities who are psychologically isolated and barely speak. The guests are living self-portraits. Their differences emerge in style, status and stereotype. There is some bonding and a few shared drinks, but overall this cocktail party mocks and epitomises the intelligentsia at play. Stein-



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berg's minimalist line drawing and juxtaposition of people spatially seems to invite us to listen to what is said in different corners of the room. The cartoon has no caption and leaves it to us to imagine conversations.

Steinberg created a variety of designs for textiles, wallpapers, dance, theatre, film and murals from the late 1950s and 1960s. His backdrop for choreographer Jerome Robbins' ballet *The Concert* included recurring Steinberg themes. The curtain, described as a "visual overture", for a production of Rossini's comic opera *The Count Ory* in 1958 was full of comic-strip Steinbergian elements. A cartoon-Cubist space contains the characters and they are framed by medieval and Moorish architecture. Hitchcock's film *The Trouble with Harry* used Steinberg's panoramic title sequence.

Ephemera and documents of all kinds were integral to Steinberg's art. He made art about documents. He saw documents as frozen moments, memories, journeys, identities and personal histories. For him, every form of document contained a visual code – whether it was an advertisement, passport, postcard, press photo, book, stamp or family memento. "The Sketchbook Table" (1974) illustrates this. It combines pencils, Steinberg's pen and stamps together with a family sketch and blurred portraits. In his mind, such groups of objects captured human experience. He used masks, rubber

stamps, thumb prints; any mark on a flat surface. He wrote: "Two- or three-letter words are beautiful. I see the word. When people speak I see words coming out of their mouths."

In his images, words wrap themselves around people or have a hybrid word-picture-logic. His portfolio is full of this visual language. His *New Yorker* cover "I Do, I Have, I Am" conveys this brilliantly. It is a verbal, visual schematic single-frame cartoon. "I Am" is mystical with the sun spinning and blazing in the sky, while "I Have" is more grounded. "I Am" is Being "...the sun blazes in the sky over a shack on a bluff – into a spiritual lesson". These words express a spirituality that appealed to many readers when it was published in July 1971.

In the 1970s Steinberg's powers of invention were expressed in a fusion of styles. "The Artist" (1970) shows allegorical low-born figures gathered around the central figure, the artist, a debased Mickey Mouse in an honorary sash who is standing at the easel trying to do his job. There is a missile, a flying fish, a crowned crocodile, a dog playing the Loyal Dog and a roaring domestic cat swelled to the size of a lion. Beset by violence and bureaucracy, the artist struggles to express himself and illuminate modernity.

In "Pineapple" (1970) Steinberg gives us a spear-carrying Don Quixote riding on a horse towards a giant pineapple watched by rubber-stamped inspectors. His pineapple is the dragon of the vegetable kingdom. It is encased in reptilian armour, spiky scales topped by plumes. "Try to cut it and you will bleed."

Steinberg may be most well known as a cartoonist, but he could draw anything. He juxtaposed visions of Manhattan with multiple views of America, past and present. His most iconic *New Yorker* cover "View of the World From 9th Avenue" expresses this starkly. He was a traveller who ultimately found a home in New York city. His genius is best represented in his work for the *New Yorker* magazine where "Steinbergian" became short-hand for his style of eloquent satire. He used an inexhaustible array of styles, blending rococo, children's art, Cubism, Surrealism, hallucinogenic images, Victoriana, Barbizon and Bauhaus with architectural elements. The retrospective exhibition of Saul Steinberg's work currently at Dulwich Picture Gallery confirms his comic genius and extraordinary draftsmanship. This is a show not to be missed.

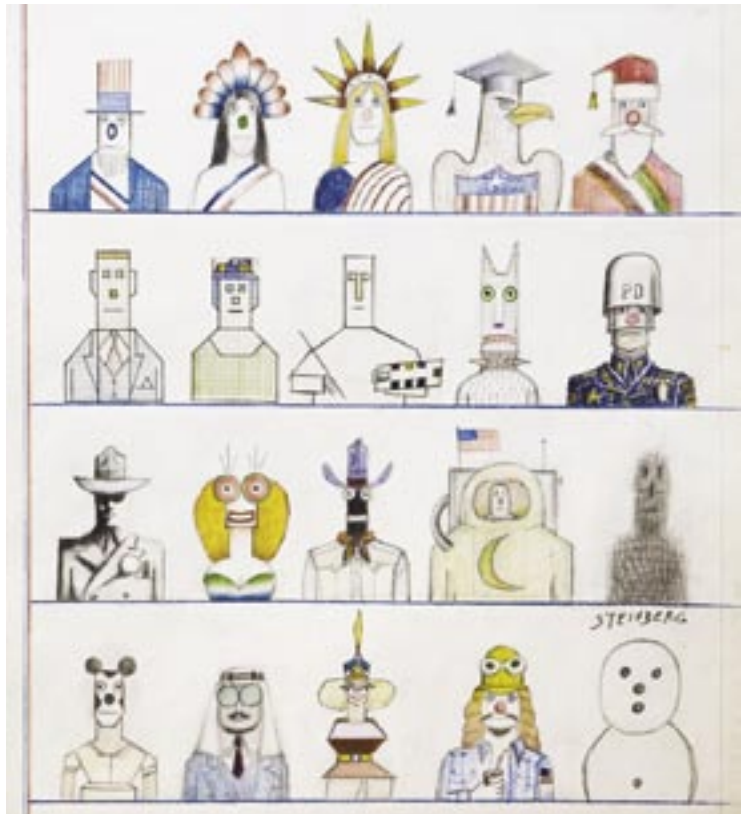


**Dr Abby Cronin** lectured for many years at London Metropolitan University. Since retiring from her lecturing post in the mid-1990s, she has been an independent researcher and freelance arts journalist in London.

**Dulwich Picture Gallery's exhibition of Saul Steinberg's** work "Illuminations" runs until 15 February 2009 (for full details see page 48). The exhibition will then move to Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg, from March-May 2009. For a reader offer for the catalogue by Joel Smith, *Saul Steinberg Illuminations* (Yale University Press, 2006) see page 4.

**Further Reading**

A Gopnik "What Steinberg Saw", *The New Yorker*, November 13, 2000  
 Joel Smith, *Steinberg At The New Yorker*, Harry N Abrams, 2005



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12 'Twenty Americans', *New Yorker* cover, October 1975

13 'Woman in Tub', 1949 (gelatin silver print)

14 'Three Liberties', 1949-51 (ink and watercolour on paper)



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