FORUM GALLERY

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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
David Dubinsky, NY, c.1934 (acquired directly from the Artist)
Jean Appleton, NY (by descent)
Forum Gallery, NY, 1999
Private Collection, NY (since 2000, acquired directly from the above)

Exhibited

Raphael Soyer (1899-1987): American Master, Forum Gallery, New York, NY, February 10 - March 4, 2000

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

Then and Now: American Social Realism, Forum Gallery, New York, NY, May 13 - July 2, 2021

Literature

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

ADAA member

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.

Art dealer Charles Daniel offered Soyer his first solo exhibition, which took place in April of 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 1932, 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, Soyer adapted to the new hardships by painting content deriving almost solely from his sensitive and sympathetic awareness of the grim social issues of the times. His painting style evolved into a new, modern "Urban Realism" wherein Soyer painted the beggars, bums, homeless workers as he saw them on the streets of New York's Union Square, the Village, Fourteenth Street and the Lower East Side.

Men at the Mission, 1935, is 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 observed:

> "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...Homeless transients sitting in a flophouse waiting patiently for sleeping space. Five men, old and young, being fed in a mission..."

In 1946 for the introduction of a monograph about his work published by American Artists Group, Raphael Soyer highlighted an article about his work written by Carl Zigrosser, first Curator of Prints and Drawings at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, that he believed understood his objectives well. Soyer quotes Zigrosser:

> "There is nothing sweet and sentimental in his approach. He views (the types that people his "Mission" and "Bowery Nocturne") with an understanding of the forces that have influenced them...There is seldom anything posed or artificial in his pictures...He portrays them in the intimacy of a homely and instinctive gesture...No need for him to travel far. He portrays what is at hand, the familiar scenes, his relatives, his friends."

Men at the Mission was acquired directly from the Artist by David Dubinsky, a Belarusian-born American labor leader and politician. Dubinsky was the founding President of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union between 1932 and 1966. He played a key role in the creation of the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) in 1935 to organize industrial workers within the American Federation of Labor. In addition, Dubinsky was one of the founders of the American Labor Party and the Liberal Party of New York.