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Robert Fishko, *Director*

RAPHAEL SOYER

(1899-1987)

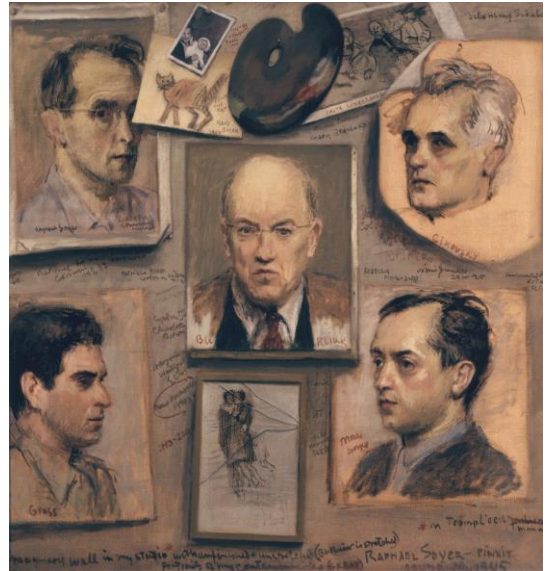
Imaginary Wall in My Studio, 1945

oil on canvas

27 x 26 inches

signed and dated lower right "*Raphael Soyer
Pinxit 1945*"

titled and inscribed lower left "*Imaginary wall
in my studio with unfinished and unstretched
(Burlinuk is stretched) portraits of my
contemporaries (GREAT) in Tromp L'oeil manner*"



Provenance

The Artist

Associated American Artists Galleries, Beverly Hills, CA
Private Collection, Los Angeles (acquired from the above)
Mrs. Alexander Ritmaster, Woodmere, NY (acquired from the above)
Forum Gallery, New York, NY
Netta Vespignani, Rome, Italy (acquired directly from the above, 1990)
Forum Gallery, New York, NY

Exhibited

Raphael Soyer's New York: People & Places

Traveling exhibition

Arthur A. Houghton Jr. Gallery, The Cooper Union, New York, NY,
October – November, 1984
University Art Gallery, Boston, MA, November – December 1984

Perception of Self, Forum Gallery, New York, NY, October 4 - November 10, 2012

American Masters, Forum Gallery, New York, NY, May 8 - 29, 2015

Literature

Goodrich, Lloyd. *Raphael Soyer*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.), 1972, p.163, Illustrated.

Raphael Soyer's New York: People & Places, Arthur A. Houghton Jr. Gallery, The Cooper Union, New York, NY, October – November, 1984, Illustrated.

Note

Imaginary Wall in My Studio depicts artists **Raphael Soyer** (upper-left), **Moses Soyer** (lower-right), **Chaim Gross** (lower-left), **David Burliuk** (center) and **Nikolai Cikovsky** (upper-right). Raphael Soyer also depicted in the painting a postcard of the Yalta conference (Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin), a drawing that Raphael Soyer's daughter, Mary, made of her pet cat, and a drawing by Raphael Soyer of an embracing couple. The identities of the embracing couple and the significance of the drawing has never been completely decoded, not even by Raphael's daughter, Mary Soyer. It is believed that, perhaps, it could be a self-portrait with a woman he knew and broke up with long ago, hence the broken glass.

DAVID BURLIUK (1882-1967) was a Ukrainian Futurist, Neo-Primitivist, book illustrator, publicist, and author associated with Russian Futurism. Burliuk is often described as "the father of Russian Futurism." Burliuk's art during his historically important early period was an amalgam of Fauvist, Cubist, and Futurist influences, which he absorbed and melded with his love of nature, a fascination for the forms and designs of Scythian culture, and especially his admiration for Ukrainian folklore.

NIKOLAI CIKOVSKY (1894-1984) painted figurative subjects, landscapes, portraits and still lifes, working in a simplified Realist manner reflective of his earlier exposure to modern European art. During the 1930s and 1940s, he was linked with American Scene painting and Social Realism in New York, creating works of art that were acclaimed for their strength, vitality and individuality of expression.

CHAIM GROSS (1904–1991) was a modernist sculptor known for his direct wood carvings of jubilant circus performers, confident urbanites, and intimate mother and child pairings. They are imagined in various states of solitude and joyous interdependence, and rendered in a combination of traditional and tribal/folk styles. A native of Austria, Gross emigrated in 1921 as teenager from war torn Eastern Europe to New York City, where he studied sculpture at the Educational Alliance on the Lower East Side and came to know painters Moses and Raphael Soyer and many other important 20th-century New York artists. Forum Gallery began representing Gross in 1962, until his death in 1991.

MOSES SOYER (1899-1974) began studying at Cooper Union, whose formalistic curriculum he eventually left in favor of continuing his studies at Ferrer Art School in Spanish Harlem. There, he studied painting and drawing with the more advanced Ashcan school artists, who sought to capture New York scenes through realistic and unglamorized representations of everyday life. Known primarily for his drawings and oil paintings, Moses art emphasized the depiction of the natural attitudes, thoughts, and gestures of individuals in performing everyday tasks. Throughout his career, Soyer's art remained close to the representational rendering and simple subject matter of the Ashcan artists and realism.

Essay

In the foreground of Raphael Soyer's 1948 painting *My Friends* the artist painted a banderole featuring the words "Friendship is the wine of life". Thin, short, and shy, Raphael began painting his artist friends in the 1930s just as he arrived at his signature style. The practice may have served Soyer as an antidote to his innate bashfulness and enabled him to express heartfelt camaraderie to his peers and admiration towards his older artist acquaintances. Soyer also produced many self-portraits which, along with his portraits, offered him intermittent hiatuses from the subject matter to which he was dedicated and brought him national acclaim: New York's poverty-stricken vagabonds and its lower-class proletariat. So prolifically did Soyer paint these artist-friend portraits that by the time of his first one-man exhibition at Associated American Artists (the gallery held three solo Raphael Soyer shows in March of the years 1941, 1948, and 1953) twenty-three of them, each portraying one of his creative comrades, were displayed together as a separate group under the heading "My Contemporaries and Elders".

Soyer's painting of *My Friends*, one of the largest compositions he ever did, includes two female models and four of his closest companions, the painters David Burliuk, Nicolai Cikovsky, sculptor Chaim Gross, and his brother Moses, with his own image appearing in the rear, back turned at his easel. A year prior, Soyer painted a much more intimate work called *Imaginary Wall in My Studio* in which he incorporated only the portraits of the same five artists, Cikovsky upper right, brother Moses lower right, Burliuk center, Gross lower left, and Raphael himself upper left. In the upper central portion of the canvas Soyer painted a postcard image of Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin at the recently held Yalta Conference (February of 1945, a prelude to the allied victory in World War II), a drawing which his daughter Mary had made of her pet cat, and a small black and white photograph of his wife Rebecca smiling as she upholds their infant daughter and only child. Bottom middle is a rendering of one of his own drawings which depicts a couple embracing, framed behind broken picture glass. The imagery relates directly to a background detail in Soyer's 1941 painting *Waiting at the Station* (Forum Gallery, New York) in which a soldier and young lady hold each other tightly in their arms, the cracked glass symbolic for the tragedy of war.

Aside from Soyer's personal friendships, something else, unpublicized yet more profound, is intimated with respect to this inner artistic circle, represented in both *My Friends* and *Imaginary Wall in My Studio*. Raphael and Moses knew Chaim Gross from their days of study together at Cooper Union (1914-18). There's little doubt that Raphael met Nicolai Cikovsky at Charles Daniel's gallery at West 47th Street, where the former had a one-man show in 1929 and the latter in 1930. Cikovsky and Burliuk were particularly close friends who painted side-by-side in Southampton, Long Island (1942). And all would have visited the Whitney Studio Club on West 8th Street prior to its 1931 expansion and conversion into a museum. Still, Cikovsky, Burliuk, Gross, Moses, and Raphael had more in common than shared interests and mutual respect. All five were from Eastern Europe: Cikovsky from Pinsk, in present-day Belarus, Russia; Burliuk from the Ukraine; Gross from the Carpathian Mountain region of what used to be known as Austrian Poland but is now Western Ukraine; Raphael and Moses from the city of Borisoglebsk in the latter-day province of Voronezh Oblast some four hundred miles Southwest of Moscow. All except Burliuk were Jewish and spoke Yiddish as well as English. Moreover, all five of them were active members of the New York chapter of the John Reed Club, which was founded in October of 1929 at the onset of the Great Depression.

Spread about the nation from Boston to San Francisco and numbering thirty at their peak, the John Reed Clubs were a federation of local Marxist organizations under the umbrella of the United States Communist Party, whose mission it was to increase political influence by engaging intellectuals, writers, and artists. It was named after the Oregon native, Harvard graduate, and activist journalist who, while working for the Socialist magazine The Masses, covered the Mexican and Russian Revolutions (in regard to the latter, writing the famed book Ten Days that Shook the World), and who perished at thirty-three of Typhoid

Fever in the newly-born Soviet Union. What may seem imponderable in current times is the appeal, breadth, and force of a Depression Era movement which offered a radical alternative to the harshness and hypocrisy of American Corporate Capitalism.

While Raphael Soyer refrained from direct political references in his canvases, those with a social conscience like him, who related experientially to the peripatetic homelessness of indigence and the humiliating terror of subjugation, found fraternity in the John Reed Clubs. Nor did Soyer or his friends create artwork directly reflective of their common religion. While a few Jewish artists like Max Weber and Ben-Zion at times did pictorially reference Judaism, it was not usual. American Jews' devotion to humanism, derived from their longstanding record of involvement in European labor movements, was given a voice in a pro-Communist creative world which asserted the dogma that art must both portray reality for what it is and convey an ameliorative message. While Raphael Soyer, his brother, and band of brothers conformed to the first tenet and not the latter, their *esprit de corps* really was their "wine of life".

"The substantial Jewish presence on the Left was, of course, nothing new—Jews had been prominent in the European and American Socialist movements before the First World War, and in the wake of the Russian Revolution, many had joined the Communist movement. During the 1920s, the American Yiddish-language Communist daily newspaper *Di fraybeyt* (later *Morgan fraybeyt*) had a larger readership than did the English-language equivalent, *The Daily Worker*, while at least one third of the members of the central committee of the Party were Jews." (Frankel, Jonathan, ed. Dark Times, Dire Decisions: Jews and Communism, Studies in Contemporary Jewry, The Avraham Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry, Hebrew University of Jerusalem; Oxford University Press, New York, 2004. Mendelsohn, Erza. *Jews, Communism and Art in Interwar America*, pps. 99-100)



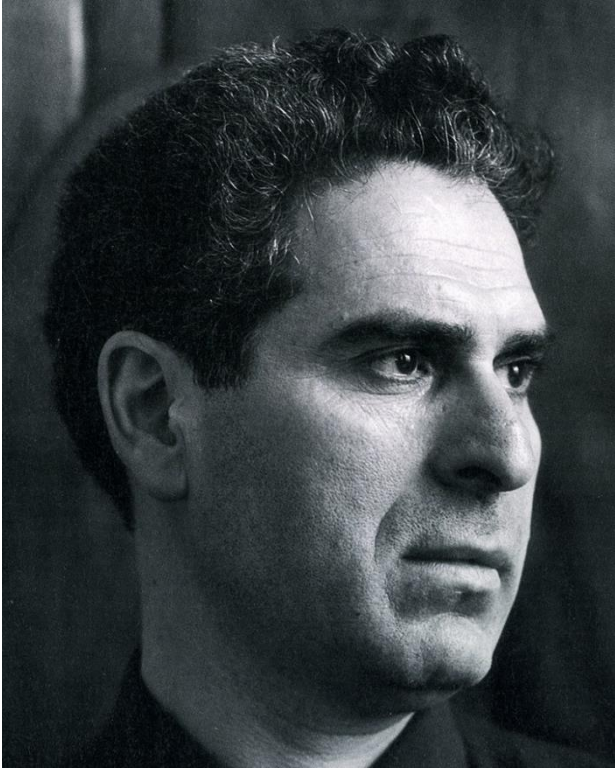
Soyer, *My Friends*, 1948
(coll. Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio)



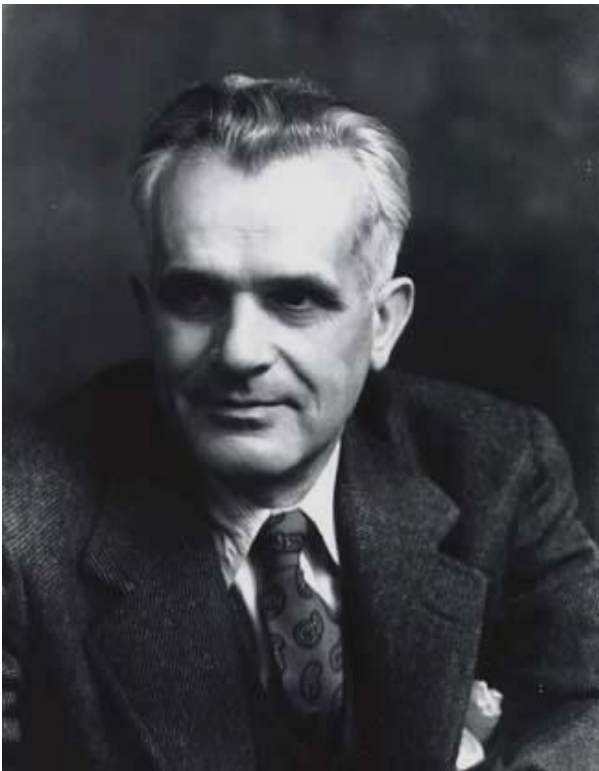
Raphael Soyer (Photograph by Alfredo Valente; Alfredo Valente papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.)



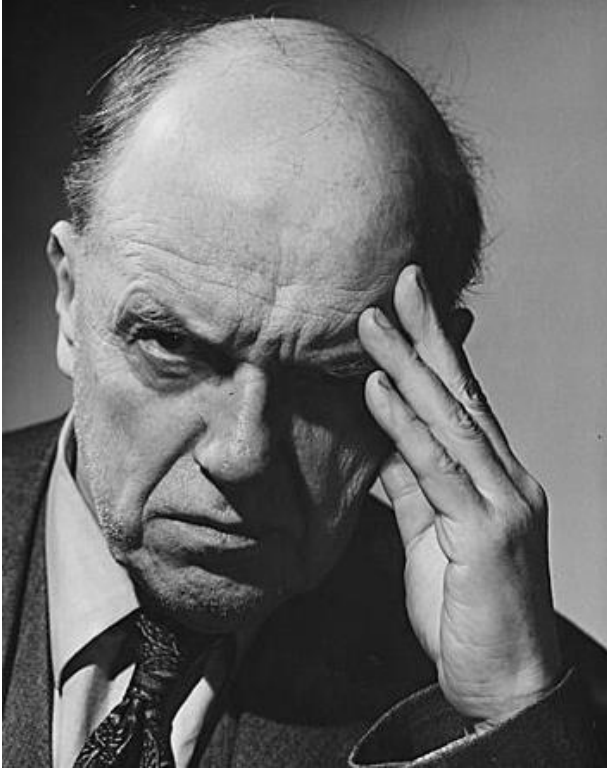
Moses Soyer *circa* 1955 (Photographer unknown; Moses Soyer papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.)



Chaim Gross in 1944 (photograph by Arnold Newman © 1994)



Nicola Cikovsky (photograph coll. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.)



David Burluk in 1950 (photograph by Alfredo Valente)



John Reed, American journalist and Communist activist, after which the John Reed Clubs were named



John Reed Club, protest march, New York City, 1934
(photograph, coll: Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.)