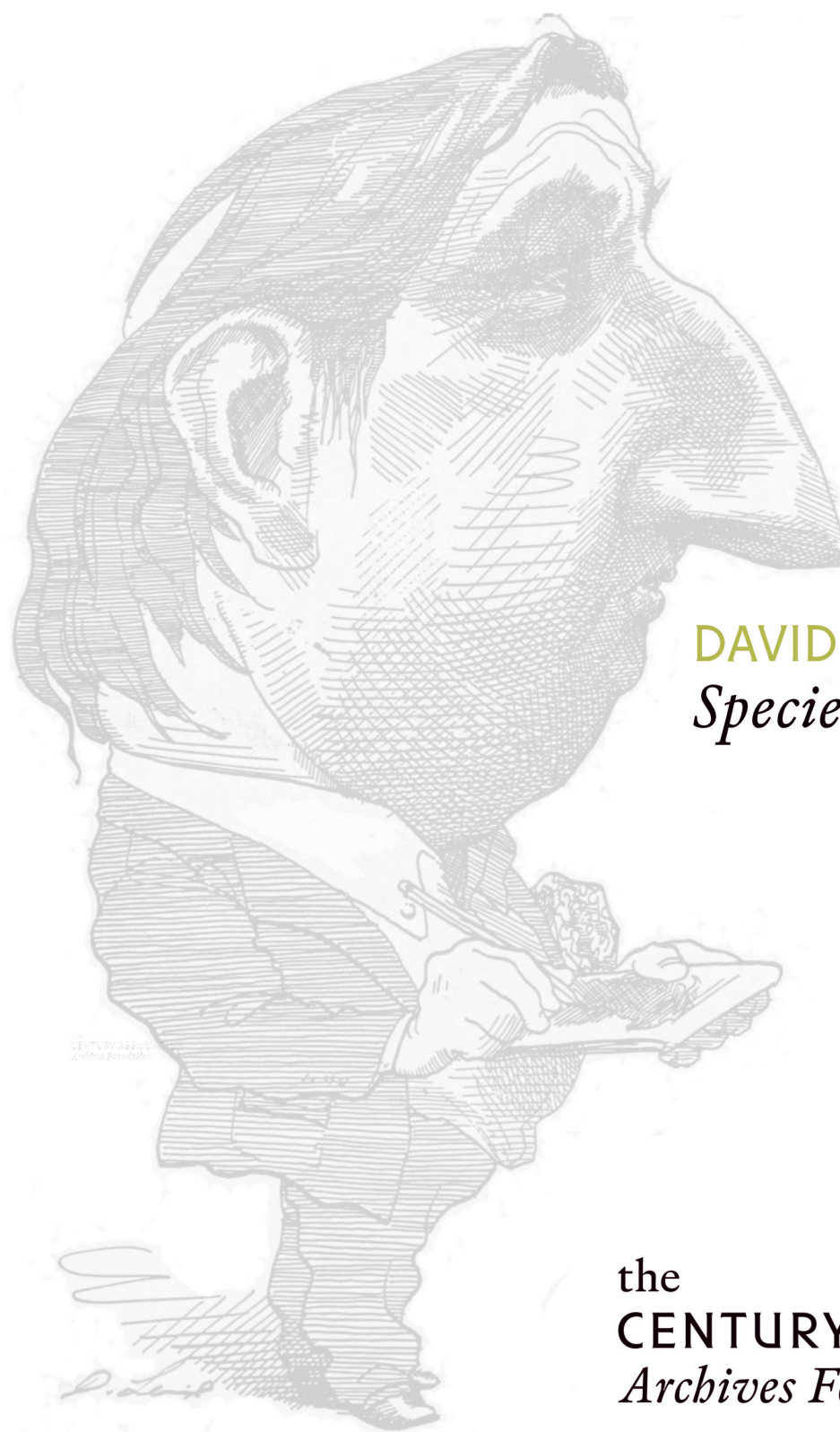


Image: *Self-Caricature by David Levine, 1968*



DAVID LEVINE'S
Species of the Century



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One need only turn to his peers in profession – and Century membership – to grasp the stature of David Levine (1926-2009, member 1971-2009): “Unquestionably, the most influential caricaturist of his day,” wrote Ed Sorel, with “a career that is unparalleled in American art.” Jules Feiffer maintained that he was “the best social, political, and literary cartoonist of this century.”

Seemingly no major figure of the twentieth century escaped Levine’s probing pen, in more than 3,800 indelible drawings for the *New York Review of Books*, where he was a staff artist since 1963, and whose iconic blocky, cerebral house style was clearly inspired by his work. He contributed thousands more caricatures to *Esquire* – where he got his professional start following submissions to *The Stars and Stripes* as a drafted WWII infantryman – *Time*, *The New York Times*, *New Yorker*, *Washington Post*, and *Rolling Stone*.

Levine’s work was quite unlike anything else, but by the 1970s, his style was already so flagrantly imitated, that Harper’s ran a feature of some of the main offenders and asked for his opinion. “As you might expect,” recounted Sorel, “David bent over backwards to be kind, and in some cases offered some helpful advice on how to make the drawings better.”

Levine never employed captions, remarking “If I can’t do it the way Charlie Chaplin did it, words are not going to help.” He sought out contradictory features in his subjects, and his work, in style and mood, as observed by Bruce Weber in his *New York Times* obituary, was similarly witty but serious, biting but deeply informed, artful in both a literate and painterly sense.

In fact, Levine self-identified as a painter supported by the “hobby” of caricature drawings. He counted Centurions as his artistic forebears, not only Thomas Nast, whose precise cross-hatching technique directly informed his famous drawings, but painters Winslow Homer and John Singer Sargent. Exclaimed member and friend John Koch, “I do not know a greater watercolorist than David. Here, by a curious reversal of those elements which dominate in the caricatures, the coarse and gamey atmosphere of Coney Island and the Brooklyn streets is invested with a sense of warmth and poetry unique in contemporary American art. His oils, so rich in fantasy, so delectable in their use of the medium, have overtones of deep human involvement made all the more haunting by the delicacy of the Touch.” The Century, alas, holds only one such work, an oil depiction of one of his favorite subjects, Garment District workers, on display on the fifth floor.

In 1958, Levine and Aaron Shikler founded The Painting Group, a salon for professional and amateur artists in which he remained active for the rest of his life, sharing his vast knowledge of technique and art history. It was fellow members of the group, including Shikler and seconder Thomas S. Buechner, that brought him into the Century fold.

As the excerpts from his letters of support for membership on display attest, he was generous and delightful company. Wrote Lovell Thompson, “David Levine is as good and as funny and as knowledgeable and as wise as his caricatures,” adding, “David, the man, is without venom; it all appears all in his pen.” And indeed, a recurring refrain in interviews with the seemingly acerbic artist is, “*I love my species*. I love looking at their faces.”

Levine, despite his lack of pretensions, was an active club man. A life-long Brooklyn resident, he received his packets of the upcoming article assignments and assembled “scrap” of images rustled up by the *New York Review of Books* at the Heights Casino racquet club, where a messenger would return a few days later for the resulting drawings, often done in only a few hours time.

The Century membership was certainly rewarded by counting Levine among its brethren. He was featured in a November 1971 exhibition of five works by five new artist-members only 6 months after his election. His first solo show of drawings was in October 1980, with another in September 2002, plus numerous other contributions to group shows and club promotional materials over his nearly four decades of membership. When the Committee on Exhibitions began hosting Art Buffet luncheons in 1994, Levine was their inaugural artist-member, selected to present slides of his work (a recording of which sadly does not survive, though the archives contain others). He tragically did not live to see the November 30, 2010 opening of his Century Masters show, where he was praised for epitomizing the founding ideals and character of the Century.

In his *Vanity Fair* profile of Levine, member David Margolick remarked that “Sometimes, life resembled a Levine drawing.” He quoted writer Richard Elman’s reminiscences of a literary party in which a “a whole collection of animated David Levine caricature faces, drinking, standing about, sitting on overstuffed sofas, and smearing chopped liver onto crackers. There was no face in that room that did not seem to recall a page out of the *New York Review of Books*.” One can imagine the Century much the same (perhaps with oysters in place of pâté). Print reproductions of Levine’s portraits of his fellow members selected for his Masters show, which have been maintained in the Century archives, are here displayed to evoke that reverie. The prints will be rotated on view throughout the season.

When asked in 2008 how he would like to be remembered, Levine shared his common advice to young cartoonists, “Your primary thing is not to leave your species on a dump,” not to over-distort so much that you are subverting the depth of the subject’s character. So he would likely be thrilled to learn that when solicited for his response to Levine’s 1987 caricature, derived from a photograph, Century member Robert Hughes opined: “I don’t think the photograph was anything like as truthful as the drawing. Most caricature is no more than cartooning. But with Levine you always knew there was some truth emanating from the drawings. You always had the sense he was telling a truth, even when it was most unwelcome.”

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Exhibition Organized by the Century Association Archives Foundation