

A Mile and a Half of Lines

The Art of JAMES THURBER

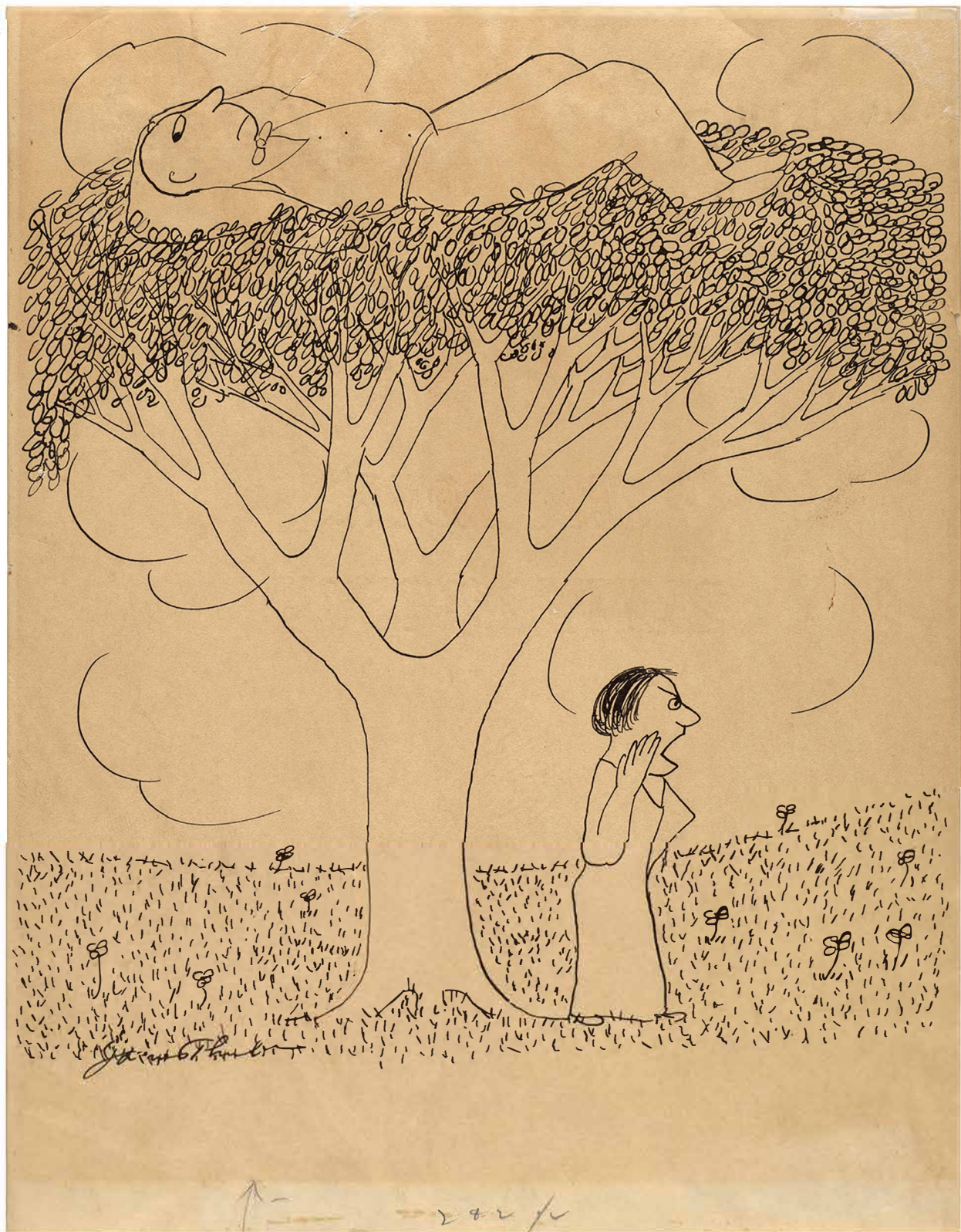


Michael J. Rosen

with contributions from

Ian Frazier, Seymour Chwast, Liza Donnelly,

Michael Maslin, and Rosemary Thurber



Contents

Acknowledgments . . . ix

One-Line Storyteller

An Introductory Note by Michael J. Rosen . . . 3

James Thurber's *The Seal in the Bedroom and Other Predicaments*, 1932

An Introduction by Dorothy Parker . . . 9

CHAPTER ONE

The Line of Matisse or a Doodling Child? . . . 13

with "Ordinary Except for This," by Seymour Chwast . . . 16

CHAPTER TWO

Signs of the Hard Times . . . 65

CHAPTER THREE

Thurber's Pre-Intentional Compositions . . . 109

with "Maslin and Millmoss," by Michael Maslin . . . 118

CHAPTER FOUR

That Thurber Dog and Other Creatures . . . 129

with "Without Saying a Word," by Liza Donnelly . . . 172

with "Isn't That Sweet?" by Liza Donnelly and Michael Maslin . . . 176

CHAPTER FIVE

The Draw of Columbustown . . . 179

Thurber's Walls

An Afterword by Ian Frazier . . . 199

A Chronology of Solo and Group Exhibitions of James Thurber's Art . . . 205

Books by James Thurber . . . 221

Notes and Sources . . . 225

List of Illustrations . . . 231

About the Editor and Contributors . . . 241

One-Line Storyteller

An Introductory Note by Michael J. Rosen



HOW I'D LOVE TO SAY THIS book allows us to see the full range of the artistic career of arguably the best-known twentieth-century cartoonist—his early and late periods, his work in various media . . . except there were less than three decades in which Thurber's drawings appeared and very little to witness other than the shifts from pencil to pen and ink to chalk as Thurber's complete blindness approached.

Thurber was well aware of his slight breadth of range. In a preface to the 1950 edition of his first book of drawings, *The Seal in the Bedroom and Other Predicaments* (1932), he wrote,

I went back over these drawings in the wistful hope that I would find evidence on which to base a fond belief that my work, or fun, somehow improved after this "first phase." The only change I could find, however,

in comparing old and recent scrawls, was a certain tightening of my lack of technique over the eras, the inevitable and impure result of constant practice. In the case of a man who cannot draw, but keeps on drawing anyway, practice pays in meager coin for what it takes away.²

Likewise, I'd like to emphasize that this book is the first to truly consider James Thurber's opus from one or another art historical or sociological point of view—except it's the first, period. And while Thurber's work was continually presented in one-man shows at small galleries and in group exhibits at major art institutions, and while his unmistakable drawings appeared in a host of magazines beyond the *New Yorker*, on dresses and ties and scarves and linens, on the covers and interiors of other books—to say nothing about his greater renown as a writer—with his death in 1961, his popularity and stature have waned.

Therefore, this book is a rallying cry: a host of preeminent cartoonists and writers reacquainting us with the significance and importance of Thurber's drawings, which changed the nature of the cartoon in America and paved the way for an entirely different approach to visual art. It's a showcase of some 250 drawings that coincides with the first major exhibit of Thurber's art. Even though the Columbus Museum of Art, back when it was called the Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, did mount two smaller shows of Thurber's work, and even though works of Thurber's appeared in several solo and scores of group shows during and after his lifetime, this year, 2019, the 125th anniversary of Thurber's birth, offers the first chance to review the character of his contribution to American illustration, cartooning, and children's books.



Thurber and His Circle

There are several variations of this self-portrait—Thurber holding forth—with a variety of bored or sleepy listeners. The version to the right of Thurber declaiming to late-night guests appeared in the *New Yorker*.



Thurber and His Circle



The Story Teller

JAMES THURBER was a storyteller, even in his one-line captions. We always find the subjects in the midst of things. Something has just happened . . . and something's about to happen, but in the interval of that ellipsis? It's a moment that invites guessing, intuiting, extrapolation—and still no clear or even likely answers arise. It's only the middle—the muddle—of things with which we are left. Amusingly stranded with a permanent fascination, we have a renewable opportunity to project our own experiences or recollections onto the figures. Thurber's men and women, often bare as cherubic dolls, stand there unselfconsciously, waiting for us to outfit them in some context and logic.

While Thurber did not draw himself into "The Story Teller," the scene certainly reveals his most natural rhythm. Talking, reciting from memory, regaling, sharing. It's just as easy to imagine Thurber at a dinner party, at a

This is the final scene in a series of eleven drawings entitled "The Collapse of Civilization," from Thurber's first collection of drawings, *The Seal in the Bedroom and Other Predicaments*.

The Machine Age

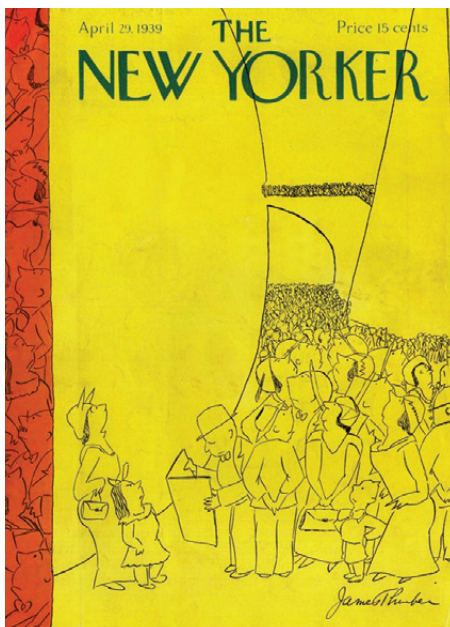
The Machine Age in America (1918–1941) was viewed as a mixed bag of helpful and harmful hardware. Travel became faster and more affordable. Telephones were installed in homes and offices. It made the world feel a little smaller. It made Thurber feel a little battier. Any gadget or appliance, everything from cigarette vending machines to a card table that, with the push of a button, transformed into an ironing board, filled Thurber with frustration—at least on the page. “Every person carries in his consciousness the old scar, or the fresh wound, of some harrowing misadventure with a contraption.”¹³

As the Machine Age progressed, many Americans found themselves with something they hadn’t experienced before: leisure time. But worries, like storm clouds, countered some of the sunny glee: Will mechanized warfare lead to our doom? Will free time lead to moral decline? Do monotonous factory hours deaden the workers? And Thurber’s prevailing question: How does this thing work, anyway?

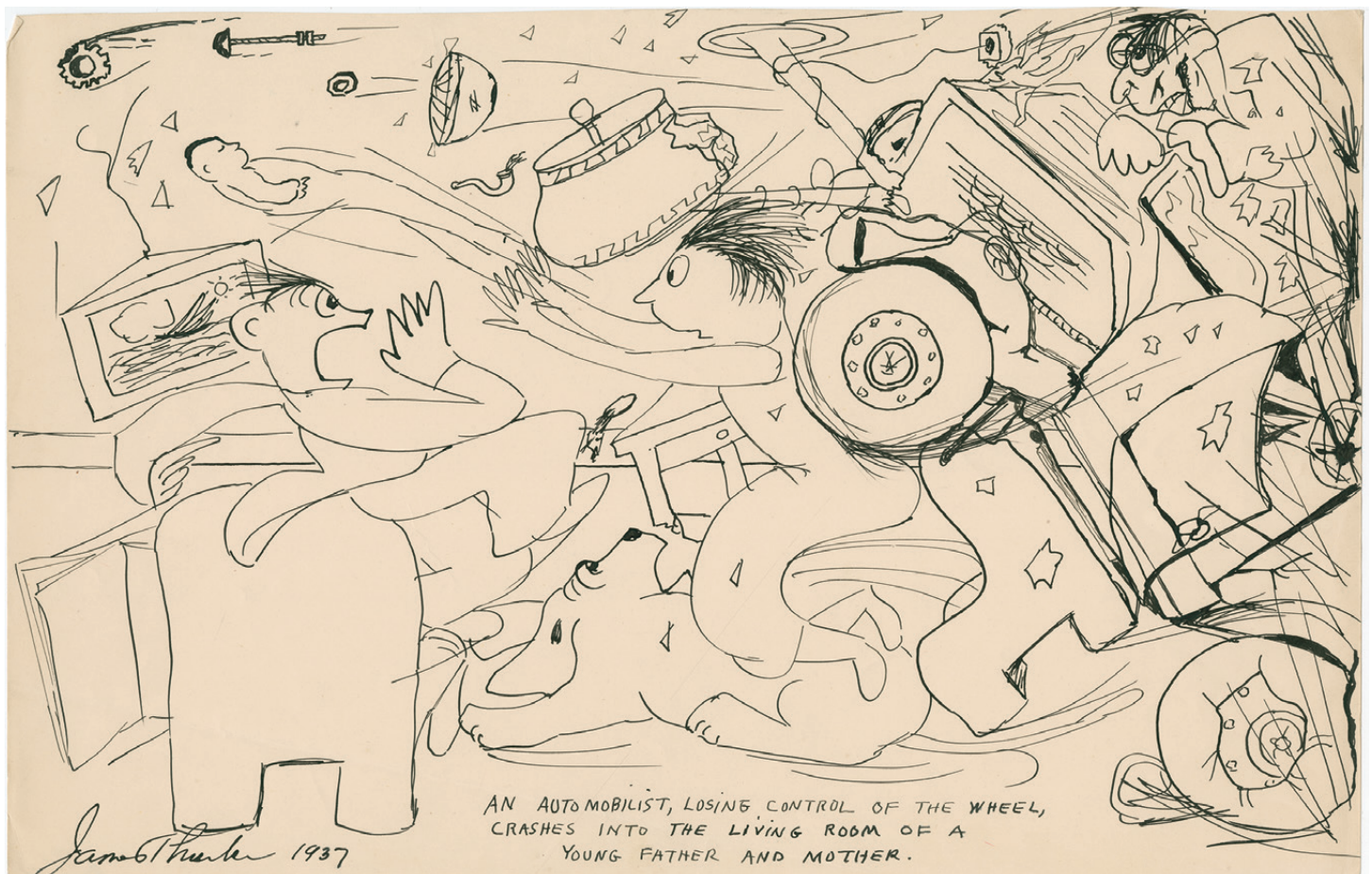
Ultimately, the age’s progress and prosperity led to substantial improvements, valuable new skills, fewer work hours for better pay, rising life expectancies. And, people could smile at each other as they passed on the streets—in their newfangled automobiles.

For Thurber, there was a wellspring of humor in our “dread heritage of annoyance, shock, and terror arising out of the nature of mechanical contrivances.”¹⁴ There’s a haplessness. A bafflement. An innocence daunted by technologies. The first Thurber biographer, Robert E. Morsberger, suggests that much of Thurber’s work is “a counterpart to Chaplin’s *Modern Times*, and his pathetic protagonists are upper middle-class cousins of Chaplin’s little tramp.”¹⁵

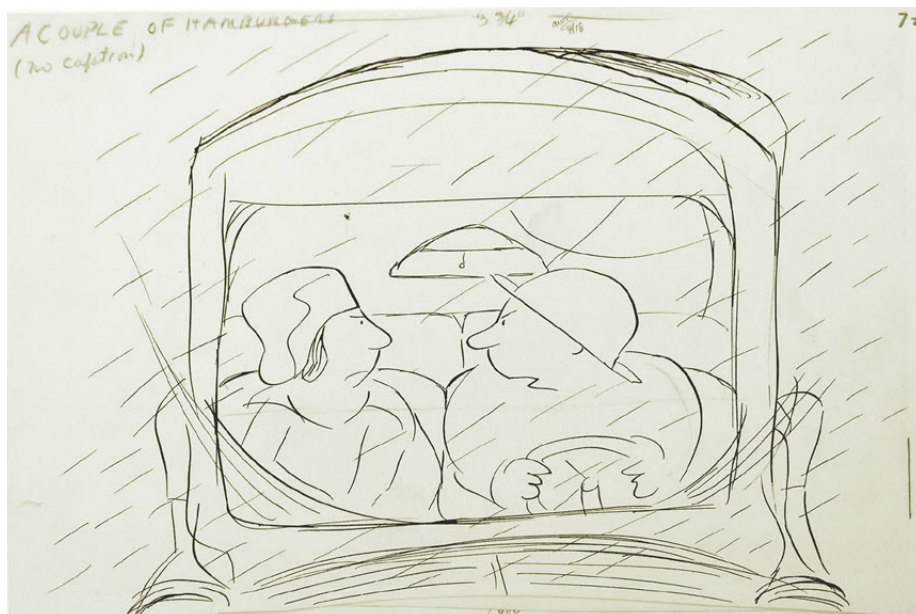
In 1941, Thurber published a story, “I Break Everything I Touch,” in which he discusses how he essentially inherited his “ineptitude with contraptions.” It ends with his stating, “This is not the world for me, this highly mechanized world. I can only hope that in Heaven there is nothing more complicated than a harp and that they will have winged mechanics to fix mine when I get it down and break its back.”¹⁶



Thurber’s cover coincides with the opening of the 1939 World’s Fair. Its theme, “Building the World of Tomorrow,” focused on the future with such innovations as the television, nylon, the View-Master, fluorescent lighting, electric typewriters, and, with 1,200 acres of experimental architecture, most remarkably, the iconic, all-white structures commonly known as “the ball and spike”: the eighteen-story Perisphere (the left half of Thurber’s cover), which housed an enormous exhibit of the future city some 44 million visitors viewed from two rotating balconies, and—connected by the longest electric escalator ever created—the 610-foot-tall Tylon (the right side of the cover).

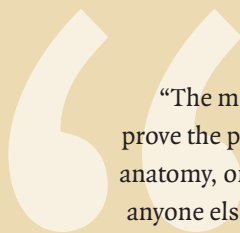


An automobilist, losing control of the wheel, crashes into the living room of a young father and mother.



“She enjoyed bringing up the subject of the burned out bearing [what holds the crankshaft in a car’s engine] whenever he got to chortling. . . . ‘All engines make a noise running, you know.’ ‘I know. . . it sounds like a lot of safety-pins being jiggled around in a tumbler.’ He snorted ‘That’s your imagination. Nothing gets the matter with a car that sounds like a lot of safety pins.’”—from “A Couple of Hamburgers,” from *Let Your Mind Alone*.





“The most wonderful thing about Thurber’s drawings is how they prove the point of a cartoon is not to show off a mastery of perspective or anatomy, or that the cartoonist can render a horse—or a sea—better than anyone else on the planet. Not that I can tell you what the point is, other than it has a lot more to do with being funny than anatomy.”

ROZ CHAST, author of *Can’t We Talk about Something More Pleasant?*

“Thurber’s drawings dropped into the pages of the *New Yorker* like graphic boulders in a placid pond.”

MICHAEL MASLIN, *New Yorker* cartoonist

“Thurber’s wit sustains life. He towers over all.”

MAIRA KALMAN

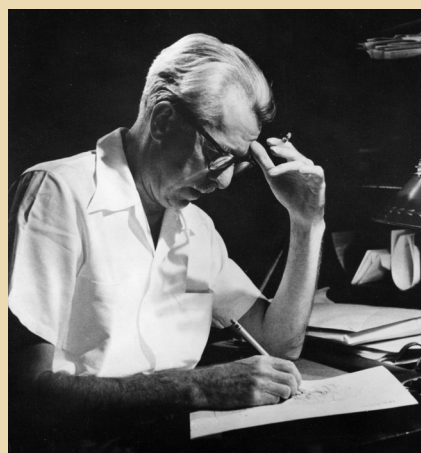
HUMORIST, CARTOONIST, WRITER, PLAYWRIGHT.

James Thurber was to the twentieth century what Mark Twain was to the nineteenth. At one point, his books were the most read of any American in the world. His work could be found anywhere—from the pages of the *New Yorker* to the pages of children’s books, from illustrated advertisements to tea towels and dresses. Now, in celebration of the 125th anniversary of Thurber’s birth, *A Mile and a Half of Lines: The Art of James Thurber* is a long overdue introduction and reintroduction to James Thurber and the artwork that fundamentally changed American cartoons.

Including some 260 drawings, this collection is the first comprehensive focus on his work as an artist, a cartoonist, and an illustrator. With commentary from a host of preeminent cartoonists and writers, including Ian Frazier, Seymour Chwast, Liza Donnelly, and Michael Maslin, *A Mile and a Half of Lines* celebrates the significance of Thurber’s spontaneous, unstudied, and novel drawing style that not only altered the nature of American cartooning but also expanded the very possibilities of an illustrated line. Coinciding with the first major retrospective of Thurber’s art presented by the Columbus Museum of Art in 2019, *A Mile and a Half of Lines* showcases both classic Thurber as well as visual material never before seen in print.

MICHAEL J. ROSEN is a writer, an illustrator, and an editor who has collaborated with the Thurber Estate and written about the works of James Thurber for almost forty years. He was the founding literary director of the Thurber House and has edited six volumes of Thurber’s work.

JAMES THURBER (1894–1961), the twentieth century’s most popular American humorist, authored nearly three dozen collections of cartoons, essays, stories, fables, and biographical works—much of which he published as one of the original voices of the *New Yorker* magazine—in addition to creating a shelf of classic children’s books, the gem-like autobiographical stories in *My Life and Hard Times*, and two Broadway productions.



DOUGLAS GLASS

COVER IMAGE: Drawing from a poster for the Washington Square Outdoor Art Exhibition, 1935. Image courtesy Library of Congress.



TRILLIUM, an imprint of
The Ohio State University Press
Columbus | ohiostatepress.org

ISBN13 978-0-8142-5533-9



9 780814 255339