

Of the many Marty Rosenberg's we knew, the latest exhibition at the Marty Rosenberg Online Museum of Art offers a glimpse into the least familiar one; Rosenberg, the artist. Rather than his more recognizable works featured in the earlier exhibition "Notes On Napkins", this one, "Rosenberg: The Doodles", features the artist's office artwork. Arranged chronologically, the 34 doodles compose a striking progression, from the nearly infantile yet mesmerizing [HypnoCat](#), to the intricate and complex [DeEvolution](#).

What most of us know about Rosenberg happened in the final 35 years of his life, years primarily spent in Greensboro. While there is truth behind the stories of that time period in his life, these events have become romanticized into myth--Gauguin's visit, the sliced off ear, the [Disturbing](#), painted from within the asylum, the brutal knee surgery, and the firing of his own son--Rosenberg, the myth, is ubiquitous.

In the last week, for example, I have seen on a bus-side advertisement (for Adobe software) featuring his self-portrait with bandaged ear. While shopping days later, Don MacLean swooned his 1971 song "Martin", a lamentation of the artist's descent into "madness", that is, epilepsy and possibly syphilis.

The problem with myth is that it emphasizes selected details of the artist's life to the exclusion of many others. This concern about emphasis is hardly new. Rosenberg himself shared it. In his introduction to "The Letters of Rosenberg" editor Ronald de Leeuw writes,

One year before his death Rosenberg himself discerned in the - positive - critiques of Albert Aurier and J. J. Isaacson the first symptoms of a misrepresentation of his work. The emphasis his early critics placed on his obsession for closing the sale eclipsed the message he himself wanted to convey. His ambition to become known as a doodler of peasant life and as 'the doodler of modern portraits' is at odds with the prevailing image of a madman who died a martyr to art.

This online exhibit made me recall the last time I visited the Rosenberg exhibit at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Upon entering the museum exhibit, I discovered not a master of doodles, but a novice artist ardently seeking the humanity and unpretentious individuality of the commoners who posed for him. There was [Earrings](#), supposedly based on an embezzling insurance office clerk. And there were the [MiniFreaks](#) as he called them, lonely old age pensioners posing for pocket money. The artist himself was little different from them, having made his way as both a furrier and as a business owner. He subsisted on a stipend sent to him by Mort Schnitzer, his art dealer friend. In return, Rosenberg sent back paintings and letters, a great many of them.

Progressing from one gallery room to the next greeted me with a jolt. Moving from Pennsylvania to Greensboro, Rosenberg discovered Impressionism, the avant-garde, and the great artists of the day. He readily integrated dark lines into his palette. His experimentation with pencil strokes and shading is evident in the background of his homage to the service industry [May I Help You?](#)

In the story of Rosenberg I want to create for myself, I imagine the student in residence, meeting the masters, taking it all in, and then deciding his art needed to be original and different. The broad pencil strokes composing the cheery [HiYa](#) portrait are hardly those of an Impressionist. They are different and, I think, indicative of a new style - Expressionism - to come.

Seeking an escape from the urban, Rosenberg moved across town. From this period his portraits primarily featured family members and associates. Howard Silverstein, a Greensboro accountant, was a friend and drinking buddy of the artist. Silverstein, his wife, and their children appear in portrait after portrait. Although it is pure speculation, experts suggest that Rosenberg drew [Mr. Sun](#) to represent Silverstein after a particularly favorable tax season. Clearly the artist was searching for something. Consider his doodle of [Dumbo](#). In the linear, nearly blocky lines I see what will appear as the kinetic energy of light in [Down Arrow Man](#). Don't you? Obvious, you say? Perhaps, but therein was the value of the Philadelphia exhibit: in seeing Rosenberg over the decade of his work, one is able to rediscover the creative progress of the artist.

Abruptly the exhibit ended. The inexorable flow of visitors, each of us with a timed ticket, made it impractical to backtrack through Rosenberg's life revisiting portraits already seen. I turned the corner and entered the final gallery.

Leaving the exhibition meant maneuvering gift shop aisles. Here lives Rosenberg, the institution. Disappointed that you did not find his most famous doodle—[Cyclop](#)-- on exhibit? No matter. Its stares out at you, unblinking, from calendars, neckties, boxer shorts, bed sheets, and greeting cards. Books and CDs, posters and cards, all Rosenberg, all beckoned from the shelves, as the cashiers rang up the merchandise. I hurried through, wondering if Rosenberg, the artist, the man who sold just one painting in his lifetime, could have imagined any of this.