

## *Raphael Soyer, Dean of Realists Sees New York as 'My Country'*

By JOHN CANADAY

At the age of 72—he was born on Christmas Day, 1899, with his twin brother, Moses, in the dismal town of Borisoglebsk, Russia—Raphael Soyer has become the dean of American realist painters, a distinction that leaves him a little puzzled.

Soyer certainly does not think of himself as Russian, although he remembers the Czarist Russia that his father, a liberal teacher of Hebrew literature and history, was forced to leave in 1912. But in a way, he doesn't think of himself as American either.

"New York is my country," he says.

This has been Raphael Soyer's month. An exhibition of his work is on view at the Forum Gallery, Madison Avenue at 79th Street, through Nov. 4. And last week Abrams published a 349-page collection of his work, called simply "Raphael Soyer."

Soyer has been painting New York and New Yorkers for 50 years, and one day last week he sacrificed a day's work in his studio to permit a reporter and a photographer to accompany him through the parts of the city that have meant most to him.

### Where His Heart Lies

Soyer's New York is only a fraction of Manhattan Island, with its uppermost limit on the West Side in the 70's. Changes in the city have forced him that far uptown

for his studio and his apartment. From there his New York stretches down, avoiding fashionable areas, to the Lower East Side, with the Williamsburg Bridge as the focal point of the area where he first lived and worked as an artist and where, it is obvious, his heart still lies.

"I used to be able to set up my easel right in the middle of this street," he said, looking out the window of a car chauffeured by a friend through the curb-to-curb traffic on the eastern end of Delancey Street. "Automobiles have choked everything up. There are no depths, no perspectives any more. The automobiles blot out everything else."

Neither are there any more perspectives from a little higher up. "It used to be, you could always get a studio with a view down here," he said. "It was so easy in those days." Second-floor windows could give onto vistas of river and city, but now even where old four-and five-story buildings still stand, the views are blotted out by high-rise housing projects.

The idea had been to photograph Mr. Soyer as he has frequently painted himself, as an inconspicuous spectator in the crowd of pedestrians on one of the streets where he used to find his models in the admixture of little people—the shop-girls, the seamstresses, the clerks and the indigent artists and poets who still supply much of his subject matter. But there was no point in stopping the car.

### 'I Don't Know Them'

"I don't know these people," he said, looking at the

mass of blacks and Puerto Ricans who have replaced the predominantly Jewish and Italian population of the section. "I wish I did, and I do introduce some of them into my pictures, but I don't really know them."

What he does know are the current versions of the same young people he used to paint. Back again in his studio where he had tacked photographs and reproductions reminding him of some of the artists he most admires—Degas, Delacroix, Pascin, La Tour and Enkins—he took out a stack of sketchbooks with page after page of graphic notations on the kind of people who have been labeled beatniks and then hippies and who are now the floating population of his former world.

"I saw this white girl and her black baby," he said, showing a series of sketches of a granny-skirted, tousle-haired young woman carrying the child in a sling on her back, papoose-fashion. "She was married to a jazz musician. I asked her to come to the studio and she did, a couple of times. Then she disappeared."

Soyer's people, over the years, have remained lonely people, and it interests theorists of American art that Soyer, like the painter he succeeded as dean of American realists, the late Edward Hopper, is a painter of loneliness. In his crowded street scenes each person is alone, and in the intimacy of a small room lovers may seem worlds apart.

### An Ever-Present Loneliness

"People ask me why the people I paint are always so



sad," Soyer said. "I don't know. It just turns out that way." Asked if he felt any difference between young people today and the young people, now middle-aged or old, that he used to paint, he said that the girls had changed.

"They are stronger, more courageous. And they complain to me that the boys are weak."

The loneliness is still very much present for both boys and girls. "They live together

and work together and they even make love on the streets," he said. "But they are not really together. They are separate — self-involved. Even in their communes. I went to one that you had to get to from the roof of the next building. Everybody shared the same refrigerator and bathroom, but everybody was alone. Self-involved."

Talking about his new paint-

ings in his current exhibition at the Forum Gallery, he paused in front of one that illustrated his point, "Avenue of the Americas." It showed a sidewalk crowd. Even the gaudy and eccentric dress affected by young people strikes him not as a form of personal expression, but as a "masquerade" behind which the self-involved person protects his true identity.

In "Avenue of the Americas" Soyer painted himself in the background as a gray, anonymous figure as lonely as the rest. But the loneliness ended there. He was anything but anonymous and lonely in the gallery. It was not a reception or an opening day, and Soyer had not been expected to be on hand, but the gallery was crowded and everyone there either

knew him and came up to greet him, or recognized him from his self-portrait and wanted to shake his hand.

Winding up the afternoon at his apartment, where he lives with his wife and an exhaustive documentary collection of drawings, paintings and photographs of their daughter and three grandchildren, Raphael Soyer was also in the presence, by proxy, of a vast circle of friends, the artists who shared his early adventure, represented by paintings and drawings that amount to a museum of American — or rather, New York — realism in the nineteen-twenties and nineteen-thirties.

Not many of his colleagues have had his staying power, either physical or professional. On a coffee table there

was the mammoth new book published at \$50. Soyer reflected that it was the fourth of a series, the others having been posthumous tributes to Edward Hopper, Ben Shahn and Reginald Marsh.

"And here I am," he said. And then, "It seems like so much," but whether he was referring to the size of the book, its price or the tribute was not clear.

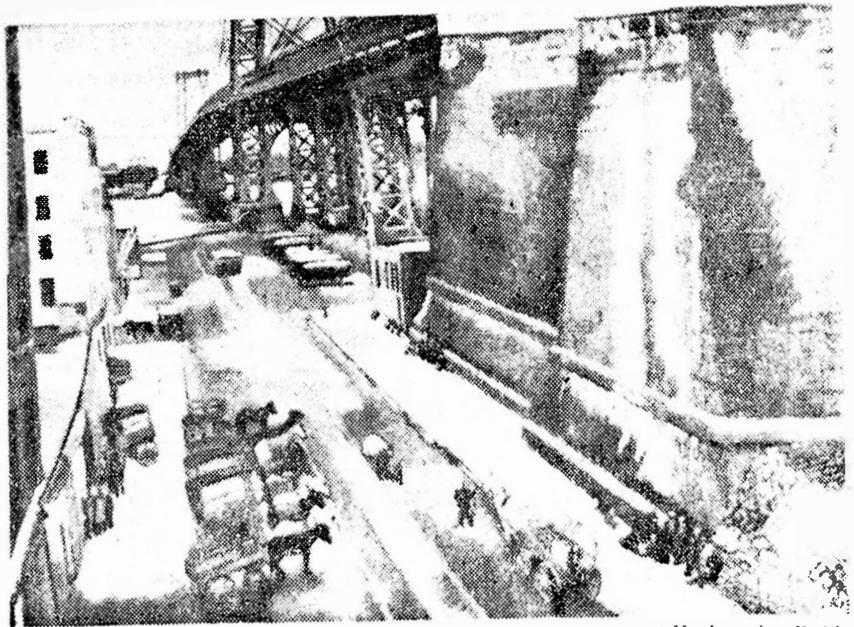


*"Avenue of the Americas"*

*Raphael Soyer, the dean of American realist painters, has been celebrating New York for five decades. His work can be seen in a major show at the Forum Gallery and in a new book published by Abrams.*



*"City Faces"*



*"Under the Bridge"*