



1920



1933



1963



1967



1969

*A gallery of Raphael Soyer's self-portraits, which span seven decades and stud the two Soyer exhibitions opening today at the Hirshhorn.*

# The Souls of Raphael Soyer

## Faces in the Shadows of New York In 2 Moving Hirshhorn Exhibitions

By Paul Richard

**T**HE ARTIST Raphael Soyer, a deeply stubborn master, etched his first self-portrait in 1917. His curls were dark and thick then. His hair is white and wispy now. He has an old man's neck. His expression has not changed.

His eyebrows still form perfect arcs, his forehead is still furrowed, the corners of his narrow mouth turn down as they always have. His eyes still search the viewer's. The face of Raphael Soyer peers from his self-portraits—from those made in the '20s and the '60s and the '80s—with exactly the same look of strangely sad surprise.

Two Soyer exhibitions, both studded with self-portraits, go on view today at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. One surveys the prints he's made since 1917. The other exhibition, "Soyer Since 1960," is devoted to his oils. The two shows feel like

one. All of Soyer's pictures share something fresh and rough. Look closely at his portraits. There is almost nothing there. His surfaces are never smooth, his crosshatching is often coarse, his brush appears to wander, to hesitate and scribble. But stand back from his pictures and they pop into the real. Living individuals, some lost in introspection, all of them unguarded, gaze out from the walls.

Soyer is relentless. Never in his long career has he been swayed by fashion. Surrealism, dada, the rise of abstract art, the sequential revolutions of the past 60 years have touched him not at all. The subjects of his early works—his family, his friends, his fellow New York artists, street people and dancers, and the face he sees reflected in his studio mirror—are his subjects still.

He is a man of iron loyalties, loyal to his habits, loyal to his city, his sitters and his friends. Abram Lerner, one old friend, was another struggling painter when the two men met in the 1930s. It was in honor of that friendship that Soyer gave the Hirshhorn—which Lerner now directs—the 146 lithographs and etchings that now are there on view.

Other artist friends—Edward Hopper, Benny Andrews, Philip Pearlstein, Mimi Gross Grooms—appear in Soyer's portraits. When Soyer comments on his prints, as he does many times in Frank Gittings' Hirshhorn catalogue, he speaks not of his art, but instead of his sitters. "The fellow on the far left," he said about a lithograph of 1932, "is Nemo Piccoli, a sculptor; next is Adolf Wolff, also a sculptor; then the painter Walter Quirt, who we used to call Shorty . . ." "This is Gittel, a favorite model of mine," he said about a lithograph from the early '30s. "She was about 17 here. She was a very intelligent girl, a sort of pre-flower child or radical. She danced in the West Village . . . Those were very difficult days, and many people were homeless. Gittel would sometimes sleep in my studio."

One of Soyer's sitters, a man named Walter Broe, was stabbing pennies through a grating with a chewing-gum-tipped stick when the two men met in the early 1930s. Broe, unemployed and homeless, moved into Soyer's studio, and it was there he died.

Soyer, all his life, has been a magnet for the dispossessed, the bohemian, the young. Yet he never por-



1982

*SOYER, From D1*

Soyer's latest print, a lithograph, a beauty, is a self-portrait he produced this year for the Smithsonian Associates. It is titled "Know Thyself." He has strived to know himself, his weaknesses, his strengths, his sitters and his city, all of his long life.

He was born on Christmas Day, 1899, in Borisoglebsk, Russia, and was 13 years old when he moved to the Bronx. For long decades, while abstract art ruled his city's galleries, his work was thought old-fashioned, perhaps anachronistic. It does not seem so now. "Since Edward Hopper's death," says Lerner, "Raphael has been the dean of American realist painters. If I had to label him, I'd call him a 'romantic realist,' 'romantic' as we use the term to disassociate a work of art from the formal, the impersonal, the classical, the cold."

## *Faces In the Shadows Of New York*

Soyer's recent oils—there are 17 on view—are larger, more ambitious, and more highly colored than his early paintings. The newest of these portraits—"Paula Hondius," "Quo Vadis"—are perhaps the best. Not all his graphics glow. He early on made portrait prints, particularly of women, that now seem oversweet. But such failures are behind him.

Many artists flare, then fade, but Soyer has been constant. His art, for more than 60 years, has been honest, heartfelt, humble. His gift cannot compare with those of Titian, Rembrandt or Matisse, but with those mighty masters he shares a special blessing. Soyer has produced what may well be his finest work in his ripe old age.

He has often shown in Washington. His Hirshhorn exhibitions, the third and fourth museum shows he has had here in the past decade, close Oct. 2.

trays types. The painters in his pictures do not carry brushes or other painters' emblems. There are many young and handsome dancers in his portraits, they stretch or apply makeup or puff upon their cigarettes, but we never see them dance.

One of Soyer's central subjects, everywhere implied but only rarely seen, is the city of New York. "New York is my country," he has often said, and some shadow of that city, of its tension, its estrangements, glows darkly in his art.

Many are the portraitists who harp on props and details, the gleam of a pearl earring, the goblet on the table there, the shine of silk or leather. Soyer is not one of these. Nothing in his pictures is portrayed in sharp focus; they owe nothing to the photograph—except, perhaps, their eerie sense of the instant seized. Soyer's etching needle may scratch this way and that, his brush may seem to wander, but the people he portrays are there as if in life. We can almost read the thoughts that move behind their eyes. Their postures show their souls.

See *SOYER, D6, Col. 1*