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❖ Top Picks

Steinberg's witty lines

London ■ art

Romanian-born Saul Steinberg (1914-1999) was an artist who lived by his wits rather than his feelings, so it's only natural that he would become a cartoonist—one of the greatest ever. "Illuminations," now at the Dulwich Picture Gallery (and headed for Hamburg's Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in March) shows just how brilliant he was at tweaking the sophisticated funnybone.

That Steinberg was a great draftsman hardly needs arguing, but at Dulwich it is possible for the first time to show the staggering, extended proof: the 10-meter-long, 1954 drawing "The Line," which has always before been exhibited with some of its 29 folds. At the far left the artist's hand poised above it draws the continuous line, which begins as a canal in Venice, becomes a washing line, then the top of a railway viaduct. Without much attention to scale, it crosses continents, depicting artifacts, people and landscapes; and ends on the far right as an airport runway, the architrave of a Beaux Arts building, the frozen surface of a lake and, finally, the line drawn by the same right hand, but from below.

The lumber-room of Steinberg's mind was filled with the objects of the 20th century. His sculptural "Library" with its books made of wood, included authors called "Kipling" and "Isaiah Berlin"; he adapted Picasso's line to draw society women that were mostly noses; he subverted cartography in a way that anticipated Sarah Palin, so that mapmaking became entirely subjective in his famous cartoon for the New Yorker magazine, in which Russia could be seen across the Pacific Ocean from 9th Avenue.

There is no menace even in his villains: the crocodiles that represent the bad guys (us) in the Vietnam War, his not-quite-right Mickey Mouses; the skeleton with the black flag bearing a cornucopia in "Allegory" or (in the same picture) the equestrian statue with its failed revolutionary rider toppling off a column dated 1871, which in turn stands on a plinth dated 1848 at the top and 1789 at the bottom. In Steinberg's art, wit almost always trumps emotion. He's too observant of our foibles, and of history itself, to feel angry.

—Paul Levy

Until Feb. 15
☎ 44-20-8693-5254
www.dulwichpicturegallery.org.uk

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'Woman in Tub' (1949), by Saul Steinberg, on show in London.

Berlin ■ art

In transit between several venues since 1989, the collections of Berlin's Egyptian Museum will finally be re-installed later this year in their restored pre-war home, the Neues Museum on Berlin's Museum Island. Highlights from the collections have been on display for a few years in the nearby Altes Museum, and the Egyptian Museum's curators have decided to close out their sublet with a modern art installation.

"Giacometti, the Egyptian" places 10 sculptures and two drawings by the great Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966) alongside ancient Egyptian works that either directly inspired, or indirectly influenced, his own works. The installation itself is nothing if not discreet, and many visitors, in search of the museum's star attraction, the bust of Nefertiti, might not even realize it's there.

But in a quiet, dramatic way, the show is a sensation. We may never look at Giacometti—or, for that matter, at Egyptian art—quite the same way again.

Born in a remote Italian-speaking Swiss valley, Giacometti made his way to Paris, where he became the artistic pet of the Surrealist movement. By the mid-1930s, he had broken with Surrealism, and over the next decade he developed a new style, which is among the most distinctive in modern art. A mature Giacometti sculpture—like "Man Who Walks" (1947), included in the Berlin show—is unmistakable: a distorted stick figure with a frozen gait and a stubborn trace of an identity. To a world that had barely survived World War II, Giacometti's solitary figures were like mid-century Everymen, somehow suggesting both the recent history's victims and its survivors.

The Berlin show manages to transform our impressions of "Man Who Walks," which is paired with the clenchfisted, dancer-like "Standing-Striding Figure" (circa 1900 B.C.). Suddenly the static Giacometti work, whose title seemed ironic, suggests real motion; no longer interpretable as a meditation on the past, it seems like a timeless study of the moving human form. Other pairings include an austere sculpture of the artist's wife, called "Annette VIII" (1962), with the iconic bust of Nefertiti (around 1350 B.C.), whose gaiety and glamour make her seem like a handmaiden to the more regal Annette.

Critics have long known about Giacometti's interest in ancient Egypt. But only now, with the formal pairings of similar-looking works, can we see to what extent the Giacometti "look" is inspired by the curious mixture of stasis and dynamism that characterizes ancient Egyptian art. Just as the Egyptian figures lend movement to Giacometti's sculpture, those sculptures, with their stripped-down but vivid sense of self, bring out a quality of individual personality, and even intimacy, in the often mysterious, monumental Egyptian works.

—J.S. Marcus

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London ■ art

Reason says it is impossible to see how war can be reconciled with healing, and that is indeed the conclusion I reached from seeing the new exhibition "War and Medicine" at the Wellcome Collection. This is a disturbing show, which is entirely to the credit of the several co-curators in London and Dresden (at the Deutsches Hygiene-Museum); despite the many horrible illustrations of the maimed and close-ups of wounds, the spectator never gets jaded or overcome by gore. The displays remain as horrible and moving at the end of this large show as at the beginning, which is a strikingly beautifully filmed three-screen installation commissioned by Wellcome from British painter and war artist, David Cotterell. He travelled to Afghanistan, supported also by the Ministry of Defence, and filmed frontline soldiers, in particular the daily activities of the armed forces' medical staff.

If there is a single, overarching concept that rules the behavior of medical people in wartime, it is triage, the principle of separating battlefield casualties into the dead or certain to die, the seriously wounded, and those not so seriously wounded and prioritizing their need for treatment.

The first area of the exhibition deals with the inherent tension of this for Florence Nightingale during the war in the Crimea. But it also features Nikolai Pirogov, the opposing Russian army surgeon responsible for implementing their system of triage. The need for triage remains and so does the chilling truth: that the military imperative is often to treat the least damaged first, so as to return them to the fighting as quickly as possible. While this goes against the instincts of most medical doctors, it very often is their plain duty to neglect the worse suffering of the more badly injured. It is the trade-off for the experience they get themselves—as Hippocrates said, "he who desires to practice surgery must go to war."

This splendid, provocative exhibition covers the last 150 years, with generous sections on both World Wars, right through the conflicts in Vietnam, the Falklands, Afghanistan and Iraq, dealing with poison gas and prosthetics, artists and facial reconstructions, civil defense and public policy; and, in its most troubling single exhibit, a last letter home from a mentally distressed World War I "deserter," one of those barbarously shot by the British military.

—Paul Levy

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