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# 60 Years of Ralph Steadman at Bates College Museum of Art

Spanning literature and art history to environmental science and more, the artist's original work surprises, delights, and even horrifies

July, 2025 | By: Lucky Platt



"Stone" magazine, 22"



"Ink Blot and Sigmund Freud," 1993, pen and ink on paper. 36.2" x 23.4"

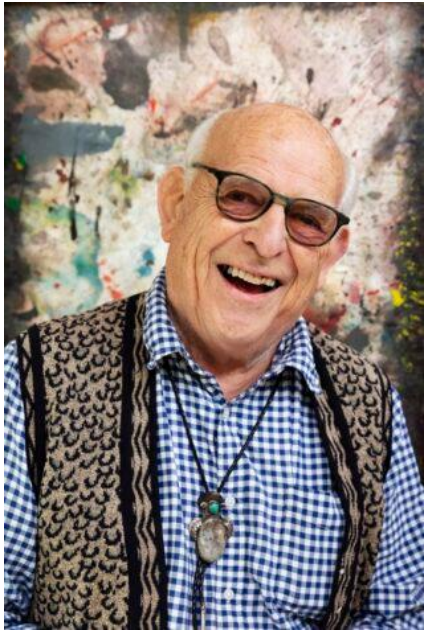


Photo: Rikard Österlund



"Self-Portrait," 2006, ink and collage on paper, 23.4" x 15"



It's hard to imagine an event more fully in concert with a liberal arts education than the visual extravaganza of *Ralph Steadman: And Another Thing*, currently on view at Bates College Museum of Art. The exhibition, curated by Sadie Williams and Andrea Harris in collaboration with the Ralph Steadman Art Collection, is as vast as any artist's retrospective might be, spanning more than 60 years. For fans and fans-to-be—there's something for everyone here—it's truly incredible to have so much original Steadman art in one place, to be able to take time with the work and revisit it, to allow the work to surprise and delight and even horrify. "This is an exhibition with so many portals," says the museum's education curator, Anthony Shostak. "The work opens directly into so many fields of study—literature, art history, American history, environmental science, political science—and Steadman makes it really easy for the viewer to open those doors."

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Whatever you think you know about Ralph Steadman—his Gonzo journalism era and his world-famous adventures with Hunter S. Thompson; his *Rolling Stone* magazine illustrations for *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*; his artwork for Flying Dog Brewery; his portraits of musicians, writers and U.S. presidents; his depictions of endangered, extinct, and imagined birds; his *Paranoids* (manipulated Polaroids); his documentary collaboration with Johnny Depp; or his award-winning children’s book illustrations—you’ve never seen him like this. You haven’t encountered his works at scale as he envisioned them, or in the context of our challenging times, where they feel as fresh and resonant as ever.

Not to say that viewing *And Another Thing* is easy. It’s unsettling, provocative, loud, and often raging. “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others,” George Orwell wrote in his 1917 allegorical novel *Animal Farm*, and Steadman’s illustrations for the 50th anniversary edition of the novel express a visceral rage at the abuse of power. At the same time, animals in their natural environments have a dignified and loving presence in Steadman’s work. He traveled with his family to South America in the 1980s to closely observe and sketch vultures, and created many reverential drawings of the unpopular bird; the milky-eyed baby bird in the ink drawing, *Owen the Owl*, was rescued by Steadman and brought to a sanctuary.

By the time Steadman found his groove, he’d experienced multiple affronts to his moral sensibility, so he set out to make world-changing art; specifically, he sought to make the world a better place by calling attention to injustice through his artistic output. “I had found my voice, and I was going to use it as a weapon,” Steadman said in the 2012 documentary film *For No Good Reason*. Regardless of the medium, his works are like a direct jolt from a mind deeply engaged with the human condition. The quality and energy of his drawing line is instantly recognizable; it’s as distinct as his signature, which he inks using a calligraphy pen in a mashup of cursive and printed all caps: STEADman. An ink splatter released from Steadman’s hand holds infinite possibilities for form and story to emerge. Even better if the ink wash water is dirty with residue, a muck of color; as he says, “It might just lead somewhere.”

Ralph Steadman was born in 1936 and grew up in Liverpool, England, where he would concentrate on the clicking sounds of his mother’s knitting needles during the air raids of World War II. He spent some time in the Royal Air Force, where he loved the engineering of flying things, an interest that would resurface years later in his immersive study of Leonardo Da Vinci. In his twenties, Steadman pieced together an art education at various U.K. schools, where he felt the strongest pull and connection to the life drawing classes. He found work as a cartoonist—thrilled to be paid to draw—and ventured to New York City in 1970. Later that year, Steadman exploded into the popular consciousness when he was invited to accompany the maverick journalist Hunter S. Thompson to document the Kentucky Derby. He and Thompson were like a chemical reaction, with Steadman’s drawings seeming to flow out and even anticipate Thompson’s words.

The story of Steadman’s now-classic black-and-white illustrations for Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and the sequel, *Through the Looking Glass*, is that Steadman didn’t know the books before he was commissioned to draw them. Somehow, this is fitting for an artist who is so often carried along by his own stream of consciousness. “I’m interested in making something that is as unexpected to me as it is to anyone else,” he says. “If I knew what was going to happen, what would be the point of doing it?” Alice shares this sentiment, as she is never sure what she will be from one minute to the next, and famously sees no point in books without pictures.

**Ralph Steadman: And Another Thing will be on view at the Bates College Museum of Art until October 11, 2025.**

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