

STAMP ART IS NOT (NECESSARILY) MAIL ART

In browsing through Saul Steinberg's book, *The Inspector* (Penguin, 1973), it occurred to me that not all "stamp art" is necessarily destined to be sent through the mails. Some of it stays pretty well on the page. Stamps function well within the context of artists' books or even on fine paper, in drawings or collages, behind spruce frames. (In the latter case, I refer directly to an exhibition of stamped collage works by Steinberg at the Pace Gallery in New York last year. It was an excellent and subtle exhibition.)

I think it is a misleading and mistaken assumption to equate the function of "stampography" with Mail Art. At this juncture—and I strongly disagree with Carlo in this respect—Mail Art is simply too raw and too ill-defined (perhaps, its glory) to have its own generalized category, regardless of how expedient the publicity might appear.

To refer to my recent essay in this journal (*Mail Art is not Correspondence Art*), let me reiterate: Correspondence has nothing intrinsically to do with Mail Art. Neither does "stampography" have anything intrinsically to do with Mail Art. Mail Art can be anything sent through the mail by an artist, if I understand Carlo once again. On this point, I think we can wholeheartedly agree. To correspond, however, is a different matter—much more personalized, more concerned with the inter-relationship of personalized signs, ideas, objects, and images.

In Steinberg's *The Inspector*, we find the use of appropriated rubber stamps as well as commercially fabricated stamps used pictorially for reasons of visual texture, nuance, style—and, most of all, *meaning*. Steinberg's works are essentially those of a satirist who has appropriated the legal insignias used by bureaucrats, the codifications of our society. He draws cartoon-like images, illustrations of neo-classic buildings such as those designed by McKim, Mead and White in the early twentieth century, then fills in, so to speak, his linear compositions with rubber-stamped insignias. In doing so, Steinberg reveals a certain absurdity in the meaning of stamps, the conflict inherent in various signs of authority, and how these signs of officialdom create more chaos than definition. In other words, he *plays* with the assigned meaning behind the rubber stamp.

For Steinberg, the rubber stamp is not merely a formalized vehicle associated with the process of sending mail; rather it is a means toward content—a means of *political* satire. The rubber stamp implies much more than we may encounter at the outset.

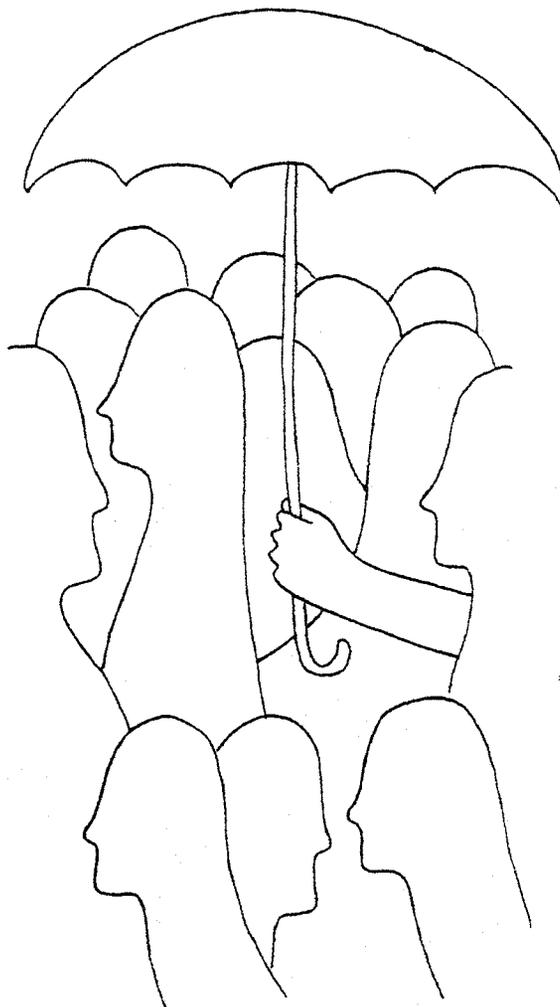
In addition to the legal insignias associated with rubber stamps, Steinberg also makes use of the banal insignias. For example, in one drawing he includes the repetitive use of a rubber-stamped Indian warrior on horseback. (Funny how I assumed it to be a "warrior." The image is really quite small.) This is juxtaposed with rubber-stamped foot soldiers, the same image repeated over and over, and finally rubber-stamped runners. Above the horizon line which the artist has drawn across the picture plane, one sees the repetitive image of an American eagle. (Anyway, it *looks* like an American eagle I have seen sometimes on currency.)

Meaning builds upon former meanings; signs (stamps) are quickly recontextualized and given new meanings, new functions of seeing and believing. . . .

If the *National Stampagraphic* is going to devote attention to "stampography" as a specialized genre, a new category of art-making, let me suggest that more emphasis be given to the *content* of stamps. We pretty much understand their function as potential art material. But once the function is accepted and realized by enough people, it's time to turn to specifics; that is, what stamps *mean* in the various contexts they are used. In the case of Steinberg, stamps can alter their meaning in a drawing or a book, perhaps better than as Mail Art.

—Robert C. Morgan

Editor's Note: This article was written specifically for *National Stampagraphic* in which Carlo Pittore defends rubber stamp art, but Umbrella thought it was important to print it as well. The article is copyrighted by Robert C. Morgan.



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