

Ralph Steadman

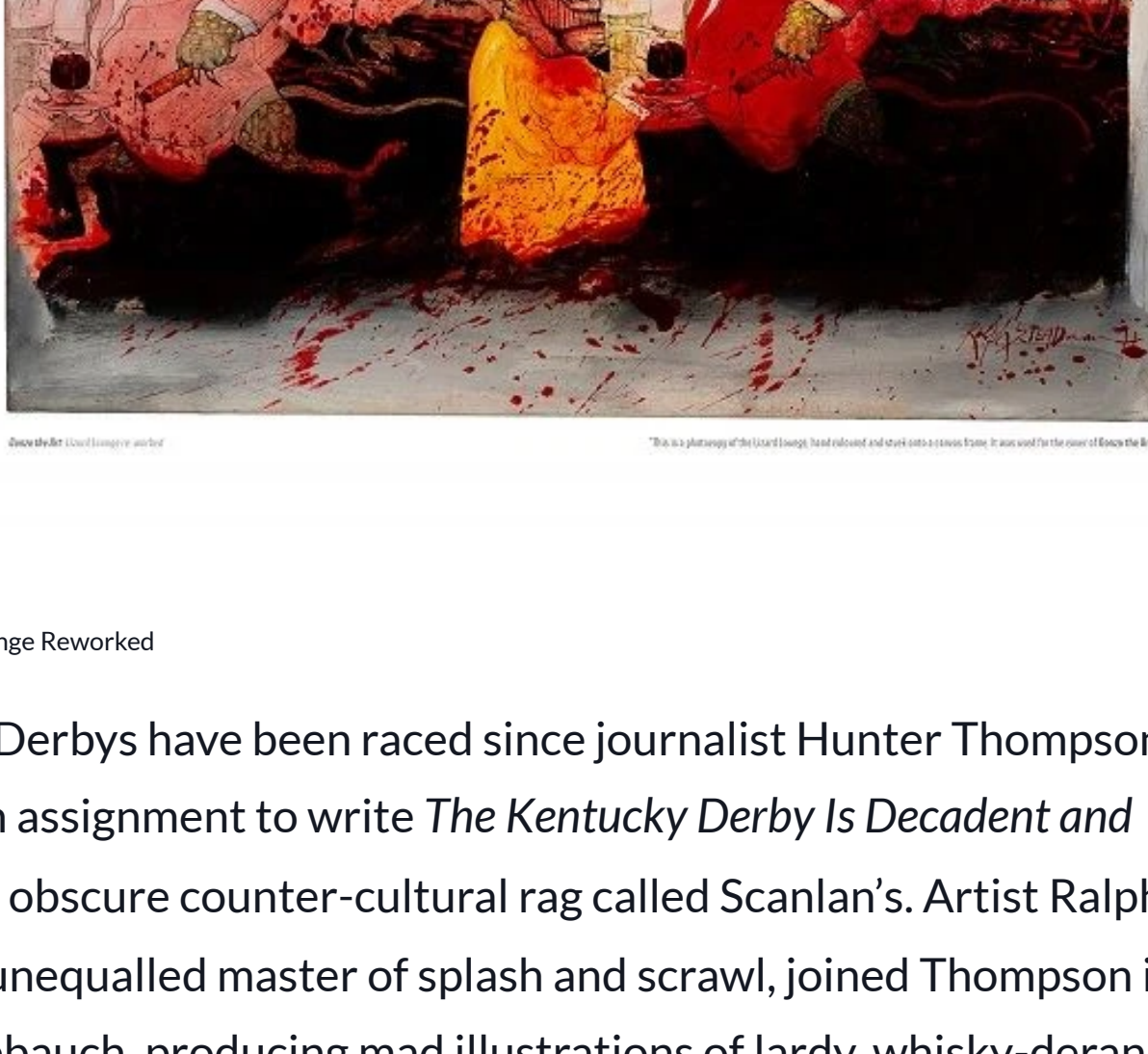
Ralph Steadman: A Life in Ink

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Michael Pearce / MutualArt Apr 30, 2021



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Fifty Kentucky Derbys have been raced since journalist Hunter Thompson embarked on an assignment to write *The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved* for an obscure counter-cultural rag called Scanlan's. Artist Ralph Steadman, the unequalled master of splash and scrawl, joined Thompson in this hilarious debauch, producing mad illustrations of lardy, whisky-deranged Southern fat cats and other degenerates. His inking of the winning horse looks as wasted as the people around it. Thompson wrote precious little about the horserace itself, but instead wrote reams describing a deranged weekend of spectacular drunkenness among the crowd gathered to watch it. The edited article described the pair's meanderings among the monied horsey bourgeoisie wrapped in the sagging linens and panamas of the old South, among the look-at-me new money watching each other in the private boxes and bars, and among the wretched, wrecked and vomit-plastered proletarian masses herded into the central enclosure of the track, fornicating, fighting and falling in a trampled mud of oxide earth, puke and spilled Schlitz while galloping horses span around them, all inseparably blended into the dervish alcoholic swirls of serious degradation. This was the birth of gonzo journalism, when the writer becomes part of the story, and fact is less important than effect.



Thompson thought the article was doomed, but instead his writing and Steadman's illustrations became famous and made the reputations of both men as founders of a new breed of dangerously individualistic, creative and drunken journalists and illustrators driven by a punkish disrespect for the establishment, known for their reckless indulgence as much as for their brilliantly anarchic art. When Scanlan's rolled and died soon after the story was published, scurrilous writers claimed it was because of Steadman and Thompson's insane bar expenses. After the Derby, Thompson wrote Steadman a characteristic gonzo letter, affectionate and schizophrenically cruel: "You filthy twisted pervert, I'll beat your ass like a gong for that drawing you did of me. You bastard . . . Stay out of Kentucky from now on. And Colorado too . . . I'd like nothing better than to work with you on one of these strange binges again, and to that end I'll tell my agent to bill us as a package, for good or ill . . . The only saving grace of that Derby scene was having you around to keep me on my rails."



Following this success, the unlikely pair — an accident-prone Scouser raised in provincial North Wales who describes himself as "an innocent abroad," and a reckless coke-headed Kentucky US airman turned sports correspondent — worked together for decades, matched perfectly in word and image, joined by their love of ink on page. A weird bond formed between them. "He always addressed me as 'Wraf,'" recalls Steadman, while raising a glass and taking a sip of white wine. "It was always like a bark, 'Wraf! What are you doing? This is the ugliest thing I've ever seen! Get out of my house!' He'd have six Bloody Mary's delivered to his room on his breakfast trolley."



Ralph Steadman, Now Do It Be President!

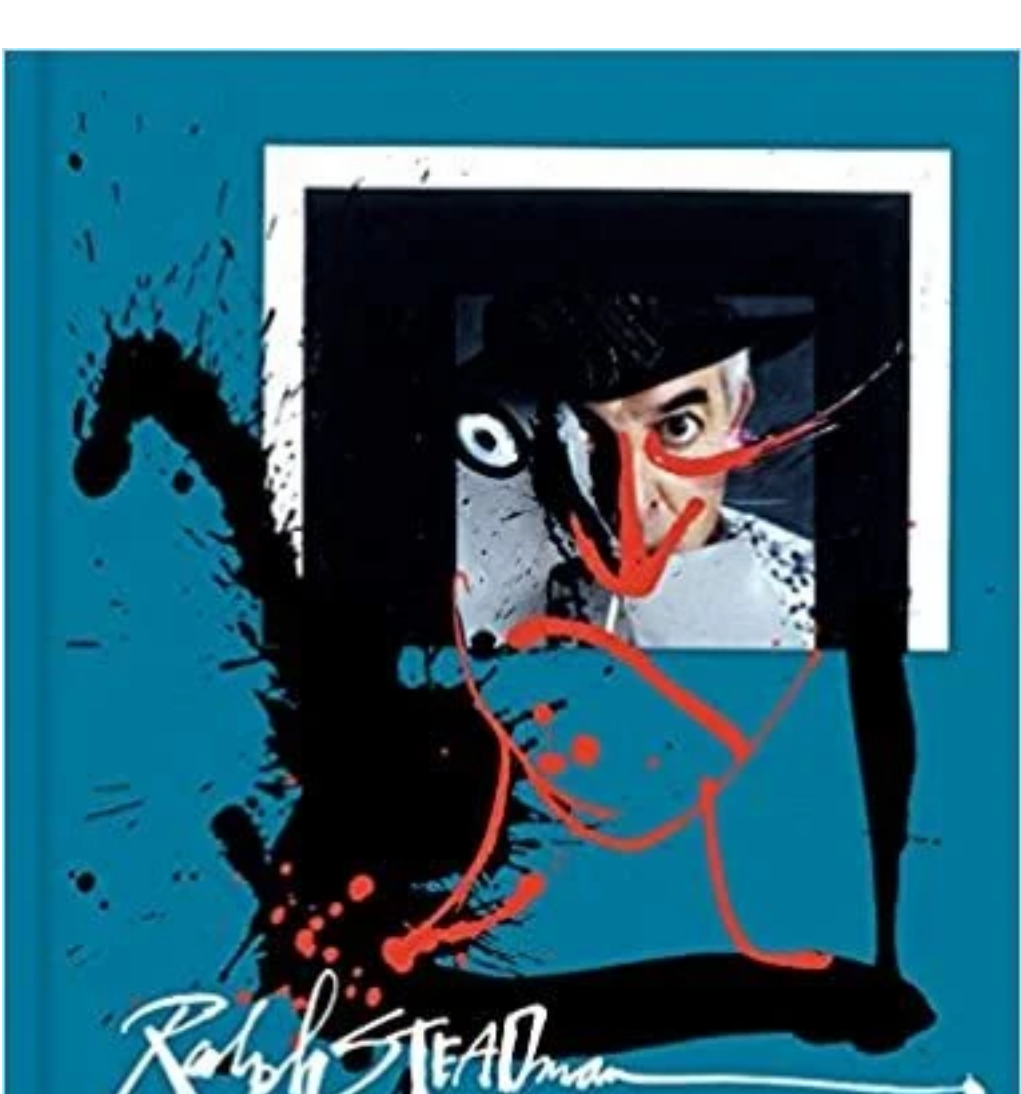
The crazed signature cartooning which made Steadman's gonzo name evolved from a mess of sources to take full form. His first job was as a stockroom clerk at Woolworths, then he trained as an illustrator via a correspondence course. He began cartooning on the margins of technical drawings he made while on a course to become a draftsman in North Wales. As a boy, Steadman experienced the horrors of the Blitz, and speculates on the influence it may have had upon his outlook. "I was able to go out as a lad and look for shrapnel, molten metal, wonderful stuff, all melted and gone hard in a particular shape. I wish I'd kept some, it was a bit like volcanic eruptions. Perhaps that's what did it, the anarchic bit." Steadman avoided indulgence in the broad pharmacopeia that fueled Thompson's wild imagination. "I never did any drugs," he says, "I didn't want to do it. I don't like the idea of losing control. I might remind you that my drawings are very confident, intelligent, and not at all out of control . . . It's very decent and proper."



Ralph Steadman, Viral Menace

Other random influences literally colored his style. Before he arrived in Kentucky at the track for his fateful meeting with Thompson, he had visited friends in New York. "I went to stay with Goddard and his wife who happened to be a representative for Revlon, and I had lost all my inks in the taxi, and she gave me some of her samples from her make-up kit. All sorts of things like that were nudges in different directions. I was much more interested in odd colors than in watercolors." He used lipstick and eyeshadow when he produced the illustrations in Kentucky — Gonzo illustration was born.

"America was better than I ever thought it would be," he muses. "There was a connection of all these things at once that made me try to become useful. I think that what I was trying to do was figure out 'What was I?'"



Ralph Steadman, A Life in Ink

Now 84 years old, Steadman is still spicy, but reflective. He puts down his wineglass and raises up a copy of a new book of his work, *A Life in Ink*, published by Chronicle Chroma, which contains an interview and photos, and pages and pages of the extraordinary portfolio which his daily dedication to drawing has produced. There are gloriously anarchic and deranged portraits of celebrities and political figures — Salman Rushdie, Kate Bush, the cast of *Breaking Bad*, Richard Nixon, Boris Johnson, paintings for his book *I, Leonardo*, pigs from his *Animal Farm*, wine tasters in California's golden Napa Valley, flying machines, and, of course, a liberal scattering of portraits of Thompson — Thompson doctored and wrapped under trademark shades, Thompson in a hospital bed hooked up to a whisky drip, Thompson hunched behind the wheel of the red shark convertible which carried him to Vegas as the bats swooped over him at the beginning of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. The book ends with a bloody and scatter-eyed insectoid creature titled *The Viral Menace*, a portrait of covid, and a self-portrait wearing a surgical mask. "Quite a few friends have died from this bloody filthy thing. I think it's ghastly. I haven't seen it like this since the Blitz. But at least you could go outside when that was happening."

What is the theme that tied his life's work together? Steadman laughs. "You know the word subterranean? I do underfilth."

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