

Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts / Lausanne

Steinlen, l'œil de la rue

17.10.2008 – 25.1.2009

Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen, a naturalized French citizen of Swiss origin, was a cartoonist, engraver, caricaturist, illustrator, poster designer, painter, and sculptor. Although self-taught, he inherited a rich artistic tradition (Delacroix, Daumier, and Manet), which he reinterpreted in genre scenes, in the domain of political iconography, and through a series of nudes, still life paintings, and portraits. The dissemination of his works in the golden age of the poster and the great illustrated periodicals made the artist one of the central figures of European visual culture around 1900.

Steinlen, Eye of the Street brings together the main public and private collections of the artist's work. For the first time the three principal collections have been jointly solicited: the bequest to the French state by Colette Desormière, née Steinlen, the artist's daughter (Musée d'Orsay and the Department of Graphic Arts of the Musée du Louvre in Paris); the vast collection formed by Mr. Oscar Ghez (Association des Amis du Petit Palais, Geneva); and the collections of the artist's own studio, which preserves the greater part of his archives since the death of his niece, Marguerite Steinlen. The Jacques Christophe Collection recently acquired by the Museum in Lausanne in partnership with the Bibliothèque Cantonale et Universitaire, and thanks to the Loterie Romande, the Association des Amis du Musée, and Pierre Gonset, reflects the will of the Museum to give Steinlen a place of primary importance in its collections.

The chronological and thematic tour of the exhibition brings the visitor from the Belle Époque of 1880s Montmartre, to the 1910s with the artist as witness of the First World War. Steinlen and his world are carried along by the winds of history.

Curators of the exhibition

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Publication

Steinlen, l'œil de la rue, monograph in French with a contribution by Philippe Kaenel, in collaboration with Catherine Lepdor. Milan, 5 Continents Editions, 240 p. Price: CHF 55.- . After the exhibition: CHF 68.-

Further venue

After Lausanne, the exhibition will be shown at the Musée communal d'Ixelles in Brussels, from March 12 to May 31, 2009.

The chronological and thematic visit of the exhibition *Steinlen, l'œil de la rue* in eight parts

Room 1 - IN LIFE

The exhibition begins with some rarely seen photographs. They show us the face of an artist profoundly committed to social causes, who declares in 1898: "We must act. The world is not going in the direction it should..." The Steinlens were a German family who settled in Vevey in 1831, obtaining the status of *bourgeois*. The grandfather, Théophile-Christian, was an artist. Samuel Steinlen, the artist's father, was a post-office clerk in Lausanne. Steinlen moved to Paris in 1881. The following year he became part of the team of the Chat Noir cabaret, having been introduced to the group by the painter and caricaturist Adolphe Willette. Shortly after the birth of his daughter Germaine (called Colette), he made his first foray into the world of illustration, and subsequently focused on the medium of the poster in the 1890s. He divided his time between various mediums: drawing for the left-wing press, illustrating for significant periodicals, and creating original engravings, illustrated books, paintings, and later sculpture. Obtaining French citizenship in 1901, Steinlen held an increasing number of exhibitions. Colette ran the artist's house with Masséida, an African model, who became Steinlen's companion after the death of his wife. During the war Steinlen realized numerous patriotic and humanitarian prints and posters. He died in his apartment at Rue Caulaincourt during the night of December 13, 1923.

Room 2 - GRAPHIC STAGING

The Chat Noir was the name of a cabaret that opened in November 1881 at the foot of the hill in Montmartre. It was also the name of a journal in which Steinlen launched his career. The journal brought together artists from quite diverse socio-cultural milieus, often of opposing aesthetic tendencies, both naturalist and symbolist. The cat, the object of a new cult in the 19th century, also became Steinlen's fetish animal, his signature. In the manner of Caran d'Ache and Adolph Willette, Steinlen animated the cabaret by drawing "stories without words", humorous, cruel, and moralizing. He also executed large decorative paintings. Along with Jules Chéret and Toulouse-Lautrec, he became one of the principal poster-makers in Paris. At the same time he collaborated with a whole host of periodicals such as *Le Mirliton*, the journal of the cabaret singer Aristide Bruant, and even the *Gil Blas Illustré*. He excelled in the graphic portrayal of the social and artistic universe characteristic of the Montmartre quarter— a world that gives itself over to spectacle day and night.

Room 3 - ON THE STREET

"From the very first day, tells Steinlen, I was seduced by life on the steep and stony streets; workers and errand-girls, launderers and the destitute. [...] Have you noticed how, in Paris more than anywhere else, the building trade has preserved the tradition of the costume? A carpenter is always wearing carpenter's clothes, one recognizes him immediately— and the roofer, the mason, and others are no different. Go in the morning to Les Halles, and you will see exactly what I mean. [...] -I always have a notebook in my pocket, I take just notes, that's all [...]. If, as he told us himself, his temperament draws him to humble people, it's because Steinlen is a bit of a socialist. He loves the common man, and fights for him with the only weapon he possesses...."

Lucien Puech, 1902

Room 4 - WANDERING

The figure of the vagabond occupies an emblematic place in the work of Steinlen. It guarantees the link between the two major points of interest for the artist: nature, and urban culture. The vagabond living off his pillage, the beggar, the wanderer, the "free worker" selling his muscle: all of these people preoccupy the social imagination at a time of intense urbanization. Without a doubt, the artist envies the freedom of movement held by vagabonds. His works express the temptation of departure and of the voyage, harking back to his early childhood when he ran away to Italy, or when he played hooky from school, or cut off his ties to Switzerland, and then to Mulhouse...to find himself in Paris, riveted to his drawing table. Three places and landscapes appear: Norway, the destination of his great voyage of 1901; the surroundings of his country-house in Jouy-le-Moutier, not far from Paris; and Belmont-sur-Lausanne seen from Chailly, an idyllic and synthetic landscape.

Room 5 - FELINITIES

The graphic work of Steinlen alternates between scratches and caresses. Pen lines contrast in an incisive manner with the tenderness of the lithographic pencil, and the suppleness of the brush. A great number of the artist's nudes exhibit rather sensual, feline postures. These engravings at times employ the traditional repertoire of the model laying on her back, sitting, and standing, and at other times adopt a more recent mannerism: a kind of contortionism, developed by Toulouse-Lautrec, Rodin, and particularly Degas, Vallotton and the Nabis. In another vein, Steinlen draws and paints Masséida, an African dancer who became his governess, and then his lover in 1911 following the death of his wife. The nudes in which figure "Massa" and her friends, take on the postures established by Titian, Velázquez, and Manet, and play on an Oriental theme.

Room 6 - LIBRARY

Steinlen was one of the great illustrators of his time. The artist invested the publishing market in multiple forms and by addressing all kinds of people, from children up to the most discerning book-lovers. Steinlen was involved, not just in the illustration of the pages, but in the very architecture of the book. Often privileged to be the first reader of the books he was to illustrate, he enlarged his circle of artist friends by frequenting editors (Pelletan), writers (Zola, France, Descaves, Colette), and poets (Ponchon, Rictus). Towards the end of his life, Steinlen created many still-life works, often at his country-house at Jouy-le-Moutier, where he was fond of gardening. These works convey his marvel for nature.

Rooms 7 and 8 - REVOLT AND COMMITMENT

"Everything comes from the people, and everything comes out of the people. And we are just their bullhorn... The true artist does not have to please anyone. He owes only the truth." This hand-written note by Steinlen amounts to a veritable confession of socialist faith. In effect, everything would point to the young Théophile-Alexandre being a rebel who fled the shackles of family in Lausanne, scorned the behavior of his family in Mulhouse, and with success in mind, arrived in Paris with certain political convictions. The socially committed work of Steinlen took a more radical turn around 1893, on the heels of headlines marked by corruption, financial scandals, and a wave of anarchist attacks that culminated on June 24, 1894 with the assassination of the president of the French Republic, Sadi Carnot. His contributions to *Le Chambard Socialiste* and his friend Zo d'Axa's *La Feuille*, along with his drawings for *L'Assiette au Beurre* and *Le Canard Sauvage* count among the most violent illustrations delivered to the press. They depict social injustice, the oppression of the people, the hypocritical violence of the military and police state, the misery of the elderly, women, and children: all corruptions of a republican ideal that originated with the Commune in 1870.

Rooms 9 and 10 - The War on War!

Close to ten million soldiers dead: that was the toll of the First World War, which broke out in August 1914, and ended in November 1918. The soldiers saw themselves confronted with the stagnation of the trenches, the middle zone known as no-man's land, and, in front of them, an invisible enemy, a state-of-the-art artillery, mustard gas, zeppelins, airplane. Although few paintings of these battles were produced, there is a vast array of engravings, illustrations, posters, postcards, photographs, and films. Steinlen contributed significantly to this iconography, producing more than two hundred engravings, about fifteen posters, ten paintings, and hundreds of drawings. During most of the conflict, the artist remained in Paris. He had to wait until April 1917 to really get close to the theater of hostilities, at Châlons-sur-Marne, in the context of the Army Artistic Missions. His compatriot Vallotton then did the same. Steinlen captures a suffering humanity: the elderly and children, women waiting in line for food, widows and orphans, broken families— but also tired and forsaken wounded soldiers. The artist was partial to the train station for the spectacle produced by the arrivals and departures of soldiers on leave, alone or accompanied— a place of flux and transit. In the end we see an artist who remained profoundly humanist and pacifist.