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Robert Fishko, *Director*

RAPHAEL SOYER

(1899-1987)

Gitel, 1933

oil on canvas

16 x 14 inches

signed, dated, and dedicated lower right

“RAPHAEL SOYER 1933 TO MARA”

titled lower left “GITEL”



Provenance

The Artist

Jacqueline Anhalt Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

Private Collection, NJ

[acquired directly from the above, 1973]

Richard Reich, Oackhurst, NJ

Forum Gallery, New York, NY

[acquired directly from the above, 2016]

Collection of Fred and Sandra Pine, New York, NY

The Estate of Fred Pine, New York, NY

Forum Gallery, New York, NY

Essay

Raphael Soyer’s depictions of women during Depression Era New York City are their own body of work within his Urban Realist imagery and offer insights on the gender ideology of the period. Right after the stock market crash of 1929 Soyer began to paint the images of urban destitution which would make him the foremost realist of the time. After a couple of years of roaming the streets of Manhattan reproducing what he saw, Raphael’s scenes of unemployed men huddled together, waiting in bread lines or sitting in soup kitchens, began to be accompanied by those of women, either shown individually as personal portraits or together in joint activities. The Ashcan School painters of two decades earlier, in particular John Sloan, had at times portrayed the average woman (as they did the common man) in natural settings performing quotidian acts with a newfound realism. However, women were predominantly rendered sumptuously in upper-class commission portraits (William Merritt Chase), wistfully in romanticized domestic scenes

(Frederick Carl Frieseke), or enigmatically in arcane settings (Thomas Wilmer Dewing). These were not the working woman, for whose portrayal Raphael Soyer created a cogent, new language.

Soyer's full-length 1932 portrait of the aspiring female poet and singer Gitel (usually spelled *Gittel*) won him the best portrait award at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts' annual exhibition in 1934. While the *Art Digest* reviewer of the PAFA show disparagingly described the painting's subject as "the essence of piquant feminine undernourishment, a frail drab little *thing* in genteel rags" *, Soyer thought highly of her and called her "a favorite model of mine". ** He always knew his sitters, often painting them numerous times, and captured their inner beauty if not outer glamor. In 1933 Soyer painted Gitel again, this time a closer, fully frontal portrait, more intimate than his full-length view, with her immediate facial expression the focus of the composition. Open-eyed, thoughtful and self-assured, Gitel seems to be studying her viewer as much as she is being observed, participating in the experience as an intellectual and interpersonal equal to all. Soyer's tactic of dignifying his female sitters by having them return the viewer's gaze communicates the artist's intention of elevating their class status through his art. There is no doubt that both Soyer's heritage and his association with progressive politics in America engendered the empathetic approach he took to his subject matter, the working woman included, and instilled in his paintings a potent psychological component.

Many middle and lower-class women worked throughout the Great Depression, like Soyer's own wife Rebecca Letz. While jobs were generally scarce, women were paid less than men and therefore hired more often for certain types of work, exacerbating traditionally accepted gender roles and often further demoralizing the ego of the already unemployed male. While a certain woman was glamorized on the silver screen, the vast majority lived arduous lives and worked in harsh, unregulated conditions. In the 1930s the definition of "shopgirl" evolved to classify the underskilled, less educated female worker generally of more recent immigrant background, as opposed to the expert department store "saleslady". Raphael Soyer's painting *Shop Girls* from 1936 famously depicts such young ladies coming out of an undetermined 14th Street store at the end of the work day. Released from their obligations, one calls out while another waves as each heads in her own direction. A far cry from the fashionable salesladies in Kenneth Hayes Miller's *The Fitting Room* (1931), they are the less privileged but hardworking women whom Soyer individualized in his studio portraits, Gitel, the under-schooled but talented girl low in so social standing yet high in integrity.

"Through his own experience, in his marriage and family, and his observations of his models, Soyer was well acquainted with the problems of working women and the importance of their right to work. He would have understood that lower-class immigrant women worked from economic need rather than for personal fulfillment. Through the 1920s, while he studied art and struggled with his early work, he himself endured firsthand the hardships of the hourly wage earner, an experience no other Fourteenth Street artist ever had. Even more interesting in the contemporary reviews of Soyer's work is the negative response to lower-class femininity. Reviewers, consciously or not, used language that reduced women to lower forms of life or made them helpless. But because of the high quality of his art, they either forgave the painter for such flaws or saw the power of his depictions." (Todd, Ellen Wiley. *The "New Woman" Revised: Painting and Gender Politics on Fourteenth Street*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1993, p. 264)

**Art Digest* 8, February 15, 1934, "Social Commentaries Mark the Pennsylvania Academy's Annual", p. 6



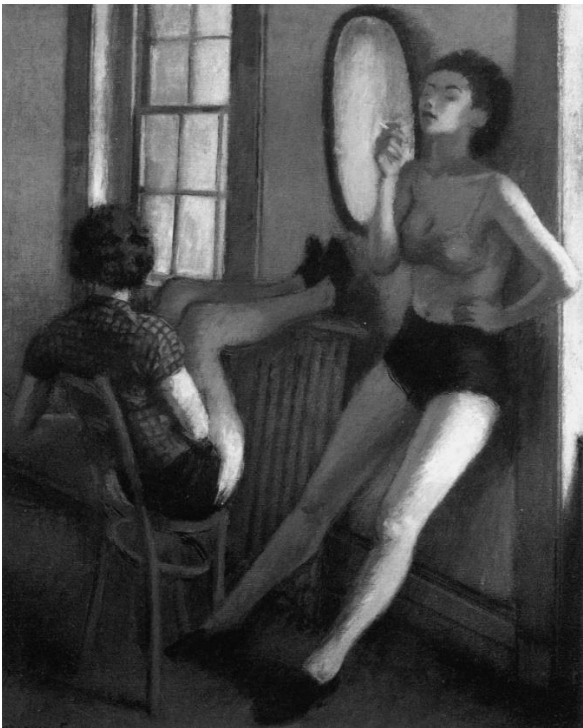
Soyer, *Girl at Table*, 1934 lithograph
(coll. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden)

**Soyer also represented Gitel in a number of his lithographs such as *Conversation* (1931-32), *Sleep* (1931-32), *Two Girls* (1934), as well as *Girl at Table* (1934) which was executed a year after his 1933 painting of her. In the compilation of Soyer's prints, published three decades later, he accompanied the reproduction of *Girl at Table* with a commemoration of Gitel, a person of whom he had fond and poignant memories and about whom he clearly cared much:

“This is Gittel, a favorite model of mine, who posed for me a great deal in the thirties. She was about seventeen here. She was 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.” (Gettings, Frank. *Raphael Soyer: Sixty-five Years of Printmaking*, exhibition catalog, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, 1982, p. 30)



Soyer, *Gitel*, 1932 (ex-coll. Myron Kunin, Minneapolis)



Soyer, *Two Models Resting*, 1936 (Private Collection, New York); Although unspecified, the upright model in this important interior scene by the artist appears to be Gitel.



Soyer, *Shop Girls*, 1936 (Private Collection, MA)



Reginald Marsh, *A Paramount Picture*, 1934 (coll. Cleveland Museum of Art)
Note the brilliant juxtaposition in the glamorous pose of superstar actress Claudette Colbert in the background poster to Cecil B. deMille's 1934 film *Cleopatra* with the doleful expression of the working woman in the foreground.



Kenneth Hayes Miller, *The Fitting Room*, 1931 (coll. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)



John Sloan, *Sunday, Women Drying their Hair*, 1912
(coll. Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Massachusetts)