

# Raphael Soyer, Social Realist Artist, Is Dead at 87

By DOUGLAS C. MCGILL

Raphael Soyer, an artist whose gently rendered portraits of New York artists, dancers and the city's lonely and dispossessed won him fame that lasted from the 1930's to the present, died of cancer yesterday at his home in Manhattan. He was 87 years old.

The last of three brothers who all achieved artistic renown — his twin, Moses, died in 1974, and Isaac died in 1981 — Raphael Soyer was, like them, a steadfast realist, always preferring the recognizable face or figure over the expressive drip or splash.

He became 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.

Throughout the middle decades of the century, when abstraction of various forms came to dominate art internationally, he often spoke out strongly for realism and against abstract styles.

"This arbitrary exploitation of a sin-

gle phase of painting encourages a contempt for the taste and intelligence of the American public," Mr. Soyer wrote, criticizing abstraction in a letter he signed with 45 other artists in the arts magazine *Reality* in 1953. "We believe that texture and accident, color, design and all the other elements of painting are only the means to a larger end, which is the depiction of man and his world."

## Quiet Amid the Crowds

Mr. Soyer's world was unceasingly poignant and tender, pastel in hue, and peopled with men and women caught in moments of quiet self-absorption though often in scenes of parties and crowds.

Deserted Manhattan streetscapes were a favorite theme of his early years, and during the Depression his studies of men out of work secured his reputation as a leading member of the Social Realist school.

"He became the grand old man of 20th-century realist art," William S. Lieberman, chairman of the department of 20th-century art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, said yesterday. "He did marvelous portraits that had no social message. He was a real painter."

Mr. Soyer was born on Christmas Day, 1899, near the Russian town Borisoglebsk. The son of a scholar and teacher of Hebrew, he and his brothers were encouraged to sketch and paint at home. The family moved to the United States in 1912, and he later worked at menial jobs and continued his artistic career at night and in his spare time.

Eventually, he attended classes at Cooper Union and later at the National Academy of Design and at the Art Students League, where he studied under Guy Pène du Bois, a writer and painter. He began to show his work in New York galleries in the late 1920's and by the middle 30's was well known.

## A Show on Saturday

Since the early 1960's, he has shown at the Forum Gallery, 1018 Madison Avenue, between 78th and 79th Street, where an exhibition of his works will go on view Saturday.

His dealer and friend of many years, Bella Fishko, said yesterday that Mr. Soyer was painting throughout last summer.

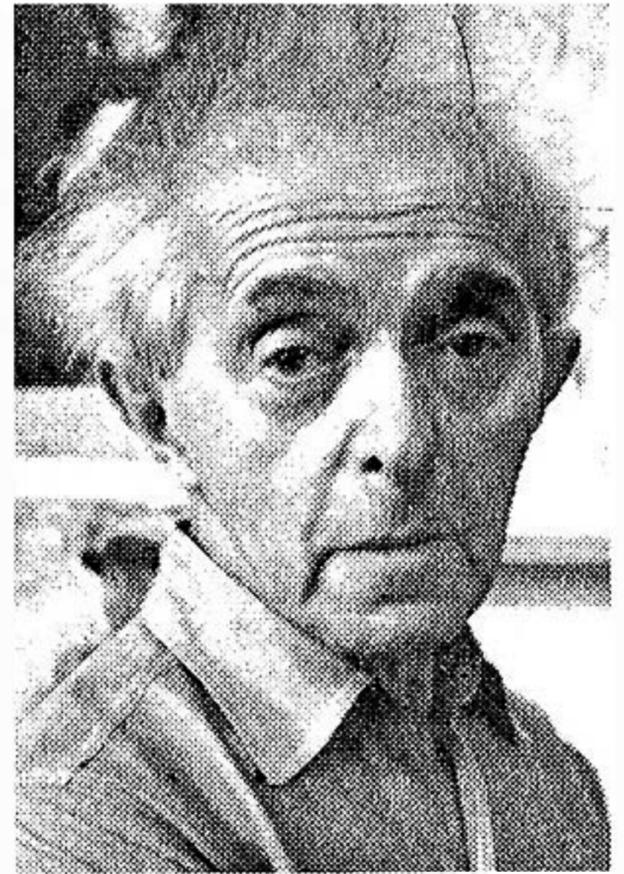
"I recently asked him what he was working on," Ms. Fishko said. "He said, 'Painting disheveled girls, as usual.'"

Mr. Soyer was known to his friends as a quiet and gentle man of firm resolve. His long devotion to realism in no way lessened his lifelong interest in the art and issues of his time.

He was a friend of vanguard artists and writers ranging from Arshile Gorky to Red Grooms and Allen Ginsberg, and it was a hallmark of his career that Mr. Soyer was frequently found at the center of New York's artistic and cultural ferment.

Resolutely unfashionable in their style, his paintings of downtown art gatherings throughout the decades

often present a Who's Who of the art scenes then current. In 1966, he painted a portrait of his Lower East Side neighbors, the poets Gregory Corso and Mr. Ginsberg.



Israel Shenker

## Raphael Soyer

A friend and occasional collaborator on illustrated books, the Nobel Prize-winning author Isaac Bashevis Singer, once wrote of Mr. Soyer: "We are both interested — he as a painter and I as a writer — in the millions and billions of variations of love between the sexes. I would say I try to write about the things I know best. He tries to paint the people he knows best."

For Mr. Soyer, this meant painting the world as he saw it. In an autobiographical article he wrote last summer for a future issue of *Art & Antiques* magazine, he described an encounter with the painter Jackson Pollock that summed up his approach. He wrote:

"Without greeting me he rudely said, 'Soyer, why do you paint like you do?' Mr. Soyer wrote. "He pointed to an airplane. 'There are planes flying, and you still paint realistically. You don't belong to our time.'"

"I could have said to Jackson, 'If I don't like the art of our time, must I belong to our time?' But I did not say that. I merely said that I paint the way I like to."

Mr. Soyer is survived by his wife, Rebecca; a brother, Israel, of the Bronx; a sister, Rebecca Beagle, of Oakland Calif., and a daughter, Mary, of Manhattan.