

WITH INCISIVE, SATIRICAL PEN

STEINBERG

LIMNS THE CONTEMPORARY SCENE

BY VERNON YOUNG

The art of living in the wrong century—this is Saul Steinberg's own designation for the predicament he has been illustrating, along with other hearts of the matter, for over a decade. In his latest collection, *The Passport** (the title is a deceptively mild clue to the whole works; it sneaks up on you), he has again and more inexorably than ever demonstrated his infinite capacity for taking pains (and giving them) in his graphic pursuit of *mélange*, drafting, with a vilifying grasp of the murderously essential, our contemporary quest for a style—in architecture, furniture, clothing and machines—which we can call our own. The Los Angeles County brand of eclecticism has by now been thoroughly anatomized; it's a relatively minor phase of a national epidemic, and the national case is in turn but an exaggerated symptom of an infection chronic to Western Man since the Renaissance. The importation of motifs and *objets de goût* from other centuries and cultures to symbolize the ruling idea of elegance probably began with the Revival of Antiquity. The glory that was Greece and the flora that was Imperial Rome have exercised a perennial influence on the decor of the West ever since, relieved occasionally by translations from the Egyptian, the Gothic, the Oriental and the Islamic.

The American-at-large, declarations of independence notwithstanding, has always left one ear open to the siren voices of alien manners. The nineteenth century consolidated his bondage. Two scenes, facing each other in *The Passport*, provide metaphors of waste and tragi-comically define the New World's unwillingness to create an indigenous mode of elegance. In less than a century the log cabin, built from the forest logged out around it, was a provincial antique. The high style of the land that bred Daniel Boone, Lincoln and Walt Whitman (whose ill-selected Gallicisms were evidence of a similar insecurity) was represented by the Victorian-Gothic pile, a multi-pavilioned mausoleum of taste, its mullions and gables and crockets and pinnacles obdurately advertising, in vain, their affinity with an impulse that had been vitally related to its surroundings four centuries earlier.

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We have never recovered. The confusion of volume with significance is a standard error in the U.S.A. As prevalent is the confusion of ostentation with style. In his earlier sorties, that man Steinberg exhaustively ridiculed the sartorial idiosyncracies of the over-chic among us, with particular attention to the brazen coiffures, the bee-hive furs, the rank eyelashes and the florescent hats of the fashionable female. The sumptuous is always more than Steinberg can tolerate without transcribing its hazards into his own version of its ultimate bankruptcy. Acquisition is the mote in the contemporary eye. And we wince as Steinberg removes it. What he did for French taxidom he has now done for the American automobile, equating its recent seizures of distension with the blimp and the Italian seedloaf.

As we browse through his catalogue of our society's whimsical attempt to express opulence, we find ourselves protesting, "Yes—but there is also Bauhaus style and Frank Lloyd Wright, Boulder Dam, the Lever Brothers Building, Lancia shoes, tank suits, the Burlington Zephyr, and the Ford Thunderbird. All is not lost; a fastidious company of citizens, some in high places, some obscure, believe in the unity of the organic and the rational, our century's last best hope of beauty!" . . . I can't presume to divine the artist's reply should he overhear us mumbling our faith in the slip-stream of the future. I daren't even presume on his tacit agreement, since he is no less diverted by the comedy of purism (he uses a logarithim sheet to parody the U.N. architectural style and allows mobiles, which some see as the quintessential emblems of our space-and-mobility conceptions, to conk their devotees on the head). I strongly suspect that no idiom whatever, neither rustic nor urbane, neither anecdotal nor abstract, would escape for long the soft glitter of his eye or the arabesque rustle of his pen. To travesty form is his destiny; to transpose gesture is his delight.

Certainly his satire is not confined by distinctions of class or economics. Snob appeal or mass appeal are equally his grist. The debutantes and gigolos fashioned by Paris and Fifth Avenue are no more preposterous to him than the guys and dolls who fashion themselves on the archetypes of Hollywood and Madison Square Garden. The masses, hungry for glamor, have a talent for discovering it in dynamic aggregations; hence their infatuation for a uniform, the primary visual token of belonging. To the uninvolved spectator the effect is meretricious, even terrifying. But when he takes another look, with Steinberg's help, at a drum-majorette or a Gorgon roller-skater or at one of those *collage* baseball players, he will begin to understand, after he has taken a grip on himself, the pandemic thirst for what is naively considered exotic.

The same spectator may also understand, if not appre-

ciate, the recrudescence of the super-Western movie, for Steinberg's unequivocal rendering of *The Cowboy as Baroque* illuminates the fanatic popularity of the type. The disappearance of the Wild West has robbed the American of his most romantic native commodity. ("Come back, *Shane!* Mother loves you, too!") In retrospect the gunfighter is the most vivid figment in the American dream of rugged elegance. And is there not something courageous in that wedge-faced, split-level Goldilocks, camouflaged above the neck as a motorcycle racer, at shoulder-level as Marie Antoinette—or is it Carmen?—and below the waist as Hopalong Cassidy? Her taut flamboyance rebukes the merciless aridity of that unadorned building on the flat plain . . . It was a bad day at Black Rock for sure when Steinberg passed by.

WE CANNOT AFFORD, even as we titter nervously, the uncomfortable conclusions to which Steinberg draws us (the pun is inextricable). The Nice American has rejected the imperial theme but he's wistful for its insignia. Pragmatic and sentimental by turns, in one area he builds highways and houses in arithmetical conjunction with devouring space; in another he erects monumental syntheses of a tradition from which he is psychologically disconnected. He is doomed to commute between the slab and the cupola; on Steinberg's evidence, wanting to eat his cake and live in it, too. He has a passport that will take him anywhere, but from where does he start? Dead sure of where he came from, cocksure of where he's going, he sure as hell doesn't know where he is now •

