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“The Eye is Part of the Mind”: Drawings from Life and Art by Leo Steinberg at the New York Studio School

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Leo Steinberg, Untitled, 1940. Graphite on paper. Private Collection, courtesy of the New York Studio School

The Craft of Looking: The Drawings of Leo Steinberg

by Noah Dillon

Leo Steinberg was a kind of godfather at both my alma maters. Although I just missed being able to hear his lectures at the University of Texas, I marveled at the collection of 15th-through-20th-century prints he donated at the Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art. At the School of Visual Arts, where I did my graduate work in art criticism, students would occasionally be invited to his home. Again, I arrived a year too late to participate in those quorums, but his writings were crucial to the curriculum there. In the summer of 2012, SVA inherited part of Steinberg's library. Looking at the marginalia and annotated bookmarks, one could glean something of his character.

And now, at the New York Studio School, another facet of this iconoclastic historian's intellectual life is revealed, in his drawings. "*The Eye is Part of the Mind*" runs through March 9.

Steinberg was born in Moscow, in 1920. After fleeing Russia for Berlin, his family settled in London in 1933. In 1936 Steinberg began to study sculpture and painting at the Slade School. Following World War II, he immigrated to New York and worked as a freelance critic and translator. Receiving his PhD from NYU's Institute of Fine Arts, Steinberg soon rose to eminence as a scholar of renaissance art. But he also wrote widely and expertly on the work of his contemporaries, making significant critical contributions to the way we understand modernism. His books and essays have left an indelible imprint on contemporary scholarship. He died in 2011, leaving behind an extensive archive of drawings, from which this exhibition has been selected.

Although the show packs 58 artworks two smallish rooms, the modest-scaled drawings are given ample space. The survey covers 35 years—from his time as a student up to the publication of his collected early essays, *Other Criteria* (University of Chicago Press, 1972) and with a few drawings, beyond. Steinberg, one imagines, would have loved these drawings, were they not his own. Co-curator Graham Nickson speculates, in an introduction to the catalogue, "He would, I suspect, be embarrassed by their public display." In them, one can see an inquisitive student's hand, eye, and mind learning how to apprehend form, discovering the effects various marks might capture or create. The draftsmanship is competent, if academic and, as Steinberg himself demurred, "overly conservative." The art historian Jack Flam, in another essay for the catalogue, asserts that, "If Leo had been made of lesser stuff [...] praise might well have led him to become a competent artist—rather than a great art historian."

His self-portraits bolster his reputation as a heartthrob. In *Untitled* (1940) the twenty-year-old Steinberg looks up with piercing, precisely drawn eyes. His numerous portraits of one Deirdre Knewstub are each rendered with care and devotion—possibly more than attended any other sitter. One in particular is a stark demonstration of his

esteem for her image, contrasting a tenderly modeled Knewstub with a spare, illustrative line drawing of another friend, René Scott.

As a great accompaniment to the obvious excitement Steinberg took in drawing, many are appended with his own exuberant memos: one sketch, showing the back of a graceful looking young woman, is given the caption, "...And then the model fainted!" On another tall and slim page (14 by 6 inches), a pensive nude approaches the viewer, her eyes downcast. A rich crosshatch shades the space at her feet and she is framed by an auratic glow of white conté around her trunk. At the top of the page, just over her brow, a note is attached with yellowed tape: "Censored!"

A fervent draftsman, Steinberg appears to have been frugal with his materials. There are drawings on all sorts of odd-sized scraps. Earlier sketches are often visible: studies fill the space around figures, some pictures are cut off at the edges or covered over with bolder images, and a few are visible on the thin leaf's verso. Steinberg seems to have been constantly drawing, either from life or after the works of other artists. His attempts at figurative abstraction and expressionism fall a bit flat, but his prodigious display of curiosity is enough to make those works endearing to anyone moved by his writing.

It is hard to imagine a better venue than a school for an exhibition of Steinberg's drawings. He was an educator, whether as an instructor of drawing at Parsons or as an art historian at various major institutions, and as a writer whose groundbreaking prose and ideas fundamentally changed the study of art's history. The exhibition is a lesson in and of itself. His drawings don't testify to the emergence of an artistic prodigy. Rather, they are predictive of Steinberg's precocious genius and dedication as an historian, as someone who sought scrupulously to understand the craft that he's looking at, thinking about, and describing. In the same way that his hand, eye, and mind were interwoven in his drawings, those same organs were entwined, enhanced by his early experience, in his descriptions and analyses of the art he wrote about. In his seminal essay, "The Eye is a Part of the Mind," (1953), Steinberg asserts, "Almost anyone with a modicum of talent and sufficient application can appropriate another man's mode of representation." That may be true, but what one is able to accomplish with such an act

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may say more about oneself than the appropriation. And his use of the medium of drawing seems to have helped Steinberg accomplish a great deal.

“Hands On,” a related panel discussion features Svetlana Alpers, David Rosand, Robert Storr and exhibition co-curator David Cohen as moderator, takes place at the New York Studio School on February 12 at 6:30 PM. The panel, held on the eve of the College Art Association 2013 Convention, considers connections between making art and writing about it.