

# j.j. sempé

CARTOONIST AND SATIRIST

Interview by Steven Heller

“Jean-Jacques Sempé is a little like Brigitte Bardot or Charles Aznavour. He’s a national institution who has acquired an almost universal appeal by remaining quintessentially French,” wrote Charles McGrath in *The New York Times* last fall during one of the cartoonist’s rare trips to New York City. Sempé was in town to greet his editors at *The New Yorker*, which has published his covers, cartoons, and illustrations for almost 30 years. He was also there to help launch an avalanche of reissued books by Phaidon Press, from *Monsieur Lambert*, his cartoon novel, to *Martin Pebble*, a children’s book, to *Nothing is Simple*, one of his many semi-thematic cartoon anthologies. As Sempé nears 75 years of age, his calming visual commentaries continue to address the lighter side of *la comédie humaine*. It is hard not to be amused (and sometimes jolted) by the curiosities in life he finds so absurd. Although his work is sometimes compared to that of James Thurber, Sempé’s single-panel tableaux are not quite gags, but quotidian paradoxes drawn from keen observation. His line is simple and serene yet sardonic; he draws little men and cherubic women with such true affection that it is possible at first glance to miss that each of them is usually dwarfed by his or her overbearing environment. While in New York, Sempé stopped long enough to parry with this hapless interviewer, refusing to take himself or his work too seriously, and sounding to this ear a lot like the tenor of his cartoons.



Cartoon from *Everything is Complicated*, an anthology reissued by Phaidon Press in 2006.

**HELLER:** Your cartoons have always pitted the little man against vast skies and mammoth skyscrapers. What in your background made you challenge these monumental things? **SEMPÉ:** I once had this very short friend who perceived me as being very tall. I had another friend who really *was* very tall. One day, I saw my very tall friend standing at the foot of an enormous building. From afar, he seemed minuscule compared to the building. That experience contributed to my philosophical development in terms of the relativity of things and feelings. Incidentally, I wrote two essays on the subject that were turned down by big and small publishing houses alike. **HELLER:** Although you are French, your work—like Folon, Topor, and François—has a universal air. Your character is everyman, but he is also an individual. How much of your everyman is Sempé? **SEMPÉ:** I’ve always forbidden my characters from getting tangled up with me. They keep on trying to do it, though. The only exception

is when tax season rolls around—then, no one is in sight. **HELLER:** There is such an architectural sensibility in your work, from the mansard roofs of Paris to the rococo filigreed columns in some of your interiors. Would you have been an architect instead of a cartoonist if you could? **SEMPÉ:** If I had been an architect, the logic and solidity of my creations would have been to blame for so many tragedies that I would have lost sleep over it. And a lot of friends, too. **HELLER:** Because your comedy is based so much on the internal and external pressures brought to bear by the environment, do you think of these cartoons as being political? Or do you avoid politics altogether? **SEMPÉ:** Of course I think in political terms! But hey, no one listens to me. And look where that’s gotten us! **HELLER:** Okay, but seriously, what is your process? Do you draw every day? Do you have ideas that are worth preserving on those days? Is there something you look to, or at, that sparks a cartoon? **SEMPÉ:** You want me to speak seriously? It’s so gloomy



Three of six Sempé titles reissued by Phaidon in 2006: *Nothing is Simple*, *Sunny Spells*, and *Everything is Complicated*.

to speak seriously. Yes, I draw more, or less, every day—but every single day. No, I don't have ideas that are worth preserving every day. You're going to be successful in making me sad with your serious questions! And unfortunately, something I look to, or at, doesn't spark a cartoon. Speaking of my everyday life saddens me, really! **HELLER:** I know that any explanation of a joke kills a joke, but can you tell me what makes you think of wonderful cartoons like the one in *Nothing is Simple* of the woman in the houseboat banging on the floor of an apartment in a bridge? It's so ludicrous yet logical. **SEMPÉ:** I can't remember what made me think of creating this cartoon, exactly 48 years ago. It's more about the fact that I used to sell only one or two drawings out of 50, so I had to make money to be able to pay my rent! Here we are—to evoke that bleak and difficult time will definitely make me sad for the whole evening. **HELLER:** Nonetheless, whenever I look at your cartoons I feel an overwhelming sense of pure joy. While I always feel the cartoons have a sub rosa level of tension, I never feel the usual cynicism common to most satirists. Why is this? Are you simply not a sarcastic kind of guy? **SEMPÉ:** I'm thrilled to know you feel "an overwhelming sense of pure joy" when you look at my drawings, and

thank you sincerely for the chocolates you send. You're right in thinking I'm not a sarcastic man. The few times I tried to be one, I received a pair of slaps so hard that I haven't been able to go out without a hat ever since. Wearing the hat allows me to obsequiously greet everyone, even people I don't know. **HELLER:** Is there a theme or topic that you are passionate about that for some reason has eluded you in cartoons? And if so, is this something that you regret? **SEMPÉ:** Yes, there is a topic that enthralles me: the beauty and grandeur of my soul. Once again, I wrote several essays on the subject and regret to say that all the publishers rejected them. It was as if they had collectively agreed to turn them down. **HELLER:** Although you publish in the U.S.—mostly in *The New Yorker*—do you believe there is a national cartoon idiom that is distinct to the country from which it derives? **SEMPÉ:** I repeated your question over several times and think the answer can be found within the question. Don't think I'm being sarcastic again. I raise my hat to you several times and assure you that you have my most profound respect. **HELLER:** I mentioned logic before. Sometimes your cartoons seem so logical—like the one in *Nothing is Simple* where you have a lone leaf spiraling down to the ground from a tree. It lands in a yard, and you see a hand throwing it

over the wall into another yard. I'd say that some things are very simple. Do you look for the simple idea as a matter of course?

**SEMPÉ:** But my dear friend, I often look at the simplest idea, but I simply tell you: It's quite a complicated game. **HELLER:** I admit, this is probably another dumb question, but nonetheless, every cartoonist has a different answer: To you, what is humor? And what is funny? **SEMPÉ:** No, the question isn't dumb, and I have the perfect and definitive answer. I called my five agents (I've put them up against each other), and they all told me they could most certainly secure a very attractive price, except that they're very busy at the moment. **HELLER:** Your cartoons are often quite poignant. When I see one of your characters riding a bike, I feel he may be living in a false paradise. Do you feel you are sometimes too optimistic? **SEMPÉ:** My compliments for your relevance. My cyclist does indeed live in a false paradise: The way he's drawn clearly suggests that at the next push of the pedals he's going to smash himself up. I really am too optimistic. **HELLER:** Now that all these collections of your work are out, do you feel you've reached the end of an era? What's next for you? **SEMPÉ:** Not all of my collections are published! It's really the end of an era: the end of my editor's peace of mind. I'm hounding him and ordering him to publish the other stuff. I call him in the middle of the night and send him anonymous letters. I'm training a dog to attack my editor on sight. My plans are to force him to publish other things, including the philosophical essays I was telling you about earlier. 📍

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*Steven Heller is a contributing editor of PRINT. His latest book, with Louise Fili, is Stylepedia: A Guide to Graphic Design Mannerisms, Quirks, and Conceits (Chronicle). Sempé interview translation: Courtney Traub.*