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Reviews: New York

Raphael Soyer

Forum

"Raphael Soyer: Finding America," the apt title of this moving, museum-quality exhibition, sums up Soyer's life and the achievement of his work. Soyer arrived in New York in 1912, a cultivated 12-



Raphael Soyer, *Shop Girls*, 1936, oil on canvas, 30 1/8" x 38 1/8". Forum.

year-old Russian Jewish émigré. Initially influenced by the teachings of Guy Pène du Bois at the Art Students League, he spent several years as a self-styled primitivist—and a good one, as was evident in the charming, curvy couple on view here in the *Dancing Lesson* (1926).

For the next six decades, he worked as a realist in a midtonal range on small and midsize canvases, producing pictures of people who stood for the multitudes: a bespectacled tailor laboring by incandescent light; gaunt men in heavy overcoats, whose faces and hunched posture embodied the Depression; a GI in a last poignant embrace before being shipped off to war.

Clearly, Soyer loved women, whom he painted as studio nudes, dancers, subway riders, and shop girls. The images are uniformly sympathetic, vaguely sexual, and yet always proper. Many owe a debt to Degas, and the delicate, frothy brushstrokes have something in common with Fragonard. The unspoken influence is that of the artist's wife, who made it a point to befriend Soyer's models and blurred the boundary between chum and chaperone.

Following Rembrandt's example, Soyer often painted himself. Like the man, his self-portraits are small, focused, humane, and observant. Usually his sensitive, owlish countenance stares out from beneath a broad-brimmed hat, giving the hint of a film-noir private eye or a Walter Mitty. Throughout, these images meld a sense of the artist's time with his temperament and make both come alive.

—Gerard Haggerty