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Robert Fishko, *Director*

RAPHAEL SOYER

(1899-1987)

In the City Park, c.1934

oil on canvas

38 x 40 inches

signed lower right "*Raphael Soyer*"



Provenance

The Artist

Dr. and Mrs. Arnold Lieber, New York, NY (acquired directly from the Artist in 1965)

Dr. Arnold Lieber, New York, NY

Private Collection (by descent from the above, 2017)

Exhibited

The American Scene: Sloan and Soyer

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, 1935

Raphael Soyer

Traveling exhibition

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, October 25 – December 3, 1967

Ackland Art Museum, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC,

January 7 – February 7, 1968

High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA, February 25 – April 7, 1968

California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco, CA, June 1 – 30, 1968

Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Columbus, OH, July 25 – August 25, 1968

Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, MN, September 11 – October 6, 1968

Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, IA, November 1 – December 1, 1968

From Foreign Shores (Foreign Born Artists), Milwaukee Art Center, Milwaukee, WI, 1976

Representations of America, Pushkin Museum, Moscow; Hermitage Museum, Leningrad and Palace of Art, Minsk (under auspices of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY), 1977-1978

Amerika: Traum und Depression, 1920-1940, Neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst, Academy of Fine Arts (Berlin) and Kunstverein (Hamburg), Germany, 1980-81, no. 322

Social Concern and Urban Realism: American Painting in the 1930s, The American Federation of Arts, New York, NY, April 1983 - October 1984

Tides of Immigration: Romantic Visions and Urban Realities, Museum of the Borough of Brooklyn at Brooklyn College, Brooklyn, NY
October 7 - December 2, 1986

Visions of America: Urban Realism 1900-1945

Traveling exhibition

Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, OH January 5 - March 3, 1996

Museo de Arte Moderno, April 5 - June 2, 1996

The Butler Institute of American Art, June 30 - August 18, 1996

Raphael Soyer: Twenty Great Paintings

Forum Gallery, New York, NY, January 19 - March 4, 1995

Between Heaven and Hell: Union Square in the Thirties, Sordoni Art Gallery, Wilkes University, Wilkes-Barre, PA, January 21 - March 3, 1996

Aaron Copeland's America, Heckscher Museum of Art, Huntington, NY,
November 4, 2000 - January 21, 2001

Old New York and the Artists of the Period 1900-1941 (The Ashcan School)

Nassau County Museum of Art, Roslyn Harbor, NY, August 19 - November 4, 2001

Art Across America: The WPA Years, Nassau County Museum of Art, Roslyn Harbor, NY,
August 15 - October 31, 2004

Reginald Marsh and Infamous New York, Nassau County Museum of Art,
Roslyn Harbor, NY, February 19 - May 14, 2006

Art in America: 300 Years of Innovation

Organized by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation and the Terra Foundation

Traveling exhibition

National Art Museum of China, Beijing, China, February 10 - April 5, 2007

Shanghai Museum of Contemporary Art, Shanghai, China, May 1 - June 30, 2007

Pushkin Museum of Fine Art, Moscow, Russia, July 24 - September 9, 2007

Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain, October 10, 2007 - April 27, 2008

You Say You Want a Revolution: American Artists and the Communist Party,
Galerie St. Etienne, New York, NY, October 18, 2016 – March 4, 2017

Literature

Goodrich, Lloyd. *Raphael Soyer*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, 1967, p. 34, Illustrated in color, pp. 12, 15, Referenced, and p. 76, Listed.

Goodrich, Lloyd. *Raphael Soyer*, H.N. Abrams, New York, NY, 1972, p. 69, Referenced, and p. 85, Illustrated.

Hemingway, Andrew. *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926–1956*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. x, Illustrated (detail) and p. 71, Illustrated.

Davidson, Susan, and Justin Wolff. *Art in America: Three Hundred Years of Innovation*, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation in partnership with the Terra Foundation for American Art, New York and Chicago, 2007, p. 203, Referenced and p. 205, Illustrated.

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."

In The City Park, c. 1934, 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:

"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." [p. 12]

Soyer's Bowery paintings, direct out of reality, owed little to other art. Each man was specifically characterized, from his face to the patches on his clothes. First-hand visual observation produced *In the City Park*, with its figures in the immediate foreground, their faces lit by strong warm light, seen against the darkening park – an utterly authentic visual document. The somber tonality of these canvases was appropriate to their subjects." [p. 15]