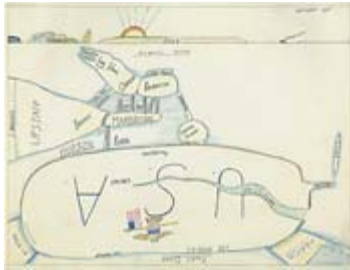




## Print Article



**Saul Steinberg**  
*The West Side*  
 1973  
 Saul Steinberg Foundation



**Saul Steinberg**  
*Untitled (Zia Elena)*  
 1937  
 Angelini Collection



**Saul Steinberg**  
*Cassino*  
 1945  
 Saul Steinberg Foundation

## STEINBERG'S SIGNATURES

### by Ben Davis

"Saul Steinberg: Illuminations," Dec. 1, 2006-Mar. 4, 2007, at the Morgan Library, 225 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10016

The current Morgan Library retrospective of work by Saul Steinberg (1914-1999) is tagged "Illuminations," an homage to the lyric poet Arthur Rimbaud, for whom the great cartoonist apparently felt an affinity. And indeed, while few artists have left their mark on visual culture the way Steinberg did as cartoonist for the *New Yorker*, curator Joel Smith wants to offer a more lyrical, personal picture of the man. His show puts the accent on Steinberg's protean powers of invention over his signature creations (his most famous image, *View of the World from 9th Avenue*, makes an appearance, only to reveal that it began its life picturing things from the point of view of L.A.). With over 100 watercolors, mixed-media collages and even a sculpture in addition to the more familiar cartoons, the show wants to save Steinberg from his own legend as an "epic doodler" (his *New York Times* epitaph).

And certainly, the artistic achievement on display, as well as the human experience, is formidable -- by the time he settled down as a professional magazine artist, Steinberg had several lifetimes of material under his belt. Born a Romanian Jew, he emigrated to Italy and became a successful cartoonist, before fascist race laws forced him to flee Milan and spend years stranded in the Dominican Republic awaiting asylum in the U.S. Shortly after his admittance in America (the *New Yorker*, hungry for his deft war satires, sponsored his entry in 1942), he was drafted to serve the armed forces in China. All this finds expression in the Morgan show, from pages featuring his Italian-era character of "Zia Elena" to busy drawings of allied bombing campaigns.

Steinberg's work as a whole offers an unparalleled interpenetration of personality and professionalism. During the war, he worked for the military propaganda department, then later toiled for an ever-shifting roster of magazine editors, ad men, greeting card companies, set designers and cruise ship decorators. Through the *New Yorker*, he even worked as a "Correspondent at Large" in 1956, traveling to Cold War Russia and sending back cartoon missives. He seems effortlessly to hit the requirements of each task, while at the same time bringing to it his instantly recognizable line and the prismatic filter of his visual wit.

Even as he mastered popular forms, Steinberg was an encyclopedia of references to heady European modernism. He seems to conjure styles effortlessly, like magic tricks, pulling from each their kernel of popular humor. A 1953 faux-Cubist still-life collage becomes a guessing game about the real and the fake (an affixed postcard is actually a watercolor by the artist, but the postage stamp is real, while the stamp canceling it is a painted forgery. . .). A 1954 drawing for a long mural is a genial rerun of the Surrealist exquisite corpse game, an unbroken line becoming alternatively water, a bridge and the sidewalk seen from above. Even his *New Yorker* drawings, with their frequent concretization of language -- a 1964 cover features the



**Saul Steinberg**  
*Road, Samarkard, USSR*  
1956  
Saul Steinberg Foundation

American landscape overrun with living acronyms like "GOP," "NBC" and "LSD" -- come to seem like friendly riffs on the "free words" of the Italian Futurists.

Yet the apparent ease of it all disguises an animating tension. Steinberg coveted the prestige of high culture, feeling a deep connection with it. Friends report that as the reputations of his contemporaries soared, he felt imprisoned by his own status as a popular artist. Yet in the more personal, ego-driven art on display -- a "group photo" in which each face is expertly conjured by different ways of smudging the same black fingerprint, a series of brown paper bag masks frozen in stereotyped expressions, or compositions created using rubber stamps, cloning the image of an artist at the easel, for instance, over and over -- a theme recurs. Left to himself, Steinberg's subject was the self emptied of its signature qualities in the process of expression.



**Saul Steinberg**  
*Vichy Water Still Life*  
ca. 1953  
Saul Steinberg Foundation

Then there's the fate of his real signature -- the unpretentious block caps reading "STEINBERG" or, alternatively, "ST," which recur from one end of his career to the other, the mark of invariable identity beneath his transformations. Yet in its very reliability, it comes to resemble a brand, or even one of those repeating stamps he used, such as the image of Millet's *Angelus* that he iterates on a grid of cheap American postcards in a 1969 composition, directly playing on the idea of artistic entropy in consumer culture. The final work in the Morgan installation is a 1991 page featuring a large, dramatic, illegible signature -- but Steinberg's "ST" can be found printed discretely on the wooden pen glued below it, supposed to have conjured the scrawl.



**Saul Steinberg**  
*Untitled (Initials)*  
1964  
Saul Steinberg Foundation

Again and again, from the mock travel documents he fabricated for friends, to the inscriptions on talismanic cartoon "ex voto" drawings meant to ward off modern anxieties, Steinberg gives us blocks of beautifully written but completely meaningless handwriting, deftly aping the form of signification without content. Most eloquent are a pair of fake diary pages, ink-spotted, given the look of care, complete with urgently crossed-out passages and notes scribbled in the margins, all of it nonsensical. This, Steinberg supposedly told a visitor to his studio, was a page from Rimbaud's "lost diary," from the later part of the poet's life. The importance of Rimbaud for Steinberg was thus not just his lyrical intensity, but the riddle represented by the prodigy who penned *The Drunken Boat*, then gave it all up to be a businessman -- the meaningless scrawl of the "diary" is the enigmatic poetry of an artist vanished completely into commerce. It represents the place Steinberg found himself.

For this reason, the curatorial project of trying to "reclaim" a more serious Steinberg for high art misses his real drama, which lies precisely in his lightness, the unbearable lightness of being that is symptom of trying to live individually in a world where everything is produced for everyone. His art was hatched in the space defined by the arcane debate between Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno -- Benjamin with his idea that there was something promising about the way mass culture dissolved the intimidating "aura" of art for the masses, Adorno with his insistence that impenetrable high culture was the only resistance to the disintegrative effects of capitalism. It is an irresolvable argument, of course. It would be fatally formalist to think that movies or mass-circulation magazines themselves have some salutary social effect independent of their ownership and the ends to which they are put, just as it is silly to praise high art's edifying energy without considering who has access to the specialized discourse that makes sense of it. The last word on the dispute awaits a world that better distributes its intellectual and material wealth -- a fact that Steinberg's quicksilver zigzags between the two poles testify to eloquently.



**Saul Steinberg**  
*Group Photo*  
 1953  
 Collection of Richard and Ronay  
 Menschel



**Saul Steinberg**  
*Nine Postcards*  
 1969  
 Saul Steinberg Foundation



**Saul Steinberg**  
*The Signature*  
 1991  
 Saul Steinberg Foundation

Lest one think that such grandiose claims are overreaching for a mere "doodler," I leave the final word to the man himself. His 1963 *Allegory*, appearing exactly at the midpoint of the Morgan installation, cites the form of a didactic medieval woodcut. On the left, laid on the earth, we find objects representing the things of this world -- knowledge, art, love, military glory, sexual desire and death. On the opposite side of the page is a floating island with a palm tree, representing utopia.

Between the two extremes stand three towers, representing the attempts of various civilizations to bridge the gap. The U.S. is represented by Uncle Sam scaling a ladder (of success, presumably) that leads to some skyscrapers in the clouds. The construction is turned decisively towards the side of material things, not particularly concerned with utopia.

Next, there is a monument representing French civilization. Cradle of utopian thinking that it is, it faces the ideal. The tower is marked with dates representing the various years in France's turbulent revolutionary history -- 1789, 1848, 1871 -- and climbs towards the sky as if to provide a way to make the leap to the island. The sequence, however, yields only a military figure on horseback turned upside-down -- the old order, upset, but still intact.

A third and final tower represents Russia. It is formed of a spreading tree, cradling a Dostoevskian dandy in one branch, a bird with a crown representing the Czar in a second, and the bearded couple of Marx and Engels in a third (Engels gestures at nearby France as a revolutionary example). From the highest branch of the tree spring royal turrets, and a crowd of tiny workers who seem to have stormed the castle and stream along a bridge towards utopia. . . .

Alas, their progress is halted by a Steinbergian talking balloon full of senseless text, representing -- what? Stultifying bureaucracy, as in his fake travel papers? Or an unresolved thought about material interest versus higher aspirations, as in the fake diary pages? Either way, the work symbolizes that history has, thus far, doomed artists to work with a paradox -- though they can, like Steinberg, find some poetry in facing it with humor and grace.

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**Saul Steinberg**  
*Large Document*  
 1951  
 Private Collection



**Saul Steinberg**  
*Diary*  
 1954  
 Collection of Richard and Ronay  
 Menschel



**Saul Steinberg**  
*Allegory*  
 1963  
 Collection of Carol and B.J. Cutler