

REA IRVIN

Wry Spirit In The Age Of Gatsby

(From *The New York Times*, 1996)

New Yorkers have been spoiled for 70 years now by The New Yorker, which has arrived weekly like a string of perfect martinis on some ideal butler's tray. Adult and aware, sexy and stylish, flattering us with its wit, sometimes painfully in the know, this magazine has represented our town to the rest of the world since the days of the flappers as *the* place to flap. I wonder how many other writers have come to New York from places like Chicago, as I did, because as a mere slip of a sliver of a seminarian I thought that New York was like, well, The New Yorker – which is not unlike going to Casablanca for the waters. Ever since its inception, The New Yorker has been not so much a periodical as a personality, and what can beat it for flash?

Rea Irvin (1881-1972) was the man who created that personality along with Harold Ross, the magazine's founder and first editor. As The New Yorker's first art editor, Irvin designed and chose covers, selected the type (still known as "Irvin type") and The New Yorker logotype on the cover, gathered artists and cartoonists, and contributed illustrations and cartoons himself. Maybe most famously, Irvin drew Eustace Tilley, the Regency fop with the monocle who appeared on the cover of the magazine's first issue in 1925 and has reappeared annually (with one exception, in 1994) ever since Irvin played von Sternberg to The New Yorker's Dietrich and gave it its "look," once and probably forever.

Now there's a show of Irvin's work at the Museum of the City of New York, and the next time you're hanging out on Fifth Avenue checking out our new Michelangelo because you crave some art, you must hike on up to 103rd Street and see the real thing. The trip is particularly

recommended for those period junkies and lost souls (like me) who reread “The Great Gatsby” at every possibly opportunity and who know that New York is still in its heart a place where jazz is played in Harlem, where Cole Porter has a new musical opening on Broadway, where men wear tuxes and women silk stockings in the evening, where Prohibition is still on, and where the Round Table is still getting sauced at the Algonquin.

Among the 83 drawings, cartoons, illustrations and covers, published and unpublished, the exhibition includes Irvin’s original drawing of Eustace Tilley, and even for those of us who have never understood the charm of that insufferable twit, the kick is still palpable, like standing in front of our city’s own Rosetta Stone.

Someday some expert will track the decline of our civilization in the passage from magazines with illustrations on the cover to magazines with Brad Pitt on the cover. In this scheme, The New Yorker is practically the sole remaining upholder of the values of human talent and invention, while other magazines are like those people who seem to think that good conversation means asking what movies you’ve seen.

Irvin’s own covers both set and continually hit a very high standard indeed, and one can tour them in pursuit of any number of amusements and interests: humor (two men passing each other in sailboats, each boat named after the same woman); wit (a woman making herself up as Shiva, with a tangle of arms carrying the necessary accessories); topical references (La Guardia’s 1933 election); the risqué (a nudist dining room); period styles and attitudes (those dowagers with pince-nez, those affectless socialites); sociological shifts (those very un-P.C. blacks); economic shifts (note that “Price 15 Cents” in the upper right corner); the satisfactions of solid composition, elegant line and piquant color. One plump, dull, gray matron eyeing an exotically colored señorita brings to mind Wallace Stevens.

After Ross's death in 1951, Irvin's place at the magazine declined sharply. His final published New Yorker cover, from 1958, has something valedictory and touching in its golfer and caddy, reflected in a water trap, looking in the wrong directions for the lost golf ball that floats before them in the pond.

Covers aren't all of Irvin's story. He also did caricatures, parodies of Diego Rivera, Picasso and Uccello, a satirical, pseudo-Audubon series called "Our Native Birds," and brilliant Hogarthian cartoons like "Pastimes of the Intelligentsia," in which the rich have nothing better to do than toss cards into a hat.

The show also includes peculiarities like two Hitler covers for The New Yorker, one published and one not, and the cartoon triptych "A Nazi History of the World," whose flipness can now, in retrospect, stop the heart and trouble the mind. A quoted note from Ross to Irvin shows how limited indeed their perspective was: "Who takes the risk of Hitler bumping off or resigning before we go to press? I am putting payment through in full but if anything happens to Hitler I guess it's partly your responsibility."

We go to certain artists because we like their spirit. Irvin's records are sparse, the number of people who knew him in his prime is declining, and his artwork is almost all the spirit we have left of him. It is a spirit largely of gaiety and joie de vivre, detachment and glee. A photo of Irvin in the exhibition shows him posing as a Buddha on a Bermuda beach, smiling and looking high as a Noel Cowardian kite. You have until the 5th of May to commune with his delightful spirit.

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