

Charles Steffen (1927-1995)

Born Chicago, Illinois, 1927

Died Chicago, Illinois, 1995

Illinois Institute of Technology, 1949

Charles Steffen was an American self-taught artist from Chicago, Illinois. He studied drawing, art history, and photography at the Illinois Institute of Technology in the late 1940s. Around 1950, while still in school, he suffered a mental breakdown and was institutionalised at Elgin State Hospital between 1952 and 1963, undergoing treatments and electroshock therapy for schizophrenia. He continued to make art during this time.

After leaving hospital Steffen moved into his childhood home with his sister, Rita. He spent most of his time drawing with graphite and coloured pencils. Steffen drew figures not only from memory, but from his daily life. His mother, siblings, and romantic interests appear consistently in his work, rendered in varying detail and often elaborated upon in his annotations.

When the family house was sold upon his mother's death in 1994, Steffen moved into a small room in a men's retirement home in northern Chicago. Previously, Rita had instructed him to destroy his piles of drawings now and then, believing them to be a fire hazard. Upon his move, Steffen was prepared to throw away a vast body of drawings but instead gave pieces to his nephew, Christopher Preissing, who had shown interest in his work. They were discovered in storage around 2006.

Steffen's work has been exhibited at the Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne; the American Folk Art Museum, New York; Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York; Galerie Christian Berst, Paris, and MARCH, New York. His work is in the permanent collections of the Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne; High Museum of Art, Atlanta; Intuit Art Museum, Chicago, and the American Folk Art Museum, New York.