

# Celebrating Raphael Soyer, an unreconstructed realist

By AVIS BERMAN

One of the more delightful customs inaugurated by Washington's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden during its five-year history has been its birthday celebrations for artists whose work is represented in depth there.

These warm appreciations, by no means inclusive or retrospective, are intimate summaries of the artist's career and provide welcome opportunities to see works of art ordinarily on loan or stored in the museum's coffers. The Hirshhorn has already feted Henry Moore, Jose de Creeft and Ben Benn, and last August it threw a big party for the 80th birthday of its begetter, Joe Hirshhorn himself.

Though January 20, the museum honors Raphael Soyer, who marks his 80th birthday on Christmas Day. The dean of American realists, Mr. Soyer has interpreted contemporary life from the 1920s to the 1970s, and the paintings on view reflect both his six decades of productivity and his obsessive themes: scenes of city life, portraits of family, friends and fellow artists, and studies of women.

Among the 24 oils and watercolors are a charming grisette from 1927, an unidentified old man from the same period who may be Mr. Soyer's father, and a full-length portrait of painter Mervin Jules, completed last summer. (Mr. Soyer still

works steadily and routinely in his Manhattan studio nearly every day from 10 a.m. to 5:15 p.m. "Not painting would be like not breathing," he says.)

The Hirshhorn owns more of Mr. Soyer's paintings and drawings than any other art museum. The holdings including the major works "Farewell to Lincoln Square" (1959) and "Homage to Thomas Eakins" (1963-1965).

Joseph Hirshhorn has remained an admirer of Raphael Soyer's canvases through three decades and a dozen art-historical fashions. The two met sometime in the early 1940s, when the collector began visiting painters' and sculptors' studios and swallowing up art as fast as he could pull \$100 bills out of his wallet.

At that time Mr. Hirshhorn was also enthusiastic about other men in Mr. Soyer's circle—Chaim Gross, Arshile Gorky, Milton Avery, David Burluk, Jack Levine and Philip Evergood. He loved joining their get-togethers and helped them financially whenever he could.

One story goes that Mr. Hirshhorn bought an Evergood painting at a gallery and went to a nearby shop to have it framed. There he discovered Mr. Evergood himself—working as a framer for \$25 a week. Mr. Hirshhorn told the artist to quit his

job, paint more and not worry about money. Mr. Evergood took him at his work and Mr. Hirshhorn kept it.

According to Inez Garson, curator of "Raphael Soyer: A Birthday Celebration," at the end of the Depression Mr. Hirshhorn committed himself to supporting living American artists and his purchases through the war years reflected that decision.

It is also safe to say that Mr. Hirshhorn must have found it comfortable—and consoling, too, during the horror of the Holocaust—to remain close to artists with backgrounds so similar to his own. Most were Eastern European Jews who had fled from poverty and persecution and all possessed the robust enjoyments and flinty drive of self-made men.

The first paintings Mr. Hirshhorn bought from Mr. Soyer were his remarkable likenesses of David and Marisa Burluk, but he did not start collecting the artist's work assiduously until the 1950s. The collector's continuing support of Mr. Soyer's art was a measure of both men's ability to remain supremely unimpressed by the clamor of avant-garde critics and museum directors.

An unreconstructed realist and humanist, Mr.

Continued on Page 2



Raphael Soyer and two of his paintings: "Self-Port-

# An unreconstructed realist honored

*Continued from Page 1*

Soyer has always proclaimed that painting should "describe and express people, their lives and times." Human beings are the center of his universe and in his pictures of single figures he places his subject in the center of the canvas.

After World War II, when the fiercest partisans of the Abstract Expressionist movement attempted to crush anyone who disagreed with them, Mr. Soyer found he was no longer invited to exhibitions or noticed as often by the art press.

His friend, portraitist Alice Neel, testified that Raphael never cared about being or not being avant-garde. He deserves credit for sticking to figurative work, for remaining 100 percent what he was. In the heyday of Abstract Expressionism anyone who wanted to paint people and paint them with feeling was considered an idiot. But he didn't give a damn what people thought and neither did I. We were called dinosaurs and we suffered for it."

Mr. Soyer ignored the kingmakers who were ignoring him and several of his best canvases emerged during that uncomfortable period. Perhaps the most memorable is "Farewell to Lincoln Square," which is about the dispossession of a band of artists including Mr. Soyer and his wife, Rebecca, from their studios in the old Lincoln Arcade Building. In a way, the picture is also about the temporary ejection of representational artists from a terrain they felt firmly entrenched in as their own.

The installation of the exhibit is beautifully designed to show the original idea, compositional arrangements, and labor surrounding "Homage to Thomas Eakins." Mr. Soyer's most ambitious work. At the far wall from the gallery entrance hangs the huge group portrait itself, flanking it are the 10 preliminary studies Mr. Soyer painted in preparation for the final composition.

Inevitably, the viewer is drawn into assembling the painting person by person, element by element, the way Mr. Soyer did himself. Anyone who attempts putting the pieces of the puzzle together will get a

good idea of the enormity of re-creating a whole from the sum of its parts. "The canvas was so huge and white that I was appalled. I didn't go near it for weeks," Mr. Soyer reminisced.

The inspiration for "Homage to Thomas Eakins" was Henri Fantin-Latour's "Homage a Delacroix" (a photo of which is helpfully mounted near Mr. Soyer's painting) and a large exhibition of Eakins's work held in Philadelphia in 1961-1962.

Mr. Soyer conceived the idea in December of 1962 and Mr. Hirshhorn did not buy the picture until February 1965, but in some sense he was involved all along. Eakins is one of Mr. Soyer's great heroes and his favorite American painter. Mr. Hirshhorn's love for the Philadelphia realist has impelled him to acquire over 120 of his works.

Mr. Hirshhorn's assistant, Abraham Lerner (now director of the Hirshhorn), chauffeured Edward Hopper to and from his sittings in Mr. Soyer's studio and kept his boss informed of the artist's progress. Months before the final canvas was completed, Mr. Hirshhorn, to nobody's surprise, raided the studio and scooped up the group portrait and, even more intrepidly, all the individual studies for it.

In glad recognition that Mr. Hirshhorn had outdone himself, Mr. Soyer wrote, "I am so pleased that you have acquired my paintings of the 'Homage to Eakins' project. Secretly I had hoped all along that you would do so because more than anything I wanted these canvases to be part of a great collection. I am working on [the painting] now, inch by inch, and am beginning to have the usual anxieties about overworking it. It is a characteristic of artists—ever apprehensive, anxious, and uncertain."

Originally Mr. Soyer had planned to paint five or six artists who professed admiration for Eakins plus Lloyd Goodrich, the artist's biographer, but Mr. Goodrich advised him to add Reginald Marsh, Leonard Baskin and Mr. Soyer himself. Mr. Soyer asked each artist (except Marsh, who died in 1954) to pose for a quick life

study in oils. From these he planned to make several versions of the entire assemblage and compose the large canvas by copying the oil sketches into the foreground.

For the background he painted in three works by Eakins: "Salutat," "The Gross Clinic" and the 1908 version of "William Rush Carving His Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill River." The vastness of the enterprise, Mr. Soyer recalled, made the project a struggle from the outset.

"Even lining up everyone to pose was complicated. Hopper growled that some of the artists would do it for the publicity. Baskin wanted to know who else was going to do it, but Jack Levine, Lloyd Goodrich and John Koch immediately agreed to pose. The sittings were tense. I was conscious of everyone's schedules so I painted without rest. I was worried about taking too much of Hopper's time. The first time Jack Levine posed, it was a complete failure."

Despite the strained working conditions, the preliminary studies comprise some of the most vibrant portraits Mr. Soyer ever did. In the portrait of Jack Levine, Mr. Soyer, usually a perfectionist, abandoned himself to a fast, almost haphazard series of brush marks and seized the subject's quiver and intensity. And the definitive interpretation of the aged Edward Hopper emerged: a massive head, a frail carapace bent by a weight of granite.

"Raphael Soyer: A Birthday Celebration" also celebrates and amplifies the fact that the artist continues undiminished in his creative powers yet keeps striving to enrich his drawing, his colors and his brushwork. That's why Mr. Soyer has a special fondness for something his friend Reginald Marsh once said: "Painting is new to me but I will conquer it."

## Funland winners

Recent winners in the Uncle Art's Funland contest in the *Sunday Sun* comics section include Wayne Adams, of Glen Burnie; Chris Denton, of Jarrettsville; Denise Stevens, of Finksburg; Karen Hom-

