

Press Release  
Zurich, 21 August 2008

**Kunsthhaus Zürich shows 'Saul Steinberg: Illuminations'**

**Cover pictures and drawings for 'The New Yorker' made Saul Steinberg (1914–1999) famous. However, it is not widely known that his drawings hung in the same galleries as the canvases of his New York School friends and that his European circle of fellow artists included Le Corbusier, Alberto Giacometti and Henri Cartier-Bresson. The exhibition at the Kunsthhaus Zürich from 22 August to 2 November 2008 is his first retrospective in Switzerland.**

In an age more inclined to see itself reflected in photographs, abstract art, cinema and television, Saul Steinberg, who died in 1999, was a master of the hand-drawn line. His modernist, clean lines defined a twentieth-century style. His first exhibition in Switzerland at the Kunsthhaus Zürich will cover the full range of his art, with over one hundred drawings, collages and objects from The Saul Steinberg Foundation and private collections.

UNMASKING DAILY LIFE

Steinberg observed and commented on his own surroundings – a spy at home in a world that regarded its own disguises as impenetrable. An important key to understanding Steinberg's technique is the art of calligraphy, which he himself called his 'true teacher'. He saw anything and everything as a form of self-descriptive script: the different personalities at a cocktail party; paths traced in the air by Italian conversational gestures; traffic roaring by on a desert freeway lined with motels. Each of his themes became a masterpiece of calligraphy. In imitation documents, as in 'Passport', each symbol – the embossed official seals, the self-important signatures of minor bureaucrats – is a fake, a scribble, and typical of Steinberg, who always maintained a humorously ironic distance from authority and from the styles of representation he employed.

DRAUGHTSMAN, CARTOONIST AND ARTIST IN EUROPE

Steinberg was born in Romania in 1914 and grew up in Bucharest. In 1933 he enrolled in the Regio Politecnico, an architecture school in Milan and a bastion of Modernism. His artistic career began in 1936 when he started to draw cartoons for 'Bertoldo', a satirical magazine published twice weekly in Milan. In 1942 Steinberg moved to New York City, having already had a number of cartoons published in 'The New Yorker'. As an officer working in the intelligence unit of the US Navy and the OSS (Office of Strategic Services), he sent home drawings from China, India, North Africa and Italy, which were published in 'The New Yorker' and later in his first book, 'All in Line' (1945). On his return to the US, he produced a series of mock-epic battle scenes (such as 'Cassino') that

were shown in the Museum of Modern Art in 1946. By the end of this decade he had become acquainted with Le Corbusier and Henri Cartier-Bresson.

In the 1950s his work became both bolder and more diverse in formal invention and philosophical reach. For the American pavillion at the World's Fair in Brussels in 1958, he produced 'The Americans,' an 80-meter long mural made of collage elements. Museums in Europe and the USA started to invite him to participate in exhibitions.

#### THE STORIES TOLD BY LINES AND MASKS

Steinberg created whole narratives from the elemental simplicity of a mere line. 'The Line' of 1954 starts as a line of ink flowing from the artist's pen; it soon turns into a horizontal line that separates water from the sky, only to mutate into a laundry line, a railway line, a street on a map and so on. . . . Ten metres and a hundred transformations later it turns back into the tip of the artist's pen. In the late 1950s Saul Steinberg's urge to portray things and people by means of schematic, greatly simplified concepts prompted him to start making paper masks. These depict typical personas of the era – the brash junior partner in a corporate firm, the maddening hostess at a party. These masks also caricature the differences separating people and the rigidity of social identities, pointing to a scary, sad, and comical fact: in the eyes of others, you are a cartoon of yourself.

#### COMEDY AND IRONY IN THE LATE WORKS

In 1960 Steinberg reduced his workload to focus on covers and drawings for 'The New Yorker' and on creating art for exhibitions at his American and European galleries. The scope of his art expanded in two directions at once: outward into what he called 'political reality', and inward to matters of personal feeling, memory, and desire. Steinberg now also started to make rubber stamps, which he used to explore the modern perils of alienation and the individual's search for authenticity. The art of representation increasingly became a subject. In the early 1970s he worked over a recent lithograph, 'Knight and Pineapple', in which a Don Quixote figure launches an attack on what Steinberg called 'the dragon of fruits', using stencils, rulers, and rubber stamps to add clouds, a pyramid, and a crowd of loitering people.

Steinberg's sense of comedy and irony never failed him. In the 1980s and 90s he often abandoned his pen-and-ink line for felt marker pens. But his drawings still had the same energy as ever. The vertiginous perspective of 'Canal Street' simulates the optical pleasure of an urbanite looking up, down, and around the city, while keeping one eye on the girls. But Steinberg could always see the darker side of social and political systems, rendering them with his characteristic wit and irony: in 'Wilshire & Lex' of 1994 the boulevards of Los Angeles and Manhattan intersect. The corrupting influence of New York money and Hollywood dreams has shrunk America down to its two coastlines.

## PLAYTHINGS OF THE HUMAN MIND

Steinberg regarded himself and his fellow citizens of the twentieth century as 'the victims of an immense prank'. Through his art, however, he raised himself and his viewers above the indignities of the age. He reinvented the modern world as an inviting tabletop strewn with playthings of the mind. Kunsthaus Zürich now invites the public to take their place at this table lavishly laid with works from six decades and to join in workshops and tours that will shed light on Steinberg's world and inspire the viewer's own imagination and creativity. The exhibition catalogue is published by Hatje Cantz. The German version (288 pages, 310 illustrations, mostly coloured) is available for CHF 95.- at the Kunsthaus shop.

## VISITOR INFORMATION

Kunsthaus Zürich, Heimplatz 1, 8001 Zurich, [www.kunsthhaus.ch](http://www.kunsthhaus.ch)

Opening Times: Sat/Sun/Tues 10 a.m.–6 p.m., Wed/Thurs/Fri 10 a.m.–8 p.m.  
Closed on Mondays.

Admission: CHF 12.- / 8.- concessions (subject to change)

Public Guided Tours: 19 September and 24 October, 6.30 p.m.

Workshop for children aged 8 and over: 8 October, 1.30–4 p.m. and 25 October, 10.15 a.m.–3.15 p.m.

Workshop for young people aged 12 and over: 8 October, 10 a.m.–12.30 p.m. and 11 and 25 October, 1.30–4 p.m.

## EXHIBITION ORGANISATION AND PARTNERS

The exhibition 'Saul Steinberg: Illuminations' has been organised by the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York. The curator of the presentation at Kunsthaus Zürich is Tobia Bezzola.

'Saul Steinberg: Illuminations' is travelling in Europe under the auspices of The Saul Steinberg Foundation. The European tour is supported by a generous grant from the Terra Foundation for American Art, with additional funding from PaceWildenstein Gallery, New York.

The exhibition in Kunsthaus Zürich is supported by AAM Privatbank.

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