



Alfred Valente, *Raphael Soyer*, c. 1940, photograph, Alfred Valente papers, 1941–1978, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

Soyer, Raphael

Also known as
Schoar, Raphael
American, born Russia, 1899 - 1987

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Borisoglebsk, Russia, Raphael Schoar's surname was changed to Soyer after his family immigrated to the United States in 1912. Arriving in Philadelphia, the Soyers ultimately settled in New York City. Raphael and his twin brother, Moses (1899–1974), along with their younger brother Isaac (1907–1981), were encouraged by their parents to pursue their artistic ambitions. When the twins were forced to drop out of high school to help support their family, both took advantage of the free evening drawing classes at Cooper Union. In the fall of 1918, Raphael and Moses pursued a more serious study of art and entered the free school at the National Academy of Design. Raphael remained at the Academy through 1922, while Moses, in a conscious effort to differentiate the twins' artistic styles and practices, enrolled at the Education Alliance Art School. In December 1920 and January 1921, and again in early 1923, Raphael also studied with Guy Pène du Bois (American, 1884 - 1958) at the Art Students League.

After leaving art school Soyer held a series of jobs and continued to paint in his spare time. He later wrote: "As soon as I left the Academy, I made a conscious effort to forget everything I had learned there . . . I started from the beginning again and painted in a frank and almost naïve manner subjects of ordinary interest that were part of my immediate life."^[1] Reserved and introspective, the artist turned to his surroundings for subject matter. His early work reflects an admiration for the

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Ashcan school's earlier commitment to realistic depictions of city life. In a flat, seemingly untrained style Soyer painted parks and streets, peddlers and children, and domestic scenes of his family. In addition to painting Soyer was a prolific printmaker, working first in etching and then lithography.

Soyer first exhibited his work in 1926 in the Salons of America. From 1927 on he showed frequently at the Whitney Studio Club, whose director, Juliana Force, eventually bought five of his paintings. Soyer also sold many paintings at his first solo show at the Daniel Gallery in 1929, which was well received by critics. From that point on Soyer was able to abandon his side jobs and paint full time in a rented studio on the Lower East Side. Two years later he married Rebecca Letz, with whom he had one daughter, Mary.

Throughout the 1930s, Soyer's style and choice of subject continually evolved. He remained committed to painting scenes of urban life that, while not overtly political, reveal the realities of Depression-era New York. He also made an increasing number of figure studies and portraits in both print and painting mediums, many with female subjects. This stylistic development occurred in tandem with his growing recognition as an artist. His work was regularly featured in annual and biannual American art exhibitions at the Whitney Museum, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Corcoran Gallery of Art, and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, among others. In the late 1930s Soyer worked in the graphic arts division of the Works Progress Administration Federal Arts Project, and in 1939 he and Moses painted two murals in the Kingsessing, Pennsylvania, post office.

By 1940 Soyer's practice was devoted to figure painting in his studio. His works reveal a renewed emphasis on female subjects, with many scenes of women in the workplace, including dance teachers and dressmakers. Although he was still known as reserved, Soyer's social circle had widened greatly from his early years and he enjoyed painting and drawing portraits of the artists he befriended and admired, including John Sloan (American, 1871 - 1951), Marsden Hartley (American, 1877 - 1943), Joseph Stella (American, 1877 - 1946), and Reginald Marsh (American, born France, 1898 - 1954). He also created dozens of self-portraits—many of which include views of his studio.

Soyer's involvement in the New York art world included many years as an instructor. He began his teaching career in 1930 at the John Reed Club in New York. He later taught at the Art Students League, the American Artists School, the New School for Social Research, and the National Academy of Design. Soyer also

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American Paintings, 1900–1945

wrote three memoirs—*A Painter’s Pilgrimage* (1962), *Self-Revelment: A Memoir* (1969), *Diary of an Artist* (1977)—and a 1966 study of the painter Thomas Eakins (American, 1844 - 1916), the American artist he most admired. In response to the rise of abstraction in the American art world around midcentury, Soyer emerged as a leading defender of representation and realism through his art and occasional public talks and writings. Despite his criticism of abstraction, Soyer remained at the center of New York’s artistic and literary scenes. He counted both Allen Ginsberg (American, 1926 - 1997) and Arshile Gorky (American, born Van Province, Ottoman Empire (now Turkey), c. 1904 - 1948) as good friends.

Soyer’s critical reception and sales remained strong throughout his long career. His paintings and drawings continued to be shown regularly in galleries and museums, and in 1967 the Whitney Museum of American Art held a retrospective of his work. Soyer continued to paint until shortly before his death from cancer at age 87.

[1] Lloyd Goodrich, *Raphael Soyer* (New York, 1968), 7.

Robert Torchia, Zoë Samels

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