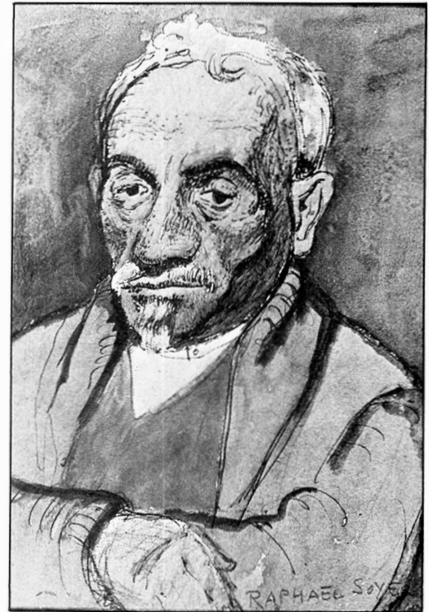




Raphael Soyer's *Portrait of Arshile Gorky*, pencil, 1940, 9½ by 6½ inches. The artist has captured the other's tortured spirit.



Raphael Soyer on Raphael Soyer: the unflinchingly honest *Self Portrait*, 1964, in pencil.



An early watercolor and ink drawing, ca. 1916-17, by Soyer, *Artist's Father (Man in Red Sweater)*, 10½ by 7½ inches.

Raphael Soyer: 'A realist without a slogan'

Soyer's introspective, isolated portraits compel the eye; he is a graphic master whose work, shown recently at the National Collection of Fine Arts, focuses on modern man

by JOANNA SHAW-EAGLE

The National Collection of Fine Arts in Washington, D.C. is honoring Raphael Soyer, that grand old man of American Art, with a first major museum exhibition of 58 drawings and watercolors and five related oils (September 30-December 27). The show surveys Soyer's development as a graphic artist from his "primitive," naive style of the 1920s, through his establishment in the '30s of his major themes—female nudes, the poor of New York, portraits of friends and himself—to his development and intensification of these themes in the 30-plus years following.

Soyer's art has often been submerged by interest in other art movements, such as Abstract Expressionism. Yet, he has always had a small but loyal group of collectors, has sold well, and hasn't had to seek out museum exhibitions and critical acclaim. Martin Peretz, a Soyer collector and editor and publisher of New Republic Books (which just published Soyer's *Diary of an Artist*) sums up the artist's special qualities: "Soyer has the realism of a private vision and not of public programs; he is one of the few American realists, with the exception of Hopper, to achieve this. Soyer's a realistic painter without a slogan."

Now 77, Soyer has devoted much of his creative energies to the art of drawing. One of the great realists of our time, he has put line (that suggests, rather than precisely describes) to the service of humanism. It is the people, especially the portraits and self-portraits, that hypnotize the visitor to this exhibition.

Soyer has described the intensity and longevity of this occupation: "One evening, a young man named Ivan Ivanovich Pzdniakov came to our house (in Russia) and did a drawing of our father from life. That one could draw a living person was a sudden revelation to me. I stopped drawing for several days, then asked my father to pose for me as he had for Ivan Ivanovich. When the drawing was praised, my elation was boundless. From then on I became a confirmed realist. I drew only from nature rather than from imagination, like other children. In retrospect, I believe that this limited my art, but perhaps my love for painting people stems from the incident."

Ivan Ivanovich was among the intellec-

tuals and artists who frequented the Soyer household in Borisoglebsk, Tambov, South Russia. Soyer's father taught Hebrew literature and history, drew pictures, and filled the house with reproductions of the great masters. All six children were encouraged to draw, but it was Raphael, and his twin brother Moses, who really took to art. (Isaac, another brother, followed seven years later.) The Russians, however, feared the liberal center the Soyer household had become, especially as the Soyers were Jewish, and deported them in 1921.

The family settled first in Philadelphia, then New York City. Raphael Soyer completed grade and high school, then set to work to supplement the family income, still painting and drawing with brother Moses at home at night. He put himself through art school with odd jobs, focusing on his fellow New Yorkers and artists.

Soyer's humanistic passion, born in Russia and persisting through his New York experiences, is all around us at this exhibition. Though the studies of New York City life are masterful, it is Soyer's portraits that compel the eye. Here is a contemporary graphic master in the tradition of Rembrandt, Ingres, Delacroix, Pascin focusing

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on modern man. Here is the human condition rendered through introspective, isolated portraits (mostly of family and artist-friends) done with a highly personal line often combined with colored wash.

The pen-and-ink double study of Soyer and Arshile Gorky (about 1940) is a trip through the souls of these two artists: Gorky, shoulders slightly hunched, sadly stares off to the right, averting the viewer's gaze; a young Soyer quizzically looks out from under a battered hat. A pencil portrait of Gorky, also 1940, and a study for the exhibition's oil portrait, effectively reveals the tortured spirit that would lead to Gorky's suicide.

Soyer's ink line combines with soft watercolor in *Yasuo Kuniyoshi* (1941) and *Jack Levine* (1957). Levine slouches against a table, arms folded, also under a battered hat, wine bottle behind. Kuniyoshi sits sketching in a chair. Both look obliquely off into space, isolated. The same oblique view is used in Soyer's portrait of his wife, *Rebecca* (1950).

The self-portraits could form a show of their own. The handsome young artist of about 1923 contrasts with the mature, sad Soyer who draws himself the day of Kennedy's assassination. In a pencil *Self-Portrait* (1964) Soyer stares directly out of the page, with deep chiaroscuro under the eyes and chin. These are his finest works, unflinchingly honest. ■

Raphael Soyer, *Pregnant Girl*, 1965,
watercolor and pencil, 13½ by 10½ inches.
Photo courtesy Forum Gallery.

Raphael Soyer, *Study for "The Mission,"* ca. 1933,
charcoal, 13½ by 23½ inches; a "highly personal line."

