

# The Social Realist Artist Studios of 240 West 14th Street

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*240 West 14th Street, today. The building retains a remarkable level of architectural integrity for a townhouse that has had so many diverse uses.*

<https://www.villagepreservation.org/2022/01/26/the-social-realist-artist-studios-of-240-west-14th-street/>



*240 West 14th Street circa 1940s from the New York City 1940s Tax Photos.*

Originally constructed as a private mansion in the 1850s, 240 West 14th Street became a hub of Social Realist painting in the 1930s when a large group of artists loosely affiliated with the Art Students League and the Fourteenth Street School began renting numerous studios in the building. The Social Realist movement was crucial to the development of American art.



*From “Tom and Jack: The Intertwined Lives of Thomas Hart Benton and Jackson Pollock”, a juxtaposition of a Thomas Hart Benton work (top) with Jackson Pollock’s first Abstract Expressionist works (bottom)*

Jackson Pollock, 1930: Jackson Pollock listed 240 West 14th Street as his address when registering for classes at the Art Students League New York in 1930. It is his first known New York address. Pollock was studying with Thomas Hart Benton at the Art Students League at this time. He contributed “action posing” for Benton’s murals at the New School a few blocks away.





*Raphael Soyer working on his painting "Man Drinking Beer". His model, a homeless man named Walter Broe started posing with a glass of brown-dyed water, but changed to the real thing in order to "feel the part". New York, 1939. Photographer: David E. Scherman*



*Raphael Soyer, "Office Girl," 1936. Oil on canvas via the Whitney Museum of American Art.*

Raphael Soyer, 1930: Raphael Soyer (December 25, 1899 – November 4, 1987) was a painter and printmaker affiliated with the Fourteenth Street School artists, along with many other instructors and students at the Art Students League. He is most well known for his sympathetic and melancholic, but never patronizing, paintings of ordinary people in New York. Soyer primarily depicted workers and laborers in the neighborhood surrounding Union Square. He and his twin brother, Moses Soyer, were heavily involved in the labor movement and Communist party. Both listed 240 West 14th Street as their studio address at various points throughout the 1930s, but 1930-1934 is listed as Raphael Soyer's primary time at this address.



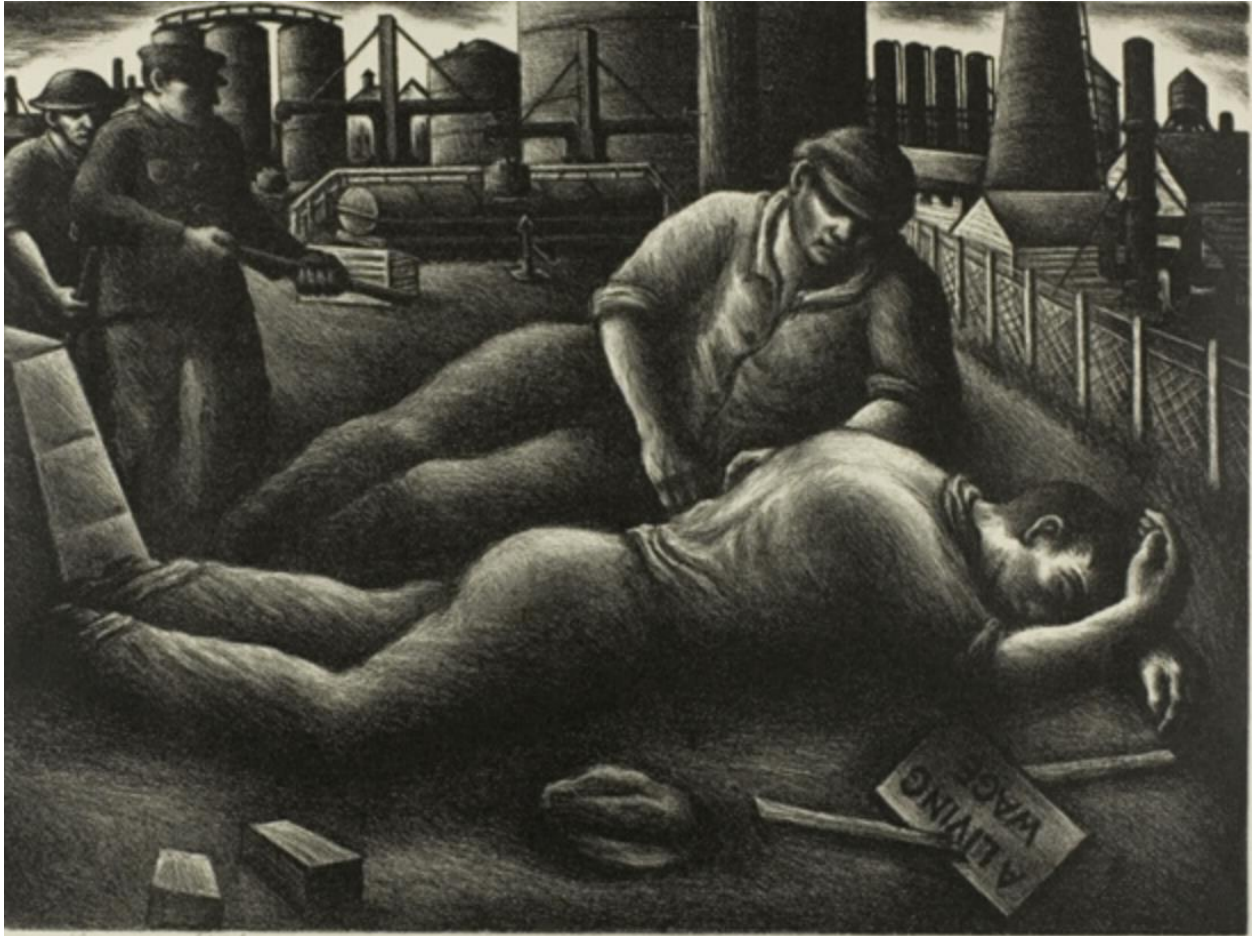
*Corner of Moses Soyer's studio. Moses, in white shirt, stands next to Isaac, and Raphael is seated on the far left. They frequently get together to criticize each other's work. The subject here is the easel canvas of Moses' wife, Ida, a dancer. On platform, still in costume, Ida chats with a Moses pupil, blonde Mrs. Lionel Stander, wife of the actor. At the right, painting, is Sandra Dagin, a pupil and model. Photos by Cosmo Sileo in 1940 via the Smithsonian Archives of American Art.*





*Moses Soyer, "Artists on WPA" 1935. Oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Moses Soyer.*

Moses Soyer, 1930: Moses Soyer (December 25, 1899 – September 3, 1974) was a painter and printmaker loosely affiliated with the Fourteenth Street School artists. Most frequently described as a Social Realist painter, Moses Soyer's primary subject matter throughout the 1930s was working men and women, but following World War II, his focus shifted to introspective self-portraits and depictions of women and dancers. Moses and his twin brother, Raphael Soyer, both listed 240 West 14th Street as their studio address at various points throughout the 1930s. A sketchbook by Lena Gurr (who later kept a studio in the building) lists 240 West 14th Street as the location of Moses Soyer's studio and Moses gave the address as his studio in Whitney Museum catalogs circa 1934 and 1937.



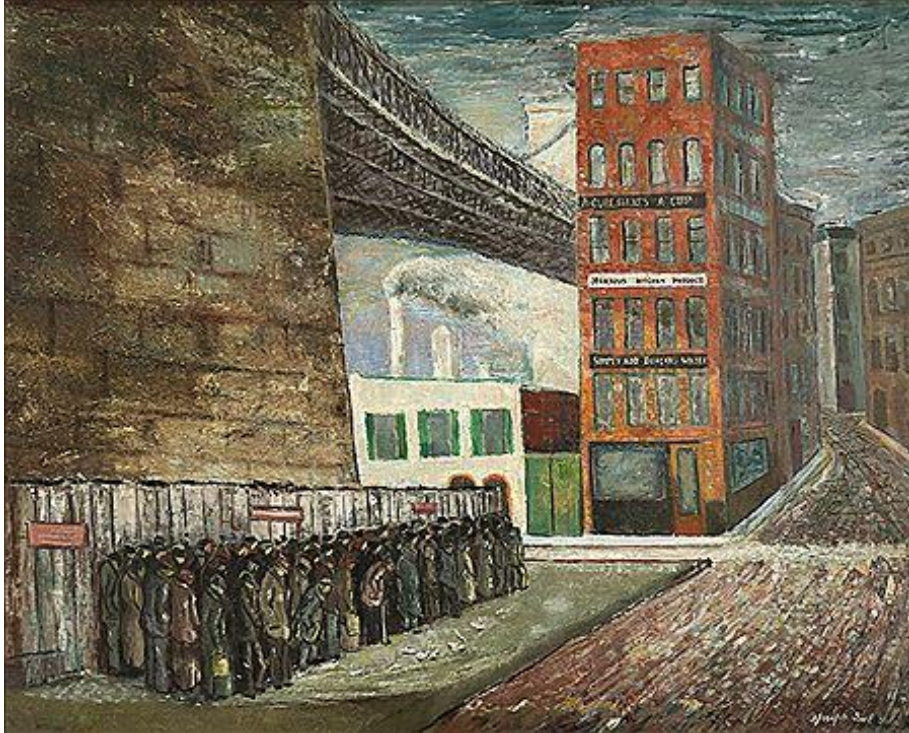
*Paul R. Meltsner, "Death of a Striker", 1934. Art Institute of Chicago.*





*Paul R. Meltsner, "Martha Graham", 1938. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.*

Paul R. Meltsner, 1931-1933: Meltsner (December 29, 1905 – 1966) was a Social Realist painter who was best known for his Works Progress Administration commissions and later his depictions of the performing arts. Meltsner's time at 240 West 14th Street is primarily known through his tumultuous eviction in 1933. According to the *New York Times*, Meltsner moved into a two-room studio on the top floor of the building, and up until a few months before this press report dated May 17, 1933, he had no trouble paying his rent, but was still awaiting payments from his gallerist for works sold in a recent exhibition. Unfortunately, on the morning of June 13, 1933, Meltsner was rudely awakened by the landlord in the guise of a City Marshall who rudely dumped all of his furniture, belongings, and paintings onto the street.



Joseph Biel, "Soup Kitchen", 1935.



Joseph Biel, "Wharf Scene", circa 1930s.



Joseph Biel, 1934: Joseph Biel (October 27, 1891- April 1943) was a well-known landscape and genre painter affiliated with the Art Students League. He is best known for the many commissions he received from the Works Progress Administration. Biel was also widely exhibited and participated in many annual exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Despite his more pastoral subject matter, his work always had a social consciousness. Biel first listed 240 West 14th Street as his studio address in a 1934 Whitney catalog. His Art Students League classmate and wife, artist Lena Gurr, also took up a studio in the building in 1938.



*Lena Gurr, from 1930 Sketchbook No. 7.*







Lena Gurr, "Bride to Be", 1940.



Lena Gurr, "Refreshment Stand", 1930.

Lena Gurr, 1938: Lena Gurr (October 27, 1897 – February 27, 1992) was a multi-disciplinary artist who made paintings, prints, and drawings that depicted daily life with quiet, sardonic humor. Gurr's first association with 240 West 14th Street comes from a 1930 sketchbook completed during figure drawing sessions at Moses Soyer's studio peppered with studies for paintings between sessions. Much like her fellow artists at 240 West 14th Street and other Art Students League colleagues, Gurr believed that there should be more to an artist than their technique. While her work is primarily representational, Gurr expertly weaves in modernist and cubist elements. Gurr exhibited widely and had a solo exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in 1932. She first listed her studio address as 240 West 14th Street in a 1938 Whitney catalog. Gurr was married to fellow Art Students League classmate and painter Joseph Biel.

The artist studios at 240 West 14th Street are a part of a much longer story about the development of American art in the early 20th century along the 14th Street corridor and the neighborhood South of Union Square. To learn more about art in this area, check out "South of Union Square, the Birthplace of American Modernism", a series that explores how the area south of Union Square shaped some of the most influential American artists of the 20th century. You can discover more locations in this neighborhood where painters and sculptors transformed the art world on our #SouthOfUnionSquare Map and Tours. Village Preservation has recently received a series of extraordinary letters from individuals across the world, expressing support for our campaign to landmark a historic district south of Union Square. To help landmark these incredible historic structures and other buildings in this area, click here.