

RÉSUMÉ OF AN AGED ARTIST

America's leading advocate
of realism looks back at a lifetime
devoted to art.

Raphael Soyer was born on Christmas Day, 1899, near the Russian town Borisoglebsk. He died at his home in Manhattan on November 4, 1987. As Douglas McGill's obituary in The New York Times noted, Soyer was "America's leading advocate of realism, not only in the uninterrupted stream of paintings, watercolors, lithographs, book illustrations, and other works that flowed from his studio until recent days, but also in occasional public talks and writings." This article, written for Art & Antiques, is the last he ever wrote. —Ed.

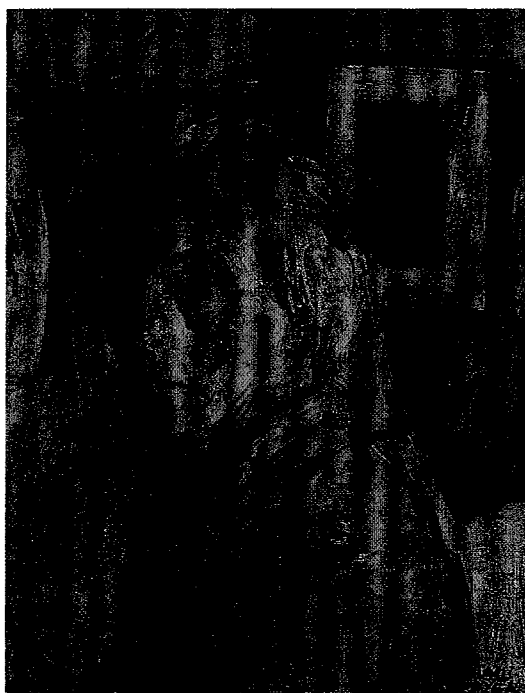
Recently I saw a few of my paintings in several museums as well as in private collections—all of them early works of the 1920s and 1930s. I had feelings of regret that I do not paint like that anymore.

An early painting in a private Los Angeles home is of a nude—probably the first nude I ever painted—a young woman with hands clasped in front of her, her intertwined, thin, pink fingers like a flower—a startling painting—pure, primitive, accomplished. It made me think of early Flemish art.

In the Los Angeles County Museum there hangs the portrait of my twin brother Moses in his studio, painted by me more than twenty-five years ago. It is reticent, restrained, harmonious in color, penetrating.

In the new wing of the Metropolitan Museum in New York devoted to twentieth-century art two of my paintings are installed, both of the early 1930s. One of them, the *Artist's Parents*, is a portrayal of a melancholy, elderly couple, intimate yet disassociated from each other, in an atmosphere of everydayness.

Now, as I think of it, only two other paintings of "Artists' Parents" come to mind, one by Manet and the other by Otto



By Raphael Soyer

Dix. There are many paintings of single parents—Whistler's and Rembrandt's mothers, the fathers of Cézanne and Eakins, etc. I imagined the three "Artists' Parents" paintings alongside one another on one wall. How different are the backgrounds that each represents—the French nineteenth-century bourgeois couple by Manet, Otto Dix's German proletarian father and mother, and my Jewish parents, immigrants from Borisoglebsk in tsarist Russia to the South Bronx of New York.

On a wall in our home hangs my painting of the early 1920s—of a tree in full leaf, a telegraph pole, tenements of that period, a gray sky, under the tree two workhorses and wagon. It is a small painting. I call it *A Tree in the Bronx*.

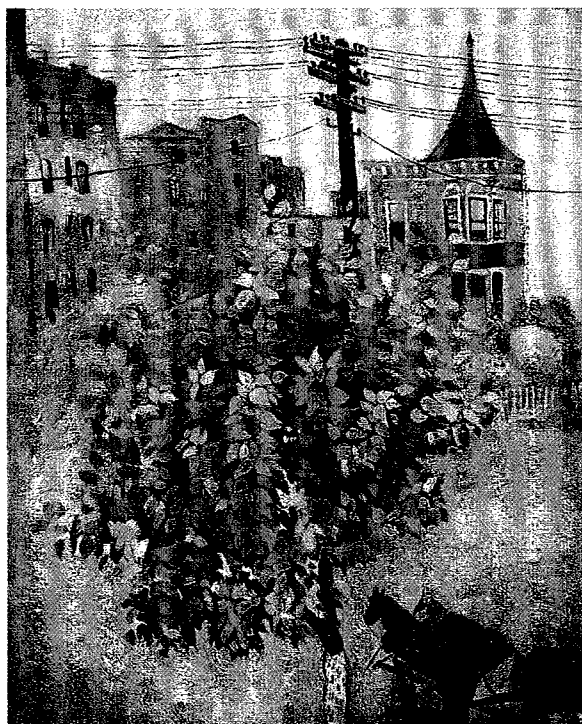
While still a student at the Academy, I painted my youngest brother—a portrait of a thin, huge-eyed immigrant boy. It is now in an Israeli museum, probably stacked away in a basement, since it is not by a Jackson Pollock or a Rothko.

The distance I am now away from these paintings enables me to judge them objectively. There is something special about them: searching, poetic, innocent and wise at the same time.

As a matter of fact, I have always liked the early work of artists. I prefer the dark, fierce studies of Van Gogh's *Potato Eaters* to his later impressionist landscapes. I love Chagall's imaginative youthful paintings of Vitebsk, its life and environment, the sentimental mountebanks by young Picasso, the early Freudian portraits by Kokoschka. How beautiful and intense was the work of these artists when they were very young.

I did not suddenly become an artist. I grew into it. An ear-

*Above: Raphael Soyer's most recent Self-Portrait, 1984, oil on canvas, 20 by 16 inches.
Left: the Depression-era Reading from Left to Right, 1938, oil on canvas, 26¼ by 20½ inches.*



I again painted from life some fellow artists as I did in the 1940s—Edward Hopper, Henry Poor, Edwin Dickinson, Leonard Baskin, and several others.

ly memory is of myself and my brother Moses sprawled on the floor copying the same face of an old, white-bearded man, probably Tolstoy, in an illustrated Russian magazine. We may have been about six years old.

My so-called formal art education took place in New York. A foreign teenager, I was an evening student at Cooper Union. At seventeen I acquired my first oil paintbox and enrolled myself in the school of the National Academy of Design—then an old red barnlike building at 109th Street and Amsterdam Avenue. Male and female students were separated. The instruction was dull. But in the limited library of that school I discovered Degas in a book of black-and-white reproductions. Around that time, too, I saw my first Thomas Eakins exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum.

One more memory: I was painting,

only the model and I were in the room. I heard distant sounds of celebration. It was 1918. World War I was over.

From the Academy school I changed to the more progressive Art Students League. The students were free to choose their teachers. I studied briefly with Guy Pène du Bois, who soon advised me to leave art schools and paint on my own. That is when I began to work at home and painted my parents, my sisters and brothers, and the views from the windows of Bronx streets. I made a conscious effort to throw off the influence of the art schools and paint in a personal manner. Every now and then, overcoming my shyness, I would bring a painting to Guy Pène du Bois's studio, somewhere on Lafayette Street. I still remember how this red-faced man looked at my work with friendly attention through his thick lenses. One day he

Above: A Tree in the Bronx, 1926-27, oil on canvas, 18¾ by 14¾ inches.

Right: Homage to Thomas Eakins, 1963-65, oil on canvas, 88 by 80 inches.









*I have no artist friends,
anymore, to share these
thoughts with.*

suggested that I show one of my paintings to Mr. Charles Daniel, the owner of the then prestigious Daniel Gallery. In 1929 I had my first one-man exhibition of twelve paintings—a portrait of my mother, a group painting of the members of my family, several street scenes, a still life, a painting of Williamsburg Bridge, several figure studies.

Because of the Depression the Daniel Gallery, which showed the work of Spencer, Demuth, Marin, Kuniyoshi—the “modernists” of those days—folded up and was not able to make a comeback. But I had no difficulty in pursuing my career. Practically all the galleries were willing to accept my work. I was becoming known. I served on art juries with Sheeler and Hopper. My paintings were exhibited in important shows. I was even awarded prizes, one at an international exhibition. Without being aware of it, I was getting into the mainstream of American art.

But, then, the art world of the 1920s and the early 1930s was different from today's art world. Art was not the big business it has become today—it did not have the air of glitter and commercialism. Art was less sensational, reputations were not so rapidly made and lost. There were about fifteen or so modest art galleries in New York, several of them filled with paintings by Eakins, Homer, and Ryder. The well-known, in fact, famous artists of that time—Bellows, Sloan, Hopper—were not “celebrities.”

The young artists of my milieu were steeped in traditional values. The names of Rembrandt, Courbet, Manet were on their lips. Cézanne was the great discovery. The aim was to emulate the great masters of the past, to carry on, at best, to renew the tradition of representational

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*The Artist's Parents, 1932, 28 by 30 inches:
“Intimate yet disassociated from each other,
in an atmosphere of everydayness.”*



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continued from page 61 art. There may have been already then an abstractionist here and there, but the main isms of which they were aware were impressionism and postimpressionism and, to some extent, cubism. It was not yet the time for the many isms that follow one another in such restless succession today.

After my first one-man show I began to have studios, sometimes sharing them with other young artists. Influenced by that talented nomad Pascin, we hired our first models and painted them in all stages of undress. Again, I loved to paint street scenes from windows. At times I would even place my easel on a side street and paint, fascinated by the emptiness of it, by space, perspective. I wandered all over the city, from east to west with sketchbook and pencil. There were not yet the highways along the East and Hudson rivers. It was easy to get to the river's edge and draw, unobserved, people on docks and piers and naked boys diving into the water.

The empty streets I had painted in the early 1920s became filled in the 1930s with the unemployed. I saw them all over—on park benches, on abandoned construction sites, in doorways, sleeping, doing nothing—and I made countless sketches of them and painted them. Some of the paintings became well known.

One of the unemployed, Walter Broe, who became my friend, took me to a mission that he knew, where I saw a group of homeless men at a table drinking black coffee from tin cups. On the walls in decorative printing was a reminder to these men, "How long since you wrote to Mother?" and religious slogans, "God is your Friend," and "Sinners are like the troubled Sea." That was the source of my painting, *How long since you wrote to Mother?* On another occasion Walter Broe brought a group of his cronies to my studio, and they became the subject of the painting *Transients*, in which I included my own face, yawning, to express the boredom and the futility of their existence. Three of these men posed for the painting with the ironic title, *Reading from Left to Right*.

In the early 1940s in one of the first

lush art galleries in New York, the Associated American Artists, I had a show that I called "My Contemporaries and Elders" of portraits of fellow artists. My elders were Weber, Hartley, Stella, Burliuk, and others. Some of my contemporaries were Reginald Marsh, Moses Soyer, Arshile Gorky, Phillip Evergood, Milton Avery, the young contemporary Jack Levine, Nicolai Cikovsky. What unforgettable people! I remember vividly the toothless, forgotten Marsden Hartley in his shabby blue serge suit but with

Jackson Pollock rudely said: "Soyer, why do you paint like you do? You don't belong to our time." I could have said, "If I don't like the art of our time, must I belong to our time?" But I merely said I paint the way I like to.

an ever fresh carnation in his lapel. "Make my eyes blue as hell," he admonished me as he sat down to pose. I met him a year or so later, resuscitated as an artist by Hudson Walker and Paul Rosenberg, but ill-looking, flabby. "Why did you exhibit that toothless image of me?" he gently rebuked me.

Very young, very famous, very shy Jack Levine posed for me standing, in profile, his hat carelessly on. Nick Cikovsky happened to come in, gave a quick look at Jack and exclaimed in Russian, "A veritable Shostakovich."

David Burliuk, the "Cubo-Futurist," spread himself out at the small wooden table and said, "Paint me like a poet." On a sheet of paper he wrote in red ink in Russian: "We are young, young, young / In our bellies is a devilish hunger." In Russian the words for hunger and young rhyme: *molod* and *golod*.

Heavy, angry, neglected Joseph Stella

sat ceremoniously on a small folding chair, his hands resting on his cane, bemoaning bitterly his lack of fame, denouncing his inferior but successful fellow artists with four-letter words, and encouraging me: "You are getting my girth, you are getting my girth."

Phillip Evergood posed hugging tightly his ugly bulldog—a character out of Lucas Cranach the Elder.

The indefatigable Reggie Marsh, without changing his position as he sat for me, drew my portrait with his etching needle on a copper plate he held on his lap under the table.

My tall handsome contemporary Arshile Gorky arranged his apparel in careful folds and assumed a pose of an old-master portrait.

Milton Avery posed dutifully without saying a word. Just chewing gum.

In the 1950s a few artists who had not yet attained full recognition began to call themselves "Abstract Expressionists" and were taken on by the critics, museum directors, art dealers, collectors. These artists soon became famous, while those of my persuasion, the representational artists, began to be ignored. There were previous groups of abstract artists in the 1930s and 1920s and even before—they were not given any special prominence. Why then were the "Abstract Expressionists" so eagerly embraced by the art establishment?

A group of us decided to meet to try to solve this puzzle, to understand this abrupt ascendancy of abstraction. The result of many meetings was a magazine, *Reality*, which pointed out our bafflement and concern with abstraction and other aspects of art. In three years three slim issues appeared and aroused great attention pro and con (con from the Establishment), reaching as far as Australia.

The abstract expressionists were my contemporaries. I knew them all. I remember meeting Jackson Pollock on the train to Long Island. Without greeting me he rudely said: "Soyer, why do you paint like you do?" He pointed to an airplane out of the window. "There are planes flying and you still paint realistically. You don't belong to our time."