

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

ART

The humane art of Raphael Soyer.



Hirshhorn Opens Its Doors For Soyer's Art



Detail of Self Portrait (1969)

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So much has been made of the "new realism" in American art that there is a danger of forgetting the "old" realism that has always been around, even during the heyday of abstract expressionism.

One old realist, Raphael Soyer, has made the human figure the primary subject of his penetrating art for more than 60 years. He has enjoyed esteem or suffered relative disfavor according to the shifting winds of critical and public taste and now, by the light of the new realism, he is seen as and spoken of almost reverently — like an old master.

And so he is, a fact which should become abundantly clear beginning tomorrow for visitors to the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden where two distinct but often complementary exhibitions of Soyer's work are opening. The larger and more comprehensive show is "Raphael Soyer: Sixty-five Years of Printmaking." This extraordinary survey includes 146 etchings, drypoints and lithographs (two of them added since the printing of the catalogue), all of them part of a larger body of prints given to the Hirshhorn last year by the artist and his wife.

The second show is "Soyer Since 1960," devoted to 17 of the large oils that typify the artist's painting over the last two decades. Four of these works are owned by Hirshhorn. The remainder have been borrowed from galleries and private collections, including the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection in Lugano, Switzerland, many of whose paintings are currently on view in the National Gallery's East Building.

Raphael Soyer arrived in Philadelphia shortly before his 13th birthday after emigrating with his family from Czarist Russia. The next year, 1913, the family moved to the Bronx, and Soyer's life-long residency in New York began. His father was a Hebrew scholar and a poet, story-writer, and art amateur. Raphael, his twin brother, Moses, and his younger brother, Isaac, were all encouraged to become painters. All did.

Raphael's formal training began at 14 at the Cooper Union. For the next eight years he studied there, and at the National Academy of Design and the Art Students League. His studies taught him the how of his profession; the what seems to have been with him from the beginning. The first print in the exhibition is an 1917 etching of his father, the second of himself, the third of his mother, the fourth of his brother, Isaac.

Least this preoccupation with family be thought only natural for a young artist living at home and without other models, it must be noted that in 1963 he made an etching of his parents (based on a painting of 1932); that in a painting of 1973-74, "Portraits at a Party," he depicted his two brothers and himself; that in 1977 he created the haunting etching, "Double Portrait," of himself and his deceased father.

This 60-year preoccupation with family and with self (some 40 self-portraits) certainly derives in part from the immigrant experience and from the Jewish experience. Beyond that, however, it reflects Soyer's fascination with specific places and their inhabitants. It is this quality that gives so many of his multi-figure paintings the quality of a scene from a play with a known cast of characters. In 1972 Soyer wrote: "My subject matter has always been derived from the locale where I happened to be at a particular time."

"Particularity" is a characteristic of

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many of his prints and paintings now at the Hirshhorn. That sometimes means that a print is descriptive of costume details or interiors and furnishings, and therefore appears "dated." Less frequently, a work may seem dated for stylistic rea-

sons. Such a print is the striking and suavely modulated lithograph, "Waterfront," of 1934. This bleak urban landscape with its almost unseen depression-era jobless men ("static,....silent, non-demanding figures" in Soyer's words) is strongly suggestive of the work of Regionalists Thomas Hart Benton and John Steuart Curry in the mannered, slightly surreal treatment of clouds and shadows. And indeed the print (after a painting of 1932) was published in a portfolio together with prints by those two artists among others.

But more often, Soyer's particularity is that of physical feature, character and mood. The wonderful print, "Furnished

Room" (1937), so bold and rigorous in poses and composition, reminds one of Picasso's "Frugal Meal" but achieves its mood of quiet desperation with a far greater naturalism, rejecting Picasso's expressive stylization. This kind of realism is timeless, and upon it Soyer's present and future reputation is firmly established.

Prints like "Furnished Room" and "The Mission," and paintings like "Waiting Room" (Corcoran Gallery of Art, currently on tour) have caused some writers to classify Soyer among the Social Realists. But although Soyer's sympathies were deeply engaged by the suffering and alienation he witnessed during the '30s, his natural psychological and philosophical stance has always been dispassionate. He is the observer who although physically present, a part of the crowd, nevertheless is content to watch and record. He is a witness, not a judge, of his time.

Uninterested in satire or caricature, Soyer's work reverberates with the steady concern for humankind that informs the work of several artists he deeply admires: Rembrandt, Degas and Thomas Eakins. More limited in subject matter in this secular age than Rembrandt, free of the ironic edge of Degas, Soyer is probably most akin to Eakins in his "brooding sense of human dignity."



Homage to Thomas Eakins (1964-65)

The largest painting in the current exhibition, more than seven feet high, is the "Homage to Thomas Eakins" (1963-65)

which belongs to the Hirshhorn. A dozen figures, including two of Soyer's brothers, are posed around a table and in front of three paintings by Eakins: the famous "Gross Clinic" flanked by two nude figure paintings. Art historian Lloyd Goodrich holds a book with a reproduction of Eakins' portrait of Walt Whitman. The pictures chosen from Eakins' oeuvre succinctly

summarize Raphael Soyer's own dominant subjects: portraits, multi-figure compositions and nude studies. The expressions of the assembled are solemn and introspective — none of the figures acknowledges the presence of any other. Both the pensive mood and the sense of psychological separateness among the figures are as characteristic of Eakins as of Soyer.

The lineage is clear. Beautifully composed and intellectually arresting, this painting has few parallels in contemporary art. It must be considered one of the key paintings in Soyer's career.



Portraits of A Party (1973-74)

There are seven multi-figure paintings in the show, and Soyer includes himself in all of them. Often he looks directly at the viewer from a position well back in the picture space, but in "Portraits at a Party" he joins his brothers in a reticent gray group while the large group of brightly dressed younger artists led by Philip Pearlstein confronts us.

This quiet preoccupation with generations and old age is apparent in many of his portrait subjects. The portrait of Melvin Jules in one, the vulnerable self-portrait of 1980 with its trembling paint surface is another. Most astounding and unforgettable, perhaps, is the portrait of Paula Hondius (1980). It is a painting which seems a sort of cross between Degas and Van Gogh but remains all Soyer. A tilted space, subtle asymmetry, and high viewpoint put the sitter at a disadvantage. The aged face suggests stroke paralysis, the legs seem rigid and burdensome. But she looks at us unflinchingly and without self-pity. The artist's emotional reticence, his avoidance of sentimentality, combines with a phenomenal improvisatory technique to create a portrait of stabbing poignancy.

The old artist continues to paint young women. "Young Woman at a Mirror" (1977) is deliciously sensual in its pose, in the shimmering flesh tones and in the liquid painting of the clothes draped over the screen.

"Cynthia Nude" (1971) is in a different expressive vein. Its somber mood qualifies the implicit sensuality of the firmly modeled body. The tension in the pose and the staring frontality emphasize a mood of isolation and loss. The closest contemporary paralled to this and some other nudes by Soyer is found in the sculpture of George Segal. Although Segals' plaster figures are white or painted non-naturalistic colors, and although they seldom if ever look directly at the viewer, they share with Soyer's nude the sense of alienation and an extraordinary integrity of space, as though an invisible barrier prevents the human contact that the palpable figure invites.

Many of the prints of the last 20 years derive from paintings in the exhibition. For instance, "Pedestrian," a 1963 etching, is the central figure from "Farewell to Lincoln Center," the 1959 oil. The etching

of "Moses Soyer" is taken from an oil sketch for "Portraits at a Party" and floated on the white paper, effectively concentrating the mood.

Of the graphic self-portraits of these decades, two should be singled out: the lithograph of 1969, one of the artist's favorites; and the just-completed print commissioned by the Smithsonian Resident Associate Program. The latter bears the Greek inscription, "Know Thyself." The eyebrows raised in mild astonishment in most of his self-portraits suggest that self-knowledge is not necessarily a great consolation.

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Paula Hondius (1980).

Each exhibition is accompanied by a completely illustrated, reasonably priced catalogue. Hirshhorn director Abram Lerner wrote the essay on the recent paintings. His measured prose provides a sensitive analysis of selected paintings, but he also chooses some paintings not in the show or illustrated in the catalogue for detailed discussion. This can only frustrate the non-specialist.

Curator Frank Gettings has provided an informative essay for the print catalogue. More important, his entries for each print, usually supplemented by Soyer's recent comments about the print, make this an instant standard reference work in the field of American prints.

It is generally accepted that the "invention" and diffusion of abstract expressionism is America's primary contribution to world art, certainly as an international influence. And yet, as our own understanding of our native art grows and our former habit of self-denigration continues to fade, we may discover that realism of a specific kind is an authentic American mode.

It is a way of seeing that can be embodied in diverse styles and it can be found in Copley and Bingham, Eakins and Homer, Hopper and Segal. This realism sees figures singly, one at a time, so that even in group compositions the psychological isolation of each figure is often felt. Accom-

panying and reinforcing this quality is the abiding sense of melancholy and quietude. Further, a tendency toward objectivity and avoidance of overt sentimentality is common to much American art.

If this is accepted it is clear that Raphael Soyer's art is squarely in this American tradition. And by virtue of his ever-increasing mastery he must be ranked high in its history.

It is thoroughly appropriate that these exhibitions are at the Hirshhorn. Joseph Hirshhorn was the exact contemporary of Soyer; both were immigrants; both were nurtured by the multi-ethnic character of America; both were men of small physical stature but largeness of spirit.

Soyer's generous spirit informs all of the works in these exhibitions. There is no better indication of the consistency and poignancy of his art than a comparison of the 1917 etching of his mother with the 1980 painting of Paula Hondius. Separated by 63 years, they are fundamentally intertwined by their penetrating concern with the frustrations, illnesses and isolation of old age. Soyer is the melancholy philosopher, equally attuned to the seductiveness of youth and the resignation of age. His concentrated images are a revelation of a rare sensitivity. And as the artist once suggested, they are "a reflection of the life and condition of our times."