

From Russia with love: Cambridge artist finds success in abstract



Wicked Local staff photo by David Gordon

Leon Steinmetz, a Moscow-born artist who recently had a major show at the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts in Russia, sits for a photo in his home on Tuesday morning, January 26, 2010.

By Ed Symkus

[Wicked Local Cambridge](#)

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Cambridge MA

Leon Steinmetz has come full circle, and then some. The Moscow-born artist, a Cambridge resident since the late-1970s, recently returned to his hometown with “Contemplating Gogol,” a solo show of his works at the renowned Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts.

But Steinmetz’ full circle goes far beyond geographical boundaries. He’s also taken quite a roundabout road involving his career, smoothly moving between the fields of art and literature, and back again.

“I started doing drawings when I was 5,” says Steinmetz. “I never thought about it as being a career; I just loved it and thought it was the most pleasant thing to do.”

Success came early, with international exhibitions of his pen drawings on his resume by his mid-20s. Over the years, he progressed to different types of works on paper, including watercolors and collages, sometimes figurative, sometimes outright abstract.

Yet celebrated by critics, and supported by collectors, Steinmetz and his creative interests took a major turn when, after a mid-'70s gallery show in Rome featuring a series of large drawings of dwarfs – based on paintings by Velazquez – he entered discussions with Harper & Row about publishing the drawings and writing an introduction about them. An editor's suggestion eventually morphed the project into "The Story of Ricky, the Royal Dwarf," a book of fiction by Steinmetz, accompanied by a whole new set of drawings.

And a whole new career.

"I started writing fiction, non-fiction, essays, and short stories," says Steinmetz, a self-taught writer. "And I started teaching creative writing at Harvard Extension School and Harvard Summer School.

"It was nothing to do with art," he adds. "When I was doing all of this, I never thought I would go back to art; I thought that writing was now my field."

Steinmetz's wife, Inga Karetnikova, was busy as a writer, teacher, and film historian. Steinmetz, too, became interested in film, collaborating on writing projects with Polish director Agnieszka Holland and British director Peter Greenaway. He even found time to publish an original screenplay, and is currently looking for a producer. But busy as he was, he also moved back into art.

"I was waiting for the outcome of a writing project, and I was on pins and needles," he recalls. "Just to calm myself down, I picked up some Dante – 'The Divine Comedy.' I was reading 'The Inferno,' and started, almost subconsciously, doing drawings, sort of meditating with pen in hand."

His longtime friend and art collector, Cambridge resident H.A. Crosby Forbes, later bought that series of drawings, and eventually donated them to the Museum of Fine Arts.

Thinking back on the circumstances that led to the creation of those drawings, Steinmetz says, "I hadn't done any art for 15 years. I was still going to museums and studying art, absorbing art. But around 2000 or 2001 I started to move back into art fulltime."

He admits, without a hint of bragging, that he feels that he's a better artist now.

"The world hasn't changed for me," he says. "The same things interest me, whether it be Plato or Moliere or Dante or Rembrandt or Goya or Greek mythology or the Italian Renaissance. If someone asked me who I consider my teachers, I would say it's Goya, Rembrandt, Leonardo, Picasso and Durer. It's not that I try to imitate them. I just love the energy, I love the combination of them, of the comic and tragic in life."

The Gogol show at the Pushkin Museum, which ran from Dec. 1 to Jan. 10, was an unexpected surprise for Steinmetz. He was in New York, attending a gala honoring Philippe de Montebello, who was retiring after a long tenure as director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. One of the other guests was Pushkin director Irina Antonova.

“I knew her from before, so we resumed our acquaintance,” recalls Steinmetz. “She asked me what I was doing, and I told her. She was interested and said, out of the blue, would you like to exhibit at my museum?”

The resulting nine sets of drawings, comprised of about 80 pieces, weren’t simply illustrations based on Gogol’s writings. They were, as the title suggests, drawings contemplating his ideas.

“Only two of the sets relate directly to Gogol,” insists Steinmetz. “Seven of them are related only marginally to him. They could have been related to any other great thinker and philosopher.”

It’s not the first time Steinmetz has made art in conjunction with the great 19th century Russian writer. In 2006, he published a collection of 21 kinetic drawings that came to life through Gogol’s story “The Portrait.” There was a release party for the book at the Pierre Menard Gallery in Cambridge, and the drawings were on display there for a while.

Though there are collections of Steinmetz’s work at both the Boston Athenaeum and the Museum of Fine Arts (the two series “Demons of the Deluge” and the more accessible “Their Majesties and Their Dwarfs” are amazing), nothing is currently on display.

“Works on paper cannot be continuously exhibited for long periods of time,” explains Steinmetz. “Some of mine were up for about six months at the MFA, then they were put back into the Department of Drawings. But they rotate them. I hope they will be seen again soon.”



For a look at more of Steinmetz’s work, visit www.leonsteinmetz.com.

Ed Symkus can be reached at esymkus@rcn.com.

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