

# Soyer prints at Grinnell reflect a melancholy world

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GRINNELL, IA. — The power of the print and its ability to establish — even control — the mood of its environment is amply demonstrated by "Raphael Soyer: Sixty-Five Years of Printmaking, Selections from the

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden." The show is on exhibit through next Saturday in the Grinnell College Print and Drawing Study Room, on the lower level of Burling Library.

Soyer, 85, is a sensitive, contemplative artist whose works reflect the

## THE VISUAL ARTS

world he grew up in: a world of poverty and hunger, grayness and grime. It was a melancholy place filled with transients, burns and starving artists. The prints that it inspired are filled with life's cast-offs and are colorless and melancholy — occasionally self-consciously so.

Rather than comment overtly on the human condition, Soyer allows his models (many of whom are people he found on the streets of New York City) to assume natural poses and expressions that reveal themselves and their lives. In fact, many a model was asked

to strike a pose of an attitude that Soyer had seen the person assume naturally on the street.

Looking at such prints gives a sobering, somewhat sad feeling to the viewer. Where an artist like Degas (whom Soyer admires very much) might have dressed up a similar scene with studied, graceful lines and rich pastel colorations, Soyer almost undresses the scene, laying bare the emotions at the expense of beauty. The trade-off is a gritty vision that bestows a kind of nobility to his subjects, elevating them from "model" to "real" person.

The irony of Soyer's work is that by assuming natural poses his models appear to be candid, but Soyer seldom worked spontaneously. Yes, the poses were natural, but the models' trying to recapture the moment seem to give the scene an air of artificiality. In many cases, whole scenes from "real" life were re-created in the artist's studio by a few of Soyer's regular models. By intellectually distancing himself from the street scene this way, Soyer achieved a vision that, as catalog essayist Frank Gettings notes, "never carried a message that could be labeled socialist realism or even social realism."

Soyer's vision, in fact, is remarkably consistent throughout the 50-plus prints covering 65 years of work in this show, which was organized by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service.

**S**OYER'S LARGE family (there were six children including his twin brother Moses) fled Russia in 1912 and, after a short stopover in Philadelphia, settled into a life of poverty in The Bronx. Soyer's first etchings were done in 1917 in his kitchen on a small press he bought for \$25. Those first works, done with his brother Moses, were quite crude yet astonishingly perceptive and subtle in their depictions of individuals.

The works were good enough to encourage the Soyer brothers to attend art school — Raphael at the National Academy of Design and Moses at the Educational Alliance. Raphael Soyer, after feeling his way through different styles (including a naive period in the late 1920s), really hit his stride in the early 1930s. The artist's control of light and isolation of subject matter begin to emerge with force. Likeness



"Laundress" (1941-42, lithograph), by Raphael Soyer

PHOTOS FROM SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION  
TRAVELING EXHIBITION SERVICE



"Self-Portrait" (1933, lithograph), by Raphael Soyer

the casual, natural poses begin to show up at that time.

Although the techniques have improved and the vision has been refined, the style that emerged in the early '30s is pretty much the style Soyer has stayed with to the present. Comparing "Dancer," done in 1980, to "Girl at Table," done in 1934, illustrates this consistency. Both works are nonjudgmental, almost matter-of-fact representations of young women. In both, the subject is introspective to the point of being outwardly expressionless. Where we see a difference is in the execution of the work. The later work is accomplished with far less effort and motion. Restraint is the older-but-wiser artist's tool.

Most of the works in this exhibition are accompanied by comments from Soyer in an interview with catalogist Gettings. Of "Behind the Screen" (1935), Soyer says: "I did this small etching spontaneously in my studio. It has an intimate, informal quality that Degas could achieve more intelligently in his work. I feel there is a little too much darkness in my etching."

The comments lend a depth not only to our understanding of the artist but also to our understanding of his models. For example, he describes Gittel, one of his favorite models and the subject of "Girl at Table," as "a very intelligent girl, a sort of pre-flower-child or radical. She danced in the West Village. Unfortunately, she became infected with a disease while she was traveling in the hinterlands of India and never recovered. Two or three years ago, a few weeks before she died, she came to our apartment. Physically changed, she was frail and emotional. A brilliant young woman."

To understand most artists, you don't have to know anything about their models. To understand Soyer, it helps to understand his deep personal concern for the individual personality of each of his models (he is able to recount information about nearly all of the people who modeled for him over the 65 years).

That, I think, is the key to understanding Soyer's vision: personal concern for, if not personal involvement with his world.