

ArtSeen

Saul Steinberg: *Untitled*

by [Barbara A. MacAdam](#)



Hardcore *New Yorker* and *New Yorker* cartoonist veteran, Saul Steinberg (1914 – 1999) claimed a weird territory all his own, nestled on the horizon between aesthetics and absurdity, satire and charm. The Romanian-born New York artist-illustrator produced, in the most sophisticated sense, work that was wry, real, and surreal. Famous for his “map” of New York positioned on the shores of the Hudson River abutting the universe—a hilarious depiction of the natives’ chauvinism—he also produced, as evidenced in this richly varied show of twenty-seven works, on view through April 21, humble paint boxes. Like a theatrical prop, these boxes hold the actors in his life—that is, the tools of his trade.

On view here are *The Travel Briefcase* (1981), holding among a few supplies, a fully executed painting with two little travelers standing beneath a rosy horizon, and an official customs stamp posed in the sky—altogether, a poignant microcosm of the universe—and *Record Table* (1970), an almost minimalist collage of wood, pencil, ink, and rubber stamps in tidy array resembling a William Scott painting. A lovely homage to the objects it bears so geometrically.



Theatrical and metaphysical, dramatic, and pensive; there are also multi-picture images like his landscape *Louse Point* (1967), taking us to a favored vacation spot in East Hampton, New York. The watercolor contains six separate little paintings within it evoking the idea of plays within a play, filled with thoughts and emotions.

Steinberg's paintings run the gamut in associations, from the lyricism of Paul Klee to the political satire of Thomas Rowlandson, to the elegantly limned Surrealism of Giorgio de Chirico. Diaristic and poetic, Steinberg's works have considerable substance even in their seemingly offhanded wit. We see *Trotzky in New York* (1982), a drawing depicting an automat, a beloved institution that was already extinct. The beret-wearing Marxist theorist carries his food tray with dignity across the tiled floor.

The artist's local yet international perspective touched on the historic and the contemporary. Like a travel writer, he leads us from *Cairo* (1981) to Venice (*The Venice Table*, 1979) to Japan (*Japanese Sunset #16*, 1971). We see the world organized by style and content. Japan appears

like a Japanese cabinet with layers of subjects and colors, while *Cairo* features a pencil box, an image of a bus, a gentleman with a red toque, and an ominous shadow figure, all simple, quintessential associations, or weighty clichés.



Hastily conceived sketches of various subjects, including several of mannequins and a witty sheet titled *Passport Photos* (1951) composed of ink fingerprints on paper, speak of his light-handedness. The passport prints allude to his status as an immigrant during World War II, and a wood panel with etched-copper “coins” bearing the deadpan title *Counterfeit* (1991) hints at his sly relation to commercial reality. A series of paper-bag masks, like those made in schools, refer to his view of the disingenuous way in which people present themselves. Here are Steinberg’s spontaneous impressions and whims given pictorial substance. From child’s play to governmental bureaucracy marked by rubber stamps to one of the most charming puns of all—a drawing titled *The Killer* (1966), showing a man with a fly swatter about to crush a question mark.

“The doodle,” Steinberg commented, “is the brooding of the hand.”

Contributor

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