

The New Criterion

Art

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Exhibition note

by [Hilton Kramer](#)

On "Saul Steinberg: Illuminations" at the Morgan Library and Museum, New York.

"Saul Steinberg: Illuminations"
Morgan Library & Museum, New York.
November 30, 2006-March 4, 2007

When we enter the world of Saul Steinberg's drawings, we find ourselves enclosed in a paradise of delightful absurdities. What we normally think of as the reality of daily life has everywhere been transformed into an animated landscape of wit and paradox. Everything we see in these drawings—nearly 100, from every phase of Steinberg's career, are on view in this fetching exhibition—is either too big or too small, and the force of gravity has been suspended in favor of objects and figures that enjoy the liberties that Steinberg has created for their benefit. Even words are endowed with the power to remain aloft, and a Christmas tree may serve as a suitable costume for a Santa Claus.

Despite the inveterate zaniness of Steinberg's art, however, it would be a mistake to regard these delightful absurdities as some variety of Surrealism. Steinberg's vision is something quite different: the vision of a comic realist. He does not invent his subjects; he discovers them in the realities that others have overlooked. Steinberg, who grew up in Bucharest, emigrated to the United States in 1942 when he was 32, and his art brings to these realities the innocence and wonder of an émigré. And this émigré vision is central to this art, as I have explained elsewhere:

Like an expert archaeologist—for the émigré, too, is a kind of archaeologist confronted with the task of decoding an unfamiliar culture—Steinberg is a connoisseur of forms and their hidden "content," the emotions and aspirations contained within the form. "You learn a new language," he says, "and when you suddenly savor the new syntax of the place, you see things that nobody had seen before."

"When I arrived here—this whole nation was involved in painting like Cézanne. Everything looked like Mont Ste.-Victoire. They had a real paradise—the most marvelous country. When I arrived here, I had such joy to find these things that were untouched—the diners, the roads, the small towns—while the natives were painting like Rubens on Fourteenth Street and Rembrandt upstate."

In this respect, Steinberg's closest affinities are, as he acknowledges, with "real immigrants—men like Bashevis Singer, Nabokov, de Kooning." Especially, I think, Nabokov, whose discovery of the American scene in *Lolita* reads at times as if it were a libretto for a Steinberg score.

Hilton Kramer is the founding editor of *The New Criterion*, which he started with the late Samuel Lipman in 1982.

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