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"Self-Portrait," 1984 Oil Courtesy Forum Gallery

By RAYMOND J. STEINER

THERE ARE TIMES when the death of a person means more than the simple cessation of a life. The passing of Raphael Soyer on Wednesday, November the 4th at his home in Manhattan was such a time. For if we have lost a man who ranks as one of America's master painters, we have lost even more: the death of Raphael Soyer brings to an end a very special force that has touched the lives of so many and in such diverse and positive ways that the full extent of the loss of his influence will not be realized for some time. Though nature gave Raphael Soyer a diminutive stature, he was also possessed of the soul and character of a man who stood larger than life for most of those who knew him. Few men

have earned such universal respect, admiration, loyalty — and love.

Fellow painter Jack Levine, whose friendship with Soyer goes back to 1924, feels the loss of more than simply a friend. "Raphael was like family — almost a father figure for me. I really loved that man," says Levine. Levine, also a social realist who never abandoned figurative art, had seen in Soyer a lifetime model and supporter for humanist art. "Soyer was a painter in a truly poetic sense — he believed in what was eternal. He saw art as permanent, immutable — not as some transient thing." In comparing his own work to Soyer's, he explained, "I always tended to carry too much 'baggage,' but Raphael attained simple

In Memoriam: Raphael Soyer 1899-1987

verity and a classical honesty in his work." Levine, who has a work of Soyer's ("Melancolia," inspired by Albrecht Dürer's engraving of the same name) hanging near his favorite chair in his living room, has as much respect for Soyer the man as he did for Soyer the artist. Especially significant for Levine was Soyer's faithfulness to depicting the human figure. Remarking upon the interchange between Jackson Pollack and Soyer in which Pollack called Soyer to task for being out of tune with his figurative art in an age of airplanes, Levine pointed out that "the so-called 'moderns' don't realize that those people inside the airplane look exactly like the people who lived in Pompeii."

Another painter and close friend is Will Barnet who, still shaken by Soyer's death, comforts himself by reaching back to a long history of fond memories. Especially strong in Barnet's memory is the time Raphael sat for him. "He was as good a model as he was a painter," recalls Barnet. "He not only understood what I needed but took a keen interest in how I worked." Soyer's interest and generosity toward fellow artists is legendary and many recall acts of genuine sharing on his part. "He not

only helped causes," says Barnet, "but he also was generous with his work, often giving it away. He was a serious collector of his fellow artists' work. I think he has one of the finest collections of drawings around, a collection that would make any museum proud to own." Barnet visited with Soyer only days before he passed away. "He was truly a remarkable man. A humanist — and always himself. A gentle man with strong opinions and a lucid mind."

Woodstock painter Karl Fortess also remembers most clearly Soyer's openness to other artists. "His studio was always a place to visit and hang around. We were all welcome — even Gorky who had little sympathy for figurative painting." Soyer's open responsiveness extended far beyond the world of the artist, including people from all walks of life. Isaac Bashevis Singer, another humanist who devoted his talents to the human scene and who collaborated with Soyer on occasion to illustrate his stories, recognized Soyer's universal and all-embracing acceptance of his fellow man.

Few knew Raphael Soyer more inti-

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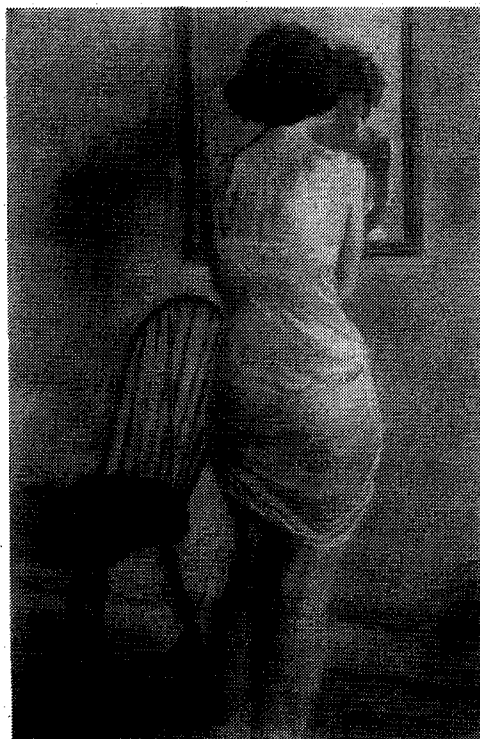
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mately than did his representative and friend, Bella Fishko, Director of the Forum Gallery at 1018 Madison Avenue in New York City where Soyer has exhibited his works for the past twenty-six years. Fishko and Soyer lunched together every week during this time, sharing conversation and planning his shows. "We planned every show together," says Fishko, "except this last one." For Fishko, Soyer was more than a client but a good friend who was "a humanist of the first order, holding true to values that have long been lost to our modern society." She remembers him as an avid reader who loved poetry and good novels and a great traveler who loved to visit museums around the world to study the great masters. "He knew the location of all his favorites and if a museum would move a picture, Raphael was sure to notice

left the gallery because we were not selling, he turned to me and said, 'What ever happened to loyalty?'"

Raphael Soyer also remained loyal to his own vision, cleaving to the depiction of mankind in all its magnificent and bewildering variety. Declaring abstract styles as too limiting for art, he chose instead to



*"Woman Looking in a Mirror," 1987 Oil
Courtesy Forum Gallery*

devote his life and talents to capturing the more elusive realities of the human form. A chronicler of his times, Soyer's body of work comprises a pictorial history of 20th Century men and women as seen through the eyes of this most remarkable man. Though generally labelled a Social Realist, his art carries no sting, no partisan "message," no pedagogic "lesson." His art was simply for and of the people. If asked about a particular work, Soyer would never speak about his technique but would talk instead



*"Group of Young Artists," ca. 1950's Oil
Courtesy Forum Gallery*

about his model — revealing that it was always the human being and his drama which lay at the heart of his vision, his work, his life. Muted in color, his strong sense of composition and unerring skill in draftsmanship allowed for concentrated attention on his figures. His nervous brushstrokes, rather than betraying any hint of indecision, reveal instead the master's eye penetrating the mysterious evanescence of the gift of life - a transience which he had ultimately to face himself.

Soyer's colleagues and friends saw him as heir to the legacies of Rembrandt, Degas, Corot, Chardin and Eakins. For Will Barnett, Raphael Soyer embodied the charac-

teristics of the true master: "He remained consistent to his vision but was always growing, always developing his idea to the fullest limits of his creativity."

For those of us who did not know Raphael Soyer, we are yet most fortunate. We are now heirs to his legacy, a body of work that has steadily grown since his move to the United States in 1912 from Russia — a body of work that shows us ourselves through the eyes of a caring and gentle man who tempered his vision with the wisdom that comes from genuine empathy with his fellow sojourners. If he has impoverished our lives by his passing, he has enriched it with his art.



*"Woman in Long Skirt," 1987 Oil
Courtesy Forum Gallery*

the change." When in the '70s the art market was at a virtual standstill, he noted that one of the artists at the Forum was missing and inquired from Bella Fishko the reason. "When I told him that the artist had



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