pg. 1

The many masks of modern art

Humanity in Art

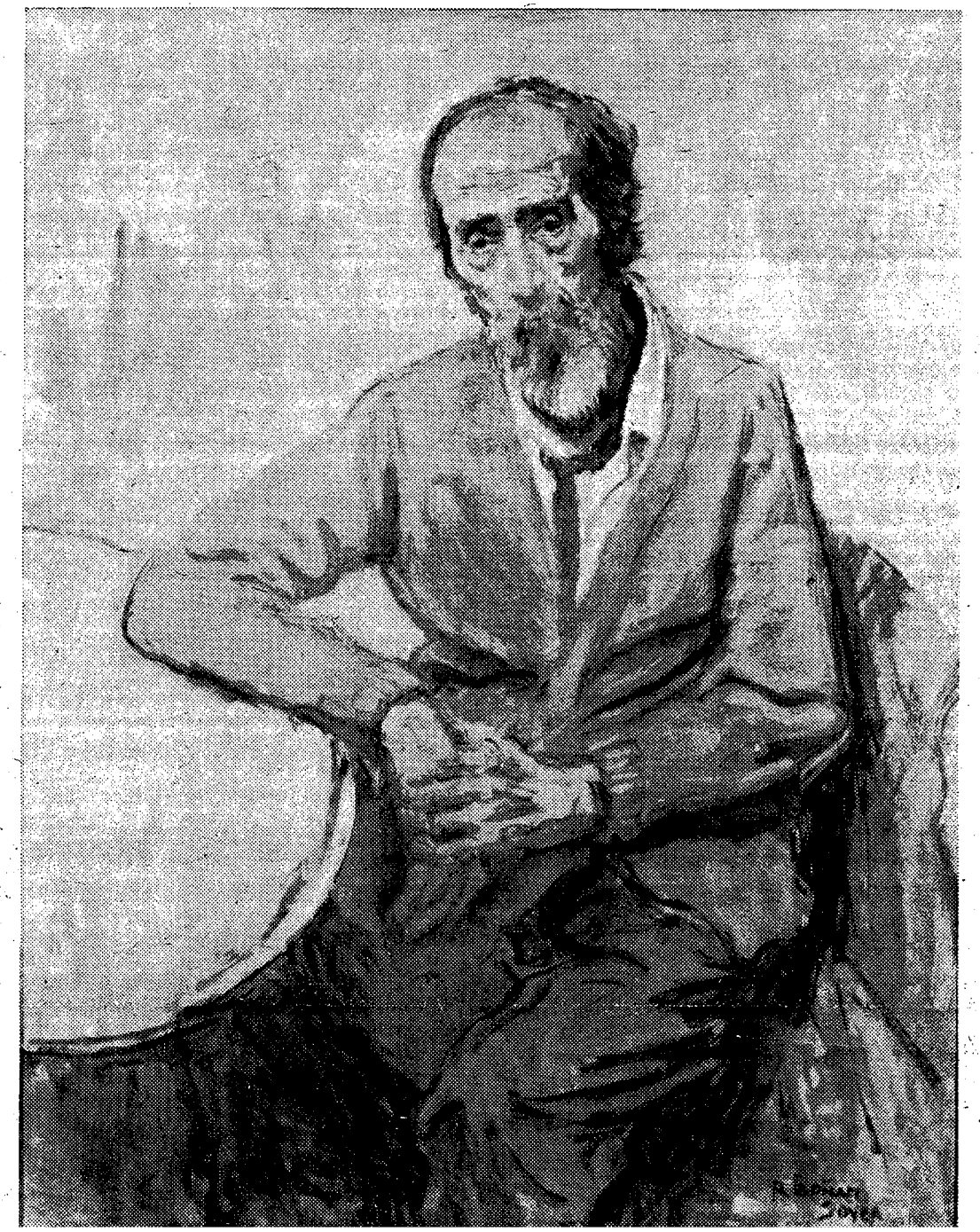
The simple, straightforward, and compassionate depiction of mankind in painting and sculpture was one of the first and most serious victims of 20th-century modernism.

If man was depicted at all by the modernists it was largely when he was in the depths of despair or felt alienated (Munch); redeemed through suffering or faith (Rouault); anxious and disturbed (Kokoschka); tormented and angry (Beckmann); courageous or vulnerable (Kollwitz); formally fragmented or distorted (Picasso); turned into decoration (Matisse); metaphysically distracted (Giacometti); stylized and monumentalized (Moore); forced to serve an artist's very private and idiosyncratic vision (Dali); dehumanized (Warhol); and so on. Throughout this century, regardless of what he might have been in actual life, individual man and his realities were little more than a device, a projection, a mask, a symbol, or a shape for whatever theoretical, expressive, or formal purposes the modernist artist had in mind.

Modernism, quite simply, had other things on its mind. If it wasn't rearranging circles and squares, raising color to its maximum pitch, inventing visual superstructures, or probing deep into the unknown — or any of the numerous other activities and interests it was engaged in — it was crying out in anger or in terror at the world's condition, or warning us that all we knew was dying and that it was time for new beginnings.

Humble, simple, individual man seemed terribly unimportant next to the formal dynamics and ideals of 20th-century modernism, or the collective goals of entire nations, societies, or systems. And man was no better served by nonmodernist art, which, for all its finger-pointing at modernism's dehumanization of art, did little more for the "ordinary" man than academically present him in the artificial guise of a Rembrandt, Manet, or Sargent painting, dress him up to serve some political or moralistic purpose, or paint his body and face, but seldom his humanity.

For every Robert Henri, George Luks, Augustus John, Lucien Freud, Graham Sutherland, Andrew Wyeth, or Alice Neel who has tried to portray man pretty much as he was, there have been hundreds and thousands who saw man merely as a convenient peg upon which to show off technical skills, score a political point, or call out melodramati-



cally (or through sure-fire sentimental subjects) for sympathy.

Now I know very well that art and the depiction of man are not necessarily the same thing, that art can (and does) have an identity quite separate from that predicated upon transcribing or mimicking physical appearance. Even so, I can't help wondering why recent art has so consistently failed to look at men and women as real people – especially since we take so much pride in calling this "the century of the common man."

We have stared at one another, that's true enough; have focused our attention upon the human face and body as though their truth and meaning could only be found by precisely recording every pore, blemish, wrinkle, whisker, or body joint. Or by freezing human action, and then recording it so perfectly in plastic or plaster that anyone coming across such a figure in a museum has a powerful urge to touch it to see if it is only a thing or a living person.

It *is* impressive, but it tells us nothing about ourselves – except that there are people willing to devote their lives to making precise human dummies – and then calling them art. We have generally not concerned ourselves in art with human character, or with human emotions, have, in fact, done our best to drain all evidence of feeling, emotion, and humanity from the large (often huge), frozen, inhuman paintings and sculptures that we have produced of one another of late. And have, as a result, produced startlingly "realistic" and "true to life" works (Chuck Close and Duane Hansen) of human beings whose images, while drawn from life, are actually oriented more toward sterility and, ultimately, toward death.

I can't help but feel that there is more humanity and more truth in the passionate dribblings of Jackson Pollock, the lively mobiles of Calder, the bold and merry shapes and colors of Miró, the subtle formal relationsips of Richard Diebenkorn, than in all these carefully but woodenly executed paintings and sculptures of supposed human beings. After all, in art as in life, it's the spirit that counts – not acres of pores, wrinkles, or whiskers, or a frozen and minutely rendered figure that serves nothing but to call attention to the cleverness and the patience of the one who made it.

Courtesy Forum Gallery, New York

'José De Creeft' (1980): Oil on canvas by Raphael Soyer

There are few things more difficult in art than to sit a man or a woman in a chair and to paint him or her simply and directly as a real human being. Too many factors can get in the way: a primary concern for paint quality, for clever composition or lovely design – for brilliance of draftsmanship, subtlety of color, or "depth" of pyschological interpretation. These and dozens of other things can get in the way, and the resulting picture, while possibly well painted, will probably be no more a study of a real human being than a blueprint is a true picture of a house.

How often, as we go through museums and galleries, do we see a painting that is so *specifically* human in character and spirit that we feel almost in the presence of an actual man or woman? Not often, and that includes Old Masters as well as recent art.

I'm pleased to report, however, that I have, over the past several years, come across paintings by a contemporary American that have precisely that quality of simple and direct humanity. They are by Raphael Soyer, one of the Grand Old Men of American art, and a painter who has recorded the face and the people of New York as few others have, either before or during his time.

I first became familiar with Raphael Soyer's paintings (and of those of his brothers Moses and Isaac), during the period of the Regionalist and American Scene movements when paintings of farms and small town activities were as common as abstractions are today. Soyer's pictures of subway riders, people waiting in unemployment offices, or elderly folk staring bleakly out of the canvas seemed like the urban version of what was being painted in Wisconsin or Iowa. I liked them well enough, but thought them a bit simplistic and overly melancholy, and so could not get very excited over them – especially after my first heady taste of Picasso and Miró, and then of Pollock.

And that feeling of interest without particular respect persisted throughout the years. I admired the way Soyer stuck to his guns and refused to follow painterly fashion, and the way he grew as a painter. But that was about it.

Until about 10 years ago, that is, when I came across some portraits he had recently painted which were not only lighter and more delicate in hue and tone but also less melancholy in mood. I became very interested, and started looking for more – and have, with almost every new one I've seen, become more and more of a fan.

Raphael Soyer is one artist who *does* have the rare ability to sit a man or a woman in a chair and to paint him or her simply and directly as a human being. And he does so without worrying overly about "good" composition or "correct" drawing, for what he hasn't learned by now about such matters has nothing to do with his art anyway! And so he concentrates his attention upon his model's character and individuality, upon his or her humanity, and creates, as a result, not a mask or a symbol, or a rendering of surface reality, but a painting of a very real person.

Theodore F. Wolff

The next article in this series appears on July 28.

7.29