



475 Park Avenue at 57th Street, New York, New York 10022  
Tel: (212) 355-4545 Fax: (212) 355-4547 www.forumgallery.com

Robert Fishko, *Director*

**RAPHAEL SOYER**

(1899-1987)

*Men at the Mission*, 1935

oil on canvas

11 x 17 inches

signed upper right "RAPHAEL SOYER"



**Provenance**

The Artist

Private Collection, New York, c.1934 (acquired directly from the Artist)

Jean Appleton, New York (by descent)

Forum Gallery, New York, NY, 1999

Private Collection, New York (since 2000, acquired directly from the above)

**Exhibited**

*Raphael Soyer: Finding America*, Forum Gallery, New York, NY, January 28 – March 5, 2005

**Literature**

Fishko, Robert. *Raphael Soyer: Finding America*, Forum Gallery New York, NY, p. 22, Illustrated.

**Reference**

Goodrich, Lloyd. *Raphael Soyer*, H.N. Abrams, New York, NY, 1972, pp. 98-99, Illustrated. The related painting is illustrated: *How Long Since You Wrote To Mother?*, c.1934, oil on canvas, 22 x 32 inches, Collection of Mrs. R.S. Schafler, New York City

## Note

Raphael Soyer and his twin brother Moses were born in the city of Borisoglebsk between Moscow and the Black Sea in the Southern Russian province of Voronezh Oblast. Their father, Abraham, was a Hebrew writer, scholar, and teacher who fostered the humanities both at his school and at home. As children, Moses and Raphael read the great Russian writers as well as Dickens and Mark Twain (in translation), discovered the seminal painters of Western art, and began to draw. Due to the ongoing oppression of Jews in Czarist Russia, in 1912 the Soyer family emigrated to the United States, settling in Brooklyn. In 1914, the twins enrolled at the free evening classes offered at Cooper Union, where their formal art training began and where they remained until 1918. Then Moses went to study at the Educational Alliance and Raphael at the National Academy of Design where, for four years, he learned traditional painting technique by working from life models in the realist tradition.

While at the Academy, however, and after leaving it, Raphael also took courses at the Arts Students League. There, he came under the guidance and professorship of painter Guy Pène du Bois (whose own teacher had been famed Ashcan School leader Robert Henri), who encouraged Soyer to paint his own real-life surroundings, and to do so instinctively. Throughout the remaining years of the decade, Soyer continued to develop and work through what he described as his own “primitive” period, when his canvases shared the simplified pictorial space and naïve subject matter (albeit more personal in the case of Soyer) as those of the French “primitivist” painter Henri Rousseau. Raphael’s most meaningful piece of this time is *Dancing Lesson* (1926), an enchanting composition of his sister Rebecca teaching Moses to dance while his parents look on and brother Isaac plays the harmonica. The piece eventually led to the art dealer Charles Daniel offering Soyer his first solo exhibition (April, 1929).

Within four months of Soyer’s one-man show at the Daniel Gallery, the stock market crashed, drastically reshaping America. Shantytowns, or Hoovervilles, named after President Herbert Hoover and built by and for the homeless, sprang up about the nation. In New York City, for instance, they were found on the Great Lawn in Central Park (“Hoover Valley”) and at Riverside Park along the Hudson (“Camp Thomas Paine”). Near where Soyer commonly painted and not far from the Bowery Mission, where New York City’s homeless converged for food and shelter, were the Hoovervilles known as “Packing Box City” on Houston Street and “Hardlucksville” on the East River, the latter by August of 1932 consisting of about 450 men living in sixty shacks occupying two blocks on East 9th and 10th Streets. In November of that year, a new President was elected, Franklin Roosevelt, who pushed through Congress his overarching New Deal program within his first hundred days in office. But recovery would prove to be a long, slow road. For Soyer, poverty, privation, and abandonment were not abstract concepts to which he had to adjust. They filled the pages of the Russian authors he had read as a youth. Moreover, as an Eastern European Jew, fear of itinerancy had always been an unfortunate part of his ethnic past. In New York, he adapted to the new hardships just as his painting style adapted to “Urban Realism.”

*Men at the Mission*, 1935, by Raphael Soyer, is a work in oil emblematic of Soyer’s Bowery paintings, works that made him a key figure of the Fourteenth Street artists known for their observations of Depression era life around Union Square in Manhattan. For the exhibition catalogue published on the

occasion of Raphael Soyer's one person traveling exhibition organized by The Whitney Museum of American Art in 1967, Lloyd Goodrich wrote about a similar painting:

“Soyer did not need the Depression to make him aware of the facts of life in most of New York; he had lived with them since childhood. As boy and youth he had roamed the streets, drawing the people of the East Side. About 1933 he embarked on a series of paintings and prints of life on the Bowery and Fourteenth Street, focusing on the derelicts – men existing without hope, begging, sleeping in parks and under bridges, dependent on missions for food and shelter. Three bums on benches in Union Square, one asleep, the others looking lost, while in the background the Father of His Country rides his bronze horse. Homeless transients sitting in a flophouse waiting patiently for sleeping space. Five men, old and young, being fed in a mission, under a sign “How Long Since You Wrote To Mother?”  
(p. 12)